The First Step:

How return home interviews can improve support and safeguarding for missing young people

By Iryna Pona, Phil Raws and Hannah Chetwynd

The Children's Society

NPCC National Police Chiefs' Council

Acknowledgements

The research group would like to say thank you to all who made this research possible.

A big thank you to all local authorities in England and Wales who participated in the national survey about the provision of Return Home Interviews (RHIs).

Special thanks to professionals in the five case study areas, from local authority services, police and the voluntary sector for sharing generously with the research team information and insights into how RHIs are organised and delivered in their areas. Their commitment to the safeguarding of missing children, and their expertise and vision for how services can further improve are inspiring.

We would also like to express our gratitude to young people in the focus groups for their passion for making things better for other young people, and for sharing their views and experiences that contributed to some of the findings in this report.

This report received an oversight from the steering group which consisted of representatives from the Home Office, Department for Education, National Crime Agency (NCA), a staff member for the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) lead on missing people, and a staff member for the NPCC lead on vulnerable children. We are grateful to Steve Cox, Scott Hill, Louise Rutherford, Kate Stewart, Annette Connaughton, Neil Dodds, Gareth Edwards, Anna Strudwick and Sharon Cooney for the insights, encouragement and steer provided throughout the duration of this research.

And lastly, but importantly, this research was made possible through funding from the Home Office commissioned by National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Missing People. We are grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the growing body of evidence on the responses needed when children come back from missing incidents.

Contents

Introduction 4

Chapter 1. Overview of policy and research on return home interviews 11

1.1. Policy context around RHIs for missing children 11

1.2. Research on young runaways and young people going missing 13

1.3. Conclusion 19

Chapter 2. The reach of Return Home Interviews for children missing from home or care 21

2.1. Key findings from the national survey of local authorities in England and Wales on the scale of RHI provision 23

2.1. Key findings from five case study areas on the factors that help or hinder the reach of RHI provision 28

2.3. Key learning from five case study areas about practices, processes and activities that aim to improve the reach of RHI 35

2.4. Conclusion on the reach of RHIs 42

Chapter 3. Delivery of Return Home Interviews to children missing from home and care 44

3.1. Key findings from the national survey of local authorities in England and Wales about the RHI delivery 46

3.2. Key findings from five case study areas on the factors that help or hinder the delivery of RHIs 49

3.3. Key learning from five case study areas about practices, processes and activities that aim to improve the delivery of RHIs 55

3.4. Conclusion on the delivery of RHIs 62

Chapter 4. Follow up after Return Home Interviews: Support for young people, information sharing and oversight 64

4.1. National survey findings about the availability of follow up support and information sharing from RHIs 66

4.2. Key findings from the five case study sites about factors that help or hinder follow up after the RHIs 71

4.3. Key learning from five case study areas about practices, processes and activities that aim to improve follow up for RHIs 81

4.3. Conclusion on follow up after RHIs 87

Chapter 5.Research conclusions and the way forward 90

References 96

APPENDIX A: Methodology 100

APPENDIX B: The development of ‘missing persons schemes’ and welfare interviews for young runaways 106

APPENDIX C. Effectiveness in RHI provision 108

FOREWORD

A Return Home Interview (RHI) is a conversation between a child or young person and a trained professional when they return from a missing episode. RHIs are required in England by the 2014 DfE statutory guidance and the all Wales Protocol recommends that an equivalent is offered.

Conducting an RHI gives an opportunity to really listen to a child or young person and identify any risk or vulnerability associated with the missing episode, therefore it is of paramount importance that they are conducted in the best way possible to deliver the best outcome for the child and to enable safeguarding agencies to protect and help a child. Until now however, there has been no evidence on the scope, scale and effectiveness of RHIs.

That's why we have commissioned this research into Return Home Interviews (RHIs), through the Violence and Public Protection Portfolio, funded by the Home Office and conducted by The Children's Society. My thanks to Iryna Pona, her team and to all who participated in this project.

Children and young people who go missing from home or missing from care can be among the most vulnerable in our society. Often there are links to criminal and sexual exploitation, county lines or complex family issues that are impacting the child or young person's safety and wellbeing. Protecting children from harm is one of the most important functions of a civilised society and police and partners rightly have this at the top of their priorities. Talking to children, listening to them and creating an environment where they feel able to describe their fears, concerns and their own unique situation is vital to effective safeguarding.

This research now gives police and partners a firm evidence base to inform how we design services to improve the support and reduce the risk to children and young people who go missing. It also demonstrates that all agencies need to work together to keep missing children safe. I urge you to use it to improve the outcomes for future generations.

Catherine Hankinson,

National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Missing People

Introduction

Children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care can be very vulnerable. Many changes to national policy and local responses have been made during the past 20 years as understanding has improved of the risks children may face. These changes include the introduction of 'Return Home Interviews' (RHIs), or 'Debriefs', as they are known in Wales.

An RHI is a conversation between a child and a trained professional after a child has come back from a missing incident. Its purpose is to *'provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home'* (DfE, 2014). Under the 'Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from care' in England (DfE, 2014) (henceforth referred to as the 2014 Guidance) all English local authorities are now required to offer RHIs, and the All Wales Protocol for Missing Children (2011) recommends that Welsh local authorities offer Debriefs to children who return from a missing incident.

The information from RHIs or Debriefs can inform an individual safeguarding response or the support a young person is given to address the risks of going missing and it can be a source of 'intelligence' for the strategic and operational work of relevant agencies (such as local authorities, the police and Local Safeguarding Children Boards(LSCBs)) in an area.

RHIs can, then, be invaluable in many ways, but understanding of current provision, including how well information-sharing is working, is extremely limited. Research which has been published has highlighted inconsistency and variations in the service provided to young people in different areas, but the reasons for this are not well understood and evidence of effective practice is sparse.

Research aims

This study was commissioned by the National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Missing People with funding from the Home Office, with the following aims:

- To help understand the national picture of RHI provision across England and Wales.
- To help understand the practical barriers that are stopping RHIs taking place in accordance with the statutory guidance.
- To identify good practice features for the delivery of RHIs.
- To identify good practice features in the use of information derived from RHIs to inform individual safeguarding arrangements as well as strategic arrangements in the area.

Methods

The study was conducted between October 2017 and December 2018 and incorporated a range of data collection methods (a more detailed description of methodology is provided in Appendix A):

- Literature and policy scoping

A brief scoping of published research, grey literature (including reports by government departments and other agencies) and policy documentation was undertaken to consider the background of policy and practice developments in relation to missing young people and the importance of other related issues (eg child sexual exploitation) in order to understand the context for the study.

- An online survey of local authorities in England and Wales

Appropriate contacts within local authorities across England and Wales were asked to complete an online survey asking questions about the scale of missing reports for young people in their area and the scale and scope of RHI provision. They were also asked about aspects of service delivery, inter-agency working, follow up support and the use of the information collected from RHIs to contribute to the safeguarding of individual young people and to inform wider safeguarding strategy within areas and across boundaries.

- Case studies

A shortlist of local authorities was selected on the basis of 'promising practice' as shown in their survey responses, and to reflect a range of different characteristics (eg a city area and a rural area). Five agreed to participate in the study, four in England and one in Wales. To ensure impartiality of the research none of the areas included had services of any kind provided by The Children's Society. Mixed methods data collection was undertaken in each area – including a request for key documentation around RHI provision and its place within safeguarding systems locally (eg protocols), interviews with professional stakeholders, focus groups with RHI workers and managers and a case file analysis. This allowed for a detailed consideration of operational and strategic issues, in particular how services had evolved, how information-sharing systems and professional cultures had developed, and how challenges to effective practice had been overcome.

- Focus groups with young people

Young people aged 16 to 22 took part in two focus groups. They were recruited through services providing support to young people (including those who had been reported missing) and all had experiences of RHI. Some young people had experience of being a looked after child, while others were living with their families. Young people in the groups were asked about what things made for good RHIs, and a vignette approach - whereby hypothetical cases involving young people who had been reported missing in different situations and with different characteristics were shared – was used to support discussions around different aspects of delivery and follow up support.

Ethics and oversight

Support around the ethical conduct of the project was provided by The Children's Society's 'Research Ethics and Engagement Framework' (REEF). A project steering group consisting of members from the police, Home Office, Department for Education (DfE) and National Crime Agency (NCA) provided inputs and oversight for the project.

Scope and definitions

This research is about RHIs and the primary focus is on children and young people who have been reported missing to the police by a parent or carer. There can be an overlap with issues related to the broader group of 'young runaways'[1] (discussed in Chapter 1) but throughout the report the term 'missing' has been used to refer solely to those young people (aged under 18) who have been reported to the police as missing from home or care. Where there are exceptions to this (eg in a later section on 'hidden missing') this is clearly explained.

The terms 'Return Home Interview' (abbreviated to RHI) or 'Debrief' have been used where it is necessary to distinguish between work in England and Wales, but for the sake of brevity RHI is used as a generic term for all interviews throughout the report.

The term 'young people' has been used in the report to refer to all children and young people under the age of 18.

The study covered missing from home and from care (young people looked after by local authorities who had been reported missing from their foster or residential care placements), including a particular focus on 'out of area' placements – ie care placements outside a young person's home local authority.

The report includes a number of technical terms and acronyms, and a glossary which explains these is provided at the end of this introduction.

[1] Young runaway are children and young people who have either chosen to leave home, are staying away from home without parental permission, or have been forced to leave by their parents or carers. A 'runaway' may or may not have been reported as 'missing' to the police. The link to issues around youth homelessness – for young people aged over 16 – have also been discussed in the research literature (eg Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

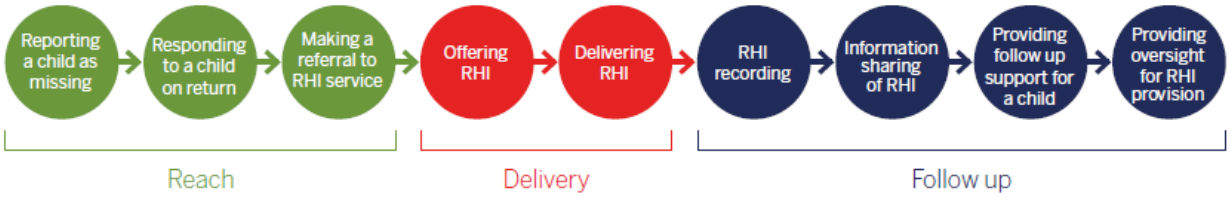
Organising concepts and structure of the report

A wide range of data was collected for the study and this enabled the consideration of many important issues that impact on the provision of RHIs.

In order to group these for analysis and presentation in the report three overarching concepts have been used:

- Reach — 'Reach' refers to the spread of the RHI delivery as required by the 2014 Guidance and to the extent of coverage of services' provision to different groups of young people.
- Delivery — 'Delivery' focusses on who provides RHIs and how they are done, including how the offer of an interview is made to a young person and their parent or carer and the conduct of the interview itself.
- Follow up — 'Follow up' refers to things that happen after the RHI has taken place, covering the issues of support offered and provided to a young person and information sharing (for individual safeguarding or to inform multi-agency strategic or operational work).

These reflect different aspects of RHI provision and highlight the need to understand that the interview itself is part of a sequence of interrelated actions or processes which comprise the responsibilities of different agencies to safeguard a missing young person. The elements of 'reach', 'delivery' and 'follow-up' (shown in the graphic below) are covered in detail in this report and an overview of key learning points is presented on after this introduction.



In terms of the structure of the report, Chapter One explains the context for the study – detailing the findings from a scoping of research literature and policy documents related to young runaways and children and young people who go missing, and also to developments in practice and policy around information sharing and safeguarding.

Chapter Two focusses on findings on the reach of RHI work – including a description of the national picture and learning from the case study areas.

Chapter Three covers delivery – how services are operating nationally and locally, and how local solutions to some of the challenges of providing RHI services have been overcome.

Chapter Four looks at the issues around 'follow up' after RHIs have been done – including support by different agencies, information sharing between agencies (how well systems are working at local and national levels), and oversight of services and information sharing.

Finally, Chapter Five provides an overall discussion and conclusion to the study, alongside recommendations for improvements to policy and practice.

Glossary – terms and acronyms

Runaway – Children and young people who have either chosen to leave home, are staying away from home without parental permission, or have been forced to leave by their parents or carers. A 'runaway' may or may not have been reported as 'missing' to the police.

Missing child – a child reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.

Police definition of 'Missing' – Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. (College of Policing, 2017)[2]

Return Home Interview - an in-depth interview normally best carried out by an independent person (ie someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge. RHIs provide the opportunity to uncover information that can help identify information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home. The interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting. (DFE, 2014)

Prevention interviews (previously known as Safe and Well Checks) - police visits to children following a missing episode to ensure that the returning person is safe and well. The purpose of the prevention interview is to identify any ongoing risk or factors which may contribute to the person going missing again. (College of Policing 2017)

Home local authority - the local authority that is responsible for a looked after child's care and care planning.

Host local authority - the local authority in which a looked after child is placed when placed out of the responsible local authority's area.

Looked after child or a child in care - a child who is looked after by a local authority by reason of a care order, or being accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

Out of area looked after children - looked after children who live in care placements outside the boundaries of their home local authority.

Safe and Well Checks – see *Prevention interviews.*

ACPO	Association of Chief Police Officers
AWP	All Wales Protocol Missing Children
AWPRG	All Wales Procedures Review Group
APPG	All Party Parliamentary Group
BAME	Black and minority ethnic
CAMHS	Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CCE	Child criminal exploitation
CEIS	Centre for Excellence in Information Sharing
CSC	Children's Social Care
CSE	Child sexual exploitation

[2] This replaced the police definition of missing and absent from 2013 referred to in the DFE 2014 guidance: '*Missing*: anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another; and *absent*: a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be'.

DCS	Director of Children's Services
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DoH	Department of Health
HMICFRS	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services
IT / ICT	Information Technology / Information and Communications Technology
LA	Local authority
LAC	Looked after children
LGA	Local Government Association
LSCB	Local Safeguarding Children Board
MASH	Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NCA	National Crime Agency
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NPCC	National Police Chiefs Council
OCC	Office of the Children's Commissioner
PCC	Police and Crime Commissioner
RMFHCP	Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Protocol
RHI	Return Home Interview
RHWI	Return Home Welfare Interview (*term used in Scotland*)
YOT / YOS	Youth Offending Team / Youth Offending Service

Key learning points about what enables Return Home Interview Provision and key areas for troubleshooting

	Reporting a child as missing	Responding to a child on return	Making a referral to RHI service	Offering RHI	Delivering RHI	RHI recording	Information sharing of RHI	Providing follow up support for a child	Providing oversight for RHI provision
Key learning points about factors that enable RHI provision	Police having access to all relevant information about risks to the child at a point of missing for appropriate risk assessments	On a return of a child adult carers being aware/ noting down any relevant information that can be shared with RHI provider	Single point of referral for RHI for all children LAs is responsible aid speedy offer of RHI Referral pathways in place for RHI for children who go missing but are not reported as missing for police	Making several contact attempts through different means of communication Offer of RHI coming with information for a child and parents/ carers about the purpose and follow up support LAs preparing in advance for peak times in demand for RHI **Where offer is refused considering whether the child is at risk and how relevant information about missing episode can be gathered or a child approached for conversation**	Designated RHI staff with specialist skills and training on how to provide RHI are best placed to deliver RHIs Child-centeredness and independence from adults providing/ responsible for care of the child matters Getting informed consent from a child The child having a choice of RHI practitioner important where young people persistently refuse RHI RHI done one to one with a child, unless a child makes a request for another adult to be present Informal approach to interview is important	Having an agreed form for recording of RHI enables consistency Accessible IT systems enable easy RHI recording Recording information about RHI offered, accepted, undertaken and reasons for refused helps understand gaps in provision	Good shared understanding among police, RHI providers and social work staff of what information is important to be shared from RHI helps Only information that is relevant to safeguarding of individual children and wider safeguarding of children in the area needs to be shared from RHI Information sharing protocols and intelligence sharing forms help drive shared understanding of risks	Receiving needed support following RHI is important for children Established pathways for referrals/ flags for follow up and monitoring what support is provided helps ensure that children receive help they need	Multiagency groups and structures for operational and strategic oversight of RHI provision operating at LA level and police level are important Data on RHI provision helps ensure robust understanding of gaps in provision, groups of children most at risk of going missing, places missing and found Commitment to safeguard missing children combined with partnership working is the key underlying factor for establishing good RHI provision
	Reach			Delivery		Follow up			
Key issues for trouble shooting	Lack of notifications and/or information about looked after children in out of area placements Over reporting of some children from care placements and underreporting of children missing from home Lack of clarity about children whose whereabouts are known but they are considered to be at risk	Notifications of a child going missing from and returning to out of area placements not timely or not happening at all	Out of area children, both placed outside by LAs and those placed within their boundaries, not having a designated RHI provider in case a child goes missing when placed out of their areas Delayed notifications to RHI providers Lack of timely referrals over the weekend and during public holidays	Lack of parental consent for RHI in some cases Young people who go missing frequently in short period of time require a different approach more focussed on relationship building 72 hour deadline starting from the point of referral made to RHI service	Young people who persistently refuse RHI lack an opportunity to build relationships with RHI providers Children in out of area placements lack access to designated RHI providers and instead more likely to have RHI delivered by the social worker or placement staff	IT systems that do not talk to each other Lack of clarity of what should be recorded and shared	Lack of feedback loop on information shared from police Lack of feedback to a wider range of agencies on risks missing children face in the area Lack of information sharing from RHI interviews with children in out of area placements Unnecessary level of detail shared from RHIs	Lack of services to refer to Lack of parental consent for early help services for families and children Lack of clarity about follow up for looked after children	Lack of oversight of what follow up support is available Lack of the voice of the child informing commissioning of services for missing children

Chapter 1. Overview of policy and research on return home interviews

Summary

This chapter offers an overview of how national policy has evolved over the last 20 years to change how local authorities and different agencies respond to young people who go missing.

It also briefly describes the research which has underpinned these policy developments: how an increasing understanding of the scale of running away and going missing, the reasons why young people run away from home or care, and the risks they may have while away, led to governments introducing initiatives to improve safeguarding responses. This increased understanding also led to the development of services to support young people who had run away or gone missing from home or care.

The chapter also reflects on the key messages from previous research which have informed the inquires within this study. These messages may inform ways to improving practice in the future, although there are many gaps in the available evidence, especially in relation to the evaluation of services (including RHI provision) working with young people who run away or are reported missing.

1.1. Policy context around RHIs for missing children

An RHI is a conversation between a young person and a trained professional following the young person's return after going missing from home or care. The 2014 Guidance says that '*Independent return interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home*' (DfE, 2014)

The policies, practices and language around RHIs and information sharing from them have been evolving over the last 20 years, see Evolution of policies on Return Home Interviews flowchart.

Good practice guidelines published by the Local Government Association and Association of Chief Police Officers in 1997 first suggested that local authorities should ensure all young people who had been reported missing were offered an interview from an independent person when they returned home, ideally within 72 hours of their return (LGA & ACPO, 1997). However, research conducted by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) found very few local authorities were providing such a service.

In the 2008 Young Runaways Action Plan, the Government committed to update the guidance on RHIs to ensure that they happen and information gathered from them was shared effectively with relevant agencies. The plan also introduced a 'National Indicator' for young runaways – NI71 (Children who have run away from home/care overnight) – implemented from April 2009. This established a standard for reporting information about missing children, but it was short-lived and abolished in October 2010.

The statutory guidance on 'Children who run away and go missing from home and care' which made the distinction between 'Police Safe and Well Checks' and 'Return Home Interviews' was published in 2009. Police Safe and Well Checks, now called prevention interviews, were to be carried out as soon as possible after a young person's return. These checks would help to establish if the young person had suffered any harm and provide an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them. An RHI by an 'independent person trained to carry out these interviews' was to follow the checks, if the young person agreed to take part.

A cross-government strategy on missing children and adults recognising the key role of RHIs in improving safeguarding of missing young people was published in 2011 (Home Office, 2011), and in the same year the Welsh Government introduced the All Wales Protocol for Missing Children. This remains the primary framework for responding to children who go missing in Wales, offering advice to local authorities, the police and other agencies on working with missing children and young people. It suggests that they should be 'given the opportunity' of a 'debrief' – the equivalent of an RHI – to discuss why they went missing (AWPRG, 2011).

Evolution of policies on Return Home interviews and information sharing

1997
Good practice guidelines by the Local Government Association and Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)
Suggested that children should be offered RHI

2004
The Children Act
Clarified duties around information sharing for safeguarding purposes at the local level

2005
Association of Chief Police Officers' Guidance on the management recording and investigation of missing persons
Provided guidance to police on responding to and recording of information about missing children

2006
DFE Working together guidance (first introduced in 1991) updated in 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2018)
Referred to the need to safeguard missing children and stipulated processes and responsibilities for information sharing

2008
DFE Young runaways action plan
Committed the introduction of RHI guidance and creation of the national indicator on missing children

2009
DFE National Indicator 71
Provided a self-assessment tool for local areas to monitor how data about missing children, including on the number of RHIs, was collected and shared between the police and children's services

2009
DFE Guidance on young runaways and children who go missing from home or care
Made distinction between police safe and well checks and RHIs, stipulated information sharing

2011
Home Office cross government strategy on Missing Children and Adults
Recognised the key role an RHI can play in understanding the reasons behind a young person's missing episode and in helping to put in place an effective course of action

2011
All Wales Protocol
Suggested that missing children on return should be 'given the opportunity' to discuss why they went missing in a 'debrief'

2011
Munro review
Highlighted lack of information sharing between agencies about vulnerable children

2011
Multiagency safeguarding hubs
First created around 2011. Some of the hubs had missing children as their key focus

2013
ACPO Authorised professional practice guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons
Updated the guidance for police on responding to and recording of information about missing children and introduced 'absent' category for missing persons

2014
DFE Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care
Required RHIs to be offered and referred to the use of information about missing children to safeguard children

2015
DFE Statutory guidance on Children Act 1989 Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review
Required local authorities to notify other local authorities if they are placing looked after children in their areas

2015
Departments of Health, Education, Communities and Local Government, Home Office and Ministry of Justice. 'Our joint commitment to share information effectively for the protection of children' letter and information sharing advice for practitioners
Letter from 5 Ministers to relevant agencies stressed that information sharing to protect children was paramount and the non-statutory guidance provided advice how this should be done in practice

2017
College of Policing Authorised professional practice guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons
Updated the guidance for police on responding to and recording of information about missing children and removed the separate 'absent' category for missing persons

2017
Government Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation progress report
Confirmed the intention to create a National Missing Persons Register

2018
DFE Information sharing advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, families, parents and carers
Updated the advice from 2018 in light of the new Data Protection Act 2018 and clarified that information could be shared even without consent if there're concerns about a child

◆ = Statutory Guidance

Following a number of reports about risks to children in care going missing and becoming victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) (eg. APPG, 2012; Berelowitz, 2013) and in response to changes in national policy (eg. the removal of NI71 and changes to the 'Working Together' guidance) the statutory guidance on missing young people was revised in 2014. The new version included a greater emphasis on RHIs and re-emphasised that they should be done by someone 'independent (ie. someone not involved in caring for the child)' (DfE, 2014). This quite broad definition of independence resulted in a variety of different interpretations by local authorities, as is discussed elsewhere in this report.

The 2014 Guidance clarified responsibilities in relation to looked after young people who were placed 'out of area' – a group deemed to be at particularly high risk of going missing and vulnerable when away from their placements (APPG, 2012). The 2014 Guidance states that a 'responsible authority' (the area where the child has become a looked after child) has to ensure that when the young person is placed in another area they should continue to have the same access to services and support, including RHIs, as when they were resident within their home area.

The Children Act 2004 had earlier introduced a range of duties on local authorities to promote multi-agency collaboration to support effective safeguarding, including the joint provision of services, sharing of budgets and resources, and the sharing of information. This led to the development of Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) – a co-located group of relevant agencies allowing for real time information sharing, decision making and communication across partners – during the early 2010s.

To ensure that agencies responding specifically to missing children were collaborating the 2014 Guidance stated that:

- Local authorities should formulate an agreed runaway and missing from home or care protocol (RMFHCP) with their local police and other partners and, where possible, with neighbouring authorities and agencies.
- Protocols should be regularly reviewed with all participating agencies and should be overseen and scrutinised by the local safeguarding children board (LSCB).[3]
- When a child goes missing, arrangements for information sharing between local authorities, the police and other agencies, and between different local authority areas, should be clearly described.

In the wake of the publication of the 2014 Guidance a number of reports have stressed the primacy of safeguarding concerns in underpinning decision-making around information sharing to safeguard children and young people (eg HM Government, 2018). A dedicated unit – the Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing (CEIS) – was established in 2015 to work with the DfE to support practitioners around improving information sharing.

1.2. Research on young runaways and young people going missing

In order to establish the context for current provision of return home interviews, a brief scoping of research and grey literature was conducted. Research studies on 'young runaways'[4] were included as these have been influential in generating knowledge and developing understanding of many of the issues that are pertinent to work with missing young people.

The *Still Running* project (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) was a watershed in research on young runaways, establishing authoritative figures for the UK (see Figure 1) as well as evidence

[3] **Children and Social Work Act 2017** sets out revised arrangements for local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships to replace the previous model of local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs). Safeguarding partners for a local authority area (named as the local authority, clinical commissioning group and police) are required to make arrangements for themselves and relevant agencies to work together in exercising their functions for the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in the area. These legislative reforms were commenced on 29 June 2018. Local areas across England are currently undergoing a transition to the new statutory arrangements, which will be complete in September 2019.

[4] Defined in the 'Still Running' series of studies as children and young people aged under 16 who have run away or been forced to leave home or their care placement for at least one night, but sometimes for longer.

of the characteristics of young runaways, the reasons why they had left – or been forced out – of home, and their experiences while they were away. Follow-up research confirmed the scale of running away by young people under 16 and highlighted the harmful experiences that young runaways may have – for example that a quarter are exposed to risk by sleeping rough or with someone they have just met, are hurt or harmed, or beg or steal to survive (Rees and Lee, 2005; Rees, 2011).

Differences in the numbers of young runaways and those reported missing

Missing from home

Research studies have consistently demonstrated the discrepancy between the numbers of young people reported missing to the police and the larger number who are known to run away, and have highlighted that many young people who run away are not reported missing to the police (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Rees and Lee, 2005; Rees, 2011). For example, in the national survey which was conducted for the second 'Still Running' study young people (aged 14 to 15) were asked if their parents or carers had reported them missing. Of these, 68% said 'No' and 13% were 'Not sure' – with only 19% saying that they had been reported (Rees and Lee, 2005).

This suggests that the official numbers that are collated and published annually by the NCA from police forces on children reported as missing to the police (described in Figure 1) are lower than the actual number of young people who run away or go missing from home. This points to a significant challenge for those responsible for developing appropriate and proportionate safeguarding responses, as the All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (APPG) noted in its 2016 report after hearing evidence of under-reporting of children missing from home, and of differences in the recording practices of police forces.

Missing from care

It has long been recognised that the issue of running away from care is particularly challenging. Early studies highlighted some of the experiences of young people in care around going missing (Newman, 1989; Rees,1993; Stein et al., 1994). The first 'Still Running' survey found that young people in care are more likely to run away (45%) than young people living at home (9.5%), and that young people who had ever been in care were also more likely to have run away at some point in their life – almost a third had run away more than three times[1] (Safe on the Streets Research, 1999).

The available evidence on the relevance of type of care placement – foster or residential – increasingly suggests that young people in residential care are more likely to go missing. Although they consistently found a higher level of running away for all young people in care, the national surveys for the Still Running studies in 1999, 2005 and 2011 had sub-samples of looked after children which were too small to establish whether placement type was associated with different levels of running away. More recently, however, an All Party Parliamentary Group report (based on missing reports) concluded that the numbers were higher for children's homes than for foster care placements (APPG, 2012). Data published by the DfE and the NCA shows a similar pattern, although variations in how local authorities and the police collect and report missing incidents means that an authoritative picture remains elusive, see DfE (2018) and NCA (2017), for comparison.

Early development of services for young runaways and recent work to provide RHIs

The antecedents to the current provision of RHIs were in voluntary sector projects working with young runaways from the early 1990s and government funding led to extensive developments in this work (see Appendix B). This was accompanied by research exploring which aspects of service delivery were most effective and where learning could support future improvements (see 'Key findings' section below).

However, an increasing emphasis on working with young people at risk of CSE grew through the early 2000s (Pearce, 2009) and Ofsted inspectors reflected that a lack of strategic direction had emerged for meeting the needs of missing children more generally, characterised by poor recording

and information sharing and an absence of clear local or national data to inform practice (Ofsted, 2013).

Figure 1. The scale of running away and going missing from home and care for children and young people in England and Wales

Missing from home

The first 'Still Running' research project included a nationally representative survey of over 13,000 14 and 15 year olds in schools across the UK and. It found that one in nine young people in England[1] run away overnight before they reach the age of 16, that there are around 129,000 incidents of running away overnight each year, and around 77,000 young people run away for the first time every year. The second and third studies in the 'Still Running' series (Rees and Lee, 2005; Rees, 2011), replicated the survey methodology of the first (but only in English schools) and found a level of running away which had remained consistent across a 12 year period.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) collates and publishes data annually on missing young people reported to police forces across England and Wales. These data show 145,121 missing from home incidents for 2015-16*, corresponding to around 60,000 young people (NCA, 2017). However, the figures are not all for overnight incidents and they represent under 18s, not under 16s (key criteria in the 'Still Running' research). There are also differences in the ways that different police forces categorise and record missing cases. A further set of data – based on responses by 108 English local authorities to a survey by the Association of Directors of Children's Services – suggested that in 2017-18 39,372 young people had been reported missing from home across 95,212 incidents (ADCS, 2018).

Estimates of the number of young people who go missing from home are likely to be underestimates of the true figure (eg research studies have only surveyed young people in mainstream schools; official data only includes those who have been reported missing to the police but research evidence shows that a significant number of young people run away from home but are not reported to the police and are, therefore, particularly vulnerable.

Missing from care

Research has found that young people who are in care are almost five times more likely to run away or go missing than young people who live at home. The reasons for this are under-researched, but it has been argued that young people in care represent a subgroup of the population where the multiple disadvantages that are known to lead to running away are most concentrated (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Official data on the numbers of young people in care reported missing is collated and published separately by the police and by the DfE. Between 2015-16* the NCA reported that there had been 53,232 incidents in England and Wales related to 10,613 individual under 18s – an average of almost five episodes per young person[2] (NCA, 2017 – data from 37 forces). For 2017-18* the DFE reported that 11,530 young people went missing 70,250 times. Around half of the missing incidents were from children's homes, supported accommodation and secure units, but no information is published on how many of these were 'out of area' placements (DfE, 2018).

Different methodologies and approaches to data collection for these contrasting datasets on missing from care mean they are not comparable with each other, and – similarly to missing from home – make it hard to know the true figure for missing from care. However, there is emerging evidence that young people in residential placements are more likely to go missing than those in foster care.

* The reporting period was from the beginning of April until the end of the following March.

[1] Rates were similar for all UK countries.

[2] Although figures for the number of incidents for young people in care are highly skewed because of a small minority of individuals with a very high number of incidents.

The recent strengthening of the national position with regard to RHIs since the publication of the 2014 Guidance and the inclusion of RHI provision in Ofsted inspections has created a situation where new developments in RHI services are likely to have taken place – but fresh evidence suggests that RHI take up may still be low (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017) and that multi-agency responses to children and young people who go missing are not working well (Ofsted, Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and HM Inspectorate of Probation 2016).

The search for literature for this report found very few documents specifically about the Welsh context for services for young runaways or young people reported missing. However, one recent report suggested that children missing from home or care in Wales were less likely to be offered a debrief than their counterparts in England, with more Welsh local authorities setting criteria (eg an identified risk of CSE) for making an offer instead of providing debriefs as a universal service (Davies, 2017).

Key findings and messages from the research

Despite the limited amount of research which has been published specifically about RHI service provision and how this contributes to safeguarding some key issues have been highlighted across studies of running away and going missing and CSE which are relevant to RHIs in particular.

The issue of 'independence'

In early studies of running away and professional responses it was repeatedly suggested that in order to facilitate young people's acceptance and engagement with services it was important that staff were not associated with statutory services – especially the police or children's social services (Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999: Rees, 2001).

The need for 'independence' of professionals in missing services has featured strongly in debates ever since – and, although the 2014 Guidance advocates for the independence of interviewers undertaking RHIs, ambiguity remains over what this means in practice and there has been a proliferation of different interpretations and service models in different areas of England (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017).

