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Dial 116 000: The European hotline for missing children

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INTRODUCTION

Every day children go missing all over the EU. But who should the parent of a missing child turn to for help? As more and more Europeans live, work and travel in other EU countries, it is increasingly important that access to essential services does not depend on 'local knowledge'. Hotlines to report missing children already exist in several Member States, but the number to call differs from one country to another.

On 15 February 2007, the Commission adopted a Decision¹ requiring Member States to reserve the six-digit number range starting with 116 for services of social value in the EU. 116000 was the first telephone number reserved in all Member States as a hotline to report missing children. This was one of the first practical measures adopted under the Commission Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child'². The combination 'same number — same service' aims to ensure that the same service is always associated with the same number across the entire European Union. Having the same hotline number will help children and parents in distress to find help when outside their Member State of origin, for example if a child goes missing during a family holiday.

In June 2008, the Commission asked Member States³ to provide detailed data on the implementation of the 116000 hotline. The results of the survey showed that Member States had done little to make the availability of the number known. This has delayed the implementation of the missing children hotline across the EU. The revision of the 'telecom package' adopted in November 2009 inserted a new obligation⁴ for the Member States requiring them to make every effort to ensure that the hotline is activated. The deadline for transposition of this provision by Member States is 25 May 2011. The goal of the Commission is to ensure that the 116000 hotline is made fully operational everywhere in the EU.

More than three years after the adoption of the Commission Decision 2007/116/EC, the situation is far from being satisfactory. The 116000 hotline is currently operational only in 13

¹ Commission Decision 2007/116/EC of 15 February 2007 on reserving the national numbering range beginning with 116 for harmonised numbers for harmonised services of social value, OJ L 49, 17.2.2007, p. 30–33, as last amended by Commission Decision 2009/884/EC. For more information see also http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/policy/ecommm/current/pan_european/index_en.htm

² Commission Communication COM(2006) 367final of 4 July 2006: "Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child", available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2006:0367:FIN:EN:PDF>.

³ The Communications Committee was set up by Directive 2002/21/EC. Through this Committee, the Member States report to the Commission on their implementation of the hotline [Communications Committee](#), COCOMM 08-06 and COCOMM 08-18 http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/info/cocom1/library?l=/public_documents_2008

⁴ Article 27a of the Universal Service Directive (Directive 2009/136/EC amending Directive 2002/22/EC) lays down that Member States shall promote the specific numbers in the numbering range beginning with "116"; shall encourage the provision within their territory of the services for which such numbers are reserved; shall ensure that disabled end-users are able to access services and that citizens are adequately informed of the existence and use of services. In addition to measures of general applicability to all numbers in the "116" numbering range Member States shall make every effort to ensure that citizens have access to a service operating a hotline to report cases of missing children. The hotline shall be available on the number "116000". OJ L 337/11 18.12.2009

Member States: Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom⁵.

The purpose of this Communication is twofold. On the one hand, the Commission renews its call on the Member States to implement the missing children hotline as a matter of priority. On the other hand, the Commission intends to ensure that the same high quality of service is offered throughout the Union.

To this end the Commission intends to provide practical support to the Member States that have not yet implemented the hotline by bringing to light the problems that have been identified so far and by facilitating the exchange of best practice.

The Communication is structured in three sections: the first section identifies the obstacles preventing the implementation of the hotline in those Member States where the service is still not operational. The second section identifies best practices and solutions to help the Member States concerned to overcome the obstacles identified. The third section proposes common minimum standards guaranteeing a high quality of service for the hotline.

1. WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES PREVENTING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 116000 HOTLINE?

1.1. The steps for making the 116000 hotline operational

Under the terms of Commission Decision 2007/116/EC ("the Decision"), Member States are required to *reserve* the number 116000 for the missing children hotline. Once the necessary *preparatory steps* have been taken, the Member States are then required to make it known that the *number is available* for attribution, so that applications for the right to use this number may be submitted. The deadline to comply with these requirements was 31 August 2007. All Member States have completed this step.

The Member States are then required to assign the number to an organisation (such as an NGO or a telecom operator). To date, only 14 Member States⁶ have completed this step.

Following this assignment, the Member States should make every effort to make sure that the hotline is fully operational.

1.2. Which problems have been identified?

The Communications Committee set up by Directive 2002/21/EC on a common regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services provides the means for the Member States to report back to the Commission on their implementation of the hotline.

On 29 June 2010, the Commission sent a questionnaire to the Member States and to over 30 organisations in charge of providing services of social value through the 116 numbers⁷. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information on i) costs (both overall and telecoms

⁵ In United Kingdom the hotline is partially operational

⁶ Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom

⁷ Communications Committee COCOMM10-30, 14 October 2010. Report available at: http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/infso/cocom1/library?l=public_documents_2010

specific costs), ii) financing of the service, iii) number of calls managed, iv) technical aspects and v) other relevant issues.

