



TOWER HAMLETS MISSING CHILDREN GUIDANCE

Purpose of the document

This document provides guidance for assessing the risks to a child who has gone missing as well as the actions that should be taken by workers in Children's Services to locate the child, assist with their return, identify the issues which caused, and may continue to cause, the child to go missing and identify and respond to other adolescent risks.

Our Key Principles:

- Children who go missing are vulnerable children.
- The safety and welfare of the child is paramount.
- Locating and returning the child to a safe environment is our priority.
- Repeatedly going missing should never be viewed as a normal pattern of behaviour.
- Professional judgement, deliberation and curiosity must be used to determine the individual level of risk to a child when missing.
- Child protection procedures will be initiated whenever there are concerns that a child who is missing, may have suffered, or is likely to suffer, serious harm.

Why does a child go missing?

A child can go missing at any time. On most occasions, they return of their own accord, safe and well, but there is always the potential for children to come to serious harm while missing. Going missing can be a symptom of an existing problem at school, at home or in a placement and put children at increased risk of harm through being trafficked, sexually and/or criminally exploited and drawn into crime and gangs. It is essential that everyone involved with the child is prepared and knows what to do if a child does go missing.

What to do when a child is missing? (Including children missing from home and care)

- If the information about a child going missing has not come from the police, the worker should ensure that the child has been reported to the police by the parent or carer, and if this has not been done, report it themselves.
- For practitioners outside of Children's Social Care, a referral should be made to the allocated worker (if known) or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
- The social worker should complete an immediate analysis of risk, including a Harm Outside of the Home Risk Assessment, if deemed appropriate.
- If the case is unallocated and there are concerns about additional vulnerability, it should be allocated to a social worker for a Single Assessment to be completed.
- Consideration should be given as to whether a Section 47 investigation should be initiated, following a strategy discussion.
- Workers in Early Help should also consider whether a step up is needed.
- Workers should keep in touch with the family/carers to offer advice and support and either maintain or try to maintain contact with the child. If it is known that a different professional is more likely to get a response, this should be agreed by the professional network at the beginning of the missing episode.
- The message of all contacts with the child should be clear and unambiguous: our primary concern is for the child and that there will be support when they return.
- The professional network should also agree who is best placed to do the Return Home Conversation (RHC) when the child has returned.
- If a child has been missing for **three or more days**, a missing strategy meeting should be convened and should decide what actions need to be taken and by whom to ensure that the child is found as soon as possible. It should be agreed what the family will be told, and how often, if the child does not usually live with family.
- If a child has been missing for **5 or more days**, a notification should be sent to the Divisional Director by the relevant social work team.
- If the child is deemed to be **high risk**, weekly strategy meetings should be arranged until the child is located. Regular liaison should continue with the network.

What to do when a child returns?

- Parents, carers and professionals should promptly inform the police and the rest of the professional network when a child returns or is found.
- Once a child is found, the police may carry out a Debrief (welfare check). The purpose of these checks 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 by or against them.
- **Within 72 hours of the child being located**, a Return Home Conversation (RHC) should be offered. The Exploitation Service is responsible for assigning RHCs to the missing support workers within the service.
- The child should be seen on their own unless they specifically request to have someone with them. Ideally this conversation should be face to face, however what is most important is that the conversation happens and so it may take place over the phone.
- The Exploitation Service is responsible for uploading the RHCs on the child's case file on Mosaic once completed.

What to take into consideration when a child goes missing repeatedly

- The risks will increase for children repeatedly going missing from home or their placement.
- We should never treat this as 'normal behaviour'.
- Professionals should always remain curious to finding out and understanding why a child goes missing repeatedly.
- We should continuously review the strategy and the plan that is in place for the child to reduce missing episodes and the risks. **Consideration should be given to the following: whom does the child engage with the most in the professional network? Does the child have an enduring worker? If not, what could be done to ensure that this worker is identified for them? whom else could complete the Return to Home Interviews? How could this make a difference for the child?**
- Consideration to be given for the case to be presented and discussed at the monthly Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Panel (MACE), particularly if the case is deemed to be 'stuck'.
- We should take into consideration the role of Children's Social Care, the Police and other professionals: **What is the role and expectations for each agency? Whom is best to do what?**
- For high risk and repeatedly missing children, consideration should be given to completing a trigger plan. **Where it is assessed that the child is at risk of going missing again**, the trigger plan should outline the key actions to be taken if the child is subsequently reported missing. This is completed by the police, with input from all other relevant professionals. A decision to complete a trigger plan should be discussed and agreed at a strategy meeting.

The Police Role in Missing Children

The Metropolitan Police Service is the lead agency for investigating and finding missing children. They are responsible for making a decision, based on on-going risk assessment, of whether a child is 'absent' or missing'.

If a child is recorded as 'absent', the police will agree review times and any on-going actions with the person reporting the absence. All children recorded by police as absent are monitored on the police. Monitoring is ongoing and subject to regular reviews to ensure risk levels do not change. Where information comes to light which introduces any risk to the child, then the case may be re-categorised as 'missing' and a police investigation instigated.