It may be important to note that the recommendation was first made in the very earliest research studies, often referring to young people who were supported by services over an extended period, and also often in relation to those young people had particular characteristics or negative experiences of statutory agencies (eg they were living in substitute care, had been in trouble with the police, were persistently reported missing etc) (Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994). It was also made at a time when professional culture within the police and social services was very different from today (eg prior to the implementation of landmark legislation such as The Children Act 2004).

Although the 'orthodoxy' around independence has for the most part been preserved in many reports (eg Evans et al, 2007: Pona, 2013; The Railway Children, 2015), some researchers have questioned whether it remains true for *all* children who go missing. After consultation with 65 young people, the Social Exclusion Unit concluded that non-judgemental support from a concerned adult – *how* the support was delivered not *who by* – alongside flexibility and choice were the fundamental aspects of what young people wanted (Turner and Jagusz, 2002; Rees et al, 2005).

Perhaps the most detailed study of 'Return Home Welfare Interviews' (RHWIs) in Scotland – based on a review of over 250 return home interviews and 64 research interviews with young people and professionals – questioned the necessity of independence from statutory services (Burgess et al, 2010; Mitchell et al, 2014). Their study gave support to an alternative view: that successful contact and interviewing could be done by appropriately-trained police or RHWI-dedicated officers, with the possible added benefit that 24-hour seven-day flexibility could be provided by police-based services (Mitchell et al, 2014).

Individualisation in service responses

‘There is substantial diversity in the characteristics of young people who run away from home and in their experiences whilst away. The former means that it is difficult to confidently predict which young people are ‘at risk’ of running away. The latter means that responses to the issue of running away need to be diverse in order to meet a wide range of contexts and needs.’ (Evans et al, 2007; p12)

The importance of recognising and responding to difference and diversity to work successfully with missing young people may seem obvious, but no clear mapping of the variety of presenting characteristics and needs has been done in order to inform a comprehensive set of responses.

A range of short and long-term interventions across England – including crisis accommodation and return home interviews – were evaluated between 2003 and 2005 (Rees et al, 2005). The authors highlighted the variety of contexts that might affect running away behaviours (eg run away or ‘forced to leave’; length of time away; previous history of running away; running ‘due to wanting to be with somebody else’) and found evidence of success among the different and sometimes innovative approaches that were in operation.

This emphasises the importance of flexibility and young person-centeredness in practice. Researchers have consistently and strongly advocated that projects and services need to work in responsive and adaptive ways to ensure that individual need is accommodated, and that young people are not pre-judged or stereotyped but actively listened to. This message was clear from the earliest studies (Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Rees, 2001), foreshadowing messages in more recent publications on safeguarding children and young people (eg Munro, 2011; the ‘Working Together’ series of guidance documents, 2010 – 2018).

Work with parents and carers

An RHI is primarily aimed at providing an opportunity for a child or young person to talk in confidence about problems they may have or issues that have contributed to a missing incident – issues which the research suggests will often reside in their relationships at home (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). However, there are important considerations to be made around how to work productively with parents or carers in order to arrange an interview, to manage the interview itself and – in many cases – to resolve the issues that may have led to the incident in order to prevent it from happening again.

The literature search did not find any research that looked at the importance of working with parents solely to conduct or follow up on RHIs, but there have been studies which raise the more general issue of the need to ensure that practice is appropriately inclusive of parents or carers in wider work with young people who run away or go missing.

One study, which asked workers to reflect in detail on their practice experiences, found that a tendency among the earliest runaways services to stick to an ‘advocacy’ model (where young people’s perspectives were represented without question in disputes with their parents) might not always serve young people’s interests, or even their express wishes:

> ‘One young person said she wanted us to mediate. We said “We advocate.” But she said “No, I don’t want you to advocate, I want you to mediate, because I’m wrong as well.” (From a practitioner interview, Rees, 2001)

Specifically referring to ‘Missing persons schemes’ (those based on police referrals after missing reports) the report also stressed that parents had been ‘surprisingly positive’ about initial contacts by services, that parents were relieved that their child was being offered help, and that ‘gate-keeping’ parents were in a small minority. At the same time workers sometimes expressed frustration at how often parents’ problems were not being addressed and the effect this was having in limiting the prospects for helping a young person (Rees, 2001).

A large-scale evaluation study of services for runaways found that project workers were aware of the benefits of including parents or carers in their work – whilst remaining clear on the need to prioritise the young person themselves – and highlighted examples of ‘family support work’ as part

of ‘innovative practice’ (Rees et al, 2005). Some services have developed family work as an additional element of their model over time (eg in the North East as part of The Children’s Society’s project – Medforth, 2011). The merits of working with parents or carers have also been proposed in reports on CSE interventions (eg PACE, 2014), although there is an ongoing recognition that there are many gaps in knowledge about the effectiveness of these approaches (Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2017).

Differences in access to RHIs for young people missing from home or care

Although the vast majority of young people who run away go from their home, young people who live in care are overrepresented in the figures (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Understanding of this has prompted particular concerns about children missing from care, and has led to the development of reporting systems, and a greater emphasis on young people who go missing from care receiving prompt support (Pona, 2013).

However, beyond the headline findings on scale, research has not yet provided clear answers on many different aspects of the phenomenon of running away or going missing from care. Small subsamples of young people in care in the national surveys for the ‘Still Running’ series of studies meant that the extent of analysis was limited. This mean it could not cover issues such as the reasons why more young people in care run away, or the potential differences in their experiences when they are away from a placement (Safe on the Streets, 1999; Rees and Lee, 2005; Rees, 2011).

Researchers have argued that a higher propensity among young people in care to run away or go missing should not be seen as a negative reflection on the care system. This is because the lives of young people who live in care (or who spend time in care during their childhoods) are often characterised by the experiences that are known to lead to running away – for example, conflict with parents, abuse or neglect at home, problems with school, issues related to substance misuse etc. In that sense they are not a random group, but represent a disadvantaged subgroup of the general population who would be expected to go missing more often (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

In contrast, other reports have asserted that factors directly related to care placements may contribute to or cause a young person to run away (eg if they have been abused by a member of staff or another young person). Reports have also suggested that features of living in care can lead to a young person going missing – eg perpetrators of sexual exploitation targeting residential children’s homes to groom young people (APPG, 2012).

The situation has become further complicated by the increasing number of looked after young people who are now placed outside their home area. This is due to the reduction, or complete removal, of in-area residential homes and a growing private sector, with homes often concentrated in particular areas of the country (DfE Children looked after data, 2012-2017; DfE, 2014; Ofsted, 2014; Ofsted, 2018).[5] Problems with information-sharing – with the new ‘host’ authority or police force at the start of an out of area placement, and, as missing incidents occur during the placement, with the ‘responsible’ authority or home area police force – may exacerbate the risk and frequency of a young person going missing (APPG, 2012)

Recommendations to local authorities in the 2014 Guidance sought to mitigate against this. But a recent report suggested that difficulties remain in relation to appropriate information sharing for looked after young people placed out of area – for example a lack of police or host authority notification of missing reports to responsible authorities, with a likely knock-on effect of fewer RHIs taking place (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017).

[5] As well as this happening extensively in England it has been reported that this is happening in Wales - https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-39861470

Whilst the policy and practice focus has sharpened, there remain many aspects of going missing from care that are under-researched – which may undermine the scope and efficacy of responses. At the same time, concentrating too narrowly on this group – as evidenced by reports showing a bias in RHI provision towards young people in care (Pona, 2013) – is unwise.

Young people in care are a small minority of the wider cohort of young people who go missing. Some of them may be at particularly high risk of going missing, but they have the benefit of professional oversight which many of those who run away or go missing from home may lack, especially those 'not known' to statutory agencies (Pona, 2013).

Data which reveals the number of young people who are 'missing from education' (eg NCB, 2014), and the findings from reviews of Serious Case Reviews showing how many young people have suffered serious harm but were not known to services (Sidebotham et al, 2016), reinforce the need to remain vigilant in relation to missing from home.

Information sharing in relation to RHIs

Very little research has been published on the use of information and intelligence collected during RHIs. Just two reports, specifically on information sharing from RHIs, were located through the literature search:

- The APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults noted inconsistencies and a lack of understanding around information sharing from RHIs, citing two particular barriers to effective work: the variety of information systems in use across different areas, and an ongoing lack of clarity about the types of information that can be shared (APPG, 2016).
- A report based on Freedom of Information requests to local authorities and police forces across England found many variations in information sharing practice, including that almost half of the local authorities which responded had no formal arrangement for sharing information about missing young people between agencies. It also found that a quarter of the 36 police forces that responded said that they 'never' or 'rarely' received information from prior interviews to assist in risk assessment if another missing report was received (Chetwynd and Pona, 2017).

In terms of information sharing as part of the wider safeguarding agenda, some research has been done on the efficacy of MASHs. One study found that the existence of a hub is, in itself, insufficient to achieve effective information sharing and thereby improve multi-agency working. Instead it was suggested that the development of relevant systems and processes and a supportive professional culture were key additional requirements. The same report also advocated the benefits of a joint information sharing protocol between the core agencies and ongoing training for all professionals who had a role in implementation (Home Office, 2014).

1.3. Conclusion

Research findings and those from other reports point to the complexity of issues around working effectively to safeguard children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care. The evolution and progress of research on these topics throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, accompanied by extensive practice development, was partially curtailed after 2010 when CSE came to dominate the agenda – although policy has continued to develop and the specific provision of RHIs has grown, particularly in the wake of publication of the 2014 Guidance.

The evidence base for current work to safeguard and support missing children is thin. There is a marked absence of focused studies on issues such as the effect of out of area placement on going missing from care, or the impact on running away of developments in the wider context of young people's lives (eg the ubiquity of social media or the effects of 'austerity'). There is also an overarching lack of evaluation studies to consider the effectiveness of services. These gaps in knowledge present significant challenges to those developing provision, including specific RHI services.

Nevertheless, findings from research on young runaways and how to support them continue to offer learnings which remain pertinent to current practice, in particular:

- Suggestion that the ‘independence’ of the type recommended in the earliest studies of supporting runaways – ie that workers should not be employed by statutory agencies (the police or children’s social care) – may be unnecessary in some cases, provided that professionals are appropriately trained and children have choice in provider.
- The importance of individualisation in service provision – including adopting a young person centred approach to all work with missing young people.
- The need to work sensitively and inclusively with parents or carers to achieve positive outcomes.

Chapter 2.
The reach of Return Home Interviews for children missing from home or care

Summary of Chapter 2. The reach of Return Home Interviews

This chapter focuses on the scale of RHI provision, examining the key factors that help or hinder the reach of RHI provision in England and Wales. Furthermore, learning from five case study areas about practices and process which seek to improve the reach of RHIs will be presented alongside findings gathered from a national survey of local authorities in England and Wales.

Key findings about the scale of RHI provision

Offers of RHIs are made to the majority of missing children after each missing incident, but variations exist between different groups of children and young people. RHIs are more likely to be offered on a case-by-case basis for those missing from home and from out of area placements than for looked after young people missing from placements in their home local authority.

In areas that could provide data, just above 50% of missing incidents across all groups of young people resulted in RHIs undertaken (24 LAs provided data in relation to young people missing from home, 21 LAs in relation to looked after children missing from placements within their home area, and 15 LAs in relation to looked after children missing from placements outside their home area). However, rates ranged from between 20–100% in individual local authorities.

Overall there is a lack of reliable data available on young people going missing from home or care, particularly for young people placed out of their home area and the number of RHIs undertaken.

Factors that help RHI reach	Factors that hinder RHI reach
Seeing missing children as a priority to local safeguarding agencies.	Complexity around delivering RHI within 72 hour framework.
Partnership working.	A young person going missing repeatedly and disengaging from services.
Continuum of actions from reporting a child as missing to follow up on return.	Parental refusal of consent for RHI.
	A young person being placed outside their home area.

Learning from five case study areas on how to improve reach of RHIs

Ensuring that young people in care are reported as missing appropriately. Areas had developed training for residential children's home staff and foster parents around the risks associated with going missing and when and how to report a child or young person missing. They had also developed mechanisms to identify young people who were missing but were not reported as missing by parents and carers and ensured that these 'hidden' missing young people had access to RHIs.

RHIs for young people in care in out of out of area placements. In one case study area the process around placing a young person out of area included compiling notes about their missing history and any live investigations which were sent to the host police force and local authority in advance of placement. The RHI provider in the new area was also identified as part of the preparation work, to ensure that this would not delay RHIs being done if needed.

Creating a single point of contact for RHI referrals. Following a missing incident, transferring all information gathered by police following a missing incident to a central contact in the local authority to be forwarded to the RHI provider was seen as important for timely delivery of RHIs.

Reporting missing from children's homes. One area had put in place an IT system that enabled local authority children's home workers to report children missing directly to the RHI provider. This had helped to reduce delays in offering an RHI when missing incidents happened during a weekend and ensured the RHI provider knew that a young person had run away irrespective of whether the police had recorded a missing incident.

Introduction

The 2014 Guidance states that when a child is found, they '*must be offered an independent return interview'* and that '*the interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting'.*

This research set out to explore how this requirement is implemented on the ground, focusing on the challenges that the case study site areas had encountered and what solutions had been developed to overcome these challenges.

Taking into account learning from previous research – about differences in access to RHIs for young people who have been missing from with their family home, from care placements within their home local authorities, and children missing from care placements outside their home local authorities – this research asked questions about the reach of RHIs for these groups of children.

2.1. Key findings from the national survey of local authorities in England and Wales on the scale of RHI provision

The survey of local authorities aimed to establish how offers of RHIs are made to different groups of children and young people, as well as gaining insight into the rate at which RHIs that are offered go on to be undertaken.

It is important to note that local authorities are only required to submit data to the DfE on looked after children who have been missing or have been absent without authorisation. However, the 2014 Guidance sets out the expectation that some degree of reporting on RHIs should be made available to a local area's LSCB: *'[the LSCB] should receive and scrutinise regular reports from the local authority analysing data on children missing from home and from care. As part of this, they should review analysis of return interviews'*.

The responses we received to questions in the local authority survey about provision and uptake of RHIs were patchy. Therefore, care has been taken to include the total number ('*n*') of responses for each question when analysis is presented throughout the report.

Due to the low number of local authorities who were able to provide answers to all questions contained within the survey, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about the national picture. However, the data does provide an insight into the scale and challenges for local authorities around the provision of RHIs.

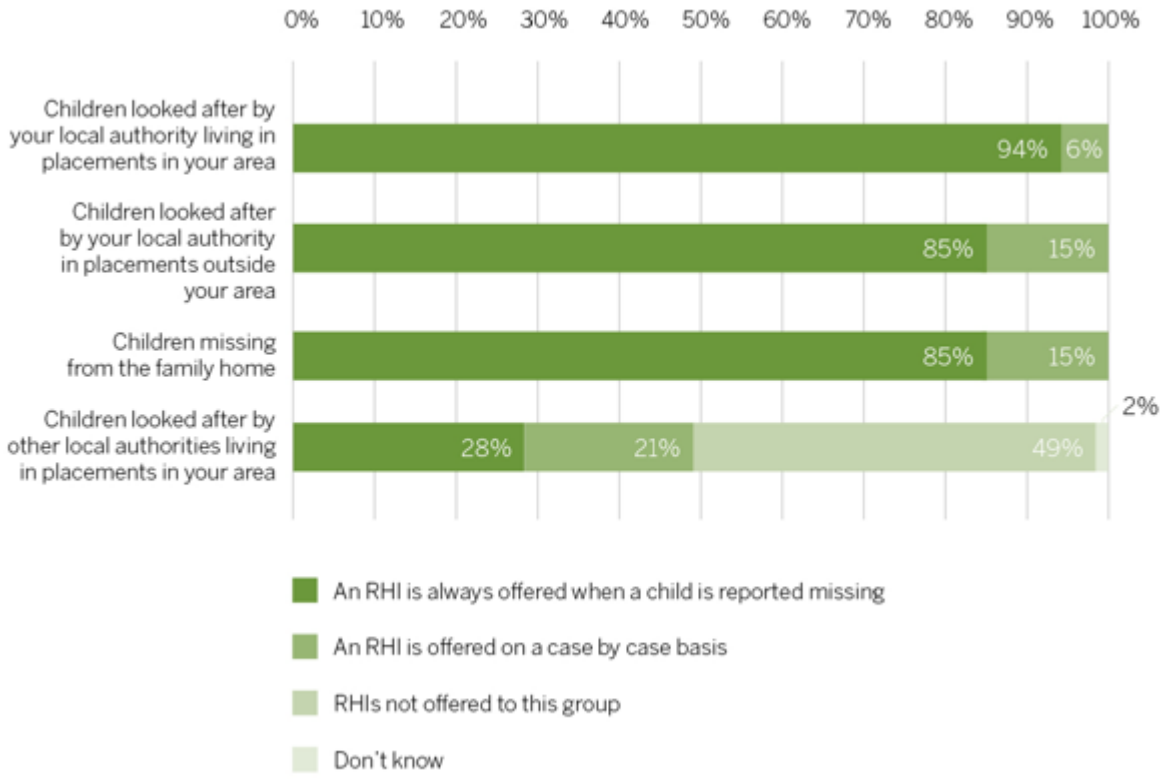
The scale of RHI offers

The survey asked if RHIs are offered to all young people from the four groups that were the focus of this research, after each missing incident (as required by the 2014 Guidance), or if an offer of a RHI is conditional on other factors.

Answers from 78 local authorities in England (highlighted in Figure 2) – which make up 51% of all local authorities in England – indicate that in the majority of areas that responded to this question, the approach is to offer RHIs to all children after each missing incident. Answers from Welsh local authorities were not used in this analysis as the requirements in relation to RHI are different in Wales.

However, there was some variation between different groups of children and young people. Ninety four percent of local authorities responded that RHIs are offered after each missing episode to children and young people who were looked after and living in their own local authority area. Eighty five percent offered RHIs to children missing from home following each missing incident, and similar number (85%) offered RHIs to looked after children missing from out of area placements. Twenty eight percent of local authorities also responded that they offered RHIs to young people to whom their local authority was acting as 'host'. This last finding was unsurprising given that the responsibility for providing RHIs lies with the placing local authority. However, issues relating to out of area placements and RHIs were frequently raised during our interviews with professionals.

Figure 2. Approaches to RHI offer by groups of children (n=78)



The high number of local authorities who offer RHIs to all young people is a positive finding. However, the difference between the groups – including the difference between offers made to young people in placements within the boundary of their home local authorities and young people they are responsible for placed outside the boundaries – is an issue that needs to be explored further.

Data received from local authorities (Figure 3) shows that on average young people in care are reported missing more frequently than young people living at home and that the rate of young people going missing from out of area placements is similarly high. However the data needs to be treated with caution, as it does not cover a representative number of local authorities and a lower number of local authorities could provide information on young people missing from out of area placements, both their own young people placed outside and those they 'host' in their areas. In addition, research and learning from case study sites suggest that children missing from home are not always reported as missing to the police.

Data from local authorities also suggests that there is considerable movement of looked after children between local authorities. Twenty six local authorities provided data on all groups of looked after children we inquired about. The data showed that in those areas 8,890 young people in care lived in placements within the boundaries of their home local authority. A further 4,985 young people were placed by these local authorities outside their own boundaries. At the same time 5,582 young people were placed in those areas by other local authorities. The issue of RHIs for young people in cross boundary placements was also raised a lot in interviews and focus groups in the case study areas.

Figure 3. Average rate of incidents per child by different groups of children (calculated as average of rates across different LAs to account for variations in rates in different areas, only areas providing a number of children and a number of incidents)

	Number of children missing	Number of missing incidents	Average rate of missing incident per child
Children missing from home (n=41)	9,981	19,375	**1.9**
Children looked after in placements within the boundaries of their home local authority (n=37)	3,649	11,844	**4.4**
Children looked after in placements outside the boundaries of their home local authority (n=25)	1,592	6,503	**4.31**
Looked after children from other areas for whom responding LAs were acting as hosts (n=27)	2,138	4,798	**3.2**

When is an offer made on a case-by-case basis?

A more detailed analysis was performed for a small number of local authorities in England who told us that they only offer RHIs on a case-by-case basis - where this offer is not automatic after each missing incident but dependent on some criteria. For children missing from home, 14 of 78 local authorities offer RHIs on a case-by-case basis. Five of seventy-eight local authorities offer RHIs in this way to looked after young people they are responsible for who have been placed within their home local authority boundaries and 13 out of 78 local authorities offer RHIs to looked after children they are responsible for placed outside their home local authority boundary on a case-by-case basis.

Figure 4 highlights that some factors are more likely to result in an offer of an RHI if they are identified in isolation. For example, the presence of some single factors such as having been hurt or harmed, having a known risk of CSE or trafficking or being considered high risk by the police are more likely to lead to an interview offer than having mental health issues, being known to CAHMS or having learning difficulties.

As this analysis is based on a small number of local authorities the data should be treated with caution. However, it useful to highlight the different approaches that local authorities take with different groups of young people as well as the seemingly arbitrary way in which some factors are prioritised over others.

Cells in Figure 4 are coloured in red, amber and green. Red cells indicate a low number of responding local authorities (0-33%) always offer a RHI to a young person if the factor was present. Amber cells indicate a medium number of responding local authorities (34-67%) always offered a RHI if the factor was present. Green cells show that between 68 and 100% of responding local authorities always offered a RHI to a young person if the risk factor was present.

Across all groups of children and young people, 14 local authorities described ‘other’ factors that were taken into account in decisions to offer RHIs. These factors largely concerned the context and circumstances of the missing episode, (e.g. location of a missing young person - in one example shared a young person had been reported missing because parents forgot about them attending piano practice).

Figure 4 Factors affecting the decision to offer an RHI to a child or a young person who has been missing when only offered on a case-by-case basis

	Missing from home (n=14)	Missing from care (n=5)	Missing from an out of area care placement (n=12)
The likelihood of a RHI being offered	Always offered RHI	Always offered RHI	Always offered RHI
Missing for the first time	0%	20%	67%
Missing more than 24 hours	86%	80%	70%
High risk by police	86%	100%	89%
Medium risk by police	57%	60%	67%
Low risk by police	7%	20%	56%
No apparent risk by police	14%	25%	43%
Known to social care	79%	60%	56%
Known to CAMHS	29%	75%	38%
Missing 2 or more times	79%	100%	63%
Frequently away from home or their placement	54%	80%	75%
Hurt or harmed	93%	80%	88%
Known CSE risk	86%	80%	75%
Suspected CSE risk	86%	60%	63%
Known CCE risk	86%	75%	63%
Suspected CCE risk	71%	33%	29%
Not reported to police as missing	9%	0%	62%
Learning difficulties	50%	84%	50%

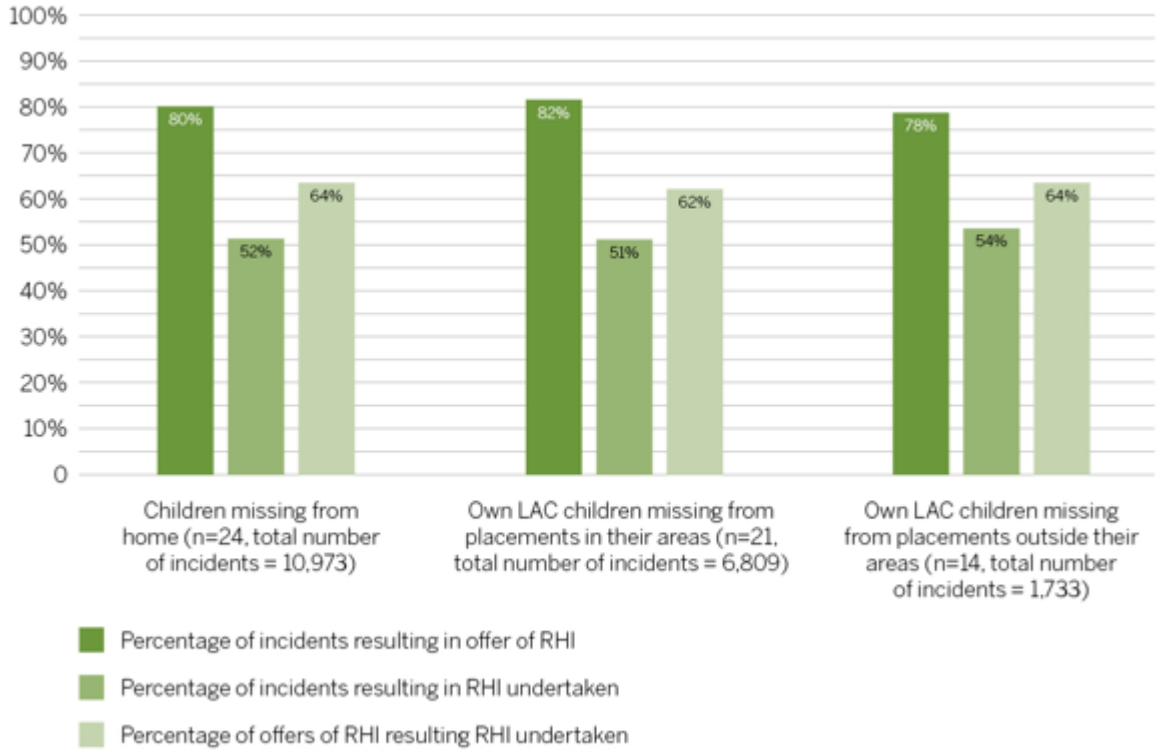
Uptake rates for RHIs

Local authorities were asked to provide data on the number of RHIs offered, accepted and undertaken between April 2016 and March 2017 for different groups: children missing from home, those looked after and placed in, and out, of the local area, and those where the local authority was hosting a young person from another area.

RHI uptake rates were calculated firstly as a proportion of RHIs undertaken in relation to the number of missing incidents, and secondly as a proportion of RHIs undertaken in relation to the number of RHIs offered. Figure 5 reports on those local authorities who were able to tell us the number of missing incidents in their areas, as well as information relating the offer RHIs and number of RHIs undertaken.

These findings must be treated with caution as – due to the low response rate to data questions, particularly regarding the data on young people in out of area placements – the size of the missing population cannot be seen as representative of the national picture. Nevertheless, they provide some insight into what is happening locally. The data show that just over half of missing incidents result in an RHI across all groups. There are big variations in uptake rates in different local authorities, with some areas reporting around 20% of incidents resulting in RHIs, while others reported that up to 100% had resulted in RHIs taking place.

Figure 5 Missing incidents resulting in offer of an RHI and RHIs undertaken by groups of young people



A smaller number of local authorities were able to provide information on the number of RHIs happening within the 72 hour framework as presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6 Rate of RHIs undertaken within 72 hours

	Missing from home (n=16)	**Own looked after children missing from care placements within their home area** (n=18)	**Own looked after children missing from out of area placements** (n=14)
Proportion of RHIs accepted and undertaken within 72 hours	51%	61%	64%
Range of RHIs accepted and undertaken within 72 hours	3–100%	25–100%	20–100%

Furthermore, with regards to the uptake rate, across all groups local authorities reported high proportions of RHIs being undertaken after they had been accepted:

- Missing from home (97%)
- Missing from care, placed in the local area (97%)
- Missing from care, placed outside the local area (94%)

Survey respondents were asked whether they recorded the reasons why RHI offers were not accepted. Less than half (48) of those who responded to the survey said they recorded the data, with only 20 of these providing a detailed response.

The main reasons provided were that 'The child or young person refused', that the 'Child went missing again', or that the 'Parent or carer refused'. Some areas said that the child or the parent (or carer) being unobtainable had led to offers not being accepted. These reasons, provided in the national survey, reflect the main reasons highlighted in the case study areas. Additional reasons included 'Poor mental health of the child or young person', 'The child or young person being in police custody', or 'The child or young person moving out of area'.

2.1. Key findings from five case study areas on the factors that help or hinder the reach of RHI provision

Recognition of the importance of responding to children who go missing

Seeing missing children as a priority for local safeguarding agencies is perceived as one of the factors that helps ensure that RHIs are seen as an important safeguarding response.

Respondents to the national survey were asked to say how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements (all of which were positively expressed) relating to the provision of RHIs or other issues, linked to the professional culture, or to the quality of information sharing systems in their area.

Their responses are detailed in Figure 7. The survey responses indicate that overall missing children and provision of RHI and information sharing from them is an issue seen as priority for local policy and practice. Although most replies indicated broad 'agreement' with the statements, there was variation about the strength of this. The highest proportion (73%) 'strongly agreed' that 'missing children is a priority in my area' and a large proportion (60%)' strongly agreed' that 'there is a well-established RHI service in my area'.

These national survey findings mirror those that came up in case study areas, where 'partnership mentality' was mentioned frequently as the factor that supports RHI provision in their area. Good relationships start with individuals in particular roles and continue to inter-agency partnerships. The ability to challenge other agencies where things are not done as expected was highlighted as one of the features of good partnerships that exist in the case study areas.

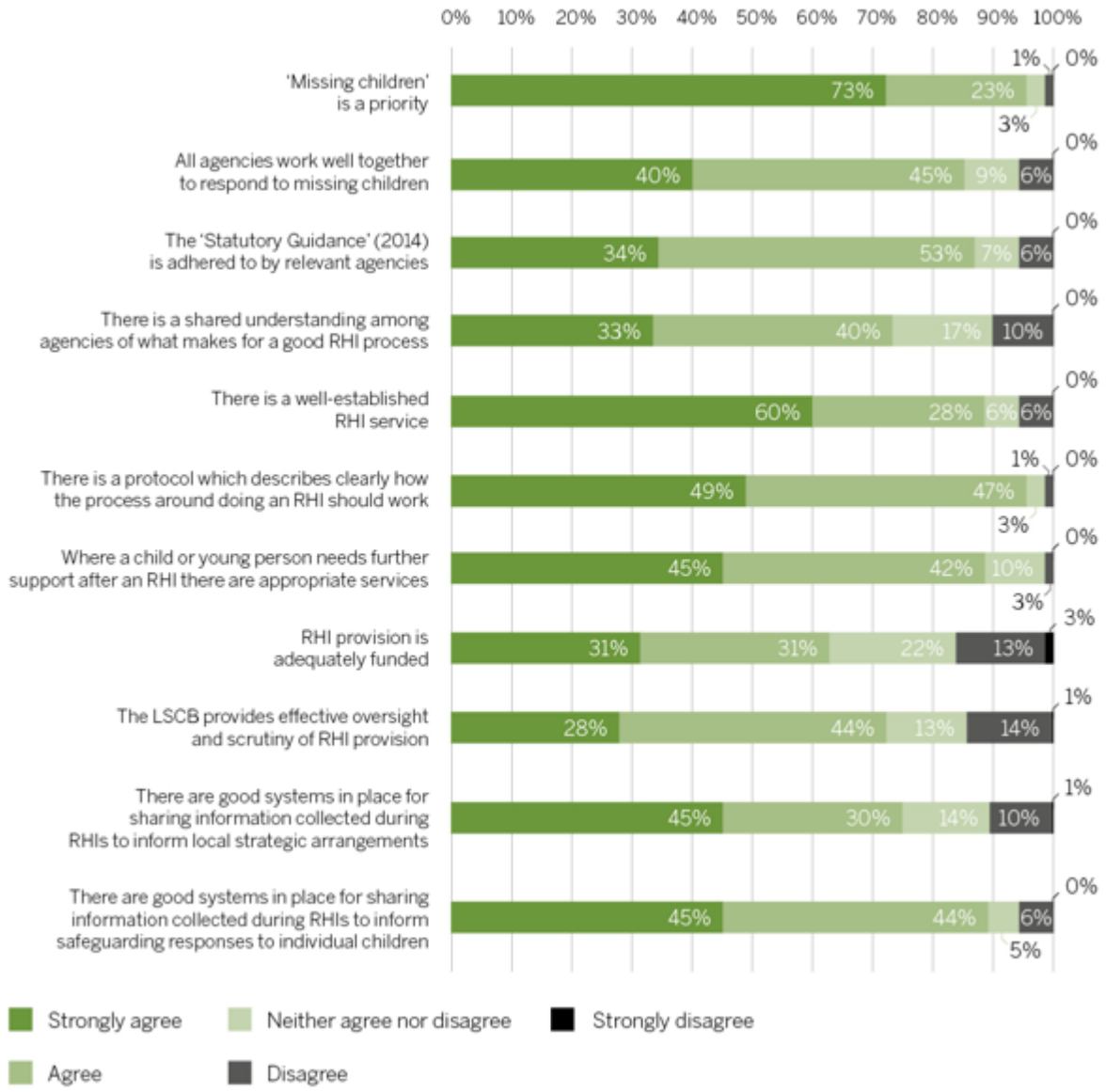
> 'What helps is I think we've got good working relationships and I think we've got good multi-agency relationships in terms of our Board, but that then sinks down into lower levels so I think we have good, close working relationships operationally.' (Area 2, LSCB[6])

Notably, in all of the case study areas, good working relationships that spanned all the local authorities in their police force area were said to have resulted in a better safeguarding response for missing children. Furthermore, all case study areas took part in partnership groups and meetings where issues relating to missing children were reviewed on a regular basis. These issues included the provision of RHIs and information sharing from RHIs (this issue will be covered in more detail in Chapter 4).

