

Missing Children Protocol

Children missing from home and care

Introduction

These procedures refer to situations when children go missing from home or when children who are cared for by the local authority go missing from residential or foster care

It defines the roles and responsibilities of agencies and staff concerned with safeguarding children and young people

This document should be read as *guidance* (which cannot anticipate every situation)

Police, Children's Services staff and foster carers should use their *professional judgement* to take any action they feel necessary to protect the safety of the child based on an assessment of risk for each individual child

Police definition of missing:

“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed.”

When a child's whereabouts are known, they would not be classed as 'Missing' to Police.

However, where there are concerns because of the child's vulnerability or there is a potential danger to them or the public, a *safeguarding response* from Social Care and/or Police may be required.

The local authority and other partner agencies should work together in the best interests of the child to ensure their wellbeing and safety.

The level of intervention required should be proportionate to the concerns held, together with the child's assessed vulnerability and the risk relating to that missing occurrence.

The assessed risk to a child and the situation can alter rapidly. Parent/Carers and agency actions and responses should adapt accordingly.

Where there is imminent risk to the child or wider public it is always appropriate for police to be involved.

If there are no imminent risks - parent/carer holds the initial responsibility to contact and locate the child to ensure their safety and wellbeing and where possible their return (*Levels of Intervention*)

This would include making an initial search of the child's home and any grounds; attempting to contact the child's friends, family members and known associates (where appropriate) to establish the child's whereabouts.

Where a parent or carer due is unable to undertake physical searches due to practical reasons, contingency planning re how and who should undertake these should be agreed.

Responding to Missing Occurrences

No intervention

- The parent/carer is not concerned for the child's safety or the safety of others based on the information they have about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence
- Based on the information known about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence, the parent/carer makes an informed decision to wait some time, to see if the child returns of their own accord.

Carer Intervention

- The parent/carer has some concerns about the child and their whereabouts, but at the outset of the missing occurrence the parent/carer does not have any immediate concerns about their safety or the safety of others.
- The parent/carer takes responsibility for trying to locate the child and ensure their safe return.

Police Intervention

- Based on the information the carer has about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence, the parent/carer is worried about the child's safety.
- The carer has been unable to contact the child, or they have made contact, but have assessed that the child or others are not safe. The parent/carer/child's social worker reports the child as missing to the police, or if whereabouts known, details the safeguarding concern.

Levels of Intervention

No intervention

- The child returns of their own accord or contacts the parent/carer (or another) and the parent/carer arranges to collect the child.
- The parent/carer makes contacts with the child and the child agrees to either return home or be collected.

Carer intervention

- The parent/carer considers if there are any reasons that warrant the child being immediately reported to the police as missing.
- The parent/carer tries to contact the child by phone, text and social media.
- The parent/carer undertakes a search of the home and surrounding area (or agrees with the child's social worker who will do this in the event they are unable to).
- The parent/carer/child's social worker contacts family and friends.
- If possible and safe to do, the parent/carer/the child's social worker visits locations where the child may be.
- The parent/carer/child's social worker continues to try and contact /locate the child.
- The parent/carer and the child's social worker continue to liaise until the child is found /returns.
- Where contact with the child is successful and they agree to return, this is arranged by/between the parent/carer and the child's social worker.
- The child is located; however, to ensure their safe return / the safety of others, police support is required and provided.
- Contact with the child is unsuccessful and there are now concerns for their safety. The parent/carer/child's social worker reports the child as missing to the police and shares the relevant missing documentation.**

Police intervention

- The parent/carer/child's social worker shares their concerns, and where applicable the child's Missing Assessment / Plan / Incident form with the police.
- The police log the child as missing, or a safeguarding concern, call and complete a Police Risk Assessment to inform action planning.
- The parent/carer /the child's social worker continues to try and locate /contact the child.
- The police, the parent/carer and the child's social worker continue to liaise until the child is found /returns.
- On the child's return a Prevention Interview and Independent Return Interview are undertaken.

Action & Outcomes

Risk Assessment

In assessing the significance of any child's missing episode a risk assessment must be conducted.

