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Just out having a good time?

Evaluation of the pilot National Partnership Agreement for Looked After Children who go missing from Residential and Foster Care in Scotland

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the young people in the three pilot areas who took part in interviews for this evaluation, and the local authority staff who helped to make this possible. Our thanks also go to the interviewees in 'professional groups', including residential workers, police, social workers and foster carers.

This evaluation has been guided by an Advisory Group comprising representatives from police and local authorities in the three pilot areas (see Appendix 1). We thank them for their valuable contributions to this work.

Foreword

By the Evaluation Advisory Group

The effective safeguarding and wellbeing of looked after children and young people is one of the most important responsibilities of all corporate parents. There is a broad range of legislation, policies and procedures to help guide and support high quality practice. The pilot of the Looked After Children Who Go Missing from Residential and Foster Care in Scotland – a National Partnership Agreement, which was co-produced and published in November 2015, enabled partners to further develop their practice with and for care experienced children and young people.

The pilot ran from 1 December 2015 to 30 November 2016 and was undertaken in three Scottish local authorities, namely Dundee City Council, The City of Edinburgh Council and South Lanarkshire Council. These three areas were chosen as they all had pre-existing, although different, protocols in place. All three areas have continued to work within the partnership agreement.

An interim evaluation was undertaken by Police Scotland in March 2017, in which the data was collated and summarised across each area. This indicated that significant reductions in missing person incidents and improvements in outcomes were achievable when - and only when - the proper joint-working arrangements were in place.

In terms of the wider context, the work is part of and referred to in the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, which was published in May 2017 following wide consultation across all sectors. By building on existing good practice, the Framework set out two national aims:

- to prevent people from going missing in the first place; and
- to limit the harm associated with people going missing.

This evaluation report is based on in-depth research, including semi-structured interviews with those who have lived experience, such as care experienced children and young people, and those who have corporate parenting responsibilities to support them throughout their care journeys.

Meticulous planning and sharing of intelligence takes place which involves all partners coming together to look at all information, patterns, trends and what resources can be brought in to

prevent, respond to, support and protect our children and young people and the wider community. This also involves an analysis of concerns and risks, including child sexual exploitation. The work of this pilot has enabled partners to track, support and help keep other categories of children and young people safe too.

Young people are often reported missing when, in fact, they have chosen to stay out later than planned and are often at no risk - they also do not see themselves as missing, rather that they are simply having a good time. Repeated police-led missing person investigations result in them being stigmatised (often with some criminalisation) for what is generally seen as typical behaviour among non-looked after peers/families. The partnership agreement helps to close the inequality gap, without any compromise of due diligence, in every situation.

Use of an 'absent' category in England and Wales was studied in 2016 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults. While the experience has been entirely different in Scotland, we concede the need for caution expressed in the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland. We therefore propose the term '**not at home**' is used in future to clearly identify the approach in Scotland.

This pilot has enabled key professionals to focus and act proportionately in relation to the individual children and young people and level of risks involved. Police, residential staff, foster carers and others can use their time more appropriately, reducing the stigma and inequality to which the children and young people have at times been subjected. Young people can develop greater independence and life-long skills - making the right choices and decisions to help keep themselves safe, without unhelpful over-scrutiny.

There is an appetite across Scotland (including within the third sector) to have a national partnership agreement, and the Care Inspectorate is keen to see progress and impact. The learning from the interim and CELCIS evaluation process, together with the shared experience of all partners, provides a perfect opportunity to review the partnership agreement, update the multi-disciplinary training materials and move to implementation across Scotland.

Our extraordinary care experienced children and young people deserve the best outcomes we can deliver for them.

Evaluation Advisory Group, October 2018

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Introduction and background

Children and young people living in care settings (such as residential or foster care) are one of three groups identified in the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland as most likely to be reported missing¹. The Framework highlights that the risk of harm for individuals in these groups '*can be exacerbated by their circumstances*' (Scottish Government, 2017, p.5).

Looked After Children who go missing from Residential and Foster Care in Scotland is a Partnership Agreement between Police Scotland and local authority partners. It aims to promote a co-ordinated and consistent multi-agency response for these young people, based on the principles of 'Getting it right for every child'. The Agreement aligns with the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, particularly in relation to local planning, partnership working, and appropriate follow-up discussions and support for those who have been reported missing. It forms part of a range of related policies and measures in the broader context around care experienced young people, including those aimed at addressing child sexual exploitation (CSE), and reducing unnecessary contact with the police.

The Agreement was piloted in three local authorities: City of Edinburgh, Dundee City and South Lanarkshire. The formal pilot period took place between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016, and all three local authority areas have subsequently continued to use the approach described in the Partnership Agreement.

The approaches used prior to the introduction of the Partnership Agreement were not the same across the three local authority areas, and all three areas therefore experienced a variety of changes to previous practice in light of the Agreement. The main overarching changes are summarised in the Partnership Agreement document as the introduction of:

an absent category, prevention plans including the capture of initial information, a risk assessment model, return interviews and follow-up intervention processes to deal with escalating concerns from repeat episodes.

(Police Scotland, 2015, p.4)

In brief, the Partnership Agreement further describes these as:

- 'Absent' category – to be used when there is considered to be no risk, or a tolerable level of risk, in relation to a young person; for example, when they fail to return from a known location, and there are no concerns about their wellbeing. This should only be used where it has previously been agreed that it might be an

¹ The others are vulnerable adults, and older people with dementia.

appropriate response for the young person. No contact with, or response from, police is required when a young person is 'absent'.

- Prevention plans including the capture of initial information – prevention planning includes an assessment as part of the Child's Plan around an individual's likelihood of going missing, and possible risks if this was to occur. The Missing Person Form is used by officers to collect information at the initiation of a missing person investigation. Care providers are expected to be aware of the information required in order to provide this efficiently to attending officers.
- Risk assessment model – this includes a number of areas for consideration in relation to risk, under three headings: Vulnerability, Influences and Past Behaviour. The Partnership Agreement also contains general guidance on, for example, 'stable' and 'dynamic' factors, 'push' and 'pull' factors, and the full and timely assessment and review of risk.
- Return interview – a process to help ensure that the young person's needs are met, which includes discussion of their reasons for going missing, the circumstances surrounding this, and any risk or harm they were exposed to whilst away. This is in addition to the response from the care provider immediately on the young person's return, and the routine 'safe and well' check carried out by police officers.
- Follow-up interventions – these include inter-agency referrals and discussions to consider what further supports might be put in place for an individual young person.

As part of the evaluation of the pilot, Police Scotland compiled a data summary report which provided information on the number of incidents and, where available, episodes² of young people being reported missing from individual children's houses in the three pilot local authority areas, in the year prior to, and the year of, the formal pilot period. This indicated a reduction in the number of missing persons incidents for most of the children's houses involved in the pilot, including some substantial reductions. The report identified a number of challenges and limitations in the collection, reporting and comparison of this data, but provided a useful starting point for further evaluative work. The partnership group invited CELCIS to assist in the evaluation, and we were able to supplement the data summary report by engaging directly with young people, police, residential staff, and others involved in the use of the Agreement. We explored their experiences, particularly in relation to:

- delivery of the Partnership Agreement, including core features and practices
- benefits, drawbacks and challenges of the Partnership Agreement and its implementation

² There are no consistent definitions of these terms. Broadly an 'Incident' is single Missing report, which may involve more than one individual, as recorded on Police Scotland's Command and Control system. 'Episodes' each relate to one individual, as recorded on the Police Scotland Missing Persons Database.

- opportunities for further development and the identification of good practice

The aim of this element of the evaluation was therefore to identify what was perceived to be working well about the Partnership Agreement, and what could be reviewed or reconsidered in order to improve the Agreement for all those involved. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews on these topics took place between October 2017 and March 2018, with four key groups of participants:

- Residential staff (at a range of seniority; including night shift workers)
- Police officers (in a range of roles and of various ranks)
- Young people in residential care (with and without personal experience of being reported missing)
- 'Other professional' participants (such as foster carers, fostering team managers, social workers, and out of hours social work team members)

Those in the 'professional groups' (police, residential and 'other') discussed the introduction and implementation of the Partnership Agreement, as well as their perceptions of its use, while the young people described their perceptions of what happens when someone goes missing, shared their opinions of whether this is appropriate, and made suggestions around what could be improved. All participants agreed to be audio recorded; recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Table 1 below shows the number of individual participants in each category, for each participating local authority. Due to the small number of participants in each group, and the high level of awareness amongst colleagues and management around which individuals participated in interviews, we have been extremely cautious in ensuring that individuals cannot be identified in this report. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, we deliberately obscured some details, and attribute all quotes to a participant group/type only³.