One of the interesting learning points was around the inclusion of children's homes in partnership frameworks. Respondents from children's homes mentioned the importance of being included in strategy meetings about individual children, the value of training provided by their local authority about processes and procedures for reporting children's missing, the risks that young people may face whilst missing and how and when to refer them for RHIs, and in how to share intelligence about missing children.

[6] To ensure anonymity of interviewees, the quotes refer to the professional group or agency on behalf of which the person was interviewed. See Appendix 1 on methodology for the list of professional roles that were included in interviews.

Figure 7 Survey respondents' views on RHIs and associated issues in their areas (N=89)



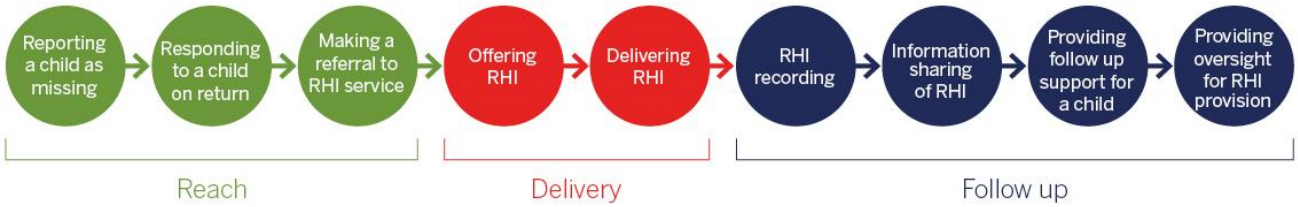
> 'In our children's homes, we have a well-trained workforce. They do come to the multi-agency events around these things, so they are very clear about their role within the process. So, things like, for example, if a young person runs off, they will always know what they are wearing, are they taking bags out with them? What state they are in before they leave? They can report that to the police if they need to. You know, if cars are coming to near the children's home which may be of concern. They have been drilled into their heads to get the number plates of those cars. Things like that.' (Area 3, Public children's home)

Seeing RHIs as part of a package of support for children who go missing

Participants in this research commented that for RHIs to be a meaningful safeguarding tool, they needed to be seen as part of a continuum of response and support that children and young people received from different agencies, on their own or in multi-agency settings.

This process starts at the point of reporting children and young people missing to the police and ends with information from RHIs being effectively used for safeguarding and disruption purposes, with each step in between playing a pivotal role in how well RHI provision can work locally. Most importantly, each step will impact the experiences of missing young people as well as the people

and services whose role it is to safeguard and protect them. These processes will be discussed throughout the report.



Availability of data about RHIs to understand the reach of RHI provision

One of the key findings of this research concerned data collection. Large variations in the quality of data collected about RHI provision, and to some extent about missing children more generally, were observed. Few local authorities in the survey were able to provide data on the numbers of RHIs offered, accepted and undertaken or on the number of missing incidents that they had had in their areas, or the number of children and young people that these incidents related to.

One of the case study areas expressed the need for a benchmarking system to help them understand the number of RHI provided, accepted and undertaken in order to help them understand the gaps. This view was reflected in the national survey, with respondents suggesting that it would be helpful to have a common set of indicators across local authorities to help areas benchmark their practice.

> 'It would be helpful to have some national criteria to measure effectiveness and some comparator data on number of children and episodes going missing.' (From the survey responses)

The differences in available data could be explained by the variety of IT systems used across police forces and local authorities to collect and share data (this will be further explored in Chapter 4). It could also be explained by the absence of common language used in relation to data collection about missing children and RHI provision across different local areas and across agencies.

It became apparent that the police and local authorities could be using different definitions for 'missing' and 'absent', both between the police and local authorities and between different areas. This could be attributed to that fact that the police changed their definition of 'missing' in 2017 when the separate 'absent' category was abolished. Moreover, it was suggested that language differences could reflect how up to date local protocols are. In our survey to local authorities we asked if their missing children protocol had been updated in the last 12 months. 60% of local authorities told us that they had been. Furthermore, interviews with professionals and comments in the survey suggested that in some instances the term 'missing from home' was understood to mean 'missing from a children's home'.

In some areas different data was being collected for different groups of young people. This was demonstrated by the fact that fewer local authorities could report on data relating to looked after young people missing from outside their home local authority areas, when compared to young people missing from care placements within their home local authority. In addition, some could only provide data on the number of individual young people who had been reported missing, or on the number incidents involving young people, not both categories of data.

Ensuring that the police and local authorities collect and share relevant data and information about missing children, not just within the same geographical area but across the boundaries of police forces and local authorities, was often mentioned as an area for improvement. Currently the police would not always know which local authority has responsibility for a looked after child reported as missing and the processes and procedures around notifying local authorities about children reported as missing vary from place to place.

> ‘First and foremost out of area is definitely an issue. We don’t get the same service from other police force areas where our children are placed, so even within [the local] police area we are not informed of children who go missing. We might have a child placed in [a neighbouring local authority] and the police don’t tell us that the person at this place in [local authority area] has gone missing because technically they don’t know that that’s a looked after child from [Area one].’ (Area 1, Local authority)

Using the 2014 Guidance to shape local provision

Across the national survey and within the case study areas there was broad agreement that the statutory guidance on missing children plays an important role in ensuring that RHI provision is central to the safeguarding response that children and young people receive following a missing incident.

However, it became clear that a number of issues contained within the guidance needed further clarification. These include: the issue of language (as described previously), the issue of ‘independence’ in reference to the RHI provider, the 72 hours requirement in relation to RHIs, and parental consent for the interview.

> ‘Clearer guidance on the meaning of the word independent.’ (Comment in the national survey)

> ‘[On the 72 hour timeframe] Does not reflect that there are occasions when local authorities don’t hear information from the police within this time frame.’ (Comment in the national survey)

According to data obtained during professional interviews, perhaps the most pressing of these issues concerned parental consent and delivery of RHIs within 72 hours – particularly in relation to young people who go missing repeatedly.

Ability to adhere to the 72 hour framework for RHI delivery

Confusion around when the 72 hour timeframe started was frequently raised during this research. Discussion focused around whether the timeframe commenced when the young person returned home or from when the referral was made to the RHI service. This issue was particularly pertinent where a young person went missing over the weekend or over a bank holiday. Furthermore, concerns were raised around the ability of staff constrained by capacity to deliver RHIs within the 72 hour timeframe.

> ‘I think for me the difficulty is if we have a young person who’s been missing on the Friday, we’re not going to get that ‘til the Monday and already the 72 hours is out and I think when we look at the guidance that isn't taken into consideration that there isn't a 24/7 Return Home Interview service. So what does that mean for our young people and us? I think it would probably be better to have the 72 hours from when you receive that notification, if I’m honest. I think that makes more sense and it’s more realistic.’ (Area 2, Focus group with practitioners)

Concerns were also expressed around meeting the 72 hour deadline in relation to cases where the young person is difficult to engage or have other things going on in their lives.

However, the majority of professionals – particularly those in senior positions – said that the timeframe was useful to inform the prioritisation of quick responses and to measure performance, but that its use should always be in the context of being clear that it was not always achievable. The 72 hour framework was also considered important from the safeguarding point of view, recognising that it was important to reach out to young people as soon after the missing incident as possible.

> ‘I think there needs to be a timeframe on it, otherwise my concern would be that actually people would just do it as and when, and I think sometimes going out to see that young person is really helpful, sooner, if you can do it in the first 24 hours, that’s really helpful.’ (Area 2, Focus group with practitioners)

It was noted that in Wales, despite there being no mention of a specific time frame in the All-Wales Protocol, the 72 hour timeframe was used as a guide for ‘police safe and well checks’ rather than a directive for a debrief, something that the workers there found helpful:

> ‘The timescales that were agreed with (name of police force) is that they maintain the safe and well checks – so that 72 hour timeframe – they maintain that. And we’re not governed by the 72 hours, so that’s a separate function for us. We sometimes go out and meet children within the 72 hours, particularly if the child is already known to us, but it’s much more typical that we’ll go out when we know the child is safe and well, home fed, is, you know, kind of settled and able to engage.’ (Area 5, Focus group with practitioners)

Reaching young people who go missing frequently

The links between the frequency of missing incidents and take up rates for RHIs also came up in conversations. This may be because of parental reticence about the effectiveness of the interview or young people’s own similar feelings:

> ‘I find, it’s the repeat ones missing where you’ve been to speak to them two or three times, you haven’t made any difference have you, there’s no point coming again, that’s where we get a lot of nil returns if we get the ones where they’ve already been interviewed, and they just don’t want you to come again.’ (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

Many of the workers who took part in the research said that a significant proportion of their time was spent with young people who were repeatedly and sometimes very frequently going missing (‘serial offenders’ as one team referred to them). This group of young people posed particular problems for complying with the 72 hour timeframe for interview prescribed in the 2014 Guidance:

> ‘Where you’ve got somebody that’s consistently missing actually being able to evidence that you’ve always done a return interview you can’t because the missing episodes, they’ll return and then go again and I think we were floundering with that and I think that’s something that we’ve been working on. How do you evidence that you’ve had the strategy meeting? That you’ve got the oversight? That as soon as a young person lands you grab them to get the missing return interview done? And that if you can’t do that you’re still formulating the risk management plan in the way that you would if you’d done the return interview? Because what OFSTED saw when they came in (recently) was where we’d got the repeat missings, we’d initiated the missing return interview but we hadn’t been able to do it, so it just was blank – and that’s not helpful.’ (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

The links between the support available to deal with the issues that may cause a young person to go missing and the ability to encourage young people who go missing frequently to engage was also raised by participants.

> ‘We have challenges with our frequent missing young people where we would like to go out and see them immediately, and before you do they have gone missing again – and those will always happen…Unless we can continue to work with them to break that chain, you know, it’s a challenge that we will have. There is fairly little we can do about it until that young person is ready to change.’ (Area 2, MASH)

Our analysis of RHI notes showed that, even though it can be difficult to engage young people who go missing frequently, it was still important for local areas to make sure that the offer was made. RHI notes showed that in lieu of RHIs with young people, having conversations with those providing care to a young person was also helpful as it allowed for some important information to be recorded about issues that young people faced. In other examples persistent offers of RHIs from consistent RHI professionals made a young person more inclined to have an informal chat about their missing incidents.

Young people in focus groups also raised the point that sometimes it takes time for them to agree to have an RHI, as they first needed time to develop trust in the person approaching them. But it was equally important for them to *‘know someone is there all the time’* when they felt ready to engage in RHIs and the support offered.

Securing parental consent for RHIs

The issue of parental consent for RHI is not specifically outlined in the 2014 Guidance, which may explain variations in approaches across different areas. Different approaches to requirements around parental consent were evident both in the national survey (Figure 8) and in the case study areas. Thus, one of the case study areas always required parental consent before a RHI could be undertaken, two areas required it often, and another area only sometimes asked for parental consent before the interview. In the last area no requirements around parental consent were reported.

Figure 8 National picture on whether parental consent is required before a RHI takes place (n=84)

Parental consent is required to undertake a RHI					
Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know
10 (12%)	11 (13%)	27 (32%)	20 (24%)	10 (12%)	6 (7%)

A key issue discussed by workers in focus groups was the difficulty in some approaches to families around negotiating parental consent to make an interview offer to a young person.

> 'Sometimes I think nil returns come from parents saying, "No - I don't think that would be very good, don't think that will be useful. We've already got a social worker, we've already got too many people in the mix." That's more often than anything.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

One worker suggested that a primary reason that parents might refuse consent was a lack of awareness and understanding about what will happen:

> 'I think it's about knowledge, knowledge of parents that the service is available. Report a child missing and this will happen…They don't know the process and they don't have the knowledge of what will happen when they report a missing, I think that's a barrier as well.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

The reasons why a parent could be wary of involvement with any services are multifaceted, but one young person suggested (in response to a vignette exercise in a focus group) that there may be issues related to pride and fear that can be difficult to overcome for parents:

> 'The reason why they didn't want her to have an interview – they may not want anyone to know that their 11 year old daughter is going missing. If people get involved then that might mean more people would find out. It could be a pride thing or it could mean that the problem is at home.' (Focus group with young people)

In some areas different strategies had been used to bypass parental consent where there were particular safeguarding concerns around regular missing incidents. For example, sometimes schools acting 'in loco parentis' were seen as being able to give consent to an interview.

However, the challenges around parental consent were seen as a significant issue and some professionals believed that clarifications are needed about when young people can give their own consent. Also points were made that for looked after children no additional consent from parents is required, indicating that young people at home may be disadvantaged when parents refuse an offer of an RHI.

> 'I think there could be improvements in actually you know, parental, what does parental consent mean? Can we override parental consent and it goes straight to the young person and at what point can we do that because a lot of our young, if its I don't know an eight, nine year old then yes, okay, but if it's say a 15, 16 year old actually do we need to get parental

> consent? That young person could probably just give their own consent and be able to make their own. When you are thinking about children who are looked after, you know they will receive a service regardless you know, we are kind of like the corporate parent so we will give that. So is that a bit unfair that as corporate parents we will of course offer the return home interview to our young people, but then you have got children who also need it, but then we are relying on parental consent.' (Area 2, MASH)

Young people in the focus group also raised the issue of consent. The point that they made related to the fact that there needs to be a recognition that although for some younger children parental consent was needed, older young people were capable themselves of making the decision of whether they want to speak to someone and what support they needed.

> 'When you're 11 you can't make decisions for yourself – you have to have your parents' consent. I think services should let young people self-refer – there are a lot of intelligent young people who are able to consent and who are able to tell people how they are feeling and what they want to happen.' (Young person in a focus group)

Capacity across different agencies

The capacity of RHI services to meet the demand for interviews came up as one of the factors impacting on RHI provision. For example, in the national survey Figure 7 discussed earlier shows that a higher proportion of respondents (16%) disagreed with a statement 'RHI provision is adequately funded'.

The stretched capacity to deliver support for missing children was mentioned as an issue across all agencies in case study areas. This included the capacity of RHI services to meet the demand for interviews, police capacity to make further referrals, and availability of follow up support.

One of the key messages from the case study areas was that RHI services were coping but operated at their full capacity. Concerns were expressed about peak times when there were more missing incidents and there was a higher demand for RHIs or when the member of staff left or became ill. One of the areas mentioned developing contingency plans to deal with such situations.

> 'Capacity is an issue because of this warm, sunny weather, missings go kind of quite much higher. So it all depends on the weather and what events are going on within [name of area].' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

Capacity was discussed in the context of providing more follow up support (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4), and an issue that affected all agencies with a role to play in ensuring that interviews occur and happen in a timely way. Capacity within police to provide missing and found notifications in a timely way was also mentioned.

> 'The only problem we sometimes have is due to the amount sent, workload and the number of us who complete these, there is sometimes a delay in them being processed onto the police system.' (Area 3, Police)

> 'One of the weaknesses that we've always had is kind of police capacity around it and being able to produce the missing lists in time for us to be responsive within the 72 hours to complete the interviews.' (Area 1, Looked after children team)

Responding to young people missing from placements outside the boundaries of their local area

Across the case study areas an offer of an RHI following a missing incident was not dependant on the young person meeting any additional criteria (something that had been found to be true for some local authorities which had responded to the survey as discussed earlier). Overall professionals commented that if a young person went missing from their local authority area, whether they were missing from care or from home, all efforts were made to offer the RHI.

However, this was not the case for young people in care in some case study areas who had been placed in other local authorities, or for looked after children from other areas placed within the boundaries of the case study areas.

A number of considerations were shared in interviews about the reasons why the reach of RHIs may not be as good for young people in looked after placements outside their home local authority boundaries. These included the distance to placement if the local authority's own looked after child was placed in a different area:

> 'We have had that, you know, where a child has been moved to [area name] or parts of England where it becomes just not feasible for us to do.' (Area 5, Focus group with practitioners)

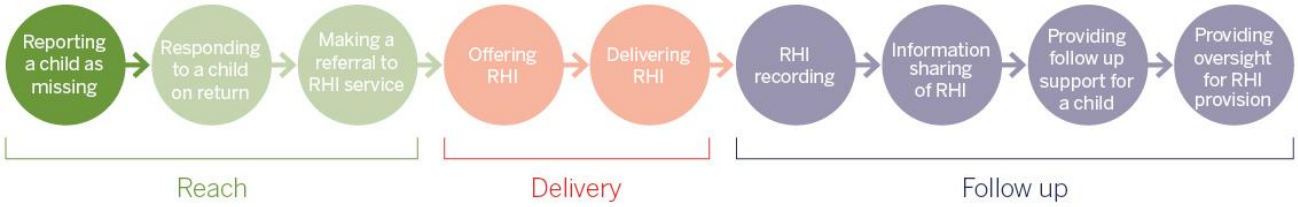
They also included a lack of notifications from other areas of young people being placed in the areas we visited:

> 'Sometimes you do get that human error where the local authorities, we do have to chase them, we've got this to say this child is living in the [name local authority] area and we find out that they may have been here five or six months but we wouldn't have known if we didn't receive the missing episode from the police. So our job basically is just to input all the missing data and assign it to the correct agency so whether it be [name external agency] or a [name local authority] social worker.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

In relation to young people placed within the boundaries of the case study areas, there were concerns that notifications were not always working well. Moreover, when notifications did take place they did not always cover any risks to a young person if they were to go missing.

2.3. Key learning from five case study areas about practices, processes and activities that aim to improve the reach of RHI

Three processes that preceded the RHI – how a young person is reported as missing to the police, response to a young person on return, and referral to the RHI service – were seen by professionals in all case study areas as having an impact on the reach of RHIs. A number of different approaches and practices had been developed in the areas to improve each of these processes.



Practices to improve responses to young people at the time they are reported missing

Reporting a young person as missing to the police was often described by professionals as an important precursor to the RHI itself. In most cases an offer of an RHI can only be made if it is known that the young person has been missing and they have been reported to the police. The police can then send a referral to the RHI provider with the relevant information about the young person. Issues of under-reporting and over-reporting, as well as disagreements about risk assessments, were often raised during the professional interviews.

Over-reporting was most often mentioned in relation to looked after children going missing from children's homes.

> 'I suppose from the looked after children point as well, the homes are following their policies and procedures that's where you get the inappropriate reporting. So one of these guys will have to pick up the phone and they're like "well I'm at my girlfriend's and I'm staying there for an hour and they knew that" – so it's not consistent.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

In one area it was suggested that the issue of reporting young people as missing when they may be away without authorisation is worse for older young people – because as they start to gain more independence and live more independently they may wish to stay out later, which may lead to them breaking their curfew.

> 'We struggle sometimes with young people 16+ that are in independent living settings, which is slightly different. They have a curfew half past nine, ten o'clock whatever it is and if the young people are not back they'll report them missing.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

Our review of RHI report notes from four areas showed that a young person's willingness to engage in an RHI may be impacted if they believe that they have been inappropriately reported as missing. For example, in one of the RHI case files analysed it was recorded that the young person was getting frustrated with being reported missing and being offered RHIs, as they were 'not missing' and the staff in the children's home knew where they were.

While it was clear from examples shared that, in some cases, there may be inappropriate reporting, a number of interviewees reflected on situations where young people may not be offered an RHI because police had not categorised them as 'missing', or had used the 'no apparent risk' category.

For example, in a number of case study sites, reference was made to the different way that young people can be viewed as they become older adolescents. Whilst in most of the areas there was a recognition amongst the local authority staff and RHI practitioners that 16 and 17 year olds are just as vulnerable as their younger peers, it became apparent that, at times, they felt their local police forces did not share this view – despite information about the cumulative risk facing the young person.

> 'I think 16+ it gets a bit muddier. It's not as clear. We have a 16 year old and a 17 year old who are very risky because of their own behaviours, and some were classed as no apparent risk which, when we know that they are at risk, we've given the police all the information, they're both offenders, we know that potentially anything could happen. But they're classed as no apparent risk. (Area 1, Private children's home).

Furthermore, one police officer voiced concerns about the drop off in support for young people as they turn 18.

> 'I'm terrified of the children that we've had coming through here who have hit 18 and suddenly disappeared. They are constantly being reported missing and while they're being reported missing, there is stuff happening to them so they're getting, coming home under the influence, all sorts happening to them. Then they hit 18 and go independent and there's nobody to report them missing anymore, it doesn't mean that they're not at risk anymore, there is still stuff happening to them, it's just nobody is reporting it.' (Area 5, Police).

Additionally, some really concerning examples were shared, suggesting a lack of clarity among professionals in different agencies in relation to children whose whereabouts are considered known but there are concerns about their welfare[7]. We heard evidence of one young person experiencing harm as a result of not being seen as missing:

> 'I can give you one example of one where unfortunately a young girl came to harm. This young girl was the subject of a deprivation of liberty and she was only allowed out if staff followed her, so the staff followed as she went out. She walked them into some very dodgy areas of the town where the staff weren't happy to follow. The manager told them to inform the police and they tried to report that person as missing from home and what the police were saying was they're not missing, your staff are looking at them, your staff know where they are

[7] The Authorised Professional Practice guidance for police (College of Policing, 2017) states that 'Individuals whose whereabouts are known will not be considered as missing, but may require other police activity in order to ensure their welfare. Police should consult their local public protection procedures to ensure an appropriate safeguarding response is provided. This includes children in care who are deemed to be 'absent without authorisation'

but they're in a dodgy area of town.' [The staff lost sight of her and she was then missing and came to harm] (Area 1, Local authority).

When it comes to ensuring that risks to young people reported as missing from out of area placements are correctly assessed, it was clear that communicating information and risks facing a young person when they move out of area was an issue that case study areas were trying to specifically address as well.

Across all case study areas, concerns about young people falling through the gaps because they were not reported as missing by their families were raised. This is an issue particularly pertinent to young people missing from the family home, and it is consistent with findings from Rees (2011) that whilst they are away from home, many young people remain hidden from professionals.

To help them overcome the issues around inappropriate reporting or inappropriate risk assessment at the time of a missing report, case study areas shared specific examples of practice they had developed. Examples included: training for staff in residential care (Box A), packages of information about young people in out of area placements (Box B), and developing referral processes to ensure

Box A. Enabling appropriate risk assessment when children are reported missing from care

In Area 1 training for residential children's home staff and foster parents was delivered in order to encourage a more well informed and strategic approach to reporting missing episodes. The area reported a substantial decrease in the numbers of children missing from residential care homes following the roll out of the training.

Last year we did some research using the Click View when Click View first came in which identified that our missing from children's homes had gone up three fold. As a result we looked at why it was, we've trained about fifty staff in our own children's homes and we've started to offer it to the public children's homes. (Area 1, Looked after children team).

Respondents from children's homes in all areas mentioned the value of being included in strategy meetings about individual children and the value of training provided from their local authority around the process of reporting children missing.

We have photographs on hand, so if police officers need to see them, they can. (Area 3, Public children's home)

Box B. Information packages when young people are placed out of area

In Area 4 police and social care prepare a package with relevant information about risks of a young person going missing and live investigations. This package is shared with the host authority when a young person is placed out of area.

'Social care have got a good system in place where they will share information about a new child that is being placed from their authority to another authority and they will send a sort of detailed report on all the issues around that child and what the threatened risk is around that child. So they have some quite good structures in place.' (Area 4, Police)

The same area demonstrated a promising recognition of the additional risks and vulnerabilities that a young person placed out of area may face. They described engaging in partnership working with in the area that the young person had been placed.

'If we've moved somebody out of the city because their missing episodes are so concerning and we think it is linked to particular activity, normally in the past CSE stuff, then that is not a young person that you drop your eye off. And I think in terms of them, engagement with where they are, strategy meetings, engagement with the local police, our police, then I would say it's good that we would have an eye to that. We are very good at notifying other authorities about a child moving into their area.' (Area 4, Local authority)

that children missing from home who were reported as missing and could be offered an RHI (Box C).

Box C. Identification of 'hidden' missing young people

In Area 4 the practitioners conducting RHIs were patch-based youth workers based across a county and were in contact with young people, families and schools. This helped them pick up information from a variety of sources about missing young people who were not on the 'official radar'.

In Area 2 different strategies had been adopted. Where schools or social workers were aware that a young person had been missing, they were instructed to alert the service so that an interview could take place. The manager of the service stressed the importance of this, and explained how she had made efforts to change the local professional culture to strengthen this aspect of referrals:

'What works well is the fact that all missing children receive a service. Even the ones that haven't come through as formal missing notifications. The missing notifications were just coming through from the police, and some social workers. What we've done is that we've made that blanket across the whole of children's services. I've done quite a lot of presentations on it to teams, to the management team just to say you need to make sure that all of the services are ensuring that if a child is not home and is missing, you have reported that through to us to make sure that we're capturing that in the service to safeguard them.' (Area 2, RHI Service)

In the same area, a proactive approach had been taken to address concerns about CSE in one town and a concurrent lack of parental reporting of missing:

'We had huge concerns about young people being exploited but we were hardly getting any missing reports. So we then contacted that locality and said "We don't know why but we're not receiving any missing reports in this area, but the information that we've got suggests that they are out, and parents don't know where they are." So there was a real push to make sure that when they (the police) went to see the families and spoke to the parents that they say "We have been informed that your child has been out all night. Why didn't you report them?" And just advise them and encourage them to do so. About six to eight weeks later we all of a sudden got quite a few missing reports coming through from that area, for males and females.' (Area 2, RHI Service)

Practices to improve responses to young people on return from a missing incident

Analysis of 49 RHI notes we undertook as part of this research showed that on occasions when a young person was not available for interview – for example, if they went missing again within a short period of time after the previous missing episode or if they changed their mind about participating in an RHI – the RHI worker still recorded information about the missing incident that could be useful for safeguarding purposes, or could help inform future RHI interviews with the same young person. As a result of this approach having been taken 14 out of 49 RHI notes had been based on conversations (in person or over the phone) with a parent, placement provider or foster carer. When a young person is found or returns from a missing incident the police carry out a safe and well checks and log the young person as found. This process was suggested by professionals in the case study areas to be an important precursor to the RHI, helping to ensure that some information about the missing incident was available even if a young person refused to engage in interview. However, many young people would not engage in conversations with police, so some areas had

developed processes to capture information that might be of use in other ways, as explained in Box D.

Box D. Children's homes noting down information on a young person's return from a missing episode

In Area 1 children's homes professionals reported using a form to communicate some standard information when a child goes missing to inform appropriate risk assessments, and to record some key information on return to communicate to the RHI provider and police as appropriate.

'What's on that form? It's simple but it's sort of obviously their name, address, their details. However, then it's where they've been, where were they found, were they picked up? Who were they picked up by? And we can send that information and email? So obviously that data is then recorded quite clearly.' (Area 1, Private children's home)

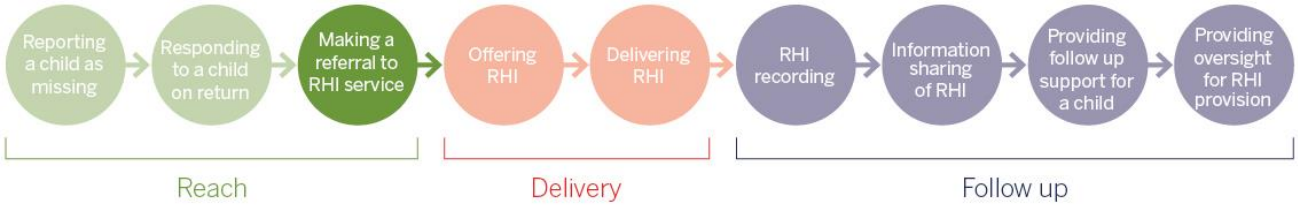
This information is recorded based on an informal conversation with a child.

'The kids know that I have to speak to them when they've been missing, so some will try and avoid. Some are happy just to sit in five minutes, and that's it. And you get another one who will literally sit and tell you their life story and use it as therapy. We'll typically get some conversation, not out of, like, a sit-down, "right, come on, we need to do this, just go and have a chat on the settee and find out where you've been" and that tends to work a lot better.' (Area 1, Private children's home)

Professionals see it as integral part of keeping a young person safe and making sure that, even if a young person refuses to engage in a RHI, there is some opportunity to engage them in conversation and understand the circumstances and experiences of a missing episode.

'We do the welfare checks. So for us we're very, very, I would say, the integral part of doing it. If we skip a step, if we missed a step, if something wasn't done, potentially the return home wouldn't happen; the return home interview wouldn't happen. (Area 1, Private children's home)

'One young person over the past year completely refused, just did not want to engage. But that wasn't just with the [RHI provider] but the professionals across the board … that's where the form that we will use comes in place there – because they've still got the details then. Even if the young person wasn't engaged, there's still a record of that return.' (Area 1, Private children's home)



Processes to streamline referrals to RHI services

There were several different issues mentioned in relation to referrals to RHIs where the five case study areas had developed specific approaches.

In order to streamline referrals from police or social care to an RHI service, all the areas had adopted a single point of contact for referrals for RHIs. Box E describes how a single point of contact for referrals was working in some of the case study areas.

There were several contexts where the case study areas reported having experienced delays or disruption in referrals. Across all case study areas, out of area placements were frequently cited as disrupting the RHI referral process. There were multiple reasons for this. Perhaps the most pressing was the fact that all areas felt they often did not receive notification from the host local authority or police force if a young person that they were responsible for went missing, limiting the likelihood of a referral for an RHI being made.

'I think the other issues that we've noticed over the past is when children are sent out of area, we don't get information about them going missing sometimes.' (Area 1, Police)

The fact that police forces are not always made aware when a young person is placed in their area was highlighted as an issue that could exacerbate this problem.

'We have children placed in [local authority] so if we have a child placed in [police force area] that goes missing the police will not necessarily know that is a looked after child from [local authority]. So how do we then get to know that that child's gone missing?' (Area 1, Local authority)

Box F describes practices developed in one of the areas to overcome disruption in referrals for RHI for children placed out of home area.

Another issue that often came up in relation to referrals for RHIs was of delays in referrals from the police having an impact on whether local authorities were able to meet the 72 hour framework for RHI delivery. It was suggested that this may be due to officers failing to log this in a timely way, or because notifications were not always sent through immediately.

'Sometimes we get one through that will be like two weeks old and that's quite difficult. The timeframe is 72 hours, you contact the family, (they say) "Oh that was ages ago – they might not remember now." And when it is one that is so long ago that's more difficult than if it was yesterday.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

A delay in referrals for RHIs being generated for young people who have been reported missing over the weekend was also often reported. It was noted that whilst, for the most part, RHIs took place in our case study areas within the 72 hour timeframe, for those who went missing over the weekend, this was not always the case. It was found that for some young people who went missing after 5pm on a Friday a referral to children's services might be delayed until the following Tuesday.

Box G describes a solution developed in one of the areas to prevent delays in relation to young people missing from children's homes. A possible solution for delayed RHI referrals for those who go missing out of hours was also being considered in one of the areas:

'One of the things that we are starting to talk about, and this is just an idea, is having a response telephone line so you know, out of hours within the workforce, would have specifically for missing and CSE young people. So we could say "if you're in trouble or you get somewhere and you can't get back" and the expectation then is that they would respond potentially if a child needed collecting or was somewhere unsafe, they would go out and they would complete the Return Interview there and then.' (Area 3, Local authority)

Box F. Making RHI arrangements in advance of placing a young person out of area

Some areas referenced arrangements that they made in advance of placing a young person in a new local authority. A common practice was identifying the agency in the new area that would be responsible for a young person's RHI if they went missing.

This practice should enable the placing authority to make a referral if they are made aware of a missing episode. However, it was acknowledged that after the referral had been made the oversight that the local authority had over the quality and timeliness of the RHI was lost.

'When we place children out of area, in the contract we set up some time ago was that we then stipulated who we needed to undertake return interviews. Say they were placed in [local authority], for example, at the point where we placed that child, we then determine who is responsible and whether we pay and commission an agency to complete those return interviews. We will then expect that that return interview is then forwarded to us and that is sent to the CSE missing and traffic team, and they will analyse information and they will always chase it to make sure they've got it. So that is the same. I suppose you just can't say that that has the same level of oversight and scrutiny as, say, the team manager that's sending out one of her workers to residential homes down the road.' (Area 3, Local authority)

Box E. Single point of contact for RHI referrals

Ensuring that information following a missing episode is transferred from the police to the central contact in the local authority before being forwarded to the RHI provider was seen as an important element for a timely RHI service. This was true for both voluntary and in-house RHI providers.

