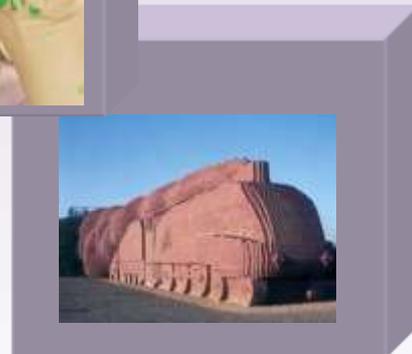


Procedure for children and young people who go missing from home, care or education



February 2017

Title	Procedure and Practice Guidance for Children who go missing from home, care or education
Version	2
Date	November 2016
Author	Missing, Exploited and Sexual Abuse Sub Group
Edited by:	Amanda Hugill

Update and Approval Process			
Version	Group/Person	Date	Comments
2	Missing and Sexually Abused Task and Finish Group	31.10.2016	Task and finish group held to review procedures and practice guidance
2.1	Jean Langthorne/Joanna Conway, DBC	6.12.16	Comments to be reviewed regards Return Interviews and Children Missing from Education
2.1	Missing and Sexually Abused Task and Finish Group	3.2.17	Full consultation, final amends approved
2.2	Missing and Sexually Abused Task and Finish Group	26.4.17	Further updates requested by Jean Langthorne in respect of return home interviews and agreed by the group
2.3	Missing and Sexually Abused Sub Group (MESA)	10.11.17	Further updates requested by DBC to improve practice guidance (para 7.13) feedback provided and agreed by the MESA group
Issue Date	Version 2.1 February 2017		
Review Date	February 2019		
Reviewing Officer			

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This procedure and practice guidance has been designed to assist practitioners who are working with children who run away or go missing from home or care. It should be read in conjunction with Department of Education statutory guidance, published in January 2014, [Statutory Guidance on children who go missing from home or care](#).
- 1.2 The procedure provides the correct steps to take when responding to a child/young person who has run away and/or gone missing from home, residential home, foster placement and/or educational establishments.
- 1.3 These procedures recognise that there are links with children and young people who go missing from either home or care and the risk to them of sexual exploitation.
- 1.4 There are no exact figures for the number of children who go missing or run away, but estimates, suggest that the figure is in the region of 100,000 per year¹. Children may run away *from* a problem, such as abuse or neglect at home, or *to* somewhere they want to be. They may have been coerced to run away by someone else. Whatever the reason, it is thought that approximately 25 per cent of children and young people that go missing are at risk of serious harm. There are particular concerns about the links between children running away and the risks of sexual exploitation. Missing children may also be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, to violent crime, gang exploitation, or to drug and alcohol misuse.

Safeguarding is everybody's responsibility and if you suspect a child is MISSING, you must report it.

2. Definition

Since April 2013 police forces have been rolling out new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' in relation to children and adults reported as missing to the police. These are:

- **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 not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk'*

The police classification of a person 'missing' or 'absent' will be based on ongoing risk assessment. Note that 'absent' within this definition would not include those defined as "away from placement without authorisation": a child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either 'missing' or 'absent' under the police definition.

¹ The Children's Society – [Still Running 3: Findings from third national survey of young runaways](#) (2011)

3. What to do if you have concerns

3.1 In order to identify who is at risk of going missing, you should consider the following RISK INDICATORS;

- Family and peer relationships
- Accommodation
- Educational issues
- Mental and Physical Health
- Experience of Violence
- Risk of Sexual Exploitation
- Contact with abusive adults and / or risky environments
- Substance misuse
- Coercion / control
- Sexualised Risk Taking
- Risk to others
- Lack of engagement with services
- Involvement with crime
- Honour Based Violence
- Forced Marriage
- Radicalisation
- Child Protection Concern
- Looked After

3.2 You should make every effort to locate the young person and provide the details of the actions you have taken if you then subsequently report the young person missing to the police.

Such steps would include:

- Physical checks of the person's residence or where they are meant to be, including any location the person may be hiding within the house / building;
- Physical checks of any garden, garage, sheds, grounds and surrounding area(s);
- Attempting to contact the missing person directly, via mobile phone, text, or social networking sites (i.e. Twitter / Facebook etc);
- Contacting the missing individual's family and friends.

If not successful in locating the young person **you must contact** the police for further advice and actions required, this contact must also include details of any other child and/or young person who may be involved (whether perpetrators/victims) and/or may also be at risk:

Contact the Police on telephone: 101

If a child is at immediate risk contact 999.

- 3.3 The police will expect detailed information when reporting a child missing; highlighting the risk indicators (as identified in 3.1 above) that cause you concern will assist the police in identifying the correct level of response.

If information is available to suggest a possible location of the missing person, and this gives rise to immediate concerns about the safety of the young person, the police response will be to immediately address those concerns.

3.4 Risk classifications employed by the Police in Missing person investigations:

High

- The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the child or young person is in danger through their own vulnerability;
- or may have been the victim of a serious crime, or
- The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public are in danger.

Medium

- The risk posed is likely to place the child or young person in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others.

Low

- There is no apparent threat of danger to the missing person or the public.

Note: children regarded as missing should not be deemed as low risk.

3.5 Multi-agency approach for missing children

A multi-agency meeting is held on a monthly basis and Chaired by a Safeguarding Lead from Durham Constabulary. The main purpose of the group is to prevent, disrupt and deter children and young people from being sexually exploited and who go missing from home or care.

It is the Social Workers responsibility to liaise with the DSCB Administrator (e-mail: safeguardingboards@darlington.gov.uk) for any cases to be included on the Missing and Exploited Group (MEG) agenda. The MEG will have management oversight of all CSE/Missing cases, with the aim to disrupt perpetrators, target locations and protect children and young people at risk.

All agencies are responsible for the implementation of the safeguarding plans and disruption plans and the appropriate dissemination of these to their organisations.

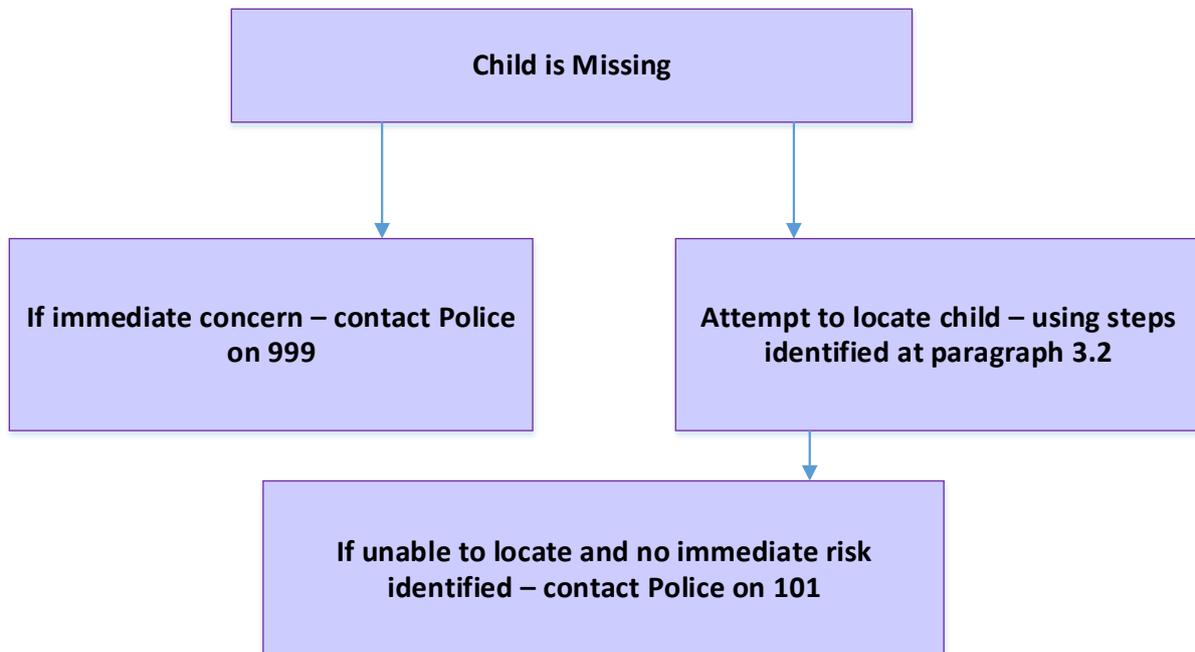
The intelligence gathered at these meetings is shared with the Missing, Exploited and Sexual Abuse Sub Group (MESA) to inform the CSE and Missing strategies and to improve the long term outcomes for children and young people in Darlington.

3.6 Professional Challenge

Should at any time you feel unhappy about any decisions that have been made in relation to a young person which you feel may not effectively ensure the safety or well-being of a child or young person, then you should refer to the [professional challenge procedure](#).

Note: At no time must professional disagreement detract from ensuring that the child or young person is safeguarded.

3.7 Process Map



4. Practice Guidance

- 4.1 The above procedure identifies how practitioners should deal with children and young people who run away or go missing from home, care or education. The Practice Guidance supports this and is designed to assist practitioners in understanding and knowing what to do if they encounter a child or young person who is missing from home, care or education.
- 4.2 The terms child, children or young person refers to any person under the age of 18 years.
- 4.3 These procedures relate to:
- All children and young people living with their families within the boundaries of Darlington.
 - Children Looked After by Darlington Borough Council and placed in Darlington Borough Council Children's homes, independent homes or foster homes, within the Darlington Borough Council area.
 - Children looked after by other local authorities but placed in the Darlington area in independent children's home or with agency foster carers, where compliance with the protocol is specified in the contract or placement agreement.
 - Children looked after by Darlington Borough Council who remain in the parental home but who are currently subject to a care order and are subject to Placement with Parents Regulations.
 - Children subject to a child protection plan residing within and outside of Darlington Borough Council area.
 - Any Darlington Looked After Child entitled to leaving care services residing within and outside Darlington Borough Council area under The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (including those aged over 18).
- 4.4 Within this context "Children Looked After" refers to children accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to Care Orders including Interim Care Orders, Section 31 and 38 Children Act 1989, children subject to Police Protection or Emergency Protection Order (Section 46 of the Children's Act 1989), and children who are otherwise provided with accommodation by Section 21 Children Act 1989. These include Police and Criminal Evidence transfers, children on remand and children subject to a supervision order with a residence requirement.
- 4.5 Children who go missing from home or care may place themselves and others at risk. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and their experiences of care. Every "missing" episode should attract considered attention to ensure a consistent and coherent response to both the initial report and return of the missing person.
- 4.6 If the young person is looked after by a Local Authority, as a corporate parent the Local Authority has a duty of care for the safety and wellbeing of that young person and is expected to take such action that reasonable parents would take to safeguard their children.

4.7 Reasons why children go missing

The Children's Society through its research has identified the following risk factors that can precede a missing incident in a young person, otherwise known as 'push' factors:

- Arguments and conflicts at home including being told/forced to leave
- Poor family relationships including specific step-parent issues
- Physical and emotional abuse including Domestic Abuse
- Personal wellbeing – feeling depressed, needing someone to talk to
- Problems with alcohol and/or drugs
- Problems at school
- Placement instability for looked after children, and children who are placed at some distance from their family and friends.

Significant 'Pull' factors are:

- Children running to be with family, particularly if contact arrangements are problematic
- Grooming for potential sexual exploitation – children will run away or go missing following grooming by adults or other children wishing to exploit them
- Pressure from their peer group, a gang or radicalisation group

4.8 The following are examples of immediate risks associated with going missing:

- Suspicion of Murder
- Suspicion of abduction
- Suspected suicide or self-harm
- Out of Character e.g. unusual behaviour prior to disappearance, disappeared with no prior indication etc.
- Severe weather conditions
- Ongoing victim of bullying or harassment, e.g. facial, sexual, homophobic etc. or local community concerns
- Previously disappeared and suffered or was exposed to harm whilst missing
- The person is normally resident in the UK and is believed to have travelled abroad
- The person is normally resident abroad and is believed to have gone missing whilst in the UK
- Risk of sexual exploitation

4.9 Children who go missing in specific circumstances:

- **Children who are abducted** - Where a child has been abducted or forcibly removed from their place of residence, this is a 'crime in action' and should be reported to the Police immediately.
- **Forced Marriage and Honour Based Violence** - Some children run away because they are at risk of abuse. The prospect of a forced marriage in particular can lead to young women running away from home. Further guidance and information can be found at [Foreign and Commonwealth Office website](#). See also DSCB [Forced Marriage and Honour Based Violence Practice Guidance](#)
- **Trafficked Children** - Department of Education guidance: '[Safeguarding children Who May Have Been Trafficked](#)' contains practical guidance for agencies.
- **Grooming for Potential Sexual Exploitation** - In some cases children may run away or go missing following grooming by adults, (including online grooming), who will seek to

exploit them sexually. Evidence suggests that 90 per cent of children subjected to sexual grooming go missing at some point. See DSCB [Sexual Exploitation Procedure and Practice Guidance](#)

- **Impact of Technology** - The role of fixed and mobile technologies (including the internet, mobile / smartphones and games consoles) in facilitating the grooming process is well documented. Some adults who seek to abuse children exploit these technologies by using text messages, e-mail, chat rooms, Instant Messenger and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) to set up actual 'off line' abusive situations. These situations often involve children going missing. In addition, online bullying is often experienced very differently from traditional forms of bullying as the opportunity to target individuals wherever they are and at any time has greatly increased due to developments in online technologies.

5. Police Safe and Well Checks

- 5.1 Once a missing child has been located, the police will carry out a Police Safe and Well check. The purpose of the check is to assess their immediate welfare, whether the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give them the opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them. Any criminality or offences disclosed will be investigated by the police appropriately. This Safe and Well check is NOT a formal return interview which is the responsibility of The Local Authority (See section 7).
- 5.2 **Sharing Return Information** – the officer responsible for the safe and well check will ensure finalisation of the missing person record even when the check may have been conducted on behalf of the Police by a suitable individual identified by a return interview strategy. The record will provide details of where/when the child was found, information surrounding the reason for absence and other general circumstances behind the missing episode. The reporting officer will also identify any risks to the child during their absence, such as the potential for the child to have been a victim or perpetrator of a crime, as well as the risk of being sexually exploited, or, of being in contact with anyone who poses a risk to children. The level of detail in the record will take cognisance of the criteria for undertaking a return interview.
- 5.3 The completed record will subsequently be examined by the dedicated Detective Sergeant for the Central Referral Unit in Durham Constabulary who will consider the referral against all information retained on police systems for that child. Following this examination, the Detective Sergeant will assess whether the threshold of "significant harm" has been met and, if this was the case, existing [DSCB Child Protection Procedures](#) will be followed. Given the links between missing children and sexual exploitation, the assessment of the Detective Sergeant will also consider whether the risk indicators of sexual exploitation are evident and follow existing DSCB child protection procedures.
- 5.4 Where the missing child is placed in Darlington, but is the responsibility of a Local Authority outside of Darlington the Childrens Access point (CAP) will ensure that the information is passed to a relevant person in that authority by the most appropriate communication channel and make a request that a return interview is actioned by that authority.
- 5.5 **Cancellation of the Missing Person on Police system** – once the missing child has been seen by the police, they will be cancelled by the Police as a missing person.

6. Return of the Missing person

- 6.1 For looked after children, it is the responsibility of the Local Authority to arrange for the young person's return.
- 6.2 However, there will be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the young person, the police may agree to requests from the relevant Local Authority to assist. The police should not unreasonably withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport for vulnerable children.
- 6.3 It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to contact the police and to confirm that the missing child has returned. The police will undertake a Safe and Well check for all children who have returned (including those in care). Once the child has been physically seen by the police, this will lead to the police closing the missing person investigation. This Safe and Well check is not a formal return interview which is the responsibility of the Local Authority.
- 6.4 It is apparent, upon the return of a young person, 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 have 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.
- 6.5 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 young person, or of the location of any crucial evidence (e.g. a used condom) they must notify the police without delay. This will enable the police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.
- 6.6 In cases where there are concerns regarding sexual assault, the police have access to specially trained officers, doctors and facilities designed to care for the victim and obtain evidence.
- 6.7 Where the circumstances of the missing person episode indicate that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, the Darlington Safeguarding Children Board child protection procedures should be implemented. These can be accessed on the [DSCB website](#) .
- 6.8 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 meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.
- 6.9 When a young person returns to the placement it is the responsibility of the carers to notify any person of the return under informing others.

7. Return Interviews

- 7.1 The '**Return Interview**' is the term applied to the actioning of a safety, needs and risk assessment of the child, in accordance with the Department of Education Statutory Guidance on [Children who run away and go missing from home or care](#) 2014.
- 7.2 The return interview is important in safeguarding the child for the future. The interview is an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they have been exposed to whilst missing or from risk factors in their home.
- 7.3 A return interview record should be used for this purpose. This record is used to identify the follow up action taken following the interview, such as assessments required or the support required from other agencies. The follow up action should be recorded in the child's case notes and will inform future assessment for the child.
- 7.4 The Department of Education statutory guidance indicates that a child should be offered the opportunity for the interview to be undertaken by an independent person. The practice in Darlington is that the return interview is conducted by an independent organisation (commissioned by Darlington Borough Council).
- 7.5 It is acknowledged that a returning child may well share aspects of their experience with different people. Children and young people go missing for a variety of reasons, but whatever the reason, a missing episode is often a sign that something is wrong in the child or young person's life. It is the responsibility of all agencies, to attend to issues of immediate safety, future support and safeguarding needs, and information-sharing in a way which respects and safeguards children and young people. The safety plans should be shared at the Missing and Exploited Sub Group (MEG).
- 7.6 Parents and carers should be offered the opportunity to engage with the Missing from Home Co-ordinator to provide any relevant information and intelligence of which they may be aware.
- 7.7 The purpose of the interview is to:
- 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.
 - Understand and try to address the reasons why the child has been missing.
 - 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 including helpline numbers if they choose to run away again.
- 7.8 **Criteria for undertaking a return interview**
The Local Authority is responsible for deciding whether a return interview is conducted. The practice in Darlington is that a return interview will be completed for every absent and missing episode which has been reported to the Police. The return interview should be carried out **within 72 hours** of the child returning to their home or care setting (as outlined in DfE Statutory Guidance).

For all missing episodes the CAP will receive a notification from the police (sleuth) and/or EDT that a child has been reported missing from home or care or the child has been found and returned home or to placement. The CAP will forward these to the Missing from Home

Coordinator, Service Manager (CAP and Children First Response Team (CFRT)), Director of Children and Adults Services and the case holders' local authority first response team. The Missing from Home Coordinator will update the missing and found dates on Liquid Logic.

7.9 **Return Interviews for a young person looked after or known to social care**

The missing from Home Coordinator will complete the missing interview with the young person (within 72 hours of the found date) and when completed will allocate to the case-holding Social Worker. The missing from Home coordinator will forward a copy of the missing from home report to the ERASE team within Durham Constabulary.

The case holding social worker will complete the missing from home action plan (within 6 working days of the found date) using the information in the return home interview to implement a plan to safeguard the young person and reduce the missing episodes. The missing action plan must be authorised by a Team Manager.

If the child is missing 3 or more times in a 90 day period the case holding social worker is required to hold a planning meeting/safety meeting/strategy to explore the concerns and share information to put additional interventions in place to ensure the safety of the young person and reduce missing episodes. They should invite a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) from the ERASE team to the meeting to support the plan.

Children who have frequent missing episodes will be discussed at the MEG to explore the issues and determine if additional support is required. The case holding social worker is responsible for ensuring the case is added to the MEG agenda.

If a Darlington LAC is placed outside of the Durham Constabulary boundary then the Missing from Home Coordinator will arrange for an independent person to complete the missing from home interview, record the details on the LCS recording form and then forward to the case holding Social worker who should then complete the Action Plan.

If a child has frequent missing episodes and Darlington have placed them in another local authority the case holding social worker, if required, should make arrangements to attend that authority's equivalent of the MEG.

7.10 **Return interviews for a young person open to an Early Help Practitioner**

The missing from Home Coordinator will complete the missing interview with the young person (within 72 hours of the found date) and when completed will allocate to the Early Help Practitioner.

The missing from Home coordinator will forward a copy of the missing from home report to the ERASE team within Durham Constabulary.

The Early Help Practitioner will complete the missing from Home Action Plan (within 6 working days of the found date) using the information in the return home interview to implement a plan to safeguard the young person and reduce the missing episodes. The missing action plan must be authorised by a Team Manager.

If the child is missing 3 or more times in a 90 day period the Early Help Practitioner should advise the CAP who will then allocate to the CFRT who will make a decision as to whether a Child and Family Assessment or a strategy discussion/section 47 is required. The CFRT will explore the concerns, share information and request additional interventions are put in place to ensure the safety of the young person and reduce missing episodes. They should invite a PCSO from the ERASE team to the meeting to support the plan.

Children who have frequent missing episodes should be referred for discussion at the MEG to explore the issues and determine if additional support is required. The Early Help Practitioner is responsible for ensuring the case is added to the MEG agenda.

7.11 **Return interviews for a young person who is not an open case**

The missing from Home Coordinator will complete the missing interview with the young person (within 72 hours of the found date) and when completed will then complete the Action plan (within 6 working days of the found date) using the information in the return home interview to implement a plan to safeguard the young person and reduce the missing episodes.

If the missing from home coordinator has any concerns or the young person has multiple missing episodes they should refer to the CAP to request information and advice or a request for additional services.

The missing from Home coordinator will forward a copy of the missing from home report to the ERASE team, within Durham Constabulary.

Children who have frequent missing episodes will be discussed at the MEG to explore the issues and determine if additional support can be put in place.

7.12 **Missing persons and out of area placements**

These procedures recognise that children and young people, placed in Darlington from other Local Authorities, also feature frequently in both the report of absences and missing episodes. The 'placing' Local Authorities must recognise their responsibility to ensure the effective management of any placements.

All Local Authorities **are required to formally notify** Darlington Borough Council of any looked after child placed in Darlington, in accordance with the Arrangements for Placement of Children Regulations 1991. Details of the placement plan, including a risk assessment, should be shared with Darlington Borough Council at the time of placement. In those cases where a child has a history of being absent from any placement, this information should also be made available to Darlington Borough Council.

It is the responsibility of the placing authority to manage and implement the care plan for any child placed within Darlington. This responsibility extends to missing person episodes, with the placing authority having responsibility for the coordination of care plan meetings to address missing person episodes. The safety plans should be shared with the Missing and Exploited Group (MEG), (Section 3.5).

Where any child or young person is located in Darlington, following a placement by another Local Authority and is reported missing on repeated occasions, this child will be subject to referral and discussion at the Missing and Exploited Group (MEG) (see section 3.5).

The missing from Home Coordinator should update the record on liquid Logic.

For children with multiple missing episodes the Service Manager (CAP and CFRT) will consult with the placing authority to request that a plan is put in place to keep the young person safe and will ensure the case is discussed at MEG. If necessary, Darlington will host and chair a strategy meeting.

