

Practice Guidance and Procedures for Missing Children and Young People

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1. Introduction and Background

This guidance sits alongside the Pan Sussex Safeguarding Procedures to provide a framework for a co-ordinated, standardised and effective response by the local authority, police and partner agencies in West Sussex when children go missing. It also includes steps that should be taken to try to prevent them going missing again.

When a child goes missing or runs away from home, care or school, they are at risk. The first part of this guidance therefore refers to protecting all children from the risks associated with going missing, whether they are looked after children or children who live within their family home. Later sections set out the additional steps to be taken in regard to children missing from care or other settings.

Many children will exhibit normal adolescent behaviour in testing boundaries, and it is **not** helpful to consider every incident of lateness or absence for all people as missing. Young people must not be reported missing as a behaviour management tool. However, some children will need to be treated as missing immediately due to their vulnerability.

2. Definitions used in this guidance

People go missing for a wide variety of reasons, which makes providing a single, concise definition of a 'missing person' or what it is to 'go missing' very difficult. This guidance 'has been devised to support the implementation of Department for Education statutory guidance [Children who run away or go missing from home or care](#) (2014) and the [College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice](#) (2017). Department for Education statutory guidance is issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which requires local authorities in exercising their social services function 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.

The College of Policing has issued Authorised Professional Practice (APP) [guidance](#) for missing persons (2017). Police officers and staff are expected to have regard to APP in discharging their responsibilities. There may, however, be circumstances when it is perfectly legitimate to deviate, provided there is clear rationale for doing so. APP states that: *"going missing should be treated as an indicator that the individual may be at risk of harm. The safeguarding of vulnerable people is paramount, and a missing person report should be recognised as an opportunity to identify and address risks. The reasons for a person deciding to go missing may be complex and linked to a variety of social or family issues.*

Three key factors should be considered in a missing person investigation:

- *protecting those at risk of harm;*
- *minimising distress and ensuring high quality of service to the families and carers of missing persons;*
- *prosecuting those who perpetrate harm or pose a risk of harm when this is appropriate and supported by evidence."*

This guidance complements Working Together to Safeguard Children and related statutory guidance (2018) and the Children Act (1989) guidance and regulation volumes in respect of care planning and review, and The Statutory Guidance on Children who run away from Home or Care (2014).

Children running away and going missing from care, home and education poses a significant operational challenge for the children's partnership, with Children's Society identifying that 100,000 children run away from home or care in the UK every year. When children run away they are at risk of physical abuse, sexual exploitation and are forced to use risky survival strategies.

Inspections have told us that the multi-agency response to missing children requires further development.

This procedure gives a high-level overview of our responsibilities to children missing from home, care and education. Given the different needs, risks, service availability and implementation of the statutory guidance in each of our local police force and local authority areas, it is imperative that local processes, pathways and expectations are well understood.

3. Action to be taken when a Child Goes Missing Before Contacting Police

Information to give the police should be gathered before the call is made. This includes a check of their room to see what might be missing, what the child was wearing when last seen, time and place last seen, any other contact they have or information from a friend or school about where they were last seen, with whom, and what they think they were doing. Other important information to give to police is about risk of harm – e.g. is the child known to be exploited? by whom? Where? When? is it likely this is happening now?

For a Looked after child who is away from placement without authorisation

Where a child's location is not known, this should be reported to the Police as above.

Being away from their placement without authorisation, e.g. late returns, staying at a known location with a friend, unauthorised family contact, where their location is known, will not normally constitute a missing episode. The discretion of the residential staff and carers is necessary to decide whether or when to make a report to the police, based on the concerns they have for the child and action taken to contact them. The responsibility for managing this type of absence lies with the staff of the residential home or carer. If the carer has concerns for the child's safety, then the usual safeguarding procedures should be followed.

If the assessment of the carer is that there is no apparent risk for the child's immediate safety it is still important that staff / carers record these incidences as "away from their placement without authorisation" in the child's record, starting a dated / timed record of their contacts, risk assessment and decisions throughout the episode from the point that they are first aware of the child being away. They should notify the child's Social Worker or out of hours service within a timeframe consistent with the placement plan or missing plan for that child; no child should be away from placement without authorisation for more than 6 hours maximum, without the Social Worker or out of hour's service being informed and consulted as to appropriate action.