'As soon as the missing reports come in, they are immediately triggered, we immediately trigger it to a return home interview there's no drift in them. Previously, there used to be a little bit of drift because we used to send them to different managers, and then the managers went onto the database, they will trigger the return home interviews. But now because it's done from the front door, we have avoided any drift, any delay.' (Area 2, MASH)

Similarly, having someone within the local police force whose sole responsibility is to manage missing referrals was suggested in one area to be a supportive factor for timely RHI referrals. Having an automated system that enables the police to notify either children's services or RHI providers as soon as a young person is found was also said to be a good way of speeding up the RHI referral process.

'With COMPACT, when a young person is found, the found report gets sent automatically through to our social care colleagues. So they are aware straight away that that young person, similarly they are aware when they have gone missing, but they are aware that they've been found. So that gives them that opportunity to start looking at doing that return interview.' (Area 4, Police)

For some police forces this issue was complicated by the fact that the local authorities within their areas had different policies and processes for RHIs. This created additional demands on police time, as did variance in the way that local authorities shared information from RHIs.

'The issue that we have is around having four different districts, doing four different things and just a vast amount of people to train.' (Area 1, Police)

Box G. Addressing the issue of delays in RHI referral for young people in children's homes

For young people missing from residential children's homes, one case study area had put measures in place to mitigate for the lag in a young person being offered a RHI due to delays in reporting and police referrals. It was noted that these delays could not only result in a narrower window for the RHI to be completed (whilst adhering to the timeframe set out in the statutory guidance) but also risk missing the window in which the young person might be willing to speak to a worker.

A database system had been developed that enabled the public children's homes in the area to notify both the police and their voluntary sector RHI provider simultaneously when a young person went missing. The children's homes in the area were also able to update both agencies, in real time, when the young person returned.

'To get over that type of thing some of the things that work well is we have the Objective Connect system…Our three council children's homes have set that up with the police so everything that happened with a child going missing from any of them three children's homes gets put into one of them folders. The police get an immediate notification to say that somebody's gone missing.' (Area 1, Local authority)

'The police and external RHI provider are informed electronically in exactly the same time when a young goes missing as well as their return home, so the information is live.' (Area 1, Public children's home)

This practice gave RHI practitioners in Area 1 a head start. They were not reliant on referrals coming though from the police and therefore not hindered by time delays brought on by issues such as young people being reported missing over weekends and bank holidays.

'The children's homes directly let the RHI provider know about these incidents, so they can almost come out sooner, go out sooner than police lists may be produced.' (Area 1, Looked after children team)

'By receiving the information from point of contact with myself, they can then start forming and offering the return home interview, coming out and seeing that young person, which gives a lot quicker response and enables them to plan when they can see young people. Sometimes you need to strike whist the iron is hot and if a young person is saying that they want to speak to somebody, they're able to come and see them a lot sooner, rather than learning about it [the missing episode] a little bit later.' (Area 1, Public children's home)

Additionally, the database system meant that specific and relevant information about each young person was sent directly to the police when children's home staff reported a young person missing.

2.4. Conclusion on the reach of RHIs

Most of the areas which responded to the local authority survey said their policy was to always offer RHIs to young people who had been missing, regardless of whether this was from home or care. However, there were differences for different groups, with indications that looked after young people placed out of area and children missing from home were receiving interview offers after missing incidents in fewer areas than looked after young people in placements within their home authority. This suggests the need for further inquiry in order to better understand the reasons why this is currently happening – in contravention of the 2014 Guidance – and what can be done to redress the disparity.

More detailed analysis was difficult because of the relatively small numbers of local authorities who were able to provide data on the numbers involved (ie. of individual young people or of missing incidents for the different groups), but there were indications of the amount of cross-boundary placements and the high numbers of missing incidents for the young people involved. When considered alongside the evidence from other reports on the vulnerability of young people placed away from their home area (APPG, 2012), and our finding of the lower likelihood of these young people being offered RHIs, this points to the critical importance of more work being done to improve the reach of RHIs for this group. It also points to the importance of the 2014 Guidance being strengthened with regard to the roles and responsibilities of local authorities, including in relation to how notification between local areas should work in relation to looked after children in out of area placements.

The absence of data on how many interviews had been done in each area also compromised the possibility of producing a comprehensive picture of uptake of interviews, but the available figures suggested that there are wide differences between local authorities in terms of how many interview offers led to interviews taking place. This suggests differences in processes and practices – issues which were touched on in the survey but more fully explored with participants in case study sites.

As highlighted by this research, and comments from participants in this study, there is a lack of common language and approach to monitoring of the reach of RHI. Examples of this are the terminology around RHI provision (‘offered’, ‘accepted’, ‘undertaken’) or even terminology around ‘missing’, ‘absent’, ‘missing from home’ or ‘missing from care’, ‘children reported missing whose whereabouts are known but of potential risk’. It would be beneficial for a standard set of data to be gathered in local areas to support the benchmarking of provision and understand where the gaps are – and crucial that such data sets include data on RHI for young people in out of area placements.

Practitioners reflected on the challenges around improving reach and on how they were working to meet them. In one area the over-reporting of young people going missing from care had been reduced through better risk assessment by staff in children’s homes and foster carers – prompted by enhanced training. In another area, careful consideration had been made as to how to appropriately manage consent issues when parents were not open to the prospect of an interview taking place, or not available within the necessary timeframe – for example, by approaching schools to act ‘in loco parentis’. In one area the timeliness of information sharing around a missing incident had been facilitated through the creation of a database used by children’s home staff for live recording and accessible to the RHI provider as well as the police. And professionals from many of the case study sites spoke about the benefits of having a single point of contact within children’s social care that could act as the referring agent for RHIs.

These and other innovations were evidence that many areas were keen to enhance the prospect of young people who had gone missing receiving interviews regardless of the circumstances. But they also underline the need for all areas to review their responses in order to achieve consistently high levels of uptake, and also for national guidance to reinforce messages that this should be a priority for safeguarding.

A particular challenge in terms of reach was that of engaging young people who frequently went missing. Practitioners explained that their ability to work productively with this group was affected by

competing demands – of the 72 hour timeframe, delays in referrals and the sharing of information from the police and other issues – but also sometimes by the characteristics of missing behaviours amongst those who regularly went missing. Young people would often have consecutive incidents within a few hours or days of each other, undermining the prospect of interviewing them through a systematic, constrained approach. This highlights the relevance of a general reappraisal of how to improve reach to this distinctive and vulnerable group, including how to better monitor and manage RHIs.

The challenges of meeting the 72 hour framework for all young people, not just those who go missing, was frequently identified by participants in all areas. It was clear that there is still some confusion as to when the 72 hours start and the desire that that more professionals are involved in making sure that the 72 hour deadline can be met. Referral processes for RHIs and notification processes between police, local authority and RHI provider come into play here. While overall agreement has been that the 72 hour timeframe is useful clarification, changes to the 2014 Guidance are needed to advise that the 72 hours begins when a referral is made to the RHI provider. Alongside the 72 hour framework for RHI providers, it is also important that expectations are set for police to make swift referrals to local authorities and RHI providers after a young person returns from a missing incident. The brief for this research did include a question related to setting a time standard for police referral, but we believe that it is an issue for national decision makers to further consult on.

Perhaps most encouragingly in terms of efforts to enhance the reach of RHI provision, a number of case study sites gave examples of how referrals were being boosted for young people who had gone missing but had not been reported by parents or carers. In one area, patch-based youth workers were keyed-in to the local grapevine and used this to find out about missing incidents which were going unreported. In another area the local authority had ensured that schools, social workers and other professionals who had contacts with young people or their families would notify the RHI service if they were aware of any missing incidents (regardless of knowing if they had been reported). And another example of extending reach was described whereby focused awareness raising work in one town had been instigated in response to concerns around potential CSE – with a subsequent increase in parents reporting missing incidents.

The high number of ‘hidden missing’ young people (as revealed in research on young runaways – eg Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Rees and Lee, 2005) who can remain outside the reach of official referral routes to services – and the understanding of this and additional efforts of many professionals to widen their provision of RHIs to include them – suggests that all local authorities should be considering how to reach those outside the current system for missing reports. It also suggests that the Guidance should reinforce the need for this to be reviewed and improved across the country.

Chapter 3.

Delivery of Return Home Interviews to children missing from home and care

Summary

This chapter focuses on the delivery of RHIs – on who provides interviews, how they are done and what has been learnt about 'what works' in the delivery of RHIs.

Key findings on the delivery of RHIs

Current provision of RHIs across England and Wales is characterised by a wide diversity of service models. These include differences in whether services are provided by local authority employees or commissioned from voluntary sector providers, variations in the approaches taken to making offers and to how the interview itself is conducted, and in the systems to support recording and information sharing.

The majority of areas reported that the practitioners who conducted RHIs with children missing from home or care were in-house RHI teams/workers or social workers. Independent voluntary sector RHI provision is less prevalent. Looked after children in out of area placements were most likely to receive an RHI from social workers.

It was clear that most areas were using a variety of methods to contact parents – and that most were not only trying a variety of methods (phone, text, home/placement visit, letter, leaving calling cards) but also making multiple attempts. Almost a quarter (24%) of local authorities indicated that they would always contact a young people separately from parents, but most (69%) said that they did this on a case-by-case basis.

Factors that help RHI delivery	Factors that hinder RHI delivery
Designated RHI service/practitioners	Capacity and unpredictable workloads
Experienced, consistent and well trained RHI teams	Lack of space and capacity to develop trusting relationships with hard to reach young people
Working to core values of young person centredness	
Individualised non-judgemental approaches to young people offering choice	
Support from senior management	
Persistency in making an RHI offer	

Key learning from processes and activities in the case study area to enable delivery of RHIs

Working with 'hard to reach' young people: Local areas reported the benefits of using individualised approaches to engaging and working with young people as a foundation for effective RHIs with young people who were 'hard to reach'. This included trauma-informed methods and working with psychologists on how to ask questions.

Prioritising trusted relationships: The merits of ensuring that a young person can be interviewed by someone they trust were highlighted by professionals in the case study areas.

Non-judgemental language and an informal interviewing style: Young people emphasised the importance of professionals conducting RHIs to be careful about the language used for questions, to be neutral in their reactions to what young people tell them and to avoid giving the impression that a young people is being 'interrogated' by using an informal style.

The 2014 Guidance stipulates that *'the interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting. This should be an in-depth interview and is normally best carried out by an independent person (ie someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge'*.

3.1. Key findings from the national survey of local authorities in England and Wales about the RHI delivery

Who delivers RHIs?

The survey asked respondents which (of a list of) different workers might undertake interviews with different groups of young people – including in-house workers, those from independent providers (commissioned by different agencies, or by a partnership), or from voluntary sector providers (funded by other means). Fifty two local authorities answered questions on provision for all three groups, so it was possible to see how the service was being delivered across the board. This gave a picture of the diversity of provision (nb for this analysis 'independent' provision, either commissioned by local authorities or enabled through funding from charitable sources or police funded, has been categorised as one type).

The responses to the survey suggested that:

- In most areas (around two-thirds) the practitioners who are conducting RHIs with children who go missing from home or care are employed by the local authority – either in teams dedicated to RHIs, or as children's services social workers.
- 21 local authorities had one provider for young people reported missing from home and from care.
- 22 had two providers across the groups.
- Nine had three providers.

In order to look in more detail at which providers were most represented, data from the same 52 areas was analysed for how often each type of service provider featured – either as the 'sole' provider or in combination with others (see Figure 9). This showed that:

- In-house RHI workers were most often involved in services for missing from home or missing from care for in area placements.
- Local authority social workers were most often providing RHIs for young people in care placed out of area (almost four times as many areas had them as the 'sole provider' of interviews for this group than for young people missing from home).
- Independent services were spread fairly consistently across groups, as sole or joint providers of RHIs.

For this sample, most provision for different groups was as follows:

- Missing from home – In-house RHI services (featuring in the provision in 32 areas).
- Missing from care (in area placements) – In-house RHI services (in 27 areas).
- Missing from care (out of area placements) – Local authority social workers (in 29 areas)

It is important to note that this gives only an overall sense of the range of different provision, since the survey did not allow for analysis of how – in circumstances where there was more than one provider for a group – interviews were allocated to staff in different services.

Figure 9 How often different providers were conducting RHIs with different groups of young people (n=52)

	Missing from home		**Missing from care** (in area placements)		**Missing from care** (out of area placements)	
	Sole providers	Alongside other providers	Sole provider	Alongside other providers	Sole provider	Alongside other providers
RHI workers from an in-house local authority service	20	12	18	9	10	6
Social workers from local authority children's services	4	12	5	14	15	14
Independent RHI provider (funded in different ways)	12	10	13	11	11	13

How long have RHI services been operating?

Local authorities were asked to say how long their current delivery model had been in operation.

Eighty nine areas answered this question and their responses showed that:

- The majority of services (54%) were relatively well established, having been in place for two years or more, with a quarter operating for more than three years.
- Around 1 in 7 (14%) had been in place for a year or less (although there may have been a service which was delivered in a different way before this time).

Profile of service delivery in the case study areas

The variety of approaches to RHI provision demonstrated by findings from the survey were manifest in the five case study areas. Interviews were being done by staff from Children's Social Care (in designated teams), by youth workers and youth work managers, by voluntary sector staff, and by police officers (see Figure 10). For the most part, out of area placed young people were being interviewed by social workers, their own social worker, although in some areas efforts were made to avoid this happening when possible.

How are young people and their parents contacted by RHI services?

Respondents to the survey were asked to say how they went about contacting parents (or carers) to offer an RHI, and also if they made direct contact with young people separately from their parents.

It was clear that most areas were using a variety of methods to contact parents – and that most were not only trying a variety of methods (phone, text, home/placement visit, letter, leaving calling cards) but also making multiple attempts.

Almost a quarter (24%) of local authorities indicated that they would always contact young people separately from parents, but most (69%) said that they did this on a on a case-by-case basis.

A similarly diverse range of ways to contact young people – most often by phone call (91% of areas), but also by making visits to home or to school (79% and 78% respectively) – and most of the 80 areas which responded to this question were also using multiple attempts to make contact.

Case study areas – number and types of contacts with young people

The case study areas said they adopted different strategies for the type and number of approaches made to parents or carers, including that all recorded that their service would make at least one phone call or send one text – but some would attempt to call up to five times.

Figure 10 Nature of RHI service provision in the case study areas

Area	Service provider	Number of staff who conduct interviews	Do staff carry a caseload of follow up support?	Do all staff conducting RHIs have a professional qualification?	How long delivered in this way?
Area 1	Vol sector	2 (plus service manager)	Yes	No	2 years +
Area 2	CSC	2[1] (plus service manager)	No	No	2 years +
Area 3*	Youth work + CSC	6[2]	No	Yes	Less than 6 months*
Area 4	Youth work + CSC	20+[3]	Yes[4]	Yes	2 years +
Area 5	Vol sector + police	50+[5]	Yes[6]	Yes	2 years +

[1] nb The two staff were both part time.

[2] Most staff part time and with youth work role too.

[3] Some staff part time and with youth work role too.

[4] Workers could do short term follow up after an RHI – up to four sessions.

[5] RHIs may be conducted by staff from any of the five safeguarding teams and staff from the other services.

[6] One voluntary sector worker had a caseload of long term follow up support.

* Nb Area 3 had recently adopted an approach deploying youth workers and managers to conduct RHIs, but after a brief trial was planning – by the time of the study – to revert to its original approach of having a dedicated in-house team (of two full time staff) within the CSC department but embedded within a safeguarding hub.

All the areas said that they would decide whether to make a direct contact with a young person to offer the interview on a case-by-case basis using a range of methods (by phone call, text message, home, school or placement visit).

Further exploration of the merits of different ways to contact young people, including their effectiveness in promoting the uptake of RHIs, was done as part of the work in case study sites and in focus groups with young people who had had experience of RHIs.

3.2. Key findings from five case study areas on the factors that help or hinder the delivery of RHIs

Professionals in the case study sites concurred on the importance of particular factors which had combined to contribute to the success of RHI services in their areas. They emphasised the benefits of experience and consistency in staff teams, a foundation of core values and principles related to young person-centredness, and the need for senior management buy-in and ongoing support.

Consistency and experience of staff in the RHI teams

In nearly all the case study areas most practitioners, and nearly all managers, had been conducting interviews since the service had started – in most areas for at least two years.

This meant that teams had benefited from learning through experience and mutually supportive professional relationships. In one team the two practitioners had themselves designed, established and operated the service from its inception, as their manager explained:

> 'The consistency of the team that we've got. So I think they've done it for so long that they've tried different things, they've tried different ways of delivering them and sometimes they find it doesn't work, (so) let's change it. Because they've had that experience, I think that's been really helpful.' (Area 2, RHI service)

This longevity of experience also allowed staff to develop particular expertise – to become skilled and confident in tackling the challenges that RHIs could present:

> 'Not to say that it's not valid what the social worker does, but these people that do the return home interviews are very specialist in what they do, and they have a lot of resources at their fingertips and I feel that them doing it does have a massive benefit.' (Area 1, Public children's home)

The ability to build and maintain relationships with young people

A key element of the approach which teams advocated was to build relationships with those young people who were frequently reported missing – in order to develop trust and to gradually find out their reasons for going missing and to identify the best ways to support them.

> 'What works well is we've not got lots and lots of different faces, different people with no understanding of the child or young person's background and issues.' (Area 3, RHI service)

Consistency and longevity of service by staff in the teams was vital in order to facilitate this approach.

RHI services as trusted partners in safeguarding systems

There was a consensus across the RHI services that their longstanding presence and positive contribution to safeguarding within their areas was well recognised by colleagues – and that their judgement was trusted:

> 'I think we have a lot of say in terms of the thresholds as well, in terms of our involvement in the (strategic group) or an involvement in the strategy meetings. We're quite well embedded within the RMFHC protocols in (Area 1), and we've got a good reputation in terms of our decision-making and our voice is heard if we don't agree.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

In some cases, where missing became a central issue for a vulnerable young person, RHI practitioners had developed a key role in steering multi-agency collaboration:

> 'And there are the kind of cases where the "missing" bit will become more involved – beyond doing the missing return interviews – because we have to buy in to that multi-agency process for that kid…Some of these meetings weren't set up because he was going missing, they were set up because everyone was concerned about this young person, and we kind of maybe just took over a bit and took the lead.' (Area 3, Focus group with practitioners)

Senior managers were appreciative of this and of the quality of information and intelligence that their work provided:

> 'There are very good partnerships across the board. I think, as well as a very clear understanding of what our shared goals are, I think we've got some structures set in place which have provided really rich information for us.' (Area 4, Local authority)

Positive reputation of RHI services with young people

Young people who came into contact with RHI practitioners – especially those who were repeatedly reported missing and/or lived in care – shared their experiences with friends and peers, spreading positive messages about the services:

> 'The young people know us and we're respected.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

And this led to further benefits, when former service users provided information that was helpful to protect other young people:

> 'Our older children who've come through our service ring up and saying "Do you know what's happening down this place? This house on my street?…I need to let you know that so-and-so, so-and-so is now associating with so-and-so" or "The police the other day were looking for so-and-so. Next time they're probably in this house." And they will do that because they know it's a safe person to tell, and that they're very clear on the process as well. (Area 5, Focus group).

Staff trained on issues helping RHI delivery

The variety of issues covered around how to best deliver RHIs points to an array of skills and knowledge that a practitioner will need to perform their role well. In the case study areas many of the staff conducing RHIs had professional qualifications (in social work or youth work) but some did not. Most had extensive experience of working with vulnerable young people – but some had acquired this over time whilst doing interviews. In some teams – for example in Area Five where the police were involved in delivery – practitioners commented that it had been important to improve understanding and awareness of key issues (eg related to the vulnerability of young people) in order to promote good practice. And those practitioners who were from the voluntary sector spoke about how the training provided or sourced by their own organisations, sometimes as part of induction, had enhanced their knowledge and contributed to effective work.

In their focus groups, practitioners were asked about any specific training they had received to help them develop their skills and described courses including in-house ones on safeguarding, using internal systems, 'achieving best evidence', understanding what 'intelligence' meant to the police etc. Also mentioned were externally-provided courses and training on 'active listening', 'motivational interviewing', CSE, child criminal exploitation and 'county lines' (although voluntary sector staff indicated – as highlighted earlier in the chapter – that they themselves were involved in training others on some of these issues too).

> 'I've got some formal training in advocacy. I've got training in working with families who are hard to reach, working with families with disguised [non-]compliance. I've got a triple-P parenting practitioner. So I've got lots of different things and, you know, a massive amount of training around safeguarding, which all of those elements feed in to this role and the roles that we did prior when I was a CSE practitioner.' (Area 1, RHI service)

Overall, it was apparent that there were significant variations in what individual practitioners had been trained in, and access to training had been piecemeal and ad hoc as courses became available. Participants highlighted how difficult it was to find training that was appropriate for the role of conducting RHIs:

> 'I don't feel like we have enough training type events for missing return interviews and we've got quite a number of new staff that have never done any of sort of formal training around it and they just learn from what we know and have to go with it.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

Some staff commented on how difficult it was to obtain a package of training which was sufficiently holistic to cover the variety of issues which were relevant. Others were able to identify distinct gaps in what had been made available to them (eg how to work with young people and parents with learning difficulties or disabilities). As one manager observed, the lack of training on 'good practice' for RHIs may be because there are so many different approaches in operation:

> 'And there isn't really Return Home Interview training. So it's then about picking out, okay, what areas do we need to concentrate on? So we've looked at CSE training, gang training, county lines training, trafficking, mental health. So we've unpicked different themes that we need to look at, but what we've always said is it would be interesting if someone did deliver training on missing and Return Home Interviews and what does that look like and what does good practice look like nationally. Because everyone does it so differently.' (Area 2, Focus group with practitioners)

Core values and principles

The staff who were conducting RHIs in the case study areas came from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines – from social work, youth work, the police or no particular profession. This meant that they had different professional qualifications, or none.

But what was made clear during interviews and focus groups was that they had committed to a set of core values and principles which informed their approach to interviews and associated work. These related to the importance of being attuned to a child or young person's needs, and to being patient, flexible and adaptable to meet them.

> 'These children may have suffered a range of different things. They've got trauma and all sorts – separation, attachment issues and all sorts behind them, and you don't just engage a child like that. There is legwork, time, constantly going back – as in, it doesn't matter how many times you tell us to f*** off, we'll always come back.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

Interestingly, one manager reflected that this was, to some degree, contrary to her professional training:

> 'With missing we know we're reaching some of our most difficult children. They don't need a social work approach; they need to trust someone who is able to work through a core issue with them that's putting them at risk. And that's what we get can't away from. It's not just about the missing; it's what caused that missing.' (Area 3, Focus group with practitioners)

These principles of practice have been referred to as 'child centredness' – and relate to the understanding that, in order to promote effective work, the needs of an individual child or young person must be at the forefront of a worker's mind in all interactions. This methodology also suggests that positive outcomes will, in many cases, only be achieved through having the skill and patience to establish a rapport with a young person, to gradually build trust (often over the course of a long period), to empower the young person in the professional relationship, and to actively listen to them at all times.

Child centredness has been advocated in much of the research on work with runaways or young people who go missing (eg see Rees, 2001; Rees et al, 2005) – and has come to be regarded as being good practice in safeguarding work more generally (Munro, 2011; HM Government, 2015).

Senior management support

The other factor that was highlighted in responses across the case study areas was the importance of senior management understanding of the value of RHIs and support for the service. This was manifested in some of the praise that was given by colleagues from partner agencies during interviews:

> 'Our return home interview team and CSE coordinator, you know, are really dedicated individuals who are very focused and very, very child focused and very driven. At the operational level I think that has significant impact.' (Area 2, Local authority)

And it was also recognised by staff and managers of the services:

> 'We should acknowledge the contribution of our senior management team and their commitment to our return home interview service, ensuring that it is in-house and that we cover the whole area.' (Area 2, RHI service)

In order for services to consolidate and thrive it was important that senior managers were clear on the value that they brought to safeguarding and were supportive of the need to provide adequate ongoing resource.

'Independence' from statutory services

The issue of 'independence' in relation to the status of professionals conducting RHIs with young people who have been reported missing has frequently featured in research and other reports (see Chapter 1). The ambiguity around this was compounded with the publication of the 2014 Guidance – which suggested that 'independence' rested primarily on being 'someone not involved in caring for the child' – and, in Wales, with the AWP which stated that the interviewer could be a social worker or police officer or a 'suitable independent person.' As a consequence, a variety of interpretations have been made and operationalised in services across the two countries – as evidenced in the findings from the case study areas for this research.

Across the case study sites of five local authorities it was evident that many different professionals were doing RHIs. If independence is regarded as being located with non-statutory workers, as some research has said is best (eg Rees, 2001; Evans et al, 2007), then only one area had fully subscribed to this – although another had one voluntary sector worker complemented by police officers who also did RHIs.

In the other three areas – where no voluntary sector staff were involved in interviewing – participants were always clear that their service was 'independent' despite being provided in-house. The demarcation used was that RHI would be provided by a designated RHI professional (some of them social work qualified)/service, not the child's allocated social worker or social worker from the statutory children's services (such as social workers for looked after children, children in need social workers). It could however be a different professional, eg a CSE specialist, who is also a registered social worker, a social work assistant, an RHI service manager (social work qualified), a youth worker or youth work manager. In some areas dedicated police officers had been trained to conduct interviews appropriately.

Processes around conducting the interviews had also been developed to enhance independence by reducing bias in local systems. For example, in one area it had previously been an allocated social worker's decision whether an RHI needed to be done after a missing incident, but this had been changed to a default position that an interview would now always be offered by the dedicated service. In another, it was argued that having a safeguarding hub – where staff focused on missing and CSE were located to promote integrated practice – in itself mitigated against other social care interests downplaying the importance of RHIs – eg managers in the hub had a chairing role:

> 'We do the majority of "strategy" meetings because I think the Hub offers that level of independence – because working with a family, delivering care packages, and everything else they (social workers) are caught up with in other strands of the case…they don't resonate with the missing episode.' (Area 3, Local authority)

As a result, many of the benefits of *complete* independence were reported as being provided through in-house models, and – as a senior manager pointed out – there could be strengths of in-house provision that should also be taken into account:

> 'It's an in-house provision which means that we are able to ensure that it's working to the standards that we want it working to. We are able to manage the service ourselves, so it's strong because it's consistent.' (Area 2, Local authority)

The key benefit of independence from statutory services that was identified in some interviews and focus groups was an improved ability to engage 'hard to reach' young people (who may have had negative experiences of the police and social workers). An in-house provider argued that this could be achieved by in-house services where staff were appropriately-trained in young person-centred

practice, were resourced and supported to build relationships with individual young people, and where there was an understanding that it could take time to achieve outcomes:

> 'The return home interview staff are very, very good at engaging young people, building those relationships and being consistent. So what we try to do is ensure the same worker goes out and supports a young person and it's kind of, the young person feels more familiar when the return home interview staff has come and you get more information, you build that relationship. Parents are more willing to engage as well, because it's the same person, it's not a new face that's coming in, but also builds that relationship with the allocated (social) workers as well.' (Area 2, MASH)

The message that came from professionals in the case study sites was that the benefits of independence from statutory services could, in most instances, be achieved through those conducting interviews working to child-centred principles. This message was, however, contradicted by what young people said in focus groups. Young people who took part in the two focus groups that were done for the study had been interviewed by practitioners from independent, voluntary sector services and said that this approach had worked well for them. They said that they would not have been comfortable being interviewed by police officers, and that social workers should not do the interviews:

> 'I don't think it should be someone from the local council who does it…it definitely shouldn't be done by a social worker because young people attach a lot of stigma to people who work for social services. No matter what they do, how nice they are, you can't change the fact that they are social workers. They work for children's services – they are still going to have that stigma and there is nothing that nobody can do because of the reputation that they have.' (Young people in focus groups)

Unpredictable workload and lack of capacity

The unpredictability of the workload of RHIs was often mentioned in focus groups as a factor that hindered good practice.

> 'There's no like rhyme or reason as to why we've had so many missings in this week and none the next week – it's hit and miss.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

This was particularly challenging in the area where youth workers – who had other work as part of their role – were being allocated interviews:

> 'In some sense because you can't predict the demand it's actually quite difficult to manage the supply as well. You need to show a lot of agility because you do have to shift things around a lot because this (RHIs) is always the priority.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

All the teams said that at times they were stretched to meet demand. One team had made a close link to a colleague, whose main role was with homeless young people, to establish the contingency that they could step in and conduct interviews if this became necessary from time to time. An interviewee who worked in the Welsh case study area explained that sometimes police officers from the wider missing team may be called in to do debriefs if those who usually did them did not have the capacity (in part because there were vacancies being left unfilled). And one worker said that his team had to change their working practice in the light of increasing numbers of interviews in their area:

> 'We used to have a question on the bottom of the evaluation forms saying "Do you want to see someone in private?" Because when we get evaluations done we get the child to do it out of sight of the parent to give them that option to go "She's conning you" or "He's conning you". But that's been removed because we don't have capacity to keep going back to do those visits, which is what we used to do before.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

The consensus was that it was often very difficult to keep up with the demand to do large numbers of interviews within the prescribed timeframe and to preserve quality.

Understanding the effectiveness in RHI delivery

> 'I think that young people want to be safe and want to know that somebody cares.' (Area 3, Focus group with young people)

The issue of 'effectiveness' in relation to RHIs poses a number of challenges, both for those delivering services and for those monitoring them or developing policies and strategies to improve services over time.

The absence of evaluation of RHI services was noted in the literature scoping for this research, and none of the local authorities who took part in the survey, or who became case study sites, had commissioned or undertaken evaluations of their services which systematically measured outcomes from the work.

This may in part point to the complex role that an RHI can play, in both the short and longer term for an individual young person – and to the wider impacts that RHIs may have (eg for safeguarding and policing). Frameworks to measure the breadth of outcomes from RHIs would require a number of dimensions in order to authentically demonstrate the true value of this work.

In their survey responses local authorities were asked to say how they measured 'effectiveness' in terms of things like how many interview offers were accepted and how many were conducted within the 72 hour timeframe (findings are detailed in Appendix C). But, as focus group and interview participants indicated, their responses were more about 'compliance' than about understanding the quality of practice. They were also asked to say whether they collected feedback from young people or from parents and carers – but few did and it was often unclear how this data was used.

To better understand what 'effectiveness' might mean with regard to service delivery – to conducting the interviews themselves – practitioners and managers were asked to reflect on what they considered to be 'success' in relation to RHIs.

They put forward a range of views on what might constitute success within an interview, or in the context of longer term outcomes. Some practitioners focused on the issue of 'engagement' during an interview:

> 'I think the bottom line for me (is) about being able to engage with that young person and their carers, whoever they may be – being able to have some level of conversation and build up some form of rapport.' (Area 3, Focus group with practitioners)

Others spoke about how important it was to try to reduce missing incidents or – for young people who went missing repeatedly – to equip them with a better understanding of how to keep themselves safe:

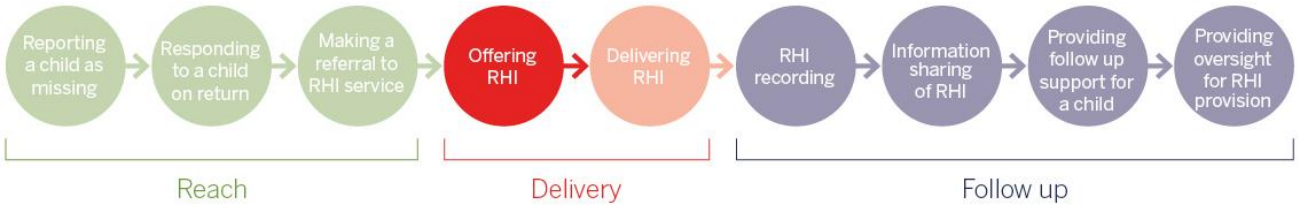
> 'We give them a safety plan and a backup plan. You know? If you want to get out of a room, you need to keep an eye out for this. If you go into a house, if you feel uncomfortable, these are options that you can use.' (Area 2, Focus group with practitioners)

And many practitioners said that linking young people to other services was often the most important indicator of success:

> 'We've got quite a lot of – I've seen a real pattern recently with mental health issues. Like literally walking for the train tracks and then changing their minds and coming back. So that's linking in with CAMHS and stuff like that and making sure they're getting medical appointments.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

But the consensus that arose within the group discussions was that successful outcomes could be very different for different young people (see Appendix C).

3.3. Key learning from five case study areas about practices, processes and activities that aim to improve the delivery of RHIs



What works in improving RHI offers

In relation to what works in improving how RHI offer is made, professionals in the case study areas raised a number of issues. Firstly, the importance of persistent approach to a young person and family was raised. Box H offers insights from the focus group with young people about how best to make an offer.

