

CHILDREN'S VOICES RESEARCH REPORT

Children and young people's perspectives on the
police's role in safeguarding: a report for Her
Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
Statement from the Young Person's Advisory Group	4
1. PROJECT OVERVIEW	5
Introduction	5
Project definitions	5
Sampling and methodology	6
Ethics and governance	8
Participant overview	8
The context for the police's role in safeguarding	9
Report structure	15
2. PROPENSITY TO SEEK AND ACCEPT POLICE PROTECTION	17
Seeking help from the police	17
Impact of previous encounters	19
Fear of the police	20
Equality of treatment	21
3. PRINCIPLES OF SAFE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	25
Demonstrating empathy and compassion	28
Respectful and non-judgmental practice	30
Effective communication: eliciting and responding to children and young people's accounts	31
Effective communication: conveying information to children and young people	32
Due consideration to confidentiality and discretion	35
Maximising continuity of engagement	36
Due consideration to children and young people's support needs	37
Facilitating choice and control	39
4. POLICE RESPONSES TO SAFEGUARDING RELATED CRIMES	41
ABE interviews	41
Post ABE communication	49
Consistent personnel	51
5. POLICE RESPONSES TO 'GOING MISSING'	53
Punitive responses to missing	55
Failure to identify vulnerability and risk	56
6. ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMPLAINTS	58
Accessing complaints procedures	59
Lack of support	61
Professional misconduct	62
7. CONCLUSION	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY	67

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Statement from the Young Person's Advisory Group

"The police are there
to keep us safe, not
to manipulate or to
intimidate us. Respect
me and I'll respect you."

1. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Introduction

- 1.1 As part of their child protection inspection programme, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies (HMIC) commissioned 'The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking' at the University of Bedfordshire to undertake exploratory research with children and young people in England or Wales who have come into contact with the police because of concerns about their safety or wellbeing. The core objectives of the work were to:
- integrate the views and experiences of children and young people into HMIC's Inspection processes, and
 - explore safe and appropriate means of facilitating this, informed by participatory principles.
- 1.2 Within this the research specifically sought to:
- explore how children and young people come into contact with the police
 - consider how they experience police responses to concerns about their safety or wellbeing
 - determine the ways in which their rights are – or are not – promoted within the process, and
 - elicit their experience-based views on (a) 'what works' in engaging with children and young people around these issues; (b) key areas requiring improvement; and (c) suggestions as to how these could best be addressed.
- 1.3 The fieldwork took place over a three month period from July to September 2015. A total of 45 children and young people, aged 7 to 19 years of age, took part through interviews (n=32) or surveys (n=13), contributing their experience-based views on the issues outlined above.

Project definitions

- 1.4 For the purposes of this research, the term 'children and young people' is used to refer to individuals under the age of 18 years.¹
- 1.5 'Concerns about safety or wellbeing' is an umbrella term that, for the purposes of this study, is taken to include experiences of:
- child abuse or neglect within the family home
 - exposure to domestic abuse (or experience of this if 16 plus)
 - child sexual exploitation (CSE) or other forms of abuse (trafficking, violence) outside of the familial home (including online abuse), and/or
 - going missing.

¹ Although some 19 year olds are included in the sample, all were reporting on engagement with the police when under 18 years of age.

- 1.6 Whilst recognising that concerns about safety and wellbeing can also exist in relation to children and young people who come into contact with the police as a result of engagement in offending behaviour, that particular cohort fell outside the remit of this study.
- 1.7 The focus on 'police responses' was taken to include both officers and civilian staff, at any point of engagement around concerns about a child or young person's safety or wellbeing. Where police had formally brought in other professionals to support their response – voluntary sector providers undertaking safe and well checks or Registered Intermediaries (RIs) supporting an interview process, for example – this was also included in the remit.

Sampling and methodology

- 1.8 Both the short timeframes of the research and the need to ensure appropriate support for participants necessitated an opportune approach to sampling that utilised agencies to identify, and support, children and young people who wished to take part in the research.² An existing network of agencies, supplemented by additional contacts provided by the Project Advisory Group, led to 105 agencies being approached as possible routes to engaging participants in the research. Seventeen subsequently supported the engagement of children and young people in the research; these are referred to as facilitating agencies within the remainder of the report.
- 1.9 These 17 agencies were geographically dispersed across England, covering the South East, North East and the Midlands.³ They included projects with a focus on CSE and other forms of sexual abuse, going missing, domestic violence, housing provision, youth support and supporting victims of crime. They also included a project with specialism in child-centred communication that has supported children through criminal justice processes and a specialist residential care unit.
- 1.10 The process for inviting children and young people to take part in the research is outlined below.
- 1) Facilitating agencies were briefed as to the purpose and remit of the research, their role and engagement opportunities for children and young people.
 - 2) Keyworkers within the facilitating agencies identified potential participants who fulfilled the inclusion criteria.
 - 3) An anonymised risk and needs assessment⁴ was completed by the keyworker and a member of the research team.
 - 4) Subject to the ability to appropriately mediate identified risks and needs, and secure parent/carer consent where required⁵, the keyworker discussed the opportunity to participate in the research with the child/young person⁶.

2 Whilst only accessing children and young people through agencies introduces a degree of bias into the sample, this was deemed to be the only safe way to facilitate their engagement within the short timeframes of the research.

3 Active attempts were made to include services in Wales but none engaged in the study.

4 The risk and needs assessment covered issues such as capacity to give consent, potential distress or harm, potential impact on therapeutic or legal processes and support needs. This was completed on an anonymised basis and no identifiable information about potential participants was shared with the research team in advance of their consent to take part in the study.

- 5) Having been given time to reflect on their decision, and speak to the research team if desired, the keyworker arranged a time for interested children/young people to participate in an interview with a researcher or complete a survey with the support of their worker.
- 6) Children and young people's informed consent was actively checked and formally recorded prior to any data collection.

Interviews

- 1.11 The primary element of the research was face-to-face qualitative interviews with children and young people. Participation in this strand of the research was open to children and young people who were 7 to 19 years of age inclusive, and had experienced police contact around safety/wellbeing concerns in the last two years (when under 18).
- 1.12 A total of 32 participants took part through this strand of the work; 28 did so via individual interviews with the remaining four taking part in small group interviews involving themselves and one other young person. All participants were offered the opportunity to have a supporter present during their interview and a minority chose to avail of this, having a family member, partner or worker present in the room.
- 1.13 Interviews were semi-structured in nature. They were conducted in the third person, allowing children and young people to share their experience-informed perspectives without having to locate them in a detailed exposition of their own experiences. This was not done to prevent participants from speaking directly about their own experiences – and indeed the majority did as the interview progressed – but to ensure that this was a choice, rather than an expectation on the child or young person. Participants were also offered choice in the themes they wished to reflect on (with topic cards used to facilitate this) and whether they wished to do this orally or visually. In order to maximise participant choice and control, all were also actively offered control over how their contributions were recorded (via audio-recorder or handwritten notes) and the opportunity to withdraw (any or all) contributions at the end of the interview and within the two weeks that followed.

Survey

- 1.14 Young people aged 14 or over, who had experienced police contact around concerns about their safety or wellbeing in the last two years (while under the age of 18), were offered an alternative means of engagement in the research; that of a short survey. Thirteen young people, aged 15 to 19 years of age, chose to engage in this manner.
- 1.15 As with interview participants, potential survey respondents were only accessed via facilitating agencies. This ensured that: (a) it was only completed by young people who fulfilled the inclusion criteria, (b) a worker could explain the nature and implications of engagement in the study, and (c) services were able to provide follow up support if required.

5 Parent/carer consent was obtained for participants under 16 years of age, unless contrary to the best interests of the child. This was generally opt-out for those aged 13-15 years and opt-in for those aged under 13.

6 This was explained verbally, with age-appropriate written materials provided alongside this. Workers were asked to emphasise that there was no expectation or requirement for children/young people to take part in the research, and that the decision to assent or decline participation would not impact upon the service or support they were receiving from the facilitating agency. These points were reiterated again prior to the commencement of data collection.

- 1.16 Surveys were distributed via keyworkers and completed online or in hard copy. The survey consisted of a short core section eliciting views on how young people experience police responses to concerns about their safety or wellbeing, followed by six optional sections in which respondents could choose to answer additional questions on particular elements of the process.
- 1.17 All research materials (for the interview and survey elements of the process) were designed and piloted with a Young Person's Advisory Group, with previous experience of the issues under consideration.

Analysis

- 1.18 The rich qualitative data emerging from the interview phase of the research was thematically analysed using NVIVO according to the semi-structured interview template and supplementary emerging themes. Participant data from both interviews and surveys, and the content of survey responses, were analysed using SPSS. Initial findings were discussed within the research team, with reference to researcher reflections captured in fieldwork notes during the fieldwork period, in order to cross-reference accuracy of interpretation. They were then reported to, and reflected on with, both the Young People's Advisory Group and the Professional Advisory Group prior to final content prioritisation.

Ethics and governance

- 1.19 The overriding methodological and ethical concern for the research team, in all work that it does, is that of ensuring a rights-informed and rights-respecting approach that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of all involved in the research process. A project such as this inevitably entails many ethical considerations, including those relating to safeguarding and welfare, participation and representation. In recognition of this, and in line with all work undertaken by the research team, ethics was viewed as an ongoing reflective concern, and not just a discrete procedural requirement. All necessary procedural approvals were, however, obtained prior to the commencement of any fieldwork. This included two-stage ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire and ethical approvals from Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee and The Children's Society.
- 1.20 An independent Professional Advisory Group was convened to support the design and oversight of the research. This group included representation from subject experts within legal and social research, social care, policing and voluntary sector specialist projects. The research was also ably supported by a Young Person's Advisory Group, comprised of young people with previous experience of the issues under consideration.

Participant overview

- 1.21 A total of 45 children and young people took part in the research via interviews (n=32) or surveys (n=13). They ranged in age from 7 to 19 years.⁷ One-sixth were male (n=7); the remainder female (n=38). One-sixth identified as a minority ethnic group (n=7);⁸ the remainder as white (n=38).

⁷ Survey participants were all aged over 14 due to the minimum age limit applied to this element of the work.

- 1.22 Three-fifths of participants (n=26) were living with their parent/parents at the time of engagement in the research. A further five participants were living with other family members, and six were living with foster carers. Four were in residential care, with a further three living in supported accommodation and one individual living with a partner or friend.
- 1.23 Just over half (n=26) of participants reported that their last contact with the police in relation to safety or wellbeing concerns related to a single issue of concern. The three most frequently identified categories of concern within this were safety at home (n=8), going missing (n=8) and safety in the community (n=6).⁹
- 1.24 The remainder of the sample reported that their last welfare-focused contact with the police related to two or more of these categories of concern. Cumulatively, this meant that across the sample of 45 children and young people, last contact with the police concerned:
- going missing (n=21)
 - safety in the community (n=21)
 - safety in the home (n=17)
 - safety online (n=6)
 - intimate partner violence (n=6)
 - something else (n=6).
- 1.25 Police contact around these issues was still ongoing for one-fifth of the sample, and had concluded within the last year for most of the rest (within the last six months for 23 participants and within the last 12 months for a further seven).
- 1.26 One-third of the sample reported having no prior experience of the police in advance of their encounter around these safeguarding concerns. The remainder reported previous experience and reflecting on the positivity or negativity of these: four described this as a good experience; eleven as a bad experience; eight as neither good nor bad and four as a mixture of good and bad.

The context for the police's role in safeguarding

- 1.27 The following section provides a contextual framework for the research, based on current understandings of the relevant policy and research evidence. This includes a brief overview of the legislative and guidance framework that determines the police's role in safeguarding children and young people, and relevant messages from literature. It is by no means a comprehensive overview and aims only to provide a 'flavour' of key messages with relevance for this study.

8 Four identified as Asian/Asian British, two as Dual Heritage and one as 'other'. A number of Black/Black British' children and young people were risk assessed but, for a variety of reasons, these did not progress to interview at a late stage in the fieldwork period. Other focussed attempts were subsequently made to try and identify potential 'Black/Black British' participants given their absence from the study but this could not be appropriately facilitated within the timeframes of the work.

9 Two participants reported contact to be around violence from a partner. A further two said it related to 'something else' – for one, this was witnessing the assault of a sibling; the nature of the concern for the other was not specified.

Legislative framework

- 1.28 Under the Children Act 1989, police (working with partner agencies such as local authority children's social care services, health services and education services) are responsible for making enquiries to safeguard and secure the welfare of any child within their area who is suffering (or is likely to suffer) significant harm (HMIC, 2015).
- 1.29 Police duties and associated best practice are further clarified by a wider range of statutory and non-statutory guidance outlining details of how these duties should be exercised. This notes specific police roles in relation to:
- the identification of children who might be at risk from abuse and neglect
 - investigation of alleged offences against children
 - inter-agency working and information sharing to protect children, and
 - taking emergency powers to protect children (see for example: HM Government, 2015; HMIC, 2015; College of Policing, 2014; Crown Prosecution Service, 2013a/b; Ministry of Justice, 2013a/b/c).

Research evidence

- 1.30 There is limited empirical UK research exploring the police's role in safeguarding children and young people, with no UK evaluations of police responses to tackling child maltreatment to date. This means that "*in essence, we do not know 'what works'*" in relation to policing and safeguarding children (Allnock, 2015:14).
- 1.31 Given the lack of a focused comprehensive evidence base on policing responses to safeguarding, this study draws upon five bodies of *related* literature:

Research on children and the police more broadly, including children in contact with the police as suspects, and children as victims of all crimes (see for example APPG 2014; Beckett and Warrington, 2014; MPA 2008).

Research on the experiences of child victims and witnesses within the broader criminal justice process, including prosecution processes (see for example Hayes and Bunting, 2013; Plotnikoff, and Woolfson, 2009).

Research into children's experiences of help-seeking and support services following maltreatment or experiences of going missing. These studies include experiences of the police alongside a range of other agencies such as social care, health and education (see for example Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar et al., 2013).

Research on specific types of child maltreatment in relation to criminal justice processes (see for example Allnock 2015 a/b; Beckett and Warrington, 2015).

Research on specific procedural aspects of child protection investigations such as forensic interviews (see for example Robinson, 2008).

- 1.32 This evidence base is supplemented by a range of recent inspections and inquiries which consider the police's role in safeguarding either broadly or in relation to specific issues such as CSE (CJJI, 2015; HMIC, 2015; APPG, 2014; Coffey, 2014).

Key messages from the literature

Perceptions, attitudes and barriers to engagement with the police

- 1.33 Children and young people's experiences of the police in relation to safeguarding matters are situated within the broader context of their wider perceptions and experiences of the police. Evidence suggests that children and young people infrequently report crime of any kind (Allnock, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2014; ONS, 2014). Explanatory factors for low levels of reporting include:
- previous negative experiences of the police
 - low confidence in the police's ability to effect change
 - young people's perception that they will be treated less favourably than adults
 - fear of negative repercussions to themselves or their family if they report crime
 - feeling in some way to blame for the crime
 - resolving incidents through other means, and
 - time or financial reasons (Beckett and Warrington, 2014; MPA, 2008).
- 1.34 The evidence suggests that the more direct contact children and young people have had with police, the more their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the police appear to be distrustful and negative (APPG, 2014, MPA, 2008). Children from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities are specifically highlighted as being more likely to have lower levels of satisfaction in the police and be less likely to report crime (Beckett and Warrington, 2014; ONS 2014; MPS 2010).
- 1.35 Children and young people with additional vulnerabilities, including those in care, are noted to face additional barriers to approaching or engaging with the police (APPG Inquiry 2014). There is also evidence that boys and young men may be less likely to report crimes involving their victimisation due to prevailing assumptions around power and masculinity (Beckett and Warrington, 2014; Horvath et al 2014; MPA 2008).
- 1.36 Similar concerns about low levels of reporting and identification exist in relation to children and young people with disabilities (Miller and Brown, 2014). Although very little is known about their experiences of police responses to safeguarding specifically, broader research on child protection and disabilities highlights significant shortcomings in professionals' skills and resources to enable effective communication with children with learning disabilities, or those using alternative communication systems (Franklin et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2014).

Reporting and disclosure

- 1.37 Although varying in their particular estimations, self-report surveys and other research studies within the UK repeatedly indicate that children and young people are experiencing much higher levels of abuse and neglect than that recorded in official police or social care statistics (CCE, 2015; Smith et al., 2015; Radford et al., 2013).
- 1.38 The evidence that children and young people only have police contact in a minority of cases of abuse and neglect suggests both low levels of disclosure and missed opportunities for intervention and criminal justice system responses (Smith et al., 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2014).

1.39 Barriers children and young people face in recognising and disclosing abuse or neglect include:

- fear of the abuser (for self, siblings or other family member)
- repression or other psychological coping strategies
- fear of a loss of control
- fear of consequences for the perpetrator – particularly in cases where the perpetrators are close relatives or children have emotional ties to them
- shame, stigma and self-blame
- a lack of opportunities to tell, and
- secrecy as a strategy for maintaining safety (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar et al., 2013; Tucker, 2011).

