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| **Title:**  Brent Children and Young People Protocol for Children Missing from Home and Care |  |  | |
| **Author:** Sonya Kalyniak | | **Issue 2** | **Date:** May 2018 |
| **Purpose** | The purpose of this policy is to set out the London Borough of Brent’s policy for children missing from home and care. | | |
| **Who is**  **Responsible** | Nigel Chapman, Operational Director | | |
| **Legislation** | List all relevant guidance:  Children who run away or go missing from home or care: Statutory guidance for local authorities and their partners to stop children going missing and to protect those who do. (Department for Education, 2014)  The London Child Protection Procedures 2017 | | |
| **Forms / links** |  | | |

**Brent Children and Young People Protocol for Children Missing from Home and Care**

**May 2018**

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1. **Introduction**

This London Borough of Brent’s Missing from Home, Care Protocol is designed to ensure that when a child goes missing there is an effective, collaborative safeguarding response from all agencies involved. “Current research findings estimate that approximately 25 per cent of children and young people that go missing are at risk of serious harm. There are particular concerns about the links between children running away and the risks of sexual exploitation. For example, according to recent studies [1], looked after children (LAC) missing from their placements are vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation, especially children in residential care.” London Child Protection Procedures, 5th Edition, 2017.

Wherever a child is missing, the Police are the lead agency, working in partnership with all Statutory Agencies and appropriate Voluntary Sector professionals that may be key in finding and/or engaging with the Child.

This protocol provides guidance for assessing both the risk that a child may run away and the risk to the child if they do go missing. It sets out the actions that should be taken by professionals to locate the child, to assist with their return and to identify the issues which caused, and may continue to cause, the child to run away or go missing.

1. **Aim of the Protocol**

The London Borough of Brent’s aim is to reduce the incidence of all children going missing. Children who go missing may themselves be at risk and may place others at risk and each missing episode is potentially serious. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or their experiences of care. Every “missing” episode should attract proper attention from the professionals involved, who must collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on his/her return.

**Scope of this protocol**

This protocol concerns a number of areas in which children and young people may be at risk as a result of being missing or absent from their family home or normal residence:

* + Children and young people missing from home
  + Children and young people missing from care (including children placed out of borough and asylum seeking children)
  + Children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking, radicalisation, offending and homelessness.
  + Children and young people missing from education Procedures, September 2017 can for obtained from the School Effectiveness Service.

1. **Principles of the Protocol**

The principles of the protocol are:

* The safety and welfare of the child is the prime objective and all relevant agencies, including the health service and schools who share in the responsibility for the safety and welfare of missing children.
* Brent CYP and Police agree to the definitions of various categories of “missing children” as set out in this protocol.
* Notification to the Police will take place in clearly defined circumstances set out in this protocol.

* All children who go missing will be offered a Return Home Interview within 72 hours of their return home. Best practice would be for the IRHI to take place within 72 hours.

* Support to parents/carers via parenting support services will be considered in order to prevent re-occurrences of missing episodes.
* The Police will act on any report of a child missing from home or care in Brent.
* Child Protection Plans, Child in Need plans, Child Looked After plans (including pathway plans) and Family Solutions Plans will take account of any known risks and vulnerabilities linked to the child or young person running away or going missing. In circumstances where children are accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act children’s parents or anyone else with parental responsibility should be informed wherever possible and appropriate; and share responsibility at every stage of the process.
* Where the London Borough of Brent has parental responsibility, parents and any other appropriate person should be informed and consulted in the same way, wherever possible and where appropriate. The Local authority retains ultimate responsibility for decisions in cooperation with the Police.
* All agencies will work together to understand the underlying reasons that children go missing in Brent and will work together on preventative measures by monitoring, reporting and analysing missing from care or home incidents including trend analysis.

1. **Definition of Missing Children**

**a) Missing**

*‘Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed’.*

**b) Absent**

*‘A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be’.*

Police: Absent not separately defined by police. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from ‘no apparent risk (absent) through to high risk cases that require immediate, intensive action.

The ‘absent’ category should comprise cases in which people are not presently where they are supposed to be and there is no apparent risk. ‘Absent’ cases should not be ignored, and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to ‘missing’ if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk.

Hence, the police response is likely to differ between cases of ‘missing’ and of ‘absent’. Typical examples of ‘absent’ may include:

* + Failing to return on time.
  + Staying at a known location, such as with a friend.

