

<b>Case 7   Issue 36 – Missing people</b>		
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## Cross-border missing person

*Police response to a concern for welfare call, raising issues about:*

- *When a person should be treated as missing, rather than a concern for welfare*
- *Conducting effective cross-border missing person investigations when multiple police forces are involved*
- *Delays in carrying out lines of enquiry due to discussions between forces about who should take ownership of the situation*
- *Gathering information in a timely manner, in particular, a missing person report and digital forensic evidence*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

<b>Call handling</b> 	<b>Mental health</b> 
<b>Public protection</b> 	

## Overview of incident

Around 8pm, Ms A phoned police to express concern about her sister, Ms B.

Ms A was put through to the force control room (FCR) of her local force, Force A. She spoke to Mr C, a communications operative.

Ms A told Mr C she was concerned about Ms B because of her sister's mental health, and because of a text message she sent to her son's partner saying everyone would be better off without her and asking she (her son's partner) look after her son. Her phone was then switched off. Ms A added *"it's not the first time she's tried to do something like this"*.

Ms A provided Ms B's car registration number. She told Mr C about a text message Ms B sent to her (Ms B's) husband, Mr D. In the message, she said she was staying with Ms A, but Ms A knew nothing about any plans to stay with her. Mr C took further details including Ms B's address, date of birth, and Ms A's address. Ms B lived in another force area, so Mr C told Ms A he was going to contact the other force, Force B, to ask that it conduct *"an urgent welfare check"*. Mr C told Ms A he was going to contact another neighbouring force, Force C. Ms A

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disclosed to Mr C that Ms B's ex-husband committed suicide in a forest in Force C's area, but she wondered if she was "*clutching at straws*".

Mr C classified the call as 'concern for welfare' and graded it as a 'prompt response'. Mr C was a witness in the IOPC investigation. He explained his grading was one below 'immediate'. He gave it this grading, despite it being sent out of his force area, to make sure "*that it was taken seriously*" by Force B, who, together with his force, were conducting intelligence checks. Mr C explained he classified it as a 'concern for welfare' because Ms A had raised concerns about Ms B. From the information he had gathered, he knew Ms B had been visiting her son in hospital. However, he did not establish if Ms B was at her home address, hence why he did not classify her as a missing person.

National automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) checks showed the last reading of Ms B's number plate was within Force A's jurisdiction at around 2am earlier that day.

Approximately 40 minutes after Ms A's phone call, Mr C noted on the log he had contacted Force C and told them about the forest Ms A had mentioned. Force C said they were alerting officers to this information. A few minutes later, Mr C recorded he had requested Force B to perform a welfare check at Ms A's home address. Mr C also phoned Force D, who requested he send through the incident log by email with the action he wanted them to take (which was to make enquiries with a hospital). In his witness statement, Mr C explained his actions were intended to establish the situation, and at no point did anyone say to him this should be a missing person investigation.

Mr E, a supervisor working in Force A's control room, added to the incident log that Force B had been asked to check Ms B's home address, and that Mr D was at home and could "*provided the relevant details for a misper (missing person) report*". Mr E also noted the other actions taken by Mr C.

### **College of Policing – Authorised Professional Practice (APP) – missing person investigations**

The police area that receives the report must record it and carry out all necessary initial actions. If the responsibility for a case is subsequently transferred to another force area, the rationale for doing so must be recorded. Written acknowledgement from the receiving force should be obtained.

When deciding where ownership of the investigation lies, the principal issue is to consider where the majority of the enquiries are and who has the greatest opportunity of locating the missing person. It is probable that the place where the person was last seen would generate the majority of the initial enquiries (although this is not always the case...).

#### **Find out more online:**

<https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/missing-person-investigations/specific-investigations/#cross-border-cases>

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Mr E gave a witness statement to the IOPC, in which he recalled discussing the incident with Mr C. He explained he was designated to supervise the controllers on that shift, not the operatives. He believed Mr C approached him as no other supervisors were available.

Mr E reflected, in hindsight, that requesting Force B complete the missing person report was not in accordance with policy. But he had previously been told by senior FCR staff the report should be conducted by the force who would be performing the majority of the enquiries. He said, in his opinion, it made sense for Force B to conduct the missing person report. That was where Ms B's husband, Mr D, was located and he would provide the information.

He went on to explain he was aware the incident was graded as 'prompt', but had not realised it was classified as a 'concern for welfare'. He thought he was dealing with a 'missing person' incident, although he felt this would not have made a difference as it was Force B that would deal with the incident. He commented Mr C should have classified Ms B as a missing person but this was not "*an isolated incident and it is a problem we are aware of in the FCR. It can be a very grey area between concern for welfare and missing persons.*"

About an hour and a half after the initial report from Ms A, Mr C recorded "*Force B are attending the home address...Force B believe this is a Force A misper.*" He requested a review from the area sergeant, PS F. He also requested advice on whether Force A officers should attend the reporting person's (Ms A's) home, and for clarification on whether this was a Force A or Force B incident.

