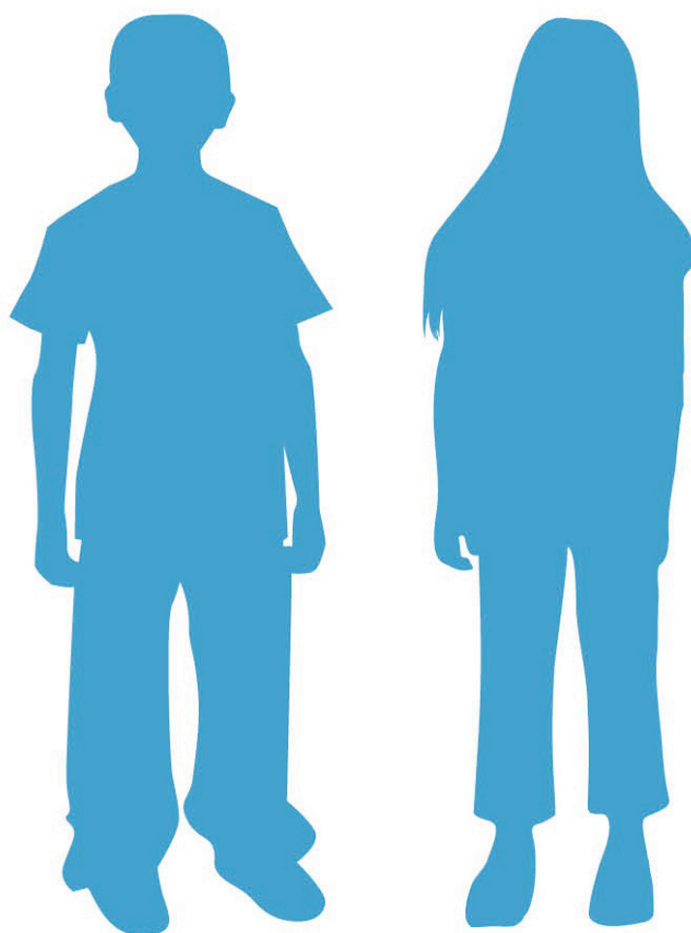


# **BEST PRACTICE GUIDE: OPERATING THE **CHILD** **ABDUCTION ALERT** SYSTEM**



With the support of the  
Daphne Programme  
of the European Union

## **“Best Practice Guide: Operating the Child Abduction Alert System”**

Prepared within the framework of the project ‘Establishing of Child Abduction Alert Cyprus’ coordinated by “Hope For Children” UNCRC Policy Center.

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## 1. General Information and Purpose of this Guide

This Best Practice Guide is designed to provide important information to the public for the activation of Child Abduction Alert System in Europe (hereafter referred to as the “System”). The information provided in this guide is to increase public understanding and involvement in situations where there is a concern that a child has been abducted or disappeared. Moreover, this guide aims to strengthen the efforts of public and private organizations which handle such cases. The Guide is considered as a useful reference point for Cyprus and other European countries. It was prepared under the implementation of the European funded program, “DAPHNE III” (2007 – 2013) and particularly it is based on the valuable information provided by some European organizations that operate the system through survey procedures.

Launching and operating the Child Abduction Alert System in Europe by utilizing the existing experience and knowledge of other EU member states, join forces of the public and private authorities/bodies. These forces facilitate Police and European Hotline for Missing Children efforts to help children return safely to their families. Law enforcement agencies and



NGOs, who handle cases of child abduction, also benefit as it enhances their efforts to battle this problem.

The Child Abduction Alert Mechanism is a system, which operates in 12 European countries in order to combat the problem. In 2007, the European Commission considered the launching of Abduction Alert Mechanism

as an immediate resolution to impact this severe problem in Europe. In order to formalize this decision, the Council of the European Union set the stage for an official declaration requesting the European states to launch a child alert system. It also required from all states to determine the guidelines at a national level in operating cross-border alert systems and activating the child abduction alert system (Council of the European Union, 2008, v. 2). Presently, twelve European states operate the mechanism and cooperate with each other in an effort to significantly reduce the number of cases of missing children. The twelve countries which operate this system are Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and the United Kingdom. The unified “border” cooperation between the twelve countries makes the process even more substantial and effective.

The European Commission developed basic principles and guidelines which they could be used by each EU member state as a benchmark in their effort of launching and operating the system. (Council of the European Union, 2008, 15084/08). The guidelines provide the resources to each EU member state on how the system operates effectively. The resources include certain criteria for launching the system, certain content and format related issues, specific duration of the alert and certain ways of disseminating the system. In this way, the Commission seeks to maintain consistent operation and to build collaborative relationships between the EU countries.

