

More than 'Safe and Well': Evaluation of Barnardo's Missing Service

Children and Young People's Centre for Justice

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Introduction

A significant proportion of people who go missing each year are children, with Missing People (2022c) finding that children accounted for 60% of all missing episodes. Children face particular vulnerabilities when they are missing, including risks to their physical safety and psychological wellbeing, alcohol and substance use along with the risk of child sexual or criminal exploitation. Furthermore, children who go missing are often already experiencing harm or vulnerability, with these factors leading to them going missing in the first place.

The Barnardo's Missing Service, in partnership with Police Scotland and North Lanarkshire Council, commenced in February 2021. The service was set up to respond to children who go missing in North Lanarkshire, accepting referrals for all children who go missing regardless of assessed risk or the circumstances of their missing episode. The service was commissioned as part of wider improvement activity, through the Contextual Safeguarding approach, being made in North Lanarkshire to support and protect young people who may be at risk in the community.

The primary response of the Barnardo's Missing Service is to offer a voluntary return discussion to children once they have returned home. The purpose of the return discussion is to provide the child with an opportunity to speak about their missing episode, and to help identify any ongoing needs, risks or supports required. Importantly, this return discussion may not be a one-off event but a series of discussions between the child and their Missing worker. In addition, the Tri-partnership sought to ensure a consistent response to children who go missing in North Lanarkshire, via a multi-agency approach and increased information sharing between Barnardo's, North Lanarkshire Council, Police Scotland and other agencies where appropriate.

The Tri-partnership commissioned the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) to evaluate the impact of the Barnardo's Missing Service. The main aims that guided this research were:

- To profile the needs and risks of young people who go missing in North Lanarkshire and engage with the service.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the Return Discussion completed by Barnardo's as well as the follow up support either through social work or universal services and the contribution of the Missing Persons meeting.
- To evaluate the effectiveness and perceptions of the Barnardo's Missing Service in North Lanarkshire.
- To consider the strengths and areas for development for the Tri-partnership.

In order to achieve these aims, interviews were conducted with professionals who were in some way involved with the Barnardo's Missing Service, along with children and families who had received a return discussion. Data was also drawn from 17 redacted social work case files for analysis.

This report will first provide a brief review of the literature relating to children who go missing and how they are responded to, before outlining the methods of the evaluation and an overview of the Barnardo's Missing Service. Findings will then be presented and discussed, and lastly recommendations for the future of the service and the Tri-partnership will be suggested.

Literature Review

Children who go missing

Definitions

'Missing' can refer to a very diverse range of experiences. The category of 'missing person' has over time expanded to incorporate those who intentionally 'run away' alongside those who are forced or coerced into going missing (Malloch & Rigby, 2020). This has been criticised by some who argue that a distinction between intentional and coerced missing episodes should be maintained, given the latter are likely exposed to a much greater risk of harm when missing (Kiepal, Carrington, & Dawson, 2012; Stevenson & Thomas 2018). In practice, however, clear distinctions between these groups are often not possible; sometimes victims of coercion or exploitation do not consider themselves to have been forced, whilst those who initially 'run away' willingly are at heightened risk of experiencing coercion and exploitation once missing that then prevents them from returning home safely (Malloch & Rigby, 2020). In these instances, an overarching definition of 'missing' that can encompass the diversity and nuance of differing missing experiences may be more appropriate. Thus the Scottish Government's [*National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland*](#) (2017) outlined a working definition of missing that encompasses intentional and forced missing episodes of any duration. This guides how missing persons are recorded and responded to in Scotland, and also guides this research. Within this, a 'missing person' refers to:

"Anyone whose whereabouts are unknown and:

- where the circumstances are out of character; or
- The context suggests the person may be subject to crime; or
- The person is at risk of harm to themselves or another".

(Scottish Government, 2017, p. 8)

This report will refer to missing children, using the UNCRC definition of a child as anyone under the age of 18, however the authors acknowledge that some who access the Barnardo's Missing Service in North Lanarkshire may regard themselves as young people.

Prevalence amongst children

Children face particular vulnerabilities and risks when they go missing and tend to make up a significant proportion of missing person reports. Missing People (2022c) find that of the

170,000 people who go missing each year, 70,000 are children who collectively account for more than 60% of all missing episodes. These numbers are likely to be higher given research suggests many children who go missing do not get reported, with up to 70% of episodes not reported to the police (Rees, 2011). Children are also more likely to go missing again, with repeat missing episodes linked to an increased risk of harm (Missing People, 2022c; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). In Galiano López et al.'s (2021) analysis of missing person reports at one UK police force, they found almost two thirds of missing episodes involved children who had been missing before. Repeat episodes were concentrated, with 6% of children in their sample going missing ten times or more, accounting for 33% of all missing episodes involving children, suggesting a high level of unmet need for this group. This reflects similar findings in other studies (Bezczky & Wilkins, 2022; Boulton, Phoenix, Halford, & Sidebottom, 2022; Sidebottom, Boulton, Cockbain, Halford, & Phoenix, 2020). This suggests that for a significant proportion of missing children, missing episodes become a repeated occurrence.

Prevalence by characteristics

There is a wealth of literature exploring whether the prevalence of going missing among children is associated with different characteristics. A significant factor appears to be age, with the likelihood of going missing increasing as children move into adolescence (Biehal, Mitchell, & Wade, 2003; Boulton et al., 2022; Mitchell, Malloch, & Burgess, 2014). In Scotland, the 12-17 year age group had the largest number of missing episodes of any age group in the year 2020/21 (National Crime Agency, 2022). Moreover, Boulton et al. (2022) found that as the age of those in their sample increased, so did the length of the missing episode. For younger children, going missing can particularly threaten their physical safety, and Stevenson and Thomas (2018) found repeat missing persons were likely to have started going missing at a younger age. The relationship here between age of onset, repeat episodes, and risk thus demonstrates the importance of early intervention to prevent a pattern of going missing from forming.

Studies have also explored the relationship between going missing and gender, providing a mixed picture. Several studies have found prevalence between boys and girls is fairly similar, with limited differences in terms of the length of absence and the average age at first episode (Malloch & Burgess, 2011; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). Galiano López et al. (2021), however, found a significant relationship between gender and repeat missing episodes, with 74% of those who had gone missing ten times or more, girls. It has also been suggested that girls are reported missing sooner, potentially influenced by assumptions about their vulnerability to harm (Barnardo's, 2014). However, Moodie and Vaswani (2016) found the opposite to be true, with boys reported sooner than girls. In Scotland, for the year 2020/21, there were more missing person reports¹ for males, at 55.1%, compared to 44.1% for females. A further 0.6% of these reports involved trans people, and in 0.2% the gender was unknown (National Crime Agency, 2022). There appears to be limited research exploring the relationship between trans and gender diverse children and going missing.

There also appears to be limited research on the relationship between ethnicity and children who go missing. For all missing person reports, including adults, the National Crime Agency (2022) reported that in England and Wales,² people from Black, Asian or Mixed Race

¹ Breakdown of gender by age not published.

² Data from Police Scotland was not made available to the National Crime Agency

backgrounds are significantly overrepresented, with Black people making up 3% of the population but 14% of all missing reports. This is particularly significant given that a mistrust of police might make these groups more hesitant to report a missing person in the first place (Missing People, 2022a; Mitchell et al., 2014). Missing People's (2022a) recent report also highlighted that in addition to overrepresentation, many families felt they experienced racial discrimination when they reported someone missing, with police de-prioritising their case and/or failing to assess their family member as being at risk or vulnerable.

Research has also explored the prevalence of missing amongst looked after children, who are consistently overrepresented in missing person statistics. Missing People's (2022c) report states that around one in ten looked after children are reported missing, which is extremely high compared to the national average of one in 200 children. They are also more likely to go missing again and, in Galiano López et al.'s (2021) study, children in residential or foster care placements accounted for more than half of those who had been reported missing ten times or more. Research has found this increased prevalence is linked to a range of different motivations and risks, which will be discussed in the next section.

Reasons why children go missing.

The reasons that lead a child to go missing are individual to each person. However, research has identified some common, interlinked factors that might trigger a missing episode. These are sometimes understood as 'push' or 'pull' factors – those that 'push' a child to leave home, and those that 'pull' or attract a child to somewhere new (Moodie & Vaswani, 2016).

