



## CORPORATE PARENTING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 15 January 2018

**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 2016 to November 2017 and an update regarding protection and monitoring of child sexual exploitation.

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#### 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.

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.”**

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. A missing strategy for each young person may be different depending upon the management of assessed risks relating to the young person.

- **Absent** – no apparent risk of harm to either subject or public
- **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**

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.

## **Absent**

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

The ‘absent’ category should comprise cases in which people are not presently where they are supposed to be and there is no apparent risk. ‘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.

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 absent 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 absent, not missing episodes), in case the level of risk changes and decisions are auditable. Absent episodes 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 not where they are expected to be absent should be classified as absent 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

The carer or residential staff member should record any information gained on the whereabouts of the young person whilst absent, and this should be shared as appropriate with the police. Where the person remains absent, and the carer/ staff feels the individual may be at risk of harm then a report should be made to the police.

#### **4. Risk Assessment**

In assessing the significance of any child's absence a risk assessment must be undertaken. The service has developed a screening assessment tool based which is completed by the care team and if there are persistent missing episodes this 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?

It is important that the assessment of risk is a dynamic process and should be reconsidered and challenged at every point during a child or young person's absence. 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.

### **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 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 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 936 missing episodes in total between December 2016 and November 2017, of which 565 (60%) were looked after children. This represents an increase in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2015-16 (875) and also an increase in terms of the number of missing from care episodes which involved looked after children for the same period (511 (58%)).

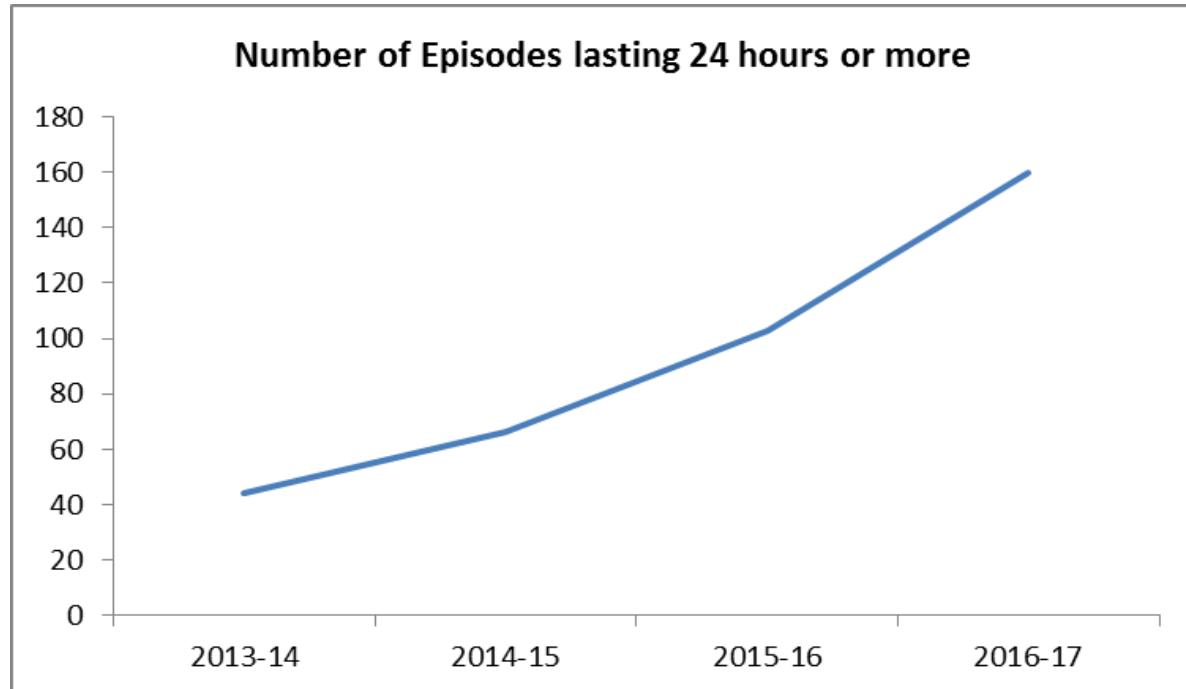
In January 2016 Northumbria Police began to differentiate between a “missing” episode and an “absent” episode. The figures shown below include those reported as missing and absent.

