

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, Children and Families**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an updated summary of missing from care episodes from August 2020 to July 2021 and an update regarding protection and monitoring of child exploitation.

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 national missing definition;
“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed.”
4. All reports of missing persons 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)
 - **Absent** – This category is not used by Northumbria Police for children.

Missing

7. A child is defined as missing when they are away from placement or not where they are supposed to be, and their whereabouts cannot be established. Where their location is known but there are concerns because of the child’s vulnerability or there is a potential danger to them or the public, this would not be a ‘missing’ episode to police. It may still require a safeguarding response from Social Care and/or Police.
8. A child or young person who is not where they are supposed to be and whose whereabouts cannot be established 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, which we use in all

our residential homes and fostering placements. 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. 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.

11. The protocol for responding to missing children has been updated, and all children who go missing are 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). This is an area of work that has been developed over the last 18 months and will be detailed later in the report
12. The key messages from research regarding young people Missing from Care over the last five years 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
13. 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.

Overall data

14. There were 861 missing episodes in total between August 2020 and July 2021, of which 510 (59.23%) were looked after children. This represents a decrease in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2019 (908) and it also shows a decrease in terms of the number of missing from care episodes which involved looked after children for the same period (626 (69%)).

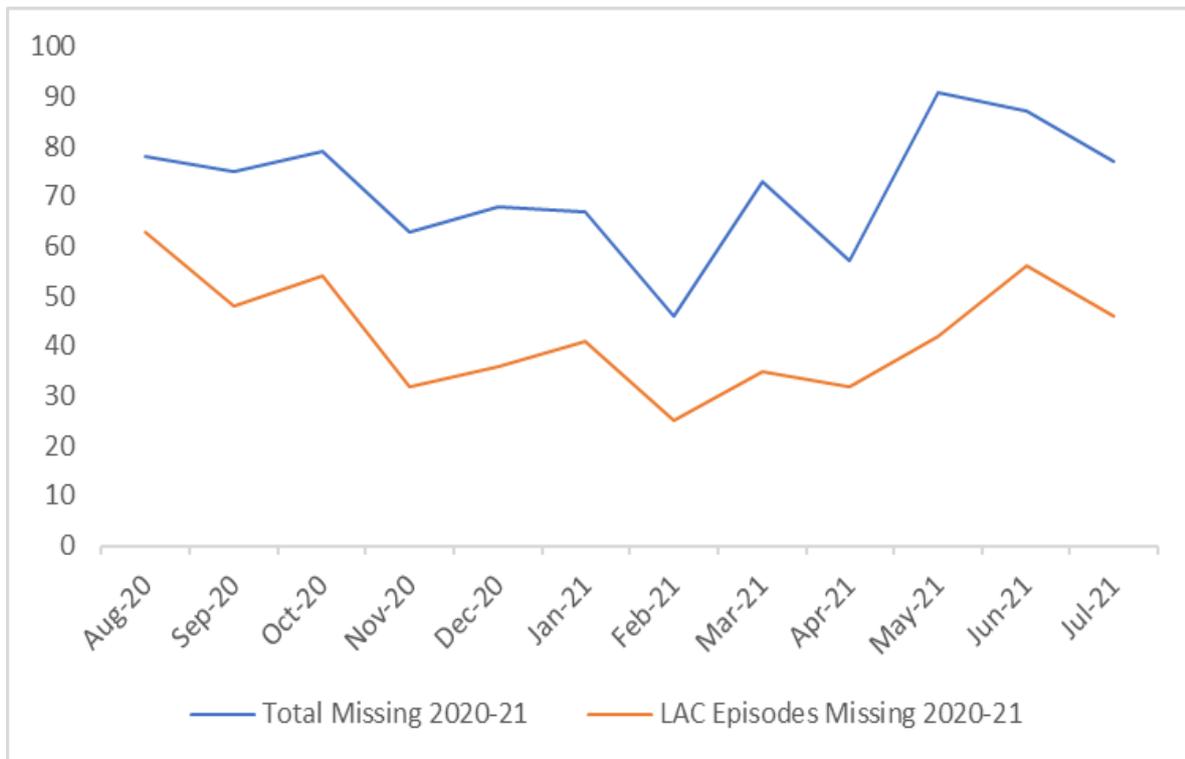
Type	No. of Males	No. of Females	Total
Missing Episodes	433	428	861
RHI Assessment	128	129	257

Type	No. of Males (Individuals)	No. of Females (Individuals)	Total
Missing Episodes	157	129	286
RHI Assessment	81	86	167

15. 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.
16. Over the last 12 months young people who have been recorded as missing from care have in most cases returned quickly to their placements.
17. 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.
18. Between August 2020 and July 2021 there were 72 episodes where a young person was missing or absent for over 24 hours. Most of those young people were missing from care (59.2%), which is an increase on last year.
19. 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