Based on the information gathered, two key issues appear to be delaying the implementation of the missing children hotline: lack of information and cost.

1.2.1. Lack of information

Lack of information about the existence of the reserved 116000 number for missing children hotlines is reported by several service providers as hampering or slowing down the assignment process. This finding is confirmed by a recent study co-financed under the Daphne III Programme carried out by Missing Children Europe⁸, and by the preliminary results of the study ‘Evaluation of the Impact of the EU Instruments Affecting Children’s Rights’⁹.

According to the respondents, lack of information has led to fewer applications from potential service providers because they were not aware of the availability of the number. Potential service providers have also been struggling with lack of information about which public authorities to contact in order to apply for assignment, lack of information about the procedures to follow and lack of coordination between the Member State authorities and the national regulatory authorities.

Lack of awareness of the missing children hotlines among the general public has also been identified as a problem.

1.2.2. Cost of running the hotline

The main difficulty identified by the service providers is the cost of running the hotline. They indicated that financing is one of the factors hindering the introduction and operation of the hotlines.

The Decision describes the 116000 service as follows: *the service (a) takes calls reporting missing children and passes them on to the Police; (b) offers guidance to and supports the persons responsible for the missing child; (c) supports the investigation.* Moreover a specific condition attached to the right of use of the 116000 requires that the service is available 24/7 nationwide. The respondents have pointed out that this requirement implies having trained staff and specific know-how that are not readily available for free through the help of volunteers. The respondents have also pointed out that the service should not just be available in the language of the Member State concerned (EU citizens travelling to another Member State often do not speak the language of that Member State). Costs related to language training for staff can also be substantial.

⁸ Missing Children Europe is the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children. As an umbrella organisation, it represents 24 Non Governmental Organisations active in 16 Member States of the European Union and Switzerland.

⁹ The Lithuanian Public Policy and Management Institute is carrying out for the Commission an ‘Evaluation of the Impact of the EU Instruments Affecting Children’s Rights with a View to Assessing the Level of Protection and Promotion of Children’s Rights in the EU’. The final report will be published at:
http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/policies_children_intro_en.htm.

The service providers are not always in a position to sustain the staffing and other administrative costs for the hotlines. In some cases telecommunications costs may also have to be borne by the service providers (this is estimated to represent around 5% of the overall budget¹⁰).

The three main sources of available financing are: public funding, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes and private funds. The financing arrangements vary among the Member States.

1.2.3. Cost of calling the hotline

Most of the service providers indicated that the 116000 hotline may not necessarily be available for users of mobile roaming and for persons calling from abroad (international calls). This would defeat the purpose of the single 116000 number, as travelling parents and children would not be able to call the hotline from their mobile phones, for example.

Helpline organisations or sponsoring telecom operators may not be willing (or able) to cover the costs of these calls. Since the 116000 hotline is required to be a freephone number, the cost of the call is normally borne by the service provider receiving the calls. This may be difficult for service providers which have charitable status, given that communication costs related to roaming can place a significant burden on their resources.

The regulatory treatment of freephone numbers differs between Member States and freephone designation does not guarantee that access to the number is actually free of charge to all types of callers. The Decision does not impose any obligation as such on the Member States to ensure that calls to the missing children hotline are free of charge. This is in contrast with the EU legal framework applicable to the 112 emergency numbers, which requires that Member States ensure that end-users are able to call the emergency services free of charge in all situations.

Another issue identified by the respondents in connection with the situation of mobile users travelling through or to another Member State is linked to the lack of existing agreements to cover the roaming costs.

2. BEST PRACTICES

Based on the feedback from the Communications Committee, the outcome of the questionnaire, and the findings of the Daphne III study carried out by Missing Children Europe, examples of good practices on how to address the main problems exist in several Member States.

2.1.1. Lack of information

On the 25 May 2009 **Missing Children Europe**, with the support of the Daphne III programme, launched a broad campaign to raise public awareness of the hotline by distributing posters, flyers and bracelets in 10 Member States.

¹⁰ Source: Communications Committee COCOMM10-30, 14 October 2010.

In 2009, **France** launched an information campaign involving distribution of more than 50.000 posters and coordinated actions with the police and the *gendarmerie*.

2.1.2. Attribution Process

Hungarian authorities organised a conference with Hungarian telecom operators on the introduction of 116000 in the Hungarian numbering system. The **British** National Regulatory Authority asked the UK Government to assist them in the selection for assigning the hotline to a service provider.

