

Title	Missing from Care Policy
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Date agreed by CfMT (if new policy)	

MISSING FROM CARE POLICY

1. Policy Aim

Children who are absent without authority are protected.

2. Legislation, Central Government and other External Documents References

- Children's Homes – National Minimum Standards: Standard 19
- Children's Homes Regulations – Regulation 16
- Care Standards Act 2000
- Children Act 1989
- Children Act 2004

Slough Borough Council and Children's Services Department References

3. Policy

Introduction

This policy recognises that children who go missing from Children's Services care place themselves at risk of significant harm.

The reasons why children go missing from care are varied and complex and are likely to reflect their home circumstances and their experience of care. The circumstances of each episode of a child/young person going missing must be fully assessed as must the overall picture of a series of such episodes.

The Police and Children's Services are both involved when children go missing from care and the purpose of this policy is to enhance the way in which the two agencies work together. The objective is to reduce the risk to children by the way in which "missing" episodes are managed, both in terms of understanding the child's behaviour and in developing preventative strategies.

Definition

For the purposes of this policy 'Child/Young Person' describes a child or young person under 18 years of age. A child/young person is to be considered 'missing' if he/she is absent from their place of residence without authority to a degree or in circumstances where the absence causes concern for safety of the child/young person or there is potential danger to the public.

For children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan see guidance as outlined in the Berkshire Area Child Protection Procedures paragraph 16.12.

Absences which cause concern are those where staff or carers have no indication that a child/young person is likely to return within a short space of time or where there is immediate concern for the child's safety. The degree of concern will be determined by the age of the child / young person and past history, if any, of absconding or periods of missing from care.

Clearly some children absent themselves for a short period and then return, often their whereabouts are known. They are not considered at risk and usually they are testing boundaries.

Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed either on purpose or unwittingly. This kind of boundary testing activity is well within the range of normal teenage behaviour and should not come within the definition of 'missing' as used for this policy.

4. Procedure

During the assessment phase of receiving the child/young person into the Looked After system, the Social Worker who is accountable will ensure that the past history is known to the LAC Placement Forum and is recorded in the Placement Plan which will be shared with carers and on the child/young person's case file on ICS.

In assessing the significance of a child's/ young person's absence, all staff will apply the above definition and, in addition, take the following into consideration:-

- Guidance already agreed and incorporated within the child/young person's care plan,
- The age and maturity of the child / young person,
- The legal status of the child/young person,
- Previous behaviour patterns,
- State of mind/perceived risk,
- Group behaviour,
- Whether the child/young person is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation.

Preventing a child/young person going missing

- If at any point a child/young person becomes Looked After, there is information to suggest that they might go missing, their care plan should –
- Describe the degree of risk of the child/young person going missing,
- Detail the level of supervision and support the child/young person will receive,
- Detail the parents' views on what action should be taken if the child/young person goes missing,
- Assess the likely level of risk to the child/young person if they go missing.
- Include a risk assessment and action plan to minimise the opportunity for them to go missing.
- Consideration should be given as to what discussion there should be with the child/young person about the actions that will be taken if they go missing.
- Children/young people should be made aware of the policy both through discussion and written information.
- All children / young people should be given clear information about –
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- Times of going out and returning,
- Who to tell about where they are going,
- How to seek help if they are unable to get back for the agreed time, whether this has happened accidentally or on purpose.

Responding to an incident

If a child/young person goes missing or does not return at the expected time the following action will be taken:

Initiate procedures which encourage them to return as quickly and safely as possible and ensure they are not intimidated by the prospect of returning,

Within residential homes – the senior manager on duty should be informed immediately of a child/young person missing,

Within foster care – foster carers should contact the child/young person's Social Worker (or, if not available, the duty officer) and out of hours the Emergency Duty Team,

The senior manager on duty in the residential home, or the duty officer will consider whether the absence causes such concern as to fall within this policy. If it does not, the residential manager or the duty officer should take whatever steps are appropriate to secure the safe and speedy return of the child/young person to the establishment of to the home. (Emergency Duty Team does not need to be informed if absence is outside the policy – see below).

Absences that fall within this policy

If the absence is considered to fall within this policy, the senior manager in the residential home, or the Duty Officer should, without delay, inform:-

- The police: who will treat the matter as involving a 'vulnerable missing person',
- The parents (and those who have parental responsibility),
- The social worker,
- The emergency duty team (if outside office hours),
- The child/young person's school.
- Record the child/young person missing, together with period of time on ICS case file.

Absences that fall outside this policy

It is expected that absences outside this policy will ONLY apply to children who already have a considerable measure of independence. This section will not apply to a child/young person with a disability, which limits their independence, whatever their age.

