**West Sussex – Practice Guidance**

IROs are qualified social workers with at least five years’ experience, and who have acquired the right skills to carry out this role.

**Missing and Absent Children**

**Introduction and Background**

This guidance is designed to sit alongside the Pan Sussex Safeguarding Procedures to provide a framework for a co-ordinated, standardised and effective response by the local authority, police and partner agencies in West Sussex to reports of children who go missing. It includes steps that should be taken to try to prevent them going missing again. When a child goes missing or runs away from home, care or school, they are at risk. The first part of this guidance therefore refers to protecting all children from the risks associated with going missing, whether they are looked after children or children who live within their family home.  Later sections set out the additional steps to be taken in regard to children missing from care or other settings.

Many children will exhibit normal adolescent behaviour in testing boundaries and it is **not** helpful to consider every incident of lateness or absence for all people as high risk. Young people must not be reported missing as a behaviour management tool. However, some children will need to be treated as missing immediately due to their vulnerability.

**When a Child Goes Missing**

Before contacting Police

Information to give the police should be gathered before the call is made. This includes a check of their room to see what might be missing, what the child was wearing when last seen, time and place last seen, any other contact they have or information from a friend or school about where they were last seen, with whom, and what they think they were doing. Other important information to give to police is about risk of harm – e.g. is the child known to be exploited? by whom? Where? When? is it likely this is happening now?

Risk Assessment / Investigation

When Sussex Police receive a call reporting a child missing, the call handler will conduct an initial risk assessment to determine the appropriate status. The police will prioritise all episodes of children ‘missing’ from home or care to investigate the disappearance and attempt to locate the young child prior to them suffering any harm. The Police investigation and all resulting actions will be proportionate to the risk level and recorded on police recording system – ‘compact’

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| --- | --- |
| High | 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 a victim of a serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger. If the child is known or believed to be at risk of exploitation, they must initially be categorised as ‘high’ risk missing. |
| Medium | The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger, or they are a threat to themselves or others. |
| Low | In line with NPCC (National Police Chiefs’ Council) guidance it is no longer appropriate to classify children aged 17 years or under as low risk missing persons. |

Once a case is generated on the NICHE system as “MISSING”, an Initial Investigating Officer will be appointed. The Initial Investigating Officer and all subsequent officers will carry out a thorough investigation in line with the latest published Sussex Police Policy on “Missing Persons”.

When the NICHE report is generated it will be sent to MASH and to the CSC Missing Children email address ([Missing.Children@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:Missing.Children@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk))

For a child that is open to CSC;MASH will review the information and notify the allocated social worker. The child’s social worker will review the information on the report and arrange a Strategy Discussion/Meeting if required.

If a child is not known to CSC, MASH will review the police report. MASH will create a new contact for the child, and record the information from the police notification on Significant Information on an Open Case on MOSAIC. MASH will arrange a Strategy Discussion/Meeting if needed.

If the child was previously known and closed, MASH will review the police report, complete a Significant Information on an open case record with details of the Missing Incident. MASH will arrange a Strategy Discussion/Meeting if needed. For all notifications of missing reports by police, the Missing Children Team will record the missing episode onto MOSAIC (CYP051), and also onto the Missing Children Database.

**Action to be taken when a child is missing**

If child is missing for 24 hrs:

* **Social Worker:** to inform Practice Manager, IRP if the child is looked after, CP chair if on a CP plan, and MEOG (Via Missing Children Team email) if child is looked after and placed outside of West Sussex.
* **Practice Manager:** to take lead role of coordinating immediate safety plan with Missing Police Team
* **Practice Manager:** to inform Group Manager and add a Case Note Summary including plan on MOSAIC
* **Practice Manager:** to arrange and Chair Strategy Meeting with Missing Police Team as soon as practicable to agree further action that is required to locate and see the child, and plan for when child is found.
* If high level of complexity **Group Manager** should chair Strategy Meeting

**A Strategy Meeting will be arranged for all children who have been missing for 24 hours,**

If a child has been missing for more than 24 hours, and within 72 hours:

* **Group Manager**: to inform the Service Leader with summary of missing circumstances, background, identified vulnerabilities, length of this missing episode and missing history, actions agreed at strategy meeting with dates, risk assessment and plan for when child is located.
* **Group Manager:** to add Case Note Summary to MOSAIC
* **Service Leader:** to inform Head of Social Care and gain permission for media release and consult parents about any decision to publish information

If a child has been missing for more than 72 hours, and within 7 days:

* **Group Manager:** to chair 2nd Strategy Meeting to include cross local authority police teams involved, social worker and social care support staff, school Head of Year or Safeguarding Lead, foster carers or Registered Manager of child’s home and other relevant professionals working with child and family.

