



# **Children Missing from Home and Care Joint Protocol**

## **BETWEEN STOKE-ON-TRENT LOCAL AUTHORITY & STAFFORDSHIRE POLICE**



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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 *“Talk to me, get to know me, don’t judge me, understand why I might go missing and help me manage those feelings and situations before it gets out of hand. Young people go missing for a reason, try to understand that. When we go don’t be angry or make us feel bad.”* (Missing People, 2021)
- 1.2 The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children (2024) highlights - *We heard that missing children were not always being adequately safeguarded. Inspections of children’s services have identified that information from return home interviews were not routinely analysed and used for future safeguarding, raising ‘concerns about the ability of partnerships to fully understand local risks and use information in a timely way to target prevention and disruption of exploitation’.* This protocol is important for the safeguarding of children and families across Stoke on Trent, or those for whom the city council has a corporate parenting responsibility. It should be read and implemented, where necessary, by all practitioners and managers working with children or young people who are at risk of going missing from home or care or are already doing so.
- 1.3 The aim of the protocol is to assist practitioners across all agencies to develop robust responses to children who run away and go missing. This will include preventing the child suffering harm and recovering them to a place they are safe as soon as possible.
- 1.4 The following safeguarding principles should be applied:
  - The safety and welfare of the child is paramount.
  - Locating and returning the child to a safe environment is the main objective.
  - The views of the child and parent/carers should always be taken into consideration.
  - Understanding the circumstances of the child going missing and seeking to reduce the risk of further missing episodes is key.
- 1.5 The most effective assessment and support comes through good information sharing, joint assessments of need, joint planning, professional trust within the interagency network and joint partnership working and developing trusted relationships with children, their families and/or carers.
- 1.6 While the individual circumstance of each episode needs to be considered, children who run away are at a heightened risk of being victims of crime, being involved in crime, being involved in substance misuse, or being exploited. Additionally, research shows that the level of risk to the individual child escalates with each episode they go missing and repeat episodes have been identified as a significant indicator of high risk to the child

- 1.7 Stoke on Trent Safeguarding Children Partnership expects all agencies working with children or young people who run away or are missing from home or care to implement this protocol and ensure that all relevant staff are aware of it and how to use it. It should be used in all new contacts with children and young people. This includes care providers who look after children from other local authorities.

## **2. Legislative Framework**

- 2.1 In January 2014, the Department for Education (DfE) published the 'Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care'. The guidance states that agencies must "work together to risk assess cases of children missing from home or care, and to analyse data for patterns that indicate particular concerns and risks".
- 2.2 The protocol should be read in conjunction with the following statutory guidance and procedures:
- Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care (2014)
  - Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) and related guidance
  - Children Act 1989 and related guidance
  - Children Act 2004 and related guidance

## **3. Definitions**

- 3.1 Stoke on Trent Local Authority and Staffordshire Police will adopt the following definition for Missing:

