

**TITLE OF REPORT:** **Missing from care episodes and child sexual exploitation for children and young people looked after by Gateshead Council**

**REPORT OF:** **Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning and Director of Children's Services**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report provides an updated summary of missing from care episodes from December 2018 to November 2019 and an update regarding protection and monitoring of child exploitation.

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#### **Background**

1. Young people who go "missing" from their home, foster care or residential care, do so for many complex reasons which cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and their experience within the Looked After system. It is therefore essential that the Council monitors this closely and understands what is happening for the young people living within the borough.

#### **Policy Context**

2. Gateshead Council has clear procedures regarding missing children and young people which incorporate a joint protocol between Northumbria Police and Children's Social Care. The procedures and data systems formed part of the Gateshead Safeguarding Children Partnership's (GSCP's) oversight of arrangements. The protocol was updated in May 2019 and then in September 2019, the new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements came into effect. Missing from home or care is still a priority for the partnership.

#### **Definition of Missing from Care**

3. In July 2017 Northumbria Police adopted the new missing definition to identify the type of missing activity;

**"Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed."**

4. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. The police determine the level of risk (low/medium/high) based on the information shared with them.
5. All professionals must ensure that all known information held on a child/young person is shared with the Police to ensure that the correct level of risk is applied – including if child is Looked After or if they have any other vulnerabilities.
6. A missing category for each young person may be different depending upon the management of assessed risks relating to the young person.
  - **Low** - Risk of harm to subject/public is possible but minimal
  - **Medium** – Risk of harm to subject/public likely but not serious
  - **High** – risk of 'serious harm' to subject/public is assessed as very likely (serious harm is defined as – risk that is life threatening and/or traumatic, from which recovery, whether physical or psychological can be expected to be difficult or impossible)

### Missing

7. Within Gateshead a child is categorised as missing when their location or reason for absence is unknown **and/or** there is cause for concern for the child because of their vulnerability or there is a potential danger to the public.
8. A child or young person who is absent should be classified as missing if one or more of the criteria below apply:
  - There is identified or imminent risk of the child or young person being exposed to significant harm
  - The child or young person poses a risk of significant harm to others
  - There are suspicious circumstances
  - The absence is out of character or unusual behaviour
  - There are indications that the child has already come to harm
  - There are indications that the episode is not a deliberate or careless act
  - There are indications that the child or young person
    - Is not expected to return within reasonable time limits
    - Is not staying at homes of others known to them
    - Will not be easily located
9. A child or young person in this category must be reported to the police.
10. In October 2019 the police developed a new protocol/initiative to help locate and safely return a young person in residential care and in some fostering placements as quickly as possible when they are missing. This went live on 1 December 2019 and is known as the Philomena protocol. There are forms with vital information on for foster carers and residential staff to complete as well as there being an up to date photograph of the young person. The police Missing from Care Co-ordinator is expected to contact/visit residential homes or foster placements where children regularly go missing and are deemed high risk to

ensure information around risk and associates is shared and agree a robust plan for joint actions to trace the child. Philomena puts police and partners on the front foot in the event of a missing episode and all agencies can respond quickly and effectively to safely locate the child. This will be reviewed after three months to look at how well this is working

11. The protocol for responding to missing children has been updated, and all children who go missing are now offered a Return Home interview (RHI), regardless of how long they have been missing or how often. The RHI form has been reviewed and updated to ensure push and pull factors are considered and to allow for more narrative (including any previous missing episodes). Guidance notes for completion are available for workers who complete RHIs. RHIs are now recorded on Carefirst (the social care system) and are overseen by the specialist support team (Early Help)

### **Absent**

12. There is also an absent category that has the following definition:

Absent - "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk."

13. 'Absent' cases should not be ignored and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk.
14. Whether the absence is careless or deliberate, if there is no apparent risk for their immediate safety, or that of the public, absent episodes must be carefully monitored. It is also still important that staff/carers record these incidences in case the level of risk changes as the child may subsequently be categorised as missing.

