

Briefing note for schools on Hertfordshire Procedures for Children Missing from Care or Home

Background

A missing child and young person is : A child or young person under the age of 18 who has run away from home or placement, or feels forced or lured to leave, or whose whereabouts are unknown.

***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; and**

***Absent:* A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be.**

Any missing episode is potentially serious, one runaway is one too many.

The Children Society identified that the following risk factors may precede a missing incident: arguments and conflicts, poor family relationships, physical and emotional abuse (including Domestic Violence), step parent issues and boundaries and control issues.

Additional risks associated with children and young people going missing are:

- No means of support or legitimate income leading to high risk activities
- Involvement in criminal activities
- Victim of crime including child/young person sexual exploitation (CSE) and violence
- Alcohol/substance misuse
- Deterioration of physical and mental health
- Disengagement from education, training or employment
- Increased vulnerability, linking with other vulnerable children/young people or gangs
- Trafficking
- Homelessness

A range of “Push” and “Pull” factors may be reasons for running:

Push factors: problems at home, including difficult relationships, family breakdown and maltreatment or abuse; problems at school, including bullying; and personal problems including mental health issues.

Pull factors: wanting to be near friends and family, peer pressure, or following grooming by adults seeking to exploit them

Missing Episodes

We know that some children/young people stay out longer than agreed for various reasons such as running away after a dispute, on purpose to test boundaries, failing to return on time, staying at a known location with a friend, he or she has missed the bus. This would be considered as absent from home or placement however, our guidance to our carers /residential placements is that if the whereabouts of the child/young person remain unknown or become a concern this should be reported to the police. Most young people reported missing in Hertfordshire are missing for less than 24hours. There are small cohort of young people, a significant number who are Children Looked After (CLA), who go missing on a number of occasions. These are carefully tracked and monitored and there is an escalation process in Children's Service via a Need to Know process to senior managers.

The police will make efforts to locate the young person. Our guidance suggests that consideration should be given to holding a Multi-Agency Risk Management for Missing and/or Sexual Exploitation Meeting (the meeting may include parents/those with parental responsibility) including police. A Risk Assessment will be undertaken when the likelihood of a child or young person going missing is identified or is missing and/or vulnerable to sexual exploitation. It enables staff and carers to be clear what the risks are for the particular child or young person and/or the risks they may pose to the public. This meeting will develop a plan and identify locations to be searched and other information about the young person to try to locate them.

Schools will be key in providing information and supporting the risk plan for a child. Clearly there is a close correlation between children missing from care or home and those also missing from education. Information sharing in these circumstances is vital. If you are concerned about a child or young person who you believe may be putting themselves at risk by going missing, please seek consent to escalate your concerns through the Targeted Youth Service (TYS). TYS manage requests for support for young people or families, or requests for safeguarding assessments if there are concerns that the young person is being neglected or abused.

Return Interviews

Once a young person is found the child/young person will be given the opportunity to talk about their experiences and any concerns they have will be taken seriously. In the first

instance the Police will conduct a 'Safe and Well Check'. Following the Police visit a return interview will be undertaken by Children's services if it meets the criteria outlined below.

A return interview will be undertaken for every Looked After child by the allocated Social worker. They will offer the child or young person the opportunity to have an Independent Return Interview with their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) or any professional the young person has a good relationship with and to whom they can speak openly. If the child or young person refuses to speak to an independent person, then the social worker or children's practitioner must complete the return interview themselves.

Those go missing from home and where the child is over 13 years old, will be undertaken by Targeted Youth Support (TYS) workers if they meet the criteria below.

Criteria for Visiting Children and Young People

- Child Looked After (for any period of time)
- Been missing for over 24 hours
- Been missing on two or more occasions (any historical instances of missing episodes should be considered)
- Engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence
- Been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case)
- Known mental health issues
- Identified risk of sexual exploitation; and /or
- Contact with persons posing risk to children

The information obtained from the return interview will be used to identify any key themes or risk factors.

Sexual Exploitation and Runaway Children Panel (SEARCH)

Professionals also need to consider whether they should refer to the SEARCH (Hertfordshire Sexual Exploitation and Runaway Children's Panel) The criteria for the panel is that a young person :

- Repeatedly runs away
- Remain missing
- Continue to present concerns to professionals
- Are identified as at risk of sexual exploitation while missing
- It will afford professionals the opportunity to:
- Share information on children whose behaviour linked to running that causes professional concerns about their safety and welfare.
- Risk assess outstanding missing children, including the possibilities of trafficking.

- Considering actions in respect of children who repeatedly go missing.

- Determine whether the children/young persons pose a risk to themselves or the community
- Improve inter-agency accountability
- Improve support to professionals working with high risk cases.
- Reduce repeat missing episodes.
- Promote and safeguard the welfare of children and young people

Governance

There is regular reporting and a vulnerable adolescents dashboard developed to monitor the numbers of children who go missing, those where there are concerns about child sexual abuse and referrals to the SEARCH panel. The Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (HSCB) monitors this through the Safeguarding Adolescents subgroup.

Co-ordinating Data and Information

There is a need to co-ordinate data about children and young people missing from education and those missing from home and care data. Work is now underway to bring this information together through a task and finish group led by the Attendance Improvement Team.

A comprehensive guide to Hertfordshire Child Protection Procedures can be found on The Grid here: http://www.thegrid.org.uk/info/welfare/child_protection/policy/hscb.shtml