**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 Children**

**Contents**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ITEM**  | **TITLE** | **PAGE NUMBER** |
|  | Introduction and Background | 2 |
|  | Action to be Taken when a Child Goes Missing | 2/3 |
|  | Escalation of Concern | 4 |
|  | Strategy Meetings for Missing Children | 5/6 |
|  | Children who have been Missing for more than 24 hours | 6/7 |
|  | Action to be taken when a Child is Found | 7/8 |
|  | Return Home Interviews (RHI) | 8/10 |
|  | Weekly Missing & Exploitation Group (MEOG) | 10 |
|  | Additional Considerations for Children Missing from Care | 10/12 |
|  | Looked After Children Placed out of West Sussex | 12 |
|  | Children Missing from School or Educational Setting | 13 |
|  | Children Missing from their Families | 14 |
|  | Child Exploitation | 15 |
|  | Flowcharts & References | 16 |

**1 Introduction and Background**

This guidance sits 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 when children go missing. It also includes steps that should be taken to try to prevent them going missing again. (<https://sussexchildprotection.procedures.org.uk/tkyxy/children-in-specific-circumstances/missing-children/joint-policy-for-children-missing-in-sussex>

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 missing. 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.

**2 Action to be taken 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 – ‘NICHE’

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 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)

For a child that is open to Children’s Social Care (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, inviting any professionals involved with the child.

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.

**3 Escalation of Concerns**

An initial decision is required regarding the level of risk and the immediacy of response or if escalation is required;

Some children will need to be treated as high risk missing immediately due to their vulnerability. It may be that this has already been decided as part of the child’s plan however, the circumstances may differ and will require a judgement to be made by the person receiving the initial notification. If in doubt, this should be discussed through the line management chain – without delay.

Risk factors demanding escalated and urgent interventions include:

• Any case where the risk of significant harm 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

**If child is missing for 24 hrs or significant risk identified immediately:**

* **Social Worker:** to inform Practice Manager, IRO if the child is looked after, CP Chair if on a CP Plan, and MEOG (Via Missing.Children @westsussex.gscx.gov.uk) if child is looked after and placed outside of West Sussex. The Missing Children Team responsible for RHI’s will confirm escalation has happened in the case of Social Worker absence.
* **Practice Manager:** to take lead role of coordinating immediate safety plan with Missing Police Team
* **Practice Manager:** to inform Group Manager and if particularly high levels of risk indicating a significant level of harm or reputational risk then Group Manager to inform Service Leader who should complete ‘Need to Know’ document to Head of Service. PM to 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 or risk **Group Manager** should Chair the Strategy Meeting

**4 Strategy Meetings for Missing Children**

A strategy meeting will be held when a child has been missing for 24 hours, or has been missing for 3 or more times within a four week period. The purpose is to ascertain the current level of risk/vulnerability and to formulate the strategy to find the child. It will also determine where the child is to be returned upon being located (note, this is not a forum for care planning).

***Do not wait 24 hours to convene a strategy discussion if the risk is immediate***

In considering the strategy to locate a missing child, discussions should consider what information each agency holds, both historical and current, in relation to ***this*** specific episode:

* **Harm**; what is the nature of harm? What is the evidence for this harm? Is the risk posed immediate, is it significant? Are there any additional complicating factors –age, communication, learning needs etc
* **Patterns**; is there a pattern of missing episodes that indicates either the nature of harm, specific or particular activity or locations?
* **Network**; what is the child’s network? Family, friends, peers and associates – any known names, young people and/or adults the child may be in contact with/going to and associated risks or protective factors?
* **Travel**; what means of travel has the child used – foot, bike, car, bus, train, boat, plane? How has this been facilitated (money, people, organisation)?
* **Accommodation**; Any known places the child may be/travelling to/likely to visit, any known addresses of friends/family.

*It is important to distinguish between that which is fact, that which is opinion and that which is hypothesis. This is particularly important when considering ‘risk factors’, for example a child who is missing can be considered at risk of CSE – on what basis, the fact they are missing and vulnerable does not necessarily equate to an active risk of CSE and it is important that we work on an evidential basis.*

Actions must be drawn up with clear timescales and have clarity of who is doing what and when:

* **Agency Checks**; who will contact Health, Education, Police, Probation, Community Safety, Anti-Social Behaviour Teams, other Local Authorities, Business Crime Reduction Partnership (as required)
* **Network**; who will make contact with identified persons including the child? How will they do so and when/at what intervals?
* **Travel**; dependent upon the pattern and mode of behaviours, have discussions been had with British Transport Police/local train and bus companies? Have images been shared with relevant agencies?
* **Other partners**; does the young person frequent local places/restaurants, eg. McDonalds/Subway etc. Does contact need to be made? CCTV for example?
* **Publicity**; is publicity required? If the child is Looked After by the Local Authority, this should be agreed by the Head of Social Care/Assistant Director. The family should be informed.

*NB A strategy discussion can be a sit down meeting or a series of phone discussions – the key determinant is urgency*

**Outcome of Strategy**

The discussion must decide whether a Child & Family Assessment is required under section 17 Children Act 1989; whether single or joint agency enquiries/investigation is required under section 47; whether a multi-agency planning meeting is needed and for those not looked after whether an ICPC is required – this determination is made according to the threshold of ‘significant harm’.

Will a reconvened strategy discussion be required – if so when and where?

It is the responsibility of the Chair to make a provisional arrangement for a reconvened strategy in the event of the child continuing to be missing, or upon return, if there is evidence they have experienced harm.