### **Categories of risk**

15. **HIGH**

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

16. The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public are in danger.

17. **MEDIUM**

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

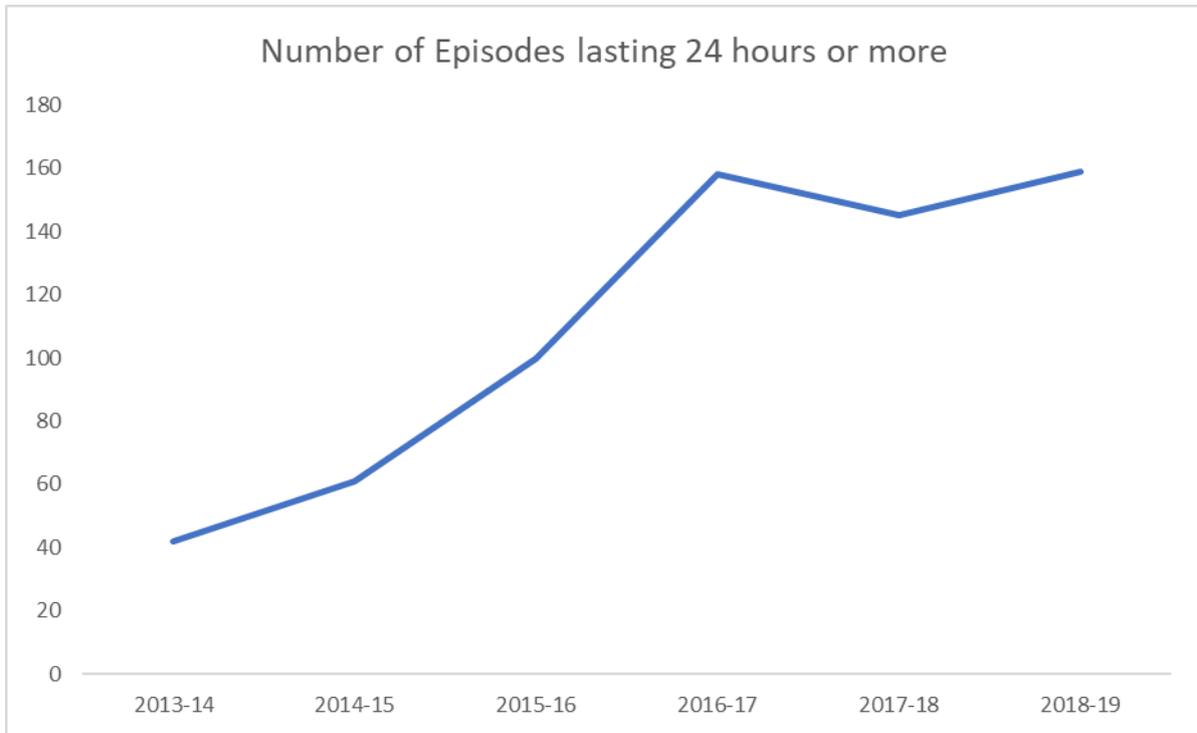
18. **LOW**

There is no apparent threat of danger to either the child or young person or the public.

19. The key messages from research regarding young people Missing from Care over the last five years indicated the need for a regional approach and highlighted that:
- Few young people leave their local area
  - Many stay with friends known to them/relatives, less than a third or a quarter sleep rough
  - Most common reasons for running away are conflict with parents/step parents and carers and wanting to spend time with friends and partners
  - Young people who run away are more likely to be absent from school through refusal to attend or exclusion
  - Young people are at as much risk whether they are missing for the first time or on any subsequent occasions
  - Young people who go missing are often very vulnerable and place themselves at risk and are exposed to violence, victimisation, sexual exploitation and involvement in crime
20. It is important that the assessment of risk is a dynamic process and should be re-considered and challenged at every point during a child or young person's absence.
21. As a minimum requirement when a child is missing the risk assessment should be reviewed every eight hours and the level of prevailing risk agreed by carers and other professionals responsible for that young person's health safety and wellbeing.