Another issue discussed was the importance of developing new approaches to reaching young people who may be perceived as hard to engage. Professionals were clear that there might be a number of reasons why offers of RHI are not accepted, and some of these issues relate to individual circumstances of young people. Box I describes one area's approach to developing psychological approaches to RHIs. But there may also be an issue with the community, who might distrust the service, or with particular individuals who may advertently or inadvertently harbour missing children and discourage them from participating in RHI. Box J and Box K describe approaches developed to address those issues.

Making RHI offer persistently

In relation to the persistent offer of RHIs, the ethos for all the teams in the case study areas was that staff should make every attempt possible to ensure that an interview was done for every missing incident, regardless of the circumstances:

> 'It's quite flexible really. I suppose we've been told our priority is to do the return interviews by whatever means around it you can go. Sometimes when you really can't get hold of a person, (maybe) you've got the wrong contact number, you do just go and do a home visit and see if they're in.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

All of the services used a variety of methods to try to ensure that interviews always took place.

The most commonly mentioned approaches to invite a young person to be interviewed were phone calls, texts and home or school visits to make the offer, whenever possible, directly to a young person. One practitioner suggested that this should be extended to other routes to supporting effective communication with young people:

> 'That would be a way to go – to get us on social media that's the same social media that they're using.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

Practitioners spoke about the frequent need to be creative in order to talk to some young people, and professionals from other agencies commented on the tenacity of staff in the RHI teams:

> 'They are, I would say, quite proactive in terms of trying to engage a young person. They don't just say "Oh well I've been once that's it", they keep going, they're very persistent.' (Area 2, MASH).

Some practitioners talked about the nuances that might be important to encourage young people to accept an interview:

> 'It could be something as simple as what you wear. So when I'm out meeting my young people I'm very much in jeans and a T-shirt or jeans and a hoodie and then they think, "Oh, well, she's quite cool, actually. I'll go and see her." If I went in my suit after being in a meeting, they'll say, "You're really important, I'm not speaking to you." So it's just the smaller things like that and perhaps engaging in another activity to begin with.' (Area 5, Focus group with practitioners)

This view was echoed by a police officer in the Welsh area that was involved, where the police conduct many of the interviews themselves:

> 'In the unit we're in, we don't wear uniforms, see. We say to them that we are police officers but it's very different, our roles are very different, we want to make sure you're safe, we're not here to catch you out and whatever.' (Area 5, Police)

She went on to explain the changes in culture that had happened within her unit – how colleagues had learnt to recognise the difficulties that young people who went missing had often experienced:

> 'So it's got to be about them, their vulnerabilities and what they are facing day in, day out – and they don't need somebody else telling them "Well that's naughty, you shouldn't be doing that." (Area 5, Police)

This idea, of the stigma that can be associated with involvement with identifiable police officers, was also alluded to by a young person in one of the focus groups. She said that two uniformed officers had come to her school the day after she returned from a missing incident and that her friends and other students, as well as teachers and other staff at the school, were then aware that she was being seen by the police and that this had led to difficulties for her. She said she wished they had not come into the school by the main entrance so that their appearance had not been so public.

Reaching 'hard to engage' young people

Practitioners and service managers who took part in focus groups, and professional stakeholders who were interviewed, were asked to say who they thought was most and least likely to accept interview offers. Many felt that a young person's characteristics or circumstances could make a big difference, and should be taken into account when thinking about the best ways to make an interview offer.

There was a consensus on which young people were most likely to agree to be interviewed:

> 'Definitely we know non-social care there's a good uptake of Return Home Interviews.' (Area 1, RHI service)

Responses on who was least likely to accept an offer of a RHI were more varied. Many said that young people in the care system were the most difficult to engage in RHIs – often because of the difficult experiences they may have had, including of professional interventions. Practitioners spoke about how variable the responses they received from looked after young people could be:

> 'They are the most difficult young people to reach because they've had enough of adults telling them what to do and they've got, you know, four social workers and an IRO and a PEP, and a teacher in this – you know they've got so much adult intervention as it is. Sometimes they look at us and go "F**k off! I don't want another one." (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

However, the point was also made that RHIs could be an important opportunity for a young person in care to talk about issues related to their placement that were not being addressed (a 'scrutiny' function that was also mentioned by professional stakeholders in their interviews):

> 'Some want that return interview because it gives them the chance to be heard and to talk about what's going on and if sometimes there are issues in the care home that are, that's why they're leaving, then that's a really good thing.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

Some practitioners said that young people who were 'known' to Children's Social Care departments (whether they were, or had been, on a Child Protection or a Child in Need Plan) could be challenging to engage for interview – and, in particular, those who had 'something to hide':

> 'The ones that are involved in criminal activity, drugs, alcohol and things like that that are more, you've got to be a lot more persuasive with those ones and engage with them differently.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

But a number of senior staff cautioned about the dangers of too much generalisation around who would report or engage with interviews:

> ‘No – I don’t want to generalise. I’ve experienced both where you’ve got families who are not well known to services and therefore don’t want to be well known to services, so won’t report. And then you can have families that are well known to agencies and you know, just don’t see this as a big issue, don’t see the risk – it’s what they did, it’s what the community does, they just don’t involve police and social services. So, I have seen both ends of the spectrum.’ (Area 5, Local Authority)

One manager suggested that it was important to try to regard those young people who might seem the most difficult to engage in a less negative light:

> ‘We try and discourage our practitioners across service from saying that this child won't engage. I think we would try to reframe that as what can we do to engage this child. We write a lot of reports for courts, for care proceedings. You know? So we’re kind of very conscious that when we write things about children, language is really, really important. So it’s about not “this child won't engage” it’s about “we haven't worked out a way to engage this child yet” but, you know, and I think it’s more about what can we do and change about us to engage.’ (Area 5, Local Authority)

Participants also said that different characteristics could have a bearing on whether young people were reported missing or whether they or their families engaged with a service.

A number of practitioners said that gender was an issue, and that fewer boys were being reported missing, and were less likely to accept interview offers:

> ‘I've really noticed that more recently with boys because, I presume, parents assume “They’re boys, they can look after themselves a lot more.”…By the time we go out they’re quite in depth in their peers and behaviours and things.’ (Area 2, RHI service)

In one area, a manager reflected on a recent upturn in boys being referred to the service because of increasing awareness of criminal exploitation:

> ‘So we’re still under-represented by boys and young men. It’s getting better, however sadly I think we’re getting more referrals because of county lines and criminal exploitation…My highest risk MISPERS are now nearly at the top. They’ve gone beyond urban street gangs, they’re now in serious organised crime and what I’ve said is we need to look at that correlation of that initial journey of a child going missing, where they’re going, who they start to develop relationships with and connections to.’ (Area 3, Local Authority)

Difficulties in reaching BAME communities in some areas were also discussed:

> ‘We’ve got a Somalian community that aren’t represented particularly well… and we tried to work with travelling communities…We tried a different route with both these very different communities to almost empower them because people are fearful – particularly if English isn’t their first language and this isn’t a country of origin – by going in and talking about what we do and why we care and why we’re “interfering”.’ (Area 3, Local Authority)

Age was also said to be important in determining young people’s engagement. Older young people – those aged 15+ – were less likely to be reported or to accept interviews, and this became particularly acute once they reached 17:

> ‘The ones that are 16 going onto 17 going onto 18 almost. They’ve already been through hell and back, they’re already established in the criminal world. I don’t know how we can help them then and that’s the hardest ones.’ (Area 5, Police)

Some professionals added that this was true even for young people who were known to be vulnerable by Social Care departments:

> ‘Where they’re not 18 yet so they’re not children as such – even though in the eyes of the law they are – social services are, kind of “Well we don’t know what to do with them now”…I’m being honest and I don’t care if you repeat this, I’m terrified of the children that we’ve had coming through here who have hit 18 and suddenly disappeared…They hit 18 and go independent and there’s nobody to report them missing anymore.’ (Area 5, Police)

RHI workers often commented that they would like to have opportunity outside of the RHI to develop relationships with hard to engage young people to ensure that next time children went missing the offer of RHI was accepted. In other examples they commented on the importance of wider awareness in community of children who may be missing and on working with adults who may be targeting young people who go missing.

Box H. Young people's views on how to make contact with an interview offer

In the focus groups young people stressed the importance of making direct contact and conveying a clear and positive message:

'The best thing to do is contact the young person by phone, ring and explain who you are and say that you want to support them.'

In one group a young person suggested that it could be a good idea to give a young person some time to consider the offer before they made a decision:

'You could leave them a little card with your work number and then the young person can make the choice to engage.'

And one young person stressed the need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the context which the young person was in, which might make it difficult for them to accept the offer straight away:

'Every young person is different -– you could ring them and not be able to get through on the phone because their parent might be listening - also. Also, I wouldn't answer an unknown number, so if they don't have the number saved then they might not answer it.'

Box I. Incorporating psychological approaches

One of the teams (Area One) talked about how practitioners used a 'therapeutic approach' as the basis for their intensive work (Area One), and. And a manager who led missing and CSE teams in a safeguarding hub in Area 3 talked in detail about one young woman who had been difficult to engage leading the team to work closely with a psychologist to develop a profile to support the intervention:

'So we've had a young person who was also subject to a CSE plan but a frequent missing person and she was kind of the highest missing person that we'd had certainly for the last half of last year … …She had a particular issue around seeing herself as exploited and you couldn't engage in any conversation around that at all because she would just shut you down … …you wouldn't even get past the door. We had some input from the psychologist at that point, who developed a psychological profile and basically suggested that these are things that we should avoid when talking to her. And (we) went with that information and gradually got to speak to her.' (Area 3, Local authority)

Box J. Working with adults harbouring missing young people

In one of the case study areas the manager of the RHI service (and CSE team) explained how staff would make visits to places where they thought there were adults who may – either inadvertently, or through deliberate targeting and grooming – encourage young people to go missing from home or care.

'We will go out and talk to potential perpetrators or harbourers or people that just don't know and think they are being helpful and explain that this isn't the right thing for the young person.'

She said that this was sometimes done with the aim of making a young person 'toxic' to perpetrators or others – to make them aware that the authorities would be looking for the young person, and that this would make things difficult for them. Alternatively, it could be a way to encourage some adults to inform the police if they knew about a young person who was at risk.

A focus for this work had been homelessness hostels in the area and other agencies working with vulnerable adults.

Box K. RHI practitioners raising awareness of the vulnerability of young people among other agency staff or workers in the community

In the two areas where voluntary sector staff were undertaking RHIs they explained how they had, over time, provided awareness raising training to different groups of adults in order to improve understanding of the vulnerability of young people who may go missing.

They talked about sessions with colleagues – the police, foster carers and residential children's home staff – and also training events for adults in the community to improve awareness and encourage reporting.

One example was given of specific training for staff at a site in a town – the local leisure centre – where young people would often meet and spend time together, and where it was known that perpetrators would sometimes visit. The RHI practitioners had noted that there was a high turnover of staff there – including seasonally – and that it was important to provide regular sessions to maintain awareness:

> 'There'll be a new staff group who perhaps don't get the vulnerability of our children. Or they don't get the importance of clocking number plates of the cars that pull up and talk to our young people. And, you know, what we don't want is our children just moved on.'

RHI staff had also provided training to workers in the night time economy:

> '…and delivering training to door staff in a particular area in [Name of town] where there's a cluster of pubs and clubs, but also that's where the young people tend to congregate because there's an empty shop with a doorway and there's [name of supermarket] opposite. So we did awareness raising with them …to see that, well, actually, these young people are not a nuisance and if they are out at one, two in the morning and what they can do about that and how they can respond …So that was really, really positive.'

What makes a difference to the delivery of RHIs

The practitioners and managers from case study areas who took part in the research said that a range of different factors could contribute to the quality of interviews. Deciding on the place to hold an interview, insuring that the person who is delivering the interview is best placed to do it, being clear with the young person (and their family where appropriate) about the purpose and limitations of interview and giving them a choice, being able to spend time alone with the young person and asking questions in appropriate ways, were all mentioned as having an impact on the quality of RHIs. These issues are discussed further and text boxes in this section describe some specific approaches developed in the areas. Box L discusses advantages of being able to do RHIs with young people in secure accommodation where they had been missing previously. Box M describes a process on deciding who the best person to conduct an RHI is. Box N presents reflections from the young people in focus groups on the best ways of asking questions during the interview.

In relation to the best place for RHIs, different views were expressed in the focus groups and interviews about this:

> 'We like to see them maybe out of their home. You know? School is – or a church, children's centre. Pick them up and take them to school in the morning and, you know, be creative.' (Area 3, Focus group with practitioners)

Others advocated for the importance of doing interviews in the home when possible, as this would permit a better understanding of the young person's circumstances and the quality of relationships with parents or carers. There was, however, a consensus that the key determinant of where interviews were done was the context in each case and the young people's own preferences:

> 'If we speak to them we say "Will you do a return interview?" and they say, "well yes" you know you say "Do you want me to come out to you or do you want me to fetch you, or do you want to meet me there?" Quite often we'll just meet them anywhere they want to.' (Area 3, Focus group with practitioners)

In relation to who is the best person to conduct an interview, most of the services in case study areas had dedicated teams for RHIs. There was an aspiration to provide interviews consistently – ie by the same worker interviewing young people who were reported more than once:

> 'What we try to do is ensure the same worker goes out and supports a young person (so that) the young person feels more familiar when the return home interview staff has come and you get more information, you build that relationship. Parents are more willing to engage as well because it's the same person, it's not a new face that's coming in, but also builds that relationship with the social worker, the allocated workers as well.' (Area 3, MASH)

Practitioners who were involved in focus groups spoke about how vital it was for many young people to retain some choice during the process of being interviewed. This might be the key to gaining initial acceptance of the offer of an interview:

> 'If you're considering 'hard-to-reach' individuals – and there are some individuals who particularly don't want to engage – I think we are very good at being persistent. So (we'll ask), "Do you want to meet me at home? Let's meet. Let's go out for a coffee or let's go out for a drive in the car." (Area 5, Focus group with practitioners)

It may also be a fundamental way of indicating to a young person, particularly one who has become wary of the involvement of professionals in their lives, that an RHI is different from their prior experiences:

> 'I think when you go out it's about where do you want this to take place? And I think it's about giving them some control back, if I'm honest with you. Because young people I think at times feel very out of control. Because everyone's coming to the home, everyone's asking questions whether they're looked after or not, but just giving them some control back and respect. But we're, "Okay, where do you want to sit? What do you want to talk about? How do you want to do this?" I think that really helps.' (Area 2, Focus group with practitioners)

Choice might also extend to whether a young person wants someone else present in their interview, as shown in one of the case files analysed where a young person wanted a member of school support staff in attendance at an RHI, because he was the only person that the young person trusted.

At the same time all the practitioners who were involved in focus groups said that it was vital – except in particular circumstances (eg where a young person had specifically requested that an adult be present all the time) – to spend some time alone with a young person, at least as part of an interview:

> 'We'll split the parent up or the carer up from the child. One of us will stay talking to the child, one of us will stay talking to the parent. And quite often that gets a young person talking.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

Many practitioners and managers highlighted the importance of being clear with young people what an interview was about, what the possible outcomes can be, and what they cannot be. They also stressed the need for transparency around the thresholds for confidentiality, as an integral part of retaining a young person's trust:

> 'From the beginning you have to really set out what your objectives are – what you can offer, what you can't offer, and what will happen as a result of your contact and particularly the

> confidentialities…And I'm still amazed how much they share with me, even though I make it very clear from the beginning.' (Area 5, Focus group with practitioners)

The importance of handling the need to breach confidentiality carefully and sensitively – including making sure that the RHI worker remained available after a disclosure – was also reinforced by what young people said:

> 'Understand that sometimes you do have to (share important information) but they should let you know and make you aware of what is going to happen and who is going to speak to you, just making sure that they are still available – that they don't just get you the help and then leave.' (Focus group with young people)

Both practitioners and young people spoke in detail about the need for the content of an interview – the ways that questions were phrased and the tone used – to be carefully managed. RHI practitioners were, for the most part, working to a 'script' – in that they had a set of topics (and sometimes a schedule of questions) that they used to ensure that all relevant issues were covered. Though the majority said that they would not actually take a document into the interview, relying instead on their knowledge and expertise:

> 'We've all got different tools in our bag that we would use, and different approaches and different styles of the way we communicate with a child. You can tell by the way they come

Box L. Location for RHIs: The benefits of a safe place for vulnerable young people

One team in a focus group highlighted the ways in which young people who had become involved in criminal exploitation were more likely to engage with RHIs once they were in a safe location:

'We used to go out and see children in 'secure' … They do engage because they're in a safe or different place. Ready to talk. When they're running it is that challenge because they're at risk and they don't know what to do. Their situation is so chaotic and maybe they're not able to talk, but when they're in that safe place or in that place where there's that security there, the likelihood of them engaging is quite high.'

The manager of the team said that she was keen to reinstitute this aspect of the work – but was aware of the resource implications:

'So that's the discussion we're having at the moment about -– it's about having the capacity; I think we should offer it. We have a young person who's just been missing recently and went down to [name of seaside town]. He is being sexually exploited; he is a heroin user; Mum is sexually exploiting him. And we've had information through; very, very sad case. But he's recently just been located and been taken to [Name of YOI], so I've been saying I'm going to go and see him because, actually, I think we'd get a lot from him.'

Box M. Trusted relationship: The best person to do an RHI

The practitioners stressed the benefits of having a good relationship with a young person. And although good practice might point to the benefits of an independent RHI worker doing the interview, sometimes this was superseded by an acknowledgement that there was someone else better placed to do it:

'What we have tried to do is to identify the most appropriate person, since there is an element of a positive relationship with some people. We will say, actually, let's identify as part of strategy meetings, for example, we would say it may not be the person in the team that needs to undertake the interview. It might be- another professional, for example, that we think is the best person to kind of get in or try and help to get us in.' (Area 3, Local authority)

Practitioners from the only voluntary sector-run service in Area One concurred with this, indicating that they would ultimately refer young people to other professionals where they could make no headway themselves:

'Where a child constantly refuses to engage with our Return Home Interview we wouldn't just leave it … …We'll take it back to the social worker for them to have a try or the person that's got the best professional relationship, the trusted relationship. (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

Box N. Young people's views on how questions should be asked in an interview

Young people in the focus groups spoke in detail about how important it was for RHI staff to 'pitch' their questions at the right level, and to manage the interview carefully. Some participants had had negative experiences of police interviews and stressed the need to avoid a direct approach in questioning a young person after a missing episode:

'It's about how they phrase them. When the police come in they just ask, "Why did you do it?" because they are trying to get answers as quickly as possible. It is literally, "Who was you with? Where were you? What were you doing? Was there any crimes committed towards you? Did you commit any crimes?" – they will just ask you that.'

The young people said that it was important to avoid any language that could feel like a young person was being blamed for anything that had happened to them or that they were being viewed negatively because of their responses in interview:

'It's about the way you word it -– using the word "why" makes it feel like you are blaming the young person.'

'So if you do admit something – whether it's something really bad or something good or whatever -– it is important that you don't feel judged.'

Others expressed an understanding of the role of the interview – how they are done to help protect young people from harm – but that it is vital to be sensitive and not to be too direct in the way questions are asked:

'We know those questions have to be asked but it is just the way that they are asked. If asked well, I will end up saying all those things anyway – but I don't feel interrogated.'

The idea of not being 'interrogated' was echoed in what another young person said, as well as stressing that the recipe for success in an interview was to aim for informality and to develop trust:

'The less formal it is the more likely the child will actually open up. It's important to develop trust between the worker and the kid.'

downstairs and when they present to you what sort of language you're going to have to use with them straight away. You let them lead the conversation to know what terminology to use so that you can be pitched at their level.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

3.4. Conclusion on the delivery of RHIs

The findings presented in this chapter on the delivery of RHIs can be split into three main themes – diversity of delivery, what has been found to work well to engage young people (including the most vulnerable or hard to reach), and how service delivery in different areas has improved practice through incorporating this learning over time.

Although it is not possible to know whether the findings from the local authority survey fully represent service provision across England and Wales, there are clear indications that young people are having different experiences of RHIs in different areas. In particular, it seemed that a larger proportion of local authorities were deploying social workers to interview young people in their care who had been placed outside the area than for other groups of missing young people (ie missing from home or from in area care placements). This would appear to run counter to the 2014 Guidance which recommends that RHIs are best carried out by an independent person (ie someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews, and it would not be in keeping with the findings from this study around what works best to engage vulnerable young people.

This suggests that some local authorities should review arrangements for the delivery of RHIs, and that the 2014 Guidance should be further clarified in relation to service provision.

Most of the chapter focused in detail on aspects of direct practice relaying the reflections of those who had day-to-day responsibility for RHIs in the five case study sites, or strategic roles in relation to safeguarding. They spoke about all the different elements of delivery – from making the offer and

how the interview itself is managed, to the longer term relationship that can develop – and what makes for a successful interview.

At the core of this accumulated wisdom was the message that there is always the need to preserve an individualised approach within all aspects of the work. An RHI can present a unique opportunity to safeguard a young person who may be exposed to risks that would not otherwise become known to professionals. This means that those conducting interviews need to be empowered to use their skill and judgement to accommodate the wide variety of characteristics, circumstances and needs that young people will bring in order to respond sensitively and appropriately. When necessary they also need to have the facility to build a relationship over time. This echoes the messages from earlier research on young runaways and how to best support them (eg Rees, 2001; Evans et al, 2007) and reflects a wider and growing consensus around the benefits of relationship-based work with vulnerable young people (eg Munro, 2011; HM Government, 2015).

To underpin this young person-centred approach it was suggested by participants in the study that having a dedicated team with a primary focus on conducting interviews was often the best model – although there may be merit in alternatives to suit local conditions, eg where there is a widely-dispersed population – and that there were distinct benefits in having staff who were experienced in working with young people.

This points to the need for local authorities to support consistency in the personnel who staff RHI services, so that expertise can be built and that young people who are frequently reported missing can have stability in who interviews them.

An 'orthodoxy' around who should interview young runaways was created by early research studies which consistently argued that practitioners must be independent of statutory services (Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999: Rees, 2001). In recent years, pragmatic considerations of the need to provide interviews nationwide as a statutory responsibility have led to the development of services which are not adhering to this approach.

This research was not aimed at resolving this issue, and it is likely that a sophisticated exploration of the differing needs of different young people who present for interview would be required to provide clear answers. This is especially the case given that the young people who took part in focus groups after experiences of RHIs done by independent practitioners said they felt this had worked well for them. The study did, however, offer some evidence to supplement what has already been reported after evaluation of RHI services (Mitchell et al, 2014). Many professionals in the case study sites asserted that with the correct delivery model (informed by young person-centred principles, good training and support) – and, for young people who were already 'known' to children's social care, by ensuring that allocated, case-carrying social workers did not conduct interviews – professionals who are not completely independent from statutory agencies can successfully do RHIs.

As the ongoing debate around independence illustrates, there remains a long way to go in understanding what is most effective in RHI provision. The absence of thorough and robust evaluation of different models and the outcomes they generate is a significant hindrance to developing 'best practice' – and this should be a priority for future work to ensure that young people can be better supported and safeguarded through RHI provision.

Chapter 4.

Follow up after Return Home Interviews: Support for young people, information sharing and oversight

Summary of Chapter 4. The follow up after Return Home Interviews

This chapter focuses on what happens after RHIs in terms of provision of support to children and young people, information sharing between agencies about risks a young person may be experiencing, and strategic and operational oversight provided.

Key findings from the national survey about the follow up to RHIs

Out of 103 local authorities participating in the survey, 98% stated that the information collected during an RHI was used to inform offers of a follow up support to individual young people. Thirty five percent of areas reported availability of missing children specialist services.

Over a half (53%) of 87 local authorities responded that an information sharing protocol in relation to RHIs was in place in their area.

RHIs are predominantly recorded on electronic social care systems (90% of local authorities). Around eighty percent of local authorities that responded (69 out of 87) indicated that they record full notes and/or RHI specific information about experiences when missing, reasons for going missing, people and places/addresses visited while missing. The remaining 20% of local authorities do not record either full notes or specific information as above. In both groups all or some information is shared with children's social services, police or in multi-agency forum. Above 80% of local authorities share RHI specific information with children's social services, above 70% with police and above 50% in multiagency forum. Majority of local authorities that did not record RHIs either as full notes or issue specific RHI information indicated that some information depending on assessment of risk, consent received or other factors may be shared. The data suggests that information sharing from RHIs is not consistent across the country and in some areas it is limited.

Factors that help with follow up	Factors that hinder follow up
Partnership working	Concerns about breaches of data protection legislation
Agreed approaches to information sharing and recording	Lack of systems and structures to share information across the boundaries of local authorities
Shared understanding of what information is useful to share	Capacity across different agencies to provide a follow up
	Lack of focus on support for children following RHI

Learnings from five case study areas about processes and activities to improve follow up after RHIs

Oversight: All case study areas participating in this research had oversight structures at the local authority level (operational and strategic) and police force level (strategic) ensuring cooperation across all areas in the police force.

Intelligence/information sharing forms: Special forms have been developed in case study sites to ensure intelligence sharing between local safeguarding agencies and police.

Packages of information when placing a child out of area: Police and local authority in some case study areas prepare important information about risks to a child and sharing it with host areas and police when a child is placed out of area.

Streamlining referrals for follow up support: one area developed an offer of a follow up support for missing children and developed a system of how this support can be quickly offered to all children who need it.

The 2014 Guidance on missing children states that *'following the safe and well check and independent return interview, local authority children's services, police and voluntary services should work together: to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing; to understand what happened while they were missing; to understand who they were with when they were missing and where they were found; and what support they require upon returning to home or their care placement in accordance with the "Working Together" guidance'.*

The guidance also requires '*LSCBs should give due consideration to the safeguarding risks and issues associated with children missing from home or care. To do this, they will need to see that partners from children's social care, police, health, education and other services work effectively together to prevent children from going missing and to act when they do go missing'.*

The follow up support received by a young person, use of information from return home interviews, and oversight provided through local structures, were the issues the research explored both in the survey of local authorities and in data collection from case study sites.

4.1. National survey findings about the availability of follow up support and information sharing from RHIs

Availability of support in local areas for missing children following RHIs

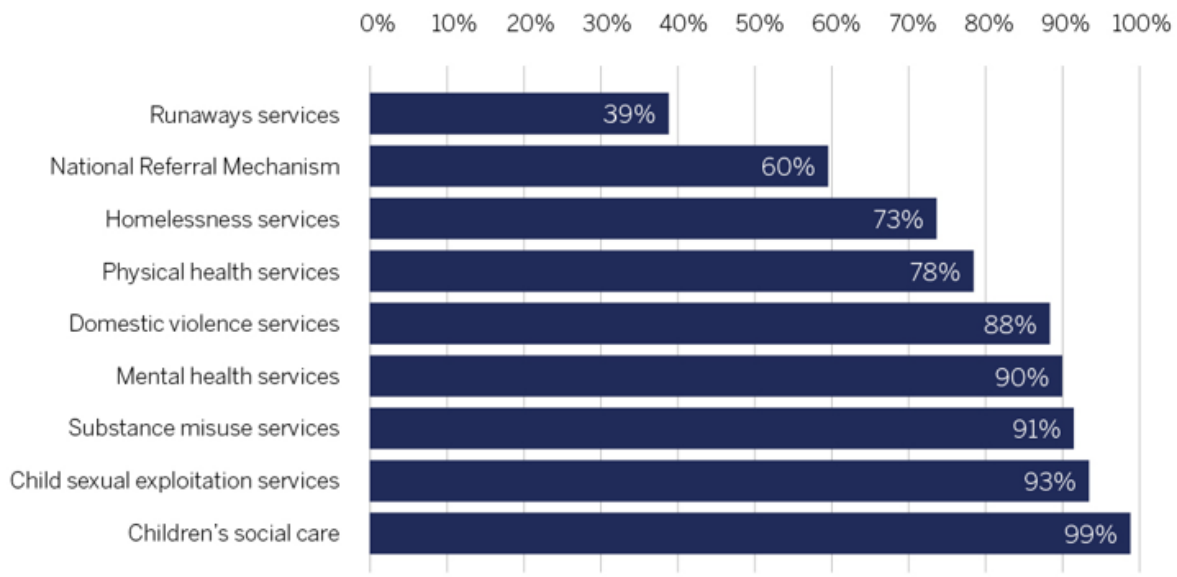
Ninety eight percent of local authorities participating in the survey stated that the information collected during an RHI was used to inform offers of follow up support to individual children. Responses to the question about what services young people can be referred to for follow up support showed that:

- Children and young people were most likely to be referred to children's social care.
- Specialist services such child sexual exploitation (in 93% of areas which responded), substance misuse (91%), mental health (90%) and domestic abuse support (88%) were also available to refer to.
- Specialist services for young runaways and children who go missing from home or care (39%) were the least available.

The list of different services that young people can be referred to is provided in Figure 11. Comments on this question also suggested that some other services were available in a small number of areas. Bereavement support, mentoring, services for LGBT young people, youth workers, and advocacy for looked after children were mentioned.

A count of the numbers of services available for follow up in each area showed that availability of services varied from area to area, with some being able to refer to eight or more different services (around half of respondents) while around 20% noted that there were five or fewer services for them to refer to.

Figure 11. Referrals to agencies for a follow up after an RHI – what services are available in different areas (n = 82)



Survey participants were also asked whether they kept records of referrals in the wake of RHIs and, where this was done, to provide information on which agencies were involved and how many referrals had been made between April 2016 and March 2017. Around a third of local authorities that answered this question (29 local authorities) said that they kept records of all referrals from RHIs, and a further 20% said they kept records of 'some' referrals. Yet, the remaining half of local authorities reported that they did not keep records of referrals.

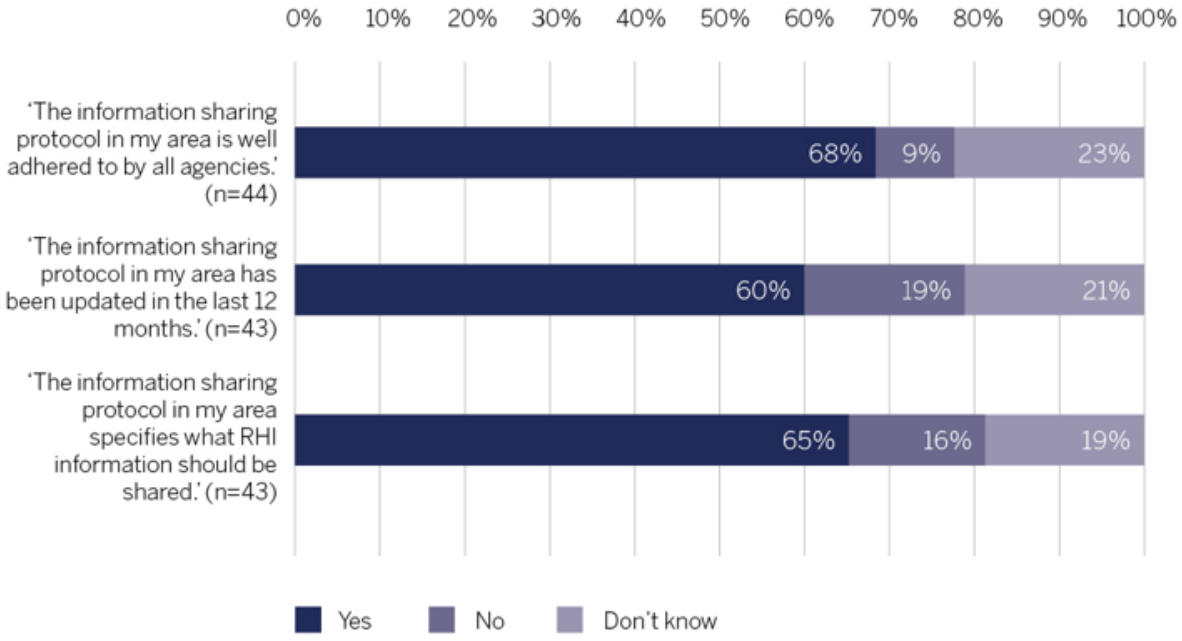
However, of those local authorities that said they kept records consistently, very few could provide data on post RHIs referrals. As a result, it was not possible to conduct analysis of what support was actually being provided to meet the needs that young people were presenting in their RHIs.

Information sharing protocols and the extent to which they are adhered to

Eighty seven local authorities responded to the question about the availability of information sharing protocols in relation to RHIs in their area. Of them, just over a half (53%) said that such a protocol was in place, a third (32%) reported that no such protocol existed, and the remaining local authorities (15%) did not know.