The information described in this Guide was derived from collecting data based on the existing tools and guidelines followed by EU countries which operate the system. Each of the 12 EU member states was asked to complete a questionnaire that will contribute in collecting information and present the best practices of the operation of the system.

## **2. The Importance of the System**

Launching and operating the System in Europe joins forces in order to help the efforts of the Police and the European Hotline for Missing Children (116000) to trace children safely return to their families. Law enforcement agencies and NGOs who handle cases of child abduction will enhance their efforts to battle this problem. The activation of the System plays a significant role also in cases where there are suspicions that the child is located in specific country. According to the investigation needed to be conducted regarding cross border cases, the effective communication and collaboration of each country with the appropriate Law Enforcement unit of the other country is considered as a catalyst in solving this problem. Also the System is considered as a vital tool to ensure public participation and involvement, as it is a mechanism designed specifically for crowdsourcing which enticing large number of people (individuals and organizations) to contribute to these efforts.

## **3. Methodology**

The best practice guide was developed based on information derived from collecting primary data from questionnaires administered to all EU member states operating the system. As depicted in Appendix 1 questionnaires were constructed to collect information regarding the procedures followed by each operating country including training techniques, collaboration and agreements between stakeholders, actions involving and activating public awareness and contribution. Moreover, one of the main purposes of the questionnaire was to

share technical and fundamental knowledge while presenting the outcomes and social impact of the operation of the System.

Also, information was generated from desk research procedures and it constituted the main part of the secondary data collected for the purpose of this guide. One technique used to collect information through desk research approach was to contact key persons who are involved in such cases. Those are police officers and staff member of organizations responsible to support police investigation in cases of missing children. Other external desk research techniques used to collect data include the personal contact that 116000 Service in Cyprus has with other 116000 Hotline staff members to share knowledge regarding this field. Significant contribution to the development of this guide was the study visit conducted at the Child Focus' premises in Brussels where tacit knowledge (use of tools and software of the system) as well as explicit knowledge (previous examples and standards activating the system in other countries) was gained. Finally, the Cypriot government's contribution to provide information regarding the law enforcement procedures followed in the country was a major resource in constructing a more comprehensive and completed representation of the system. More specifically, the already existing cooperation between the Cyprus Police and the 116 000 service in Cyprus highly contributed to ensuring that all the legal matters in relation to the establishment of the child alert are taken into consideration. Internet based research was another useful method to gather information to complete the best practice guide. Plethora of information available from related websites was browsed for the purpose of developing the guide.

#### **4. General Definition of the term “Missing Child”**

There is no standard definition used by all member states in Europe to determine and assess whether the child is missing. Few member states develop specific terms to define the situation whereas other states rely on their local police decision to determine and define the situation as “a missing case”. The term “missing children” is categorized into 5 distinct categories according to Missing Children Europe (MCE) which are very helpful for Law enforcers to clarify and identify each case. MCE is the European Federation which operates as an umbrella organization joining together 28 non -governmental organizations working on issues regarding missing and sexually exploited children. The legislation of each EU member state defines the term “missing child” according to National Laws as well as specified by International Conventions. These categories are:

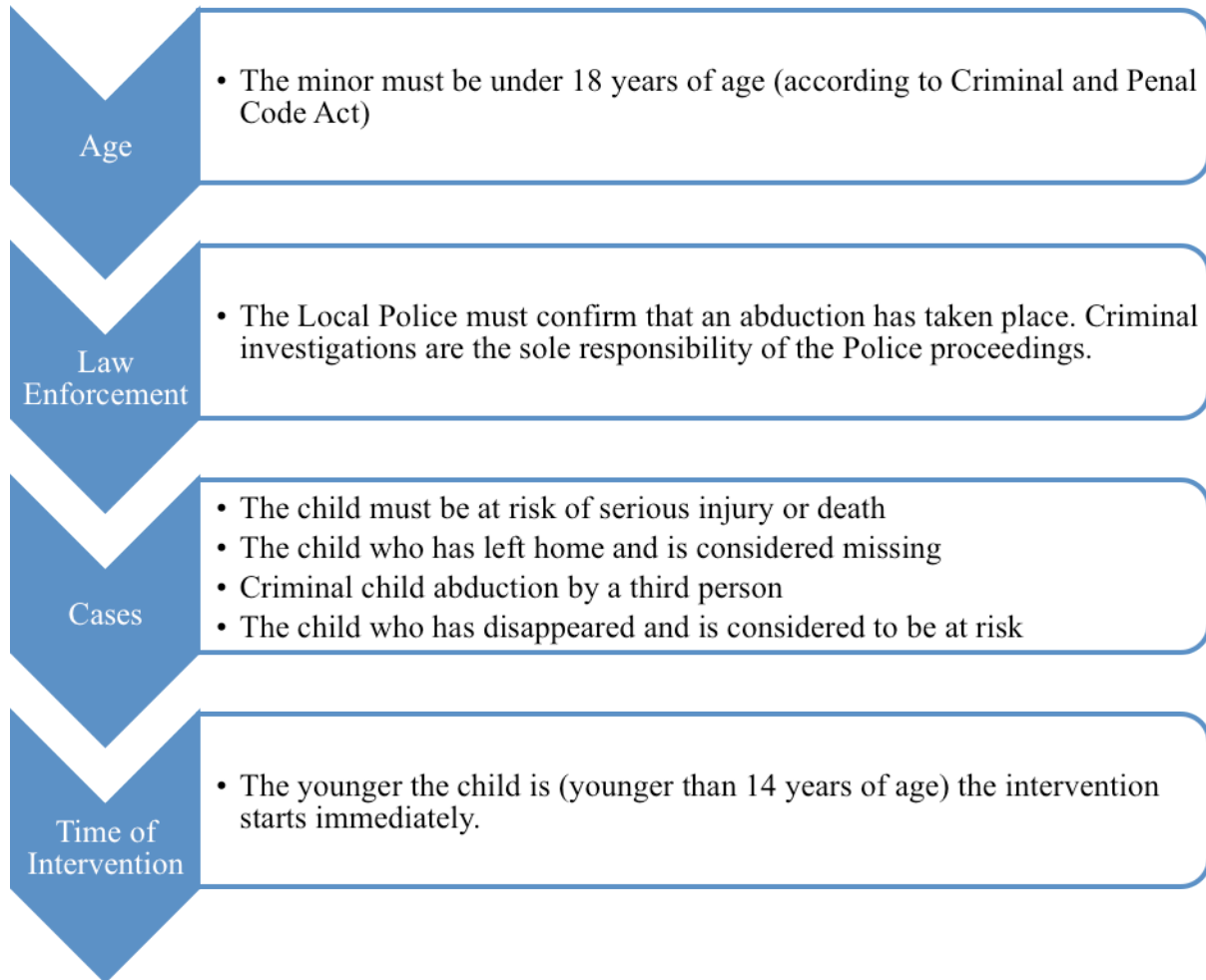
## CATEGORIES OF MISSING CHILDREN AND STATISTICAL DATA

1. Runaways (national / international): This category includes children who left (run away) from the place they live and being taken care.
2. Parental child abduction (national / international): This category describes children who are kept against their will by one parent (or the legal custodian) in another country or another place other than that of children's home or home country. EU countries that do not differentiate between national from cross border parental abduction, then they could follow the provisions of Hague Abduction Convention
3. Missing unaccompanied migrants' minors: Disappearances of migrant children fall in this category.
4. Abduction by a third person: This category describes the criminal cases in which children are allegedly abducted by another person other than the parents. The reification of this category depends on the particular jurisdiction's criminal law in each EU country
5. Lost, injured or otherwise missing children: This is a more general category including children disappearances with no determined or ostensible cause. It also includes cases where the children have been injured and missing.

According to data derived from the MCE annual reports (2011-2013) showed that there was a 17% decrease in Runaway cases in 2 years range. Specifically, in 2011 67% of all cases were reported as runaways compared to 2013 where 50% of all cases were recorded as Runaways. However, there was a 10% increase in parental child abduction from 2011 to 2013 (in 2011 26% of these cases were recorded whereas in 2013 36% of all cases were reported as parental abduction).

However, there are certain criteria for determining whether a child is considered as missing and are used across European states. These criteria must be met to activate the System. The operators must make sure that all the criteria from the checklist below are met to proceed with the investigations.

## CHECK LIST OF THE CRITERIA TO ENSURE ACTIVATION





## **5. Knowledge Transfer**

### **5.1. The operation**

The operation of the system varies according to each national Law enforcement approaches to deal with each case. The most prevalent fact that generally appears in the questionnaire data reveals that constant communication between police and operators of the System plays a vital role in the resolution of the problem. In some countries the process is just “a few clicks of a button” which makes the activation simple and quick whereas in other countries the process follows some complicated methods but effective as well.

#### **5.1.1. Tools**

A specific software is used to enable the automatic operation of the message into the specific format and to be disseminated quickly to partners and therefore to the public. A database of contacts plays a vital role as it enhances and improves the communication between the stakeholders during the operation. Electronic media and computer-mediated tools, such as website, Facebook, twitter etc., are also considered as necessary tools for the effective dissemination of the information. The use of social media is considered as a modern method of disseminating the information as quickly as possible and most importantly is a tool to increase public awareness and active participation in police efforts.

#### **5.1.2. Target Group**

The target group is distinguished into two main categories. The first category includes the child who is under 18 years of age (according to Criminal and Penal Code Act) and must be at risk of serious injury or death, the child who has left home and is considered missing, or a child who has disappeared and is considered to be at risk.

