

Missing Procedures 2023

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1. Introduction

This protocol applies to all children living within the London Borough of Lambeth, whether they are at home with their parents/carers or Looked After Children. It also applies to Looked After Children open to Lambeth Children's Services who are placed outside the local authority area.

This protocol provides a local context to the London Child Protection Procedures guidance '*Missing from Education, Care or Home*' (September 2022) and should be read in conjunction with The Department of Education Guidance on '*Children who run away or go missing from home or care*' (January 2014). The local Detective Inspector and Detective Sergeant of the Missing Person Unit have approved these procedures.

These procedures should be considered in conjunction with other relevant guidance including:

DFE (2014) [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#)

LSCP (2022) [Missing Families](#)

LSCP (2022) [Trafficked and Exploited Children Procedure](#)

DFE (2016) [Children missing education: statutory guidance for local authorities](#)

LSCP (2022) [Missing from Care, Home or Education](#)

LSCP (2022) [Sexual Exploitation Procedure](#)

MET Police (2021) [The London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol 2021](#)

2. Principles

The following principles are adopted by Lambeth Children's Services:

- The safety and welfare of the child is paramount
- Locating and returning the child to a safe environment is the main objective
- Child protection procedures will be initiated whenever there are concerns that a child, who is missing, may have suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm
- Every 'missing' child who returns will be interviewed by someone other than their direct carer
- Where the child is known to Children's Social Care or meets the criteria for referral to Children's Social Care, the Local Authority will ensure that there is a range of service options to address the child's needs when they return.

3. Definitions

The Metropolitan Police service, as the lead agency for investigating and finding missing children, will respond to children and young people going **missing** or being **absent** based on on-going risk assessments in line with their current guidance. The Police will prioritise all incidents of missing children as medium or high risk. The Police definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' are:

Missing: Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another'.

Absent: A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be'.^[1]

The Police classification of a person as 'missing' or 'absent' will be based on on-going risk assessment. A child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either 'missing' or 'absent' under the Police definitions.

Cases where the child is classified as “absent” will be recorded by the Police and risk assessed regularly but no active response will be deployed. Absent cases will be resolved when a young person returns, or new information becomes known suggesting he/she is at risk where the case will be reclassified to “missing”.

Unauthorised Absent: This category is critical to the clarification of roles of the Police and Children’s Social Care. Some children absent themselves from home or care without permission but their whereabouts are known, or they are staying out past their curfew. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed as a boundary testing activity which can be considered normal teenage behaviour.

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC, formerly ACPO) explains:

‘If a child’s whereabouts are known then they cannot be ‘missing.’ However, if they are known to be staying somewhere where they are in danger and it is not possible for the carer/person with parental responsibility to remove the child or young person, then it may still be necessary to involve Police and partners in safeguarding them.’

4. Police Risk Assessment

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

The Police guidelines renewed in 2021 are ([Missing persons | College of Policing](#)):

No apparent risk (absent): There is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public.

Police response should be: – Actions to locate the subject and/or gather further information should be agreed with the informant and a latest review time set to reassess the risk. Ownership may remain within the Police contact centre.

Low risk: The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.

Police response should be: – Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.

Medium Risk: The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.

Police response should be: – Requires an active and measured response by the Police and other agencies to trace the missing person and support the person reporting.

High Risk: The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely. Risk of serious harm has been defined as: “A risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible.”

Police response should be: – Almost always requires the immediate deployment of Police resources. A member of the Police senior management team must be involved in the examination of initial lines of enquiry and approval of appropriate staffing levels. There should be an Investigating Officer and possibly a Senior Investigating Officer, and a Police search adviser.

Missing and Wanted

There will be occasions when a child is reported missing where they are also wanted, either by the Police for a criminal offence; where they have absconded from lawful custody, or a court has issued a warrant of arrest. In these situations, the Police should treat a child as both a missing and wanted person. A missing person report should be generated in all cases. However, the response will be on a case-by-case basis according to the individual risk assessment for both the child and the public. Where a child is wanted for a minor criminal matter and there are also increased risk factors, then it may be more appropriate to deal with them as a missing child rather than a wanted offender. This approach would apply even if the sole reason the child went missing is because they were aware that they were going to be arrested. Likewise, if the offence for which they are wanted is a serious crime and there is potentially a danger to the public, then it may be better to deal with them as a wanted person. The main objective should be to bring the missing/wanted episode to a safe conclusion.