Where the initial assessment is that the absence falls outside this policy, the Residential Manager or the Social Worker/Duty Officer will review the decision at least hourly. If after four hours the child/young person has not returned or their whereabouts is unknown then the absence will be considered to come under this policy. Four hours should be seen as a maximum period and in most situations much shorter period will be appropriate.

Use of discretion – the Manager on duty has the discretion to extend this period beyond four hours before doing notifications that the young person is missing if they feel they know the whereabouts of the young person and the behaviour is not extraordinary given their age and previous expressions of independence. In some instances, the managers on duty may wish to consult with the police duty inspector when exercising discretion.

Absences Giving Rise to Particular Concern

In circumstances where the age or vulnerability of the child/young person or the circumstances in which the child/young person goes missing, including suspicion of abuse, give rise to particular concern, the Group Manager (Children's Services) and the Duty Inspector on call (Police), or their nominee, must be notified without delay. The Group Manager and Duty Inspector on call will then decide on further action and consider the need to inform the Divisional Crime Manager (Police).

Possible actions are a risk management meeting, or a strategy meeting if there are grounds for a Section 47 Child Protection Enquiry. These will be decided following consultation with the Group Manager and the Duty Inspector on call.

Any unauthorised absence lasting for 8 hours should continue to be reported to the Group Manager by the Senior Manager of the home or the Social Worker. The Group Manager will inform the Assistant Director, Children and Families.

Any unauthorised absence lasting 24 hours will be reported to the Assistant Director, Children and Families, by the relevant Group Manager.

The Group Manager will report the young person to the Missing From Care Department. The Department is part of the National Missing Persons Helpline, a charity which provides a service to members of the public when a person goes missing. It has a comprehensive national database of missing persons and case workers experienced in providing support, practical advice and assistance to families, carers and social workers.

Missing from Care Department
Telephone: 020 8392 4527
Fax: 020 8392 4529
Email: mfc@missingpersons.org

Information To Be Made Available

When reporting the matter to the Police, the senior manager on duty in the home or the duty manager should make available –

- a description of the child/young person,
- where the child/young person was last seen, with whom and what they were wearing,
- a recent photograph,
- family addresses,
- known acquaintances,
- any previous history of absconding,
- the name and address of the child/young person's GP and dentist,
- circumstances, which increase the risk to a child/young person, should be drawn to the attention of the Police, the situation immediately prior to the child/young person going missing.

Informing the Press

It is for the Police to inform the media regarding a child/young person missing from the care of the Local Authority. This may be arranged at local level, by direction of the Group Manager (or nominee). A decision to publicise by press and/ or television will only be made in consultation with Children's Services and with prior warning, in order to allow the parents to be informed.

Recording

Throughout the process identified within this policy, a full record must be kept of all actions taken and messages received and given. This recording should be made within the home's logbook, with duplicate entry on the child/young person's ICS file (this latter recording could be a photocopy of the log book entries). Foster carers should be required to keep a record as described, as should the child/young person's social worker.

The Residential Children's Homes and the Fostering Service will maintain a distinct log that records on a regular basis all unauthorised absences. This will be monitored by the Residential Manager, Fostering Manager, Group Manager and Regulation 33 Visiting Officer.

Planning For Return

If a child/young person's absence comes within this policy, the senior manager on duty in the home or the Duty Officer (in consultation with social worker and parents and the Police, where appropriate or where possible), should commence contingency planning for when the child/ young person is located. Such plans should include:

- Determining the most appropriate way to ensure child/young person is "listened to",
- How best to ensure the child/young person's access to Rights and Advocacy Services,
- Identifying ways in which the child or young person can meaningfully inform and participate in the plan,
- Whether the child /young person will return to the previous placement and how will he/she will be conveyed there?
- Whether the Police wish to interview the child/young person before he/she is returned to his/her placement?
- Who will be an appropriate "Independent Person" (to be appointed by police) to talk to child/young person after his/her return. (In most circumstances the independent person will be a police officer).

The Police will co-operate in the plans developed by Children's Services to return a child/young person to his/her residence. In exceptional circumstances and if no other means are available the Police will assist in this, subject to Policing requirements.

Normally the Children's Services Department will make arrangements for the transportation of a child/young person to his/her residence. Where appropriate the Police will assist in this.

Discussions should take place between Children's Services and Police regarding their respective powers to enforce a return if the child/young person resists and is not apparently at risk. If there is a failure to agree on a course of action then senior managers from the respective agencies will be asked to resolve the issue.

Risk Assessment Meeting

The same level of consideration must be given to all children/young people who go missing from care. Each missing episode should be subject to the same level of assessment, even in situations where the child /young person absconds frequently. It is important to recognise the potential seriousness of this behaviour. A young offender needs the same level of consideration as any other child/young person missing from care.

