

# Missing Children Protocol

## Introduction

This protocol is important for the safeguarding of children and families in the Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Portsmouth local authority area. It should be read and implemented by all practitioners and managers working with children or young people who are at risk of going missing from home or care.

It is also based upon the principles found within the local authorities' statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from care or home and the police's 2010 guidance on the management, investigation and recording of missing persons.

It is intended that this protocol will assist in the development of robust responses to running away, in line with the good practice already established to those children and young people (hereafter referred to as 'children') who are at risk of sexual exploitation.

**For the purposes of this protocol the term missing means “A missing person is anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well being, or otherwise, is established.”**

It should be used to engage partner agencies in developing preventative services for children who are at risk of running away. An annual review will be commissioned by the chair of the strategic missing group on the effectiveness of this protocol.

Each local authority should nominate a senior manager from its child's social care department to ensure the effective implementation and day to day use of this protocol within their organisation. The police will also nominate a senior manager to ensure similar outcomes.

The most effective assessment and support comes through good information sharing, joint assessments of need, joint planning, and professional trust within the interagency network and joint action in partnership with families.

The local Safeguarding Children Boards expect all agencies working with children who are missing from home or care to implement this protocol and ensure that their staff are made aware of it. It should be used in all new contacts with children

## 1. Background

1.1 Over 6700 missing person reports were made in the Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Portsmouth area during 2009. In the majority of cases the incident was closed within the first 48 hours. Age data from the 6700 reports showed that 73% (4923) were children under the age of 18.

1.2 The police recorded that 3571 individual children went missing in 2009.

1.3 The Childrens Society through its research has identified the following risk factors that can precede a missing incident:

- Arguments and conflicts
- Conflict within a placement
- Poor family relationships
- Physical and emotional abuse
- Boundaries and control issues
- Step parent issues

The immediate risks associated with going missing include:

- No means of support or legitimate income – leading to high risk activities
- Involvement in criminal activities
- Victim of abuse
- Victim of crime, for example through sexual assault and exploitation
- Alcohol/substance misuse
- Deterioration of physical and mental health
- Missing out on schooling and education.

- Increased vulnerability

Longer-term risks include:

- Long-term drug dependency / alcohol dependency
- Crime
- Homelessness.
- Disengagement from education
- Child sexual exploitation
- Poor physical and/or mental health

## 2. Legislation

2.1 The legal parameters for investigating missing person incidents can be found in common law, statute and in the provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR).

2.2 Data Protection legislation places certain conditions on the 'processing' of information classed as personal data.

2.3 Data Protection legislation does not prevent the police and local authorities working together to ensure the safe return of a missing child. Both organisations are registered for the purpose of protecting people and the disclosing of information for that purpose.

2.4 Statutory guidance on children who runaway and go missing from home or care DCSF 2009.

2.5 Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2010).

## 3. Scope

3.1 The protocol is designed for:

- All children living within Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Portsmouth.
- Children in care by a local authority placed within a children's home or foster care (either local authority or independent) within Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Portsmouth.
- Children in care by a local authority or with parents who are subject to a care order within Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Portsmouth.

3.2 The relevant local authority retains a responsibility for those children in care that are placed outside their local authority boundaries. In these cases the local authority will require the placement provider to comply with these protocols and any other protocol local to their area. Other local authorities placing children within Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Portsmouth will be required to comply with this protocol.

3.3 Within this context, "children in care" refers to children accommodated under s20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to care orders including interim care orders (s31 and 38 Children Act 1989) and those children who are otherwise provided with accommodation under s21 Children Act 1989.

3.4 To promote positive collaboration between managed residential units and the police, a community police liaison officer will be designated as a point of contact to conduct visits and build a positive relationship. This will be in addition to the normal safeguarding police contacts.

## 4. Principles

4.1 This protocol should be read as guidance as it cannot anticipate every situation. Anyone working with children in a professional capacity should use their judgment to take whatever action is deemed necessary to protect and safeguard the child.

4.2 Our joint aim is to reduce the incidence of all children going missing. Children who go missing may place themselves and others at risk and each missing episode is potentially serious. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or

their experiences of care. Every “missing” episode should attract proper attention from the professionals involved, who must collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on their return.

4.3 When a child does go missing our joint aim is to prevent that child suffering harm and to recover the child to safety as soon as possible. We do this by partnership working, information sharing, problem solving and performance management.