Risk assessments should take into consideration guidance and agreed actions in the child's care plan and these factors

If a young person is not cared for by the local authority the police will use the same criteria to assess the risk following discussions with parents.

All children who go missing must be reported to the police. The Police will determine the level of risk (low/medium/high) based on the information shared with them.

All professionals must share all known information with the Police to ensure that the correct level of risk is applied – including if child is cared for or any other vulnerabilities.

Where a child is assessed as at risk of exploitation an 'SE' marker will be evident on the child's police information system.

The assessment of risk is a dynamic process and should be reconsidered and challenged at every point during a child's absence.

What is the legal status of the child (e.g. Emergency Protection Order, Full or Interim Care Order, remanded, curfew conditions etc)?

Why are you worried about the missing child?

Is this out of character?

Does the child have any physical or mental health needs?

Is the child at risk of harm to themselves or others? (inc. is child likely to self-harm or commit suicide?)

Is the child at risk of being exploited?

Is there any suggestion that the child may be involved in extremism or at risk/vulnerable to radicalisation?

Is the child suspected to be the victim of a significant crime in progress, e.g. abduction?

Is the child in the company of a person who may cause them harm?

Any other particular circumstances at the time of the incident influencing the risk assessment?

Police Responsibilities

Police will investigate all cases falling within the 'missing' definition

HIGH RISK

- The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely
- **Serious Harm:** 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.
- This category almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources.
- Police Silver commander will be involved in the examination of initial enquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels and allocation of ownership.
- Such cases will always have allocated a named investigating officer. There should be a press/media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies.

MEDIUM RISK

- The risk of harm to the subject or the public is likely but not serious
- This category requires an active and measured response by police and other agencies in order to trace the missing child and support the person reporting.

LOW RISK

- The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal
- Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the child has not come to harm.

Definition of each category and what it means in terms of operational response

Northumbria Police do not use the category '*No Apparent Risk – Absent*' for children

Police will inform CSC of all children who are reported missing within 1 working day via CCN.

Where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, **significant harm**, there should be a strategy discussion/meeting (as set out in *statutory guidance* and *GSCP safeguarding procedures: Child Protection Enquiries - Section 47 Children Act 1989*).

Parents and carers are responsible for children in their care at all times and this responsibility remains when they have reported a missing child to the Police

Police missing persons lists are checked daily (during triage) for children that have been or are currently missing and MASH officer's check that a Child Concern Notification (CCN) has been submitted. If there is no Child Concern Notification present, one is created

When MASH officers identify a child that is open to children's social care or early help (and is also recorded as a current missing child) they will access the missing report and record on the additional information section who the allocated worker is and contact details for liaison during the missing enquiries.

The Police MASH officers advise workers of any identified concerns regarding exploitation and missing, inviting the worker to consider MSET referrals and risk assessments.

Children's Social Care (CSC) will work with police during any enquiry to locate a missing child.

When Police locate a child reported as missing, Police will return the child to parent/carer/placement. In some instances it may be inappropriate to return a child to their home or placement and in all such cases Police will contact CSC (EDT out of office hours) for an evaluation of their safety.

LA responsibilities

Initial action to be taken by carers, when a child is missing or absent

Carers must take all reasonable and practical steps to:

- Establish the whereabouts and well-being of the child or young person
- Determine the level of risk of harm to the child or young person
- Determine the nature and reasons for absenteeism
- Ascertain the likely intentions of the child or young person before contacting the police

Actions should include those in the Levels of Intervention including:

- Searching their own premises, immediate locality, and where the child is likely to be
- Make enquiries with other children and young people in the home/school /workplace (using social media where appropriate)
- Make enquiries with other professionals
- Make enquiries with relatives (unless it is considered not in the child or young person's best interests)
- Consider recent events
- Telephone/text the child and young person to establish their safety and well-being and use social media where appropriate

All issues/decisions/actions should be fully documented

Informing the police

Every child goes who goes 'Missing' must be reported to the police immediately where there is *imminent risk* to the child or wider public, in other cases initial enquiries should be made by the parent/carer to establish their whereabouts.