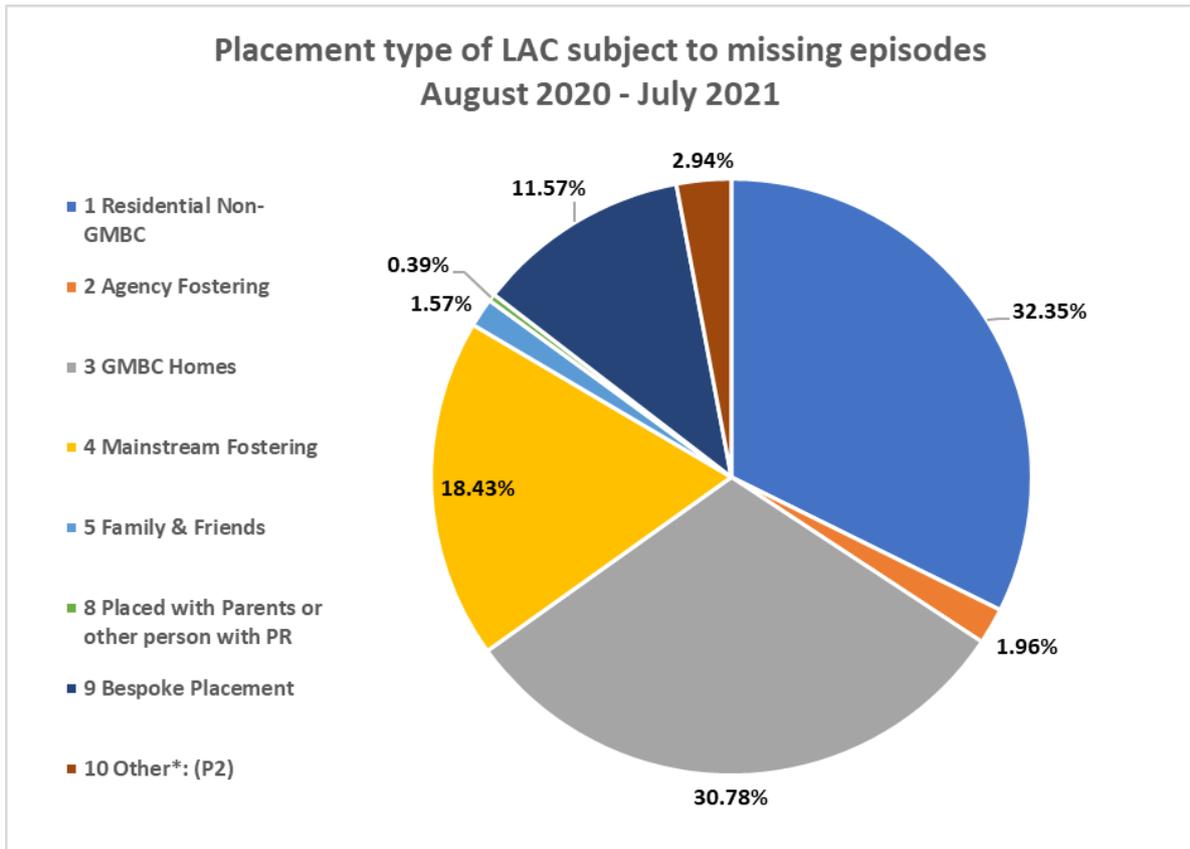
Aug 20 – Jul 21 data

Month	Total missing and absent episodes	Episodes over 24 hours	Episodes over 72 hours	LAC missing and absent episodes	Number of individual LAC	LAC episodes over 24 hours
August	78	6	1	63 (80.8%)	20	5
September	75	10	0	48 (64.0%)	21	10
October	79	14	0	54 (68.4%)	25	11
November	63	12	2	32 (50.8%)	17	8
December	68	5	1	36 (52.9%)	14	6
January	67	6	0	41 (61.2%)	11	2
February	46	0	0	25 (54.3%)	10	0
March	73	2	1	35 (54.7%)	12	3
April	57	4	0	32 (56.1%)	15	2
May	91	5	1	42 (46.1%)	22	1
June	87	5	0	56 (64.4%)	22	3
July	77	3	3	46 (59.7%)	20	0
TOTAL	861	72	9	510 (59.2%)		



20. 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.
21. 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 49 missing episodes over a 12 month period, one having 41 missing episodes over a 7 month period, a third having 29 missing episodes over a 11 month period and a fourth having 19 missing episodes over a 4 month period.
22. Interventions and incentives are in place to reduce the number of missing episodes for these young people.
23. 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. Two young people went missing 35 times, another went missing 25 times, and another 24 times, which accounts for 119 of the 165 missing episodes.
24. In relation to children placed with in-house foster carers, only one young person had more than 10 missing episodes. There were a further 9 young people who each had between 5 and 9 missing episodes.

