

TITLE OF REPORT: Missing from Care Episodes and child sexual exploitation for Children and Young People Looked After by Gateshead Council

REPORT OF: Strategic Director Learning and Children and Director of Children's Services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an updated summary of missing from care episodes from April 2014 to November 2015 and an update regarding protection and monitoring of child sexual exploitation.

1. Background

Young people who go "missing" from the care of the Council whether from foster care or residential care, do so for many often complex reasons which cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and their experience within the Looked After system.

2. Policy Context

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 form part of the Local Safeguarding Children Board's (LSCB's) oversight of arrangements. A designated officer is a legal requirement for each Local Authority. This remit is delegated to Service Manager Looked After Children.

3. Definition of Missing from Care

"A Looked After young person is considered missing if he/she is absent from her place of residence without authority." Children can be reported missing within 30 minutes to 3 hours from their anticipated return time.

To identify the type of missing activity there are three main categories of missing episodes outlined in the missing children and young people procedure, 'Unauthorised absence', 'Missing' and 'Absconder'. In addition a missing strategy for each young person may be different depending upon the management of assessed risks relating to the young person.

Unauthorised absence

Some children absent themselves for a short period and then return and during their absence their whereabouts are known or they have made contact. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose or accidentally, and may be testing boundaries, but do not jeopardise their wellbeing. This kind of boundary testing is within the range of normal teenage behaviour and not necessarily considered a risk.

Whether the absence is careless or deliberate, if there is no apparent risk for their immediate safety, or that of the public, it may fall within the unauthorised absence category. The assessment of the carer is initially that they are safe but are away from home without permission. It is still important that staff/ carers record these incidences (as unauthorised absences, not missing episodes), in case the level of risk changes and decisions are auditable. Unauthorised absences must be carefully monitored however as the child may subsequently go missing.

If a child's whereabouts are known then they cannot be 'missing'. For example, in some circumstances young people staying with a friend without prior agreement may not be 'at risk' and it would be inappropriate to flag this event as a missing from care incident or report it to the police.

In situations where a child is absent without permission the first response may be that providers of their care along with any relevant staff from their responsible authority, which could include the child's social worker, should act as a responsible parent and take all practical steps to establish the child's location and to ensure that they return to their placement without delay.

A child or young person who is absent should be classified as unauthorised absence if the criteria below apply:

- They have deliberately or carelessly absented themselves
- They are likely to return of their own accord or they are staying with others known to them
- They are likely to be easily located
- They are unlikely to suffer or cause significant harm whilst absent

Some police forces in the country formally record episodes of "unauthorised absence" and provide a different response to these cases than episodes where people are reported "missing". This process was introduced following revised guidance for police forces from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). Northumbria Police has decided not to adopt the new definition, and all missing reports are given the same "gold standard" response.

Missing

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.

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

A child or young person in this category must be reported to the police.

Absconder

An absconder is a child or young person who is absent from a placement without the permission of the responsible person and who is subject to a legal order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process or a secure order made in either civil or criminal proceedings.

A child or young person in this category must be reported to the Police as soon as possible and treated as a wanted person. The Police must be made aware of the particular order under which the child has been placed in the residence and the expiry date of the order.

4. Risk Assessment

In assessing the significance of any child's absence a risk assessment must be conducted. The service has developed a screening assessment tool based on the Phoenix model developed in Manchester. This tool is completed by the care team and if there is persistent missing episodes is presented to the Multi agency Sexual Exploitation Trafficking meeting.

Where a child is missing, relevant staff from Local Authority and Police, must consider the above definitions and take into consideration the child's care plan and factors listed below, when assessing risk:

- The legal status of the person in care (e.g. Emergency Protection Order, Full or Interim Care Order, remanded, curfew conditions etc.)
- Previous behaviour patterns. (Such as a history of absence and quick return)
- The child's state of mind/perceived risk. (Is child likely to self-harm or commit suicide? Does child see risks in a balanced way?)
- Group behaviour at the time of the absence
- Whether the young person is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation
- Any physical or learning disabilities the child may have which increase the risk to them
- Is the child vulnerable due to age or infirmity or any other factor?