Issues in the family home are some of the most common factors associated with going missing (Boulton et al., 2022; Kempf-Leonard & Johansson, 2007; Missing People, 2022b; Mitchell et al., 2014; Rees, 2011). This could be where an argument or outburst leads to a child 'walking out', or could be where a child intentionally goes missing as a response to more long term issues at home, such as: parental neglect or abuse (Rees, 2011); parental substance misuse (Malloch & Burgess, 2011); bereavement (Smeaton, 2013); and caring responsibilities (Mitchell et al., 2014). Similarly, issues with care placements are some of the most common reasons why looked after children go missing, especially where there is conflict between the child and their carers or peers. This can be particularly acute at the point of transition into care, which can be a stressful and confusing experience, with children often going missing to reconnect with their family members (Moodie & Vaswani, 2016; Taylor et al., 2014).

Another reason many children go missing is due to issues at school, particularly if a child is going missing during school time. This can be linked to bullying, conflict with peers and difficulty following school structures and timetables, which may be especially challenging for neurodiverse children (Mitchell et al., 2014). In addition, many children also go missing to engage in prohibited behaviour. This can include meeting up with friends, travelling further or staying out later than agreed, using substances, or engaging in offending behaviour (Hayden & Goodship, 2013). For many children this is perceived as 'ordinary' adolescent behaviour and is not them actively 'running away' or going missing. In Boulton et al.'s (2022) study, for example, 40% of children who received a return discussion did not think they had been missing. This is important and raises the question of whether, in these instances, parents were being too quick to report a child as missing or, alternatively, whether the child did not understand the seriousness of the circumstances that led to them being reported (Boulton et al., 2022).

Research has also established that mental health issues underlie much of the 'push' and 'pull' factors discussed (Boulton et al., 2022; Malloch & Burgess, 2011; Meltzer, Ford, Bebbington, & Vostanis, 2012). In 2020/21, Police Scotland reported that 56.4% of male missing persons and 42.5% of female missing persons had an indicator of poor mental health, with actual figures likely higher, given that this may not be disclosed or apparent to police (National Crime Agency, 2022). For children with poor mental health, going missing can be perceived as a way to get away from their problems. In Stevenson and Thomas' (2018) study, children with poor mental health were more than two and a half times more likely to go missing again compared to those without mental health vulnerability. Linked to this, research has consistently found that many children who go missing have adverse childhood experiences and histories of trauma and abuse (Hutchings, Browne, Chou, & Wade, 2019; Meltzer et al., 2012; Moodie & Vaswani, 2016; Rees, 2011; Smeaton, 2013). This is related to going missing in a variety of ways, where past trauma can trigger a 'flight' response that leads to a missing episode, and where children may run from ongoing adversity and disruption they are experiencing at home.

Risks faced / impact of going missing

The risks of being missing are complex and nuanced. Many children are already exposed to risks, some of which may lead them to go missing and/or be exacerbated in the process (Sturrock & Holmes, 2015). Missing People's (2019) analysis of 200 return discussions highlights that children are exposed to a significant level of risk when missing; children who had been assessed by police as at low or medium risk frequently disclosed experiences of serious harm when missing, during their return discussion. This can include the risk of physical harm, where children may spend time in unsafe locations, sleep rough and engage in substance use (Boulton et al., 2022; Rees, 2011). It can also include emotional and relational harm – increasing a sense of isolation for children who are struggling, and/or intensifying family conflict (Meltzer et al., 2012; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018).

Furthermore, an increasing concern is the risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) for children who go missing (APPG, 2012). This is a concern before the child goes missing (where exploiters may be grooming them to leave home) and a concern during their missing episode (where exploiters may be aware of their heightened vulnerability and take advantage of this) (Boulton et al., 2022; Smeaton, 2013). Going missing, then, is understood to be an important early indicator that a child may be being sexually exploited (Hutchings et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2014). This relationship appears to be particularly strong for children in care. Crewe (2022) reports that of confirmed victims of CSE who were in the UK care system between 2018-2020, half had a history of going missing. This link is highly concerning; however, it should be noted that the majority of children who go missing are not victims of CSE. In Boulton et al.'s (2022) study, for example, 3% of children who had gone missing were known to have experienced CSE.

Another risk associated with going missing for children is involvement in offending behaviour. This can be as a result of child criminal exploitation (CCE) (The Children's Society, 2019), with missing children being targeted by organised crime groups, or could involve breaking the law in order to survive, for example stealing money or food (Kempf-Leonard & Johansson, 2007; Malloch & Burgess, 2011). Commonly, however, this can involve substance use, with children using substances as a means to cope whilst missing, or going missing in order to use substances and engage in other risk-taking behaviours (Boulton et al., 2022; Malloch & Burgess, 2011). Further, being reported as missing increases children's contact with police and therefore their likelihood of being charged for low-level offending behaviour like substance

use. The criminalisation of children who go missing is raised as a serious concern in various studies (Colvin, McFarlane, Gerard, & McGrath, 2018; Malloch & Burgess, 2011; The Howard League, 2017). This can have long term impacts for children, with Stevenson and Thomas' (2018) longitudinal study finding that over two thirds of children who went missing had an offending history ten years later.

Responses to missing episodes.

Value and purpose of Return Discussions

Research on appropriate responses to missing episodes is increasing. In the UK context, the established response in most areas is to offer a missing person a return home discussion. In the Scottish Government's (2017) *National Missing Persons Framework*, an expectation was placed on all local authority areas to set up multi-agency partnerships that would provide return discussions to children and ensure specialised support is provided when required. These return discussions are considered a valuable tool in supporting missing persons for a variety of reasons (Mitchell et al., 2014). Return discussions can offer the opportunity to disclose harms experienced either before or during a missing episode (Missing People, 2019). This is particularly important for children, given the fact that going missing can be an indicator of CSE, CCE or other forms of abuse (Smeaton, 2013). A considerable number of studies have found return discussions, when held with a trained professional, can elicit disclosures that services would have otherwise been unaware of, and that this information can be used to safeguard against future harm (Beckett, Warrington, Ackerley, & Allnock, 2015; Missing People, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014). In Missing People's (2019) study, they identified high rates of disclosure during return discussions, with 90% of children agreeing that what they had discussed could be shared with police and/or local authorities. Importantly, disclosures of serious harm came from children who had initially been assessed as 'only' low or medium risk. This suggests the value of return discussions being available for all children, regardless of risk assessment (Malloch & Burgess, 2011).

Further, a return discussion can be a useful learning event for children; the worker can highlight the risks associated with going missing, and provide the child with strategies for keeping safe in the future (Moodie & Vaswani, 2016). A return discussion can also provide an opportunity to facilitate productive communication and mediation between a child and their family, where family conflict has been identified as an issue (Railway Children, 2015). Moreover, if ongoing support is required for the child or their family, the worker conducting a return discussion is well placed to identify needs and refer on to other support services (Railway Children, 2015; Scottish Government, 2017).

The effectiveness of return discussions in reducing the likelihood of the child going missing again is, however, less well evidenced. Given the complex nature of going missing, causal relationships between interventions and reduced missing episodes are difficult to discern. Children often require intense, specialised support to deal with whatever led to their missing episode(s), and this can take time (Missing People, 2019; Moodie & Vaswani, 2016). Despite these challenges, however, The Children's Society (2013) found that 60% of children who had received a return discussion *and* ongoing support had stopped or reduced their missing episodes. This suggests the importance of return discussions being provided alongside the opportunity for continued support, rather than as one-off meetings.

How Return Discussions are conducted

Whilst there is consensus in the literature that return discussions can be useful, identifying who is best placed to provide these discussions is much harder. Return discussions are usually provided by police, social work or third sector organisations.

Several studies have suggested that having an existing positive relationship with the child can be beneficial, with the child more likely to agree to a return discussion, and more likely to open up during the discussion (Boulton et al., 2022; McIver & Welch, 2018). For children with an allocated social worker, this might be the best person to carry out the return discussion, especially as they would have access to background information that may help to contextualise the missing episode. However, many children and their families are suspicious of social work, and might struggle to trust that any disclosures made will not lead to negative repercussions (Moodie & Vaswani, 2016). A similar problem arises for police officers providing return discussions, where negative perceptions or experiences of the police can limit the likelihood of disclosure, especially if the child has been involved in offending (Moodie & Vaswani, 2016). Further, studies have found that negative perceptions also go the other way, with police officers considering children who go missing a drain on their time and resources (Beckett et al., 2015; Colvin et al., 2018; HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016). Despite this, however, Malloch and Burgess' (2011) evaluation of a pilot - where specially trained police officers conducted return discussions - found that officers could build trust and relationships, with children, citing that they could open up to them. Additionally, police were able to provide the discussion more promptly than other agencies, since they receive and respond to the initial missing person report.