4.4 Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes. Interventions for looked after children must be driven by and reflected in the placement information record and in any care plan. Interventions must also be informed by effective return interviews. **The child’s view will be taken seriously.**

4.5 Interventions may be focused on the individual child, a child’s home, or by targeting ‘pull’ factors in the community.

4.6 The reporting of a child in care as a missing person should not be used as a sanction against the child by any practitioner or manager.

4.7 The national minimum standards and regulations for children’s homes and fostering services require all providers to have in place procedures for when a child is missing from their care establishment. These procedures must be compatible with the protocols established by the host local authority and Hampshire police.

4.8 The four local authorities and the police will conduct analysis of the training needs of their staff. This will help to build professional confidence, improve our working practices and enable our staff to complete their duties to the highest standard. The timings of any analysis and the costs of any training will be commissioned by the strategic missing person group.

4.9 The relevant local authority will report a missing ‘looked after child’ to the police according to this protocol.

4.10 Hampshire Constabulary will also receive and record reports of a child missing from their parental home. It is expected that this will be carried out by either the parent or by the person who has parental responsibility for the child.

4.11 The local authorities, police and other agencies will monitor compliance and outcomes jointly via the Strategic Missing Person’s Group.

## 5 Procedures for a child who runs away or goes missing from home

Children under the age of 16 years old are not legally considered as being able to live independently. For children over the age of 16 years old consideration should be given to their legal status, physical and emotional needs when making a judgment as to whether they can live independently.

### 5.1 All agencies / members of the public

5.1.1 If it comes to the attention of any agency that a child is missing, they must advise the parent/carer to report this matter to the police. They also need to advise the parent of their agency’s duty to ensure that the matter is reported to the police and if necessary follow this up by contacting the police to verify that the child has been reported missing.

5.1.2 The consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation.

### 5.2 Responsibility of parents/carers

5.2.1 Parents and those with parental responsibility will be expected to undertake basic measures to try to locate their missing child. Anyone else who has care of a child without parental responsibility should take all reasonable steps to locate the child and ascertain their safety.

Before a child is reported missing the following actions should be undertaken:

- Search bedroom/ accommodation/ outbuildings/vehicles
- Contact known friends and relatives
- Visit locations that the child is known to frequent

5.2.2 Anyone who has care of a child without parental knowledge or agreement should do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. In these circumstances, they should inform the police, children's services and the parents of their whereabouts and safety. If this is not complied with then the police should consider further action as prescribed in the Hampshire Constabulary harbouring guidance.

### 5.3 Role of the Police

5.3.1 The police will carry out enquiries aimed at locating the child as soon as possible.

5.3.2 They will complete a risk assessment for each individual on every separate occasion they are reported missing. A risk level grading of either high or medium will be used.

5.3.3 During the normal working week the police will notify the relevant local authority of each child reported as missing within 24 hours. At other times this will be completed during the next available working day.

5.3.4 Children who have gone missing may come to the attention of the police in other ways. When a child whom they believe is missing is then located and this has not been reported by their parents/carers then this should trigger further enquiries with other relevant agencies in accordance with safeguarding procedures.

5.3.5 If enquiries identify risk factors at the home address then safeguarding procedures will be implemented. If the police decide not to return the child to their home address then options should be discussed with children's services to identify other suitable responsible adult(s) and/or accommodation.

### 5.4 Recording

5.4.1 A police RMS (record management system) report must be opened on all occasions when a child is reported missing to the police. The RMS will remain open until the child has been located.

### 5.5 Sharing information

5.5.1 The relevant 'missing person co-ordinator' will also notify the appropriate child services lead if there is further information in a particular case or if they have concerns that need further assessment (e.g. common assessment). Consideration will also be given to notifying other safeguarding partners.

### 5.6 Review of continued absence

5.6.1 Throughout the missing episode, the police are responsible for the investigation and risk assessment.

5.6.2 In the event of a continuing missing episode, then good communication and close cooperation is essential to ensure that any significant concerns are identified and appropriate safeguarding action is taken.

5.6.3 When a child has been absent for a period of 24 hours, the police should then daily update the relevant local authority of any significant developments.

5.6.4 The police, in consultation with the child parents, will be responsible for any media strategy to locate a child missing from home.

### 5.7 Return of the child

5.7.1 It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to contact the police and confirm that the missing child has returned.

5.7.2 If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the parent or carer to arrange for the child's return. In exceptional circumstances, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the police may agree to assist.