Whenever a child goes missing from a children's home or foster home then the *foster carer* or the *Lead Person* on duty in a children's home should also inform the following as soon as possible (and in all cases within 24 hours)

- The parents or those who have parental responsibility (where appropriate)
- The Social Worker or Team Manager
- The Emergency Duty Team (if out of hours)

Once a decision has been made to report the child or young person missing the carer should contact police using the non-emergency telephone number (101) unless they have *significant concerns* about the welfare of the child.



The carer (in consultation with other professionals responsible for the child's health, safety and well-being) must be explicit when reporting an episode to the police so that the level of perceived risk to the child or young person is clear from the outset. **This will determine the level of police response.**



The carer will be given a unique reference/log number, which should be retained and used in any future contact with the police.

When reporting to the police the following minimum information is required:

- 1 Description of the child or including their clothing;
- 2 Details of where the child was last seen and with whom;
- 3 Recent photograph;
- 4 Relevant addresses;
- 5 Known associates and addresses frequented;
- 6 Personal details of the child
- 7 Previous history of missing and circumstances of where found;
- 8 Circumstances under which the child or young person is missing;
- 9 Any factors which increase the risk to the child
- 10 Name of the staff member completing the risk assessment and / or the search of the home and locality.

Reporting procedure

Philomena Protocol

The Philomena protocol is used as best practice to share information on risk, vulnerabilities, associates and places frequented by a child who is at risk of going missing – for more information see [Philomena Protocol Leaflet](#)

When a child moves to a placement, staff should complete [this form](#) (with the child where appropriate)

The information detailed on it can be used as an investigation plan for both parent/carer and police in the event of a child not being where they are expected to be.

The protocol promotes joint responsibility for all agencies to work together to safely and quickly locate the child.

Philomena protocol can be used for non-looked after children where it would be of benefit to the child and other agencies.

A strategy discussion/meeting must be held **within 72 hours** if a child is missing for a prolonged period of time.

The meeting will be convened for the purpose of developing a strategy to locate and return the child to safety (this may or may not include the initiation of s47 enquiries).

Whenever a child is missing for longer period (over 72 hours) the *Deputy Strategic Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help* will also be informed.

If the child has been missing for **28 days** a *senior police manager* and the *Deputy Strategic Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help* should jointly review the case and take any actions they consider necessary to locate and return the child

The meeting will involve:

The Team Manager from Children's Social Care responsible for the child welfare

A police representative from the Safeguarding Team and/or the Missing From Home Coordinator

The registered manager of the children's home or fostering service and foster carer where appropriate

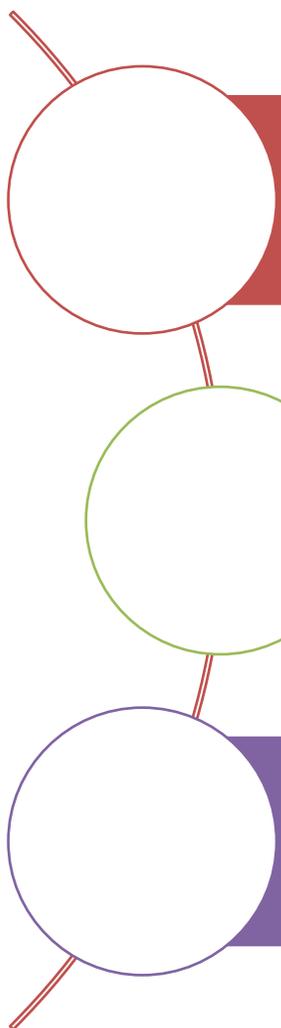
Other relevant staff from Children's Social Care and the Youth Justice Team

Other relevant professionals working with the young person (e.g. health, education etc)

The meeting may also involve parents (if relevant / appropriate)

Longer absences

These senior officers will review the actions taken up to this point and satisfy themselves that all possible steps are being taken to locate and return the child



Throughout the period that the child or young person is missing, carers and social workers must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received or given.

Police will keep a record on the appropriate missing personal report/computer system.

The records should clearly include details of where the young person was found, any reasons the child has given for going missing and any actions taken in light of those reasons. This information is important for any future missing from care episodes.

Recording

General principles..

When a child is located the police, parents, social workers and any other person informed of the child absence should be notified without delay (unless these would place the young person at risk of significant harm).