**c) Away from placement without authorisation/unauthorised absence (looked after children only)**

This is where the child or young person is staying out longer than agreed, either on purpose or unwittingly. This kind of behaviour is within the normal range of teenage behaviour and will not usually endanger the young person. Alternatively the young person may be staying with a friend or family member without permission. In most cases the carer will know the location of the child.

Under these circumstances there does not have to be an immediate report to the police unless there is a separate reason to believe the child is at risk.

It is important to note that while they are not missing, they may still be placing themselves at risk (e.g. they may be at the house of friends where there are concerns about risks of sexual exploitation).

The carer or social worker should take reasonable steps to ascertain the wellbeing of the child including, when appropriate, visiting the location. However, if there is a concern the child may be at significant risk of harm to themselves or to others then police should also be notified in order that appropriate safeguarding measures can be taken. This should not be confused with reporting a child missing.

This classification of missing must always be evidenced i.e. clear reasons as to why the key worker believes the child or young person to be away from placement without authorisation and not missing and not at risk. Please see section 9.

**Additional definitions are:**

**Child:** anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. ‘Children’ therefore means ‘children and young people’ throughout this guidance

**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 is not known.

**Away from placement without authorisation**: a looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.

**Looked after child**: a child who is looked after by a local authority by reason of a care order, or being accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

**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.

**Care leaver**: an eligible, relevant or former relevant child as defined by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

**Children at risk of radicalisation:** Children and young people can suffer harm when exposed to extremist ideology. This harm can range from a child adopting or complying with extreme views which limit their social interaction and full engagement with their education, to children being groomed for involvement in violent attacks. Children can by exposed to harmful, extremist ideology in the immediate or extended family, or relatives/family friends who live outside the family home but have influence over the child’s life. Older children or young people might self-radicalise over the internet or through the influence of their peer network – in this instance their parents might not know about this or feel powerless to stop their child’s radicalisation. Going missing is a risk factor in relation to radicalisation.

* + A child may go missing because they have already been radicalised.
  + A child’s risk of being radicalised might increase because they are missing and are spending time with people who may seek to involve them in radical/extreme activities. -The risk is heightened whilst they are missing, because the protective factors of family or care are not available to them.
  + Professionals should always assess whether a child who has gone missing is at risk of radicalisation.

**Children at risk of ‘county lines’ exploitation and/or offending:** Children and young people who go missing from care, home and education also need safeguarding against the risk of exploitation through gangs and/or offending. Children are being exploited and playing a significant role in what is colloquially known as the ‘county lines’ issue. The ‘county lines’ issue involves London gangs running drug sales operations into the Home Counties and beyond.

**Children at risk of sexual exploitation (CSE) :** The sexual exploitation of children involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where the young person (or third person/s) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common. Missing from home, care and education is an indication of potential CSE.

**16/17 year olds:** 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.

**Trafficking:** Some of the children who local authorities look after may be unaccompanied asylum seeking children or other migrant children. Some children in this group may have been trafficked into the UK and may remain under the influence of their traffickers even while they are looked after. 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.

1. **Legislation and Framework**

This protocol should be read in conjunction with:

* Children who run away or go missing from home or care: Statutory guidance for local authorities and their partners to stop children going missing and to protect those who do. (Department for Education, 2014)
* The London Child Protection Procedures 2017

Additional legislative references:

* Anyone who ‘takes or detains’ a child under 16 without lawful authority may be prosecuted under the Child Abduction Act 1984.   
  Where a child/young person under 16 (or 18 if disabled) stays with a person (other than someone with parental responsibility or a close relative) for more than 28 days, this constitutes a private fostering arrangement and the local authority must be informed.
* Anyone who unlawfully removes keeps away or assists a child to run away or stay away from their care placement may be liable to prosecution under the Children Act 1989.
* Young people under the age of 16 have no legal right to claim benefits and live independently of adults with parental responsibility.
* Young people aged 16/17 are able to claim benefits and work but by law are unable to live independently without their parents’ consent. Legal and practice issues for young people of this age are likely to overlap with youth homelessness. Under the Southwark ruling 2009, all 16-17 year olds who present as hungry and homeless must be assessed as children in need by Children’s Social Care under the Children Act 1989.

The Brent Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) will hold all agencies to account for their response to children who run away or go missing from home or care and will want to be assured that the procedures are delivering positive outcomes. Monitoring of the implementation of this protocol across all relevant agencies will be the responsibility of the Monitoring & Evaluation sub-group of the Brent LSCB.