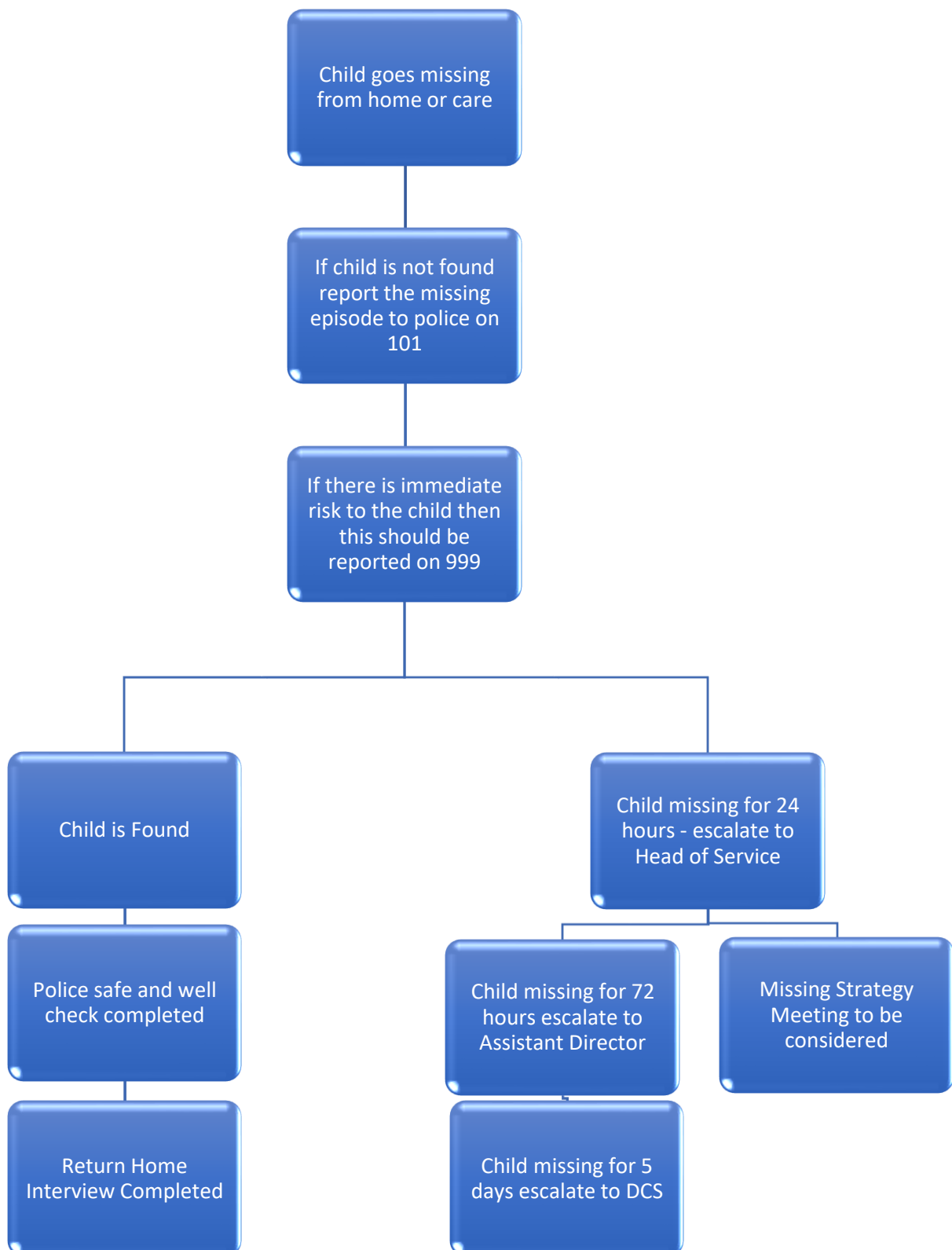
'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another'. (College of Policing, Authorised Professional Practice: Missing Persons. February 2023)

## **4. Scope**

- 4.1 For the purposes of this protocol, a child is defined as anyone who is under 18 years of age. This protocol relates to:
- Children that go missing from their home address or other non-care related address.
  - Children Looked After by Stoke-on-Trent Local Authority (Stoke-on-Trent Local Authority retain responsibility for children in their legal care who are placed outside their boundaries, and will comply with the Missing Children protocol of the Local Authority where the child is placed)
  - Children Looked After by other Local Authorities and living with care providers within Stoke-on-Trent (Other Local Authorities who have legal care of children residing within

Stoke-on-Trent will be expected to comply with Stoke on Trent's Missing Protocol).  
*\*Within this context, "Children Looked After" refers to children accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to Care Orders including Interim Care Orders, Sect 31 and 38 Children Act 1989, and children who are otherwise provided with accommodation by sect 21 Children Act 1989*