Table 1: Number of individual participants in each local authority

	Dundee	Edinburgh	South Lanarkshire*	TOTAL
Residential staff	3	1	11	15
Police officers	2	3	6	11
Young people	2	4	2	8
Other	3	2	1	6
TOTAL	10	10	20	40

* The higher number of participants from South Lanarkshire results from several participants choosing to be interviewed as a group.

³ Participant codes: R for residential worker, P for police officer, O for other professional, and Y for young person, followed by a randomly generated number for each interview. All participants in group interviews are identified by the same code.

Since the Partnership Agreement is between Police Scotland and local authorities, the residential care workers and 'other' participants in this study are those employed or otherwise associated with the local authorities, rather than with private or third sector providers or agencies. The majority of participants discussed their experiences in relation to residential care settings rather than foster care, and the findings therefore relate mainly to young people living in children's houses, and those who care for them. We present the findings relating specifically to the foster care context as a separate section of the report.

There was a clear sense from some interviewees that their interest in participating in the study went beyond discussion of the Partnership Agreement, and that they were keen to air their views on a range of related issues. Additionally, participants' responses are influenced by their individual context, including, for example, recent 'high profile' instances of missing persons. As a result, the findings reported here reflect the context in which the Partnership Agreement functions. The views and experiences of these participants should not be taken as representative of everyone in that participant category.

In this report, we present the main themes that emerged from interviews with young people and those in professional roles on their experiences of the Partnership Agreement. The recommendations that conclude this report were developed by the members of the evaluation Advisory Group.

Findings

We discuss the findings from these evaluation interviews in three broad themes:

1. Communication and information sharing
2. Risk assessment
3. Professional roles and responsibilities

We report each of these broad themes in turn, along with some sub-themes. A fourth section includes additional themes we identified from the interviews. Although presented in this way for clarity, many of the themes are interrelated, and the findings should be considered holistically.

Communication and information sharing

Participants identified one of the key strengths of the Partnership Agreement as its contribution to improvements in communication and the sharing of information. They described this improvement as taking place between police and local authority partners in particular, but also within and between individual children's houses, and beyond. Participants discussed communication in a range of contexts, including the ways in which the Partnership Agreement was introduced to them, the use of liaison meetings, and the shared communication around Return Interviews. They described improvements, but

some indicated that these improved communications were mainly taking place 'at a level away from the front line' (Participant P1), and that sometimes information was not shared and cascaded as well as it might be.

Introduction of the Partnership Agreement

Some interviewees demonstrated a good understanding of the Partnership Agreement and the changes in practice that resulted from it; others, including residential workers and police officers, indicated less familiarity. Some described previous procedures as current practice. Others did not recognise terminology such as 'absent'⁴, or recognised the term but were unclear as to its purpose or usage.

When we asked participants to describe how the Agreement had been introduced to them, most reported that they had received some form of direct, face-to-face training delivered jointly by local authority and police representatives, which they felt was valuable. Joint training was thought to offer opportunities for:

- Better shared understanding of risk assessment and decision-making processes
- Discussion of different scenarios and how to respond to these
- Development of relationships between residential staff and police officers

One participant described the benefits of joint training with police and residential workers, explaining:

What it does is it helps build tolerance, because everybody has constraints, everybody sees, has their own view of what their job is and, I think it's really helpful to do it jointly

(Participant O5)

Some participants had not received direct training in this way, but had learned about the Partnership Agreement via colleagues and managers, or by being shown the paperwork. Those who had not received direct training attributed this largely to the difficulties associated with arranging face-to-face training for shift workers, and particularly those working nights. Police participants, as well as residential workers, raised this issue. Some participants also mentioned the turnover of staff as a reason why the provision of direct training had not been available to everyone.

Some participants indicated that introductory and refresher training, perhaps through an online module, might be a way to address this; however, police officers who discussed this issue felt that it would be difficult for them to protect time to undertake e-learning, and one described the challenges associated with the overall pace of change within the police service at present. One participant in the 'other professionals' category suggested

⁴ The 'Absent' category described in the Partnership Agreement differs from that used by police in England and Wales. See Appendix 1 for further information.

that an overview of Missing Persons procedures should be part of routine induction procedures for all new staff.

Liaison Meetings

Participants in 'professional' categories described the introduction of regular liaison meetings as an important part of improving communications and information sharing. The function of these meetings was also closely intertwined with the role of the Police Missing Persons Operational Co-ordinator. One participant described the discussions enabled by these as a vital feature of the Partnership Agreement which must not be lost, and explained, *'I think the police liaison meeting makes a massive difference to us for gathering information'* (Participant R6).

Participants considered the improved communication and information sharing to be beneficial in a number of ways, in relation to individual young people as well as more broadly. Identification and discussion of individuals allowed partner agencies to develop a shared understanding of risks, vulnerabilities, and the context of behaviours. Some participants felt that an increased emphasis on this kind of information sharing in particular was a key improvement facilitated by the Agreement. They told us that these individual-level discussions also helped to identify patterns of behaviour, which could, for example, enable interventions to be put in place for a young person who was being regularly identified as 'absent', before this escalated into a more challenging issue. Participants felt that recognition of behaviour patterns could allow partners to discuss collaborative or different approaches to support the young person, and to reduce their instances of being reported missing.

The sharing of broader information and detail at liaison meetings was also thought to be useful; names, addresses and car registrations that had come to the attention of the police or residential workers could be shared, for example. Information about particular locations or concerns, such as identified 'party flats'⁵, could be discussed, and shared awareness of these raised. This also offered scope to engage with other agencies, such as Housing, where relevant.

Some residential workers also reported improved information sharing within and between children's houses following the introduction of the Agreement. These participants described instances in the past in which two young people, reported missing from two different children's houses, were found in the same location. In the past, residential staff might not have been aware that the young people had been together, but it was now more likely that this information would be shared. Participants considered improved information sharing through the Missing Persons Co-ordinator and at liaison meetings to

⁵ The term is used here to refer to locations where groups of people gather within a single property, and where vulnerable young people may be at particular risk of harm. Barnardo's (2014, p.7) describe 'party flats' as being amongst a range of "places where vulnerable and underage young people go in search of alcohol, a free lift, food, or a warm place to stay while 'missing', and therefore could be exploited."

be part of this, but also highlighted increased phone contact between houses and improved information sharing at shift handovers.

The liaison meetings were also thought to improve communication by providing a forum to exchange information and discuss any instances where residential workers or police felt that a situation had not been handled as well as it could have been, or where the Agreement had not been followed. In relation to this, one participant explained that the liaison meetings provided '*a great hub for actually ensuring that anything that becomes a small thing can get dealt with before it becomes a big thing*' (Participant O3).

The role of the Missing Persons Co-ordinator within the local police was particularly important, as they were a recognisable point of contact and had the opportunity to develop relationships with residential staff and young people, as well as the understanding and authority to feed issues and comments back to police colleagues directly. Some participants explained that in the past there was no overt mechanism through which these types of discussions could take place. The opportunity to share issues and concerns also helped everyone involved to better understand each other's roles and the context around looked after young people. In a discussion about the volume of paperwork to be completed, one police officer described an increased awareness of why robust recording was so important: '*I've developed my understanding of these kids and the problems*' (Participant P2).

Response to a Missing Report

There were mixed and complex views on communication and information sharing when a young person is reported missing. Police participants generally reported that residential staff were helpful and forthcoming when making a missing report and, in discussion with attending officers, could usually provide the information required. In some instances, however, officers had found that residential staff making the report did not have much information about the young person, and sometimes had never met them. This was attributed largely to new and locum staff, who might not have had the opportunity to get to know the young people in the house. One residential worker reported, however, that new or inexperienced staff would most usually be on shift with someone more experienced or established.

The arrival of new young people in a house was another reason understood by police to contribute to a lack of information when reporting that young person missing, and some officers queried what information is shared when a young person moves between placements, or during handover between shifts. In contrast, some residential staff described files for each young person in the residence, which were regularly updated by managers and could be accessed by staff reporting a young person missing.

