Risk, bureaucracy and missing persons

An evaluation of a new approach to the initial police response

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Executive summary

Key findings

Three forces piloted a new approach to missing persons for a three month period. While officers were previously required to attend all incidents as the default initial response, the pilot introduced a new risk assessment process and 'absence' category. During the pilot, this category of incidents (involving a person who was not where they were expected to be but not thought to be at risk of harm) were to be monitored by police call handlers without officers being deployed immediately.

The evaluation found promising qualitative evidence of the pilot having achieved its primary aim – to make the initial police response to missing persons reports more proportionate to risk. It was thought – as a side benefit – that a more proportionate approach might also help free up police capacity. The evaluation found consistent evidence of the pilot having achieved this secondary aim.

Did the pilot result in a more proportionate and risk-based response?

- The qualitative research found a widespread perception among officers that the pilot had helped to better identify those at risk, and ensured that higher risk incidents received the attention they required.
- This result was not reflected in some of the survey findings. Based on officer descriptions, a high proportion of incidents in the pilot sites were assessed to be low risk.

Did a more proportionate response help free up police capacity?

- Despite an increase in the number of recorded incidents in the pilot sites, around a third were classified as absences and, thus, did not require officers to attend.
- By being more proportionate, the pilot forces were able to target resources better and free up capacity. A saving of 200 shifts over the three month period was estimated as a result of officers not attending absences. The amount of time spent on the initial response to missing persons was also reduced in the pilot sites (-23%) relative to the comparison sites (-3%). In theory, these resources could be redirected towards higher risk incidents.

Did the pilot improve officer attitudes and job satisfaction?

- Most response officers and supervisors who were interviewed welcomed the pilot, and said their attitudes about attending missing persons incidents had improved.
- A survey of officers, however, did not reveal a consistent pattern of attitude change.

How did partners view the pilot?

- There was widespread view among partners that the police should move away from a 'one size fits all' approach to missing persons.
- About two-thirds of respondents were positive or neutral about the pilot. A third were more critical, mainly raising concerns about the application of the new category.
- The quality of the engagement partners reportedly received from the police before implementation seemed to affect their level of support for the pilot.
- The reduction in missing person coordinators in the pilot forces – an organisational change that was unconnected to the pilot – was potentially regarded as a greater problem.

How was the pilot perceived to have affected police safeguarding work?

- There was no evidence to suggest the pilot had undermined forces' ability to carry out proactive safeguarding work (though it was a perceived concern for some partners).
- The reduction in missing person coordinators in the pilot forces reportedly would have placed pressure on monitoring and partnership work after the pilot (though it continued).

Background

Three police forces piloted a new approach to missing persons for three months under the ACPO/Home Office Reducing Bureaucracy Programme. The primary aim of the pilot was to ensure the initial police response to missing persons was more proportionate to the risks involved. Sending officers immediately to all incidents – as the default initial response – was seen by the police to be disproportionate as it involved officers conducting inquiries, completing records, and updating systems even when the risks involved were low.

During the pilot, the initial police response to an incident depended on a new risk assessment process and how it was subsequently classified.

- Incidents involving a person whose whereabouts could not be established, behaviour was out of character, or who was thought to be at risk of harm were classified as a **'missing persons'**. Officers would be deployed immediately and expected to complete initial enquiries, create a detailed record of the incident, and update force systems.

- Incidents involving people who were not where they were expected or supposed to be but not thought to be in any risk were classified as **'absences'**. The call handler would agree some initial steps with the caller to assist them to find the person, and regularly monitor the situation until it was resolved or became a missing persons incident.

As a result of officers not being immediately deployed to absences, it was thought that the new approach might also help to free up police capacity – a secondary benefit of the pilot. Despite the change to the initial police response, the police were expected to continue to with its proactive safeguarding activities to identify and deal with longer terms risks (e.g. monitoring repeat occurrences, and making referrals to support services).

This report presents findings from a College of Policing evaluation of the pilot. A quasi-experimental impact evaluation was carried out in the three forces which tested the effect of the new approach before and after implementation in a series of pilot sites relative to a series of comparison sites. A qualitative process evaluation was carried out in two of the three forces which sought to develop a richer understanding of how the pilot was implemented in practice from a range of difference perspectives (e.g. officers, staff and local partner agencies).

Did the pilot result in a more proportionate initial response?

The primary aim of the pilot was to ensure that the initial police response was targeted towards higher risk incidents where there was potential for the person to come to harm. The absent definition was designed for low risk incidents, so no impact on public safety was expected, and no information collected during the evaluation suggested anyone was harmed as a direct result of the change.

- The evidence from the process evaluation was consistently positive. The qualitative research revealed there to be a broad consensus among officers that the pilot had helped the police to better identify those at risk, and had ensured that higher risk incidents received the attention they required.

- The survey results were somewhat mixed, although there was no evidence of any negative effect. The post-implementation survey asked officers whether they attended a greater proportion of incidents that they perceived to be higher risk. Although there was a significant difference between the pilot and comparison sites, which suggested

the pilot had a positive impact, a majority of the officers in the pilot sites did not perceive an increase level of risk in the incidents they attended.

- Other survey indicators showed little change. When assessing the level of risk based on officers' descriptions of the last incident they attended, the proportion of incidents assessed to be low risk showed little difference before and after implementation in both the pilot and comparison sites.

- Given the promising qualitative evidence and the length of the pilot period, it is possible that there was insufficient time for the new approach to become fully embedded and for its full effect to be reflected in the survey results. Greater change might be expected to occur in the longer term.

- There was also evidence from the qualitative research that officers and staff were starting to grapple with the idea of having to manage risk and think through the implications of their own actions.

- There was wide agreement among the partner agency respondents that the police should move away from a 'one size fits all' approach to missing persons, and that it was unnecessary for the police to attend all incidents (although this view was not always expressed as support for the pilot).

Did a more proportionate initial response help free up police capacity?

By being more proportionate and responding only to incidents where someone was at risk of harm, it was thought the new approach might also help free up police capacity. In theory, at least, any freed up capacity could have been redirected towards proactive work or higher risk cases which the 'what works' evidence in policing generally suggests can be effective.

- Over the three month pilot, the total number of incidents recorded by the police increased in the pilot sites (+22%) relative to the comparison sites (-5%). This result suggested the pilot did not have an adverse impact on the reporting or recording of incidents.

- By risk assessing all incidents, the pilot sites were able to target their resources better. Around one-third of incidents were assessed to be low risk (absences) and did not require officers to attend immediately. As a result, the pilot sites could focus their resources on a smaller number of incidents after implementation (-18%) relative to the comparison sites (-5%).

- By targeting the deployment of officers only to incidents where there was a risk of harm, the pilot sites were able to free up officer capacity. Over 1,700 officer hours were freed up in the pilot sites over the three month period – equivalent to more than 200 shifts. There was also estimated to be a reduction in the total amount of time spent on the initial police response to missing persons in the pilot sites (-23%) relative to the comparison sites (-3%).

- This overall picture of the pilot having had a positive impact was supported by the qualitative research. Most officers who were interviewed tended to think the pilot had resulted in police time being freed up. They talked about having more time to spend on proactive patrol or dealing with higher risk cases.

Did the pilot improve officer attitudes?

While not an explicit aim of the pilot, the evaluation looked at whether the new approach improved officers' attitudes to missing persons and job satisfaction.

- The officer attitudes survey carried out in the pilot and comparison sites did not reveal a consistent pattern of change before and after implementation. Positive change was limited to thinking that not all incidents should be attended by the police. There was no evidence, however, of any negative effects.

- The qualitative research found that most response officers and supervisors felt the pilot had improved how they perceived missing persons calls. Almost all respondents described the situation prior to the pilot in negative terms, but reportedly felt much less frustrated with the way missing persons incidents were dealt with under the pilot.

How was the pilot perceived to operate in practice?

- The officers and staff who were interviewed were positive about the pilot – there was a high level of agreement about what it sought to achieve. Views about the new process were also generally positive, although some issues were raised about who had the final decision as to how to classify incidents and the need for supervisory checks.

- About two-thirds of local partner agency respondents were also either positive or neutral about the impact of the pilot, with a third being more critical in their view.

- The police and partner respondents who were positive in their view tended to talk about: the pilot having improved working relationships; children's homes taking more responsibility for people who went absent; and the police response being more proportionate.

- The third of local partners who were more critical tended to raise concerns about how the police had classified incidents in practice. It was reported that, on occasion, the police had recorded an incident as an absence and not deployed officers, even though the respondent perceived the situation to be high risk. This view was not widespread, however, and others seemed to indicate these issues occurred mainly at the start of the pilot. There was also a suggestion that these negative views were more about the quality and consistency of implementation, and that better engagement and alignment of risk assessments might have helped to resolve the issue.

- Engagement appeared to be a critical factor in securing successful implementation of the pilot. The quality of the engagement that partners reportedly received from the police – and the extent to which they felt they had a 'voice' and could influence implementation – seemed to affect their level of support for the pilot.

- Potentially of greater concern to partners was the reduction in missing persons coordinators; an organisational change in the forces that was unconnected to the pilot.

Did the pilot affect police safeguarding work?

- There was no evidence from the research to indicate the pilot had undermined forces' ability to carry out proactive safeguarding work. It was reported by the police that monitoring work was being carried out during the pilot, as expected, to identify repeat absences and homes which accounted for a disproportionate number of incidents.

- While recognised as being important, some police respondents questioned whether it would be possible to continue with the same level of monitoring after the pilot. The principal issue was seen to be the reduction in missing person coordinators in the pilot forces – a more general organisational change unconnected to the pilot – which reportedly would have placed some pressure on their capacity for monitoring and partnership work in the pilot forces after the pilot ended (although it continued through the pilot period).

- Opinions about the safeguarding implications of the pilot varied among the local partners who were interviewed. Several respondents were positive in their view. Two respondents raised specific perceived concerns about the level of police monitoring (despite the evidence from the police and other partners that monitoring continued) and the referral of repeat absences to charities for support services. Their views may have been linked to general concerns about missing person coordinators, and potentially a result of the quality of police engagement with them.

Summing up and implications

Overall, the evaluation found promising qualitative evidence that the pilot had achieved its primary aim to make the police initial response to missing persons more proportionate to risk. More consistent evidence was found in relation to enabling the pilot sites to target resource better by freeing up officer capacity – a secondary benefit of the risk-based deployment of officers. There was also qualitative evidence of the pilot having been successful in terms of improving officer attitudes about attending missing person incidents. Partners were largely positive or neutral about the impact of the pilot, although around a third were more negative in their views. Finally, there was no evidence from the research to indicate the pilot had undermined forces' ability to carry out proactive safeguarding work. However, the reduction in missing person coordinators – a change unrelated to the pilot and which was more of consistent concern to local partners – appeared to make monitoring more of a challenge in the pilot forces (though the activity continued to happen).

The evaluation highlighted a number of learning points about implementation:

- The need for clarity about the process for deciding how incidents are classified and whether officers are deployed, and to provide support and supervision to contact centre staff involved in this process.

- The need for internal communications and training to ensure that officers and staff understand the new approach, can influence the process, and can explain it to people outside the police, such as children's home workers.

- Stakeholder engagement is essential if changes to the initial response to missing persons are to be successful, as the quality of engagement appeared to affect support for the pilot and assuage concerns.

- As it is essential that the new approach does not affect proactive safeguarding work, careful planning may be required to ensure there are no unintended consequences downstream. Specific consideration should be given to ensure that information about absent and missing persons is adequately captured, systems are useable, and there is sufficient analytical capacity and capability in order to carry out proactive monitoring to identify repeats and high risk cases.

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Risk and bureaucracy in policing

In recent years, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy has been a running theme in government thinking on police reform. A number of reviews have been conducted which concluded that the effectiveness and efficiency of the police service has been affected by increased bureaucracy (e.g. Flanagan 2007; Berry 2010; HMIC 2010). While these reports recognised that some bureaucracy was necessary (e.g. some aspects of record keeping and guidance) to ensure the police were transparent and could be held to account for decisions and actions, they observed that extra layers of bureaucracy had been created which had made some processes rigid, burdensome, and an end in themselves. As Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) noted 'in seeking to reduce every risk to the public and possibility of error, all police officers' work has increasingly become controlled by rules of good practice or guidance' (2010: 3).

It is notable that the discussions about bureaucracy in these reports were not so much about paperwork, but more about risk aversion in policing and the growing use of standardised 'blanket' responses to problems which did not afford officers any flexibility in their decision-making. HMIC reported that the police feel the need to anticipate every possible risk through extensive information gathering and documentation, which has a detrimental affect on the wider general public, whereas they should focus instead on 'the most probable risks that arise routinely, that they can reasonably be expected to deal with' (2010: 18). The then Chief Inspector of Constabulary (Sir Denis O'Connor) recommended 'It is only when there is a real and immediate risk of which the police have, or ought to have, knowledge that they are expected to do all that could reasonably be expected of them to avoid the risk' (O'Connor 2010: 5). Sir Ronnie Flanagan's 2007 report similarly concluded that risk aversion had resulted in culture of 'over-recording' as officers and staff were said to be concerned about 'missing something' or being vulnerable to criticism. He advocated increased discretion and greater use of professional judgement accompanied by increased accountability through more active supervision.