5. **Procedures for initial reporting when a child is missing from home**



- 5.1 ***Before contacting the Police – proactive attempts to locate the child or young person must be made unless it could place the person at risk or it would leave another child at risk i.e. leaving a younger child alone at home to search.***
- 5.2 When a child or young person is identified as not being at a location they are expected to be at, the reporting individual (for example a parent/care provider/foster carer/social worker/residential staff/teacher etc.) must take proactive steps to trace the child or young person's whereabouts and keep a record of these enquiries so they can pass on the information.
- 5.3 If the reporting individual assesses that the child is missing and at immediate risk, the child should be reported missing without delay and the anticipated risk communicated to the police via 999. Where there is no immediate risk of significant harm the 101 number should be used.
- 5.4 Unless there is an immediate risk identified, parents/carers should undertake the following basic measures before reporting a missing child (If child is residing in a Residential care home setting, carers should implement the Philomena Protocol:
- Search bedroom/house/grounds/outbuildings/vehicles;
  - Ascertain if any clothing, cash, mobile phones and/or medication etc. are missing;
  - Speak to any other people at the house who may know where they are;
  - Contact known friends and relatives where the child may be;
  - Check social media sites;
  - If they own cctv or video doorbells review these to identify the time the child left and what they were wearing;
  - Visit locations that the child is known to go, if safe to do so; and will not take too long before the child is reported missing.
- 5.5 Where such enquiries do not establish the whereabouts of the child or young person, the reporting individual should report the incident to the Police. For children and young people who reside within Stoke on Trent and were last seen in Stoke on Trent, including children and young people placed by another Local Authority within Stoke on Trent, this will be Staffordshire Police. When all reasonable steps have been exhausted, parents/carers and anyone who has care of a child should inform the police on 101 and if the child is open to children's social care the reporting individual should advise the social worker or EDT (if out of hours) on 01782 234234.

- 5.6 If the child is normally resident in Stoke on Trent but has gone missing whilst in another county, this should be reported to that Police force so that initial enquiries can be made in the immediate area. Where a child or young person is placed in another Local Authority area by Stoke on Trent Children's Services, the contact will be the police force covering the area of their placement if that is the area where they are missing from. Where children are open to early help or social care a missing episode must be opened on Liquidlogic.
- 5.7 If there has been no need to contact the Police, e.g. the child was found, and the child is in the care of the local authority details of the incident should be recorded in full, according to the appropriate Children's Social Care protocols and dealt with as part of the existing care plan. Where the child was missing, a missing episode must be opened on Liquidlogic.
- 5.8 The police will need to know:
- The child's name and date of birth
  - Where, when, and with whom the child went missing
  - A description of the child and what they were wearing
  - The time and location they were last seen
  - The circumstances of going missing
  - Details of any friends or associates
  - If there are any vulnerabilities, disabilities, or major health issues

## 6. Missing Risk Levels

### Missing Risk Levels:

#### HIGH RISK

The risk of serious harm to the missing person or the public is assessed as very likely.

#### MEDIUM RISK

The risk to the missing person or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.

#### LOW RISK

The risk of harm to the missing person or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.

- 6.1 Staffordshire Police will respond to all reports of a missing person. Every report will be subject to regular review in accordance with College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) to determine the appropriate level of risk and to ensure the investigation is being adequately progressed.
- 6.2 Whenever a report is made to the police regarding a missing child, the child's social worker must be contacted who should provide information to the police as part of their ongoing risk assessment.
- 6.3 An initial risk assessment is undertaken by the police call-taker to determine the appropriate level of response.
- 6.4 The missing person report is then brought to the attention of a supervisor based within the control room so they can either ratify or amend the decision relating to the level of risk and, in turn, determine the urgency of the enquiries to be made.
- 6.5 This risk assessment helps to identify the level of risk that is posed to, or by the child and to determine the most appropriate police response. It is therefore important that as much information as possible is obtained during that first contact. All missing persons will be subject to a continuous assessment of risk.
- 6.6 Staffordshire Police will regularly review the risk assessment of any person reported as missing but if any dispute arises over the level of risk posed to a child, the matter will first be referred to the Police Missing Person Investigation Team Leader who will review the report, the current circumstances and the most recent risk assessment.
- 6.7 The second line of escalation will be the Local Operational Police Inspector based within the Local Policing Team. If a missing child has not been reported by parents/carers, this will trigger further enquiries and an assessment by the police and other relevant agencies, in accordance with local safeguarding procedures.
- 6.8 The relevant local authority will be notified, and information and intelligence gathered from the Found Debriefs (Safe & Well Checks) and debrief will be recorded onto COMPACT (Missing Persons' Database).

