

NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP

CHILDREN MISSING FROM EDUCATION

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1. DEFINITION

“ACPO Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons (2013) uses the following definitions (as used by the police):

MISSING

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be a subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another; and

Statutory Guidance On Children Who Run Away Or Go Missing From Home Or Care (January 2014) uses the following definitions:

CHILD

For the purposes of this document a child is anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. ‘Children’ therefore means ‘children and young people’ throughout the Guidance and this chapter.

AWAY FROM PLACEMENT WITHOUT AUTHORISATION

A Looked After child whose whereabouts are known but who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.

YOUNG RUNAWAY

A child who has run away from their home or care placement or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.

MISSING CHILD

A child reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.

MISSING FROM CARE

A Looked After child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g. school) and their whereabouts are not known.

RESPONSIBLE LOCAL AUTHORITY

The local authority that is responsible for a Looked After child’s care and care planning.

HOST LOCAL AUTHORITY

The local authority in which a Looked After child is placed when placed out of the responsible local authority’s area. These definitions are reflected in the **NEL SCP Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Protocol** as well as in the safeguards that should be put in place to identify children, who are Missing and are judged to be suffering, or likely to suffer, Significant Harm.

The police classification of a person as 'Missing' will be based on on-going risk assessment.

It is important to note that professionals or others reporting a child missing to the police, should not make the judgement themselves as to whether a child is missing– this decision will be made by the police on the basis of the information provided.

The College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice Website contains more information about the police's risk assessment on Missing. The police risk assessment on Missing now ranges from No Apparent Risk (absent) where there is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public; to High Risk, the risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely. The change to the national police guidance is still being determined locally in some areas.

2. RISKS

PREVENTION AND PLANNING - RISK ASSESSMENT

Local authorities have a duty to place a Child Looked After in the most appropriate placement to safeguard the child and minimise the risk of the child running away. The Care Plan and the Placement Plan should include details of the arrangements that will need to be in place to keep the child safe and minimise the risk of the child going missing from their placement.

- The Care Plan - should include strategies for absences, vulnerability and risks.
- The Placement Plan - include a strategy for preventing the child from running away going missing; and the day to day arrangements to keep the child safe.
- The pre-incident risk assessment form - should be completed for all children for whom there is concern that they may run away.
- Provide the child with advice about an independent advocate and take the child's views into account.
- Statutory Reviews should consider any absences and revise any strategies to prevent any repeats and review the Care Plan accordingly.

Where a child already has an established pattern of running away, the Care Plan should include a strategy about keeping the child safe and minimising the likelihood of the child running away in the future. This should be discussed and agreed as far as possible with the child and with the child's carers and should include detailed information about the responsibilities of all services, the child's parents and other adults involved in the family network. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) should be informed about missing/absent episodes and they should address these in statutory reviews. The pre incident risk assessment form/plan should be regularly reviewed.

The designated health professionals for Children Looked After should contribute to the Care Plan and should be informed of children missing from care who are deemed to be 'high risk'. They should be included in any multiagency strategy meetings or activity to manage the child's retrieval and any subsequent health needs.

OUT OF AREA PLACEMENTS

When a child is placed out of their local authority area, the responsible authority must make sure that the child has access to the services they need. Notification of the placement must be made to the host authority and other specified services. The notification to the host authority must include details of the assessment of the child's needs and the reasons why the placement is the most suitable for responding to these and a copy of the child's Care Plan.

Designated Professionals for LAC should share relevant information and intelligence relating to high risk individuals or emerging themes and patterns indicative of organised and targeted abuse.

TRAFFICKING AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Trafficked children are at high risk of going missing, with most going missing within one week of becoming Looked After and many within 48 hours. Unaccompanied migrant or asylum seeking children, who go missing immediately after becoming Looked After, should be treated as children who may be victims of trafficking.

Many children, who have been trafficked, will be exploited for sexual purposes and the link to sexual exploitation should be addressed in line with the **NEL LSCB Child Sexual Exploitation Practice Guidance & Procedure** which includes the Child Sexual Exploitation Tool. Many children, who go missing from care or home and education, may be victims of sexual exploitation locally; this issue should always be considered when undertaking an assessment and should be referenced to NEL LSCB Child Sexual Exploitation Practice Guidance & Procedure.

The assessment of need to inform the Care plan will be particularly critical in these circumstances and should be done immediately as the window for intervention is very narrow. The assessment must seek to establish:

- Relevant details about the child's background before they came to the UK;
- An understanding of the reasons why the child came to the UK; and
- An analysis of the child's vulnerability to remaining under the influence of traffickers.

In conducting this assessment it will be necessary for the local authority to work in close co-operation with the **Modern Slavery Helpline** and immigration staff that will be familiar with patterns of trafficking into the UK.