The local authority staff need do an assessment of the risks, create a plan to mitigate those risks, and if manageable decide whether to allow the child to temporarily remain at that location, whilst they arrange for their return. Please note that any decisions need to be made in accordance with guidance on unregulated placements.

Risk Assessment / Investigation

When Sussex Police receive a call reporting a child missing, the call handler will conduct an initial risk assessment to determine the appropriate status. The police will prioritise all episodes of children 'missing' from home or care to investigate the disappearance and attempt to locate the young child prior to them suffering any harm. The Police investigation and all resulting actions will be proportionate to the risk level and recorded on police recording system – 'NICHE'.

High	The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability, or may have been a victim of a serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger. If the child is known or believed to be at risk of exploitation, they must initially be categorised as ‘high’ risk missing.
Medium	The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger, or they are a threat to themselves or others.
Low	In line with NPCC (National Police Chiefs’ Council) guidance it is no longer appropriate to classify children aged 18 years or under as low risk missing persons.

Once a case is generated on the NICHE system as “MISSING”, an Initial Investigating Officer will be appointed. The Initial Investigating Officer and all subsequent officers will carry out a thorough investigation in line with the latest published Sussex Police Policy on “Missing Persons”. When the NICHE report is generated it will be sent to MASH and to the CSC Missing Children email address (Missing.Children@westsussex.gov.uk)

For a child that is open to Children’s Social Care (CSC); MASH & Missing Children Team will review the information and notify the allocated social worker.

If a child is not known to CSC, Missing Children Team notify MASH who will create a new contact for the child and record the information from the police SCARF on MOSAIC. Missing Children Team will then open and create a Record of Missing or Absent child or YP (CYP051). MASH will arrange a Strategy Discussion/Meeting if needed, inviting any professionals involved with the child.

If the child placed in West Sussex by another local authority, MASH will (if needed) create a new contact for the child and record the information from the police SCARF on MOSAIC. Missing Children Team will then open and create a Record of Missing or Absent child or YP (CYP051) and send the Police SCARF to the placing authority. MASH will arrange a joint Strategy Discussion/Meeting if needed, inviting any professionals involved with the child.

If the child was previously known and closed, MASH will review the police SCARF, and record the information from the police SCARF on MOSAIC. Missing Children Team will then open a Record of Missing or Absent child or YP (CYP051). MASH will arrange a Strategy Discussion/Meeting if needed.

For all notifications of missing reports by police, the Missing Children Team will record the missing episode onto MOSAIC (CYP051), and also onto the Missing Children Database.

4. Daily Operational Missing Meeting

This daily meeting is held to review all children who have been missing for more than 24 hours, and all children who have returned from missing within past 24 hours (or during weekend if meeting is on a Monday).

Membership:

- Missing Persons Co-ordinator, Missing Persons Team, Sussex Police
- Missing and Child Exploitation Advanced Practitioner, Children’s Social Care
- Team Leader, Return Home Interviews

The review will consider:

- Risks and harm disclosed or observed when the child returned to family or carers;
- Risks and harm identified by police whilst child was missing;
- Risks and harm identified in circumstances that led to a child going missing;
- Significant harm incidents that happened whilst missing;
- Risks particular to the needs of any Looked After Children that went missing, including looked after children placed out of county
- Vulnerability to and risk of harm from exploitation; and
- Perpetrators of serious harm

Missing Persons Co-ordinator Sussex Police will create a summary of children who have been missing or found in last 24 hours (or weekend if meeting is on a Monday) or who are still missing. This summary will include the time the child went missing and was found; the place they were missing from and found and significant places they went whilst missing. The Police identification of harm, indicators of exploitation and any intel concerning peer groups or networks and/or perpetrators of harm will be shared.

CSC Missing and Exploitation Advanced Practitioners and Return Home Interview Team Lead will add information from social work and return home interviews, including name of social worker.

The summaries will be individually saved onto Mosaic and emailed to the child's social worker or Lead Professional, their Practice Managers and where relevant, the Education DSL. It is the expectations that lead professionals notify the schools and if there is no lead professional schools are notified by MASH Education Advisor.

All children who meet the criteria below will be timetabled for discussion at the following Weekly Complex Safeguarding MEOG with invitation to attend sent to SW/LP and where relevant, the DSL:

- Child is being exploited and harmed
- There are significant indicators of exploitation and harm
- The child is perpetrating serious harm to others

A child who has, or is believed to have, suffered significant harm whilst missing will have notification for the need for a referral for a strategy meeting sent to allocated SW and PM or MASH.