## **7. When a child is found**

- 7.1 When a practitioner is aware that a child has been found, this intelligence should be passed onto the Missing Person Investigation Team (Monday – Saturday between 07:00 – 23:00hrs and Sundays 07:00 – 16:00) on 01785 232960 or using the Police non-emergency number; 101 as soon as possible.
- 7.2 When the whereabouts of a child is suspected, or becomes known, it is the responsibility of the parent/carer to arrange for the child's return where possible, unless to do so would place them at risk. In exceptional circumstances, the police, in conjunction with children's services, may assist in the return of the child where necessitated.



- 7.3 Consideration should be given to whether a strategy meeting (Children Act 1989) is required with partner agencies/professionals, for example if a pattern of going missing is developing. Any partner agency can request a strategy meeting following consultation with their manager, if it appears that there is significant risk to a child, or if there are child protection concerns. This should be done via referral to IFD/SCASS who can then liaise with Police colleagues within the MASH following local Safeguarding Partnership protocols.

## **8. Police Found Debriefs (Safe & Well Checks)**

- 8.1 When a child is located or has returned home of their own accord, a quality 'Found Debrief' (safe & well check) will be undertaken by the police or in some exceptions, another professional where appropriate, as soon as possible. The purpose of the check is to establish whether the child has suffered any harm, to confirm where they have been and who with and to provide the child with an opportunity to disclose any offences committed by them, or against them. As much information as possible should be gathered to help prevent further missing episodes, and to safeguard the child where necessary.
- 8.2 A PPN is also completed for every child that is reported missing

## **9. Return home interviews (RHI's)**

- 9.1 Statutory guidance on children who go missing (2014) states that when a child goes missing, they should be offered an independent return interview.
- 9.2 In Stoke-on-Trent, the completion of return interviews is delivered by specialist RHI Workers within the Local Authority who conduct all return interviews for children up to 18 years old living in Stoke-on-Trent including children who are Looked after by Stoke on Trent Local Authority placed outside of the city (but excluding Children Looked After by other Local Authorities living in Stoke on Trent).
- 9.3 The purpose of the return interview is to:
- Identify factors which led to the missing episode
  - Prevent further missing episodes and risk behaviours or needs escalating
  - Inform any subsequent missing person investigation
  - Share intelligence and information
  - Provide independent, non-judgmental, confidential and child- centered return home support for all vulnerable children who go missing, in spaces where they feel safe and able to talk.
  - Develop prevention and risk reduction strategies alongside children who regularly go missing including safety planning and addressing wider risk factors such as exploitation, drug and alcohol misuse and domestic abuse.

- Support and sign-post young people to access specialist support services in their areas that can help address their specific needs.
  - Provide high quality engagement and follow up intervention with children.
- 9.4 Particular attention should be paid if a child is suspected of being involved in or at risk of trafficking or exploitation as they may be fearful of giving information.
- 9.5 The return interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child being located or returning from the missing episode. This is particularly important if they have been missing before and/or if there are risk indicators suggesting potential exploitation, involvement in crime or if the child has been harmed.
- 9.6 Attempts to see the child should continue for at least 14 days at which point if the attempts have been unsuccessful this must be passed on to the allocated social worker to undertake.
- 9.7 Prior to any interview conducted with a child, the interviewer should inform the child who this information will be shared with, when and why and gain consent before sharing. If they are unwilling to speak to anyone for fear of confidentiality issues, arrangement may be made for the child to speak to an independent advocate or suitable voluntary agency.