Month	1 Residential Non-GMBC	2 IFA Fostering	3 In-house Residential	4 Mainstream Fostering	5 Family & Friends	8 Placed with Parents or other person with PR	9 Bespoke Placement	10 Other*: (P2)	Total
Aug	34	0	26	3	0	0	0	0	63
Sep	13	2	25	5	1	0	0	2	48
Oct	14	1	21	13	0	0	0	5	54
Nov	12	0	14	6	0	0	0	0	32
Dec	10	1	10	8	0	0	7	0	36
Jan	16	0	14	2	1	0	8	0	41
Feb	8	0	9	6	1	1	0	0	25
Mar	18	0	10	2	2	0	3	0	35
Apr	7	1	8	8	0	0	8	0	32
May	11	2	10	16	0	0	3	0	42
Jun	5	3	5	17	2	1	16	7	56
Jul	17	0	5	8	1	0	14	1	46
Total	165	10	157	94	8	2	59	15	510
%	32.35%	1.96%	30.78%	18.43%	1.57%	0.39%	11.57%	2.94%	100.00%

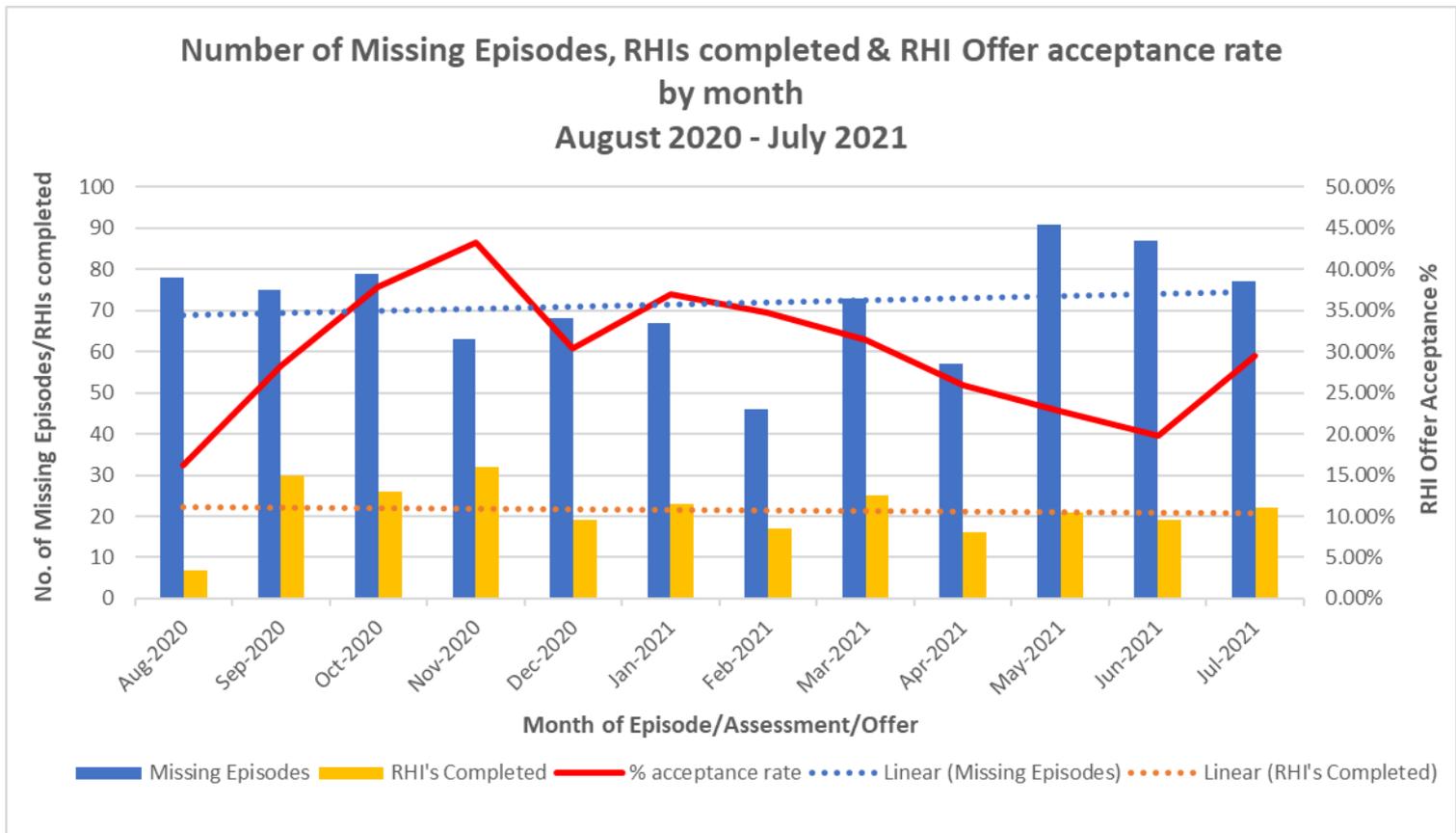


Return interviews

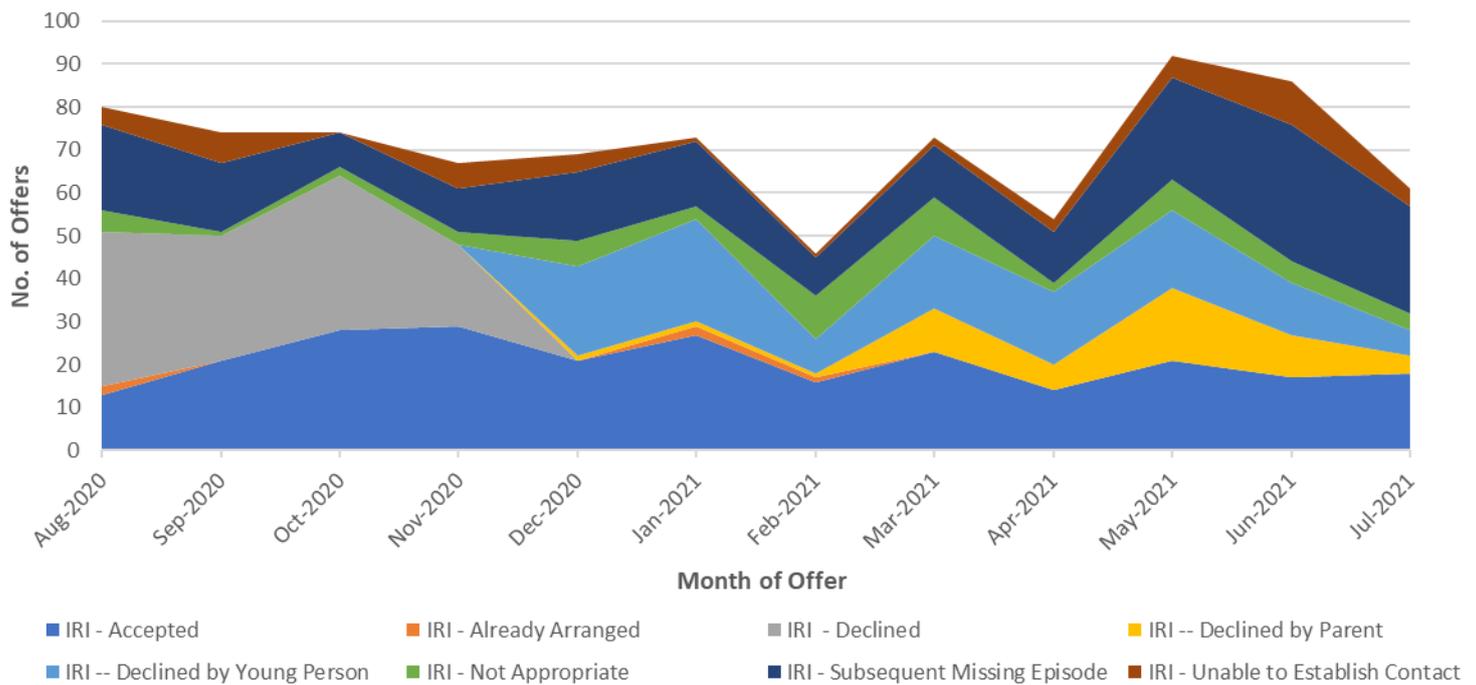
25. A Return Home Interview is an in-depth conversation with a young person who has been reported missing. It should be led by an independent, trained professional whom the young person trusts.
26. This differs from the police Prevention Interview (which all missing people receive on return) and is carried 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.
27. Within the period of this report, a total of 849 offers have been made to young people following their return from a missing episode. There has been a very gentle increase in missing episodes with the number of return home interviews completed remaining consistent. The % rate of acceptance for young people engaging in a return home interview has fluctuated throughout the year with the start of the period seeing a steady increase before a decline from January 2021 to June 2021. The graph below shows this data discussed with May 2021 seeing the most missing episodes in a month with 91 recorded and November 2020 the month where most return home interviews were completed at 32.
28. In relation to young people accepting a return home interview then there was a clear increase in engagement following July 2020 until November 2020 however this has steadily decreased since the start of 2021 to June before an

increase to 29.51% in July. Looking further into the outcomes following an offer an interview being made just over a third (34.51%) have been declined with this from either the young person or their immediate parent/carer. 29.21% of all offers made have been accepted and an interview undertaken. The stacked area chart shows consistency in the outcomes on a monthly basis with 23.44% of all offers being ended with 'subsequent missing episode'. This option is used where the young person has been reported missing again whilst in the process of being offered an initial interview.

29. 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.
30. 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.