**5.7.3** Police 'safe and well' check - Once the child has been located, the police will carry out a safe and well check. It will not be conducted over the telephone. Its purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them. This is not a return interview which is described below. The police will notify the relevant local authority of the return of the child and any relevant risk information via the established CYPr Notification system.

**5.7.4** If it is apparent that they have been the victim of a crime or that they have been at risk from any person then the police will instigate further enquiries. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence.

**5.7.5** Additionally, in matters of sexual exploitation, or in any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or put at risk of, significant harm, a referral must be made to the local authority in accordance with local safeguarding procedures.

**5.7.6** The Local Authority is responsible for deciding whether a return interview is conducted for each missing episode. Completed return interview forms should be sent electronically to the police.

## 6. Procedures for a looked after child

### 6.1 Pre –placement and admission to the placement

**6.1.2** Foster carers and residential providers will be given a copy of this policy which must be followed when a child goes missing. They should be provided with training, supervision and support in the use of this policy and develop skills to enable them to divert children from going missing.

**6.1.3** Each child in care has a care plan based on a full assessment of the child's current and future needs, including potential risk to self or others. The care plan will therefore take into account any risk that the child may go missing and any factors which may increase the risk to the child should they go missing.

**6.1.4** Children's residential and fostering service staff should also contribute to this assessment and it will detail the level of supervision that is needed for the child. All risk information should be included in the placement plan and the child's care plan. As part of this assessment it will be appropriate for the relevant local authority to consult with the police to share information.

**6.1.5** Should a child go missing then a recent photograph of the child should be made available. Most commonly the photograph will be used by local police officers to help them recognise the child when patrolling or when actively looking for the child at relevant locations. In serious cases the police and the local authority may decide to use the photograph more widely and even involve publishing the photograph to national or local media.

**6.1.6** In respect of children in care, a recent photograph bearing a good likeness to the child will be kept on record by the local authority. When a child is admitted to care the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation. If possible the agreement of the child should also be gained.

**6.1.7** The relevant local authority will ensure that sufficient knowledge and information about the child is recorded to enable carers to complete the missing person form (see supporting documents – MISPER) should the child go missing.

**6.1.8** The residential unit manager/foster carer should consider the most appropriate ways to meet the above requirements and whether it is necessary and appropriate to discuss 'running away' with the child.

### 6.2 When the looked after child goes missing

**6.2.1** Categories of absence have been agreed between the police and the four local authorities. If a child is absent from care then the local authority must decide if that child is an unauthorised absence or a missing person.

## Unauthorised absence or missing

6.2.2 In deciding the category of absence, all staff must consider the circumstances of the child and their absence. This will include detailed consideration of:

- The circumstances of the absence.
- The child's care plan.
- The age of the child.
- The maturity of the child.
- Any physical or cognitive disability of the child.
- Any continuing or urgent need for the child to have medication or other medical treatment.
- The legal status of the child.
- Previous behaviour and history of the child.
- Danger posed by the child to themselves or others
- General vulnerability of the child.
- The child's tendency to drug/substance abuse.
- Whether the child is perceived as running to, or running from, someone or something.
- Any circumstances within the placement, say with carers or other residents that may be relevant to the absence.
- The risk of offending.
- The influence of peer groups, families or friends.
- Predatory influences on the child. These may relate to others wanting to use the child for crime, sex or drugs.
- Any known risk of abduction.
- Environmental factors including weather, time of year, community events or tensions.

6.2.3 Children who are absent from their placement can be a matter of considerable concern to their carers and there is a need to locate them and ensure they are safe. The children can be thought of as being on a continuum, with there being little cause for concern at one end, and with significant cause for concern at the other. Children who are a few minutes late home from school would not normally give rise to concerns; they may have missed the bus, or they may be exhibiting normal adolescent testing out, to establish the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, or to show their disagreement with aspects of their placement.

6.2.4 It is not helpful to consider every momentary absence as warranting a formal missing person report. However, at some point, depending upon the child and the circumstances, the child's absence will give rise to justifiable concern and require a formal missing person report to the police. Whilst there can be no substitute for a considered judgement, based on a sound assessment of the child and the circumstances, it is the purpose of this framework to assist carers to structure their thinking with regard to the two categories of absence. This decision should not be taken in isolation, residential staff should consult with the senior member on duty and foster carers should liaise with the child's social worker or EDT staff. The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances taken into account. If the child is receiving support from CAMHS professionals, Educational Psychologists and so on, it may be advisable to discuss the case with them. However, if they are not readily available a decision must be made on the basis of the best available information.