Review vulnerabilities and risk assessment, actions taken and outcomes of those actions, and ensure that all possible steps are being taken to locate and return the child; update Service Lead.

Review media actions taken

Agree steps to be taken when child is found

* **Group Manager**: to add Case Note Summary to MOSAIC
* **Service Leader:** to provide summary of missing circumstances and actions being taken for Head of Social care, Chief Executive and Cabinet Members.

If a Child Remains Missing for a longer period of time:

* **Head of Service** and **Director of Children’s Services** will formally review all cases each week until child is found.
* **Group Manager** should formally review plan at monthly intervals – case must always remain open

**Additional Considerations for Children Missing from Care**

The attitude of professionals, such as police and social workers, towards a child who has been missing can have a big impact on how they will engage with subsequent investigations and protection planning. However 'streetwise' they may appear, they are children and may be extremely vulnerable to multiple risks. A supportive approach when a child returns, actively listening and responding to their needs, will have a greater chance of preventing the child from going missing again and safeguarding them against other risks.

**Safe and Well Checks (SWC)**

All missing children should have a police ‘Safe and Well Check’.

The purpose of a SWC is outlined below:

Check for any indications that the child has suffered - or is suffering - harm and follow normal Child Protection Procedures if relevant, including consideration of a referral to Social Care for this young person and / or others in the household; Identify where they have been;

* Identify who they have been with;
* Give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them;
* Offer and encourage a full return interview with a relevant agency, in areas where this service is available;
* Provide information about The Missing Children Team who will make contact with regard to the Return Home Interview (RHI)

The SWC will :

* Consider and record appearance and demeanour as well as verbal information;
* Be recorded on the Police record on NICHE.

The information from the SWC is to be sent through to MASH on a NICHE notification in addition to being sent to ‘Missing Children Team’ (Missing.Children@westussex.gcsx.gov.uk) for the Return Home Interview (RHI) to pick up on any observations made by the officer or disclosures and other important information provided by the child.

**4.2** **Return Home Interview (RHI)**

When a child is found, in addition to the police Safe & Well Check, the child must be offered an independent Return Home Interview (RHI) – arranged and/or completed in West Sussex County Council’s Missing Children Team. RHI’s provide an opportunity for professionals to understand why the young person ran away, to uncover information that can be used to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing again; to address the risks or incidents they may have been exposed to while missing and the risk factors in their home and social life.

The Missing Children Team will ascertain whether another professional already has an established and positive relationship with the child. Evidence shows that children and young people are more likely to disclose information regarding what happened when they are missing to a trusted professional.

Prior to any interview conducted with a child, the interviewer should inform the young person who this information will be shared with, when and why, and gain consent before sharing. If they are unwilling to accept an interview for fear of confidentionality issues they should be encouraged to call the ‘Missing People’ confidentional Freephone helpline on 116 000 or Childline on 0800 1111.

The Missing Children Team will provide children with information about what a return interview is about before they take part so they can fully contribute.  By the end of the interview the interviewer should have made it clear to the young child what they are worried about and what steps they may take to address this.  The RHI should also be an opportunity to share information with the child on how to stay safe, including helpful numbers to call if they choose to run away again. Local community support services will also be discussed with the child, and appropriate referrals can be made from the RHI. Information gained through this interview is fed back to the Police, Children’s Social Care, the IRO for CLA, IPEH, Health, Education and partner agencies in the Weekly MEOG forum. Themes or areas/persons of concern are identified and inform into the monthly WSCSB Strategic MACE (Missing & Child Exploitation) meetings.

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

The Purpose of the Return Home Interview is to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing and address this; specifically to try to listen to the child and understand:

* What happened whilst they were missing
* Who they were with when they were missing and where they were found
* What support they require upon returning to home or their care placement in accordance with the ‘Working Together’ guidance.

**4.3 Escalation of Concern**

Other risk factors demanding escalated and urgent interventions include:

* Any case where the risks involved in even a single future missing episode is very high;
* Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of the child.

**Weekly Missing and Exploitation Operational Group**

The Weekly MEOG is chaired by Children’s Social Care and has participation of a multi agency group with the aim to review each episode of ‘missing children’ within West Sussex for the previous 7 days.

MEOG will check there is a safety plan in place and identify services and interventions available to reduce the likelihood of a child repeatedly going missing. Professionals regularly attending the Weekly MEOG include: Child Exploitation Coordinators, Missing Children Team, CSC Managers, Exploitaton Health Nurse, YOS, Missing Police Team, IPEH, Barnardos, WORTH Services and Asphaleia. The Commissioning Manager also attend to represent children placed in residentional homes in West Sussex by WSCC or by other local authorities.

Safety planning actions are agreed by MEOG with identified risks to the child as a priority action. MEOG can be kept informed of any actions regarding a child going missing or at risk of going missing via CSEHUB@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk.