Of those local authorities that reported having a protocol in place (see Figure 12) most reported that the protocols were well adhered to by different agencies (48%), that they had been updated in the last 12 months (60%) and that the protocols specified what information should be shared from RHIs (65%). However, it is important to note that 1 in 5 local authorities (19%) had not updated their protocol in the last 12 months, a period in which the policy definition of 'missing' and 'absent' was changed. Furthermore, 16% of local authorities reported that the protocol did not specify what information from RHIs should be shared. The number of local authorities that answered 'do not know' in those two questions also is worrying, given that the survey respondents were expected to have good understanding of RHI for missing children in their areas.

Figure 12. Information sharing protocols (n=43)



Findings on recording and sharing of information from RHIs

Survey responses indicated varied practice across local authorities with regard to the information that was recorded and shared from RHIs. Seventy nine percent of local authorities (69 out of 87 LAs that responded to this question) indicated that they recorded full notes, and the majority of those (61 out of 69) specifically recorded experiences of children while missing, reasons for going missing, people they spent time with, and places/addresses visited.

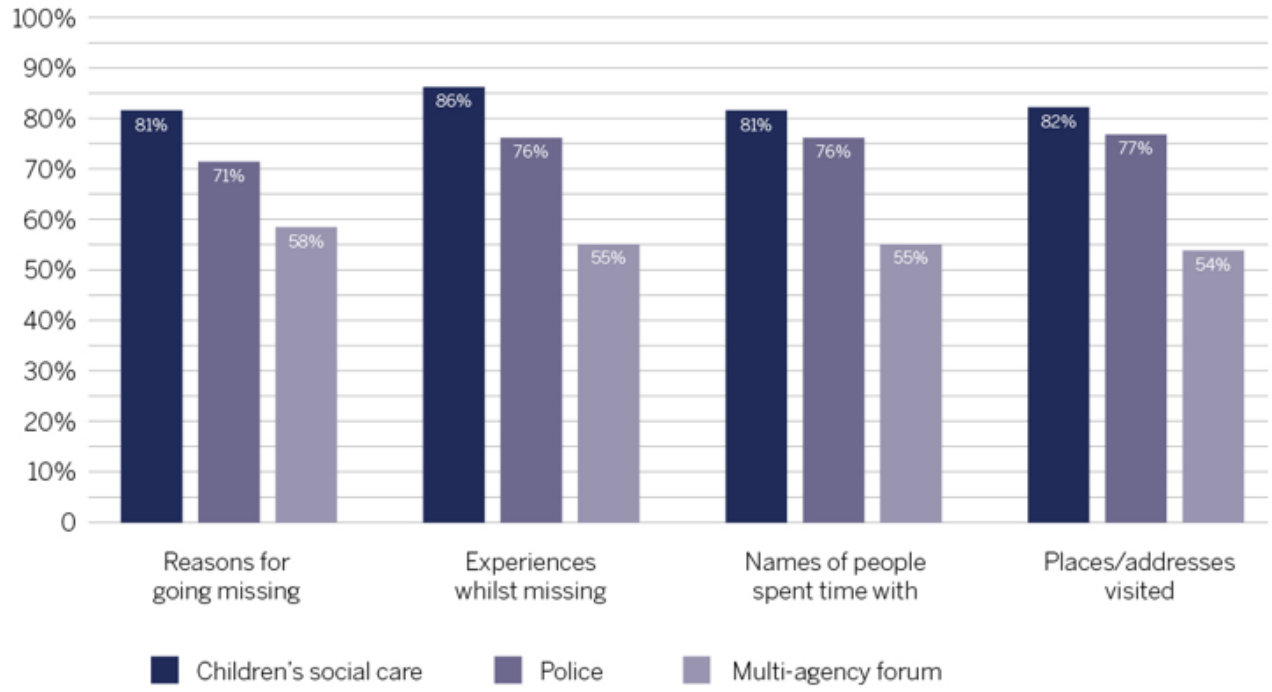
The remaining 20% (18 out of 87) did not record either full notes or specific information. Some areas provided explanation that relevant information might be recorded in case file notes, for example, if a child was open to services. Recording information in case file notes is recommended by the 2014 Guidance.

In four of the areas that did not record full notes or specific information from RHIs, RHIs were provided by an independent provider to the three groups of children: missing from home, and looked after children placed within and outside the local authority boundaries. 11 out of 18 areas had a mixed provision by social workers, an internal provider, police or a mixture of school, YOTs and most suitable adult (in order of frequency of mentions in the responses from higher to lower number). One of the areas did not provide information on how RHIs were provided to different groups of children.

All of the local authorities that reported recording information from RHIs (69 local authorities) also reported sharing it with children's social services, police or in multi-agency settings – with the highest number (63 or 91%) sharing with children's social services. Most of local authorities that did not record full notes or any of the specific information we asked about (14 out of 18) reported sharing some information about some young people with other agencies. Some indicated that as RHIs are provided by social workers or in house providers the information would be available for children's services. Others commented that the decision to share information was made on case-by-case basis and depended on vulnerability of the child. For high risk children, for example, information may be shared through strategy meetings. Some indicated that some information was only shared if a parent or a young person gave consent. Overall, the data suggest that information sharing from RHIs is not consistent across the country and in some local authorities it is limited.

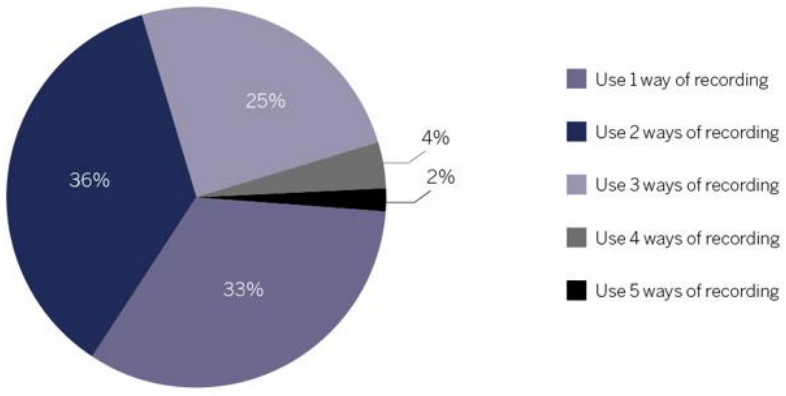
As highlighted above ninety one percent of local authorities that recorded full notes from RHIs (63 LAs out of 69) said that these notes were shared with children's social services. 55% (38 LAs out of 69) of this group shared full notes with the police and 35% (24 LAs out of 69) with a multi-agency forum. Specific information from RHIs such as reasons for going missing, experiences whilst missing, and people and addresses visited whilst missing were more likely to be shared with children's social services, the police and within the multi-agency forum than full notes. Please see Figure 13 for more detailed information. Comments left by a small number of respondents suggested that in some areas only top level data was shared via multi-agency forums rather than details related to individual children.

Figure 13. Information sharing from RHIs with different agencies (n=81)



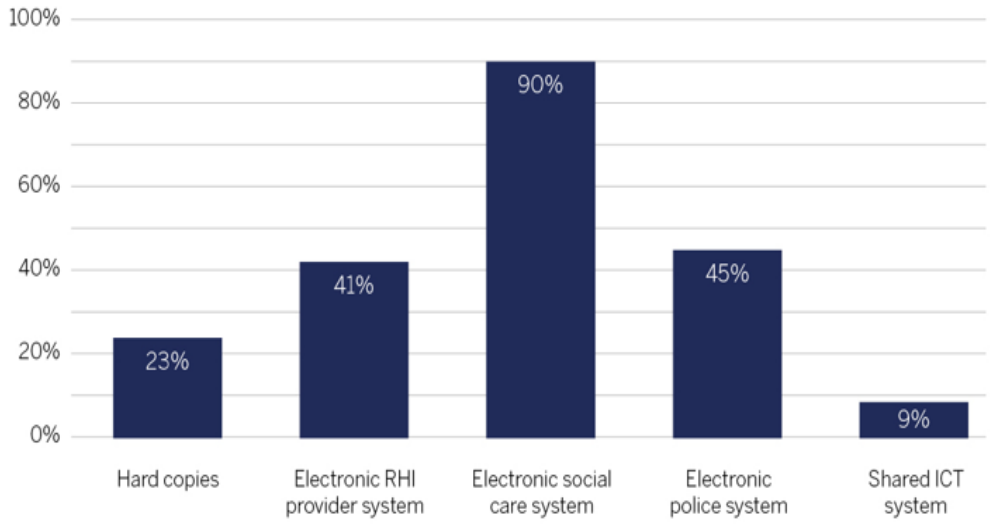
The survey also showed that information from RHIs was recorded in a variety of ways. 81 local authorities reported recording information in a variety of ways, from hard notes to shared ICT systems. In the majority of cases information was being recorded in two or three different ways, as Figure 14 explains.

Figure 13 How many different ways RHIs information is recorded (n=81)



The survey data shows that recording on electronic social care systems was the predominant way of recording RHIs 90% of LAs, followed by electronic RHI provider systems and electronic police systems (Figure 15). It is important to note that in all areas RHIs information was recorded electronically, as no areas reported recording RHIs in hard copies only.

Figure 14. How RHIs are recorded (n=81)



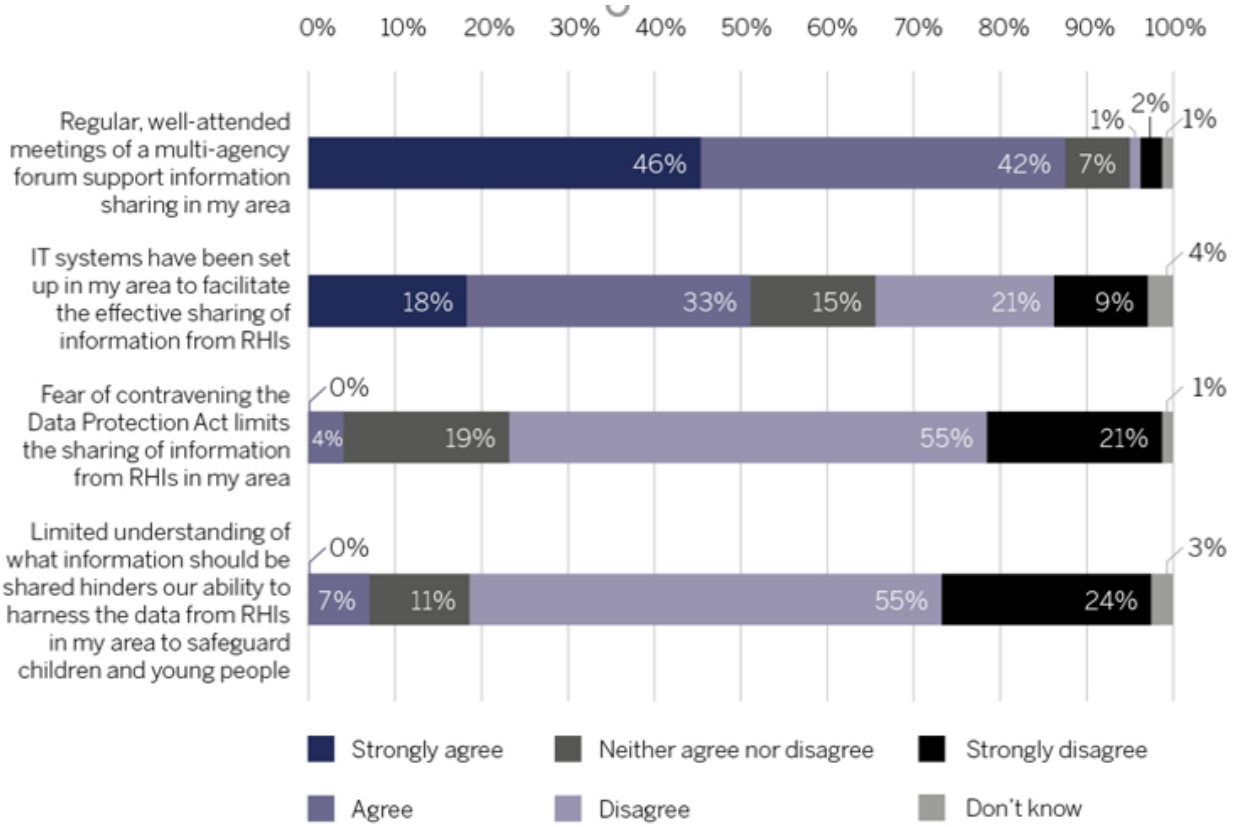
What supports or hinders effective use of information from RHIs

Respondents to the survey were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about things that might help or hinder the effective use of information from RHIs in their area.

Their answers – detailed in Figure 16 – suggested that:

- Multi-agency forums were functioning well to support information sharing. Almost half – 46% – 'strongly agreed', and a further 42% 'agreed' with a positive statement about this.
- Electronic systems to effectively share information appears to be an issue that respondents felt less positive about – 18% 'strongly agreed' and 33% 'agreed' that IT systems in their area had been set up to share information effectively while around a third (30%) of respondents 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'
- Information sharing and concerns around contravening the Data Protection Act were issues that were felt to be problematic in a small proportion of areas that responded (with only 7% and 4% respectively 'agreeing' or 'strongly disagreeing' with negative statements about them).

Figure 15. Survey respondents' views on recording and sharing information from RHIs (n=86)



4.2. Key findings from the five case study sites about factors that help or hinder follow up after the RHIs

Partnership working

Partnership working between different agencies within the local authority, and with other local authorities within the same police force, was highlighted as being an important factor enabling effective follow up after an RHI had taken place. The latter was particularly important for information sharing and understanding the risks children might be facing in the area when missing.

The national survey indicated that majority of local authorities believed that in their areas all agencies worked together to respond to missing children – 85% agreed with this statement (see Figure 7 earlier in this report). And 89% agreed or strongly agreed that there were good systems in place for sharing information collected during RHIs to inform safeguarding responses to individual children or local strategic arrangements (75%).

In the case study areas we visited for this research professionals reported that in their areas partnership working is supported in a variety of ways. There were multi-agency groups or hubs, both at the operational and strategic levels that met on a regular basis to deal with operational issues, share safeguarding information and/or provide oversight. Strategic leadership was one of the key ways partnership working was ensured. Information from RHIs fed into or informed the work of these groups.

Co-location of staff across the police, social care and other relevant agencies was a feature of partnership working in some areas and professionals mentioned it as a helping factor. In one of the areas, multi-agency hub arrangements cover all LAs in the police force area either through physical colocation or through shared protocols, processes and co-ordinated response to missing children:

> ‘We are part of the safeguarding hub here at [name of place] which effectively means that a lot of our partner agencies are co-located with us, which enables us to literally walk across the room and have conversations with social care, health, YOS, whatever to try establish background, look at where these young people might be, look at what the risks are. We have also got the CSE team working in the next row of desks alongside us and there’s obviously a lot of links between CSE and young missing persons as well, so we have an ability to information share on quite a broad scale here which is really quite beneficial.’ (Area 3, Local authority)

In another area, a multi-agency safeguarding hub at the local authority level helped with responses to missing children:

> ‘We do have a multi-agency safeguarding hub which obviously has people from the police and health within it, so if a new referral came in then they would be able to check information with each other through the hub.’ (Area 2, MASH)

Partnership working was also achieved through having clear processes in place for referrals for RHIs, information sharing and pathway to support following RHI:

> ‘Dedicated teams conducting the return home interviews. They all have an understanding of what is required from the return home interviews and what information is valuable to police. [Name of local authority] and police hold weekly missing meetings with a number of representatives from various agencies, including those conducting return home interviews. This ensures that we work in conjunction together to safeguard children.’ (Area 4, Police)

Positive relationships between individuals working in different agencies underpinned all good partnership working arrangements:

> ‘It all boils down to having the relationships with individuals, the teams, it helped bridge the gap because sometimes you need that relationship first before someone is willing to give something a go.’ (Area 1, Public children’s home)

Partnership working was also mentioned as enabling different forms of follow up support for missing children that were not available from statutory children’s services or through local authority early help services. This was particularly the case in the two areas where all or some of RHI provision was delivered by a voluntary sector provider. It was clear that an additional benefit of working in partnership with voluntary sector providers was their ability to make RHI provision part of a wider range of offers of support to children locally:

> ‘The beauty of having [name of independent voluntary sector RHI provider] here, they run a whole host of things like music groups, like just a whole host of groups that actually they can key children into as part of that as well.’ (Area 1, Looked after children team)

Agreed approaches to RHI information recording and sharing

Our analysis of RHI notes from four case study areas offered a helpful insight into variations in approaches to recording and sharing of information from RHIs. Overall, there was a great deal of variation, both in respect of different recording systems, and depending on individuals conducting the interviews. Some areas had developed templates that covered a range of predesigned questions or issues. In others, RHIs were recorded in free formats with guiding notes for what the conversation might need to focus on. In areas with a template for RHI recording, information was recorded more consistently and comprehensively. However, it is not possible to attribute this type of recording solely to the structure of note recording. It should be viewed in the context of the wider factors which facilitate information and intelligence sharing in the area, such as an evolution of a template for RHI recording based on learning from the delivery of RHIs, or introduction of specific processes for RHI information sharing.

Our review of 49 RHI notes showed that they provided an important insight into the circumstances of the child going missing and information that could improve safeguarding responses to children. Interview notes recorded places where children went missing to or information about individuals who young people were going to or missing with. Places included names of streets, areas, cities and supported accommodation for older young people. People included named friends, internet names of individuals contacting young people, adults at specific addresses.

Experiences while missing were also recorded, such as spending time with friends or with adults, taking drugs, sleeping rough, being taken in a car to another area, spending time in a hotel, sharing a bed with other people. Some cases report further intelligence recorded from the words of carers/ parents/other young people where the young person refused to engage in interview or where additional information mentioned was of importance.

In four of the areas RHI notes were stored on a local authority IT system, reflecting the picture presented in the national survey, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

In all areas some information from interviews was shared with the police. One area mentioned a designated inbox where RHI information was sent, others described specific intelligence sharing forms that were completed with relevant information and sent to police. All areas also shared information through dedicated meetings focussed on children at high risk of harm (either strategy meetings focussed on individual children or regular meetings focussed on all children at risk).

One police professional involved in the research reflected on how variations in recording were observed through their experience of working with several local authorities in the area, and how this had an impact on their ability to safeguard children:

> 'I did a bit of analysis on return home interviews versus our intelligence form that we were getting through. I asked for all the information to be sent from four different local authorities and [Area1] are the only ones that were able to provide me with all of the information that I needed. And they provided me with every single, it was over a month, every single return home interview that was done. I found it very difficult in the other three districts because it's done by social workers and it's so difficult to collate that information.' (Area 1, Police)

Information recording where RHIs were undertaken by social workers came through as an area for improvement in one site, where participants raised concerns that social workers did not always follow the same practice of RHI recording and intelligence sharing as a designated RHI service provider.

> 'They [social workers] don't always put intelligence sharing forms in as often as they should. The intelligence sharing form is for any organisation, it's not just for social workers so the return home interview from the social workers, concentrating on that, should be put in. Not always put in and particularly if they're doing the out of areas, the intelligence sharing form is a [name police force] Police form, it is not for other constabularies, so there is a weakness in the intelligence being shared back with the police in other areas.' (Area 1, Local authority)

The analysis of RHI notes also showed that what was recorded from RHIs depended to an extent on the role of the person conducting the RHI. It was observed that notes recorded by social workers were more reflective of the relationships between the child and the social worker, while those recorded by a designated RHI staff focussed more on details of missing incident. Some of those included observations about the young person's behaviour or presentation during the interview. For example, concerns that a young person looked wary of a parent/carer being present during an interview led to the worker arranging the next RHI at the young person's school. Notes recorded from social workers were also not as accessible and available in the sample of notes that we analysed.

Although more research would be needed to confirm this, there is an implication from this – when cross-referenced to data from the survey which showed that areas which did not report recording or

sharing of RHIs were predominantly those that reported mixed RHI provision delivered by different agencies and with higher number provided by social workers or in-house service – that better recording and sharing of information can be achieved through using dedicated RHI staff.

The RHI notes analysis also highlighted the importance of training for RHI workers on understanding risks and the availability of information about the missing incident to enable RHI workers to make the right conclusions during the interview. In one example, an RHI worker recorded that the young person's account of travelling to a different place during the missing incident was not credible. This view was influenced by the RHI worker's perception of the young person and the views of the young person's parent, rather than factual information pointing at risks – as a previous RHI note stated that the young person had been picked up and returned home by a police force from a different area to where he lived.

These examples are important from the point of view of understanding the skills and attitudes RHI workers should bring into the interview process. They also highlight the need for RHIs to be recorded and reviewed to enable a bigger picture about the lives of young people who go missing to be built and for RHI workers to have access to relevant information about missing incidents (other than the current one) to enable meaningful engagement with a young person.

Shared understanding of what information is useful to share and how

Intelligence and information sharing was discussed in conversations with professionals as issues that were seen and approached separately. Participants in case study areas shared examples of how information from RHIs was analysed to provide intelligence for police responses and for safeguarding responses in the area:

> 'The information that comes from return home interviews gives us a very good understanding of what areas are looking like. We have recently been able to do a bit of a CSE mapping as well. We were then able to submit that information into the police and we submitted enough intel for them to then start police operation about it'. (Area 2, MASH)

The police conveyed the need for RHI providers to have a good understanding of what information is necessary to share to enhance the safeguarding response to children:

> 'It's dependent on how switched on that particular social worker is. We don't want to know that they have gone to McDonald's and they've had a Big Mac and they have had a Coca Cola and then they have gone and done this and then they have gone to the shop and bought, you know. We want to know that they've been to a location where somebody's offered them some cannabis or whatever that might be.' (Area 4, Police)

One police force described the long process involved in developing an approach of cross agency working to ensure that they get all the RHIs which contain relevant information sent through to them. The police described having trust in the RHI workers to understand what information is relevant for the police. However, this was said to come with time, multi-agency working and training:

> 'Return home interviews are a requirement from social care. Historically, they were not often sent to police. A lot of change has happened within [Area 3 police] police within the last few years in regards to missing people and joint agency work with social care. We now work alongside social care in our Safeguarding Hub. We now receive better quality return home interviews with information contained which can assist with police intelligence and safeguarding young people...We have a dedicated inbox where the return home interviews are sent. We have an agreement that they are only to be sent to us (police) if they contain valuable information (so no 'nil return' interviews are sent through).' (Area 3, Police)

Knowledge of relevant intelligence from RHIs was mentioned not just by police, but by other agencies as well. For example children's homes, who did not deliver RHIs themselves, also expressed an understanding of the role of RHIs to inform safeguarding responses to children:

> ‘The intelligence coming from those interviews where young people are cooperative to come back into our overall safeguarding is really important. Because if they have got good quality intelligence about who they may be encouraging young people to go away from the placements, or you know which location they are going to, then obviously that can be fed into the greater intelligence and safeguarding network, so then probably introduce more effective strategy to try and stop that happening, and so we do, do a lot of that.’ (Area 3, Public children’s home)

Representatives from children’s homes we spoke to, both private and public, expressed a desire to be included in meetings and local information sharing structures as they believed it would enable them to better safeguard children in their placements.

> ‘I think now that we have direct contact with [LA lead on missing children], which we didn’t really have before, that’s really improved our knowledge of the local area and we’ve been offered a lot of training, which the team – the missing team are providing for free for us as well for all of our staff, and have really good knowledge and understanding of the local procedures. So that’s going to have a positive impact on us as a team and hopefully the same with the children as well.’ (Area 1, Private children’s home)

In some case study areas, there was evidence of inclusion happening in relation to the local authority children’s homes, but not to the same extent for private children’s homes. In other areas, due to cuts to funding, the inclusion of children’s homes was said to have reduced or disappeared.

Participants in this research also raised an issue of language when talking about information sharing. It was voiced that perhaps the term ‘intelligence’ is not well understood and that, to enable the wider range of services in communities to share relevant knowledge with the police about safeguarding risks to children, it may be important to use simple language that is more easily understood. In the area where this point was raised there is an active promotion of an information sharing form to education, health, children’s services staff, therefore, this comment is reflective of learning from local practice:

> ‘We do have a Multi-Agency Intelligence Form. In actual fact I think it’s called Information Sharing form now because “intelligence” scared people and originally we didn’t have that many coming in and we’ve done a lot of communications around that actually. We’ve done a lot of work to push that and actually now that’s in the annual report about a good thing that we’ve managed to increase them.’ (Area 2, LSCB)

Although there was general agreement that information sharing was important and we saw evidence of how information sharing process, forms and oversight structures had evolved to enable information sharing to happen, some participants raised issues which they felt required further improvement in their area. In particular, a feedback loop from police back to RHI providers and social care about the outcome of information sharing was mentioned on a few occasions as something that would enhance practice. It was clear partners were aware of, or partly aware of, safeguarding responses in instances of high-risk activity. However, for lower risk cases, the same was not true.

Concerns about breaches to data protection law

Concerns around potential data protection breaches were acknowledged to be an issue with regard to what information can be shared. It was clear that interviewees understood that when safeguarding issues were identified information should be shared. However, there was less clarity around what constituted a potential safeguarding concern. Across the case study areas there was a strong commitment to find ways to share information and different forms and structures were reported to have been put in place to facilitate this:

> ‘I think we’re frightened of Data Protection and all the stories that they’re going to get fined twenty million euros and that you need consent and there’s that element. We do have an

> information sharing protocol which is across all organisations and we have a legal obligation to share.' (Area 1, Local authority)

Seeking consent for information sharing from young people and making a young person aware that issues of concern may be communicated after the interview were two elements of practice that were helping reduce worries around data protection breaches:

> 'That rules out any kind of issues around breaching information. Obviously you've got to respect the needs and wishes of the child but, you know, we know from confidentiality statements that the children are always aware that if there's something that we're concerned about that we'll share that information and we'll let them know that we're going to do that from the start. I think, you know, explaining to them right from the start what you can and can't do is really important because I think it just really sets the stall, really, for the expectations of a young person at that return home interview.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

The issue around potential breaching of confidentiality of RHIs was reported to be resolved through separating detailed RHI information sharing from soft intelligence sharing about issues picked up in the interviews:

> 'We have an information sharing form, and there is an expectation that its, that's a completely independent return interview. Pick up any soft intelligence, or information. They complete those forms and send them directly through to [name] police.' (Area 4, Local authority)

It transpired in conversations with professionals in the case study areas that there is a need for a nuanced approach to what information may need to be shared from RHIs. The approach advocated was a balance between ensuring confidentiality of RHIs whilst allowing the sharing of limited information which was of significance for safeguarding a young person or other young people in the area.

Sharing of information across the boundaries of local authorities and police forces

Variations in police and local authority systems and processes for sharing information about missing children was described as a factor hindering information sharing on young people in out of area placements. Information sharing was reported to be particularly problematic if a child was placed not only outside the boundaries of their local authority, but also outside the boundaries of their local police force.

> 'First and foremost out of area is definitely an issue. We don't get the same service from other police force areas where our children are placed so even within [name of police force] police area we are not informed of children who go missing. We might have a child placed in [name of area] and the police don't tell us that the person at this place has gone missing because technically they don't know that that's a looked after child from [name of local authority]. There's no other police force that will tell us that our children are missing.' (Area 1, Local authority)

Professionals cited differences in systems and the lack of knowledge that a police force may have that a young person who has been reported missing is the responsibility of another local authority as some of the reasons behind the lack of information shared about this group. They were also aware that there were differences in how police might work with local authorities in their force area, and were concerned that police may not notify the host local authority of all cases when young people in their care were reported missing.

Professionals also reflected that this issue was equally a problem for them as a 'host' local authority as they were not receiving information from RHIs conducted by other areas which had placed young people in the case study areas:

> ‘Who does the interviews? At the moment it’s the responsibility of the home local authority. We don’t get information back as to whether they (looked after children placed in this LA area) have been interviewed, whether they haven’t been interviewed and the intelligence from them interviews I’m not convinced goes into our local police. So they might be regular, they might do the return home interview and find out and say they come into this particular location and they’re at risk of this, drugs, alcohol, they’re at risk of [county lines] stuff, but does that information get fed through to the police? Those risks may follow them from other areas, it’s a national issue, I don’t think there’s any guidance on that and I think there will be weaknesses there.’ (Area 1, Local authority)

> ‘I don’t think [other areas offer to share RHI with us] so, I don’t think so because all the children are logged on mosaic and today I have not seen any feedback.’ (Area 2, MASH)

Some examples were shared about how in practice this put these young people at risk. Particular concerns were expressed about young people who had been placed in case study sites who were known to be at risk of exploitation, either sexual or criminal:

> ‘We have experienced that with somebody that came to stay and they were from London and they had got all these connections to gangs and everything else and we didn’t know anything about them, nobody had told us anything. They had been there for a month and you know, we didn’t know until they went missing and they said “Oh yes, by the way we need to tell you about this.” Oh right.’ (Area 4, Police)

Even where young people were placed in neighbouring local authorities within the same police force area, there were reports of a lack of appropriate information sharing despite identified risks associated with such placements.

Our analysis showed that there were differences in the availability of RHI notes between different areas and the groups of young people the research focussed on. The availability of notes was worst for young people in out of area placements – and the notes for this group were also the least detailed.

Respondents reflected that providing interviews to young people placed by other local authorities into their area might be the preferred solution for them as this would facilitate access to all relevant information. However, they also acknowledged that it was not a straightforward issue due to the concentration of out of area placements in some areas of the country which may affect capacity to conduct RHIs.

> ‘As soon as our first contact team see that, they have the details of which local authority they’re from and they will send an email to that local authority to say they’ve been missing. We don’t actually do – we don’t carry out the return home interviews and there’s an argument potentially why don’t we? It’s time, it’s money and what always sticks in my mind is one particular area which was [name of local authority] when we’ve phoned about one particular one of their children, and we asked them if they would do ours they said well we’ve got 600 young people placed in our area from other local authorities, we can’t afford to do all that so you’ve got that dilemma.’ (Area 1, Local authority)

Differences in IT systems and the availability of data on RHIs

How data about RHI provision is collated, stored and shared came up often in interviews with professionals across the sites as a factor than can either help or hinder follow up support after a RHI.

> ‘The other thing to mention is around the data and the availability of it because that data updates every single day. So we've got an absolute up to date clear picture that immediately updates automatically I think at 8:30 every day and that’s really valuable to have. Because if there is a spike and [name of person responsible] absolutely, absolutely looks at all of that data all the time and looks at, he's got a team of two workers that are starting and beginning to do some work for him as well in terms of analysis of that that's helpful to have. There's been a

> lot of work and a big drive to get our data sets correct in children's services so that it all links up and that we can see.' (Area 1, Looked after children team)

Availability of IT systems that enable quick, regular and easy ways to deal with RHI information was seen as important. Where such systems were in place they allowed streamlining referrals to RHIs, preventing delays and helping with the analysis that could inform local safeguarding responses and plans for future services.

> 'Our liquid logic system can record missing very well, because up until a few years ago we had Excel sheets held in my office which recorded all those missing from care episodes and then if we need a report, we had to go through and then trawl the Excel sheet and pull the information out. Now our performance teams can just press buttons and get information off for us when they need to know, so we have moved on quite a bit in the last 20 years or so in that respect.' (Area 3, Local authority)

Professionals described how the data was analysed to help build a picture about a range of issues that needed to be addressed:

> 'We have changed that report to show we can see how many pieces of intel that was submitted that related to CSE or to drugs, or to whatever and we could then put kind of ask for per area, so we are able to collate that information. But in regards to individuals it is very much about connecting the dots because I have heard that name before, or the intel will come.' (Area 2, Local authority)

While there were some examples shared of how helpful the IT system and data collated could be, some further improvements were also said to be needed in one area, as even within the same agency systems did not always talk to each other.

> 'It's not perfect in terms of our early help system and our social care system they're two different things. We've got to interrogate two systems, I mean you know if we had a magic wand we would wave it and have all that in one place.' (Area 1, Looked after child team)

Another issue raised was of the importance of RHI providers who were independent to the local authority having the same access to the systems as other safeguarding agencies:

> 'But what about your social work systems? Our access to the liquid logic is exactly the same (as a social worker). We have full access.' (Area 3, Focus group with practitioners)

Capacity issue in relation to information sharing

As mentioned earlier in this report, capacity across all agencies to respond, report or refer missing children to RHIs was persistently highlighted in interviews as a hindering factor. Capacity to share information was similarly a problem that was reported by some interviewees.