6.2.5 Each case must be decided on merit and a formal missing person report to the police may be actioned earlier in some circumstances than in others. Indeed for a small number of young people it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. Normally this will be as part of the care plan because of the child's vulnerability.

6.2.6 The fact that the child may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk. In fact, children who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Furthermore, short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.

The categories and consequent actions are outlined below:

### 6.3. Unauthorised absence

6.3.1 Clearly some children absent themselves for a short period and then return, with their whereabouts known to the carer. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose to test boundaries, or accidentally. Examples of situations where unauthorised absence will apply are:

- Running away after a dispute.

- Failing to return on time
- Staying at a known location with a friend.

The carer should take all the reasonable steps which a good parent would take, to secure the safe and speedy return of the child e.g. visiting addresses where the child may be or telephoning known friends

6.3.2 If the carer assesses that the child is at risk, then the child should be reported missing without delay and the perceived risk communicated to the police.

6.3.3 If the assessment of the carer is that there is no apparent risk for their immediate safety but are away from home without permission it is still important that staff/carers record these incidences as unauthorised absences in the child's record.

6.3.4 In addition to this staff/carers should start a dated/time record of their contacts, risk assessment and their decisions throughout the episode from the point that they were aware of the child's absence so that the incident is auditable.

6.3.5 Instances of unauthorised absences should not be reported to the police. Hampshire Constabulary will not record instances of unauthorised absences.

6.3.6 The responsibility for managing this type of absence lies with the staff of the residential home or carer. It is not the responsibility of the police to influence or determine the decision of whether a person is missing or an unauthorised absence.

6.3.7 A clear assessment needs to be made by the carer in each individual case as to the length of time that elapses before a child who is unauthorised absent becomes categorised as missing. An unauthorised absence must be kept under regular review by the appropriate carer. It is important to consider whether the circumstances of the disappearance would now render the child at risk of harm, for example:

- The child requires medication at a set time

Or

- Weather conditions have severely deteriorated

6.3.8 It will not be appropriate for any child whose whereabouts are not known and who cannot be contacted, to remain out overnight, without being formally reported as missing.

## 6.4 Missing

6.4.1 Reporting a child missing involves providing detailed information to the police. It is important that the carer makes it clear to the police that they are reporting the child as missing. The carer should always ask for, and record the police reference number.

6.4.2 When receiving a missing person report the police will tailor their response to the circumstances. If information is available to suggest a possible location of the missing child, and this gives rise to concerns about the safety of the child, the police response will be to immediately address those concerns.

6.4.3 Premises search: For a child missing from a child's home or foster placement (not a residential children's home), a premises search will be undertaken by police officers. For a child reported missing from a residential home, the police will ask the senior care manager responsible for the unit to verify that a thorough premises search has been conducted by care staff.

6.4.4 Whilst the decision to categorise an absent child as 'missing' ultimately lies with the carer, the decision about the risk level attributed to the case lies with the police. In making both decisions, dialogue between carers and police is paramount.

6.4.5 The carer will provide sufficient information about risk factors. After considering this and other information the police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will be high, medium or low. Hampshire Constabulary has decided that no case involving a child under 16 years will be classified as low risk.

6.4.6 Carers must also inform without delay:

- The parents/those who have parental responsibility (unless indicated otherwise on the care plan)

- The Social Worker or their team manager
- The emergency duty team, if out of hours, and the Social Worker and accountable team manager the next working day

## 6.5 Roles and responsibilities

6.5.1 After reporting a child missing, children's services remain responsible for the child in their care. This responsibility is not absolved when the child has been reported missing to the police.

6.5.2 Carers and the child's social worker will be responsible for liaising with the police, taking an active interest in the investigation and passing on all information which may help to inform the investigation and assist in protecting the child while absent.

6.5.3 Carers and the child's social worker should continue to make appropriate enquiries with other residents or by telephone with all persons who may be able to assist with the investigation unless they are requested not to do so by the police. All information gleaned from these enquiries should be passed to the police.

6.5.4 Once a child is reported missing to the police they will then have primacy in respect of the investigation to trace the child.

6.5.5 The police will normally conduct all physical enquiries away from the premises from which the child is absent.

6.5.6 In certain circumstances the police may need to revisit the duties initially performed by care staff. When necessary they will do so in liaison with appropriate children's services staff and will do so sensitively, causing as little disruption as possible to the establishment and residents.