For cared for children, the children's services for the area from where the child is missing will be responsible for recovering the child and returning them to their home or placement (unless the child is located by police).

In some instances it may be inappropriate to return a child to their home or placement and in all such cases police will contact EDT for an evaluation of their safety.

If there are specific and identified issues of safety or public order associated with returning that child or young person then a coordinated approach to recover the child or young person should be agreed with the police.

Any out of hours referrals received by EDT involving a child or young person who has been reported missing or has returned should be forwarded to the relevant social worker or the Integrated Referral Team (IRT). This information must include where the young person was placed.

Police interview

- The police will interview all children when they return from a missing episode.
- The purpose will be to gather intelligence about the missing episode and it serves to confirm the identity of the child and that they have returned.
- If the child makes an allegation of crime that occurred whilst they were missing or that contributed to him/her running away, the police officer will record this allegation and take appropriate action.

The return

Every child who goes missing will be offered a return interview.

Return interviews will be conducted (where possible) by the Return Home Support Worker from within the Specialist Support Team.

Contact to arrange the interview should ideally take place within 72 hours of the child or young person's return.

Information gathered, as part of the return interview will be recorded on the child's social care record and shared with the police Missing From Home Coordinator.

Intelligence gathered from all interviews each month will be shared at the monthly MSET meeting

High risk factors include:

Been missing for over 24 hours

Been missing on two or more occasions in six months

Engaged (or believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence

Been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to be the case)

Known mental health issues

Known risk of sexual exploitation or contact with persons posing risk to children

Independent return interviews

REPEAT MISSING

If a child repeatedly goes missing (*3 or more times in a month*) or causes specific concerns due to risk factors when missing, a multi-agency strategy meeting should be held to develop a *strategy to prevent* future missing events and *reduce the risk* of harm to the child should they go missing again.

The purpose of the strategy meeting is to:

Agree and record a pre-risk assessment

Agree a reporting strategy

Recommend the minimum enquiries to be undertaken by carers, children's services and police

Agree an appropriate return strategy

Consider contextual risks and appropriate interventions

A child protection action plan to bring about behaviour change should be put in place, and regularly reviewed in accordance with child protection procedures for its effectiveness.

Things to consider..

- Repeat runaways should be viewed with as much concern as children who run away for the first time.
- The persistence of this behaviour would suggest that the action following from earlier assessments should be reviewed and alternative options considered.
- Short absences may present the same risk as longer ones** and should be viewed with equal seriousness and urgency.

Supported accommodation can be used as a positive choice to support cared for young people aged 16 and 17 to transition to independence

Supported accommodation is unregulated:

Unregulated provision

- These settings provide independent or semi-independent living, with staff available to provide advice and support to residents
- **Unregulated provision is allowed in law**
- Ofsted do not regulate this type of provision

Unregistered provision

- is when a child who's being provided with some form of 'care' is living somewhere that is not registered with Ofsted
- **This is illegal**
- Once a provider delivers a care element as well as accommodation, they must register as a children's home - It's an offence not to

Careful planning needs to take place to support a young person towards independence whilst ensuring safeguards are in place to mitigate any risk.

When a young person does not return to their provision at an agreed time staff should be encouraged to use the *Levels of Intervention* to determine whether police involvement is required.

Where there is **no assessed imminent risk** to the young person, staff should **contact EDT** to notify them the child is away from placement without authority.

EDT and/or social worker will periodically review the risk and where there is assessed imminent risk police should be notified.

16 & 17 year olds (Transition / supported accommodation)

OUT OF AREA PLACEMENTS

Statutory guidance and the associated regulations, outline duties on local authorities to notify other local authorities if they place a child in care within their area.

It also requires children's homes to notify their host local authority when a child is placed with them by another authority.

Gateshead have agreed to notify Police of any out of area children they Host, particularly where there is risk relating to missing, exploitation and radicalisation.

In cases where a child placed in Gateshead by another local authority runs away from their placement, the home authority should call a strategy meeting. If necessary, this will include the relevant organisations from both the home and host authority and will establish a plan.

Local procedures should be followed and the response should also be based on the young person's care plan.