7.13 Local Authority Escalation Process for prolonged periods of missing

If the child/young person remains missing for a prolonged period of time, senior managers must be informed as follows:

- For any absence over 24 hours inform a Children's Services Head of Service.
- For absences over 3 hours for children under the age of 10, inform a Children's Services, Head of Service.
- For any absence of 3 days or more inform the Assistant Director of Children's Services who will then make the decision as to whether a missing children's alert should be initiated.

There may be individual circumstances where the risk is so high that the Director of Children and Adult Services should be notified immediately. All missing children will be assessed following the multi-agency approach as identified in section 3 of this document.

8. Children Missing from Education

8.1 All children, regardless of their circumstances, are entitled to a full time education, which is suitable to their age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have. Local authorities have a duty to establish, as far as it is possible to do so, the identity of children of compulsory school age who are missing education in their area. Effective information sharing between parents, schools, colleges and local authorities is critical to ensuring that all children are safe and receiving suitable education.

8.2 Definition: "Children missing from education" refers to all children of compulsory school age:

- Who are not registered pupils at a school, and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school or
- Who have been out of any educational provision for a substantial period of time? (Usually agreed as ten days without provision of reasonable explanation).

8.3 A child going missing from education is a potential indicator of abuse or neglect and such children are at risk of being victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation. All schools must inform the local authority of any pupil who fails to attend school regularly, or has been absent without the school's permission for a continuous period of 10 school days or more. Schools must also inform the local authority if they remove a child's name from the school roll.

8.4 Schools will carry out reasonable enquires to attempt to make contact with the family, this can include: home visits, telephone calls and letters. If this fails the school must refer the case to the Children's Access Point (CAP) and the Children Missing from Education Officer following the local authorities Children Missing from Education (CME) procedure. The CAP, Early Help Team and the CME Officer will then complete reasonable enquires to establish the whereabouts of the child. Checks will be undertaken and all attempts will be made to trace the child via extended family, housing or other agencies. Safeguarding checks will be undertaken and an assessment to establish if the child should be referred to MEG. If the child is not located after 20 school days (of unauthorised absence) from last day of attendance, the child can be removed from the school register, school should inform the Local Authority Admissions Team and the child will be recorded as Missing from Education (CME). An out of authority child trace will be initiated via School 2 School (S2S) messaging, if the child is found in another Local Authority contact will be made with the receiving authority to discuss the case.

- 8.5 Schools and colleges should put in place appropriate safeguarding policies, procedures and responses for children who go missing from education, particularly on repeat occasions. It is essential that all staff are alert to signs to look out for and the individual triggers to be aware of when considering the risks of potential safeguarding concerns such as travelling to conflict zones, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

[Statutory Guidance - Keeping Children Safe in Education \(September 2016\)](#), provides further details for schools.

9. Research, evidence based practice and resources

There are many additional resources and websites available to obtain further information on children and young people who go missing from home, care or education.

HM Government - [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care \(September 2014\)](#)

Department for Education – [Keeping Children Safe in Education, statutory guidance for schools and colleges](#) (September 2016)

Barnardo's <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>

Barnardo's purpose as a charity today is to transform the lives of the UK's most vulnerable children and provide a wide range of information on their website aimed at parents, children and professionals

Childline <https://www.childline.org.uk/>

Childline helps anyone under 19 years in the UK with any issue they're going through.

NSPCC <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

The NSPCC Child Trafficking Advice Centre provides specialist advice and information to professionals who have concerns that a child may have been trafficked. Phone 0808 800 5000 Monday to Friday 9.30 to 7.30 pm; email help@nspcc.org.uk; or web http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/ctail/ctail_wda84866.html

Children's Society <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk>

A charity working to support vulnerable children.

Catch 22 <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/>

Missing from home and care services identify reasons for young people running away, provide support and prevent or stop child sexual exploitation.