1.40 A number of studies and inquiries also highlight children and young people's fears of not being believed when they report abuse or neglect to professionals (APPG, 2014; Allnock and Miller, 2013; Tucker, 2011). These fears are associated with a range of expectations including: negative attitudes by professionals towards themselves or their families; professionals' tendency towards disbelief if the alleged abusers were well known, respected or held significant status; and feeling judged by professionals for their own behavior or role in the abusive scenario.

1.41 While for the police, 'disclosure' may be seen as a formal means of giving a statement, it is important to understand that disclosure, for a child or young person, is a process and they may face multiple challenges in getting to a point where they seek help (Allnock, 2015a; Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar, 2013). Also, as Kelly et al. (2005) note, the failure to disclose may itself be recognised as the first point of attrition within the criminal justice system. Where police do receive disclosures of abuse or neglect, it is most likely to be after another adult has been told or a third party has discovered the maltreatment (Allnock, 2015).

1.42 The research literature on initial contact suggests that children and young people's experiences with the police may be better if those officers that they have contact with hold an understanding of the barriers to children disclosing maltreatment and associated wider vulnerabilities (Allnock, 2015).

Police responses

1.43 Evidence from recent inspections suggests that child protection policing remains inconsistent both within and across different forces. Of the 578 police safeguarding cases assessed as part of the National Child Protection Inspection programme, more than a third (220) were judged to be inadequate (HMIC, 2015). The inspection programme found that many child protection cases were not properly investigated; characterised by 'delay and drift'; and that many simple procedures were being missed (HMIC, 2015).

1.44 A number of studies highlight a central tension for the police when dealing with child protection matters. They note the challenge for police in aligning their role in substantiating evidence of maltreatment with the need to take protective action and respond to a child/young person's welfare needs (Children's Commissioner for England, 2015). While in principle these dual aspects of the police's role should be mutually reinforcing, there is evidence that, in practice, investigative needs may sometimes be prioritised above safeguarding. Current evidence from research with sexual abuse

victims, for example, suggests that attention to victims' welfare needs continues to fall short within investigative processes (Allnock, 2015a; CCE, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015).

- 1.45 For child protection cases to be policed effectively, safeguarding and welfare issues need to be identified early, thereby increasing the likelihood of the involvement of specialist teams, effective planning and subsequently improved responses (HMIC, 2015). Evidence suggests that in a majority of cases, early assessments of children and young people's needs are not taking place (CJJI, 2014).
- 1.46 Another key component of good practice in child protection policing is the presence of effective multi-agency working (HMGov, 2015). Specifically, relationships with other agencies support the police to ensure that the welfare needs of victims and witnesses are adequately addressed alongside investigative needs.
- 1.47 Where child victim and witness welfare needs are effectively identified and addressed, the evidence observes a relationship with improved investigative outcomes (Allnock, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Hershkowitz, 2011; Malloy et al., 2011; MoJ, 2011).
- 1.48 Key components of good practice in supporting child victims' welfare needs are identified as including the following:
 - treating children with compassion, empathy and respect
 - timely and effective communication between the police, and their families and supporters
 - facilitating opportunities for children's views to be heard and inform decision-making, and
 - supporting children to maintain a sense of control (Allnock, 2015a; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2014).

ABE interviews

- 1.49 Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews are widely cited to be particularly stressful and significant aspects of children and young people's experiences of police responses to safeguarding concerns. They are variously described by children as 'intimidating', 'embarrassing', 'awkward' and 'scary' among other things (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; CJJI, 2014; Hayes and Bunting, 2013; Smith and Milne, 2011; Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009).
- 1.50 A recent inspection report examining the police's adherence to ABE guidance identified poor levels of compliance (CJJI, 2014). Many of the shortcomings identified directly relate to concerns raised by children, young people and practitioners elsewhere in research (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; CCE, 2015; Bunting, 2011; Hershkowitz 2011; Smith et al 2011; Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009; Robinson 2008a, 2008b). These include:
 - poor rapport building at the outset of interviews
 - poor explanations of the purpose and process for interview
 - the lack of child-friendly spaces for interviews
 - a failure to consider the impact of the gender of the interviewer
 - insufficiently skilled interviewers
 - a lack of support within the interview (including the low use of intermediaries)
 - unnecessarily long questioning

- examples where children are left alone in the interview room as police leave the room to check something with colleagues
- unwarranted and unnecessary interruptions
- a failure to go at an appropriate pace for the interviewee, and
- a lack of discussion with children about their choice to participate in an ABE (CJJI, 2014).

1.51 The best examples of ABE practice were identified in police forces which had a 'centralised and specialised model for the management of child protection' (CJJI, 2014). Wider improvements to practice were noted to require:

- better planning at the outset
- improved supervision of interviewers, and
- better quality assurance of the recording (CJJI, 2014).

1.52 Furthermore, alongside shortcomings with ABE interviews, there is noted to be limited use of special measures more widely. Early discussions between the police and Crown Prosecution Service to facilitate their use are generally found to be lacking (CJJI, 2014).

Case progression and attrition

1.53 Available evidence suggests that more cases of child sexual abuse than ever before are proceeding to court although the rate of prosecution is falling (Allnock, 2015a; CPS, 2015). Equivalent evidence on other child maltreatment cases was not available.

1.54 The period prior to children and young people attending court as victims or witnesses in safeguarding cases is noted to be a particularly stressful one with the potential for significant negative impacts on children's emotional wellbeing (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009). Relevant research highlights the need for improved support to help children prepare for court and regular communication throughout this period.

1.55 Both the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2014) and HMIC child protection inspection reports (2015) repeatedly note problems in communication between the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the police resulting in delays to prosecutions and problems with evidence.

1.56 Decision-making processes between the police, CPS and courts, and delays within these processes, can also contribute to case attrition (Allnock, 2015a). Cases of sexual offences present the greatest likelihood of delays given their complexity. In an international literature review, multiple delays are identified as a key factor associated with increased negative outcomes for child victims involved in legal processes (Quas, and Sumaroka's, 2011).

1.57 In one study by Hohl and Stanko (2015), attrition was found to be significantly lower in cases of CSA investigated by specialist officers through a Child Protection Unit (CPU). This same study revealed that attrition due to police actions ('no criming' decisions) increased in cases where (among other things) victims had additional vulnerabilities such as mental health problems or learning disabilities or the victim was over 13 years (cited in Allnock, 2015a).

Children and young people's views of supportive professional behaviours

- 1.58 Cossar et al. (2013) explored key characteristics of helping professionals involved in safeguarding (including the police) that are valued by children. They noted that children tend to confer trust on individuals rather than services based on assessments of a number of key professional qualities and their effectiveness. The key qualities identified from the literature that promoted children's trust include:
- an ability to listen
 - being welcoming and friendly
 - being caring and understanding
 - not being dismissive or patronising or likely to trivialise a child's concerns
 - being non-judgmental and respecting the child's views
 - having time to build a trusting relationship
 - being competent, experienced and qualified; and
 - treating the young person as an individual.¹⁰
- 1.59 A comparable list of service characteristics identified in the same review note that children value: confidentiality; opportunities to be seen alone and in private; being given sufficient time, and not feeling rushed; a reliable service with punctual professionals; consistency of personnel; being given a choice of who to see (including the gender of professionals); professionals who respond and take action relating to what children say; creation of a sense of safety; provision of good advice and information; and being offered choices and influence in decision making (Cossar et al, 2013).
- 1.60 Finally, it should be noted that a key message to emerge from a range of research addressing safeguarding practice is the value of eliciting children and young people's perspectives directly – both in relation to their own experiences and reflections on how processes should be developed and improved. This work notes that children and young people, as key stakeholders, have a unique and vital contribution to make to applied research and practice development in this field, observing that a failure to consider these perspectives significantly restricts our capacity to effectively safeguard and respond (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Berelowitz et al., 2013; Cossar, 2013; and Thomas, 2009).

Report structure

- 1.61 Having outlined the context, approach and conduct of the study, chapter two considers children and young people's propensity to seek and accept support from the police in circumstances where their safety is comprised. Chapters three to six explore participants' experiences of police responses to concerns about their safety or wellbeing, identifying a series of factors that children and young people identified as core to safe and effective policing practice within this field (chapter three) and considering their specific application with reference to the investigation of safeguarding related crimes (chapter four) and responses to going missing (chapter five). Chapter six reflects on the implications of the variability of experience outlined in the previous chapters, together with examples of professional misconduct, in terms of the concept of police accountability and children and young people's

¹⁰ Lists adapted from Cossar et al. (2013).

propensity to access complaints procedures where standards of engagement fall below that which would be expected. Given the specific remit of the research to elicit and report on the self-reported experiences of children and young people, all these findings chapters give pre-eminence to the presentation of their experiences in their own words. The report concludes with a short reflective discussion on the core learning emerging from the study and the implications of this for policing practice and inspection of the same.

A note to the reader

- 1.62 The findings of this research begin to address an identified gap within the literature and offer critical insights into children and young people's perspectives on police engagement where there are concerns about their safety or wellbeing. There are, however, a number of critical points that the reader should bear in mind when considering the commentary presented within the report and the wider applicability of the findings. Firstly, whilst attempts were made to embed diversity within the research sample, it is not – nor can it be given its limited scale – a representative sample of the wider population. Secondly, the qualitative nature of interviews yields rich insights into participants' experiences and perspectives but does not easily lend itself to quantification. Relatedly, the choice to maximise participant control over what topics they discussed, and what information they shared, means that variable levels of data were collated on different aspects of the study and this is reflected in the report.
- 1.63 The authors also recognise that the report is produced in a climate of change and development, in which some of the issues raised in the report are beginning to be addressed. These shortcomings in the system will not, however, be quickly or easily remedied. Nor will they be effectively addressed without engaging children and young people in solution-generation. The prioritisation of children and young people's experience-based observations and recommendations within this report offers a useful contribution in this regard. Similarly the process learning from the study offers a useful template for future engagement with children and young people around these issues.

2. PROPENSITY TO SEEK AND ACCEPT POLICE PROTECTION

Key messages

- The majority of participants recognised the contribution police could make in terms of ensuring a child or young person's safety and pursuing perpetrators. The vast majority, however, would not directly approach the police for such support unless in immediate danger, preferring to have this access mediated through an individual they already knew.
- Characteristics such as approachability, trustworthiness, empathy and respect were identified as influencing a child or young person's propensity to seek support around safety or wellbeing concerns, but few participants associated these traits with the police. Indeed, fear of the police was a strong theme for almost half the research sample.
- Unsurprisingly, children and young people's propensity to seek – and accept – help from the police is clearly linked to how positively – or not – they view their existing experiences of police engagement, or indeed those of family or friends.
- Reflecting on this, the majority of participants expressed a belief that the police, as a whole, have a bias against youth and do not treat children and young people fairly. Some groups of children and young people were observed to be treated even less fairly than others on the basis of factors such as race, gender and previous engagement with the police.
- These perceptions hold clear implications for children and young people's propensity to seek or accept police help when their safety or wellbeing is compromised. This in turn holds clear implications for police's ability to safeguard children and young people and investigate associated crimes.

- 2.1 As a means of gradual introduction, the interview element of the research commenced with a general discussion about who children and young people would approach for help if their safety or wellbeing was compromised. These discussions elicited pertinent information about (a) children and young people's propensity to seek and accept help from the police; (b) the circumstances in which – and ways in which – they might do this; and (c) the extent to which existing perceptions of, and/or encounters with, the police act as enablers or barriers to accessing police support in protective contexts.

Seeking help from the police

- 2.2 Although approximately one-quarter of interviewees indicated that they would not approach the police for help in any circumstances (generally attributing this to the impact of previous negative experiences), the majority recognised that there were certain circumstances when it would be appropriate or necessary to engage with the police for protective reasons. The two main motivators for this identified by interviewees were to ensure a child or young person's safety (with particular reference to being in immediate danger) and, relatedly, to have perpetrators arrested:

"If it's needed. Like, say like, if you're getting beaten up like really badly, you might need to get the police involved...The police are here to help people that really need their help...to keep us safe" (I24, 12 year old male)

"If they're getting threatened or they have been abused online and stuff then you have to tell the police [R: and what would police do?] Stop the incident and then the person like who's threatening you would get arrested and then obviously they're not threatening you no more" (I8, 14 year old female)

"They're there to make people safe...put the offenders behind bars" (I2, 16 year old male)

"Even when I'm with my mum sometimes I don't feel safe...but the police have all their equipment and stuff...they have the Taser and cuffs and they're able to arrest someone, and they have the ability to arrest someone" (I9, 11 year old female)

"It depends on the situation really, to go to the police or not. If it is a high situation of danger or someone's going to get hurt or something, then definitely go to the police, but if not then you can find other ways to solve it...When I had my problems I was straight up round the police because it all kicked off at home and I felt unsafe for myself and my mum. That's why I called the police" (I30, 19 year old male)

- 2.3 Whilst a minority of interviewees felt that police would be the first point of contact if they needed protective support – and would initiate this contact directly themselves – the majority indicated that unless it was a situation of immediate danger they would rather seek support from an individual who they already knew and trusted, and have this individual mediate contact with the police where required:

"It wouldn't be straight away like 'Hi police officer, can I tell you something?' It definitely wouldn't be like that. It would be like tell a friend, and a friend will tell them. Or tell a youth worker and the youth worker will tell them" (I23, 17 year old female)

- 2.4 The key individuals who interviewees identified as their preferred source of help when their safety or wellbeing was compromised were friends, family members, youth workers, project workers and teachers. Frequently cited reasons for why they would go to these individuals included trust, familiarity, approachability, confidentiality, care, empathy, understanding and respect.

- 2.5 Whilst discrete examples of the presence of such attributes in individual police officers were identified by interviewees (as explored in chapters three to five), these were clearly presented as exceptions, rather than the norm. Indeed the absence of these attributes – whether perceived or experience-based – was frequently cited as the reason why children and young people would not choose to seek help from the police except in, what they perceived to be, extreme circumstances:

"I don't really like the police so I prefer to avoid them as much as possible...They're just horrible people, some of them. I've experienced them and some of them are really horrible...I don't feel like I can trust the police and I know quite a lot of people don't trust them so we just try and avoid them as much as possible" (I7, 17 year old female)

"Because young people these days, they don't trust the police, they don't like the police...because they're always like, if something happens, then they're in your business" (I1, 16 year old female)

"Some young people think 'what's the police going to do? They're not going to help me, why would I go to them'" (I18, 16 year old female)

Impact of previous encounters

- 2.6 Interviewees' contributions strongly indicated that one's propensity to seek – and accept – help from the police in the future was clearly linked to how positively – or not – they viewed their existing experiences of police engagement, or indeed those of family or friends. Those children and young people who reflected positively on these experiences unsurprisingly expressed a greater confidence in the police, together with a greater propensity to approach them for help in the future and/or recommend that others do the same. The converse applied to those who held negative associations with their – or others' – encounters with police which, as illustrated in the participant data outlined in section 1.28, was more often the case than not for our research sample:

"I got in contact with the police straight after it happened and they was there for me right from the beginning, right up to the end, which it helped me all the way through. If I had any problems they told me to ring up straightaway and they'd sit there and talk to me all night, if I really had to. And if I didn't feel safe they'd come back and they'd help me out and then they'd go, so it did help me quite a lot...One of the things my dad's always said is, police are wrong...don't talk to them, don't let them help you and that's what I was getting drilled into my head. But ever since that happened I'm now thinking better of the police. I'm now thinking actually yeah they're there for some things, some things they could do a bit better, but most of it is good" (I19, 17 year old female)

"I think if they know that they're kept away from all the trouble or whatever they're going through, then I think it'll be better for them [to go to the police]. The police will reassure them that everything's going to be okay, they're not allowed near them, like there'll be things put in place for it not to happen again and things like that, they'll feel much safer and much more open to the police about their situation" (I16, 15 year old female)

"Some people might tell the police. I wouldn't [R: Why do you feel that way?] I just don't like them because when I was young, I've seen them arrest my dad, my mum, my auntie in front of me and everything, and I've seen them section my mum and everything, so I don't really like them. When I was in foster care they kept taking me back to placement and everything, when I kept running away, so I didn't really like it" (I11, 13 year old female)

"Cause some young people, they'll be in like a really horrible situation back at home or online or down town or wherever and ... and if they like they get police involved, the police don't always do anything...I know quite a few people who have like got the police involved and they aren't doing nothing...you kinda lose faith don't you? Like that's someone who's supposed to help you but they're not really doing that" (I6, 18 year old female)

- 2.7 Reflecting on existing engagements with the police, interviewees expressed particular concerns around unintended or unwanted consequences of police efforts to ensure their safety or wellbeing. These concerns were particularly pertinent in relation to the potential of a child or young person getting in trouble themselves and/or family disruption where harm occurred within the family environment:

"I think with my experience, I was a bit scared to go because you'd think you'd get in trouble for going there, rather than thinking about the good side of getting help" (I20, 18 year old female)

"Some people don't feel comfortable ringing the police about something like that, because they feel like if they get the police involved it'll make things worse" (I30, 19 year old male)

"The police just separate [families]. They go to social services and just split up families; that's all they do" (I17, 13 year old female)

"[Young people] sometimes feel a bit scared – because you never know with the police, they can get the wrong people. The police aren't always right. Down where I live the police took someone for something they didn't do" (I9, 11 year old female)

Fear of the police

- 2.8 Moving beyond discrete experience-informed perspectives, interviewees' discourse clearly indicated that more general perceptions of the police, developed through observation of their presentation or persona when out in the community, could act as an enabler or, more frequently, a barrier to seeking – and accepting – their help. A strong theme within this, for approximately half of the sample, was that of fear of the police:

"I think kids are more scared of the police now, not like think the police are there to keep them safe" (I5a,¹¹ 15 year old female)

"There was a lot of things which I did want to go to the police for, but I was just too scared" (I14, 16 year old female)

- 2.9 Although recognising that there were times when it would be beneficial for police to be in uniform and act authoritatively (and the sense of safety and validation this could offer in certain situations), interviewees' discourse strongly linked fear of, and resistance to, police engagement with their attitudinal and visual presentation, with specific reference to particular forms of uniform and the visibility of policing equipment:

"I know I don't like them because I am absolutely terrified of them, because of the big scary uniforms and stuff... you can see the batons; you can see the handcuffs...it's just scary... If a police officer came up to me in the street...and he wasn't in uniform I wouldn't mind talking to him. I wouldn't be scared of him but when a copper comes up to you in the massive padded vest like walking like that you're like 'oh, what have I done' and that is the first thing that enters your head and it's just scary...I understand that they need protection and they need all the stuff but maybe if they're dealing with kids, if they don't look as scary...They are intimidating" (I4, 16 year old female)

"They could be a nice person under all that uniform, but when they've got the uniform on and they're standing there with handcuffs and shit, it's like, things just run through your head. You're thinking 'crap, they're coming for me' or 'they're gonna arrest me' or 'they're gonna hit me'. For me, it's gonna be like 'shit, escape plan, jump out the window'" (I15, 16 year old female)

11 There are two interviews (numbered I15 and I22) in which two participants chose to be interviewed together; 'a' and 'b' are used to distinguish between different participants' contributions.

