

Children Missing From Home or Care

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/service

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Prepared by: Safeguarding Improvement
Officer/Head of Delivery Corporate Parenting
Approved by: Service Director – Children and
Families

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is a key duty on local authorities and requires effective joint working between agencies and professionals. When a child goes missing or runs away they are at risk. Safeguarding children therefore includes protecting them from this risk. Milton Keynes Council is responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care. It is important that any looked after child should consider their placement as their home. This document will make clear the responsibilities of Milton Keynes towards children and young people who go missing.
- 1.2 It is important to understand the reasons why children might go missing from home. It may be a response to an argument or other incident at home or to more serious problems either at home, at school or in the community. On the other hand, a child may be running to, rather than from, something. Whatever the reason, children can place themselves at significant risk. Whereas a first absence may never be repeated a second absence may denote the beginning of a pattern of response that requires examination. Similarly, the response of parents to the absence – whether or not they had tried to locate the child, whether the absence was reported to the police in a timely manner, the appropriateness of their response on the child's return all are relevant to understand the child's behaviour and whether or not any intervention by agencies is indicated.
- 1.3 A range of 'push' and 'pull' factors may be reasons for being absent including:

Push Factors

- Problems at home – ranging from arguments with parents/carers to long-term abuse or maltreatment.
- Family break-up – young people drawn into their parents' conflicts are less likely to do well at school and more likely to truant or to run away from home.
- Mental health problems – a disproportionate number of young people who run away have mental health problems.
- Bullying – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away from school and home or care.
- Teenage pregnancy – some young women run away or are forced to leave home because they become pregnant (or fear that they may be pregnant).
- There is also a greater risk of pregnancy when girls run away, and those working with them will need to ensure they have rapid access to confidential contraception and sexual health services to prevent unwanted pregnancies.
- Issues regarding identity, sexuality, religion or culture may be prevalent

Pull Factors

- Running to be near friends or family – especially when a young person is in care and placed away from their usual home environment, also where there are problems in contact arrangements with family and friends.
- Grooming for potential sexual exploitation or child trafficking – young people may run away or go missing following grooming by adults who will seek to exploit them.

2. **CONTEXT**

- 2.1 This guidance is for staff working within Children's Social Care supporting children whose case is open to a Children and Families Practice or are a child in need, subject to a child protection plan or a looked after child. This guidance arises from:
- **Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care: January 2014**
 - **ACPO Guidance April 2013**
 - This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Multi Agency guidance contained within the MKSCB procedures and to the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) multi agency protocol.

3. **DEFINITIONS**

- *Child*: anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. 'Children' therefore means 'children and young people' throughout this guidance.
- *Young runaway*: a child who has run away from their home or care placement, or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.
- *Missing child*: a child reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.
- *Looked after child*: a child who is looked after by a local authority by reason of a care order, or being accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.
- *Responsible local authority*: the local authority that is responsible for a looked after child's care and care planning.
- *Host local authority*: the local authority in which a looked after child is placed when placed out of the responsible local authority's area.
- *Care leaver*: an eligible, relevant or former relevant child as defined by the Children Act 1989.
- *Missing from care*: a looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (egg, school) and their whereabouts is not known.
- *Away from placement without authorisation*: a looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.
- **CSC**: Children's Social Care

Police definitions (from April 2014)

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"

ABSENT – "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be"

Thames Valley Policy will not categorise the following as absent –they will always be subject of a missing person investigation:-

- All children 14 and under
- All registered sex offenders
- All children 15 and over who have a CSE warning marker, CSE intelligence or are named in a child abduction warning notice

For more information see http://www.mkscb.org/mkscb-professionalsandvolunteers/documents/TV_joint_protocol_concerning_CYP_who_run_away_or_go_missing_from_home_2014.doc