Both residential workers and police participants referred to the reliance on memory in the provision of information at the point of a missing report. In some cases, they viewed this as appropriate, such as where residential workers knew the young person well and could

easily recall the most up-to-date information about their circumstances. There was a note of caution, however, around the possibility of potentially important details being forgotten. Sometimes, individual police officers might also know the young person well, often through responding to multiple previous missing reports for that young person. In these situations, police officers could also rely on memory of, for example, where the young person had been found in the past, or their friendship groups, as a starting point. Again, there was caution around this. Occasionally, residential staff presumed that police remembered a young person's previous missing episodes, which could result in them not sharing details relevant to the current episode. Similarly, there could be assumptions about officers having had access to records of previous missing episodes. Police participants explained that attending officers often arrived at the children's house directly from another incident, and had not therefore had the opportunity to return to the office and review past missing episodes in advance of speaking to staff.

Participants in both groups suggested that, sometimes, the appropriate and efficient sharing of information depended on which staff members or officers were involved in any given incident. While participants gave some clear examples of good practice, there appeared to be some inconsistency and misunderstanding around accessing and sharing information when a young person is reported missing.

When the young person returns

The Partnership Agreement emphasises the use of Return Interviews for understanding the context and circumstances around the young person going missing, as well as gathering information to inform prevention and any future missing persons investigations around that individual.

Police and residential workers in this study gave a range of perspectives on the information that can be gathered and shared from Return Interviews. They described that some young people will be entirely candid, and others only up to a point. One residential worker explained that in some cases there will be 'naïve disclosure', but that the young people will cease sharing once they realise the purpose of the discussion. Others explained that young people will only say 'what they want you to hear', or will give very broad and sometimes deliberately false responses. One young interview participant explained their approach to Return Interviews: '*I answer them, but I make things up [...] I just say whatever pops up in my head.*' (Participant Y8). Some participants noted that the young people were expected to sign the Return Interview form, giving permission for the information to be shared with the police, and that this could be a barrier to the young person participating in the discussion.

There were some discussions about who is best placed to conduct Return Interviews. There was a suggestion that some young people, particularly those in the younger age range or with less experience of going missing, might be somewhat 'in awe' of the police, and could find the experience of being interviewed by a police officer to be a deterrent to future instances of going missing. Some police officers also felt that Return Interviews

should be a police task, to ensure that appropriate and useful information would be gathered, although it was also suggested that residential staff could be offered additional guidance on collecting information of interest to the police.

Although police and residential care worker participants generally felt that young people would be more likely to take part in a discussion with someone they knew well, residential workers nevertheless reported that young people often declined to participate in Return Interviews with them. In relation to Return Interviews with residential staff, one young person explained: *'If they speak to me in a nice manner I'll let them, if not I'll just walk away.'* (Participant Y5).

Young people in this study generally felt that Return Interviews should be conducted by someone the young person knows and gets on with, and that police officers were usually not the appropriate person to do this. Some suggested that the young person should be asked to choose who should conduct their Return Interview. One felt that even if a young person chose not to participate in a particular Return Interview, the opportunity should still be offered following any future instances of being reported missing.

A number of participants, including some of the young people, expressed doubts about the usefulness of the Return Interview. In circumstances where young people were frequently being reported missing, for example, the non-completion of Return Interviews could mean that these 'piled up'. There were suggestions from some participants that the sharing of information between the police and residential workers was more fruitful. This could take place in person when the young person returned, but residential workers could also gain information through casual conversations over a period of time, or from other young people in the House, which could then be shared with police through the local Missing Persons Co-ordinator, as per the Partnership Agreement.

As one participant in the 'other' category highlighted, these interviews can play an important role in giving the young person a chance to talk about 'what's going on' for them, and in demonstrating to the young person that they are cared about. The formal Return Interviews, as described by most interview participants, seemed to focus more on the gathering of information for use in future episodes, while informal discussions and casual conversations demonstrated caring. These could allow residential staff to discover any issues which had provoked the episode of going missing, and to better meet the wellbeing needs of the young person.

Relationships and partnership working

Police, residential care workers and 'other professional' participants discussed partnership working and relationships between residential workers, police and young people. A small number of participants felt that there had been no changes to this recently, although they sometimes attributed this to the relationships having been good historically. Several participants gave examples of what they regarded as improved and effective partnership working and the development of better relationships. One residential worker described

'more mutual respect between police and the staff in the houses' (Participant R7). They described this as a significant strength of the Partnership Agreement, but noted that not everyone would see it that way. A police officer in the same local authority similarly felt that there was less of a feeling of *'them and us'* (Participant P6) than in the past. Participants in other local authorities also described more trust, understanding and tolerance between the professional groups. In one example, a young person was described as unlikely to be found at a parent's house. In the past the police may have visited this location as a matter of routine, but would now take on board residential workers' advice, and provide a more individualised response. As Participant R2 described, *'we're stopping a whole lot of unnecessary visits by the police to places where we know the kids are never going to be.'*

Another similar example highlighted the potential impact on police and residential care workers' relationships with families; one parent was described as proactively contacting the residential staff when the young person arrived at their home, knowing that the young person might then be considered 'absent' rather than 'missing', and police involvement or attendance at the parent's home could be avoided. Police visits to a young person's parents and friends can also impact on the young person's potentially already fragile relationships. Minimising unnecessary visits can help young people to build and sustain positive relationships with family and friends.

Further examples of effective partnership working included individual police officers working directly with a young person who had been going missing regularly, to build a relationship which was not based only on being reported missing. The participant described this as having reduced the number of times the young person was reported missing.

Other participants described the involvement of police officers, including but not limited to Missing Persons Co-ordinators and Community Officers, in developing relationships and building rapport with young people. Examples included police having a contact number available for young people to call, or visiting a children's house to have tea or play pool. This type of involvement from the police was highlighted as a positive change, and some young people were thought to have responded well to getting to know officers in a context other than missing reports and other incidents.

The kids have got a great relationship with them...Having the Community [officer] coming in at least allows the young people to see, you know what, they're not just here for, to give you a hard time, they're here cos they care

(Participant R7)

Some young people discussed their relationships with police as part of their interviews, and explained that some officers, particularly those who visited the house regularly, were 'sound'. They described those with whom they had the best relationships as the officers who listened, gave leeway, and treated young people fairly, with respect, or *'how you'd*

treat your own kids' (Participant Y3). Other officers, however, were perceived to be dismissive of the young people, aggressive in their attitude, or too quick to use physical interventions. Some were described as 'being cheeky' to young people and speaking to them in ways which aggravated, rather than de-escalated, the situation. One young person suggested that police should not be surprised if young people 'lashed out' after being spoken to disrespectfully or treated as criminals. Unlike police and residential workers, who described having a forum to discuss situations which were not handled as well as they could have been, young people felt they had no real mechanism to highlight treatment that they felt was inappropriate, and were encouraged to just brush it off.

One participant in an 'other professional' role noted the greater pastoral role of the police now compared to in the past. They highlighted, however, that this change could not be attributed only to the Partnership Agreement, as the participant had noted similar changes in another area that was not part of the pilot.

There was concern from a small number of interviewees that too casual a relationship between young people and police could affect the necessary 'professional distance' and influence the levels of respect young people had for the police. One suggested:

The kids can call us [staff] by our first names, that's fine cos we're like their corporate parents, but I don't think for the police it's really that appropriate

(Participant R5)

Some police officers who were involved in responding to missing reports felt that they had a good rapport with those young people whom they met frequently, but highlighted that they had few opportunities to get to know the young people beyond this. Some officers suggested that there were fewer opportunities to get to know young people well in bigger areas compared to smaller ones. Similarly, residential staff felt that although some young people were able to develop good relationships with the officers who could visit casually, these were rarely the same officers who would be responding to incidents and missing reports. Some of the young people who discussed their relationships with the police shared this view.

There was recognition that some young people would not respond to attempts by police to establish a rapport. One residential worker explained that, due to their past experiences *'there is some kids it's ingrained in them to hate the police'* (Participant R6), and these young people's perceptions would not be easily changed. Some 'professional participants' from a residential care background reported, however, that police were now more likely to recognise this, and to listen to residential workers' advice.