In response to these concerns, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and Home Office established the Reducing Bureaucracy Programme Board (RBPB) with the aim of developing proposals to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy in the police service, and promote the use of professional judgement and a more proportionate approach to the management of risk. Through a commitment to an evidence-based approach, the RBPB has subsequently set up a series of projects in particularly high risk areas of policing (e.g. crime recording, bail, domestic abuse, sudden deaths and anti-social behaviour) in order to understand the nature of the problem better, develop possible solutions, and evaluate pilots if relevant.

The initial police response to missing persons – a disproportionate approach?

Previous work by the Home Office's Reducing Bureaucracy Advisor (Berry 2010) and HMIC (unpublished) has highlighted the police's response to missing persons, in particular, as being bureaucratic – with officers being expected to attend and document in detail all incidents related to a missing person regardless of the risks involved – and recommended a more proportionate and risk-based approach to both recording and the initial response. It was identified that the ACPO definition – shown below – used to classify incidents as missing persons resulted in many cases in a disproportionate police response relative to risk as every call was treated as if it involved the same level of risk (Berry 2010):

Anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well-being otherwise established. (ACPO/NPIA 2010)

In addition, recent observational research carried out by the National Policing Improvement Agency identified that a lack of trust in officers' judgement had led to overly bureaucratic forms and processes in relation to missing persons (Mclean and Hillier 2011).

The conclusions of these reports were in line with the perceptions of the practitioners attending the RBPB and its sub-group. They too were of the view that a risk averse approach to missing persons incidents had been adopted by the service. For them, the issue was primarily about the initial police response to calls about young people who were regularly reported as missing by children's homes. They expressed concern about children's homes calling the police as soon as a young person was regarded as an unauthorised absence, in spite of the children's home knowing where the person was, not having taken steps to return them, and not anticipating the person would come to any harm. The practitioners were also of the view that some children's homes did not take on their responsibilities as statutory parents and/or take steps to prevent unauthorised absences, but expected the police to take action instead.

Examples might include children's homes calling the police when a person:

- was half an hour late for a 7pm curfew one evening, when it has been agreed with the person that they were trusted to stay out later on other evenings;
- went around to a friend's house regularly (albeit on an unauthorised basis) and could be contacted on their mobile phone; and
- was seen walking out of the children's home, but was not challenged.

Such calls for service would ordinarily trigger a full response from the police, as the incident would be classified as a missing person. This initial response would typically involve officers being deployed, conducting a risk assessment, completing detailed records, carrying out enquiries, potentially locating and returning the person to their home (if they had not already done so), searching and updating the force missing person system, and carrying out a 'safe and well' check. These steps were perceived to be disproportionate, particularly as the person was not thought to be at any immediate risk of coming to harm.

Given the number of missing persons incidents recorded by the police per year[1], the RBPB formed the view that the police's current response to missing persons also placed strain on police resources and potentially diverted resources away from those people with the greatest need.

A more proportionate approach?

In order to address these issues, the RBPB sought to pilot a new approach to missing persons incidents. In so doing, they drew on the experiences of Sussex Police, which had introduced a more proportionate and risk-based approach to missing persons in 2010. The approach adopted by Sussex focused on the immediate police response. Rather than using the standard ACPO definition and routinely sending officers to all incidents, call handlers were expected to carry out an initial risk assessment when an incident was first reported, and classify the

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[1] In England and Wales, the police recorded a total of 288,000 missing persons incidents in 2010/11, the equivalent of around 800 incidents a day (NPIA 2012). Around two-thirds of all incidents related to people under 18 years old, a notable proportion of whom were likely to have been children's home residents.

person as either 'missing' or 'absent' depending on the level of risk involved (as per the definitions in Table 1).

Table 1. Definitions and related initial police response and record keeping

Category	Definition	Initial police response	Record keeping
Missing	Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established; and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject to crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another	• Officers deployed to attend incident	• Officers complete a full record and update the force missing persons system (e.g. Compact or Opus)
Absent	A person who is not at a place where they are expected, or required, to be	• Officers not initially deployed to attend incident • Call handler monitors incident and repeats risk assessment at defined intervals • If risk levels change, the incident is reclassified and treated as a missing person	• Call handlers record details on the force command and control system

Importantly, the way an incident was classified determined the nature of the police response and how the incident was recorded.

- Where a person's behaviour was felt to be out of character or there was potential for harm (i.e. a missing person), officers would be required to attend the incident and carry out enquiries to find the person. They would also be expected to update the force missing person system.

- If, however, the person's whereabouts was known – but they were simply not where they were supposed to be – and they were not in any risk (i.e. an absent person), the call handler would agree how the situation was to be monitored with the person who had reported the incident to the police. Officers would not automatically be deployed to attend, although they would be required to do so if the circumstances changed and the incident met the criteria for being a missing person. Details about the incidents were to be recorded by the call handler on the command and control system, rather than on the missing person system.

While there was no formal evaluation of Sussex's model, feedback was positive. During the first year implementation, quicker access to multi-agency services and better use of police officer time were reported. Most importantly, no evidence was reported that anyone had come to any harm as a result of the new approach during the three year period of implementation.

As a result, the RBPB sought to pilot the Sussex's initial response model in other forces to test whether it enabled better targeting of resources, but without affecting the ability of the police to engage in safeguarding activity (such as carrying out longer term proactive work to identify those people most at risk).

Risk, missing persons and safeguarding

Given the inherent risks around missing persons, it is important to think about what the wider effect of the pilot might be. Rees et al. (2007) have previously suggested that the language of 'risk' in relation to missing persons – particularly with children and young people – can be imprecise and have different meanings to different people. 'Risk' may refer variously to: the likelihood of a young person running away; the possibility of them coming to harm while away from home; the issues they may face if and when they return home; and the potential for longer term negative outcomes. This point highlights the need for greater clarity when discussing risk, and to think about the risks of someone coming to harm and not just those related to them running away.

Previous research has suggested that there is a risk that people who go missing can be subject to significant harm, particularly vulnerable adults (e.g. due to mental health issues) and children (e.g. who may at risk of sexual exploitation) (see, for example, Rees 2011 and CEOP 2011). These risks are present under the current approach adopted by police service. There are important questions, however, about whether the current approach taken by the police when responding to calls about missing persons is effective at reducing these risks. On its own, simply deploying officers to attend a call for service about a missing person is unlikely to have much of an ameliorative effect, unless the person is in imminent danger to themselves or others. Even then, the deployment of officers would not necessarily mean that the immediate risks are dealt with effectively (e.g. if the person cannot be found). Indeed, with some calls, officers may not be sent with any urgency to deal with the incident if the immediate risks of harm are considered to be low. Furthermore, if the risks are longer term in nature, it is not clear whether and how the attending officers would be able to identify and manage all the relevant issues, or whether other organisations might be better placed to deal with them (e.g. children's homes, social services, charities).

Parallels can be drawn with other aspects of policing. The 'what works' evidence in policing shows that the reactive and rapid deployment of officers to incidents does not necessarily reduce crime (unless a suspect is at the scene). Rather, the evidence shows that proactive targeting and preventive problem-solving – often in partnership with other organisations – are much more likely to be effective. For example, a focus on crime hot spots, repeat victims and high volume offenders is likely to be an effective way of allocating police resources to reduce crime. Such approaches require the police to have a good understanding of the problem, based on the detailed analysis of a range of data, and to develop tailored interventions to deal with underlying issues. (For an introduction to the 'what works' evidence on policing, see: Quinton and Tuffin 2012; and Telep and Weisburd 2012.)

With this evidence in mind, it is conceivable that activity by the police to identify those people most at risk of coming to harm in the longer term, understand the nature of that risk and its causes, and work with partners to safeguard them is more likely to be effective than deploying officers to all incidents regardless of the risks involved. To this end, forces have taken some promising steps by, for example, creating specialist roles (e.g. missing persons coordinators and public protection units) and analysing incidents for people who repeatedly go missing and who may be at risk. Their work in partnership with other organisations is likely to be particularly important given that the police have limited resources, do not own all of the possible remedies, or have all the relevant information necessary to understand the nature of the problem.

Partnership working has been identified as critical to the identification and management of risk in this area. The Home Office Missing Children and Adults Strategy (2011) proposed that all service providers involved with people who go missing in England and Wales – whether operating at a local or national level, or in the statutory or voluntary sector – should work

collectively to deliver the three broad objectives of prevention, protection and provision. It also specified that the police had a key role in the protection of vulnerable people and were key statutory partners in the safeguarding arena, with duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. The most common forums for such activity are the Local Safeguarding Children Boards and Local Safeguarding Adults Boards, attended by the police and other agencies (such as social services, education, health, local charities). As with other areas of policing, a number of issues have been identified as barriers to effective partnership working in the context of safeguarding vulnerable people. A recent All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Inquiry (2012), for example, highlighted the attitudes of some practitioners, the prevalence of the problem, the complexity of risk factors, the availability of good quality data, and communication and information sharing between partners as critical factors.

In piloting the Sussex's model in other forces, RBPB was mindful of these wider links between missing persons and safeguarding. In particular, they wanted to check that the changes to the **initial** police response were not thought to adversely affect the **longer term** police response in terms of their existing safeguarding arrangements. In theory, there was no reason to suppose that the Sussex model would have a detrimental impact. While connected, the initial deployment of officers to missing person incidents did not represent all the activity carried out by the police to protect vulnerable adults and children. Furthermore, officers would still be deployed to incidents where there was potential for harm or the person's whereabouts could not be established. Only when there was perceived to be no risk would officers not be deployed. Even then, information about these incidents would be captured (albeit via the call handler rather than an attending officer and on a different force system). Thus, under the Sussex model, it was anticipated that information about both missing and absent persons that were reported to the police would remain available to support the essential safeguarding activity carried out by the police and their partners (e.g. the monitoring of repeats and partnership referrals). Nevertheless, because the Sussex model would represent an important change in process, there was a need to look at the relationship between the new approach to initial response and longer term safeguarding work.

The evaluation

The College of Policing was commissioned by the RBPB to carry out an evaluation of the Sussex model which was to be piloted in three other police forces. The pilot sites introduced the new approach to missing persons at different times in late 2011 (between September and November). The evaluation was carried out after a three-month pilot period, the scope of which was determined largely by what was feasible and proportionate over such a time period. The study consisted of an impact and process evaluation.

Impact evaluation

The impact evaluation aimed to assess the effect of the pilot on a number of outcomes that were measured using police recorded data and a survey of officers (see Appendix A, page 46). It specifically looked at whether the new approach resulted in the police response being more proportionate and risk-based (the pilot's primary aim). The evaluation also examined whether there were any secondary benefits in terms of helping the pilot sites to free up officer capacity through the better targeting of resources, and improving officer attitudes about attending missing persons incidents.[2]

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[2] Public safety was not examined as part of the impact evaluation as it would not have been possible to determine the effect of the new model over a three-month period. The small number of incidents that result in harm meant that any before/after comparisons would not have been meaningful.

To help determine whether the pilot resulted in change, a quasi-experimental design was adopted. This design involved comparing outcomes before and after implementation in five pilot Basic Command Units (BCUs), relative to four comparison BCUs where 'business as usual' was maintained.[3] As the pilot and comparison sites were selected by the participating forces on a non-random basis, there may be other systematic differences between the sites that could explain the result. Put simply, such an approach to implementation means the evaluation cannot rule out other reasons for change. Moreover, the short length of the pilot meant that the evaluation was unable to look at change in the longer term. Nevertheless, quasi-experimental designs can provide evidence of impact and, particularly when coupled with qualitative research on the context of the pilot and comparison areas, can help to increase the degree to which it is plausible that changes are attributable to the intervention.

Process evaluation

The process evaluation sought to develop a richer understanding of how the pilot was implemented from a range of different perspectives, and to explore the attitudes and experiences of people involved or affected by it. The fieldwork for the process evaluation was carried out in two of the three pilot forces. It consisted of in-depth interviews and focus groups with police officers, police staff and local partners, plus a small number of supplementary observations to aid understanding (see Appendix A, page 46).

The qualitative research helped to develop an appreciation for how the pilot has perceived to have work, which can be set alongside evidence comparing quantitative data between pilot and comparison areas in order to assess how plausible it is that change is related to the intervention. Specifically, the work explored how the new approach worked in practice from the perspective of both police practitioners and local partners, and whether the pilot was perceived to have adversely affected proactive safeguarding work by the police.

The qualitative findings presented in this report are based on the **subjective perceptions** of the respondents. Nevertheless, where possible, this data was triangulated with other sources from across the evaluation to provide a more rounded assessment of the pilot. Furthermore, the small number of interviews and method of sampling mean that the findings may not represent the views of all the officers, staff or partners in the pilot sites. **They only relate to those people interviewed for the study.** While potentially unrepresentative, the views of individual respondents have also been presented, where relevant, to show the range of views that were expressed and to generate learning about the pilot. As these views were in the minority, they should not be taken out of context or seen as being more widely held.

The structure of this report

The next chapter discusses how the pilot was implemented in two of the forces, and highlights a number of important lessons about the implementation process. Chapters 3 and 4 look at the impact of the pilot, respectively, on the proportionality of the initial police response, and the workload of police officers and staff. Chapter 5 explores the views of officers and staff towards the new approach. Chapter 6 examines the reaction of local partners particularly in terms of their awareness and understanding of the pilot, how it was implemented, and its perceived impact. Chapter 7 looks at the issue of safeguarding, and whether the new approach was perceived to have affected the proactive work carried out by the police around missing and absent people. The final chapter seeks to draw out the main conclusions and implications from the study.