"[I wouldn't go to police for help] because the police can like, are usually really like, I don't know - a lot of them act quite cocky innit especially because they think they've got the uniform on so they can do whatever they want in it. That's how they come across basically" (I12, 17 year old female)

- 2.10 Such fear or apprehension of the police, whilst obviously an issue requiring redress in and of itself, hold serious implications for children and young people's propensity to report experiences of harm and abuse to the police and engage in criminal justice processes around these. Conversely, positive experiences of police engagement in school or community environments were seen as enablers to seeking police help in circumstances of compromised safety or wellbeing and a number of interviewees specifically recommended greater investment in these:

"For young people, maybe educating them in school about the police and even if you have done something wrong, they're still there to help you, no matter what, that's their job" (I18, 16 year old female)

"There's young people out there that aren't even raising their voice because they're scared, because they don't know who to turn to... You need to have a few liaison officers – that is there like in between the police and young people – that will go into schools, go into youth groups" (I23, 17 year old female)

"[I'm in] a behaviour school so I'd have thought police would have been there more times to come and see the kids...but they haven't...so I don't know the local police officer. So if there is trouble in school, I can't really go tell them cause I don't know them... They should go round schools and then talk about internet safety, safety on the streets and stuff like that" (I8, 14 year old female)

"They should communicate with like different people in the community...and make them feel like they can respect the police and talk to them" (I2, 16 year old male)

Equality of treatment

- 2.11 Core to young people's discourse about the need for improved engagement with the police was the need for this to be premised on fair and equal treatment. Despite the fact that police practice is underpinned by a stated commitment to equality and fair treatment, the majority of children and young people who participated in this research articulated a belief that police, as a whole, do not treat children and young people fairly.
- 2.12 Three-quarters of interviewees discussed the issue of fair treatment by the police. The majority of these individuals stated that they did not believe the police treated young people fairly. The remainder were equally split between believing that police did treat young people well, and a 'sometimes they do, sometimes they don't' opinion. These interviewees who expressed positive or mixed opinions – and indeed some who expressed an overall opinion of discriminatory treatment – reflected that this could vary according to the individual police officer and the particular circumstances of the interaction:

"Sometimes they do but then others, it's in different situations and depending on what police officer it is" (I9, 11 year old female)

- 2.13 Two key elements of unfair treatment were elucidated within commentary on this issue: a general bias against youth and, for some young people, additional biases based on their demographic profile, presentation and/or background. Considering first the concept of a general bias against youth, the majority of both interviewees and survey respondents indicated a belief that police responses to them and their peers were, to some degree, influenced by negative perceptions of youth that framed them as immature, troublesome, disruptive and/or a nuisance. Although not explicitly articulated as such, the commentary that participants offered on this topic indicated that perceptions of deviancy were an issue of particular pertinence to adolescence, as opposed to younger children:

"Some of them just have like grudges against young people, like, I don't know how to explain it...[they think] that we're all criminals" (I2, 16 year old male)

"I think if they saw like a gang with like all tracksuits and hoods up and stuff, I think they'd see them more as being naughty than like a bunch of other people just sitting in a park playing or something" (I8, 14 year old female)

"Because if young people get in trouble with the police, it's a stereotype, adults are like 'oh, they go out and get work, they get money', then young people just don't go school, always get in trouble with the police, run away, stuff like that, it's just ... yeah" (I17, 13 year old female)

- 2.14 Alongside these concerns about negative attitudes towards young people were concerns about a tendency to disbelieve, or minimise the seriousness of, children and young people's perspectives. One female interviewee, for example, described a scenario in which, aged 16, she reported safeguarding concerns about her younger sister's contact with individuals via the internet to the police, receiving the response *"do you understand the seriousness of what you're alleging"* (I25, 18 year old female). She explained to the researcher that her experience led her to conclude that police took concerns raised by young people less seriously than those raised by adults.¹² This was a sentiment that was also raised by other participants who made direct links between these perceptions and experiences and children and young people's likelihood of reporting safeguarding concerns to the police:

"Because of our age it is highly unlikely that an adult police officer will listen to what we have to say when we are children" (S8, 18 year old female)

"[They] take the adult's point of view rather than the child's...[therefore] not likely to talk to the police" (I26, 15 year old female)

"Like you don't really want to tell them anything because you know that they're just going to judge you so that's why most things don't get reported or most people don't speak to the police when they need to because it's the fear of being judged" (I7, 17 year old male)

- 2.15 Further to these perceptions of a general bias against youth, both survey respondents and interviewees identified a number of other perceived biases that led them to conclude that certain children and young people experienced multiple forms of discrimination from police:

"Depending on the police officer they may treat people in minority groups regarding race/sexual orientation/gender identity/religion less well" (S11, 15 year old female)

¹² As this young person preferred not to be audio-recorded, the commentary on this cannot be provided as a direct quote.

"Yeah, they prejudge about how you're going to act...And they don't know who we are, so they shouldn't judge us at all" (I22b, 17 year old male)

- 2.16 Interviewees and survey respondents identified a range of factors that they felt negatively influenced police perceptions of children and young people and thus potentially reduced the likelihood of them recognising and responding to the vulnerability of those individuals. This included the equality categories of race and gender:

"People with gypsy heritage and people who have been in trouble with the police before. They assume we are bad" (S12, 17 year old female)

"Me and my mate got arrested and my mate was like black and even like she saw like they were treating me different because like, like they handcuffed me but they handcuffed me at the front with my handcuffs all loose and with her they just pushed her onto the floor and handcuffed her from the back" (I11, 13 year old female)

"It is how they treat two genders as well, they treat girls differently to boys which is really clear to see...Girls, they'll be 'Well you shouldn't really do this. Is it because you're with the wrong people? Is it because you're with your boyfriend?' or whatever. So they try to help girls more than boys. But with boys they're like 'You shouldn't be doing this. You need to go home now, we're taking you home'. They don't try to help them, they don't try to figure out why they're doing this" (I21, 15 year old female)

- 2.17 Young people's presentation and behaviour were also identified as factors that could influence how fairly they would be treated by the police:

"Say if people opt for like joggers and stuff like that, and police like, I don't know they just think they're criminals" (I2, 16 year old male)

"I think if they saw like a gang with like all tracksuits and hoods up and stuff, I think they'd see them more as being naughty than like a bunch of other people" (I8, 14 year old female)

"If they look mature they would see their point of view, but if not they won't take you seriously" (I26, 15 year old female)

- 2.18 However, the factor participants most frequently identified as reducing children and young people's likelihood of receiving 'fair' treatment was prior experience of police contact (with them or their families) or in one young person's words having a 'reputation'. This included not only offending behaviour, but also external indicators of vulnerability that had brought them into repeated contact with the police, such as experiences of exploitation or repeat missing episodes. Participants observed that there was a greater likelihood of vulnerability being overlooked for such children and young people who were perceived to be 'bad' or 'time-wasting':

"They judge and treat people differently to people who they think are gonna be bad" (S6, 17 year old female)

"They assume things, and judge you by your past and your family...[police need to] not judge young people by their past or their family, for example if there last names familiar, and they make a comment about it" (S5, 15 year old female)

"It depends, if you have a bad reputation the police wouldn't believe you. If you have a good reputation, obviously if you're not really known to the police then they'll be like, 'Yeah well...' ...So for example if you're known to the police as 'that stupid young boy who's always getting arrested, and always messing about, never went to school, bunking off school. Always getting drunk and getting into fights', then that is... Then police won't believe you, whether you say in your interview... Say if you had an actual problem at home, they wouldn't really listen... honestly I just think it's a bit stupid, because just say if that person is getting in trouble that's only because their home life isn't really good, there's a reason why they're getting in trouble, and the police don't really look into that" (I23, 17 year old female)

- 2.19 These perceptions of inequality hold clear implications for children and young people's propensity to seek or accept police help when their safety or wellbeing is compromised:

"Like a few boys that I know, I know that if they had a problem the last people they would go to is the police. They would never go to the police for anything, only because yeah they're troublemakers, they're known to the police for bad things...and they think the police think bad of them and they're not going to bother...and that's why I think most young people don't go to the police" (I23, 17 year old female)

- 2.20 This in turn holds clear implications for police's ability to safeguard children and young people and investigate associated crimes. Fair treatment, on the other hand, was observed to build confidence in policing, increase likelihood of crime reporting and contribute to both better protection of children and young people and enhanced prosecutorial opportunities.

3. PRINCIPLES OF SAFE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Key messages

- One of the most striking observations about participants' reflections on police engagement with safety and wellbeing concerns was the variability of these experiences. This included not only variability between forces, but also variability within forces, even within the same child or young person's encounter with that force.
- A child or young person's levels of (dis)satisfaction with their engagements with police will inevitably be influenced by their own biography and the contextual circumstances of their engagement. However they are also strongly influenced by the behaviour and approach of the individual officers with whom they engage.
- Reflecting on their variable experiences with different officers, participants identified eight principles of practice that maximised their sense of safety and wellbeing and their willingness to engage in police safeguarding processes. These were:
 - Demonstrating empathy and compassion;
 - Respectful and non-judgmental practice;
 - Effectively eliciting and responding to children and young people's accounts;
 - Conveying information to children and young people in a timely and appropriate manner;
 - Due consideration to confidentiality and discretion;
 - Maximising continuity of engagement;
 - Considering children and young people's support needs; and
 - Facilitating choice and control.
- These principles of practice need to be consistently adhered to and demonstrated by all police personnel, at all stages of children and young people's engagement with them. Failure to uphold these principles at any stage of the process holds serious implications for children and young people's propensity to engage with the police, not only in relation to that present set of circumstances but also in relation to future issues of concern.

- 3.1 One of the most striking observations about participants' reflections on police engagement with safety and wellbeing concerns was the variability of these experiences. This included not only variability between forces, but also variability within forces, even within the same child or young person's encounter with that force.
- 3.2 At one extreme, a minority of participants' reflections on police responses to concerns about their safety or wellbeing included strongly positive discourse on enhanced safety and empathetic and respectful practice, encouragingly noting that they could not have wished for more from their engagement with the police:

"I had a good experience with the police, they helped me so much and I couldn't have asked for a better experience of them...they helped me, they got me involved with [specialist voluntary sector project worker] so they were like giving me support, they just kept on keeping

me updated with everything that's happening, I don't know, they were just really good" (I16, 15 year old female)

"The police do an excellent job in keeping young people safe. They helped me find a safe place to stay and without them I never would have been here now. They have helped me understand that what happened was not my fault and that I was not to blame" (S1, 17 year old female)

"I thought [name] from CSE team was very good at her job and wanted to thank her for all the help I was given in my situation"¹³ (S7, 17 year old female)

- 3.3 At the other extreme were examples of professional misconduct or abusive practice that actually undermined the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, as explored in chapter six. Somewhere in between lay the experiences of the majority of respondents; positive in some regards and negative in others, unfortunately with a greater weighting towards the latter in the majority of experiences.
- 3.4 A child or young person's levels of (dis)satisfaction with their engagements with police will inevitably be influenced by their own biography and the contextual circumstances of their engagement. This includes existing perceptions and experiences of the police, openness to their intervention (recognising that some police safeguarding interventions are actively sought by children and young people whilst others are imposed upon them by the police or other third parties), their emotional state at the time of engagement and the influences of other key players in their lives.
- 3.5 However, analysis of participant contributions demonstrates that a relationship exists between the individual practice of the officers with whom participants engaged and participants' subsequent levels of (dis)satisfaction. This relationship explains the coexistence of positive and negative reflections within participants' narratives on engagement(s) that involved interaction with different officers:
- "Because of the way he was with me, we were having a laugh, he were like asking where I were and all this, we were having a laugh and joke, getting along. Whereas another time, there were these women police officers, they've obviously been out all night looking for me and...they picked me up, I were just like two minutes away from me house and they asked me to get in police car, so I was sat in police car...I didn't like the way she talked to me. They were like 'we've been out all night looking for you' all this and that. So I'm just like 'whatever' because I just didn't like the way she talked to me" (I1, 16 year old female)*
- "Depends, 'cause there can be officers that are nice but they can be really shitty with you, more than half are really shitty... The nicer officers will like get you through the process quicker and they'll probably sit there and talk to you for a bit or they'll keep you updated or let you ring someone. The shitty ones, they tell you just to sit there and you'll be sitting there for hours and they'll be taking their time to do things, so they won't be doing it quickly" (I15, 16 year old female)*
- 3.6 Reflecting on participants' discourse across the breadth of their experiences, a number of common components could be identified, the presence or absence of which was clearly related to their levels of

¹³ Both survey quotes are taken from responses to an open text option at the end of the survey 'If there is anything else you would like to tell us before you finish, you can write it here'.

satisfaction, safety and engagement with individual officers and indeed the police as a whole. These were equally evident from narratives that praised the police and those that voiced frustration and dissatisfaction. Participants' narratives identified these components as cumulatively contributing to safe and effective policing practice that would more likely be positively experienced by children and young people.

- 3.7 Thematic analysis of the data suggests that although these principles may be realised differently, depending on the procedures with which children and young people engage, they are equally relevant across the range of different child protection and safeguarding issues that police respond to. Unsurprisingly, many of them resonate strongly with messages from existing research about children's broader experiences of safeguarding professionals and practice (Cossar et al., 2013).
- 3.8 These principles, identified by children and young people as maximising their sense of safety and wellbeing and their willingness to engage in police safeguarding processes, are as follows:
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion;
 - Respectful and non-judgmental practice;
 - Effective communication: eliciting and responding to children and young people's accounts;
 - Effective communication: conveying information to children and young people;
 - Due consideration to confidentiality and discretion;
 - Maximising continuity of engagement;
 - Considering children and young people's support needs; and
 - Facilitating choice and control.
- 3.9 The following sections provide examples from interviews and survey responses revealing the presence, absence, meaning and significance of these principles for children and young people who encounter the police for safeguarding purposes. This commentary is supplemented by that provided in chapters four and five, which expands this analysis and considers the specific application of these principles to children and young people's experiences of investigative processes related to safeguarding crimes (chapter four) and police responses to going missing (chapter five).
- 3.10 Whilst articulated distinctly for the purposes of exploration, in reality, these principles are mutually reinforcing and interdependent, as the quotes themselves demonstrate. Furthermore, while at times reflecting tensions between the seemingly contradictory functions of the police – to simultaneously respond to both welfare and investigative needs – overwhelmingly they highlight the reciprocal and mutually supportive nature of these needs.
- 3.11 Whilst not specifically articulated as such, what is clear from the variation of experience shared by the young people is the need for these principles of practice to be consistently adhered to and demonstrated by all police personnel, at all stages of children and young people's engagement with them. This spans general engagement with community and school-based police (which as demonstrated in chapter two, clearly influences propensity to seek or accept support in situations of compromised safety), the actions and attitudes of call handlers and response officers who most young people experience as a first point of contact, and those of investigative and victim support officers who will subsequently engage with them throughout the process. Failure to uphold these principles at any stage of the process holds serious implications for children and young people's propensity to engage with the police, not only in relation to that present set of circumstances but also in relation to future issues of concern.

Demonstrating empathy and compassion

3.12 Given that police engagement in children and young people's lives around safeguarding concerns only occurs where there is an identified vulnerability, risk and/or experience of harm, one cannot overestimate the significance of sensitivity and empathy in such circumstances. Whilst this is clearly critical in terms of victim welfare – an observation repeatedly highlighted by participants in this research – evidence also shows that identification of, and appropriate responses to, victim and witness vulnerability holds wider evidential and prosecutorial benefits (Allnock, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Hershkowitz, 2011; Malloy et al., 2011; MoJ, 2011). Unfortunately, however, both the contributions of participants within this research and the wider evidence base demonstrate inconsistent application of these traits.

