



# **WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## Guidance on Children Missing from Care or Home

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Any questions or concerns about the contents of this policy should be raised with the Quality Assurance and Policy Team via email at: [ImpactAndInspectionTeam@wokingham.gov.uk](mailto:ImpactAndInspectionTeam@wokingham.gov.uk).

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Definitions of missing and absent.....	3
The local approach to defining missing .....	3
Reporting missing occurrences from care .....	4
Wokingham’s procedures for responding to missing reports. ....	5
Return Home Interviews.....	5
Other Local Authority (OLA) Missing Persons.....	6
Children in care missing for over 24 hours or missing “3/90” .....	6
Appendix A - Responding to Missing Occurrences .....	7

## Introduction

This document has been produced to provide a brief overview of the processes that professionals should adhere to when Wokingham Borough Council Children's Services are notified of a child who goes missing from home or care. It applies to all children who go missing in the borough of Wokingham, whether they are living at home with parents/carers or are children in care who are looked after by Wokingham.

## Definition of missing

As of March 2016, the College of Policing has stated the following with regard to when a person should be defined as missing:

*"Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action."*

It is important to note that professionals or others reporting a child missing to the police should *not* make the judgement themselves as to whether a child is missing or absent - this decision will be made by the police on the basis of the information provided. Thames Valley Police are the lead agency for investigating and finding missing children, who will respond to children and young people going missing or being absent based on on-going risk assessments in line with current guidance.

More details about the risk assessment table that will inform the policing response when a child or young person goes missing can be found on the College of Policing website here:

<https://www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/missing-persons>

## The local response to missing.

Thames Valley Police are aligned to the above national College of Policing definition of missing - i.e.

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

When a child is reported as missing, Thames Valley Police will assess the level of risk and the appropriate response based on the grid below.

As per the information below, it should be noted that children who go missing will not be categorised as "No Apparent Risk (Absent)" by TVP, and therefore a missing child will always be treated as missing and not absent.

Risk Level	Definition	TVP Response
<b>Low Risk</b>	The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal”	Proportionate enquiries are to be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm. Investigation Hub are responsible for the Management of the investigation, Response Hub can be tasked to complete enquiries if appropriate.
<b>Medium Risk</b>	The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.	This category almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources. Action may be delayed in the exceptional circumstances such as searching water or forest areas during hours of darkness. A Chief Inspector or Superintendent will command the investigation. Investigation Hub have responsibility managing and completing enquiries with support from the Response Hub.
<b>High Risk</b>	The risk of Serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely	This category requires an active and measured response by the police and other agencies in order to trace the Missing child and support the person reporting. Investigation Hub are responsible for the management of investigations, Response Hub can be tasked

## Reporting missing occurrences from care.

Guidance for carers on when to consider reporting a child as missing from care to the police is not covered in this document. However, an overview of relevant best practice can be found in the ***Children Missing from Care Framework***<sup>1</sup>, a document that was co-produced by national partners (including the NPCC, ICHA, The Fostering Network, Keys Group and NYAS) in 2022.

Page 7 of this document provides a useful overview of how to respond to missing occurrences, and is reproduced under **Appendix A** of this guidance document.

<sup>1</sup> The latest version of the guidance can be found via the Fostering Network website here: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/node/12550>

## Wokingham's procedures for responding to missing reports.

### Return Home Interviews.

Where a child has been reported as missing to Thames Valley Police, and we subsequently receive a missing report via the TVP Missing Investigation Support Team (MIST), this will be logged by Wokingham's MASH Team on to Mosaic and sent directly to the Return Home Interview (RHI) Coordinator.

The RHI Coordinator post is currently held by the Team Manager of the Prevention & Youth Justice Service.<sup>2</sup>

Upon receipt of the report, the RHI Coordinator will check whether the child in question is currently known to Social Care/Early Help, or not.