**Additional Considerations for Children Missing from Care**

The Care Plan

Prior to each accommodation arrangement for a Looked After Child, the social worker must consider within the care planning process all potential risks to the child including an assessment of the potential for them to go missing. The child and their parent/carer should be involved in the planning process and it should be related to that individual’s needs, previous history and views. Missing episodes prior to the child becoming looked after must to be taken into account.

When placing outside West Sussex, it is even more critical to properly assess the above issues. If there is a need to discuss specific risks or issues, the placing Authority should speak to the Safeguarding Unit in the Authority in which the child would live. When a placement is confirmed, the Placing Authority **must always** follow the Formal Notification Process to inform the new Authority that a Looked After Child is being placed in their area – the Placement Finding Team complete this notification process – however the social worker will need to inform the placing authority, their MaCSE, Missing and CSE Team and local Missing Police of the Safety / Trigger Plan.

The initial [Placement Plan](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/placement_plan.html) is an opportunity for the care provider/foster carer and the social worker to discuss with the young person issues around going missing and absent and to explain the rules and responsibilities of all involved. It is also the opportunity to provide the carer with details of the young person and their family and history. This will help carers to understand any risks to the young person or themselves if they go missing and it may help to locate the young person. The Placement Plan should cover:

* Trigger points for absence or missing episodes;
* Risks to themselves, the public and/or the carer before, during or after a missing episode including when being picked up;
* What steps can be taken to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing and coming to any harm or harming others.
* Friends and family details and contact numbers as well as addresses commonly found at;
* Expectations of the young person: e.g curfew; when and how to make contact; consequences of lateness etc.
* Expectations of the care provider / foster carer:
  + at which point the Police will be notified, the information the police will need, what processes will follow an incident, who will collect a child if they are missing, details of who conducts immediate assessments on their return and arrangements for full return interviews etc.
  + to immediately inform social worker / EDT and keep them constantly up to date
  + to attend Strategy meetings as practicable

All these elements should be reviewed during the care planning process.

Parenting Responsibilities

When a child or young person is reported ‘Missing’, the carer(s), Local Authority with Parental Responsibility (PR) and the police have **joint** responsibility for protecting the wellbeing of the individual. Whilst the police are the lead professionals for the investigation of ‘Missing’ people, any child who is Looked After by the Local Authority remains the responsibility of that Local Authority at all times.

Equally, the act of reporting a child or young person MISSING (or Absent) by staff at the care establishment or foster home does not absolve the carers from their ‘duty of care’ to the individual and of continued duty to do what a ‘reasonable parent’ would do.

It is the responsibility of the care provider to inform the family and social worker of a child being reported missing, in accordance with local arrangements. It is good practice for the care provider to record all incidents of absence in order to build a picture of behaviour.

Publicity of Looked After Children

Before any final decision is made, the Police will discuss any publicity of a child or young person missing from care with the child’s care provider, and social worker, who should involve their Senior Management. This will be done in sufficient time for Children’s Services to notify the child’s parents / next of kin. In a situation of immediate risk of harm the police will risk assess publicity for High Risk missing children and will notify social worker and care provider as soon as practicable on the decision.

Out of Area Placements

Carers have responsibility notify of missing incidents to the Local Authority which has Parental Responsibility. It is the responsibility of the Local Authoirty with Parental Responsibility to establish what provision they will make for Looked After Children to have RHI’s.

**Children Subject to a Child Protection Plan**

If a child subject to a Protection Plan appears to be missing, as well as the usual reporting to Sussex Police, the following urgent actions must be taken:

* **Social Worker:** to inform CP chair and initiate local enquiries as follows with all Core Group members; Health staff (including GPs); and Education staff.
* **Practice Manager:** to ChairaStrategy Meeting as soon as practicable to agree further action that is required to locate and see the child, and plan for when child is found. If high level of complexity Group Manager should chair Strat.
* **Group manager:** to inform Service Leader with summary of missing circumstances, background, identified vulnerabilities, length of missing episode and missing history, actions agreed at strategy meeting with dates, risk assessments and plan for when child is located.
* **Service Lead:** to inform Head of Social Care if child is missing more than 24 hours.

**If these enquires prove unsuccessful the Police may make use of information as follows:**

* The local DWP office should be asked to search local and national records for information;
* The Child Benefit Agency on **0845 302 1444**, for any information they can supply;
* UK Visas and Immigration can be contacted if it is suspected the child may be being taken out of the country without permission. Police have established procedures to obtain exit information from the UKVI National Border Targeting Centre (NBTC). This unit has access to electronic records of all passengers leaving the UK. In association with UKVI and Special Branch, arrangements could be put in place for the child and any accompanying persons to be potentially stopped at the airport / port.
* If the child (ren) has not been located as a result of these enquiries within seven days of the family going missing, the key worker must request an urgent Child Protection Review Conference. This should take place within two weeks unless the key worker and register Custodian agree to an extension for specified reasons. In any event, a Child Protection Review must be held within four weeks of the family going missing. This Review Conference will determine what further action should be taken to ensure the safety of the child and family.