Many local areas have commissioned third sector agencies to conduct specialised return discussion programmes with children. Again, research has found benefits and drawbacks to this. The independence of third sector agencies can increase the likelihood that a child will feel comfortable enough to open up to their worker (Missing People, 2019; The Children's Society, 2013). However, the reverse can also be true: if the child already has other service involvement they may feel overwhelmed with the number of adult workers intervening (Moodie & Vaswani, 2016). Further, Boulton et al. (2022) found that the length of time between the missing episode and return discussion was longest when conducted by an independent agency. They suggest that this is likely a result of delays in inter-agency information sharing. This is significant given guidance typically stresses the importance of a speedy response to a missing episode, with the Scottish Government (2017) advising that a return discussion should be held within 72 hours. Studies have found that these kinds of targets are difficult to meet regardless of the conducting agency, though, especially where the child is not already known to services (Galiano López et al., 2021; Malloch & Burgess, 2011; Missing People, 2019). Related to this, research has emphasised the importance of multi-agency working when responding to missing episodes; effective information-sharing must be in place to support children going forward and safeguard them from future harm (APPG, 2012; Missing People, 2019).

This section has explored the existing research on children who go missing - including the associated reasons and risks - whilst examining how children who go missing have typically been responded to in practice. The next section will outline the methodology used for this evaluation, including how data was collected and analysed and the relevant ethical considerations.

Methodology

Research aims.

The main aims of the research were:

- To profile the needs and risks of young people who go missing in North Lanarkshire and engage with the Service.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the Return Discussion completed by Barnardo's as well as the follow up support delivered either through social work or universal services and the contribution of the Missing Persons meeting.
- To evaluate the effectiveness and perceptions of the Barnardo's Missing Service in North Lanarkshire.
- To consider the strengths and areas for development for the Tri-partnership.

Data collection

In total, 17 interviews were undertaken with children, families, and practitioners.

Practitioner participants

11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a mix of frontline and management level practitioner participants over Microsoft Teams. This included four Barnardo's Missing workers, three education practitioners, two police officers and two social workers. Participants were recruited by the respective Missing lead in each agency, on the condition that each interviewee must have had some involvement or experience with the service or supported a child who had received the service.

Child and family participants

Children, parents, and carers who had received a return discussion were initially approached by a Barnardo's Missing worker to see if they were interested in taking part in the research. If an interest was expressed, and consent given, the Missing worker would pass their details on to the researchers who then contacted them to further explain the research; where informed consent was given, interviews were then scheduled. This resulted in semi-structured interviews being conducted with four parents and two children. These interviews were undertaken in-person by two researchers; children were interviewed separately to their parents in line with their preference.

There were significant challenges to engaging children and parents in the research process which affected the sample size. In several instances, either the Barnardo's worker or a parent expressed that it was not an appropriate time for a child to be interviewed as they were already experiencing significant service involvement and/or continuing to go missing. Conversely, for other children whose missing episode was a 'one-off', it is possible that there was little interest in discussing their return discussion with researchers as they had received relatively little service involvement or sought to move on from their missing episode. This obstacle to engagement is to some extent expected due to the early interventionist and light touch nature of the service, where engaging in evaluation activities may be disproportionate to the level of

service contact. Similar barriers are experienced when trying to engage individuals who have not taken up a service; therefore, the sample of participants represents individuals who engaged with the service, and generally speaking had a prolonged and positive experience. This is a key limitation, and it is important to note that the perspectives and experiences of those we interviewed are not necessarily reflective of those who didn't engage either with the evaluation, or with the service itself.

Interviews with professionals, parents and children were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, with original recordings destroyed.

Supplementary data

Interview data was supplemented with a review of 17 redacted and anonymised social work case files of children who had been referred for a return discussion following a missing episode. The files represent a random sample of all children reported missing between March 2021 and May 2022 and were selected, redacted and anonymised by North Lanarkshire social work staff. As such, it is not known whether these case files are associated with the children and parents interviewed. As a social work record is created for all children whose missing episode is reported to the police, this sample included both those who were previously known to social work and those who were not. Case files provided an additional understanding of the diversity of missing episodes, along with information on the child's background, service involvement and wider concerns. However, it is not possible to undertake statistical analysis on this data due to the small sample size and the redaction of significant information including outcome information.

In addition, two researchers observed one Missing Persons meeting. These meetings take place every Wednesday and last around 45 minutes, typically with representatives from Social Work, Barnardo's, Police, Education and Children's Houses. Both researchers took observation notes from this meeting, and these have been included in the analysis.

Analysis

All interview data was manually coded by the report authors using a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis was initially conducted by participant group, and then brought together to identify overarching themes, learning and areas for development in relation to the Return Discussion, the Barnardo's Missing Service and the Tri-partnership. Due to the small number of child and parent participants, and the consistency of views across the participant groups, there is no section dedicated to children and parents' views – rather, their experiences and perspectives have been prioritised within the body of the report.

Ethics

The research was approved by: the School of Social Work and Social Policy Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde; the Barnardo's Research and Evaluation Committee; and the North Lanarkshire Ethics Committee. Maintaining high ethical standards and having continual consideration of ethical issues throughout the research was paramount due to the sensitive nature of the issues being explored.

Overview of the Barnardo's Missing Service

Aims and objectives.

The Barnardo's Missing Service, in partnership with Police Scotland and North Lanarkshire Council commenced in February 2021. This Tri-partnership initiative was set up to provide a service to work directly with children and families to reduce incidences of missing, and the associated risk of children becoming subject to harm, including harm outside the home. This was initiated following concerns that increasing numbers of children in the community were going missing, in contrast to significant progress that had been made in the number of children going missing from Children's Houses. There was also an awareness from Police and Social Work that an independent agency may be better placed to support children to reduce their missing episodes, with Barnardo's providing similar Missing Services in other local authority areas.

The service was set up primarily to offer children up to the age of 18 an independent return discussion to explore their missing experiences and identify any additional support they may need. The return discussion aims to meet the following objectives:

1. Enhance the protection of missing children and young people and reduce the incidents of young people repeatedly going missing by:
 - a. Identifying the underlying reasons why the person was missing.
 - b. Using the information gathered to assess ongoing risk and identify support needs to prevent the individual from going missing in the future.
2. Enable young people who go missing to have an understanding of their situation, vulnerability and potential risks they may face.
3. Raise young people's awareness of the resources they can access and safety strategies they can use.

In addition, the Tri-partnership aimed to support the capacity building of agencies to offer a consistent and shared approach to responding to the needs of children, via effective information sharing and multi-agency working.