1. **Police Actions and Police Definitions of Risk**

Where police are informed of a missing young person, the missing persons unit has a duty to:

* + Record all relevant details of the missing person
  + Complete a MERLIN missing person report
  + Conduct an initial investigation
  + Conduct a preliminary risk assessment – graded high, medium or low which will determine the scope and reach of the police response.

From the outset of the investigation police will conduct an ongoing review of the circumstances of the person’s disappearance and will consider the possibility that the missing person has been the victim of crime - for example, offences of homicide, kidnap or abduction, domestic violence, child abuse, so-called honour based violence, and forced marriage.

On a daily basis the Police based within BFFD / MASH provide MERLIN reports to the Children and Young People’s Missing Person’s Coordinator in MASH regarding all young people reported missing from a Brent home address. The Missing Persons Coordinator is responsible for tracking and reviewing the list of young people missing from home in Brent.

Where the child is considered to be at ongoing risk of significant harm or has been the victim of crime, police will take immediate action - usually in liaison with the relevant social worker and their manager to safeguard that child and/or investigate any crime.

**Police Definitions of Risk**

**HIGH RISK**

The risk posed 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 posted is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.

This category requires the immediate deployment of police resources. A member of the Borough Command Unit's senior management team or similar command level much be involved in the examination of initial enquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of an Investigating Officer (IO) and possibly a Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) and a Police Search Advisor (PolSA). There should be a press/media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be put in place. The UK’s Missing Persons Bureau should be notified without delay. CEOP and Children's Services should also be notified (only if missing person is under 18).

**MEDIUM RISK**

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.

In addition to recording the information on the Police National Computers, the police will advise the person reporting the disappearance that once all active enquiries have been exhausted, the case will be deferred to a regular review pending any further information coming to notice. In these cases, they may be filed on the computer system as 'inactive' provided the review process continues.

1. **Children Missing From Home**

**Responsibilities of Parents and Carers**

Parents and those with parental responsibility are expected to undertake the following basic measures to try to locate the missing child if considered safe to do so. Anyone else who has care of a child without parental responsibility should take all reasonable steps to locate the child and ascertain their safety.

It is expected that the Police will be informed without significant delay when a child goes missing from home. Before a child is reported missing to the Police and without delay the following actions should be undertaken:

* + make contact with the child/ young person by mobile and email
  + search bedroom/ accommodation/ outbuildings/ vehicles
  + contact known friends and relatives where child may be
  + visit locations that the child is known to frequent, if it is possible

When it is established that the child or young person is missing from home, the child/young person needs to be reported as missing to police. Police would then as a matter of course undertake the actions listed in section 6 above.

**Responsibilities of Brent CYP**

The MPU notify the CYP of all missing persons under the age of 18 years. A MERLIN form will be sent by secure electronic mail to the Brent Family Front Door (BFFD)/Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The MASH manager will carry out a risk assessment involving database checks and a discussion with the Police Officer from the Missing Persons Unit (MPU).

See Appendix 5 for the MERLIN triage process for missing children.

Once the BFFD officer has received the MERLIN form, they will discuss with the Missing Persons Unit and where appropriate the Risk Integration Management Meeting whether there is a need for further investigation and assessment:

* If there are no immediately identified safeguarding or child in need concerns, the BFFD will forward the referral to the Family Solutions Service, who will make arrangements for to offer the child an Independent Return Home Interview (IRHI) and the child and family to be considered for an Early Help Assessment and services if they consent to accepting this.
* Where children have an allocated social worker – information will be passed to the allocated worker to follow up with young person and their family, including offering the child/young person and IRHI.
* Where children have an allocated worker and the allocated Social Worker finds out the child is missing before Police (i.e. where the parent or carer has not reported the child as missing) the social worker must report the child missing to Police by calling 101. In this instance the Social Worker should send an email to BFFD with the details of the missing episode.
* When child protection and or safeguarding concerns are being expressed by the child/young person to the police as the reason they are running away from home, a Section 47 investigation should be triggered.
* When the history on Mosaic or the police reports indicate that there are concerns within the family, for example domestic violence, parental mental health or this is the third time the child/young person has run away from home, a Child and Family Assessment should be undertaken.
* Children under the age of 11 years who go missing from home cause particular concern, especially if they go missing repeatedly. The expectation is that their circumstances would lead to a CFA and where the risk is considered to be high, a Section 47 investigation.
* All children must be offered an IRHI within 72 hours of going missing. The child/young person can decide if they would like to have this interview with their allocated social worker, a duty social worker, or an independent person such as the Children’s Rights officer. This can take place as part of the Section 47 enquiry or assessment. Best practice would be for the IRHI to take place within 72 hours.