Immigration staff should be able to advise on whether information about the individual child suggests that they fit the profile of a potentially trafficked child. Provision may need to be made for the child to be in a safe place before any assessment takes place and for the possibility that they may not be able to disclose full information about their circumstances immediately. The location of the child should not be divulged to any enquirers until their identity and relationship with the child has been established, in these situations the roles and responsibilities of care providers must be fully understood and recorded in the Placement Plan.

Proportionate safety measures that keep the child safe and take into account their best interests should also be put in place to safeguard the child from going missing from care or from being re-trafficked.

It will be essential that the local authority continues to share information with the police and immigration staff, concerning potential crimes against the child, the risk to other children, or other relevant immigration matters.

Where it is suspected that a child has been trafficked, they should be referred by the local authority into the UK's victim identification framework, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

3. PROTECTION AND ACTION TO BE TAKEN

The police will prioritise all incidents of missing children as medium or high risk. Where a child is recorded as being absent, the details will be recorded by the police, who will also agree review times and any on-going actions with person reporting.

HIGH RISK

Risk that is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability; or may have been the victim of a serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.

This category requires the immediate deployment of police resources.

MEDIUM RISK

In this case the risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others. This category requires an active and measured response by police and other agencies in order to trace the missing

person and support the person reporting. This will involve a proactive investigation and search in accordance with the circumstances to locate the missing child as soon as possible.

Local authorities must ensure that incidents are appropriately risk assessed and record all incidents of Looked After children who are absent without authorisation. All incidents of missing or absence that are reported to the police must also be collected and submitted by the local authority to the Department for Education as part of the annual SSDA903 data collection.

Even with strong systems and services that minimise the likelihood of young people running away, some young people will still feel that they have to run. In all circumstances local safeguarding procedures should be followed. If there is concern that the child may be at risk if returned home, the child should be referred to Children's Social Care to assess their needs and make appropriate arrangements for their accommodation.

Support should also be made available to families to help them understand why the child has run away and how they can support them on their return.

It is important that emergency accommodation can be accessed directly at any time of the day or night. Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation is not an appropriate place for any child or young person under the age of 18 and should only be used in exceptional circumstances.

16 / 17 YEAR OLDS AND CARE LEAVERS

When a 16 or 17 year old runs away or goes missing they are no less vulnerable than younger children and are equally at risk, particularly of sexual exploitation or involvement with gangs.

When a 16 or 17 year old presents as homeless, the local authority must assess their needs. Where this assessment indicates that the young person requires accommodation, they may become Looked After.

The accommodation provided must be suitable; risk assessed; and the sustainability of the placement must be considered as well as if it meets the full range of the young person's needs.

Young people who have run away and are at risk of homelessness may be placed in supported accommodation, with the provision of specialist support, for example, for those who may have been sexually exploited.

Care leavers, particularly 16 and 17 year olds, are vulnerable to exploitation and may go missing from their home or accommodation. Local authorities must ensure that care leavers live in "suitable accommodation" as defined in Section 23B (10) of the Children Act 1989 and Regulations 9(2) of the Care Leavers Regulations. In particular, young people should feel safe in their accommodation and the area where it is located. Local authorities should ensure that Pathway plans set out where a young person may be vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or going missing, and put in place support services to minimise this risk.

Whenever a child runs away from a placement, the foster carer or the manager on duty in the children's home is responsible for ensuring that the following individuals and agencies are informed within the timescales set out:

- The local police.
- The authority responsible for the child's placement - if they have not already been notified prior to the police being informed; and
- The parents and any other person with parental responsibility, unless it is not reasonably practicable or to do so would be inconsistent with the child's welfare.

The reporting of the child should include the details of the child as follows:

- The child's name/s; date of birth; status; responsible authority.
- Where, when and who missing with.
- What was the child wearing plus any belongings such as bags, phone etc.

- Description and recent photo.
- Medical history, if relevant.
- Time and location last seen.
- Circumstances or events around going missing.
- Details of family, friends and associates.
- Updated risk assessment.

The carer/s should take all reasonable steps to secure the safe and speedy return of the child based on their own knowledge and the information in the child's Placement Plan. If there is suspected risk of harm to the child or those seeking to recover the child, the carer/s should liaise immediately with the police.

Following initial discussions between the allocated Children's social care worker and the police, they should agree an immediate strategy for locating the child and an action plan.

- Missing from care meetings/discussions should be held every month to update the action plan and share information.
- The Assistant Director should be notified within 3 days of the child going missing. They will notify the Lead Member and Corporate Parenting Board within 7 days of the child going missing
- Any publicity will be led by the Police, the use of harbouring notices etc. will be agreed at the Missing from Care meeting. Recovery Orders may be used where the child is Looked After.

During the investigation to find the missing/run away child, regular liaison and communication should take place between the police, the responsible local authority Children's Social Care services and the host authority (if an out of area placement) and any other agencies involved.