**5 Children who have been missing for more than 24 hours**

Children who have been missing for more than 24 hours, and within 72 hours:

* **Group Manager**: to inform the Service Leader using the ‘Need to Know’ template with the 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
* **Head of Social Care:** to review Need to Know document, seek assurance regarding any actions if required and advise DCS if necessary.

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 children’s home and other relevant professionals working with child and family. Ensure note taker is booked for the meeting.
* 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 and seek consent of Head of Children’s Social care if required.
* Agree steps to be taken when child is found, for those subject to CP liaise with CPA (consider Review Child Protection Conference) and liaise with IRO for CLA.
* **Group Manager**: to add Case Note Summary to MOSAIC
* **Service Leader:** to provide summary of missing circumstances (updating Need to Know document) and actions being taken for Head of Social Care.
* **Head of Children’s Social Care:** To send ‘Need to Know’ document to DCS who will advise Chief Executive and Cabinet Members if required.

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

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

**6 Action to be taken once a Child has been found**

The Children’s Society Runaways charter set out standards for Local Authorities in working with this very vulnerable group. There are six standards set out in their section on “How runaways should be treated”. These are as follows:

* + Be understanding, calm and relaxed with us;
	+ Help us trust you and don’t judge us;
	+ Be straightforward and honest with us;
	+ Listen to us and take us seriously;
	+ Explain things to us;
	+ Give us choices and don’t force us into making decisions we don’t understand;
	+ Show us respect.

**https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-you-can-do/campaign-join/make-runaways-safe**

**Safe and Well Checks (SWC)**

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

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 Safe and Well Check 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.

**7 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) Fo those living in West Susses this will be arranged and/or completed by 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 confidentiality issues they should be encouraged to call the ‘Missing People’ confidential 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 available to 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.

**IF A CHILD RETURNS AND DISCLOSES SIGNIFICANT HARM OR THERE IS EVIDENCE OF HARM HAVING TAKEN PLACE OR AN ONGOING RISK OF HARM LIKELY, A FURTHER STRATEGY DISCUSSION IS REQUIRED FOR THAT SPECIFIC INCIDENT/ALLEGATION**

**8 Weekly Missing and Exploitation Operational Group (MEOG)**

The Weekly MEOG is Chaired by Children’s Social Care and has participation of a multi-agency group to review Children who have been reported to Police as Missing in the previous week as well as review the management of risk of children who are at risk of being exploited.

MEOG will check that when a child has been missing the risk of exploitation has been considered, that 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, Exploitation Health Nurse, YOS, Missing Police Team, IPEH, Barnardo’s, WORTH Services and asphaleia. The Commissioning Manager also attend to represent children placed in residential homes in West Sussex by WSCC or by other local authorities.

Safety planning actions are outlined by MEOG with identified risks to the child as a priority and relevant owners of these actions and timescales will be agreed. 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.

**9 Additional Considerations for Children Missing from Care**

**The Care Plan**

Prior to each accommodation arrangement for a Child Looked After, 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. Please ensure CSEHUB@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk copied in to these notifications

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 what 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 support 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. (More detailed and specific guidance can be found at the end of this document)

For children who are placed in residential care there is further guidance in the NMS & Children’s Homes Regulations;

**In addition, when a young person who is looked after goes missing the IRO must be informed.**

**Parental Responsibility**

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 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, for all CLA the Head of Children’s Social Care needs to approve any media release. 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.

**10 Looked After Children Placed outside of West Sussex**

Carers have responsibility for notifying missing incidents to:

* the local missing police team in the Local Authority in which the child is residing
* MASH in the Local Authority in which the child is residing,
* and the Local Authority which has Parental Responsibility – i.e. West Sussex
* WSCC MASH and the child’s social worker.
* In addition we ask that the carers inform our Missing Children Team via Missing.Children@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk.

**The child’s social worker will be responsible for**

* arranging a joint strategy meeting with the placing authority MASH; with our Missing Police Team in West Sussex and the local Missing Police Team in the local authority where the child is placed.
* arranging a Return Home Interview when the child is found
* reviewing the safety plan and take steps to prevent the child from missing again.

**11 Children Missing from School or their 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 judgement 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 **Pan Sussex Procedures;** [**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.

**12 Children missing with their families**

Refer to Pan Sussex Procedures;

https://sussexchildprotection.procedures.org.uk/tkyxs/children-in-specific-circumstances/children-and-families-who-go-missing

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.

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. These elements should be shared by Social Care with the Police.

**13 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 provide 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) (use link below for specific guidance)

<https://www.westsussexscb.org.uk/professionals/child-sexual-abuse-exploitation/>

**14 Further Guidance/Information**

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 [**DoE Statutory Guidance Missing from care published 2014**](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care__3_.pdf)

[**The Childrens Society APPG Report for runaway and missing children 2012**](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint_appg_inquiry_-_report...pdf)

[**Still in harms way Report 2018 from ECPAT and Missing People Charity**](https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/PandR/Still_in_Harms_Way_Final.pdf)

[**Govt Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018**](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729914/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children-2018.pdf)

[**WSCSB Procedures - Missing Children**](https://sussexchildprotection.procedures.org.uk/tkyxx/children-in-specific-circumstances/missing-children)

[**WSCSB Child Exploitation Procedures and Guidance March 2017**](https://www.westsussexscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Child-Sexual-Exploitation-Procedures-and-guidanceMarch-2017-2.docx)

**Related One Minute Guides to be inserted when signed off.**