The second main category of target group is the general private and public partners. By using all necessary resources, the partners get informed regarding these issues that could dynamically assist the role and efforts of the police and law enforcement in general. Specific agreements/ mandates/ and or protocols are established among involved partners in each EU country where the system has been operating. Partners' agreements make the process easier and more efficient for detecting the missing child by directly and hastily disseminating the information to the public which will then assist to combat these issues. Agreements could be signed by private TV and radio stations, NGOs, and volunteers that are willing to contribute to the police efforts.

## 5.2. Other countries operating the system

The important collaboration between EU countries, especially those which operate the system, must be kept constant in gaining significant outcomes that can be beneficial to the victims and their families. To illustrate, collaboration between national and international Law authorities, media, investigators etc., is useful in the fight against cross border abduction cases. In some EU countries, police is the main responsible actor that through existing channels communicates with other police department to investigate the crime.

116000 is the European emergency line for missing children and is the most convenient and easily accessible service that all children, parents and the public can use to receive the proper support. The Hotline has been operated in more than 24 EU member states (Belgium, France, Greece, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, The Netherlands, Spain, England, Estonia, Germany, Malta, Cyprus, Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Slovenia) and it has been coordinated by the MCE. It is recognized as a common system for the immediate response in cases where children are at risk. One of the main activities of this service is the guidance for parents how to receive support when their children have disappeared. Another important aspect of this service is the European expansion of its operation. Specifically, the Hotline 116000 operates also outside the prevailing borders of the EU member state, thus it facilitates the investigation of cross border cases of missing children. All the operators of the line are qualified to provide the necessary psychological support to parents, are also trained to get constant updates on issues regarding missing children, and are responsible to maintain effective relationships with law enforcement agencies. Non-Governmental Organizations are responsible for the operation of 116000 in each country. In 2012, operators of 116000 responded to 89340 calls Europe-wide (Annual Report, 2012).

The German NGO named Initiative Vermisste Kinder with cooperation of the 116000 Hotline-Missing Children Europe are responsible to coordinate public and private authorities in Germany. Their goal is the effective support in the search for missing children and the maintenance of close cooperation with other organizations (public and private) which work for children and adolescents rights in general.

In Greece the system has been operated for 8 years based on the coordination of an NGO (the Smile of the Child) and the cooperation of Law Authorities and 50 other public and private entities. The focus of a successful activation of the system is mainly on the vital competence of the trained administrator who could be either from the Police Department or from a public authority responsible for dealing with the issue. Also, Greek authorities based

all their efforts on the effective communication and collaboration of the involved stakeholders and the instantaneous dissemination of the information to the public.

Recognizing the hazardous effects on children prevailing from such cases the authorities in 2008 Dutch authorities decided to launch the System in The Netherlands. The Dutch minister of Justice affirmed that the System could save many innocent young people lives. Therefore, the cooperation of Law enforcement members with IT specialists established a non-profit organization that will coordinate the operation of the System. Currently, the Dutch Amber Alert Organization is considered to be the leading organization and fundamental point of reference regarding the operation of the System in Europe since it maintains effective cooperation between EU police and all Law authorities of other member states and it assists for the establishment of an EU network. The established network of EU Alert systems provides all member states guidance and clarifications on how they will officially and effectively approach each situation by following specific guidelines based on the European Parliament declaration as well as the European Commission's goals and expectations.

The European Center (Child Focus) dealing systematically with issues regarding child abduction and sexual exploitation is another leading organization operating in Belgium. The organization's main goals are to contribute significantly to the efforts of all European member states to prevent child abduction and respond to missing children cases.

In the United Kingdom, the command of the National Crime Agency, CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) is in charge for the coordination of the Child Alert system. From the moment the Senior Investigating Officer in UK decides that the System needs to be put into operation, the CEOP organize all necessary information needed to be disseminated through media to alert the public.

Similarly, in Czech Republic, and Romanian specific strategies are monitored in order to operate an abduction alert system. Specifically, the Bureau of Criminal Police in Czech Republic (SIRENE) and the Prosecutors in Romanian are responsible to investigate the case and decide for the activation of the System. Following the command received by each official authority in the specific countries, it puts the System into operation.