In some countries National Regulatory Authorities work with the Ministry of the Interior to make sure that the best service provider is selected for the hotline by using a grid with specific criteria (**France**).

2.1.3. Running costs

In **Hungary** the overall cost of the hotline service is partly financed by public funding, as part of the national programme for the protection of children's rights.

In **Portugal** the service operator managed to obtain public funding for the entire running of the service.

In **Belgium** the operator receives an annually renewable grant from the National Lottery and works on the basis of a public-private partnership.

The **Greek** service provider runs the service without bearing any cost, as all costs are covered by the telecom operator under its corporate social responsibility programme.

Some Member States (e.g. **Belgium** and **France**) have converted the hotline into an emergency number, i.e. have switched their previous emergency line to the hotline. As an emergency line, public funding covers the costs and the service is provided on the basis of a public-private partnership.

2.1.4. Telecom costs

The telecom operators in **Portugal** and **Romania** have agreed to cover the telephone costs. In **Poland** all mobile phone operators have agreed not to charge the telephone costs to the service provider. As a result, the service is free of charge for the caller and for the service provider.

In **Hungary** the service provider has agreed to negotiate a 'commercial price' which was defined as the minimum price charged to a medium-sized business customer.

3. COMMON MINIMUM STANDARDS GUARANTEEING A HIGH QUALITY OF SERVICE

Once the hotline is operational in every Member State, it is important to deliver a high-quality service throughout the European Union, so that parents and children can count on the same assistance, no matter where they are. Although the Decision underlines the need for people travelling across Europe to have the same service at their disposal, there is evidence that the existing hotlines offer different services to callers for help after a child has disappeared.

In addition to the requirements enshrined in the Decision (service to be available 24/7 and nationwide) and in other relevant applicable legislation, such as data protection rules, a

number of minimum standards guaranteeing a high quality of service can be identified, and best practices are already crystallising based on experience in several Member States:

- The service must be available in the language of the Member State and at least in English.

For example, in **Romania**, the service is available also in French, English and Spanish. In **Greece** the service is available also in English.

- The members of staff of the service provider must be trained to perform the tasks they have been assigned, including specific training on how to deal with children in a way tailored to the age and maturity of the child.

Targeted training is organised for operators in **Romania, Hungary and Spain** where staff are usually social workers and psychologists. Hotline operators receive training on procedural rules and on how to respond to calls, coping with the caller's emotions such as anger and panic.

- Transnational cases must be redirected to the relevant authorities.
- Follow-up must be offered after the case is closed, where appropriate.

Although not formalised, the **Belgian** service provider follows up on individual cases by phone so as to re-orient the child and/or the family to other services or organizations which can provide them with further support.

- A cooperation agreement must be signed between the service provider and the national enforcement and/or judiciary authorities.

Examples of agreements between service providers and national enforcement and/or judiciary authorities exist in **Romania, Spain, France, Portugal and Belgium**.

CONCLUSIONS

The telecom reform package empowers the Commission to adopt technical implementing measures to ensure the effective implementation of the "116" numbering range, in particular the missing children hotline number 116000. This shall be without prejudice to, and shall have no impact on, the organisation of these services, which remain the exclusive competence of Member States.

The Commission will continue to provide support to the Member States for the swift introduction and full functioning of missing children hotlines. To this end, the Commission will continue to monitor and assess the situation through the work of the Communications Committee.

The Commission will also organise yearly high-level meetings with all stakeholders until the hotline is operational in every Member State. The purpose of these meetings will be to raise awareness, to allow exchanges of best practice and to identify practical tools to ensure that the missing children hotline becomes operational and that it offers a high-quality service in all Member States. These meetings will be held around 25 May every year to mark International Missing Children's Day and to express solidarity with missing children and their families.

The Commission is committed to making the missing children hotline fully operational across the EU and will continue to closely monitor progress made at national level. If no further progress is made within a reasonable timeframe, the Commission will consider presenting a legislative proposal to make sure that for every child and for every parent help is truly only a phone call away, wherever they may be in the EU.

ANNEX

State of implementation for 116000		
Member State	116000 Assigned	116000 Operational
Austria		
Belgium	X	X
Bulgaria		
Cyprus		
Czech Republic		
Denmark	X	X
Estonia		
Finland		
France	X	X
Germany		
Greece	X	X
Hungary	X	X
Ireland		
Italy	X	X
Latvia		
Lithuania		
Luxembourg		
Malta	X	
Netherlands	X	X
Poland	X	X
Portugal	X	X
Romania	X	X
Slovakia	X	X
Slovenia		
Spain	X	X
Sweden		
United Kingdom	X	X ¹¹

¹¹ Partially operational