

Return Home Interview

Best Practice Guidance

What is a Return Home Interview?

A Return Home Interview (RHI) is a valuable intervention offered to missing children at the earliest opportunity following their return from a missing episode. It is an essential tool in helping to identify why the child went missing, to identify risk, the sources of risk and ensuring the swift provision of support to safeguard and protect the child from further harm and help reduce further missing episodes.

RHI's inform wider safeguarding - valuable information can be gathered from RHI's, including in some instances information that isn't known by professionals or hasn't previously been disclosed by the child. They are crucial in flagging up early, children at risk of serious harm, including sexual and criminal exploitation, mental health issues and problems at school and home. This can be vital to the future safeguarding of that child and potentially other children, for example those at risk from the same perpetrators of exploitation. Vital information/intelligence from RHIs must be shared with the police and other services as part of safeguarding children. If this doesn't happen, we are failing to protect children.

A good Return Home Interview can help understand the reasons why a child has run away ; it can identify harm; help the child feel safe; provide them with information on how to stay safe; and, allow professionals to identify actions to help them

When should a RHI be completed?

When a child returns from missing, Missing Persons Police team will firstly need to see the child to check they are safe and well. This is known as a 'safe and well check.' During a safe and well check, Police will try to find out if the child has come to harm whilst missing and if they were a victim of crime.

Police will notify Missing Children Team (MCT) and West Sussex Integrated Front Door of a child's return and we will aim to see the child for a RHI within 72 hours of notification.

There are instances when a RHI is not required/appropriate:

- When a child has suffered significant harm during a missing episode
- If the child is involved in an active police investigation
- If the child is admitted to hospital due to physical or mental health difficulties
- If the child is too young (MCT do not conduct RHI's with children under 10 years old).

Who completes the RHI?

DFE statutory guidance suggests that the RHI should be completed by someone independent of the child's care. The Missing Children Team (MCT) currently has specialist independent Return Home Practitioners who carry out the majority of RHI's. However there are occasions when it is more appropriate / beneficial for the child for another worker to complete the interview, for example by a 'trusted adult,' someone with who the child has an existing positive relationship e.g. social worker, family support worker, youth worker or teacher.

When a child is placed out of county it is the responsibility of the Social Worker to complete/ arrange completion of the RHI. Please refer to [Practice Guidance Missing Children \(on tri-x\)](#).

What makes a good RHI?

Consideration should always be taken into who is best placed to conduct the RHI.

The child MUST be at the centre

*They MUST be listened to and
their voice heard*

- If the child has been missing previously and where possible, the same worker will complete the interview for continuity.
- The interview should be conducted independently unless the child requests otherwise, and in a neutral setting where the child feels safe as possible for example at school, in a family centre or youth club. If you conduct the interview at home, it is important that you try to speak to the young person alone, but also make sure you give parents or carers space to talk about their concerns.

- If the child declines, be persistent, a child may talk to you at the 2nd or 3rd time of asking. If they don't engage from the phone call, our leaflet and /or a letter can allow you to clearly explain the return home interview to the young person, so they have time to digest the information before you call them.
- The RHI should be **child focused/led**, therefore it is important to involve the child as much as possible when planning the appointment to ensure the child feels safe and ready to talk. You can do this by contacting the child and finding out e.g. some children may be more likely to respond to a text than a cold call.
- The worker should **explain to the child** who they are, why they are there, what they need to know. Confidentiality should be discussed at the beginning of the interview, and the child made aware that information will be shared with other services, their families or carers. Always tell the child what you plan to do with what they have told you.
- Your **conversation needs to be caring, creative, conversational, and courageous** to develop a sharing culture and relationship - use child friendly discussion techniques.
- **Be friendly and listen** to how they want to proceed. It is important to ensure that they feel they can talk to you in the future; some young people run away frequently and may be referred to your service again.
- The worker should apply an **open mind and professional curiosity** to explore and understand and be able to apply a critical and holistic evaluation to the information the child is sharing.

Discuss confidentiality at the beginning

Make sure the child understands what information will need to be shared with other services and what information will always be kept confidential. When discussing consent, limits to confidentiality and safeguarding it is best practice to make some of the following considerations prior to the interview:

- How will the information be used?
- Will this information be shared directly with professionals already involved with the child?
- Does the child understand and consent with full knowledge of the limitations of confidentiality?

The Interview

Children go missing for lots of reasons. We can see missing as a behaviour that a child is using to get their needs met – these may be complex as a result of a range of needs, or more straight forward to understand and response to an isolated incident.