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[3] Most of these areas were urban or suburban, and were relatively deprived. All but two of the corresponding local authority areas were below the 20th percentile in terms of deprivation.

2. Findings – pilot implementation

The fieldwork for the process evaluation, which was carried out in two of the three pilot forces, highlighted several important lessons about how the pilot was introduced in the two pilot forces in terms of:

- the process for classifying incidents;
- training and communicating with officers and staff internally; and
- engaging externally with local stakeholders.

The process for classifying incidents

While the two forces involved in the process evaluation used the same definitions for absent and missing, and similar assessment criteria, some differences were identified in terms of how calls for service were handled, and the role of individuals within that process. Figure 1 (page 15) outlines the process in the two forces as described by research participants.

Staff views about the new processes were generally positive. One call handler, for example, described the system as being straightforward and "bullet-proof". Their role in the process was seen to involve simply recording the callers' answers to the questions as they appeared in the log. There was also a widespread view – held by all contact staff and their supervisors, senior force leads, and some other police respondents – that the new approach had led to better decision-making because, for example, decisions were now informed by a broader range of information. As one respondent remarked: "[Response officers] don't get the luxury of looking up previous intelligence when attending". One service desk manager felt the risk assessment questions were effective at identifying risk. Another call handler thought inspectors were better able to make decisions in the here-and-now as more information was available immediately. No evidence was provided during the fieldwork that incidents were routinely being misclassified or that the classification given to an incident had had negative consequences.

Several learning points were raised about the process during the interviews with officers and staff:

- **The need to gather information on first contact** – Contact staff highlighted that there was a need to find out as much information as possible from the caller during the first contact to aid the risk assessment process (particularly where time was limited in busy shifts).

- **The need to clarify the decision-making process** – There was evidence in one force of a need to clarify who made the final decision about how to classify incidents. Some contact centre staff said they felt undermined when their decisions were subsequently questioned or changed by others. However, it was reported that this issue was partly due to a lack of awareness of the process among response officers at the start of the pilot, which had since been resolved.

- **The need for supervisory checks** – Two response supervisors and two officers highlighted that the risk assessment process relied on information given by members of the public to a call taker, rather than by trained officers at the scene. They felt that, as there was potential for information to be missed, supervisors needed to carry out checks and be involved in the decision making process.

Figure 1. The call handling, risk assessment and ongoing monitoring process (Forces 1 and 2)

Force 1	**Force 2**

Initial report

The call handler opens an incident log and asks the caller the following risk assessment questions*	

↓ ↓

| 1. What is the specific concern in this instance?
2. Is this significantly out of character?
3. Are there any specific medical needs?
4. Are they likely to be subjected to crime?
5. Are they the victim of abuse?
6. Are they at risk of sexual exploitation?
7. Are they likely to attempt suicide?
8. Do they pose a danger to other people?
9. Is there any other information relevant to their absence? | 1. Is this event significantly out of character?
2. Is this person likely to be subjected to harm or a crime?
3. Is this person a danger to themselves or others?
4. Is this person likely to attempt suicide?
5. Is this person a victim of abuse?
6. Does this person have any specific medical needs?
7. Is there a specific concern? |

Incident classification

↓ ↓

| • The incident is passed to the service desk to make the final decision about how it is classified
• They conduct the risk assessment, speak with the caller and look for additional information on force systems
• The supervisor is then notified, who confirms the decision
• The service desk may sometimes contact the shift supervisor for informal advice | • The call log is switched by the controller to the inspector (who is also notified via the radio)
• The inspector is responsible for making the final decision how the incident is classified

[It was not clear from the interviews when additional information would be gathered from the caller] |

Ongoing monitoring and review

↓ ↓

| • The service desk agrees time limits with the caller for monitoring the situation and updating each other
• After 72 hours, the absence is reclassified as a missing persons (subject to review and approval by the shift inspector) | • After the log is reviewed by the inspector, they will carry out further enquiries with the caller or task the service desk/call handlers to do so
• Actions will be agreed with the caller (e.g. to do a search)
• After 24 hours, the absence is reviewed and a decision made as to whether it should be reclassified |

*All 'no' answers would result in an incident being treated as an absence. A single 'yes' would result in it being treated as a missing person. In Force 1, it was also reported that a person would be classed as missing if there was a slightest doubt about risk.

Training and internal communications

While many officers and staff were given information about the pilot prior to its implementation, there appeared to be a general lack of training and communication available to response teams. Overall, face-to-face briefings – supported by electronic resources – were widely seen as an effective way of communicating information and raising awareness about the pilot internally.

Response officers

Relatively limited training and communications were provided to response officers in both pilot sites. No inputs were provided to response officers on Force 1 on the basis that the pilot was not expected to affect their work directly (i.e. they would simply attend the calls they were deployed to). Response officers in Force 2 had access to key information about the pilot on the intranet, and were advised to get in touch with the contact centre inspector if they had any queries. Some officers also reported receiving information via email.

The lack of training and communications that was specific provided to response officers potentially led to some misunderstandings about pilot. This issue was identified as a particular shortcoming in Force 1. The fieldwork in both sites revealed some confusion around how the risk assessment criteria would be applied and who was ultimately responsible for classifying incidents, as well as some negative views about the capability of contact centre staff.

Officers and staff involved in classifying incidents

Extensive training was reportedly provided to those officers and staff involved in classifying incidents as missing or absent in Force 1. Contact centre staff attended a session delivered by a trainer and the service desk manager, were provided with hard copy manuals, and given access to a range of electronic resources (e.g. presentations, flow charts, and Frequently Asked Questions). "[The service desk manager is] always great for training, so I think the training was fine… it was kind of almost like a one-to-one". Contact centre staff also reportedly sought informal advice during the first weeks of the pilot. As a result of the pilot, additional training was also to be provided to contact centre staff by a local charity to improve their knowledge levels about child sexual exploitation. Service desk supervisors reportedly received trained during the pilot period.

In Force 2, call handlers and dispatchers were reportedly given a one-hour group briefing on the pilot by the project manager (although those interviewed did not recall much about it). Staff were also given information electronically (e.g. a process map and scenarios) and sent emails to clarify aspects of the new approach. They were also provided with laminated copies of the risk assessment questions, as no template existed on the system.

As inspectors in Force 2 had responsibility for deciding how incidents were classified, they were given an input on the pilot as part of other scheduled sessions (e.g. routine performance meetings, events for newly promoted inspectors): "We were sufficiently briefed by the lead on that pilot".

External engagement with stakeholders

The fieldwork revealed some important differences in the extent to which the two forces engaged with local partner agencies about the pilot. There was some evidence to suggest that the level of engagement affected how much partners understood about the changes, and whether they were supportive of the new approach.

> If other people are going to use [this approach], I think the education about the scheme needs to be done well, because otherwise people will get the wrong idea about what it's all about… (Missing persons coordinator, Force 2)

The level of partnership engagement

Stakeholder engagement appeared to be more extensive and direct in Force 1. The project manager reportedly delivered briefings to groups of children's home managers about the reasons for the pilot, what the police would be doing differently, and how the changes were expected to affect them. The project manager said there was much less resistance to the pilot than he originally anticipated, and that he even received some positive comments. A stakeholder reference group was also set up, which met monthly before and after the pilot was underway. The group played the role of 'critical friend' by, for example, reviewing and providing feedback on the new policy and training package (upon which the force acted).

Engagement was much more limited and slightly delayed in Force 2, partly because the pilot site was changed at quite short notice and was not coterminous with the wider local authority area. It consisted of a single presentation at local safeguarding subgroup meeting – two weeks after the start of the pilot – with a view that that information would be disseminated by the partner agencies represented on that group. The lack of any training activity with response officers would have prevented them from talking about the pilot to those people who would have reported incidents to the police.

The views of local stakeholders

Most of the local stakeholders interviewed for the process evaluation said they came to know about the pilot through the partnership meetings they regularly attended. Some said they also learnt about the pilot from direct contact with officers.

Unsurprisingly, the partners from Force 1 were more positive about the quality of engagement. They felt the police had been open with them and that they were able to provide a good level of input. Two respondents, in particular, said they were able to have a direct influence on the pilot. Both mentioned how engagement resulted in a charity providing call handlers with awareness training about sexual exploitation. One of them added that the police agreed to make other changes to the pilot which "came specifically as a result of [us] sitting on the stakeholders' group" (i.e. the police helping to return people classed as absent who might be in breach of the peace, and sharing information about repeat absences).

Views were more negative in Force 2. A couple of the respondents said that, while they were informed by the police about the pilot at the partnership meeting, they did not feel they were asked for their views or were able to influence the pilot:

> We heard that the changes were going to take effect, be piloted, but I wouldn't say that we were given the opportunity to sort of look at what some of the shortcomings might be of it, and to put that view across before they were implemented. (Charity)

This perceived lack of voice and influence seemed to affect the extent to which they supported the changes that were being piloted (see Chapter 6).

Given the effect these levels of engagement seemed to have on the views of partners, plus the findings from other research that engagement is likely to be a critical factor in delivering successful organisational change (Wheller at al. 2012), there appeared to be a need for the police to discuss the new approach proactively with partners – and at a number of

organisational levels – in order to build understanding and support, and to learn about and address their concerns about implementation.

Summary

There was a general agreement among the police officers and staff who participated in the study that the new risk assessment process was positive. In particular, there was a widespread view that decision-making was now better because of the improved availability of information. Furthermore, no evidence was provided during the fieldwork in the pilot sites that incidents were routinely being misclassified. It was noted that clarity was required as to who made the final decision about how an incident was to be classified, and the value of supervisors' involvement in the decision-making process was highlighted.

The limited training and communication provided to response officers in the pilot areas was highlighted as a drawback, which had implications for their understanding about the new process. The level of engagement with external stakeholders was found to be mixed. Engagement with local partner agencies was more extensive and direct in one force. It appeared that, as a result, stakeholders were more positive about the pilot because they felt they had an opportunity to voice their opinion and were able to influence how it was implemented. Engagement with local partners was much more limited in the second force, which seemed to affect their support for the pilot.

3. Findings – the impact on the proportionality of the initial response

The evaluation looked at whether the pilot had achieved its primary aim – to make the initial police response to missing persons incidents more proportionate to risk. The impact of the pilot in this respect was tested quantitatively using the officer survey in all three forces, and explored qualitatively in the interviews and focus groups with practitioners in two of the three forces.

Officers' perception of risk after pilot implementation

The impact of the pilot on the proportionality of the initial police response to missing persons was explored in the officer attitudes survey carried out post-implementation. Officers were posed a series of questions which aimed to measure whether they thought they were more likely to attend higher risk incidents compared to three months ago (i.e. before the pilot started). Officers were specifically asked, on a seven-point numbered scale, to agree or disagree with three statements that focused on: the risk of the person coming to harm; their behaviour being out of character; and the likelihood of them turning up safe and well. The three items were combined into a single scale, which measured whether officers perceived they were attending a greater proportion of higher risk incidents than three months before.[4]

T-test analysis showed a statistically significant difference between the officers in the pilot sites and those in the comparison sites (see Table 11 below), in line with the pilot having had a positive impact. The average for the officers in the pilot sites was significantly higher than for those in the comparison sites. In other words, officers in the comparison sites were less likely, on average, than those in the pilot sites to say they were attending a greater proportion of higher risk incidents. Despite this difference, the score for the pilot sites remained lower than the midpoint on the seven-point scale. In other words, a majority of officers in the pilot sites did not think they were attending higher risk incidents.

Table 11. Officer perceptions of risk post-implementation (programme level)

	Mean score*		Statistical significance
	Pilot	Comparison	
"I attend incidents that are higher risk than three months ago"	3.62	2.73	<.05

Note: See Table C2, page 53, for the full t-test results.
*1='strongly disagree' and 7='strongly agree'.

Causal statements about the impact of the pilot cannot be drawn from these results, however, as officers perceptions were not measured before the pilot and because of the overall design of the study. Nevertheless, the survey results provide supportive evidence that the officers in the pilot sites did see some change in the expected direction.

The perceived risk profile of attended incidents

The officer survey was used to explore whether the pilot had resulted in a more proportionate and risk-based approach to missing persons incidents. The survey – administered before the

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[4] Factor analysis was carried out to find out whether the items scaled together (see Table C1, page 52). The responses were then added together and divided by the number of items.

pilot and again three months after its introduction – asked officers a series of questions about the last missing persons incident they had attended. A risk profile of these incidents was created for the periods before and after implementation, based on level of risk that was perceived by the attending officer and measured through three survey questions. For the purposes of the analysis, incidents were given a 'low risk' score unless the officer indicated that: the person might come to harm; the person's behaviour was out of character; and/or the person was not going to return safe and well within a short time. The risk profiles for the pilot and comparison sites were then compared at a programme level.

