

20 September 2022

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

REPORT OF: **Helen Ferguson Director Children's Social Care and Early Help**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an updated summary of missing from care episodes from August 2021 to July 2022 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 last updated in May 2019 and continues to be fit for purpose. Missing from home or care is a priority for the partnership.

Definition of Missing from Care

3. Missing is defined as;

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

4. Every time a child or young person goes missing, they are reported to the police as missing, this report sits 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 by the reporting person.

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. If more information is gained following on from the initial missing report practitioners will update the police with this information and they will look to see whether the risk level needs to change.
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. If a child or young person is in any of the above categories they must be reported as missing.
10. In December 2019 Gateshead implemented the regional Philomena protocol, which we use in all our residential homes and fostering placements. This is a targeted approach to responding to missing. This includes completing a missing form which contains all the vital information on the child / young person including an up to date photograph. The Philomena protocol 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 Philomena protocol includes a Return Home interview (RHI), regardless of how long they have been missing or how often. The RHI is where an independent person meets with the child / young person on their return to understand what led up to their missing episode, understanding what happened whilst they were missing and what support / action is required to prevent further missing episodes. This includes the findings being recorded on a form where the push and pull factors are considered and to allow for more narrative (including any previous missing episodes).

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. Children and young people who are absent 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 (i.e., late home) 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 tells is:
 - 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, 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.

Overall data

21. There were 723 missing episodes in total between August 2021 and July 2022, for looked after children. This represents an increase in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2020-2021 (510) for the same period.

Type	No. of Males	No. of Females	Total
Missing Episodes	263	460	723
RHI Assessment			

Type	No. of Males (Individuals)	No. of Females (Individuals)	Total
Missing Episodes	38	43	81
RHI Assessment			

22. 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.

23. Over the last 11 months young people who have been recorded as missing from care have in most cases returned to their placements within a reasonable time.

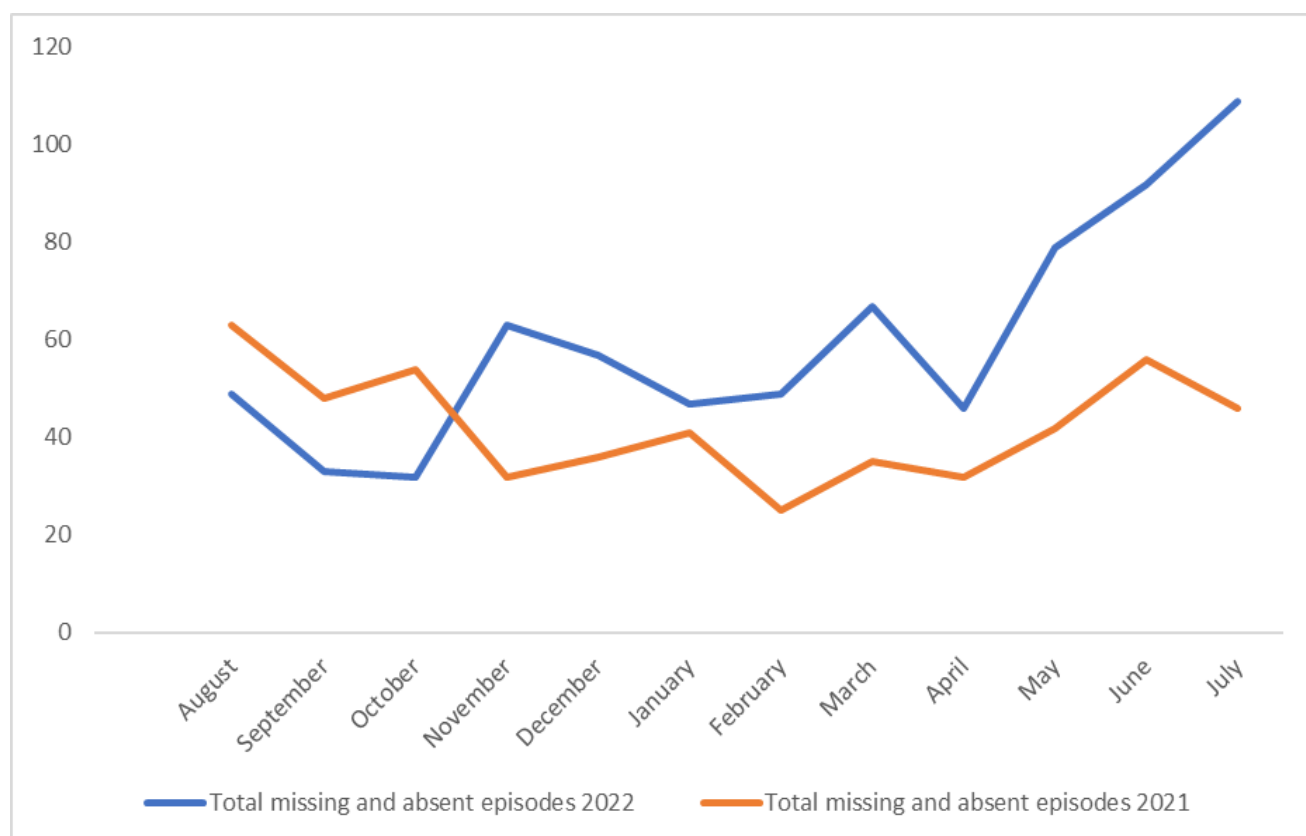
24. A small cohort of missing episodes of looked after children are for more than a 24-hour period. They are young people who are in the older age group and who have had very complex needs and backgrounds. Clear procedures are in place to manage these longer episodes.