Risk assessment

Risk assessment is included in the Partnership Agreement in several ways, including as part of routine planning for individual young people. An assessment is conducted by residential care workers to determine whether a young person should be considered 'absent' or reported missing. If the young person is subsequently reported missing, there is then a police-led assessment to determine whether the young person is a 'low', 'medium' or 'high' risk missing person.

Some participants described the inclusion of risk discussions as part of a young person's routine planning as a strength of the Partnership Agreement, but there was limited evidence to indicate whether this was done consistently for all young people. There was also some indication that, for young people who moved frequently between placements, plans were not always reviewed or updated in good time.

Residential workers explained that, where risk assessment was recorded in a young person's plan, this would influence decision-making around reporting the young person missing, and might be discussed with police to aid understanding of the young person's level of risk. As outlined above, however, there did not seem to be a clear understanding amongst police of this discussion and record keeping, and some had not experienced this type of information sharing at the time of a missing report.

Participants generally felt that the approach to risk assessment for residential workers outlined in the Partnership Agreement was appropriate. It was not overly based on 'tick-boxes', and broadly covered the main factors that should be considered in assessing the level of risk. Some participants described the approach to risk assessment as very subjective, with decisions sometimes relying on the staff and culture in an individual children's house. There was a general feeling, however, that there is flexibility to take account of individual circumstances, and that it would be hard to retain this if the process were to become more formalised or akin to a 'scorecard'. Most participants who expressed a view on this regarded it as important that the risk assessment process had a focus on 'what does this mean for that individual?', rather than on 'yes/no' questions.

Participants, including some police participants, indicated that it was appropriate for residential care workers to be making this assessment of risk, as they know the young people best and are aware of the most up-to-date information, including anything that may have happened for the child that day (such as trouble at school, contact/family time, etc.). One residential worker emphasised that their role, particularly for night shift workers, involves '*risk assessing constantly*' (Participant R4) by having an awareness of what is and has been happening in the house.

We know the kids, we know what the dangers are, it's us that can assess whether or not they're in danger or whether they should be brought back or whether we can say, okay, they're fine, they can be left as long as we get a telephone call.
(Participant R6)

Some participants indicated that residential workers and police had different understandings of risk. There was some suggestion that the police understanding of risk meant that if a young person had been in touch and 'sounded okay on the phone' then this could be regarded as 'absent', but that this did not take into account that individual young person's vulnerabilities.

The police's level of risk are different from Social Work level of risk, cos their 'high' is immediate death basically, our 'high' is well, 'They never normally go missing, they're only 13, we don't know where they are', that's our, you know, that would make them 'high' to us

(Participant R7)

Some police participants also shared the view that interpretations of risk vary between organisations. One explained that in determining the level of risk of a young person reported missing, 'Every child that goes missing from local authority care is medium risk, without exception' (Participant P5). This view was echoed by a number of other police participants, who felt that children and young people were usually considered to be at 'medium' risk due to their age, and would be considered high risk if circumstances warranted it, but rarely (if ever) low risk. This led some to question the usefulness of the low/medium/high assessment.

In general, however, there was a feeling that the different interpretations of risk were not in themselves a problem, as long as the assessment resulted in the appropriate response for each young person. The emphasis from most residential workers and police participants was on the importance of consistently assessing each individual young person based on the most up-to-date information, rather than making assumptions based on that young person's history of going missing. This required identification of any differences between the current occasion and previous episodes that might impact on risk (such as difficulties experienced by the young person that day, access to medication, etc.).

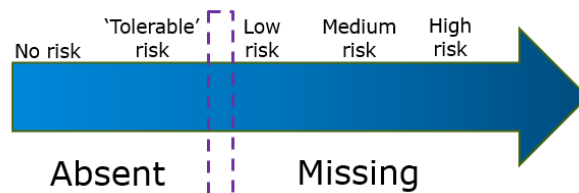
Discussions around risk assessment also related closely to the decision-making processes around whether a young person is 'absent' or 'missing', and their level of risk (low, medium or high) once reported missing. We discuss this further below.

Professional roles and responsibilities

Police and residential workers described their roles in relation to young people being 'absent' or 'missing', and how these had changed since the introduction of the Partnership Agreement. Some also discussed how the roles were understood by themselves, and by others involved in the Partnership Agreement. These discussions mainly focused on roles in relation to decision-making, and around actions taken when a young person is 'absent' or 'missing'.

Decision-making

Despite the improved relationships described above, particularly between residential child care workers and police, there remain some tensions around decision-making. This relates mainly to the decision to escalate the categorisation of a young person from 'absent', which does not require a police response, to 'missing', which necessitates alerting the police. The Partnership Agreement describes the threshold between these as a determination of 'tolerable risk' by the residential care workers.



There was a general perception from police participants in evaluation interviews that the 'absent' category was not well used, and that residential staff were reluctant to consider a young person 'absent', but instead would err on the side of caution and report the young person missing.

We thought that the 'absent' [category] would be used a lot more, so that we wouldn't get reports of regular people, unless there was another issue like, there's a known associate who think's a criminal, or something like that, something to raise the bar, but we just get reported everybody's missing generally now

(Participant P7)

This view was shared by a few participants from the residential care category, who felt that decisions to report young people missing could be influenced by a 'risk averse' or 'blame culture' context in which they had to make these decisions. One pointed out: '*...one of these days something's going to happen, and if you haven't been looking for them then it's, it's going to hit the fan*' (Participant R5). Similarly, some police participants felt that if something 'went wrong' following a missing persons report, police would get the blame.

Many of the residential worker participants described the greater responsibility placed on them by the Partnership Agreement to make the decision between absent and missing. For some, this was an appropriate recognition of their more up-to-date and personal knowledge of the individual young people, and their professional role. Participant O3 explained, '*I feel it's a better system. It allows that kind of professional judgement to be recognised*'.

Some participants noted the importance that residential work colleagues needed to feel confident, empowered and supported to make that decision. They emphasised that such

decisions should be shared between all staff on shift at the time, rather than made in isolation by one staff member. A few described the mechanisms in place to ensure that these issues were attended to, but also felt that colleagues did not consistently experience this sense of empowerment and support.

In contrast to the perception of an appropriately increased level of professional autonomy for residential workers, some police participants seemed to feel that the Partnership Agreement eroded opportunities to use their professional judgement. They described this particularly in relation to residential care workers making the decision to identify a young person as missing.

I find it almost incomprehensible that an outside agency is dictating a Police response, I don't know when we lost a grip of our own decision-making process

(Participant P5)

There was some evidence from both police and residential worker participants that this decision is not always accepted by call handlers and officers, although some participants reported that this was happening less frequently now than in the past. Participants gave examples of residential workers being asked to wait for a longer period of time before categorising a young person as missing rather than absent. There were also examples given of young people who were in visual range being reported missing because they were refusing to return, and residential staff were unable to leave the building due to staffing numbers. Police participants who described this type of scenario felt that these young people should not have been categorised as missing. Some described the need to query whether a young person was 'really missing' at the point of being reported, and one participant in the 'other professionals' category described conversations along similar lines with foster carers in non-pilot local authorities:

"Are they actually missing?", is the conversation that you're really having, "Or are they just not back yet?"

(Participant O5)

The concept of what constitutes 'really missing' was discussed by a number of participants, and is described further in the 'Other themes' section.

There was a view amongst some participants that the responsibility for the decision-making process is now more balanced between residential care workers and police. In particular, residential workers make the initial risk assessment to determine whether a young person is 'absent' or 'missing', but once a missing report is made, there is police-led decision-making on the 'level' of risk (low, medium or high) and the response. As discussed above, the confidence of residential workers to be able to risk assess together and feel supported by colleagues and management in their decision-making was important. Relatedly, being able to clearly articulate to police the reasons for considering the young person to be 'missing' rather than 'absent', and the risks and vulnerabilities relevant to the individual young person in that specific instance, was regarded as vital in

ensuring clarity of communication and making sure that missing reports would be responded to appropriately. This also included ensuring that police were made aware if a young person being reported missing had already been considered 'absent', for how long, and what had changed that they were now considered missing. Most police participants valued the role of residential workers as being the people with the best knowledge of the individual young people; the tension here seemed to lie in the use and articulation of that in determining that a missing report is appropriate.