6.5.7 Throughout the process the police, residential carers and social workers must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given.

6.5.8 Media Strategy: In some cases, particularly where a missing child is felt to be especially vulnerable or where they have been missing for a long period of time, it may be necessary to publicise the case via the media. Such an approach is not routine but is usually a response to very serious concerns for the child's safety. Either carers or the police may suggest such an approach. Normally, such decisions to publicise will be jointly made, and where appropriate, in consultation with parents and children's services. The police may also utilise the website facility of the 'missing person bureau' ([www.missingkids.co.uk](http://www.missingkids.co.uk)) to publicise the absence of the child or young person.

## 6.6 Review of continued absence

6.6.1 When a child has been absent for a period of 48 hours the social worker should inform the relevant senior manager.

6.6.2 Throughout the missing episode, carers and the police will continually review the case. If deemed appropriate, an urgent review meeting will be held. It will involve police officers, carers, the child's social worker, and any other professional involved in the care of the child.

The meeting will review:

- What action needs to be taken by the Police and other professionals?
- Decide whether the child should return to that placement when located
- Consider any other relevant information

Further such reviews will take place as necessary.

## 6.7 Return of the child

6.7.1 If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it will be the responsibility of the local authority to arrange for the child's return between the hours of 0900 hrs to 2100 hrs / 7 days a week. The police will not be used unless the circumstances in 6.7.3 apply.

6.7.2 From 2100 hrs to 0900 hrs / 7 days a week the child's return will be completed by either the local authority or the police dependant upon the known risk and the resources available at the time.

6.7.3 However, there will be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe return of the child, the police may agree to requests from the local authority to assist. The police should not unreasonably withhold assistance in cases involving the recovery and transportation of vulnerable children. However the police will not agree to requests to provide escorts for missing children which would unreasonably involve officers leaving their normal area of patrol.

6.7.4 It is the responsibility of the carer to contact the police by telephone and to confirm that the missing child has returned. For children in residential placements, the police will accept confirmation from care professionals without the need for an officer to attend the home and visit the returnee. This will lead to the police closing the missing person investigation. For children in foster placements, the police will verify the child's safe return in person.

6.7.5 If it is apparent, upon the return of a child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that had occurred whilst they were absent then the police must be called and asked to attend without delay. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence.

6.7.6 In such circumstances, the missing persons clothing, mobile phone and trace evidence from their body, fingernails or hair may be crucial. In cases of sexual abuse the child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the police. If carers become aware of the location of the scene of any crime committed against the child, or of the location of any crucial evidence they must notify the police without delay. This will enable the police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.

6.7.7 In sexual abuse cases the police have access to specially trained officers, doctors and facilities designed to care for the victim and obtain evidence.

6.7.8 Additionally, in matters of sexual exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, a referral must be made under the relevant LSCB policy guidance and procedure 'guidance on child sexual exploitation'.

**It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi-agency intervention meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.**

6.7.9 When a child returns to the placement it is the responsibility of the carers to notify any person of the missing episode under para 7.4.

## 7. Return interviews: safety, assessment and information gathering

7.1 'Return Interviews' is the term applied to the safety, needs and risk assessment carried out by the statutory children services department and/or their partners. It should include an exploration of the reason the child left their home or placement as well as what risks they were exposed to whilst missing. The 'return interview' is different from a police 'safe and well' check and is not an Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interview.

7.2 The return interview is important in safeguarding the child for the future. It must not be viewed as a routine or administrative task.

7.3 The local authority is responsible for deciding whether a return interview is conducted for each missing episode.

7.4 Return Interviews should be offered for every instance of running where a child has:

- Been missing for over 24 hours;
- Been missing or has runaway on three or more occasions;
- Engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
- Known mental health issues;

For a child in care a return interview should always be conducted. Appropriate safeguarding procedures should be followed where there are safeguarding concerns for example:

- Where the child has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case)

- Where there is known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or contact with persons posing a risk to children.

7.5 It is acknowledged that a returning child may well share different parts of their experience with different people. It is the responsibility of all agencies therefore, to attend to issues of immediate safety, future support, safeguarding needs and information-sharing.

7.6 It is the responsibility of each locality children services team manager to ensure that the return interview is carried out to a suitable standard by a person approved to do so. Central Government guidance suggests that ideally this is conducted by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is also able to follow up any actions that emerge.