The results in Table 12 (below) show that the proportion of incidents considered 'low risk' showed little sign of change before and after implementation in both the pilot and comparison sites (a two-point decrease and a four-point increase respectively). These differences were not statistically significant. This result suggested that the pilot did not affect the level of risk in incidents as perceived by attending officers. Irrespective of this result, it is notable that around 70 per cent of the 'last incidents attended' were still perceived by officers to be 'low risk' after the pilot was introduced. This proportion is relatively high given the pilot's aim to limit officer deployment only to higher risk incidents. One possible reason for this result is that the pilot sites may have been cautious in their use of the new definitions during the short implementation period. Response officers in one of the focus groups also said they were sometimes required to attend incidents unnecessarily because the information available to call takers was inaccurate or out of date (e.g. a risk flag related to an address not being removed when no longer up-to-date).

Table 12. The risk profile of the last incident attended by officers (programme level)

	Before		After		Change in proportion
	Sample of 'last incident attended' (n)	Proportion assessed as 'low risk' (%)	Sample of 'last incident attended' (n)	Proportion assessed as 'low risk' (%)	
Pilot	288	70%	192	68%	-2 pts
Comp	286	69%	200	73%	+4 pts

The risk scores were based on a retrospective assessment of the incident (which will have had the benefit of hindsight). When these supposedly lower risk incidents were first reported to the police, contact centre staff may not have been able to classify them as absences due to the nature of the information available and/or the apparent level of risk involved at the time.

The views of officers and staff on risk

Issues of risk and proportionality were raised during the qualitative research carried out with officers and staff from the pilot sites in Force 1 and 2 for the process evaluation. There was a broad consensus among those interviewed that the pilot had helped the police to better identify those at risk, and to ensure that higher risk incidents received the attention they required. It was generally felt that, prior to the pilot, the high volume of missing persons reports to which officers had to respond meant they 'could not see the wood from the tree'. There was a view that the 'one size fits all' approach to incidents had resulted in resources being overstretched and some incidents not be treated sufficiently seriously. One respondent said that, before the pilot, officers previously used to "pay lip service" to calls about missing persons (Supervisor, Force 1).

There was an indication that, as a result of the pilot, officers and staff were also starting to grapple with the idea of having to manage risk and what the implications might be of their own (in)action: "It's better being risk aware but not risk averse" (Supervisor, Force 2).

Most respondents also felt that the police service had become risk averse in the way it responded to incidents. There was widespread agreement among officers and staff that it was not necessary for the police to attend all incidents, but that those classed as missing did need to be attended. It was generally accepted that the level of resources available meant the police could not deal with every risk or mitigate for every eventuality.

> When you have care homes that have got five, six, seven children [reported]… three or four of which might go missing together at any one time, the amount of time it takes to go and then put four people on the system and start running the investigation from there… you know they'll come back. (Supervisor, Force 2)

While respondents understood there was no need to attend all calls, they recognised the new approach could not remove all risks and prevent harm from happening. Virtually all participants in the process evaluation made some sort of reference to being worried about things 'going wrong' unexpectedly.

For this reason, some response officers and supervisors felt uncomfortable about not responding to absences on the grounds that the person involved might come to harm even though no one thought they were at risk of doing so. These concerns seemed to be linked to the belief that someone would be blamed for a negative outcome. In response, people felt the need to demonstrate, visibly, that they had carried out some sort of 'defensible action' (e.g. attending the incident, filling out a form). They held this view even though they also felt that the risks of harm were probably low in most incidents, and that they would not have carried out many enquiries or been able to have secured much information in practice prior to the pilot.

Some contact centre staff – particularly in one force – felt cautious about their new role for similar reasons. In addition to the extra workload and responsibility, and lack of financial remuneration, they were concerned they would be held to account for a harmful outcome even if they had followed the correct process: "I would get the blame for that" (Service desk staff, Force 1). While contact centre staff were experienced in making operational decisions, they did not feel supported by colleagues when their classification of particular incidents was questioned (although they did report feeling well supported by their own supervisor and the pilot project manager).

In general, the concerns described above potentially highlight the need for such issues to be addressed directly in training and communications to officers and staff, and for there to be greater clarity about the circumstances under which officers and staff would be supported or challenged for their actions and decisions. It is also possible that there were wider cultural issues at play that might need to be addressed. Some response officers, for example, questioned whether contact centre staff had the necessary skills and experiences to make operational decisions, even though they did so on a daily basis.

Summary

In summary, the effect of the pilot on the proportionality of the initial police response to missing persons was found to be promising. While there was some qualitative evidence of the pilot having had a positive impact, some survey indicators showed no change. However, there was no suggestion that the pilot had a negative impact.

Those interviewed for the study were in broad agreement that the pilot had helped the police to better identify those at risk, and ensure that higher risk incidents received the attention they required. The survey results were less conclusive. Comparisons between sites before and after implementation suggested there was no significant difference in the proportion of

incidents officers attended which they regarded as being 'low risk'. In addition, a relatively high proportion of incidents attended by officers in the pilot sites after implementation were perceived to be 'low risk'. However, their views had the benefit of hindsight being gathered retrospectively. Nevertheless, the survey questions posed post-implementation showed that, on average, officers in the comparison sites were less likely than those in the pilot sites to say were attending higher risk incidents. Despite this difference, a majority of officers in the pilot sites did not report an increase. The absence of baseline data means causal statements about impact are not appropriate as it is not possible to rule out other factors which might have played a part. It is possible that over a three-month pilot period there was insufficient time for the new approach to become fully embedded, and for the change in the number and type of incidents attended by officers to have influenced their perceptions. Given that some evidence of impact was identified, change may become more evident over time as practitioners get more accustomed to the new processes.

4. Findings – the impact on police capacity

As a result of being more proportionate and deploying officers only when someone was at risk of harm, it was thought the pilot might also help the police target their resources better and free up capacity (a secondary benefit of the pilot). In theory, at least, any freed up capacity could have been redirected towards proactive work and higher risk incidents. The evaluation examined the impact of the pilot in this respect in a number of ways. Officers and staff in two of the three pilot forces were asked about the perceived effect of the new approach on their workload during the process evaluation. In all three forces, police data on the number of recorded incidents and time estimates derived from the officer survey were also used to provide a more rigorous test of whether the pilot was successful in reducing the total amount of time spent on the initial response to missing persons.

The perceived impact on officer and staff workload

Response officers

Overall, police views about the impact of the pilot on officers' workload were either neutral or positive. Most people who were interviewed agreed that some time had been freed up as a result of the changes. The response officers and supervisors interviewed for the study volunteered information about how the time saved from their reduced workload had been used. They felt that more time was now being spent on proactive patrol (Force 1 focus group) or dealing with higher risk cases (Force 2 focus group).

> It's freeing officers up to attend other incidents that need to be attended and not chasing people round in circles… [They are] able to spend more time on [the] genuine missing. (Supervisor, Force 2)

Contact centre staff and supervisors

As expected, views on the pilot's impact were in line with how the pilot had been implemented and the specific processes that had been adopted:

- **Force 1** – The workload of call handlers and service desk staff was reported to have increased. In this site, the pilot required service desk staff to carry out the risk assessment process and monitoring of live absences in addition to their established duties. Staff raised concerns about taking on these additional responsibilities (e.g. in terms of a lack of remuneration and potential to be blamed for incorrect decision), although their views may also have been connected to other organisational changes in the call centre which had reportedly had a detrimental effect on staff morale.

- **Force 2** – The workload of inspectors was said to have been affected as they were expected to speak to callers to find out more information and suggest actions, and to review outstanding actions and missing logs. The impact on the workload of sergeants was said to have been minimal, as they had a limited role in relation to absences. Furthermore, in Force 2, debriefs with young people that were carried out by sergeants prior to the pilot, were now said to be carried out by a dedicated missing persons constable (who reported directly to the inspector).

Changes in the amount of time spent by the police responding to missing person incidents

The impact of the pilot on the overall time spent by the police responding to missing persons was examined in terms of the number of incidents that required officer attendance and how long officers thought they spent dealing with individual incidents.

The number of incidents recorded by the police

Police recorded data

The pilot did not seek to change the total number of incidents reported to, and recorded by, the police relating to missing persons and absences. Instead, its aim was to identify those incidents where it was not necessary for officers to attend in person because of the low level of risk involved. As a result, only the number of incidents requiring attendance was expected to fall after the pilot, not the calls made to the police.

The number of incidents recorded by the police, and how they were classed, were compared for the three months before and after implementation. The results were consistent with the pilot having its desired effect. As expected, there was no marked decline in the number of incidents reported to, and recorded by, the police. In fact, the number of incidents went up by 22 per cent across the pilot sites (see Table 5 below). Therefore, there was no evidence to suggest the pilot adversely affected the reporting and recording of incidents.

Table 5. The total number of recorded incidents (programme level)

| | Recorded incidents (n) | | | | | Estimated change (%) |
| | Before | After | Difference | 95% conf interval* | | |
				Upper	Lower	
Pilot	1,770	2,168	398	521	275	+22%
Comparison	1,256	1,188	68	165	-29	-5%

Note: See Table B1, page 50, for force level results.
*These are approximate 95% confidence intervals, assuming a Poisson distribution for the number of incidents, and modelled using a normal approximation.

Overall, of all the incidents recorded by the police in the pilot sites in the three months after implementation, around two-thirds were classified as missing persons and one-third as absences (see Table 6, page 25). As a result, the number of incidents requiring police attendance consistently went down in all the pilot sites. Across the programme as a whole, the number the police were required to attend fell by 18 per cent in the pilot site, relative to a 5 per cent fall in the comparison sites (see Table 7, page 25). Taken together, these findings indicated that, while public calls for service remained the same or increased in the pilot sites, the pilot enabled the police to target their resources through risk-based deployment. While the results are indicative of the pilot having had a positive impact, strong causal statements are not possible. The design of the study and the reduction in number of incidents requiring attendance in one of the comparison sites[5] meant alternative explanations for the overall pattern of change could not be ruled out.

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[5] In Force 2, the number of missing persons incidents fell after implementation by 31 per cent in the pilot site and by 33 per cent in the comparison. The reason for the reduction in the comparison site was not clear-cut. One senior officer thought it was part of a broader and

Table 6. The profile of recorded incidents after implementation (pilot sites, programme level)

Recorded incidents (n)	Incidents requiring police attendance (missing persons)		Incidents not requiring police attendance (absences)	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
2,168	1,458	67%	710	33%

Note: See Table B2, page 50, for force level results.

Table 7. The number of incidents requiring police attendance (programme level)

	Incidents requiring police attendance (n)					Estimated change (%)
	Before	After	Difference	95% conf interval		
				Upper	Upper	
Pilot	1,770	1,458	312	423	201	-18%
Comparison	1,256	1,188	68	165	-29	-5%

Note: See Table B3, page 50, for force level results.
*These are approximate 95% confidence intervals, assuming a Poisson distribution for the number of incidents, and modelled using a normal approximation.

Officer perceptions

Other elements of the evaluation confirmed the general picture presented by the recorded police data. The survey showed that officers in the pilot sites were significantly more likely than those in the comparison sites to say they attended fewer missing person incidents than before the start of the pilot (65 per cent compared to 20 per cent).

Moreover, the qualitative research carried out in Forces 1 and 2 tended to correspond with the quantitative changes in recorded incidents found for those sites. The views amongst officers in Force 1 were less consistently positive than those in Force 2 (which saw a 6 and 31 per cent reduction respectively).

While some officers in Force 1 felt the number of missing persons reports had fallen by as much as half (focus group and one inspector), others did not notice any change: "[I] don't think that many [are] being put as absent" (Supervisor, Force 1). Respondents in Force 2 were more regularly positive about the pilot's impact. For example, two supervisors said the number of missing person incidents had fallen: "Up to 10 less a day or three or four on a good day". Response officers similarly noted that fewer incidents were 'on the system' which had lightened their workload, though they felt this depended on which inspector was on duty.

The average amount of perceived time officers spent responding to a missing person incident

The aim of the pilot was not to reduce how much time officers spent dealing with individual incidents when they were required to respond, but to limit police attendance only to those incidents where it was needed due to the level of risk involved. On that basis, the average length of time spent by an officer responding to an incident was expected to stay the same after the pilot was implemented. There was even a possibility that the average duration might have increased during the pilot given that the higher risk incidents officers were expected to attend might also have been more complex and potentially more time consuming.

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ongoing trend across the force resulting from partnership work that had reduced repeats and improved the management of the higher risk cases.

The qualitative evidence from the process evaluation did not indicate that officers had noticed any big differences in how long they spent dealing with incidents. When asked, officers were general uncertain as to whether the time spent carrying out enquiries for individual missing person incidents had changed as a result of the pilot.

There was also no consistent evidence from the officer survey that there had been a significant change before and after implementation. While there was a significant difference between the pilot and comparison sites in terms of whether officers said they spent more time on missing persons investigations than three months before, these officers did not represent the majority (30 per cent compared to 20 per cent).

For each survey respondent, the perceived amount of time they spent on the last incident they attended was also calculated from time estimates they provided for five standard tasks they would typically carry out (see Appendix A, page 46).[6] Average time estimates were then created for the pilot and comparison sites both in the period before and after implementation.[7] No statistically significant differences were found (see Table 8).

Table 8. The perceived duration of a response to a missing persons incident (programme level)

	Before				After			
	Sample (n)	Mean duration (mins)	95% conf int		Sample (n)	Mean duration (mins)	95% conf int	
			Upper	Lower			Upper	Lower
Pilot	289	147	136	159	195	138	124	152
Comp	287	155	144	167	204	160	146	174

Note: See Table B4, page 51, for force level results.