> 'It would be the police not having the time to hand that information over. That was one of our major challenges. But we've kind of rectified that with this [name of external agency] form that we've only really had in place about a month now, haven't we?' (Area 1, Private children's home)

The issue of capacity was not only mentioned in relation to information sharing after the RHI took place – professionals also commented how important it is for the person doing the current RHI to have information from police about the missing incident, or previous missing incidents, that could help inform the RHI (as discussed earlier in this chapter):

> 'I know the gentleman who does the spreadsheet, he's not the one out seeing that missing person at the time, so he's only getting information given to him by the officers. Sometimes it's not good enough, if we asked [name of external agency] to go out and do the return home interview, not having the information that may be necessary can be hard for them. So it's

> things like next of kin, the address where they're missing from, what else do they normally miss? Sometimes it can be live episodes that we're sent from the police and although they do their best to give all the information, they don't let us know when that child has returned, we have to chase it up the majority of the time.' (Area 1, Focus group with practitioners)

Availability of services for follow up support

Provision of follow up support was identified as being in need of improvement across all areas.

> 'The weakness is about closing off the loop because I think what we are doing is we are going out, we are doing the return home interview, gathering some really good information which is being shared and that's producing you know a very good wider intelligence picture to enable proactive steps to be taken. That information is shared with the social workers and what I would like us to develop is I would like us to see that information gathering being used more effectively to inform the support and the plan then for that young person.' (Area 2, Local authority)

Our analysis of RHI notes showed that following RHIs a number of actions had been suggested ranging from safeguarding responses to arranging necessary support and/or assessments for young people. Examples of recommendations for actions from statutory agencies included: referral to social services, referral to police, challenging police on not recording all information relevant in the referral form, referral to multi-agency groups, recommendation for professionals to meet and to assess the vulnerability of the young person, provision of NEET support, and offer of family support around relationships, referral to CAMHS. There were also actions to resolve some day-to-day issues for a young person: sorting out a bus pass, allowances and gym membership for a young person.

RHI notes did not record whether any of the recommended follow up actions had taken place, but suggested that in some cases the follow up had happened and certain things progressed, while in others the same follow up action was recorded again or there was an indication that things were progressing slowly.

The voice of the young person and the importance of listening and responding to concerns/issues raised by the young person came through in some of the RHI notes. For example, in one case a child was running away from the out of area placement to see friends and family in the home area. One of the RHI notes recorded that the young person decided to return from a long-term missing incident because he understood that the local authority had found a new placement which was in the home area. In another case it was recorded that the young person was getting really frustrated with being reported missing and offered RHIs every time as she 'was not missing' and staff in care placement always knew where she was. This reflected some of the challenges mentioned in interviews with professionals related to situations where the whereabouts of a young person was known but they had refused to come home, or where whereabouts were known but there were concerns that the location was presenting a risk to them.

The limited capacity of services to provide follow up support was said to be a hindering factor by many professionals in the case study areas. Some follow up support was available in all areas, particularly where children were identified to be at risk though referrals to social care and allocated social workers. This reflects the national picture, as well reported earlier in this report, which showed that statutory social care teams were available to refer missing children to. In two of the case study areas, immediately after being logged the RHI notes were proactively shared/flagged with social workers so any follow up actions (including where early help was required) could take place.

There was also a recognition that many more services and more capacity in existing services was needed:

> 'I think just more workers. Like, we have a fantastic drug and alcohol worker but he's stretched across the board.' (Area 1, Public children's home)

And that thresholds for some services were quite high, particularly when children required mental health support:

> ‘We sit there, and these vulnerabilities are screaming out at us and we find out that CAMHS have closed the case on them. And I don’t know what the threshold is, I don’t know, I’m not trained, I’m not a CAMHS worker, but I would like to have a point of contact because we have no one to contact.’ (Area 5, Police)

Participants in this research commented on waiting times in the existing services:

> ‘The youth service at the moment is not in a great state and it’s just about those additional services for young people that I wish every young person could access, every support service that we recommend, and unfortunately they don’t. Like we spoke earlier about CAMHS, certain substance misuse services, certain specialist sexual abuse services may have long waiting lists. So it’s about just those young people being able to access all the support they need and sometimes, you know, they’re not able to immediately.’ (Area 5, Focus group with practitioners)

It was recognised that it would have been beneficial if RHI staff could be available to provide more time and support beyond the interview itself for young people who are more difficult to engage or who go missing repeatedly, but in most cases such support was not available.

> ‘A potential barrier could be funding, in a sense of how many staff that [name of external agency] have to the return home interviews. The fact that because if they had more staff they might be able to spend more time with individual young people who have a history and a pattern of going missing. So they could spend more time so they’re not just seeing them for missing report, they’re able to call and spend have social visits and things like that. So it would free them up, so I suppose looking at the financial side that could actually potentially play a factor.’ (Area 1, Public children’s homes)

Provision of follow up support for looked after children after missing incidents was identified as one of the issues where it was not always clear what support could be provided – because a young person was already receiving help from statutory services – and also a situation where there were often delays in providing the necessary support:

> ‘I think that sometimes a frustration can be when we make those recommendations for looked after children, once children are open to our family support team and I wondered just how pro-actively they are actioned. And that’s a frustration that kept coming up all of the time, seeing an episode, the same child and the same issue, where we’ve made recommendations and none of that has yet been followed up.’ (Area 2, RHI service)

Participants also highlighted how information from RHIs can help inform commissioning of services in the future. One area specifically reported that they had recently changed their RHI form to improve how information on ‘the voice of the child’ was collected to ensure that the scarce resources that the local authority had were used most effectively to provide services that young people really needed.

4.3. Key learning from five case study areas about practices, processes and activities that aim to improve follow up for RHIs

Practices around information recording from RHIs

Examples were given in the case study sites of how electronic systems had been developed and improved to facilitate the capturing of data about missing children generally, and from RHIs more specifically:

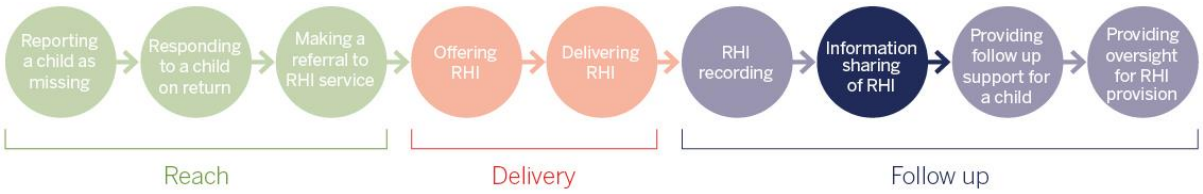
> 'Our system can record missing episodes very well…until a few years ago we had Excel sheets held in my office which recorded all those missing from care episodes and then if we needed a report, we had to go through and then trawl the Excel sheet and pull the information out. Now our performance teams can just press buttons and get information off for us when they need to know, so we have moved on quite a bit!' (Area 3, Local authority)

It was also evident from the analysis of RHI notes in four of the case study areas that some areas specifically looked into what information it was important to capture from RHIs to allow adequate information sharing as well as a follow up for a young person. Box O presents information on the form used in Area 1. Professionals described how the form had been developed significantly in recent years to reflect the need to capture relevant information and the voice of the child.

Box O. Example of RHI information recording

In Area 1 the standard form is in use to capture information from RHI. The form has evolved to include the following key areas:

- **Information about a child:** Name, date of birth, address.
- **Information about involvement of services in child's life:** Whether known to services as a child in need, or a looked after child or open to local multi-agency group.
- **Information about the missing episode**: Time of reported missing and return, length of missing, location of missing and found, notifications made of missing, police level of risk.
- **Information from RHI about the missing episode**: Reasons for missing and experiences while missing.
- **Risk factors identified and protective factors in child's life**
- **Comments from the child**
- **Practitioner's reflection** on what could be done to prevent risk escalating and future missing.
- **Actions to be undertaken** after the RHI.
- **Team manager's response** to proposed actions and outcomes.



Practices around information sharing from RHIs

The five case study areas we visited reported on a number of practices that they had developed to ensure that information was shared about missing children. Information sharing was happening at different levels – through strategy meetings focussed on individual young people to strategic meetings focussed on a wider picture about missing children. To enable information sharing about risk to missing children between the RHI provider, social care and police information/information sharing forms had been developed. A summary of what these forms aimed to capture is provided in Box P.

To address the issues mentioned earlier in this chapter in relation to information sharing about young people in out of area placements, some areas had established specific processes (as reported in Box R). One area reported not just on a process to share information but also on an approach they used to analyse information that had been collected, as explained in Box Q.

In the case study areas where processes for sharing and recording information were well established, professionals across all agencies could explain how information from RHIs was shared and used and the roles that they played in making it happen.

> 'When the return home interviews staff have completed the return home interview they then submit intel which is then sent to the front door, and then again I oversee all the intel that comes in as well and ensure that there's no safeguarding that needs to be considered, rather than it just been intelligence that's come through from the return home interview service.' (Area 2, MASH)

An involvement from a broad range of agencies was often reported:

> 'There's a crisis link between missing from education, missing from care home, so there's that sort of overlap which does benefit each of the groups that can take it back to their agencies from that group as well.' (Area 1, LSCB)

> 'We have a very good presence at our missing, strategic missing meetings, we are very visible and we are not afraid to challenge the police.' (Area 2, MASH)

Information sharing was happening at different levels – though strategy meetings focussed on individual young people, operational meetings focussed on young people at risk and strategic meetings focussed on the wider picture of missing children in an area.

> 'Once a month we have a missing (name of) group and that's a police meeting, and it discusses the kind of trends and themes and, they try and talk about individual cases, more about the trends and stuff, the number of missing children that have been reported, those kind of things.' (Area 2, MASH)

One of the areas reported on an approach focussed on utilising available data to safeguard children.

> 'We have a weekly missing meeting and our analyst puts together some statistics in relation to who's gone missing, whether they're down as high or medium risk and the frequency of their missing episodes, so we have that data available to us before we go into the meeting, and obviously within this team we will have been part of investigating most of those missing episodes in one way, or shape or form, so we have already got an understanding of what's

gone on and where those young people have gone missing from and where they've been found.' (Area 4, Police)

As discussed earlier in the chapter, in the case study areas important information from RHIs was shared with police through intelligence/information sharing forms. Box P summarises different issues covered in these forms.

Information sharing about young people in out of area placements was perceived to be the most problematic, as the notifications between local authorities did not always work and also police were not getting any information about risks and vulnerabilities of young people placed in their area. This was particularly true for young people who had been placed from local authorities outside their police force area.

'You mentioned kids coming from out of county and then being placed in our county, the reason why is that we don't get any information given to us so these children are super vulnerable and they could be highly sexualised. You don't know what's going on in their lives or what's happened to them and they just get placed here because there's nowhere else to place them. But they don't pass the risks to us and nobody tells us, A) that they're coming and B) what the risks are when they are here.' (Area 5, Police)

Participants gave examples of practices that helped them overcome some of the barriers to information sharing about missing children in out of area placements, described in Box Q.

Box P. Intelligence/information sharing forms

These forms were reported to be used across police force areas by different agencies for sharing information from RHIs with the police that may be of significance to safeguard vulnerable children. The details within forms differed from one area to another but for the most part asked for similar information:

- Issues in relation to what intelligence can be submitted (some forms are limited to one or more of the list): CSE, gangs, missing, drugs.
- Key information: names/actions/ significant events/dates/vehicle details and communication details.
- Known associates/friends or persons of concern: names, dates of birth, addresses, or any identifying factors, phone details, vehicle details, nicknames.
- Source of information.
- Third party information eg rumours or concerns about people or locations.
- Details of any coercion or control over a young person.
- Details of any payment or other transactions to or from a third party in connection with sexual or criminal exploitation activity.

Box Q. Problem solving approach to missing children

Area 1 the established a problem solving approach that helped consider the data from the RHIs in combination with information other agencies have. In that way the information is analysed on issues individual to the child, location of missing and potential perpetrator(s).

The information that comes in, so they don't just look at the child they look at the location that it happened, and they also look at the perpetrator and what's going on around that. So, they sort of look at the three elements and join them up and see if there are any links, the police obviously come with their perpetrator list into that meeting and absolutely [missing children lead] has in his head that triangle all the time around that street's been mentioned twice let's have a look at that one and they will home in at that level of detail. So, they've kind of absolutely got that information so they look at all of those things. (Area 1, Local authority)

Box R. Information sharing about young people missing from out of area placements

In Area 3 police talked about sending information to another force and requesting information about a young person found in another area. It is important for police and areas to have information about where a young person has been found to enable them to make such requests.

> 'If we receive intelligence that relates to another force, this can be sent to them. Likewise, if one of our young people is found in another force area, we can request information from them. For example, we recently had a young person found in [city] who was in company with other young people. A request has been placed with the relevant force to share the information of who he was located with.' (Area 3, Police)

In another case participation in strategy meetings was described as a process through which to address the issues:

> 'I think it's information sharing across local authorities is difficult. In [local authority] we do go out to other authorities and do attend strategy meetings for the children that are in our area, and will convene and host them here and invite the local authorities, so we do try. It's different to the police force packaging around [name of local authority] children or children that are moved, that package moves with them. I think it's very, very difficult as I said before if we've got a child that's placed here that is possibly part of an investigation elsewhere, and there is the missing episode, and we are unsure or unclear how to respond. High risk missing doesn't mean anything, I told you nothing, that could be one episode or it could be 34, it's about what's happened to that child so it's a narrative that we are interested in.' (Area 4, Local authority)

Practices around ensuring that follow up support is provided to a child after an RHI

Practices around ensuring that follow up support is provided for a young person following an RHI had been developed across the case study areas. It was reported to us that having a single point of contact for RHIs was helping to ensure that follow up support happened, as described in Box S.

One of the areas described having an offer of standard follow up support to missing children as helpful (see Box T).

Two of the areas reported that immediately after being logged, the RHI notes were proactively shared/flagged with social workers so any follow up actions (including provision of early help or Section 47 inquiries and strategy meetings), could take place.

> 'So what we make sure we do is obviously the return home interview to the social worker, but we will make sure that anything significant that they need immediately that day is sent straight over to that team member and allocated worker. And we will also speak them, if it is something immediate they will take that on board and have a look and a chat about that or look at what actions do we need to take right now. That has worked very well.' (Area 2, Focus group with practitioners)

Box S. Single point of contact for RHIs

One of the areas described how having a single point of contact for missing children, RHIs and follow up support ensures that any safeguarding concerns are dealt with promptly and can be cascaded to appropriate services within the local authority, for example through social services or Early Help services.:

> 'All the missing notifications come though from the police to our front door. That is then logged as a contact and that will be sent to our team to do Return Home Interview. When the Return Home Interview staff have completed the return home interview they then submit intelligence which is then sent to the Front door [service], and then again I oversee all the intelligence that comes in as well and ensure that there's no safeguarding that needs to be considered.' (Area 2, RHI service)

When the area identified that follow up support was not working properly they introduced changes to enable better follow up support.

> That's why we changed our process and again, this has been presented to senior management just to say that those return home interviews and those recommendations, they need to be followed up within the team meetings and also with interview provision and LAC reviews to ensure that it has been followed up. ' (Area 2, RHI service)

As part of the new process team managers within children's social care are asked to reflect on recommendations from RHIs.

> 'What we have asked our team managers to do is with their social workers, you know where there has been a return home interview, to take some time specifically to reflect on that information, you know and sort of consider the, you know, so 'what does this mean, what?' 'What is that telling us that we didn't already know,' or 'Does that make us look at something in a different way,?' and then using that information and. And then the social worker then using that information to talk with the young person about developing their plan and what is it that they want, you know, and what's going to make a difference for them?' (Area 2, RHI service)

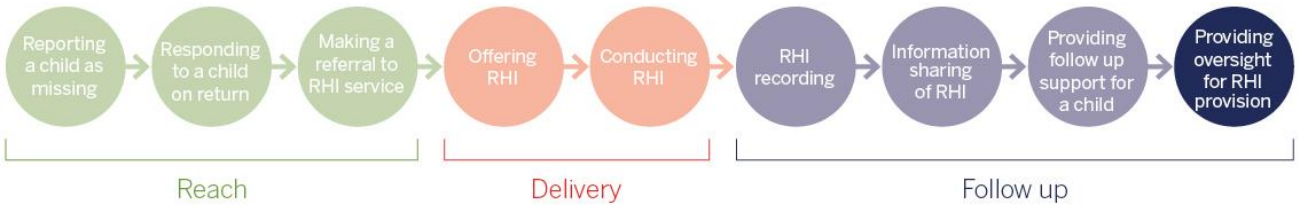
Box T. Streamlining a referral for follow up support and offer of youth services support

Area 4 reported that referrals for a follow up support improved in the last 12 months and were streamlined to enable a quick response:

> 'Better than what it was 12 months ago, we can go back to our team leader now and say I've done this missing, identified they might benefit from attending, what's the risk, can I put them forward for it? Whereas before you'd have to put in the request for services, massive long process going through 'First response' when we knew that young person and what they wanted. Now if you want to put in a request for services off the back of a return interview, you just tick the box and then it goes through, it's magic. It was quite long winded in before, so it might have prevented you from putting a referral in.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)

In the last 12 months a core offer of follow up support had been developed delivered through group work. It included four group sessions focussed on the following issues:

> 'So we have a core offer across the county, we all offer the same group work, 'Bounce Back' which is like anxiety and managing emotions and things like that. 'What's the risk?' is understanding the risk of taking alcohol, sex, that sort of thing. 'Anger, managing your emotions' is quite similar to 'Bounce Back' in that way, manage emotions and anger. 'Send' which is an ongoing thing. We've 'Young carers', we've got parenting groups and 'Feeling Safe' which is for children.' (Area 4, Focus group with practitioners)



Practices around provision of oversight for RHIs

In the case study areas oversight of RHI provision was done through a range of mechanisms including: performance review at LA level, reports to LSCBs, specific groups created to provide operational and strategic oversight for responses to missing vulnerable young people. These groups sit at the local authority level as well as at the police force level. Box U explains how different groups (strategic and operational) were organised in Area 1.

> 'RHIs get fed into what's called the practitioner group on individual cases, and there's good information sharing at that group at that level. At high level you've got the reports that come to the board which will be fed into all the different agencies and also to the [police area] strategic group, which will have information on missing and a higher strategic level of information on the missing and return home interviews.' (Area 1, LSCB)

The structures ensure monitoring of the uptake of RHIs, as well as monitor how risks are identified and that young people who are most at risk are getting the response they need.

> 'We have a structure across [name of police area] which is led by the police called [name of the strategic group], so sitting across all four local authorities, chaired by the Detective Superintendent from the police. That group has its strategic aims, it has an action plan and is very strongly driven by the police and attended by senior managers and director level from a wide range of agencies so it's almost like a board. That sits under the umbrella of the four local safeguarding children's boards and it is people of that status that sit on that group as well as my equivalents, that is, the chairs of the [name of the practitioner group] from each of the four local authorities in the police area. So that's the strength of it and the missing protocols that are agreed between the four local authorities are agreed under those structures. So we all work to the same protocols and we all have the same return home interview form which started life in [name of area] but it's now agreed by all four local authorities.' (Area 1, Local authority)

Another area reported on their structure that serves a similar purpose:

> 'We report to a CSE Operations Group that's chaired monthly by the Assistant Director from the [name of local authority] so we report to that next week. We report to Chief Officers within the police, the Assistant Chief Constable manages – he's the Chair of the Chief Exec group for CSE and Missing Children so we report to him and we report to two LSCBs.' (Area 3 Local authority)

It was explained that RHI information that the group considered, whether it is data on the number of RHI delivered or safeguarding concerns is seen as valuable. Two areas highlighted that they would like to improve further how the information from RHIs is used in the future, in particular to make sure that it informs the commissioning of services not just for missing children, but overall.

> 'We have weekly reports on all return home interviews that come out and then monthly we have our performance assessment, which again as a full management group of approximately forty managers, we look at everybody's performance, including return home interviews, to see how many return home interviews have been offered, taken up, timescales and outcomes as well. (Area 2, MASH)

Participants in the research commented that having structures and performance management in place specifically related to RHI provision helped maintain the focus on missing children, RHIs and finding ways to improve response if needed:

> 'By having those meetings, that structure in place, it makes it very clear to people that they are going to have to come along every month with their information and take part in those discussions. I don't know if you didn't have a structure of people being able to come along and share that, that they would share it as much when there's an expectation and it's clear that you will come along, you're part of that group. I think having a structure means that people have to do it.' (Area 2, LSCB)

Box U. Example of oversight structures in Area 1

Local authority operational level. Group focused on vulnerable missing and trafficked children meets every four weeks to discuss: information and intelligence, perpetrators/potential perpetrators, children missing from home / /care / /education, individual young people identified to be at risk.

Local authority strategic level. A strategic group focused on vulnerable missing and trafficked children receives data and information from the chair of operational group and from other agencies in relation to audits, trends and issues surrounding CSE, trafficking and missing from home and care. The Chair of the Group reports to the police level Strategic Group and the LA Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB).

Police force level. A group focused on vulnerable missing and trafficked children meets bi-monthly, attended by senior managers from all local authorities in the police force. Established under the agreement from LSCBs. The group receive reports and data from the Local Authorities' strategic level groups and drives developments through a police area wide action plan. It also establishes multi-agency, task and finish groups for specific pieces of work.

4.3. Conclusions on follow up after RHIs

What happens after RHIs take place emerged as a very important area for consideration in this research. If an RHI is about listening to a young person and understanding the reasons behind each missing incident, the follow up afterwards is about acting on a young person's concerns through providing adequate support to address the issues they have talked about, or acting on professional concerns about a young person and sharing information to safeguard the individual who has been interviewed or other young people who may also be vulnerable. These issues are of equal importance.

Provision of support for children following RHI

Follow up in terms of provision of support to individual children is one of the areas that this research identifies where improvements are most needed. Firstly, there is a need for better monitoring of what services are available and how well referral from RHIs to this provision is currently working. Few areas were able to provide data on this in their survey responses although, more reassuringly, both the national and local information that was collected suggested that where young people's needs were understood to be serious they can be referred to statutory services for support.

It is not that clear that children who were considered to be less at risk had access to the support they may need. Some young people who go missing young people have been found to have complex needs, face conflict at home, or face contextual safeguarding risks. Often they require time and space to build trusting relationships with professionals to enable them to reduce risks and engage with the support they are offered. This research suggests that even though RHI services do their best to ensure consistency in relationships, they may require additional time and space to work with a child outside the RHI process, but that this time and space was often not available. The low

number of missing-specific services reported to be in place across the country highlighted the scarcity of missing children specialist support.

To address this issue nationally the Department for Education should consider updating the statutory guidance on missing children to provide more guidance to local authorities on how follow up support is provided to missing children by ensuring that:

- The guidance recommends clear referral processes after the RHI and recording what referrals were made.
- Advises that commissioning of local services for vulnerable children is informed by the needs identified in RHIs.

Information sharing following RHIs

Follow up in terms of information sharing also emerges as one of the areas where more consistency is needed. This research shows that a variety of approaches to information recording and information sharing is used across the county. While majority of the local authorities who responded to the survey reported some information sharing, information sharing across the country is not consistent and in some local authorities it is limited. Learning from case study areas shows that it is important that information shared is proportionate and enables different agencies to safeguard missing children effectively.

This is another area that needs to be addressed in future revision of the statutory guidance, which could build on the DfE guidance on information sharing (DfE, 2018a) and provide more details on the appropriate level of information sharing from RHIs, specifically addressing:

- Sharing safeguarding concerns with social services.
- Sharing intelligence with police, which should include areas that may need to be covered as recommended by police.
- Training for RHI staff on information sharing.

Issues with information sharing between police and children's services, or across the borders between different local authorities and police force areas, require attention both at the national and local authority levels. This research suggests that there are specific types of information that could help with safeguarding missing children:

- Information on the young person's missing and found locations.
- Information on the young person's risk and vulnerabilities.
- Relevant information/intelligence from RHIs that is significant from safeguarding perspective.

It was found to be important that partners across police, social care and RHI provision in local areas ensured that they had systems and processes in place to share these types of information. Respondents to the survey, as well as participants from the case study areas, also pointed out that this is an issue that needs to be resolved more broadly as the variation in local systems contributes to difficulties with information sharing between areas and on a national scale. We believe that the Missing Persons Register, which the government is working towards to be in use operationally in 2020/21 as part part of the National Law Enforcement Data Programme, may offer an opportunity to address some of the problems with information sharing discussed in this research. [8]

We can see a case for the new register to be developed as a system that not only supports the collection of information on the number of children who go missing but, most importantly, helps police and social services safeguard missing children effectively by allowing recording and sharing of appropriate information about missing children and risks they face, which can be readily accessed as appropriate by agencies across the country.

[8] UK Parliament. Human Trafficking: Children: Written question - HL14552. Answered 28 March 2019

We also believe that this is an area to consider in future updates to the statutory guidance on missing children. It could be revised to clarify the most up-to-date interpretation of the relevant data protection legislation and clarify how it should be applied in the context of information sharing from RHIs.

Another area for improvement that emerged though this research is information sharing about young people in out of area placements. The evidence strongly suggests that information sharing for this group is not working well and there is a need to reconsider how it should be delivered.

Several areas of practice emerged that would be helpful to provide consistently across all areas in England and Wales:

- Ensuring that police receive information about young people placed in their area by local authorities and about risks they may face.
- Ensuring that police notify both the host local authority and the responsible local authority about a young person's missing incident and found information, and – where a young person is from a different police force area – that the home police force is notified as well.
- Ensuring that local authorities (as part of the notification process about out of area placements under the statutory guidance on Children Act 1989 (DFE, 2015) include information on the risks and vulnerabilities of a young person they place outside their boundaries.
- Ensuring that a named RHI provider is allocated to each child in an out of area for every placement that a local authority makes their area boundary in orderto prevent any delays or drifts in offering a RHI if the young people goes missing..
- Ensuring that relevant information from an RHI is shared both with the responsible and host local authorities – to include information about the risk of going missing and any specific safeguarding risks (eg CSE, county lines).

Some of the practice above is already happening in some areas and we would encourage all local authorities to consider how they can address these issues in their area. To ensure national consistency in approaches we believe a national policy change is needed. It should happen through making relevant changes to the 2014 Guidance, the statutory guidance on Children Act 1989 (DFE, 2015), and the Authorised Professional Practice guidance on missing persons for police (College of Policing, 2017).

This research raised an issue of whether the responsibility for the delivery of RHIs for children in out of area placements could be transferred onto the host local authority but understanding the implications of this would require further research, particularly to build evidence about the financial implications for those local authorities which host large numbers of out of area placements. Wider consultations with local authorities and the police as well as RHI providers would also be needed to draw conclusions on this issue.

The last issue we would like to comment on is how oversight of RHI should be provided. One of the learning points from this research is that oversight needs to happen at LA level, and at police force level covering all the LAs in their area. Evidence collected for the study showed that LSCBs were playing an important role in ensuring oversight, but with their imminent demise it is important that gaps are not created in how RHI provision is monitored.

Chapter 5.

Research conclusions and the way forward

This research confirms that a return home interview for a young person missing from home or from care can be an important intervention. From the young person's perspective it is an opportunity to speak to an adult about the issues that may have led to them going missing, a signal that someone cares about what happens to them, and an opportunity to access help. From a children's services perspective it is an intervention that allows them to carry out their safeguarding role. For the police it is an opportunity to receive intelligence about risks to an individual young person or a group of young people in their area, enabling them to provide better protection or even to disrupt criminal activities which may harm young people. It is an intervention that requires integrated approaches from all agencies that are tasked with responding to missing children.

This research found that the importance of RHIs is recognised across the majority of areas that responded to the survey and in all those who took part as our case study sites. This recognition though does not translate into consistent provision everywhere.

The data on what is actually provided is very patchy, but it shows that uptake rates for RHIs vary from area to area. In some areas as few as around 20% of missing incidents result in RHIs whilst in others closer to 100% of missing incidents result in RHIs.

The majority of RHIs across areas were delivered by in-house provision within local authority services, either in the form of a designated in-house service or by a social worker. Only around a third of local authorities reported provision by an independent provider to be in place. There appeared to be differences in who delivers RHIs to young people in different groups – for example, young people in care who had been placed away from their home area were more likely than other groups to be interviewed by a social worker.

A number of factors that impact on the reach, delivery and follow up related to RHIs were identified:

Partnership working

Partnership working across different local agencies embedded through local structures, groups, protocols, shared training and co-location was often highlighted as a primary helping factor for effective work. Where these partnerships work well they allow problem solving of issues that individual missing children face, and provide scrutiny and oversight for RHIs uptake and delivery in the area. In all case study areas for the research partnership working had expanded outside the boundaries of the local authority to cover all local authorities within the police force area. In many cases partnership working was found to support a culture of challenge across agencies when things were not happening as they should – and this was an important feature of proactive, forward looking approaches to RHI work.

Designated RHI service

Availability of a designated RHI provision delivered by trained and experienced staff was found to be another factor helping reach, delivery and follow up to RHIs. It allowed referrals to RHI to be streamlined reducing delays in RHI delivery, supported relationship building with a young person through ensuring that the same professional interviewed them if they went missing on more than one occasion. It also meant that workers had become experts in RHI delivery, developing a good understanding of how to best conduct interviews with 'hard to reach' young people and of what information to collect and share with other professionals. The merits of having a voluntary sector provider or a designated in-house local authority service were outlined during data collection for the research. Both types of providers perceived themselves to be 'independent' from statutory social care provision and able to put a young person's interest first and to advocate for children. The independence of voluntary sector services was rooted

in being entirely separate from the local authority, but for in-house providers it needed to be established through internal processes and by making a clear line of separation from the statutory social care caseload. The ability to win young people's trust came out as one of the key underlying requirements for RHI providers.

RHIs seen as an element in a continuum of actions and processes in relation to missing children

Findings from this study show that for RHIs to be an effective safeguarding intervention they need to be seen as an element in a continuum of interrelated actions or processes which comprise the responsibilities of different agencies to safeguard a missing young person. What happens before, during and after the interview – as discussed through this report – makes RHI provision valuable. RHIs should not be seen as an isolated box ticking exercise.

Individualised approaches to young people who go missing

A key learning points from this research is that there is no one standard approach that can guarantee better overall take up rates for RHIs. The individual circumstances of young people, relationships between a young person and an RHI worker and RHI delivery techniques combined ensure that a RHI happens and that the young person is able to participate and talk about their experiences. Therefore, an individualised young person-centred approach to the delivery of RHIs is reported to work best. Where young people go missing repeatedly and may be reticent to accept the offer of an RHI, that individualised approach may mean creating opportunities for the worker to develop a relationship with the young person. This could happen through, for example, group work or targeted youth activity, or in some cases by training a trusted adult of the young person's choice to undertake the interview.

Placing looked after children out of area

Placing looked after children out of area and the lack of consistent practices around how police and local authorities notify each other about: missing incidents, young people found after going missing, information about risks and vulnerabilities of young people in out of area placements, and information from RHIs, were persistently mentioned as an issue where improvements were needed. Only a small number of local authorities provided information on the number of RHIs looked after children placed out of their home area had received making it difficult to draw conclusions as to whether there are any significant differences in the national uptake rates for this group of young people. On the other hand, the data on providers of RHIs suggests that there are differences in provision, and that young people in out of area care placements were more likely to have an RHI undertaken by a social worker. This presents an additional issue for consideration as this research found that where RHIs were delivered by social workers, not through a designated RHI service, this could undermine the effectiveness of the process, eg through delays to an interview taking place – due to the need to fit with other social work responsibilities and priorities – and inadequate recording of information from the interview. The responses by local authorities to survey questions suggested that a high number of young people are moving between out of area care placements, which makes it pertinent that the issues identified in this research are addressed.

Clarity on delivering RHIs within a 72 hour timeframe

Many participants in this research said that the 72 hour timeframe for RHI delivery outlined in the 2014 Guidance was difficult. There was some confusion about when 72 hour countdown starts. They also described how difficult it could be to meet this requirement due to the constraints of services being provided Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, despite missing incidents occurring every day and at all times of the day, and because some young people go missing repeatedly with incidents happening in quick succession. Indeed, only around 50% of RHIs were reported as having been delivered within 72 hours by the small number of local authorities able to provide data for the survey. However, a number of professionals advocated that the framework of 72 hours is about right as it helps focus providers' efforts on reaching a young person without delays. Some clarification to the 2014 Guidance – as discussed in the conclusion to Chapter 2 – would be helpful.

Clarity around when parental consent is needed before an RHI can go ahead

The lack of parental consent was identified as a hindering factor for the delivery of RHIs. It was not possible to quantify the proportion of RHIs that do not happen because parents do not agree due to the lack of data collected either nationally or locally but, as has been identified in earlier reports (APPG, 2016), this is an issue that requires a consistent approach across the country. Solutions suggested by participants included providing guidance on when young people should be considered competent to themselves agree to the offer of an RHI, self-referral options for RHIs, use of schools to facilitate access to young people who require an RHI, and clarity about the circumstances when a parent's lack of consent for an RHI should be overridden by greater considerations of a young person's interest and safety.