In a statement to the IOPC, PS F explained he felt it necessary to first visit the home of Ms A, who was the reporting person, and she was based in Force A's area. He continued that while discussing the incident with Mr C, they were overheard by Inspector G. Inspector G instructed Mr C to send the report to Force B to investigate. PS F recorded these details on the incident log. He noted any further discussion about taking the report should be discussed with him or Inspector G. They would then liaise with the inspector in Force B.

In a statement to the IOPC, Inspector G recalled it was a particularly busy evening in the FCR. Amongst other incidents, they were dealing with a cross-border firearms incident and another firearms incident. Inspector G stated he was briefed verbally about Ms B. He said he was aware of the missing person policy that requires the force receiving the report to conduct the missing person report. However, he said he took a "*pragmatic approach*" which was "*in light of any golden hour principles of securing and preserving evidence.*"

He recalls informing Mr C to ask Force B to conduct the missing person report. He explained Force A and Force B often work together, and he felt in this instance it made sense for Force B to take ownership of the incident due to its location and because they already had officers at Ms B's home.

PS H was the late turn patrol sergeant for Force A. He informed the IOPC he recalled being contacted by the FCR. He initially believed it was a request for an address check at Ms A's property. He stated he did not have any units immediately available, but had opportunity to review the incident log. While reviewing the log, he saw an update from PS F which stated the incident should be transferred to Force B for a missing persons report. He handed over to PS I before finishing his shift.

In a statement to the IOPC, PC J of Force B, stated he was tasked on an immediate response to undertake an address check at Ms B's home. He spoke with Mr D, and obtained the details requested by Force A and details of Ms B's son. PC J recorded this information on the incident

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log. Mr D corroborated this account. He added he told PC J he was aware Ms A had reported his wife as missing, and therefore he did not wish to do the same, as he did not want to duplicate work.

Two hours after the original report was made, Mr C recorded details of a THRIVE (Threat Harm Risk Investigation Vulnerability Engagement) risk assessment. He noted concerns over mental health, and that this was an out-of-force investigation.

Shortly afterwards, a supervisor for Force B, Mr K, updated the incident log. He referred to missing person policy and stated Force A should have conducted the initial investigation as it received the initial report. He commented that as Ms B was last seen visiting her son at a hospital, which was in neither force area, she could be "*anywhere in the country*". He then wrote unless there was clear evidence Ms B was in Force B's area, they would not be taking responsibility for the investigation or any subsequent investigation. The incident was transferred to Force A.

Mr K was treated as a witness to the investigation, but declined to assist the IOPC or provide any explanation for his actions. According to him, this was the advice of his union representative.

At 10.40pm, Inspector L took over from Inspector G in Force A's FCR. He received a handover from Inspector G, who informed him they had a "*potential high risk missing person*". He explained they discussed the incident together and how complex it was, spanning three forces. He stated he was concerned too much emphasis was being placed on a literal interpretation of standard operating procedure.

Inspector L felt Force B's issue was Mr D had appeared unconcerned over his wife's whereabouts and, as such, officers had not really pressed him to complete the missing person report. Inspector G phoned his equivalent in Force B, Inspector M. Inspector M recalls this was the first he heard about the incident, but that he had to cut the call short due to the ongoing firearms incident. He did update the incident log, noting the investigation needed "*gripping one way or another*".

Approximately an hour later, Force A control room supervisor, Mr N, received instructions from Inspector M to task Force A officers to go to Ms A's address. If needed, they were to obtain a missing person report, which would be sent to Force B for ownership of the investigation.

Ms A gave a witness statement to the IOPC in which she stated she received numerous calls that evening from both Force A and Force B. She was told somebody would take a statement from her. According to College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP), it is good practice to keep families informed during missing person investigations.

She said she was well informed by police about the actions they were taking to find her sister.

PC O of Force A, was tasked by PS H to search the area surrounding Ms A's home for Ms B's car. She conducted the search but found no sign of the car. She reported back to PS H.

At approximately 12.30am, PC P and Special Constable Q (SC Q), were tasked with obtaining the missing person report from Ms A. According to witness statements provided by PC P and SC Q, they were delayed in arriving at Ms A's home as they were diverted by the FCR to another incident en-route.

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Following their discussion with Ms A, PC P and SC Q returned to the station where they completed the missing person report. This included a photograph obtained and set a number of actions including: searching Ms B's address, speaking with Mr D to get an idea of Ms B's medical history, and to liaise with the police search advisors (PoISA) and the technical unit to obtain mobile phone data.

About one hour after the officers were assigned to go to Ms A's address, Mr R, a supervisor in the Force A FCR, updated the log noting he had spoken to Duty Manager Inspector S (DMI S) from Force A and "*given the circumstances, Force B \*will not\* accept the transfer of ownership for the missing person report.*" DMI S provided responses to questions by the IOPC. He stated his role on the day was as a uniformed inspector, and he was "*responsible for the operational policing often of the entire force.*" He stated he could not recall the incident or any conversations he had with the FCR.