Have a problem free conversation with the child before you start asking questions about the missing episode - you need to [form a trusting relationship](#).

RHIs need to be a [confidential](#) safe space for children to talk about their missing episode, but if serious disclosures made during an RHI are not shared, recorded and taken into account when professionals are supporting that child, this is a failure in effective safeguarding. It undermines the child's trust as their voice and concerns have not been listened to and acted upon.

If a young person has disclosed something, they need to be reminded that you will pass this on if it is a concern. **Do not break confidentiality without agreement** - talk through the consequences of sharing information with you.

Look for the reasons the child gives for going missing or running away

- Was this the first time the child went missing or has it happened before?
- Did the child go alone or with others? Were they persuaded to go by someone else?
- Did they try to resolve the problem before it caused them to run away and if so, why didn't this work?
- Does the problem/trigger still exist?
- Where did the child go or stay? How did they get access to food, money, transport, clothing, etc? Did they get involved in criminal activity? Did they seek or need medical help?
- Did they get help from anyone while they were missing? Did they enter into any relationship, particularly if it made them feel uncomfortable? Were they harmed or at risk of harm from other people?
- How did they feel? Did they feel physically and mentally healthy? Did they feel bullied or pressured?
- Were there signs of stress, depression, or self-harm? Were they involved in substance misuse?
- What lead them to return or be found? How did they feel about returning?

These are often referred to as 'Push & Pull' factors – pushing a child away from their family and their home and pulling them towards potentially harmful situations.

Potential Push Factors to look out for:

- Problems at home, family conflict or break up, arguments with parents, neglect, domestic abuse or substance misuse in the home
- Unhappy in care
- Mental Health problems, self harming
- Problems at school or being bullied
- Emotional health, confidence or loneliness

Potential Pull Factors to look out for:

- Excitement/taking risks - Achieving a buzz / a sense of excitement from doing something risky or forbidden;
- Feeling accepted and being part of an alternative scene e.g. group/gang or music scene;
- Running to be with or near friends or family – especially when a child is in care and there are problems with contact arrangements with family and friends.
- Grooming for potential child exploitation or child trafficking –children do not usually recognise they are being groomed but respond to the initial affection or perceived kindness of an adult who is seeking to exploit them. They may see that adult as one who has promised to 'look after' them.

Ask yourself

- Do the things that caused the child to go missing still exist?
- What does the child see as the risk involved with running away again?
- What alternatives to running away might there be?
- What does the child think might be done to prevent them from running away again?

Safer strategies should be explored with the child and their family and details of support services provided. Any immediate or long-term follow-up support such as counselling should be identified. Be clear to the young person about the limitations of your support from now on, while also being clear on how they can reach you if they need to.

What Next?

1. **Tell the child what you will do** and agree what you will feed back to professionals, or their parents/carers, if it isn't a safeguarding concern.
2. **Put a plan in place to address any issues identified during the return interview** - Always tell the child what you plan to do with what they have told you.
3. **Assess** whether they might run away again and identify any immediate or long-term follow-up support such as counselling or a police referral.
4. **Be clear to the young person about the limitations of your support from now on**, while also being clear on how they can reach you if they need to.
5. **Follow up with the young person and any professional** within a week to see what action has taken place.

Recording information

- Information disclosed by the young person in a return interview should be collected onto the Childs record on Mosaic using the Missing Child Episode (CYP051), e.g where they were, who they were with and what happened while they were away (see template below).
- The information given by the child must be shared with the social worker or lead professional at the earliest opportunity, along with any plan you have made with the child for follow on support or referrals to other agencies such as Change Grow Live and included in safety planning.
- Let the Missing Person Police Team and Complex Safeguarding Multi Agency Operations Group know of any 'hot spots', areas where children are going missing to, and individuals who target children for sexual exploitation. This evidence can help the police with their investigations and targeted services to be aimed at problem areas.

Follow up

Although RHIs are a valuable service for identifying harm and providing an initial intervention for vulnerable children, a one-off conversation is often not enough to be considered as effective support for children who have experienced trauma, have complex needs or are at ongoing risk.

It is therefore important that there is the opportunity for follow-up support; this can allow children to build trust and to get ongoing help.

Resources

[DfE Statutory Guidance on children who run away or go missing from care \(2014\)](#)

[Working Together to Safeguarding Children 2018](#)

[First Steps - conducting good return interviews for young people who run away,](#) The Children's Society

[The value of Return Home Interviews and follow-up support when young people go missing,](#) Railway Children 2015

[A Safer Return](#) report Missing People charity (2015)

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