- Is the child suspected to be the victim of a significant crime in progress, e.g. abduction?
- Are there family /relationship problems or recent history of family conflict, including domestic abuse
- Does the missing person have any physical illness, disability or mental health problems?
- Are they in the company of a person who may cause them harm?
- Do they require essential medication which is not likely to be available?
- Is there ongoing bullying or harassment, e.g. racial, sexual, homophobic or local community concerns and/or cultural issues?
- Do they pose a threat of harm to others?
- Is there drug or alcohol dependency or substance misuse?
- Any other particular circumstances at the time of the incident influencing the risk assessment?

As a minimum requirement 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 well being.

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.

Categories of risk

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

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

MEDIUM

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

LOW

There is no apparent threat of danger to either the child or young person or the public. 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 runaway 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 place are often very vulnerable and place themselves at risk and are exposed to violence, victimisation, sexual exploitation and involvement in crime

5. Overall data

There were 865 missing episodes in total in 2014-2015, of which 572 (66%) were looked after children. This represents a slight increase in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2013-2014 and a large increase of over 100 episodes in terms of the number of missing from care episodes.

To date in 2015 (April–October) there have been 558 missing episodes, 444 of which (80%) were looked after children. This represents a decrease in the total number of episodes compared to the same period last year (573) but a large increase in the number of missing from care episodes (378 or 66%) and this would suggest that year-on-year 2015-2016 will see a large increase overall.

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. In January 2015 there were 13 individuals reported missing from care and in May 2014 there were 22.

Over the course of 2014-2015 there were 66 episodes where a young person was missing for over 24 hours. The majority of those young people were missing from care and is an increase from the previous year where there were only 44 episodes lasting 24 hours or more. To date in 2015-2016 (until 31 October) there have already been more episodes of missing from care for over 24 hours than there was in the whole of 2014-2015.

2014-2015 data

Month	Total missing episodes	Number of individuals	Episodes over 24 hours	MFC episodes	Number of individual LAC
April	62	36	7	41 (66%)	21
May	83	48	7	44 (53%)	22
June	93	46	5	66 (71%)	21
July	66	32	4	44 (67%)	15
August	78	36	3	54 (71%)	20
September	106	43	6	73 (69%)	20
October	85	36	7	56 (66%)	16
November	71	40	13	42 (59%)	17
December	44	21	3	32 (73%)	14
January	61	24	0	37 (61%)	13
February	60	30	3	46 (77%)	18
March	56	31	8	38 (68%)	14
TOTAL	865		66	573 (66%)	

Placement young person reported missing from (number of episodes)

Month	Placement young person reported missing from (number of episodes)					
	Gateshead residential		Other residential (out of borough, private)	Foster care		Other
	Blaydon	Crawcrook		Gateshead	Out of borough	
April	1	15	4	14	7	0
May	1	11	3	11	18	0
June	7	26	16	6	10	1
July	13	12	7	4	8	0
August	20	12	11	4	7	0
September	19	18	13	5	9	9
October	10	14	15	9	9	0
November	2	8	5	14	12	0
December	3	15	6	2	6	0
January	13	10	4	5	5	0
February	14	4	6	19	3	0
March	5	13	6	9	5	0
TOTAL	108	158	96	102	99	10

Issues to note:

- In April 2014 there were seven episodes where a young person was missing for more than 24 hours and four of these episodes were for over 48 hours. All four of these episodes involved young people missing from care.
- There was an increase in the number of episodes reported from Gateshead Council children's homes in summer 2014. These episodes were down to a small cohort of young people who were going missing together more often than not. Meetings were held between key professionals, the young people themselves and family members and plans were put in place to reduce the number of episodes.
- In November 2014 there were 13 episodes where a young person was missing over 24 hours; eight of these episodes involved a Looked After Child. Six of the episodes involved one particular LAC and the other two episodes relate to two other children (GB and NR). BB was actually missing 10 times in total in November 2014, GB three times and NR once. There were four episodes that month where young people were actually missing over 48 hours
- In March 2014 there were eight missing episodes over 24 hours, seven of which related to a looked after child. Three of those episodes actually lasted over 48 hours.