3.13 Unsurprisingly, children and young people who participated in this research highly valued experiences where police words or actions conveyed understanding of their needs or vulnerabilities and demonstrated empathy or care:

"[She was] really polite and so calming and because I got really upset about it, she was just like cuddling me, telling me that it was all gonna be ok..." (I16, 15 year old female)

"She was actually really nice. She took her time to write everything and then she was like, I'm really sorry but I'm going to have to rush quickly...I think it was really helpful that she did stay, because it shows she cares about the person she was dealing with already, she didn't want to like leave and feel the person or patient or whatever... kind of rejected" (I29, 15 year old male)

"She was super kind...she got me chocolate sweets. She said if you get a bit too shy you can just leave and go back to class – because I was super shy then...she was different to the policeman because the policeman said 'please stay because we need you to help us'" (I28, 9 year old female)

[Q. What do the police do well in these situations?] 1. Worked quickly and organised 2. Very caring and helpful 3. Making sure I was safe and comfortable" (S7, 17 year old female)

3.14 Demonstrations of empathy identified by participants related to both the presence and absence of attitudes or actions. This included the absence of judgmental or dismissive attitudes (explored below) and the presence of verbal and physical demonstrations of respect, care and prioritisation of needs:

[Q. What do the police do well in these situations?] 1. aren't patronising, and don't make you feel like you've done something really bad, like committing a crime. 2. are nice and understanding 3. listen to what you say and take it into account" (S5, 15 year old female)

"They talk very softly and they show that they're being quite understanding to you" (I10, 11 year old female)

"Always listen to them never judge. Offer male and female officers. If they say they are going to do something do it. If they don't young people feel they are in trouble. They always make you feel you have done something wrong" (S9, 19 year old female)

3.15 The contribution of empathetic practice to 'calming' a situation and helping a young person engage with police efforts to try and protect them was noted by a number of participants, as illustrated by the reflections below:

"Because its calm and like they don't shout, then I'll get in the car...they'll wait for me to come down...I know PC [name] from up there and every time I'm at police station I'll have a talk to her because she's always in front, so I'll just talk to her about everything that... I don't even know. I think it's because she knows how to, she knows when I'm pissed off because obviously I've been brought to police station that many times and she knows if I'm angry and she'll bring me a hot chocolate or something in and she'll carry on talking to me try to calm me down and shit" (I3, 13 year old female)

"And, then I kind of like I don't know, I went a bit crazy and then the police came and one of this police woman she was like actually quite nice to me. Like she was just trying to like, I don't know she could kind of empathise because she was saying...I know what it's like when you get, when one minute you can be like really, really happy and the next minute you can be really like unhappy whatever and you know why...and I don't know, she was like trying to relate to me. It was nice that like she was trying to like empathise thing, and then she was like, she was kind of like persuading me to go into hospital and stuff, because obviously I'd like cut myself and everything and I was quite, I was in a bad state basically and to be honest I don't, I wouldn't have gone to hospital if she hadn't convinced me really....That was like the only one good experience I had, because I'm not going to lie, I went pretty mental that night, so I expected them to be all up in my face and angry with me and everything and treat me like a criminal again, but she was actually quite nice to me....It was surprising, yeah and I felt like, more police officers need to be like that do you know what I'm saying?" (I12, 17 year old female)

- 3.16 Beyond the immediate benefits for the child or young person in that situation and the contribution it could make to their subsequent engagement in investigations about their case, the presence of empathetic practice was observed to play an important role in offsetting prior negative perceptions or experiences of the police:

"Yeah, like just to show that they do care and they're not always there just for you to get told off" (I8, 14 year old female)

"Yeah, [I had good support] when I was in police protection like that man, like he...Like it feels nice to have like a person around you and I thought, 'Oh great, I'm stuck in a police station with loads of police' but when I met him he was like, it was like he wasn't a police officer to me, like a good experience that I had and how nice he was being. It was like he wasn't a police officer to me" (I10, 11 year old female)

- 3.17 This is critical given the impact that the absence of empathetic and victim-centred practice can have on children and young people, as illustrated by the quotes below. They illustrate that it can leave children and young people feeling devalued, undermined and disinclined to further engage either in that instance or in future circumstances of compromised safety:

"The [second] woman, I mostly saw her at home only. She didn't really speak to me, she mostly just spoke to my mum. When I tried to show her a portrait that I did all by myself she didn't give me any attention" (I28, 9 year old female)

"Then you've got the other police officers who just want to get on with their job, who make it sound like your problem is petty and stupid. They will say... 'you've got this going on but there

is other bigger things going on in the world, it's not all about you' ... I just think that's really rude, I think that's really harsh" (I23, 17 year old female)

"I just would have liked to think that they was trying harder. I know they get, they have like a lot of cases to deal with, so they're probably really busy or whatever, but at the end of the day, the way they go about it, it does make you feel like you're just another case, you're just job basically, you're not a person to them. They don't really care about you, you're just a job that they need to do and then if they can't do it, then that's tough on you" (I12, 17 year old female)

- 3.18 Children and young people's requests for further demonstrations of empathy included a call for police to consider their previous experience when planning the management of a case and allocating officers to this. Given the complex needs and poly-victimisation of many of the children and young people police are engaging with in such circumstances, such considerations may be critical:

"Like if you have a background with the police they should think about your background, like they always have it on file when you go missing...like if it's a certain background then maybe you need a female police officer or a male police officer. They need to think about things like that." (I7, 17 year old female)

Respectful and non-judgmental practice

"It's just about the respect really" (I2, 16 year old male)

- 3.19 Alongside the need for empathetic and caring responses from police officers, children and young people highlighted the need for respectful and non-judgmental practice that did not dismiss or devalue children and young people's perspectives, nor treat them in an inferior manner, because of their age:

"They treat adults with respect and they'll talk to them nicely and things like that, whereas kids, they're like, 'Oh whatever, you're just a child'" (I7, 17 year old female)

"I think it's how they present themselves and how they talk to people, not looking down at them, thinking you're just a teenager who has been in trouble or who has issues or whatever. It's like, you need to be on the same page as them, you need to talk to them with respect as well...[R: What does that look like?] Just not talking down to them and just respecting what they say and what their wishes are. If they say, I don't want to do this, then say right okay then we don't have to do this, or whatever. Which not in my experience, but in other people's experience, they have. It's just being on the same page as somebody and not shouting at them as well or being ignorant in what you say...Obviously you want them to be respectful, you want them to talk to you on the same wavelength, you don't want them talking down to you or feel like they're telling you off or anything. You don't want that" (I21, 15 year old female)

- 3.20 Participants reflected on how respect could be demonstrated through a number of different means: words, body language, active listening, facilitating the contribution of a child or young person's perspective and demonstrating concern for their welfare. Unsurprisingly, dismissing or devaluing children and young people's opinions, not affording them the right to have a say, or deferring to parents and carers over them were perceived as demonstrations of disrespect. Such actions decreased their propensity to cooperate and increased the likelihood of reactive responses that, in some circumstances, can result in offending behaviour:

"It's like, you want me to tell you something and then you sit there talking to me like a piece of shit. I'm not going to tell you ought if you're sitting there talking to me like a piece of shit am I?" (I3, 13 year old female)

"They just have no respect, like, they're the sort of people that demand the respect but don't give it. The way I see it is if they're going to respect me then I'll respect them but if they're going to be rude to me I'll be rude back, like it's just the way life is really. You can't demand respect but not give respect back...It just feels like they're judging you all the time, like you don't really want to tell them anything because you know that they're just going to judge you so that's why most things don't get reported or most people don't speak to the police when they need to because it's the fear of being judged" (I7, 17 year old female)

"I've had some experiences where they've come in and I've had problems with my mum, and they wouldn't listen to me, I was just crying and then they'd listen to my mum and then they tell me off for being rude to my mum and then they'd leave" (I29, 15 year old male)

- 3.21 The infantilising of older children was an issue of particular concern for older participants in the research:

"Being treated like a baby...[makes you] angry, you know you've grown up, you want the police to take you seriously and get to know you...build trust" (I26, 15 year old female)

"Do not patronise young people we are not deaf and dumb" (S9, 19 year old female)

- 3.22 The differential treatment of children and young people according to judgments based on their gender, ethnicity or history with the police, previously highlighted in chapter two, was also observed in descriptions of participants' current experiences of police responses to safeguarding concerns. Reflecting on this, they noted how prejudging a child or young person could result in them receiving less care or attention than someone with a different profile or 'reputation' might be afforded. Participants made a strong plea for police responses to situations of compromised safety to be based on an unbiased consideration of the needs of the child and not ungrounded assumptions about their vulnerability or lack thereof. As one survey respondent neatly concludes: *"they need to ignore stereotypes and focus on the welfare of the child"* (S8, 18 year old female).

Effective communication: eliciting and responding to children and young people's accounts

- 3.23 Descriptions of positive or supportive experiences of contact with the police around safeguarding issues were frequently associated with effective and regular communication, with an absence of the same clearly linked with more negative experiences. Effective communication was noted to include two important dimensions: actively facilitating and listening to the perspectives and accounts of children and young people and, as explored in the next section, conveying information back to them in a clear and timely manner.
- 3.24 Considering first the concept of elicitation of accounts and responses to these, participants' discourse around this was closely related to that around respectful and empathetic practice, as explored above. It was clear from their accounts that participants identified a link between police personnel's recognition (or lack thereof) of the validity and importance of children and young people's perspectives and the likelihood of them sensitively eliciting and responding to these accounts. Unfortunately, for

many participants, their experiences reflected a perceived absence of both of these interconnected factors:

"I felt I should be seen and not heard. I was talked to not with" (S9, 19 year old female)

"Police don't believe young people...[this is] frustrating [and] makes me feel small because police are not hearing their [the young person's] point of view" (I26, 15 year old female)

"[Top three things that the police should change] Police need to hear the young person. Get two sides of the story and find out what the problem is. Make sure the young person feels they are listened to" (I26, 15 year old female)

- 3.25 More positively, other participants shared experiences where they felt that they had been heard and where their contributions had informed the decisions that were made by professionals about them. Verbal acknowledgements of their contributions, 'taking time' to listen and attempts by the police to actively respond to needs that children and young people had raised were all identified as important signifiers that made participants 'feel valued' and more inclined to remain engaged with the police and any associated investigative processes:

"You've got your police officers that are nice, that will listen to you and will actually hear you out and hear what you have to say and try and do as best they can" (I23, 17 year old female)

"[It was a] good experience because they wanted to know everything that happened and I felt that was, like, nice because at least... they wanted to help and listen. It's a nice feeling, like at least someone wants to help" (I14, 16 year old female)

"Yes, they're good, their response is, like what I mean, they come, sometimes in my experiences some of them they're really good, they're really kind, they listen to you, they sort everything out and they make sure everything is out before they leave." (I29, 15 year old male)

"They let you talk and say what you want when you're with them and just let you talk, say what you want and just talk to someone when you want to. And they listen to you [R: And why is that important?] Because then you feel like you've got someone who does listen to you and you feel ... more confident to talk to someone 'cause you've got someone to listen, it makes you feel a lot better" (I10, 11 year old female)

Effective communication: conveying information to children and young people

- 3.26 Alongside the elicitation and listening skills described above, the other key communication skills which children and young people highlighted related to the ways in which the police conveyed information to them. Interviewees and survey respondents emphasised a need for information that was underpinned by three core principles:

- **clarity:** provided in appropriate and meaningful ways, supporting children and young people to understand the (often complex) safeguarding processes with which they were engaged
- **timeliness:** enabling children and young people to maintain up-to-date knowledge of any ongoing processes that initial police contact catalyzed, and
- **directly communicated:** unless specifically requested, not mediated through parents/carers or other third parties.

3.27 Core elements that they felt this needed to include were:

- Procedural explanations
- Information about their rights, and
- Signposting to additional support.

3.28 Participants reflected on the complex nature of what happens when police get involved in their lives about safety or wellbeing concerns and the variable levels of clarity and detail with which these processes are explained. They similarly reflected on the need to recognise the potentially limited ability of children and young people to comprehend and process this information when in a state of distress, as is often the case in both their initial contact with police and their subsequent engagement in evidential processes. They highlighted the consequent potential for misunderstanding and confusion around the processes in which they had become involved and the associated importance of clarity and repetition of messaging to both increase understanding and manage expectations around this:

"In some situations they don't explain it enough. So it goes in one ear and out the other, sometimes. But it just depends...If they just... what's the word... explain it a bit more, about how it all works and not just be like, right this is happening" (I18, 16 year old female)

"[R: You said to me that mummy told you a lot of things. Did the police explain or try to explain anything to you?] They [the police] didn't explain anything to me" (I27 7 year old female)

"It wasn't clear, like I was just confused. I was thinking, 'Wait, the receptionist said after the statement you're going to arrest him so why aren't you doing it?'...Oh, I felt quite, how do I say it? I felt, ... I trusted them, basically...The whole reason she said she was going to arrest him is to keep me safe and then the [police officer] is saying, 'If you see him around' - so how am I going to be safe because if he does see me then he'll probably attack me or something?" (I14, 16 year old female)

"I think it is important for young people to be told about what is going to happen as it is going to be happening to them. The young people should always understand what is going on" (S10, 17 year old female)

3.29 Although participants' discourse around explanations of processes and rights was predominantly focused on shortcomings in this regard, the minority of positive examples that were shared noted good communication to both enhance a sense of feeling cared for and go some way to countering the well-documented loss of control that many children and young people associate with engagement with safeguarding professionals (Beckett and Warrington 2014; Allnock et al 2013; Cossar et al 2013). Similarly, several young people highlighted communication skills as critical when describing the difference between a supportive and a non-supportive officer:

"The supportive people are definitely better at explaining and asking if you have any questions about it, and answering your questions. Whereas the intimidating people, they just want to get on and get way and move on to the next job. When I've run away, the supportive people stay there for quite a long time and actually talk to you, but the other people, they get in, tell you off and leave. They just want to get on with their job, which is fine, do your job, but not like that" (I18, 16 year old female)

"I don't really know, like I don't know of anyone that's actually had proper support from the police. It's always been from other agencies so I don't know. At least they keep you up to date on things, I guess that's kind of supportive but apart from that I don't really know of anyone that's ever really been supported by the police"(I7, 17 year old female)

What effective communication looks like in practice

- 3.30 Although there was a clear consensus among interviewees and survey respondents about the importance of the police communicating effectively with them, there was some variance in how they felt this should best be operationalised. A number of interviewees explicitly noted the value of face-to-face contact, while others in both interviews and the survey highlighted the equal value of phone, email or letter contact. In two cases, respondents additionally noted the value of mediating communication through a third party worker with whom they had an existing trusting relationship. For one young woman, this was noted to reduce the stigma she associated with the police attending her home and enable more effective communication as a result of this:

"Well I don't know, I didn't see him [police officer] as much because basically I didn't like talking to them [police], I'd rather come and talk to S [my project worker] and S could pass it on because I'm more comfortable doing it that way instead of having a police officer in my house because everyone gossips" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 3.31 Regardless of which channels of communication were favoured by participants, the value of the police prioritising proactive, regular, timely and confidential contact was deemed essential to good practice.
- 3.32 There were varying opinions among participants about whether parents or carers should be kept informed about children's contact and ongoing involvement with the police regarding safeguarding matters. Some expressed a clear desire for their parents or carers to be kept informed, some for information not to be shared with their parents and others expressed a contextually variable opinion around this. Whilst a small minority of younger participants or those with additional communication needs expressed a clear preference for their parent or carer to actually be the main point of contact for police, communication with parents or carers was clearly understood to be a supplement, rather than alternative to, communication with the child or young person themselves for the majority.
- 3.33 It is interesting in light of this to see that survey respondents felt the police communicated with their parents or carers much better than they did with them. Asked how well the police explain to young people what is going to happen when they get involved in their lives to try and protect them, three respondents answered 'very well' and eight answered 'badly'. Asked the same question of how well police communicate with their parents or carers around these matters, a very different pattern emerges with seven answering 'very well', three 'ok' and only one 'badly'. This message was reflected in interviewees' discourse which also highlighted a pattern of police prioritising communication with parents or carers over direct communication with the child or young person:

"Normally if it's like a young child or a teenager, they normally tend to tell the parents, and then it's up to the parents whether they tell - they feel it's necessary to tell...Just tell the young person instead of like the parents...And first instead...From about 14, because they're old enough to know what they're doing" (I2, 16 year old male)

"The main person they should be explaining it to is the person, the victim, because they should be understanding it more... I think it means more to the person that's actually reported

whatever's happened. That's the main person that needs to be, you know, clear with everything...It's like they can tell my mum what's going on but my mum might not understand properly and tell me something different and it can get misinterpreted" (I20, 18 year old female)

"Instead of talking to me they talked to my dad... I just thought 'It's my situation and it's about how I feel, not my dad'...It's me, I'm the one it actually happened to. [R: What if they'd spoke to you and your dad together?] That would have been a lot better than just my dad...because at the moment I don't know whether my parents or lying or what, I'm just clueless" (I14, 16 year old female)

- 3.34 As illustrated in these latter quotations, failure to communicate directly with children and young people both sidelines them within their own experience, it can also lead to misunderstanding about what is going on, as a result of parent/carer misunderstanding, selective sharing or misrepresentation.
- 3.35 There was an overall sense from across the data that in many cases the police underestimate the significance of timely, accurate and jargon-free communication in mitigating children and young people's anxiety and distress. Given the inevitable, though varied, vulnerability of children and young people in contact with the police about safeguarding concerns, understanding the importance of effective communication – both in terms of elicitation and information sharing – is critical.