If a child is assessed as wanted, it is crucial to establish who the lead team and who the officer in charge is so that information can be shared, and they would be the Police representative at missing strategy meetings. Where it is not clear then our advice is to escalate your concerns through a Police supervisor of at least Inspector rank to ensure that there is the correct Police response.

5. Data and Monitoring

The Service Managers for the Family Support and Child Protection and the Children Looked After services have responsibility for ensuring staff adhere to the agreed Lambeth Children Missing from Home or Care Procedures.

The Missing Coordinator Manager will have oversight of cases of missing children, team compliance and work closely with services to develop response and ensure good practice. The Missing Coordinator Manager, or a representative from the Contextual Safeguarding Hub, should be invited to all missing strategy meetings. The Performance Team gather data from the recording of missing children that can be used to develop safeguarding practice and response. Lambeth collects data on children reported missing from care and home, unauthorised absences from care placements and regularly analyse this to map problems and patterns. This includes identifying patterns of child exploitation. In Lambeth the following data is collected:

- Demographics of all children who are missing, absent or away from placement without authorisation.
- Associates of the above.
- The legal status of the children.
- Episodes, and length of episode by child.
- Numbers from safe and well checks; (this can be provided by Police)
- Numbers and themes from return interviews.
- Cross match data with gang's matrix, CE lists, home educated and missing from education lists, including information about children who go missing for part of the school day.
- where the child is found as this information could help identify links between missing children and child exploitation.

6. Multi Agency Violence and Exploitation Panel (MAVE)

The MAVE panel takes place every two weeks and is co-chaired by the Contextual Safeguarding Hub Service Manager and the Detective Inspector for Missing and Child Exploitation.

The MAVE panel provides additional oversight on high risk/complex cases, or cases where it is felt the social work team feels stuck. The allocated social worker and/or line manager is invited to attend the panel to advise on the case and participate in discussions and planning. The panel is not intended to replace strategy meetings and safety planning. The panel provides an opportunity for problem solving to take place on individual cases that are of concern.

Referral link: www.lambethsaferchildren.org.uk/mave

7. Children Missing from Care

Whenever the whereabouts of a looked after child is not known, the foster carer or the manager on duty in the children's home is responsible for conducting preliminary checks to see if the child can be located. For example, if a child was supposed to have returned home from school but has not arrived within the normal journey time, checks could include finding out if there are transport delays, phone calls to the child, phone calls to the school to see if the child has been delayed etc. If these initial checks fail in locating the child or there are still concerns that, despite contact being made with the child they are at risk, the individuals and agencies listed below should be informed.

The reasonable timeframe is based on an assessment of the risks relating to the individual child. In some cases, there might be specific reasons to be worried for the child's safety immediately and the individual agencies detailed below should be contacted straight away. This is in conjunction with on-going attempts to contact the child and find out why they are not where they are supposed to be. A curfew time should be set with the placement and an agreement made with the placement when they report missing episodes.

The individuals and agencies who should be contacted by placement staff or foster carer when a child is missing, or they are away from their care home/foster placement without authorisation:

- The local Police (if missing).
- The Local Authority; and
- The parents and any other person with parental responsibility unless it is not reasonably practicable or to do so or would be inconsistent with the child's welfare.
- The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) – this is the social worker's responsibility.

Notifications

- The Assistant Director should be notified within 3 days of the child going missing via the social work team. This should be done via a Serious Incident Form
- In addition, the Missing Children Coordinator Manager produces a biweekly report for the Lead Member on all missing from home and care cases for 7 days or more.

8. Children Missing from Home

Local authorities and LSCPs should also consider the 'hidden missing', who are children who have not been reported missing to the Police but have come to an agency's attention after accessing other services. The organisation, *Missing People*, points to research which suggests as many as 7 in 10 children are not reported to the Police when they go missing.¹

When a professional learns that a child is missing, but has not been reported missing by the family, they must make an online third party missing report via this professionals' link:

www.met.Police.uk/ro/report/mp/v2/report-missing-person/. Alternatively, they should call 101.