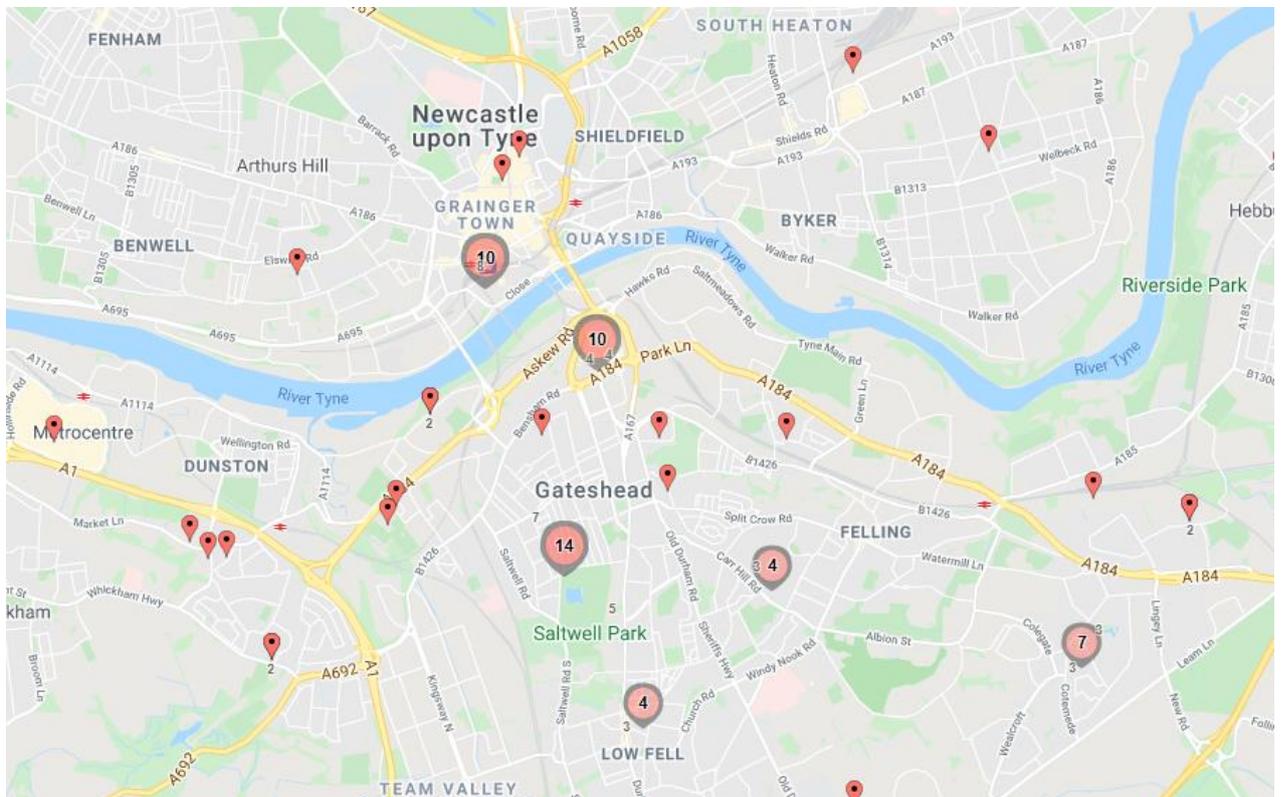
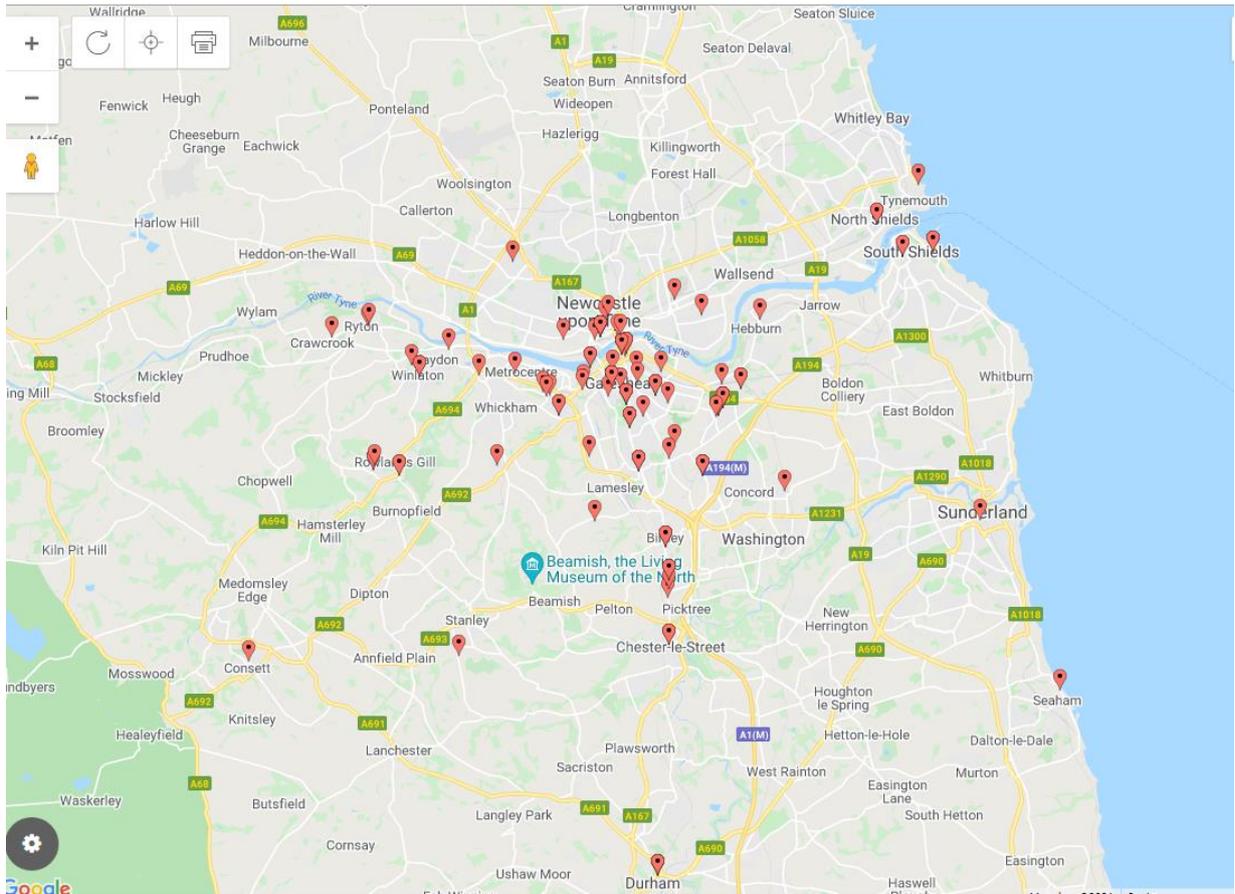