Consideration should also be made of any vulnerable adults within the family or any possibility that the family are running away from a threat due to Domestic Abuse or ‘Honour-based violence’ etc (see [**Section 8, Specific Circumstances**](http://greatermanchesterscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_ch_missing_home_care.html#specific_circum)). These elements should be shared by Social Care with the Police.

**Missing from School / Educational setting**

If a young person under 16 (or 18 if in care) is found to be missing from a school or educational facility (College / University), the educational authorities must inform the person or organisation with parental responsibility. It is the parent’s / carer’s responsibility then to notify the police of the missing child. If the individual is aged over 16 years (over 18 years if in care), the educational authorities may decide to report the individual missing directly to the Police. The only exceptions to this rule are:

* When managers of the institution make a professional judgment that circumstances indicate too high a risk so any delay must be avoided, such as for very young children or people with Special Educational Needs or disabilities;
* Those resident at the school or educational facility (i.e. Boarding school) when staff may decide to report the individual missing directly to the police;
* In cases where the educational establishment cannot get in contact with the person with parental responsibility;
* If the school has concerns about compromised parenting and / or believes the parents will not report the young person missing in a timely manner. Reference should also be made to the Specific Circumstances (see [**Section 8, Specific Circumstances**](http://greatermanchesterscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_ch_missing_home_care.html#specific_circum)) discussed below. Schools should follow their usual Safeguarding procedures and report to Social Care where they have concerns for the child’s safety and welfare during or following a missing or any absent episode.

UK Visas and Immigration can support partner agencies with information on children who are, or who are suspected to be, subject to immigration control who are missing from education. Please use this form. See [**Appendix E: Children Missing Education - Home Office Request for Information**](http://greatermanchesterscb.proceduresonline.com/client_supplied/appf_gmp_missing.doc).

Missing from school or an educational setting should not be confused with “Missing from Education” which is about an individual’s access, or lack of access, to education rather than their physical location.

**Child Exploitation**

There is a strong link between people (including adults and boys) being at risk of exploitation and going missing from home or care - evidence suggest that 90% of children subject to sexual grooming go missing at some point (DCSF, 2009).  Early intervention, effective monitoring and management of children who are reported as missing provides an early recognition of the possibility of Child Exploitation.

Concerns around suspected exploitation could include:

* The child is repeatedly reported missing from home;
* The child is known to be visiting locations or addresses which raise suspicions around sexual or criminal exploitation;
* The child has unexplained money, gifts, mobile phones etc;
* The child has additional vulnerability; this is linked to the age of the child.

If child exploitation is suspected or a risk then the WSCSB CE procedures should be referred to and a CE Screening Tool and Risk Assessment should be completed, and sent to the CSEHub (CSEHub@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk)

[***WSCSB Guidance for Professionals - Child Exploitation***](http://www.westsussexscb.org.uk/professionals/helping-you-work/child-sexual-exploitation/)

Missing and Exploitation Operational Group’ (MEOG) will consider the risk of CSE for all children who have gone missing, monitor the safety plan and identify services and interventions available to reduce the likelihood of a child being exploited .

**Collecting, Sharing and Analysing Data on Children who go Missing**

Early and effective sharing of information between professionals and local agencies is essential for the identification of patterns of behaviour. This may be used to identify areas of concern for an individual child, or to identify trends and ‘hotspots’ of activity in a local area.

Data and analysis of children who go missing both from home and from care are included in regular reports to council members, especially to the lead member for children’s services and in reports by the local authority to the WSCSB. 

**Appendix , Flowcharts and References**

**Flowcharts**

* **Joint Childrens Social Care and Police Procedure**
* **Recording a Missing Child Flowchart**
* **Timeline Guide for when a child goes Missing**

**References**

This document should be read in conjunction with our local Safeguarding Policies and Procedures, particularly around Trafficking and Exploitation - see also

* [**Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked Procedure**](http://greatermanchesterscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_sg_ch_trafficked.html) and [**Safeguarding Children and Young People Abused Through Sexual Exploitation Procedure**](http://greatermanchesterscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_sg_ab_sexual_exploit.html).
* [**Department for Education - Statutory Guidance on Children who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care – January 2014**](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care__3_.pdf);
* [**Working Together to Safeguard and Promote the Welfare of Children, 2015**](http://www.workingtogetheronline.co.uk/);
* [**Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Action Plan, DfE, 2011**](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-child-sexual-exploitation-action-plan).