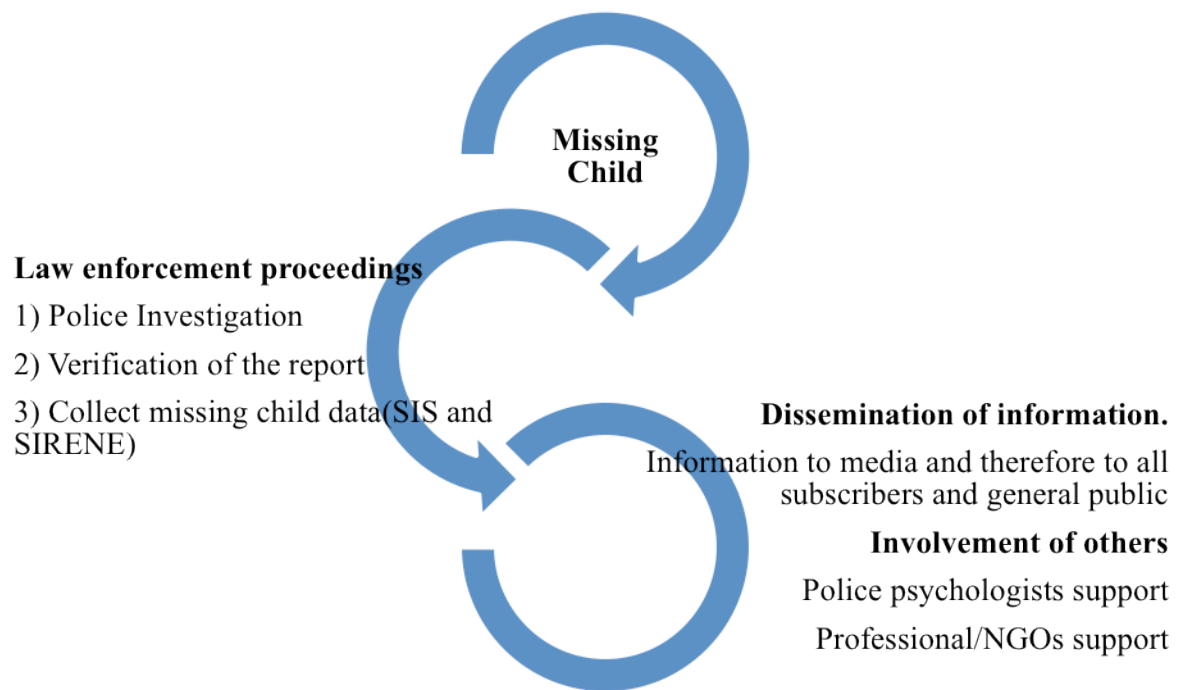
Currently, launching the System in Cyprus is in progress. It reinforces the efforts of the Cyprus Police and the European Hotline for Missing Children (116000) to trace children safely return to their families. Two Organisations, the "Hope For Children" UNCRC Policy Center (HFC) and the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family

(SPAVO), which operate the European Hotline for Missing Children 116000 in Cyprus, are responsible for the operation of the System in Cyprus.

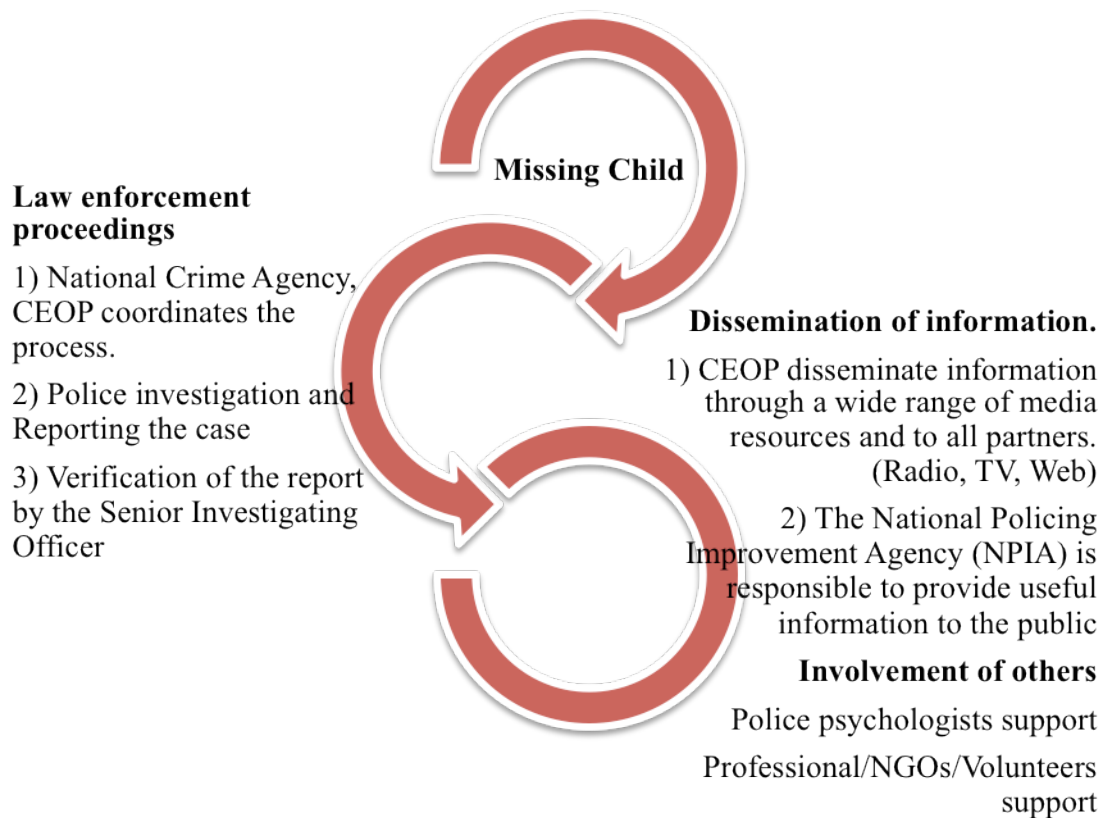
### 5.2.1 Illustration of how does the System operate in some EU member states.