### **Overall data**

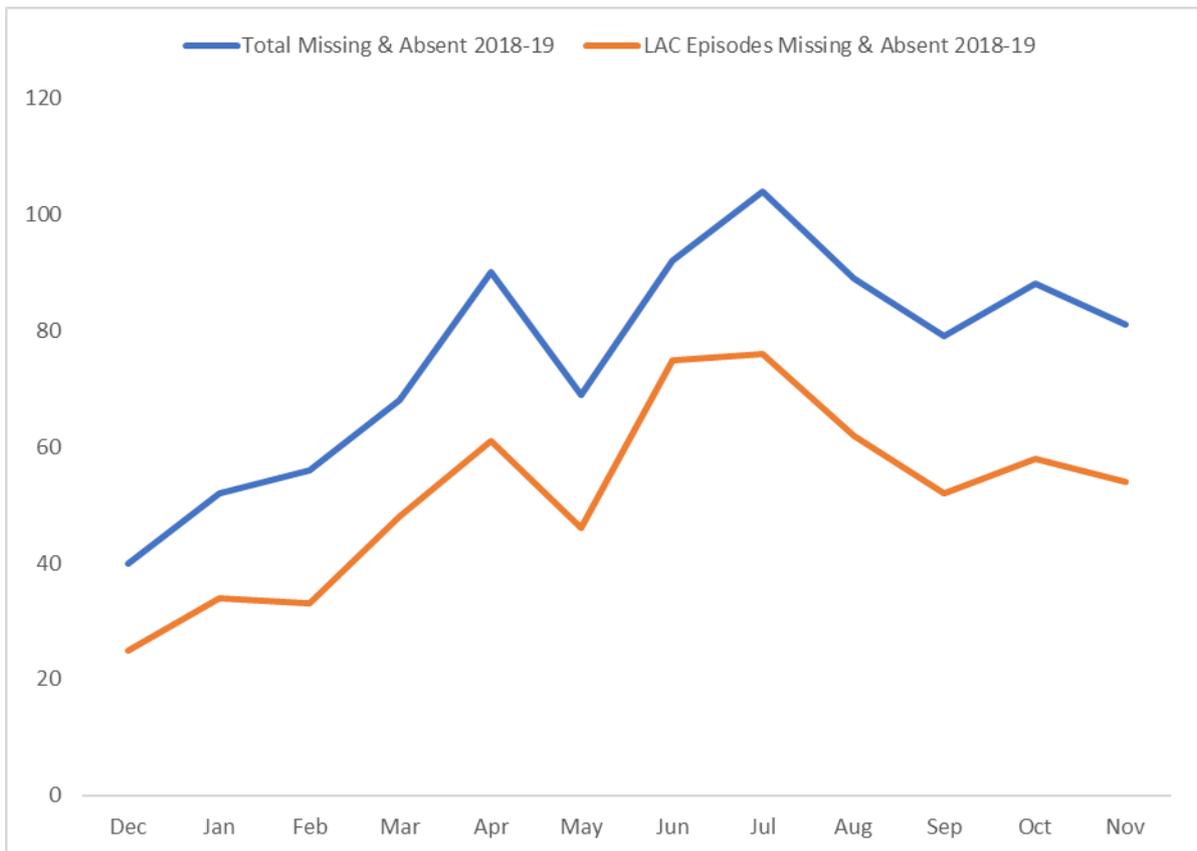
22. There were 908 missing episodes in total between December 2018 and November 2019, of which 626 (69%) were looked after children. Whilst this represents a decrease in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2017-18 (948) it also shows an increase in terms of the number of missing from care episodes which involved looked after children for the same period (612 (65%)).
23. There is a difference between the number of missing/absent episodes each month and the number of missing/absent individuals as some people will have more than one episode. Each month the number of individual young people in total and individual looked after children reported missing varies and is different from the number of missing episodes.
24. Over the last 12 months young people who have been recorded as missing from care have in most cases returned quickly to their placements.
25. A small cohort of missing episodes of looked after children are for more than a 24-hour period. They are young people who are in the older age group and who have had very complex needs and backgrounds. Clear procedures are in place to manage these longer episodes.
26. Between December 2018 and November 2019 there were 159 episodes where a young person was missing or absent for over 24 hours. Most of those young people were missing from care (63%), which is an increase on last year.