Approximately 15 minutes later, Inspector L recorded on the log he had liaised with Inspector M of Force B, who agreed that Force B would take the "*lead role.*" It was recorded the missing person report was being updated. It would be graded as high due to the "*substantial grounds to suspect that the risk posed to her life is immediate*". This was due to factors including information contained in Ms B's text message to a family member, and previously having tried to kill herself. It was also recorded the hospital had confirmed Ms B visited and left at approximately 7pm, and her phone was switched off.

Inspector M provided information to the IOPC in a witness statement. In that statement, he disagreed Force B were best placed to find Ms B, but said his main priority was locating her. He explained he contacted the communications team to obtain mobile phone data to help find Ms B. This was corroborated by the communications officer, Ms T, who said her first task was to read through the information. This had become "*bitty*" due to the number of forces involved, and because none of them had taken ownership of the situation.

At around 3am, the missing person report was signed off by a Force A inspector and transferred through to Force B. Shortly afterwards, Ms T was given authorisation to commence the telecommunication work due to potential for "*life at risk*". She informed the IOPC, in her experience working for Force B, where there is such an imminent threat to life, it is not usual procedure to wait for the missing person report to be received before commencing the telecommunications work.

Approximately 15 minutes later, Ms T ascertained the last location of Ms B's mobile phone. It was close to a hotel in Force A's area. Inspector M, of Force B, requested an urgent task for Force A officers to visit the hotel and search the surrounding area.

The incident log shows Force A supervisor, Mr R, made several phone calls, including to the hotel near Ms B's last known location and to a nearby supermarket, although the line was busy.

Inspector L in Force A's control room requested on the log a unit be assigned to carry out Force B's request. Mr R updated the log with his notes regarding the calls he made. He requested the hotel be checked by officers in person to "*double-check*", and to check the supermarket car park.

In his statement to the IOPC, Force A patrol sergeant, PS I, recalled tasking units to check the area near Ms B's home and local hotels. He did not mention tasking units to attend the supermarket or adjacent car parks. PC P was the officer tasked with searching the hotel and car park, which came back negative. He stated he was not tasked with any other actions.

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PC U of Force A recalled being at the station waiting to go to another incident when he heard the results of the telecommunications work and where Ms B was last sighted. He was aware there were a number of ANPR cameras in the area, so carried out some investigative work on these cameras. This proved negative. He was tasked by PS I to go to another hotel to enquire about Ms B. PC U explained to the IOPC, this was “*a substantial distance from the cell-site location*”. The search proved negative and the log was updated.

Approximately 12 hours since the initial report from Ms A, PS V of Force B began his shift. As part of the handover, he was informed about Ms B. He assigned PC W to re-attend Ms B’s address to speak to Mr D and see if any more information could be obtained to find her.

PS V explained he made contact with the missing persons unit. He was advised by DC X that as the latest information indicated Ms B was in Force A’s area, they would be responsible for taking the lead role in the investigation. PS V recorded this information on the log.

About two hours later, Force A received a call from the local fire department stating Ms B had been found in a car park close to the supermarket Mr R had requested be checked and where he requested their attendance. Ms B had taken a suspected overdose. Both fire and ambulance services were in attendance.

The car park (located in Force A’s area) was not searched by officers. With Force B taking ownership of the investigation, a lack of geographical knowledge of that particular area may have impacted on the locations officers were tasked to search. It could be suggested once the communications data had been obtained, Force A’s officers’ geographical knowledge of the area may, potentially, have led to a more effective search.

At hospital it was confirmed Ms B had taken an overdose of opiates. At the time, her condition was thought to be life changing. Reports since indicated Ms B was discharged from hospital and making a good recovery.

### Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

### Good practice

Part of the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice for Missing Persons ‘Police actions in relation to families’, is to provide regular updates to family. Ms A informed the IOPC in her witness statement she was kept well informed by police and the actions they were taking to find her sister.

### Action taken by this police force

Following this incident, Force A introduced a number of changes to its missing persons policy. The most notable are:

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- A change to the missing person definition. A missing person is defined as “Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.”
- The “Absent” category has been removed entirely.
- Initial risk assessments (previously completed by FCR supervisors) will be completed by the force control room police sergeant.
- A new STORM question set will guide call handlers taking reports of missing persons.

### Questions to consider

#### Questions for policy makers and managers

1. Do you provide training to your communications staff and officers on cross-border missing persons’ investigations, in line with Authorised Professional Practice (APP) guidance? Are you confident if faced with a similar situation, they would be aware of their responsibilities?
2. Does your force routinely dip-sample cross-border missing persons’ investigations to examine compliance with policies on cross-border working?

#### Questions for police officers and police staff

3. At what point would you have treated the woman as missing?
4. If faced with a similar situation which involved at least one other force, who do you think would be responsible for completing the missing person report?
5. If you directed officers in a missing person investigation outside your normal force area, what steps would you take to make sure lines of enquiry were not missed, due to not knowing the geography of the area?