Outcomes following offer of Return Home Interview following missing episode August 2020 - July 2021



Return Home Interviews – ‘Hot Spot’ areas

31. During every return home interview, the young person is asked about where they went while they were reported missing. This analysis demonstrates that a high number of young people refuse to disclose their whereabouts however, information has been obtained from 123 interviews completed (47.86%). The map below plots the locations where the young people have told us they have been. The locations vary across the Gateshead borough as well as areas in Newcastle, North & South Tyneside.
32. A further map focusing on central areas of Gateshead and Newcastle show some hot spot areas where some locations have been frequented on multiple occasions by young people during missing episodes. The main areas identified were Bensham, Trinity Square and Gateshead Interchange areas of Gateshead along with central Newcastle. It is important to note that due to the generic locations given by young people, the maps plot general areas rather than specific postcodes.

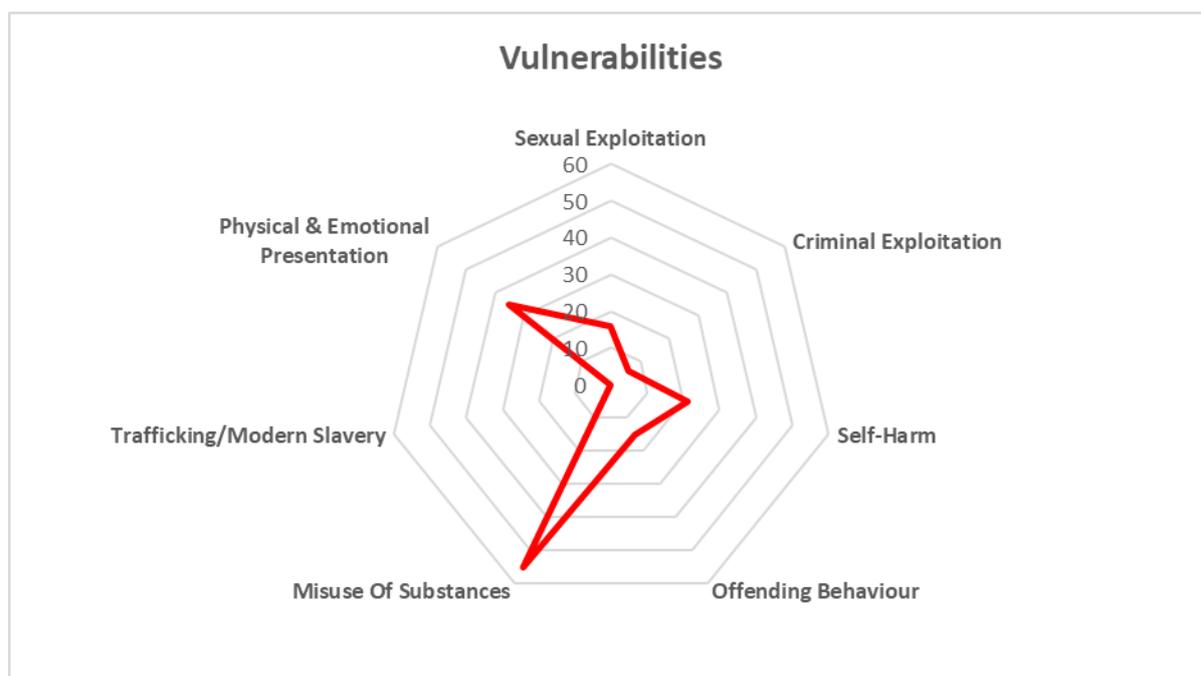


Return Home Interviews – Factors

33. During every return home interview, the young person is asked about why they went missing to help us identify vulnerabilities and high-risk concerns. From the data gathered, the three radar charts below show the most frequent factors, what has taken place during this missing episode and an overall category given following the information provided to show all high-risk indicators being met.
34. Where this intelligence is available it is apparent that substance misuse is prevalent during missing episodes having been identified on 55 occasions (21.40%). Other vulnerabilities identified were physical and emotional presentation (13.62%), Self-Harm (8.17%), Sexual Exploitation (6.23%), Offending Behaviour (5.84%) and Criminal Exploitation (2.33%).

