

Children's Services

Children Missing or Absent from Home or Care Procedures

**West Sussex County Council
Children's Services**



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Feedback: Our customers expect first class service and we aim to provide it. We therefore welcome feedback about our policies and procedures. If you have any comments about this document please e-mail: socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk

Introduction:

New guidance was issued in January 2014 regarding the role of local authorities with missing children. This guidance must be complied with and has been written to complement existing statutory guidance such as 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' and the [Sussex Safeguarding procedures](#).

- [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care January 2014](#) (DfE)

This procedure is intended to set out clearly for **Social Care** practitioners how they should respond to a report of a missing child in a variety of circumstances.

Since April 2013 police forces have used new definitions for 'missing' and 'absent' in relation to children and adults who are reported as missing to the police:

1. **Missing** is defined as "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"
2. **Absent** is defined as "a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be"

Classification is based on on-going risk assessment. Absent does **not** include those defined as:

3. **"Away from placement without authorisation"** Under the police (ACPO) guidance a child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either 'missing' or 'absent' and not recorded or responded to.

From a Social Care operational perspective:

Missing defines 'whereabouts unknown, worrying circumstances',

Absent is defined as 'a child or young person not where they are expected to be; their whereabouts are unknown but there is no immediate cause for concern.'

Away from placement without authorisation describes a child looked after (CLA) whose whereabouts are known and they are not considered to be at significant risk at this location. Any unauthorized absence that extends beyond six hours will require the child or young person to be reported as missing to the police who will risk assess and classify the absence.

The Police have the lead in responding to reports of children Missing or Absent but other agencies all have their part to play. This document sets out the responsibilities for the Children's Safeguarding Unit (CSU), foster carers and residential workers, social workers, IROs and managers.

One of the risks for children who go missing is that they may be at risk of sexual exploitation or coercive sexual activity. (See [MIN 20](#))

Further guidance on how to respond to suspected CSE can be found at [MIN 38](#) (Child Sexual Exploitation). Where a young person goes missing regularly, and

particularly if sexual exploitation or coercion is suspected, it is important to build up knowledge of their networks by recording links. This can be done by establishing a personal relationship of 'in contact with' on frameworki.

Some young people, especially those that arrive unaccompanied through Gatwick airport may be at high risk of being trafficked by unknown contacts. Guidance on a specific response in these circumstances can be found below (see MIN 19)

- **Protocol for children at risk of trafficking** (linked to MIN 19)

Where a child or young person is missing, absent or away from placement without authorisation, foster carers and residential care workers should follow the attached process.

- **Process for foster carers and residential workers if a child goes missing** (linked to MIN 19)

Children who are missing or absent will come to the attention of Social Care in a number of different ways depending on their circumstances and categorization. These specific circumstances are set out below with the required response from Social Care.

1. Children reported to the local authority who are missing nationally

All local authorities have the option of reporting children, families and vulnerable adults as missing nationally, where there is a cause for concern and no information about their whereabouts. No action is required from the notified authorities other than passing to key stakeholders such as Health, recording the information and acting on it should the child or adult come to their attention.

Children or unborn babies who are the subject of a Child Protection Plan and who go missing should be notified nationally.

In West Sussex these notifications are managed in the Children's Safeguarding Unit and admin staff in the Unit manage any communication and chase the notifying authority for a return date if one is not notified.

A new episode has been developed on frameworki to record 'National Notifications of Missing Children or Families' to differentiate them from other types of 'Missing Children' (December 2014)

If the child goes missing as part of a vulnerable family group then the procedure to follow is set out in [8.22 Children and families who go missing](#) (Sussex Safeguarding Procedures).

The guidance set out in the pan Sussex Safeguarding Procedures covers the different types of 'Missing' and should be consulted when dealing with any one of the following situations.

- [8.21.1 Joint policy for children missing in Sussex](#) (Sussex Safeguarding Procedures)

2. Children missing from home in West Sussex and notified to Sussex Police

Reports of children deemed to be 'missing' are generally notified to Social Care following a Police report called a Single Combined Assessment of Risk Form (SCARF); often when the incident has been dealt with, and the child has returned safely home. They are recorded on frameworki at the CAP as a Contact and then a 'Missing' episode which also contains information about the child's return.

