



## Practice Guidance and Procedures for Missing Children and Young People

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## 1. Scope

When children and young people go missing, they are at risk of coming to harm and can become extremely vulnerable to Child Exploitation, especially if they go missing on multiple occasions. It is therefore important that all necessary steps are taken not only to safeguard children and young people when they do go missing, but also what can be done to prevent them going missing again in the future.

This guidance sets out the specific roles of each member of the partnership when a child goes missing and sits alongside [The Children Act \(1989\) Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018](#), [The Statutory Guidance on Children who run away from Home or Care \(2014\)](#) and [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.

The College of Policing has issued [Authorised Professional Practice \(APP\) guidance for missing persons \(2023\)](#). Police officers and staff are expected to have regard to APP in discharging their responsibilities. There may, however, be circumstances when it is perfectly legitimate to deviate, provided there is clear rationale for doing so. APP states that: "going missing should be treated as an indicator that the individual may be at risk of harm. The safeguarding of vulnerable people is paramount, and a missing person report should be recognised as an opportunity to identify and address risks. The reasons for a person deciding to go missing may be complex and linked to a variety of social or family issues.

Three key factors should be considered in a missing person investigation:

- *protecting those at risk of harm;*
- *minimising distress and ensuring high quality of service to the families and carers of missing persons;*
- *prosecuting those who perpetrate harm or pose a risk of harm when this is appropriate and supported by evidence."*

Many children will exhibit normal adolescent behaviour in testing boundaries, and it is not always helpful to consider every incident of lateness or absence as "Missing". Children 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. It is therefore important to consider each child within their individual context.

## 2. Action to be taken when a child goes Missing

### [Before Contacting Police](#)

Efforts must be made to try and locate the missing child prior to calling the police unless there is evidence that they are at immediate risk of harm. This can include looking for them in the local area and contacting other people that they know or could be with.

When a call is made to report a child missing, a call should be made via 101, but if you feel that a child is at immediate risk of harm whilst missing, you should call the police on 999. During the initial call, police will ask important questions that will assist them in locating the child at the earliest opportunity, so it will be important to gather as much evidence as possible to prevent delay. These questions might include;

- The time and place they were last seen
- If anything is missing from their room, or have they taken any belongings with them
- What they were wearing when last seen

- Names of any friends, family or associates that they might be with and contact details for those people
- Are there any risk factors to consider? For example, if they are experiencing Child Exploitation; by who, where and when and is this likely this be happening now?

[For a Child We Care For who is away from placement without authorisation](#)

Where a child’s location is not known, this should be reported to the Police as above. Being away from their placement without authorisation, e.g. late returns, staying at a known location with a friend, unauthorised family contact, where their location is known, will not normally constitute a missing episode. The discretion of the residential staff and carers is necessary to decide when to make a report to the police, based on the concerns they have for the child and action taken to contact them. The responsibility for managing this type of absence lies with the staff of the residential home or carer. If the carer has concerns for the child’s safety, then the usual safeguarding procedures should be followed. If the assessment of the carer is that there is no apparent risk for the child’s immediate safety it is still important that staff/carers record these incidences as “away from their placement without authorisation” in the child’s record, starting a dated and timed record of their contacts, risk assessment and decisions throughout the episode from the point that they are first aware of the child being away.

They should notify the child’s Social Worker or Emergency Duty Team (EDT) within a timeframe consistent with the placement plan or missing plan for that child; no child should be away from placement without authorisation for more than a maximum of 6 hours, without the Social Worker or EDT being informed and consulted as to appropriate action. The Local Authority staff need to do an assessment of the risks, create a plan to mitigate those risks, and if manageable decide whether to allow the child to temporarily remain at that location whilst they arrange for their return. Please note that any decisions need to be made in accordance with guidance on unregulated placements.

[Police 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 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’

<b>High</b>	The risk posed is <b>immediate</b> 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.
<b>Medium</b>	The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger, or they are a threat to themselves or others.
<b>Low</b>	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.