All children recorded as missing are categorised by the police as medium or high risk. A missing child incident would be prioritised as **'high risk'** where:

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

A 'high risk' missing child requires the immediate deployment of police resources. A member of the senior management team or similar command level must be involved in the examination of initial enquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels. An Investigating Officer and possibly a Senior Investigating Officer and a Police Search Advisor (PoISA) should be appointed. There should be a media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be put in place. The UK Missing Persons Bureau should be notified of the case immediately. CEOP and local authority children's services should also be notified.

A 'medium risk' missing child requires an active and measured response by police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting. This will involve a proactive investigation and search in accordance with the circumstances.

Operational Activity

Missing child: Response

Whereabouts of the child unknown. The child has been reported missing to the police. For children missing from home, this information is shared with the Exploitation Service daily by the Tower Hamlets Missing Persons Unit (Police). For Looked After Children placed out of borough, notifications are received from the Out of Hours Emergency Duty Team (EDT).

As part of good practice, Social Workers should also alert the Exploitation Service if a child they are working with has been missing, to ensure that relevant information is shared and the correct processes are followed

The Exploitation Service (Business Support) is responsible for recording the missing notification on the child's file.

Child is missing from home (i.e. Tower Hamlets)

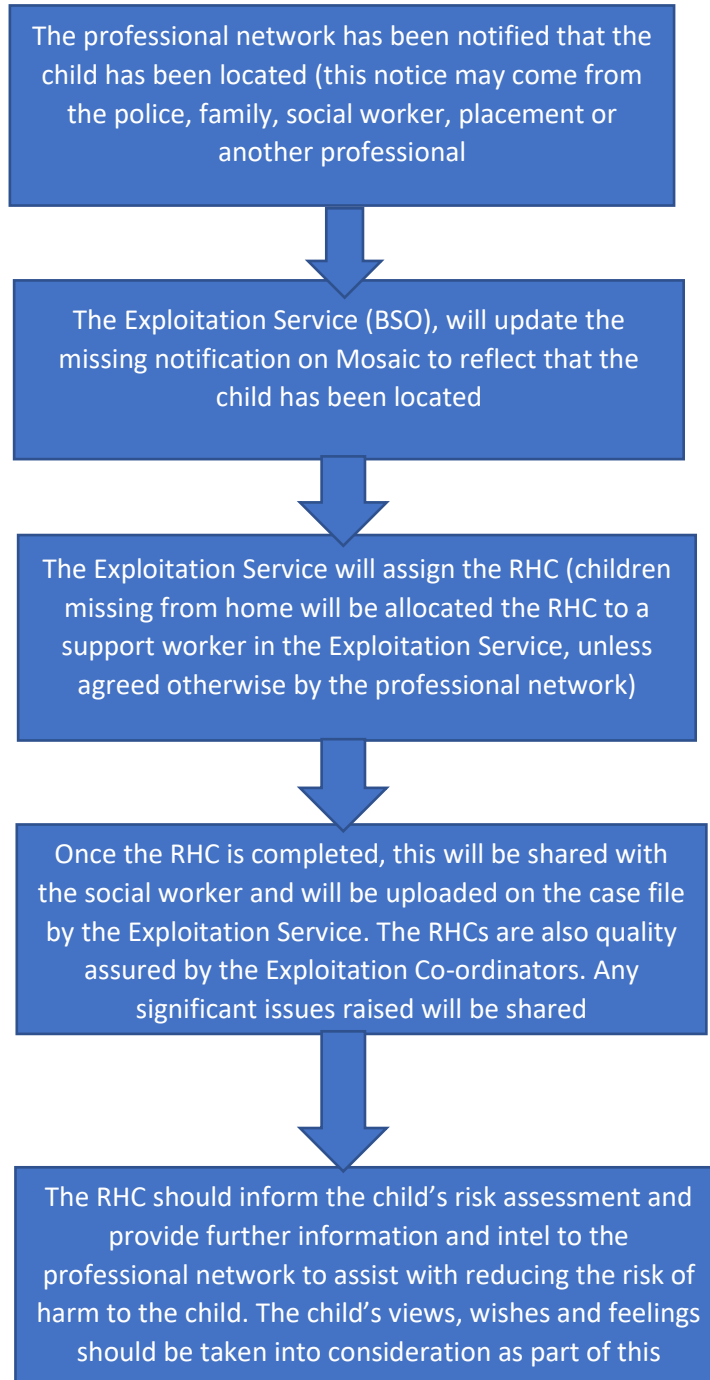
Child is missing from out of borough (i.e. child is placed in the local authority's care out of the borough)

If the child has been missing for **three or more days** or if the child has been missing for **three or more times within the month**, a strategy meeting should be convened. The 87a referral form should be sent to the relevant BCU to ensure that the relevant police unit attends the meeting, depending on where the child is residing (*The Exploitation Service will assist with providing the correct contact details for the BCU's within the Met Police*)

Strategy meeting takes place. A multi-agency discussion takes place about what strategies will be put in place to locate the child. If the child is deemed to be high risk or is a regular missing child, it should be discussed and agreed if a trigger plan is necessary. Weekly strategy meetings should be convened if the risk is high and the child has not been located. If the child has been missing for **five or more days**, a notification to be sent to the Divisional Director. The social worker should also consider completing a Harm Outside of the Home Risk Assessment, as part of assessing the risk and harm to the child

Operational Activity

Child Returned: Response



Operational Activity

Repeat missing, high-risk/harm children: Response