27. It is always a concern when young people are missing for over 24 hours which is why it is monitored to see if there are any patterns for individual or groups of young people. Targeted interventions are implemented and, disruption plans looked at by the multi-agency Missing Slavery Exploited and Trafficking (MSET) group to ensure everyone is doing all they can to keep young people safe

#### Dec 2018 – Nov 2019 data

Month	Total missing and absent episodes	Number of individuals	Episodes over 24 hours	LAC missing and absent episodes	Number of individual LAC	
December	40	23	5	25 (62.5%)	9	
January	52	32	9	34 (65.4%)	16	
February	56	31	5	33 (58.9%)	11	
March	68	32	6	48 (70.6%)	15	
April	90	39	15	61 (67.8%)	21	
May	69	39	14	46 (66.7%)	24	
June	92	31	17	75 (81.5%)	20	
July	104	44	17	76 (73.1%)	24	
August	89	40	26	62 (69.7%)	21	
September	79	44	23	52 (65.8%)	23	
October	88	40	15	58 (65.9%)	17	
November	81	43	7	54 (66.7%)	21	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>908</b>		<b>159</b>	<b>624 (68.7%)</b>		



28. To try and understand the missing episodes of looked after children the following data looks at where young people are placed, and the number of missing episodes linked to both residential placements and foster placements

Month	Placement Young Person reported missing from (number of episodes)				Total
	Residential		Foster Care		
	in-house	Other residential (out of borough, private, independent living)	Gateshead (in-house)	IFA placements	
December	2	7	16	0	25
January	6	15	13	0	34
February	7	10	16	0	33
March	15	16	16	1	48
April	12	15	29	5	61
May	2	20	20	4	46
June	6	14	51	4	75
July	14	21	35	7	77
August	9	17	33	3	62
September	16	18	18	0	52
October	22	20	16	1	59
November	13	29	11	1	54
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>626</b>

29. The data demonstrates that there was a significant number of missing episodes from our in-house residential provision. These missing episodes relate to a relatively small number of young people with one young person having 36 missing episodes over a 6month period, another having 25 missing episodes over a 4month period and a third having 21 missing episodes over a 3month period.
30. Interventions and incentives are in place to reduce the number of missing episodes for these young people.
31. In relation to other residential, including out of borough provision, the high numbers of missing episodes relate again to a relatively small group of young people. One young person went missing 27 times, another went missing 23 times and a further five young people went missing between 16 and 19 times each, which accounts for 136 of the 202 missing episodes.
32. In relation to children placed with in-house foster carers, the majority of these missing episodes relate to seven young people who each had over 10 missing episodes. The largest number of missing episodes related to two young females who were missing a total of 46 and 44 times respectively and have subsequently been placed in residential provision. The remaining five young people accounted for 103 missing episodes out of the remaining 184 episodes.

## **Other relevant information**

### **Return interviews**

33. When a child is reported missing from home or care for a second or subsequent time in a six-month period or for a single episode lasting longer than 24 hours, they are offered an Independent Return Interview. This differs from a police Safe and Well Check (which all missing people receive on return) and is carried out by skilled and experienced workers to determine underlying reasons for the missing episode and wider risks and vulnerability factors. The interviews are also used to identify broader trends, including “CSE hotspots” and there are clear links into MSET meetings and intelligence sharing with police.
34. These interviews are undertaken by workers in Early Help and the outcome of the return interview is shared with the young person’s social worker, the police and any other relevant professionals. In cases where a Gateshead child is looked after and placed out of borough the return interview is commissioned and undertaken by someone within the area the young person lives. This information is shared with the social worker and the hosting local authority.
35. Participation levels for Return Interviews is an area of work that needs to be improved as often young people refuse to engage at all and of the ones carried out young people are often quite reluctant to share the reasons why they have gone missing or absent.