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.

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 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.

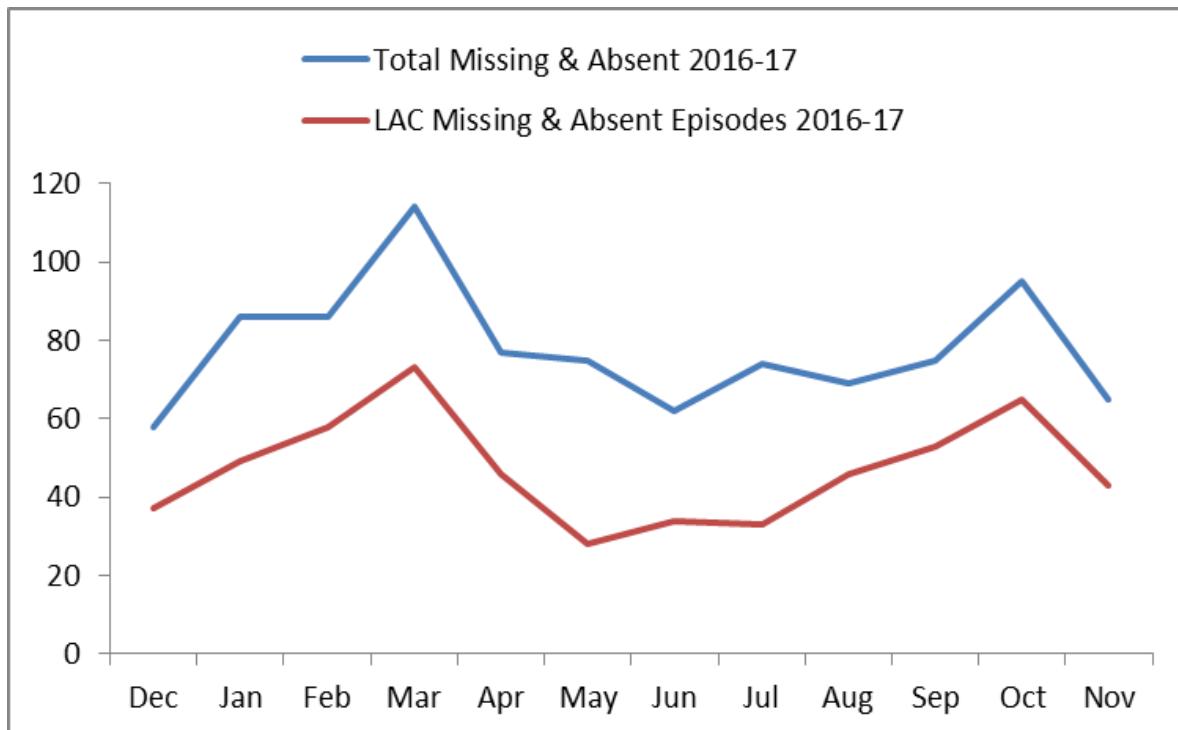
Between December 2016 and November 2017 there were 160 episodes where a young person was missing or absent for over 24 hours. The majority of those young people were missing from care (68%) and this is a continuation in the trend of increased episodes lasting 24 hours or more from previous years. In 2015-16 there were 103 episodes, in 2014-15 there were 66 episodes and in 2013-2014 where there were only 44 episodes lasting 24 hours or more.