7.7 The child's view on who should be conducting the return interview should also be considered.

7.8 When it is not practicable for a return interview to be conducted by the most suitable person, or an independent person, it is better that an interview is conducted by a nominated care professional than no interview being conducted at all.

7.9 The return interview should be conducted in all instances within 72 hours of the child's return, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

7.10 The purpose of the interview is:

- To better understand the reasons why the child went missing
- To explore the circumstances leading to the missing episode
- To inform future prevention strategies
- To inform any future missing person investigation should that child go missing again?
- To learn of the activities, associates, risks and victimisation involved in the missing episode, and where possible to address those risks with appropriate and proactive strategies.
- To identify and address any harm the child has suffered – including harm that may not have already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check.

7.11 The interview will be recorded and all return interviews must be signed off by a children services team manager after presentation by the relevant professional.

7.12 A copy of the return interview should be sent to the lead manager within children's services and the police. The police 'missing person co-ordinator' will ensure that details from the return interview are added to their own RMS records. The signed copy should be kept and stored in accordance with the local authorities administrative procedures and not sent to the police.

7.13 In some circumstances the child may make extremely sensitive disclosures that need particularly careful management that should be recorded separately but referred to on the return interview form. In such circumstances it may be appropriate for the interviewer to discuss the information with relevant professionals.

7.14 Where a return interview leads to a disclosure that needs specific action, for example, to safeguard the child or investigate a crime the matter should be referred to the local authority and the police.

7.15 For looked after children it remains the responsibility of the relevant social worker to ensure completion of the return interview. There is an additional responsibility on the child's placement to monitor that they are conducted within the agreed timescales. In the event that the return interview is not conducted within 72 hours, then the placement should alert the relevant senior manager in children's services.

## 8. Police powers.

8.1 The Police have significant powers to safeguard vulnerable children. These include powers to enter premises, to recover children and to take them into police protection.

8.2 When a missing child is found or known to have been in company with an adult during any missing

episode, in circumstances which afford reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence has been committed by that adult (i.e. child abduction, sexual offence, drug offence, assault), then the incident will be taken seriously throughout the process of reporting, investigation and provision of follow up care. The main priority will be the safety and well being of the child; thereafter, the police will take positive action against any perpetrators, hold them accountable for their actions and prefer charges where appropriate.

8.3 It is recognised that children who have been the victim of a serious offence may not always see themselves as a victim or be willing to assist in any investigation, particularly in the early stages. Likewise those whom others have used for criminal purposes may not be willing to assist the police. A complaint from a victim is not required to make an arrest. Usually reasonable suspicion is enough to arrest. When such an offence has occurred and a power of arrest exists, the offender should normally be arrested.

8.4 Without prejudice to the welfare of any child, the local authority will support the police in taking appropriate action against those who commit crimes against children and/or involve children in their offending behaviour.

## 9. Response to escalating concerns

9.1 In response to escalating concerns formal intervention meetings must take place in the event of repeat episodes of children going missing. For these meetings to work, and thereby improve our collective responses, appropriate attendance and clarity of purpose is essential. The intervention meetings should be held within a week of any trigger episode. It is the responsibility of the police 'missing person coordinator' to alert children services of the need for an intervention meeting. It is the responsibility of children services to arrange that meeting.

9.2 The scheduling of intervention meetings will be initiated by the local authority and will be determined by missing person reports.

N.B. In cases of a child going missing from an out-of-authority placement then the responsible authority arranges the intervention meeting involving the relevant organisations from the host authority, to determine action and to ensure change.

When a child who has a history of going missing is moved to an out-of-authority placement, the host authority should be informed of the risk and as part of the placement agreement, appropriate details should be shared to support the local authority to manage the risks to inform care planning for that child.

9.3 The trigger for holding a missing from care/home intervention meeting **will be three episodes in a three month period**. This is a crucial stage in avoiding a serious escalation and must, therefore, be given a high priority by all concerned. Representatives from each organisation or interested party must be present. The meeting should be chaired by a children services manager, attendees should include:

- **Child\***
- Social Worker or relevant lead professional
- Police representative
- Parent and or carer, residential worker or foster carer
- Fostering Social Worker
- Person who conducted return interview if different to above
- Other relevant professionals/voluntary agency (For example Health, Education, Youth Offending Teams)

\* Discussion should take place between the chair and the child's social worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

9.4 This meeting should try to identify any 'push' or 'pull' factor in the case and any other voluntary or statutory agency, which has an interest, or may take an interest, in the missing child's welfare and circumstances. In the case of 'pull' factors it may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the missing child or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs. The meeting should be minuted and **MUST** produce a clear action plan, including timescales for action, named lead professionals, risk/contingency planning and regular review dates. The notes of the meeting should be copied to all invited professionals. In addition, copies should be sent to the child's allocated Independent review officer.

