

Missing Child Policy

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

This policy provides essential information on what happens when a child in foster care goes missing, and how we work together to plan for and prevent children from going missing. It takes into account the guidance under standard 5 of the National Minimum Standards 2011 dealing with Children Missing from Care.

You can find more detailed information on the process and the activities of different agencies in the local missing child protocol for your area:

- [Kingston and Richmond LSCB Joint Handbook for Safeguarding Missing Children](#)
- [RBWM Procedures Online Children Missing From Care](#)

1.2. Why children go missing

Children who go missing from home or care place themselves, and sometimes others, at increased risk of being harmed. The reasons why children go missing are complex and frequently involve a number of push and pull factors which should not be viewed in isolation from a child's home circumstances or experience in care. Every missing episode warrants professional attention, and practitioners need to offer a consistent and coherent response to ensure the child is protected from harm.

1.3. Care planning and risk assessment

Every child who is looked after has a care plan based on a full assessment of their current and future needs, including potential risks to themselves and to others. The care plan will take into account any risk that the child may go missing and any factors that may increase risk should they go missing. All risk information should also be included in the child's placement plan. Relevant information about the risks that a child may go missing should be shared with foster carers and the Police. If there are grounds to suspect that a child is likely to go missing from his or her placement, a multi-agency preventative meeting should be held to reduce the risks.

The risk assessment should consider:

- Any clear antecedents or trigger factors for when the child has previously gone missing
- The likelihood of the child going missing (push and pull factors)
- The seriousness of the risks the child is likely to face whilst absent
- Control measures to reduce these risks
- The actions that need to be taken if a child goes missing
- Who needs to be informed

Should a child go missing then a recent photograph of the child will need to be made available to the Police. Most commonly the photograph will be used by Police officers to help them identify the child when actively looking for the child at relevant locations. In serious cases the Police and Achieving for Children may decide to use this photograph more widely as part of a media strategy to locate the child. A recent photograph bearing a good likeness of a looked-after child must be kept on record by Achieving for Children for every child. When a child becomes looked-after, the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for

a photograph to be used in any missing person investigation. Achieving for Children will also ensure that sufficient knowledge and information about the child is recorded to enable a detailed Police report to be made should a child go missing from care.

2. What happens when a child goes missing

2.1. Immediate risk

If you are worried that a child or young person is at immediate risk, report it directly to the police by calling 999.

Achieving for Children should also be alerted by calling:

- for Kingston and Richmond the Single Point of Access (SPA) on 020 8547 5008 or 020 8770 5000 if out of hours
- for Windsor and Maidenhead the First Response and Assessment team on 01628 683 150 or 01344 786543 if out of hours.

2.2. What to do if a child in your care is missing

2.2.1. Basic measures

Foster carers are normally expected to undertake the following basic measures to try to locate their missing child and ascertain his or her safety, if it is considered safe to do so:

- Call or text any mobile phone held by the child or young person and leave a message asking them to make contact
- Search for the missing child in their home and immediate locality, including bedroom, accommodation, outbuilding and vehicles
- Contact known friends and relatives where the child/ young person might be, and if they are not there gather any available information regarding their whereabouts
- Visit locations that the child/ young person is known to go to, if it is possible

Professionals working with foster carers should support them in taking the steps above if required.

If it comes to the attention of any agency that a child is missing, they should check that the carer has taken the basic measures outlined above to try and locate the child. They must advise the carer of their need to report this matter to the police. If appropriate they also need to check that the matter is reported to the police.

Anyone who has care of a child without parental knowledge or agreement needs to do all that is reasonable to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of the child. They should inform the carers, police and/or Achieving for Children about the whereabouts and safety of the child.

2.2.2. Determine if a child is 'missing'

The foster carer should determine if the child is missing from placement. Not all absences from a care placement will warrant a missing report. A child who is half-an-hour late returning from school would not usually be considered a missing person; neither would a child be missing if they are known to be staying safely with a friend for a short period and are likely to return home. Absent status can only last for a maximum of 24 hours and the child should always be reclassified as missing at the 24 hour mark at the very latest.

To determine if a child should be reported missing, foster carers should consider the circumstances of the absence and the risk to the child. Making this decision will require a consideration of the following factors:

- The circumstances of the child's absence
- The legal status of the child and his or her care plan
- The age and maturity of the child
- Any physical or cognitive disabilities or medical requirements
- Previous behaviour and historical concerns
- The child's tendency to substance misuse
- Any circumstances within the placement relevant to the absence
- The risk of offending
- The influence of peer groups, friends and family members
- The risk of sexual exploitation or predatory influences on the child
- Any known risk of abduction
- The general vulnerability of the child.

For a small number of children and young people it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. This should be part of the child's care plan/risk assessment and will normally be due to his or her vulnerability. A child identified as at risk of sexual exploitation should not be considered absent but as missing. They will be flagged automatically by the Police as missing. The Police are responsible for assessing and classifying the degree of risk when a child goes missing from home or care.