Due consideration to confidentiality and discretion

- 3.36 A further issue identified by participants as core to positive police engagement – in particular, to their ability to trust police – was that of confidentiality, discretion and the appropriate management of personal information. Whilst most recognised and understood the need for limits to the confidentiality that could be offered by police – or indeed other professionals working with them – their perception was that these boundaries were not always as restrictive as they could have been, with many voicing a request that confidentiality only be breached on a 'need to know basis'.
- 3.37 Participants also identified a need for greater clarity and transparency about when and how, and with whom, information about their involvement with the police would be shared and a need to manage children and young people's expectations about what 'confidentiality' does (and does not) mean. Relatedly, they emphasised a need to ensure that what children and young people are told in this regard reflects what actually happens in practice:

"Because they tell you one thing and then they don't do it. Like this information will be kept confidential between who is on the case, and it's not that, everybody knows...With my first thing with the police...she knew about my past, about what had happened and what is going on at the minute. So obviously that wasn't kept between who was on the case...so they've lied and said everything will be kept confidential, but it clearly hasn't" (I21, 15 year old female)

"My friend had reported something against the same person, I didn't know and she [the police officer] told me that as well, so breaching confidentiality" (I7, 17 year old female)

- 3.38 A lack of confidence in police's ability to maintain appropriate boundaries of confidentiality and discretion was cited as a key reason why children and young people would be reluctant to go to the police for help when their safety was compromised. A number of participants cited fears about the police sharing information with other professionals such as social care and the potential

consequences of this on their family lives, particularly where professionals deemed risk to be present – or inadequately managed – within this environment.

- 3.39 Participants' discourse about confidentiality and discretion also highlighted a desire for greater consideration of the degree of privacy afforded to children and young people when engaging with the police in their homes, schools or community and the potential impacts of others being aware of these engagements:

"They usually speak to you when everyone is around... or they might say [to a parent] okay stay down here or whatever and then go upstairs but then obviously people will still be close enough to hear, do you know what I'm saying" (I12, 17 year old female)

"I think they could also just informally dress instead of wearing a, instead of making themselves noticeable 'cause like if a police officer comes into your college or school and they're dressed in uniform and they've come to get a young person to talk to and you've got your friends just stood there watching, they're gonna obviously want to know what's going on but if they're not dressed in uniform, they won't want to know as much because people can be quite nosy when police are involved" (I6, 18 year old female)

- 3.40 The particular sensitivity of information about children and young people's lives which the police were privy to, and its potential to expose them to stigma, shame and risk understandably heightened the importance of these issues in children and young people's minds and made it a very real barrier to seeking or accepting police support.

Maximising continuity of engagement

- 3.41 As documented above, children and young people expressed a significant need to feel as if police personnel view them as more than 'a case', care about their wellbeing and are actively working on their behalf. One of the ways that participants felt that this can be achieved is through consistency of personnel in ongoing contact with children and young people. Many participants spoke of the value of seeing the same police officer over time, observing how this supported the development of a trusting relationship and rapport building. This, in turn, was noted to increase the likelihood of children and young people sharing safeguarding concerns and seeking support from the police:

"So if you've got like one trust in, like the male police officer I had were like right nice, who I were having a laugh with, if he come every time then it'd be all right 'cause then...I'd probably just tell him stuff that needed to be said" (I1, 16 year old female)

"Maybe the same, they know what is going on in their life, to check up and like if it's a different person then they'd probably get a bit mixed up, the police officer wouldn't know everything because it would be a different one every time...If it's the same one, then they can get to know them more and then they feel more comfortable talking to them about things that are going on" (I10, 11 year old female)

"Definitely 'cause you're building like a trust, it's with anyone really, if you go to counselling, you don't want to see a different person every week 'cause you ain't gonna feel as comfortable, you're gonna start from square one all the time" (I6, 18 year old female)

- 3.42 Consistency of personnel, and the increasing trust and familiarity that this engendered, was also noted to enhance children and young people's confidence in the management of their personal information which, as noted above, was another issue of significance to participants in this research:

"This time with the police, because it's a different thing, they've been helpful and I've only ever seen two police officers about what's going on at the minute. At first I didn't trust them at all, I was like, I don't want to speak to you, don't want to come anywhere near you. Then I obviously done my statement or whatever and he says it is confidential and whatever. He just reassures me and if I ever go into the police station about something, I only see them two, I don't see nobody else. So then that reassures me that yes, it is confidential" (I21, 15 year old female)

- 3.43 Conversely, the impact of inconsistency of personnel was discussed not only in terms of the absence of these positives, but also in terms of the damaging and distancing impact it could have on a child or young person. As illustrated in the quotation below, personnel changes could leave a child or young person feeling abandoned and let down, at a time when ontological security and safety concerns should be paramount:

"Don't swap us around with different officers more than once. I was never sure who my officer in charge was and each time my case got swapped to a different officer it felt like the previous officer was giving up on me" (S8, 18 year old female)

Due consideration to children and young people's support needs

- 3.44 It is widely accepted that children and young people engaging with police around safety and wellbeing concerns can require considerable support to sustain their engagement in these processes and address the negative impact of both the experiences which brought them to the attention of the police, and the difficulty of the process itself (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009).
- 3.45 Whilst the remit of the police is primarily investigative, guidance clearly stipulates a need to consider victim welfare alongside investigative needs. In the case of investigations, police are required to formally record vulnerability when completing an initial witness statement, which should, in turn, prompt a full consideration of required support during ongoing investigation and prosecution, and ensure that investigative strategies are mutually supportive of victim care strategies.
- 3.46 Participants' discourse revealed little about the ways in which their support needs were specifically addressed within investigative processes. They did, however, talk about how supportive they felt police themselves were and the ways in which they helped children and young people access wider support.
- 3.47 Participants' expectations of the support that would be directly provided by police was very limited, acknowledging that this was not their primary role:

"I don't think it's depending all on the police, there's other services that need to help. The police are so busy with other crimes, there's not enough for them... just to be focusing on kids" (I29, 15 year old male)

"Maybe if they had a group that was like witness support rather than the police because they can do the job of just supporting people and then they can think about supporting young people because the police have got all the other jobs they have to do" (I10, 11 year old female)

"It depends on the situation. The police don't do that, their job is to put bad guys in prison. They're probably going to call someone up or email someone and be like, this person really needs help and support. They'll obviously talk to the young person and be like, right we're going to pass your details on to them, if you're okay with this, so you can get some help and support. But they can't do it themselves, that's not their job" (I18, 16 year old female)

3.48 Participants' discourse did, however, indicate a strong expectation that police would be 'supportive', both in terms of their demeanour when engaging with children and young people (as discussed in paras 3.12-3.18 above on empathetic practice) and in terms of proactively linking them in with individuals and agencies who were well placed to support them through these processes.

3.49 Over half of the participants who discussed the provision of support in their interviews described that the most helpful action the police had taken was to put them in contact with other agencies or professionals who could support them, noting the significant difference this had made to them. A similar theme was apparent within a number of survey responses:

"She's always been there for a chat and she's come round and visited a few times, so yeah, and I've spoken to her a few times so she's been really helpful...She's lovely, like the police gave her to me and when she came round the first time I was like, 'Right, there's a stranger in my house, I don't like it.'...I was kind of worried because I don't know what the police told her about my case, so I was kind of like, 'Right, I don't know what they've told her, like if they've told her something that's wrong I'm going to be annoyed.' So then when she got here she was like, 'You can tell me, you don't have to tell me, I don't mind.'" So I was like, 'Right, I'm kind of shy but' ...But she's lovely. If I didn't have her to talk to I'd be ripping my hair out by now" (I13, 18 year old female)

"This is a positive thing that the police have done, definitely...This is the most positive and I'm quite thankful to the police for doing this for me, or else I could have... I can quite easily go back to what I was doing before but with this, I can talk about my problems. I know who to go to and I know that I'm safe with (name of agency)" (I21, 15 year old female)

"Like the first time I went missing I was straight with (name of agency) [R: That was a positive thing?] Yeah, I haven't been missing for a year now since I've been with (name of agency) so that was alright... yeah, they are really good with support with other agencies" (I7, 17 year old female)

"They get the correct support systems and best people involved for that situation" (S7, 17 year old female)

"They make sure that young people have someone to contact if they're finding things a little difficult" (S10, 17 year old female)

3.50 Being connected in with appropriate sources of support was noted to work particularly well when there was proactive inter-agency working between the police and these agencies in which each used their skills and remit to enhance the role of the other with the ultimate aim of decreasing risk and enhancing

safety for the child or young person concerned, as was the case for one young woman who came into contact with the police around repeated missing concerns:

"If I said to 'J' [the police officer] - I don't know, for example, 'I feel like running away tonight', he'd get 'S' [my project worker] involved and 'S' would be like, 'come, we'll sit down and we'll talk about it', or if I said to 'S', 'I don't think I can go through court', then she'd inform 'J' and 'J' would be like, "Right, this is what we can do" ... If 'J' couldn't deal with my problem, he'd pass me onto 'S', if 'S' couldn't deal with the problem, she'd pass me onto 'J'.... if they didn't work together, it would be a - like kind of hard, it would be difficult and it would be confusing and I'd be repeating myself all the time... They'd both tell me, they'd make sure I knew so if I spoke to 'J', he'd be like "Right, well I'll inform 'S' and I'll deal with it this side of it" and 'S' would text me, "J's had a word with me, we can meet up and talk about it" and I'd be like right, that's fine" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 3.51 Not all participants, however, appeared to benefit from access to such support, with many of the remainder expressing a desire for police to more actively consider this need in all of their engagements with children and young people whose safety or wellbeing is compromised:

"[R: Do you think that the police do realise in these kind of situations that young people do need support?] Not really, because they don't stick around long enough to realise, they just pick them off, drop them off and go to a different job that needs to be done. [R: How does that make children feel?] Just like we'll do it all over again, they're not going to do anything about it" (I9, 11 year old female).

"Tell them that there is always someone you can talk to and encourage them to do so" (S8, 18 year old female)

"They could offer some sort of support, on where to go about certain things, or if they need someone to speak too, rather than just doing what they have to do and leaving" (S5, 15 year old female)

"Offer other service information not just from the police. Show me how I can move forward" (S9, 19 year old female)

Facilitating choice and control

"Ask young people their opinions of what they think should happen and take opinions into consideration." (S1, 17 year old female)

- 3.52 Participants in this, and previous, research have identified engagement in policing processes around their safety and wellbeing as frequently characterised by disempowerment and a lack of control. Building in opportunities for choice and control, no matter how small, are consequently seen to be of critical importance for children and young people. Unfortunately, the majority of participants in this study felt that they were offered limited opportunities to exercise such choice and control.
- 3.53 Asked how much choice and control young people have when police get involved in their lives to try and protect them, all 11 survey respondents who responded to this question opted for either 'a little' (n=5) or 'none' (n=6) with none opting for the 'a lot' option:

"Did not get a say in anything. I was told I put myself in this situation" (S9, 19 year old female)

"I don't think police give any choice...[police should] communicate with young people and find out what they want/need" (S10, 17 year old female)

- 3.54 Opportunities to exert choice or control, no matter how small, were highly valued by respondents, with a clear call for greater integration of these opportunities across all stages of police interaction with children and young people:

"They should do it [ABE interview] somewhere where you feel good, they should give you a choice...They just tell you where you have to do it" (I2, 16 year old male)

"They need to be able to make the person feel comfortable and also they need to let the young person be able to take control of the situation, like for example, if they don't want to speak about something, they don't need to speak about it or they don't want a person sat in with them, they don't need to do that, I think they should have like those kind of options, whether they want someone there or not or whether they want other people to know...I think choice. Giving them a choice" (I6, 18 year old female)

- 3.55 The application of choice and control, and the other principles of safe and effective practice outlined within this chapter, to experiences of investigative processes and police responses to missing episodes are further explored in chapters four and five that follow.

4. POLICE RESPONSES TO SAFEGUARDING RELATED CRIMES

Key messages

- The key elements of investigative processes discussed by participants were ABE interviews and associated investigative processes. These were consistently noted to be intimidating, challenging and emotionally difficult processes.
- Participants did, however, highlight how the attitudes, actions and interactions of police could either ease or further compound these difficulties. This included the degree of empathy and understanding communicated by police, their engagement style, explanations of process, the presence of an element of choice and the prioritisation of victim welfare alongside investigative requirements.
- Participants highlighted a strong desire to 'not be forgotten about' after their engagement in ABE interviews or other evidence-gathering processes and to be kept informed about case progress. However, whilst a minority reported positive experiences in this regard, the majority commented on police's failure to adequately communicate with them about the progress and outcomes of their case.
- Children and young people's difficulties with engagement in investigative (and prosecutorial) processes were noted to be compounded by the number of different officers a child or young person can have to engage with during this time. These personnel changes could leave a child or young person feeling abandoned and let down at a time when ontological security and safety concerns should be paramount. Inconsistency in personnel can also hold implications for the quality of evidential material gathered.

4.1 Four-fifths of participants in the research came into contact with the police because of one or more concerns about safeguarding related crimes (online, in the community and/or in their home) and reflected on their experiences of police responses to these during their interview or survey response. The key aspects of these experiences discussed by participants were those of Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews (with some associated commentary on other evidence-gathering processes) and post ABE engagement, with reference to the need for appropriate support and continuity of personnel across these. Participants' discourse around these issues clearly elucidates both the variability of their experiences and the difference that the presence or absence of the principles of safe and effective practice outlined in the previous can make to this.

ABE interviews

4.2 Around one-third of interviewees and all but one of the 13 survey respondents shared their reflections on experiences of ABE processes. The strong consensus across all of these respondents, which resonates with contributions of children and young people in other research and consultation reports, was that engaging in an ABE interview is a very intimidating, challenging and emotionally difficult process:

"When I were doing statements, it was horrible, I hated it because I weren't just reliving what happened once, I was having to go through it over and over again" (14, 16 year old female)

"Nervous...Scared...They underestimate how hard it is" (I2, 16 year old male)

"Pressure. Lack of control. Once you have said something you cannot get it back" (S9, 19 year old female)

"Being made to answer the questions when it can sometimes be a very personal thing and you have to explain it to a complete stranger. I was uncomfortable telling people I was close to, never mind a stranger" (S8, 18 year old female)

"The questions that are asked and how much detail they have to answer (personally I got embarrassed at some detail)" (S1, 17 year old female)

- 4.3 Most of those who offered commentary on ABE interviews indicated an understanding of the necessity of these (or a similar means of gathering and representing evidence), together with a recognition that this would inevitably, by its very nature, be a difficult process. Their contributions, however, reflected a wide variation of experience within this:

"Sometimes it goes well and sometimes it doesn't" (S12, 17 year old female)

"Some care a lot, some don't, all different" (S13, 16 year old female)

- 4.4 Reflecting on this variation of experience, participants' contributions highlight that the attitudes, actions and interactions of police could either ease or further compound the difficulty of the ABE and related investigative process, a causal link also explicitly recognised in ABE guidance. Largely mirroring the issues previously covered in chapter three, in relation to what constitutes good policing engagement more generally, this included: the degree of empathy and understanding communicated by police, their engagement style, the presence of an element of choice and the degree to which a child or young person's support needs were addressed.

Empathetic practice

- 4.5 Reflecting on the importance attributed to empathetic responses during other stages of the protective process, a common theme across participants' contributions on ABE interviews was a desire for police to recognise and demonstrate an understanding of the difficulty of this process for children and young people and plan their engagement accordingly. A small number of interviewees and survey respondents commented positively on their experiences of this, noting the positive difference this made to their experience of the process:

"They spoke to me about what would happen in the ABE (achieving best evidence) interview. The suite in the SARC was laid back and informal. They said I could stop the interview at any time or my [voluntary agency] worker could stop it if she felt it was getting too much for me" (S12, 17 year old female)

"It was a good experience because they wanted to know everything that happened and I felt that was, like nice at least...they wanted to help and listen. It's a nice feeling like, at least someone wants to help...He was really supportive, asking if I'm okay and stuff" (I14, 16 year old female)

"They obviously can't hug you and comfort you and stuff like that, but if you get upset and you can't speak because you're crying, they wait for you to calm down and they allow you to carry

on. Or, if you don't want to carry on, if you're having an interview at a police station and they've taken you there, they'll take you home if you get too uncomfortable and you ask them to. And they won't say 'why do you want to do that?'. They'll just say 'Yeah, that's fine, we'll stop the interview now and we'll just take you home'....He spoke to me in an easy way, not hammering me down with questions...And I felt comfortable because I could have say an hour in there and do and say what I wanted at my own pace. And then I could have a break for about 10 to 20 minutes, go outside, have a break and come back in and finish it, which I did" (I22a, 14 year old female)

- 4.6 Unfortunately, however, many more commented on a perceived absence of such empathy and sensitivity in their experiences:

"They underestimate how hard it is...[you are] nervous and scared...[they should] take the feelings into consideration...try to put themselves in them shoes...ask how the young people's feeling" (I2, 16 year old male)

"I don't think they understand that it's not nice to go into detail about something that's happened, especially in front of someone you don't know...It's like embarrassing. I find it embarrassing" (I5a, 15 year old female)

"[They] ask a lot of questions that you might not want to answer...[they should] be a bit more sympathetic and understanding" (S6, 17 year old female)

"Don't be sympathetic, be empathetic. They should care about young people. They should make you feel its not as bad as you think" (S9, 19 year old female)

"They were nice, don't get me wrong, but they were just ... the way some of them looked at you...I felt like I were like a piece of meat, I was like 'I don't like this', it were awful" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 4.7 These participants noted the need for better understanding and empathy on the part of those conducting the interviews, together with more concerted efforts to counteract the anxiety associated with these interactions. Specific reference was also made by a few participants to the particular anxieties associated with the videoing of ABE interviews – a feeling of 'being watched' or 'stared at' – and the need for officers to recognise and attempt to allay these fears.