2015-2016 data to date

Month	Total missing episodes	Number of individuals	Episodes over 24 hours	MFC episodes	Number of individual LAC
April	91	38	10	77 (85%)	25
May	115	49	10	80 (70%)	22
June	72	33	9	59 (82%)	20
July	81	38	9	63 (78%)	21
August	76	31	11	63 (83%)	20
September	82	41	15	55 (67%)	21
October	71	43	3	47 (66%)	22
TOTAL	558		67	444 (80%)	

Placement young person reported missing from (number of episodes)

Month	Placement young person reported missing from (number of episodes)				
	Gateshead residential		Other residential (out of borough, private)	Foster care	
	Blaydon	Crawcrook		Gateshead	Out of borough
April	10	27	13	16	11
May	6	23	6	28	17
June	8	13	5	27	6
July	10	15	9	2	27
August	9	18	1	11	24
September	4	22	6	11	12
October	2	21	3	8	13
TOTAL	49	139	43	103	110

Issues to note:

- In April 2015 there were 10 episodes where a young person was missing for over 24 hours, eight of these episodes were a young person missing from care and two of these eight episodes involved a young person being missing for over 48 hours. The eight episodes of missing from care actually involve five individuals.
- In May 2015 there were also 10 episodes where a young person was missing for over 24 hours and six of them were missing from care episodes, four of which lasted over 48 hours.
- In July 2015 there were 11 episodes where a young person was missing for more than 24 hours, eight of those episodes were a young person missing from care and on three occasions a young person was actually missing from care for over 48 hours.
- In September 2015 there were 15 episodes where a young person was missing for over 24 hours and 12 of those young people were missing from local authority care. Six of these episodes relate to a young person being missing from care for over 48 hours and one of the episodes related to a young person being missing for nine days.

6. Other relevant information to note

MSET

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 the LSCB Missing, Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Sub Group (MSET). The MSET is a multi-agency group chaired by the police which meets monthly and discusses individual cases where there are concerns around missing from home/care and or Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and/or Human Trafficking. MSET processes have recently been reviewed and strengthened, based on good practice from other areas, and a robust risk assessment and monitoring framework is in place for those cases of concern. In 2014-2015 there were 54 young people discussed at the MSET. To date 31 young people have been discussed in 2015-2016 to date.

Individual social workers attend the meeting to present the case, share information and receive information from other agencies. A diversion plan is then put in place to address and manage the presenting risks and concerns. The Registered Managers of both Gateshead Council children's homes are members of MSET, in addition to the Service Managers for LAC, Safeguarding and R&A/EDT. The team manager of the LAC & Young People's Team and Assistant Team Manager of the Fostering Team are also members to ensure that information from the meetings is disseminated appropriately.

In addition to discussing individual cases, MSET meetings also focus on wider areas of intelligence in Gateshead and other areas locally, for example known CSE "hot spots" in the borough or issues raised in MSET meetings elsewhere within the Northumbria Police force area. This information is then disseminated as appropriate so that professionals are alert to particular issues of concern.

Return interviews

When a child is reported missing from home or care for the second or subsequent time in a six month period they are offered an Independent Return Interview. These interviews are undertaken by Youth Workers or a specialist CSE worker from the Children's Society's SCARPA project. 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 information is also shared with the hosting local authority.

Unauthorised absences

Northumbria Police was one of three police forces in the country not to record "unauthorised absences" and recorded all episodes where someone was reported "missing" as a missing episode. From early 2016 an absent category will be introduced and an episode will be classified as absent or missing following an assessment when the call to the police is made. A missing person is "anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crim or at risk of harm to themselves or another". The definition of absent is "a person not a place where they are expected or required to be". Other police forces have experienced between a 26% and 46% reduction in missing episodes when they introduced this

change. It is estimated that of the 8538 missing person reports to Northumbria 3414 could have met the absent category (40%).

Training on this change will be rolled out to residential staff etc. and reassurances have been given to the LSCB and partners that any child flagged as vulnerable to CSE will not be recorded as absent.

Since July 2015 social workers have been categorising episodes as missing or unauthorised absence on Carefirst. Obviously work is required to bring these classifications in line with those that will be used by police from 2016 to ensure that the data matches and ensure consistency across Children's Social Care.