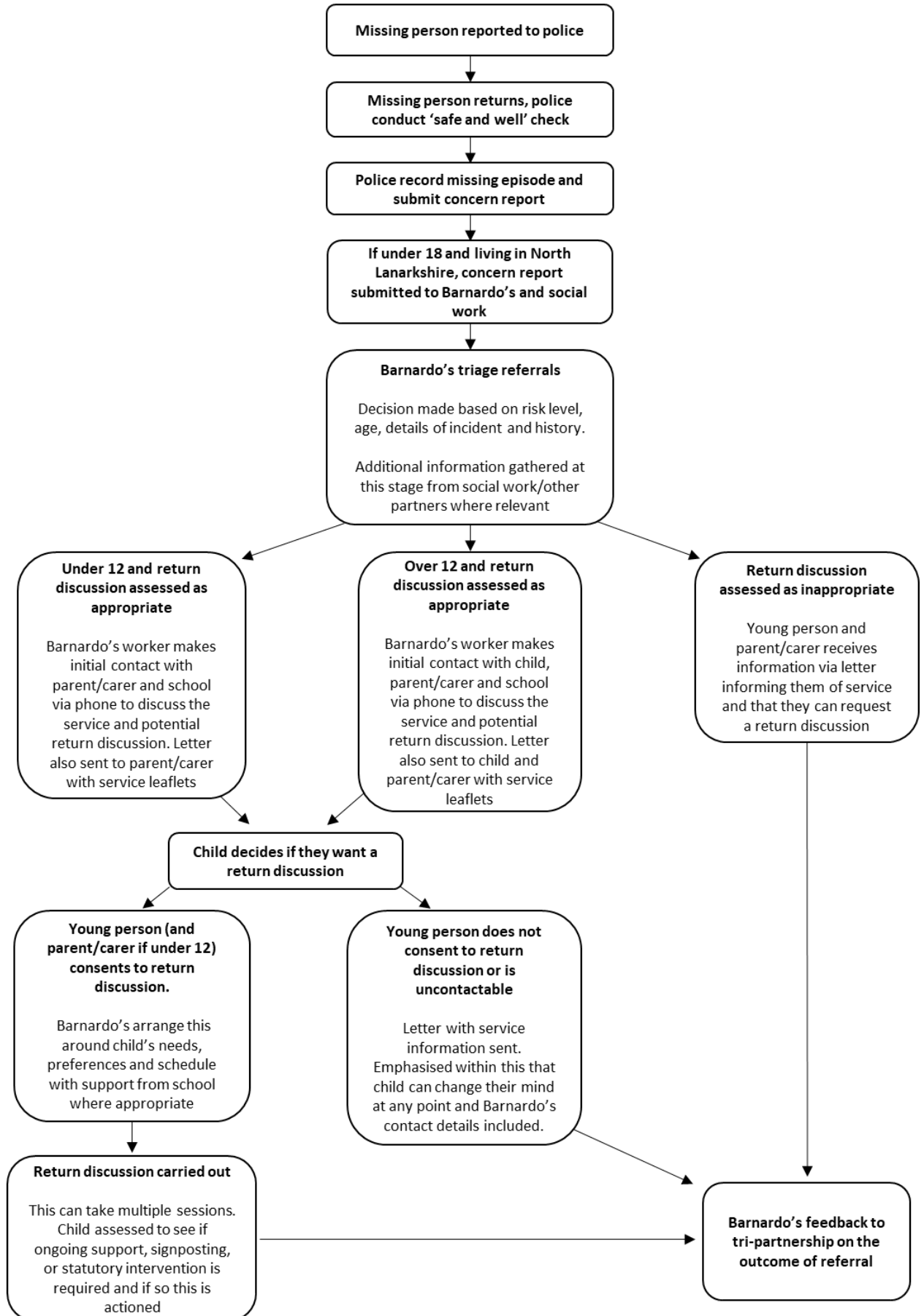
Missing Service Referral Process

A detailed referral process for the Missing Service is mapped in *Diagram 1* on page 14. Unlike similar Barnardo's Missing Services, the service in North Lanarkshire accepts referrals for all under 18's living in North Lanarkshire, with no criteria based on assessed risk or circumstance of missing episode. Once the child has been returned - typically with a 'safe and well' check carried out by the police (if they are returned by police) - the police then submit a concern report that is sent to both Social Work and Barnardo's. Formally, the process for children living in Children's Houses is that residential staff will approach the child first and give them the choice of either partaking in a return discussion with them or with Barnardo's. Only if the child chooses the latter would they be referred to Barnardo's. In practice, however, Barnardo's

receive a referral from the Police Concern Hub for every missing person under 18, meaning Barnardo's may then make contact first with residential staff and the child to determine if their service is needed.

After reviewing the information, they have received from police - and, where appropriate, social work - Barnardo's will triage cases to consider whether a return discussion is appropriate. Triage in this service is limited, with a return discussion deemed appropriate in the vast majority of cases. Barnardo's will then reach out to the child, their parent/carer and their school to explain the service and offer a return discussion. This is completely voluntary, and a return discussion will only take place if the child agrees to one. For children who don't want a return discussion, or who are uncontactable, service information and contact details are posted to the child and their parent/carer, emphasising that they can get in touch with Barnardo's if they ever need support with missing. For children who do want a return discussion, the Barnardo's worker will liaise with them, and if appropriate their school, to decide when and where the discussion should take place. Barnardo's then feed back to the partnership on the outcome of each referral, including whether a return discussion was conducted and any continued support that may be needed.

Diagram 1 – Referral Process



The Return Discussion

The return discussion seeks to offer the child an opportunity to talk with an independent person about their experiences in a supportive and confidential environment. This will not necessarily be a one-off event, but a series of discussions that allow the child to build trust in the Barnardo's worker whilst discussing their experiences. The discussion(s) aims to explore the reasons the child went missing, what happened when they went missing, what risks they may have faced and any follow-up care or support they may need or want. Following these discussion(s), the Barnardo's worker completes an Initial Assessment that details the missing episode, return discussion and any concerns the worker has.

Missing Persons meeting and information sharing.

The Tri-partnership hold a weekly online Missing Persons meeting. This is chaired by Social Work and attended by representatives from Police Scotland, Barnardo's, Education and Local Authority Children's Houses. Before the meeting Police Scotland send the representatives a list of all children reported missing during the week prior. Representatives gather relevant information they have for each child and discuss this at the meeting. This is a critical part of the Missing Service, with information shared across agencies and space provided for professionals to discuss concerns and make decisions over how each case should be progressed.

In addition to attending the Missing Persons meeting, Barnardo's share information with the child's social worker (if allocated), named person, and school, as well as police, on the outcome of any return discussion that has taken place, any continued support that is required, and any relevant information that would minimise risk of harm from future missing incidents.

Profile of children referred to Barnardo's Missing Service

Prior to this evaluation, the Tri-partnership reviewed the profiles of children who had been referred to Barnardo's Missing Service since its inception in February 2021, up to January 2022 as part of an internal review. This showed that in the 11-month period Barnardo's received 641 referrals for 259 children, of whom 148 were boys and 111 girls. Of these, 244 children referred were living at home at the time of their missing episode, and this group accounted for 451 referrals. Only 12 children who had been referred were living in a children's house when they went missing, and a further three were in foster care. This group, however, accounted for an exceptionally high number of referrals, at 190. This equates to an average of 12.7 referrals per child missing from care, compared to 1.8 per child for those missing from the community, suggesting that this small group of children had a far greater number of missing episodes than children missing from the community. Interestingly, 127 children were not known or allocated to social work at the time of their missing episode, compared with 80 who were allocated to a worker. (For 37 children this information was not known or recorded).

From these referrals Barnardo's conducted return discussions with 135 children, representing just over half of those referred. This may be reflective of some of the difficulties faced when engaging this group, with some children declining the opportunity of a return discussion. It might also reflect instances where children have been triaged and/or it was felt that another adult worker may have been more appropriate to carry out the return discussion.

Findings and Discussion

Profile of children missing in North Lanarkshire

The first aim of the research was to understand more about the needs and risks of children who go missing in North Lanarkshire. The literature review provides an overview of broader literature in relation to missing people, with a particular focus on missing children. An internal review provided in-depth statistics on all referrals received (Feb 21-Jan 22) and is outlined in the previous section. This section presents the descriptive statistics drawn from the social work case file review to provide a snapshot of the profile of missing children in North Lanarkshire. The files represent a random sample of all children reported missing between March 2021 and May 2022. As a social work record is created for all children whose missing episode is reported to the police, this sample included both those who were previously known to social work and those who were not.

The total number of case files reviewed was 17. This was a random sample of files of missing children in North Lanarkshire. To reiterate, this was not a complete review of all files; the files had been anonymised, and identifying material removed. In addition, the authors note that not all information available is reproduced in reports; what is represented below is what has been documented in available reports - details may be omitted.

In all cases reviewed the children were residing at home³ (including in Kinship placement) and all had gone missing from home. All had been reported missing by a parent or family member. The children's ages ranged from 9 years old to 16 years old, with the majority (n=14) being aged 12 and over. The sample included the cases of 13 females and four males. Six of the children's cases that were reviewed were allocated to Social Work, six had been previously allocated to a social worker and five were unknown to social work prior to the missing episode. Following a missing episode all children discussed at the multi-agency meeting will have a social work record created and the missing episode documented against their name.

The table below shows the number of 'official' missing episodes i.e. those reported to the police. In half of the cases reviewed the referral had been their first missing episode (n=9), with the remainder of the sample having been missing on multiple occasions (n=8). Four cases also detailed 'unofficial' missing episodes, totalling over 18 episodes, which were not formally recorded by agencies, but became known through discussion with the child or family or other services.