Engagement Style

- 4.8 One of the key things that was noted to counteract – or indeed compound – children and young people's anxiety around ABE interviews was the engagement style of the officer(s) leading these. A minority of participants' contributions identified very good practice in this regard, reflecting an approach to interviewing that prioritised explanation and understanding, went at the pace of the child or young person concerned and prioritised victim welfare alongside investigative requirements.
- 4.9 This resulted in some positive reflections on the interview experience despite the inherent difficulty of the process. This illustrated the difference that sensitive and person-centred communication approaches can make in this situation. This is aptly illustrated by the contributions of three survey respondents who in response to the opportunity to 'rate' their interview experience (on a scale of 1 to 10) provided an extremely positive rating of 9 or 10. Whilst noting similarly difficult aspects of the

process as the other survey respondents who gave significantly lower ratings, they attributed their higher ratings to two core things: the interviewing style of the officer and the degree of choice they were offered in how the process occurred (as explored below):

"The police always explain before what will happen in the interview. They never ask personal questions outside the interview...They took their time in my interview and didn't force me to answer straight away" (S1, 17 year old female)

"Was very good but I'm not sure, it may have just been the situation being discussed. I wasn't rushed or pushed for answers which was very helpful. Very patient, not pushing for answers, kind, allowed a break should things get too difficult" (S11, 15 year old female)

- 4.10 Conversely, the free text contributions of those survey respondents who rated their interview experience less positively emphasised a more formal, procedurally-driven and authoritarian engagement style. These attributes were also highlighted as contributing to the difficulty of ABE interview processes by interviewees, as was an absence of noted relationship-building or familiarity-enhancing actions:

"They're patronised because there sitting with the police, because interviews are too professional for young people or because they feel intimidated by all the questions and how they are asked...Make it less formal, and make the questions more appropriate for the young people they are interviewing" (S5, 15 year old female)

"They speak in police language, not normal language. It is hard to understand" (S12, 17 year old female)

"They lectured me. They did not say were going to be ok. They always try to put words in your mouth. Truth should come from the horses mouth not manipulated...Make it more relaxed, chilled. I would feel I could talk. Give time to think, you need time to think because things you want to say don't even cross your mind when under pressure" (S9, 19 year old female)

"Feel interrogated...Questions and interrogation!" (S4, 17 year old female)

"You get a person, they sit there, they're asking you questions, you have to like explain everything in little detail, it takes like a couple of hours and then you just go...I didn't even know the person I met on the day " (I5a, 15 year old female).

- 4.11 When asked how these processes could be improved, a number of inter-related themes typified participants' answers. Box 1 (p 45) presents the thoughts of survey respondents on how police could help address the elements of ABE interviews that young people find most difficult; these themes can also be observed in interviewees' thoughts on the topic.

Choice and Control

- 4.12 Participants in this, and previous, research have identified engagement in ABE and wider investigative processes as frequently characterised by disempowerment and a lack of control:

“Having no control. It feels like a police officer walks into your life and decides your every move and action. They decide you will give evidence in a video link room, they decide how long your interview evidence at the SARC will be. I had no options and was given no choice. I was the most important person in the whole case and was given no control over my life” (S8, 18 year old female)

Box 1: Survey respondents’ suggestions for addressing ABE interview difficulties

Make it less formal, and make the questions more appropriate for the young people they are interviewing

Be a bit more sympathetic and understanding

Ask if they're comfortable with the questions

Get to know the child first and tell them that they can have a different officer question them if they want

Make it more relaxed, chilled. I would feel I could talk. Give time to think, you need time to think because things you want to say don't even cross your mind when under pressure

Not push people

Check as you go along if all is understood

- 4.13 Building in opportunities for choice and control, no matter how small, are consequently seen to be of critical importance for children and young people. A related point, reflected in the final quote above, is the need to clarify children and young people’s understanding of the questions asked. However it is also worth noting that research suggests that in interview scenarios children and young people are unlikely to state if they don’t understand a question or language, and therefore interviewers must not rely on children to identify comprehension problems (Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2015).
- 4.14 The majority of participants in this study felt that they were offered limited opportunities to exercise choice and control. For example, only one of the twelve survey respondents who answered questions about choice around ABE interviews felt that young people were given ‘a lot’ of choice about the location or the individual conducting these interviews. The majority (8 out of 12) said that young people were not offered any choice about who conducted their interview. Half (5 out of 10) similarly said that young people were given no choice about where the interview took place. Relatedly, all but one of the ABE interviews discussed by interviewees were noted to have taken place in a police station, most frequently in the absence of any choice around this. This is in spite of the fact that ABE guidance specifically promotes choice of environment and timing for interviews and the gender of the officer conducting the interview.
- 4.15 Where an interview takes place – and the biography and approach of the person facilitating it – can have a significant impact on both the information that a young person shares (and hence the potential success of associated prosecutions) and the impact of this process upon them (victim care). Whilst

participants held different opinions on what would be preferable for them in terms of this (whether a male or female officer; whether at a police station or other location etc.), what they were united in was a desire to be consulted about, and offered some degree of choice or control, in relation to this:

"They just tell you where you have to do it...They should do it somewhere where you feel good, they should give you a choice...give them [young people] a choice of where they want to do it or who they want to speak to" (I2, 16 year old male)

"As young people their opinions of what they think should happen and take the opinion into consideration" (S1, 17 year old female)

"Explaining whats going to happen, or what happens next. Also giving the young child a choice about certain things" (S4, 17 year old female)

"Ask them what they want" (S13, 16 year old female)

"I just think you need a choice...I don't really know what you could have a choice about but you should have like ... choices, you should be able to do it your way so you feel comfortable" (I5a, 15 year old female)

"We got a choice on how we gave our evidence in court, but I think that's just the court" (I5b, 14 year old male)

Support structures

- 4.16 Although a minority of participants reported receiving good support around their engagement in ABE and other investigative processes, the majority described an absence of support both in terms of how supportive police themselves were (as described above) and the degree to which police facilitated desired support from others in line with guidance on vulnerable witnesses.
- 4.17 Two of the youngest participants mentioned the presence of a registered intermediary and spoke favourably about their role in helping to both make them feel comfortable (providing them with opportunities to draw and play) and helping them to understand the process¹⁴.
- 4.18 Although five survey respondents stated that young people were able to choose if they wanted someone in their ABE interview with them for support, the majority of participants indicated little experience and/or understanding of their right to have a supporter present, with a number of participants indicating a misconception that *"you need to be on your own, no parents/guardians in the room or support workers in the room"* (S11, 15 year old female).
- 4.19 A small number of participants shared examples of requesting supporter presence in the interview with them, but this not being facilitated. Conversely, another shared an example of her mother being present during an ABE interview in spite of the fact that this was against her wishes:

¹⁴ The two interviewees who this refers to were both accessed through a service that includes staff who are registered intermediaries. Apart from these references, no other children or young people mentioned the presence of intermediaries in their interviews or survey responses. This may suggest limited experience or awareness of this type of support among the sample. This is despite the fact that all children are automatically eligible to be considered for intermediary assistance to facilitate communication (CPS, 2013a).

"My mother sat next to me, which I didn't want her in the room, but they wouldn't let her not be in the room. I don't know why, they didn't ever explain" (I22a, 14 year old female).

"Don't blame children, do not remove parents out of the process if they want them there. I have some learning difficulties and sometimes find it hard to understand things. I wanted my mother to be there but they said I was old enough to talk to them myself" (S9, 19 year old female)

"I asked 'how come I can't be in same room as my mum?' because I wasn't told my mum was a witness until we went to do the video statement. So that's 24 hours with me being like, I can have my mum, getting ready, I'm gonna do this massive thing, I can have my mum by my side and then all of a sudden she's being dragged away from me, she's been taken away because she's giving evidence in court... I understand why they'd separated me and my mum but it was a literally straightaway separation. And I were like 'I don't want to be separated from my mum, I don't understand what's going on, I want to be with my mum for at least five minutes', you know for a cuddle and a bit of comfort before I went and did my video statement but as soon as they were ready for my mum...they sent me off into the room and they took my mum off into a different room... I didn't see where they took my mum and I'd rather know where my mum is because if I need my mum, I want to be able to get to her" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 4.20 This young female's subsequent description of being called back to view her video evidence prior to a court appearance aptly illustrates the need for ongoing recognition of the traumatic nature of engagement in ABE processes, the accompanying need for support to be considered at all stages of the investigative process and a failure to consistently do so :

"They basically separated us again, left me on my own in the station to watch the DVD, to recap what I'd said and see if I wanted to make any changes but left me on my own and then they took my mum back with an officer with her, to read back through her statement and all that. I'm not being funny, she's a grown woman who is reading some paper and I'm watching...She gets an officer and I'm watching something that I don't particularly want to be watching cause I don't want to hear it on my own without anything, do you know? They said 'If you want to make any changes, add anything back in, write it down' and I was like, 'What do I write it on? I don't have a pen, I don't have a piece of paper' and I'm sat with my legs crossed, nearly in tears, not knowing what to do. I were like what do I do? How do they know I'm not gonna kill myself because you're making me watch it?And I were like how do you know I'm in a stable mind to do it on my own, because they didn't ask, they just went 'Right, sit there, watch that' and they went...I asked 'is there anyone gonna be in here with me?' and she went 'no, it will be next door'. They were next door doing work but there were no surveillance in the room so I could have done anything, I could have snuck out, I could have jumped out of a window, I could have done anything... Like my mum's, what, 35 and she gets people to look after her and I'm 15 and I don't?" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 4.21 Whilst, as in this case above where the mother was a witness to the crime, there can be valid reasons why a child or young person's preferences around support cannot be accommodated, it is critical that this is communicated to the child in advance of their engagement, with clear and meaningful explanations as to why this is. In cases where this means a preferred supporter cannot be present, it is also critical that alternative sources of support that are acceptable to the child are secured instead. For some young people, this took the form of non-police professionals, brought in to support their engagement in investigative processes. As illustrated in the quotation below, this was felt to be

positive both in terms of their capacity to provide emotional support and act as a conduit between a young person and the police during, and indeed beyond, investigative processes:

"Well, with my experience, they helped me, they got me involved with [name of worker] so they were like giving me support, they just kept on keeping me updated with everything that's happening, I don't know, they were just really good" (I16, 15 year old female)

Removal of possessions

- 4.22 Across the interviews and surveys, a small number of children and young people discussed situations where the police had taken something of theirs as evidence and what the process for this was like. What emerged from their discourse was a clear message that when police provided explanations for why they were taking possessions, or what would subsequently happen with them, this was easier for young people to accept. What also emerged, however, was the infrequency with which this happened, a failure to honour stated timeframes and a consequent sense of frustration:

"I was supposed to get it back about four months ago, and they've still got it now...and they haven't done anything with it...Like they should be talking to you and if nothing is going on with it then they just give you it back" (I3, 13 year old female)

"They took my diary. One with a lot of information in, a lot of memories which I don't actually remember anymore, so I wrote them all down. They've had that for a year and a couple of months now. I still haven't had it back, they said you'll have this back within two months. So, obviously the police don't understand time length" (I22a, 14 year old female)

"Yeah, they took my phone, I was not happy about that...I didn't get it back until the day after court. It was like if they would have been straight with me from the beginning and said, 'Okay, I'm keeping your phone the whole time'...they still kept my phone and I was like, 'you're not paying my bill, what do you need my phone for?' I was still paying the bill when I didn't have a phone...It wasn't a cheap bill either, it's like £40 a month for something I'm not using, it's not like been in use at all" (I5a, 15 year old female)

- 4.23 Some participants also identified a sense of social isolation or decreased sense of safety after removal of their mobile phone or other social networking device, an issue that has also been raised in previous research by the authors (Beckett and Warrington 2014):

"Only take evidence they need and try to give it back as soon as possible...They took my ipod and phone and it meant I could have no contact at all with friends" (S8, 18 year old female)

"I have to travel from where I live, go to town, then go to school and it's like that's two bus journeys at early hours in the morning and then two bus journeys after school. I don't have a phone, like if something were to happen then" (I5a, 15 year old female)

Post ABE communication

- 4.24 Participants highlighted a strong desire to 'not be forgotten about' after their engagement in ABE interviews or other evidence-gathering processes and to be kept informed about case progress. Some interviewees positively described actions taken by the police to do this, interpreting this as caring and protective and noting their contribution to maintaining a sense of understanding and control during potentially distressing events:

"I think just being kept up to date makes the young person feel less pressured because they know what's gone on so they're not always worrying about whether they know, I think when they know, there's a bit less, like you've got a weight off your shoulders" (I10, 11 year old female)

"They usually do have updates on your case and they will ask if it is better to contact you or your parents, if the young person isn't very confident or shy then it is good that there is the option of calling their parents" (S8, 18 year old female)

"Keeping in touch with them, like over periods of time, like you get a phone call every couple of weeks and just be like, you know, this is going on or this is going to happen, like it is really good to know even if it doesn't involve you specifically they still tell you so you know what's happening" (I7, 17 year old female)

"This situation is probably the hardest situation any young person would go through... She's [the police officer] been really good. She calls me every time there's an update - anytime... She protects me. She will tell me when I'm needed, when she needs to see me, if it's important, wherever. She's really good at her job and I'm happy with her. I'm so happy I have her...[having] that one liaison officer that has to be with you, even though you know they're getting paid just to care for you, it just makes you feel like 'well yeah they actually do care' ... I've had liaison officers who weren't even working, who would still text me the night before my court case saying 'Listen you're going to do fine, I'll see you tomorrow bright and early' That just makes you feel like 'well yeah she cares'. She's not even getting paid to text me...you do have your other workers around you, but obviously you've got that one police officer who knows things, has been dealing with your case and is just there not only for you but for this special reason. It just makes you feel so much better." (I23, 17 year old female)

- 4.25 This young woman further noted the significance this positive experience held in terms of her propensity to seek – or accept – support from the police in the future:

"If you have a good experience with them like I did, I know for a fact that I would be able to go back if I ever had a problem again. I'd be able to go back to the same liaison officer and just tell her, 'Listen this is what happened to me'. I know for a fact she would listen to me, and she'd help me go through it" (I23, 17 year old female)

- 4.26 Unfortunately, however, as with comments elsewhere, this young woman's experience was positioned as exceptional practice associated with an individual officer rather than the police as an institution. More interviewees and survey participants commented on police's failure to adequately communicate with them about the progress and outcomes of their case, citing major delays in, or complete absence of, proactive case progression communication:

"Why aren't you telling me anything about what's going on with my case? Why don't I know anything? Why aren't you talking to me?'... I was left in the dark, basically" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 4.27 In the absence of proactive communication, young people and/or their parents were left with the difficult task of trying to ascertain what was happening with the case – a responsibility that participants felt should be firmly located with the police:

"I understand if they don't ring us but if we're like constantly trying to get in touch with them, it's nice to like have a reply back and know what we're doing because we don't know what's going on at court or like" (I5a, 15 year old female)

"It just makes you feel like they've forgot about the whole thing and they've just like put it on hold and just left it" (I5b, 14 year old male)

"Contact the young people or their family to explain what's happening rather than leaving it up to the family" (S10, 17 year old female)

"Don't leave it up to the victim to constantly ring up to find out about updates, you should be calling them" (S8, 18 year old female)

- 4.28 In instances where cases were being progressed to court, participants associated a lack of preparatory contact from the police with a lack of understanding of court processes and higher than necessary levels of anxiety and distress:

"Yeah, so she [the police officer] was the only person that we could have spoken to [about court] - we didn't have - when we went to court, we had no clue what we was doing and we was told on the day because we didn't see her" (I5a, 15 year old female)

"I were crying [during court] and the lot, whereas if the police was there I might have had a different way about it... they haven't been in contact before court, they haven't been in contact after" (I19, 17 year old female)

"I don't think they're [the police] good at following up things. Also with liaison between police and family as well, that is not a good thing either. The first time was shocking. My mum wanted to go to the court to see what he was sentenced. The police liaison officer didn't call my mum. The officer in charge called my mum saying that he wasn't meant to be in work and he just went into work and he had an email saying who was in court that day - who raped me - has just gone into court and is confirming his name ... This time it's a little bit better but it's not... we got told that he was on bail by the police liaison officer" (I21, 15 year old female)

