

# More than 'Safe and Well': An Evaluation of Barnardo's Missing Service – Summary Report

Children and Young People's Centre for Justice

Holly Maclean & Fern Gillon

March 2023

## Introduction and method

The Barnardo's Missing Service, in partnership with Police Scotland and North Lanarkshire Council, commenced in February 2021. The service accepts referrals for all children who go missing in North Lanarkshire, regardless of assessed risk. The primary role of the service is to offer children who have returned home a voluntary return discussion, through which the child has an opportunity to speak about their missing episode and any ongoing needs, risks or required supports. In addition, the Tri-partnership members have sought to strengthen their multi-agency working through increased information sharing and a weekly Missing Persons meeting.

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 evaluation involved 17 interviews with professionals, children and parents who had all had some involvement with the service. This was supplemented with an analysis of 17 redacted social work case files of children who had been reported missing by the police.

This summary report will provide a brief overview of the key findings and recommendations from this evaluation. For a more detailed account, please see our full report.

## Findings

### Profile of children missing in North Lanarkshire

A key aim of the evaluation was to provide a snapshot of the profile of missing children in North Lanarkshire. Drawing on data from the review of 17 social work case files, descriptive statistics found:

- All children had been residing at home when they had gone missing, and all had been reported missing by a parent or family member;
- The children's ages ranged from 9 to 16 years old, with the majority being aged 12 and above;
- Six were allocated to social work, six had been allocated a social worker previously, and five were unknown to social work prior to the missing episode;
- In nine cases the referral had been their first missing episode, with the remainder having gone missing on multiple occasions;

- Four cases detailed 'unofficial' missing episodes which, whilst not formally recorded by agencies, were identified in discussions with the child or family. These unofficial episodes often represented a high level of risk, on occasion even higher than those 'official' missing episodes that had been recorded.

There were a number of concerns noted in the cases files, including concerns around mental health, family conflict, issues at school, and wider family issues including childhood trauma and abuse. Risks associated with the missing episodes were also noted, including concerns about associations and children's safety while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

### The Barnardos Missing Service

Through return discussions and follow-on support, the Barnardo's Missing Service provides 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. Interviews with children, parents and professionals highlighted that:

- Return discussions are child centred, prioritising the voice, needs and wishes of the child. The offer of support was flexible and voluntary. The children interviewed spoke highly of the relationship with their worker and the support they had received.
- In addition to support for the child, parents valued the support they received from their child's Missing worker. The worker was able to provide reassurance, recognition and emotional support to parents who were struggling with their child's missing episode and associated issues.
- The Missing workers role in providing support to both children and parents enables them to mediate between child and family, family and services etc. An important aspect of their role within this early intervention service was to signpost to universal and community services, or refer to statutory services where necessary.

### The Return Discussion

Barnardos were identified as being the most appropriate organisation to undertake the return discussion, as a specific and complementary service to the other agencies in the Tri-partnership. There are benefits to a third sector organisation such as Barnardos undertaking the return discussion, as some children and/or families may have negative perceptions or experiences of statutory services and therefore may not engage with them. Additionally, most children who go missing will not be known to statutory services, and therefore may be more willing to engage with a third sector organisation. However, undertaking a return discussion with Barnardo's does not preclude discussions happening with other professionals who have existing positive relationships with young people.

### The Tri-partnership

The Tri-partnership is able to act on intelligence, concerns and learning which are raised through the Missing Persons meetings and Barnardos Missing service, at a strategic level. This ensures the prioritisation of early intervention services which safeguard the wellbeing of all children who are reported missing.

Regular and consistent attendance at Missing Persons meetings has improved relationships, trust and understanding between agencies and staff. This in turn improves multiagency information sharing which is central to ensuring children receive the support they require. Importantly, there was no discernible correlation between number of wider concerns or risks in a child's life and the number of missing episodes. This highlights the importance of early

intervention services, like the Barnardo's Missing service that engage with children and families regardless of assessed risk or number of missing episodes, along with the importance of multi-agency information sharing. Overall, the Barnardos Missing service, Missing Persons meeting, and Tri-partnership demonstrate the potential for multi-agency early intervention to improve the wellbeing and safety of children and young people.

### **Areas for development**

The evaluation identified positive practice across the Barnardo's Missing service, the return discussion, and the Tri-partnership, which all contribute to improved responses to children who go missing in North Lanarkshire. To build on this work, the evaluation identified a need for improved awareness-raising across children, families and a range of professionals in North Lanarkshire. This could include education around the reasons why children go missing, the risks they might face, and the support available to them via the Barnardo's Missing service.