The depictions below illustrate how does the System operate in Czech Republic, UK, Romania, Belgium, Greece, The Netherlands, Germany and ultimately in Cyprus.

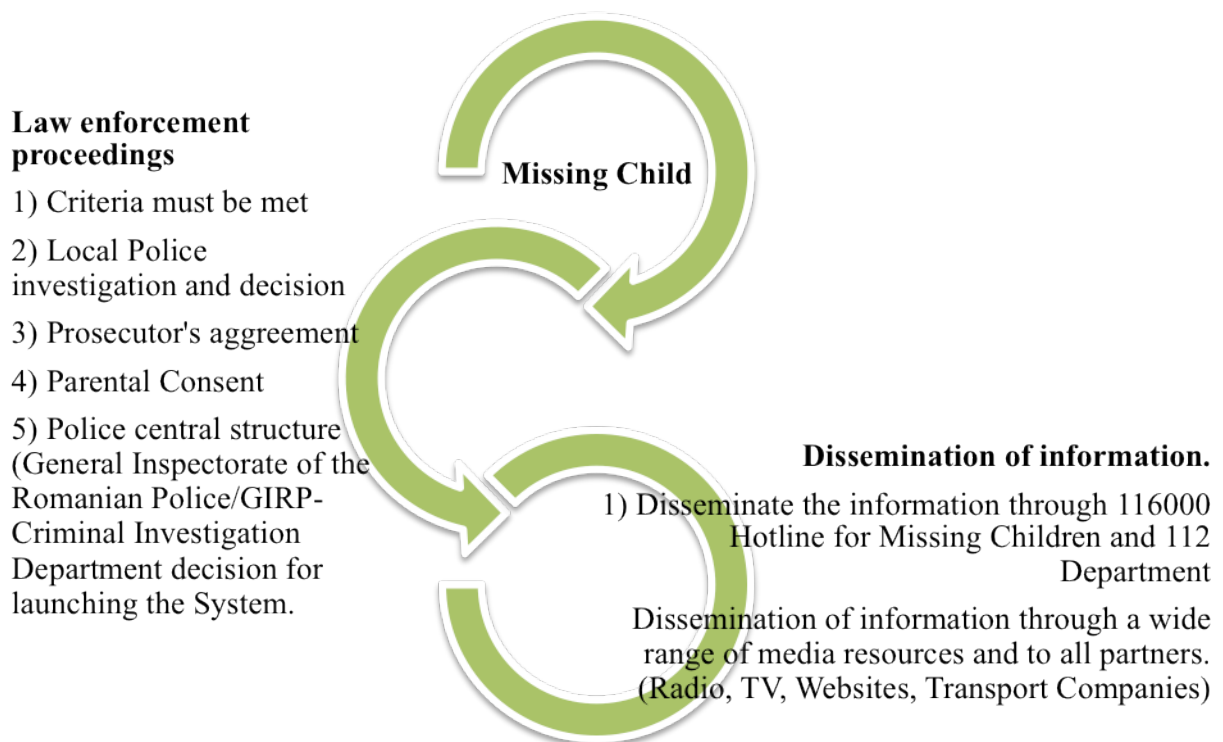
#### Czech Republic Child Alert System



## United Kingdom Child Alert System



## Romania Child Alert System



## Greece Child Alert System

### **Law enforcement proceedings**

- 1) Hellenic Police investigation and approval
- 2) Parental Consent
- 3) The Smile of the Child coordinates the Launching of the System
- 4) The System is activated by the programmes' administrator

### **Missing Child**

### **Dissemination of information.**

- 1) Disseminate the information through 116000 Hotline for Missing Children
- 2) Dissemination of information through 50 public and private entities (ministries and public authorities, TV channels, Radio, Internet and mobile providers, volunteers)
- 3) Actively engagement of public

## The Netherlands Child Alert System 1

### **Law enforcement proceedings**

- 1) Local Police investigation and approval
- 2) Dutch Amber Alert Organization coordinates the Launching of the System
- 4) The System is activated by the Organization's administrator

### **Missing Child**

### **Dissemination of information.**

- 1) Disseminate the information through public and private entities linked to the CMS platform (public authorities, TV channels, Radio, Internet and mobile providers, mobile applications, social media)
- 2) Actively engage public to gather information regarding the case.