25. Between August 2021 and July 2022 there were 117 episodes where a young person was missing or absent for over 24 hours, which is an increase on last year (81).

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

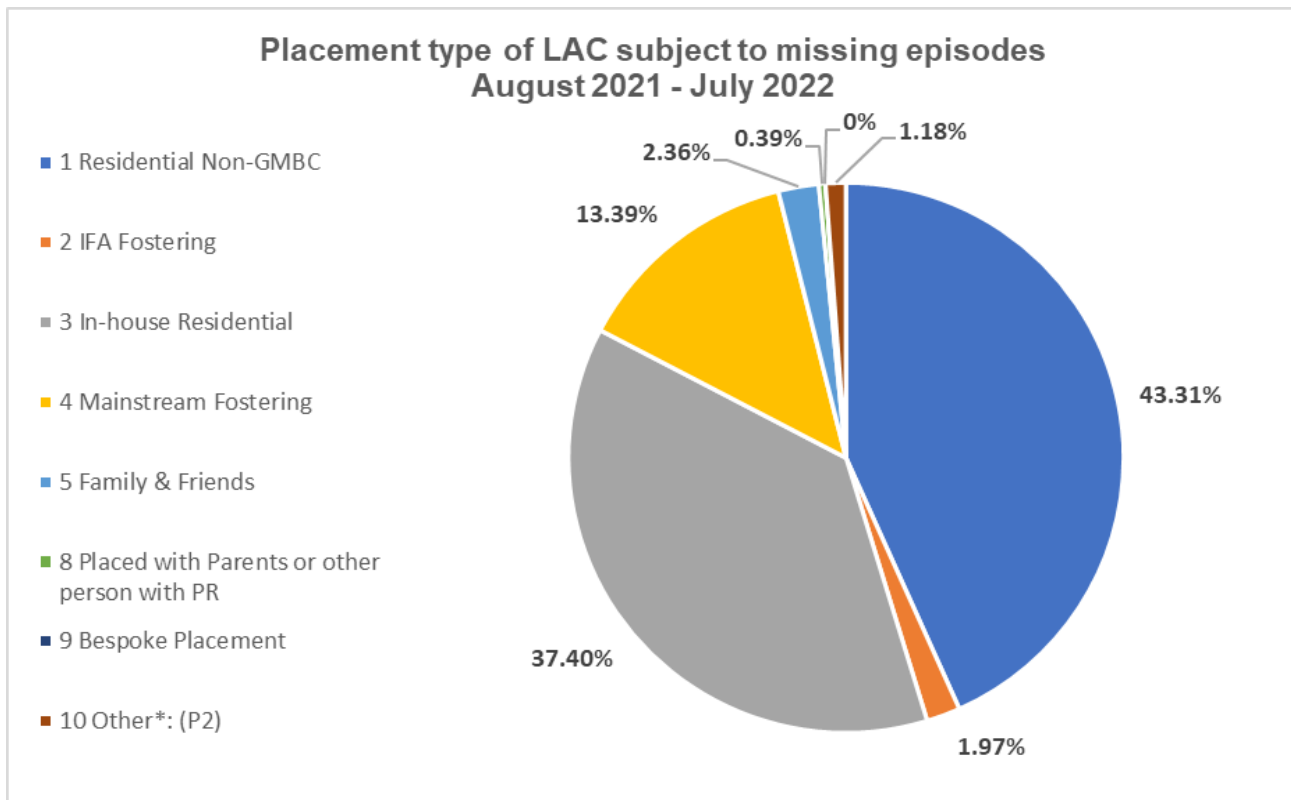
Aug 21 – Jul 22 data

Month	Total missing and absent episodes	Episodes over 24 hours	Episodes over 72 hours	Number of individual LAC
August	49	3	1	21
September	33	2	1	19
October	32	3	0	17
November	63	7	0	25
December	57	12	5	18
January	47	12	0	14
February	49	12	0	18
March	67	10	0	22
April	46	14	1	18
May	79	13	1	24
June	92	15	2	23
July	109	14	1	27
TOTAL	723	117	12	



28. To try and understand the missing episodes of looked after children the following data looks at where young people live, and the number of missing episodes linked to both residential placements and foster placements.
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 (9) with one young person having 30 missing episodes over the 6 month period that placement data is available for. Another young person had 27 missing episodes over the same time period, with a third having 11 missing episodes over a 5 month period.
30. Interventions and incentives are in place to reduce the number of missing episodes for these young people. These are reviewed to understand impact and progress alongside understanding what this means for each young person.
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 (16). One young person had 30 missing episodes over the 6 month period between August 21 and January 2022, with a further 5 young people having between 10 and 12 missing episodes. These are reviewed to understand impact and progress alongside understanding what this means for each young person.
32. In relation to children placed with in-house foster carers, no child had 10 or more missing episodes. Only one child had 9 missing episodes, with the majority only having 1 missing episode. These are reviewed to understand impact and progress alongside understanding what this means for each young person.

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	19	1	20	8	0	1	0	0	49
Sep	16	3	11	2	1	0	0	0	33
Oct	18	0	8	5	1	0	0	0	32
Nov	30	1	21	6	4	0	0	1	63
Dec	21	0	26	8	0	0	0	2	57
Jan	6	0	9	5	0	0	0	0	20
Feb	DATA CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE FROM NEW SYSTEM FOR THIS PERIOD								
Mar									
Apr									
May									
Jun									
Jul									
Total	110	5	95	34	6	1	0	3	254
%	43.31%	1.97%	37.4%	13.39%	2.36%	0.39%	0%	1.18%	100%