Children known to Children and Young People’s Services may go missing in the following circumstances:

* + Children subject of a Child Protection plan or where there is an ongoing child protection investigation or assessment of need. Often these children go missing with their parents or carers. In these circumstances:
* The social worker will make a report to the MPU as a matter of urgency outlining the risk factors.
* The social worker upon their manager’s advice will send out an alert to all local authorities with details of the family and contact names and addresses
* If the children are not located within 20 days a CP conference to be convened.
* The social worker should inform their Line Manager, Service Manager, Head of Service, Operational Director and the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance within 72 hours of the child being missing.
* The Social Worker should convene a multi-agency strategy meeting within 72 hours to explore the missing episode and ensure that all appropriate action is being taken.

All missing children are overseen monthly by the Vulnerable Adolescence Panel to review risks in relation to other forms of vulnerability and exploitation.

1. **Strategy meetings when children are missing**

Integrated Risk Management (IRM) meetings are held every day at 10am within the BFFD/MASH. This includes multi-agency professionals who are part of the MASH service in Brent. All missing children, whether residing in Brent, in placements outside of Brent and or who are regular missing children, with concerning risk levels are considered at this meeting. Social Workers and Team Managers who require urgent strategy meetings for missing children, should seek input and guidance from the IRM meeting and consider further strategy meetings and review meetings where appropriate and relevant.

**Strategy meetings must address:**

* + Last known whereabouts
  + Any intelligence relevant to the child/young person, their family friends or any other significant relationships
  + Plan of action and by whom
  + any potential risk to the child and whether the circumstances warrant Child Protection Enquiries when the child is located
  + Media strategy where appropriate
  + Planning follow up strategy meetings
  + Plan of action upon the return of the child in relation to contacting all parties, how and who will receive the child and confirming that the police return interview will take place and an IRHI offered within 72 hours
  + The IRHI should be part of all over-arching plans and must consider, the risk factors and issues and a plan to prevent any further absconding behaviour
  + Updating the risk assessment and action plan (if there is not one available one must be considered).

**The strategy meeting must also consider:**

* + Whether other local authorities and agencies need to be contacted
  + Whether there is a risk that the child may be removed from the UK jurisdiction and what legal interventions need to be put in place (this includes circumstances where a child or young woman is being taken out of the country for the purposes of a Forced Marriage or for Female Genital Mutilation
  + Available intelligence and whether reference should be made to another protocol (e.g. Forced Marriage).
  + Carers and the child’s social worker will be responsible for liaising with the Police, taking an active interest in the investigation and passing on all information, which may help to inform the investigation and assist in protecting the child while absent.
  + Once a child is reported missing to the Police, the Police will have primacy in respect of the investigation to trace the child. The Police will normally conduct all physical enquiries away from the premises from which the child is absent. In certain circumstances the Police may need to revisit the duties initially performed by care staff. When necessary they will do so in liaison with appropriate children’s services staff and will do so sensitively, causing as little disruption as possible to the establishment and residents. Throughout the process in this protocol, residential carers, Social Workers and the Police must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given.
  + Where a child or young person is determined by Social Care, Police and partner agencies to be at immediate or high risk, then the use of the press should be considered alongside other safeguarding measures for example, legal planning meeting.

**Media Strategy**

In some cases, particularly where a missing child is felt to be especially vulnerable or where they have been missing for a long period of time, it may be necessary to publicise the case via the media. Such an approach is not routine but is usually a response to very serious concerns for the child’s safety. Either carers or the Police may suggest such an approach. Normally, such decisions to publicise will be jointly made, and where appropriate, in consultation with parents and Children’s Services. However, for operational reasons primacy over such decisions must lie with the Police. The Police may also utilise the website facility of the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB) (www.missingkids.co.uk) to publicise the absence of the child/young person.

**Review of continued absence**

If the child/young person continues to be missing for 7 days (including the first 72 hours) then a further Strategy Meeting will take place. Further Strategy meetings should take place fortnightly for the first 6 weeks, and then monthly to ensure all that should be done is being done. This should be reviewed up until 3 months, where it is then recommended for the Strategic Director of CYP to formally review all cases where children/young people have been missing for 3 months to satisfy him/herself on the actions taken to recover the child/young person.