The estimated total amount of time spent by the police responding to missing person incidents

While the average amount of time spent by officers on the response to an incident was not expected to change, the total amount of time the police spent responding to incidents was anticipated to go down as a result of the pilot by virtue of the fact that officers were not required to attend all incidents. In theory, this would mean that resources could be redeployed to higher risk incidents or proactive work (other things being equal).

The overall time spent by the police responding to missing persons was estimated for the pilot and comparison sites for the three months before and again after implementation (see Table 9, page 27). These estimates were based on the number of recorded incidents that would have required police attendance and the average time spent by officers responding to a missing persons incident.[8] As expected, across the programme, there was evidence to suggest that the estimated total amount of time spent by the police responding to missing persons in the pilot sites had fallen. There was a 23 per cent reduction across the pilot sites

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[6] All incidents were included regardless of whether every task was completed in order to avoid over-estimating how long, on average, each incident took.
[7] It is possible these are conservative estimates. A recent report on the cost of missing persons investigations, based on the tasks generated automatically by Compact, estimated that officers spend an average of 443 minutes conducting initial enquiries for medium risk missing person incidents (Shalev Greene and Pakes 2012).
[8] These estimates assumed that: a) the average time spent by officers responding to a missing persons incident represented the 'true value' and ignored the confidence intervals around the figures; and b) officers attended those incidents when attendance was required.

as a whole, compared to a three per cent reduction in the comparison sites. This overall result was consistent with the pilot having a positive effect. However, and as stated before, it is not possible to say that this change can be attributed directly to the pilot. The design of the study and the notable reduction on the total amount of time estimated for one of the comparison sites mean that other reasons for the change cannot be completely excluded.[9]

Table 9. The total estimated amount of time spent by the police on incidents requiring police attendance (programme level)

	Before			After			Change in total (%)
	Recorded incidents (n)	Mean duration (mins)	Total time estimate (mins)	Recorded incidents (n)	Mean duration (mins)	Total time estimate (mins)	
Pilot	1,770	147	261,063	1,458	138	201,045	-23%
Comp	1,256	155	194,982	1,188	160	189,875	-3%

Note: See Table B5, page 51, for force level results.

The potential opportunity cost of attending absences

In addition to estimating how much time the police spent responding to missing person incidents before and after implementation, it was also possible to assess how much additional police time would have been required in the pilot sites if officers were deployed to absences during the three-month pilot. These estimates would represent the potential opportunity cost of attending absences.

Estimates were again derived from the perception measures from the survey and police data. Officers were asked a series of questions about the perceived level of risk involved in the last missing persons incident they attended. Specific time estimates were calculated in all the sites before implementation for incidents where officers felt:

- the person was not thought to be at risk of harm;
- the person's behaviour was not out of character; and
- the person was likely to return safe and well in a short time.[10]

Averages were then created for the pilot sites based on these incidents. It was assumed that the absences recorded after implementation would have taken a similar amount of time because of risk involved. The overall amount of time the police would have spent responding to absences (if they had been required to do so) was then calculated, based on the average time estimates and the number of incidents recorded.

The estimates presented below in Table 10 (page 28) provide evidence that capacity might have been freed up in the pilot sites as a result of them adopting a more risk-based approach to deployment. Across the programme as a whole, it was estimated that over 1,700 additional officer hours would have potentially been required had these incidents been attended in the three months post-implementation – the equivalent to more than 200 shifts (assuming an eight hour shift). In theory, it would have been possible for the pilot sites to redirect this resource to other priorities.

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[9] In Force 2, there were estimated to be marked reductions in both the pilot sites (-16%) and comparison site (-26%) due to the changes in the number of recorded incidents.

[10] If one of more of these factors was thought to have applied, the incident was not regarded as not corresponding to the 'absence' definition post-implementation for the purposes of this analysis.

Table 10. Potential opportunity cost of attending absences (pilot sites, programme level)

Mean duration (mins)	Recorded absences (n)	Total time estimate (mins)	Total time estimate (hours)
145	710	103,135	1,719

Note: See Table B6, page 51, for force level results.

Summary

Overall, the pilot appeared to have had a positive impact. Specifically, the new risk-based approach to officer deployment appeared to enable the pilot sites to target their resources better and free up capacity. It was estimated that if the absences recorded during the pilot had been attended during the pilot, more than 1,700 extra officer hours – or 200 extra shifts – would have potentially been required across the programme as a whole. Importantly, there was no evidence to suggest that the pilot adversely affected the reporting and recording of incidents. Officer perceptions about the impact of the pilot on their workload were broadly consistent with these findings.

5. Findings – officer and staff views

The evaluation examined the perceptions of police officers and staff towards the pilot in two pilot forces. This chapter describes their views about the pilot in general, and about attending missing persons incidents. Results from the officer survey from all three forces are then described which look at the impact of the pilot on attitude and job satisfaction. Finally, practitioners' views about the impact of the pilot on children's homes are explored as the subject featured strongly in the process evaluation carried out in two of the three forces.

Overall police attitudes towards the pilot

Overall, a large majority of the officers and staff who were interviewed for the process evaluation in Forces 1 and 2 were positive about the pilot. Typically, respondents welcomed the pilot's introduction. They talked about the need to differentiate those people reported missing who were not at risk from those who were more likely to come to harm, and for the police to respond accordingly.

Most of the respondents also felt the new approach to missing persons, and the criteria for classifying an incident as missing or absent, were clear. There were some minor misunderstandings about some aspects of the new definitions (e.g. whether the behaviour of someone who was absent a second time was out of character) and some individuals questioned aspects of the risk assessment process.

Police views about attending missing persons incidents

Most response officers and supervisors commented that the pilot had improved how they viewed attending calls for service about missing persons. From the interviews and focus groups, there was a sense in which respondents felt less frustrated about how missing persons were handled under the pilot. Almost all respondents described the situation prior to the pilot in negative terms. They talked about:

- dealing with people who they felt were not genuinely missing;
- children's homes passing on their responsibilities to the police;
- people who would repeatedly go missing – and be reported to the police – who would go missing again soon after receiving advice from officers;
- the police response largely being a low priority, paper-based exercise that wasted officers' time; and
- being unable to do anything to help the young people who were in difficult circumstances, and to address the root cause of their problems.

Since the pilot, however, most uniformed respondents felt their attitudes had started to change. They talked about the people who needed police attention now getting it, and felt that the incidents they attended were more likely to involved someone who was 'genuinely missing':

> [Previously] we would act as a taxi service… [But now] we don't feel like we're being used, taken advantage of. So we go there with a different mind set. (Focus group, Force 2)

Only a very small minority of officers indicated the pilot had no effect on their attitudes. There no evidence from interviews, however, to suggest the pilot had had a negative impact on officer attitudes.

A change in police attitudes and job satisfaction?

There was good evidence from the qualitative research that the pilot had been positively received by officers and staff, and that the new approach had started to alter their views about missing persons. With the officer survey, it was possible to explore these issues quantitatively to see whether attitudes had significantly improved in the pilot sites after implementation, relative to the comparison sites.

The questionnaire asked people, on a seven-point numbered scale, to agree or disagree with a series of statements about the police response to missing persons and how satisfied they were with their jobs. As some of the statements were deliberately framed to measure the same issue from different perspectives, they were combined into a series of scales.[11] In total four scales were formed which measured whether officers thought:

- the police should attend all reports of missing persons (two statements);
- attending missing persons incidents was a waste of time (three statements);
- the response to missing persons was proportionate (three statements); and
- they were satisfied with their job (four statements).

A series of independent t-tests were carried out to identify whether the differences in the mean scores for the pilots sites before and after implementation were statistically significant. Only one significant difference was identified (see Table 13 below). On average, officers were less likely to feel that the police should attend all reports of missing persons after implementation. More advanced analysis was also carried out – using univariate ANOVA – to compare the means for the pilot and comparison sites, before and after implementation. No significant differences were identified. Overall, therefore, the analysis revealed no consistent pattern of change. The reason for this lack of change was not clear given the qualitative responses of officers. One possible explanation is that wholesale change in officers' attitudes may not have been possible over a relatively short space of time (three months).

Table 13. Officer attitudes before and after implementation (pilot sites, programme level)

	Mean score*		Statistical significance
	Before	**After**	
"The police should attend all reports of missing persons"	3.00	2.65	<.05
"The police take a risk averse approach to missing persons"	5.48	5.37	>.05
"The police response to reports of missing persons is proportionate"	4.60	4.64	>.05
"I am satisfied with my job"	5.27	5.17	>.05

Note: See Table C2, page 53, for the full t-test results.
*1='strongly disagree' and 7='strongly agree'.

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[11] Factor analysis was carried out to find out whether the items scaled together. Each scale was found to be reliable (See Table C1, page 53). To form the scale, the responses to each item were added together and divided by the number of items in that scale.

The perceived impact of the pilot on children's homes

Many of the views expressed by officers focused on how the pilot had affected the work of local children's homes. Overall, the pilot was seen to have had a positive impact in terms of children's homes becoming more responsible for the people they were charged with looking after.

The perceived role of children's homes prior to the pilot

A majority of police respondents felt that children's homes were one of the main reasons why the pilot was needed. They were of the opinion that most of the calls classed as absences were reported by children's homes. These calls were typically seen to relate to children who regularly left the home unauthorised or did not return home when they were expected to, but whose whereabouts was known to the children's home, which also had no specific concerns about their safety. The unanimous view was that children's homes used to report children to the police as soon as they left the home, and took no action to prevent it happening or find them. In short, children's homes were seen by respondents as 'passing the buck' to the police and not taking their corporate parental responsibility seriously.

This situation seemed to cause some resentment among officers and may partly have shaped their previously negative attitudes towards missing persons incidents (e.g. see them as wasting police time, people not being 'genuinely' absent). Nevertheless, some respondents did recognise that children's homes might act in such a way because of their own procedures, pressures and risk aversion:

> I mean the staff at the care home as much pull their hair out [as we do] sometimes because they're in the same position, they know where they are, but they've got to report it… (Service desk operator, Force 1)

Views about the effect of the pilot on children's homes

Overall, the pilot was thought to have resulted in a number of positive developments in relation to children's homes:

- **Playing more of an active role –** The majority of respondents thought the pilot had resulted in children's homes taking more of an active role in dealing with people who were missing or absent: "Now the responsibility is put back on the care home" (Focus group, Force 2). It was reported that children's homes now waited before calling the police and made efforts to look for the children themselves. For example, they were thought to pre-empt the questions they knew they would be asked when reporting an incident by taking steps first (e.g. following a person who was walking out of the home).

- **Improved working relationships** – Some participants also reported that the working relations between children's homes and the police had improved. It was felt that expectations were now clearer and that there was a better understanding about each other's working practices.

- **Better communication with young people** – It was also been reported that the young people in the children's homes were more likely to tell staff where they would be going (possibly because the police did not come to the children's home). This was felt to have improved the relationships between the home and young people, and the quality of information likely to be gathered.

So there's actually more intelligence gathered about who they're associating with and where they are as a result of the absent pilot, and less reluctance on the part of the person that knows they're going to go missing or not return when they should, to say where they're going. (Service desk manager, Force 1)

While the impact of the pilot was largely perceived to be positive, one unintended consequence was reported. Some officers and supervisors felt that some children's homes were deliberately overstating the level of risk when they reported an incident to the police (e.g. by saying someone was at risk of sexual exploitation) in order to ensure the police would send officers. There was, however, no other evidence found during the evaluation in support of this view. Indeed, call centre respondents and missing person coordinators reported that callers would be probed when an incident was reported for specific evidence that might signify sexual exploitation.

One missing person coordinator also felt that some children's homes may have been less inclined to report absences to the police during the pilot. Their monitoring apparently revealed that some people who regularly went missing pre-pilot appeared much less often in force systems after the pilot. Others had a different view. One project manager, who noticed a similar reduction, was unable to attribute it to a specific cause. A response supervisor regarded such reductions as a positive sign and possibly indicated that children's homes were taking positive steps to locate the people who were absent before reporting them to the police. Importantly, the number of incidents recorded by the police did not point to the pilot having an adverse impact on reporting.

Summary

The majority of police practitioners who participated in the process evaluation were positive about the pilot and welcomed its introduction. Most of the officers who were interviewed felt the pilot had improved their opinions about calls for service for missing persons. There were signs of a positive change in attitudes in terms of officers thinking their efforts were worthwhile, addressed to people with genuine needs, and likely to make a difference. While a very small minority were more neutral, there was no evidence of the pilot having a detrimental effect.

This overall positive feedback was not found to translate consistently into a significant difference in officer attitudes between the pilot and comparison sites (as measured by the officer survey). Again, given the short timeframe for the pilot, it is possible that wholesale change in officers' attitudes may not have been possible especially if the new approach had not become fully embedded and given other influences on officer attitudes about their work. In terms of the specific impact of pilot, many respondents held the view that it had had a positive impact on how children's homes operated – encouraging them to take greater responsibility for those people they were charged with looking after.

