




Improving  
Policing  
Across  
Scotland

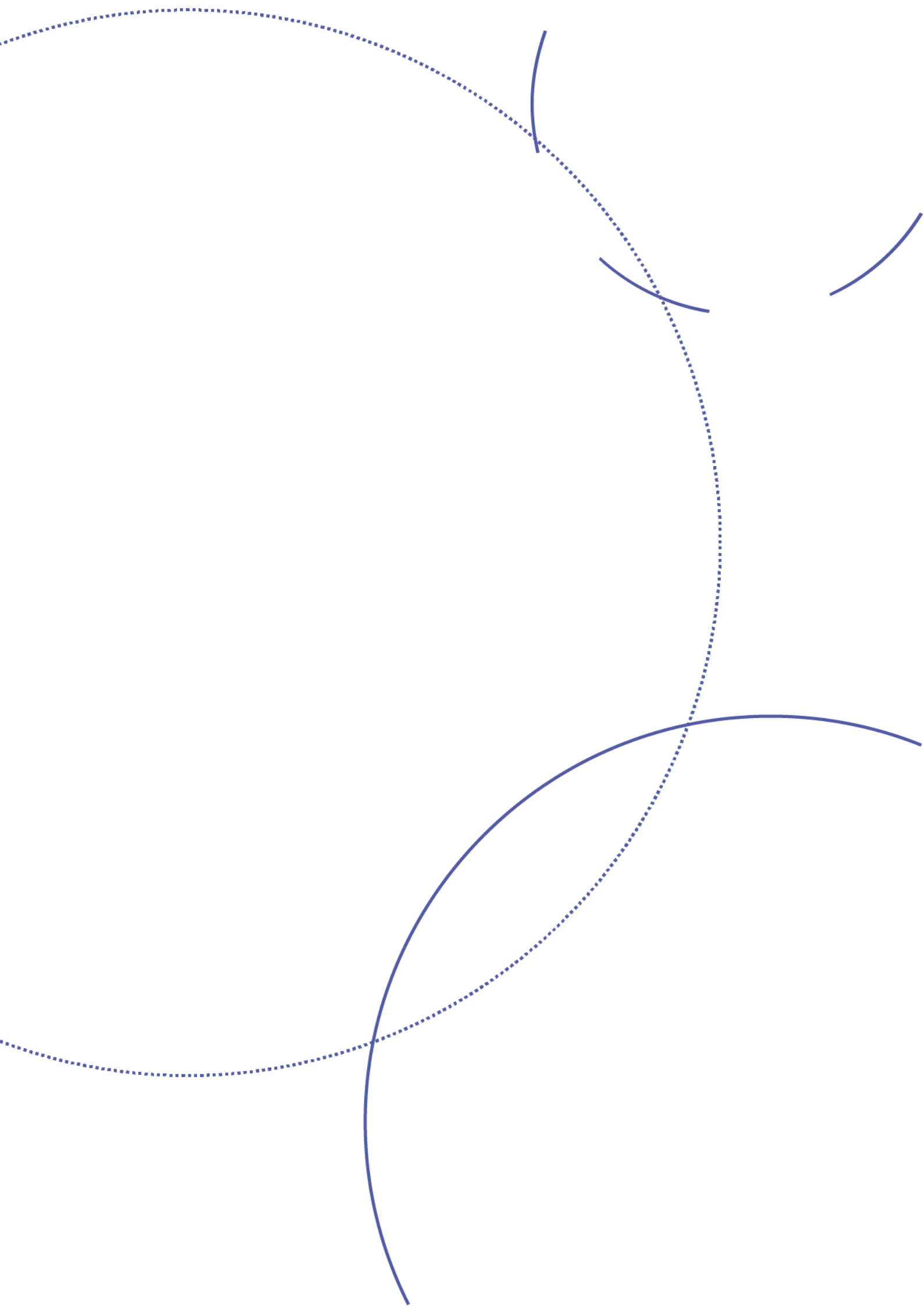


# HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland

October 2024



Thematic inspection  
of police response to  
missing persons in  
Scotland





# HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland

---

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) is established under the [Police and Fire Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#) and has wide ranging powers to look into the 'state, effectiveness and efficiency' of both the Police Service of Scotland (Police Scotland) and the Scottish Police Authority (SPA).

We have a statutory duty to inquire into the arrangements made by the Chief Constable and the SPA to meet their obligations in terms of best value and continuous improvement. If necessary, we can be directed by Scottish Ministers to look into anything relating to the SPA or Police Scotland as they consider appropriate. We also have an established role in providing professional advice and guidance on policing in Scotland.

- Our powers allow us to do anything we consider necessary or expedient for the purposes of, or in connection with, the carrying out of our functions
- The SPA and the Chief Constable must provide us with such assistance and co-operation as we may require to enable us to carry out our functions
- When we publish a report, the SPA and the Chief Constable must also consider what we have found and take such measures, if any, as they think fit
- Where our report identifies that the SPA or Police Scotland is not efficient or effective (or best value not secured), or will, unless remedial measures are taken, cease to be efficient or effective, Scottish Ministers may direct the SPA to take such measures as may be required. The SPA must comply with any direction given
- Where we make recommendations, we will follow them up and report publicly on progress
- We will identify good practice that can be applied across Scotland
- We work with other inspectorates and agencies across the public sector and co-ordinate our activities to reduce the burden of inspection and avoid unnecessary duplication
- We aim to add value and strengthen public confidence in Scottish policing and will do this through independent scrutiny and objective, evidence-led reporting about what we find.



Our approach is to support Police Scotland and the SPA to deliver services that are high quality, continually improving, effective and responsive to local needs.<sup>1</sup>

**This thematic inspection was undertaken by HMICS in terms of Section 74(2)(a) of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 and is laid before the Scottish Parliament in terms of Section 79(3) of the Act.**












---

<sup>1</sup> HMICS, [Corporate Plan 2021-24](#), 1 February 2022.



# Contents

---

	Page
 Our inspection	4
 Key findings	6
 Recommendations	14
 Areas for development	16
 Areas of good practice	17
 Methodology	19
 Background	22
 Leadership and vision	35
 Delivery	41
 Outcomes	89
 Appendix	93



## Our inspection

---

We have undertaken this comprehensive inspection of the police response to missing persons in recognition of the impact that this issue can have on individuals and their families. We have also become increasingly aware of the significant resources dedicated to responding to missing person incidents within local police divisions and across the specialist national divisions (e.g., operational support, Policing Together and the contact, command and control divisions).

Our inspection has been far reaching and we have engaged widely across the aforementioned police divisions, through interviews and focus groups. We undertook onsite visits to meet with partners from health, local authority and third sector services to examine how well partners work together to address this important issue. In the methodology section of this report, we outline our approach and the range of tasks undertaken, including a comprehensive review of calls made to police service centres and an audit of the national missing persons application used by police to record incidents and guide investigations.

A significant number of people are reported missing each year. We know from research that becoming missing is a universal issue as anyone can potentially go missing. People from all walks of life can be affected and the incident can occur in a wide variety of circumstances. There are many complex reasons why an individual may go missing, and it is likely that one person's reasoning may differ greatly from another. Research has tended to focus on the most vulnerable groups of individuals such as children, people with mental health issues or with dementia. However, there are many cases where the pressures of everyday life or problems within relationships can be the basis of a missing person incident.

It is of concern that the majority of people reported missing each year are children and young people. Our report outlines that children and young people represent over 60% of missing people in the past year (2023-24). We outline the extent to which police and partners are responding to and addressing this issue, however, recognise that this is part of a wider societal problem that needs to be addressed in order to protect, support and prevent children and young people from becoming missing in the first place.



This report highlights that while there is a significant level of demand placed on policing, with over 20,000 missing person calls being made to police service centres each year, the vast majority of missing people either return by themselves or are returned by Police Scotland. That said, many missing people come to harm while missing, and the impact on families in the relatively small number of situations where a person is not found, or is found dead, can be devastating.

Overall, the policing response to missing persons is robust and effective and demonstrates a significant level of commitment to investigate thoroughly and locate people as swiftly as possible. However, more needs to be done to ensure that clear leadership and strategic direction is in place. We have also highlighted where improvements can be made in the operational response and have outlined recommendations intended to support Police Scotland to drive improvement.

The role of partner organisations, including local authorities, health services and third sector partners, is critical to achieving positive outcomes for missing people. We have found that while some areas can demonstrate effective partnership working that has resulted in better preventative approaches and a reduction in missing person incidents, this is not consistent across the country.

The competence and professionalism of Police Scotland's approach to missing persons has been recognised for its effectiveness by partners across Scotland and police forces in other countries. Our interviews with leaders from health, social work and the third sector, were very positive about the commitment and expertise that police bring to addressing missing person incidents. Police Scotland has previously been approached by the Australian Federal Police, South Australia Police, Swedish Police Authority and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, to discuss structures, processes and practice that have proved effective, with a view to adopting these.

We anticipate that the findings and recommendations resulting from this inspection will contribute to the collective efforts of police and partners to achieve better outcomes for missing people and their families.

**Craig Naylor**

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

October 2024



## Key findings

---

### General

- The scale of missing person incidents in Scotland is considerable, with Police Scotland recording over 20,000 missing person reports on its system for tasking and operational resource management (STORM)<sup>2</sup> in 2023. Following assessment, almost 18,000 missing person investigations proceeded and were recorded on the police national missing persons application (NMPA) in the same year.
- The number of police investigations undertaken has reduced over the past two years. Investigations undertaken in the year 2022-23 were recorded as 17,917 whereas, in 2023-24, the figure reduced to 16,236.
- Most people go missing from their home address. There has been a decrease in the number of people missing from home in the past year, along with those missing from NHS settings, foster care and children's houses.<sup>3</sup>
- The majority of missing person investigations in Scotland relate to those aged 17 years and under.
- The issue of missing persons in Scotland is wide-ranging and affects both urban and rural areas (although the police investigative response can differ significantly, based on differences in population and geographical issues).
- There is a clear definition in place of what constitutes a missing person, which has been agreed between Police Scotland and partners. This includes an agreed definition of risk.

---

<sup>2</sup> STORM is a computer system used by Police Scotland to create and manage incidents reported by members of the public, but also to manage the deployment of operational resources.

<sup>3</sup> This is the term commonly used in Scotland when referring to what were previously known as residential childcare units or children's homes.



- The response to missing persons is not solely a police matter and often involves key partners from health, local authorities and third sector organisations at a national and local level.
- Police Scotland has demonstrated consistent success in resolving missing person incidents. Data for the past four years shows that over 99% of missing persons are traced alive each year. Over 90% of missing incidents are closed within 48 hours, with 58% closing within the first eight hours.

## Leadership and vision

- Police Scotland subscribes to the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland (the framework). This is a Scottish Government-led framework that sets out expectations and commitments for a multi-agency response to missing persons in Scotland.
- Police Scotland has collaborated effectively with partners at a national level to develop the framework, which was first introduced in 2017.
- The establishment of a national multi-agency framework for missing persons is a particular strength in Scotland. The principles are supported by research and evidence of what works. There is no similar framework in place in other parts of the UK.
- The Scottish Government provides valuable support to promote missing person policy. It provides funding for national missing person coordinators (hereinafter referred to as national coordinators), hosted by a third sector charity organisation, [Missing People](#), that operates across the UK and undertakes secretariat functions for the framework implementation group.
- Police Scotland has been a driving force behind the implementation of the framework. However, more recently, there have been gaps in clear and visible leadership at senior level, as well as in the oversight and governance of operations.
- There is clear and effective divisional leadership. This includes effective command structures for high-risk missing person investigations.



- The framework is not statutory guidance, which can result in some partners giving it less attention and emphasis than it requires. The framework does not have the consistent profile that it should have among some partner organisations.
- There was limited awareness of the collective aims and objectives of the framework across divisions and among operational officers and staff.
- Several partners and partnership areas have made considerable progress in adopting the framework and have worked effectively with Police Scotland on its implementation at a local level. However, this is not consistent across the country.
- Police Scotland has a good understanding of demand resulting from missing persons. However, a more strategic planning response is required to identify efficiencies that may have a positive impact on demand levels.
- Police Scotland has developed suitable guidance for officers and staff, but there is no specific role profile or overarching guidance for divisional missing person coordinators where they are not affiliated to a divisional missing person coordination unit.
- While there are a range of procedures and toolkits in place to support the operational practice of officers and staff in respect of missing person investigations, these can be difficult to find on the police intranet. This resulted in some staff not being aware of relevant practice guides.
- Police Scotland provides quarterly performance reports to the SPA. The reports are used to highlight trends and changes in the number and type of incidents that are investigated. Current performance management data includes a range of demand-related information relevant to demographics and geographical differences.
- There is no overarching internal mechanism to evaluate the quality of the police response for missing persons.



## Partnership working

- Police Scotland is a key partner in the framework implementation group. This is principally made up of representatives from Scottish Government, police, third sector agencies and academia. While beneficial in setting the agenda and providing oversight of the development and implementation of the framework, the group has no representation from senior personnel from local authorities or health services, which limits its influence.
- The development of collaborative working arrangements and positive operational culture is largely driven by divisional police leadership, alongside the National Crime Agency's UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU). This is considered by partners to be very positive.
- The contribution of partner organisations at a divisional level is variable. Several partners and local authority areas have made considerable progress in adopting the framework and have worked effectively with Police Scotland on its implementation at a local level. However, this is not consistent across the country.
- There is no national strategic group, made up of senior representatives from partnership bodies including police, health, and local authorities, to collectively steer the partnership response to missing persons. The effectiveness of a collaborative missing person response tends to be based on the quality of divisional partnership working agreements and can therefore depend on the level of priority given to it by divisional commanders and local partners.
- A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was previously in place between Police Scotland and Missing People however this has lapsed. The MOU concentrated on arrangements for referrals aimed at helping and supporting missing persons and their families. An information sharing agreement is being developed, however more needs to be done to ensure the range of services offered by Missing People are understood and used more widely across Police Scotland.



## Delivery

- The overarching operational response to missing person incidents is very effective. There are a number of areas where efficiencies can be identified and should be addressed to ensure that resources are used effectively, and that police response and outcomes for missing persons continue to improve.
- The Police Scotland national missing persons unit (NMPU) provides effective oversight and support for missing person enquiries. The unit provides investigative advice and quality assurance of the forms uploaded to the NMPA and oversees compliance with the system.
- The NMPU has limited staffing and resources to achieve its aims and objectives and relies on divisional coordinators (with varying degrees of capacity) to drive national approaches at a local level.
- The role of divisional coordinator is an essential and integral part of ensuring an effective response to missing persons. The role is not always protected within divisions. This can result in inconsistencies in how missing persons are managed at a local level and can affect the quality of performance information and partnership working.
- The NMPA provides a standardised framework for all Police Scotland missing person investigations. It is a very useful system that holds information on all missing person incidents and allows police to analyse critical missing persons information that can enhance investigative opportunities.
- The NMPA does not work well on mobile devices used routinely by police, as the system was developed for desktop use. This has introduced time inefficiencies, with officers often travelling to and from offices to record information on the system.
- Police Scotland's initial response to calls made to police service centres was of a very high standard. Most calls were dealt with by service advisors in a polite, helpful and professional manner. Our audit of calls made to service centres showed the majority of service advisors accurately obtained and recorded information as expected, in accordance with guidance.



- A THRIVE<sup>4</sup> assessment was used in almost all calls reviewed as part of our audit. However, we consider that the assessment could be used more effectively and consistently in respect of children reported missing and, in some cases, where calls had been made from older-adult care facilities.
- Contact centre service advisors referred to the iVPD<sup>5</sup> and other police systems to gather relevant information on potential vulnerabilities of the missing person, however their access to the system is limited.
- Almost all calls within our audit were assessed accurately and resolved appropriately by service advisors. This meant that accurate response levels were provided to local police divisions in a significant majority of cases.
- The operational response from local policing divisions to missing person incidents is very good. Police are highly committed to locate and return people who have been reported missing, as quickly as possible.
- The issue of some people being reported missing repeatedly presents a considerable challenge to police and partners. Children and young people are most likely to be subject to repeat missing person reports.
- Addressing repeat missing persons is a priority for Police Scotland, but there is no distinct national strategy for this. It is most often led by local divisions and therefore the approach can vary across the country.
- The effective use of early intervention, preventative approaches and protocols is essential to improve outcomes and reduce demand in an appropriate manner, including subjects of repeat missing persons reports.