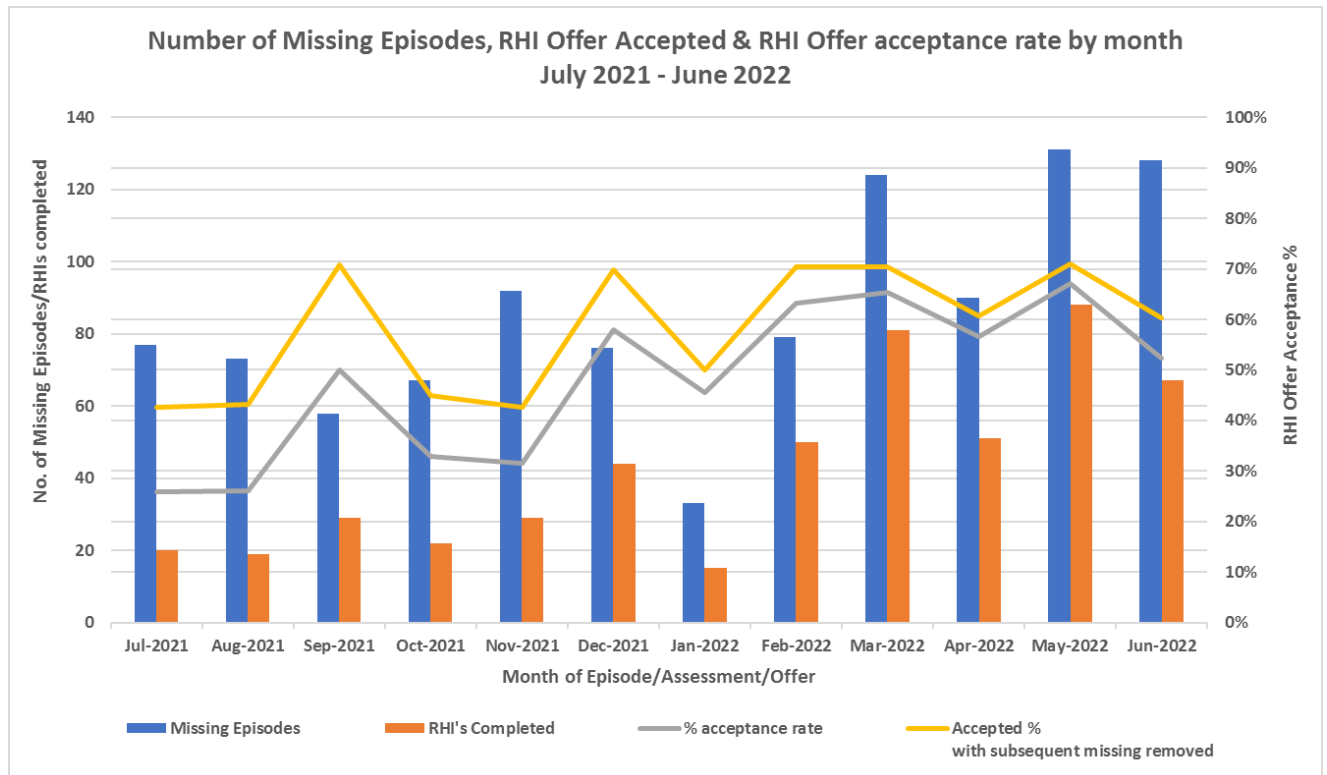