### If the child is NOT known to Social Care:

1. The RHI co-ordinator (or supporting RHI team) contacts the parent/child to offer the RHI.
2. If they decline, the step is closed with an explanatory note added.
3. If the interview is agreed, the RHI Co-ordinator or supporting team arrange for an interview to take place **within 72 hours**. Delays can occur when timely contact with parents/child cannot be achieved OR when suitable meeting dates cannot be arranged, but the team should endeavour to meet the 72-hour timeframe wherever possible.
4. Once the interview is completed, the outcome is written up and the Mosaic step is closed by a manager. If additional support is required, the RHI Coordinator will send a Multi-Agency Referral Form (MARF) to the MASH Team for Early Help/Social Care input. Any intelligence that is gathered during the RHI process should also be submitted via partnership intelligence forms to TVP. If any crimes are identified to have taken place, then they should also be reported to TVP through standard reporting functions.

### If the child is known to Social Care or Early Help

1. The allocated worker (or Team Duty Cover) contacts the parent/child to offer the RHI.
2. If they decline, the step is closed with an explanatory note added.
3. If the interview is agreed, the allocated worker (or duty worker) arranges for an interview to take place **within 72 hours**. Delays can occur when timely contact with parents/child cannot be achieved OR when suitable meeting dates cannot be arranged, but the team should endeavour to meet the 72-hour timeframe wherever possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the process is overseen by the Return Home Interview Coordinator, the process is managed day-to-day via the Prevention and Youth Justice Duty Team as a whole. All staff in this team are trained in the delivery of the process, to ensure a timely response to all missing reports received.

4. Once the interview is completed, this is written up and the Mosaic step is closed by a manager. Support is then identified, delivered, and overseen by the allocated Social Worker/Family Worker and network. Any intelligence that is gathered during the RHI process should also be submitted via partnership intelligence forms to TVP. If any crimes are identified to have taken place, then they should also be reported to TVP through standard reporting functions.

### Other Local Authority (OLA) Missing Persons.

All police reports, missing reports or referrals for children who are placed in the Wokingham area, but who are children in care to other local authorities, are sent immediately to the local authority they are ordinarily resident of, who are responsible for the child.

For OLA children in care who are missing, the “Missing Child information (MCI)” Step on Mosaic will still be triggered, but the responsibility for conducting a Return Home Interview will be held by the relevant local authority. This step will be closed by the RHI Coordinator, with a narrative explaining this.

### Children in care missing for over 24 hours or missing “3/90”.

Where a child has been missing for over 24 hours, a Strategy Meeting will be convened and an action plan for locating the child developed as required.

Where a child has been missing three times within a 90-day period (known as “3/90”) a Strategy Meeting will be considered and convened as appropriate. A decision *not* to hold a Strategy Meeting in these circumstances will usually only arise if, following further consideration of the missing episodes in question, it is decided that one or more of these is more appropriately classified as an episode of “absence”. For example, where children have missed a curfew or have left school grounds unexpectedly, but have then arrived home shortly after.

All children who are missing for over 24 hours or who are missing 3/90 are also discussed at the next available Exploited and Missing Risk Assessment Conference (EMRAC). This relates to Wokingham’s children in care, as well as Other Local Authority (OLA) children in care - although it should be noted that the management of the latter group remains with the home local authority, in conjunction with the local placement and Thames Valley Police.

Each month prior to EMRAC taking place, Wokingham will receive a missing list from the Missing Investigation Support Team (MIST) at Thames Valley Police, which informs the meeting agenda.

## Appendix A - Responding to Missing Occurrences.

This guidance is reproduced from Page 7 of the 2022 *Children Missing from Care Framework* guidance document. This document can be read in full [here](#).