---

<sup>4</sup> The term THRIVE relates to a risk assessment approach that focuses on the following areas of relevance: threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement.

<sup>5</sup> The Police Scotland interim Vulnerable Persons Database.



- Police Scotland is very committed and engaged in working with partners to implement nationally adopted protocols at a local level, including the Herbert, Philomena and Not at Home protocols.<sup>6</sup>
- We found several good examples of early intervention, prevention and the use of protocols at divisional level, however this was not replicated consistently across the country.
- The national coordinators, hosted by the Missing People charity, provide consultancy, training and valuable support for divisional police and partner organisations to implement and embed the missing persons framework.
- Some divisional coordinators and their local partners have achieved a reduction in demand by targeting repeat missing persons and collaborating on an appropriate supportive response.
- The practical approach and arrangements for return discussions (conducted with returned missing people) vary across the country, and more needs to be done to coordinate a consistent approach between police and partners.
- Police Scotland provides introductory-level training on missing persons to all probationary officers at the Scottish Police College, but there are gaps and inconsistencies in its training for operational officers and supervisors. Such training should enable and equip them to assess risk consistently across the country.
- While the operational support division (OSD) provides a wide range of specialist support services to local policing to enhance and support investigations, there is some inconsistency in access to specialist support services particularly in rural and semi-rural areas. Divisions in such areas have formed partnership arrangements with local specialist services to address this issue, and ensure more immediate access to meet their needs, and support investigations.
- It is a challenge to balance the resource required to meet the volume of missing person investigations that occur each year with that of other policing demands.

---

<sup>6</sup> These protocols have been introduced nationally to improve the information provided to police by people making a missing person report. These are most often used by professionals, however, families can also use them to provide details about their family member to enhance initial investigations. We say more about this in the 'Protocols' section of this report.



## Outcomes

- While, Police Scotland has achieved positive outcomes in terms of delivering a largely effective response to missing people, there is no overarching structure in place to set outcome targets and monitor the extent to which these have been achieved.
- Performance reports provide quantitative data, but there is limited information on the quality of service provision. This has resulted in missed opportunities to identify what is working well (or less well), to share learning and good practice, and to further develop this aspect of police services.
- Senior partners from health and local government should do more to collaborate with Police Scotland to ensure that there is a genuine multi-agency response to missing persons, aligning with the aims, objectives and commitments of the framework.
- Our onsite visits to local divisions to meet with partner organisations, senior managers and practitioners provided sound examples of very good local partnership working. We know that this also exists in those divisions not visited during our inspection, however, we are aware that this varies considerably across the country.
- We visited Lanarkshire, Highland and Islands, and Edinburgh City divisions during our inspection and were impressed by the collaborative approach and practical arrangements put in place by police and partners in those areas. There was a clear focus on working together to achieve the best possible outcomes for missing people, to reduce repeat incidents, and to provide support to missing people once returned.
- The development of divisional partnership protocols outlining an agreed strategic approach to missing persons – including focus on early intervention and prevention activity – is essential in achieving positive outcomes and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the multi-agency response.



## Recommendations

---

### Recommendation 1

Police Scotland should promote the national missing person framework's aims, objectives and commitments to officers and staff across divisions, and emphasise that this underpins its strategic direction.

### Recommendation 2

Police Scotland should ensure that there is consistent national leadership in place to direct missing persons policy, establish outcome targets and support effective operational delivery.

### Recommendation 3

Police Scotland should re-establish the missing person strategic governance forum to provide scrutiny, oversight and governance for matters relating to the police and partner response to missing persons.

### Recommendation 4

Police Scotland should bring together all operational practice guidance relevant to missing persons in one place on the police intranet – including protocols and procedures, shared learning, and the national missing persons toolkit – to enable easy access for managers and staff.

### Recommendation 5

Police Scotland should review the training provided to officers and staff regarding missing persons and ensure that it is adequate and meets the requirements of the role.

### Recommendation 6

Police Scotland should develop a role profile and operational guidance for divisional coordinators, and ensure that the role is supported and enabled to fulfil tasks and responsibilities effectively.



### **Recommendation 7**

Police Scotland should develop a version of the national missing persons application that has full functionality on mobile devices, and respond swiftly to any technical problems and potential improvements identified by users.

### **Recommendation 8**

Police Scotland should continue to engage with partners and service providers at a national and local level to encourage greater adherence to the collective commitments of the national missing persons framework. This should include engagement on the implementation of early intervention and prevention approaches, and the use of national and local protocols.

### **Recommendation 9**

Police Scotland should ensure consistent and effective communication and engagement takes place with families, carers and key contacts throughout investigations.

### **Recommendation 10**

Police Scotland should work with partners to ensure that clear and co-ordinated arrangements are in place to conduct return discussions across divisions. These should align effectively with safe and well checks, and all relevant information gathered from such discussions should be shared between partners.

### **Recommendation 11**

Police Scotland should routinely evaluate the quality of its missing persons operations to pinpoint areas for improvement, using that knowledge to drive improvement, reduce demand and improve outcomes.



## Areas for development

---

Areas for development	Number
Police Scotland should examine the role of tactical missing person coordinator and provide clarity across divisions on the aims, objectives and overall purpose of the role.	1
Police Scotland should ensure that quality assurance tasks are undertaken competently and consistently at each stage of the process.	2
Police Scotland should examine the level of access to the national missing persons application required by service advisors to improve operational efficiency and service delivery in response to missing persons.	3
Police Scotland should ensure that service advisors are aware of national protocols and their relevance and, where possible, have an understanding of the type of local protocols that are in place and what benefits these can bring.	4
Police Scotland should examine the processes and practice relevant to the management of long-term missing person enquiries, and introduce necessary improvements.	5
Police Scotland should explore opportunities to gather information on the experiences of missing people and their families, to better inform service planning and provision.	6



## Areas of good practice

---

- Missing person co-ordination units exist in Lanarkshire and Greater Glasgow divisions, with a clear management structure driving their progress. The existence of these units provides consistency in approach, with a focus on multi-agency prevention and intervention activities to reduce demand and improve outcomes for missing people. Edinburgh City division has a similar structure incorporated within its prevention, intervention and partnership unit.
- Highland and Islands and Greater Glasgow divisions have established quarterly divisional missing person tactical/strategic meetings chaired by superintendents, through which the NMPU can raise divisional issues. This meeting provides focus, scrutiny and oversight of the divisional approach to missing persons, where areas for improvement are identified and addressed.
- The Lanarkshire divisional coordinator holds weekly missing person partnership meetings involving all key agencies and partners. Such practice provides good lines of governance, reporting and accountability, while strengthening partnership arrangements.
- North East and Fife divisions have dedicated officers trained to conduct return interviews with children and young people deemed at risk of harm. These are co-ordinated with partners, so that the child or young person receives the most appropriate intervention.
- Highland and Islands division ensure all adults from mental health hospitals receive a return discussion on return from a missing incident.
- Edinburgh City, Highland and Islands, Renfrewshire and Inverclyde, and Lanarkshire divisions, have partnership arrangements in place with local authority social work services or third sector agencies to carry out return discussions with children and young people. The outcome of these discussions is shared with police.



- Highland and Islands division has successfully used harbouring notices<sup>7</sup> to respond to adults found in the company of missing children and young people. Such notices are deemed valuable by the division and partners as a safeguarding measure, particularly relevant to children who regularly go missing and who are at risk.
- Lanarkshire division's sergeant and inspector forums offer a platform for tactical and operational discussions on missing person enquiries (among other matters) and aim to improve the understanding of the roles and responsibilities of police and partners. Such forums are an opportunity for the divisional commander to highlight the divisional approach to missing persons.
- The Highland and Islands divisional command team regularly warns officers against complacency, clearly stating that all missing person incidents should be considered individually – regardless of how often a person may have gone missing. This serves to promote a positive culture among officers required to respond to a significant number of missing incidents.

---

<sup>7</sup> A harbouring notice can be made by police under Section 171 of the Children's Hearing Scotland Act 2011. This provision can be used when it is suspected that a person knowingly and persistently attempts to induce a child to abscond and/or knowingly harbours or conceals a child who has absconded.



## Methodology

---

1. We published terms of reference (ToR) for this inspection in November 2023, which outlined our aims and objectives, as well as the approach we intended to take.
2. The ToR outlined our intention to consider the Police Scotland response to missing persons in Scotland by assessing:
  - how well Police Scotland understands the demand resulting from missing persons and whether there is a well-developed strategy, vision and clearly-defined objectives in place to guide the police response
  - how well Police Scotland provides the necessary guidance, training and support to staff at all levels to enable them to respond effectively to missing persons
  - the effectiveness of Police Scotland's response from initial point of contact by service centres through to the resolution of missing person incidents
  - how well police officers and staff respond to missing person incidents and investigations, including the availability of specialist operational support services where required
  - the effectiveness and value of the Police Scotland NMPA, and how well other police information systems are used
  - the impact and effectiveness of the Police Scotland NMPU and the role of divisional coordinators in improving outcomes for missing persons
  - how well Police Scotland works in collaboration with partners and key stakeholders to share relevant information and to plan for and deliver effective and efficient services for missing persons
  - the extent to which partners, key stakeholders and service providers make an effective contribution in improving outcomes for missing persons, by engaging in partnership agreements with police



- the effectiveness of Police Scotland's involvement in preventative approaches (including national and local protocols and initiatives intended to reduce demand), and the impact on missing persons
  - the quality of Police Scotland's engagement and communication with missing persons once returned, and with their families, carers and key contacts throughout investigations
  - how well Police Scotland evaluates service delivery and captures learning, to drive improvement, reduce demand, and achieve better outcomes for individuals, families and communities.
3. We have undertaken a range of activities to examine and assess progress against these themes, as well as the overarching state, efficiency and effectiveness of the police response to missing persons in Scotland. We have examined this from the perspective of leadership and vision, and delivery and outcomes (all key indicators in the EFQM framework).
4. We have considered the role of partners and key stakeholders in the planning and delivery of services for missing persons, and gathered information on the views and experiences of people who have been missing and of those families who have been involved with police and other missing persons services.



5. Our methodology included the following:
  - a review of existing academic research and open-source documents relevant to the subject
  - an audit of 365 calls made to Police Scotland's service centres by people reporting someone missing, to analyse the quality of engagement, information gathering, risk assessment and resolution of calls
  - analysis of a self-evaluation report and supporting service (provided to us by Police Scotland) on its performance against EFQM indicators
  - an audit of the Police Scotland NMPA
  - over 80 interviews with police personnel at all levels, and with representatives from partner organisations and key stakeholders
  - onsite inspection visits to police divisions in Lanarkshire, Highland and Islands, and Edinburgh City, to meet with local partners at both senior and operational level
  - review of information obtained through the Missing People charity and Barnardo's Scotland on the views and experiences of missing people and their families, carers and key contacts.
6. Our methodology has provided sound evidence of police practice and the contribution of partners, which we will refer to throughout this report.



## Background

---

### Context

7. The most recent [inspection of police response to missing persons](#) by HMICS was carried out in Aberdeen City and published in June 2015. The inspection report made 11 recommendations, most of which were for Police Scotland and the local division. It was recommended that Police Scotland work with Scottish Government to establish an agreed definition of missing persons and a consistent approach to risk assessment.
8. It was further recommended that Police Scotland should work with local authorities and local child and adult protection committees to develop more routine analysis and sharing of missing persons data to inform shared partnership tactical assessments. The remaining recommendations were, in the main, related to operational practices.
9. Subsequently, Scottish Government published a [National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland](#) (the framework). It was the first of its kind in Scotland and was developed through close collaboration between the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, local authorities, NHS Scotland and a number of third sector organisations, including the charities Missing People, Barnardo's Scotland and Shelter Scotland.



10. The framework provides the following definition of a missing person, as agreed by partners to the framework. It also proposes a consistent response to low, medium and high-risk categories of missing persons with corresponding definitions.

A missing person is anyone whose whereabouts is unknown and:

- where the circumstances are out of character; or
- the context suggests the person may be subject to crime; or
- the person is at risk of harm to themselves or another.

The framework provides the following definitions of risk:

- **High Risk:** the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the missing person is in danger through their own vulnerability; or may have been the victim of a serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.
- **Medium Risk:** the risk posed is likely to place the missing person in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others.
- **Low Risk:** the apparent threat of danger to either the missing person or the public is low (a child should not be graded as low risk).

11. The framework sets out the roles and responsibilities of the respective agencies, as well as key national objectives and commitments on which to focus collective efforts on missing persons. It provides a basis for understanding the underlying issues relevant to missing episodes, and outlines its objectives of 'prevention, respond, support and protect'. It also promotes the ongoing development of an effective frontline response when someone goes missing and encourages a preventative approach to reduce the number of people going missing in the first place.
12. A multi-agency group was established by Scottish Government to promote the implementation of the framework and to provide practical support to police and partners to meet agreed objectives. This is the framework implementation group, referred to in this report as the implementation group. Scottish Government is reviewing the framework with the support of the implementation group to update it and include learning achieved since its initial publication.



13. The establishment of a multi-agency framework for missing persons is a particular strength in Scotland. There is no similar framework in place in other parts of the UK. This provides opportunities for policing and partnership working in Scotland in terms of strengthening collaboration on strategic planning, service delivery and working toward achieving the objectives of the framework.
14. The Scottish Government provides valuable support to promote missing persons policy and provides funding for national coordinators, hosted by a third sector organisation, Missing People, which operates across the UK. Scottish Government staff also undertake secretariat functions for the implementation group.
15. The national coordinators play a key role in raising the profile of the framework across police divisions and provide expert advice and support to police and partners to develop local partnership protocols and a collaborative operational service delivery.
16. The scale of missing person incidents in Scotland is considerable, with Police Scotland recording over 20,000 missing person reports on STORM in the year 2022/23. Following assessment, almost 18,000 missing person investigations proceeded and were recorded on the police NMPA in the same year.
17. The number of investigations reduced from almost 18,000 in 2022/23 to 16,236 in 2023/24. While this represents a significant reduction and positive trend, the number of missing incidents (and subsequent investigations) remain considerable.
18. It should be recognised that these figures include repeat missing investigations; this means that the number of people who are missing each year is fewer than the overall figure. The number of missing individuals reduced from just over 10,000 in 2022/23 to just over 9,000 in 2023/24. This highlights the challenge of addressing the issues related to repeat missing persons, which we refer to in detail in the delivery section of this report.



19. It should also be noted that the figure of 20,000 missing person reports on the police system during 2022/23 is dwarfed by the overall number of calls made to Police Scotland service centres by people concerned for an individual whom they believe may be missing. Approximately 40,000 such calls are made to the service centres each year.
20. This requires a skilled response from service advisors. They use risk assessments to differentiate between calls that most likely fit the criteria of a concern for person<sup>8</sup> call and those that relate more explicitly to a missing person incident. Overall, service centre advisors carry out this task to a very high standard.

### Underlying causes

21. A common consideration made within missing persons research literature relates to the typology of individuals reported missing and some of the underlying causes. The literature has tended to focus on the most vulnerable groups of individuals – such as children, those with mental health issues, or those with dementia. However, it is important to stress that there are a variety of complex reasons why an individual may go missing and one person's reasoning may differ greatly from another.
22. Such complex issues do not disappear once a missing person has returned, especially in situations where an individual returns to their previous situation/s without support to improve/address their circumstances. This can result in further missing episodes.
23. A recent report by [Missing People \(2022\)](#) supported this idea, noting the presence of multiple challenges and pressures that may influence missing episodes, while suggesting that a missing episode could be symptomatic of a stressful situation for the individual.

---

<sup>8</sup> A concern for person coding is used where a call is made to the service centres whereby the whereabouts of the person is known, or believed to be known, and there are concerns regarding risk of harm to the individual.