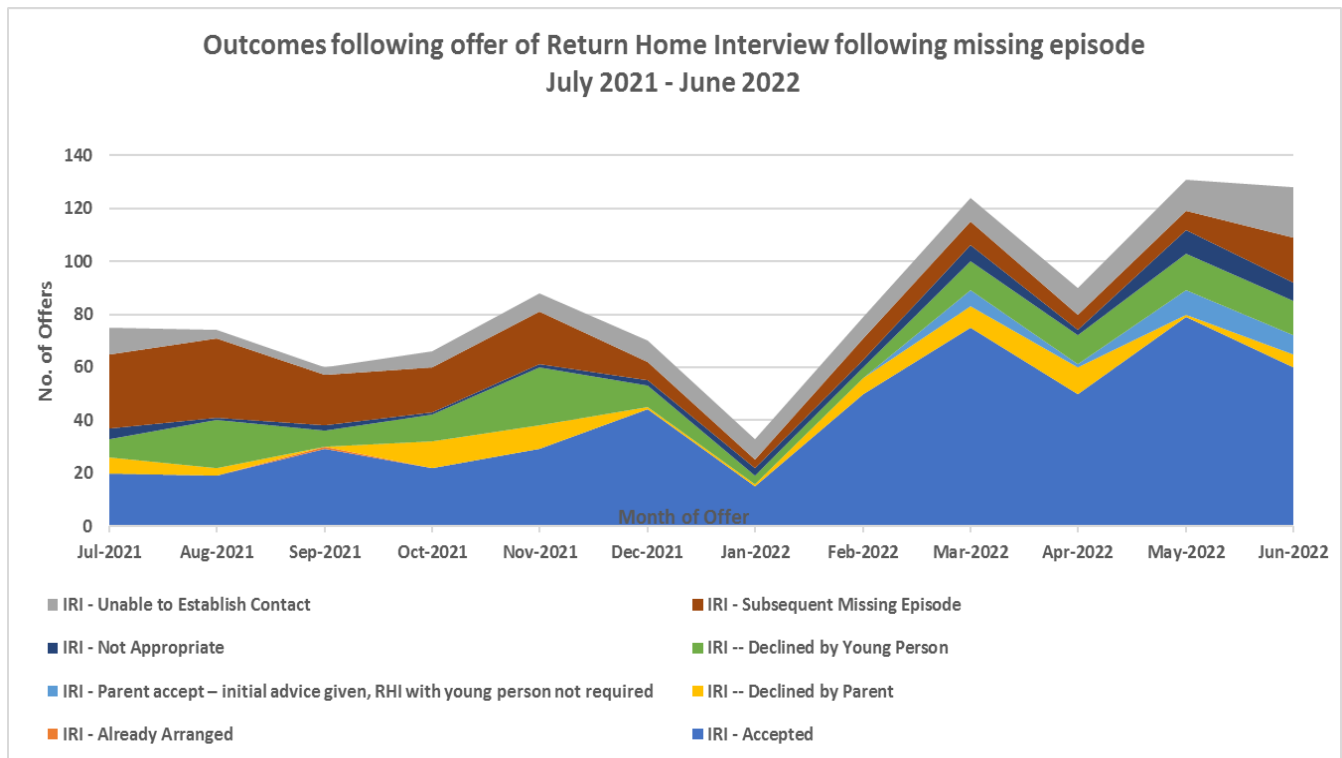
Return Home Interviews (RHI)

