

# The Next Chapter



**Building Safety:** Co-designing safety and fairness into the ‘missing’ response for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families



**This project is part of the Contextual Safeguarding programme's 'The Next Chapter' project. The Contextual Safeguarding research programme is based at Durham University.**

**For more information about the research and to find resources from this project please visit: [www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk](http://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)**

# Contents

## Background

Inequalities and Contextual Safeguarding	2
The Bristol context	3
The national context	4

## Method

Project aims	5
Participatory Action Research	5
The consortium	6
The workshops	6
Ethics and governance	6

## Findings

Is the missing response fair for all young people, or are there inequalities in how different young people are kept safe?	7
How can we make young people who are reported missing from care safer, by making their peer groups, schools, and neighbourhoods safer?	12

## Conclusion

Practice recommendations	31
Prompts for local and national leaders	33
References	34

# Background

Building Safety was a Participatory Action Research project exploring the role that statutory services can have in building safety or creating risk associated to extra-familial harm. We partnered with Bristol City Council to explore the ‘missing’ response for young people in care who are at risk of harm beyond their families.

This project followed a period of national piloting of Contextual Safeguarding that took place between 2019 and 2022 as part of the National Scale Up project. This piloting surfaced inequalities issues: both in relation to how young people experience harm beyond their families and how they experience protection.

We formed a consortium of young people, carers, community organisations and professionals to co-design an element of Bristol City Council’s protection response to extra-familial harm. The consortium explored the ‘missing response’ for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families. Young people in care in Bristol are reported missing at a significantly higher rate than their peers, and boys in care recorded as Black, Asian, and Mixed-Race and Arab are reported more regularly and more often than their white peers. The project explored: does the police and statutory led ‘missing’ response contribute to safety or harm in young people’s lives?

## Inequalities and Contextual Safeguarding

Testing of the Contextual Safeguarding framework to date has indicated opportunities for Contextual Safeguarding to support a child welfare response to adolescent extra-familial harm (Lefevre et al, 2020). It has also surfaced some challenges (Firmin and Lloyd, 2022), including numerous inequalities in young people’s experiences of extra-familial harm and protection. These have included:

- Education providers admitting they have **overlooked the needs of Eastern European children and their families**, resulting in a lack of protective support in relation to community-based harm.
- Observations by professionals that **unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are experiencing violence and exploitation** and are housed in areas where there are no youth services and where there are high levels of community tensions (Contextual Safeguarding, no date a).
- **Disproportionate representations of Black boys in county lines safeguarding and police cohorts** with limited evidence that they are safeguarded through this profiling (Wroe, 2021).
- The commissioning of **‘gangs’ services for Black boys and young men** that do not match what professionals understand their needs to be (Contextual Safeguarding, no date b).
- **White British young people being described as ‘our indigenous young people’** (compared to immigrant young people) by multi-agency partners.
- Observations by professionals and young people that **child welfare/protection responses are slower for Black young people**.

- Observations by professionals that **young Black people experience discrimination from social care, policing and education** (Contextual Safeguarding, no date b).
- Indicative evidence that **Black young people are over-represented in cohorts of young people that have been ‘relocated’** in response to extra-familial harm (Wroe, 2022).
- Observations by professionals that issues related to **poverty, including overcrowded housing or loss of tenancy, are linked to family breakdown** and young people being ‘missing’ or harmed outside the home (Wroe, Lloyd and Manister, 2023).
- Reports by **girls and young women that they experience significant harmful sexual behaviour in schools** and that protection frequently involves them being asked to change their behaviour (Lloyd, 2019).
- Reports by young people that they are **discriminated against or harassed in the community based on their appearance** (i.e., wearing a hijab) and that there are limited protections in place in relation to this (Contextual Safeguarding no date, a).
- Observations by professionals in the VCS sector that **young people feel unsafe because of interactions with the police, social workers, and immigration enforcement** (Contextual Safeguarding, forthcoming).
- The **profiling of working-class communities as being prone to violence, as criminal and as a ‘drain on resource’**.
- Professionals noting that a lack of resource and deeply held biases by multi-agency partners result in **young people with disabilities being disbelieved or being criminalised when they experience harm** beyond their families (Lloyd et al, 2020).

Research indicates (see Wroe et al, 2023) that the harms young people experience in relation to extra-familial risk can result from experiences of violence in the community and from the systems in place to protect them.

## The Bristol context

In 2022, 445 young people were reported as missing to the police on 1,173 separate occasions, 100 of the 445 young people (22.5%) were young people in care, despite making up only 0.6% of young people in the area. Professionals in Bristol shared that this disproportionality could be related to:

- risks that precede young people entering care
- the quality of care young people receive
- and/or statutory processes that increase the likelihood that young people in care are reported missing.

*Although being a child in care isn’t currently a protected characteristic...some areas are looking to adopt ‘care experience’ as a protected characteristic, and I think that’s something to kind of be thought about, about the impact of just, not just, but being ‘care experienced’ as a potential protected characteristic in and of itself. And, and what we know is, that children in care are more likely to be reported ‘missing’ to the police, and that’s in Bristol but it’s also nationally. And there’s a couple of reasons around that, being a child living in a children’s home is a significant correlated factor to exploitation and harm...sometimes it is because their experiences of abuse and harm that brought them into care make them more vulnerable to harm in the community.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

The local area was concerned that children in care are more likely to be reported as missing to the police than their peers who live at home. They were concerned that young people in care can be more vulnerable to harm in the community, like exploitation, which can make it more likely for their carers to not know where they are. They were also concerned that young people in care are sometimes being reported as missing to the police in situations where they wouldn't if they lived at home, and that this means they are more likely to have police involved in their lives. The local area was concerned that having police involved in young people's lives can mean they are less likely to talk to adults about where they are spending time, their friendships and what is happening to them, and was worried that this means young people can be less safe because they have reported them as missing to the police, rather than safer.

*Because they're cared for by the State, sometimes we end up in a statutory process-led safeguarding response, rather than perhaps what, how a family... our tolerance for risk looks different.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

In addition, they shared that some young people in care are reported missing more than others: those recorded as Black, Asian and Mixed-Race and Arab boys and young men were being reported missing more regularly and more often than white young people, and this was thought to be connected to risks around child criminal exploitation (CCE).

## The national context

Young people in care are reported missing far more frequently than their peers. An average of 1 in 10 young people in care will be reported missing compared to 1 in 200 of their peers (NYAS, no date). When young people are missing from care it can increase risks associated with extra-familial and others forms of harm (Wroe et al, 2023; NYAS, no date), it also escalates their interactions with the police and other statutory agencies which can be stigmatising and criminalising. Young people in care have far more interactions with the police and the criminal legal system than their peers. By the time they are 24, over half of care experienced young people will have a criminal conviction, compared to 13% of their peers (ONS, 2022).

According to Missing People (2023), Black young people in care are over-represented in missing reports nationally:

*While 7% of looked after children are Black, 10% of all children who are looked after and go missing are Black. Looked after children went missing on average 6.2 times in a year, compared to 1.9 times for all children. Children who are looked after and of mixed or multiple ethnicities went missing the most frequently, at 7.7 times per year, followed by Black children who went missing on average 6.7 times each in a year*

*(Missing People, 2023: 8)*

Black and Asian missing young people are less likely to have risks associated with mental health or exploitation recorded compared to white missing young people. However, it also noted that child criminal exploitation (CCE) markers were higher for Black young people (20%) than white young people (17%) and Asian young people (20%). Concerningly, Black young people were also most likely to be missing for longer periods and only 16% of missing reports related to Black young people resulted in young people being found compared to 23% for white young people. The report stated that:

*These disproportionalities are likely to be linked to systemic issues including differential access to health services, support services and employment, as well as disparities in rates of school exclusion, and care experience which all link to the likelihood of someone being in a crisis that leads to them going missing.*

*(Missing People, 2023: 6)*

# Method

## Project aims

Through the Building Safety study, the local area wanted to explore:

1. Is the missing response fair for all young people, or are there inequalities in how different young people are kept safe?
2. How can we make young people who are reported missing from care safer, by making their peer groups, schools, and neighbourhoods safer?