24. An estimated 80,000 children go missing in over 210,000 reported incidents each year in the UK. Missing children are at significant risk of harm, although it is difficult to quantify what proportion come to harm while missing. Research by the [Children's Society](#) found that 11% of missing children had been 'hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion'. Other research has found that one in every eight young people reported missing had been physically hurt and one in nine had been sexually assaulted while away.
25. In Scotland, children and young people are reported missing more than any other category. A significant majority of missing person investigations relate to those aged 17 years and under.
26. Children who go missing and the causes of missing episodes in children are key points of interest in the academic literature. [Maclean and Gillon, \(2022\)](#) reported that children and young people in the 12-17-year-old age bracket had the largest number of missing episodes of any age group in Scotland, for the year 2020/2021. As outlined previously in this report, this trend has continued.
27. Some of the cited reasons relate to difficult family situations and neglect ([Woolnough and Cunningham, 2020](#)) or issues linked to bullying and difficulty following instructions at school ([Maclean and Gillon, 2022](#)). A recent analysis of risks and responses to missing children by [Sidebottom et al. \(2020\)](#) suggested that care experienced children and young people are over-represented in missing persons data. However, this may in part be due to reporting practices, with carers obliged to contact the police when a child in their care is missing.
28. A [Missing People \(2022\)](#) report states that the most common reasons adults go missing are linked to mental health, suicide and relationships with other people. It notes that going missing can exacerbate risk of harm, with 66% of returned missing adults disclosing that being missing had affected their mental health. Three in four adults who responded to a survey for the report disclosed experiencing harm while missing.



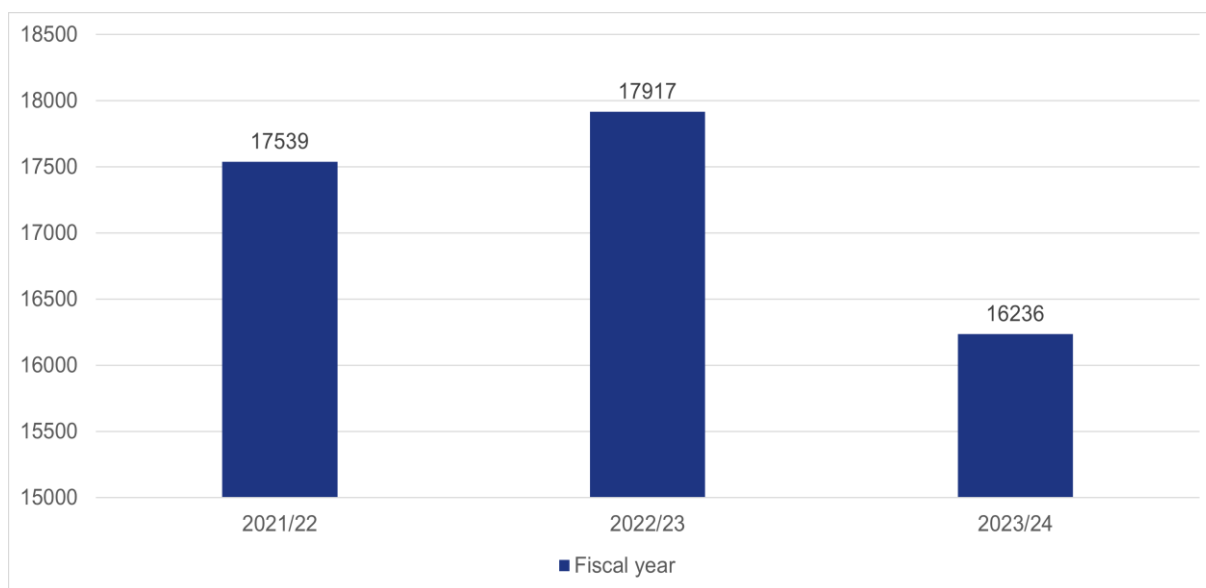
29. A recent report by Alzheimer Scotland focuses on those with dementia and outlines the potential risks for missing people with dementia, including potential exposure to dehydration, hypothermia, injuries and abrasions. [Petillo \(2023\)](#) reports that there are 90,000 people diagnosed with dementia in Scotland, with 40% reported missing at some stage.
30. Relatively recent research found there is a trend of under-reporting regarding missing person incidents by the families of individuals with dementia. [Shalev, Greene, Clarke, Pakes and Holmes \(2019\)](#) suggest that police forces in the United Kingdom are not fully aware of the scale of missing episodes in dementia patients.
31. Research conducted in England and Wales provided an estimate that up to 80% of adults who are reported missing have mental health issues, increasing the risk to their safety ([Harrington et al., 2018](#)).
32. Mental health issues were identified as the most commonly cited vulnerability experienced by adults reported missing ([Missing People, 2022](#)). Police Scotland provided statistics in [Maclean and Gillon \(2022\)](#) covering the year 2020/2021, which showed that 56% of male missing persons and 42% of female missing persons indicated poor mental health (it is likely these figures are higher, as this can be under-reported).
33. The families, carers and key contacts of missing persons can experience considerable upset and distress when a loved one goes missing, so the quality of the police response, engagement and communication with such groups is of high importance.
34. While most people either return by themselves, or are returned by police, the impact and distress caused to families and friends of the relatively small number of people who are not found, or who are not found alive, cannot be underestimated.



## Demand profile

35. Missing person investigations are a priority for Police Scotland and, as stated, require a considerable level of commitment from across policing. However, given the high number of calls made to the service centres, and subsequent investigations, this places a significant demand on Police Scotland's resources. Figure 1 outlines the demand profile of missing person investigations recorded by police for the last three fiscal years, 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24.

Figure 1 – Number of missing person investigations by fiscal year



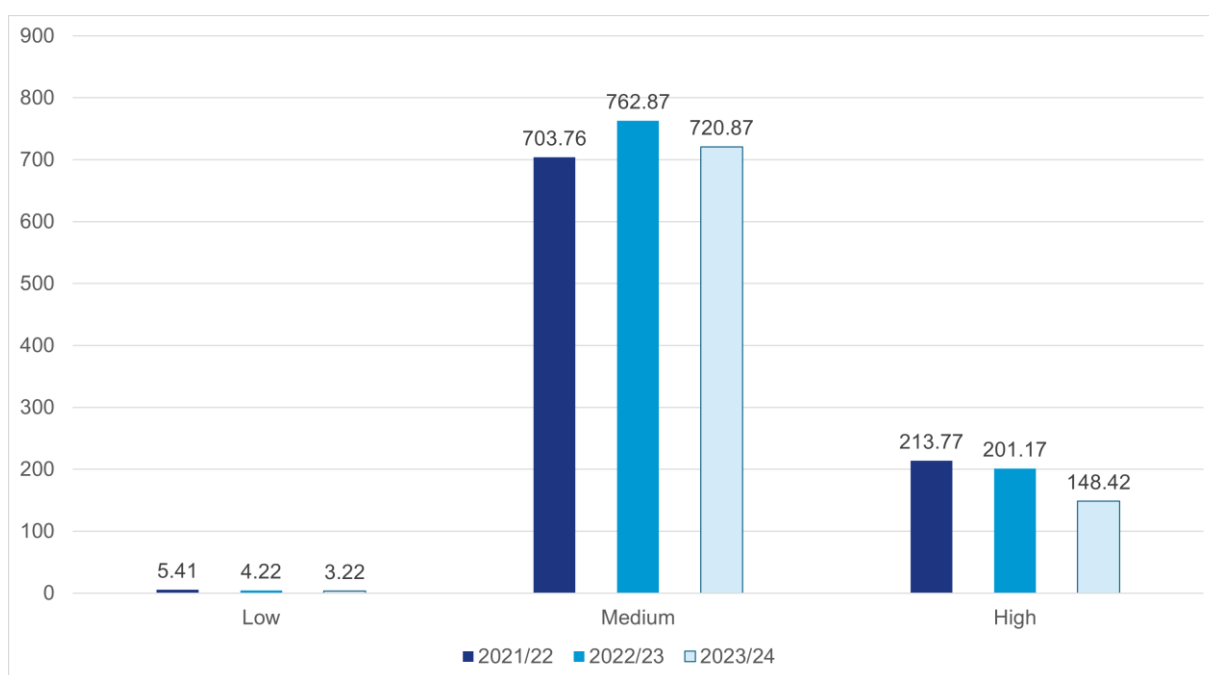
Source: Police Scotland

36. A significant number of officers are needed to undertake investigations to trace people who are reported missing. In particular, the resource requirement for high and medium-risk missing person investigations has the potential to affect the ability of Police Scotland to deliver other policing priorities.



37. To illustrate this demand, it is estimated that the staff resource required to undertake missing person investigations is the equivalent of 900 full-time officers per year, as an average. This is a significant resource demand for a force the size of Police Scotland. Figure 2, below, demonstrates the level of officer resource required to respond to missing person investigations by risk level.

Figure 2 – Level of full-time officer equivalent demand by risk level



Source: Police Scotland

38. Police Scotland records missing person incidents on its STORM command and control system. In 2022/23, there were 20,658 missing person reports recorded on the STORM system, resulting in 17,917 missing person investigations. There are various reasons why incidents do not always result in a missing person investigation. For example, the missing person may return prior to the police being dispatched; a duplicate incident may have been created; or the individual may have been traced prior to investigation. Police Scotland has business rules regarding how this information should be recorded.



39. While there were minor inconsistencies in the way staff applied these business rules, we did not find evidence that such inconsistencies detracted from investigations being appropriately recorded on the NMPA. Inconsistencies can occur as a result of different interpretations of the business rules being applied, particularly regarding the recording of information on the application. Managers should continue to ensure that officers and staff are consistently recording incidents accurately to prevent an unreliable picture of missing people in Scotland.
40. Service advisors gathered good information from reports of high-risk missing persons, and we noted that, in most cases, they were appropriately inquisitive about the circumstances relating to people being reported missing (which has the potential to reduce demand). As Police Scotland correctly identifies in its [Missing Person Standard Operating Procedure \(SOP\)](#), its purpose is not to act as a tracing agency, but to find individuals where an element of risk has been identified. Staff should therefore be inquisitive, to identify those cases where risk is present, or can reasonably be assumed to be.
41. Information gathered by staff for high-risk investigations was good and risk assessments were applied appropriately to reports received by service advisors. However, through our call audit, we found service advisors could do more to gather valuable background information regarding low-risk missing persons, to potentially reduce demand on operational officers.
42. In some instances, cases that were transferred to area control rooms (ACR) could have been more fully explored by service advisors, particularly with partner agencies making a report. While we recognise the degree of time pressure placed on service advisors to deal with calls, there is benefit in pressing the reporter for all useful information, as well as querying the existence of protocols and whether they have been adhered to. For example, if they are reporting a person missing from a care facility, it is realistic to expect that the agency has followed their internal protocols to gather relevant information and to search for the individual within reasonable limits.

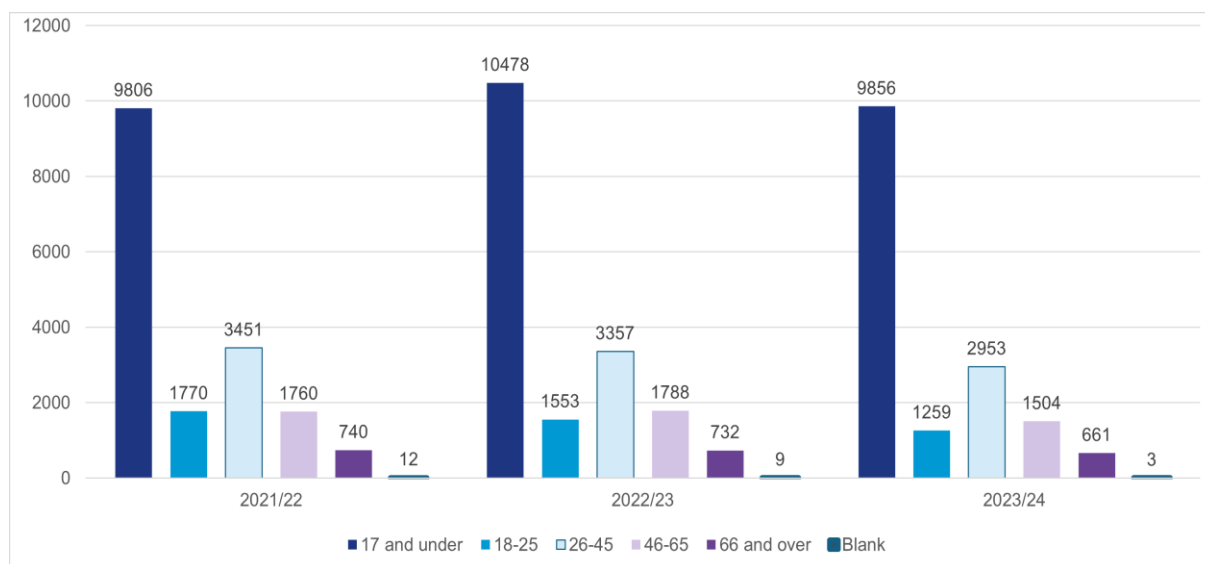


43. It was evident that demand on operational staff can, at times, be greater in rural areas. This can be as a result of differing access to specialist resources. Divisions in rural areas tend to rely more heavily on specialist partner organisations to assist them at the initial stages of an investigation. We acknowledge that any lack of access to specialist resources in the initial stages of an investigation is likely as a result of geography (and the time taken to get specialist resources to the area).
44. In 2019, Police Scotland created a missing person dashboard from information taken from STORM and the NMPA. Development of the dashboard has been a collaborative effort between the demand and productivity unit (DPU) and the NMPU. The aim of the dashboard is to allow police to identify both geographical and demographic information regarding missing person incidents, which includes the following information:
- location of incident
  - age
  - gender
  - duration of incident
  - repeat incidents
  - number of people found safe and well
  - number of people found deceased
  - number of people still missing.



45. It is clear from data provided by Police Scotland that the majority of missing person investigations relate to children and young people aged 17 years and under. Figure 3 outlines the age ranges of individuals reported missing over the past three fiscal years.

Figure 3 – Number of missing person investigations by age group



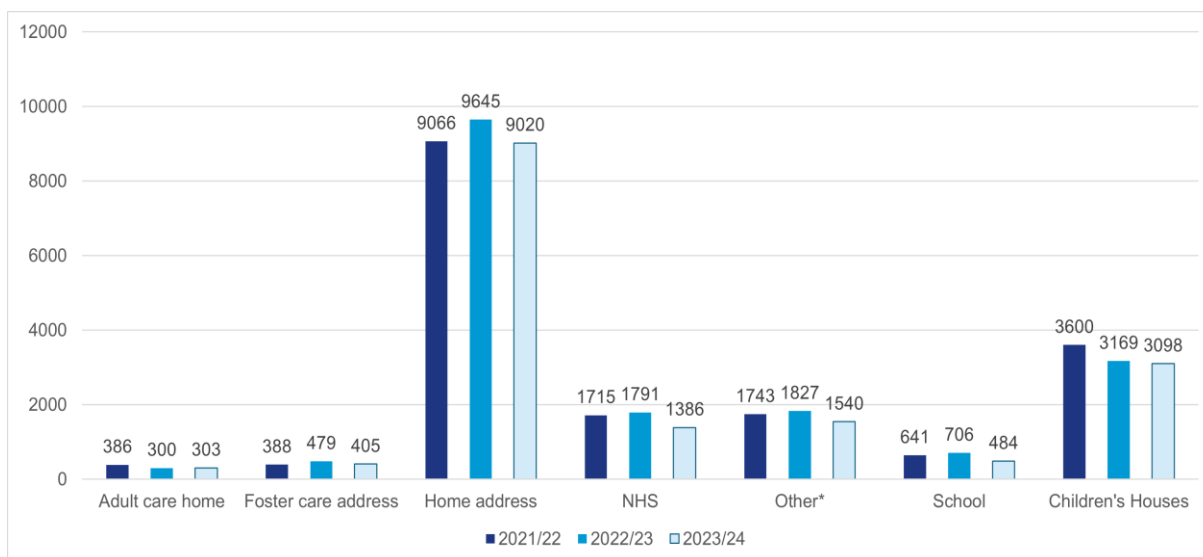
Source: Police Scotland

46. The majority of children and young people are reported missing from home, although a significant number are also reported missing from residential childcare settings.
47. Police Scotland has also identified useful demographic data about other categories of individuals prevalent in missing persons reports, such as those with mental health issues and progressive neurological disorders such as dementia. This is useful, not only for Police Scotland, but also for local authority partners and third sector agencies, to inform internal protocols and procedures.