Actions in response to absent/missing

Along with discussions about decision-making, participants gave their views on professional roles and responsibilities in relation to the actions taken at the point of a young person being reported missing. Police generally felt that residential staff were as helpful and informative as they could be when providing information about a missing young person, but some also questioned the actions that were taken ahead of the missing report being made.

As described above, some police felt that residential workers called the police too quickly. Some felt that there had been no attempts made to contact the young person's friends or family to determine their whereabouts, or that such actions were not communicated clearly to officers responding to the missing report. Others reported that these actions were sometimes taken, and that in some areas there had been improvements in this, but that staff groups in some houses were better at this than in others. Police generally felt that it would be useful to have a clear list of actions for residential staff to take in advance of the police arriving, including a list of phone calls made, that could be shared with officers.

Most residential staff who participated in interviews reported that they were generally happy to do some 'phoning around' and checking of locations the young person was known to frequent, if there were enough staff to make this realistic. They noted, however, that the majority of young people are reported missing in the late evening or at night, when fewest (and often only two) members of staff are on shift. This limited the feasibility of one leaving the house. They also noted the need to ensure that disruption to the other young people in the house is kept to a minimum. When there were too few staff to allow one to leave, this meant that police were sometimes called to retrieve young people from known locations. Some officers queried this and expressed frustration that residential workers did not seem to leave the house to proactively collect or search for young people. One gave an example of staff knowing the whereabouts of the young person, having spoken to them on the phone. The young person was refusing to return, and police were called to retrieve them. This officer's personal view was that this young person should have been considered 'absent', and the residential staff should have gone to fetch them. Police participants held mixed views about whether this was appropriate. While some felt that this was the responsibility of residential staff, others felt that there could be risks associated with this.

What protection do they have? They don't know whose houses they're going to, they don't know who's going to come to that door

(Participant P2)

Some police also recognised that there were often too few residential staff to make this a realistic prospect, especially at night. One described this as being a 'staffing issue' rather than a 'willingness issue'.

Generally, residential worker participants were happy with the actions and response of the police when a missing persons report was made. Some police, however, described their frustrations with procedural and record keeping matters. Sometimes officers were obliged to return to the office following attendance at a children's house, to enter the Missing Person report and relevant information on to computer systems. This was recognised as important in ensuring that the information about the young person was circulated quickly, but was also thought to cause delays in actively searching for the young person. This was an issue when officers were already aware of locations the young person was known to frequent, which some felt could usefully be checked quickly before returning to the office. This was sometimes a matter of a 'judgement call' by individual officers.

Most police participants who discussed the recording of information on computer systems regarded it as laborious and time-consuming. Information was reportedly required to be entered across several different systems which did not automatically cross-populate, and software was described as outdated and complex to use. Some officers reported pressure to complete records in a particular way due to management scrutiny of these, which increased the amount of time spent on this. Participants discussing these issues felt that there was scope to streamline how information is captured and circulated, including what is input by officers themselves, and what can be recorded by call handlers and the control room.

Other themes

Absent, missing, 'really missing' and flexibility

Several participants, in different roles and areas, used the phrase 'really missing' in various contexts, implying that being reported 'missing' was not the same as being 'really missing', which was the cause of greater concern. This status was contrasted with:

- Truancing – which was described or implied by some participants to be 'normal teenage behaviour' (discussed further below in relation to the involvement of other agencies)
- Just not back yet / a bit late
- Whereabouts known but refusing to return
- Not missing, but misbehaving

Although not explicitly using the term 'really missing', this concept was also implied by some of the young participants, who considered themselves to be '*just out having a good time*' (Participant Y1). Most of the young people who took part in interviews made a clear distinction between spending time with friends and not wishing to return, and running away, being in an unknown location, or being in danger. Some felt that it was a waste of police time for young people who were with friends to be reported missing, particularly if they were keeping in touch to report their whereabouts and confirm they were safe. In response to an example of a young person at a friend's house and missing their curfew, one participant explained:

She's no' running away from anybody, she just doesnae want to come in. She's no' missing.

(Participant Y2)

There are nuances here in relation to the themes discussed above, regarding which circumstances result in a missing report, and which result in a young person being considered 'absent'. Some residential care workers and 'other' participants clearly regarded the introduction of the 'absent' category as having enabled a more individualised and flexible response to young people. One participant (in the 'other professionals' group) highlighted the need to recognise that teenagers, who are the most common age group living in residential houses, often have trouble with timekeeping and following rules, and that a degree of leeway is often appropriate. Another regarded the 'absent' category as providing scope for a sensible and proportionate response to the needs of individual young people. Describing one young person for whom the 'absent' category had been used, one participant explained:

To assume that every time he left that building he was a clear and present danger to himself and/or others would have been nonsense.

(Participant O4)

Young people who participated in evaluation interviews were asked to describe what happens at each stage when someone is reported missing. One of the most frequent responses from young people suggested that this was not straightforward to describe, because of the variety of factors involved. As Participant Y5 explained, '*...it all depends what, what circumstances it is*'. This suggests that the young people's experiences are varied, that the response from staff and police depends on individuals and their circumstances; this appears to contrast, however, with some of their other descriptions of having been reported missing.

There was some indication from these discussions that the introduction of 'absent' can offer the scope to respond appropriately to those young people who might be considered by some to be 'not really missing', but who are nevertheless in need of some response to ensure their safety.

Several participants did query the usefulness of the 'absent' category, however. Some of these concerns seemed to relate to the issues described above, such as the perception

that 'absent' is not well used, lack of awareness of when it is being used, caution about using this category, and that understanding and use of the category is not consistent. One residential staff member questioned the usefulness of 'absent', feeling that young people themselves do not seem to be concerned by being identified as such; they know there will be no police involvement unless and until they're reported missing. In contrast, another felt that young people had a clear understanding of the use of 'absent', describing some young people as having become more proactive in keeping staff informed of their whereabouts, once they understood that this might avoid police involvement by allowing staff to categorise them as 'absent'.

Missing from foster care

Few participants in this study discussed the issue of missing young people solely from a foster care perspective, although many of the professionals had experience of working alongside foster carers, and it is likely that the young people had some experience of foster care. There was some sense from participants who discussed this that a young person going missing from foster care is much more unusual, and therefore places proportionately less demand on resources than young people going missing from residential settings. Participant O5 noted *'we don't have that many foster kids that go on a wander'*. Nevertheless, several participants emphasised that some young people do go missing from foster care, and that the Partnership Agreement includes those young people.

Some participants indicated that when a young person goes missing from foster care, this is regarded or handled differently to a young person being reported missing from a residential setting. One police officer participant suggested that this was regarded as more akin to a young person going missing from home. Examples of difference included that there is a greater likelihood of the young person returning of their own accord, or of foster carers searching for and returning the young person. This implies that young people may be 'absent' from foster care, and that the situation is resolved without a formal missing report ever being made. It is not clear, however, whether foster carers are categorising or recording young people as 'absent', or sharing this information in the valuable ways described above in relation to young people in residential settings. The Police Scotland data summary report which formed the early stage of this evaluation did not contain statistics on young people reported missing from foster care, and there was little evidence in this phase of the evaluation that foster carers or foster care managers are involved in routine liaison meetings where this sort of information is shared and discussed. Furthermore, a foster carer who took part in this study reported a historically good relationship with local police, and an appropriate response to a young person who was repeatedly reported missing. On occasions when the situation was handled less well, however, this foster carer felt that they had no real mechanism to discuss the issue. They described sharing their concerns with a supervising social worker or making a formal police complaint as the only avenues available, which they would only use in extreme circumstances.

Some participants felt that, due to the self-employed nature of a foster carer's role, there would be less expectation on them to complete paperwork and report statistics in relation to young people going missing. The involvement of an out-of-hours social work team in supporting foster carers when a young person is missing was suggested by some participants as a means by which such information could be collated and shared.

Involvement of other agencies

Participants were asked to consider whether all the appropriate agencies were involved in the Partnership Agreement, or whether there were others who should be more closely involved. Most participants were content that the main and most relevant agencies were involved in the Partnership Agreement, although, as discussed above, there remained scope to improve shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of those involved.

Amongst those participants who identified other categories of groups and agencies that could be more closely involved in the Partnership Agreement, the most frequently discussed was Education. Participants used this broad term in relation to individual schools as well as local authority-level education departments. The issue of young people going missing from education settings is explicit in the Partnership Agreement document, but participants in this study reported mixed experiences of this in practice.