## Participatory Action Research

The Building Safety study followed the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR, Doucet et al, 2022). Alongside our partners at Bristol City Council, we formed a consortium of local professionals, community organisations, young people, and their carers to explore inequalities in the missing response and ways forward.

The consortium worked together over six months to co-design changes to the 'missing' response through a series of four workshops:

- A **scoping** workshop where the local authority shared their areas of concern with the consortium and these were explored by professionals, community organisations and young people and carers affected by the issues.
- A **proposing** workshop where the consortium discussed solutions to these problems or areas for change.
- An **adapting** workshop where the local authority responded to the consortium's ideas and shared what it felt were realistic and feasible areas for change to focus on.
- A **reflecting** workshop where the consortium reflected on outstanding issues and the process of working together.

In addition missing policies were reviewed, and qualitative semi-structured interviews (n=6) were carried out with professionals at the local authority to understand their areas of concern.

## The consortium

The consortium (n= 16) included (reported broadly for anonymity):

- Young people (all male) aged between 17 and 20 with experience of the care system and being reported missing in relation to extra-familial harm (n=3)
- Community-based organisations (n=3)
- Carer (n=1)
- Children's Social Care (n=2)
- Local authority Violence Reduction Unit funded youth service (n=2)
- Criminal/youth justice (n=2)
- Facilitator (n=1)
- Durham University researchers (n=2)

All consortium members not attending in a professional capacity were paid an hourly rate of £12 for their attendance at and preparation for the workshops.

## The workshops

The workshops were held in two community spaces and were facilitated by Jahnine Davis from **Listen Up**, an external facilitator whose organisation amplifies the voices of marginalised young people in child safeguarding.

Researchers Dr Lauren Wroe and Joanne Walker attended the workshops, recorded discussions and analysed the data. Food was provided and tables were laid with activity sheets to facilitate discussions, fidgets, pens, and paper. Younger attendees were supported to attend by a trusted support worker who also joined the consortium and took part in the workshops. The group agreed a group contract to govern how they would work together.

## Ethics and governance

The consortium was made up of a small number of individuals often as the sole representative of their organisations or service, or representing their lived experience of extra-familial harm, the care system and being reported missing. Quotes are not labelled by profession to avoid revealing the identity of participants.

Throughout the report I have used the phrase 'young people who are/were reported missing' as consortium members shared that not all young people would describe themselves as 'missing' when they aren't where professionals or carers expect them to be.

This is a small-scale, in-depth study focusing on a specific practice issue in one local area. The findings should therefore be viewed as a guide for other areas and should also be viewed considering the national research findings that are discussed in this report.

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the Durham University Sociology ethics panel.

A Research Advisory Board was formed to support the design and delivery of the project:

- Professor Anna Gupta, Royal Holloway
- Jahnine Davis, Listen Up
- Daniel Morris, Listen Up
- Connie Wessels, Tomorrow Begins
- Ross Podyma, Sporting Communities
- Dr Will Mason, Sheffield University
- Becky Lewis, Bristol City Council
- Charlene Richardson, Bristol City Council

## Findings

**Question 1: Is the missing response fair for all young people, or are there inequalities in how different young people are kept safe?**

The consortium shared that the likelihood and quality of the ‘missing’ response is determined by care status, background, gender and ‘race’. The disproportional missing reports for young people in care, and specifically those recorded as Black, Asian, Mixed-Race and Arab boys, was the driving concern for the project:

*when we look at our children who go ‘missing’, males who are predominantly, black...black British mixed race young people... are disproportionately represented, and our cohort of children who are missing, children who are in care who are reported ‘missing’, who are reported ‘missing’ regularly, and that correlates with that group being disproportionately affected by criminal exploitation, and so we see those young people as being- that cohort being disproportionately represented as young people experiencing serious violence, but also significant harm in the communities from criminal exploitation and more likely to come into our care as a result of exploitation in adolescence, and experience that kind of disproportionality, then, across the system.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

The consortium identified points in the system response where bias or unequal treatment showed up:

- The **identification** of young people who may be vulnerable to extra-familial harm; with Black British boys and Black and white British Mixed-Race boys being more likely to be identified as being criminally exploited via county lines, and questions about whether this led to safeguarding or criminalisation.

- In the **decision to report** a young person as missing; with young people in care being far more likely to be reported missing than young people living with their families; and with young people recorded as Black, Asian, Mixed-Race and Arab boys being reported missing more regularly and more often.
- At the **risk assessment** stage: young people from certain areas of the city were deemed to be less vulnerable or more likely to be involved in crime; girls were thought to be responded to more quickly and deemed as more vulnerable; and Black young people were thought to receive a slower response. This was described by some consortium members as ‘racism’ and ‘favouritism’.
- In the **missing and protection response**: white young girls got a bigger social media campaign from services to help find them if they were missing; boys from certain areas of the city were treated unfavourably by the police when they were encountered in the community; boys, older young people aged 16/17, asylum seeking young people, and those placed in supported accommodation went missing for longer, potentially because their needs were not being met, preventative support for these young people was not effective, or efforts to find these young people were slower.

These issues are discussed in more detail below:

### ***Young people in care were removed from supportive relationships and communities resulting in escalation to statutory and police processes***

Young people were sometimes moved away from familiar areas of the city as a means of managing risk. This can mean that young people in care were moved to areas they didn't know, and where they may face new harms or risks. Young people in this situation may have fewer people around who know them, who might look out for them, or spot them when they are out, and who might be able to support efforts to locate them when they aren't where carers expect them to be. This can mean that whereas some parents might have numerous people they can call on to help them find their child, or young people might have a variety of adults around who know them, often carers and young people have to rely on professional networks and statutory processes:

*children who are regularly missing and... are not the children who providers want to provide homes to, and so that can be an exacerbating cycle as children become more and more disconnected from their care networks, more and more disconnected from their own safety networks, and from their parental networks, and I think that is a bit of a spiral, when we think about the service response. That when those sufficiency issues impact, actually, just our ability to care for, you know, to respond effectively to children, we end up contributing negatively to their... to safety for them*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*I think for me it's two things. I think the young people also have [to have a] choice because we have seen young people, we don't give them a choice... like young people who live in [area], when you move to [another area] where they have no relationship, no link, it's getting worse. And all the time they're missing because you put somewhere that they don't know somebody, some place that they feel racism is high, discrimination, [rather] than where they feeling is like a home. Everyone is like their family and they will not feel fear...and feel like home. If the takeaway don't give food, they ask him, 'Oh, I'm gonna bring tomorrow. Can you give me food?' And then the takeaway gift them. Say, 'Okay'.*

*(Participant Response, Proposing Workshop)*

Carers showing more interest in young people, their lives and experiences; including more trusted (non-professional) people in safety planning; keeping young people in familiar areas; providing more support for carers with risk assessment; and fostering mutual support between carers, were suggested as antidotes to this. These practice recommendations are discussed in the next section.

### ***Young people in care were subject to competing and contradictory pressures***

Young people in care, and who are at risk of extra-familial harm, can experience low levels of care alongside high levels of restriction. Pressures from carers and statutory processes can be contradictory, sometimes treating young people like adults (placing them in semi or fully independent accommodation with limited amounts of support and oversight) and sometimes treating them like children (imposing stricter curfews that other young people of their age may not be subject to). Some felt this was a double standard that put young people under competing pressures from carers, the statutory processes they follow, and from people who are harming them. This, alongside an absence of a consistent caring figure, could increase vulnerability to harm. When young people do not comply with strict rules, it could lead to placement breakdowns, and breaches of YOT orders, making young people's lives more precarious:

*We wanna have high hope for things to be really brilliant for all of our young people in care, but sometimes life is really tricky and sometimes young people do have to take risks, and learn, and be in situations that are difficult. So, are we having good enough conversations about what's good enough, if you know what I mean?*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

*I can say from a YOT perspective, sometimes it could be like, 'Oh, now I've missed my YOT appointment so I'm gonna...' That can feel like it's worse for them cos they're like, 'Now I'm gonna be in breach and go back to Court.' So having a YOT worker chase them sometimes isn't always helpful.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

Giving young people a sense of independence and choice in their care placements; specialist training for carers on working with adolescents; mutual support networks for carers; and reflective spaces with supervising social workers, could support a more nuanced response. These practice recommendations are discussed in the next section.

