



APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults

Call for evidence - Inquiry into safeguarding absent children

The APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults has launched an inquiry into how the police, children's services, schools and other professionals safeguard children who are categorised as 'absent' from home or care or education. This inquiry is intended to examine how the introduction of the 'missing' and 'absent' categories has affected the safeguarding response to children who run away.

We are inviting interested individuals and groups to submit written evidence, which we will use to inform the inquiry. The deadline for submissions is **Friday January 22 2016**. Please read the information below before submitting evidence.

1. Background

Since 2013, police forces across England have adopted new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' persons, including children. Under these definitions, police forces record a person as 'absent' if they are 'not in a place where he/she is expected to be'.

Persons recorded as 'absent' are not considered to be at risk of harm, and therefore the police will not take action to safeguard them, unless new information comes to light following on-going risk assessments. Most police forces in England implemented the new definitions but some decided not to adopt them due to concerns over how these definitions will keep children safe.

Despite geographical variations and that these definitions have been in place for some time, there is little data available on 'absent' children. Anecdotal evidence suggests that decisions to record children as 'absent' – and the safeguarding response these children receive – differ significantly from one area to another.

2. Call for evidence

The inquiry will consider how children recorded as 'absent' are safeguarded by the police, and the ways in which absent children are safeguarded by others like local authorities and schools.

We are inviting evidence submissions that address the following topics:

Decision making and risk assessments

When deciding whether to categorise a child as 'missing' or 'absent', police call handlers must complete a risk assessment. In addition, those reporting children as missing may be expected

to undertake their own assessments of whether the child is missing. For example, schools and children's social services will have their own procedures for responding to and assessing cases of 'unauthorised absence'.

We would like to hear evidence relating to how these assessments are carried out, including:

- questions asked to inform the decision about categorisation as 'missing' or 'absent'
- the training and supervision of call handlers and other staff undertaking risk assessments;
- monitoring, evaluation and escalation of decisions;
- the risk assessment process, including which factors are, or are not, taken into account
- how other professionals risk assess children in cases where the police have assessed a child as 'absent'
- local procedures to deal with situations where the police have categorised a child as 'absent' but the person reporting a child as missing does not agree with their assessment
- role of missing persons co-ordinators in risk assessment of 'missing' and 'absent' cases

Risks to absent children

We would like to hear evidence on the risks to and vulnerabilities of children who are absent from home, care, or education including how factors such as age and the length or frequency of episodes affect risk. We are also seeking evidence on the risks faced by different groups of absent children, for example those absent from home, care, or education, absent BME children, absent older children and absent children with disabilities.

Safeguarding responses to absent children

We are seeking evidence on how local agencies - including the police, children's services and schools - respond to 'absent' children, including both when they are reported missing and when they return. We would like to hear how this differs from the response to children categorised as 'missing', whether responses adequately address the risks to absent children and evidence relating to the outcomes of the use of the 'absent' category. We are also seeking evidence around safe and well checks and return home interviews for 'absent' children.

Joint working and information sharing

We are seeking evidence on how different agencies work together to risk assess, monitor and safeguard cases of absent children. This includes how data about absent children (whether held by the police, schools or children's social services) is recorded and shared with other local safeguarding agencies. We also seek evidence of how data about absent children is used to inform other local safeguarding responses like child sexual exploitation or exploitation by criminals or gangs.

What needs to improve?

We would welcome suggestions for how the safeguarding of absent children could be improved, including examples of good practice and whether national policy, guidance or inspection can be improved

1. Submitting your response

Please structure your submission so that it addresses each topic in turn. We intend to publish submissions we receive, unless requested otherwise. The submissions will inform a roundtable session due to held in February 2016 and an inquiry report, due to be published in early 2016.

All submissions should be sent by email to richard.crellin@childrenssociety.org.uk or via post to:

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