Where a child/young person has been missing from care for 12 weeks, the above will be adhered to. Following the information gathered from the strategy meetings, the Strategic Director of CYP will hold a case review meeting and review the case. A decision as to whether or not to end the accommodation placement must be an outcome of the meeting. If the decision outcome is to end the placement, then it will be recorded within the meeting minutes that should the child/young person be found then a placement will be sought.

**Legal Orders**

Where a Child or Young Person is deemed to be at significant risk of harm, the Local Authority will consider whether it is necessary to apply to Court for a Recovery or Collection Order to seek and find the child or Young Person.

1. **Responding to children and young people who go missing from care**

Where the London Borough of Brent acts as the Corporate Parent for the child, there is an expectation that ALL carers and/or key workers including respite carers make every effort to know the child or young person, to understand their normal routines and behaviours, and be able to identify any changes to their demeanour.

If the young person is resident in Brent the responsibility for investigating their disappearance rests with the local Missing Person Unit (MPU).

Where the young person is living outside of Brent e.g. placed in a foster placement, residential or semi-independent unit, the responsibility for investigating the disappearance lies with the local missing persons unit in the area of the placement. In certain circumstances where the bulk of enquiries are likely to be elsewhere, the two missing persons units will liaise to decide who will lead the investigation.

**a) Roles and Responsibility of the carers/keyworkers' of Looked After Children**

In line with the London Child Protection Procedure 2017 *“The carer/s should take all reasonable steps, which a good parent would take, to secure the safe and speedy return of the child based on their own knowledge of the child and the information in the child's placement plan. If there is suspected risk of harm to the child the carer/s should liaise immediately with the police.”*

It is therefore advised that the carer or key worker must establish whether the child is Away from Placement without Authorisation/Absent and without delay the following actions should be undertaken.

* + make contact with the child/ young person by mobile and email
  + search bedroom/ accommodation/ outbuildings/ vehicles
  + contact known friends and relatives where child may be
  + visit locations that the child is known to frequent, if it is possible

The carer/keyworker must maintain clear records of ALL enquiries made and to evidence their level of concern. The records must be shared with the relevant Team Manager and Social worker for every incident. It is also expected that the carer/keyworker attends strategy meetings where required.

When the Child is reported Missing, the Police would then as a matter of course undertake the actions listed in section 7 above.

Where children are missing from care, their risk assessments in their care and pathway plans (see appendix 4) should be reviewed to identify further the potential risk(s) to the child or young person.

Where the young person is **missing for longer than 24 hours:**

* A Missing from Care notification form should be completed by the social worker and forwarded to their line manager, Service Manager and Head of Service, Operational Director and the Head of Safeguarding and QA.
* A strategy meeting should be set up. The time-scale for the strategy meeting will depend on the assessed risk level but should be held at the latest within 3 working days to share information, analyse risk and ensure that there is an appropriate plan of action to locate the chid/ young person. This meeting would normally be chaired by the team manager and should involve the parents/carers of the young person unless the young person has no contact with them/ information sharing precludes parental involvement. Information gathered from the main care giver is vital to developing a picture to locate a child. The child’s Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) should be invited to this meeting. All safety planning around missing children and young people(and any associated needs) MUST be actively analysed and reflect in the Child or Young persons’ over- arching plan i.e. CIN plan, CP plan, CLA Review plan and Pathway plan.

**b) Children looked after by other Local Authorities**

A number of children who go missing in Brent may be children who are looked after by another Local Authority but placed in foster homes or residential units in Brent. In these situations the police may liaise directly with the placing authority. However MERLINS will be sent to the Brent BFFD and will be logged. In these circumstances the Missing Person’s Coordinator/Social workers should liaise with the appropriate Local Authority to inform them of the missing episode. The MERLIN must also be checked for information pertaining to any involved Brent child in the missing episode. The Missing Persons Coordinator writes to the Responsible Authority requesting that they undertake a Return Home Interview. For repeat missing episodes the Merlin officer will write to the placing Borough requesting information on any risk factors that may be useful to police in their search for the child.

1. **When children are found/return**

A missing person investigation is never closed until the child is found. In Brent Police will undertake the welfare checks in the following way:

Within 24 hours of police being notified of the missing persons return and by taking into account the circumstances of each case MPS staff will adopt one of the following methods of preventative interview.

1. Police will speak via telephone with the parent/carer/medical professional in charge of the subject and confirm the person’s wellbeing.
2. Police speak directly via telephone/video call with the person and confirm their wellbeing
3. Police will deploy and conduct a formal face-to-face prevention interview using an aide-memoire to capture key information.
4. In **high-risk** cases there will continue to be face-to-face prevention interviews.