The authority responsible for the child should ensure that plans are in place to respond promptly once the child is found and for determining if the placement remains appropriate.

ACTIONS WHEN A CHILD HAS BEEN FOUND

When the child has been located, care staff/foster carers should promptly inform the child's social worker and the independent reviewing officer that the child has returned. Arrangements should have been made for Safe and Well checks and independent Return Review interviews.

SAFE AND WELL CHECKS

Safe and Well checks are carried out as soon as possible after the child has returned. Their purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them.

Where a child goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable for the police to see them every time they return. In these cases a reasonable decision should be taken in agreement between the police and the child's parent or carer with regard to the frequency of such checks bearing in mind the established link between frequent missing episodes and serious harm, which could include gang involvement, forced marriage, maltreatment or abuse at home, bullying or sexual exploitation. The assessment of whether a child might run away again should be based on information about:

- Their individual circumstances.
- Family circumstances and background history.
- Their motivation for running away.
- Their potential destinations and associates.
- Their recent pattern of absences.
- The circumstances in which the child was found or returned; and

- Their individual characteristics and risk factors such as whether a child has learning difficulties, mental health issues, depression and other vulnerabilities.

INDEPENDENT RETURN REVIEW

The independent Return Review is an in-depth interview and should be carried out by an independent professional who is trained to carry out these interviews). The person conducting the interview should usually be independent of the child's placement and of the responsible local authority. An exception maybe where a child has a strong relationship with a carer or social worker and has expressed a preference to talk to them, rather than an independent person, about the reasons they went missing. Children sometimes need to build up trust with a person before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they ran away.

The responsible local authority should ensure the Return Review interview takes place, working closely with the host authority where appropriate. Contact should be made with the child within 72 hours of them being located or returning from absence, to arrange an independent Return Review interview in a neutral place where they feel safe.

Where a Looked After child has run away, they should have the opportunity to talk, before they return to their placement, to a person who is independent of their placement about the reasons they went missing. The child should be offered the option of speaking to an independent representative or advocate.

The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered - including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the 'Safe and Well check'- either before they ran away or whilst missing.
- Understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away.
- Help the child feel 'safe' / understand that they have options, to prevent repeat instances of them running away.
- Understand what the child would like to see happen next whether short term and/or long term
- Gather the parents or carers views of the circumstances, if appropriate.
- Provide the child with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again, including helpline numbers.

It is especially important that the independent Return Review interview takes place when a child:

- Has been reported missing on two or more occasions.
- Is frequently absent without authorisation.
- Has been hurt or harmed while they have been missing.
- Is at known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking.
- Is at known or suspected risk of involvement in criminal activity or drugs.
- Has contact with persons posing risk to children; and/or
- Has been engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence.

IDENTIFIED NEED FOR FOLLOW UP

The local authority Children's Social Care services, police and other agencies involved with the child should work together to assess the child and:

- To build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing.
- What happened while they were missing
- Who they were missing with and where they were found; and
- What support they require upon returning home

Where children refuse to engage with the interviewer, parents and/or carers should be offered the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence they may be aware of. This should help to prevent further instances of the child running away and identify early the support needed for them.

REPEAT RUNNING AWAY

If a child continually runs away actions following earlier incidents need reviewing and alternative strategies should be considered.

To reduce repeat running away and improve the longer-term safety of children and young people, the agencies involved may want to provide:

- Better access and timely independent return interviews, particularly for the most vulnerable; and
- Better access to support whilst a young person is away, which may come from the voluntary sector

There may be local organisations in the area that can provide repeat runaways with an opportunity to talk about their reasons for running away, and can link runaways and their families with longer-term help

4. ISSUES

Children's homes staff and foster carers should be trained and supported to offer a consistent approach to the care of children, including being proactive about strategies to prevent children from running away; and to understand the procedures that must be followed if a child goes missing.

The competence and support needs of staff in children's homes and foster carers in responding to Missing from Care issues should be considered as part of their regular appraisal and supervision.

The Children's Home Regulations require providers to have explicit procedures in place to be followed whenever a child is absent without authorisation or has run away or is missing from their placement. This procedure must take into account police and local authority protocols for managing missing person's incidents in the area where the provision is located. The National Minimum Standards specify that staff should actively search for children and work with the police where appropriate.

If a child is, or has been, persistently absent without permission from residential care and the Home/Manager considers that the child is at risk of harm, the Manager should ask the placing authority to review the child's Care Plan.

5. FURTHER INFORMATION

The Trafficked Children Toolkit, developed by the London Safeguarding Children Board, has been made available to all local authorities to help professionals assess the needs of these children and to refer them to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

The NSPCC Child Trafficking Advice Centre (CTAC) provides specialist advice and information to professionals who have concerns that a child or young people may have been trafficked. CTAC can be contacted at free phone number: 0800 107 7057, or by email at CTAC@nspcc.org.uk