Month	Total MFC episodes	Missing	Unauthorised absence	Not classified yet
July	63	49	12	2
August	63	55	8	0
September	55	47	8	0
October	47	37	10	0
Total to date	228	188 (82%)	38 (17%)	2

Over the last 12 months young people who have been recorded as missing from care have in the majority of cases returned fairly quickly to their placements. Young people who are persistent in being absent without permission, often leave their placements because of conflict primarily due to boundary setting, for example around coming in times or refusal to allow them to undertake activities which are not felt to be consistent with promoting their welfare. Some young people have links with others in other placements and are absent from their placements together. Social workers and staff are familiar with these young people, their contacts, likely whereabouts and they usually return later that day, rarely are young people in the care of the Council missing overnight or more than 24 hours.

A small minority 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.

7. Case Scenario

The following outlines a typical response to a young person missing from children's home:

- Child A, male aged 15 years placed in Children's home under a Care Order
- The young person leaves the building with permission to return at agreed time of 10:30pm. He does not return at this time. He has a history of coming home late and going missing.
- Staff allowed an hour as agreed in his risk assessment and then reported him missing to the police. Staff inform Emergency Duty Team with the log number and share Missing from Care details
- Parent/persons with parental responsibility informed and advised to inform staff should he arrive there.
- Further telephone calls to the police on a regular basis in order that intelligence is shared to maximise locating the young person.

- Police make a visit to the children's home at to gather further information from staff and young people
- Service Manager and LSCB Business Manager informed of all missing episodes.
- Police continue to make searches of the local area and places where the young person may be. Regular contact maintained between parties.
- Child A returns of his own accord after almost 24 hours. All parties informed. Social worker and team manager informed at next working day
- On return to the children's home the young person is spoken to by staff to ensure he is ok, to establish reasons for the missing episode
- Police make a safe and well visit to the young person.
- An Independent Return Interview in line with LSCB Missing from Care Procedures.
- A Strategy meeting is held with the police and social worker and other key professionals to discuss, debrief and review the risks and agree actions.
- The young person's name is discussed at the MSET meeting scrutinising the plan and considering the risk assessment.

8. Child Sexual exploitation

The service monitors the risks of child sexual exploitation very carefully. Currently there are 14 young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation which is a similar figure this time last year. Including 3 males and 11 females aged 14 years plus.

The CSE monitoring information is scrutinised in the service performance meeting.

Planning processes include interventions to minimise risk, disrupt activity, build in direct action from services with the young person, develop incentives and sanctions. The plans are also scrutinised within the MSET meeting.

There is also an escalation process with senior management of the children and families service and the police to ensure further scrutiny.

There has been a large conference and range of CSE training delivered across a wide spectrum of multiagency services.

Further development work has been undertaken regarding the risk assessment screening tool this is presented to the MSET meeting. The tool has scores for each category of risk which produces an overall score rating indicating high medium or low risk.

9. Practice Improvement Plan

Northumbria Police have two dedicated Missing from Home Coordinators with a remit to improve the police response when someone is reported missing, and to work strategically with partners to reduce the numbers of children and young people reported missing from care. The two coordinators are senior and experienced police sergeants who cover the same geographical areas as the Protecting Vulnerable People (PVP) Units. The coordinator for the south of Tyne area is working closely with the Service Director –Social Work, Children and Families, the LSCB Business

Manager and the two local authority children's homes and private children's home in the borough.

The LSCB Business Manager has been working closely with the SCARPA project of the Children's Society as part of their work to establish a "hub and spoke" model following a number of years of successful work in Newcastle. The worker provides training to partner agency staff in statutory services, including social workers, residential staff and foster carers, on sexual exploitation and provide case-based advice to frontline staff.

The service has developed a risk assessment screening tool based on the phoenix model developed by Manchester local authority. This tool has recently been rolled out and is being completed for every young person presented to the MSET meeting.

There has also been the development of a strategic MSET group which the operational MSET group also reports. This group is developing further awareness and strategic plans linking resources to the CSE focus developing multi agency information and training.

The LSCB will continue to receive written reports three times a year on children who go missing from home and care and are at risk of sexual exploitation.

The local authority will continue to work to develop a system to capture and share accurate and meaningful information on missing from care episodes with the LSCB.

The local authority will continue to work with the LSCB to strengthen work to protect those young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation

10. Recommendation

It is requested that the Looked After Children Overview and Scrutiny Committee continue to receive an annual report on missing from care issues within Learning and Children.

CONTACT: Elaine Devaney
Service Manager
Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting
Ext 3420