Vulnerabilities

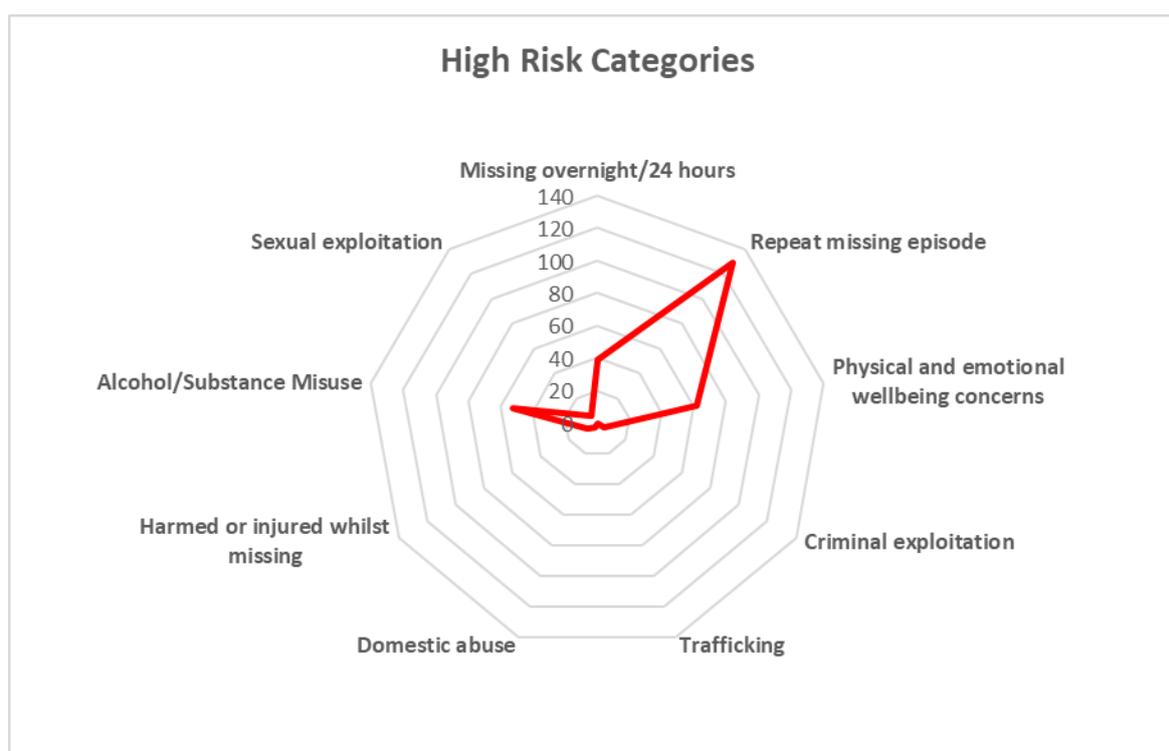
Category	Total
Sexual Exploitation	16
Criminal Exploitation	6
Self-Harm	21
Offending Behaviour	15
Misuse Of Substances	55
Trafficking/Modern Slavery	0
Physical & Emotional Presentation	35



High Risk Categories

35. The most common theme identified for high risk factors was repeat missing episode which related to 129 return home interviews so over half at 50.19%. Other noticeable figures from the data were concerns around physical and emotional wellbeing (24.12%), substance misuse (20.23) and missing overnight/24 hours which was a concerning feature on at least 39 occasions (15.18%).

Category	Total
Missing overnight/24 hours	39
Repeat missing episode	129
Physical and emotional wellbeing concerns	62
Criminal exploitation	5
Trafficking	0
Domestic abuse	3
Harmed or injured whilst missing	7
Alcohol/Substance Misuse	52
Sexual exploitation	6

