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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins

Evidence from Paige Monaghan, Dr Sara Waring, Dr Susan Giles (University of Liverpool), and Dr Freya O'Brien (Liverpool John Moores University)

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**Please note: The response to this inquiry has been formulated from a PhD funded study looking into multi-agency responses to missing children investigations at the University of Liverpool.** Paige Monaghan is supervised by Dr. Sara Waring, Dr. Susan Giles and Dr. Freya O'Brien. Their expertise is in risky and uncertain contexts, evidence-based policing and missing people. The authors have published collaboratively into three academic journals on multi-agency responses to missing children investigations:

- Waring, S., Monaghan, P., Yates, A., Girgiel, N., Giles, S., O'brien, F. (2023). Examining what factors affect inter-agency working in missing children investigations, *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, Volume 17, paad044, <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paad044>
- Waring, S., Fusco-Maguire, A., Bromley, C., Conway, B., Giles, S., O'brien, F., Monaghan, P. Examining the Impact of Dedicated Missing Person Teams on the Multiagency Response to Missing Children. *Camb J Evid Based Polic* 7, 5 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41887-023-00090-5>
- Monaghan, P., Waring, S., Giles, S., & O'Brien, F. (2024). What works in improving inter-agency responses to missing children investigations: A scoping review. *The Police Journal*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X241241016>

**Key question addressed:** Display your views on missing children.

**Focus:** Multi-agency responses to missing children investigations. The focus of findings presented will be on the third publication, *What works in improving inter-agency responses to missing children investigations: A scoping review*

## **1. Factors that facilitate and hinder multi-agency working in missing children investigations.**

The responsibility to prevent a child from going missing, locating them when they do go missing and providing support upon their return is the responsibility of several agencies including police, social workers, care homes, third sector, healthcare, education and charities. There is an expectation that all agencies will work together. However, police perceive responsibility to be falling on their shoulders (essentially being the default agency) when a child/young person goes missing placing strain on resources. Serious case reviews and public enquiries acknowledge that agencies need to work better together to improve outcomes for children, however agencies consistently report struggling to work together. Our research attempts to look at what are the factors that facilitate and hinder inter-agency working, and what can be done to improve the working relationship between agencies. We know that where agencies work better together, this improves outcomes for children.

From interviewing 13 police personnel comprising of call handlers, dispatch supervisors, bronze inspectors, missing person team officers, detective inspector, missing person coordinator and front line response officers and 11 partner agencies comprising of social workers, local authority managers, care home staff members and emergency accommodation staff members we identified what factors facilitate and hinder multi-agency working. We detail our findings below.

### ***1. Facilitator: Single point of contacts between agencies***

All participants interviewed highlighted that inter-agency working was facilitated by having a point of contact within each service that they could communicate with directly, whether that be via telephone, face-to-face

meetings, or e-mail. Most notably, participants noted the importance of this for improving inter-agency information sharing. The most common way partner agencies are expected to provide information to police in relation to a missing child is to call the non-emergency service number (101), which is problematic and inefficient. Since 101 receives a large volume of calls, partner agencies spend substantial time on hold waiting to speak to someone who then needs to transfer them to the relevant person to repeat the same information. This could sometimes lead partners to question whether it was worth passing on information. When practitioners had a direct point of contact, they did not need to repeat the same information so the relevance and timeliness of information sharing was improved.

## *2. Hinder: Technology*

Across policing roles, feedback highlighted that inter-team information sharing was affected by technology. The police force participating in this research utilizes two operating systems to document missing person investigations: ControlWorks and Niche. ControlWorks is a control system used primarily by senior command and call handlers to support 999/101 calls. Niche is a record management system. Despite the intention being for risk assessments and warning markers documented during a call to be manually transferred from ControlWorks to Niche during closure of the incident, this does not always happen. ControlWorks was reported to hold vast amounts of disorganized, duplicated information that is difficult to filter, which increases the potential for documented risk factors to be missed. Consequently, police are required to cross-reference both systems to interpret information, which is time-consuming. There are a number of different policing roles involved in the response to missing children, and each party potentially has access to different information that someone else may need, sometimes quickly in dynamic situations. Feedback highlighted the need for systems to be integrated to improve ability to quickly share and access information. Police officers suggested the implementation of trigger plans to provide a concise summary of the most relevant information to increase clarity on the systems.