6. Findings – partner agency views

This chapter presents findings from the in-depth interviews carried out with representatives from local partner organisations in the pilot sites in Forces 1 and 2. The chapter focuses primarily on their awareness and understanding of the pilot, and its perceived impact. Issues about the perceived impact of the pilot on safeguarding are discussed in the next chapter.

Stakeholder understanding

Awareness of the pilot

The overall level of awareness amongst respondents was high, although detailed knowledge and practical experience was found to vary. Almost all the partner organisations who were interviewed said they were aware of the pilot and had a broad understanding of the missing and absent definitions.

Those working in health seemed to be least aware, and have less experience, of the pilot. One respondent, who worked in a mental health unit, said they did not know about the pilot although they were familiar with earlier police proposals to classify people as missing or absent. Their level of awareness about the pilot did not appear to be due to a lack of engagement with the police, as they described their working relationship as "very good", but this was largely because they had not noticed any changes in practice (the police response was described as "very robust"). It is possible that this view was shaped more by the type of incidents that were generally reported by the unit (e.g. high risk patients), and the unit's previous work with the police to grade risk accurately.

The perceived scope of the pilot

The fact that other changes were taking place in the pilot forces at roughly the same time as the pilot meant that, in some instances, respondents had a mistaken understanding about its scope. One respondent, in particular, made a direct link between the introduction of the new definitions, and the reduction in missing person coordinators (which was unconnected to the pilot). Given that a few respondents raised concerns about the cuts to these posts, it is possible that the pilot may not always have been seen in a positive light by some respondents if they thought it linked in any way to those other changes. It should be noted, however, that while the reduction in missing person coordinators was subject to strong criticism by about a third of the respondents, a connection was not always made to the pilot.

> [By] total coincidence, there have been significant cuts in the number of missing from home officers… And that hasn't happened in a planned way to be at the same time as the absent pilot… I'm more concerned about the impact of that position than I am about the absent pilot, because I think there was a need to take a risk assessed approach to missings because of the numbers. (Local authority safeguarding)

The perceived rationale for the pilot

When asked about the reason why the pilot had been introduced, none of the respondents interviewed used the 'official' language of the pilot in terms of the police seeking to provide a more proportionate or risk-based response to missing persons incidents. However, six of the respondents described, in their own words, how the pilot was about the police responding in a more targeted way or focusing resources more appropriately. These respondents sometimes talked about the police trying to concentrate on those people who were 'really missing' rather

than those who would return after a short time or whose whereabouts was known (albeit not where they were supposed to be).

> I think it was because of the amount of call-outs sometimes that the police are receiving are … unnecessary call-outs. They try to reduce that number of unnecessary call-outs. (Children's home)

The respondents who were more negative about the pilot tended to talk about its purpose in narrow financial terms. Three respondents, in particular, saw the pilot as largely being about the police reducing costs. As one children's home representative said: "[It's] all about budgets and manpower and saving time".

A couple of respondents referred to specific claims made by the police about level of savings accrued as result of the pilot. Given the concerns expressed about the reduction in missing person coordinators, there was interest among some of those interviewed in the police reinvesting a small proportion of these savings into funding the missing person coordinators.

The perceived need for a more targeted police approach

There was a general consensus about whether the police should attend all incidents where a person has been reported as being missing. None of the respondents who were specifically asked (11 in total) felt it was necessary for a police officer to be despatched immediately in every case. Given the pilot sought to move away from a 'one size fits all' approach, it could be argued that respondents' views and the pilot's aims were in broad alignment (although some respondents would not have described their views in these terms and were negative about some aspects of the pilot).

Respondents typically said police attendance should depend on the nature of the incident: "I think every case would be judged on its individual merit; you can't really have a blanket approach to that" (Health). One person's view about police attendance seemed to be contingent on there being adequate safeguards in place to ensure those who do not receive an immediate police response still have access to support services and are subject to monitoring to identify longer term risk.

> I mean I don't think they [the police] necessarily have to always attend, but what I do think is that if we get a good referral pathway in place … [we are] very good at… following things up. (Charity)

The perceived impact of the pilot

About two-thirds of the people who were interviewed were either positive or neutral about the impact of the pilot. The remaining third were more negative about the pilot. Individual respondents were rarely uniform in their views. For example, some people who were largely positive reported some teething issues, and those who were largely negative agreed with some aspects of what the pilot sought to achieve and raised concerns more about implementation.

Positive views about the pilot

As mentioned, respondents were either positive about the pilot or, at the very least, did not raise any concerns about it:

> [The pilot's] running smoothly. It's going okay. (Children's home)

> [Things] are generally working as they were. (Health)

I think they've been positive changes… But it's like anything else, it's a work in progress, you know. (Children's home)

It's a positive view. It enables the police to see the wood for the trees in terms of the most targeted, the children they need to target. There are appropriate checks and balances in the system. So, it's a positive view. (Local authority safeguarding)

A range of different reasons were given by respondents as to why they thought the pilot had had a positive or neutral impact. During the interviews some respondents gave specific examples to support their view.

- **Improved working relationships** – People most often talked about the pilot having resulted in a closer working relationship between the police and partners. A respondent, for example, had noticed an improvement in the officers attending the incidents. "[They] are lot more receptive and they seem to understand a little bit more about young people that are in care at the moment" (Children's home).

- **Changed responsibilities** – There was some evidence that the pilot had started to shift the responsibilities of the police and children's home for the better. A few respondents talked about the pilot having resulted in children's homes improving their internal reporting procedures, making more of an effort to track down people before involving the police, and getting better at updating the police when there was more information. Another children's home representative also felt they were now making fewer calls to the police due to the pilot.

  [We] have to do all the risk assessments and everything from this end before we even get to the point of picking the phone up… [We've] got more defined time scales now. If they've been gone for X amount of hours you do this, if they haven't come back after another 10 hours after that you do that. (Children's home)

  [The pilot] means… they're encouraged to look for the children or make contact with the children before they're reported as missing. That frees up the time that police will then have to focus on a young person that really is missing… (Charity)

- **A more proportionate police response** – Respondents sometimes felt that the police response to missing persons was now better targeted towards those incidents which posed the greatest risk:

  [The] risk assessment approach has enabled a focus to be provided on the children that are missing and at risk. (Local authority safeguarding)

  [The] old system I felt was a bit 'one size fits all' and it didn't really differentiate [the] young people who were particularly vulnerable… So, I think it's a bit clearer now. (Children's home)

- **Reduced contact with the police** – An unintended benefit of the pilot perceived by at least one respondent was that the more targeted approach had resulted in children's homes having less contact with the police, which was positive for reputational reasons: "[We] probably see less of [the police]… which is probably a good thing really for these people… [as] it can send out the wrong signals" (Children's home). A couple of other respondents also suggested that the changing nature of contact had potentially

resulted in young people being more open with children's home staff about their whereabouts.

Concerns about the pilot

About a third of the partner representatives were less positive in their view about the pilot. Those who were most negative tended to focus on how the new definitions had been applied by the police in practice. Two respondents talked about the decisions of call handlers to classify incidents as 'inflexible' and being made 'in isolation'.

> The young person, especially one that does it on a regular basis, isn't a priority [for the police]. And often we understand that, but what [the pilot] doesn't do, is it doesn't allow for the grey areas. It's either very black or very white… I think the reality of it is that the… the flexibility's not there and discretion element is taken away… Because [some people] don't fit the criteria, you know, you've got to hit all the things on the checklist for action to be taken, and sometimes it's not that straightforward. (Children's home)

There was a concern that, in some but not all cases, people who had been assessed by their children's homes as high risk were being classed by the police as absent and, thus, did not receive the immediate response they felt was required. These decisions were a source of frustration to the respondents as they felt the police were working to a different threshold and not recognising the risk assessment work that had already been carried out. Processes were described during the interviews whereby children's home workers would carry out a risk assessment and sometimes wait for a defined period before calling the police to report a person missing from a home. Thus, for them, the act of calling the police meant that they felt attendance was required. Moreover, there was also a view that the children's homes were best placed to make this risk assessment because of their professional knowledge of the person and the situation: "We've got a much better insight into a young person, their behaviour, what the risks are" (Children's home).

A couple of specific examples were provided to illustrate their concerns.[12] In one example – described by two separate respondents – a children's home reported a 14 year old girl missing who they regarded as high risk as she was said to becoming involved with sex workers and possibly heroin. Despite these issues, the police classified the incident as an absence: "[If] that isn't high risk then I really don't know what high risk is for a young person" (Children's home). It was reported that the classification was only changed after 72 hours following the intervention of a senior safeguarding partner. While there was no indication the girl came to any harm, the example (as it was described) raised important questions about how the pilot was implemented. Given that the police were supposed to deploy officers when a person was at risk of harm, the issue raised by partner agencies might relate more to the quality of implementation and the police's interpretation of the definitions than the pilot's principles.

It is worth noting that these views were far from universal among local stakeholders: "I certainly haven't come across any cases where the wrong label was put on a child" (Local authority safeguarding). Moreover, the call takers and response supervisors interviewed for this study said that these disagreements mainly occurred during the early stages of the pilot, when children's homes were said to be less aware of how the pilot was supposed to operate and assumed the police were taking no action at all. Engagement prior to the pilot was seen to be critical in assuaging these concerns. There were also some suggestions from the stakeholder interviews about how these situations could be prevented in the future:

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[12] An issue from one interview was referred to the police by researchers with the respondent's consent, due to its nature, although the police found no evidence of any harm.

- Better engagement between the police and children's homes in order to resolve disagreements when they arose.
- More work with staff within children's homes to develop their understanding of the new police approach.
- The development of a shared understanding about what constituted a high risk incident:

> I think the staff were a little bit frustrated sometimes if the police wouldn't take the young person who was missing [but] I think the risk assessments are all the same now…" (Children's home)

> We've had some complications at our end but that's not to do with the [pilot] so much. That's due to establishing a common approach in-house with social workers. And that's to do with... that's reaching a common understanding as to when somebody's reported missing, really. (Children's home)

- Greater recognition by the police that children's homes may have conducted a risk assessment before reporting an incident to the police.
- Flexibility in terms of how the police applied the new definitions so that the professional judgement of children's home staff could be taken into account; and
- Scope for officers to be deployed to absences in some circumstances (e.g. if a breach of the peace was likely to occur when the person was being returned home).

In addition to how the new definitions were applied, one respondent was also concerned that pilot may have inadvertently resulted in officers not being in a position to reassure relatives or carers in distress if they did not attend all incidents. The respondent was also of the opinion that some parents from chaotic households, whose children went absent repeatedly from home, were less inclined to contact the police because they "think it's not worth reporting anymore". She recognised, however, it was the role of the charity to encourage parents to report these incidents to the police still, and to provide education and support about the risks involved. There was also no evidence, however, to suggest that the reporting of incidents was adversely affected by the pilot. One respondent also expressed concern that the police could 'take the word' of a young people who lied about their whereabouts meaning they could never be regarded as low risk.

Summary

Overall, awareness of the pilot was found to be good among the representatives of the local partner agencies interviewed for the study. Views about the rationale and the scope of the pilot were relatively mixed, with some respondents linking the new approach to other changes unconnected to the pilot (e.g. the reduction in missing person coordinators). Importantly, there was broad agreement that the police should not attend all incidents were a person was reported to be missing and that a more targeted approach was required (although some would not have described their views as support for the pilot). Most of the partners interviewed for the study were either positive or neutral about the impact of the pilot. They talked about the pilot having improved the relationships between partners and the police, children's homes taking more responsibility, and the police response being more proportionate to risk. A notable proportion – about a third – were more negative in their views. Concerns were raised about how the new definitions had been applied in practice, particularly in those cases where children's home felt an incident was high risk but it was classified by the police as an absence. These views were far from universal however, and engagement with partners about the new approach and better alignment between risk assessment tools were seen to be critical at assuaging these concerns.

7. Findings – the perceived impact on police safeguarding

An important aspect of the process evaluation was to understand whether the introduction of the pilot had affected the proactive problem-solving work carried out by the police to safeguard people who were at risk of harm and, if so, in what ways. As the pilot focused on the initial police response, no change was expected in how the police approach their safeguarding work which targeted longer term risk.

In this chapter, the views of local partners on police safeguarding arrangements, collected through interviews in two of the forces, are briefly discussed. The perceived effect of the pilot on proactive monitoring and partnership working is then discussed.

The view of stakeholders on safeguarding

Views about the safeguarding implications of the pilot varied among the local partners who were interviewed for the process evaluation.

Several respondents were positive in their view. They suggested that partnership working to protect vulnerable people was still "very productive" (Children's home) and might even have become more targeted: "I think [the pilot's] enabled us to focus on young people who we feel might be more at risk"(Children's home). Moreover, access to information was not said to have been adversely affected by the pilot: "I don't think there are any difficulties around information sharing" (Local authority safeguarding).

Two respondents, in particular, were concerned about the potential safeguarding implications of the pilot in terms of the need for ongoing monitoring and the effect on referrals. Their concerns (discussed below) were, however, potentially more about local implementation issues than the aim of the pilot.

Proactive monitoring by the police

Under the terms of the pilot, the police were expected to continue to record and monitor all incidents (including absences via the force command and control system) for project management and safeguarding reasons. The need for monitoring in support of safeguarding is highlighted by the evidence suggesting, for example, that children in need of safeguarding often go missing from home. Jago et al. (2011) has shown that over half of all young people using child sexual exploitation services on one day in 2011 had previously gone missing; a quarter of which had reportedly gone missing over 10 times.