Capacity

Lack of capacity across all agencies to make RHI provision work was highlighted as a hindering factor on many occasions by professionals. It was mentioned from the point of view of police officers making timely and informed referrals to RHI services, from the viewpoint of RHI providers to be able to meet demand during peak times and to invest into developing relationships with 'hard to reach' young people, and from the point of view of follow up services to meet the needs of young people which had been identified in RHIs. Areas that we visited spoke of operating at full capacity and provided information on how local processes, structures, and innovative practice were put in place to streamline services and maximise capacity. Professionals in the case study sites also described how cuts to local authority and police budgets had impacted on decisions about how services were delivered or not delivered. Further research is needed to evaluate to what extent this is replicated across the country and how much the system's capacity to meet the needs of vulnerable young people who go missing from home or care has been eroded by recent cuts to public services, and how that capacity can be built back in.

A greater focus on follow up support for a young person

For an RHI to be young person-centred and to serve its ultimate purpose of safeguarding and dealing with issues that led to a young person going missing, a much greater focus is needed around what support is provided in the wake of a missing incident. This research suggests that follow up support is by and large a neglected side of RHI provision. No monitoring of what follow up support happened as a result of RHIs is in place in the majority of areas. Some examples

of pathways for follow up support were shared but these were still in their early stages of implementation. Participants recognised that capturing the level of need for follow up support could help with commissioning services that were better placed to respond to the issues that young people were presenting during interviews – but no evidence was given of this being done in practice. Yet the availability of support was one of the most important reasons why young people valued RHIs.

This research suggests that RHI delivery and information sharing from RHIs has been evolving since the publication of the 2014 Guidance. While there are many good examples of RHI provision there are still areas for improvement which the study has highlighted. Many of the approaches outlined in this report do not necessarily require changes to national policy but can be implemented by local areas.

Local areas could:

- Adopt a designated RHI provision approach in their area.

- Facilitate training for staff conducting RHIs.
- Encourage flexibility around the delivery of RHIs – adopting models which allow staff doing interviews the time to be young person centred in their approach to:
  - contacting to make the offer;
  - arranging the interview;
  - conducting the interview

  and facilitate ongoing relationship building for young people who are reported missing more than once.
- Allow newly-developed services to bed down within local safeguarding systems.

- Ensure that senior managers understand and value the work of RHI services and that they support challenges within systems to ensure that RHI work is recognised for its contribution to safeguarding.

- Develop and implement appropriate 'customer satisfaction' and feedback systems for young people and parents/carers, to inform improvements to RHI provision.

- Develop structures and groups for oversight and information sharing from RHIs.

Some other issues identified will require changes to national policy to ensure consistency in RHI provision across the country. These national policy changes need to focus on addressing issues around young people in out of area placements and clarifications of issues where varied interpretation and implementation currently exists across local authorities. These changes should:

- Require that local authorities, when placing a young person outside their local authority area, name the RHI provider that will be responsible for RHI in case a young person goes missing.

- Require that relevant information on the risk of missing and vulnerabilities of the young person is shared with the host local authority and police in the area of placement.

- Clarify issues around parental consent for RHIs.

- Clarify requirements around the 72 hour timeframe.

- Update/clarify language used in this field to support consistency of communication – update missing definitions, introduce terminology around RHI provision (offered, accepted, undertaken) or equivalent.

- Clarify what information should be shared from RHIs.

- Request that local authorities establish clear pathways for follow up support and monitor follow up support provision.

There are some changes that would be helpful from the policing point of view.

- Clarifying the expectations around notifications from police to RHI providers about a young person found and recommend an appropriate timeframe for this to happen.

- Clarifying the appropriate safeguarding response to young people whose whereabouts are known but who are considered to be at a place of risk.

- Setting expectations about police providing feedback to local partners on information shared with police from RHIs.

- Recommending best practice in information sharing forms from RHI.

These potential national policy changes can be considered by the Department for Education to inform changes to the 2014 Guidance and the statutory guidance on Children Act 1989 (DfE,2015) and appropriate data collection, such as DfE data collections on looked after children or children in need. They can also be considered by the College of Policing and NPCC to be included in the Authorised Professional Practice guidance on missing children for police. It is important that the advice and requirements used in national guidance for different groups of professionals foster the use of the same language and the approaches to responding to missing children, thus enabling better working across different agencies as well as greater consistency across the country.

References

Abrahams, C and Mungall, R. (1992) Young Runaways: Exploding the Myths. London: NCH & Action for Children

All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012), a joint inquiry into children who go missing from care. London: HM Government

All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2016) Inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children. London: HM Government

All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group (2012) All Wales Protocol, Missing Children

Association of Directors of Children's Services (2018) Safeguarding Pressures Phase 6. Manchester: ADCS

Authorised Professional Practice (2017) Major investigation and public protection: Missing persons

Barrett, D. (ed.) (1997) Child Prostitution in Britain: Dilemmas and practical responses London: The Children's Society

Barter, C. (1996) Nowhere to hide: Giving young runaways a voice. London: Centrepoint / NSPCC

Berelowitz, S. & Clifton, J. Firimin, C. & Gulyurtlu, S. & Edwards, G. (2013) If only someone had listened Office of the Children's Commissioner's inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. London: The Office of the Children's Commissioner

Burgess, C. Malloch, M. Mitchell, F. Chan, V. Eunson, J. & Murray, L. (2010) Grampian Police Return Home Welfare Interview Pilot for Young Runaways: Pilot Evaluation. *Psos MORI Social Research Institute*

Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing (2018) The General Data Protection Regulation – an opportunity for Change

Chetwynd, H. & Pona, I. (2017) Making connections: understanding how local agencies can better keep missing children safe. London: The Children's Society

Coy, M., Sharp-Jeffs, N., & Kelly, L. (2017) Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Strategic Commissioning of Children's Services. London: London Metropolitan University

Davies, T. (2017) The knowledge gap: safeguarding missing children in Wales. The Children's Society

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation. London: HM Government

Department for Education (2013) Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. London: Department for Education

Department for Education (2014a) Statutory guidance on children and adults who runaway or go missing from home or care. London: Department for Education

Department for Education (2014b) Children's homes data pack. London: Department for Education

Department for Education (2015) Statutory guidance on Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review. London: The Stationery Office

Department for Education (2016) Children looked after in England including adoption 2015 to 2016. London: The Stationery Office

Department for Education (2017) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2016 to 17. London: The Stationery Office

Department for Education (2018) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2017 to 18. London: The Stationery Office

Department for Education (2018a) Information sharing advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, families, parents and carers. London: The Stationery Office

Department of Health, Home Office, Department for Communities and Local Government & Ministry of Justice, Our joint commitment to share information effectively for the protection of children, Joint letter (2015)

Evans K, Houghton-Brown M and Rees G (2007) Stepping Up: The future of runaways services. London: The Children's Society

Frost, N. & Stein, M. (1989) The politics of child welfare: Inequality, power and change. London: Haverster Wheatsheaf

Gilligan, P (2015) Turning it around: what do young women say helps them move on from child sexual exploitation? *Child Abuse Review*, 25, 2

HM Government (2015) Working Together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. London: The Stationery Office

HM Government (2018) Working Together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. London: The Stationery Office

Home Office (2011) Missing Children and Adults Strategy. London: Home Office

Home Office (2014) Multi-agency working and information sharing project. London: Home Office

Hughes, C. & Thomas, M. (2016) You can trust me, young people going missing and at risk of, or abused through, child sexual exploitation in North Wales. Cardiff: Barnardo's

La Valle, I. & Payne, L. & Jelicic, H. (2012) The Voice of the Child in the Child Protection System. London: National Children's Bureau

Local Government Association and Association of Chief Police Officers (1997) Missing from Care: procedures and practices in caring for missing children. London: The Children's Society

Medforth, R (2011) Family work at SCARPA: Parents' views and experiences. London: The Children's Society

Melrose, Barrett and Brodie 1999 One Way Street? Retrospectives on Childhood Prostitution. London: The Children's Society

Mitchell, F. & Malloch, M. & Burgess, C. (2014) The Role of Return Home Welfare Interviews in Responding to the Needs of Young Runaways. *Children & Society*, 28, 55-65

Munro, E. (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A Child-Centred System. London: The Stationery Office

National Crime Agency (2016) Missing Persons Data Report 2014/15

National Crime Agency (2017) Missing Persons Data Report 2015/16 2.0

NCB (2014) Not present, what future? Children missing education in England. London: National Children's Bureau

Newman, C (1989) Young Runaways: Findings from Britain's first Safe House. London: The Children's Society

Ofsted (2013) Missing Children. Manchester: Ofsted

Ofsted (2014) From a distance: Looked after children living away from their home area. Manchester: Ofsted

Ofsted, Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and HM Inspectorate of Probation (2016) Time to listen: a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children. London: Ofsted

Ofsted (2018) Children's social care data in England 2017 to 2018: main findings. London: Ofsted

PACE (2014) The Relational Safeguarding Model: Best practice in working with families affected by child sexual exploitation. Leeds: PACE

Pearce J (2009) Young People and Sexual Exploitation: 'It's not hidden, you just aren't looking'. Abingdon: Routledge

Pona, I. (2013) Here to Listen? Return interview provision for young runaway. London: The Children's Society

Raws, P (2001) Lost Youth: Young runaways in Northern Ireland. London: The Children's Society

Rees, G. (1993) Hidden Truths: Young people's experiences of running away. London: The Children's Society

Rees, G. (2001) Working with Young Runaways: Learning from Practice. London: The Children's Society

Rees, G, Smeaton E and Wade J (2002) Children and young people going missing from children's homes in Leeds. London: The Children's Society

Rees, G. & Lee, J. (2005) Still Running 2: Findings from the second national survey of young runaways. London: The Children's Society

Rees, G. (2011) Still Running 3: Findings from our third national survey of young runaways. London: The Children's Society

Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK. London: The Children's Society

Sharp-Jeffs N, Coy M and Kelly L (2017) Gaps in the knowledge base. London: Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse.

Sidebotham P, Brandon M, Bailey S, Belderson P, Dodsworth J, Garstang J, Harrison E, Retzer A and Sorensen P (2016) Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014. London: Department for Education

Smeaton E (2013) Running from Hate to what you Think is Love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation. Barkingside: Barnardo's

Social exclusion unit (2002) Young Runaways: Report by the Social Exclusion Unit. London: Office for the Deputy Prime Minister

Stein, M, Rees, G and Frost, N. 1994 Running the risk: Young people on the streets of Britain today. London: The Children's Society

The Railway Children (2015) The value of return home interviews and follow up support when young people go missing: a social return on investment. London: The Railway Children

Turner C and Jagusz S (2002) Feedback from young people on the SEU Recommendations for Young Runaways – Report for the Social Exclusions Unit. Barkingside: Barnardo's

Vis, S., A. & Strandbu, A. & Holtan, A. & Thomas, N. (2010) Participation and health – a research review of child participation in planning and decision-making. *Child & Family Social Work*, 16, 3

Wade, J. & Biehal, N. & Cayden, C., J. & Stein, M. (1998) Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons

APPENDIX A: Methodology

This research study was commissioned by the Norfolk Police and Crime Commissioner through funding from the Home Office with the following aims:

i. To help central government to understand the practical barriers that are stopping return home interviews for children and young people from taking place in accordance with requirements set out in statutory guidance.

ii. To identify promising practice approaches for delivery of return home interviews and use of the information derived from them. Use of information refers to both use of RHI information to inform individual safeguarding arrangements and to use in local area plans and other strategic local arrangements.

A methodology was specified in the original tender by the commissioner and this was, to a large degree, adhered to in the delivery of the study.[9] This required a mixed methods approach with a view to collecting a broad range of data which could afford insights from different perspectives and facilitate the exploration of the range of issues relevant to policy and practitioner audiences for the study.

The study incorporated:

1. A literature scoping and policy analysis.

2. A survey of local authorities across England and Wales.

3. Case studies[10] – areas where there were indicators of 'promising practice' – including:
   - Analysis of relevant documents [policies, protocols etc related to return home interview provision].
   - Interviews with professional stakeholders.
   - Focus groups with RHI practitioner staff and managers.
   - RHI Case file analysis.

4. Consultation with young people who had experience of RHIs – through a survey and focus groups.

A Project Steering Group (PSG) was recruited comprising representatives from the police, Home Office and Department for Education.

Literature searching, design and initial data collection began in September 2017 and analysis and report writing was completed in December 2018.

1. Literature scoping and policy analysis

In order to contextualise the study a brief scoping of research literature was undertaken on the issues around young people being reported missing, agency responses and the development of RHIs. The exercise was not systematic, relying principally on Google and Google Scholar searches with relevant terms including 'missing children', 'young runaways' and 'return home interviews', alongside a search of websites (of voluntary sector organisations – eg the National Working Group on Child Sexual Exploitation (NWG), and

[9] Although an initial request to observe return home interviews in operation was rejected on the basis that this would be unethical, partly due to the additional challenges in achieving informed consent from young people at the point when they were interviewed.

[10] To avoid any conflict of interest none of the case study sites selected had The Children's Society as a service provider (for RHIs or any other services).

government departments – eg Ofsted). For the period 1989 to 2017, 55 articles, books and reports were found which were relevant for the research.

This was supplemented by a scoping of policy development over the past 20 years.

2. Survey of local authorities

Design and topics covered

The survey was designed in collaboration with the PSG and through consultation with others (including representatives of other voluntary sector organisations). It included questions on a range of issues, including:

- Local arrangements around RHI service provision – eg on who does interviews, how long services had been delivered, whether there were different approaches for different groups of young people (missing from home, missing from care in area and out of area).
- RHI process – eg on how referrals were managed, criteria for an RHI offer, how parents and young people were contacted, how permissions worked, where interviews were done.
- Information management – eg on how information was recorded and stored, how information from RHIs was used, whether there was an up-to-date protocol for information sharing, the presence/role of safeguarding hubs.
- Performance – eg on whether feedback was sought from young people/parents/carers and how this was used, whether data was kept on refusals of RHI (including reasons for refusal), what performance indicators were used for RHI work.
- Follow up support – eg on what specialist services were available, whether details of referrals on to them were recorded.
- Delivery – eg on numbers of missing incidents for young people in different groups (as above), number of RHI offers, numbers of interviews done (or refused, including reasons for refusal) and numbers done within the 72 hour timeframe.
- General views – eg on what helps or hinders RHI provision, what could be improved in the guidance around missing children.

Piloting and administration

During the design phase Directors of Children's Services (DCS) for all the local authorities across England and Wales were contacted to promote the research. We asked them to nominate a member of their team whom they felt was best placed to answer a questionnaire on RHI provision in their area. Most were responsive to this and 94 key contacts were identified. Where there had been no response further correspondence was sent to the DCS at the time of the survey with the request that it was passed over to the appropriate professional for completion.

Piloting of the survey was done during December 2017 with three representatives from local authorities (two in England and one in Wales) and three managers of missing from home services run by The Children's Society. This led to some minor changes, and also to including a summary at the start of the questionnaire which clarified the two main elements (multiple choice questions and open-ended questions requiring knowledge of the current service and requests for local data on missing, interview delivery and follow up). This was intended to alert the respondents that full completion may require the support of colleagues to provide the data which was being requested.

The survey was set up using Smart Survey and was published online on 23 January 2018 with a closing date of 26 February. A Welsh language version of the questionnaire was made available upon request. Respondents who had not returned a completed survey were followed up via telephone and email a fortnight before the deadline. A staff member from the NPPC office for Missing People supported with a final chase of local authorities by contacting police partners in areas where a response had not been received.

Responses and representativeness

One hundred and three local authorities responded to the survey – 96 in England and 7 in Wales.

This gave an overall response rate of 59% (103 out of 175 local authorities), but it was difficult to assess the degree to which the data could be said to be fully 'representative' because of the differences between different local authorities (eg in terms whether they cover rural or urban areas, profile of the population etc).

There were also gaps in responses, especially for questions that asked about the scale of missing, interview provision and follow up.

Some of this may be partly accounted for by the variation of roles that survey respondents had – responses were received from service managers, missing and CSE coordinators, quality assurance managers and heads of improvement, staff involved in commissioning of services and others. But the gaps may also suggest that the data was not being recorded or was not readily accessible in some areas.

As a result, some of the findings presented in the report should be interpreted with due caution. Where relevant this is discussed in the text and sample size for each finding that has been included is clearly displayed in the text or in figures.

3. Case study sites

Selection

A shortlist of potential sites for additional data collection was identified via a selection process based on survey responses and other available data (eg Ofsted reports). The aim was to recruit local authorities where RHI provision was working well and which had a range of characteristics – eg urban or rural areas, concentrated or dispersed populations, different areas of England plus one Welsh area.

A list of 'essential' criteria was created, based on the scale of provision, effectiveness of approach and evidence of good recording and information sharing practice. This was supplemented by a set of 'desirable' characteristics (eg 75%+ take up rate for RHIs) and a scoring system was created to rank potential participants. From this, 13 areas were selected and approached to take part in the more focused work. For various reasons not all the areas contacted were willing to participate, but five sites were recruited – four in England (including two local authorities within one police force area), and one in Wales.

A key contact – usually the person who had completed the area's survey response – was identified who helped facilitate the participation of their local authority and partner agencies.

Data collection

1) Documents and data request

To supplement what had been received in an area's survey response the following information and data was requested:

- Local protocol on young runaways and children missing from home or care.
- RHI data (for the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017) – an overview of the data recorded on missing children as ordered by children's services, the name of the recording system used and an outline of variables recorded.
- A copy of the standard referral form that the police send to social services and/or to any RHI provider – if no standard referral form a description of the process.
- RHI service specification and annual or quarterly reports.
- Evaluation(s) of RHI project.

- Information sharing protocol or equivalent document explaining what information from RHIs is shared between the police, RHI provider and social services.
- Intelligence sharing form or any procedural documents.
- Membership list of relevant multi-agency groups responsible for missing children.
- Notification processes or forms for looked after children who are placed outside of the home local authority.
- An overview of RHI process, including the format of an interview.
- RHI information form/procedure used to record and share information from the interview.
- Sample of communication to missing children and parents/carers regarding the offer of an RHI.
- Details of the number of public and private children's homes within the local area (including key contacts). Information on which homes are used when young people are placed out of area.

Not all areas were able to supply everything that was requested. Alongside their survey responses this material was used to put together a file on each case study area.

2) Professional stakeholder interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with professionals whose role linked to RHI provision or to the use of information from the interviews (or both). The interviewees were selected to represent the following agencies or teams:

- Local Authority (eg. local authority lead on missing children or equivalent).
- Looked after children team (eg. local authority lead on looked after children or equivalent).
- Police (eg. missing persons coordinator or police lead on missing children).
- Public and private children's homes (eg. managers or relevant member of staff)
- LSCB (eg. chair/business manager or chair of the relevant subgroup.
- RHI service (eg. manager of service).
- MASH (eg. manager).

Sites were also asked to suggest where there were other key professionals who might have an important insight into local ways of working. Interviews were done face-to-face or over the phone. They were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Overall 27 interviews were completed – at least three in each area.

3) Focus groups with RHI practitioners and managers

Focus groups were arranged in each area to bring together practitioners and managers who were conducting RHIs.

A range of key areas of practice were discussed:

- The reach and accessibility of the service.
- What makes for a good interview?
- What happens after an interview? (Follow up support for young people).
- Training for your role.

Groups varied in size from two to eight participants. With breaks they took two or three hours. Overall 22 professionals took part in a focus group.

Groups were audio recorded and transcribed.

4) Case file analysis

An exploratory analysis of case files was undertaken to look at what had been recorded, in what format and how much this varied (from area to area, and from worker to worker). In order to boost the likelihood that a spread of recordings would be available for scrutiny, case study sites were asked to provide a sample of the notes for the three young people (one from home, one from care and placed in area, and one from care and placed out of area) who had most frequently been reported missing during the period 01/04/17 – 31/03/18 (including incidents which lasted for more than 24 hours). Where possible, five sets of interview notes spread sequentially across the period were analysed to allow for a consideration of issues such as whether the same professional had consistently done the interviews, whether there was evidence of follow up support having taken place, whether (for young people in care) placements had been stable or had changed.

Where available from the notes the following data was collected using a pro forma:

- Factors related to the take up of an interview (eg how long before an offer was made, who made the offer).
- The conduct of the interview (eg where it was done, from whom information was collected, especially where a young person had not engaged well).
- What facts and observations were recorded (eg whether intelligence regarding whom the young person had associated with had been noted, or on where they had been).
- Whether actions/recommendations had been made.
- Whether there was a record of how actions had been conveyed to relevant professionals or otherwise taken forward.

Case files from four of the five sites were made available for analysis within the requisite timeframe for fieldwork. In total, 49 sets of interview case notes (out of a possible total of 60) were analysed due to some gaps in recording in some of sites.

3. Data collection from young people

Survey of young people who had experience of RHIs

To explore the views of young people who had had experience of RHIs a survey was designed in consultation with colleagues from missing and RHI services, and members of the Runaways Coalition.

The survey questionnaire asked about:

- How many RHIs a young person had experienced.
- How they had been contacted with the interview offer on the most recent occasion (and what would be the best approach to making the invitation).
- Where they had been interviewed (and where they would like to be interviewed).
- Who had done the interview (and what had been good or bad about it).
- Whether they had had follow up support.

The questionnaire was administered online, and shared through relevant organisations who deliver RHIs (eg the charity Missing People) alongside a request to services run by The Children's Society to invite their service users to take part.

A target of 100 was set but – despite follow up requests to partners – only 26 young people took part in the survey.

Focus groups with young people who had experience of RHIs

Two focus groups were recruited from services run by The Children's Society. All the young people who took part had experience of RHIs, but the profile of participants was different.

- The first group comprised five young people (four female, one male) all of whom were 16 years old. All members of the group were in the care of the local authority. All had had at

least one RHI during the month before the group took place. The group was conducted at the offices of the service and was run by a member of the research team supported by a practitioner at the service.

- The second focus group was made up of members of a pre-existing participation group (who had worked together before). All six members were female and aged 17–22. None of the young people had been in care. The focus group took place at the service's offices. The young people who took part had had past experiences of RHIs (but not as recently as for members of the first group).

Professional transcription of the groups was not possible (because young people often spoke at the same time) but detailed notes were taken and where possible transcription was done in-house.

APPENDIX B: The development of 'missing persons schemes' and welfare interviews for young runaways

During the 1980s the voluntary sector began to develop projects working with young runaways, including outreach work and the first residential refuges. One element of this was the emergence of collaborative work with the police to establish missing person's (MISPER) schemes. These services operated on the basis of police forces making referrals when a young people were reported missing – with a view to the service making contact with them once they had returned home, or to their care placement. If the young person agreed to meet a worker this may lead to a discussion about why they had gone missing, what might help prevent this happening again, etc. – a precursor to current RHI work (Rees, 2001; Rees et al, 2005).

It had been common practice for the police themselves to follow up on reports of missing children and young people, but it was becoming increasingly clear that this was often an ineffective response, for example because some young people were not willing to speak to police officers (Rees, 1993; Stein et al,1994; Rees, 2001). A pilot project run by Leeds Safe House first conducted interviews with young people after receiving referrals of police missing person reports in 1996. Other services opened elsewhere in the late 1990s operating a similar model of practice – e.g. eg the 'ASTRA' project in Gloucester; Barnardo's 'Young Missing Persons Scheme' in Bradford; The Children's Society's 'Safe on the Streets' project in Leeds and 'Two Way Street' in Cardiff. Information from these services provided increasing evidence that workers who were not linked to the police or social services may offer a better way to support young people who were running away from home (Rees, 2001). Moreover, in research looking specifically at the issue of children and young people going missing from children's homes, children's home staff suggested the need for independent interviews for young people when they returned home, in addition to or instead of the standard police interview (Rees *et al.*, 2002).

A report, based on extensive interviews with practitioners who had worked with young runaways, recommended a number of features that were regarded as being important to the successful development and implementation of a missing persons scheme:

- Appropriate methods of contact.
- A quick response when the young person returned home.
- The perceived independence of projects from social services and the police.

The research also noted the high numbers of children living in residential care homes who were being reported as missing, and that a large proportion of them were recorded as 'unauthorised absences' rather than 'missing' incidents (Rees, 2001).

During the 1990s and early 2000s there was a significant and increasing investment in research and practice around young runaways, especially in the development of services which relied on police referrals from missing reports (Rees and Lee, 2005). However, specifically in terms of how many services were offering a welfare interview which equated to what we now call an RHI, the picture is unclear – at least partly due to confusion around terminology. Survey data collected across England in 2007 gave a confusing snapshot, leading the authors to comment that it was likely that the majority of activity was in fact police-delivered, and that this could vary from 'alive and well' checks to full assessments (Evans et al, 2007).

At the same time, concerns were being raised that this form of intervention may not be reaching the majority of runaways (those who were not reported missing) and, thereby, not working with many young people who may be at high risk. Debates about how to address this were aired in a large consultation exercise and survey of local authorities and police. This extensive project led to recommendations which included a 'national safety net', with a 'mixed economy' of services operating at local, regional and national levels to provide comprehensive responses to the diverse situations where runaways might be located (eg on

the street through outreach work), and the wide variety of needs that they may present (Evans et al, 2007).

The emergence of ‘child sexual exploitation’(CSE) – a term officially introduced to the lexicon of safeguarding in 2009 in lieu of a prior terminology which mostly referred to ‘child prostitution’ (Pearce, 2009) – with the publication of specific guidance by the DCSF, allied to a change in government in 2010, shifted the political focus (and much of the funding) away from runaways. Although the links between CSE and running away were widely acknowledged (DCSF, 2009), the closure of runaways refuges followed, and many other surviving services were realigned to work with young people identified as being ‘at risk of CSE.’

APPENDIX C. Effectiveness in RHI provision

'I think that young people want to be safe and want to know that somebody cares.' (Area 3 focus group).

The issue of 'effectiveness' in relation to RHIs poses a number of challenges, both for those providing services and for those monitoring them or developing policies and strategies to improve services over time.

The absence of published evaluation studies of RHI services was noted in the literature scoping for this research, and findings from the survey of local authorities for this study confirm the current dearth of evaluation activity. Participants were asked if they had commissioned or conducted evaluations – and, if so, to share copies of reports – but none of the 103 who took part in the survey gave a positive answer.

Fifty-five local authorities responded to a question on the indicators they used to monitor RHI provision in their area. Most (85%) were recording the numbers of interviews offered, proportion accepted and undertaken within 72 hours. Smaller numbers were asking service users about 'customer satisfaction' – with just 19 areas seeking young people's views and only 14 seeking requesting from parents (see Table A).

Table A: What measures of effectiveness are used in your area? (*n* = 55)		
The number of RHIs offered within 72 hours	47	85%
The proportion of RHIs accepted after an offer has been made	47	85%
The number of RHIs undertaken within 72 hours	47	85%
The number of young people who were satisfied with the service	19	35%
The number of parents who were satisfied with the service	14	25%

Although these might be regarded as indicators of effectiveness, the first three are output measures and could also be viewed as being more about 'compliance' than about understanding the quality of practice – as one professional commented in interview:

> 'You can have a return home interview where you tick to say you've done it, you've done it in the timescale. But if all they've said is 'No, don't want to tell you, none of your business', you can tick the 'compliance' (box) but the quality of that return home interview isn't necessarily going to make a difference for that child or young person.' (Area 3, LSCB)

In addition, although they were asked to say how service user feedback was used where it was collected, few areas gave an answer to this question.

Overall, then, the evidence base on 'what works' in RHI provision is extremely thin and, as yet, little effort has been made to address this. Frontline staff and managers were asked for their reflections on good practice during focus groups and interviews in the case study sites for this research – and findings have been reported elsewhere in the report, especially in Chapter 2 – but participants were also asked to consider what *should* be taken into account when assessing the benefits of an RHI; what 'success' looks like from a practitioner perspective.

Many staff talked about the primary issue of 'engagement' within the interview as a vital measure of effectiveness:

> 'I think the bottom line for me (is) about being able to engage with that young person and their carers, whoever they may be – being able to have some level of conversation and build up some form of rapport.' (Area 3, focus group)

They explained how challenging this could be in some circumstances and highlighted the place of professional judgement in managing the interview situation sensitively:

> 'You can look at the interview in one of two ways: you can look at it as this is my one and only chance to ever have a conversation with this young person so I need to get absolutely everything, or (that) this might be a part of building a relationship.' (Area 3, focus group)

Most staff regarded engagement as being the most fundamental aspect of effectiveness, since it afforded the opportunity to assess need and, thereby, the platform for positive change for an individual young person.

In terms of interim outcomes from an interview – things that demonstrated that the situation was moving in the right direction for a young person – RHI workers talked about:

- **Equipping young people who they knew would continue to go missing with 'risk management strategies'**:

  'We give them a safety plan and a backup plan. You know? If you want to get out of a room, you need to keep an eye out for this. If you go into a house, if you feel uncomfortable, these are options that you can use.' (Area 2, focus group)
- **Giving a young person support – in the short term:**

  '(When) they identify an issue they need some support with and you're able to give that support, which actually then changes the world for even 10 minutes for that young person.' (Area 4, focus group)
- **Linking a young person to other services:**

  'We've got quite a lot of - I've seen a real pattern recently with mental health issues. Like literally walking for the train tracks and then changing their minds and coming back – so that's linking in with CAMHS and stuff like that and making sure they're getting medical appointments.' (Area 4 focus group)
- **Reductions in the number or scope of missing incidents:**

  'Before we would lose her for a day, but we reduced that to four to six hours. She was less at risk.' (Area 3, focus group)

They also described how collecting, analysing and sharing intelligence with the police or other local authorities to improve young people's safety was a measure of the effectiveness of the work:

> 'I think once we get patterns we try and look at disruption. So we work closely with police, don't we? And we've used harbouring notices before in the past to prevent young people going to certain addresses or to places.' (Area 2, focus group)

> 'There was one interview where she was mixing with a (OTHER AREA) LAC child who was living in the area and once we'd identified quite a few risk factors I think we held a 'strat' with (OTHER AREA), who weren't aware of half of what was going on. I think he was independent living … and they then moved him out of our area and back closer to (OTHER AREA). So that was, I would say, quite a successful intervention.' (Area 2, focus group)

And, in one instance, a worker gave an example of how an interview visit could lead to a much wider support role in keeping children and young people safe:

> 'So we went out to one this week, didn't we? And we got there and (mum's) ex-partner had been down and smashed her door through … she had seven kids in the house; everyone was witnessing domestic abuse. So we rang the council. We got people down to mend that door that day because they didn't feel safe. We put all the children on a (support) programme. We haven't done the return interview yet, but we've put other things in place to make that family safe that evening.' (Area 4, focus group)

The wide variation in how workers and managers described effectiveness was best summed up in the view expressed by one worker:

> 'I know what generally the measure of success is – it's about reduction of missing incidents. But sometimes making progress doesn't always look like that for some young people. It's a journey or a road that's got some very small steps to it … Practically, sometimes, with some of our young people, we have to slowly guide them to the point where they're not going to go missing, and that can take time, and it's about managing risk for them in the meantime.' (Area 3, focus group)

The underlying consensus, then, was that successful outcomes from RHIs will be very different for different young people. Given the range of characteristics and contexts that young people may present, and the challenges posed by those who may be 'hard to reach' or who may go missing repeatedly, to fully measure effectiveness would require a sophisticated approach. This would likely include data collection to track how things change for a young person over time (including for a period after they had had interviews) – and it would also perhaps necessitate a consideration of different models for different sub-groups amongst those who go missing (acknowledging, for example, that the intervention for a young person who goes missing from home once will be very different from the intervention for one who goes missing repeatedly).

In addition, and reflecting the earlier observation made from this study that an RHI (or series of RHIs) should be viewed as one element in a wider safeguarding intervention, the overall effectiveness of this work will be dependent on what precedes the interview (eg the efficiency of referral processes) and on how other agencies combine and collaborate to act on what comes from the interview – so these factors will also need to be taken into account.

The complexities around measuring effectiveness go some way to explaining why so little evaluation of RHI has been done – but if there is an aspiration to improve the work based on robust evidence, then there remains a need to overcome them to ensure that young people who go missing can be better safeguarded in the future.

Right now in Britain there are children and young people who feel scared, unloved and unable to cope. The Children's Society works with these young people, step by step, for as long as it takes.

We listen. We support. We act.

There are no simple answers so we work with others to tackle complex problems. Only together can we make a difference to the lives of children now and in the future.

Because no child should feel alone.

The Children's Society

© The Children's Society 2019

Charity Registration No. 221124 PRE006/0419

No child should feel alone