### ***3. Hinder: Lack of a shared definition of what it means to be ‘missing’***

When asked to define what the term ‘missing’ meant, all participants provided a similar definition that corresponded with the UK CoP (2021) definition, that missing refers to ‘anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established’. Nevertheless, feedback from police officers interviewed highlighted that, in practice, ‘whereabouts unknown’ was insufficient for classifying a person as missing. Police believed that ‘out of character’ was an important factor, despite this no longer being part of the national policing definition. In contrast, partner agencies placed emphasis on ‘whereabouts unknown’ in justifying the need to report a young person as missing if they were not where they were expected to be. These differences in conceptualizing missing across agencies created obstacles for inter-agency working, generating inconsistencies in expectations that could create tensions between agencies (for example, care homes reporting a young person as missing that police did not recognize as meeting the criteria).

### ***4. Hinder: Lack of understanding roles and responsibilities***

All participants highlighted the importance of understanding one another’s roles and responsibilities for effective partnership working and believed that further work was needed to achieve this, both within and between agencies. Within the police service, front line response officers and call handlers reported being unfamiliar with other policing roles, which could sometimes affect their ability to know what information to elicit. Staff from unregulated accommodations also felt that police did not understand limitations in their power to set curfews and decide whether to report young people as missing. In addition, across partner agencies, feedback highlighted difficulties understanding policing decisions due to lack of awareness of police powers and policies. This lack of understanding meant that expectations often differed and could create frustrations.

### ***5. Service demand***

All participants interviewed highlighted that a key barrier to inter-team working, both within and between agencies, was the level of demand being

placed on finite resources. Pressure on resources meant that agencies felt they needed to prioritize meeting internal goals over inter-agency working. Whilst police recognized what they should be doing to fulfil their responsibilities, they felt they were expected to meet '*impossible demands*' with limited staff. All parties worried that missing children were not always prioritized in the way they should be as a result of demand. Partner agencies recognized the pressure that police were under and that this affected their ability to share information and meet the expectations of external partners. Police also recognized the importance of social workers and care home staff in supporting missing child investigations, but that lack of resources meant these partner agencies were often unable to invest the time and effort needed.

### ***6. Fear***

All practitioners noted having a '*worst-case scenario*' mindset in relation to missing children. This was encapsulated by the fear of '*what if*' a missing child is categorized as 'no apparent risk' or 'low risk' and subsequently becomes injured or killed. This fear produced a mantra of '*possibilistic*' over '*probabilistic*', with decisions being driven by unlikely worst-case outcomes. For example, care home staff believed that repeatedly reporting a child as missing, even when concern was low, would prevent personal liability if something untoward happened to the child. Police interviewees felt that partner agencies risk adverse approach to reporting all children as missing when they were not where they were expected to be fractured relationships between agencies as they perceived this as passing responsibility to police and increasing demand on police resources.

### ***7. Discrepancies in responses to missing***

Feedback from all participants highlighted there were inconsistencies in responding to repeat missing children within and between agencies. Risk level appeared to vary across police interviewees with specialized safeguarding roles having more complex understanding of risks associated with repeat missing incidents. This knowledge led to disparities with repeat

missing children being viewed as low risk for non-specialized roles and high risk for specialized roles. Consequently, specialized police roles often needed to reassess incidents and argue for the risk level to be increased due to safeguarding concerns causing intra-agency tension. This perception also compounded inter-agency hostility during implementation of curfew procedures for repeat missing children. Partner agencies noted that safety plan protocols required them to report children as missing if they missed curfew. However, police participants perceived this type of reporting meant that many cases reported to them did not warrant police intervention, perceiving them to be of low/no apparent risk. Care home and accommodation staff often felt stuck in the middle, with social workers pushing them to report a child that missed curfew and police pushing not to report.

***Summary:***

Drawing on interviews conducted with 24 representatives from across police, local authorities, social services, and care homes the current study aimed to identify facilitators and barriers to inter-agency working within the missing children context. Overall, findings highlight seven key factors that affect inter-agency working: (i) direct points of contact; (ii) technology; (iii) inconsistent definitions of missing; (iv) understanding of roles and responsibilities; (v) service demand; (vi) fear; and (vi) discrepancies in responses. Findings also suggest that police and partner agencies define 'partnership effectiveness' in terms of ability to easily share relevant, reliable, timely information and to coordinate actions to achieve the common goal of safeguarding children. We therefore argue that more research is needed in understanding how agencies work together, what the problems are to collaboration and looking a ways to improve this. We call for more single points of contacts between agencies, better use of technology (and the possibility of using a single system), the potential for agencies to review the term 'missing' and facilitating inter-agency visits to better understand each other roles and responsibilities.

## 2. What works at improving inter-agency responses to missing children investigations

While there is limited research dedicated to multi-agency responses to missing children investigations, the little that is available is often dedicated to the problems. This means that little is known about 'what works' in improving multi-agency responses. Agencies that wish to improve their interactions face difficulties in knowing what to do. Therefore, we did a scoping a literature review to highlight what works at improving multi-agency responses to missing children investigations.