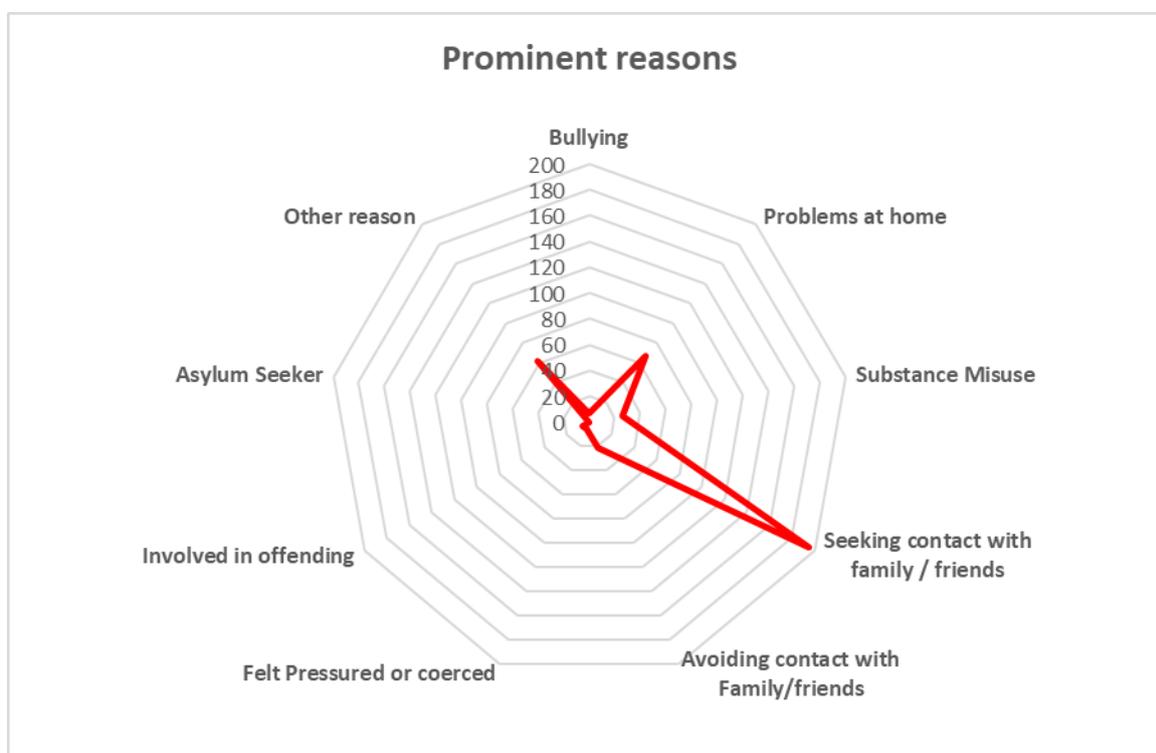


Prominent Reasons

36. The final table and radar chart below considers the prominent reasons disclosed by young people as to why they have gone missing. Over three quarters of young people interviewed went missing to seek contact with family and/or friends. This is followed by over a quarter (26.07%) of young people

citing problems at home. Other reasons account for 23.74% and over 10% of young people went missing due to substance misuse.

Category	Total
Bullying	7
Problems at home	67
Substance Misuse	26
Seeking contact with family / friends	195
Avoiding contact with Family/friends	21
Felt Pressured or coerced	6
Involved in offending	6
Asylum Seeker	0
Other reason	61



Overall Summary

- Missing episodes have increased slightly and participation in return home interviews has not yet improved. Bensham, Central Gateshead and Newcastle City Centre are popular destinations for young people however, the data is limited, and further detailed data collection and analysis is recommended.
- The main vulnerabilities and high-risk factors identified were substance misuse and repeat missing episodes. Physical and emotional issues were also identified as a concern so again obtaining further knowledge and depth into these specific factors from the young person for example as to whether it's mainly all alcohol for substance misuse or is there a specific need for more

awareness and input from substance misuse services in general required would be beneficial.

39. 61 out of 257 young people responded “Other” as the reason for the missing episode which requires further in-depth analysis and clearer recording in the future to identify specific areas around mental health and education.

A New Approach to Return Home Interviews

40. Young people’s participation in Return Home Interviews has been acknowledged as an area for development in Gateshead and significant action has been taken in recent months to enhance our approach and improve quality and participation.
41. A new role has been developed as a dedicated resource to support children and young people who have been reported missing from home or care and undertake return home interviews to enable them talk through their experiences.
42. A Return Home Support Worker has been appointed to quickly build rapport with young people who have been reported missing, offer a safe space to talk about why they went missing, what happened while they were away and any remaining concerns they may have.
43. The Return Home Support Worker will gather intelligence and advocate on behalf of young people to help understand how we can effectively safeguard them and prevent further missing episodes.
44. The role will commence in September 2021 and provide an opportunity for meaningful interventions and ensure a high-quality approach to supporting children who go missing.

Practice developments

45. The local authority continues to work to develop a system to capture and share accurate and meaningful information on missing from care episodes and this will remain a priority area when we transfer to the new electronic system.
46. The local authority will continue to work with all agencies to strengthen work to protect those young people vulnerable to exploitation
47. Return interviews will continue and services will work together to try and improve the uptake and quality of these. It envisaged that the dedicated worker will have a significant impact in influencing the uptake of RHI
48. Monthly meetings with the police and partners have been implemented. These are chaired by Andrea Houlahan – Assistant Strategic Director, Social Work, Children and Families to ensure we have a co-ordinated approach to missing and these will continue

49. Missing from Home Co-ordinators from the police are involved in placement information meetings in our residential homes and are included in in writing and updating risk assessments of young people in placement
50. Police and Specialist Support co-ordinator are invited to registered managers to review the missing process, discuss any issues or concerns and develop practice. It is envisaged they will participate in these meetings every three months.
51. Police are working with Gateshead's Business Manager – Safeguarding Children Partnership to revise Gateshead's Local Missing Children policy in line with the Levels of Intervention Model. This work will feed into the review of the Regional Missing Children Policy.

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 the committee would like to receive Missing from Care reports

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