### **Welfare responses are slower for Black young people (especially boys)**

Boys who were recorded as Black, Asian, Mixed-Race and Arab were reported missing from care placements at a higher rate than their white peers, but some consortium members felt that the type of response they received was notably different. The consortium shared that the police respond slower for Black young people, and that protection efforts to locate young people and ensure their safety, such as creating social media campaigns, do not happen or happen more slowly. This was described as ‘favouritism’, ‘racism’ and due to the police not liking young people and adultification.

One consortium member suggested that Black young people (boys in particular, but also young women) are ‘adultified’, resulting in a slower response, that is less about their welfare and may result in criminalisation:

*Disproportionality for black boys is massive again, especially around adultification and there's been lots of times when we've had some of our black boys go missing and people have said to the police, this is really worrying, they've been gone for so long and the response has been, just if I compare it to say a white young boy has gone missing, like the level of response from the police, because I know they like, they tier their response and how much they look for them, so sometimes they might put something out on social media where I feel we have to like really fight and push for that when we're looking at some of our black boys and, again, the ones who are regularly going missing or have been in trouble with the police, they're criminalised more than the worry of them being exploited.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*If it was a black girl, they'd take their time probably by ten minutes or something. It's like a favouritism, in a way.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

Consortium members said risk can be viewed differently for boys and girls, again resulting in a different type of response. They said that longer missing periods reported for boys could be an indication that preventative care for boys may not be as effective:

*But I guess like what you were saying, [anon], that societal thing, you know, your worries are, oh, the girl might've been kidnapped or sexually assaulted. Whereas I don't think you necessarily think that that's happening to a boy when they go missing.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

*I guess the bit that stands out to me is if we've got the same number of boys and girls from care who go missing. So, it's nearly fifty-fifty. But the boys who go missing or are reported missing go more. So, what that would say to me is, once they've gone missing, whatever we're doing as professionals isn't making a difference in their lives in the same way we can make a difference to girls and young women. So, there's something about the support or what we give to young women that's working better. And so, I guess I'm interested in what could we be doing for young people, boys and young men who go missing, and particularly – well, all boys and young men, but particularly black young men who – what aren't we getting right with the support, to change things for them. Cos I think – do you know what I mean? If a girl goes missing and then they're less likely to be missing lots of times, it would suggest we're getting it right after that happens. Whereas what seems to happen for some young men is, they go missing, then it happens more and more and more and more as well.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

Some felt that local data would need to be analysed to test this. Tracking local data to analyse trends in relation to demographics was suggested as an action for the police and council to take forward. It was felt that more conversations would need to be had between agencies to explore this problem. Others felt this problem would persist as the problem is related to racism, adultification and favouritism. Practice recommendations are discussed in the next section.

### ***Young people were treated differently by the police if they knew their 'background'/depending on the area they are from***

Some consortium members shared that if the police know that a young person is from an area that they view negatively, they will treat them negatively. This was due to assumptions about young people's involvement in criminal activity due to the neighbourhoods they have grown up in. This can impact how the police interact with young people in the streets, including when they have been reported missing:

*it depends if they know your backstory. If you've been brought up, like, rough, then you're gonna be doing – you're more likely to be actually doing crime. Cos you're gonna meet more people like you, for how you grew up. So, it means you'll bump into more trouble really, from just growing up.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

*from working with young people, when they're picked up by police from different areas who don't know them and don't know their backgrounds, they've then run into, like, really hostile situations and ended up being, sort of, restrained by police and stuff*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

The availability of non-police guardianship; young people being collected by people they know; and welfare-informed and trauma informed training were suggested as an antidote to this. Practice recommendations are discussed in detail in the next section.

## **Question 2: How can we make young people who are reported missing from care safer, by making their peer groups, schools, and neighbourhoods safer?**

### **Overarching Principles**

Recommendations for change were organised under a set of 'over-arching principles' that were agreed by the consortium and shared with the local area.

### **Trusted relationships**

The council should consider how to **include the people that young people already trust** and choose to go to for support in safety planning. This means trusting non-professionals to be a part of safety planning, and broadening this to family, friends and community members who are known and trusted by young people:

*I think one thing all the young people said last time is that they always had someone that knew where they were, whether that was like a, a parent or a mentor or a friend or someone they trusted, there was always somebody that actually knew. And it's like, how do we use that to keep them safe?*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

Trusted relationships between professionals and young people, and their families and communities, should be maximised. This is earned and sustained by having well-resourced staff who remain in roles (this includes out of hours staff, carers, and residential workers); adequate training and support for professionals to help them to manage risk, avoid unnecessary escalation, and lead with care; and through communication and negotiation with young people:

*They'd happily tell me, and then that's a safety factor. But why is it that they're happy to tell me but they're not happy to tell other professionals? And it's to do, I guess, with relationship. And a lot of the time these young people have one or two or three people that they feel safe sharing that with that- that are professionals, and it's the other professionals looking at that practice and seeing what works.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

### **Risk-sensible**

The Council should **avoid escalation to the police** unless there is a real risk of harm. A risk-sensible approach could be supported by professionals and carers making collaborative safety plans and decisions with young people and their trusted networks about risk and responses:

*For me massively, it's like how we manage risk, because the responses we get from foster carers, from residential workers, from social workers or whatever, it's about kind of accountability and the risk. And that kind of forces a lot of the responses rather than actually being bespoke, looking at the context of the young person. Like if you'd say, you've got a girlfriend, you go to your girlfriends, we don't do*

*enough to look at that and actually just holding risks. You know, it's okay that there are risks and what can we do to buffer it or make it more protective? And I think then you go back to the relationships. Because it's like if I'm gonna have a go at them and say like, 'Ooh, you're gonna keep me up all night, I'll be on the phone for three hours.' Probably you... what message is that?*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

## **Guardianship**

Young people need **access to safe and trusted people at all times of day and night**, in their care placements, in their professional networks and in the community. This could be maximised by increasing the availability of trusted professionals out of hours, and increasing access to safe respite spaces for overnights and weekends when breaks are needed. It could also be supported by increasing the presence of safe people and places in the community:

*I think like acknowledging everyone around that young person and who those trusted people are that they will contact. So whether that's like their mom or their sister or a mentor or whoever that person is, and working with the systems that are in place to make sure these people are integrated and recognised as, 'Okay, well they've checked in with that person, that person's had eyes on them on, you know, Sunday, but they were missing Saturday night and that is good enough.' Rather than it being, you know, escalated.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

*In town nowadays they have the suicide people going out instead of like the police coming around on the docks and stuff. They should make a thing up for missing people.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

## **Care**

As well as managing risk and building safety, protection responses need to centre care. Professional relationships, interventions and care placements should **nurture young people**, be appropriately skilled and flexible for working with adolescents, and **reflect and nurture young people's community and cultural needs**:

*The safety comes from a pro-active care-giver, and, you know, where we have either residential staff or supported accommodation staff, or foster carers who pro-actively respond, and try and maintain contact with the young person, and encourage them back home and help them process what happened and the triggers for it, that's the primary source of safety.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*there are lots of times where we are looking for the state to, rather than the state providing care, they're providing enforcement*

*(Professional Interview, June 2023)*

## Respect and equality

Young people should be **treated equitably and should not be discriminated against** due to their 'race', gender, background, or care status. Local areas should have oversight of how protected characteristics and care status impact outcomes and responses for young people, and all staff should receive training and supervision (that includes feedback from young people) to support them to understand, record and mitigate the impact of discrimination:

*I think the thing is about the evening, is that it's sort of, what is normal for a young person of that age as well. So, there's something about you know we would expect to know where most young people are in the evening, whereas they might have more free time in the day when they're a bit older as teenagers. But I think the curfew stuff is something about what do we expect for a young person of that age, but it doesn't always match up to the actual what the risk is for that individual young person.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

*When the people report the black person, it takes time to put on the system. But when the white person is, the next day you see on the paper or you see on the television, you see the Twitter, the police Twitter, and then it's quick respond. But sometimes you see the black person is missing, but it's not on the system.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

## Practice recommendations

After workshop one and two, a set of practice ideas were shared with Bristol City Council. In workshop three, the project lead at Bristol City Council fed back the ideas that strategic leads in the local area felt could be feasibly taken forward. These were discussed further in workshop three and four. Not all the consortium's initial ideas were thought to be feasible, and the consortium did not support all the suggestions fed back by the local area. Similarly, there was not always agreement between consortium members about what a response should look like. These areas of divergence are noted where they exist, but the thematic findings presented below draw on the ideas with the most convergence.