The scoping review involved looking at databases, grey literature, sending out FOI requests to police officers, referencing harvesting and consulting with experts. We attempted to answer the question: **What approaches can be or have been applied to missing children investigations to improve the working practise between police and partner agencies to reduce harm, and/or demand?**

We found that a single intervention/ pilot/ scheme was unable to help as they were often contradictory. But instead common human processes is what can be applied to multi-agency working within missing children investigations to improve the working relationship between police and partner agencies.

### *1. Importance of information sharing techniques*

We found that providing consolidated, timely information was highlighted as a mechanism for maintaining effective police-partner working relationships during a missing child investigation. Results highlighted the positive impact effective information sharing had on working relationships, including improving case response time, minimising task duplication and facilitating standardised risk assessments. This fostered shared understanding of risks across agencies and enhanced trust, leading to more efficient professional responses. However, several sources identified poor information sharing as a barrier to effective multi-agency working. Many organisations hold valuable information, but it is not routinely shared in a consistent or consolidated

manner. A reluctance to share information was associated with fear of breaching data protection laws. Intelligence gathering documents (e.g. public protection notices, missing reports and return home interviews) were noted as often incomplete/inconsistent, impacting the overall quality of information exchanged. Recommendations to improve information sharing included:

- Improving data recording and reporting to facilitate relevant information sharing (e.g. providing access to shared e-mail systems and computer drives for all staff to view, limiting single-person access).
- The need to address inter-agency data protection worries was also recommended through utilising clear, uniform data-sharing protocols.

## *2. Cross-agency technology*

Results also found that effective technology is a key factor in improving the working relationship between police and partners. Agencies employing effective technology were more likely to maintain up-to-date information, which was reported to facilitate quicker risk assessments and support timely recoveries. However, some sources reported that the use of multiple IT systems and databases by police and partner agencies was cited as an obstacle to effective collaboration (despite multiple databases and IT systems being used across most police forces in the UK). Multiple systems often held disorganised and duplicated information, making data filtering and retrieval challenging which could result in loss of information.

Recommendations to improve technology included:

- Improving IT systems by advocating for the integration of multiple systems into a central joint database to enhance sharing and accessing information.
- Another recommendation included allowing agencies read-only access to each other's databases to promote live information sharing. Several real-world scenarios demonstrate early adoption of this strategy, with Dorset Police sharing their missing person database with social

services. Similarly, FOI results show personnel at Merseyside Police have read-only access to a local authority recording system. Additionally, a return home interview service provider was given permission to input data into a police forces reporting system for intelligence purposes

### ***3. Single points of contact***

The implementation of a single point of contact from another agency to another was highlighted as a best practice approach for enhancing police-partner relationships. Three sources highlighted negative implications of not having a single point of contact, resulting in dissemination of incorrect information. Having a single point of contact could eliminate these obstacles as agencies could share information directly, reducing repetition and duplication. Streamlining communication through a single point of contact enabled a quick response, encouraged openness and information sharing between all agencies, and built trust and rapport. Moreover, a single point of contact allowed agencies to become familiar with one another, promoting a better understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, and fostering positive working relationships. Real-world examples from FOI requests highlight the importance of a single point of contact with Cambridgeshire implementing a Vulnerability Focus Desk, which provided a single point of contact between frontline resources and specialist advice from the Protecting Vulnerable People department. Results highlighted a decrease in repeat missing episodes, with the average missing time reduced from 27 h to 9 h. FOI results from Merseyside Police also highlighted having designated Missing Person Co-ordinators based with partners in a local authority building to improve single point of contacts. Recommendations to improve single points of contacts included:

- Implementing more single points of contacts between police and partner agencies at both operational and strategic levels.

### ***4. Regular and broad multi-agency meetings***

Multi-agency meetings emerged as a crucial process for maintaining good police-partner working relationships. Eleven sources self-reported improved working relationships following the implementation of multi-agency meetings, asserting that they promoted communication between services. They also fostered a mutual understanding of each other's roles, outlining clear outcomes and responsibilities for each agency. They offered opportunities for broader discussions, enabling agencies to address instances where a situation had not been managed effectively, thus alleviating tensions. However internal meetings and demands of agencies made attendance at meetings challenging, leading to delays/absences that could leave children exposed to ongoing risks. Third-sector organisations also reported not being routinely invited, despite having valuable information to share. Delays in circulating meeting notes with wider partners were also reported which was reported to both increase the risk of miscommunication regarding identified risks and impede the establishment of good working relationships. Key representation from agencies was reported to be imperative, as detailed child protection plans are formulated and reviewed in these meetings. Recommendations to improve multi-agency meetings include:

- Ensuring that a wide range of stakeholders and third-party organisations should be included to ensure vital information about missing children is shared. The Missing from Home Service in Oldham reported a reduction in missing persons incidents when police were integrated into the monthly missing from home meetings attended by key partners.