- 4.29 This lack of communication around court processes or case progression understandably raised levels of anxiety and frustration for participants, particularly when their cases involved suspects who lived within their communities and/or were closed without communication or explanation:

"With my first case when I was 13, at first I thought 'Yeah they're doing a really good job, they're doing their best' but...when the case dropped they never actually told me. So it was like for a month that I had in my head that 'Oh my god what's going on? Why haven't the police contacted me, what's going on?'...and then I had to find out when the liaison officer was at the school for a completely different reason, not because of me. I came asking for her 'Are you

here to see me?' She goes 'No I'm here to see a young person'. I said 'Well what's going on with my case?' She goes 'Oh yeah your case was dropped ages ago'" (I23, 17 year old female)

"My mate, she has the boy [who was charged] on Facebook and he wrote on Facebook that he got let out without any charges due to my case that I put against him...So I emailed them [the police] back, I'm like 'It's kind of annoyed me that I ain't been told that you've let him out'...It's ridiculous how they didn't tell me nothing, like I was sitting here panicking, like 'What are they going to do? Will I have to go to court?' All that, and they let him out when I don't even know. I'm not annoyed that they let him go - well I am - but I'm more annoyed that they didn't tell me. That's the thing I'm annoyed about" (I13, 18 year old female)

- 4.30 A failure to communicate on case progression or case outcomes could also prohibit a sense of closure and an ability to begin to 'move on':

"There's just no sense of closure on the whole thing because we've not received a phone call or email or letter. Nothing at all" (I13, 18 year old female)

Consistent personnel

- 4.31 Children and young people's difficulties with engagement in investigative (and prosecutorial) processes were noted to be compounded by the number of different officers a child or young person can have to engage with during this time. As noted previously, these personnel changes could leave a child or young person feeling abandoned and let down, at a time when ontological security and safety concerns should be paramount:

"You don't get any, you don't get told, they're just all of a sudden not there... there was no, 'This is it, I'm not working with you anymore, I'm not working alongside you anymore', it was just literally just, 'I've finished with your case, I've moved onto the next one'" (I4, 16 year old female)

- 4.32 As illustrated in the quotation below, as well as impacting upon a child or young person's welfare and personal experience of the process, this can also have implications for the quality of evidential material gathered:

"The first time anything happened, the first night it happened I had two police officers that came around. Then the day that things came out, I had another police officer, didn't have a clue who he was, with the forensic guy. Then another police officer came around and said that what had happened, he had been arrested and put on bail. I was like, I don't know who you are but okay. Then I finally got to meet [name] who was in charge of the case and I saw him twice out of the whole case, and that went on from August to January. So I met him twice in that space of time. I didn't know who to contact or who to call if anything ever happened or if I remembered something, or if I didn't tell them something...I know I have stuff that I didn't tell them. Not on purpose, I just pushed it aside or thought it wasn't important. Then I'll remember it three months later and then I think, I don't know who to call to be honest, and I don't just want to talk to anybody. So I never called them (121, 15 year old female)

- 4.33 More positively, this young woman also reported a contrasting subsequent experience in which continuity of contact around her case both facilitated evidential endeavours and enhanced how she

personally experienced the process, reflections mirrored in the contributions of a small number of other participants who also experienced continuity of personnel during their engagement with investigative processes:

“This time, I’ve remembered things so I’ve called up and said, is this any good or whatever. I know who to talk to and [name] who is in charge of the case this time, if he’s not in his deputy is and I know them as well. So I know that I can talk to them because they always come out together or [name] comes around by himself. It’s just so you know there, it just feels more confidential that way, if anything, and it’s just a familiar face to talk to. You sort of get to know people and you sort of either trust them or you don’t. I can trust [name] but I don’t trust the police force in general” (121, 15 year old female)

“[I had the same officer] the whole way through because then like she knew the whole situation. It wasn’t like one police officer knew one bit of the thing and then you went to go and see another one and they completely lost some information or whatever, it was the same police officer the whole way through. And I think that was better as well because it was more easier for us to trust her because obviously she was going through [it] with us and she was supporting us and it wasn’t like, we got jumped from one person to the next, it was all like one case, it was good, it was nice...Yeah, and you don’t have to keep on saying the situation because they know it” (116, 15 year old female)

- 4.34 Such positive reflections on police engagement were, however, in the minority and generally attributed to the actions of individual officers, rather than representative of a wider policing commitment to this.

5. POLICE RESPONSES TO 'GOING MISSING'

Key messages

- A minority of participants with experience of going missing shared positive reflections on how police had responded to this, noting empathetic and respectful practice, continuity of engagement and recognition of vulnerability and need for support. Flexibility of approach (where possible) and a willingness to work with young people to minimise their vulnerability and identify solutions were also highly valued.
- Such experiences were, however, presented as exceptional practice rather than the norm, with the majority of participants registering dissatisfaction with how police responded to their missing episodes.
- Participants were particularly unhappy with how young people who runaway can be conceptualised – and subsequently responded to – as troublesome or problematic, noting that this often appeared to be a punitive-informed, rather than vulnerability-informed, approach.
- They also highlighted a perceived lack of recognition of, and response to, the vulnerability of these young people, in terms of the factors they may be running from, the risks they may experience while missing and how they may be feeling when police locate them, with an observation that most police seemed to feel their job was done when they returned a young person to their living arrangements.
- Follow up 'safe and well' checks were observed to be inconsistently implemented and generally process-driven rather than focused on safety or wellbeing needs. Where done well, as they were being in a minority of cases, these encounters could not only elicit information about harm that has occurred, thereby facilitating investigative processes, but also identify the associated support needs of children and young people.

- 5.1 As noted in chapter one, half of the children and young people who took part in interviews and responded to the survey during this research last came into contact with the police because of either singular concerns about going missing¹⁵ or concurrent concerns about going missing and other safeguarding concerns.¹⁶ All were aged 12 or above and, all but one, were female.
- 5.2 Young people who reflected on their experiences of going missing highlighted the fact that, more often than not, their contact with police occurred in unwanted circumstances in which police were responding to someone else's reporting of their absence rather than a self-generated request for support. This meant that, in many such circumstances, police contact was experienced as unwanted and unwelcome, a factor that both increases potential resistance to police intervention and, relatedly, increases the need for sensitive and empathetic policing that pays cognisance to these important contextual factors.

¹⁵ Under new police definitions, this could include experiences of 'absent' as well as 'missing' as participants were not asked, nor would they necessarily have been aware, which of these categories their experiences were classed as by police.

¹⁶ Last contact for 18% was singularly related to concerns about missing. The remaining 29% reported that their last contact related to the concurrent presence of missing and other safeguarding concerns.

- 5.3 A minority of participants with experience of going missing shared positive reflections on how police had responded to this. As with experiences of investigative processes, positively experienced policing in this field was related to the presence of the principles of practice previously outlined in chapter four, particularly those of empathetic and respectful practice, continuity of engagement and recognition of vulnerability and need for support. Flexibility of approach (where possible) and a willingness to work with young people to minimise their vulnerability and identify solutions were also highly valued, as illustrated in the following example of a 16 year old young woman with repeat patterns of missing:

"They go out looking, they try and ring you, they'll leave voice messages on your phone asking you to ring them back and asking if you're safe...in my experience, I didn't go home, I went to a party instead and the police were ringing me, asking me if I were going home... it were about 3, about 4, 3 o'clock in morning...And he says 'Hiya, just wondering where you are', so I'm like 'in town', he's like 'shall I come and pick you up?', 'No, I'm getting in a taxi now' so I told a fib to the police officer, he says 'Okay then, we'll see you when you get home, just give us a ring when you get home' so about half seven, I were getting on bus to go home... And this police officer rang me, he went 'You're a cheeky monkey, you aren't you? Telling us you're on your way home and you didn't go home', so I started laughing, he was like 'Where are you?' I said 'I'm on my way home now, I'm on the bus', so then this police officer come to my house and he were just talking to me about what, where I were...He were like a nice police officer because of the way he was with me, we were having a laugh, getting along whereas another time, there were these women police officers, they've obviously been out all night looking for me..., like you can get nice police officers and then you can get horrible ones...she were cocky, bitchy with me...like I can't be dealing with, yeah you might not have had no sleep but it's your job, if a person goes missing, you're meant to look for them... if you don't like it, if you don't like looking for people at whatever time then don't be a police officer...don't come to me with the attitude" (I1, 16 year old female)

- 5.4 As is the case for this young woman, most of those who shared examples of positive police responses to missing episodes situated these as exceptions to, rather than representative of, the norm, often contrasting them with other very different experiences at the hands of other police personnel on other occasions:

"There's so many different kind of police officers. You've got your police officers that are nice, that will listen to you and will actually hear you out and hear what you have to say and try and do as best they can. Then you've got the other police officers who just want to get on with their job, who make it sound like your problem is petty and stupid. They will just say... I'm not being funny but they'll say something for example like 'you've got this going on, but there is other bigger things going on in the world. It's not all about you'. But then again that's like I've been in that position before, and looking back on it, when I was there at that point, I just think that's really rude, I think that's really harsh....the good police that will try their best, they will listen to every single word you have to say" (I23, 17 year old female)

"But then there are other ones that are very nice and they're just like, come on why did you do this. And actually talk to you like a person, because some of the police officers just stand there and tell you off. And some of them are actually very kind... You might just be one of those unlucky people that just get all the bad ones. But you might be one of those very lucky ones that get all the good ones. It just depends on what police officer is on duty" (I18, 16 year old female)

- 5.5 The more negative illustrations included in these examples were, unfortunately, much more predominant than the positive. Much of this related to the absence of the principles of practice previously explored in chapter four and linked to positive practice above. However, participant discourse also indicated a particular dissatisfaction with two elements of policing practice specifically related to their response to missing episodes. These were:
- how young people who runaway can be conceptualised – and subsequently responded to – as troublesome or problematic; and relatedly
 - a perceived lack of recognition of, and response to, the vulnerability of these young people, in terms of the factors they may be running from, the risks they may experience while missing and how they may be feeling when police locate them.
- 5.6 A number of young people also raised concerns about the use of excessive force or restraint when trying to stop a young person from running; this is explored in chapter six under the critical theme of accountability for professional misconduct.

Punitive responses to missing

- 5.7 One of the recurrent motifs in participants' discourse around police responses to going missing was that of a punitive-informed, rather than vulnerability-informed approach. Participants spoke of being made to feel guilty about the trouble they had caused police, the time taken to look for them and the worry caused to others:

"Yes okay if you want to tell me how much I've cost the police force tell me, but don't do it in a snotty way. He was like, do you know how much you've charged the police force tonight, over £1,000. I was thinking, yes okay I've done wrong and yes okay I shouldn't have run away and yes you have wasted your time in certain ways, but first of all this is your job. Yes okay I shouldn't have done what I done but it is your job at the end of the day. I'm not the only one who's ever done this either. And yes okay you've worked overtime and you're probably tired but there is no way... you shouldn't talk to me like that. If he said to me, by the way look, if you want to do this again... that's nothing like he said. By the way, if you do this again this is how much it does cost us." (I21, 15 year old female)

- 5.8 Participants also spoke about being made to feel 'like a criminal' as a result of how police responded to their missing episodes. These associations with punishment, discipline and guilt are reflected in the language they used to describe their experiences of police responses to missing episodes (caught, restrained, in trouble and scared) – language that was often more aligned to experiences of having committed a crime rather than being in need of protection:

"In all honesty they made me feel like I'd just committed murder. I know it sounds like a really stupid thing to say but you just had a young person run away from home, they're going to be shaken up, they wouldn't have eaten, I hadn't eaten for 24 hours at least. I was run down, very tired, very stressed out and they just kind of, threw everything at me and said, 'Well, you shouldn't have done that because you've done something wrong'. But if it, well in my view, I done the perfect thing to remove myself from a harmful situation, which I had called up 999 multiple occasions after my mum had hit, kicked all that stuff. I got through to them, nothing was done... I'd run away multiple times from home, but in January this year was the first time that I'd actually made it out of my village and the way the police handled it was just disgusting" (I22, 14 year old female)

"[They would treat them] like they're a criminal, like they've done something wrong" (I2, 16 year old male)

"Don't just say, 'Oh you're coming with us, if you don't come home, you're coming in a police cell', just don't say that 'cause that won't make us feel any better, that's just gonna make us feel more annoyed and angry because they're not understanding, they're just doing their job but they're not doing their job properly because they're not listening to people, they just say, 'you're coming with us, you're going home' without explanation or thing, they just say what they need to say and just do it. They don't take time to understand or talk... they can at least say, 'We're a police officers, we're not going to take you home if you don't want to, we can make arrangements or something' and not just saying, 'You're coming home with us'. Yeah, just not right....running away is a choice, it's not breaking the law" (I17, 13 year old female)

Failure to identify vulnerability and risk

- 5.9 Many participants identified a clear link between these punitive and disciplinary informed responses and a failure to demonstrate any attempts at understanding of, or empathy for, the reasons why a young person may have run away, what may have happened while away and how they may be feeling as a consequence of all of this.
- 5.10 Participants felt that if police understood that going missing is generally an indicator of a wider vulnerability issue – *"it could be their way of saying I need help"* (I18, 16 year old female) – and attempted to understand why they went missing and the risks they may have faced during this time, they would respond in a more patient and supportive manner. Unfortunately, however, participants reflected little experience of this happening in practice, with many expressing a strong sense that most police felt their job was done when they returned a young person to their living arrangements.
- 5.11 Participants identified two key sets of circumstances in which they felt police failed to identify and respond to vulnerability in missing situations, common to both of which was a failure to empower and facilitate the sharing of children and young people's perspectives. First of these was returning young people to a situation of risk having failed to identify that the presence of harm in that environment had been the reason why the young person had run away in the first place:

"That's where the problem is....They take you back into the problem, to make it worse" (I17, 13 year old female)

"It's weird because if you were running away from a problem at home, and you're running away because of that, and you don't really have anywhere to stay, or you don't have anywhere safe to stay. The police will come and they go, 'Oh you don't have anywhere safe to stay so we're going to have to take you home.' They're putting you back in that position. Depending on what time it is, so say if it was like three in the morning, like calling up ChildLine or Social Services, it takes a while. So that young person may be going home at risk, and the police wouldn't really care. They will literally, it will be like this, 'We've done our job, we took her home, cross that person off our list, let's go for the next person.' That's it" (I23, 17 year old female)

- 5.12 Second of these was a failure to explore whether harm had occurred during the missing episode and what response was required in light of this:

*"The first time I run away, I got on a train with this bloke who raped me and he put me on the train back home because... so I came back and then I didn't have a ticket so obviously the ticket inspector had to call the police. Then obviously he found out that I was missing. So I was there and obviously arrived at **** and then one policewoman met me off the train and took me home. Nothing really got said between me and the police officer, or the police officer and my mum, they just literally just dropped me off home... There wasn't any communication really. It was just like, she's home, what else do you want us to do...there was no, would you like to talk to us or would you like to come to the police station in the morning, or would you like us to organise, I don't know, something for you, or would you like to... there was none of, we can help with you with this, there was like, you're back home. There was no... I knew there were organisations I could talk to, nothing bad was going on at home, just how I felt, but they just didn't help me at all. They didn't say, well we can... there was nothing. There was like... for me and my mum it both felt like she's home now, what else do you want us to do. We've brought her home." (I21, 15 year old female)*

- 5.13 These are the types of issues that, even if missed in the initial response, should be picked up in a 'safe and well' check following a young person's return but participants indicated little evidence of this happening at present. This was in part because a minority indicated that they had not experienced a safe and well check following their return and the majority of those who had described these as process-driven rather than focused on safety or wellbeing needs. Where done well, as described in a minority of participants' cases, these encounters could not only elicit information about harm that has occurred, thereby facilitating investigative processes, but also identify the associated support needs of children and young people and access appropriate support for these:

"Like going back to the good and bad police officers, you've got it where the police officers have tried their best, who will sit there up all night with you, even after their shift. They will look for you and they will be like... This is what the outcome became, and you know the police officer is trying when their shift is over and they're still there helping...if you feel like they're trying, you feel like they care...If you feel like they care, you'll probably be honest enough to open up to them and tell them what the real problem is. It's like as soon as they know what your problem is that's how they can help you more" (I23, 17 year old female)

- 5.14 Where done badly, all such opportunities were quickly closed down, an omission that holds serious consequences for children and young people's welfare and the likelihood of continued missing episodes and all the risk which that entails:

"[With the nice ones] you sit on the sofa and you talk face to face, and they ask you, where did you go, and all the important questions like if you were safe and stuff. And they do it in a different way than other police officers, because other police officers just sit there, or just stand there while you're sitting down and just tell you off. They're like, why did you go, you shouldn't have done that. And doesn't let you speak... At the home visit, the nice police officers, the good ones, they do offer you some support. They will be like, do you need any support from anyone that we can get you in contact with. That's a good point but if it's one of the bad ones it's just, suffer" (I18, 16 year old female)

6. ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMPLAINTS

Key messages

- Whilst some examples of what was perceived to be exemplary police practice were shared in terms of respectful and supportive engagement with children and young people whose safety was comprised, many more examples were shared of situations where children and young people experienced police practice as falling short of expected standards.
- Beyond these specific examples of poor practice, there was also an underlying belief on the part of many participants that police could operate according to their own set of rules, and do so with relative impunity. This included 'getting away' with attitudes and behaviours that participants believed they would be held to account for.
- Although most descriptions of unfair treatment focused on the presence of judgmental attitudes, a lack of respect and/or inconsistency in approach, there were a small number of examples shared during fieldwork that suggested serious professional misconduct of a verbal and/or physically abusive nature.
- Despite the dissatisfaction with police engagement expressed by the majority of participants, there was little evidence of experience of, or propensity for, making complaints.
- A number of barriers were identified in relation to this: lack of knowledge about processes and their right to access these, lack of confidence in the system (would their complaint be taken seriously and/or would anything change as a result), fear of negative repercussions and a lack of support.