## The role of the police

### Acknowledging harm

The missing process often results in an automatic call to the police, triggering a response that is primarily police-led. This is problematic as it can result in unnecessary escalation and can put pressure on young people when they are just 'doing normal teenage things' like spending time with girlfriends/boyfriends, or at the cinema. There was broad agreement in the consortium that **police involvement can be unwanted**, unhelpful, and sometimes unnecessary, and that in some cases, particularly in larger cities in the UK, policing can be heavy handed, and the police can 'take it too far'.

The consortium reported that the police were more punitive when they didn't know a young person (and their vulnerabilities), and also that they could be more punitive if they knew a young person's 'background' (i.e., if they are from a part of town that is viewed negatively). The timing of police interviews was raised, with some members sharing that young people could be woken at 3am by police wanting to speak with them after they have been reported missing.

*How the police over there done it [London/Manchester], they're more, like, aggressive. Like, they'll grab you for nothing. And like, just drag you off the train and you'll get put in the van and they take you all the way back to Bristol in the car.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

Consortium members shared that young people had sometimes 'had their fun' by the time police found them. However, it was also shared that sometimes young people are relieved that the police have found them when they have been feeling unsafe.

#### *Welfare and trauma informed responders*

The local area suggested that there could be a specialist missing team, or named police officers, for young people who are regularly reported missing. However, consortium members shared concerns that police shift patterns, and the frequent placement moves that young people experience, could make this infeasible. The consortium also shared concerns that the police are not currently welfare or trauma informed enough in their approach and require more **specialist training**. The consortium suggested that groups of police officers should not be sent out to look for one young person (adding that in most cases they will make their own way back) and that for very vulnerable young people it is important to get a caring, welfare response and that this could be facilitated by having **someone who knows the young person and who they trust** going to find them:

*But I suppose it's about, you know, ensuring the police are aware enough that they are not just like 'oh my god it's another missing person we are going after'. You know, seeing all of this data coming out about this young person and where they might be, and what the professional is concerned about and in some way interpreting that in a way, I suppose it is more punitive rather than welfare, safeguarding driven.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Three)*

The consortium suggested that in addition to **training** and **monitoring of police responses**, there should be a mechanism for young people to **feedback** to the police about their experiences and that this could be done through a trusted worker. The consortium said there is a greater role for carers, parents, and young people's networks to be included in the search for young people to avoid unnecessary escalation to the police. Some consortium members felt that issues with policing would persist, despite practice changes, due to racism, adultification and favouritism.

## Systems and processes

### Proportionality

There was broad agreement across the consortium that young people can come to harm in extra-familial contexts when they are reported missing from their care placements, and that young people can be safe, 'just having fun' and 'doing normal teenage stuff'. This is important as a central concern of the consortium was the **extent to which professional involvement creates vulnerabilities in relation to extra-familial harm through over-intervention and procedural led care:**

*Speaker 1: I can't imagine being a young person and you have a curfew, and you have your staff or your parents wanting you to get back at eleven o'clock, but then you're also being exploited by people who are not that nice, they're ringing your phone, they're ringing your phone. You've got ten different people ringing your phone and you're pulled in different directions. That can then put you at more risk because you're making quick decisions in that moment and you're not able to— tell—you know, tell me if I'm wrong, but you're not able to really process what's going on. Cos you've got your professionals ringing, the person you owe a hundred quid to ringing...*

*Speaker 2: You end up throwing the SIM card away.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop One)*

*there is also a kind of low tolerance to risk, and sometimes we can see carers use 'missing' processes in circumstances where, actually, a family wouldn't, because they have to follow procedures. So, where in families, a child, a teenager coming back late wouldn't necessarily lead to a 'missing' report, that, for children in care, does, and it can lead to further distrust or ability to be honest about what's happening in their lives, and where they're going, and their networks and connections, which can increase their lack of safety*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*What we did learn from some of the young people was actually, that feeling of wanting, at times, something more bespoke, to be listened to, and actually, if they'd had a better rapport, perhaps, with the foster carer, or placement, or children's home, and it hadn't been so rigid a structure, then they perhaps wouldn't have stayed out all night. They would have just been late, or there would have been some negotiation of extending that curfew, which would have meant that they would have come back home, perhaps, rather than stay somewhere that they, you know, ended up doing. They might have been, perhaps, more honest, in those conversations that, actually, if you'd followed that through, would have actually meant that they were less likely to come to harm, or be exposed to harm.*

*(Professional Interview, June 2023)*

**Process-led** responses were thought to put additional **pressure** on young people by expecting them to be accountable for their wellbeing and whereabouts, while they may also be under pressure in harmful relationships and spaces. When young people don't comply with these processes they are sometimes informed of the consequences of 'going missing' for professionals (i.e., that it places services under stress, or means professionals worry about their jobs) adding to the pressure on young people. Non-compliance with processes (rather than actual instances of harm or need) can then lead to placements breakdowns or breaches of YOT orders, resulting in more disruption, harm or policing of young people:

*Speaker 1: And actually, if a parent carer knows where that young person is, is it right to involve the police at that time? No. Because I would say they're just not where an adult wants them to be. They're not necessarily missing. And I think that can cause...*

*Speaker 2: Yeah, definitely. No, it can ruin the placement, which is then more detrimental because...*

*Speaker 3: I ain't even gonna lie, whoever thinks to ring the police just don't know what to do*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Two)*

*And as a professional, we are responsible, where actually, it should be a whole team of people that are responsible, not just that one support staff that's waiting in the placement, staying up all night that feels like they could lose their job if... Because then the pressure on the young person is mad because the young person's then like feeling the pressure of all the organisations.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Two)*

**Curfews** were flagged as a source of harm, placing responsibility on young people to get themselves out of harmful or unsafe situations, and often dictated by professionals/carers, rather than mutually negotiated in the way they might be for young people living at home. First, curfews often related to night-time, even though young people could be more at risk during the day. Second, young people's anxiety about what might happen when they return to placements could result in them being missing for hours or days, instead of just coming home slightly later than agreed. There is little leniency with curfews and young people can find them hard to stick to for a range of reasons that are not all indicators of harm (like wanting to finish a film at the cinema or stay with their boyfriend/girlfriend). Regardless, they often trigger an automatic missing response from the police regardless of the reason the curfew is missed.