48. Most people (including children) go missing from their home address. The number of people missing from home has decreased in the past year, as well as reductions in those missing from NHS settings, foster care and children's houses. This is shown in figure 4.

Figure 4 – Number of missing persons by location



\*Includes people missing at sea or work address

Source: Police Scotland

49. Police Scotland systems have the ability to analyse and report on valuable trend information, which has identified the following.
- almost 85% of missing person investigations are resolved within 24 hours
  - most missing person investigations involve males
  - investigations with a dementia/neurological disorder marker on the system have fallen by 13% compared with 2021/22
  - missing person investigations with a mental health marker made up over 31% of all investigations in 2023/24.
50. Identifying and understanding these issues and trends provides an opportunity for the development of targeted prevention and intervention measures, in partnership with other organisations, to reduce the number of missing person episodes. We say more about the police and partner response in respect of preventive approaches later in this report.



51. Police Scotland has demonstrated consistent success in resolving missing person incidents over recent years. Performance data for the past four years up to 2022/23, demonstrates that over 99% of missing people are traced alive each year. In addition, 94% of missing incidents are closed within 48 hours, with 58% closed within the first eight hours.
52. While people who have been missing may return of their own volition, the [UK missing persons unit missing persons data report 2021/22](#) highlights that Police Scotland locates 60% of missing people in Scotland. This is double the average rate of individuals located by police in England and Wales (at just over 30%). Reasons for the disparity between results in Scotland compared with England and Wales are unclear, as the report provided by the UKMPU does not provide any contextual explanation. Therefore, it cannot be ascertained if the differences relate to reporting practices or investigative processes and protocols.



## Leadership and vision

---

### Purpose, vision and strategy

53. We found Police Scotland to be appropriately aligned to the framework for missing persons. As indicated, partners to the framework include Scottish Government, Police Scotland, local authorities, NHS Scotland and a number of third sector organisations. This particular approach is not replicated elsewhere in the UK.
54. The framework clearly outlines the intended purpose and expected approach that should be taken by partners working collaboratively to respond to and resolve missing person incidents. It also sets out strategic objectives (referred to as commitments in the document) and highlights a vision for a collaborative partnership approach that embraces the principles of early intervention and prevention.
55. The framework aims to share good practice that has been developed locally, recognising that by doing so through a framework with a shared aim, partners will achieve better outcomes for people and their families across Scotland.
56. Police Scotland has been a driving force behind the implementation of the framework. However, more recently, there have been gaps in clear and visible leadership at senior level, as well as in the oversight and governance of operations. This is partly down to previous gaps in senior posts in the Policing Together division (which has oversight of missing persons), but can also be attributed to missing persons sitting within an overly broad and diverse portfolio with potentially competing demands.
57. This has meant the NMPU has lacked the level of oversight that it once had. Nor has it had the benefits of senior manager cover to enable it to influence system improvements and changes that can be required from time to time. For example, where the NMPA has required system changes, the unit lacked the influence senior managers can bring to this type of issue.



58. Police Scotland does not have an internal strategy for missing persons in place to outline organisational purpose and vision across police divisions. Several officers and staff we spoke with during interviews were unclear on the police strategy for missing persons, and were unable to identify the organisation's aims and objectives they were expected to deliver.
59. While we do not consider it essential for Police Scotland to develop a separate strategy, given the aforementioned alignment to the framework, it is important that officers and staff are aware that Police Scotland's strategic position and approach are contained within the framework.

### **Recommendation 1**

Police Scotland should promote the national missing person framework's aims, objectives and commitments to officers and staff across divisions, and emphasise that this underpins its strategic direction.

## **Implementation of the framework**

60. The framework provides a sound basis for partnership working in order to plan for and address missing person incidents. However, if it is to be fully effective, it must be implemented as intended. Police Scotland has shown commitment to the implementation of the framework, but there is a lack of collaboration with partners from health and local authorities at a national planning level. There is no national multi-agency forum in place to collaboratively monitor the effectiveness of policy and delivery of the response to missing persons.
61. Although the framework has been in place for several years, it does not have a widely-recognised profile within some key organisations and across police divisions. Because it is non-statutory guidance, this can result in some partners and local authority areas giving it less attention and emphasis than it requires.



62. There is limited awareness of the collective aims and objectives of the framework across divisions and among operational officers and staff. As such, the importance and relevance of the framework should be shared more widely across relevant personnel within Police Scotland. The framework should be seen as more of a priority by officers and staff with involvement in missing persons work.
63. The implementation group provides valuable oversight of the development and implementation of the framework. It is principally made up of representatives from Scottish Government, police, third sector and academia. However, the group has no representation from senior personnel from local authorities or health services, which limits its influence as there is no direct route to communicate developments to senior leaders outwith policing. The implementation group should invite representation from these bodies.
64. Several partners and partnership areas have made considerable progress in adopting the framework and have worked effectively with Police Scotland on its implementation at a divisional level. However, this is not consistent across the country.
65. We are aware that the framework is being revised and updated by members of the implementation group. This has included considerable work by the group to incorporate learning from what has worked well since its initial publication. The revised version will, no doubt, provide very useful guidance on partnership working at a strategic and operational level, to achieve the best possible outcomes for missing people and their families.
66. We outline the extent to which the current framework has been implemented effectively at a divisional/local authority level in the delivery section of this report.



## Leadership, governance and oversight

67. Police Scotland demonstrates effective divisional level leadership in the oversight of missing person investigations, but there are gaps at the national level. It is important that national and local divisions are connected through clear policy and strategic leadership. This has been hindered by a lack of clear governance structures at national level, which would help to progress its aims and objectives for missing persons.
68. There is a disconnect between local policing and the Policing Together division at a senior level. Police Scotland's missing person strategic governance forum aimed to provide scrutiny oversight and strategic leadership and governance for matters relating to the policing response to missing persons, but this has not operated in recent years.
69. Although Policing Together hosts a regular partnership superintendents forum, it does not provide strategic oversight of missing persons to ensure local initiatives and activities across Scotland are effective, aligned to the framework, and implemented nationally. There is inconsistency in the resourcing and remit of divisional partnership superintendents. For example, where governance and oversight of missing persons is given to an operational superintendent, they would not ordinarily be invited to attend this forum.
70. Police Scotland highlighted its intention to revive the missing person strategic governance forum that had previously been in place. We would support its reintroduction to oversee the strategy and direction for missing persons work. This has the potential to fill the gaps identified and to promote improvements in governance.
71. There was little evidence of regular strategic multi-agency missing person meetings taking place within divisions. The topic of missing persons is discussed in some local authority areas at their chief officers' group, as well as at child and adult protection committees. However, as this is part of a much wider agenda, we could not be confident that all relevant issues relating to missing persons were being addressed within these structures.



72. There was no indication that Police Scotland had identified and introduced specific outcome targets for missing persons work and was monitoring progress against these. This appears to be a missed opportunity, as we have identified several areas where police were performing well. More importantly, the introduction of outcome targets and measures would enable the service to understand more fully what aspects of missing person response are working well and why, so that learning can be shared and embedded across the service.

### **Recommendation 2**

Police Scotland should ensure that there is consistent national leadership in place to direct missing persons policy, establish outcome targets and support effective operational delivery.

### **Recommendation 3**

Police Scotland should re-establish the missing person strategic governance forum to provide scrutiny, oversight and governance for matters relating to the police and partner response to missing persons.



## Performance management and reporting

73. Police Scotland provides quarterly performance reports to the SPA. These reports are used to highlight trends and changes in the number and type of incidents that are investigated each quarter and, subsequently, each year. Reports are made available to the public on the SPA website.
74. Current performance management data outlined in performance reports includes a range of demand-related information relevant to demographics and geographical differences. This provides a helpful picture of the potential increase or decrease in incidents that have taken place for specific groups, including adults, children and young people, and those missing from settings including NHS facilities and children's services.
75. However, there is no overarching internal mechanism in place to evaluate the quality of the police response for missing persons. Police are able to provide valuable quantitative data, but performance reports make little reference to the quality and effectiveness of service provision and the outcomes achieved.



## Delivery

---

### Key stages involved in the police response

76. There are a number of different stages involved in missing person investigations, which align to the various stages of an enquiry. For example, when a member of the public, or someone from a professional setting or agency, contacts Police Scotland via phone or online, the contact goes to one of its national service centres overseen by the Contact, Command and Control Division (C3). Each call is automatically directed to the next available service advisor.
77. Service advisors engage with the individual to gather as much relevant information as possible and apply risk assessment tools to assess the required level of response. Service advisors will often refer to an ACR, which is staffed by experienced police officers who will review the circumstances and prioritise the deployment of police officers.
78. Where the deployment of police officers is not considered necessary, an incident can be passed to the resolution team for non-immediate investigation, advice and direct crime recording. There is good co-ordination within and across C3 regarding missing person enquiries and we found the system to be effective. As part of our methodology for this inspection, we undertook an extensive audit of calls made to police service centres, details of which are outlined later in this report.
79. When the deployment of local policing officers is necessary, the division from where the individual is reported missing is designated as the investigating division. The investigating division is responsible for carrying out enquiries to establish the whereabouts of the missing person, including the management, governance and risk grading of the enquiry. These tasks are guided by, and recorded on, the NMPA. The division is also responsible for keeping the person making the missing person report up to date with the progress of enquiries.



80. In some circumstances, specialist resources from the OSD will be required to progress the investigation. OSD can provide advice, support and assistance to the investigating division regarding the missing person investigation. This can include assistance with searches using trained dog-handling teams, drones and helicopters, specialist teams such as mountain rescue and, in some circumstances, engagement with the Coastguard.<sup>9</sup>
81. The NMPU provides oversight and co-ordination of missing person issues on a national basis. Local divisional coordinators can also be involved in investigations, often from the perspective of providing insights to the command structure meetings that take place to direct and oversee high-risk investigations.

### Provision of guidance

82. There is a suitable range of guidance available to allow operational officers and staff to carry out effective missing person investigations. The guidance documents that Police Scotland has produced include the following:
- Missing person investigation SOP – provides details of roles and responsibilities of those involved in a missing person investigation. It provides general information rather than practical advice on how to investigate.
  - Missing Persons Additional Investigative Considerations – a guide in the form of a detailed checklist listing topics that would be expected to be covered during any enquiry.
  - Missing Person Aide Memoir – covers information that should be recorded while compiling a missing person report. It also contains a risk assessment aid to identify and assess the presence or absence of risk factors to assist in the appropriate risk grading to be applied.
  - [Looked after & accommodated children who go missing from residential & foster care in Scotland national guidance](#) – provides detailed guidance relating to vulnerable missing children who are looked after by local authorities. It covers aspects of the documents mentioned above, but with a more specific focus on children and young people.

---

<sup>9</sup> HM Coastguard is responsible for the initiation and co-ordination of all maritime search and rescue within the UK Maritime Search and Rescue Region. This includes the mobilisation, organisation and tasking of adequate resources to respond to persons either in distress at sea, or to persons at risk of injury or death on the cliffs or shoreline of the United Kingdom.



83. Additional guidance exists for role-specific tasks within the specialist divisions (for example, C3 and OSD) and for operating the NMPA.
84. The framework also provides important guidance on good practice approaches, with a particular focus on partnership working, return discussions and risk assessments. However, as previously indicated, awareness of its existence among those we interviewed was limited. It was not referred to as a prominent guidance document by officers and staff outwith the NMPU.
85. There was no specific guidance in place for officers conducting the role of divisional coordinator within local policing divisions, other than for those located within divisional missing person co-ordination units. This has led to inconsistencies across divisions in the way the role is conducted.
86. Although each of the documents outlined above fulfil a slightly separate function for missing person investigations, we found significant repetition. Having several separate documents covering similar information on the one topic is potentially problematic; efforts to resolve this would most likely be beneficial for operational officers and staff.
87. The consensus among those interviewed was the need to have missing person guidance in one place. At least two local policing divisions have developed their own missing persons toolkit in an attempt to address this. However, such an approach creates a risk that these may exist outwith Police Scotland's national policy document set and therefore not comply with quality assurance standards.

#### **Recommendation 4**

Police Scotland should bring together all operational practice guidance relevant to missing persons in one place on the police intranet – including protocols and procedures, shared learning, and the national missing persons toolkit – to enable easy access for managers and staff.



88. There are gaps in the guidance available to officers within criminal investigation departments (CID) in respect of their involvement in a missing person investigation. The SOP outlines that CID should be notified of all high-risk missing persons and states that CID should consider carrying out reviews of low and medium-risk missing persons after 48 hours. It is therefore important that CID officers who become involved in investigations should have clear guidance on what their role entails and what level of enquiry they would be expected to make while reviewing investigations.
89. We were pleased to see that Police Scotland was following National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) policy and guidance documents on missing person investigations where required. These have specific relevance for national issues and include the following advice notes:
- [NPCC – advice to police forces on tasking other forces to conduct missing person enquiries and the transfer of investigations](#)
  - [NPCC – guidance to police forces on missing migrant children](#).
90. These documents have clear cross-border implications and include legislation specific to Scotland. It is therefore important that all UK forces work together in these areas and Police Scotland continues to be involved in updating and maintaining those parts relevant to Scotland within these documents.

## Provision of training

91. Missing person investigations can be complex in nature and are, without doubt, a high-risk area of policing. Decisions made at the initial stages of any enquiry can have significant implications on the outcome of the investigation. Therefore, it is important that officers and police staff at all levels are trained to a high standard.
92. There are, however, significant gaps in the training that officers and police staff receive on missing person investigations. This was particularly evident in the case of operational officers, who receive no formal refresher training on missing person investigations once they leave the Scottish Police College (SPC).
93. Practical learning on how to conduct missing person investigations was described by officers as on-the-job, peer-to-peer learning and included supervisory support.



94. All new probationary officers attend an initial training course at SPC, where they undergo training on various areas of policing, including missing persons. This training is supported by peer-to-peer learning once they leave the college.
95. However, there should be a mechanism for continuous professional development for all officers and staff involved in missing person investigations, to ensure they are able to maintain consistent and up-to-date knowledge and understanding of procedures and expectations.
96. There is also a lack of training for operational supervisors involved in missing person investigations and therefore a reliance on peer-to-peer learning. Again, we recognise that this can at times be useful, but there is also a risk that incorrect practices are being passed on. The NMPU has attempted to address the lack of supervisor training by delivering training to newly-promoted sergeants, but this has been limited due to capacity issues within the NMPU and is not therefore widely available in all areas across the country.
97. Moodle<sup>10</sup> training modules exist for C3 staff, operational officers and supervisors, providing background context to missing person policy, which requires completion before access to the NMPA is authorised. The content of the Moodle packages provides clear guidance on expectations placed on officers and supervisors involved in missing person investigations.
98. While the training material, where followed, should promote a consistent approach to missing person investigations, officers and staff reported feeling insufficiently trained. Officers stated that it is often a considerable challenge to find time during their increasingly busy working hours to complete Moodle training, which reduces the value and effect of the online approach to training.

---

<sup>10</sup> Moodle is an online training platform that is used by Police Scotland to provide training courses on a wide range of topics.



99. Supervisors who attend the police operational command training course are tested against a complex scenario in respect of leadership, assessment and decision-making abilities, among other relevant aspects. In recent years, a missing person enquiry has been used as the scenario for the exercise. While no doubt valuable as a training exercise, there is no specific requirement for specialist knowledge in respect of managing a missing persons enquiry, nor does it focus on the guides and tools used to oversee a missing person incident.
100. Police Scotland provides an element of missing person training to senior investigating officers (SIO), as part of their course. This takes the form of a scenario within the training programme, which examines the SIO in dealing with high-risk issues relevant to missing person enquiries.
101. We identified that many of the published Police Information and Review Commissioner (PIRC)<sup>11</sup> reviews relate to issues associated with risk assessments made at the first point of contact. The success or failure of an investigation relies on the quality and training of the supervisors overseeing any or all aspects of investigations, including risk assessments. It is important that Police Scotland supervisors are appropriately equipped to manage missing person investigations effectively.
102. Notably, Highland and Islands divisional command team, regularly warns officers against complacency in respect of missing person investigations, highlighting that all missing person incidents should be considered individually – regardless of how often a person may have gone missing. This effort to address the issues resulting from repeat missing persons seems worthy of adoption across the service.