The perceived need for monitoring

One of the charity representatives made the point that, for them, being absent was still an important marker of vulnerability. While the respondent stated that the police should focus on those people who 'really were missing' and needed to be looked after, they were concerned about the level of police monitoring they thought was taking place around absences.

> I think there needs to be something in place… [to] oversee young people who are being regularly classed as absent, so a service can then get involved and see what's going on with that young person. And someone needs to be monitoring the patterns of absent young people… [If] you have a young person that's absent 10 or 11 times a month, and it's always an

hour a night, well that could well be that they are still being exposed to some vulnerability. (Charity)

Nevertheless, while the police were still required to engage in monitoring, the point raised by the charity worker stressed the continuing need for the police to monitor, and be seen to monitor, all incidents for long term risk.

Monitoring during the pilot

It was reported that tight monitoring of the absences took place in both pilot forces during the pilot (partly due to the project reporting requirements). This monitoring was carried out by the missing persons coordinators and the project managers, and said to involve scrutinising force systems to identify the:

- number of incidents classified as absences;
- people who repeatedly went absent; and
- locations that accounted for a disproportionate number of incidents.

One force, for example, had also introduced trigger points for repeat absences. When the same person was reported absent five times in a month, and when the same home reported seven or more incidents, the issue was brought up at the local safeguarding board.

The availability of monitoring data

There was no evidence from the missing person coordinators interviewed for the study – who were responsible for monitoring – that the pilot had affected the amount or quality of information available. Officers who were not directly involved in the monitoring process, and whose opinions would have been less well informed, did speculate that there might be less intelligence about absences because they were not attended. However, most respondents recognised that attending incidents did not guarantee that useful information would be identified because of the limited time available, and the nature of the relationship between the officers and the person who was absent.

Some also felt that information flows had improved, albeit from a different route, because young people were more inclined to tell children's home staff where they were going and who they were with as a result of the pilot (which would be shared with the police when the incident was reported).

The usability of force systems

Some issues were raised during the fieldwork about how easy force systems were to use for monitoring purposes.

The force systems for missing persons (i.e. Opus or Compact) tended to be used for tasking, intelligence searches, case monitoring, generating referrals and multi-agency work. However, it was reportedly difficult for officers and staff to update the system in long running cases or after leave, and to identify the most relevant information easily about a person or incident because it contained long narratives, complicated action settings, and automated entries. In one force, the pilot was thought to have helped the usability of the system by reducing the number of incidents as previously the system could not cope with the high volume of entries.

The command and control systems that were used to record absences were seen as difficult and time-consuming to use for monitoring. The main concern was that it was difficult to search for entries on the system because they were referenced by the address of the call rather than the name of the person who was absent. It was also reported that multiple logs

were sometimes created for the same incident because it was quicker for call handlers – when they were busy – to open a new log than to find and update an existing entry. As a result, information was missing from some of the logs and it was sometimes unclear which log was most up-to-date. Issues were also raised about there being no automatic links to the Police National Computer and other force systems, and the accuracy of incident closing codes.

Monitoring capacity?

It emerged from the fieldwork that, while monitoring was acknowledged to be important, the activity may have only happened because of the requirements of the pilot. Some police respondents questioned whether there was sufficient capacity to continue with the same level of monitoring after the end of the pilot.

The issue with capacity largely related to an important contextual change that was unconnected to the pilot. Both forces decided to make a marked reduction in the number of missing persons coordinators. Before or during the pilot, the number of posts was cut from 10 to four in Force 1, and from 12 to six in Force 2.[13] The reductions in these posts were part of wider organisational change programmes – prompted by budget cuts – which had nothing directly to do with the pilot. The project leads, however, were of the view that the reduction in coordinator posts did not affect the overall level of resource devoted to missing persons (e.g. because of the number of vacant posts, and the change in size and remit of Public Protection Units). Nevertheless, and as mentioned, many of the partners were very concerned about the reduction in missing person coordinator posts. Furthermore, some linked this change directly to the pilot, which influenced their reaction to the new approach.

There was evidence that the reduced number of missing persons coordinators would have made the monitoring of absences more challenging after the pilot ended (although there was no evidence to say that this work was not being conducted during the pilot). In one of the forces, the reduced number of coordinators necessitated a change in their responsibilities. While the missing persons coordinator monitored absences as expected during the pilot period, it was not strictly part of their remit following the organisational changes in force, and they were unlikely to be able to continue do so in the future. Their new role required them to monitor medium and high risk missing person cases on a routine basis, and to examine lower risk incidents only when they were specifically requested to carry out a review. In the other force, while the missing person coordinator saw the proactive monitoring of repeat absences as being part of their role, they were concerned about the extra work that result from the reduced resource levels (particularly if the pilot was implemented across the force area).

While the reduced number of missing person coordinators could potentially affect how the pilot would operate if it were extended, it is important to note that the monitoring processes may not have become 'business as usual' in the pilot sites and that others may able to perform the function. For example, intelligence and business analysts might have: greater capacity; routine access to data; and the necessary analytical skills to identify underlying risk. Indeed, one of the pilot forces reportedly had plans to assign some of the monitoring role to neighbourhood officers.

Partnership working

The reduction in the number of missing persons coordinators – a contextual change unrelated to the introduction of the pilot – was reported to have affected the level of contact between

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[13] The number in Force 2 was reduced to four after the pilot. However, a child sexual exploitation team was created which was expected to take on some of the responsibilities of the missing persons coordinators.

the police and safeguarding partners: "We're now missing that early intervention work because we're not attending the same level of meetings that we did before" (Missing Persons Coordinator).

Prior to the reduction in missing person officers, there were reportedly greater opportunities to develop ongoing relationships with other agencies and to pick up information that was helpful in terms of knowing when to trigger an intervention (e.g. information on a child's behaviour at school from a designated child protection teacher). In one force, neighbourhood officers were reportedly being sent to attend safeguarding meetings in the place of the missing persons coordinator.

Concerns were also raised by a couple of respondents about whether the police were referring people who repeatedly went absent to charities for support services: "[A] lot of these children now are not even coming through because they're classed as absent and not missing" (Charity). Given that absences were recorded on the command and control system and monitored by the police, it was possible that their concerns were related again to the reduction in missing person coordinators and their workload, than they were to the pilot.

While focused on the role of the police, the concerns about the referral process raised important questions about who should have responsibility for making referrals and the duty of care that corporate homes have to bring in support services.

Summary

No evidence was found that showed the pilot had adversely affected the proactive problem-solving work carried out by the police to safeguard people at risk of harm. There were some differences of opinion among the local stakeholders about the safeguarding implications of the pilot. While several respondents were positive in their view, a couple were concerned about the level of police monitoring that they thought was taking place around absences and the number of referrals the police were making to charities about repeat absences.

No major issues were raised by the police about the perceived impact of the pilot during the process evaluation. The monitoring of the absences reportedly took place in both pilot forces during the pilot as expected, with a focus on identifying repeat absences and locations accounting for a disproportionate number of incidents. There was also indication from those responsible for monitoring who were interviewed for the study that the pilot had not affected the amount or quality of information available for this analysis. Some issues were raised about how easy force systems were to use for monitoring purposes. Command and control systems, for example, were described as being difficult and time-consuming to use.

While the proactive monitoring of missing person and absences to identify long term risk was recognised as being important and was reported to be taking place in the pilot sites, questions were raised about whether there was sufficient capacity to continue with the same level of monitoring in the longer term because of contextual change unconnected to the pilot. There was evidence that the reduced number of missing persons coordinators would have made the monitoring of absences more challenging after pilot ended (although there was no evidence to say that this work was not being conducted during the pilot). Notably, about a third of the local partners interviewed for the process evaluation raised specific concerns about reduction in missing person coordinators. While the reduction in posts could potentially affect how the pilot would operate if extended, it is possible that the monitoring processes may not have become 'business as usual' in the pilot sites.

8. Conclusions and implications

Conclusions

The evaluation found promising qualitative evidence about the pilot's impact on proportionality of the initial police response to missing persons – its primary aim. More consistent evidence was found with regards to the pilot enabling the police to free up capacity, a secondary benefit of the new approach.

The proportionality of the initial police response

The pilot found promising qualitative evidence of the pilot's impact on the proportionality of the initial police response (and no indication of a negative effect). There seemed to be a broad consensus among officers who participated in the qualitative research that the pilot had helped the police to better identify those at risk, and ensure higher risk incidents received the attention they required. The post-implementation survey also showed there was a statistically significant difference between the officers in the pilot and comparison sites – in favour of the intervention – in terms of whether they thought they were attending higher risk incidents than three months before. Nevertheless, the survey also showed that most officers in the pilot sites did not perceive a change, and that the majority of the incidents they attended were considered to be low risk even after implementation. Given the length of the pilot period, it is possible that there was insufficient time for the new approach to become fully embedded and for its full effect to be felt. Greater change might be expected to occur in the longer term.

The effect of more proportionate response on police capacity

There was consistent evidence across the programme that, by being more proportionate to risk, the pilot sites were able to target their resources which had freed up some capacity. In theory, at least, this additional capacity could have been used for proactive work or deployed towards higher risk cases (other things being equal), which the 'what works' evidence in policing generally suggests can be an effective approach. While the total number of incidents recorded by the police remained the same or increased in the pilot sites relative to the comparison sites, officers were required to attend only about two-thirds of them, following the introduction of the new risk assessment process and absence definition. As a result, the total amount of time spent on the initial response was estimated to have been reduced by the police in the pilot sites (-23%) relative to the comparison sites (-3%). Had all the incidents recorded by the police in the pilot sites been attended, over 200 additional officer shifts would have been required to deal with them over the three-month pilot period (which could be redirected towards other priorities).

The views of officers and staff

The evaluation found qualitative evidence of the pilot having been successful in changing the attitudes of officers and staff, although this was not supported by the survey data. The majority of police practitioners who participated in the process evaluation were positive about the pilot. They felt it had improved their attitudes about attending missing persons calls and how incidents were dealt with, and thought decision-making was better as a result. In contrast, the officer attitudes survey did not reveal any consistent pattern of change. It is possible to speculate that this result was due there being insufficient time for the new approach to have affected a wholesale change in attitudes – particularly as other factors may also have an important bearing on attitudes. The lack of training or briefing provided to responses officers about the pilot might also have contributed to this nil result.

The views of local partners

About two-thirds of the partners interviewed for the study were either positive or neutral about the impact of the pilot. They talked about the pilot having improved the relationships between partners and the police, children's homes taking more responsibility, and the police response being more proportionate to risk. About a third were more negative in their views. Specific concerns were raised about how the new definitions had been applied in practice. The level and quality of engagement with partners by the police was found to vary between the sites, which appeared to affect how stakeholders subsequently perceived the pilot.

Police safeguarding

There was no evidence from the research to indicate the pilot had undermined forces' ability to carry out proactive safeguarding work. It was reported by the police that monitoring work was being carried out during the pilot, as expected, to identify repeat absences and homes which accounted for a disproportionate number of incidents. There was also no indication from those responsible for monitoring that the pilot had affected the amount or quality of information available for analysis, although some issues were raised about the usability of force systems. Concerns were, nevertheless, raised by some partner respondents about a perceived lack of police monitoring and the referral of repeat absences to charities for support services. These views may have been linked to concerns about the number of missing person coordinators – which had reduced in number as part of wider organisational changes – and potentially a result of a lack of police engagement with partner agencies. The reduction in missing person coordinators – a change unrelated to pilot – was a more of a general concern among partners, raised by about a third of respondents.

Implementation learning

The evaluation highlighted a number of learning points about implementing the Sussex model in other police forces.

- The evaluation highlighted the need for clarity over the **decision-making process** that is used to determine how incidents are classified and whether officers are deployed. Having a clear process – which is understood by all – is likely to minimise the scope for confusion and disagreement over deployment decisions. Given that contact centre staff will have an important role in gathering information from the caller about the incident, the risk assessment process, and deciding how incidents are classified – but may have limited previous experience in this area – there is likely to be value in making sure that proportionate supervision and monitoring is in place. As contact centre staff are likely to be taking on new responsibilities, there is likely to be a need to ensure they feel adequately supported and empowered (e.g. through active supervision, additional training to help them identify risk factors). Wider cultural issues about their perceived status and capability of contact centre staff may also need attention.

- The limited **internal communications and training** provided to response officers in the pilot sites was a recognised drawback. It was found to have potentially led to some misunderstandings about the pilot and would have also prevented officers from explaining the new approach to those people who had reported incidents to police. There would also be scope for internal training to shape the views of officers and staff, and deal with any underlying cultural issues (e.g. the status given to call centre staff). The 'what works' evidence on the delivery of successful organisational change highlights the importance of engaging with staff before change is introduced so that

they can understand the need for, and potential benefits, of the new approach and have the opportunity to shape the implementation process (Wheller at al. 2012).