**Summary of reasons given by young people for going missing or absent December 2018 to September 2019 (old Return Interview form)**

	Care	Home
Alcohol	26	4
Bullying	2	2
CSE	11	4
Domestic Violence	2	0
Drugs	21	2
Emotional	37	11
Neglect	1	0
Physical	4	1
Planned	39	7
Sexual	8	3

36. Between December 2018 and September 2019, the number of Return Interviews requested was 292, and the number that were completed following engagement with a total of 43 young people was 155; an uptake rate of approximately 53% (a decrease on the rate for 2017-18).

37. In August 2019 the Return Interview process and recording form changed and all young people reported missing are offered a return interview. The form now records vulnerabilities, as well as re-wording the reason categories for the missing episodes. Since the process changed, 99 IRI's have been carried out for a total of 59 young people.

**Summary of vulnerabilities identified by workers completing the Return Interview forms (August to November 2019)**

	Total
Concerns about Physical & Emotional Presentation	20
Criminal Exploitation	25
Misuse of Substances	39
Offending Behaviour	18
Self-Harm	11
Sexual Exploitation	32
Trafficking/Modern Slavery	9

## Summary of the most prominent reasons given by young people for going missing (August to November 2019)

	Total
Avoiding an abusive situation	2
Avoiding contact with family or friends	6
Bullying	5
Felt pressured or coerced	3
Involved in offending behaviour	1
Other reason	17
Problems at home	25
Reason unknown	2
Seeking contact with family or friends	48
Substance misuse	8

38. It is essential that this work continues as the information provided feeds into the MSET. This completion rate is significantly higher than in other areas where external services are commissioned to provide the service and reflects the specialist skills and local knowledge that workers have whilst also retaining independence from the case. The Early Help workers also have links in to other services which means that appropriate support can then be put in place for young people when required.

### Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficking (MSET)

39. In addition to being reviewed and monitored by their own social workers and care team, children who go missing regularly from care are also monitored by **MSET**, which is a multi-agency sub group of the Strategic Exploitation Group. MSET monitors and coordinates multi-agency activity for children who are reported missing from home or care and has oversight of cases where there are concerns about slavery, exploitation or trafficking.

40. There were 46 cases discussed at MSET due to concerns about them in 2018-2019, eight of which were discussed on more than one occasion. This is a 42% decrease from 2017-2018 when there were 79 cases discussed (20 of those were discussed more than once).

41. It is not possible to separate how many of those cases were discussed due to missing episodes and how many due to sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation due to the overlap between the concerns, but an MSET risk assessment was carried out for each case that was discussed and disruption plans put in place.

42. It is thought that this decrease represents improved screening and assessment of risk, rather than decreased incidence of exploitation. Police Child Concern Notifications (CCNs) are now picked up as part of the Police Triage and

Integrated Referral Team Process. During triage the Police MASH officers advise of concerns regarding exploitation and missing and invite the worker to consider MSET referrals and risk assessment. This has led to more appropriate referrals to MSET, focussing on high risk cases. It has also meant that lower risk cases that do not meet criteria for MSET can be managed appropriately to manage risks and work done to disrupt exploitation and try to prevent concerns escalating. More detail on the work of the MSET is set out in Appendix 4.

43. The GSCP Business Manager has reviewed how child exploitation is recorded on the Social Care System and is continually working with the management information team to improve recording to ensure data is accurate and up-to-date. This review has also looked at the way risk assessments are recorded, how we can improve the quality of risk assessments and how they inform care planning. This work was carried out alongside the wider review of the whole social care system, and will inform the specification for the new system, which is currently going through procurement process.

### **Practice developments**

44. The local authority continues to work to develop a system to capture and share accurate and meaningful information on missing from care episodes and will remain a priority area.
45. The local authority will continue to work with all agencies to strengthen work to protect those young people vulnerable to exploitation
46. Return interviews will continue and services will work together to try and improve the uptake and quality of these.

**Recommendation** - it is recommended that the Corporate Parenting OSC:

- (i) note and comment on the information provided in the report.
- (ii) consider the frequency with which it would like to receive Missing from Care reports

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