4. PREVENTATIVE CASE PLANNING

- 4.1 Whenever Milton Keynes Council staff are working with a child who has or is likely to go missing, planning for and with children should include a detailed assessment of their needs, and the overall plan of work with that child and their family/carers and should include actions to manage and reduce the risk of that young person going missing.
- 4.2 Where there is a concern regarding Child Sexual Exploitation or Child Trafficking a hazard flag will be added to the case management system indicating this concern. The decision to add a flag to the system should be made by the Social Worker and Team Manager and must be reviewed at least every 6 months. This also applies to children and young people placed in Milton Keynes by another local authority and the decision to add a hazard flag to these children will be made by the MK MARM meeting.
- 4.3 In brief, the following points should be considered in assessing the risk
- The age of the child.
 - The vulnerability of the child, e.g. special educational needs physical/learning disability.
 - The views of the child
 - The child's legal status, and who has parental responsibility and their views
 - Previous patterns of behaviour e.g. the absence is "out of character" and is considered as being unusual. Also consider where they were found on any previous occasions
 - The state of mind/perceived risk, e.g. the child is considered to be at particular risk by virtue of self harm or being harmed by others.
 - Exploitation, sexual or financial
 - Risk of trafficking.
 - Whether the young person is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation.
 - The level of supervision/support that can be offered to the child where they are living.
- 4.4 Patterns of running away/going missing should be discussed regularly with the police missing persons unit and other agencies as part of the wider strategy for keeping children safe. If the running away/going missing of a child is causing specific concern, e.g., by its frequent repetition or indicators of particular risk such as contact with an adult or adults deemed to be a risk to children, there should be a multi-agency planning meeting to discuss the combined response to such incident and concern.
- 4.5 For children who are Looked After, placing the child in an appropriate placement should help to minimise the risk of the child running away. Any decision to place a child at distance should be based on an assessment of the child's needs including their need to be effectively safeguarded. All placements at a distance will need to be signed off by the Director of Children's Services (DCS), or the DCS is unavailable by the Service Director Children's Social Care.
- 4.6 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) should be informed about missing and away from placement without authorisation episodes and they should address these in statutory reviews.

- 4.7 Where a child goes missing from a placement in care, a statutory review of their care plan can provide an opportunity to check that it addresses the reasons for an absence. The review should result in the development of a strategy to minimise a repeat of the missing episode and this should form part of the care plan
- 4.8 Where the child is subject to a Child Protection Plan, then the Child Protection Coordinator should be informed and consider whether the next review should be brought forward.

5. **WHEN A CHILD GOES MISSING**

- 5.1 When parents, carers and professionals involved with children realise that a child may be missing, they should collate all the relevant information and any current risk assessments that they have available and take into account the definitions detailed above
- 5.2 The information should be reported to the Police Enquiry Centre (PEC) tel 101 who will categorise the definition and level of risk to the child and undertake investigations in line with the level of risk
- 5.3 The parents/carers may need support as the police may undertake a search of their premises as part of their investigations
- 5.4 The Police will contact the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) or ESWT to share details of the missing child. The missing episode will be recorded by the Missing Person Coordinator who notifies the relevant practitioner/manager where the child is Looked After, or subject to a Child Protection Plan/ S47 enquiry, or subject to a Family Support Plan or open to a Children and Families Practice (see Annex 1 – Missing Flowchart).
- 5.5 Where relevant to do so, the practitioner should ensure that the parent or anyone else with parental responsibility is informed (unless it is impracticable to do so or would be inconsistent with the child's welfare). They should also inform the Independent Reviewing Officer (where the child is Looked After) / Child Protection Coordinator (if subject to a CP Plan) and the Safeguarding Manager and any other relevant involved agencies.
- 5.6 Where a Looked After Child has been missing for 24 hours, the Service Director must be informed of the absence by the social worker/manager, including the assessment of risk, and actions that are currently being undertaken to locate the child.
- 5.7 Where the police have deemed a child to be at high risk and they have been missing for more than 24 hours, the police will liaise with MKC staff and partner agencies to consider a media strategy
- 5.8 When a child has been missing over 5 days, CSC will convene a strategy meeting, or sooner if they consider the child is likely to suffer significant harm
- 5.9 Subsequent strategy meetings will be convened as frequently as required to progress the joint investigation, but at no less than 5 working day intervals for the first 4 weeks and then at a frequency agreed between the senior responsible police officer and the DCS or his/her delegated representative.
- 5.10 The strategy meetings should consider all actions required to locate the child and ensure their safety and also include plans to respond the child when they are located

6. WHEN A CHILD IS FOUND

6.1 It is crucially important that the parents/ carers and all agencies involved with the child should provide a positive and supportive response when the child is found. Their general condition should be assessed by those directly involved and, if appropriate, medical attention arranged. Any actions or plans where there have been strategy meetings should be enacted.