Children who have suffered or at risk of serious and significant harm, or who have caused serious harm, will need to have a 'Need to Know' started by the Practice Manager, completed and Group Manager and forwarded by them to Service Leads, and Assistant/Deputy Director. The criteria for a 'Need to know is:

- Missing CLA – after 24 hours and non-CLA after 72 hours.
- Missing family subject to Child Protection processes.
- Incidents that may trigger media interest including children who commit or are victims of serious crimes.
- Cases referred to the Home Office through the National Referral Mechanism as trafficking and / or modern slavery is suspected.

Children who have been missing for more than 24 hours and are still missing will have an alert sent to PM/GM notifying them of the need to convene a strategy discussion. All strategy requests are sent to MASH including missing children - Missing Police Team attend as a participant for children who are still missing.

5. Escalated and Urgent Intervention

Some children will need to be treated as high risk missing immediately due to their vulnerability. It may be that this has already been decided as part of the child's plan however, the circumstances may differ and will require a judgement to be made by the person receiving the initial notification. If in doubt, this should be discussed through the line management chain – without delay.

Risk factors demanding escalated and urgent interventions include:

- Any case where the risk of significant harm in even a single future missing episode is very high;
- Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the safety of the child

If significant risk is identified immediately:

- **Social Worker:** to inform Practice Manager, IRO if the child is looked after, CP Chair if on a CP Plan. If the child is looked after and placed outside of West Sussex the social worker must inform the Missing Children Team via Missing.Children@westsussex.gov.uk. Social worker to put a case note summary on mosaic.
- **Practice Manager:** to take lead role of coordinating immediate safety plan with Missing Police Team. PM to add a Case Note Summary including plan on MOSAIC.
- **Practice Manager:** to arrange and Chair Strategy Meeting with Missing Police Team as soon as practicable to agree further action that is required to locate and see the child, and plan for when child is found. If high level of complexity or risk **Group Manager** should Chair the Strategy Meeting
- **Practice Manager:** to inform Group Manager and if particularly high levels of risk indicating a significant level of harm or reputational risk.
- **Group Manager** to inform Service Leader who should complete 'Need to Know' document to Assistant/Deputy Director. GM to add a Case Note Summary including oversight of plan on MOSAIC.

6. Strategy Meetings for Missing Children

A strategy meeting will be held when a child has been missing for 24 hours or has been missing for 3 or more times within a four-week period. The purpose is to ascertain the current level of risk/vulnerability and to formulate the strategy to find the child. It will also determine where the child is to be returned upon being located (note, this is not a forum for care planning).

Do not wait 24 hours to convene a strategy discussion if the risk is immediate

In considering the strategy to locate a missing child, discussions should consider what information each agency holds, both historical and current, in relation to **this** specific episode:

- **Harm;** what is the nature of harm? What is the evidence for this harm? Is the risk posed immediate, is it significant? Are there any additional complicating factors –age, communication, learning needs etc
- **Patterns;** is there a pattern of missing episodes that indicates either the nature of harm, specific or particular activity or locations?
- **Network;** what is the child's network? Family, friends, peers and associates – any known names, young people and/or adults the child may be in contact with/going to and associated risks or protective factors?
- **Travel;** what means of travel has the child used – foot, bike, car, taxi, bus, train? How has this been facilitated (money, people, organisation)?
- **Accommodation;** Any known places the child may be/travelling to/likely to visit, any known addresses of friends/family.

It is important to distinguish between that which is fact, that which is opinion and that which is hypothesis. This is particularly important when considering 'risk factors', for example a child who is missing can be considered at risk of Child Exploitation – on what basis, the fact they are missing and vulnerable does not necessarily equate to an active risk of Child Exploitation and it is important that we work on a proportionate balance of probabilities basis.

Actions must be drawn up with clear timescales, with clarity of who is doing what and when:

- **Agency Checks;** who will contact Health, Education, Police, Probation, Community Safety, Anti-Social Behaviour Teams, other Local Authorities, Business Crime Reduction Partnership (as required)
- **Network;** who will make contact with identified persons including the child? How will they do so and when/at what intervals?
- **Travel;** dependent upon the pattern and mode of behaviours, have discussions been had with British Transport Police/local train and bus companies? Have images been shared with relevant agencies?
- **Other partners;** does the young person frequent local places/restaurants, eg. McDonalds/Subway etc. Does contact need to be made? CCTV for example?
- **Publicity;** is publicity required? If the child is Looked After by the Local Authority, this should be agreed by the Head of Social Care/Assistant Director. The family should be informed.