Not Open to Social Care

If the child does not have an allocated social worker, the missing episode will still be recorded on Mosaic. The referral will then be screened by the Integrated Referral Hub who consider current and historical factors. If a child remains missing normal procedures apply in that a missing strategy meeting should take place within 7 days.

If a child goes missing two or more times in 90 days, or for 5 days or longer, the child's case will be allocated for a Child and Family assessment. Professional judgement to be used by screening officers.

If the child is returned within 24 hours but the Police believe there are concerning issues, they should make a referral to CSC even after the child is returned home.

If a child remains missing, they will be referred to a statutory social work team for a safeguarding response on the fifth day of being missing unless information indicates that a statutory social work service is needed more swiftly.

Notifications

National guidance does not specify who should be notified when a child from home goes missing. Lambeth carries out the same responsibilities as those missing from care.

- The Assistant Director should be notified within 3 days of the child going missing via the social work team. This should be done via a Serious Incident Form
- In addition, the Missing Children Coordinator Manager produces a biweekly report for the Lead Member on all missing from home and care cases for 7 days or more.

9. Strategy meetings

Where a child is missing, the first Strategy Meeting should be requested immediately and a strategy meeting should be held as soon as possible and at the latest within 7 days if missing from home, or within 3 days if missing from care. If the child returns home prior to the meeting, the meeting can be cancelled, however where there are repeat concerns or there is identified high risk to the child, it is recommended that a professionals meeting is still held to ensure the child's future safety and planning is discussed.

Where the Police do not consider a child to be missing, and is unauthorised absent, the relevant Team Manager will need to consider if the circumstances still warrant a Section 47 investigation due to the level of risk to the child. Where this is the case, a strategy meeting should still be called, however not with

¹ <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/key-information#:~:text=Under%2Dreporting&text=Research%20suggests%20that%20as%20many,who%20are%20not%20reported%20missing.>
Accessed 19th January 2023

Missing Persons Unit, it may be that Child Abuse Investigation Team (CAIT), Child Exploitation Team (CET) Police or another Police team would attend.

If a child is unauthorised absent and is not considered at immediate risk to warrant a Section 47 investigation, the Team Manager should decide if a professionals meeting is appropriate to review plans and actions for the child. The Team Manager should record their decision making on Mosaic.

For children who remain missing a review missing strategy meeting should be held within 2 weeks.

When a child is missing for 28 days or more, strategy meetings to take place at least monthly. This considers the possibility that long term missing investigations can have fewer leads as time goes on, and that the network remain in contact in between meetings. This is not true of all missing investigations and if there are still numerous actions being worked on the network can decide to hold the meetings more often than monthly.

The Team Manager is to chair the initial strategy meeting, a Service Manager to chair at 2 weeks, the Assistant Director to chair once missing for 28 days, and the Director of Children's Social Care to chair thereafter.

Organising a Strategy Meeting

If the child is missing within London, then an 87A should be sent to the Lambeth CAIT desk (ASMailbox-CAITReferrals@met.police.uk). If the child is placed outside of Lambeth, then the CAIT desk should either forward the 87A on to the relevant borough or provide the email contact for the social worker to send to themselves. If the child is within Lambeth, then the CAIT desk will share with the Missing Person's Unit.

For children placed outside of London, 87As should be sent directly to the local equivalent of CAIT. The Missing Coordinator Manager can assist in finding the right email address if needed.

Within the Metropolitan Police a child will not be allocated to the MPU until after 48 hours of being reported missing. Prior to this the investigation is dealt with by the First Response Unit who do not attend strategy meetings/discussions. Therefore, it is not possible to have a strategy meeting until after 48 hours after being reported. If a child is assessed as high risk by the Police, then they will be allocated to the MPU immediately and a strategy meeting can be arranged sooner.

It is best practice to find out who the Officer in Charge (OIC) is on the missing investigation, what their shift pattern is and arranging the strategy meeting around them to ensure Police attendance.

If there are any queries regarding Police attendance at strategy meetings, please contact the Missing Coordinator Manager or the Lambeth MPU mailbox (asmalbox.safeguardingmisper@met.Police.uk).