When a child is going missing repeatedly the child/young person's Social Worker, Team Manager and the Police must consider the need for a Risk Management meeting. The decision about when to hold a meeting will be made on the basis of:-

- The child's/young person's age and maturity,
- Previous behaviour patterns,
- State of mind /perceived risk,
- The effectiveness of strategies to prevent further episodes.

The Risk Management meetings should involve the child/young person's Social Worker, Team Manager, foster or residential carers, parents and any other relevant professionals. Children's Services Team Managers should chair this meeting.

The purpose of the meeting is to increase the understanding of the child's/young persons behaviour -

- Ensure a consistent and coherent response by parents, carers and all involved agencies,
- Clarify the role of each agency,
- Put strategies in place to prevent the behaviour.

Communication

Should a child/young person's absence continue, and after Police, Social Worker and Parents have been informed, the senior residential manager in the home should make arrangements to inform all children and staff within the home. Similarly all children in a foster home should be informed. In this way, distressing rumours may be avoided and additional information regarding the missing child/young person's whereabouts might be obtained. The child/young person's school should also be informed in case they, too have any information regarding his/her whereabouts. Any such information should be passed to the Police.

Return of the Child/Young Person

When the child/young person is located they should be positively encouraged to talk about their reasons for going missing. Children and young people should always be advised that they could contact the Group Manager, who can advise them of independent sources of advocacy and support.

Whenever possible a discussion should take place with an independent person appointed by the police before the child/young person returns to their placement. This will not always be possible and the reason should then be recorded by the Police. If the child/young person has not been seen before their return, the interview should take place within 48 hours. The independent person shall have no formal line management links with the children's home nor should they be related to any member of staff within the home or its line management nor to the foster carers. In most circumstances the independent person could be a police officer.

Whenever possible the police should consult with the child/young person's Social Worker (or Emergency Duty Team Social Worker) before the child's return to their placement.

The child's/young persons Social Worker should visit the child as soon as possible and, at the outside, within 72 hours of their return.

On the child/young person's return, their medical condition should be discussed immediately and offer made to arrange medical attention. The circumstances of the return will influence who has the discussion with the child/young person in the first instance, Social Worker, Police or carer.

Parents, Police, Social Worker and all others informed of the absence should be advised of the child/young person's return without delay.

In consultation with the carers, the Social Worker should decide whether a Risk Management meeting is required.

Missing During an External Activity or Holiday of a Residential Home or Foster Home

The person in charge or foster carer will –

- Notify the local police in the area and force covering home address,
- Notify the child/young person's Social Worker,
- Notify a Senior Manager of the residential home/fostering service,
- Notify the Group Manager
- Institute a local search if staffing levels permit.

The senior residential manager will be responsible for ensuring the general procedures in relation to a missing child/young person are followed.

The senior residential manager and the person in charge of the party will decide within 24 hours of the absence whether the party should return to the home before planned time.

Ongoing communication regarding the missing child/young person will be maintained between the home and the police local to where the absence occurred.

If the child's/young person is from a foster home, the foster carer will be advised by the child's/young persons Social Worker, who will be responsible for ensuring the general procedures in relation to a missing child/young person are followed.

Longer Absences

Whenever a child/young person is missing for 7 days, a strategy meeting should be held, attended by the relevant Children and Families Team Manager and Divisional County Manager (Police), or his/her nominee, together with other appropriate staff from both agencies. At this meeting these Senior Officers should elicit a clear statement of the actions being taken in respect of the absence and should satisfy themselves that all that should be done is being done.

A Missing child/young person should be reported to the Police National Missing Persons Bureau 14 days after going missing by the Divisional Family Unit.

The Assistant Director – Children and Families should formally review all cases where children/young people have been absent for six months or more and should satisfy themselves on the actions taken to recover the child/young person.

Whilst the child/young person remains absent, their case should be identified as open and should be reviewed at six monthly intervals by an officer at Assistant Director level. The child/young person should continue to have an allocated social worker as the channel for day to day communication. If the child or young person contacts the allocated social worker they should routinely be advised of how to contact the Group Manager of Children's Services for possible support.

All Police missing persons files will remain "live" until the person is traced or until the Divisional Commander is satisfied all lines of enquiry have been exhausted. They will then take the decision to file or otherwise and inform Children's Services of the action taken.

Where the Divisional Commander has made the decision to file, the divisional Family Unit will be responsible for bringing forward the file on persons who remain missing for review by the Divisional Crime Manager 12 months after the file date.

5. Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed by the Group Manager on a yearly basis on the date specified on page 1 of this policy.