**a) Police welfare check**

The police officer must if possible ascertain the following facts:

* + That the child/young person is actually the child reported missing
  + Establish whether the child or young person is in fact well and safe – that they have not been harmed or in need of medical attention.
  + The reasons for going missing
  + Where the child went
  + What they did whilst missing
  + Who did they go missing with
  + Anything else the child/young person would like to discuss with the police officer

Following the interview the police officer will complete a second MERLIN form. If the police officer has concerns about the welfare of the child these will be included on the MERLIN form. On a daily basis the Police based within BFFD / MASH provide MERLIN reports to the Children and Young People’s ‘Missing Persons Coordinator in MASH regarding all young people reported missing from a Brent home address. The Missing Person’s Coordinator is responsible for tracking and reviewing the list of young people missing from home in Brent.

Where the child is considered to be at ongoing risk of significant harm or has been the victim of crime, police will take immediate action - usually in liaison with the relevant Social Worker and their Manager - to safeguard that child and/or investigate any crime.

1. **CYP Response and Independent Return Home Interviews**

Once the BFFD duty officer has received the MERLIN form, they will discuss with the Missing Persons Unit and where appropriate the IRM Meeting whether there is a need for further investigation and assessment:

* Where children have an allocated social worker – information will be passed to the allocated worker to follow up with young person and their family.
* When child protection and or safeguarding concerns are being expressed by the child/young person to the police as the reason they are running away from home, a Section 47 investigation should be triggered. The IRHI is offered to the child with the choice of this being conducted by a duty social worker, their allocated social worker or independent person such as the Children’s Rights Officer.
* If there are no immediately identified safeguarding or child in need concerns, the BFFD will forward the referral to the Family Solutions Service, who will make arrangements for the child to have IRHI offered within 72 hours and the child and family to be considered for an assessment and services if they consent to accepting this. Best practise would be for the IRHI to take place within 72hrs.
* Depending on the circumstances of the missing episode the social worker and their manager together with the child’s Independent Reviewing Officer should consider whether to:
  + - Convene a multi-agency strategy meeting;
    - Arrange an early looked-after child review;
    - Review any prevention/support work currently being undertaken with the child.

It should be noted that it is always good practice for the carer / residential home / semi-independent accommodation provider to have recent photographs of children in their care – especially if they have a history of going missing.

The IRHI is an in-depth interview – separate from the police interview - and is usually best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. In Brent this can be undertaken by a social worker within the allocated team, the children’s advocate or if stipulated by the child, their allocated social worker.

Many young people who run away or go missing need to build up trust with somebody before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they decided to run away. The role may be shared between professionals from different agencies and the process for ensuring this happens is detailed in guidance in Appendix 3.

The IRHI 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 (his/her medical condition should be discussed and any need for medical attention assessed).
* Understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away.
* Understand the “story” or lived experience of the missing episode i.e. what happened before the episode, during and after the episode and where the child or young person went/was taken to.
* Explore ways to prevent/disrupt/reduce missing episodes and try to prevent it happening again.

It is good practice that this interview is offered and takes place within 72 hours of the young person being located or returning from absence. It is especially important that a Return Home Interview takes place when a child:

* has been missing for over 24 hours;
* has been missing on two or more occasions;
* has engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
* has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case);
* has known mental health issues;
* is at known risk of sexual exploitation; and/or trafficking
* has contact with persons posing risk to children.

(Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home, education or care 2014)

1. **Prevention and planning**

Thematic information from missing statistics, police return interviews and IRHIs for children at high risk, have frequent and repeated episodes of missing and or absence (away from placement without authorisation) and who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, grooming and trafficking are scrutinised monthly at the Vulnerable Adolescents Panel chaired by the Local Authority.

Findings and learning from this panel informs training and development programmes of all staff to reduce missing and the improve safety of children who go missing under the categories listed above.

1. **Important Services and Helplines**

In an emergency call the Police on 101.

Brent Police Missing Persons Unit: 0208 733 3771

Brent Family Front Door: 0203 276 3362/3365/3364

The **Missing People Helpline** provides publicity to help trace missing children and young people, a network of street workers and advice and support from case managers.

Freefone: 0500 700 700 (from the UK)

Tel: +44 (0)20 8392 4527 (outside the UK)

Email: mfc@missingpeople.org.uk

Website:www.missingpeople.org