## Germany Amber Alarm

### **Law enforcement proceedings**

- 1) Local Police investigation and approval
- 2) Initiative Vermisste Kinder coordinates the Launching of the System
- 3) The System is activated by Initiative Vermisste Kinder

### **Missing Child**

### **Dissemination of information.**

- 1) Disseminate the information through 116000 Hotline for Missing Children
- 2) Disseminate the information through public and private entities (public authorities, TV channels, Radio, Internet and mobile providers, mobile applications, social media)
- 2) Actively engage public to gather information regarding the case.

## Cyprus Child Alert System (in progress)

### **Law enforcement proceedings**

- 1) Investigation to clarify indications that the child's life and health is at risk
- 2) Operator Receives the Report on missing Child through the European hotline 116000, or Cyprus Police.
- 2) The Police sends Approval for the activation
- 3) A parental consent form must be signed
- 4) The operator of "Hope For Children" UNCRC Policy Center (HFC) and the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO) will coordinate the activation of the System.

### **Missing Child**

### **Dissemination of information.**

- 1) Disseminate the information through 116000 Hotline for Missing Children
- 2) Disseminate the information through public and private entities (public authorities, TV channels, Radio, Internet and mobile providers, mobile applications, social media)
- 2) Actively engage public to gather information regarding the case.



### 5.3. Cross border

Statistical data, collected from 24 EU countries, indicate that in 2008 a number greater than 1000 corresponds to incoming international abduction cases in the country where Germany has the highest number of incidents (n= 325). During the same year, there was a similar number of international abduction cases recorded as cases outside the country (n= 1162) and United Kingdom with the highest score (n=181). (Information derived from European Parliament's Committee, 2015). Unfortunately, statistical results beyond 2008 regarding these cases are limited and incomplete due to unavailability of some national authorities to provide relevant data.

The Hague Convention on Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction was adopted in October 1980 and aims:

- a) To ensure the safe return of abducted children back to their home country
- b) To protect children's rights as stated in the law of each contracting EU member state and respected by all other contracting states.

### 5.4. Trainings

Trainings of the operators and relevant stakeholders are considered very important as they ensure the producibility and competence of the operators and project team. Therefore, in each EU member state in which the System is operating all users of the system undergo training either by an EU expert on the operation of the system or by local police specialists. The expert shares knowledge and provides practical guidance to all involved users. Moreover, operating manuals both for operators (internal operational manual) and involved stakeholders (communication tool) contribute to a more comprehensive education of the System. The manuals entail detailed information regarding the use of the system including descriptions of the types of messages, suggested duration and frequency of the alert, and termination of alert.



## 6. Empiricism.

### Burdens resulting from the operation of the system. Providing solutions for the improvement of the system.

- Impact of the child's and family's privacy
  - **Solution:** Assessment must be made by specialists; media that are 'privacy neutral' and all information must be destroyed after the deactivation of the System.
- Lack of necessary training of people who operate the System and who deal with these cases.
  - **Solution:** Trainings must be progressive in each country so as the police, psychologists and all involved parties be capable to adhere to issues of crisis intervention.
- Lack of continuity in communication between involved parties and police.
  - **Solution:** Communication with the police must be kept constant before and after the case. Maintaining communication with other Law enforcement units is of equal importance in all countries in which the system is operating specifically for cross border cases.
- Sketchy information about the case
  - **Solution:** provide as detailed information as possible regarding each case. The dissemination of information by each national authority must be standardized and operative so as the information must be assimilated rapidly and effectively.
- Differences in Juridical and Law enforcement systems in each country create some obstacles in resolving the problem particularly for crossborder cases.
  - **Solution:** Given the fact that judicial authorities have full responsibility to investigate cross-border cases and evaluate the appropriate law procedures followed to resolve the missing cases, each national law authority must acknowledge and consider the legal framework of each country in disseminating important information regarding international cases. Also, a universal operation manual developed with the corporation of all cross-border states by establishing agreements between borders will be considered as a stepping stone for establishing better communication between member states.