2.2.3. Reviewing absence

The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances should be taken into account. If the child is receiving support or services from CAMHS professionals or other agencies it would be advisable to discuss the case with them to inform the decision; however, if they are not readily available a decision must be made on the basis of the best available information.

A review should be conducted and recorded at a minimum of six-hourly intervals except during the night when a review should be conducted and recorded at 2300 hours and again at 0800 hours on the following morning.

If the assessment of the foster carer is that there is **no apparent risk to the child's immediate safety**, he or she should record the absence as absent from placement without authorisation in the child's record, and inform the child's allocated social worker or Emergency Duty Team if out of hours:

- for Kingston and Richmond the Single Point of Access (SPA) on 020 8547 5008 or 020 8770 5000 if out of hours
- for Windsor and Maidenhead the First Response and Assessment team on 01628 683 150 or 01344 786543 if out of hours.

The record should be dated and timed including a log of any contact made or attempted with the child, the child's response (or lack of response) and an indication of the assessed risk. Responsibility for managing this type of absence remains with the carer and the allocated social worker.

If the carer and/or allocated social worker know the child's whereabouts they will need to make a decision about whether to allow the child to temporarily remain at that location or make arrangements to facilitate the child's return.

Where the assessment of the foster carer is that the child **is at risk from being absent** from his or her placement, the child should be reported as missing to the Police.

2.2.4. Reporting a child missing to the police

When reporting a child missing to the police, any relevant information that might help to find or support the child should be shared, including:

- If there are any specific risks
- A description of the child/young person and the clothing they were wearing
- Any mobile phone numbers
- Whether or not the missing child/young person uses social media
- Details of the placing authority if outside of RBWM
- Details of where the child/young person was last seen, when and with whom
- A recent photograph
- Relevant addresses, known associates and addresses frequented
- Details of any previous absences – when, where, for how long, with whom, where found/when returned
- The circumstances and any relevant information such as an argument, being bullied etc.
- Any other information that be seen as increasing the vulnerability of the child/young person such as learning disability, if the child/young person has previously experienced or considered being at risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced marriage or female genital mutilation.

Foster carers should always ask for and record the Police Incident Number.

Please note that once you have told the police that the child is missing, they will have a right to search your house internally and externally.

You will also need to report to the police about whether you have contacted:

- The child's parents
- Other significant relatives or friends
- The child's Social Worker or the Emergency Duty Team.

2.2.5. Informing Achieving for Children

You must tell the child's Social Worker (inside office hours) or the Emergency Duty Team (outside office hours) immediately. They may be able to help you recover the child, but only if this does not put the Social Worker or the Emergency Duty Team in danger or in a compromising position.

- for Kingston and Richmond the Single Point of Access (SPA) on 020 8547 5008 or 020 8770 5000 if out of hours
- for Windsor and Maidenhead the First Response and Assessment team on 01628 683 150 or 01344 786543 if out hours.

2.2.7. What happens next

The Police will decide if a child is recorded as 'absent' or 'missing'.

A child is considered to be 'missing' if his or her whereabouts cannot be established, whatever the circumstances of his or her disappearance, and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the child may be the subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.

A child is absent when he or she is not at a place where he or she is expected or required to be. The absent category will include cases where children are not presently where they are supposed to be and where there is no apparent risk of harm. Absent cases will be monitored by the Police with consideration given to escalating the case to the missing category where there is a change in circumstances that has increased the level of risk to the child.

Where a child has been identified as at risk of sexual exploitation he or she should not be considered as absent, but as missing. All children under the age of 13 reported to Police, whether "absent" or "missing", will be classified due to risk issues as "missing".

Normally, when a child has been missing for a period of 24 hours, Achieving for Children will initiate a multi-agency meeting with the Police and other relevant agencies (this timescale could be shortened depending on risk factors). The meeting will agree the safety plan for the child and agree the actions that are necessary to locate the child and facilitate his or her return to the placement or to an alternative placement where that is in his or her best interests. Further meetings should be held at least every seven days or until the child is located. The initial meeting should determine whether the second or any subsequent meetings should be held before the child has been missing for seven days. This decision should be informed by the Police risk assessment, a multi-agency chronology and the child's care plan. The minutes from meetings should be circulated to all agencies attending the meeting and recorded on the case management system.

2.2.6. Missing episodes during external activities or outings

If a looked after child goes missing during an external activity or outing, the responsible adult in charge of the activity, outing or holiday will:

- Arrange a search of the area where the child went missing
- Notify the local Police for that area

The Police for the area where the child went missing and the Police for the area where the child normally resides will decide which Police Force and division will take responsibility for managing the investigation. This will normally be the Police Force and division that covers the area where the majority of enquiries are likely to be conducted. The Police will notify the responsible local authority of their decision. The relevant team manager will be responsible for ensuring the guidance in relation to a missing looked-after child are followed. Ongoing communication must be maintained between the allocated social worker or team manager and the Police Force responsible for managing the missing person enquiry to support the investigation. The child's electronic social care record must reflect all the actions and discussions undertaken. The social worker should inform the child's parents or any other person with parental responsibility within 24 hours of the child going missing.