## **10. Response to Escalating or Growing Concerns**

- 10.1 When any child goes missing they are at risk, however these risks can increase when they have gone missing for an extended period, they have gone missing on a number of occasions or there are particular risks associated with their periods missing from home (e.g. sexual exploitation; criminal activities; substance use; self-harm, etc.).
- 10.2 If there are immediate safeguarding concerns regarding a child who has been missing, practitioners should follow their organisation Safeguarding Policies and Procedures to respond to and report these concerns.
- 10.3 If there is reasonable cause to suspect that the child has suffered or is likely to suffer Significant Harm, a Strategy Discussion will be arranged by Children's Social Care Services with Police and Children's Health to decide whether a Section 47 Enquiry under the Children Act 1989 is required and if so, to develop a plan of action for the enquiry.<sup>2</sup>

## **11. Missing Intervention Meetings**

- 11.1 In Stoke-on-Trent, missing intervention meetings should be held for any children that meet the trigger points of 3,5 and 9 criteria (the 3, 5 and 9 is explained in this guidance).
- 11.2 All relevant professionals must work together and include parents and carers during missing intervention meetings to reduce the likelihood of a child repeatedly going missing and to support the child.

11.3 Missing Intervention meetings should take place in the event of repeat episodes of children going missing from care and home and should be held within five working days. The meetings should be chaired by the most appropriate person from the local authority as detailed below. It is the responsibility of the appropriate person within the Local Authority to also arrange these meetings. These meetings should take place within 10 working days of the missing episode that triggered the meeting.

11.4 **3 Missing Episodes in 90 Days**

After three episodes within a 90-day period, for children who are open to Early Help or Children's Social Care, the meeting will be chaired by the social worker. When a child is not open to Early Help or Children's Social Care the IFD manager will chair the meeting and could be supported by a manager from the Assessment and Duty team. IFD will be able to consider if a referral for a Child and Family assessment is required at this stage.

11.5 **5 Missing Episodes in 90 Days**

After five episodes within a 90-day period, for children who are open to Early Help or Children's Social Care, the meeting will be chaired by the Principal Manager. Where a child is open to Early Help, consideration may be given to a step-up consultation for assessment. When a child is not open to Early Help or Children's Social Care the IFD manager will chair the meeting and could be supported by a manager from the Assessment and Duty team. If not already completed a Child and Family assessment is required at this stage.

11.6 **9 Missing Episodes in 90 Days**

After nine episodes within a 90-day period the meeting will be chaired by the Head of Service. At this meeting the Head of Service will agree the frequency and chairing of any additional meetings within the 90-day period (at no less than intervals of 3 episodes i.e. 12 in 90 / 15 in 90)

11.7 **Attendance**

The following attendees should be present:

- The child (where appropriate)
- Their parent(s)(where appropriate),
- The child's social worker (if open to a social worker),
- The Chairing Manager
- Police ([missingpersons@staffordshire.police.uk](mailto:missingpersons@staffordshire.police.uk))
- CE & Missing Coordinator
- Residential worker/foster carer/fostering social worker (where the child is in care)

- Education
- Health
- The person who conducted the return interview
- Any other person relevant

#### **11.8 Purpose**

- 11.9 The meeting should try to identify any 'push' or 'pull' factors, and in the missing person's welfare and circumstances. In the case of 'pull' factors it may be necessary to target those in the community who are felt to harbour the missing person or exploit them through crime, exploitation or drugs. The police should consider all disruption tools available to them in this situation e.g., Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) etc. See Appendix 1. Consideration should also be given as to whether a National referral Mechanism referral should be undertaken

### **12. Longer Missing Episodes**

- 12.1 When a child is open to children social care and has been missing for a period of 24 hours, the child's social worker should inform their line manager.
- 12.2 If there are any significant concerns, the relevant senior manager should be alerted immediately.
- 12.3 When a Child has been missing for 24 hours the Head of Service should be informed. After 72 Hours the Assistant Director should be updated and after 5 days the DCS should be updated. The responsibility for notifying the more senior manager lies with the manager below.

