



Department
for Education

Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care

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Introduction

1. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is a key duty on local authorities and requires effective joint working between agencies and professionals. When a child goes missing or runs away they are at risk. Safeguarding children therefore includes protecting them from this risk. Local authorities are responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care¹.

2. 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 year². 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 harm³. 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.

3. Looked after children missing from their placements are particularly vulnerable. In 2012, two reports highlighted that many of these children were not being effectively safeguarded: the Joint All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Inquiry on Children Who Go Missing from Care and the accelerated report of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's on-going inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. Key issues identified suggested that:

- children in residential care are at particular risk of going missing and vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation; and
- Local Safeguarding Children Boards have an important role to play in monitoring and interrogating data on children who go missing.

4. The Ofsted report 'Missing Children' published in February 2013 on local authorities' work in relation to children missing from home and care highlighted a number of concerns. These were that:

- risk management plans for individual looked after children were often not developed or acted on;

¹ It is important that any looked after child should consider their placement as their home. This document uses the terms "missing from care" and "away from placement" to make clear the additional responsibilities of local authorities towards looked after children. When such a child goes missing, however, they should be considered as having gone missing from their home.

² The Children's Society: [Still Running 3: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways \(2011\)](#)

³ *ibid*

- placement instability was a key feature of looked after children who ran away;
- reports about looked after children missing from their care placement were not routinely provided to senior managers in local authorities; and
- there was little evidence that safe and well checks or return interviews were taking place.

5. Although looked after children are particularly vulnerable when they go missing, the majority of children who go missing are not looked after, and go missing from their family home. They can face the same risks as a child missing from local authority care. The same measures are often required to protect both groups of children. The first part of this guidance therefore refers to protecting all children from the risks associated with going missing, whether from home or from care. A separate section sets out the additional steps to be taken in regard to children missing from care.

6. This guidance sets out the steps local authorities and their partners should take to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do go missing. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of best practice, research or evidence regarding missing children. This guidance replaces the statutory guidance issued in 2009, in line with changes in evidence, policy and the statutory framework covering looked after children.

Status of this guidance

7. This guidance is issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which requires local authorities in exercising their social services functions to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. Local authorities must comply with this guidance when exercising these functions, unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons that justify a variation.

8. It also complements:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children and related statutory guidance (2013);
- the Missing Children and Adults Strategy (2011);
- Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (2009);
- the Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation Action Plan (2011); and
- the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volumes on care planning and review.

Who is this guidance for?

9. The guidance is addressed to Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members for Children's Services. It will be of interest to Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCB) Chairs, senior managers within organisations providing services for children and families (including police, health, schools and the voluntary sector), as well as social care professionals, health and education practitioners and those who care for looked after children. Police forces should read this document in conjunction with Authorised Professional Practice guidance on Missing Persons.

Definitions used in this guidance

10. The terms below are used throughout this document with the following definitions:

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

Police definitions

11. 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.

12. The police classification of a person as 'missing' or 'absent' will be based on on-going risk assessment. Note that 'absent' within this definition would not include those defined as "away from placement without authorisation" above: a child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either 'missing' or 'absent' under the police definitions. Guidance on how police forces will apply these definitions to children was issued by ACPO in April 2013. Paragraph 19 below explains how local protocols for safeguarding young runaways or children missing from home or care should reflect these definitions.

Roles and responsibilities

Local authority

13. Section 13 of the Children Act 2004 requires local authorities and other named statutory partners⁴ to make arrangements to ensure that their functions are discharged with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. This includes planning to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do. Through their inspections of local authority children's services, Ofsted will include an assessment of measures with regard to missing children as part of their key judgement on the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection.

14. Local authorities should name a senior children's service manager as responsible for monitoring policies and performance relating to children who go missing from home or care. The responsible manager should look beyond this guidance to understand the risks and issues facing children missing from home or care and to review best practice in dealing with the issue. Some further resources are listed at Annex B of this guidance.

Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)

15. In fulfilling their statutory roles, LSCBs should give due consideration to the safeguarding risks and issues associated with children missing from home or care. To do this, they will need to see that partners from children's social care, police, health, education and other services work effectively together to prevent children from going missing and to act when they do go missing. They should ensure that the local Runaway and Missing From Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol (see paragraph 19) is adequate and up to date. They should receive and scrutinise regular reports from the local authority analysing data on children missing from home and from care. As part of this, they should review analysis of return interviews. They should also review regular reports from children's homes used by the local authority or within the local authority area on the effectiveness of their measures to prevent children from going missing.

Multi agency working

16. The local authority and police should work together to risk assess cases of children missing from home or care and to analyse data for patterns that indicate particular concerns and risks. As part of their framework to safeguard children, individual local authorities and police forces should have an agreed RMFHC protocol.

⁴ [The Children Act 2004: Section 13](#)

17. Local authorities should also consider those children who have not been reported missing to the police, but have come to an agency's attention from accessing other services. There may also be trafficked children who may not have previously come to the attention of children's services or the police. For example, the Office of the Children's Commissioner's report (see Paragraph 3) highlights that children from black and minority ethnic groups, and children that go missing from education, are less likely to be reported as missing. Local authorities and the police should be pro-active in places where they believe under reporting may be more likely because of the relationships some communities, or individuals, have with the statutory services.

Voluntary sector

18. Those working in the voluntary sector, as well as youth workers working in both statutory and voluntary services, are experienced in building trusted relationships with children. Their projects can often provide a range of additional services, such as family mediation and specialist support to parents. They can also help play a part in engaging with children to develop a support package to meet their needs if they are at risk of running away.

Jobcentre Plus

19. In some circumstances, 16 and 17 year olds will be eligible to claim a Social Security benefit. Although the numbers of 16 and 17 year olds that are currently in receipt of benefit are low, most Jobcentre Plus (JCP) offices will come into contact with 16 and 17 year olds, some of who may be at risk of running away or who are already missing from their families or from care. JCP under 18 advisers are required to create and maintain close working links with local authority personal advisers, identifying and forwarding information required by local authorities.

Runaway and Missing From Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol

20. Local authorities should agree with local police and other partners a protocol for dealing with children who run away or go missing in their area. Where appropriate, they should also have agreed protocols with neighbouring authorities or administrations. The protocols should be agreed and reviewed regularly with all agencies and be scrutinised by the LSCB. Police force operational areas often cover more than a single local authority area. RMFHC protocols should therefore be agreed by agencies on a regional or sub-regional basis to ensure a consistent approach. The key elements that should be described in the protocol are detailed in the box below.

Responding to missing children

- details of the lead person in local authority, police and other agencies responsible for children missing from home or care
- an agreed inter-agency framework for assessing and classifying the degree of risk when a child goes missing from home or care or when a missing child comes to agency notice
- guidance on what responses different agencies will offer in relation to each degree of risk
- an agreed list of measures to ensure that police 'missing' and 'absent' definitions are applied to children with due consideration given to their age, vulnerability and developmental factors
- details of what assessments will be carried out following missing and absent episodes, particularly assessments under S17 and S47 of the Children Act 1989 and how this information should be shared
- responses for groups facing specific risks of going missing, such as children with learning difficulties who may have little understanding of their actions or the risks to them, or to previously trafficked children who may be at risk of returning to exploitation
- which agencies will support the family while the child is missing and after they return
- details of how safe and well checks are conducted
- arrangements for independent return interviews, agencies which can provide them and how they will be offered to young runaways

Additional arrangements relating to looked after children

- the actions residential or foster carers should take to locate the child before they are reported as missing (such as trying to contact the child by phone or contacting known friends)
- appropriate responses to children going missing or away from placement without authorisation, including an assessment of risk, the actions and arrangements for making reports to the police when looked after children go missing
- agreed local authority reporting and recording systems on children missing and away from placement without authorisation, including children placed in other local authority areas
- details of any agencies providing independent advocacy services to looked after children
- arrangements to monitor outcomes and analyse patterns including of children placed in the area by other local authorities

Intelligence and prevention

- arrangements for information sharing between the local authority, the police and other agencies
- arrangements for information sharing between different local authorities when a child runs away to another area
- details of data to be analysed on a regular basis, arrangements and frequency for data monitoring by LSCB and partners
- agreed safeguards for runaways and missing children to identify those at risk of significant harm, particularly looking at the length of the missing episode, frequency of running away, risk factors, family history of the child
- details of preventative approaches to avoid further instances of running away, including the provision of alternative accommodation when appropriate
- details of work with children, including both those in care and those not in care, so that they understand the risks associated with running away and the support that is available to them

When a child goes missing

21. The response set out in the RMFCH protocol should be put into action as soon as a child is reported as missing.

Access to support

22. When a child has run away or is missing from home they should be able to easily access support services, such as help lines or emergency accommodation. Support should also be made available to families to help them understand why the child has run away and how they can support them on their return.

Risk assessment

23. The police will prioritise all incidents of children categorised as 'missing' from home or care as medium or high risk. Where a child is categorised as 'absent', the details will be recorded by the police, who will also agree review times and any on-going actions with child's family, carer or responsible local authority.

24. A missing child incident would be prioritised as '*high risk*' where:

- the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the child is in danger through their own vulnerability; or
- the child 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 is in danger.

25. The high risk category requires the immediate deployment of police resources. Police guidance makes clear that a member of the senior management team or similar command level must be involved in the examination of initial enquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of an Investigating Officer and possibly a Senior Investigating Officer and a Police Search Advisor (PoISA). There should be a media strategy and / or close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be put in place. The UK Missing Persons Bureau should be notified of the case immediately. CEOP and local authority children's services should also be notified.

26. A missing child incident would be prioritised as '*medium risk*' where the risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others. This category requires an active and measured response by police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting. This will involve a proactive investigation and search in accordance with the circumstances to locate the missing child as soon as possible.

27. Where a child is categorised as 'absent' within the police definition, the details will be recorded by the police. Review timings and any on-going actions will be agreed as set out in the RMFCH protocol. The case will remain the subject of constant review, particularly in the light of new information and changes in circumstances.

When a child is found

28. The attitude of professionals, such as police officers and social workers, towards a child who has been missing can have a big impact on how they will engage with subsequent investigations and protection planning. However “streetwise” they may appear, they are children and may be extremely vulnerable to multiple risks. A supportive approach, actively listening and responding to a child’s needs, will have a greater chance of preventing the child from going missing again and safeguarding them against other risks.

Safe and well checks

29. Safe and well checks are carried out by the police as soon as possible after a child reported as missing has been found. Their 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. Further guidance is available in the ACPO guidance on Missing People.⁵

30. Where a child goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable for the police to see them every time they return. In these cases a reasonable decision should be taken in agreement between the police and the child’s parent or carer, or their social worker, with regard to the frequency of such checks bearing in mind the established link between frequent missing episodes and serious harm, which could include gang involvement, forced marriage, bullying or sexual exploitation. The reason for a decision not to conduct a safe and well check should be reported on the case file.

Independent return interviews

31. When a child is found, they must be offered an independent return interview. Independent return interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home.

32. The interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting. This should be an in-depth interview and is normally best carried out by an independent person (ie, someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. Children sometimes need to build up trust with a person before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they ran away.

⁵ Association of Chief Police Officers and National Policing Improvement Agency: [Guidance on The Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons, Second Edition \(2010\)](#)

33. The interview and actions that follow from it should:

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

34. The interview should be held in a neutral place where the child feels safe. The interview provides an opportunity hear from the child about why they went missing and to understand the risks and issues faced by the child while missing. This could include exploring issues where a child:

- has been reported missing on two or more occasions;
- is frequently away from placement (or their home) without authorisation;
- has been hurt or harmed while they have been missing;
- is at known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking;
- is at known or suspected risk of involvement in criminal activity or drugs;
- has contact with people posing risk to children; and/or
- has been engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities while missing.

35. The assessment of whether a child might run away again should be based on information about:

- their individual circumstances, including family circumstances;
- their motivation for running away;
- their potential destinations and associates;
- their recent pattern of absences;
- the circumstances in which the child was found or returned; and
- their individual characteristics and risk factors such as whether a child has learning difficulties, mental health issues, depression and other vulnerabilities.

36. Following the safe and well check and independent return interview, local authority children’s services, police and voluntary services should work together:

- to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing;

- to understand what happened while they were missing;
- to understand who they were with when they were missing and where they were found; and
- what support they require upon returning to home or their care placement in accordance with the 'Working Together' guidance.

37. Safe and well checks and independent return interviews provide an opportunity to inform case planning, for wider strategic planning and for professionals to take into account children's views. The outcomes of the checks and interviews should therefore be recorded on case files so that they can be shared with professionals.

38. Where children refuse to engage with the independent interviewer, parents and carers should be offered the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence of which they may be aware. This should help to prevent further instances of the child running away and identify early the support needed for them.

39. When children missing from home are located but have not been reported missing to the police by their families, parents and carers should be encouraged to report any future episodes of running away. This may require particular work in some communities, for example those with high levels of gang crime. Local authorities should pro-actively consider investigating further to identify early any safeguarding concerns, or whether the child and their family need further support.

Emergency accommodation

40. It is important that emergency accommodation can be accessed directly at any time of the day or night. Bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation is not considered suitable for any child under the age of 18 even on an emergency accommodation basis.

41. The police have powers to take immediate action to protect a child⁶. Should it be necessary to take the child into police protection, the child must be moved as soon as possible into local authority accommodation. The local authority should consider what type of accommodation is appropriate in each individual case. It is important that children are not placed in accommodation that leaves them vulnerable to exploitation or trafficking.

16 and 17 year olds

42. When a 16 or 17 year old runs away or goes missing they are no less vulnerable than younger children and are equally at risk, particularly of sexual exploitation or involvement with gangs. A 16 or 17 year old who has run away may present as

⁶ [The Children Act 1989, Part V - Protection of Children, Section 46](#)

homeless. In this case, local authority children's services must assess their needs as for any other child. Where this assessment indicates that the child is a child in need and requires accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, they will become looked after.

43. The accommodation provided must be suitable, risk assessed and meet the full range of a child's needs. Sustainability of the placement must be considered. Children who have run away and are at risk of homelessness may be placed in supported accommodation. For example, the accommodation may include provision of specialist support for those who have been sexually exploited.

44. Local authorities should have regard to statutory guidance issued in April 2010⁷ to children's services authorities and local housing authorities about their duties under Part 3 of the Children Act 1989 and Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 to secure or provide accommodation for homeless 16 and 17 year olds.

Children who repeatedly run away and go missing

45. Repeatedly going missing should not be viewed as a normal pattern of behaviour. For example, repeat episodes of a child going missing can indicate sexual exploitation. In addition to strategies and issues already highlighted, the following should also be considered when dealing with this specific group.

46. If a child has run away two or more times, local authorities should ensure a discussion is held, either with the child, their family or both, to offer further support and guidance. Actions following earlier incidents should be reviewed and alternative strategies considered. Access to and timeliness of independent return interviews should also be reviewed.

47. There may be local organisations in the area that can provide repeat runaways with an opportunity to talk about their reasons for running away, and can link runaways and their families with longer-term help if appropriate. They may also be able to provide support to children while they are away from home or care. Local authorities should work with organisations that provide these services in their area.

Collecting, sharing and analysing data on children who go missing

48. Early and effective sharing of information between professionals and local agencies is essential for the identification of patterns of behaviour. Relevant data may include

⁷ Department for Education: [*Provision of Accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people who may be homeless and/or require accommodation \(2010\)*](#)

times and duration of missing episodes, information from return interviews, absence data from schools, etc. This may be analysed to identify areas of concern for an individual child, or to identify 'hotspots' of activity in a local area. This will help authorities to identify risks in their area, such as exploitation, gangs or crime related activity that might not be apparent. It will also help identify trends, for example, whether children are going missing from a particular children's home or other patterns across the local authority.

49. Data and analysis of children who go missing both from home and from care should be included in regular reports to council members, especially to the lead member for children's services and in reports by the local authority to the LSCB.

Additional actions to protect looked after children

50. Looked after children are particularly vulnerable. Though the number of looked after children going missing is a small percentage of the overall number of children that go missing, it is disproportionately high compared with the children's population as a whole. Further responsibilities on local authorities for looked after children who go missing are detailed below.

Looked after children who are away from placement without authorisation

51. Sometimes a looked after child may be away from their placement without authorisation. While they are not missing, they may still be placing themselves at risk because of where they are. For example, they may choose to stay at the house of friends where the carer has concerns about risks of sexual exploitation. The police will not consider this child as missing or absent, but the RMFHC protocol should describe the appropriate course of action to protect the child and seek their return.

Reducing the risk of looked after children running away

52. Local authorities have a duty to place a looked after child in the most appropriate placement available, subject to their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. Placing the child in an appropriate placement should help to minimise the risk of the child running away. The care plan should include details of the arrangements that will need to be in place to keep the child safe and minimise the risk of the child going missing from their placement.

53. Any decision to place a child at distance should be based on an assessment of the child's needs including their need to be effectively safeguarded. Evidence suggests that distance from home, family and friends is a key factor for looked after children running away.

54. Listening to a child is an important factor in protecting and minimising the chances of a child running away. The Children's Rights Director (2012) reported that "*one of the major influences of them running away is having a sense that they are not being listened to and taken seriously*", particularly about placement decisions and moves. All looked after children should be informed about their right to be supported by an independent advocate.

Care planning and review

55. Care plans should include a detailed assessment of the child's needs, including the need for the provision of an appropriate placement that offers protection from harm. Where a child goes missing from a placement, a statutory review of their care plan can provide an opportunity to check that it addresses the reasons for an absence. The review should result in the development of a strategy to minimise a repeat of the missing episode. In particular, any issues relating to the vulnerability of the child to sexual exploitation, trafficking or criminal or gang involvement should be identified. Actions to address these needs and ensure the child is kept safe should be clearly set out in the care plan. The police and other relevant agencies should be given the opportunity to contribute to the review.

56. Where a child already has an established pattern of running away, the care plan should include a strategy to keep them safe and minimise the likelihood of the child running away in the future. This should be discussed and agreed as far as possible with the child and with the child's carers and should include detailed information about the responsibilities of all services, the child's parents and other adults involved in the family network. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) should be informed about missing and away from placement without authorisation episodes and they should address these in statutory reviews.

Out of area placements

57. When a child is placed out of their local authority area, the responsible authority must make sure that the child has access to the services they need. Notification of the placement must be made to the host authority and other specified services.

58. If children placed out of their local authority run away, the local RMFHC protocol should be followed, in addition to complying with other processes that are specified in the policy of the responsible local authority. It is possible that the child will return to the area of the responsible authority so it is essential that liaison between the police and professionals in both authorities is well managed and co-ordinated. A notification process for missing and away from placement without authorisation episodes should be agreed between responsible and host local authorities.

Children's home staff and foster carers

59. Children's home staff and foster carers should be trained and supported to offer a consistent approach to the care of children. This should include being proactive about strategies to prevent children from running away and understanding the procedures that must be followed if a child goes missing.

60. The competence and support needs of children's home staff and foster carers in responding to missing from care issues should be considered as part of their appraisal and supervision.

National Minimum Standards – looked after children

61. The National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Children's Homes and those for Fostering Services⁸ set out expectations about how providers should take account of the needs of the children who rely on their services. Standards concerned with protecting children from abuse and neglect, countering bullying, promoting leisure opportunities, privacy and confidentiality, access to advocacy, and maintenance of familial contact are likely to be relevant to creating a constructive caring environment designed to minimise the likelihood that children will run away from their placements.

62. Registered children's home providers are required to have quality assurance arrangements in place. As a minimum, this will involve an independent person visiting the home at least once a month to monitor the effectiveness of the home's arrangements for safeguarding children and for promoting their wellbeing. This visit may be unannounced. The independent person undertaking the visits will wish to be satisfied that the home has an effective approach to behaviour management. They should routinely examine missing person's reports to check the home provides stable, secure and safe care. The visit must, wherever possible, include private interviews with children and young people living at the home (and if appropriate their parents, relatives or carers). Staff employed at the home must also be interviewed privately. A written report on the conduct of the home must be prepared after the visit and sent to Ofsted, to the local authorities responsible for the care of each child in the home, to the homes provider and manager, and, on request to the authority where the home is located.

63. The Children's Home Regulations require providers to have explicit procedures in place both to prevent children going missing and to take action if they do go missing. This policy must specify the procedures to be followed and the roles and responsibilities of staff when the child is absent. For example, this may include whether there is an expectation that staff attempt to locate missing children and how staff should support children on return to the home. This procedure must take into account the views of appropriate local services and have regard to police and local authority protocols for responding to missing person's incidents in the area where the home is located. The NMS specifies that staff should actively search for children and, where appropriate, work with the police.

64. On 1 April 2013, regulations came into force requiring Ofsted to provide details of the locations of children's homes to local police forces to support the police in their

⁸ Department for Education: [Children's Homes: National Minimum Standards \(2011\)](#)

strategic and operational approach to safeguarding children. This duty is in addition to the existing obligation for Ofsted to provide this information to local authorities. A protocol published alongside the regulations sets out the responsibilities of the public authorities to use information about the location of children's homes only for the purposes for which it was disclosed, and to share it onward only where this is compatible with safeguarding children and promoting their welfare⁹.

Care Leavers

65. Care leavers, particularly 16 and 17 year olds may go missing from their home or accommodation and face the same risks as other missing children. Local authorities must ensure that care leavers live in "suitable accommodation" as defined in regulation 9(2) of the Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010, (made under section 23B(10) of the Children Act 1989). In particular, young people should feel safe in their accommodation and the areas where it is located. Local authorities should ensure that pathway plans set out where a young person may be vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or going missing, and put in place support services to minimise this risk.

When a looked after child goes missing

66. Whenever a child runs away from a placement, the foster carer or the manager on duty in their children's home is responsible for ensuring that the following individuals and agencies are informed within the timescales set out in the local RMFHC protocol:

- the local police;
- the authority responsible for the child's placement – if they have not already been notified prior to the police being informed; and
- parents and any other person with parental responsibility, unless it is not reasonably practicable or to do so would be inconsistent with the child's welfare.

Please see the accompanying document, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from care: Flowchart to accompany the statutory guidance*.

When a looked after child is found

67. The responsible authority should ensure that plans are in place to respond promptly once the child is located. Care staff should inform the child's social worker and the independent reviewing officer that the child has returned. If the child is located but

⁹ Department for Education: [Joint protocol: children's homes - procedure for disclosing names and addresses \(2013\)](#)

professionals are unable to establish meaningful contact, then the responsible authority should contact the police and consider the appropriate action to take.

68. When the child has been located, the responsible local authority should review whether the child's placement remains appropriate. The decision should be informed by discussions with the child and carers where appropriate. The outcomes and reasons for the decision should be recorded.

69. An independent return interview should be offered when a missing looked after child is found. Where possible, the child should be given the opportunity to talk before they return to their placement. The person conducting the interview should usually be independent of the child's placement and of the responsible local authority. An exception maybe where a child has a strong relationship with a carer or social worker and has expressed a preference to talk to them, rather than an independent person, about the reasons they went missing. The child should be offered the option of speaking to an independent representative or advocate. When a looked after child is placed in a host authority, the responsible authority should ensure the independent review interview takes place, working closely with the host authority.

70. Children's home staff or foster carers should continue to offer warm and consistent care when a child returns, and running away should not be viewed as behaviour that needs to be punished. The need for safe and reliable care may be particularly significant for a child who faces pressure to run away from their placement as a result of circumstances beyond the control of their carers. In these circumstances, it will be even more important that the child's care and placement plans are kept up-to-date and include a strategy to reduce the pressure on the child to run away.

Data on looked after children who go missing or are away from placement without authorisation

71. Looked after children who go missing, or who are away from placement without authorisation, can be at increased risk of sexual or other forms of exploitation or of involvement in drugs, gangs, criminal activity or trafficking. Particular attention should be paid to repeat episodes. Data on these episodes should be analysed regularly in order to map problems and patterns. Regular reports on this data should be provided to council members and the LSCB.

72. Data for children missing or away from placement without authorisation should be reported to the Department for Education by the responsible authority through their annual data returns on looked after children.

Looked after children who may have been trafficked from abroad

73. Some looked after children are unaccompanied asylum seeking children or other migrant children. Some of this group may have been trafficked into the UK and may remain under the influence of their traffickers even while they are looked after. Trafficked children are at high risk of going missing, with most going missing within one week of becoming looked after and many within 48 hours. Unaccompanied migrant or asylum seeking children who go missing immediately after becoming looked after should be treated as potential victims of trafficking.

74. The assessment of need to inform the care plan will be particularly critical in these circumstances and should be done immediately as the window for intervention is very narrow. The assessment must seek to establish:

- relevant details about the child's background before they came to the UK;
- an understanding of the reasons why the child came to the UK; and
- an analysis of the child's vulnerability to remaining under the influence of traffickers.

75. In conducting this assessment, it will be necessary for the local authority to work in close co-operation with the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) and immigration staff familiar with patterns of trafficking into the UK. Immigration staff who specialise in trafficking issues should be able to advise on whether information about the individual child suggests that they fit the profile of a potentially trafficked child.

76. Provision may need to be made for the child to be in a safe place before any assessment takes place and for the possibility that they may not be able to disclose full information about their circumstances immediately. The location of the child should not be divulged to any enquirers until their identity and relationship with the child has been established, if necessary with the help of police and immigration services. In these situations the roles and responsibilities of care providers must be fully understood and recorded in the placement plan. Proportionate safety measures that keep the child safe and take into account their best interests should also be put in place to safeguard the child from going missing from care or from being re-trafficked.

77. It is essential that the local authority continues to share information with the police and immigration staff, concerning potential crimes against the child, the risk to other children, or other relevant immigration matters.

78. 'Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked'¹⁰ contains practical guidance for agencies which are likely to encounter, or have referred to them, children

¹⁰ HM Government: [Safeguarding children who may have been trafficked: practice guidance \(2011\)](#)

and young people who may have been trafficked. Where it is suspected that a child has been trafficked, they should be referred by the local authority into the UK's victim identification framework, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The Trafficked Children Toolkit¹¹, developed by the London Safeguarding Children Board, has been made available to all local authorities to help professionals assess the needs of these children and to refer them to the NRM.

79. 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 9.30am to 4.30pm; email help@nspcc.org.uk; or web http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/ctail/ctail_wda84866.html

¹¹ London Safeguarding Children's Board: [*The Trafficked Children Toolkit*](#)

Annex A

Checklist for local authorities

This is a short checklist that local authorities may find helpful to refer to the relevant paragraph in the guidance.

| Checklist | Paragraph |
|---|-------------------|
| Do you have a lead manager in place with strategic responsibility for children who run away or go missing? | 13-14 |
| Do you have a Runaway and Missing From Home and Care Protocol (RMFHC Protocol)? | 15, 16, 20 |
| Do you have a clear definition of a child who has run away? | 10, 11-12, 20 |
| Does your LSCB have in place systems to monitor prevalence of and the responses to children who go missing, including gathering data from LSCB members and other local stakeholders in order to understand trends and patterns? | 15, 20, 49, 71 |
| Do you have effective working relationships with your local police force? | 16, 20, 23-27, 66 |
| Do you have effective partnerships with the voluntary sector, relevant specialist services and information about national level resources, eg, helplines for missing children? | 18, 22, 79 |
| Do you have clear procedures in place to offer return interviews when a missing child is found? | 31-39, 69 |
| Do you have support services in place for children and their families? | 22, 40-41 |
| Do you have a strategy to prevent children from running away and to deal with repeat runaways? | 20, 45-47, 52-54 |

Annex B

Associated resources

General guidance

- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013) clarifies the core legal requirements on individuals and organisations to keep children safe, including the legal requirements that health services, social workers, police, schools and other organisations who work with children must follow.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children>
- Joint statutory guidance, DCLG and DfE 'Provision of Accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people who may be homeless and/or require accommodation' (April 2010)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/provision-of-accommodation-for-16-and-17-year-olds-who-may-be-homeless-and-or-require-accommodation>

Missing children guidance, strategy and police resources

- Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons <http://www.acpo.police.uk/documents/crime/2011/201103CRIIMP02.pdf>
- Missing Children and Adults strategy (2011) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/missing-children-and-adults-strategy>
- Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) website <http://www.ceop.police.uk/>

Prevention and supporting missing children and their families

- Railway Children Reach model, which looks at before, during and after incidents (RMFHC)
<http://www.railwaychildren.org.uk/our-solution/where-we-work/uk/reach-model/>
- ChildLine (telephone: 0800 1111)
<http://www.childline.org.uk/pages/home.aspx>
- Safe@Last, working with and on behalf of children and young people at risk through running away
<http://www.safeatlast.org.uk/>

- What to do if a child goes missing: a guide for those working in education and youth work (2013) from the Children's Society http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/pro_guide_to_runaways_-_online_versionfinal_0.pdf
- What to do if your child goes missing: practical advice for parents and carers (2013) from the Children's Society http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/runaways_parents_guide_2013_final_six-page.pdf
- Developing local safeguarding responses to young runaways. Planning guide for professionals (2013) from the Children's Society <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources>
- Missing People research: reports on various related issues <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/missing-people/about-the-issue/missing-people-research>

Child sexual exploitation

- Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (2009) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-and-young-people-from-sexual-exploitation-supplementary-guidance>
- Tackling child sexual exploitation action plan (2011) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-child-sexual-exploitation-action-plan>
- What to do if you suspect a child is being sexually exploited. A step-by-step guide for frontline practitioners (June 2012) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-to-do-if-you-suspect-a-child-is-being-sexually-exploited>
- National Working Group website, a UK network of over 1000 practitioners working on the issue of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and trafficking within the UK. includes relevant resources for practitioners www.nationalworkinggroup.org
- Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation (PACE) <http://www.paceuk.info/>

Child trafficking

- Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked Guidance (2011) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-who-may-have-been-trafficked-practice-guidance>

- NSPCC Child Trafficking Advice Centre (CTAC)
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/ctail/ctail_wda84866.html
- London Borough of Hillingdon resources for trafficked children
at <http://www.hillingdon.gov.uk/article/16450/Child-trafficking-sub-group>
- On the Safe Side: Principle of Safe Accommodation of Child Victims of Trafficking (ECPAT UK, 2011) link available
here: http://www.ecpat.org.uk/sites/default/files/on_the_safe_side.pdf
- Conducting good return interviews for young people who run away (2014) from the Children's Society
http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/8pp_a5_runaway_return_interviews_final.pdf



Department
for Education

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