One participant estimated that, in their experience, up to 40% of missing young people had gone missing from an education setting, and others described the issue of young people being taken to school but not entering the building on arrival. As described above, there was some suggestion that a young person who was not in attendance at school may be engaging in normal teenage truanting behaviour. Some participants described variations in the timing and consistency of school staff identifying that a young person was not at school. This meant that a young person's whereabouts may have been unknown for some time before residential staff and, where appropriate, the police were notified of this.

The Partnership Agreement states that the response to a young person missing from an education setting should be a matter of advance planning, but there was little suggestion that this was happening consistently. It should be noted, however, that no representatives of education settings were interviewed as part of this evaluation, and their own perspectives on this issue may therefore warrant further exploration.

Some participants suggested closer involvement of advocacy agencies such as Who Cares? Scotland, and local services offering support, diversionary activities, child sexual exploitation (CSE) awareness and prevention, and antisocial behaviour prevention. Participants thought that these agencies and services might help to reduce the likelihood of further episodes of going missing by individual young people, and could be approached as required, rather than necessarily being formally included in the Partnership Agreement.

One participant expressed caution around the involvement of too many different agencies in the Agreement, and highlighted that, in terms of appropriate information sharing, this should be kept limited.

Prevention of missing episodes

Some residential staff participants described how, since the introduction of the 'absent' category, they were able to explain to the young people in their care that they were less likely to be reported missing if they kept in touch with staff while away from the house. One residential staff member felt that this was an important opportunity for the young people to demonstrate that they can take responsibility for themselves. The young people were described as receptive to this, and had become more consistent in phoning in to keep staff informed of their whereabouts. Participant Y8 similarly explained, *'If you answer the phone, they're less likely to report you missing.'* Another young person, however, described having been reported missing while sleeping over at a friend's house, despite having phoned to inform staff that this was their intention. This young person suggested that this was an over-reaction and a waste of police time.

Other participants described a variety of approaches that had been implemented for young people who were repeatedly reported missing, including adjusting curfews and exploring alternative options for family contact. Some participants described approaches intended to disrupt behaviour patterns, including periods of respite away from the influence of particular social groups, and longer-term placement moves. Two participants reported that interventions of this type had been successful. Participants also reported that diversionary activities and developing relationships to better understand the young person's reason for being away were also useful strategies. Some police participants, however, expressed frustrations around the time taken to decide on and implement these sorts of interventions. One gave an example of a young person who was being taken by taxi to school but not attending. Although there was general agreement between social work and police that a change of school would help, the police officer felt that social workers were 'not willing' to implement this until it had been discussed at a Children's Hearing.

There was also clear frustration from some participants in all 'professional groups' interviewed that little can be done to prevent young people from leaving the premises. Approaches including locking the doors, locking shoes away, and physically holding the young people, were described as ways in which the number of young people being reported missing might be reduced. Some participants felt that such actions would be carried out by parents, if necessary, to keep their child safe. A small number of police and residential staff participants also suggested more use of secure placements as a means of reducing missing episodes.

Some police officers expressed scepticism about the idea that there was nothing residential workers could do to stop young people from leaving, suggesting that they

have parental responsibilities for these young people and can therefore take 'reasonable measures' to stop them leaving. One participant commented:

'Apparently they're not prisoners, so I must have been a prisoner as a child cos I wasn't allowed [out] after 8 or 9'

(Participant P4)

The possibilities of locking doors as a protective measure, or limiting the times a young person is allowed to go out, were also suggested by some of the young interview participants, although one noted that being 'grounded' was not taken seriously by young people. A foster carer who participated in this study described a young person in their care as asking to be 'locked up' because she didn't trust herself. The participant concluded:

I don't actually know what they can physically do for these children that are screaming out for help, but they [the children] just can't see why they should be helped.

(Participant O1)

The participant related this to the young person's self-worth and sense of self-esteem, noting that young people can't be forced to engage with therapy or other interventions, and often don't believe themselves to be worth helping. Another participant was clear that preventive work was largely beyond the scope of the Partnership Agreement as it stands. Instead, they suggested that to be robustly addressed, changes would be needed in resource areas such as mental health supports and appropriate therapeutic placements.

Clearly, some participants thought the Partnership Agreement contributed to the prevention of further missing episodes for individual young people through improved monitoring, information sharing, and the inter-agency discussions of individual young people's circumstances. In relation to improved recording leading to the identification of patterns and an increased focus on diversionary activity, one residential staff member commented:

'I think it's been quite successful [...] I think it can only get better, the more experienced we get, the better we'll become'

(Participant R4)

Discussion and Conclusions

Participants generally felt that the Partnership Agreement offered a sensible approach for responding to young people going missing from residential care. Few participants in this study discussed the Partnership Agreement in relation to young people going missing from foster care, and there was some evidence to suggest that the foster care context is not fully integrated.

Research and case reviews in relation to CSE have clearly demonstrated that '*multi-agency working and information sharing is crucial to safeguarding vulnerable children and young people*', but this is challenging to put in place (Dodsworth & Larsson, 2014, p.28). Changes in practice resulting from the Partnership Agreement have provided a forum for improved collaborative working, and the development of relationships between police and local authority staff. This offers increased opportunities for information collection and sharing between agencies, and for collaborative approaches to recognising and preventing CSE.

There remain some challenges and inconsistencies in the implementation of the Agreement across and within agencies, however. Despite increased partnership working, there is scope to improve the understanding of the roles and expectations of different agencies, and the contexts, circumstances, and vulnerabilities of young people who are reported missing. Such increased understanding could improve the experience of missing reports for police, residential workers and young people.

The findings of this evaluation are wide ranging, and the themes identified are nuanced and interrelated. The discussion of these can nevertheless be related to the key components introduced by the Partnership Agreement. These are:

- Information capture
- Risk assessment and the absent category
- Return interviews, follow-up and prevention

A further two areas are also included as part of this discussion: relationships, and the broader context surrounding the Partnership Agreement.

Information capture

Although there were some inconsistencies around the capture and sharing of information at the point when a young person is reported missing, participants generally felt that the sharing of collected information had improved. The establishment of liaison meetings and the role of the Missing Persons Operational Co-ordinator were important for ensuring that information acquired by residential workers or police at any time could be recorded and shared. This increased partnership working had also led to some improvements in relationships between police and residential workers, shared understanding of each

other's roles and contexts, opportunities for wider discussion of responses to individual young people, and chances to resolve issues at an early stage.

The challenges around partnership working and information sharing tended to be found in relation to the different professional groups' understanding and expectations of each other's roles and responsibilities, and the context in which they work. This was the case particularly for those in operational, 'on the ground' roles. Malloch and Burgess (2011, p.66) similarly note, in their discussion of responses to young runaways in Scotland, that while protocols for joint working '*were developed at strategic management level, it was suggested that their implementation could 'fall down' at grass-roots practitioner level.*'

In their recent study of children in England who were missing due to running away, Chetwynd and Pona (2017, p.17) found '*a lack of awareness of the vulnerability of missing children among the police staff.*' In the present study, some police officers felt that they had a good or improving understanding of the context surrounding looked after children and young people, but this was not the case for all. Some participants in all 'professional' groups had overt misunderstandings in important areas such the boundaries and expectations of each other's roles, and the legal status and processes associated with looked-after young people and their carers.

The variation in training and awareness raising at the introduction of the Agreement may account to some extent for the differing levels of awareness and understanding amongst interviewees. Following their national scoping study in Scotland, Malloch and Burgess (2011, p.66) report that when protocols for joint working are established, it is important to include '*joint training to support their implementation in practice and the need for clarity in agency responsibilities.*' In this evaluation, professional participants valued such opportunities for joint training, which allowed police, residential workers, and sometimes staff in other roles, to discuss hypothetical situations from their own perspectives. This, along with the improvements associated with increased partnership working, could help to address the areas in which a lack of shared understanding has been found, including:

- Roles of different professional groups, and the legal boundaries of these
- What information is collected by different professional groups, and what should be accessed and shared when a young person is reported missing
- The circumstances and contexts around looked-after children and young people, broadly and individually

Partnership working seemed to be helping police and residential workers to improve their understanding of the young people, and of the challenges associated with each other's work, but the findings of this study show that there is room for further improvement.