NB A strategy discussion can be a sit down meeting or a series of phone discussions – the key determinant is urgency

Outcome of Strategy

The discussion must decide whether a Child & Family Assessment is required under section 17 Children Act 1989; whether single or joint agency enquiries/investigation is required under section 47; whether a multi-agency planning meeting is needed and for those not looked after whether an ICPC is required – this determination is made according to the threshold of 'significant harm'.

It is the responsibility of the Chair to make a provisional arrangement for a reconvened strategy in the event of the child continuing to be missing, or upon return, if there is evidence, they have experienced harm.

7. Children who have been missing for more than 24 hours

- **Group Manager** to inform the Service Leader using the 'Need to Know' template with the summary of missing circumstances, background, identified vulnerabilities, length of this missing episode and missing history, actions agreed at strategy meeting with dates, risk assessment and plan for when child is located.
- **Group Manager** to add Case Note Summary to mosaic.
- **Service Leader** to inform Head of Social Care and gain permission for media release and consult parents about any decision to publish information. Case note to be added by Service Leader to mosaic.
- **Assistant/Deputy Director** to review Need to Know document, seek assurance regarding any actions if required and advise DCS if necessary. Case note to be added by Assistant/Deputy Director to mosaic.

If a child has been missing for more than 72 hours, and within 7 days:

- **Group Manager:** to Chair 2nd Strategy Meeting to include cross local authority police teams involved, social worker and social care support staff, school Head of Year or Safeguarding

Lead, foster carers or Registered Manager of children's home and other relevant professionals working with child and family. Ensure note taker is booked for the meeting.

- Review vulnerabilities and risk assessment, actions taken and outcomes of those actions, and ensure that all possible steps are being taken to locate and return the child; update Service Lead.
- Review media actions taken and seek consent of Assistant/Deputy Director if required.
- Agree steps to be taken when child is found, for those subject to CP liaise with CPA (consider Review Child Protection Conference) and liaise with IRO for CLA.
- **Group Manager:** to add Case Note Summary to mosaic
- **Service Leader:** to provide summary of missing circumstances (updating Need to Know document) and actions being taken for Head of Social Care. Case note to be added by Service Leader to mosaic.
- **Assistant/Deputy Director:** To send 'Need to Know' document to Executive Director who will advise Chief Executive and Cabinet Members if required. Case note to be added by Assistant/Deputy Director to mosaic.

If a Child Remains Missing for a longer period of time:

- **Group Manager** will formally review all cases each week until the child is found.
- **Assistant/Deputy Director and Executive Director of Children's Services** should formally review plan at monthly intervals – case must always remain open

8. Action to be taken once a Child has been found

[The Children's Society Runaways](#) charter set out standards for Local Authorities in working with this very vulnerable group. There are six standards set out in their section on "How runaways should be treated". These are as follows:

- Be understanding, calm and relaxed with us
- Help us trust you and don't judge us
- Be straightforward and honest with us
- Listen to us and take us seriously
- Explain things to us
- Give us choices and don't force us into making decisions we don't understand
- Show us respect.

9. Safe and Well Checks (SWC)

All missing children should have a police or professional 'Safe and Well Check' upon return. (This is sometimes referred to as a 'return interview' which can be confusing as we also need to provide a 'Return Home Interview' as below).

The purpose of a SWC is outlined below:

- Check for any indications that the child has suffered - or is suffering - harm and follow normal Child Protection Procedures if relevant, including consideration of a referral to MASH for this young person and / or others in the household
- Give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them.

The Safe and Well Check will:

- Consider and record appearance and demeanour as well as verbal information
- Be recorded on the Police record on NICHE.

The information from the SWC is to be sent through to MASH on a SCARF notification in addition to being sent to 'Missing Children Team' (Missing.Children@westussex.gov.uk) for the Return

Home Interview (RHI) to pick up on any observations made by the officer or disclosures and other important information provided by the child.

9. Return Home Interview (RHI)

When a child is found, in addition to the police Safe & Well Check, the child must be offered an independent Return Home Interview (RHI). For those living in West Sussex this will be arranged and/or completed by West Sussex County Council's Missing Children Team. RHI's provide an opportunity for professionals to understand why the young person ran away, to uncover information that can be used to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing again; to address the risks or incidents they may have been exposed to while missing and the risk factors in their home and social life.