Number of official missing episodes	Number of children
1	9
2	3
3	2
4	1
5	0
6	1
10+	1

³ NB: some children had spent time away from home under s25.

Interview participants also raised the extent of unreported missing episodes and the implications for how these are responded to:

you'll sometimes phone a parent, and they'll say ohh yeah they reported missing like that time but they've actually they go missing all the time but they're not reported so it's really difficult to know. Because we just get the referrals of the children are reported to the police but actually sometimes when you look into, they've actually gone missing more times but we've just not had the referral cause they've not been reported

Parents may not report their child missing to the police for a number of reasons: some parents may choose not to report a child missing, and this would raise significant concern; some parents may perceive reporting as having the potential to get their child in trouble; some parents may have previously reported missing episodes, however as the child's behaviour has continued with little change, they stop reporting the child missing; other parents may be uncertain about when and how to report their child missing, and at present this issue appears to be unaddressed.

Concerns

There were a number of wider concerns noted in the cases files, including: concerns around mental health (suicide attempts or self-harming, anxiety, bereavement); family conflict (breakup, boundaries); school (bullying, attendance); and wider family issues (childhood trauma, parental mental health, domestic abuse, sibling child protection concerns). A number of reports stated that children were 'outwith parental control'; a feeling of not being able to control or manage behaviour was often noted by parents themselves, and arguments or outbursts were often a precursor to a missing episode. Importantly, there was no discernible correlation between number of wider concerns in a child's life and the number of missing episodes (i.e. children who had more missing episodes did not have an increased number of concerns). This highlights the importance of early intervention services, such as the Barnardo's Missing service, that engage with children and families regardless of wider known concerns or number of missing episodes, and are therefore able to offer early help, support and signposting. This also suggests that the act of going missing may in itself flag broader unidentified - and therefore unmet - needs.

Risks

A number of risks associated with the missing episodes were also noted in the files and included risks to health and wellbeing or concerns about other vulnerabilities. Risks tended to centre around extrafamilial harm: concerns about associations (both peers and unknown associates or whereabouts); and children's safety while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. A small number of children were noted to have been in conflict with the law prior to their missing episode, however none of the cases reviewed involved offending by the children while they were missing. Again, levels of risk while missing do not appear to correlate with the number of missing episodes. There was a slight difference in perceived risk related to age. While older children may be at risk from others, they are also perceived to be at an increased

risk of harm as they tend to go further, go to new places, places of 'interest' and undertake other 'risky behaviours' i.e., drinking, whereas for younger children the concerns were presented more as risks to their personal safety as a result of other people. In a number of cases, children were able to travel a considerable distance in a relatively short space of time using public transport, often going unchallenged or unsupported by adults. While missing, children spent time in varying locations. Some were found to be with friends, peers or family; a smaller number however were noted to be spending time with people or in locations already known to services due to other concerns i.e., exploitation. In all cases, children were either returned by police or of their own accord.

Protective factors

Protective factors and the voice and views of the child were less evident in the files reviewed. Familial support was noted in a number of the files, with parents either showing an appropriate response to the missing episode or engaging with/pursuing support from agencies following the missing episode. While school was a protective factor for some children, where counselling or other support was accessed, other children were noted to go missing from school/have attendance issues or a poor relationship with school. Where children's views were recorded, they tended to comment on parenting styles and boundaries put in place by authority figures such as parents and schools. Children often stated they didn't mean for the missing episode to cause concern; they didn't mean to be gone for so long or travel as far, and generally noted that the situation had gone beyond their control. As with the broader concerns and risk factors when missing, protective factors were not correlated with number of missing episodes.

Discussion

The evidence from the case files suggests that missing episodes can be an attempt from children to communicate that something in their lives is not OK. This could be in the immediate (following an argument in the house, or having been triggered by an event); they could be persuaded to not return home, with minor risk (e.g. pushing the boundaries of curfews or going along with friends); or finally, purposely taking themselves away from home, with an increased risk (due to concerns within their wider situation which increase the risk of harm e.g. age, under influence). In reviewing the cases, it can be concluded that the number of missing episodes (and the risks when missing) are not always an accurate measure of wider risk and need. Agencies typically act on 'official' missing episodes (those that have been reported to, and recorded by, the police). However, four of the cases reviewed contained details of 'unofficial' missing episodes that were not reported at the time. These 'unofficial' missing episodes appear to raise a high level of risk, on occasion higher than 'official' missing episodes where children may have been referred missing as a result of protocol rather than concerns for safety. What is clear is that every missing episode has specific circumstances and requires a tailored response which is best achieved through universal, proportionate, early intervention.

Perceptions of the Barnardo's Missing Service

This section of the report outlines participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Barnardo's Missing Service. The Barnardo's Missing Service was discussed by participants in terms of the Return Discussion and follow up support, and in terms of their role within the

multiagency Tri-partnership. Participants identified three key aspects of the work of the Missing service: the emotional and practical support offered to the child and parent via the return discussion; the conditions which facilitated this support (including Barnardo's perceived independence, workers qualities and organisational approach); and the perceived impact and effectiveness of this service.

Emotional and practical support provided by the missing service.

There was an overwhelming level of agreement across participant groups that Barnardo's return discussions were providing a safe, confidential and supportive space for the child to discuss their missing episode(s), what had led up to it and what could be done to reduce the likelihood of future missing episodes. The ability to create a safe space for support was due to a number of factors.

Firstly, the Barnardo's return discussions and wider support were framed as being primarily for the child - prioritising their voice, needs, and support. This was expressed as important by several of the professional participants, and also reflected by the parent and child participants:

“and [worker] told [child] I'm here for you, not for your mum, and it helps cause she knows that she can open up and not hold back” [Parent]

This relationship often became incredibly valuable to the child, with one child participant noting that the only person they were prepared to meet and speak with was their Missing worker. Two education participants echoed this, detailing cases where a pupil would only engage with Barnardo's and no other service:

“we're at a point where this girl feels most comfortable and confident speaking to her missing person worker than anybody else” [Education]

“[Barnardo's worker] is the only one that when my mum said someone's coming out to see me, I'd be like alright that's fine, but I'd kick off when the rest of them wanted to come” [Child]

The fact that the support offered by the Missing worker is child-centred is evidenced in the voluntary and flexible nature of the service. The decision to engage in a return discussion was completely up to the child, free from the compulsion that sometimes comes with statutory services. In addition, it was noted that Barnardo's adapted to the preferences of the child and were prepared to meet where and when - and as often as - the child wanted. This was understood as being hugely important to building relationships with children, allowing the child to have a sense of autonomy over the process, knowing they could engage with the return discussion on their own terms:

“and for kids...it's a hierarchy.....when [worker] went into school they said *'look you don't have to talk to me, I'll go away'* so she chose to speak to them” [Parent]

“I've seen a young girl for months where, she only wants to see me in school. I even offer to go see her when she's off on holiday, [...] and she phones me, texts me, if you

want to see me, I'll even come and see you over Easter. But no she only wants to see me in school, that's her space [...] that's where she gets fed, there's structure, there's safety" [Barnardo's worker]

This allowed children to talk about concerns and issues that influenced their decision to go missing; they could disclose details about their missing episodes and explore strategies and safety when missing, in places and at times which suited them.

Secondly, whilst the Barnardo's Missing Service was seen as being 'child-centred', interviews with parents and professionals demonstrated that the service was providing a huge level of support to families too. For parents, the relationship with the Barnardo's worker provided reassurance, recognition, and emotional support at a time of increased concern and worry. Professionals and parents both discussed how families were often at crisis point prior to Barnardo's involvement, and felt an acute sense of isolation as they attempted to deal with the child's missing episode and the reasons for it, often with limited support:

"But when I heard [Barnardo's] were coming, I'm going. "Come, come. Somebody." [...] I was so heightened with fear, anxiety and emotion, overwhelming judgment of myself, everything took into question [...] My world was kind of turned upside down" [Parent]

"the families are very supportive of Barnardo's, I think a lot of the parents we get are at their wits end to be honest, with behaviour issues of their children, and they're just happy to have more support and more input, cause a lot of them are kinda, at the end of the line with their child's behaviour and it's really, really stressful for them" [Police]

Missing workers played a key role in listening to parents' concerns, validating how they were feeling, whilst helping them move forward as a family. Missing workers were perceived as having 'genuine empathy' for parents, providing them with a constant and non-judgemental person to turn to when they needed to unload their worries.