Currently, if the child is not an open case to Social Care any existing records are checked but there is no immediate response, unless requested by the Police, or concerns are identified. However, in all cases a strategy meeting will be considered when a child has been reported missing on 3 or more occasions in a 12 month period, for a single longer period, or if a parent fails to report their child missing following reasonable attempts to find them. The purpose of this is to try and understand the factors involved and any risks. It is good practice to use the Vulnerability checklist ([MIN 21\(4\)](#)) to inform the strategy discussion about perceived risks or, if CSE is evident then the Missing Service Risk Assessment/Referral Form part of the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Form (SERAF) should be completed (linked to MIN 19).

- [8.21.1 Joint policy for children missing in Sussex](#) (Sussex Safeguarding Procedures) - Guidance on setting up a strategy meeting in these circumstances can be found at 8.21.1.38.

Safe and well checks are carried out by the police as soon as possible after a child reported missing is found. Children who have been categorized as 'Missing' should be offered an independent return interview to be carried out within 72 hours. In West Sussex these interviews are undertaken by Barnardo's and a report provided to the Police and Social Care.

Children and young people who are reported to the Police and categorized as either 'Absent' or seen to be missing from placement without authorisation will not receive either a Safe and Well check or a Return interview. They will not be reported to Social Care but details of the absence and return will be noted by the Police and used to identify any patterns that may need a further response.

MaCSE

The multi-agency 'Missing & Child Sexual Exploitation (MaCSE) Group' considers young people up to the age of 18 who may be at risk from going missing or involved in aspects of sexual exploitation. The MaCSE Panel is accountable to the West Sussex Safeguarding Children's Board (WSSCB) Child Sexual Exploitation and Missing sub group and through this to the WSSCB.

Cases that are assessed to be high risk or where professional judgment indicates will be discussed at MaCSE. A social worker or lead professional should use the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Form (SERAF) to assess the level of risk before referral to the Panel. Each case that is discussed at the MaCSE is further assessed

through the nationally recognized Northumberland Risk Management Model which provides a consistent approach to risk management.

- **SERAF Missing Service Joint Return Interview Proforma** (linked to MIN 19)

The record of any case discussed should be uploaded onto frameworki and added as a case note.

- 3. Children Missing from Education (CME)** are defined as children who are not on a school roll or in any other suitable provision.

Section 436A Education Act 1996, as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides that local authorities must make arrangements to enable them to establish (so far as is possible to do so) the identities of children residing in their area who are not receiving a suitable education. In relation to children, by 'suitable education' we mean efficient full time education suitable to his/her age, aptitude and ability and to any special educational needs the child may have. The duty applies in relation to children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll, and who are not receiving education otherwise than being at school, for example, at home, privately, or in alternative provision.

Children are identified as CME from a number of sources. One of the most effective tools for identification is the Removal from Roll (RfR) process which enables the CME Team to act as a conduit for all notifications for removal from roll outside of the normal admission transitions.

- **Children missing education and removal from roll process guide** (linked to MIN 19)

This process also allows school to fulfill their duty to inform the local authority when children are removed from roll. In addition, other agencies and organizations inform the CME Team when they come into contact with a child or young person who may be missing from education, particularly colleagues in Health, Social Care, Police, Voluntary Organisations and Housing.

Following notification the case is opened to the CME Team; the Social Care data base is checked, and Social Care or the Police are notified, if it is deemed appropriate to do so, given any concerns raised through enquiries. They are discussed at MaCSE (see above) if the CME team worker is concerned.

Children Missing in Education are defined as on roll at a school, however they are absent from school. Schools have their own absence policies and responses to dealing with attendance, but the local authority guidance is very clear about expectations in regard to first day absence checks and what schools should do had there been no contact.

4. Looked After Children placed in West Sussex by another local authority (CLA to OLA)

Whenever a child runs away from a placement, the foster carer or the manager of the children's home is responsible for informing the local police, the placing authority, and the person (s) holding parental responsibility (PR) unless this is inconsistent with the child's welfare. They should also report that the child has returned, and inform the child's social worker and IRO. The placing authority should review whether the child's placement remains appropriate.

Reports of missing children in West Sussex who have been placed by another local authority will be reported to the CAP by the Police and recorded on frameworki. Any existing record should be checked but there will be no immediate response, unless requested by the Police, or concerns are identified. From a Social Care perspective these young people are responded to as in **2. Children Missing from Home** (above)

Safe and well checks are carried out by the local police as soon as possible after a child reported missing is found. They should also be offered an independent return interview to be carried out within 72 hours.