Where there is a history of the young person running away, the home authority must inform the host authority as part of the placement agreement.

Appropriate details should be shared to support the home authority (who retain ownership) to manage the risk and informal care planning for the child.

Any information gathered as part of the return interview will also be shared with the host local authority.

Child Abduction

Sometimes parents, foster carers or social workers know where the child is staying but feel powerless to prevent the adult from harbouring the child because there is no proof of a crime being committed against the child.

The police are usually called upon to assist with retrieving the child/young person, which involves a lot of time and resources, often with no positive outcome for the child.

In order to address this, the police in Gateshead have adopted a Child Abduction procedure aimed at disrupting and prosecuting those who present a risk to children who they enable to stay away from lawful custody.

The guidance is aimed at tackling those children aged under 16 (under 18 if in local authority care) who are at risk of significant harm due to their associations and the forming of inappropriate relationships.

Any report of a child abduction or immediate child protection will not fall under this procedure – such cases will be considered a crime in action and the relevant force child protection procedures will apply and supersede this process.

Types of CAWN

There are two types of Child Abduction Warning Notice which can be issued by Northumbria Police:

Child under 16 who is not under local authority care

- To issue a Warning Notice for children aged under 16 and not in local authority care, the police will need a complainant statement from one of the parents.

Child aged under 18 who is in the care of a local authority

- Where young people are looked after *under section 31* the local authority will have full parental responsibility.
- In cases of interim care orders this responsibility can be shared.

A warning notice can be issued by police a child under 16 (or 18 if under local authority care):

1. Child is subject to reports suggesting a suspect has induced or incited them to run away from the responsible person, or their behaviour and association with a suspect is giving rise to significant safeguarding concerns

OR

2. Child has been in the company of a suspect in circumstances in which it is suspected that the facts amount to an offence of child abduction, but there is insufficient evidence to justify a decision to prosecute, and safeguarding concerns still remain.

A CAWN cannot be issued upon the child's parent

- The Police Missing From Home Sergeant (or out of hours duty Inspector) can authorise a CAWN
- If there is evidence that the terms of CAWN have been contravened (for example if the child has been reported missing and found with the suspect after the CAWN has been served) then the subject could be arrested and interviewed on suspicion of having committed an offence under the relevant legislation.

On each occasion that a child is reported missing from home or local authority care:

Northumbria Police – ACTION

- Police will submit a child concern to Children's Services in accordance with Northumbria Police procedure within 24 hours (missing from home only).
- At the point of return a Police Officer will visit the child/young person. Where possible the young person should be seen alone. The officer will provide contact details to the child to allow future contact if child wishes.
- Police information will be supplemented by information from other statutory partners and where appropriate the voluntary sector. Information from return interviews will be shared with police and Children's Services.
- Where there is any child protection concern, this will be followed up as part of the daily triage process and appropriate child protection procedures followed.

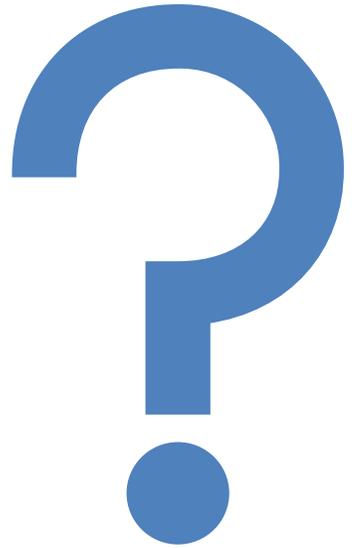
Gateshead Children's Social Care - ACTION

- A full needs assessment should be considered by Children's Social Care (CSC) so that their broader needs can be identified and addressed.
- CSC will provide early intervention and support where necessary to understand and address reasons for running away.
- CSC should consider whether a S50 Recovery Order is applicable to this case.

WIDER STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Gateshead will share with police any adverse findings of any OFSTED registered children's home in the area (for support and to address any wider safeguarding issues).
- Gateshead Planning Authority will notify Police of any applications for new children's homes or supported accommodation for children to enable police contribution to the *Location Risk Assessment* assessing the application from a safeguarding perspective.

SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION



Any
questions?