### 3. Recording that a Child is Missing

#### Police Response

Once a report 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](mailto:Missing.Children@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk))

#### MASH/IFD Response

For a child that is open to Children’s Social Care (CSC); MASH will review the information and notify the allocated social worker.

If a child is not known to CSC, MASH will create a new contact for the child, recording the information from the police notification on MOSAIC and take appropriate action as set out below.

If the child is placed in West Sussex by another Local Authority, MASH will record the information from the police notification accordingly on MOSAIC and will alert the relevant Local Authority who has responsibility for the child.

If the child was previously known and closed, MASH will review the police report and create a contact on MOSAIC with details of the Missing Incident taking appropriate action depending on the current risk identified.

#### Missing Children Team Response

The Missing Persons Co-ordinator from Sussex Police will create a summary of children who have been missing or found in last 24 hours (or weekend if meeting is on a Monday) or who are still missing. This summary will include the time the child went missing and was found; the place they were missing from and found and significant places they went whilst missing. The Police identification of harm, indicators of exploitation and any intel concerning peer groups or networks and/or perpetrators of harm will be shared.

They will send this summary to the Missing Children Team in Children’s Social Care where the following actions will be taken;

- The Missing Children Team’s Embedded Co-ordinator will upload a Missing Episode on MOSAIC for the missing child, stating the date and time that they were last seen, and the date and time that they were reported missing.
- The Missing Children Team’s Embedded Co-ordinator will alert the Allocated Social Worker that their child is missing and advise of the necessary procedures below.
- The Missing Children Team’s Embedded Co-ordinator will send an email to all Team Managers, Service Managers, Heads of Service and Assistant Director in Children’s Social Care every afternoon to ensure they are alerted to which children missing. The email will include a link to the [Missing Children’s Dashboard](#) where updated information is captured and allow for sufficient management oversight.

### 4. Intervention when a Child is Missing

#### Initial Action

The Missing Children Team Lead will liaise with The Missing Persons Co-ordinator from Sussex Police and the Allocated Social Work team on a frequent basis throughout the day to ensure they are sharing information to inform the current risk assessment and to assist police to find the child at the earliest opportunity. The allocated Team Manager will take the lead in coordinating a safety plan with the Missing Police Team and Missing Children

Team Leader to ensure that the child is located as quickly as possible and formulate a plan of action for when the child is found.

If the child who is missing is reasonably considered to be at risk of significant harm and it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the safety of the child, then their Social Worker must inform their Team Manager and the CRO if the child has one. The Team Manager must arrange and chair a Strategy Meeting with all relevant partners but must include the Missing Police Team and Missing Team Lead as soon as practicable to agree further action that is required to locate and see the child, and plan for when child is found under the guidance as set out below.

The Team Manager must also inform their Service Manager if particularly high levels of risk indicating a significant level of harm or reputational risk are evidenced. The Service Manager will inform their Head of Service who should complete a 'Need to Know' document. The Service Manager will add a Case Note Summary including oversight of plan on MOSAIC.

## 5. Children who have been missing for more than 24 hours

As stated above, if it is reasonably evidenced that the child who is missing, regardless of their legal status is currently/or likely to be at risk of significant harm then a strategy discussion should be held at the earliest opportunity. This Strategy Discussion should preferably be chaired by the Allocated Team Manager, but if they are not available this action should not be delayed and therefore chaired by an alternative Team Manager. If the risk is identified out of office hours, then an EDT Manager should take the lead in organising and chairing a Strategy Discussion. If there is a high level of complexity or risk, then a Service Manager should Chair the Strategy Discussion under the same principle.

### Strategy Discussions

A Strategy Discussion will be held when a child has been missing for 24 hours. Additionally, if the child has been missing for 3 or more times within a four-week period then consideration must be given to holding a Strategy Discussion specifically focusing on whether the child is being exploited.

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

In addition to the core professionals within the child's network, the Strategy Discussion should include The Missing Team Lead, Missing Persons Police, Community Safety Team and where relevant the child's CRO and Youth Justice.