---

<sup>11</sup> The Police Investigation and Review Commissioner (PIRC) carries out independent investigations into certain incidents of concern involving the police. The PIRC also reviews how policing bodies in Scotland have handled complaints made about them by the public.



103. It was evident that Police Scotland has invested in the training it provides to its specialist support officers such as police search advisors (PoISA) and mountain rescue teams. The training provided is comprehensive and subject to regular recertification processes to ensure officers remain proficient in the specialism. We consider that this level of proficiency should also apply to operational officers conducting investigations.

#### **Recommendation 5**

Police Scotland should review the training provided to officers and staff regarding missing persons and ensure that it is adequate and meets the requirements of the role.

### **The national missing persons unit**

104. The NMPU is a national resource located within Police Scotland's Policing Together division. The unit consists of an inspector, sergeant and two constables, managed as part of a wider portfolio overseen by a chief inspector and superintendent. As a result of having a relatively limited resource, the NMPU relies heavily on a cadre of divisional coordinators, who have varying degrees of capacity, to drive national approaches at a local level.

105. Members of the NMPU are experienced and knowledgeable on the subject of missing persons and have a clear desire and determination to drive improvement in the organisational approach and response. The unit provides effective oversight and support for missing person enquiries. In particular, it provides scrutiny, specialist advice and assistance to complex or protracted high-risk missing person investigations. It also supports and contributes to delivery of training through the police leadership programme and to operational officers and supervisors, where it has the capacity to do so.



106. The NMPU has a role in the quality assurance of input and compliance with business rules in respect of the NMPA. The unit is the third layer of quality assurance regarding missing persons. Operational supervisors perform the first layer of quality assurance and are required to check submissions made by officers to ensure they are accurate. Thereafter, divisional coordinators should undertake additional compliance checks. It was clear from our review that the NMPU was spending a significant period of time on quality assurance processes as the other layers of quality assurance were not as robust as they should be.
107. The police inspector at the NMPU represents Police Scotland on the implementation group, through which there is regular engagement with other group members to drive improvements in line with the aims and objectives of the framework. The NMPU is highly regarded within this group for its commitment to improvement and co-ordination of activities in respect of partnership working, policy development, and training.
108. The NMPU also collaborates with the UKMPU to promote consistent and effective practice across divisions. The role of the UKMPU is to provide support and advice to police forces investigating missing person incidents. It also provides the following range of services:
- national and international cross-matching of missing individuals with unidentified people, bodies and remains
  - co-ordination of enquiries with our network of partners
  - procedural assistance on effective retrieval and retention of forensic material
  - tactical advice and support regarding suspicious cases, such as suspected homicide, 'no-body' murders, and cold case reviews
  - access to specialist advice from experts in a range of fields
  - collation and dissemination of good practice in missing person enquiries.
109. The UKMPU reports having positive and increased engagement with the NMPU and local policing divisions seeking support and assistance in respect missing person-related issues. However, it questions the reasons behind the increase in divisional queries on policies and procedures, which should be directed to divisional coordinators or the NMPU.



110. The established route for local policing divisions should be to seek support and assistance through their divisional coordinators in the first instance, and thereafter through the NMPU. While this process can work well at times, a disconnect exists between the unit, divisional coordinators and local policing divisions, with some areas seeking advice and assistance on missing persons policy and procedures directly from the UKMPU.
111. While this may be appropriate in some circumstances, the process of bypassing the NMPU and seeking advice and assistance from the UKMPU creates a potential risk for the organisation, as advice provided and followed may not align directly with existing policy. In addition, it is unlikely that such advice will be recorded by the person making the enquiry and shared with the NMPU, so that it may be considered in any potential changes made to internal guidance documents. Senior officers should consider why local police divisions are, at times, not seeking answers to their queries within the organisation.

### Police Scotland missing person coordinators

112. The role of the divisional coordinator was introduced by Police Scotland to provide divisional access to officers with enhanced knowledge of missing persons, to improve understanding and operational approach locally. Divisional coordinators are expected to act as a conduit between national policy and local policing practice. This includes a focus on partnership working and the development and implementation of strategies aimed at early intervention and prevention.
113. As indicated, divisional coordinators are also expected to provide a robust quality assurance function for divisional recording processes and practice in relation to STORM and the NMPA.
114. Each of the 13 local policing divisions has a designated missing person coordinator. While the responsibilities of the role are guided by the NMPU, how the post is expected to operate within the division is a decision for divisional commanders. This includes whether the role is dedicated and protected as a full-time role or whether it is held by someone with a range of other tasks and responsibilities. Similarly, commanders may decide to add additional resources by creating a divisional coordinators team, sometimes with a sergeant and police constables in post.



115. As there has been a lack of strategic planning regarding this issue between local divisions and the Policing Together division, the NMPU relies heavily on the extent to which divisional commanders recognise the business benefit of ensuring that coordinators have capacity and the correct skill set to fulfil the role.
116. We found some divisional coordinators balancing the demands of the coordinator role with various other operational tasks and responsibilities. This affected their ability to perform key tasks such as ensuring that compliance checks were undertaken consistently. It also limited their ability to undertake work with local partners to develop and implement approaches aimed at reducing and (where possible) preventing further missing person incidents.
117. Police Scotland has an approved role profile for the role of a divisional coordinator based within a divisional missing person co-ordination unit. However, only three divisions have such a unit – Edinburgh City, Lanarkshire and Greater Glasgow. This means that the majority of divisional coordinators do not have a recognised post profile on Police Scotland’s resource management system (SCOPE). This can result in the responsibilities associated with their existing operational post profile taking precedence over those of a divisional coordinator, which further limits their ability to perform the coordinator function effectively.
118. The guidance document relating to looked-after and accommodated children, and the NMPA business rules, make brief reference to the role of divisional coordinator. However, the role of the divisional coordinator is not included within the missing persons SOP. This omission has contributed to a lack of clarity across divisions about the role, functions and expectations of divisional coordinators. This has resulted in an inconsistent approach to how missing persons policy and practice is followed in some divisions.



119. There is no bespoke training for divisional coordinators. Quarterly missing person coordinator forums, which are organised and chaired by the NMPU, provide a degree of learning and development input. The NMPU also arranges inputs from the UKMPU, which are missing person-focused and include information on a wide range of investigative opportunities. However, the extent to which this can influence national practice depends on the availability of divisional coordinators to attend. Evidence suggests this learning is not being cascaded as well as intended, with some divisions continuing to seek guidance on the approach to missing persons from the UKMPU.
120. In the three divisions we visited, it was clear that the role of the coordinator was protected and that divisional leaders recognised it as being crucial in instilling consistency in local and national practice. Coordinators in these areas were also supported to establish and strengthen partnerships working arrangements, which can result in reducing demand. We are aware that similar good practice exists in other divisions that we did not visit as part of this inspection, however, it is also evident this is not sufficiently consistent across the country.
121. Where we found the coordinator role being dedicated, protected and supported within divisions, this correlated with evidence of effective and innovative practice, and strong partnership working.

### **Recommendation 6**

Police Scotland should develop a role profile and operational guidance for divisional coordinators, and ensure that the role is supported and enabled to fulfil tasks and responsibilities effectively.



## Police Scotland tactical missing person coordinators

122. Local policing divisions have a designated tactical missing person coordinator (tactical coordinator), but we found a lack of clarity and understanding of this role among the officers and staff we spoke with. This is likely due to the lack of a role profile for the tactical coordinator. There is also wide variation in the rank of officers tasked with the role, ranging from police inspector to superintendent, as well as variation in where they were located within divisional structures.
123. The NMPA business rules refer to the post of tactical coordinator as being responsible for ensuring that divisional coordinators are effective in respect of data input (with the caveat that their line manager may also cover this role). The tactical coordinator role is absent from any other Police Scotland missing person guidance. The absence of a role profile has resulted in a disparate approach in how the role is performed across police divisions.

### Area for development 1

Police Scotland should examine the role of tactical missing person coordinator and provide clarity across divisions on the aims, objectives and overall purpose of the role.

## National missing person coordinators

124. Scottish Government provides funding for two national coordinator posts and have done so since 2019. These posts are hosted by the UK Missing People charity. The national coordinators report to, and receive support from, the aforementioned implementation group. They play a key role in raising the profile of the framework and promoting good practice across local authority areas.
125. The implementation group created a model whereby national coordinators are tasked with engaging with police and partners within local authority areas to embed the framework in practice. This model is referred to as the implementation project. The implementation project was principally introduced to improve engagement and collaboration between partners, establish effective partnership working arrangements and protocols, and provide specialist advice and support where required.



126. The national coordinators have also worked closely with the NMPU, divisional coordinators and multi-agency partners within localities to provide support on the following tasks:

- journey mapping to examine local processes in detail and to work through hypothetical missing person profiles to identify effective practice and gaps in the multi-agency response
- ensuring partners are aware of the support available for missing people and families in their area
- return discussion training (including train the trainer)
- developing good practice guidance, informed by learning captured from engagement across Scotland
- promoting good practice nationally via webinars, an annual good practice conference and the online toolkit
- providing support in the development of a multi-agency partnership protocol.

127. There is no cost to police or partners for the services provided by national coordinators. To date, they have provided support and assistance in 26 local authority areas. Recent funding approved by Scottish Government, will allow national coordinators to work with the remaining six local authority areas during 2024-25.

128. The previously outlined inconsistencies in the arrangements for divisional coordinators have had a negative impact on progress made by the national coordinators in those areas where divisional coordinators are not fully supported to undertake the role. For example, national coordinators have found it more challenging to engage widely across a division and with all relevant partners where these relationships have not been established and fostered. However, where the divisional coordinator operates within a protected role, engagement with national coordinators is described as very effective in establishing the necessary links with local partners to further embed good working arrangements.



## The national missing persons application

129. The NMPA is the single live management system for missing person investigations conducted by Police Scotland. It was introduced in 2019 as a standalone, web-based system to replace legacy police systems and the interim National Missing Persons Database, which was housed on SharePoint<sup>12</sup> between April 2016 and March 2019.
130. The application holds information on all missing person incidents and allows police to analyse critical missing persons information that can enhance investigative opportunities. It is administered by the NMPU and is supported by business rules that formalise conditions of use, alongside a separate user guide.
131. The NMPA is used by police officers to manually record data relevant to a missing person incident, on to the application. Officers can add and update actions in live time and, importantly, this can be viewed and read by anyone within policing with a legitimate interest or involvement in the investigation.
132. An additional benefit of the application is the ability to pre-populate saved missing person data into subsequent missing person reports relevant to the same person. It also provides officers with information on a missing person's key contacts and associates, as well as locations where they may previously have been found. Integration with a geographical information system provides a map view of all current missing people and where they were located on previous occasions.
133. The NMPA has been imported into Police Scotland's insight search system along with other police systems including iVPD. It can utilise information from the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) system, which is managed by Disclosure Scotland. This technology provides the user with quick access to brief consolidated information on previous missing episodes, including key addresses, associations and level of vulnerability, to support timely decision-making. However, as the NMPA and iVPD are standalone systems, the information available through insights is minimal, resulting in the need to access those systems individually.

---

<sup>12</sup> SharePoint is used by Police Scotland as a secure place to store, organise and share information that can be accessed either nationally, locally and/or departmentally, dependent on business need.



134. The NMPA integrates with the Police Scotland Criminal History System (CHS), to identify information on any warning signals associated with the missing person. It also integrates with the Police National Computer (PNC) system, enabling a missing person's details, when saved in the NMPA, to be simultaneously added on to PNC, saving time and duplication of work.
135. NMPA has been welcomed by many across Police Scotland as it brings increased consistency to the process and provides a platform on which to carry out a more comprehensive missing person investigation.
136. However, the application does not work well on the mobile hand-held devices routinely used by police, as the system was developed for desktop use. We found that the application was only used by officers on mobile devices in eight per cent of missing person investigations. This has introduced time inefficiencies, since officers often travel to and from offices to record information (rather than being able to use the equipment available to them). This is a system development issue, which is outwith officers' control.
137. We also learned of difficulties in the transfer of accurate information from the NMPA to the major incident room standardised administrative procedures (MIRSAP), in instances where cases may become a serious crime enquiry. This results in a manual transfer of information, leaving the process open to potential human error. In addition, there is no policy guidance on when an enquiry should be transferred from the NMPA to MIRSAP.
138. In recent years, the NMPU has encountered barriers to the improvement and development of the NMPA, and only incremental changes have been achieved. This has been attributed to a lack of availability at senior management level within the division, to drive development. However, it was also highlighted that the systems developer resource is very limited and thinly spread (in terms of the number of police systems that require similar attention), so that is likely to be the central problem.
139. This lack of progress on much-needed improvements to the application can further limit its use, resulting both in a lack of confidence in the system and the risk of it falling behind other advancing technology.



140. The NMPA is relied on for missing persons statistics and accuracy of data and is dependent on the accuracy of use. The statistical reports produced by the application are used by analysts as the basis for publication of performance information. We have referred earlier in this report to gaps in the quality assurance process regarding the application. It is essential that competent quality assurance is undertaken appropriately – and at each stage of an enquiry/investigation – to ensure high standards of reporting.

### **Area for development 2**

Police Scotland should ensure that quality assurance tasks are undertaken competently and consistently at each stage of the process.

## **Audit of the national missing persons application**

141. We undertook an audit of the NMPA to consider its value and effectiveness.

Inspectors selected and analysed a random sample of 36 records from the application. These were reviewed alongside the associated STORM incidents. The process was supported by members of the NMPU to facilitate system access.

142. The sample was drawn from the overall number of calls analysed previously by inspectors as part of a comprehensive audit of calls made to police service centres. We audited 365 calls that had been made to police service centres between August 2022 and August 2023. Therefore, the 36 records analysed from the application represents 10% of our call audit. We outline further details and findings from our call audit later in this report.

143. While our sample of 36 records from the application is relatively small, it provided useful information on how the system was being used and where gaps existed. We found that the application was largely being used appropriately by officers. In most cases with the sample, there was an appropriate level of supervisory oversight and quality assurance at both sergeant and inspector levels. However, this is not reflective of wider quality assurance practice. As previously highlighted, the NMPU has to review a significant number of cases to ensure compliance with NMPA business rules.



144. Risk assessments recorded on the system were largely of a good standard, though a small number were poor. Nevertheless, it was clear those risk assessments that did not meet adequate standards were brought up to a good standard by effective supervisory intervention. This demonstrates the importance of quality assurance within the system and the supervisory element of the process.
145. We found inconsistencies in the use of the STORM and NMPA systems by police officers. Business rules state that where police officers are deployed to a missing person incident, this should be recorded on the application as the incident would meet the criteria for a missing person enquiry. However, we found examples where a missing person is found by police relatively quickly, the incident can, at times, be finalised on STORM with no corresponding missing person form being submitted on the application.
146. Running a missing person investigation on STORM rather than correctly on the NMPA creates a risk of information being lost when the STORM incident is closed. This can be problematic as – should the same person become missing again – relevant information from the previous incident would not be available. It should be stressed that this scenario occurs in a small number of instances, but it is worthy of ongoing attention from the NMPU and senior officers with strategic responsibility.
147. Our audit of the application also confirmed that the mobile hand-held devices used by police have limited functionality in respect of the application. For example, they do not have an auto-save function, which can result in officers losing data, particularly where connectivity to the system is lost. In addition, the action filtering tool and function for downloading tasks on to a PDF document, were found to be faulty.



148. These issues were discussed with members of the NMPU and were highlighted by the unit for attention by system developers. However, as indicated within this report, the mobile devices are not operating effectively, and a solution needs to be found to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of the process.

### Recommendation 7

Police Scotland should develop a version of the national missing persons application that has full functionality on mobile devices, and respond swiftly to any technical problems and potential improvements identified by users.

