

SLIDE 1

Good morning.

Thank you for inviting me to this important international conference which is being attended by so many of you with a wealth and expertise and knowledge in this area.

It's six years ago since I helped to open your first International Conference on Missing Children and Adults.

A lot has happened since then and it's good to come back to share with you my experiences in the intervening years and outline the challenges we still face.

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I have been invited to speak here today in my role as the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults. We are a group of MPs and peers, from all political parties, who work together with the public and private sector, charities, practitioners and researchers to improve understanding amongst policy makers and legislators of issues connected to children and adults who go missing

We are supported in our work by two excellent charities, Missing People and the Children's Society

Children and adults can be missing for a variety of reasons – they can be children running away from home or care for short or long periods; abducted, kidnapped and trafficked children; adults with mental health problems or those who have suffered traumatic life events and elderly dementia sufferers.

The latest data published by the NCA in the Missing Persons Data Report 2016/17 this week showed that a total of 147,859 individuals were reported missing in England and Wales with a total of 286,763 missing incidents recorded.

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The theme of this year's conference - 'Coming Together' - was also my theme in 2013 when I spoke to your first international conference.

I stressed then the importance of partnership between organisations – statutory and voluntary. I also said that the experience of those who go missing and the observations of their families should be used as a

resource to help shape the responses of agencies who are there to safeguard them

I expressed concern that the significance of missing episodes was not being identified because data was not being properly shared or understood.

This was partly because police, children's services, community safety, health youth services or education each decided separately if it was appropriate for them to become involved with a child that had gone missing. A lot of time and resources were being taken up with that assessment process which meant that many children were slipping through the net.

We said then that we needed to develop a new of working model where the question is not: "Is this the responsibility of my agency" but becomes "What needs to be done to protect this child?" The only way to do that effectively is for all organisations to join forces and work together and listen to each other.

Such a familiar but true mantra.

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Parliamentary Inquiries and Reports

I would like to take you through some of the parliamentary inquires and other work we have done since 2012 to try to raise awareness of 'missing' and to encourage people to 'come together' to achieve change. I should point out that all the reports of the APPG are accessible through my website – Anncoffeyp.com/reports

'Coming Together' is a recurring theme. Each of our reports has identified that

The last time I spoke to this conference our parliamentary group had just held two important parliamentary inquires. The first was into how to help and support the families of missing people. We recommended a Presumption of Death Act after a person had been missing for seven years, which came into force in October 2014. We also recommended a guardianship law for relatives of missing loved ones to be able to manage their financial affairs when they are missing, which will come

into effect on July 31. That could not have been done without MPs of all parties working together.

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The second was a very high-profile inquiry, published in June 2012, into the dangers of children who go missing from care. That report came at a time of greater awareness of the extent of sexual exploitation of children. The country's eyes had been opened by the media coverage of the trials of groups of men who had groomed, raped and sexually abused young girls in Rotherham and Rochdale, many of those children had been reported missing.

Our inquiry heard that children in care are three times more likely to run away than children living at home and that a significant number of children coming into the care system were targeted for sexual exploitation because of their higher vulnerability. It highlighted that the harm to children was not being identified while missing, especially when they went missing for short periods.

We were concerned at that time that professionals and practitioners failed to protect children who were sexually exploited because they saw them as 'child prostitutes' making a 'lifestyle choice'.

We also exposed a huge and worrying discrepancy in different data collected by the police and the Department of Education on the numbers of children missing from care. We were also concerned that almost half of all children in children's homes were being sent away to live miles away from their home towns in 'out of area' placements. An out of area placement is where children who are the responsibility of one local authority area are placed in another local authority area sometimes more than 100 miles away from their home town. Many children placed 'out of area' frequently go missing and come to harm.

In 2012 we made 31 recommendations and the Government responded positively to our report and to another report issued simultaneously by the then Deputy Children's Commissioner, Sue Berelowitz, into sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. Changes were made including the Department for Education collecting more robust and detailed data on children going missing.

A change was also made to enable Ofsted, which inspects children's homes, to share information with police forces about the locations of homes in their area. This was important as it rectified the ridiculous situation where paedophiles knew where children's homes were but the police didn't!