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, taxi, bus, train? 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 Child Exploitation – on what basis, the fact they are missing and vulnerable does not necessarily equate to an active risk of Child Exploitation and it is important that we work on a proportionate balance of probabilities basis.*

Actions must be drawn up with clear timescales, with 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, e.g. McDonalds/Subway etc. Does contact need to be made? CCTV for example?
- **Publicity**; is publicity required? If professionals feel that publicity would help in finding the child, then Missing Police will seek consent from the child's parents/carer with Parental Responsibility. If the child is Looked After by the Local Authority, this should be agreed by the Assistant Director. The family should be informed. Missing Police will gain an up to date photograph of the child and will be responsible for any publicity.

#### Outcome of Strategy Discussion

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'.

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. This meeting can be cancelled should the child return and there is no immediate evidence that they have experienced significant harm whilst they have been missing.

- **Service Manager** to inform the Head of Service 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.
- **Service Manager** to add Case Note Summary to mosaic.
- **Head of Service** to inform their Assistant Director and gain permission for media release for Children We Care For and consult parents about any decision to publish information. Case note to be added by Head of Service to mosaic.
- **Assistant Director** to review Need to Know document, seek assurance regarding any actions if required and advise the Director of Children Young People and Learning if necessary. A Case note is to be added by the Assistant Director to mosaic.

#### If a child has been missing for more than 72 hours, and within 7 days:

- **Service Manager:** to chair the 2<sup>nd</sup> Strategy Discussion to include cross local authority police teams involved, core professionals within the child's network, the Strategy Discussion should include The Missing Team Lead, Missing Persons Police, Community Safety Team and where relevant the child's CRO and Youth Justice. 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 Head of Service.
- Review media actions taken and if relevant discuss the need for an update with either the child's family, or with an Assistant Director if the missing child is a Child We Care For.
- Agree steps to be taken when child is found, and ensure that the child's CRO is included in these actions if necessary.
- **Service Manager:** to add Case Note Summary to mosaic
- **Head of Service:** to provide summary of missing circumstances (updating Need to Know document) and actions being taken to the Assistant Director. Case note to be added by Head of Service to mosaic.
- **Assistant Director** To send 'Need to Know' document to the Director of Children Young People and Learning who will advise Chief Executive and Cabinet Members if required. Case note to be added by Assistant Director to mosaic.

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

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

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

### Police Response

All missing children will have a 'Safe and Well Check' upon return conducted by the Police. (This is sometimes referred to as a 'return interview') The purpose of a Safe and Well Check is to check for any indications that the child has suffered, or is suffering harm and to give them the opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against them.

The Safe and Well Check will consider and record the appearance and demeanour of the child, taking into consideration what the child has told them. The Safe and Well Check will then be recorded by Police on NICHE.

The information from the Safe and Well Check is to be sent through to the IFD/MASH on a SCARF notification in addition to being sent to 'Missing Children Team' ([Missing.Children@westussex.gov.uk](mailto:Missing.Children@westussex.gov.uk)).

### The Missing Children Team Response

- The Missing Children Team Embedded Coordinator will record the date and time that the child has been found in the relevant Missing Episode on Mosaic which will then trigger the need for a Return Home Conversation.
- The Missing Children Team Embedded Coordinator will advise the Allocated Social Worker that the child has been found.

### Return Home Conversation

Following the Police Safe & Well Check, the child person must be offered an independent Return Home Conversation within 72 hours of them being found. For those living in West



Sussex this will be arranged and/or completed by a Return Home Interviewer in the West Sussex Missing Children Team. Return Home Conversations provide an opportunity for professionals to understand why the child 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 purpose of the Return Home Conversation is to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing and address this, but to also capture their voice with the intention of understanding;

- 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.

The Missing Children Team will ascertain whether another professional already has an established and positive relationship with the child and if this is found to be the case then the Missing Children Team Lead will liaise with that professional's manager and request that they carry out the Return Home Conversation. Evidence shows that children and young people are more likely to disclose information regarding what happened to a trusted professional after they have been missing so it will be important to ensure that they are given every opportunity to express their views.

A Return Home Conversation must always be a priority when the child;

- has been hurt or harmed while they have been missing
- is at known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking
- is at known or suspected risk of involvement in criminal activity or drugs
- has contact with people posing risk to children
- has been engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities while missing.
- have been reported missing on two or more occasions or who are frequently away from placement (or their home) without authorisation.

**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.**

The assessment of whether a child might run away again should be based on information about:

- their individual circumstances, including family circumstances
- their motivation for running away
- their potential destinations and associates
- their recent pattern of absences
- the circumstances in which the child was found or returned; and
- their individual characteristics and risk factors such as whether a child has learning difficulties, mental health issues, depression and other vulnerabilities.

## **7. Children Missing from Care**

When a child is reported missing all of the steps noted above must be followed, but the carer, the responsible Local Authority and the police have a joint responsibility for protecting the wellbeing of the child. Whilst the police are the lead professionals for the investigation of missing children and young 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 missing by staff at the care establishment or foster home does not absolve the carers from their 'duty of care' to the child 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 to build a picture of behaviour.

### The Care Plan

Prior to each accommodation arrangement for a Child We Care For, 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 a Child We Care For must be taken into account.

When a child is placed 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 Allocated Social Worker will need to inform the placing authority and local Missing Police of any safety planning that is already in place.

### Placement Plan

The initial Placement Plan 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 child or themselves if they go missing and it may help to locate the child.

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 child: e.g curfew; when and how to make contact; consequences of lateness etc.
- Expectations of the care provider / foster carer
- 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.
- Immediately inform the child's Allocated Social Worker and EDT if necessary and keep them constantly up to date
- Attend Strategy Meetings as practicable
- Ensuring the CRO is informed if the child goes missing.

All these elements should be reviewed during the care planning process. For children who are placed in residential care there is further guidance in the NMS & Children's Homes Regulations.

### Publicity of Children We Care For

Before any final decision is made, the Police will discuss any publicity of a child missing from care with the child's care provider, and social worker. For all Children We Care For an Assistant Director needs to approve any media release. This will be done in sufficient time for Children's Services to notify the child's parents or 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.

## **8. Children We Care For Placed outside of West Sussex**

When Children We Care For are placed outside of West Sussex and they go Missing, Sussex Police are not made aware and as such the Missing Children's Team do not automatically receive a notification. Instead, the child's allocated Social Worker will receive the police notification and to ensure sufficient management oversight and scrutiny of the child's safety the following actions need to be followed.

Carers have responsibility for notifying missing incidents to:

- the local missing police team in the Local Authority in which the child is residing
- the child's Allocated Social Worker
- MASH in the Local Authority in which the child is residing

The child's social worker will be responsible for;

- Requesting that their Embedded Co-ordinator sends the Missing Notification to the Missing Children Team [Missing.Children@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:Missing.Children@westsussex.gov.uk) to ensure the child is captured on the Missing Children Dashboard to allow for senior leadership oversight.
- Arranging a joint Strategy Discussion with the placing authority MASH; with West Sussex Missing Police Team and the 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 taking steps to prevent the child from missing again.

## **9. Children placed in West Sussex by another Local Authority**

When children are placed in West Sussex by another Local Authority all of the steps noted above must be followed, but additionally if there is an identified risk of Child Exploitation then they can be referred to West Sussex MACE to ensure that their risk is reduced by the professional network in the area that they live.

All actions taken must include the child allocated Social Worker.

## **10. Children Missing from School or their Educational setting**

If a child 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/young person. 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) 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.

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.

## 11. Children Missing with their Families

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.

Additional guidance can be found in the [PAN Sussex Procedures](#).

## 12. Child Exploitation

There is a strong link between children and young people being at risk of exploitation and going missing from home or care. 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 please follow the guidance to the new [Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Procedures](#).

<b>Review / Contacts / References</b>	
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