- It was clear from the evaluation that **stakeholder engagement** is essential if changes to the initial response to missing persons are to be successful. There was some evidence to suggest that the quality of the engagement affected the extent to which local partners supported the pilot. Inevitably, partner organisations will have questions and concerns about any changes, and how they could affect them and the people for who they are responsible. As with internal staff, it is important to ensure the changes are explained to them, and that they have a chance to voice their opinions and influence what is planned. Upfront engagement could help resolve any disagreements with partners in advance of implementation. As part of this engagement, consideration should be given to aligning the risk assessment tools used between partners to identify people who are at risk of coming to harm, in order to minimise any problems with how the new definitions are applied.

- While there is very limited evidence of 'what works' in this high risk area of policing, **proactive safeguarding** work is more likely to reduce harm in the longer term than simply deploying officers to attend all incidents (unless the person is at immediate risk). The general evidence in policing suggests that targeted and preventive problem-solving – often in partnership with others – can be effective strategies in reducing crime. Furthermore, the local partner organisations involved in this study seemed to be principally interested in ensuring the safeguarding arrangements were maintained. When implementing a change to the initial police response to missing persons, therefore, it is important that this essential longer term preventive work is not undermined. Careful planning and testing may be required to ensure that implementation does not have any unintended consequences downstream. In so doing, the connections and interrelationships between a change in initial classification and response, and other organisational process and changes may need to be explored. For example, the reduction in missing person coordinators was unconnected to the pilot, but occurred at a similar time, and seemed to affect the context in which the pilot operated and how it was perceived. Specific consideration should be given to ensure that information about absent and missing persons is adequately captured, systems are useable, and there is sufficient analytical capacity and capability in order to carry out proactive monitoring to identify repeats and high risk cases.

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Appendix A. Research methods

Impact evaluation

Police incident data

Incident data were gathered from force command and control systems on the number of missing and absent persons recorded in the three months before, and three months after implementation in both the pilot and comparison BCUs.[14] These data were used to assess changes in the volume of incidents and in estimating the demand levels of response officers. The study did not examine the profile of incidents categorised as missing or absent in any level of detail as such analysis was carried out by the pilot forces.

A survey of frontline officers

A survey of frontline officers was carried out in the pilot and comparison BCUs immediately prior to implementation (between August and October 2011), and again three months afterwards (between January and March 2012). The questionnaire was designed by RAI researchers and administered online by the pilot forces. The survey was sent electronically to all response officers based in the pilot and comparison sites. Despite efforts by the forces to encourage officers to complete the questionnaire, the response rate was relatively low in some areas (see Table 2 below) which raised the possibility of non-response bias.

Table 2. Officer survey response rates

Sites	Eligible sample*	Number of valid responses			
		Before		After	
Force 1					
Pilot	289	66	(23%)	101	(35%)
Comparison	236	131	(56%)	122	(52%)
Force 2					
Pilot	244	129	(53%)	54	(22%)
Comparison	268	115	(43%)	44	(16%)
Force 3					
Pilot	364	98	(27%)	40	(11%)
Comparison	187	43	(23%)	38	(20%)

* Immediately before the pilot (between August and October depending on the force).

The survey was used to measure the following:

- **The perceived level of risk involved in last incident officers attended** – A series of questions were asked to gauge the perceived level of risk of harm in the last incident attended by the officer. Respondents were specifically asked whether they thought: the person was at risk of coming to harm; their behaviour was out of character; and they were likely to turn up safe and well after a short period of time.

  As a result of the pilot, it was expected that there would be a significant increase in the proportion of incidents attended by officers which they regarded to be high risk on the

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[14] Depending on the force, data collection started for the 'before' period in June, July or August 2011, and for the 'after' period in September, October or November 2011.

basis that, after implementation, officers should have only been deployed to higher risk incidents (i.e. missing persons).

- **The perceived amount of time spent on the last incident officers attended** – A series of questions were posed about how long officers thought they spent dealing with the last missing person incident they had attended. Officers were specifically asked to estimate how long they spent – in minutes – on five standard tasks that would typically be carried out during an initial response to a call about a missing person.[15]

  No change was expected in terms of the length of time officers said they spent dealing with individual incidents before and after implementation. However, the overall amount of time spent by response officers on missing persons was predicted to fall because officers would no longer be required to attend some incidents (i.e. absences).

  These survey items cannot be taken as objective measures of the actual time spent by officers on missing persons, not least because a person's perceptions are likely to be tied to whether they liked the work or felt a sense of ownership over the task. The perceptions measures are used as a proxy. More objective methods were considered (e.g. direct observations, activity diaries, time stamps from force systems) but rejected on grounds of cost, proportionality and feasibility. The survey measures were found to be broadly consistent with the time estimates generated by RAI researchers through direct observations of officers.

- **Officer attitudes towards missing persons and their job** – On a seven-point scale, officers were asked to agree or disagree with a series of attitude statements with reference to their experiences over the previous three months. All three forces included questions designed to measure officers' general attitudes towards missing person incidents. It was anticipated their attitudes might improve given they would no longer be required to attend incidents where officer might feel they 'added less value' (e.g. when the person's whereabouts was known and not thought to be at risk of harm).

  Two of the three forces also included questions that sought to measure officers' overall job satisfaction before and after implementation, on the basis that the new approach to missing persons might encourage officers to think of their work as being more meaningful, valuable, less mundane, and requiring the use of skill. Such change would be consistent with 'job characteristics theory' (see Hackman and Oldman 1980).

  Finally, in the post-implementation survey, officers were asked a series of questions about the pilot and its perceived impact.

The survey was analysed as cross-sectional data (rather than as a panel) because the answers of individual officers could not be tracked over time between the two sweeps of the survey. The analysis of the survey data is described in the main body of the report.

Process evaluation

Interviews and focus groups with police officers and staff

Fieldwork was carried out by RAI researchers with officers and staff on the pilot sites after implementation in May 2012. In-depth interviews were carried out with 23 police officers or members of police staff (mostly face-to-face). In addition, two focus groups were conducted

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[15] Namely: travelling to the scene; activities at the scene (e.g. searching and filling out a report); inputting data about the incident on to force systems; carrying out investigative and intelligence enquiries; and conducting a 'safe and well' check.

(one per force) with a total of 13 response officers. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and focused on the perceived impact of the pilot, implementation and process issues, and safeguarding. The pilot forces were responsible for identifying officers and staff to be interviewed, based around guidelines about the number and type of people who should be represented. The profile of research participants is set out below (Table 3).

Table 3. The profile of the police officer and staff respondents (n=36)

Sample characteristic		Number
Pilot site	Force 1	21
	Force 2	15
Role	Response officers	13
	Response supervisors	9
	Contact centre staff (e.g. call handlers, service desk staff, and supervisors)	7
	Missing persons coordinators	3
	Pilot project managements and senior leads	4

Interviews with representative of local partner organisations

In April 2012, a series of in-depth telephone interviews were also carried out by RAI researchers with 15 respondents from a range of partner organisations in the pilot sites. The profile of those interviewed for the process evaluation is set out below (Table 4). Suitable partners were initially identified by the forces, and were supplemented by a small number of additional interviews following a snowball sampling strategy.[16] It is possible this approach may have resulted in a biased sample, although a range of positive and negative views were aired. All the partner interviews were semi-structured in nature and focused on the following issues:

- What respondents knew about the pilot and how they became aware.
- What the perceived effect of the pilot had been in practice.
- Their views on the police risk assessment process and related police response.
- The perceived implications of the pilot on the safeguarding work carried out by the police and their partners.

Table 4. The profile of the partner agency respondents (n=15)

Sample characteristic		Number
Pilot site	Force 1	6
	Force 2	9
Organisation	Children's home	6
	Charity	4
	Health	2
	Local authority safeguarding	3

The recording and analysis of qualitative fieldwork

The interviews with officers, staff and partner representatives typically lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. With consent, the interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Two interviews could not be transcribed due to technical problems, and one

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[16] A non-probability sampling technique that involves respondents identifying additional respondents to participate in the research.

respondent did not consent to be recorded. In these cases, contemporaneous notes were made and included in the analysis.

The authors were responsible for carrying out the qualitative analysis. A standard thematic approach was used. To begin with, all transcripts or notes were read through to develop a general understanding of what had been said. Overarching themes were then developed from this initial reading and the issues set out in the topic guide. The interviews were then re-read in order to mark out text relevant to these themes. Under each theme, the views of individual respondents were compared and contrasted to: get a sense of the range of perceptions; identify how widely certain attitudes were held; and explore the nature of their views. Often, the interviews were re-read in their totality to ensure the thematic approach did not result in views being taken out of context, and to make connections across different themes. Quotes were also identified as providing a good illustration of a broader analytical point.

Appendix B. Force level results

Table B1. The total number of recorded incidents (force level)

	Before	After
Force 1		
Pilot	953	1,305
Comparison	664	695
Force 2		
Pilot	419	476
Comparison	281	188
Force 3		
Pilot	398	387
Comparison	311	305

Table B2. The profile of incidents after implementation (pilot sites, force level)

	Recorded incidents (n)	Proportion requiring police attendance (missing persons)		Proportion not requiring police attendance (absences)	
		(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Force 1	1,305	894	69%	411	31%
Force 2	476	290	61%	186	39%
Force 3*	387	274	71%	186	29%

*The number of absences for the first month of the pilot had to be estimated due to an issue with the command and control system. The estimate (38) was based on the number recorded for following two months (75), which were fairly evenly spread.

Table B3. The number of incidents requiring police attendance (force level)

	Before	After
Force 1		
Pilot	953	894
Comparison	664	695
Force 2		
Pilot	419	290
Comparison	281	188
Force 3		
Pilot	398	274
Comparison	311	305

Table B4. The perceived duration of a response to a missing persons incident (force level)

	Before		After	
	Sample (n)	Mean duration (mins)	Sample (n)	Mean duration (mins)
Force1				
Pilot	66	131	101	125
Comp	131	126	122	144
Force2				
Pilot	129	152	54	185
Comp	115	179	44	197
Force3				
Pilot	94	153	40	109
Comp	41	188	38	167

Table B5. The total estimated amount of time spent by the police on incidents requiring police attendance (force level)

	Before			After			Change in total (%)
	Recorded incidents (n)	Mean duration (mins)	Total time estimate (mins)	Recorded incidents (n)	Mean duration (mins)	Total time estimate (mins)	
Force 1							
Pilot	953	131	124,843	894	125	111,750	-10%
Comp	664	126	83,664	695	144	100,080	+20%
Force 2							
Pilot	419	152	63,688	290	185	53,650	-16%
Comp	281	179	50,299	188	197	37,036	-26%
Force 3							
Pilot	398	153	61,046	274	109	29,948	-51%
Comp	311	188	58,407	305	167	50,815	-13%

Table B6. The potential opportunity cost of attending absences (pilot sites, force level)

	Mean duration (mins)*	Recorded absences (n)	Total time estimate (mins)	Total time estimate (hrs)
Force 1	115	411	47,216	787
Force 2	157	186	29,122	484
Force 3	161	113	18,138	302

*An estimate based on 'low risk' incidents before implementation in all pilot and comparison sites. For the individual forces, the confidence intervals ranged from 11 to 32 minutes.

Appendix C. Detailed survey results

Table C1. The internal consistency of the attitude scales (Crombach's alpha)

Scale and related attitude statements	α
"The police should attend all reports of missing persons" • In my opinion, the police should attend all reports of missing persons • Attending all reports of missing persons is essential in order to ensure that people are safe	.879
"The police take a risk averse approach to missing persons" • Our force policy for responding to missing persons is there to make sure we 'cover our backs' • Many of the missing persons incidents we attend are a waste of time • I spend too much of my time dealing with missing persons incidents where there is no risk of harm to the person involved	.757
"The police response to reports of missing persons is proportionate" • The amount of time we devote to investigating missing persons reports is proportionate to the risk of harm to that person • The missing persons incidents I attend are cases where there is a risk of harm • The missing persons incidents I attend are ones in which somebody could be in danger	.752
"I am satisfied with my job" • I am happy with my job most of the time • I don't get a lot of personal fulfilment from my work • I don't have much enthusiasm for the work I have to do • I like the kind of work I do	.805
"I attend incidents that are higher risk than three months ago" • The proportion of incidents I attended where the missing persons was genuinely at risk of coming to harm has increased • In the past 3 months I have attended a higher proportion of missing persons where behaviour has been out of character • I am more likely to deal with missing persons who may not turn up safe and well compared with 3 months ago	.845

Table C2. Officer perceptions – results of the attitudes survey (programme level)

Scale	Sites	Mean score*		T-test			Univariate ANOVA		
		Before	After	t	df	p	F	df	p
"The police should attend all reports of missing persons"	Pilot	3.00	2.65	2.12	479	<.05	0.75	1,974	>.05
	Comp	2.98	2.81	-	-	-			
"The police take a risk averse approach to missing persons"	Pilot	5.48	5.37	0.86	479	>.05	0.37	1,973	>.05
	Comp	5.58	5.58	-	-	-			
"The police response to reports of missing persons is proportionate"	Pilot	4.60	4.64	-0.30	479	>.05	0.52	1,972	>.05
	Comp	3.40	3.22	-	-	-			
"I am satisfied with my job"	Pilot	5.27	5.17	0.79	346	>.05	0.42	1,754	>.05
	Comp	5.27	5.05	-	-	-			
"I attend incidents that are higher risk than three months ago"	Pilot	-	3.62	6.89	392	<.05	-	-	-
	Comp	-	2.73						

*1='strongly disagree' and 7='strongly agree'.