### **13. Missing Strategy Meetings**

- 13.1 Reasons to launch or escalate interventions to a Missing Strategy Meeting could include:
- Children where the risks involved in even a single future-missing episode is very high
  - Children where it has been identified that immediate safeguarding action is necessary to ensure the well-being of the person
  - A quick succession of missing episodes eradicating the need for 90 days to elapse
  - Children where there is an extended duration of missing episode(s) – these meetings need to be considered from the third day of an active missing episode when the child is missing

### 13.2 The meeting will review

- What action has been taken so far by the police and care professionals;
- What action needs to be taken by the police and care professionals;
- Whether the child should return to that placement when located;
- Date of further meeting to be agreed by all parties should the missing episode continue;
- Whether an NRM should be considered;
- If procedures should be invoked under section 47 (Children Act 1989) and a formal strategy meeting should be convened

## 14. ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 14.1 Philomena Protocol

14.2 All Care providers are expected to complete Part 1 of the Philomena Protocol for all children living in Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent. Profiles of the children that have a missing and/or exploitation risk should then be shared with the allocated Police Community Support Officer Single Point of Contact (SPOC).

14.3 Any known associates, addresses and hotspots for the child should added to Part 2 and be risk assessed by all agencies in order for care providers to complete checks when a child is believed to be missing.

14.4 When a child's whereabouts is not known, and there are no immediate risks or concerns, care staff are expected to complete necessary checks. Part 3 of the protocol should be completed along with checks with known associates, addresses and hotspots included on part 2. If child is not located by care staff, then care staff should contact 101 to report the child missing and send part 2 and 3 into the Police

### 14.5 Independent Reviewing Officers

14.6 Where a looked after child has had missing episodes, this needs to be considered in children's care plans and looked after reviews.

## 15. Trigger Plans

15.1 Trigger Plans are a Policing tool created to assist officers when investigating a repeat missing child, the plan should inform Police of any known risks and concerns, associations and places the child frequents. The Trigger plan should also provide officers with fast-track actions and safeguarding information to allow an effective tactical response when dealing with a missing investigation. This will enable officers to protect themselves and others from significant harm.

- 15.2 Trigger Plans should be created by Staffordshire Police. Where a child is being placed out of the city, Staffordshire Police should share their trigger plan with the force in the local area.

## **16. Missing children who are found outside of the area usually resident**

- 16.1 Where missing children from one local authority present themselves in another local authority, it is important that the host authority works with the responsible local authority to ensure they get access to the help and support services they need. Responsibility for making child protection enquiries rests with the host authority where significant harm is alleged to have occurred in that area, who may negotiate with the responsible local authority to continue with S47 enquiries.

### **16.2 Information to be shared when placing children with history of missing in another Local Authority area**

- 16.3 Where children, who are at risk of going missing, are placed outside of their home authority area, arrangements should be made to notify the host Police Force and Local Authority of the risks, safety planning and any other relevant documentation (Philomena Protocol/Trigger Plan).
- 16.4 For Looked after Children usually resident in Stoke on Trent but placed outside of the city, a notification of any missing episodes should be sent to [missing.children@stoke.gov.uk](mailto:missing.children@stoke.gov.uk)

## **17. Referrals to Children's Social Care**

- 17.1 Where the police or other agencies assess that a child is suffering, or likely to suffer significant harm, a referral is made to the Integrated Front Door team (IFD) on 01782 235100 or to the out of hours Emergency Duty Team (EDT) on 01782 234234 out of hours.
- 17.2 Upon receipt of a referral concerning a child missing from home, IFD will assess whether a referral meets the thresholds for a child in need (section 17) or a child in need of protection (section 47).
- 17.3 Where no onward referral to the IFD is made, the police are still obliged to notify the missing episode to the relevant Local Authority. In Stoke-on- Trent, when a missing notification is received, IFD determine if this meets criteria for a referral to children's social care and further assessment and if not then record contact on the information system (Liquid logic) as missing notification. If a child is not open and has been missing for longer than 24 hours they should be open for an assessment to ensure they are safe and found.
- 17.4 Any child who is not open to early help or children's social care and who has three missing episodes in an 90 period should be considered for a referral to children's social care unless there are compelling reasons not to do so, i.e. the child was not actually missing. The reason for not proceeding for an assessment should be clearly recorded on Liquidlogic