"I felt not judged, they were in my home, and they were just wanting to relate...they made me feel at ease. And they put the situation as, 'we are concerned, we want to help you, help [child] and not just [child]. You as well. You're important." [Parent]

Related to this, parents expressed feeling an overwhelming sense of relief when Barnardo's became involved:

"So, I got a phone call from [worker] I think it was about 25 minutes, a [person] I've never spoken to in my life, and by the end of that phone call I was completely and utterly reassured. I was on the phone to [partner] straight away saying there's somebody here to help". [Parent]

All parent participants in the study described engagement between the Missing worker and their child as a key turning point for them. In part, this was because of the support the Missing

worker was providing for their child – parents discussed an overwhelming sense of relief that their child was speaking to someone about what had happened, even if they would not open up to them:

“aye its just good that she can just pick up the phone to someone if she really doesn’t want to talk to anyone in the family d’you know what I mean, she can just, and it is a professional...” [Parent]

“and for her independently, she needs to be speaking to somebody independently, because we couldn’t understand where this had come from” [Parent]

In addition, the missing workers were able to use their position to communicate and mediate between the child, family and wider services and supports:

“they’ve been absolutely brilliant, really good at keeping the communication open between the young person, and the family. And with us as well.” [Education]

I kinda look at my job as somebody that can join dots and provide a tighter net for young people, where if there’s any concerns, worries, risks around young people, then you can join in with young people, whether it’s at school, residential, social work, you can, you can join the dots with different professionals [Barnardo’s worker]

Parents often contrasted the support they received from their Missing worker with the perceived absence of statutory support. Statutory services, where present, were felt to be unrelatable and unreachable, with parents describing feeling like their family was not a priority:

“it’s things like that, I just find the polis don’t really help you when any of that happens, it’s the outside help, like [worker], and that, it’s there that you get the help from, it’s them that you can pick up the phone to. And it’s the same, you can never get the social work you know, social workers are always busy anyway, at least with [worker] he gets back to you that day or whatever” [Parent]

Barnardo’s were able to gather information from the return discussion, supplemented by information across agencies, to create a holistic understanding of the child to inform and coordinate support. Parents noted that Barnardo’s Missing Workers involvement with their child often prompted action, support or referrals. A range of participants identified that key to Barnardo’s role was advocating for, and where necessary pushing for, support for children on a diverse range of issues:

“And I do find parents and young people particularly like if we’ve gone in and maybe bridged the gap between another service and they’ve really appreciated that or even helped them to access another service It’s that kind of almost like signpost thing that’s helpful as well” [Barnardo’s worker]

“And for me [worker] got the ball rolling. It shouldn’t have been the only reason that got the ball rolling, but it did, and without Barnardo’s. I don’t know where we’d be...” [Parent]

“yeah I have seen a couple of times when the Barnardo’s worker has raised a child protection concern or a notification of concern based on the information they’ve been told, so that’s a positive thing as well that they are acting on those concerns”
[Education]

However, as raised by Barnardo’s Missing workers and parents, signposting and making referrals for support are only effective if services are able to provide the support required. Due to thresholds and criteria, waiting lists, and capacity, across a range of services both statutory and universal, support is not always in place as quickly as hoped. In these situations, Barnardo’s Missing workers can monitor and follow up directly with referral progress, and where necessary raise these issues within the Tri-partnership. In addition to signposting to external supports or services, other services provided by Barnardo’s offered a smooth transition of support if appropriate for the needs of the child. The schools work delivered by Barnardo’s – either through the Missing Service or through wider services - was noted by participants as helpful, as schools are aware of Barnardo’s and what they can offer, or children and families are more open to support from Barnardo’s due to workers familiarity within the school.

“I think [worker] has a pretty good relationship with the school, so the school will say to me [worker] has been in touch.” [Education]

To conclude this section, the emotional support that is offered to both children and their families is seen as an integral benefit of the return discussion. Children felt confident and comfortable enough to open up to their Missing worker about concerns and issues in their lives. This relationship was valued too by parents, in addition to the support they also received from their child’s Missing worker. Missing workers additionally took up a signposting and coordinating role, advocating for children to ensure they received the support they needed.

What makes a ‘good’ return discussion?

This section outlines participants’ reasons for engaging in the return discussions that then enable the Missing service to have such a positive impact on children and families. Findings indicate unanimous support for Barnardo’s undertaking return discussions due primarily to their perceived independence. In addition, the specific qualities of the workers and their approach to the service was praised.

Perceived Independence

As discussed in the literature review, previous studies have come to mixed conclusions over which agency should undertake return discussions. In this study, though, there was significant consensus across participant groups that Barnardo’s, as a third sector organisation, were best placed to carry these out. Independence from statutory services and other authority figures was raised by almost every adult participant and one child. Participants expressed that Barnardo’s independence – from police, social work, school, Children’s Houses and families - meant children were more likely to feel relaxed and able to open up during return discussions.

Participants expressed that this was perceived to be different from other adults in the child's life, where there was a sense that saying the wrong thing could lead to negative consequences for the child or family:

"...independent, somewhere for the kids to go but also somewhere that we can communicate without the fear of saying the wrong thing" [Parent]

"not really because like, with school they say obviously just talk to your teachers and that but they're really just there to teach you and shout at you when you do stuff wrong" [Child]

For these reasons, most participants, including both police officers interviewed, emphasised that police were not an appropriate agency to carry out the return discussion as children were unlikely to open up to them. This may be particularly the case if the child or family has negative perceptions or experiences with the police, or where the child or their friends had been involved in offending during their missing episode. Further, it is often police who return a missing child, and are thus associated with the crisis point of the missing episode and the anxiety that surrounded this. How the officers in this moment respond to the missing episode can affect any future attempts by police to engage that child; as several participants expressed, police rarely have the capacity to carry out anything more than a basic 'safe and well' check:

"So when the missing child is found we still go to their house and speak with them, but we're getting a lot of kids who are quite reluctant to speak to the police and have a negative vibe from the police, maybe they've had bad interactions with the police before so they don't tell us anything ehm or maybe clam up, and are maybe fearful about spilling information about their pals, so having that independent body there allows us an avenue I feel to get a wee bit more information in a more relaxed environment" [Police]

Similarly, there was an understanding across participant groups that sometimes children and families have negative perceptions or experiences of social work and would be less likely to engage or open up to them for fear of repercussions. That Barnardo's were independent of social work, and further that the service was voluntary, was seen as critical to engaging children and families:

"[worker] is independent to anything, cause as soon as you hear social work, even kids when they hear social work, that means there getting taken off" [Parent]

"One of the key things is the independence [...] the young people and their parents have told us that, that maybe where they don't have good relationships with statutory services. And we've had young people in Children's Houses who have quite clearly come up and said so you're not police and social work. And we go no, and they go right ok. I'll maybe talk to you then." [Barnardo's]

As noted in the literature review, some previous studies have concluded social work were well positioned to undertake the return discussion where they had an existing relationship with the

family and could therefore contextualise the missing episode. Of course, engaging in an independent return discussion does not exclude return discussions occurring or being supported by social work. Two families in this study had no prior engagement with services, and data suggests most will not have statutory involvement. Therefore, engaging with a third sector organisation may seem more appropriate at an early stage. For one child participant they felt that their social worker was there to provide their family with support. Their Missing worker, however, was felt to be focused on them – someone they could contact whenever they needed who could be relied on to listen and support them. Further, as noted by professionals, having someone ‘new’, even where existing relationships are positive, can be beneficial for the return discussion, as it provides the child with an opportunity to start fresh, and explain as much or as little as they want about the missing episode and what led up to it:

“Barnardo’s will go in, and sometimes they can get more information out of them than their parents can, it’s like going to counselling sometimes, you are a completely different person, a new face, it’s like an open book to you” [Police]

“I know some people will go aw well we know them best and we’ve got a good relationship with them but, sometimes being a “stranger”, sitting in that space, and because we’re not social work, we’re not police, we cannae put consequences in for young people or families, its voluntary, its confidential so we sit in a very privileged position I think where we can make change” [Barnardo’s worker]

Moreover, there was also a sense that Barnardo’s independence meant they were able to mitigate traditional power relationships which may exist between children and adult professionals. This helped engage children and develop a relationship on the child’s level that was informal and supportive.