We are saying locally that after the first intervention meeting if the subsequent review meeting identifies that the pattern of missing has not improved a senior manager needs to be involved in the subsequent meetings.

9.5 The volume of missing episodes is not the only reason to launch an intervention or to escalate the level of intervention. The following are examples of other reasons to initiate or escalate interventions:

- Any case where the risks involved in even a single future-missing episode are very high
- Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well being of the child

9.6 It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi-agency intervention meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.

9.7 When it is believed that an adult is adversely involved with a child going missing the local authority will invoke safeguarding procedures and the police will consider using enforcement tactics such as the harbouring and/or abduction legislation.

9.8 Alternatively the local authority and/or parents may decide to institute civil proceedings to obtain an injunction preventing any particular adult having any contact with a named child.

## 10 Missing vulnerable families

10.1 The loss of professional contact with a child, (including an unborn child), young person or family who are perceived to be "at risk" must always be regarded as a matter of concern.

10.2 Once the loss of contact is established then agencies should be proactive in making efforts to locate the person/family concerned. All actions must be recorded.

10.3 Initiatives taken at a local level are often more productive in locating people and good communication/links with other agencies should be established.

10.4 The agency identifying the missing child/family/person should inform their relevant line manager.

10.5 Measures should be taken to trace the person informally through family, friends, neighbours etc as is considered reasonable and appropriate.

10.6 Enquiries should be made through other local agencies involved with the child or family.

10.7 The person should be reported as missing to the police as soon as it is felt appropriate to do so. The police will take a lead role in investigating the matter.

10.8 Refer to child services if appropriate. Consideration must be given to convening a strategy meeting with other agencies to coordinate efforts.

10.9 Consideration should be given by child services to circulating the details to other local authorities if all other avenues have proved unsuccessful.

10.10 In the event of a family being "missing" for a period of 7 days then a formal review should be undertaken by a strategic manager in safeguarding and the operational head of the relevant children services authority should be informed.

# Appendix A

## Definitions

**Child:** A child or young person under the age of eighteen years with the exception of a former relevant child within the meaning of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; these young people continue to be the responsibility of the Local Authority up to the age of 21 (24yrs if in receipt of full time education).

**Missing person:** A missing person is anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well being, or otherwise, is established.

**Runaway:** A child who is absent from their home or placement without permission for any length of time where their age, experience, background and ability make this a concern or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers. This can also be self defined by a child who runs away when they do not believe that they have any alternative.

**Child in care:** A child who is looked after by the Local Authority e.g. they are 'in care' by reason of a court order, if they are provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours with the agreement of their parents or with the child if they are aged 16 or more.

**Unauthorised absence:** Absent for a short period of time and after a careful and thorough risk assessment the absence does not raise concern for their immediate safety or that of the public. This should only be used, by staff and carers in respect of children in care for the purpose of determining whether a child is missing as per the definition.

A child who is absent should be classified as 'unauthorised absence' if the criteria below apply:

- They have deliberately or carelessly absented themselves
- They are likely to return of their own accord or they are staying with others known to them
- They are likely to be easily located
- They are unlikely to suffer or cause significant harm whilst absent

**Sexual exploitation:** Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive something (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities.

**Unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC) and trafficking:** The UK Borders Agency refers unaccompanied children to the relevant local authority when they assess that a child may be vulnerable or at risk from harm e.g. trafficking. The local authority, along with other partners, will look at the needs of the child as part of its duty to safeguard all children in its care.