*Speaker 1: What's the worst thing I could say then?*

*Speaker 2: No, if you don't come back before you have a curfew...*

*Speaker 1: Like a threat?*

*Speaker 2: ...I'm gonna call the police on you cos then I have that in my head already. I don't need you reminding me every day.*

*Speaker 1: Okay. Okay. So don't need reminding of the consequences...*

*Speaker 3: Yeah. You're just making a young person on breaking point and then they're not gonna want to go back anyway. So it's almost like you build up all this anxiety around keeping them safe, but actually is it sometimes making you more unsafe?*

*Speaker 2: Yeah. Definitely.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Two)*

Overall, it was felt a more **bespoke** response would be appropriate, that did not automatically escalate to the police and was based more on **collaborative** care planning and case-by-case risk assessment between young people, the people they trust and the local authority:

*Speaker 1: It just needs to be mutual respect to be honest. Even if you are like a residential to a semi-independent placement. The curfew on the missing episode shouldn't stop you from living your teenage life. Let's say, if you're at the cinema, yeah, but you have to be back at eleven o'clock. Some movies finish after eleven o'clock, but then you let your person know, [so they don't] report you missing.*

*Speaker 2: So it's like you can negotiate your time?*

*Speaker 1: Yeah. And I always feel like that needs to be put out there.*

*Speaker 2: Then you could kind of negotiate, can't you? ... Like if there is staff that have that level of concern, then say, 'Oh cool, yeah, you can stay out till when the film finishes and I'm about for a lift. Give me a call if you need me.' And then that's like, you're letting the young people take a bit of like autonomy, like making their own choices as well instead of putting them in these very like strict boxes.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Two)*

*Focus on context*

A **focus on the contexts** of young people's lives, and how these could be made safer, can shift professional processes away from solely focusing on young people's decisions and actions:

*Speaker 1: What are we doing kind of outside of the young person. You know, what work has been done if we know there's hotspots or you know, things change. Yeah, and you probably know a bit more about that than I do, but it's about kind of going in there as well, isn't it? And getting an understanding of what goes on in the community and it not making the onus on the young person all the time...*

*Speaker 2: Like don't criminalise the victim, you know?*

*Speaker 1: Understand of the context where young people are located and the environments in which they're situated within rather than just solely focusing on the individual, but the actually wider environment and community from the strength space as well.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Two)*

Designated **safe spaces and people** in local hotspot areas where young people were thought to come to harm could increase guardianship and remove the sole responsibility on young people to keep themselves safe. This shouldn't be the police, but youth services or youth workers who young people feel they can approach. It is important that safe and trusted people (usually youth services and community/grass roots organisations) are available **out of hours**:

*I'm gonna say the thing that someone else said earlier, but like a call-in centre or a check-in centre or even if it was a phone number, that a young person could phone and say, 'Look, I don't wanna say where I am, but I'll have a little chat with you just to reassure you that I'm okay. This is my plan.' That phone would be great, but even better if there was a place where a young person could go in, get food, have a chat and then go. I don't know how that would work.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

*If young people are going missing or are out in the community, they want their workers to talk to them about where to go, what their safety plan is, and doing that bit, like, we know you're going to go out and about, so how do we map it? And making sure workers are having that conversation. So not a bit like touch, really, making sure that workers are thinking about it. Because we think on a bigger scale, it looks different for everyone. And it's hard to manage it.*

*(Participant Response, Reflecting Workshop)*

**Outreach workers** in the streets that young people can go to if they need help when they are out in the community could also increase guardianship:

*Speaker 1: Cos, like, in town nowadays, they have, like, the suicide people going out instead of, like, the police coming around on the docks and stuff. They should make a thing up for missing people. Like if you see, or, like, say we go out, yeah? And yeah, and it's a couple of us boys, and we just see police walk to us, yeah? We don't know what's actually happening. We could- they could either just have a friendly*

conversation, or we could just get searched for nothing. So, technically we don't know what we're doing. Like, we don't know what they're up to. So, it's like, they don't know what we're doing, but we don't know what they're doing. So, it's either we've got to take the risk...

Speaker 2: So, you're not seeing them as safety.

Speaker 3: Cos they've got too many jobs.

(Consortium Members, Workshop One)

## Relationships

### Increasing guardianship

Trusted relationships were key to preventing young people from being reported missing, and as part of the protection response. Limited guardianship out of hours and in community spaces where young people spend time meant that if young people needed help, they had to report themselves to agencies or wait to be found by the police. Young people need access to trusted professionals who they can contact if they need support, who will stay calm and offer practical help like lifts and food, rather than interrogating them and immediately asking for information, which can push them away. Youth workers were often best placed to do this. It was suggested that more **youth work provision** is needed out of hours.

*And that's what's missing definitely. And I think in the [youth work] organisation I work for, is, we do create a bit more of a family approach to things. And like, I'm looking at you two and it's just cos I've done it for you both, but I've definitely out of hours come and got you back from situations before, and it's like they've come to me, why? What am I doing differently? But it's because, you can tell me if I'm wrong, but like I don't create a judgmental space. I'm not like, 'Where have you been? How are you?' Do you know what I mean? I'm just like, 'Oh yeah, that's fine.' And we'll come sort it out and then in the moment you work through it with the young person and you manage that risk as a professional. And if they're safe and well, and you can get them home safely, that is a positive. And then you can deal with whatever you are concerned about later rather than in the moment throwing all these like worries on them, cos they might not want to talk at that moment. They might have been through something unsafe but they want to talk about it when they're ready to talk about it. And it is just, yeah, creating a bit more of like trust with you and them.*

(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)

An **out of hours** service for missing and exploitation was thought to be helpful if the service and its staff know young people, have spent time building trusted relationships with them and were able to offer practical support, as above, and also emergency breaks – i.e., taking a young person away for a weekend, or to do some respite activities when

space was needed. The service should be able to work flexibly with young people and to manage risk and harm, to an extent, before calling the police. It was suggested that video calls could be used to introduce young people to out of hours workers so that they could get to know professionals across the service:

*Speaker 1: having that person in those hours that you can contact is a lifeline. Like, tell me if I'm wrong. But...*

*Speaker 2: You're not wrong.*

*Speaker 1: And it does build that trust as well*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop One)*

*Interviewer: Would you echo that? Do you feel like that's [short respite breaks] something that if a service could offer, that would be helpful for some young people?*

*Respondent: Yeah, it could be.*

*Interviewer: It could be.*

*Respondent: It's been very effective in my case*

*(Interview with Consortium Member who couldn't attend Workshop Three)*

*So that's what some of the work of the Missing Engagement Worker is that once, yeah, they, we know that there is the potential that they are being exploited and they've gone missing regularly, part of their role is to work with them outside of that missing, kind of the missing work and build relationships with them, so that it gets to a point then when they do go missing, they've got that relationship with the worker to tell them that that's what's going on for them.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*There are some young people who use some of our, like, Youth Centres or Special Services to drop in, when they're missing, or present to, kind of, talk about why they've gone missing*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

The local area suggested that a trusted professional could be identified for carers to link with when they are concerned that a young person is missing who could support with locating young people and making risk assessments. Consortium members challenged whether this needed to be a professional or whether this could be a **family member or friend** (noting that this would be bespoke for each young person). Trusted people could be identified in the young person's induction to their placement, so the carer knows who to

contact, and that they could also be included in the police 'Philomena' (missing) protocol, so that the police know who to contact before escalating. This person could also be contacted by the young person using an app like Hollie Guard or What Three Words if they need help:

*Somebody who is not classed as a typical professional. Because from the research, kind of, what's kind of coming out so far, is a lot of discussion of, kind of, extending that in terms of community groups and other individuals rather than it being a professional.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

*But the idea is that professionals at some point do move away and that you've got the resources to continue without professionals being present. Maybe that's something that's built into that, it could be either or, actually, who is your person? It could be a professional, it could be somebody else. These are the things we need to factor in and think about, and let them choose.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

Grassroots, community-based, youth work organisations were thought to be effective in providing caring and responsive services to young people, but it was noted that these organisations, particularly Black-led organisations are not always in receipt of larger funding opportunities. It was felt that this was due to larger, white-led organisations being seen as more familiar and therefore more trusted. The consortium said that work would need to happen for the local authority to **trust non-professionals or other non-traditional partners**, including community-based organisations and friends and family networks, but that family members and friends may not trust the local authority and the police enough to want to engage in the response:

*We can make an assumption about the safety or otherwise of friendship networks. But young people tell us that, you know, they may have peer groups who... or other young people in care, particularly the older ones, who may be in independent living, or supported living arrangements, where there aren't other adults or professionals who know that they might have a young person staying who is missing from care, but that is actually providing them with safety in their own kind of way and that might be through their friendship network and support. But sometimes the barriers, for them telling us about those arrangements, are not wanting to bring police to the door.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*If they ring their mentor and tell them where they are that... Is that gonna be sufficient enough for the police or for [local authority]? Because I know just from the work I'm doing, I struggle quite a lot when I go, right, I wanna bring in a community organisation to do this piece of work. And there's still a lot of negativity and mistrust from people quite high up within the council when we're talking about*

*grassroots community organisations. So there needs to be, you know, if we look at something like that, a lot of work needs to be done with, within our own, well, I say our own, [local authority], about some of that stuff that goes on around local organisations.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

Consortium members shared that when young people are reported missing, they often return to home communities and places where people know them and where they can be safe. Young people are usually in touch with someone, a family member or friend or people in the community who do know where they are. The consortium flagged that when Black young people are moved into care placements this can remove them from communities that know them, and where there are **existing trusted relationships and organic forms of support** networks. The consortium also flagged that the communities young people are moved away from can offer representation and a sense of safety:

*if you are around your mate's house who you've grown up with, you know his mom, you're smoking weed all weekend, that might feel like home. So again, you don't feel like you're missing, because you feel like you are home.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

*And [when] one of the black person put on that system, straight away [they] come out ... just say, 'oh, I'm...' – cos the community know each other, and they [say] 'we know he's here. He's been missing'. And he was with A or B, and then it's come out we'd had him. We work a lot for the young people, and sometimes they contact with their worker and then they say, 'I'm not missing. I'm coming out any time you want with me. But I'm not going home'. So, sometimes the curfew's nine o'clock and they say, 'I'm not going. So, tell the police I'm not going home until two o'clock, but I'm not missing'.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop One)*

*You know, it was community, it was representation, you know, I knew where I could go if something was ever wrong. So, I just think there is, how do we bring that's in as well, you know, you know, that sense of safety.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Three)*

### *Care, not process-led*

The consortium shared that in addition to the need for greater guardianship and trust there is a need for greater **caring oversight** for young people, whether in the community or in care placements. This included placement options that have sufficient care in place particularly for older young people, and where young people receive care that is equitable with young people who are cared for within their/families:

*My thoughts are, there are times when, yeah, for our sixteen plus, the lack of provision or providers or whatever, has perhaps made our young people more vulnerable.*

*(Professional Interview, February 2023)*

*I think about, you know, me as a mother of two children, what's good enough for my kids, and what would I do? And would I be doing this whole report? You know, I need you to tell me, you know, you're gonna, in terms of just the human response or just that, and that care and nurture. I think where things sometimes it feels, what I'm hearing is process and procedure. I'm thinking, well, within kind of the capacity of being a parent, a carer, where is that? Where's that kind of connectiveness on the person to person level?*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

*The young person would feel, I think, probably, more valued. It's an interest, rather than actually it's a placement cos they've got to be here, or it's a job, do you know what I mean? It would be feeling that actually somebody is interested, somebody is caring, and I think that came out really loud and clear from the workshop with the young people, that, that, sometimes, they felt that they had no option but just to go.*

*(Professional Interview, June 2023)*

Carers should be supported to provide a nurturing environment for young people, focusing on how to welcome young people when they arrive at placements and when they return from periods of being reported missing. Carers should be provided with **specialist training on working with adolescents** and agreed with the local area suggestion that a set of **standards for care placements** should be produced with young people to support this. The local area suggested that these standards could be shared with commissioning teams and could support carers to provide home-like and nurturing care placements that were specifically suitable for adolescents, i.e., that were flexible, that were open to negotiation and able to manage the concerns that can be associated with extra-familial harm:

*And I think there's a very particular way to build that relationship and create that safe space. And because they're constrained by their agency that they work for, you know, like, for example, staff at [residential setting], they can't go out, they can't leave the building, but what if you have got a seventeen year old in there that is at risk out in the community and needs that professional to drive out and pick them up? And then that bypasses the police because you're doing it all within a professional space and relationship...*

*(Participant Response, Scoping Workshop)*

*With the foster carer learning how to welcome home a young person, that would be very helpful, 'cause I've been in situations as well. 'Cause you know that you've passed the curfew, whatever, and now you're missing like that three o'clock in the morning. And then, yeah. And then that just turns it into a day, whatever, then it goes on a month, because you're just anxious to know how that first greeting is going to be when you come back to the house.*

*(Interview with Consortium Member who couldn't attend Workshop Three)*

*And then also how they were greeted on their return. You know, was it the finger-wagging? Were they in trouble? Were they gonna get this, that and the other, or actually were they gonna be welcomed back in, and then could share where they've been? All that different approach would all mean that the young people would have... yeah, they'd be able to make contact, to say, 'I want to stay here', or, 'actually, I'm now in a dodgy situation. Can you come and pick me up'? Because that relationship would be far stronger*

*(Professional Interview, June 2023)*

Caring responses were those that are proportionate and **rooted in young people's relationships** (i.e. between carers and others in young people's networks as discussed above) **rather than processes that manage risk for professionals**. This could allay unnecessary escalation to the police, with emergency intervention being available when it was needed:

*I think, and, and I think that's the bit that really speaks to me most is we've got this single process responding to such a range of... it's like in a way, for me, seeing missing as a, is very behavioural in our thinking, right, like, and the structure and procedure. You end up focusing, I think, on the being reported missing, rather than perhaps all of the reasons why the child isn't where the person who's caring for them thinks they should be.*

*(Professional Interview, June 2023)*

*Like just the trust is like, you know, that nine times outta ten, you know, through the experience and the work I've done, I probably can say whether there's real risk or not risk. I might not always get it right, But neither would the police, do you know what I mean? There's still gonna be elements where the police might not judge risk well.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

## Managing risk together

*It feels like there's something about, I don't know, spreading risk or responsibility, feels like it's really important for this process because it becomes individualised, that's when you get the responses, oh, it's one minute past eleven, let's automatically call the police because that's who we are concerned about, we'll just put it onto the police and then, you know, we've done... so, it just feels like there is something somewhere that if you do have some questions that you can, sort of, full-back on a little bit that make you think okay, or somebody else to contact, or something to help, kind of, make that decision rather than it just be based on time or based on such a like, okay, I called them, and I can't get through to them, so therefore, I'm going to report it.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Three)*

The local area suggested that a risk assessment could be designed with young people to guide carers' decision making. There were mixed views on whether a co-designed risk assessment would be helpful. Some felt a consultation such as the one being carried out for this project could produce a co-designed risk assessment with reflective and prompt questions for carers, leading to a checklist/pathway that results in escalation or not. This way, responsibility is spread between carers and other partners who will have contributed to the risk assessment. Others felt any such process would need to be bespoke for individual young people.

One suggestion to enable a **bespoke risk assessment** was for three people to be identified by the young person and their network who can be contacted when a young person is not where they are expected to be, and who can work together to discuss the situation and their concerns. This '**trusted trio**' would know the young person and have a trusted relationship with them and could make a risk assessment, take action and decide whether escalation to the police is necessary:

*Respondent: Yeah, it should be like, you should have a little three people team, if it does come to that. And where it's just a quick call. And then yeah, you go from there.*

*Interviewer: And who would be part of that three-person team?*

*Respondent: Trusted people in your life and who you feel comfortable with.*

*Interviewer: Right. Okay. So not just a generic police officer or a social worker, but actually people who know that young person, who that young person trusts.*

*(Interview with Consortium Member who couldn't attend Workshop Three)*

The local area suggested an **out of hours support service for carers** to support their decision making. Consortium members suggested that young people's supervising social workers, or a service that knows young people, should be available out of hours to help carers to make and share responsibility for decisions:

*Speaker 1: And it might even feel quite comforting for a carer who is a bit unsure about all of this, and concerned. If they have that person that they are like, right, this is who I talk to first and may be think about making a decision with this person first.*

*Speaker 2: Well, yeah, because it would feel like they are kind of holding some of that risk with them.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Three)*

It was flagged that the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) and the police (the current options) are not best placed to support this decision making, as they often do not know young people well. It was felt this unfamiliarity with young people led to over or underreacting.

*Interviewer: any thoughts on an out of hours service?*

*Respondent: I just lost hope with those people to be honest. I don't really know where I came across them. I feel like even if he was to change anything to do with EDT, it still be a same process that is now.*

*Interviewer: In terms of EDT, what is it about the process that doesn't work now?*

*Respondent: They may not know the young person, the case, severity of the case or at the time or whatever. So they may not play on it how they should play on it.*

*(Interview with Consortium Member who couldn't attend Workshop Three)*

The local area also suggested that a **mutual support network for carers** that they are introducing called Mockingbird could provide opportunities for carers to come together to support each other with the emotional impact of managing risks associated with extra-familial harm and missing, and to provide practical support to each other, for example getting to know the young people each foster carer is caring for and helping out with respite or helping to locate young people. This was felt to be positive as it supports carers to manage risk decisions as well as increasing the network of guardianship around young people:

*I'm a foster carer, and I've seen that happen naturally, not me. And they were giving each other respite for the young person, so it worked really well.*

*(Participant Response, Reflecting Workshop)*

## **Rights and agency**

### *Creating parity and equality*

Young people in care are not **treated with the same flexibility** as other young people and protection responses should align more with what is expected of young people who live with their families. Care plans should be appropriate for the increasing independence that is usual for the adolescent developmental stage while ensuring caring and trusted relationships and support are available:

*Speaker 1: And leniency when it comes to normal teenage stuff. If they're seen you at the cinema and they're sure you're in the cinema and that, from a picture, and then just leave them to do it. Don't ask them what film they're watching, encourage them to do more stuff like that. Not say, 'Oh you have to leave now.' And then putting you in like two minds of, 'Oh, am I gonna leave and waste my money?' Things like that*

*Speaker 2: So allowing young people to be young people is what I'm hearing.*

*(Consortium Members, Workshop Two)*

**Designated 'safe spaces'** in community areas for young people in care and at risk of extra-familial harm were discussed, and this raised rights and equality issues. Designated safe space could be **stigmatising**, with one consortium member sharing that designated safe spaces aren't needed – anyone who feels unsafe would go to a supermarket or somewhere where there are people as that is common-sense. As discussed earlier, it was suggested that **keeping young people in familiar communities** increases guardianship, and rather than designated safe spaces, short-term respite trips with trusted workers are useful when young people need a break or are particularly at risk. Local, community businesses, were thought to play an on-going and important role.

*Interviewer: Professionals were talking about safe places that they might be able to develop - like working with supermarkets. So you could go to a supermarket and that person would know, you could go up to somebody in the supermarket and say, I'm feeling unsafe. And then they would be able to get some help for you, or smaller takeaways or McDonald's or something like that. Would any of that work?*

*Respondent: Well, that's just normal life. If you're in town today and something happens, and you run into a shop saying, 'Oh, I'm in a situation for something.' They're going to get you up either way. So it's not really going to change anything. If anything, it's just going to put a label on the young people, but yeah.*

*Interviewer: Right. Okay. That's really useful. So actually, you would just go in these places anyway. You would consider them safe places anyway if you needed to get emergency help.*

*Respondent: Anyone would, like if yourself was in town and a group of people tried to mug you, you're screaming and you're running to the local shop or something that's open, where there's lights and you can be seen. That anyone really, that's your natural instinct if you are in that situation, that you want to get out of it and get to some place safe.*

*(Interview with Consortium Member who couldn't attend Workshop Three)*

*I think if you're from a community, like when you're in [name of local district], the people that work around there they know how to react to those things anyway 'cause they're all living in that community. So they're always... for example,*

*there's like a little shop on the corner. They see stuff all the time and they know how to react and how to respond. So it's almost like you're preaching to the people that already know what they're doing.*

*(Interview with Consortium Member who couldn't attend Workshop Three)*

There are **disparities in protection responses** dependent on 'race', gender and 'background'. Protective responses should be rooted in respect for young people, for their wishes and choices and be respectful of their identities, backgrounds, or cultures in line with their rights not to be discriminated against. It was suggested this could be supported through reflective supervision tools for carers and social workers to include feedback from young people and about their experiences of protection responses.

*And another thing is to give them fair trial for the young people, to be fair. All of them. No different. And some people think the young people don't know what's going on. They know of it. They know their rights. They know- their eyes is open, their ears, they understand the way you treat other people the way you treat me. So they know. So you have to be fair and respect.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

### *Reflect on information sharing*

There are ways of sharing information across multi-agency safeguarding partners that deescalates rather than escalates responses to young people. Young people should have a **choice** of who to speak to about their experiences (for example Return Home Interviews). Information from these interviews should be shared with the **consent** of young people to help track **patterns and trends** not to build intelligence on or profile young people. This can help professionals assess what response might be needed in the future (i.e., are they usually always at a friend's house where the risk is low). A **reflective space** for professionals and carers that is not about sharing information but reflecting on practice could help professionals manage risk and reflect on practice challenges, including those connected to equality and rights. A prompt sheet could be designed by young people for use in these sessions to help professionals and carers reflect on how they make decisions about risk.

*You do that as a social worker, don't you, you assess it, you think okay well, actually, is this out of character for them? How long has it been? Kind of, and they said this morning that's where they were going and that you said no: so probably they're actually there. You can kind of rationalise it a bit, whereas as a foster carer, are you are like oh my god, I've got this responsibility this person is not mine. And I think that having that kind of [reflective] questions would help you to think through that and, kind of, give you a kind of thought process around it, rather than just being like oh gosh, that's what I've got to do.*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Three)*

# Conclusions

The Building Safety consortium supported the local area to understand disparities in the missing response for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families. The recommendations were co-developed by the consortium and the local area, and an action plan is being taken forward to begin to integrate some of the ideas into the local areas service development. The findings have implications for local practice but should also be read for their national applicability for exploring the entrenched inequalities in our social care systems, and the communities they are there to serve.

Almost a quarter of young people reported missing in Bristol in 2022 were young people in care, despite making up only 0.6% of young people in the area. Boys recorded as Black, Asian, Mixed-Race and Arab were reported missing more regularly and more often than their peers, connected to concerns around criminal exploitation. This reflects national figures that tell us that young people in care and Black young people are over-represented in missing reports. When young people are missing from care it can increase their exposure to harm (Wroe et al, 2023). It also increases their interactions with the police and other statutory agencies, and their risk of being criminalised. Young people in care and Black young people already have far more interactions with the police and the criminal legal system than their peers. The concerns shared by the local area that police and statutory-led missing responses may contribute to vulnerability by pushing young people away rather than building safety around them, are echoed nationally. In their report  *Holding Our Own: A guide to non-policing solutions to serious youth violence*, Liberty (2023) warned that when the government invests in policing and expanding police powers as a response to serious youth violence (a form of extra-familial harm) rather than funding supportive infrastructure for young people, this increases the unfair treatment that many young people already receive from the police. As the Building Safety consortium told us: investment in communities and in trusted organisations increases guardianship around young people mitigating the need for unnecessary escalation to emergency services.

The findings mirror national findings by Missing People report (Missing People, 2023), specifically that whilst Black (young) people may be more at risk when they are missing, the response they receive may be less rooted in concern for welfare and safety. Missing People found that child criminal exploitation (CCE) markers were proportionally higher for Black young people but that Black and Asian missing young people are less likely to have risks associated with mental health or exploitation recorded compared to white missing young people. These findings resonate with the findings discussed here, suggesting that whilst Black young people, and young people from particular areas of the city, may be more likely to be viewed as at risk, they are less likely to be treated as vulnerable and in need of care, which significantly determines the type of response they receive.

*I wonder how much that powerlessness also comes from some of our contexts at the moment... which is like real financial challenges and like, you know, systems and poor services that are, are stripping back, but that is when you need transformation, isn't it, and that's when inequality is, yeah, is, is bigger*

*(Professional Interview, June 2023)*

The overarching principles and practice recommendations have been developed in response to these issues, but it is not proposed that they can solve them. The Building Safety consortium was clear that many of these issues exist outside of local practice, and that we must be realistic about the inter-personal, organisational and structural determiners of inequality and discrimination in services. This includes financial pressures on local areas that limit transformation opportunities, and the pressure to retreat into familiar practice cultures and frameworks in risk-averse environments.

*I think part of my concern is – is actually will we be able to affect such a change within such a short space of time because actually it's about changing how we've done things for you. Do you know what I mean? And to take people out of a comfort blanket or away from perhaps a process, which is what we're saying. Don't be process driven, let's be, you know, human, basically. That's really, really hard sometimes for some people so yeah*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

*I think for me it's nice to hear like other professionals feel the same because I think sometimes I'm like, 'Does no one else feel like this isn't working? Is it just me that thinks this is ridiculous?' So like to sit and hear from everyone else that's like, 'Yeah. This is something that needs to be changed.' That feels better. And I think even for the young people to hear that we all feel that is probably refreshing cos I think they think we are just in this realm of like risk assessment all the time and they're like, 'You just don't understand.' But I think, yeah, to just sit there and be like, 'This isn't working and we could do things better as healthy.'*

*(Consortium Member, Workshop Two)*

## Recommendations

Recommendations for local practice, and local and national leaders are summarised below:

### Practice recommendations

#### *Overarching principles:*

- **Trusted relationships:** Include people and organisations that young people already trust and choose – trust them to be vital part of the safety plan. Build trusted relationships across the service by having well-resourced staff who remain in roles (out of hours, carers, residential); through training; co-creating plans with young people; and time together.
- **Risk-sensible:** Avoid escalation to police unless real risk of harm; make collaborative decisions about risk with young people and their trusted network.
- **Guardianship:** Increase the availability of trusted people (i.e. youth services) out of hours; increase access to safe respite spaces for overnights and weekends.
- **Care:** Resource, support and sustain caring and nurturing placements that treat teenagers like teenagers and consider community and cultural needs.
- **Equality and respect:** Demand equitable treatment regardless of race, gender, class or care status. Have oversight of this through tracking trends and feedback from young people; training for staff including young people's voices.

*Before a young person is reported missing:*

- Keep young people in **familiar communities** to increase a sense of safety and guardianship (where possible).
- Develop a **Missing Safety Plan that is co-designed by the young person**, their carer and social worker on arrival in a placement.
- Support young people, their carers, and social workers to identify **three trusted people** (not necessarily professionals). This 'trusted trio' should be named in safety plans and in their police missing protocol. Carers can contact these people when concerned about the young person's whereabouts – to avoid escalation.
- Resource **out of hours services** staffed by workers who know/are known by young people and carers to help risk assessment and avoid escalation. Avoid using the police and emergency duty teams who do not have relationships with young people.
- Design **prompt questions for carers and out of hours staff**, that are developed with young people, to guide risk assessment when a young person is 'missing'.
- Coordinate a **mutual support network** for carers to provide emotional support, mutual oversight of young people, and mutual respite.
- Deliver mandatory **training for carers** on what to do if worried about a young person's whereabouts to help manage risk, locate young people safely, and avoid unnecessary escalation.

*When a young person is reported missing:*

- Include and support friends/family and **non-traditional partners** to look for young people, **trust them** to be part of the safety plan to reduce need for police response.
- **Increase guardianship for young people** via detached youth workers and out of hours youth services. Particularly grassroots, community-led and Black-led organisations so that young people have someone/somewhere to go to.
- Where emergency responses are required, ensure they are **welfare and trauma informed** to reduce heavy-handed policing and promote a welfare response.
- Use **safety apps** (i.e. Holly Guard/What Three Words) for young people to contact trusted people when they are at risk.

*When a young person returns:*

- Deliver mandatory training for carers on adolescent development and **nurturing responses** – to promote choice, flexibility and care.
- Publish a set of standards for care placements on **welcoming young people home** (with young people's voices included) to avoid deterring young people from returning to placements.
- Resource **out of hours respite services** (overnights and weekends) for young people in care who are at risk beyond their families and who need to get away for short periods.
- Ensure **young people have a choice of who to speak to** for their Return Home Interview. Agree and review with young people how information will be shared, and with whom, to increase trust.
- Coordinate **reflective, welfare-focused, professional meetings** to understand trends and patterns in relation to extra-familial harm and missing from care.
- Provide **reflective supervision tools** for social workers (including feedback from

- young people) to reflect on the missing response and inequalities and discrimination.
- Create **opportunities for young people to give feedback**: text/QR code and questions in the Return Home Interview for young people to feedback on police response. Provide training for staff on how to facilitate these discussions.

Prompts for local and national leaders:

- **Oversight**: Are young people in care more likely to be reported missing? How is this informed by 'race', gender and age? Black young people, particularly boys, are more likely to be viewed as at risk, but less likely to be treated as vulnerable. Local areas should have oversight of disparities in responses.
- **Responses**: Is the missing response proportional to the risk? Does it build safety around young people or control their behaviour through statutory processes - increasing their interactions with the police and other agencies and isolating them/increasing their risk of criminalisation?
- **Investment**: Do you invest in communities, and in the community-based and youth work organisations that young people and their communities' trust. This increases guardianship around young people, mitigating the need for unnecessary escalation to the police and statutory services.

# References

Contextual Safeguarding, no date a [Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders | Contextual Safeguarding](#)

Contextual Safeguarding, no date, b. [Building Safety: Safeguarding black young men and boys in Lambeth | Contextual Safeguarding](#)

Doucet, M., Pratt, H., Dzhenganin, M. & Read, J. (2022). Nothing About Us Without Us: Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and arts-based methods as empowerment and social justice tools in doing research with youth 'aging out' of care, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 105358  
Firmin, C.; Lloyd, J. Green Lights and Red Flags: The (Im)Possibilities of Contextual Safeguarding Responses to Extra-Familial Harm in the UK. *Social Sciences*, 11, 303  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11070303>

[Firmin, C.; Lloyd, J. Green Lights and Red Flags: The \(Im\)Possibilities of Contextual Safeguarding Responses to Extra-Familial Harm in the UK. \*Social Sciences\*, 11, 303](#)  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11070303>

Lefevre, M., Preston, O., Hickle, K., Horan, R., Drew, H., Banerjee, R., Cane, T., Barrow, M. & Bowyer, S. (2020). Evaluation of the implementation of a Contextual Safeguarding system in the London Borough of Hackney Evaluation report. (online) [Evaluation of the implementation of a Contextual Safeguarding system in the London Borough of Hackney \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Liberty (2023). Holding Our Own: A guide to non-policing solutions to serious youth violence. (online) [Holding Our Own: A guide to non-policing solutions to serious youth violence - Liberty \(libertyhumanrights.org.uk\)](#)

Lloyd, J. (2019). Response and interventions into harmful sexual behaviour in schools. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 94, 104037

Lloyd, J., Walker, J. & Bradbury, V. (2020). [Harmful sexual behaviour in schools | Contextual Safeguarding](#).

Missing People (2023). The ethnicity of missing people: findings from police and local authority data, 2021-2022. (online) [Missing\\_Ethnicity-report.pdf \(missingpeople.org.uk\)](#)

National Youth Advisory Service (online) [76,000 Times Too Many | International Missing Children's Day | NYAS](#)

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2022) The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system (online). [The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Wroe, L.E. (2021), "Young people and "county lines": a contextual and social account", *Journal of Children's Services*, 16:1, 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-10-2020-0063>

Wroe, L.E. (2022). When Helping Hurts: A Zemiological Analysis of a Child Protection Intervention in Adolescence— Implications for a Critical Child Protection Studies. *Social Sciences*, 11, 263. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11060263>

Wroe, L., Lloyd, J., & Manister, M. (2023). *From peers and parks to patriarchy and poverty: inequalities in young people's experiences of extra-familial harm and the child protection system*. In C. Firmin, & J. Lloyd (Eds.), *Contextual Safeguarding: The Next Chapter* (17-29). Bristol: Policy Press.

Wroe, L. E., Peace, D. & Firmin, C. (2023). 'Relocating' Adolescents from Risk beyond the Home: What Do We Learn When We Ask about Safety?, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53, 5, 2958–2978