## 7. RESULTS

### **Social impact of the operation**

Launching and establishing the Child Abduction Alert in Cyprus enables all relevant stakeholders to cooperate and work under a unified system to enhance the efforts of the police to address the problem of missing children. Launching the system in Cyprus and in other EU member states result in strengthening other child alert initiatives in the EU since a more structured cooperation is established especially for cross-border cases. There is a need to strengthen the role and effectiveness of all authorities as well as to increase awareness of European society regarding the mechanisms of finding missing children and young adults. The Child Alert System is considered as a fundamental value to the efficacy of the “European Hotline 116000” operating in Cyprus and to the intensification of cooperation with other European countries. The System also promotes and appends certain policies and guidelines that support media abidingness to dedicate space and time displaying messages and broadcasting information when it is highly needed. Moreover, the increasing willingness of the public to contribute to this effort is noteworthy. Following dissemination and awareness campaigns of the system’s operation, people provided extremely positive feedback.

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### Websites

- <http://missingchildreneurope.eu/>
- 116 000 - The European hotline number for missing children - 116 000 national contact points
- 116 000 - The European hotline number for missing children - 116 000 national contact points\_files
- [http://ec.europa.eu/justice\\_home/daphnetoolkit/html/organisations/dpt\\_org\\_be\\_399\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/daphnetoolkit/html/organisations/dpt_org_be_399_en.html)
- <http://missingchildreneurope.eu/>
- [http://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/enop/non-ind/0\\_154/index.html](http://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/enop/non-ind/0_154/index.html)
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## Appendices

### 1. Interview Guide contributing in collecting information and in developing the best practice guide.

# Launching and operating the Child Abduction Alert System in Cyprus

## Interview Guide

---

<i>Name of Organization:</i>
-
<i>Telephone:</i>
-
<i>Email Address:</i>
-
<i>Person responsible for this interview guide completion:</i>
-
<i>Date:</i>
-
<i>Year of Child Alert System establishment:</i>
-

All information gathered in this form will be kept strictly confidential.

### Purpose of the Current Project:

Launching and operating the Child Abduction Alert System in Cyprus by utilizing the existing experience and knowledge in EU countries operating the Child Alert the public and private authorities/bodies will join forces in order to help the efforts of the Police and the European Hotline for Missing Children to trace children safely return to their families. Law enforcement agencies and NGOs who handle cases of child abduction will also benefit as it will enhance their efforts to battle this problem.

### Purpose of the Current Interview Guide:

To collect data based on the existing tools and guidelines followed by EU countries which operate the system. By completing the interview/questionnaire in each country, it will contribute in collecting information and in developing the best practice guide. The developed Practice Guide also focusing on cross-border cases will be then distributed to other EU countries, especially those which haven't launched the System yet.

## What was the Main Purpose?

### What was the need to launch the system?

Please provide your answer here

### Why do you think it is important for your country?

Please provide your answer here

## Knowledge Transfer.

### How does it work?

Please provide your answer here

### What tools are needed?

Please provide your answer here

### What is the target group (receiving the information)?

Please provide your answer here

### Technological tools used

Please provide your answer here

### What resources are needed for its operation? In terms of local cooperation with actors and partnerships established?

Please provide your answer here

### Is there any operational manual? Is it useful for the users? Why? Do you have any feedback? To whom is it available?

Please provide your answer here

**Is there a protocol/mandate between your institution and the government for the operation of the system?**

Please provide your answer here

**Do you collaborate with other EU countries who operate the system? If yes which countries? Why do you think is necessary to have this collaboration?**

Please provide your answer here

**What procedures are followed to train the staff members who operate the system?**

Please provide your answer here



**Are there trainings available for the target group receiving the operation?**

Please provide your answer here

**Do you think the contributions of experts are important to the system?**

Please provide your answer here

**Which country do you consider as “experts” of the EU child alert system?**

Please provide your answer here

## Empiricism

**What are the burdens resulting from the operation of the system?**

Please provide your answer here

**From the year of establishment what is your impression about the operation in terms of its usefulness and effectiveness?**

Please provide your answer here

**Do you collect any data/statistics about the cases in which the system is activated?**

Please provide your answer here

**Why do you think it is necessary to operate the system in other countries in Europe?**

Please provide your answer here

## **Outcomes.**

**What are the outcomes of the operation of the system, if any?**

Please provide your answer here

**What is the social impact of the operation?**

Please provide your answer here

### How do you think people respond to the system?

Please provide your answer here

### Principle Issues

Do you follow any ethical guidelines concerning the technical operations of the system? Is there any code of conduct for operators or the target groups receiving the information?

Please provide your answer here

## What is Needed?

**What changes are necessary for the improved operation of the system in general and in your country?**

Please provide your answer here

**What is necessary for the operators and target groups in order to handle the system in an improved manner?**

Please provide your answer here

## Your Opinion Matters

**What is your opinion on the usefulness of creating a system with emphasis on the management of transnational cases?**

Please provide your answer here

**What is your opinion on having a guide including an assortment of all good practice on translational cases which will be distributed in all EU countries?**

Please provide your answer here