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 MSET to ensure everyone is doing all they can to keep young people safe

#### Dec 2016-Nov 17 data

Month	Total missing and absent episodes	Number of individuals	Episodes over 24 hours	LAC missing and absent episodes	Number of individual LAC
December	58	29	10	37 (64%)	13
January	86	43	16	49 (57%)	16
February	86	37	17	58 (67%)	14
March	114	40	15	73 (64%)	15
April	77	39	16	46 (60%)	16
May	75	44	13	28 (37%)	10
June	62	27	12	34 (55%)	10
July	74	41	6	33 (45%)	18
August	69	30	11	46 (67%)	16
September	75	32	14	53 (71%)	16
October	95	35	18	65 (68%)	18
November	65	23	12	43 (66%)	12
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>936</b>		<b>160</b>	<b>565 (60%)</b>	



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	7	14	16	0	37	
January	16	8	24	1	49	
February	26	15	16	1	58	
March	26	6	29	12	73	
April	16	3	26	1	46	
May	9	6	11	2	28	
June	3	12	17	2	34	
July	1	5	25	2	33	
August	1	21	21	3	46	
September	3	16	34	0	53	
October	0	33	32	0	65	
November	0	21	22	0	43	
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>565</b>	

The data demonstrates that from January 2017 to May 2017 there was a significant amount of missing episodes from our in house residential provision. However, these

missing episodes relate to a relatively small number of young people with one person having 115 missing episodes. Most of these were late returns and following intensive work and support from the staff this has reduced significantly.

In relation to out of borough residential, the high numbers of missing episodes relate again to a relatively small group of young people. One male young person went missing 58 times, another young man went missing 20 times and a female young person went missing 24 times, which accounts for 102 of the 160 missing episodes

In relation to children placed with in-house foster carers, the majority of these missing episodes relate to 9 young people, with the largest number of missing episodes relating to one young female who was missing a total of 57 times. This young person also accounted for the 12 missing episodes in March 2017 recorded for IFA placements and plans have been put in place to keep her safe

## **6. Other relevant information**

### **MSET**

In addition to being reviewed and monitored by their own social workers and care team, children who go missing regular 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 and meets monthly, discussing 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, and a robust risk assessment and monitoring framework is in place for those cases of concern.

In 2016/17 there were 48 young people discussed at the MSET. During 2017, 45 young people were discussed. A number of these young people were discussed at MSET more than once, due to escalating concerns or for review.

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.

Representatives from children's homes and fostering 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 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 or for a single episode lasting longer than 24 hours 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.

Participation levels for Return Interviews range between 8.3% and 66.7%, with an average of 50% participation in return interviews. Even where completed the 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**

	Care	Home
<b>Alcohol</b>	24	10
<b>Bullying</b>	3	5
<b>CSE</b>	2	0
<b>Drugs</b>	24	10
<b>Emotional</b>	39	19
<b>Physical</b>	2	1
<b>Planned</b>	28	13
<b>Sexual</b>	7	4

Even though the uptake is approximately 50% it essential that this work continues as the information provided feeds into the MSET.

## **7. Case Scenario**

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

- Child A, a male aged 15 years is placed in Foster Care under a Care Order.
- The young person leaves goes out to meet friends at 6:30 and it is agreed he can return at 9:30pm. He does not return at this time and the foster carer tries to contact him via mobile phone but gets no answer.
- He has a history of coming home late (usually within 30 minutes) and he has occasionally stayed out overnight
- The foster carer allows him an hour before reporting him missing to the police. This had been agreed by the care team and formed part of his risk

assessment. The police wanted to class him as absent rather than missing, however as he was vulnerable and at risk of CSE the foster carer ensured that the police classed her as missing. They informed EDT of the missing episode, shared the Missing from Care details and gave them the police log number.