Should the risks be assessed as 'high' by the police then a strategy meeting may be required. This would ideally involve the placing authority in addition to the host authority but, in line with Sussex Safeguarding Procedures the responsibility to convene the strategy meeting lies with West Sussex as the host authority. If a S47 investigation is indicated actions should be agreed across authorities. Any emergency action should be taken by the host authority unless agreement is reached for the home authority to take alternative action.

Where emergencies and enquiries are dealt with by the host authority, responsibility for the child will revert to the home authority immediately thereafter. The home authority will also normally be responsible for the provision of any form of foster or residential care or other services to ensure the protection of a child found in a host authority. The welfare of the child will be the paramount consideration in this determination. Negotiations about responsibility must not cause delay in urgent situations.

All CLA should have risk management plans that are reviewed and updated in light of new or changing information. A statutory review of the care plan can provide an opportunity to check that it addresses the reason for an absence and should be the forum for the development of a strategy to minimize missing behavior. If a young person placed in West Sussex is putting themselves at risk by frequent absconding the placing authority may be asked to undertake an early statutory review to re-assess the suitability of the placement and the safety planning. Young people who continue to go missing from another local authority should be risk assessed by the placing authority in addition to the return interview process.

A notification process for missing and away from placement should be agreed between the 'placing' and 'host' authorities.

If a young person deemed to be at high risk is placed within West Sussex from another local authority, the expectation is that a representative of the placing authority will complete the Missing Service Risk Assessment/Referral Form part of the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Form (SERAF).

➤ **Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Form (SERAF)** (Word)

A representative from the placing authority should contact the ART in West Sussex who will alert the Police and refer to the MaCSE Panel.

5. West Sussex CLA placed outside of West Sussex

Children missing in other local authorities will initially be responded to by the host authority and police force. Whenever a child runs away from a placement, the foster carer or the manager of the children's home is responsible for informing the local police, the placing authority, and the person (s) holding parental responsibility (PR) unless this is inconsistent with the child's welfare. They should also report when the child has returned, and inform the child's social worker and IRO who are responsible for reviewing whether the child's placement remains appropriate or constitutes a risk to their welfare.

Trafficked children and unaccompanied migrant or asylum seeking children are considered to be particularly vulnerable and an early strategy discussion may be advisable. ([Sussex Child Protection and Safeguarding Procedures 8.33](#))

West Sussex has developed a protocol with other key agencies to respond to suspected trafficked children.

➤ **Protocol for children at risk of Trafficking** (linked to MIN 19)

In all cases of young people missing, absent or away from placement without authorisation West Sussex, as the placing authority should be informed and involved at the earliest possible point, as the responsibility for the care of a Child Looked After remains with West Sussex even after the police have been made aware. The expectation is that the allocated social worker will undertake the Return Home interview and record it on the CYP 051 'Record of Missing or Absent Child'. The purpose of the Return Home interview is to clarify:

- Are they well?
- Where have they been?
- Who were they with?
- Has any exploitation taken place?
- Did they feel safe?
- Who did they contact?
- Where did they go?
- How can we help?
- What is going on in placement?
- What would have stopped the young person from going?
- Do they have/ want an advocate?

It is important to be clear that the information they give you will be shared.

Where sexual exploitation is a feature then a SERAF needs to be undertaken and the young person referred to MaCSE where appropriate.

IROs should be informed about children who are missing, absent or away from placement and this should be addressed at the statutory review which should provide the forum for the development of a strategy to minimize missing behaviour.

All CLA should have risk management plans that are reviewed and updated in light of new or changing information.

Any West Sussex CLA who goes 'missing' from another authority should be notified to the relevant Service Manager who will ensure that all the appropriate people are informed and that, if required, a press statement is prepared.

West Sussex Children Looked After (CLA) who are placed out of County and who are known to be missing or at risk of CSE should be raised by the Social Care representative at the next available MaCSE.

A notification process for missing and away from placement should be agreed between the 'placing' and 'host' authorities.

6. West Sussex CLA placed within West Sussex

- [8.21.1 Joint policy for children missing in Sussex](#) (Sussex Safeguarding Procedures) - Refer to 8.21.1.46- 8.21.1.63
- **Process for foster carers and residential workers if a child goes missing** (linked to MIN 19)

When a member of children's home staff or a foster carer realises that a child is missing from their care they should consider which definition the absence falls into. This should be done in conjunction with the Family Placement Service and the allocated worker or Emergency Duty Team (EDT) if this happens out of core business hours.

If the young person is considered to fall into the 'missing' category then the Police should be informed without delay. If in any doubt then inform the Police who will assist in categorizing the absence. A decision should be made about informing the parent or anyone who holds parental responsibility, in conjunction with a Social Care manager.