The Purpose of the Return Home Interview is to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child went missing and address this; specifically, to try to listen to the child and understand:

- What happened whilst they were missing?
- Who they were with when they were missing and where they were found?
- What support they require upon returning to home or their care placement in accordance with the 'Working Together' guidance?

Return Home Interview Guidance, a template and an *aide memoire* are attached below. The Missing Children Team will ascertain whether another professional already has an established and positive relationship with the child and may request them to complete the RHI. Evidence shows that children and young people are more likely to disclose information regarding what happened to a trusted professional after they have been missing.

For a Looked after child who is away from placement without authorisation (please see Section 3 above) but *not reported as Missing* from a registered children's home or foster care, the carer must check that the child did not come to harm whilst away and that the child has the opportunity to talk about what happened, and to create a plan to reduce likelihood will happen again. The carer should contact the child's Social Worker if there are any concerns arising from the period they have been away.

A Return Home Interview must always be a priority when the child has:

- 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.
- have been reported missing on two or more occasions or who are frequently away from placement (or their home) without authorisation;

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.

Prior to any interview conducted with a child, the interviewer should inform the young person who this information will be shared with, when and why, and gain consent before sharing. If they are

unwilling to accept an interview for fear of confidentiality issues they should be encouraged to call the 'Missing People' confidential Freephone helpline on 116 000 or 'Childline' on 0800 1111.

The Interviewer needs to provide the child with information about what a return interview is about before they take part so they can fully contribute. By the end of the interview the interviewer should have made it clear to the young child what they are worried about and what steps they may take to address this. The RHI will be an opportunity to share information with the child on how to stay safe, including helpful numbers to call if they choose to run away again. Local community support services will also be discussed with the child, and appropriate referrals can be made from the RHI. Information gained through this interview is fed back to the child's social worker or lead professional, or to Police using Police Intelligence Form. Themes or areas/persons of concern are identified and inform into the weekly Complex Safeguarding Multi Agency Exploitation Operation Group and the bimonthly (strategic) Exploitation Group.

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. Any information or support available to parents should also be considered.

If a child returns and discloses significant harm or there is evidence of harm having taken place or an ongoing risk of harm likely, a further strategy discussion is required for that specific incident/allegation.

10. Weekly Complex Safeguarding Missing and Exploitation Operational Group (Complex Safeguarding MEOG)

Children who are identified by the Daily Operation Missing Meeting as having come to harm or where there are indicators of harm or exploitation will be scheduled for discussion at weekly Complex Safeguarding MEOG.

A time slot invitation to attend weekly Complex Safeguarding MEOG will be sent to SW/LP/PM an, where relevant, **DSL and Contextual Safeguarding Delivery Officer** on the day that the harm or risk of harm was identified. A conference call facility will be available.

The agenda will include a short summary of why the child is at heightened vulnerability and the circumstances complex, as outlined on the DOM or Complex Safeguarding & Child Exploitation Notification.

Together with the social worker or lead professional, the multi-agency group will:

- Seek to understand the circumstances that led to a child being exploited, going missing and/or coming to harm;
- Seek to understand what happened during the missing episode and any disclosures or observations of a child upon their return or in the return home interview;
- Consider evidence and indicators of exploitation or vulnerability to exploitation or criminality/serious harm to others;
- Review interventions/support in place to repair harm and reduce likelihood of further missing episodes or harm;
- Together create an up to date and dynamic safety plan, identifying any actions required which could include additional support needed for the child, including health or pastoral support in school and agree who will arrange this;
 - develop any contextual safeguarding response (including disruption of potential perpetrators or organised crime groups);

- address blockages in access to services or actions being completed and ensure Pan Sussex Procedures and statutory requirements are being adhered to; and
- Identify themes and trends with children’s vulnerabilities, places and perpetrators to develop targeted responses.

The Weekly Complex Safeguarding MEOG is chaired by Children’s Social Care or Police and has participation of a multi-agency group to review Children who have been reported to Police as Missing in the previous week as well as review the management of risk of children who are at risk of being exploited.