2.2.7 When a missing child is located

The foster carer is responsible for collecting the child and returning him or her to the care setting. The allocated social worker may be able to assist with this. If there are thought to be specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in collecting and returning the child, then coordinated action should be agreed with the Police.

The foster carer or residential unit manager should request Police assistance to collect a child if:

- The carer is being prevented from obtaining access to the child
- There is evidence to suggest that the child is at immediate risk of harm
- This is necessary to prevent a public order incident due to a threat of violence or disorder

If the Police locate a child they should not leave them at a location where he or she is likely to be exposed to the risk of harm, or from where they are likely to go missing again, prior to the carer(s) being able to make arrangements to collect the child. In some circumstances, the Police may need to consider returning a child direct to his or her care placement or taking the child to a local Police station, after confirming a collection time with the carer(s).

Children should not be returned to the place they ran away from until their safety and wellbeing is fully evaluated. If there are concerns that to do so would mean a child is likely to suffer significant harm, a referral must be made to children's social care services in Achieving for Children for the consideration of section 47 child protection enquiries. The Police may consider the use of Police Protection powers to ensure the safety of the children until child protection enquiries are undertaken, including applying for an Emergency Protection Order, or applying for a Recovery Order.

2.3. What to do when a child returns home

2.3.1. Give the child time to settle back in

When the child returns home, or is brought home, you will need to handle the situation carefully. Try not to ask too many questions about why the child went missing, or what happened while they were away from home. You will be able to ask these questions later, when the child has settled back in.

2.3.2. Who to tell a child has returned

Make sure that you have told everyone that the child has returned. This could include:

- The police
- Child's Social Worker
- The Emergency Duty Team
- The child's parents (subject to Care Plan)
- Other significant relatives or friends (subject to Care Plan)
- Anyone that you questioned about the child's whereabouts

2.3.3. What you need to record

If the child you are looking after goes missing, you will need to keep careful records. You will need to record:

- When the child went missing
- When they came back

- Whether the child was absconding, having an 'unauthorised absence' or was reported missing.
- Details of everyone that you informed when the child went missing
- Any other relevant information

2.3.4. Police Safe and Well Checks

The Police will complete a Safe and Well check in person within three hours of the child's return to placement, if they have been deemed at medium or low risk. If the child has been classified as high risk, the Safe and Well check must take place within one hour of return. It is common for children to be unwilling to engage in this process. If a child refuses to engage, it is important for the Police to record the child's manner, their physical appearance and any other factors that may be relevant as part of any ongoing investigation. The purpose of the Safe and Well check is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, identify where they have been and with whom, and to give them the opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them.

2.3.5. Return home interviews

Statutory guidance outlines that every missing child who returns to home or care will receive an independent return interview to determine the reasons for their missing behaviour and the associated risks to them. The views expressed by the child in the return interview will be taken seriously by all agencies. This meeting needs to take place in private with a trusted individual of the child's choosing. The fostering service will then consider with the child's social worker and foster carer what actions should be taken to prevent the child going missing in the future.

2.3.6. Reviewing the care plan

When a looked-after child who has been missing has been located, the allocated social worker and team manager will decide in consultation with the Independent Reviewing Officer, carers and child whether they should convene an early statutory review of the child's care plan. The statutory review will provide an opportunity to check that the care plan has been appropriately amended to address the reasons for the child's absences and include an intervention strategy to prevent future missing episodes.

2.3.6. What happens the child goes missing again

The child's social worker will arrange a planning meeting if a child goes missing more than once, or if they develop a pattern of going missing. The social worker may want to involve the police.

At this meeting, you will work together to plan what to do if the child goes missing again. Normally, the plan will be reviewed as part of the care planning process.

Achieving for Children will appoint a named worker (normally the child's social worker) to liaise with the police if necessary. The child will not normally be placed elsewhere unless the child's absence or absences become a problem. The foster carer would need to discuss with their supervising social worker how to handle the situation.

3. Further information and support

3.1. Training

Foster carers should be provided with training, supervision and support in missing child policy and procedures and develop skills to enable them to divert children from going missing.

3.2. Further information

The following are sources of further information on local missing child protocols and the legislative and regulatory framework relating to missing child processes:

- Kingston and Richmond LSCB Joint Handbook for Safeguarding Missing Children
- Pan Berks Procedures Children Missing From Care
- Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care (2014)
- Working Together to Safeguard Children and related guidance
- Children Act 1989 and related guidance
- Children Act 2004 and related guidance
- London Child Protection Procedures and Practice Guidance Berks equivalent
- ACPO guidance on management, recording and investigation of missing persons (2010)
- ACPO interim guidance on the management of missing persons (2013)
- Metropolitan Police Missing Persons Standard Operating Procedure (2016) Berks equivalent
- Safeguarding children who may have been trafficked (2011)
- The national minimum standards for residential and fostering agencies (2011)

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