The Police will require the following information from the referrer:

- A description of the child and their clothing
- Details of when the child was last seen and with whom
- A recent photograph (if available)
- Family addresses
- Known associates and addresses frequented
- Personal details of the child
- Any previous history of absconding / absenteeism and circumstances of where found
- The names and addresses of the child's GP and dentist

- The circumstances under which the child is absent
- Any factors which increase the risk to the child

Any young person who is known to have a history of absconding behaviour should have a plan developed and in place containing this information from the start of the placement.

If the child is considered to be absent or is away from placement without authorisation the decision to record the child as such and the reasons why, must be recorded by the foster carer or residential worker as well as the Police. The Police will keep children considered to be 'absent' under review and be part of any discussion with a foster carer or residential worker about what action needs to be taken.

Foster carers and residential workers should continue to make enquiries to locate the young person and to liaise with the Police. If the absence persists for 6 hours consideration should be given to re-classifying the young person as 'Missing'. Change of classification is a police decision based on risk and as time absent does not always increase the risk there is a possibility that this will not result in a re-classification. However, the foster carer or residential worker should always explain their worries for the young person to the police and give their own assessment of risk.

Police do not consider a child whose whereabouts is known but who is absent without authorisation as 'missing' and will not record or respond to any such report.

The Police will carry out a 'safe and well' check when a young person returns home from a missing episode. The Return Home interview must be completed within 72 hours. In West Sussex Barnardos have been commissioned to undertake these interviews and to provide a copy to Social Care. The allocated worker should also make contact with the young person to try and understand the reasons for their absence, and to ensure that any care or placement planning issues are discussed and, as far as possible, resolved. This may also involve the IRO and an early CLA review may be indicated.

Foster carers and residential workers should ensure that they report a return to all those who have been made aware of the absence.

Where any concerns of a Safeguarding nature are reported or identified then contact should be made with the police Child Protection Team (CPT) and a strategy meeting considered.

Escalation:

If there is a high level of Missing behaviour being exhibited by a Child Looked After to WSCC then the allocated worker should in all cases discuss this with their line manager and agree a suitable response. For single episodes of Missing the following escalations are advised. However, should there be a particular vulnerability or worrying context then escalation is recommended at any point.

Children Missing for more than 24 hours

The Service Managers responsible for the provision and for the young person must be told about any child or young person who is missing for longer than 24 hours, by the allocated social worker or their Team Manager.

The 24 hours begins at the point the child/young person is first noted as missing from care and **not** at the point of any official report being made.

The Service Manager for the young person will then take the lead role in issues concerning the missing child or young person. In their absence the Principal Manager must be contacted and take the lead.

Children missing for more than 3 days

The Principal Manager and Head of Service must be notified of any young person missing for more than 3 days by the young person's Service Manager.

Children missing for up to 7 days ([8.21.1 Joint Policy for Children Missing in Sussex](#)) (section 8.21.64)

A joint meeting with all the key professionals but especially the police will be called if the child or young person is missing for a longer period within a maximum of 7 working days. Police Child Protection Officers must be invited and consideration should be given to them chairing this meeting.

It is the responsibility of the social worker and relevant Team Manager to initiate the meeting which will review the actions taken to this point and ensure that all possible steps are being taken to locate and return the child. This meeting will decide on any further action to be taken and include considerations of using the media. If it is decided to use the media, it is the police's responsibility to advise the Local Authority via the responsible worker and the Council press office as to how this will happen.

Any decision to publish information must always be made in consultation with the parents so their views can be sought and so that they are given notification of the intentions of the Police and Social Care Services. Workers must be alert to issues such as parental collusion with the child or young person's behaviour.

Children missing for longer periods of time

The Head of Service and Director for Children's Services will formally review all cases where the child/young person has been missing for more than 6 weeks.

Cases must always remain open and should be formally reviewed at 3 monthly intervals by the Service Manager for the young person. When a young person becomes 18 if they are owed duties under the Children (Leaving Care) Act they will remain eligible.

Children/Young People placed with Independent Providers

All serious issues relating to children's homes must be reported to Ofsted without delay.

West Sussex police should always be notified about a child or young person placed outside the council area going missing since there is a significant likelihood that they will try to return to their home area.

Returning

On return the child/young person's medical condition must be assessed and appropriate medical attention or advice arranged immediately. All safeguarding concerns should be progressed in the usual way.