## **18. National Alerts**

- 18.1 In some circumstances, practitioners may feel it is appropriate to alert other local authorities or request a national alert. This alert is not intended for all children/young people who go missing and should be agreed as part of a Missing Strategy Meeting, but may be beneficial for those that have been missing for several days or weeks and are: High risk with notable vulnerabilities such as being at risk of or involved in Child exploitation, concerns of trafficking, deteriorating Mental Health concerns or physical health condition or as an Unaccompanied asylum seeking child.
- 18.2 The missing alert is to notify all local authorities so that a flag should be placed on the other local authority's data system, to advise that there is a child missing from Stoke on Trent and if found, to contact the Local Authority. 21.3 Practitioners should use the below emails to provide details of, or to request a national missing alert: [IFD.referrals@stoke.gov.uk](mailto:IFD.referrals@stoke.gov.uk)

## **I. APPENDIX 1 - DISRUPTION TOOLS**

### *i. CHILD ABDUCTION WARNING NOTICE (CAWN)*

Anyone who is in the company of a child without parental, or carer, knowledge or agreement should do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. They should inform the police, children's services and the parents/ or carers of the child of their whereabouts and safety. If this is not complied with, and the child is under 16 or under 18 if subject of a Care Order, the police could consider advice or warning under the Child Abduction Act 1984 (Child Abduction Warning Notice). It may then be considered that they have been harbouring a missing child.

A Child Abduction Warning Notice is a valuable safeguarding measure to prevent young people from coming to harm, when at risk of exploitation or missing from home or care. If a Child Abduction Warning Notice is served by the police, the Local Authority should be informed.

In addition, other disruption tools can be used. For more information <http://paceuk.info/for-parents/advice-centre/disruption-tools-available-police/>

Link to Disruption Toolkit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-exploitation-disruption-toolkit-23>.

### *ii. NATIONAL REFERRAL MECHANISM (NRM)*

Children who go missing may be trafficked. This can happen on a very local basis, for example, from house to house, hotel to hotel, vehicle to vehicle. Children and young people can also be trafficked from between towns and cities within the UK and between the UK and other countries. The trafficking of children can be for the purpose of a multitude of reasons such as child exploitation or county lines, as well as several other reasons. Anyone who works with children should be aware of the warning signs and associated risks of various types of grooming and exploitation.

Significant numbers of children who are categorised as UASC have also been trafficked. Some of these children go missing before they are properly identified as victims of trafficking. Such situations should be urgently reported to the police. Local authorities should consider the risk that a trafficked child is likely to go missing, and take all appropriate measures to prevent and reduce this risk.

The Modern-Day Slavery Act 2015 requires the Local Authority to refer any child who they believe is being trafficked or has been trafficked to the National Referral Mechanism.

If the child goes missing, the following should be completed immediately: Comply with the requirements in this policy and local procedures in their entirety.

- Report to the police – identifying where the child is suspected to be a victim of trafficking and request a Strategy discussion under S47 Child Protection Procedures. Complete a National



- Referral Mechanism (NRM) framework for identifying victims of human trafficking or modern slavery using this link [Report modern slavery – GOV.UK](#). Guidance on the NRM can be found at [National referral mechanism guidance: adult \(England and Wales\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

## **II. APPENDIX 2 - SAFETY PLANNING**

- i. The safety plan is an opportunity for the social worker/family support worker and family or care provider to discuss with the child issues around going missing and to explain the roles and responsibilities of all involved.
- ii. The plan should detail:
  - Trigger points for missing episodes,
  - Risks to themselves, the public and/or the carer before, during, or after a missing episode.
  - 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 and addresses commonly found at.
  - Expectations of the child: for example, curfews and, when and how to make contact, and the consequences of lateness etc.
  - Expectations of the parent or care provider e.g. at which point the police will be notified; 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 arrangements for return interviews.
  - Agreements around rules for staying overnight at friend's houses or going on trips. NB: For children in care this is frequently raised as a major issue by young people and Local Authority Circular (2004) 4, suggests that "decisions on overnight stays should normally be delegated to foster carers and residential care staff. Arrangements for such decisions should be written into the Placement Plan or equivalent." There is no statutory duty for DBS checks to be carried out on adults in a private household where a child may stay overnight and so restrictions should only be placed on Looked After Children if there are exceptional circumstances.