Complex Safeguarding MEOG will check that when a child has been missing the risk of exploitation has been considered, that there is a safety plan in place and identify services and interventions available to reduce the likelihood of a child repeatedly going missing. Professionals regularly attending the Weekly CS MEOG include: Child Exploitation and Missing Advanced Practitioners, Missing Children Team, CSC Practice or Group Managers, Youth Justice Service, Missing Police Team, Early Help, Barnardo’s, CAMHS, Leaving Care and asphaleia. The Commissioning Manager also attend to represent children placed in residential homes in West Sussex by WSCC or by other local authorities. Safety planning actions are outlined by MEOG with identified risks to the child as a priority and relevant owners of these actions and timescales will be agreed. CS MEOG can be kept informed of any actions regarding a child going missing or at risk of going missing via CSEHUB@westsussex.gov.uk.

11. Additional Considerations for Children Missing from Care

The Care Plan

Prior to each accommodation arrangement for a Child Looked After, the Social Worker must consider within the care planning process all potential risks to the child including an assessment of the potential for them to go missing. The child and their parent/carer should be involved in the planning process and it should be related to that individual’s needs, previous history and views. Missing episodes prior to the child becoming looked after must to be taken into account.

When placing outside West Sussex, it is even more critical to properly assess the above issues. If there is a need to discuss specific risks or issues, the placing Authority should speak to the Safeguarding Unit in the Authority in which the child would live. When a placement is confirmed, the Placing Authority **must always** follow the Formal Notification Process to inform the new Authority that a Looked After Child is being placed in their area – the Placement Finding Team complete this notification process – however the social worker will need to inform the placing authority, their MaCSE, Missing and CSE Team and local Missing Police of the Safety / Trigger Plan.

Please ensure Missing.Children@westsussex.gov.uk copied into these notifications.

The initial Placement Plan is an opportunity for the care provider/foster carer and the social worker to discuss with the young person issues around going missing and absent and to explain the rules and responsibilities of all involved. It is also the opportunity to provide the carer with details of the young person and their family and history. This will help carers to understand any risks to the young person or themselves if they go missing and it may help to locate the young person. The Placement Plan should cover:

- Trigger points for absence or missing episodes;
- Risks to themselves, the public and/or the carer before, during or after a missing episode including when being picked up;
- What steps can be taken to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing and coming to any harm or harming others.
- Friends and family details and contact numbers as well as addresses commonly found at;
- Expectations of the young person: e.g curfew; when and how to make contact; consequences of lateness etc.
- Expectations of the care provider / foster carer:

- at what point the Police will be notified, the information the police will need, what processes will follow an incident, who will collect a child if they are missing, details of who conducts immediate assessments on their return and support arrangements for full return interviews etc.
- to immediately inform social worker / EDT and keep them constantly up to date
- to attend Strategy Meetings as practicable

All these elements should be reviewed during the care planning process. (More detailed and specific guidance can be found at the end of this document).

For children who are placed in residential care there is further guidance in the NMS & Children's Homes Regulations.

In addition, when a young person who is looked after goes missing the IRO must be informed.

Parental Responsibility

When a child or young person is reported 'Missing', the carer(s), Local Authority with Parental Responsibility (PR) and the police have **joint** responsibility for protecting the wellbeing of the individual. Whilst the police are the lead professionals for the investigation of 'Missing' people, any child who is Looked After by the Local Authority remains the responsibility of that Local Authority at all times.

Equally, the act of reporting a child or young person MISSING (or Absent) by staff at the care establishment or foster home does not absolve the carers from their 'duty of care' to the individual and of continued duty to do what a 'reasonable parent' would do. It is good practice for the care provider to record all incidents of absence in order to build a picture of behaviour.

Publicity of Looked After Children

Before any final decision is made, the Police will discuss any publicity of a child or young person missing from care with the child's care provider, and social worker, for all CLA the Head of Children's Social Care needs to approve any media release. This will be done in sufficient time for Children's Services to notify the child's parents / next of kin. In a situation of immediate risk of harm the police will risk assess publicity for High Risk missing children and will notify social worker and care provider as soon as practicable on the decision.

12. Looked After Children Placed outside of West Sussex

Carers have responsibility for notifying missing incidents to:

- The local missing police team in the Local Authority in which the child is residing
- MASH in the Local Authority in which the child is residing,
- and the Local Authority which has Parental Responsibility – i.e. West Sussex
- WSCC MASH and the child's social worker.
- In addition we ask that the carers inform our Missing Children Team via Missing.Children@westsussex.gov.uk.