## Initial response process

149. There are a number of ways that Police Scotland can receive a missing person report. These include a member of the public [reporting](#) a missing person to an officer on patrol, or directly to a police station. The main way to report a missing person is to call police service centres via **101** or **999** (depending on the circumstances). Police Scotland thereafter adopts a [call handling](#) system to assess and prioritise calls.
150. A service advisor based at one of the police service centres will usually take the initial call and will create an incident on STORM. If reported directly to a police station, the incident is created by front counter staff and transferred to the ACR for assessment. The service advisor and/or controller will then assess the circumstances of the incident by using a risk assessment process called [THRIVE](#), to ensure the call gets the most appropriate response. The risk assessment process includes the following considerations:

<b>T</b>	Threat	Is there a threat and who or what is the threat?
<b>H</b>	Harm	If the threat is carried out, what is the likely level of harm?
<b>R</b>	Risk	What is the likelihood of the threat occurring and what is the level of risk?
<b>I</b>	Investigation	What investigative opportunities can be identified? This could involve known contacts, previous locations found, or use of CCTV, for example.
<b>V</b>	Vulnerability	Adversity can affect anyone at any point in their life. It can be physical, mental or emotional. Identifying indicators of vulnerability is key to an effective assessment.
<b>E</b>	Engagement	What is the most appropriate response?



151. As detailed in THRIVE, the last element of the assessment is for service advisors, and ACR staff, to determine the most appropriate response by the police. Police Scotland has devised a process where four levels of response are considered and available to the service centres, as outlined below.

Type of police response	Rationale for response
Immediate	Where circumstances dictate that there is a threat to life, property or an ongoing incident that requires a dynamic police response.
Prompt	Dispatch as soon as possible, supervisor will review after 45 minutes.
Standard	A local policing appointment is made.
Other resolution	Advice and signposting provided.

152. If a service advisor determines that there is a requirement for an immediate or prompt attendance by police, they will transfer the incident to an ACR. Staff within the ACR will, on receipt of the incident, carry out a review of the THRIVE assessment to determine what type of police response, if any, is required. If the incident requires a police response, the most suitably located and equipped police officer/s will be dispatched to the incident.

153. Any incident that is not deemed appropriate for immediate or prompt attendance will be passed on to the resolution team for non-immediate investigation, advice or further assessment, as required. However, missing person incidents are predominantly dealt with by police being dispatched to gather information and commence an investigation.

154. Missing person investigations are thereafter managed through the structural processes outlined in the '**Key stages involved in the police response**' section of this report.



## Audit of calls made to police service centres

155. To allow our inspectors to examine the quality and effectiveness of the initial response process, we carried out an audit of 365 calls relating to reports of missing persons, received by service centres between August 2022 and August 2023. The audit allowed us to examine the consistency of risk assessment, risk management and the appropriateness of decisions regarding operational response and final resolution. The calls audited were randomly selected, with a spread broken down evenly across the following categories:

- adult care home
- children's residential care
- NHS establishments
- PW25 – other<sup>13</sup>
- other – PW25<sup>14</sup>.

156. The 365 calls represent a sample of wider call data. Assistance was provided by statisticians within the Justice Analytical Services Division of Scottish Government, who calculated the figure to be a large enough number to provide reasonable representation of the overall data. The sample was randomised, which is the most robust method of sampling and the best way of reducing sample bias.

157. Given the randomised sampling and initial sample size calculation, the findings from our call audit are likely to be representative of practice across the wider number of calls made to service centres.

158. We found that Police Scotland's initial response to reports of missing persons was of a very high standard. The vast majority of calls were dealt with by service advisors in a polite, helpful and professional manner and demonstrated that they were accurately obtaining and recording information in accordance with guidance. There were also examples of good, probing questions being asked by service advisors to gain clarity on some of the details provided by the caller.

---

<sup>13</sup> This relates to a call generated as a missing person report and concluded under another STORM coding.

<sup>14</sup> This relates to a call generated under another STORM coding and concluded as a missing person incident.



159. There were some instances where service advisors did not accurately record information. These related, in the main, to calls made from adult care homes and in the PW25-other category. This seemed to be as a result of service advisors attempting to speed up the process and expedite answers before the caller was finished. This can result in key information being missed or inaccurately recorded, but this only related to a small number of calls within our sample.
160. There was a lack of follow-up questions from service advisors – again, in respect of a small number of calls. This was predominantly evident in calls that were made from NHS establishments, where the service advisor could have asked further questions about the type of medication a person might be receiving. There is also an opportunity to ask the caller about the extent to which they have used their own internal protocols in terms of undertaking initial searches within the facility, but this was not done in around 40% of the calls received from NHS settings.

### THRIVE assessment and system access

161. THRIVE assessments were being used in almost all calls reviewed as part of the call audit. However, similar to our findings from the [HMICS review of the contact assessment model \(CAM\)](#) in 2022, we consider that the assessment could be used more effectively and consistently overall. In particular, the model could have been applied more thoroughly to the calls made regarding young people missing from children's houses.
162. Understandably, the focus of service advisors was most often on gathering information on the young person's description, known contacts and places where they may have been found previously, which is commendable. However, as outlined, the THRIVE assessment provides an opportunity to explore the nature and level of risk posed, including the potential level and likelihood of harm resulting from the incident. These factors were not always explored and therefore the assessment was limited as a result.



163. In these cases, there appeared to be a default position to categorise children and young people missing from children's houses as high risk at all times, and to deploy immediate resources. Again, this is understandable as care experienced young people are particularly vulnerable. However, if this is the formal position, guidance for service advisors on the use of THRIVE in these cases should be updated to reflect that a full assessment is not required.
164. Despite the identified issues in the application of THRIVE assessments, inspectors found that, in a considerable majority of cases, the result of the call was appropriate, and an incident was created in accordance with guidance.
165. Police Scotland has revised its THRIVE training as a result of carrying out a training needs analysis. This is being rolled out across all service centres and ACRs to encourage consistency and improve understanding of the model. During training, service advisors and controllers are guided to break down and assess each individual element of THRIVE to better inform decision-making in respect of the most appropriate response.
166. We heard positive reports from those who had received this training, regarding an increase in their confidence in using the tool and in their understanding and application of the assessment approach. However, although delivery of THRIVE training is seen as a strategic priority for Police Scotland, progress on the rollout has been slower than expected. This has been escalated to the contact, engagement and resolution project (CERP) programme board.
167. Service advisors are required to carry out various enhanced checks across multiple police systems, which are of particular importance to the completion of THRIVE assessments regarding missing persons. Service advisors routinely refer to the iVPD and other police systems to gather relevant information on the potential vulnerabilities of the missing person, to enhance the information they provide to investigating officers.
168. However, service advisor access to the iVPD is limited to accessing the number of vulnerability reports recorded on the system. Access is denied to more detailed information on vulnerability relating to those incidents. This results in service advisors having to pass the call on to others, to undertake the task on their behalf, which introduces inefficiencies into the process.



169. This issue was also identified during our aforementioned inspection of CAM in 2022, where we said:

“Police Scotland must improve the resilience and capability of its core police ICT systems to ensure C3 division staff have efficient access to the information required to perform their roles”.

170. Missing person incidents are closed on STORM once a missing person report is generated on the NMPA and there is no further need for deployed resources to be actively managed by the ACR. Service advisors do not have access to the NMPA, which results in the service advisor being unable to access information from previous or ongoing missing person investigations. Should a call be received by the service centre relating to a live missing person investigation being managed on NMPA, a new incident has to be generated to capture the information, which is thereafter linked to the closed/originating incident. This therefore creates the need for additional tasks that could potentially be eliminated by wider system access.

### **Area for development 3**

Police Scotland should examine the level of access to the national missing persons application required by service advisors to improve operational efficiency and service delivery in response to missing persons.

171. When applying the engagement part of THRIVE, service advisors are expected to consider what support could be provided, with a focus on improving service delivery. This support may be in the form of signposting the individual to support services provided by health, social work or third sector agencies. However, we found very little evidence of this taking place. Where this did occur, it was most often in respect of calls received about children and young people.

172. We found that almost all incidents contained an appropriate level of supervisory footprint. We saw good examples of supervisors intervening at an early stage to identify a resolution to prevent the need to dispatch resources unnecessarily.



## Protocols

173. As noted previously in this report, Police Scotland works with partners to implement nationally-adopted protocols at a local level, including the Herbert, Philomena and Not at Home protocols. In addition, service providers including NHS facilities, hospitals, children's houses, and older-adult care facilities, may have locally-developed protocols in place, aimed at improving service provision.
174. In most of the calls we reviewed, service advisors did not demonstrate an awareness of the existence of national or local missing person protocols. As such, they were not able to ask questions relevant to the use of protocols in respect of calls that were made by professionals from the aforementioned care settings.
175. We consider it important that service advisors are aware of national protocols and their relevance. Where possible, they should also have an understanding of the type of local protocols that are in place and what benefits these can bring.
176. This would provide service advisors with the ability to ask more relevant and probing questions on, for example, the extent to which a service provider had utilised their local protocols to conduct their own enquiries and searches of premises, in advance of making a call to the police.

### **Area for development 4**

Police Scotland should ensure that service advisors are aware of national protocols and their relevance and, where possible, have an understanding of the type of local protocols that are in place and what benefits these can bring.

177. In reviewing calls made by professionals from partner agencies, it was clear that there were many instances where the person making the report was unprepared and unable to provide often the most basic information relevant to the missing person. This occurred in several calls made from hospitals, NHS care facilities and children's houses. It was apparent, in some instances, that the caller was not a permanent member of staff but was either covering for core staff, working in a place that they didn't usually work, or from an agency.



178. This can, of course, result in delays in information being gathered by service advisors and, at times, delays in a resource being dispatched. We recognise that staffing pressures exist across all public sector services. However, it is essential that professionals working in care settings where the opportunity for a person to go missing exists, are suitably equipped to make a missing person report that reflects the person's details and circumstances clearly and accurately.
179. As stated previously in this report, there is no structure in place whereby Police Scotland can engage at a senior level with health, local authority and independent sector leaders to address this type of issue. At a divisional level, we saw that police were working effectively with partners from health and social work settings to develop and improve protocols, but this was not taking place consistently across the country.

### Incident coding

180. The call audit identified that a combined absconder/missing person opening code was being used by service advisors. This code seemed to be considered and used differently between service advisors and the ACR. Service advisors informed inspectors that they apply the code as determined by their training, but stated that this is often overturned by the ACR due to a difference in interpretation. Service advisors believe that the code should be separated, as someone missing is different from someone who has absconded.
181. The issue also has the potential to affect the count in terms of overall missing person incidents in any given year, especially if some of these could have been more appropriately recorded as a person having absconded from a care setting but not actually missing. Having a single tab that includes two different things seems to be causing unnecessary confusion and should be reviewed and resolved by the C3 division.



## Local policing response

182. Once police attendance is decided, missing person investigations are thereafter managed by one of the 13 local policing divisions in Scotland. An officer will be dispatched by the ACR to take further details relevant to the missing person. Once an officer is dispatched, they will collate information and carry out an initial risk assessment using the Police Scotland aide memoir. Once completed, the information gathered is used to initiate and guide the investigation. The officer will also record the details on to the NMPA.
183. Each missing person incident will then be graded by officers, based on the circumstances and vulnerability of the individual. Risk gradings available to officers, outlined in the following chart, are contained within the framework and Police Scotland's missing person SOP.

Risk Category	Rationale for grading
High	Where the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the missing person: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ is in danger through their own vulnerability; and/or</li><li>■ may have been the victim of a serious crime; and/or</li><li>■ the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.</li></ul>
Medium	Where the missing person is likely to place themselves in danger or is a threat to themselves or others.
Low	Is deemed as any person that goes missing where there is a low risk of harm to that person or others (a child should not be graded as low risk).
Concern for person	Is defined by Police Scotland as a person, whose whereabouts are known or believed known and there are concerns of risk of harm to the individual. An incident classified as a 'concern for person' will be recorded on command and control until their safety/wellbeing or otherwise is established.



184. There are various roles involved in a missing person enquiry. The first is the investigating officer/s who will be assigned to the investigation and carry out enquiries to establish the whereabouts of the missing person. The investigating officer's first line supervisor (sergeant) will manage the investigation and ensure that appropriate actions are being carried out. They will liaise with their line manager (police inspector) on any additional resources that may be required. The inspector will have management responsibilities for all high, medium and low-risk missing person investigations in their area.
185. The divisional senior management team also plays an important role in the process, as they are required to oversee all divisional missing person investigations. In high-risk investigations, they will convene gold group meetings and maintain an overview of actions and enquiries. We outline the gold, silver and bronze command structure below.
186. Police Scotland applies a command structure for the oversight and co-ordination of incidents, including missing person investigations, ([Critical Incident Management National Guidance](#)). The command structure is separated into gold command (strategic), silver command (tactical) and bronze command (operational), defined as follows:
- **Gold** – The gold commander is the strategic lead, setting overall strategy that all other plans defer to. The gold commander has responsibility for both the incident and investigation
  - **Silver** – This designates the tactical commander function. The silver commander co-ordinates individual strategies in accordance with the strategic aims
  - **Bronze** – This designates the operational commander function. There may be several appointed, each occupationally competent in a relevant discipline, for example, in diversity or community reassurance.



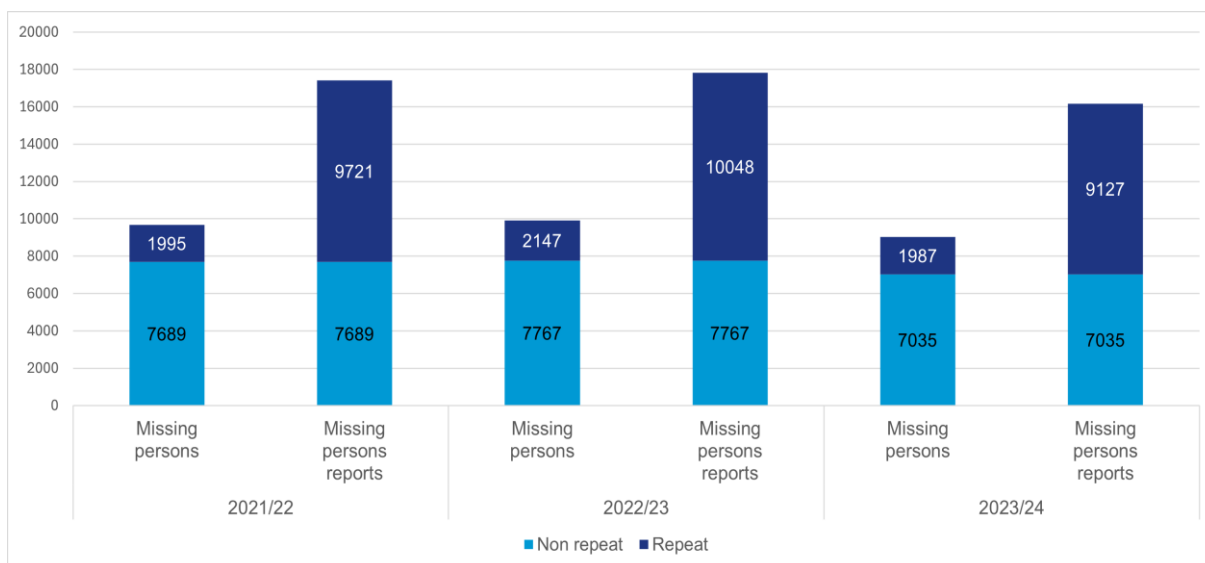
187. Each of the command levels used in policing are role specific rather than rank specific. Different ranks of officers can undertake these roles depending on the risk category assigned to the missing person. In general, Police Scotland will have either a chief inspector or superintendent acting as gold command for a high-risk missing person. In contrast, an inspector would normally fulfil the lead role in medium and low-risk missing person enquiries. This structure allows for detailed scrutiny of the investigation, allocation of resources and oversight of progress against the actions established.
188. We found the command structure approach, as applied to missing person investigations, to be robust and effective. We noted it was used to good effect in cases reviewed as part of our call audit. The local policing response was very strong overall, with clear evidence of visible leadership at a divisional level. Partner organisations in the areas we visited, were very complimentary about the valuable contribution made by police officers, middle managers and divisional leaders. In particular, partners highlighted their positive engagement, collaboration and commitment to address missing person issues.



## Repeat missing incidents

189. Police Scotland has effective mechanisms in place to identify the number of individuals who are reported missing on more than one occasion, often referred to as 'repeat missing persons'. Some of these individuals are reported missing on numerous occasions. Figure 5 demonstrates the number of individuals reported missing and the proportion of those that are repeat missing persons.