The government also shared our deep concerns about the risks of out of area placements and going missing and made changes to attempt to stop children being placed 'out of sight out of mind'. Children's homes were also told they must now notify the host authority when a child was placed with them and that local authorities had to notify the local police when a child at risk was placed in their area.

and the police when a child at risk is placed in their area. Often, the first the police knew of the existence of a child was when he or she went missing.

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In May 2015 the APPG held a Roundtable of experts on vulnerable 16-17-year olds who go missing and found that age was used as an indicator of risk and older children were not seen as at risk. We were concerned to see that many of the young people who were reported as frequently going missing in their early teens stopped being reported at all on turning 16.

We were also concerned that children aged 16 to 17 were being placed in supported, semi-independent unregistered children's homes so were essentially 'off the radar.' We called for greater regulation of this sector. This accommodation has many forms and includes housing youngsters in houses or hostels with older adults. Some of the children may have been in care and others may have no family support or be classed as homeless

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In May 2016 an Inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent children' found that at least 10,000 children a year could be at 'high risk' because they received no active police response when they went missing.

At that time there was a two-tier police recording system that classified children as either 'missing' or 'absent'. The problem was that if a child was classified as merely 'absent' then they received no police response.

We successfully called for the scrapping of the absent category because our inquiry heard of cases of children classed as absent who had been groomed for sexual exploitation or criminal involvement such as drug running across county lines.

They were not identified as a high-risk group because at that time there was a distinct lack of awareness of the extent of gang exploitation as boys going missing were often seen as low risk and classed as 'absent' not 'missing' even though they may have been groomed and coerced into transporting and selling Class A drugs – crack cocaine and heroin – from one area of the country to another.

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Later in December 2017 the APPG held a roundtable on 'County Lines' – the new grooming phenomenon - when many parents told us of their anguish of having their children groomed to sell drugs and their struggle to get the police and other agencies to initially see the children as victims, even when they were repeatedly going missing.

One mother told us: "It become so frustrating as all services that were assigned to working with my son in this period.... were all working as separate entities – with this came, on many occasions, lack of communication, oversight or duplication of that was meant to be done or not take place, this caused me great distress."

The experience of this mother again, highlighted the need to Come Together. In the end she set up an email group of all the professionals she was dealing with so that they could come out of their respective silos and be aware of what each other was doing and build up a whole picture of her son's life. She hoped that sharing the all the information might enable the professionals to come up with one coherent safeguarding response.

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Then in June 2018 we held an Inquiry into safeguarding missing adults who have mental health issues. Our report found that many lives are being put at risk each year because adults with mental health problems

are 'found and forgotten' after going missing. Going missing should be a 'red flag moment' which ought to trigger help but instead tens of thousands of adults are left alone and isolated with no support on their return. Our inquiry heard that about 80 per cent of adults who go missing are experiencing mental health problems and up to one third go missing again. Up to 600 missing people a year are found dead; the most common cause being suicide. In short opportunities for intervention and prevention of further harm are frequently being missed.

Our central recommendation was that mental health services must take on a greater role in assessment of risk, rather than just leaving it all to the police, given the high levels of missing people suffering from depression and, anxiety and other mental illnesses.

There are also still problems with police and health services sharing data about adults going missing from hospital. When you compare data from the NHS on missing people and data collected by the police there is an underreporting of those going missing from hospitals, particularly from Accident and Emergency Departments.

Many vulnerable missing people are taken to A and E by the police but do not receive a mental health or risk assessment at that time. So when the subsequently go missing again, often from A and E, it is difficult for the police to decide what an appropriate response might be, There is also the loss of an opportunity to give early help.

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What has changed?

I want to look now at what has changed over recent years. It has been a mixed bag. Some things have got better, and some have got worse.

We are currently in the process of conducting another parliamentary inquiry into children who go missing from out of area placements in children's homes because of concern that the picture is getting worse.

When we did our first report in 2012 into children missing from care there were 46 per cent of children living out of borough and that has now soared to 64 per cent – which is two thirds of all children in children's homes.

There has been a 77 per cent increase in the numbers of children sent to live in children's homes out of area and they are running away at a far faster rate than children placed in borough. Children aged 15-17 are

three times more likely to go missing as other age groups – precisely the same dominant age for grooming by criminal gangs.

It is disappointing that the situation has deteriorated since 2012 as the Government promised to curtail the high numbers of out of borough placements. Record numbers of children are being ‘sent away’ to live miles away from home and record numbers of them are going missing.