“I think the advantage of the Barnardo’s worker is that they are not a teacher, and I think they come from a different angle for the children and sometimes that can really help, and they’re not the police, they’re not social work, they’re not in this position of authority – I mean that sounds terrible, it’s not that they’re not professional – but they don’t have that authority position in relation to the child like some other people do” [Education]

It is clear, then, that this independence is perceived as critical to the ‘success’ of Barnardo’s return discussion. It provides the child with a confidential and voluntary space to speak with a professional who is independent. This helps the Missing worker to build a trusting and supportive relationship wherein they can better assess the child’s support needs.

Worker Qualities and Organisational Priorities

In addition to the independence of the service, the qualities and skills of individual Barnardo’s Missing workers were noted as key to the effectiveness of return discussions. Across participant groups, there was general agreement that Barnardo’s’ Missing workers possessed important qualities for working with children. They were viewed as being personable and

relatable, and able to strike a balance between supporting the child on their level whilst remaining firm when it came to discussing the risks of going missing:

“she was nice, she was a kind person, she was really kind to me, generous and loyal”
[Child]

“[worker] is nice and funny but also serious...they get to the root of the problem but not make out like they are lecturing you about it” [Child]

“who’s just going to see it how it is, I think that’s how [child] took to him, cause he talks just like he’s one of them you know what I mean, he’s got a way of talking to them, I think that’s why she takes to him” [Parent]

There was a sense across participants that Barnardo’s Missing workers expressed empathy and care to the children they worked with and were genuinely invested in trying to help the child and the family resolve the reasons underlying their missing episode(s). Sessions felt empowering and positive, where the concerns and issues affecting children were heard and acted upon through advice or through co-ordinating other supports:

“ the young person isn’t a tick box for me, I’m genuinely like if I can help you I’m going to, if I need to come back and see you I will, so it’s not, if it was a tick box then it would be ah well it’s a one-off return discussion so that’s it done [...] And when they might think that the whole world’s crashing down around them. I don’t want to be one of them. It’s that consistency, providing that kinda structure, somebody believing in you. Even just that one person.” [Barnardo’s worker]

In addition to the qualities of individual Missing workers, participants expressed that Barnardo’s as an organisation showed a clear dedication to supporting children and reducing missing episodes. Barnardo’s were noted to have ‘stickability’, persisting to engage with children and parents multiple times, attempting various means of communication and going back to children and families after multiple referrals, to continue to offer support.

This dedication was reflected in the child and parent interviews too. One child noted that their Missing worker had said they could always contact them whenever they needed, and that if they ever felt like going missing their Missing worker would find a safe space for the child to go to. This consistency and reliability is crucial for children once they have returned home, and has the potential to meaningfully safeguard children from future harm if they feel like going missing again.

At the same time, it was noted by several participants that there was a need for Barnardo’s to be transparent about the service and the limitations of what can be offered in a return discussion(s). This is critical for early intervention work, and it was felt that Barnardo’s typically provided clear boundaries to children and families about what they would be doing and how long this would be for. Further, the service was sufficiently flexible to allow each child to be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, with the Missing team deciding when it is an appropriate time to disengage, and then communicating this with families. Even at this point of transition, though, it was stressed that Missing workers always left communication lines open, and

emphasised that if the child or family ever needed them, or if they started going missing again, then they could re-engage with the service:

“I think I think they're quite clear, with young people as well about what it is, what their remit it is and exactly what it is it should be doing like we need to be sure that young people know when somebody's coming in to a case and, you know, if it's going to be quite quick in and out kinda thing, it's a wee bit like if you are doing early effective intervention, so they kinda need to know exactly, and I think they're quite up front about that” [Social Work]

“I didn't expect to get as much out of Barnardo's, and they let me know straight off, 'look we'll be here for a time as much as we can put in place and it was, they didn't disillusion me that they're coming in and ohh we're going to fix everything. They delivered what they said they said they were going to do.” [Parent]

“that's the golden question [how long will worker be involved] ...I mean I think [worker] will stick around for as long as they are concerned or [child] asks him to stop...I think as well, you know if [worker] was gone, that you could pick up the phone and speak to them as well” [Parent]

In conclusion, the perceived independence of Barnardo's as an organisation was seen to facilitate positive relationship building with children and parents, encouraging engagement with the Missing service. The workers were noted to be non-judgemental, understanding, and helpful. In addition, the organisational values promoted engagement through the flexible and transparent approach.

Tri-partnership

In addition to the Barnardo's Service the evaluation also explored the role of the newly established Tri-partnership. The partnership between North Lanarkshire Council, Police Scotland and Barnardo's enables information sharing and multiagency decision-making regarding children who go missing in the area.

Key to the success of the Tri-partnership has been the establishment of a weekly Missing Persons meeting between social work, education, Police and Barnardo's. This regular contact was noted as important in building relationships, trust and understanding of each other's services and thresholds. In addition to the same group of representatives who attend weekly, partners noted that additional expertise or services could be invited along if required. The regular meetings gave the Tri-partnership and other organisations a place to raise concerns or cases where missing may be an issue:

“I think we've been very good at establishing partnership working, about establishing the meeting, about trusting relationships, about people, feeling comfortable sharing information” [Social Work]

“I can certainly say that the information that’s shared between social work, police and Barnardo’s has improved brilliantly”. [Social Work]

As professional relationships have developed, information sharing has also improved. It was the feeling that all agencies benefited from the partnership, ensuring their systems were up to date with the most recent and relevant information, including associates, addresses, risk and concerns. The Missing Persons meeting was noted as being a helpful place for workers to bring concerns and raise issues or get more information from agencies:

“but the one good thing about that is it gives a place just to I suppose flag up particular issues, it’s a place that we can connect with each week, if we’ve got difficulties maybe accessing certain services or things like that, those wee things” [Barnardo’s worker]

All agencies agreed that better information sharing was improving the support delivered to children, ensuring it was tailored and coordinated support, and that by knowing “...the full picture... we can then make informed decisions”. In addition to improved decision making, police and social work identified the potential to develop intelligence about persons, locations, and issues of concern, based on the information obtained in return discussions:

“We are, by sharing that information, able to gain a lot more intelligence, about people, who they are hanging about with, where they are hanging about” [Police]

“...it’s through some of our work that you start picking it up, locations, vehicles, different bits like that. Sometimes when you start unpicking up all those bits and you think that persons connected to that person and they’re involved you know, and it just starts mapping out into a bigger picture and you realise hang on a minute this isn’t just one young person that’s going missing here this is a network of young people going missing and before you know it you’ve got another young person popping up on your system as well, and creating a better picture” [Barnardo’s worker]

However, participants also suggested that information sharing outwith the Missing Person meeting could still be improved. While information is obtained centrally by agency representatives, information gathering by individuals is time consuming, and often takes place in addition to their other duties, and the information provided is only as comprehensive as the records kept about the child. Timely responses to missing episodes were seen to be key to successful and meaningful engagement and therefore information sharing and contact between services working with the child is very important.

Prioritising the needs of children who go missing in North Lanarkshire through the commissioning of the Barnardo’s Missing Service, is further supported by the Tri-partnership between North Lanarkshire Council, Police Scotland and Barnardo’s. The Tri-partnership has benefited from improved professional relationships, information sharing and therefore improved decision making for children who go missing.

‘Effectiveness’ of the Barnardo’s Missing Service- ‘more than safe and well’

It is very difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of an early intervention service, particularly quantitatively, as there is very little way of knowing if the absence or reduction of a behaviour is in fact due to the intervention or whether the reduction would have naturally occurred. However, in the qualitative responses there was considerable information which indicates that the introduction of the Barnardo’s Missing service is effective in the following respects:

- As a specific and complementary service, it operates outwith the thresholds and inclusion criteria which exist for other agencies in the Tri-Partnership.
- The service, and all the positive aspects outlined above, enable a better understanding of the push and pull factors which contribute to missing episodes, in turn leading to better responses.
- Ultimately, the breadth and depth of information, as a result of the Barnardo’s return discussion and information sharing at the Missing Person meeting, enable effective and timely responses which can support the prevention of future harm.