[http://publications.everychildmatters.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF\\_Child%20Trafficking.pdf](http://publications.everychildmatters.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF_Child%20Trafficking.pdf)

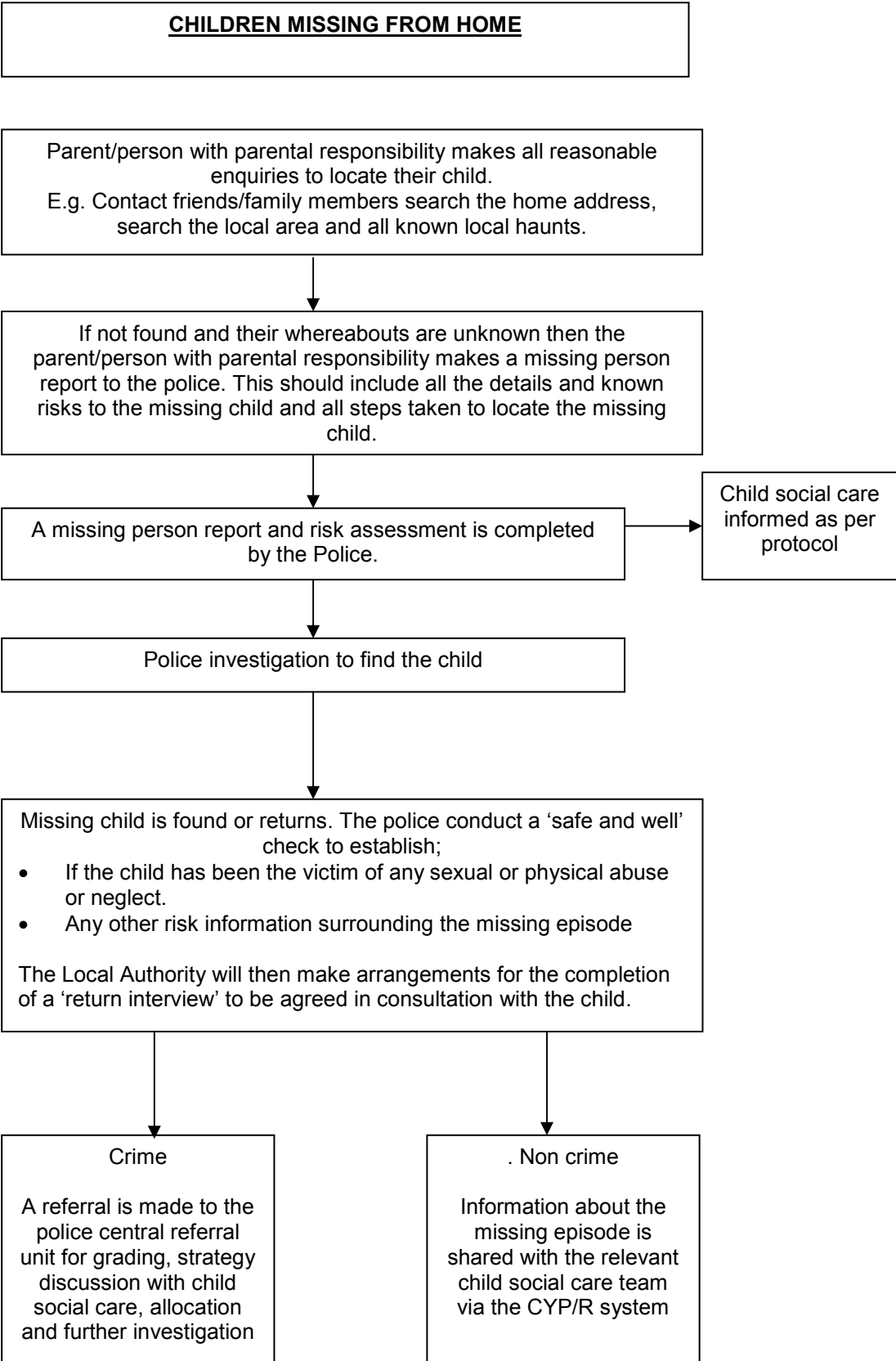
**Children not receiving a suitable education:** This was previously known as 'Children missing from education and there was some confusion in relation to the use of term 'missing'. Children not receiving a suitable education are defined as children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll and who are not receiving a suitable education by any other recognised means. When a child fails to attend school, this may be for a variety of reasons and may indicate that the child is at risk of harm. The education authority should make reasonable enquiries to ascertain the circumstances before reporting them as missing to the police. Details of these enquiries are contained in guidance for local authorities on children not receiving a suitable education, which can be found at:

[www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/childrenmissingeducation/](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/childrenmissingeducation/)

**Intervention meeting:** This meeting will be for all relevant safeguarding practitioners to discuss the push and pull factors as to why a child repeatedly goes missing, to agree a multi agency intervention plan to reduce the risks to the child and to reduce the number of repeated missing person episodes.

**N.B.** For the purposes of these protocols a missing child will be defined as one where the missing episode has been reported to the Police.

# Appendix B



# CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE

