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**EMPOWER U PRACTICE GUIDANCE:**

**SAFER RETURN HOME INTERVIEWS**

**January 2022**

**Under Review**

**Introduction:**

The statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (Department of Education January 2014) sets out the steps Local Authorities and their partners should take to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they go missing.

**Our Service Offer:**

The EMPOWER U hub will ensure that Missing Support Workers are flexible in their approach to supporting children who go missing and will work extended hours to respond to children missing and found out of office times. The service recognises that children who go missing and are found may not be found during office hours and there is a need for a more flexible approach.

**Definition of Missing:**

* Missing child:

A child reported to the police or by police as someone whose whereabouts are unknown by their families or carers, whatever the circumstances of their disappearance, and they are **considered missing** until located. A **missing** person under the age of 18 is **classified as a missing child.**

* Missing from Care:

A child in care who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g., school) and their whereabouts are not known.

* Away from Placement Without Authorisation:

A child in care whose whereabouts are known but who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be, and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the Police.

* Young Runaway:A child who has run away from their home or care placement or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.

**Information Sharing and Recording**

When notifying/informing the Police that a child is missing from home or care, it is vital to provide information about the circumstances and risk factors that led to the child going missing. It is also important to discuss possible strategies for finding and recovering the child safely, and the actions the home have already taken to try and locate / contact the child. Agreement should also be reached about others who may need to know the child is missing e.g., the child's parents.

The Police will require the following information:

1. A description of the child, possibly a photograph;
2. When the child was last seen and with whom;
3. Family addresses;
4. Other addresses of people the child may contact;
5. Any previous history of the child going missing.

**BCT Information sharing and Recording**

On receipt of the Missing Police Compact, information will be recorded on the child’s record by Business Support within in Eclipse on the Missing and found Notification worklist and form. This worklist and form will remain open to Business Support until they receive the found notification from the Police. Once updated; the worklist will be reassigned to the Exploitation and Missing Hub team. An Exploitation and Missing Coordinator will have oversight of the missing and found information and using their judgement will decide the most appropriate outcome and assign a Return Home Support Worker worker to conduct a return home interview.

Any high-risk missing children will be discussed all partners within the hub on a daily basis within the Exploitation and Missing Hub daily briefing.

**Police Response**

On receiving a missing person report the Police will assess the risks to the missing person using a continuum of risk which ranges from ‘no apparent risk (previously known as absent)’ through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. For more information see the [College of Policing definition of missing and absent](https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/#definition-of-missing).

The Police will not send an officer to cases where children/young people are defined as being at no apparent risk (‘absent’). Instead, the onus in this situation will be on the home to take steps to locate the child/young person, with on-going monitoring of risk and escalation if there is a change to the circumstances or an increase in the level of risk.

It is expected that all reasonable steps should be taken by the home to locate the child/young person prior to making a report to the Police. When making decisions about how to respond to a child or young person who appears to be missing, the welfare of the child should always be the primary consideration. When considering individual cases, professionals in all agencies should where necessary consult and seek advice from each other in order to support the process of shared risk assessment.

If a child is deemed, ‘**high risk**,’ the Police will seek to put out a media appeal. At all times they will seek to get consent from parents/carers. However, media appeal can be circulated without the consent of parent/carers.

**Birmingham Children’s Trust Response:**

We will review all children missing regardless of the risk deemed by the Police.

When considering individual cases, we will (where necessary and appropriate) consult and seek advice from each agency within the EMPOWER U Hub in order to support the process of a shared risk assessment. We will offer all children missing from home and care, a return home interview. There may be instances whereby we will offer children missing from care who we are hosting (from another local authority). An example would be where they are missing with our children for whom there are exploitation concerns, or the child has been placed in our area from another area a considerable distance away.

We will consult with the Other Local Authority and share any information. We expect the Other Local Authority to provide relevant information such as a risk assessment.

Depending on the length of time a child has gone missing (72 hours), level of risks associated with the missing episodes and or the frequency of the missing episodes (missing 3 times in 30 days) a strategy discussion must be convened.

**When a child returns:**

The way parents and carers respond to children when they return from a missing episode is key to preventing future missing episodes and to ascertaining any harm they may have experienced during the missing period. When children return, they should be welcomed back and asked whether they want anything to eat or drink. Parents and carers should make a note of their presentation on their return (have they lost weight, is their clothing clean) these are indicators of their experiences whilst missing. Parents and carers should try to refrain from asking them any questions immediately after they return.

The Police will conduct a Safe and Well interview to conclude their investigation. Where a child goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable for the police to see them every time they return.

Within the EMPOWER U Hub we will ensure full oversight of the found circumstances is recorded with a clear rationale and where needed prioritise on the day visits by a Missing Support worker.

Any professionals involved with the child will be notified that the child has returned.

For children in care, at the request of the child, or where there are concerns about a child who frequently goes missing, the home's manager or foster carer’s supervising social worker should consider arranging a meeting between the child and the placing authority to look at their reasons for going missing.

Staff based at any Children’s Residential setting should ensure a de brief is conducted with the child when they return from a missing episode. They should ensure that any information is recorded and share any relevant information with the allocated social worker and where appropriate the Police.

**Purpose of the Return home conversation**

* Establish the reasons why a child went missing
* What happened whilst they were missing?
* Who they were with, area’s locations visited?
* Identify harm such as abuse, neglect, exploitation
* Allow professionals to identify actions they need to keep the child safe
* Provide them with information to keep themselves safe
* Advocate on behalf of the child

Information from the Independent Return home conversation should be used to develop strategies to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing again, or if they do, what strategies can be identified to keep themselves safe.

There is a recognised link between children going missing and exploitation, including child sexual and criminal exploitation. The return home conversations may indicate signs of exploitation or potential harm that they may have been placed at which may require a strategy discussion, assessment or information to be shared with the Police. Children should be informed that the information from Independent Return Home Conversations may be used in this way.

In some cases, children may feel unhappy at home or within their placement and this may be a contributing factor in a child running away or going missing, and this should be explicitly considered and explored when they return.

### Independent Return Home Conversations:

The statutory guidance states that local authorities must offer an independent return interview to all children who run away or go missing from their family home or care.

An [Independent Return Home Conversation](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/indep_return_interview.html) **must** be offered to every child who goes missing from care or home regardless of the Police risk rating. The offer should be made when the child returns. Contact to offer a Return home Conversation should be made within 72 hours of the child returning.

This contact could be via letter, telephone call and /or any other virtual methods such as text or what’s app where age appropriate and consent from parents have been gained). Social media can offer creative ways of communicating with children. It is important to note that apps have different terms and conditions, and workers are advised to ensure they have checked the terms and conditions and in addition, BCT policies and procedures prior to using these platforms.

**The role of the Missing Support Workers**:

The role of the Missing support worker is an essential role to the reduction and protection of children that go missing. They should build trust and work in a relationship-based way with children. Their responsibilities include:

* Connecting and building relationships with children who go missing
* Missing from Home and Care Return Home Conversations and direct brief intervention for young people who go missing
* Improved evidence gathering, intelligence/mapping and information sharing to inform police and partnership problem profiling, disruption and prosecutions
* Links in with commissioners regarding placement suitability to support permanence planning
* The conduit for criminal and safeguarding investigations both in and out of force areas including progression of NRM’s
* Support and advice to colleagues/social workers re CSE/CCE specialist intervention with children and parents including children looked after out of borough
* Work in partnership with the BCT Practice hub and Safeguarding Partnership to develop a contextual approach to safeguarding across the workforce and partner agencies
* Coordination and oversight of missing and child exploitation cases via the Disruption Planning Meetings
* Connecting children to specialist commissioned/voluntary services including Barnardos and Children’s Society
* Working with care homes across the borough re CE and missing

**Planning:**

The conversation should be carried out by an independent professional (e.g. a social worker, teacher, health professional worker from an organisation commissioned to undertake these conversations who does not usually work with the child and is trained to carry out these conversations).

Children sometimes need to build up trust with a person before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they ran away. While the person conducting the interview should usually be independent of the child’s placement and of the responsible local authority, an exception may be where a child has a strong relationship with a carer or social worker and has expressed a preference to talk to them, rather than an independent person, about the reasons they went missing.

Workers should ensure that they read the history and the missing and found notification and any information from daily briefing to get some contextual information before calling the numbers provided.

**Child known to services:**

If you have spoken to the child on several occasions and know them well, continue to connect as you usually do. Routine and familiarity are reassuring and aid engagement. Where possible BCT will try and ensure that the child is assigned the same worker if this is appropriate, and they have built a good relationship.

If a Return home conversation is required for a child missing from care from another local authority; the responsible local authority should ensure the Return Home Conversation takes place, working closely with the host authority where appropriate.

The Return Home conversation should take place in a neutral place where the child feels safe and good practice dictates it is always best to see a child face-to-face (where possible) after they have been missing.

**Initial Contact with parent/carer:**

The assigned worker needs to ensure that in the first instance they speak to the parent/carer first to gain consent and explain the purpose of the RHI (where age appropriate). Before the RHI takes place, ask them to explain to their child who you are, what you do and why you want to speak to them.

It is important that unsuccessful initial contacts are followed up using different methods of contact.

If you are making contact in writing to a child (where age appropriate), make sure that you use child friendly language. If they have an email account, send them information, contact details and consent documents for information.

Explore with parents/carers the best time for you to visit this should not disrupt children’s everyday activities. Ensure there is a comfortable and private space available for the child to feel safe to talk.

**The Return Conversation:**

Call the child at the arranged time. Be reliable. If it is not convenient anymore, reassure them that it is fine and arrange to call back later. For children who have multiple missing episodes and there are risks weekly visits maybe required. The day, time and place needs to be agreed with the child.

**Conducting interviews remotely:**

All return home conversations should be undertaken face to face unless the child decides this is not what they want. Staf are advised to follow BCT policies and procedures whilst using social media platforms to conduct interviews. In the first instance we should attempt telephone calls.

Only work devices and specially created work social media accounts can be used.

If using video links, you should be in a safe and confidential location. If at home, this should be in an area that is completely unidentifiable e.g., a blank wall.

You must not turn on your location settings as this can allow others to see where you are.

Privacy settings must be at the highest setting.

Ask the young person (and parent/carer where appropriate) if they consent to using the messaging/call service.

All messages and calls must be recorded on the child’s record within Eclipse using the return home interview worklist and forms.

Ensure the young person understands boundaries between the two of you and that these messages will be shared with your line manager and uploaded on the case recording system.

When on a 1-to-1 call, ensure the young person is in a safe space where they can talk freely.

Ensure any safeguarding concerns that are disclosed within the Return home interview are immediately discussed with your line manager who will advise of the appropriate action to take with a clear timescale.

Ensure any intelligence regarding locations, names places of concern are interview are immediately discussed with your line manager who will advise of the appropriate action to take with a clear timescale (this may include submitting a FIB intelligence form to the Police).

**Sharing the Return Home Conversations:**

If a request for a copy of the return home conversation is made from an agency/organisation or parent and the decision is made to share, this must be the decision of the lead practitioner to share and not the decision of the EMPOWER U Hub. Any information shared should be shared sensitively.

* There may be issues at the placement which may be a reason for the child going missing and finding out that a child has disclosed these issues may prove challenging for the child.

* Staff at a children’s home (and parents) may not fully understand the sensitivity of the information or the risks around certain names/locations and could compromise intelligence or investigations by not understanding the context and wider picture around the child and the missing incident. The service recommends that that care staff should not get a copy unless redacted and all intel removed. This should be the same for the parent/carer.

References used:

* A Safer return home (Missing Police) Conducting good return home interviews for young people who run away (Children’s Society)
* Department of Education Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (January)