6.2 Police Safe and Well Checks

Within 24 hours of the child's return, the police will undertake a 'safe & well' check and inform CSC of the child's return. Police will pass details of the safe & well check to CSC as soon as practicable.

6.3 Return Interviews

6.4 A return interview will be completed whenever a child has been missing for longer than 24 hours.

6.5 Return interviews will also be completed when a child has been missing less than 24 hours and we have significant concerns, for example when the child:

- has been hurt or harmed while they have been missing;
- is known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking;
- is known or suspected risk of involvement in criminal activity or drugs;
- has contact with people posing risk to children; and/or
- has been engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities while missing.

6.6 The interviews should be conducted by someone who is not involved in caring for the child and will be completed within 72 hours of the child returning to their home/placement

6.7 Where the child goes missing very regularly and it is not feasible to undertake a return interview for every episode, the timing and frequency of the return interview(s) should be agreed with the Team Manager for the service area and be clearly recorded in the child's case summary on ICS.

6.8 Where the child is not Looked After, Milton Keynes Council staff will conduct a return interview within 72 hours of the child's return.

6.9 Where the child is Looked After, the social worker will be offer the option of the return interview being completed by an independent person or advocate to the child or for the interview to be completed by the social worker. The return interview will be completed within 72 hours. The social worker must clearly record the offer and the child's response.

6.10 Where an independent return interview is required, the social worker should commission this through the Placement Commissioning Service.

6.11 The Missing Person Coordinator will monitor completion of the return interview and once completed will add the information to ICS and send to the Police (see Annex 1 – Missing Flowchart). Where a return interview is not completed within 5 working days of the child's return the Missing Person Coordinator will escalate to the relevant Team Manager.

- 6.12 The interview should identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the ‘safe and well check’ – either before they ran away or whilst missing; The interview should
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away;
 - help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away;
 - provide them with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again, including helpline numbers.

6.13 Future planning and reviewing

- Following the safe and well check and independent return interview, local authority children’s services, police and all involved agencies should work together:
 - to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing;
 - to understand what happened while they were missing;
 - to understand who they were with when they were missing and where they were found
 - what further and ongoing support they require to ensure their safety

Where the child is looked after the outcomes of the above processes should be reported to Independent Reviewing Officer and the Safeguarding Manager. The IRO will ensure that the information can be considered in the child’s review.

- 6.14 Where the Child is subject to a Child Protection Plan, the outcomes should be reported to the Child Protection Coordinator and the Safeguarding Manager.
- 6.15 Where a child is not currently subject to either of the above processes, and the case is not held within CSC, and the enquiries indicate that a child may be suffering significant harm, a referral should be made to CSC.
- 6.16 Further to this, there should be a formal consultation with a Child Protection Coordinator.
- 6.17 Where the child is subject to a Family Support Plan, the issues should be considered within a Family Support meeting and if there are significant risks a formal consultation with a Child Protection Coordinator will be considered.

7. MKMARM

- 7.1 Information, data and analysis of children where there are significant interagency concerns who go missing in Milton Keynes will be considered on a monthly basis at the MKMARM meeting of senior multi agency managers.

8. CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION

- 8.1 Children Missing Education (CME) are defined as children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll, and who are not receiving a suitable education elsewhere: for example, at home, privately or in alternative provision.
- 8.2 Children and young people who are missing education may also be at risk of becoming missing from home or care.

- 8.3 For guidance in relation to CME please refer to the Children Missing Education guidance and local arrangements which can be found at <http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/schools-and-lifelong-learning/information-for-schools/children-missing-education>.

Annex 1 – Missing flowchart