In March 2018 a record 1,990 out of area children in children’s homes were reported missing a total of 10,460 times – doubled since 2015.

I do welcome the fact that since 2012 the Department for Education collect more extensive data of children who go missing.

There is growing evidence that this “sent away generation’ of vulnerable youngsters are in danger of falling prey to paedophiles and drugs gangs who target them because they are vulnerable and alone.

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Our current inquiry is already hearing evidence of the trauma caused to ‘sent away’ children and how they feel isolated and alone away from an area that is familiar to them and without family and friends. The removal of their mobile phones or access to wi fi increases their feeling of isolation. Their response is to run away. Some children can travel over great distances to get back to their home. One child walked 10 miles.

The evidence also shows that local authorities are placing children out of borough because they have no choice as private children’s homes, which make up 73 per cent of all homes, are clustered in three areas of the country.

It is a ‘perfect storm’. Vulnerable children with issues of attachment are sent to live miles away from home which increases their vulnerability to falling victim to paedophiles and criminals. The missing episodes are the symptom of a much deeper problem exacerbated by the decision of the social care system to place them many miles from their home area.

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Other Interim findings of this ongoing inquiry – based on a survey of all 43 police forces - revealed that 80 per cent of forces were concerned about children being placed out of borough in unregistered semi-independent units for children aged 16 plus.

These children are being dumped in a 'shady twilight' world of unregistered children's homes making them a magnet for paedophiles and drugs gangs. A record 5,000 children are in these placements, doubled since 2009.

Among the police concerns highlighted were that there is no registration, no inspection, a high proportion of the children repeatedly run away again and again and that there are numerous inappropriate placements, for example of a victim of sexual exploitation being housed with a sexual perpetrator; girls targeted and groom and transported to other areas for sex and one girl imprisoned by a gang. One young person was stabbed another after social services knowingly placed two opposing gang members in the same unregistered home.

Most police forces also talked about a lack of notifications that a child at risk is being placed in their area and most said that the children were often not known to the police until they went missing.

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Since 2015 the Department for Education now publishes more comprehensive data on children who go missing from care. Local agencies are working together to share data more but barriers remain to collecting and sharing data across police force and local authorities areas, which will hopefully improve substantially when the new Register of Missing Persons is introduced hopefully at the end of this year.

The new Register will mean that police forces across the country can access each other's data for example about missing children which would enable them to identify that a child picked up, for example for drugs offences was a child repeatedly missing from another area. This would immediately indicate that that child was involved in a County Lines operation.

But for this to be a good intelligence tool it requires all children and adults who are reported missing, including those classed as 'at no apparent risk' to be on the register.

The success of the of the new Register will depend on whether local police forces are collating at a local level the information we need to prevent children being exploited and to prevent adults coming to harm. The data will only be as useful as the information from individual police forces.

To understand the significance of a missing episode for a child or adult we need to understand what is going on in that persons' life. The key to this understanding is for partner agencies – whether it be Accident and Emergency Departments, sexual health clinics, GPs, schools, social care – all to be able to add information at a local level.

I recently met Thames Valley Police to discuss ELPIS, a software tool that has been developed by them. It allows all local agencies to do this. This helps to build up a picture of a persons' life and makes it easier to assess risk and decided on an appropriate response that should be made to that child or adult. This is not solely a police response but a whole system response. It enables a better understanding of the vulnerabilities of a person, trends and patterns and trigger events and for a more tailored response from safeguarding agencies. So, the missing episode is not seen in isolation.

The information that is provided helps identify and map hot spots and information, such as who a child might be associating with, which can help identify the risk to that child or sexual and criminal exploitation.

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Inspectorates are vital in driving change in police forces, local authorities and children's homes. So, it is good that **Joint Targeted Area Inspections** were launched in 2016 which allows important information to be linked together.

Four inspectorates – Ofsted; the Care Quality Commission (CQC); Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) – now jointly assess how local authorities, the police, health, probation and youth offending services work together in an area to identify, support and protect vulnerable children and young people.

Each inspection includes a 'deep dive' element on a theme and the first set focused on children at risk of sexual exploitation and those missing from home, school or care. It said:

“There needs to be a better understanding of why children go missing at an individual and a strategic level if agencies are to do more to protect them. Local authorities need to gather all available intelligence to understand why a child has gone missing, including sensitively encouraging children to talk about why they ran away. The current requirement that every child who has been missing

should receive a return home interview is not working well enough.”