<b>Levels of Intervention</b>			
<b>Assessed level of concern</b>		<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Actions and Outcomes</b>
<b>No Immediate Intervention Required</b>	The carer is not significantly concerned for the child's safety at this time, or the safety of others based on the information they have about the child and the circumstances of the absence.	Based on the information known about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence, the carer makes an informed decision to wait some time, to see if the child returns of their own accord.	<p><b>Actions Recommended</b></p> <p>(a) The carer waits a reasonable time to see if the child returns of their own accord.</p> <p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <p>(a) The child returns of their own accord.                      (b) The child contacts the carer (or another) and child agrees to either return home independently or be collected by the carer.                      (c) The child contacts the carer and what the child says raises the level of concern to either carer intervention or police intervention.                      (d) The carer receives information that raises the level of concern to either carer intervention or police intervention.                      (e) The child does not return within a reasonable time, so the level of concern raises to carer intervention.</p>
<b>Parental/ Carer Intervention</b>	The carer has some concerns about the child and their whereabouts, but at the outset of the missing occurrence the carer does not have any immediate concerns about the child's safety or the safety of others that would warrant contacting the police immediately.	The carer takes responsibility for trying to locate the child and ensure their safe return	<p><b>Actions Recommended</b></p> <p>(a) The carer considers if there has been any antecedent behaviour, trigger incident or out of character behaviour that warrants the child being immediately reported to the police as missing.                      (b) The carer/child's social worker tries to contact the child by phone, text, and social media.                      (c) The carer undertakes a search of the home and surrounding areas (or agrees with the child's social worker who will do this if they are unable to).                      (d) The carer undertakes a search of the place the child was expected to be and the place the child was last seen (or agrees with the child's social worker who will do this if they are unable to).                      (e) The carer/child's social worker contacts family and friends.                      (f) If possible and safe to do, the carer/ child's social worker visits locations and addresses where the child may be.</p>

			<p>(g) The carer and the child’s social worker continue to liaise until the child is found or returns.</p> <p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <p>(a) The child returns of their own accord.                  (b) The child contacts the carer (or another).                  (c) The carer contacts the child.                  (d) Contact is made and the child agrees to return home independently.                  (e) Contact is made and the child agrees to be collected. This is arranged by/between the carer and the child’s social worker.                  (f) Contact is made and what the child says raises the level of concern to police intervention, so the child is reported as missing to the police.                  (g) The carer/ child’s social worker receives information that raises the level of concern to police intervention, so the child is reported as missing to the police.                  (h) The child is located but to ensure their safe return / the safety of others, police support is required.                  (i) The carer/ child’s social worker has undertaken reasonable actions to locate the child, and allowed the child a reasonable time to return of their own accord, but the child has not been located, so the level of concern raises to police intervention and the child is reported as missing to the police.                  (j) If the child is reported as missing to the police, the carer/ child’s social worker shares the relevant missing documentation with the police.</p>
<p><b>Police Intervention</b></p>	<p>Based on the information the carer has about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence, the 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.</p>	<p>The carer/child’s social worker reports the child as missing to the police.</p>	<p><b>Actions Recommended</b></p> <p>(a) The carer/child’s social worker shares their concerns with the police.                  (b) Where applicable, the child/ child’s social worker shares the child’s Missing Risk Assessment form, Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and Management Plan with the police.                  (c) The police complete a risk assessment and either record the child as missing or inform the carer/ child’s social worker that they disagree that level of risk lies within the police intervention band of the levels of intervention model and delays police deployment.</p>



			<p>(d) If the police have recorded the child as missing, the police undertake enquiries to locate the child.</p> <p>(e) The carer /the child's social worker continues to try and locate /contact the child.</p> <p>(f) If the police have delayed police deployment and the carer/ child's social worker disagrees with that decision, the carer/ child's social worker escalates the case to a Senior Police Officer on duty who has operational command responsibility.</p> <p>(g) The police, the carer and the child's social worker continue to liaise until the child is found /returns.</p> <p>(h) When the child has returned or has been located, a Prevention Interview and Independent Return Interview takes place in accordance with locally agreed processes and any specific arrangements previously agreed and recorded.</p>
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