### ***5. Shared understanding of terminology***

Sixteen sources identified the importance of having a shared understanding of the term 'missing' to enhance inter-agency working. When agencies shared a similar understanding in policy and practice, organisational consistency improved, facilitating better communication. Additionally, clear definitions helped standardise risk assessment procedures, aiding in

appropriate responses to missing child cases. Conversely, a lack of consistent understanding of the term ‘missing’ posed a clear obstacle to inter-team coordination. Both police officers and partner agencies deemed the current definition provided by the College of Policing (2021) unsuitable, citing varying interpretations that lead to disparities in discerning when a child should be classified as missing and subsequent actions. This means police and partner agencies have an element of interpretation in practise, leading to differing approaches across sectors. There was also variation in how ‘repeat missing’ is defined and implemented across agencies, with some defining it as more than one missing episode, whereas others require several (e.g. FOI sources highlighted Merseyside Police view ‘repeats’ as three times in 30 days, whereas Essex Police view it as three times in 90 days and Durham view it as three times in 60 days). To enhance inter-agency response, recommendations include:

- Advocating for a policy-level intervention to alter the current definition
- Establishing a shared agenda. This involves interpretation protocols, such as setting clear age guidelines, an agreed time limit before ‘absent/no apparent risk’ becomes ‘missing’, and defining what ‘locating’ means.
- Facilitating inter-agency visits to develop awareness and understanding.

## ***6. Roles and responsibility clarification***

An in-depth understanding of roles and responsibilities is crucial for effective partnership working. When agencies have clear cognisance of their roles, they can respond suitably to missing child reports, prevent misunderstandings and enhance coordination. However, a lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities obstructed partnership functioning. This misunderstanding led agencies to view others as neglecting their duties in responding to missing children. One study, Kim (2017) found 51% of participants from police and partner agencies held negative

perceptions of inter-agency collaboration due to role and responsibility misunderstandings, hindering a sense of shared goals. Recommendations for clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities in missing child investigations include:

- Increase training to comprehend the roles, responsibilities and limitations of different agencies thereby enhancing awareness. Specifically, mapping the allocation of roles promoting mutual understanding and respect for each other's roles, responsibilities and limitations.

### *7. Joint training*

Inter-agency training is important to support effective responses. The training mentioned within the study related to either administrative training (e.g. how to fill out forms and better elicit information that is useful) or awareness training (e.g. how to improve knowledge of what it means to be missing and subsequent harms involved). Both forms of training were reported to enhance police-partner relationships, leading to improved information sharing and consistent understandings. Two sources reported collating and sharing more information readily as a result of joint training. Additionally, agencies reported feeling more informed and confident concerning missing children and related issues, such as criminal exploitation. However, most sources emphasised a lack of cross-agency training in missing children investigations. In two sources, reliance on single-agency e-learning was seen as a hindrance to training consistency, resulting in varying levels of awareness and understanding. Furthermore, partner agencies self-reported disparate intelligence gathering methods as a result of a lack of training on what information to gather to effectively serve as police intelligence. Recommendations include:

- Implementing multi-agency training aimed at developing cross-agency competencies in identifying and gathering critical intelligence beneficial to police would lead to shared ownership, accountability and clarity of roles.

## Summary:

This scoping review provided a comprehensive overview of approaches to enhance the working relationship between police and partner agencies to better support missing children. Findings indicate that effective inter-agency working during missing child incidents can be fostered through mechanisms such as (i) providing access to shared e-mail systems for all staff to view rather than limiting access to a single person; (ii) implementing cross-agency data-sharing protocols; (iii) the use of a single joint database; (iv) allowing agencies read-only access to each other's databases; (v) setting up dedicated single points of contact; (vi) conducting inclusive multi-agency meetings; (vii) establishing a cross-agency shared agenda of what it means to be 'missing'; (viii) facilitating inter-agency visits; (ix) mapping roles and responsibilities across agencies; and, x) facilitating cross-agency training.

However it is important to note that many of the recommendations have not been evaluated for their effectiveness. Further focus is needed on developing rigorous empirical research to examine what mechanisms improve inter-agency working, evidencing their impact on key outcomes, and the cost-effectiveness of such approaches. It is important to move beyond assumed rhetoric that inter-agency working is a best practice approach by systematically reviewing evidence to understand the impact and outcomes of inter-agency collaboration within a missing child setting.