So, there is greater significance of the awareness of missing but we still do not really know what happens to young people when they have been away. To properly assess the level of risk to children and adults who go missing and determine the appropriate response requires knowing as much as possible about their lives and why they went missing. Knowing where a child has been and who they have been with is important information in assessing risk.

Statutory guidance issued in 2014 by the Department for Education - “Children who run away or go missing from home or care” - said that all children who have been reported missing must be offered an independent return interview.

But not all children accept. There remains a problem with the take up of the offer of return home interviews and who conducts them and how intelligence gathered from those interviews is shared. For example, in my area only 50 per cent take up the offer. Research shows that children are far more likely to disclose information to a person they trust – a ‘trusted individual’ – who may be an independent organisation or it may be a police officer or social worker. There is not a one size fits all.

The 2014 guidance puts responsibility on to local authorities to do return interviews.

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Research by the Children’s Society in May 2019 found on average just 50 per cent of missing episodes resulted in return home interviews taking place despite it being a statutory requirement on local authorities to offer them each time a child goes missing. One in five local authorities are not recording information from interviews in any consistent way. The data also suggests that information sharing from RHIs between children’s services and police is not consistent across the country and in some areas is very limited.

Additional research by Missing People in June this year looked at nearly 600 missing episodes involving more than 200 missing children in three areas in England. I shone a light on why these interviews are so important. Even though the police had categorised the children involved as being at low or medium risk of harm, they found that:

- 1 in 7 (14%) of the children had been sexually exploited and nearly half disclosed high risk warning signs of sexual exploitation.
- one in ten (8 per cent) had been a victim of criminal or other forms of exploitation
- 1 in 5 disclosed information about mental health issues with one in ten at risk of self-harm and 4 per cent at risk of suicide

The study shows that information from RHIs can be used for follow up support, to inform wider safeguarding, identify those at greatest risk and lead to fewer going missing in the long term.

The report recommends that RHIs should continue to be offered to all returned missing children, regardless of the level of risk defined by police; findings from RHIs should be effectively shared, recorded and included in safety planning.

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Working Together to Safeguard children

The 'Working Together to Safeguard Children July 2018' guidance from the Department for Education which highlights the need for contextual safeguarding states that collecting information is not an end in itself but needs to inform intervention and prevention of harm. It says:

“Children may be vulnerable to neglect and abuse or exploitation from within their family and from individuals they come across in their day-to-day lives. These threats can take a variety of different forms, including: sexual, physical and emotional abuse; neglect; exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups; trafficking; online abuse; sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation. Whatever the form of abuse or neglect, practitioners should put the needs of children first when determining what action to take.”

The guidance highlights that practitioners should be alert to potential need for early help for children, who are frequently missing; at risk of modern slavery, trafficking or exploitation and showing signs of being drawn into criminal behaviour including gang involvement.

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Changing attitudes is key

An overriding aspect of my parliamentary work and earlier experience as a social worker is the importance of culture and attitudes in shaping services.

I mentioned the Rochdale and Rotherham scandals and press coverage changed attitudes towards girls, who were seen as 'child prostitutes'.

I am pleased to say that the change in the law came into force on May 3 2015 remove all references to child prostitution from legislation substituting it with 'sexually exploited child

When language is changed, understanding of behaviour is changed and work practices change. A response to a child prostitute will be different to a response to a sexually exploited child.

Conclusion

We are better at collecting data on missing but what is more challenging is understanding why people go missing and what is going on in their lives.

We need to understand that what we collect data for is to protect children and adults from exploitation by those who would seek to harm them.

"Coming Together" means listening more to children and young people who go missing. Children will not trust us if they do not feel we understand them

Going missing is a cry for help, a red flag moment. It is a symptom of a problem and it up to agencies to work together to find out what the underlying cause is and to give help and support,

One young woman who had gone missing memorably told us: "Going missing was the easy bit, returning home to no help was far harder."

Unless we address the causes, we are not going to stop children and adults going missing.

Missing is a symptom – we need to focus on the cause. To do that we must bring together all the knowledge from all the agencies and use this to develop the services children and adults can trust and rely on to help keep them safe.

ENDS

4,217