Figure 5 – Number of individual and repeat missing persons by fiscal year



Source: Police Scotland

190. Almost a quarter of individuals reported missing are reported on more than one occasion, and sometimes on multiple occasions. Children and young people make up a significant proportion of repeat missing persons. However, repeat missing persons also include people with mental health problems and older adults with dementia. Due to the often high level of vulnerability of people in these categories, the police response is, quite rightly, comprehensive. However, addressing repeat missing incidents has a considerable impact on police resources and demand.

191. There is no distinct Police Scotland strategy, or force direction in place, for dealing with individuals who go missing on multiple occasions. Most of the work to reduce repeat incidents is led by local divisions and therefore the approach taken by individual divisions can be variable.



192. Some of the divisional coordinators had a very good understanding of who the repeat missing people in their area were and they collaborated effectively with partners to plan an appropriate response. The response to repeat missing persons is supported by the use of guidance and protocols; however, these were not applied consistently across divisions. Encouragingly, we found that divisional coordinators in some areas were able to demonstrate where they had achieved a reduction in demand by working closely with partners to target repeat missing person incidents.
193. We found good examples of partnership working to address issues relevant to repeat missing persons during our onsite visits to Lanarkshire, Highland and Islands, and Edinburgh City police divisions. We met with police and partner agencies in these areas to explore a wide range of related issues, including how repeat missing incidents were being addressed.
194. As an example, police and partners in Lanarkshire held regular meetings to discuss individuals who were repeatedly reported missing. Often, given their level of vulnerability, children and young people were a primary focus of partnership meetings where individual cases were discussed and reviewed in detail. This resulted in action plans being developed to provide support for children and young people to address related issues and reduce missing incidents wherever possible.
195. Having reliable information regarding individuals who go missing on multiple occasions can help considerably in subsequent investigations. The NMPA provides officers with very useful information on all previous incidents, which can help to locate a missing person more quickly.



## Specialist resources

196. The vast majority of specialist resources for missing person investigations are provided by the OSD. The main role and function of OSD is to provide advice, assistance and support to local policing. Search advice regarding missing persons is provided by a PolSA. They are accessible to operational supervisors on a 24/7 basis, through an on-call system. While PolSA support is focused on high-risk missing persons, they are available to advise on lower-risk enquiries when capacity allows.
197. The OSD is able to provide a wide range of specialist resources to support missing person investigations. These include the following:
- PolSA – there are over 60 trained officers located throughout Scotland (based at Aberdeen, Dundee, Fettes, Fife, Govan and Inverness)
  - police search teams – which consist of a team leader or PolSA, and between six and ten search pairs
  - air support – helicopter and drones
  - dog units – these consist of seven hubs of eight sergeants and 66 constables
  - police mountain rescue teams
  - dive and marine unit resources.
198. Specialist resources are located across the country to provide wide coverage, and any requests that local policing have for these are made through the C3 division, which has access to all relevant contact details for teams, officers and resource sites.
199. We spoke with divisional commanders from several areas across Scotland and found that the quality of service from OSD was very highly regarded. It was highlighted that the level of expertise of officers providing support services was often exceptional.
200. However, it was also highlighted that rural and semi-rural divisions did not always have the same level of access to specialist support services as urban areas. Understandably, in some instances, it can take time to get the correct resource to the more remote parts of Scotland. This can be particularly challenging at the early stages of an investigation, where the swift availability of resources can significantly improve investigative opportunities.



201. We found that divisions with more rural geography have formed partnership arrangements with civilian organisations providing specialist services, in order to support their investigations.
202. Police Scotland has access to a wide variety of civilian organisations that can provide specialist support and assistance with missing person searches. Requests for external resources will usually be made for high-risk incidents. Resources available to Police Scotland include:
- HM Coastguard
  - Civilian and military mountain rescue teams
  - Civilian cave/mine rescue
  - Scottish Fire and Rescue services
  - Scottish Ambulance Service special operation response team (SORT)
  - Search & Rescue Dog Association Scotland (SARDA).
203. These organisations provide essential support services to enhance search options and capability, and are highly regarded and valued by Police Scotland.
204. We recognise the need for balance between where specialist resources are geographically located and the varying levels of demand for their services across the country. There should, however, be sufficient flexibility to ensure specialist support services, officers and equipment can be deployed quickly to support missing person investigations in more rural areas. The OSD should continue to liaise with local policing divisions to ensure they are providing the necessary level of support to these areas.
205. Due to the level of public concern that some missing person incidents can understandably cause, Police Scotland will, at times, be required to manage members of the public who want to assist in the search for missing people. On occasion, police can be inundated with hundreds of civilian volunteers wanting to assist with searches. It is, of course, essential that such volunteers are utilised in an appropriate and focused manner, so as not to impede trained search teams.



206. Police Scotland is very experienced, skilled and knowledgeable in this regard and clear about when information and support from the public can be helpful, and in which circumstances the involvement of non-trained individuals may be detrimental to an investigation.
207. Police divisions have their own divisional intelligence units, which can provide information on any activity being generated by, or in the name of, the missing person. This usually relates to activity on electronic devices such as mobile phones. The monitoring of activity on social media platforms can also be a key tool in investigations. These approaches provide a crucial line of enquiry for investigating officers and, in high-risk situations, can be used to identify information on the location of the missing person.
208. Requests to obtain information relating to a mobile device belonging to a missing person are strictly controlled, with several levels of authorisation required to obtain information. Requests are dealt with by the communication investigation unit (CIU) who act as gatekeepers between the police and telecommunication providers. All authorisations are recorded and subject to scrutiny by independent external bodies.

### Partnership working

209. Positive outcomes for people reported missing are reliant on effective partnership working arrangements that ensure services are planned and delivered collaboratively and efficiently, with a person-centred focus.
210. The framework is clear on the need for a well-planned and co-ordinated partnership approach to respond effectively to missing people in Scotland. It provides clarity on the expected roles and responsibilities of each partner and emphasises that addressing the issues surrounding missing person incidents cannot solely be the responsibility of Police Scotland. It contains several wide-ranging commitments that partner organisations have signed up to and that, if enacted fully, would make a significant improvement to outcomes for missing people.
211. However, we found considerable variation in the level of engagement of partner organisations and the extent to which they were meeting the expectations of the framework. As outlined, key partners include health and care services, hospitals, local authority social work services, and third sector agencies.



212. As stated earlier in this report, we saw examples of very positive and effective partnership working arrangements in the areas we visited, but this was not consistent across the country. This is a complex issue; there are a substantial number of services being provided by partners across the country, any of which could potentially make a report regarding a missing person. As with policing, partner organisations need to have a strong element of strategic leadership from senior officers to plan missing person responses – as well as an effective operational response from staff across a vast range of service settings. Unfortunately, this was not always the case.
213. While we consider the framework to provide crucial guidance for partners, it is not statutory guidance, which can result in some partners giving it less attention and emphasis than it requires. The framework does not have the consistent profile that it should have among some partner organisations.
214. In Lanarkshire, for example, the missing persons co-ordination unit acts as an effective conduit between operational policing and partners. Any issues regarding partnership or policing arrangements and activities are reported to the unit to resolve. Any areas for improvement or learning opportunities are captured and subsequently shared with partners.
215. Regular meetings take place between police and partners to co-ordinate their missing person response at a senior level (attended by strategic leaders from police and the local authorities that make up the Lanarkshire division). Operational meetings between partners take place on a weekly basis. These often focus on the most vulnerable individuals, and repeat missing persons. At times, daily communication is maintained between police and partners regarding children and young people at risk of becoming missing, in order to plan an appropriate response.
216. The division was able to provide tangible evidence of the impact of this approach where it had reduced instances of children and young people going missing from children's houses, particularly for those likely to be repeat missing persons. This demonstrates a positive preventative approach. While this level of regular engagement with partners will come at a cost, in terms of time and resources, we are confident that the cost and resource of responding to potentially high-risk missing person investigations would be greater.



217. Reducing and, in some cases, preventing missing episodes can also improve outcomes for children and young people, as the result of being missing can be very damaging. Partners in the divisions we visited were clear about the potential risks for missing children and young people, including sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation. We saw a considerable level of commitment between police and partners in the areas we visited to prioritise these issues, and we heard about very strong partnership working arrangements aimed at targeting the most at-risk children and young people.
218. Multi-agency partner meetings do not take place consistently across police divisions. This can result from a combination of factors, including: the level of buy-in from senior managers from health and social work services; the availability of operational partners to engage with police; and the lack of structures and protocols in place to support this approach.
219. Some divisional/local authority areas have entered into partnership protocols, which set out their strategy and agreed operational approach to missing persons in their area. These can come about through the support and advice provided by national coordinators from the Missing People charity. Partners we spoke with generally welcomed the opportunity to be actively involved in a multi-agency group to discuss and address the aims and objectives of the framework; however, partnership protocols were not in place in most areas.
220. We heard about particular progress being made on a partnership protocol for missing persons in the Forth Valley police division, which includes Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannanshire local authorities. At the time of our inspection, partners were at an advanced stage of formalising agreements and arrangements to improve their collaborative approach to the issue. We consider that the learning achieved as a result of this process could assist other divisions to establish similar partnership protocols, aligned to the expectations of the framework.



### Third sector

221. Police Scotland has a good working relationship with third sector organisations involved in missing person investigations. This includes a strategic partnership with the charity, Missing People. There is a formal protocol in place between Police Scotland and the charity to provide several services relevant to missing persons and their families. Police Scotland and Missing People are also in the final stages of developing an information sharing agreement to support the wider use of available services.
222. Missing People offers a range of support services across the UK to assist in investigations and support missing people once returned, alongside their key contacts. It can provide the following:
- [Text Safe](#) – a text message system whereby a text is sent to a missing child or adult to let them know about confidential helpline services available to them. These messages are sent by the charity and not the police. In 2023/24, the system sent 600 messages to missing people. This a free service, which we believe is not being used to its full potential. Police Scotland can also send text messages directly to missing people to ask them to get in touch – however, the use of a third sector partner has the potential to increase the response level.
  - [Family Support](#) – police can refer families to the charity for advice and support. However, Police Scotland does not use this service widely and there is limited uptake of it in Scotland. The charity has offered support to around 30 families in the past year, which is a small fraction of the number of families affected each year.
  - [Appeals](#) – public appeals for a missing person can assist an investigation considerably. Missing People are able to use digital billboards, social media, print media and local partners to share public appeals – with a potential reach of millions. In addition, the charity can utilise its Safeguarding Briefing Network, with over 120 Scottish partner agencies, which is available to the police when a public appeal is not appropriate. Through this network, the charity can share briefings about missing people with professionals and services that a missing person is likely to use, such as train stations and homeless outreach services, without making the appeal public.



- [Return discussions](#) – the charity can provide training to police officers and staff from partner organisations to enable them to conduct return discussions more effectively. At the time of our inspection, the charity had trained over 700 individuals in carrying out return discussions.

223. We suggest that Police Scotland explore all of these options to ensure that they are being used, to an appropriate extent, to improve outcomes for missing people.

## Early intervention and prevention

224. As outlined previously in this report, police and partners work collaboratively to introduce early intervention and prevention approaches; this happens in varying degrees across the country. In some instances, they are provided with support by national coordinators in developing approaches based on their experience of what can work well.

225. Several national protocols have been introduced over recent years aimed at improving partnership working – particularly to reduce and/or prevent missing person incidents wherever possible.

226. Police Scotland and partners in local authority areas/divisions have also collaborated to develop a range of local protocols and approaches focused on issues of concern identified in their own area – such as a spike in missing incidents being reported by a particular service, facility or setting (e.g., a hospital, care home for older adults, or children's house).

227. Police Scotland has adopted the following approved national protocols:

- Not at Home Protocol (relevant for children and young people)
- Philomena Protocol (relevant for children and young people)
- Herbert Protocol (for people living with Alzheimer's and dementia).

228. The NMPU is the driver behind the development and implementation of national protocols. However, responsibility lies with local divisions and partners to deliver these effectively.



## Not at Home Protocol

229. This protocol has been in operation for two years, with the aim of reducing the number of missing person reports made from children's houses. The processes and procedures to be adopted are outlined in Police Scotland's 'Looked after & accommodated children who go missing from residential & foster care in Scotland' guidance.
230. The protocol places responsibility on care providers, as corporate parents<sup>15</sup> to gauge the level of tolerable risk when a child or young person in their care has not returned home. The intention is that carers should only report them as missing when their whereabouts are unknown and there is a potential threat, or risk of harm posed to the individual.

## Philomena Protocol

231. Police Scotland adopted the Philomena Protocol as best practice following the introduction of the protocol in England and Wales.
232. It was subsequently launched across Scotland in May 2023 and is relatively well established. The protocol is a scheme that asks carers to identify children and young people who are at risk of going missing, and to record vital information about them that can be used to help find them quickly and safely. This information should include:
- physical description
  - recent photograph
  - details of friends/associates
  - places frequented
  - access to mobile phone/money
  - medical information
  - habits/routines/missing episodes.

---

<sup>15</sup> The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 define corporate parenting as "the formal and local partnerships between all services responsible for working together to meet the needs of looked after children, young people and care leavers".



233. Having this crucial information to hand at the time of reporting a young person missing assists the reporter giving the information and provides more comprehensive details to service advisors (and thereafter to investigating officers), enabling them to progress enquiries swiftly.

## Herbert Protocol

234. The Herbert Protocol was introduced by Norfolk Constabulary in 2011 and is now adopted by many forces across the UK. Following its introduction, the protocol was used by some of the police divisions in Scotland and rolled out nationally in September 2021. The purpose of the protocol is to help police and other agencies quickly locate people who are living with dementia.

235. The Herbert Protocol operates in a similar way to the Philomena Protocol, in that it asks carers or family members to complete a form containing relevant information on a vulnerable person's personal details; places where they may have been found previously, as well as the potential level of risk or harm posed. Responsibility for updating the form rests solely with families and/or carers of a vulnerable adult at risk of going missing.

236. We found evidence of several divisional coordinators working effectively, in collaboration with their local partners, to embed preventative measures at a local level. However, the success of such preventative approaches was found to correlate with the extent to which the division had a dedicated coordinator with a protected role and support from divisional leaders.

237. There appears to be heavy reliance by partners on Police Scotland to drive progress on the implementation of the various protocols. While, quite rightly, police are the lead agency in terms of investigating missing person incidents, partner organisations have a shared responsibility for implementing an early intervention and prevention approach, as outlined in the framework.

238. Anecdotal evidence suggests that – where divisional coordinators do not have the capacity to promote these protocols and assist in the delivery of training to partners on the subject – organisations can, at times, revert to their legacy practices.



239. Despite this, we found good examples of where national and local protocols were being implemented effectively by some local authority/divisional areas.
240. The Highland and Islands division, in partnership with social work services, has embedded the Philomena Protocol into practices and procedures relating to the placement of asylum-seeking children and young people placed within their locality.
241. Divisional coordinators in Highland and Islands, Argyll and West Dunbartonshire, and Lanarkshire carry out daily reviews of missing person incidents to identify those who meet the criteria of the Herbert Protocol and thereafter link with partners, carers and/or families to raise awareness of the protocol.
242. The Highland and Islands division has used existing harbouring legislation to respond to adults found in the company of missing children. This practice has been captured by the NMPU who are looking to share learning across Scotland.
243. Care providers in Lanarkshire routinely collate information on when and how often the Not at Home Protocol has been used by children's services, and share the resulting information with divisional coordinators. This provides valuable information on where missing person incidents have potentially been prevented, which can also result in reduced demand. It is often argued that it is very difficult to measure something that may have been prevented as a result of an intervention, or activity. However, in this instance care providers in the region can draw a comparison to the use of the protocol and a reduction in reports being made by their services.
244. We would suggest that divisional coordinators and the NMPU share this good practice with care providers in children's houses across the country.

### **Recommendation 8**

Police Scotland should continue to engage with partners and service providers at a national and local level to encourage greater adherence to the collective commitments of the national missing persons framework. This should include engagement on the implementation of early intervention and prevention approaches, and the use of national and local protocols.