Risk assessment and the absent category

Hayden and Goodship (2015, p.454) suggest that the use of the absent category in England may be '*useful at least in reducing incident reports and releasing police time to*

work more constructively with social care staff. In contrast, amongst police participants in the present study, the use of absent was not perceived to have reduced the number of missing reports. Nevertheless, the introduction of the absent category offers the opportunity to respond in a flexible and individualised way based on knowledge of each young person's circumstances and vulnerabilities.

The risk assessment process informing this categorisation was regarded as appropriately flexible, but could be influenced by risk averse decision-making. Furthermore, residential workers and police held different perceptions of risk. As Hayden and Shalev-Greene (2018, p.46) noted in their report on people going missing from institutional locations:

in relation to assessing risk the police are advised: "If in doubt, think murder" [...] Care agencies, in comparison, tend to focus on vulnerability to abuse and exploitation, or a risk of neglect.

This difference was not thought to be a problem, however, as long as the emphasis was on providing the right response to each individual young person. HMIC (2016, p.8) describes that *'children who are clearly at great risk of immediate harm generally receive a good response; but incorrect risk assessments for some children are leaving them at risk of harm'*. In the present study, professionals generally felt that children and young people received an appropriate response.

There were also some tensions around the decision-making roles of residential workers and police at the time of a missing report being made. As part of Barnardo's 'Safer Choices Missing Service' in the Renfrewshire Council area, Moodie and Vaswani, (2016, p.43) similarly found that *'some very positive relationships were reported between children's houses and the police which ensured good communication and decision-making while others reported struggling to convince the police to accept a severity level they felt was warranted'*.

Hayden and Shalev-Greene (2018, p.50) explain that *'predicting risk is notoriously difficult because one is trying to predict individual and rare events'* and that *'because of this the police will have to exercise a good deal of professional judgement in missing persons cases'*. In this study, the professional judgement of residential workers was also highlighted. The increased responsibility involved in making the decision between absent and missing was regarded as appropriate to the professional role of residential child care workers, as those with the best knowledge of individual young people. There is scope, however, for staff to feel more supported and confident in making the distinction between absent and missing, and articulating their reasoning (including the risks for the individual young person at that time) to the police.

Participants in this study also referred to young people who were 'really missing' when the subject of a missing report, in contrast with those who were not considered to warrant the description 'missing'. This distinction has also been identified in a number of previous studies in Scotland and beyond. Biehal and Wade (2000) identified two broad

groups in their study with young people going missing from residential and foster care in England, which they categorised as 'runaways' and 'with friends'. Malloch and Burgess (2011, p.64) found in their scoping study that *'from the outset, participants indicated that the term "missing" contained variations in meaning'*. Their participants made distinctions between young people who are 'not where they're meant to be' and, for example, those who have run away, whose whereabouts were known, or those who are genuinely missing. Mitchell et al. (2014) similarly noted that some young people in their interviews with 'young runaways' had made a conscious choice not to return in time for their curfew. In the present study, these distinctions may relate to what can be regarded as usual teenage behaviour. Young people considered that they could be reported missing when they were out socialising with friends and having fun. Decision-making around absent and missing is closely related to how risk is assessed and articulated, when young people see themselves as being out with friends and not missing.

Return interviews, follow up, and prevention

Two main purposes of Return Interviews are recognised in the Partnership Agreement: the gathering of police intelligence, and the offering of support to the young person who had been missing. This was not an easy balance to strike, and it was not clear from participants how and by whom interviews should be conducted to simultaneously fulfil both purposes. Beckett et al. (2015) suggest, however, that such dual-purpose interviews can be achieved, but report that this does not happen consistently.

Young people were generally expected to be more likely to participate in an interview with someone already known to them. In contrast, in their evaluation of a pilot 'Return Home Welfare Interviews' (RHWI) scheme for young runaways in two areas of north east Scotland, Burgess et al. (2010) found that police officers and dedicated interview staff were able to engage with young people. Reporting on the same study, Mitchell et al. (2014) suggest that specialist training, and the boundaries of the interviewers' role, helped to facilitate this. The findings of the present study align more with those of Beckett (2015), who found that in relation to safeguarding and seeking support, most children would not approach police directly, but would prefer contact with the police to be mediated by someone they already know.

The involvement of a familiar interviewer was no guarantee that the young person would engage, however. Participants in all groups suggested that young people rarely disclosed information to anyone conducting such an interview, but that it was nevertheless important to offer the opportunity to discuss the episode of being missing and any other concerns the young person might be feeling. Mitchell et al. (2014, p.64) note that *'for some it appears that there were benefits, such as providing space to disclose further information and additional opportunities to engage'*, but highlight, too, some questions around *'the value of RHWIs for those already involved with social services and, in particular, those living in residential care'*. Return Interviews for young people may vary in usefulness depending on whether the young person has been 'with friends', or whether they have been away for another reason, as described above. Furthermore, formal return

interviews are only one element in a range of possible follow-up activities and discussions.

In relation to information sharing for follow-up with young people and the prevention of further missing reports, some participants suggested that discussion between police and residential staff was a more useful source of information. Residential staff may have information from casual conversations with young people, for example, about posts on social media, which can be considered alongside police use of social media in missing persons investigations. As discussed, partnership working and the availability of established communication routes can facilitate the sharing of relevant information. In some cases, there has been effective partnership working for individual young people, for example, in building relationships and providing diversionary activities.

Young people's relationships with the police

Some young people were thought to have well-established negative feelings about the police. This view was articulated by young participants, as well as by those in the 'professional' groups. The young people who participated in this study felt that some police treated them unfairly, or in a heavy-handed manner. Beckett (2015) found that some young people's experiences of the police when reported missing were of an attitude which implied that they as individuals were problematic or troublesome, or treated them in a punitive way, as if they had committed a crime, rather than as vulnerable people who may be in need of understanding and support. Young people in the present study suggested that, where a young person had negative experiences of being in contact with police following a missing report, they did not have the same opportunities to feed back and discuss this as did the participants in 'professional groups'.

Who Cares? Scotland (2018) note that for many care experienced young people, their interactions with the police are often in relation to being missing, or the police visiting the place where the young people live. They further report that *'young people who abscond from children's homes are more likely to be known to police so even if they have not absconded they will more than likely be stopped by police'*. This can lead to *'being stopped in public with friends so the police can check they are not missing, causing the young person to feel embarrassed, anxious and criminalised'* (Who Cares? Scotland, 2018, p.5). Children and young people in residential care are criminalised at a higher rate than their non-looked after peers (Howard Leage for Penal Reform, 2017).

Often, a negative first experience of the police can influence a young person's perception of the police in the future. In the present study, positive experiences with police officers were described as those in which the officers take the time to be understanding and build a relationship. Young people felt that they had good experiences or a good rapport with some individual officers, but that this was not universal. Who Cares? Scotland (2018, p.3) explain: *'Our research tells us that fundamental to Police Scotland fulfilling their corporate parenting duties, is the rebuilding and strengthening of their relationships with care experienced people'*. There was evidence from evaluation participants of some

activity taking place which was helping to build relationships between the police and young people. Important here is not that police should necessarily avoid knowing the young people, but that the development of good relationships, getting to know the young people in non-stigmatising ways, and responding without pre-judging, is key.

Broader context and resourcing issues

Several issues around resourcing were identified as part of this work, in relation to preventing young people from going or being reported missing, as well as in relation to the response when a young person is reported missing. These included the number of residential staff on shift and their availability to go out looking for a young person, and more broadly, the availability of appropriate placements and access to mental health support.

Similar issues have also been identified in previous studies. Hayden and Shalev-Greene (2018) describe several barriers to preventing people going missing, and to locating them when they do. In relation to young people (and adults) being repeatedly reported missing from institutional locations, these included the desire to be elsewhere, especially for people placed a distance from family and friends, and the limited scope for staff flexibility when there are few staff on shift. As part of the present study, we heard informally about instances of flexible responses, such as the sharing of staff between houses, and the availability of extra staff at times of particular need, but this was not reported to be a routine occurrence.