- His mum was informed and advised to inform staff should he arrive there.
- He returned to the placement at 11.30pm and the foster carer informed the police and EDT that he had returned to placement. They also informed his mum that he had returned.
- Police visit the foster carers home to ensure the young man was safe and to try and find out who he had been. He is unwilling to say where he has been, other than to say he was safe and was with friends.
- An Independent Return Interview in line with LSCB Missing from Care Procedures takes place, however no further information is shared about who he had been with.
- The care team meeting reviews the risk assessment and agrees actions.
- The young person has two further similar episodes in a 2 week period and the foster carer shares with all professionals that she is concerned that he is returning home under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs
- He is discussed at the MSET meeting, scrutinising the plan and considering the risk assessment and disruption plan to ensure a co-ordinated approach is taken to try and minimise risk and to get the young man to work with relevant professionals.
- He is subsequently re scored for the MSET pre meet 2 months later and professionals were happy that there had been no further missing episodes

## **8. Child Sexual exploitation**

The sexual exploitation of children involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where the young person received 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common. A common feature of CSE is that the child or young person does not recognise the coercive nature of the relationship and does not see themselves as a victim of exploitation.

The service monitors the risks of child sexual exploitation very carefully. Currently there are 16 young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation which is a 33% increase on the number last year. All the young people listed are currently female. The average age is 14 years old, with the youngest being 11 years old.

Processes have been developed to monitor and review these young people to ensure they are categorised appropriately and receive the right support and interventions, which include interventions to minimise risk, disrupt activity and 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 is undertaken if the risks to a young person increase or interventions by professionals are having limited impact on the young person.

There is a comprehensive training programme for staff and foster carers to ensure all professionals working with young people at risk of CSE have the knowledge and skills to support and educate the young people

## **9. Sanctuary South**

Operation Sanctuary North has been running since April 2015 and Sanctuary South has been live since Monday 4th April 2016. The two multi-agency operational teams were set up to tackle child exploitation, vulnerability and modern day slavery. This is a Northumbria Police led multi agency team operation to target the criminal behaviour of those who commit sexual offences against vulnerable women and children.

Sanctuary South covers the three local authorities in the South of the Northumbria area, Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside. The co-location within a hub arrangement brings together children and adult social care services, health, the police and a broad range of third sector organisations including Bright Futures, Changing Lives and Barnados.

The multi – agency team adopt a non-police led victim strategy involving social services and the voluntary sector to secure on-going trust and confidence with potential complainants. There have been significant benefits from this approach and this has achieved active engagement from victims as well as access to specialist services at the earliest opportunity.

To further promote joint up working, the Sanctuary South Social Worker for Gateshead is an MSET Panel member, in addition, the pre-meet is also attended with Northumbria Police MFH Co-Ordinator and LSCB Safeguarding Children's Manager to consider the cases for MSET.

All Stage 1 CSE Screenings and Stage 2 Risk Assessments are discussed and this allows professional discussion/challenge as well as continued oversight of children who may be a risk CSE. The Sanctuary South Social Worker being a part of this process whilst being based in the multi-agency Sanctuary Team provides valuable links for potential / identified victims. It has led to joint visits to provide the young people with a consistent person from the Police and Social Care who have Sexual Exploitation knowledge and experience.

If risk assessments and discussion at MSET indicates the child is a medium or high risk of CSE then the Social Worker is also able to provide 1:1 intervention even if a crime has not been identified or investigated. This is in addition, but also feeds into any ongoing Care Plans. The intervention consists of prevention work as well as ongoing education work in a bid to assist with the young person being able to identify exploitative behaviours.

Flexibility around appointments is promoted to provide as many opportunities for the child to engage in the work. As well as acknowledging risks; by undertaking this specialist work it also assists in identifying the young person's understanding and this can lead to highlighting strengths and strategies and any reduction in risks. Any cases which lead to a trial / Court action, the Social Worker provides ongoing support through that process, and again a consistent point of contact.

The funding for these posts has been reviewed and it is hoped this resource will continue to be supported by the police and partner agencies, within the new safeguarding arrangements.

## **10. Practice developments**

Northumbria police continue to have 3 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 coordinator from the Central area works closely with the Service Director- Social Work, Children and Families, the LSCB Business Manager, the Local authority Children's Home and Private Children's Homes within Gateshead.

The LSCB Business Manager has continued to work 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.

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 continues 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 continues 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

## **11. 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.

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