## Engagement with missing people and their families

245. Police Scotland has no overarching communication strategy to engage with missing people, once returned, and their families, friends and key contacts during the course of an investigation. It relies on guidance contained within the missing person SOP, aide memoire and Moodle training packages to direct officers on the requirement of effective engagement and communication with families and key contacts throughout investigations, and with missing persons once returned.
246. These documents have very limited detail on what is expected of officers in this regard. The SOP includes information on the need to identify a single point of contact in the family, and a corresponding officer, to facilitate regular engagement and communication. More detailed information is available within missing person Moodle training packages, but these are not available to officers at the time of responding to an incident.
247. There is guidance for gold group commanders, which aims to ensure that a single point of contact is in place to facilitate regular communication and engagement with family members throughout the duration of a high-risk missing person enquiry. However, this does not routinely capture those enquiries assessed as medium or low risk.
248. There is a lack of information available to officers on the provision and availability of support services that families and/or missing persons may be able to access.
249. Police Scotland can make a follow-up call or send a letter to a missing person, once returned, with the offer of help and support. This is used in some instances by divisions, usually through the divisional coordinator, but it is not done in all cases.
250. A memorandum of understanding was previously in place between Police Scotland and Missing People, which has now lapsed. Most of the officers we interviewed were not aware of the existence of the charity, nor of the services it could provide. On examination, we found that work is being done to develop an information sharing agreement to capture the range of services offered by the charity.



251. Despite the lack of a distinct strategy, most of the people we interviewed, who worked for organisations other than the police, felt Police Scotland maintained an appropriate level of communication with families and key contacts during missing person investigations. Nevertheless, there is insufficient evidence to form a view on the level, quality and consistency of engagement between Police Scotland and missing people and their families across Scotland. Police Scotland should examine its performance in this regard to identify opportunities for improvement.

### **Recommendation 9**

Police Scotland should ensure consistent and effective communication and engagement takes place with families, carers and key contacts throughout investigations.

## **Return discussions**

252. The concept and practice of carrying out return discussions with missing people, once returned, has been in place within policing for a considerable period of time. More recently, the framework has drawn together research and good practice from a range of sources to promote a more tailored approach to such discussions.

253. The framework sets out expectations for how these are carried out and by whom, with an emphasis on identifying the needs of the missing person and then establishing the most appropriate person and organisation to carry out the interview.

254. The framework makes a strong statement on the subject:

"The importance of return discussions cannot be stressed enough. These are absolutely central to preventing individuals from falling into patterns of repeatedly going missing".

It also encourages the returned person to be given a choice about with whom, and with which agency, they would like to complete their return discussion, with the aim of increasing the chances of engagement, identifying triggers and preventing further missing episodes.



255. Police Scotland considers 'safe and well' checks and return discussions as being part of the missing person investigation, which are included within its missing persons policy and supporting aide memoir.
256. Safe and well checks are the initial interaction between police and missing persons on their return. These are carried out exclusively by police officers. They are followed by a return discussion, which is also referred to as a 'return home interview' in the framework and Police Scotland missing person policy and guidance.
257. Police Scotland national guidance states that the initial safe and well check should be carried out as soon as possible following a person's return. However, we received mixed views from partners on the practical approach taken to safe and well checks, particularly in respect of children and young people living at children's houses.
258. Partners highlighted that the practice could often be very disruptive for the young person returned to the service, but could also upset other children living there as, at times, these visits would be made by police during the night.
259. This issue has been addressed by police and partners in some divisions, resulting in improved outcomes.
260. Edinburgh City division has worked with partners to agree an arrangement whereby the return of a missing young person is confirmed by residential childcare staff at the service, with details provided to local policing. This often takes place via a telephone conversation, with arrangements for a follow-up appointment the next day (or sometimes within a few hours if the incident takes place in the middle of the night). We heard from police and partners that this small adjustment has made a considerable difference to the working relationship, as well as having a positive impact on the children and young people living at the service.
261. We would suggest that Police Scotland examine the learning achieved from this approach, for consideration of wider implementation across divisions.



262. Research suggests that the police are not always the best agency to conduct the more in-depth return discussions required. This is often the case for care experienced children, who may have difficulties with authority figures such as the police. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in the absence of alternative arrangements in some areas, police are conducting the majority of return discussions.
263. The police should always be considered as a competent resource to conduct a return discussion, but officers conducting such interviews need to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to complete the role. Local divisions and their partners should introduce a model that meets the needs of missing people.
264. In contrast, in England and Wales, statutory guidance places responsibility on local authorities to ensure that every child is offered a return home interview by an independent, trained individual. This is considered a statutory right of the child or young person (not adults). The College of Policing's Authorised Professional Practice (APP) also recommends police forces establish a process for providing return discussions for vulnerable adults at risk of harm.
265. As stated previously, intelligence gathered from return discussions for all missing people can be invaluable in identifying vulnerabilities and can also provide useful information in the event of an individual becoming missing again. We found a distinct lack of co-ordination and information sharing by local partners in some areas regarding return discussions. This can have a negative impact on the success of any prevention and intervention approaches, and can result in unnecessary gaps in police efforts to trace repeat missing persons. Any information gleaned from a return discussion is of benefit to all those potentially involved in the ongoing care and/or support of that missing person.
266. There is no widespread approach to the provision of return discussions for adults. The most compelling example we identified was the model developed by Alzheimer Scotland, in partnership with Edinburgh City division. This is being piloted and will be reviewed for further implementation. During the pilot period, specialists from Alzheimer Scotland will carry out return discussions with missing persons living with dementia and will share appropriate information with the division.



267. Alzheimer Scotland has received funding from the [RS McDonald Charitable Trust](#) to enable this pilot to be extended further to Motherwell and Fife local authority areas. It is Police Scotland's ambition to roll out this pilot nationally to all those living with dementia, but this is currently reliant on the prospective up-scaling of the model and provision of funding for Alzheimer Scotland to continue the work.
268. We found several examples of effective practice in the approach to return discussions carried out by both police and partners, which we outline in the appendix of this report.
269. There is a disparity in the provision of return discussions, resulting in a potential loss of prevention and intervention opportunities. This results from: a lack of focused collaboration between partners on the delivery of return discussions; funding issues for third sector agencies; and a lack of capacity and support for missing person coordinators to drive local improvements.
270. Clear and co-ordinated arrangements, procedures and information-sharing protocols should be put in place to support return discussions, with any resultant valuable intelligence captured and shared between partners.

### **Recommendation 10**

Police Scotland should work with partners to ensure that clear and co-ordinated arrangements are in place to conduct return discussions across divisions. These should align effectively with safe and well checks, and all relevant information gathered from such discussions should be shared between partners.



## Long-term missing persons

271. As previously indicated, the vast majority of people either return by themselves, or are returned by police. However, the impact and distress caused to the families and friends of the relatively small number of people who are not found is considerable.
272. Police Scotland subscribes to the schedule set by the NPCC for the review and management of long-term missing persons. An individual becomes a long-term missing person when they have been missing for 28 days or more. The 28-day peer review of the investigation is the responsibility of the CID, irrespective of risk level. Subsequent reviews are the responsibility of a trained divisional senior investigating officer (which, on occasion, will be of sergeant rank) at intervals of three and six months, and annually thereafter.
273. The appointed senior investigating officer for the long-term missing person investigation is required to record details of the review on the NMPA. The NMPA has a standalone section for archived long-term missing person investigations, however, is unable to separate those which are in the review cycle from those which are archived. This creates difficulties in managing the review cycle. To address this issue, the NMPU has requested that the police digital division create a tab and search function within the NMPA for long-term missing person investigations. We would support this as it could have a positive impact on long-term investigations.
274. The NMPU has national responsibility for providing annual alerts to divisions to carry out a review of their respective long-term missing person cases. We were informed that complacency and inconsistency has been introduced into the approach within some divisions, as they are routinely devolving responsibility to untrained inspectors or sergeants.
275. We were provided with some examples of effective practice whereby, as a result of the commitment of the officer involved, a long-term missing person was traced safe and well, living under a new identity.
276. The current missing person SOP does not include any guidance on the ownership, management and/or review of long-term missing incidents. There is no performance reporting in respect of progress on long-term missing cases.



277. The management of long-term missing cases should be improved by instilling divisional ownership, supported by the NMPU, to ensure there is appropriate oversight, governance and timely reviews in accordance with the review cycle. The NMPA should also be updated to a satisfactory level to afford opportunity for effective record keeping and retrieval of required performance information on status of forms within the review cycle.

#### **Area for development 5**

Police Scotland should examine the processes and practice relevant to the management of long-term missing person enquiries, and introduce necessary improvements.

### **Safeguarding responsibilities**

278. An individual being reported as missing could be a sign of wider vulnerability that they may be experiencing or being exposed to. Understanding these issues and attempting to put intervention measures in place could prevent further missing person incidents and reduce harm.

279. This was identified in the aforementioned HMICS inspection report on the approach to missing person investigations in Aberdeen City division. As a result of that inspection, Police Scotland provided guidance to officers in respect of vulnerability issues relevant to missing person investigations. This included the need for officers to submit the following reports relating to missing person incidents, to meet safeguarding responsibilities:

- submission of concern reports for children
- submission of concern reports for adults deemed to be an adult at risk who meets the three-point test, or someone who is a vulnerable person as a result of the situation or circumstances and may require support
- safe and well checks and return discussions
- Single Point of Contact (SPoC)/Family Liaison Officer (FLO).



280. Police Scotland should take the opportunity to review the guidance from our previous inspection on this issue, so that it captures all relevant safeguarding information and relevant practice. The review should ensure that relevant processes related to potential child criminal exploitation are captured and managed appropriately. This should include developing protocols with partners to identify the most appropriate agency to conduct return discussions.



## Outcomes

---

### Governance and performance

281. Police Scotland's leadership on missing persons strategy and governance should be clearer and more visible, at the national strategic level. The gaps that exist may be partly due to gaps and changes in previous senior posts, but may also be as a result of missing persons sitting within a very broad and diverse portfolio within Policing Together, with potentially competing demands. Police Scotland should reintroduce the strategic governance forum that was previously in place to oversee the strategy and direction for missing persons work.
282. We found no evidence that there were effective audit and assurance processes in place to ensure all areas were adopting a consistent approach to delivering services relevant to missing persons. There were inconsistencies in how information on missing persons is reported by local policing divisions to national teams. We would expect to see clear criteria in place for how local policing divisions should report on missing persons.
283. Police Scotland provides performance reports on missing person operations to the SPA on a quarterly basis. These are made available to the public on the SPA's website. These reports include quantitative information on a range of factors, including the number of people that go missing from various settings and facilities each year.
284. This missing person information is part of a wider performance report that Police Scotland produces for the SPA performance committee. The missing person section of the report is limited in the information provided and gives no detail about the effectiveness of prevention and intervention measures. We would suggest that Police Scotland provide the SPA with more detailed information regarding what measures and protocols are working well, or less well, and what is being done to achieve improvements.



285. The performance management data in these reports includes a range of demand-related information relevant to demographics and geographical differences. This provides a helpful picture of the potential increase or decrease in incidents that have taken place in respect of specific groups, including adults, children and young people, and those missing from settings including NHS facilities and children's services.
286. There is, however, no overarching internal mechanism in place to evaluate the quality of the police response in respect of missing persons. While as noted, police are able to provide valuable quantitative data, performance reports make little reference to the quality and effectiveness of service provision and the outcomes achieved.

### Performance outcomes

287. Police Scotland does not directly gather and report on performance information relevant to the commitments outlined within the framework. Rather, it sets out its objectives and outcomes against those outlined in the [Annual Policing Plan 2023/24](#), which is based on its Strategic Threat & Risk Assessment (STRA) 23/28.

<b>Outcome 1</b>	Threats to public safety and wellbeing are resolved by a proactive and responsive police service.
<b>Objective</b>	Keep people safe in the physical and digital world.

288. We consider it appropriate for Police Scotland to align missing people to its own, wider outcomes concerning threats to public safety and keeping people safe. However, as the service is aligned to the framework and has adopted the commitments outlined therein, it would be appropriate for the service to monitor, measure and report on progress against these.

**Recommendation 11**

Police Scotland should routinely evaluate the quality of its missing persons operations to pinpoint areas for improvement, using that knowledge to drive improvement, reduce demand and improve outcomes for missing people and their families.



## Partner agency involvement

289. It was clear from information gathered during the inspection, that some partners in health and local authorities could do more to collaborate with Police Scotland on missing persons. The issue is more prevalent at a senior planning level where gaps exist in some areas. Greater collaboration would ensure that there is a genuine multi-agency response to missing persons, aligning with the aims, objectives and commitments outlined in the framework. Partners should also be involved in monitoring progress against the objectives and commitments outlined in the framework.
290. We found that positive outcomes were more likely where local policing divisions had collaborated with partners to develop missing person protocols. The successful implementation of preventative protocols can result in fewer missing person incidents, reducing, in turn, the number of officers required to resource investigations.
291. The collaborative approach and practical arrangements put in place by police and partners in the areas visited during our inspection were impressive. There was a clear focus on working together to achieve the best possible outcomes for missing people, to reduce repeat incidents and provide support to missing people once returned.

## Experience of missing people and families

292. While we have outlined evidence of Police Scotland engaging effectively with partner agencies on missing persons on a number of levels, we found no evidence of partners asking for the views of missing persons (or their families) on their experiences. There was no mechanism in place to ask what they felt about the police or partner response to missing incidents. As a result, missing people and their families had no viable route to highlight what had worked well for them and what had not. This lack of enquiry limits the potential for services to improve, and inhibits organisational learning.
293. Police Scotland's 'user experience survey' is undertaken regularly to gain an understanding of the views of the public, communities and partners regarding what is working well (and not so well) for them. However, this does not include questions specific to missing persons.



294. The Missing People charity has developed a lived experience forum and network to provide platforms to hear from those who have experience of being missing, and their families. The aim of these is to gather feedback to help improve the way in which the charity can offer support to people at risk of going missing.

#### **Area for development 6**

Police Scotland should explore opportunities to gather information on the experiences of missing people and their families, to better inform service planning and provision.



## Appendix

---

1. During our inspection, we identified the following examples of effective practice in respect of return discussions, carried out by both police and partners.
  - In Fife, two police officers have been nominated as ‘young missing person co-ordinators’ and are trained to carry out return discussions for children and young people. During our audit of the NMPA, we found evidence of one of the divisional coordinators completing a joint return discussion with social work staff, which was deemed thorough and well documented.
  - In Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray, return discussions for children and young people deemed at risk of harm were carried out by police ‘risk and harm reduction officers,’ which can include an adult who has a better relationship with the child or young person. Frontline officers carry out return discussions with those at lower risk of harm. This ensures a partnership approach for those deemed at higher risk of going missing and promotes opportunities for informed prevention and intervention activities.
  - In Highland and Islands, NHS mental health services reported being impressed by the consistency of approach by local police in the completion of return discussions. Social work services also follow up with patients in communities in respect of return discussions.
  - The local authority in North Lanarkshire carries out return discussions with care experienced children and young people, with clear and established reporting routes into the divisional coordinator. This ensures consistent capture of the outcome of return discussions, which is recorded on the NMPA and discussed in multi-agency missing person meetings.
  - In East Renfrewshire, Barnardo’s carry out return discussions on behalf of statutory services, which also includes a follow-up service in the form of support services for children and young people.
  - In Edinburgh, staff within mental health services carry out return discussions for their patients. Intelligence gathered is used to inform risk assessments and is shared with the divisional coordinator and/or the police hospital liaison officer.
  - In Highland and Islands, youth street workers are trained to carry out return discussions, with a particular focus on child sexual and criminal exploitation. Positive relationships have been developed between the street workers and vulnerable children and young people.



**HMICS** HM INSPECTORATE OF  
CONSTABULARY IN SCOTLAND

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland  
1st Floor, St Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh EH1 3DG

Tel: 0131 244 5614

Email: [hmic@hmic.gov.scot](mailto:hmic@hmic.gov.scot)

Web: [www.hmics.scot](http://www.hmics.scot)

### **About His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland**

HMICS operates independently of Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority and the Scottish Government. Under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012, our role is to review the state, effectiveness and efficiency of Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority. We support improvement in policing by carrying out inspections, making recommendations and highlighting effective practice.

© Crown copyright 2024

978-1-910165-85-0

HMICS/2024/07