10. Frequently Missing

If a child has five or more missing episodes in a month, then a Police Missing Coordinator should attend a strategy meeting. If a child has fewer missing episodes than this and their missing episodes are never long enough to hold a strategy meeting, then a professionals meeting should be considered.

For those that are missing but return after a short period, the Missing Person Unit will not attend a strategy meeting, yet if there are other concerns that warrant a S47 strategy meeting another appropriate Police team would attend.

11. Long Term Missing

Where a child continues to be missing and there is a live police missing investigation Children's Social Care must escalate any recommendation to change the status of a case (from CIN, CP, Child Looked After or an open case to the 16+ Leaving Care Service) or to close a case to the Director of Children's Social Care. The Assistant Director only will determine the next steps and record under a Senior Management Decision on case notes in the child's record. Decisions should be taken in collaboration with multi-agency partners and clearly communicated.

12. Prevention and planning

A child's CIN/CP/Care/Pathway/Early Help Family Plan should include details of what is needed to reduce missing episodes and risk while missing. It should include strategies to avoid unauthorised absences and/or a child going missing. It should also include strategies to reduce the duration and risks associated if the child does have unauthorised absences/go missing. A Missing Risk Assessment and Grab Pack needs to be completed and updated for all children who are missing or at known risk of going missing.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Child Protection Chairs should be informed about missing/absent episodes, and they should address these in reviews. The IROs and CP Chairs receive a weekly list of Lambeth children that have gone missing.

13. Actions when a child is found

Safe and Well Checks

A safe and well check, also called a Police Debrief, should be carried out by the Police as soon as possible after the child has returned. Their purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give the child an opportunity to disclose any offending against them.

Independent Return Home Interview

In Lambeth there are two Return Home Interview Workers, managed by the Missing Children Coordinator Manager. All children who go missing are offered a RHI for each episode. These are allocated by the Missing Coordinator Manager upon the child's return. RHIs are found in the Missing from Home and Care work step on Mosaic. Safeguarding information and intelligence such as names and/or locations are shared with the missing Police. To increase engagement Lambeth have an agreement with the police that the whole interview will not be shared with them.

A RHI is an in-depth interview and should be carried out by an independent professional (*e.g. a youth worker, social worker, teacher, or health professional, who does not usually work with the child and is trained to carry out these interviews*). Some children will respond better to a professional they already know such as their social worker so there are times when a social worker may be allocated an RHI. This will be discussed between the Missing Coordinator Manager and the social work team. An RHI will never be carried out by a child's direct carer.

Contact should be made with the child within 72 hours of them being located or returning from missing, to arrange an independent return review interview in a place where they feel safe. Some children prefer this to be over the telephone or a face-to-face meeting.

RHIs are voluntary. Where children decline the offer an interview, parents and carers should be given the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence they may be aware of.

The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered– either before they ran away or whilst missing.
- Understand and try to address the push/pull factors why the child ran away.
- Help the child feel listened to and 'safe' so they understand that they have options, to prevent repeat instances of them running away.
- Understand what the child would like to see happen next whether short term and/or long term.
- Gather the parents or carers views of the circumstances, if appropriate.
- Provide the child with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again, including helpline numbers.

14. Missing Risk Assessment and Grab Pack

A Missing Risk Assessment and Grab Pack form should be completed for all children who are missing or at known risk of going missing and to be reviewed when necessary or every 3 months. This is a form on Mosaic that can then be downloaded and shared with the local Missing Person Unit. This form helps the Police to assess the risk when a child gets reported missing and will also have details that will help their investigation such as associates names and Oyster Card number. Social workers are expected to complete this form. When a child is missing from care it is placement procedure to also complete one.

15. National Missing Notifications

When a child is missing, there has been no contact and there are concerns the child may have left the area they live/London then an alert can be sent to other Local Authorities nationally. This is done via the Quality Assurance admin team. This is a form of publicity so will need approval from a senior manager. If the child is at risk of going abroad, Police can run border and ports checks, this will be led by the missing Police.

16. Care Leavers

While these procedures do not apply to over 18s it is recognised that they are still at risk. The current options would be to report missing. Police are more likely to assess them as missing if they are not in contact, it is out of character and/or there is evidence of risk and vulnerabilities. The Contextual Safeguarding team can provide advice and support via case consultations and 1:1 work for young people up to and including 25 years old.

