

# Missing Persons Media & Online Publicity

## A Good Practice Guide for Police Investigators, Force Media & Communication Teams

The aim of this guidance is to promote consistent good practice across the UK in terms of media/social media appeals for missing children and adults. By considering each element, forces can maintain the integrity and effectiveness of the tactic.

### ADVANTAGES

- Cases can often benefit from publicity appeals originating within the control of the investigating force. Wide reaching and instant engagement with communities and the sharing of an image to prompt a sighting can progress a case and offer great comfort to families and loved ones of a missing person.

### DISADVANTAGES

- The impact of any media appeal for an individual reported missing can be significant. Social media appeals have an immediate reach, can be shared, re-posted and control of the content can diminish. The online legacy of appeals can prove difficult to remove and can have long lasting consequences. Repeated appeals for recurring incidents can flag and enhance vulnerability, prompt empathy fatigue and generate negative public comment.

### THE FOLLOWING SHOULD BE CONSIDERED IN EACH CASE

**Treat each case individually** - A bespoke approach that is balanced, proportionate and based on the circumstances of the case should be applied. Avoid a 'tick-box' approach and ensure the public appeal tactic is not selected too hastily before initial police searches are completed. Many missing people are found relatively quickly without publicity and this should always be the preferred outcome. For these reasons also consider the likelihood of the success of an appeal to the general public - does it outweigh the potential negative impact of publicity?

**Target audience and proportionality** - Consideration needs to be given to the desired reach and proportionate extent of the publicity e.g. the need for a local or national approach. Decisions need to be intelligence-led. Police appeals can generate a large amount of potential sightings and investigators should have a strategy to help consider and prioritise any response.

**Rationale** - It is important to record both the rationale for issuing an appeal or deciding not to.

**Consider using the first name only** - The family name of the missing individual will not always add value to the social media appeal. The publication of a full name can always be added where deemed necessary or assistive; this is an investigative decision to be made on the circumstances and necessity of each case.



**Minimise the amount of identifiable information disclosed** - Consider the potential impact of publicity and whether this could increase the risks to the individual. Use basic, pertinent information. Do not detail vulnerabilities, illnesses or health conditions, exposure to exploitation or coercive relationships and avoid wherever possible post codes and street names. This can enhance risk to the individual. Organised Crime Groups have been known to target and recruit missing children as a result of publicity appeals.

**Public perception** - Consider language and wording used. Appeals and images can influence public perception and evoke prejudice. Assumptions will be made of the individual and this can be intensified by shared appeals. Wording should be brief, factual and sensitive to the individual and their family. Consider the issue of racial and gender discrimination bias. Comments made in response to social media appeals should be closely monitored for negative remarks or intelligence.

**Best use of images** - The photographs used are likely to be the most impactful element of the appeal; consider the effect on the individual's mental health, social standing and be mindful of public assumption. Ensure recent images are of a good likeness and clarity as far as possible, with custody images only ever used as a last resort when no other image can be obtained from any other source.

**Family/informant awareness** - It is vital that as consent for publicity is discussed, those providing it are aware of what this could entail, including that police may make operational decisions in their best efforts to locate the individual safely. Media appeals aren't always appropriate due to the risk to the missing individual. This needs to be communicated to the family/friends to prevent their own media appeals being used and including information that is best withheld from public sharing. Police and family need to have an understanding that they are working together to find the individual.

**Post-appeal housekeeping** - Minimise the online legacy of the appeal by ensuring prompt removal from force-controlled media platforms. Update 'Missing People' charity, the media and any other partner in order that they can remove appeals. Remember the rights for individuals to be forgotten after they have returned.



#### NCA - UK MISSING PERSONS UNIT

- Force Alerts
- Coastal Alerts
- Enquiries with professional bodies



#### MISSING PEOPLE CHARITY

- Safeguarding Briefing Network
- Findsafe
- Publicity Decision Tree - see attached link



Missing People  
Publicity Decision Tr



#### OTHER CONTACTS

- Local community or religious leaders
- Travelling community police liaison
- Local train / bus station
- B&B Alerts via local tourist info office
- Notification to previous contacts, e.g. previous care homes