Rather than working from a strict inclusion criteria or threshold system, the Missing service endeavours to engage all children who go missing in the locality regardless of wider concerns, previous engagement, or whether previous offers of support have been taken up or not. Participants identified that this meant Barnardo’s were able to bring a much-needed specific and complementary service in the context of stretched statutory services. The addition of the service offers an opportunity to reach out and meaningfully engage children, many of whom might still be at crisis point:

“they may well have a bit more time. You know, they may have a little bit more time to actually be sitting there and because if we had the luxury of time, we’d all like more, and. we’d all like less in our case load obviously. But they have that bit more time” [Social Work]

“she’s a very difficult girl to engage and so I suppose it’s about their stickability of continuing to go back” [Social Work]

In the absence of a repeated offer of a return discussion, a missing episode with no apparent wider concerns would not normally meet thresholds for intervention by statutory services. This early intervention service meets a gap in service for children who may have unmet needs and are going missing, providing an opportunity to coordinate support with universal services. This does not suggest that the service is driving up unnecessary referrals but rather identifying, at an early-stage, risk and concerns which can be addressed proportionately prior to escalation. Without the return discussion being undertaken in the manner outlined above, concerns, needs and risks may not be highlighted and addressed. The importance of a universal return discussion being offered to all children who go missing was evident:

“eh, we’ve had other more obvious I suppose impacts we’ve had instances of disclosure, everything from exploitation concerns to quite a bit of physical abuse, parental violence towards children, domestic violence, we’ve had those disclosures,

and ...we have put in quite a lot of notifications, and we've put in quite a few police intelligence reports as well. So having the I suppose the option to do that particularly flagging up young people who either aren't known to social work, so a lot of those issues have maybe gone unnoticed ehm, or who have been known to social work and then have been closed, that's occurred as well, that's resulted in young people then having an allocation and additional supports, sometimes child protection registration following that, so then there's supervision for those young people, ehm so that's been a positive impact ehm for the young people concerned," [Barnardo's worker]

Practitioners referred to the benefit of the additional information gleaned from a return discussion, which contains more detailed information than a police 'safe and well check':

"Historically... when a young person's reported missing...previously 'no further action, intervention completed, dealt with response appropriately'...what we've got here is the police are being involved appropriately... because it's been actioned... an independent return discussion is a better place to start from." [Social Work]

The ability of Barnardo's to spend time developing relationships supports understanding of the needs and concerns of children who go missing. This additional capacity means children who on paper do not raise particular concerns or reach the threshold of statutory services are still engaged, providing the opportunity to identify issues at the earliest opportunity and address concerns.

In addition, commissioning this service signifies that the needs of children and young people who go missing is a priority for the Children's Services Planning Partnership in North Lanarkshire. It facilitates "*a bit of space and a bit of time and a bit of independence*" (Social Worker) to see beyond the circumstances of individual children to the needs of a diverse population of children. This is important as participants identified that attitudes towards children who go missing still require attention:

"...Because what's happening, with this young person, is their missing's on the increase, police are then kinda responding to her as "she's just a pain in the backside she just goes running away all the time"... because they're just responding to the incident of a young person going missing as wasting their time. So, it's just about joining those dots and we can sit in a space where we...keep her confidentiality of course, but to just say listen this young person's experienced trauma. Just so they get a better response. Because that young person spent all sorts of hours in a cell, because they felt she was wasting police time..." [Barnardo's worker]

"...And it'll be on the concern report "safe and well at home address". Whereas when you start sitting and invest a bit more in that, you start, so many things can get open for a young person, when there's actually a lot more need, than what's been classed as essentially a pain in the back side, a young person that just keeps going missing." [Barnardo's worker]

This suggests that wider organisational attitudes and understanding about children who go missing still require work, and that cultural change is perhaps harder to shift in services who are first responding to missing with little input in the wider context. By conducting the return discussion, the Missing worker develops a relationship that can then be used to mediate, advocate and coordinate support which is timely and appropriate.

Finally, the responses suggest that the approach taken to the return discussion to understand children's concerns, needs and risk, and the invaluable follow-up and parental support provided by the service has the potential to reduce the likelihood of future harm for that child. While only two children took part in the evaluation, their feedback was that their Missing worker provided them with a safe space to engage with a dedicated, trusted adult, enabling them to share their concerns. This relationship was confirmed and greatly appreciated by all parents interviewed. Parent participants too disclosed that the support, information and advice they received from the Barnardo's Missing service had been a lifeline at a point of concern and struggle. In addition, they noted that without the Barnardo's Missing worker they would not have accessed wider support. Both children noted that their worker gave them strategies to keep safe should they go missing again. Professional participants all valued the specific and complimentary service, acknowledging that as a partnership they have improved information sharing and that, in combination with the information from return discussions, they were able to make better decisions for children who go missing in North Lanarkshire. In conclusion, there was agreement from all participant groups that the work and approach of the Barnardo's Missing Service better supports children who go missing in North Lanarkshire and can help address the underlying issues which 'push' or 'pull' children to go missing.

Areas for development

Overall, the perceptions and experiences of the Barnardo's Missing Service, return discussion and Tri-partnership were all very positive, with most participants expressing that their only improvement suggestions would be more of the same. However, there are some areas for development which the evaluation has identified that could provide added value to what already exists and works well.

The Missing Service operates as an early intervention service, where support is offered after the first reported missing episode. However, we know from the evaluation that official missing episodes may be preceded by 'unofficial' missing episodes or wider concerns. Parents don't always have the same level of support or experience as regards knowing when to report a child missing, and therefore don't always report. In addition, the strength of feeling from both parents that they had no one to turn to prior to Barnardo's involvement suggests it may be unclear where support can be accessed for children and families when missing episodes occur, particularly those who are not involved with statutory services. Therefore, we suggest there is scope for the Tri-partnership to explore greater awareness raising opportunities as a method of primary prevention, but also to increase knowledge of the service and the benefits of taking up return discussions.

The following are provided as examples:

- **Inputs with Children and Parents (via schools):** Input with pupils and parents to raise awareness regarding the risks of going missing, safety strategies they can

employ and information about who they can contact if they are struggling or feel like they want to go missing. This could complement and enhance any existing safety training in schools, with the additional benefit of Barnardo's being able to strengthen or build their relationships with schools, children and parents, potentially increasing the likelihood of future engagement in return discussions if they are already aware of the service.

- **Inputs with Professionals:** in the form of awareness raising training. This could lead to an improved understanding of the push and pull factors that lead children to go missing and thus encourage a better initial response to their missing episodes. It may also encourage appropriate reporting and signposting and improve uptake of follow-on support such as the offer of a return discussion. This includes a focus on universal services and public service providers like transport companies, particularly now that there is a new statutory national concessionary travel scheme.⁴ For example, Barnardo's have provided training to Transport Scotland to support them in ensuring that every bus driver across Scotland has the ability to identify the signs of exploitation and has the tools to respond to any concerns that they may have.

A finding of the evaluation is that risk of future missing episodes and risk while missing do not necessarily correlate with levels of perceived need. Therefore, it is essential that the Barnardo's Missing Service continues to be considered for every child where a missing episode has occurred, other than where the official episode is perceived to be unjustified, or where it would not be beneficial to offer the child the service at that point in time. This creates a necessarily low threshold for an offer of support, and universal services such as these can experience high demand. While a missing episode is the trigger for an offer of support, where there is significant risk, or disclosures have been made during the return discussion, it is often appropriate that the Missing workers continue to support the child and family. Increased awareness raising may result in an increase in referrals to the Barnardo's Missing Service and an uptake in return discussions, which in turn may increase demand on other services where the Barnardo's Missing worker identifies a need for additional support, ensuring this aligns with the GIRFEC Pathway. Tri-partnership should continue to monitor the resourcing and capacity of the Barnardo's Missing Service to ensure this invaluable service is sustained.

As noted in the evaluation, providing evidence of improved outcomes in relation to early intervention services is complex. However, the Missing service and wider Tri-partnership would benefit from enhancing systems of data recording and monitoring, in particular outcome data; methods of evaluation, particularly light-touch, real time methods which would be suitable for children and families should be explored. This will enable future research into the effectiveness the Missing service; it could also inform strategic service delivery around missing children and associated concerns, enabling the Tri-partnership to see beyond the circumstances of individual children.

⁴ Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel see <https://www.transport.gov.scot/concessionary-travel/young-persons-free-bus-travel-scheme/>

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