17. Specific risks

Homeless 16- and 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.

When a 16 -17-year-old presents as homeless, local authority children's services must assess their needs as for any other child. Where this assessment indicates that the young person is in need and requires accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, they will usually become looked after. The accommodation provided must be suitable, risk assessed and meet the full range of the young person's needs. The sustainability of the placement must be considered. Young people who have run away and are at risk of homelessness may be placed in supported accommodation, with the provision of specialist support. For example, a specialist service might be provided for those who have been sexually exploited, or at risk of sexual exploitation.

Local authorities should have regard to statutory guidance in April 2010[17] issued to children's services authorities and local housing authorities about their duties under Part 3 of the Children Act 1989 and Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996[18] to secure or provide accommodation for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.

[Children Act 1989 Section 20](#)

[Provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)

[Housing Act 1996](#)

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. See [Trafficked and Exploited Children Procedure](#).

Children, who have been trafficked, may be exploited for sexual purposes and the link to sexual exploitation should be addressed in conjunction with the [Sexual Exploitation Procedure](#).

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

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

In conducting this assessment it will be necessary for the local authority to work in close co-operation with the [Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Centre](#) and immigration staff who will be familiar with patterns of trafficking into the UK. Immigration staff should be able to advise on whether information about the individual child suggests that they fit the profile of a potentially trafficked child.

Provision may need to be made for the child to be in a safe place before any assessment takes place and for the possibility that they may not be able to disclose full information about their circumstances immediately. The location of the child should not be divulged to any enquirers until their identity and relationship with the child has been established, if necessary, with the help of Police and immigration services. In these situations, the roles and responsibilities of care providers must be fully understood and recorded in the placement plan. Proportionate safety measures that keep the child safe and consider their best interests should also be put in place to safeguard the child from going missing from care or from being re-trafficked.

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

'Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked: Practice Guidance (2011)'[20] contains practical guidance for agencies which are likely to encounter, or have referred to them, children and young people who may have been trafficked. Where it is suspected that a child has been trafficked, they should be referred by the local authority into the UK's victim identification framework, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) [21].

Grooming

Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse or exploitation. Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional. Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age. Many children and young people do not understand that they have been groomed, or that what has happened is abuse [23].

Children can be groomed for the purpose of sexual abuse as well as other forms of exploitation including involvement in criminal and extremist activity. Children who are missing are more vulnerable to being groomed and may also go missing because of being groomed.

Protecting 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 be 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.

Please contact the Prevent Team if there are concerns of radicalisation prevent@lambeth.gov.uk

Children at risk of sexual exploitation (CSE)

See [Sexual Exploitation Procedure](#).

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) because of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common.

Involvement in exploitative relationships is characterised by the child's or young person's limited availability of choice because of their social, economic or emotional vulnerability.

A common feature of CSE is that the child or young person does not recognise the coercive nature of the relationship and does not see themselves as a victim of exploitation.

Going missing is a significant risk factor in relation to sexual exploitation:

- A child may go missing because they are being sexually exploited.
- A child's risk of being sexually exploited might increase because they are missing and are spending time with people who may seek to involve them in sexual exploitation. The risk is heightened whilst they are missing because the protective factors of family or care are not available to them.

Because there is such a strong link between children going missing and risk of sexual exploitation, professionals should always assess whether a child who has gone missing is being sexually exploited or at risk of being sexually exploited.

Children at risk of being drawn into offending behaviour

Children and young people who go missing from care, home and education also need safeguarding against the risk of being drawn into offending behaviour. This involves children being used by organised groups to transport and distribute drugs. Criminal exploitation of children is child abuse and should be responded via child protection processes. Please see [The London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol 2021](#).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Missing from Home and Care Flow Chart

Appendix 2: Missing Strategy Meeting Agenda/Guidance [Missing Strat Agenda and Guidance.docx \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

Appendix 3: Information Sharing between Schools & local authority Children's Social Care [Read here](#)

Appendix 4: Safeguarding Children Missing Education Process for Schools [Read here](#)

Appendix 5: Statutory guidance for local authorities: Children missing education (January 2015) [Read here](#)