- 6.1 As has been the case in other research conducted on children and young people's experiences of policing (Warrington and Beckett 2015, 2014; MPA, 2008), participants in this research felt that police should be both operating to professional standards of behaviour and held to account where this is not the case. Whilst some examples of what was perceived to be exemplary police practice were shared in terms of respectful and supportive engagement with children and young people whose safety was comprised, many more examples were shared of situations where children and young people experienced police practice as falling short of expected standards. Beyond these specific examples of poor practice, there was also an underlying belief on the part of many participants that police could operate according to their own set of rules, and do so with relative impunity. This included 'getting away' with attitudes and behaviours that participants believed they would be held to account for:

"One set of rules for police and then different for us" (I1, 16 year old female)

"I don't think it's right that they can do that because if we shouted at them then we'd get done straightaway but then if it's the other way round, I don't think it's right" (I3, 13 year old female)

"They just have no respect, like, they're the sort of people that demand the respect but don't give it. The way I see it is if they're going to respect me then I'll respect them but if they're going to be rude to me I'll be rude back... You can't demand respect but not give respect back" (I7, 17 year old female)

*“Police can twist things with young people 'cause we’re kids, according to them, adults can do what the f**k they like and us kids can’t do nothing about it because of our age, when really it shouldn’t be about our age but they’ll do anything” (I15, 16 year old female)*

Accessing complaints procedures

- 6.2 Interestingly, in spite of the levels of dissatisfaction with police interactions shared within the research, only three of the 18 interviewees who discussed the issue of complaints procedures described direct experience of them (or their parents) making a complaint against the police following an intervention around safeguarding. One of these cases related to an incident of physical abuse by the police, one to verbal abuse by a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) and the other to an absence of communication around a court case¹⁷. The remainder either did not know it was possible to make a complaint or, more commonly, felt there would be little benefit in doing so.
- 6.3 Variable perspectives on young people’s awareness of their right to complain if they were unhappy with how they were treated by the police were also identified by survey respondents, with six thinking that young people realised they had this right, and six thinking they did not. Interestingly, when further asked if they felt young people knew how to make a complaint (as opposed to the fact that they had the right to do this) – or if they would actually make a complaint – only one respondent answered in the affirmative, with the majority citing no or maybe, and the latter primarily noting the reasons why young people would not avail of this right.

Barriers to complaints

- 6.4 The barriers to children and young people making a complaint described by both survey respondents and interviewees fall within three inter-related categories: lack of knowledge about processes and their right to access these, lack of confidence in the system and/or fear of negative repercussions and a lack of support. These are considered in turn below.

Lack of knowledge about complaints procedures and their right to access these

- 6.5 When children and young people talked about knowledge of their rights more broadly, the only clear examples of police informing children and young people about their right to complain – or indeed any other right in many cases – related to circumstances where the child or young person was in trouble with the law, as opposed to at risk of harm. It was clear that many participants who came into contact with the police around safety or wellbeing concerns were either unaware of their right to make a complaint and/or had simply not considered the applicability of complaints procedures to these circumstances:

“Make young people aware that they can complain as most probably don’t realise that they can” (S5a, 15 year old female)

¹⁷ One further interviewee described knowledge of their peers making complaints against the police although the context for this was not clear.

"The police could explain to the child how to do this (I didn't know this was even possible until now) and explain that it is simply to help them improve their role as a police officer and they won't be offended. They should encourage constructive criticism" (S8, 18 year old female)

- 6.6 In a number of cases, participants described an awareness of their right to complain and an interest in being able to avail of this but a concurrent lack of knowledge about the specific processes or options available to realise this:

"I've never known anyone in my life to ever make a complaint about the police and it was always because they didn't know how... most people have said they would if they knew how but they didn't so they left it." (I7, 17 year old female)

"I don't know if the police have a complaints number. I don't know none of this. So you need to make people aware that this is who you complain to, in each station or if it's nationwide...I wanted to complain about the PCSO but I didn't know who to go to. I didn't know whether to phone up the police station or... my mum was there so my mum emailed. She didn't know who to email so she just emailed [name] police station. ...I still don't know whether to phone a police station, email them or email somebody higher" (I21, 15 year old female)¹⁸

"We didn't know what to do [to make a complaint]. I don't think adults know either. I think there's a website or something, I don't know. I'm not sure. I'm totally blank about this. I don't know" (I29, 15 year old male)

- 6.7 Both interviewees and survey respondents suggested that providing children and young people with clear information about processes for complaining was a concrete way in which police could address this barrier to accountability, noting that this should be done in a number of different ways (both oral and written). Other recommendations included the need to let children and young people know about independent (non-police) personnel who complaints could be directed to and opportunities to complain anonymously.

Lack of confidence in 'the system' and fear of negative repercussions

- 6.8 The most regularly cited factor inhibiting children and young people from making a complaint was that of a lack of confidence in the system; a questioning of whether their complaint would be taken seriously and/or an absence of belief that, even if it was, anything would change as a result of this. For some, this reflected a generic lack of confidence in police complaints systems; for others, it reflected a more specific belief that their complaints would not be taken seriously because of their youth:

"I wouldn't want to be bothered to go through all of it, like reporting it and stuff 'cause in the end of it, it could come to where nothing's gonna happen anyway" (I8, 14 year old female)

"[Young people wouldn't complain] because they either don't know they can complain, they think nothing will be done, or they can't be bothered to go through it all" (S5, 15 year old female)

¹⁸ This particular child/young person explained that the process became more confusing due to a lack of transparency (or easily accessible information) about the ID and status of PCSO's and how to identify who they were accountable to.

"There's no point in starting an argument because it ain't going to get us far" (I24, 12 year old male)

"Because of our age it is highly unlikely that an adult police officer will listen to what we have to say when we are children. They might not want to offend anyone or they might not have the energy to do so when they are already going through the court process" (S8, 18 year old female)

- 6.9 As alluded to in this final quotation, for some participants an absence of belief in the possibility of positive change was actually accompanied by a fear of potential negative repercussions as a result of registering dissatisfaction with police practice:

"Really there's no reason making a complaint because it's going to get more... it's going to have more chaos isn't it, get more chaos" (I24, 12 year old male)

"Like they're the police and if you go against them then something might happen to you" (I1, 16 year old female)

- 6.10 Children and young people's cognisance of the power differential between themselves and the police was specifically cited as underpinning their lack of trust in the system and sense of resignation. This was associated with a belief that some police felt themselves to be 'above the law' and therefore able to act with a degree of impunity:

"[R: But if the police did something that someone wasn't happy about?] They're [the young person] just going to have to deal with it because it's the police decision, it's their decision" (I24, 12 year old male)

"And you obviously feel you can't complain to police as well because obviously they are doing their job, they're higher than you sort of thing. So you feel like you can't complain as well" (I21, 15 year old female)

- 6.11 Even in the minority of cases where young people suggested that complaining might effect some change in police practice in the longer term they could see little benefit to them as individuals which, again, caused them to doubt the benefit of pursuing this line of action:

"In all honesty, I don't really see the point, because there's obviously the police can get a bit of information and try and deal with things better, but there's nothing that I can get out of it to make myself feel better ... I look back and it and go "Well it's happened now, there's nothing I can do about it"" (I22a, 14 year old female)

Lack of support

- 6.12 The final theme to emerge in discussions about what prevented children and young people from pursuing complaints in the face of unfair treatment was a lack of support to do so. Several participants reflected that making a complaint against the police required a level of confidence, assertiveness, skill and tenacity which many children and young people may not hold:

"You have to be confident as it can be a bit intimidating" (I26, 15 year old female)

"[Name of project worker/police] gave me a complaint form but I've lost it. I looked at it and I was just like 'it's too much, too much work'. My brain just went 'work, oh my god, no'" (I13, 18 year old female)

"I think it depends on what their personalities are like, because I'm quite a confident person, so I speak my mind. If someone annoys me I'll tell them. I won't go behind their back. I won't talk about them, I'll go to them directly. But you do have other people that are a bit more timid and a bit afraid of what would happen if they did make a complaint" (I30, 19 year old male)

- 6.13 In light of this, it is interesting to observe that the three examples shared of children and young people completing a complaints procedure all referenced the presence of support from a parent and additionally, in one case, a police officer. In the latter example, although there was no evidence of the complaints submitted having been upheld or effecting any change, the process of police actively supporting their right to complain was itself seen to be an important validator:

"Everytime I go up to police station I always tell PC [name], she's like 'I'll put it in a complaint form' so she'll sit and then do a complaint form with me, and then it's all done.... Because she knows that's how it calms me down" (I3, 13 year old female)

Professional misconduct

- 6.14 Although most descriptions of unfair treatment focused on the presence of judgmental attitudes, a lack of respect and/or inconsistency in approach, there were a small number of examples shared during fieldwork that suggested serious professional misconduct, of a verbal and/or physically abusive nature.¹⁹ Whilst these are in no way presented as typical of a wider pattern of experiences across participants, their seriousness and the impact they have both on recipients' perceptions of policing and those of their wider social services, merit some reflection within this report.
- 6.15 In one case, a young female describes a response from the police following her missing episodes that clearly frames her as wasting police time. It includes the use of deeply derisory language, accusations of blame and perhaps most disturbingly attributing responsibility to her for others' sexual victimisation:

"They're really rude, some of them. I've been, like, sworn at. I've been told that it's my fault people are out there getting raped because they [the police] can't stop them and that's what I got told, me and my friend got told. Yeah, I got sworn at. I got told that I was an attention seeking little bitch and I had a court case going on and apparently I was going to fuck up that" (I7, 17 year old female)

- 6.16 This same young woman describes a separate encounter in which disproportionate force was applied in an attempt to prevent her from running away. It is interesting that this is presented in the language of 'detention' more frequently applied to offending behaviour, a depiction that aligns with her reflections on how such restraint can be perceived as punitive and potentially antagonising for young people:

¹⁹ The research team, in consultation with the Research Advisory Group, took action to ensure that examples of professional misconduct had been registered with the relevant authorities.

"They detained me because they thought I was going to run and I was like, 'I'm not going to run. I don't have the energy to run,' so they detained me anyway, pushed me to the floor and detained me...Being restrained for me and my friends is not a good thing, like, we don't like it...I think it makes most people want to lash out even more because it's like being arrested for something you haven't actually done, except they don't go through the whole procedures, like your rights and stuff. They don't go through that, but still, it's like being arrested for doing nothing. It's not nice" (I7, 17 year old female)

- 6.17 A similar point was raised by a 13 year old female who described being threatened with a Taser as a response to her running away:

"I've been threatened with a Taser. They said because I was trying to run away, they said 'if you carry on running away, we are gonna Taser you and restrain you' and I was just like 'No, I'm trying to get away from the problem, that's just gonna make the problem worse'. And I don't think they should Taser people under the age of 16, I think that's just wrong" (I17, 13 year old female)

- 6.18 A number of other interviewees echoed these examples, describing incidents in which their running away had been responded to with the use of force or restraint that appeared to be disproportionate or accompanied by a degree of violence and/or humiliation. As one young woman describes:

"When the police came, there was about four of them, no there was five actually, so there was two women and three men, there was no need for it but ... they decided to handcuff me in the house because I'd backed up in a corner and I don't think that was right and it was the way they handcuffed my hand to my leg and I don't think that was right... ..It made me feel stupid. Like it made me feel really ... I don't know how you say it, like I know I felt scared at first but then I felt really angry with them because it was cruel and they were trying to make me walk to the door like it...And I refused to so I sat on the floor and then eventually because they knew they weren't gonna get me out that door unless they carried me, they had to uncuff me and ... one of the officers dragged ... and one of them thought it would be funny to pull me this way and the other one hold me like that, so literally my hands are like that and they're proper scraping into my hands so I screamed at them" (I15, 16 year old female)

- 6.19 Several other young people also remarked on the use of handcuffs as means of restraint and described processes that felt unnecessarily punitive (being handcuffed without justification) or overly aggressive (handcuffs being applied too tightly). In one interview, a young woman shows the researcher visible marks on her wrists which she explains are from *"handcuffs, they [the police] put on way too tight"* (I3, 13 year old female) and describes the excessive use of force experienced in the lead up to this:

"My own experience was like, two week ago and then they were a female copper and a male copper and I went to run off, because obviously I weren't going to have them arrest me, and I ran off and my auntie lives just across the road and then I ran to my aunties and my uncle's car were just there. The male copper grabbed my head and smacked it off the car. I shouted my mum, my mum came out screaming after" (I3, 13 year old female)

- 6.20 Whilst a complaint was registered in this instance, the young woman reported that *"nothing happened, nothing happened at all"* as a result of this, an omission that understandably led her to question police

capacity to manage risk without physical force and compounded her, and her family's, lack of confidence in their ability to appropriately respond to concerns about her welfare.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Drawing on the contributions of 45 different children and young people, in different parts of the country, this report has explored their views and experiences of police responses to safety and wellbeing concerns.
- 7.2 One of the most striking findings is the variability of these experiences, both between forces (as might be expected) and within forces, including within an individual child or young person's encounters with different individuals within the same force.
- 7.3 At one extreme, a minority of participants describe strongly positive experiences which enhanced safety and demonstrated empathetic and respectful practice. Encouragingly, some such individuals noted that they could not have wished for more from their engagement with the police. At the other extreme, examples are given of professional misconduct or abusive practice that undermine children's safety and wellbeing. Between these two extremes lay the experiences of the majority of participants: positive in some regards and negative in others, with a greater weighting towards the latter in the majority of cases.
- 7.4 Certain groups of children and young people were observed to be more likely to have negative experiences with the police, with participants feeling that police were less likely to recognise their vulnerability and need for support. These include children who go missing, those known to the police for offending behaviour, older children, BME children and those who may be less likely to be present as cooperative or compliant (even though these behaviours may themselves be associated with their additional vulnerability).
- 7.5 Reflecting on the variability of these experiences, participants' narratives reveal eight core principles of practice associated with enhancing children and young people's sense of safety and wellbeing, and maximising their willingness to engage with police in safeguarding processes. As explored in chapters three to five these are:
1. demonstrating empathy and compassion;
 2. respectful and non-judgmental practice;
 3. effectively eliciting and responding to children and young people's accounts;
 4. conveying information to children and young people in a timely and appropriate manner;
 5. due consideration to confidentiality and discretion;
 6. maximising continuity of engagement;
 7. recognising and responding to children and young people's support needs; and
 8. facilitating opportunities for children and young people to exert choice and control.
- 7.6 The research found that for the majority of participants these principles were neither fully nor consistently applied, a finding which resonates strongly with previous research (Beckett and Warrington 2015, 2014).

- 7.7 These principles also closely align with current policy and practice guidance for police which recognises the additional vulnerability of children and young people and articulates a series of related entitlements. These include:
- early identification, and ongoing review, of victim and witness support needs
 - clear explanation of processes and requirements
 - provision of information about appropriate avenues of support
 - appropriate facilitation of supporters within the investigative process
 - ongoing communication about the progress of the case, and
 - use of specially trained officers (College of Policing 2014; MoJ 2014, 2013a, 2011; CPS 2013a, 2013b).
- 7.8 It is clear from children and young people's contributions to this research that these commitments are not, as yet, being consistently translated into practice. Examples of good practice are presented as exceptional and related to the approach of a particular individual, rather than indicative of a wider victim-centred professional policing culture.
- 7.9 This picture is supported by findings from related research and inspection reports which suggest that despite some areas of improvement over the last decade, an enduring gap remains between policy and young victims' and witnesses' experiences (HMIC, 2015; Beckett and Warrington 2014; CJI, 2014; Hayes and Bunting 2013; Plotnikoff and Woolfson 2009).
- 7.10 There remains a pressing need to bridge this gap, to ensure that stated entitlements and recommendations are effectively translated into exemplary practice when supporting all young victims and witnesses, irrespective of their circumstances, geography or the police personnel they engage with. The principles of practice identified by participants in this research, and supported in policy and practice guidance, need to be consistently adhered to at all stages of children and young people's engagement with the police. Failure to do so holds serious implications for children and young people's propensity to engage with the police and subsequently their safety and wellbeing.
- 7.11 The ongoing dissonance between the commitments articulated in policy and practice and the reality of working practices on the ground serves as an important reminder for HMIC, and other bodies interested in the practical outworking of these commitments, to repeatedly return to voices and experiences of those young people at the centre of these processes. These voices represent a critical check on the degree to which rhetoric is being translated into reality and a key means of demonstrating accountability in relation to this.

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