Many of the challenges reported as part of this evaluation are not directly within the remit of the Partnership Agreement, but relate to wider systems and societal issues. As well as the Partnership Agreement, other influential factors in the same sphere, such as increased training and awareness around CSE, were also mentioned by some participants, and may have contributed to the improved understanding amongst police of the risks and vulnerabilities to young people, and particularly to those who are looked after. Nevertheless, participants in this evaluation indicate that important improvements have been enabled and facilitated by the Partnership Agreement, but that challenges remain in the detail of its implementation.

Recommendations

B the Evaluation Advisory Group

The Advisory Group welcomes the findings of this evaluation. We consider there to be a number of benefits to the approach described in the Partnership Agreement. In particular, we recognise the Partnership Agreement as a multi-agency Agreement in which multiple Corporate Parents share roles and responsibilities, and which has several interacting components which should not be viewed in isolation.

The adoption of this approach as best practice across Scotland would contribute to ensuring appropriate responses for individuals, and to the promotion of safeguarding the wellbeing of children and young people in residential and foster care.

We will seek now to revise the Partnership Agreement, and the training materials associated with it.

Communication and information sharing

- Awareness of the Partnership Agreement should form part of stakeholders' standard induction processes for new staff. Regular multi-disciplinary training, including refresher training, should be undertaken.
- Partnership working, including the regular meeting of a local liaison group, is a key component of the Agreement. This promotes communication, a shared understanding and meticulous exchange of intelligence. This is key to any future roll-out of the Agreement.
- The use of return interviews should be reviewed in light of ongoing other work in this area, to ensure that they are purposeful and, most importantly, meet the needs of children and young people. Formal return interviews should be considered alongside other follow-up activities and discussions.

Risk Assessment

- Stakeholders should ensure that there is consistency, understanding and confidence around risk assessment, and that staff feel empowered and supported in their decision-making.
- Planning for individual children and young people, and ensuring their views are heard, is key. Stakeholders should ensure that each Child's Plan and Risk Assessment is kept updated, and that relevant information is shared where appropriate.

Professional roles and responsibilities

- Training should be undertaken jointly (including for example with residential workers, foster carers, social workers, out of hours social workers, fieldwork social workers, supervising social workers for foster carers, police and missing person coordinators), to ensure: shared ownership and accountability; clarity of roles and responsibilities; each other's working remits and boundaries, and the context surrounding looked after children and young people.

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Appendix 1: Advisory Group membership

Lex Baillie, Chief Inspector, National Missing Persons Unit, Police Scotland

Yocksan Bell, Missing Persons Operational Co-ordinator, E Division, Police Scotland

Paul Collins, Missing Persons Operational Co-ordinator, Q Division, Police Scotland

Richard Grieve, Missing Persons Operational Co-ordinator, D Division, Police Scotland

Liz Lafferty, Service Manager (Children & Justice), South Lanarkshire Health and Social Care Partnership

Mark MacAulay, Resource Manager, Dundee City Council

Frank Phelan, Team Manager – Residential Care, City of Edinburgh Council

Lorraine Sharkey, Sergeant, National Missing Persons Unit, Police Scotland

Gavin Smith, Inspector, National Missing Persons Unit, Police Scotland

Appendix 2: 'Absent' in the Scottish context

The introduction of an 'absent' category is a main feature of the *National Partnership Agreement for Children and Young People who go Missing from Foster and Residential Care in Scotland*. The Partnership Agreement describes the use of this category as a decision which is made by foster carers or residential staff, based on their consideration of the young person's circumstances. It is used where there is considered to be no apparent risk, or a tolerable level of risk, and only where it has been previously agreed that this might be appropriate for the individual young person

Similar terminology was introduced in England and Wales in 2013, with an updated definition in March 2015 (HMIC, 2016). This use of an 'absent' category has been the subject of some concern, particularly around the appropriate assessment of risk and the actions taken as a result. HMIC (2016, p.7), for example, found that 'serious inconsistencies in the way that forces use the "missing" and "absent" categories are leaving some children at risk of serious harm'. The incorrect assessment of risk was reported as a factor in this. Furthermore, an enquiry into this use of 'absent' reported that:

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

(The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2016, p.9).

A range of other concerns, for example, around recording, reporting and appropriate follow-up for young people, were also found, particularly in relation to looked-after young people who were reported missing.

The decision to categorise a child or young person as 'absent' or 'missing' in England and Wales is a police decision, made at the time a missing report is received. Actions in response to an 'absent' young person are agreed between the police and the person making the missing report, and carried out by the reporting person. Although there is some overlap in terminology, these differing uses of 'absent' should not be conflated.

Appendix 3: Technical notes

- Fieldwork for this evaluation took place between September 2017 and March 2018.
- The purpose of this element of the evaluation was to explore experiences of the Partnership Agreement specifically. In relation to the young people who took part, the aim was not to explore their reasons for running away or going missing, their engagement with return interviews, or their personal experiences generally – although some chose to discuss these experiences as part of their contribution.

Methods

In order to capture the experiences and opinions of those involved with the Partnership Agreement, we sought to hear directly from a range of relevant people, through semi-structured interviews. Initially, we hoped to engage with:

- Young people in residential and foster care who had experience of being 'absent' or 'missing'
- Residential care workers (including managers and night shift workers)
- Foster carers
- Police officers
- Other professionals, such as social workers

Participants were offered the opportunity to take part face-to-face or by phone, individually or with others. They could choose whether they were willing to be audio recorded, or whether they would prefer that the researcher take handwritten notes instead.

All the young people took part in individual interviews within their children's house or school. Two young people chose to have a member of staff sit in during the discussion, but these individuals were not participants in the evaluation. The interviews with young people ranged from 10 to 22 minutes in length.

Interviews with those in the 'professional' category were conducted face-to-face with individuals, pairs and groups, mostly in participants' workplaces. Interviews ranged from 28 minutes to 1 hour 10 minutes; the longest interview was with a group of 5.

All participants consented to be audio recorded. Interviews were fully or partially transcribed, and analysed thematically with the aid of the nVivo11 software package.

Participants

Potential participants were initially engaged mainly through email contact via members of the advisory group. In some cases, pre-existing meetings of relevant staff groups provided a forum for researchers to describe the evaluation and highlight the call for participants. At the end of the first phase of fieldwork in December 2017, there had been

a good level of participation from residential care workers and police, and some participants from 'other' professional groups.

There were no young people involved in the first phase of fieldwork for this evaluation. The challenges of involving young people in residential care in research on sensitive topics have been recognised by researchers (e.g., Kendrick et al., 2008 and Vaswani, 2018) and, in order to ensure that the views of young people were included in the evaluation, we conducted a second phase of fieldwork. In the second phase, we broadened the scope of the study to include participants who did not have personal experience of being or responding to an absent or missing young person.

In addition to expanding the scope in this way, the approaches to involving young people in the study were altered to include:

- More direct contact between researchers and managers/deputes in individual children's houses
- Stronger emphasis on young people's rights to voice their opinions, and the opportunity offered by this study in relation to that
- Amendments to the consent process, to try to make this more straightforward

In order to explore the main topics and themes around the Partnership Agreement with those who did not have personal experience of it, we developed vignettes as a means of eliciting discussion.

A total of 8 interviews with young people and 20 interviews with professional participants took place across the three local authority areas. The table below shows the number of interviews in each area. (The number of individual participants is given in the Introduction and background section.)

Number of interviews in each local authority area

	Dundee	Edinburgh	South Lanarkshire	TOTAL
Professionals	8	6	6	20
Young people	2	4	2	8
TOTALS	10	10	8	28

The young people who took part in interviews ranged in age from 10 to 16 years old. Some had personal experience of being reported missing, while others did not; participants were not asked directly about their personal circumstances, but some chose to share this as part of the discussion. Others discussed their understanding and perception of responses to young people going missing more generally.

Ethics process

This project was approved by the University Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde in July 2017. The project was also approved through the relevant processes in each of the three local authorities.

The inclusion criteria, recruitment approach and interview methods were amended to broaden the scope of the study and to address low participant numbers. These amendments were submitted to the University Ethics Committee and approved in December 2017.

About CELCIS

CELCIS, based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, is committed to making positive and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of Scotland's children living in and on the edges of care. Ours is a truly collaborative agenda; we work alongside partners, professionals and systems with responsibility for nurturing our vulnerable children and families. Together we work to understand the issues, build on existing strengths, introduce best possible practice and develop solutions. What's more, to achieve effective, enduring and positive change across the board, we take an innovative, evidence-based improvement approach across complex systems.

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