The child's social worker will be responsible for

- Arranging a joint strategy meeting with the placing authority MASH; with our Missing Police Team in West Sussex and the local Missing Police Team in the local authority where the child is placed.
- Arranging a Return Home Interview when the child is found – please refer to best practice guidance for Return Home Interviews. What is important is that the person completing the return home interview ((RHI) is independent of the child's care provider so that they are able to talk freely about any anxieties or concerns they have about their care that may have contributed to them running away. For a child placed at a distance you may be able to engage a local independent charity /organisation that provides RHI's, you can do this yourself or

another professional can provide this, or you may have to complete this by phone. If you do complete this by phone, wherever possible, ensure the child is able to have a confidential conversation with you

- Reviewing the safety plan and take steps to prevent the child from missing again.

13. Children Missing from School or their Educational setting

If a young person under 16 (or 18 if in care) is found to be missing from a school or educational facility (College / University), the educational authorities must inform the person or organisation with parental responsibility. It is the parent's / carer's responsibility then to notify the police of the missing child. If the individual is aged over 16 years (over 18 years if in care), the educational authorities may decide to report the individual missing directly to the Police. The only exceptions to this rule are:

- When Managers of the institution make a professional judgement that circumstances indicate too high a risk so any delay must be avoided, such as for very young children or people with Special Educational Needs or disabilities;
- Those resident at the school or educational facility (i.e. Boarding school) when staff may decide to report the individual missing directly to the police;
- In cases where the educational establishment cannot get in contact with the person with parental responsibility;
- If the school has concerns about compromised parenting and / or believes the parents will not report the young person missing in a timely manner. Reference should also be made to the Specific Circumstances (see **Pan Sussex Procedures; Section 8, Specific Circumstances**) discussed below. Schools should follow their usual Safeguarding procedures and report to Social Care where they have concerns for the child's safety and welfare during or following a missing or any absent episode.

UK Visas and Immigration can support partner agencies with information on children who are, or who are suspected to be, subject to immigration control who are missing from education.

Please use this form. See **Appendix E: Children Missing Education - Home Office Request for Information**.

Missing from school or an educational setting should not be confused with "Missing from Education" which is about an individual's access, or lack of access, to education rather than their physical location.

14. Children missing with their families

Refer to [Pan Sussex Procedures](#);

Police may make use of information as follows:

- The local DWP office should be asked to search local and national records for information;
- The Child Benefit Agency on **0845 302 1444**, for any information they can supply;
- UK Visas and Immigration can be contacted if it is suspected the child may be being taken out of the country without permission. Police have established procedures to obtain exit information from the UKVI National Border Targeting Centre (NBTC). This unit has access to electronic records of all passengers leaving the UK. In association with UKVI and Special Branch, arrangements could be put in place for the child and any accompanying persons to be potentially stopped at the airport / port.

Consideration should also be made of any vulnerable adults within the family or any possibility that the family are running away from a threat due to Domestic Abuse or 'Honour-based violence' etc. These elements should be shared by Social Care with the Police.

15. Child Exploitation

There is a strong link between people (including adults and boys) being at risk of exploitation and going missing from home or care - evidence suggest that 90% of children subject to sexual grooming go missing at some point (DCSF, 2009). Early intervention, effective monitoring and management of children who are reported as missing provide an early recognition of the possibility of Child Exploitation.

Concerns around suspected exploitation could include:

- The child is repeatedly reported missing from home;
- The child is known to be visiting locations or addresses which raise suspicions around sexual or criminal exploitation;
- The child has unexplained money, gifts, mobile phones etc;
- The child has additional vulnerability; this is linked to the age of the child.

If child exploitation is suspected or a risk then the WSCSB [CE procedures](#) should be referred to and a [Complex Safeguarding](#) and Child Exploitation Notification should be completed, and sent to the CSEHub (CSEHub@westsussex.gov.uk) (use link below for specific guidance)

16. Further Guidance/Information

Timeline Guide for social workers of children who go missing i.e. those children that are open to Children's Social Care



Timeline Guide for
when Children Go Mis

[DoE Statutory Guidance Missing from care published 2014](#)

[The Childrens Society APPG Report for runaway and missing children 2012](#)

[Still in harms way Report 2018 from ECPAT and Missing People Charity](#)

[Govt Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018](#)

[WSCSB Procedures - Missing Children](#)

Review / Contacts / References	
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