33. 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.
34. This differs from the 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.
35. Within the period of this report, a total of 1018 offers have been made to young people following their return from a missing episode. The % rate of acceptance for young people engaging in a return home interview has fluctuated throughout the year and overall, is higher than the previous year. The graph below illustrates this with May 2022 seeing the most missing episodes in a month with 131 recorded and May 2022 the month where most return home interviews were completed at 88.
36. In relation to young people accepting a return home interview, there was a clear increase in engagement since Dec 2021. Looking further into the outcomes following an offer an interview being made, the number of interviews declined by either the young person or their immediate parent/carer has decreased from 34.51% last year to 18.37%. This year. 48.33% of all offers made have been accepted and an interview undertaken.

The 'subsequent missing episode' option is used where the young person has been reported missing again whilst in the process of being offered an initial interview.

37. 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 in our care 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.
38. Participation levels for Return Interviews is an area of continued development as some 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.



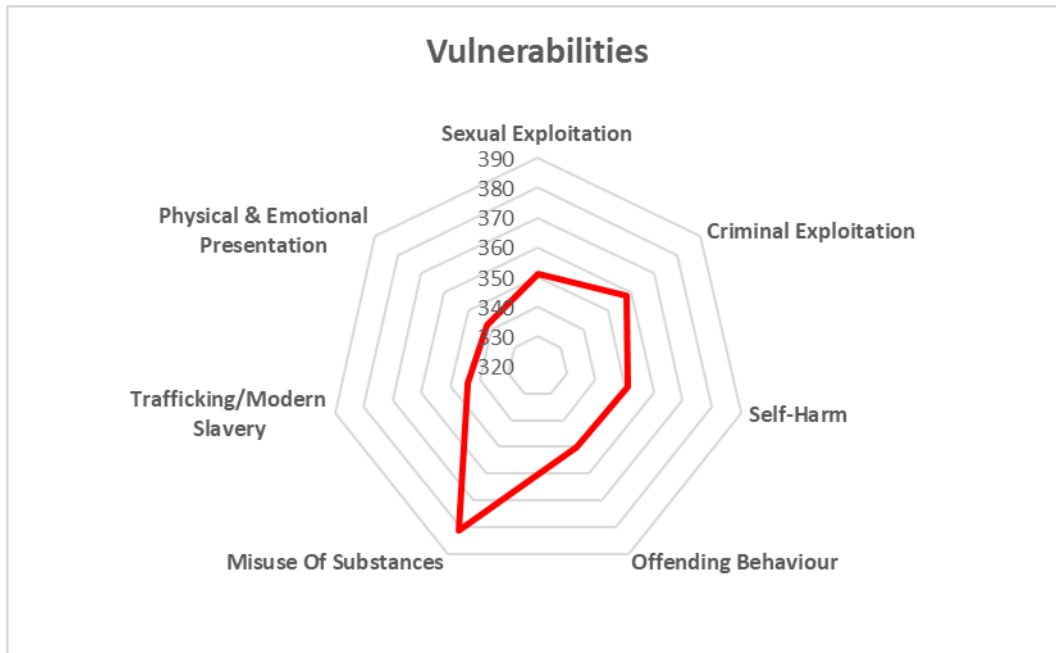


Return Home Interviews – Factors

39. During every return home interview, the young person is encouraged to talk about why they went missing to help professionals identify vulnerabilities and high-risk concerns. From the data gathered, the two radar charts below illustrate the most frequent factors, what has taken place during this missing episode and an overall category given to show all high-risk indicators. It is evident that the categories of vulnerabilities remain static.

Vulnerabilities

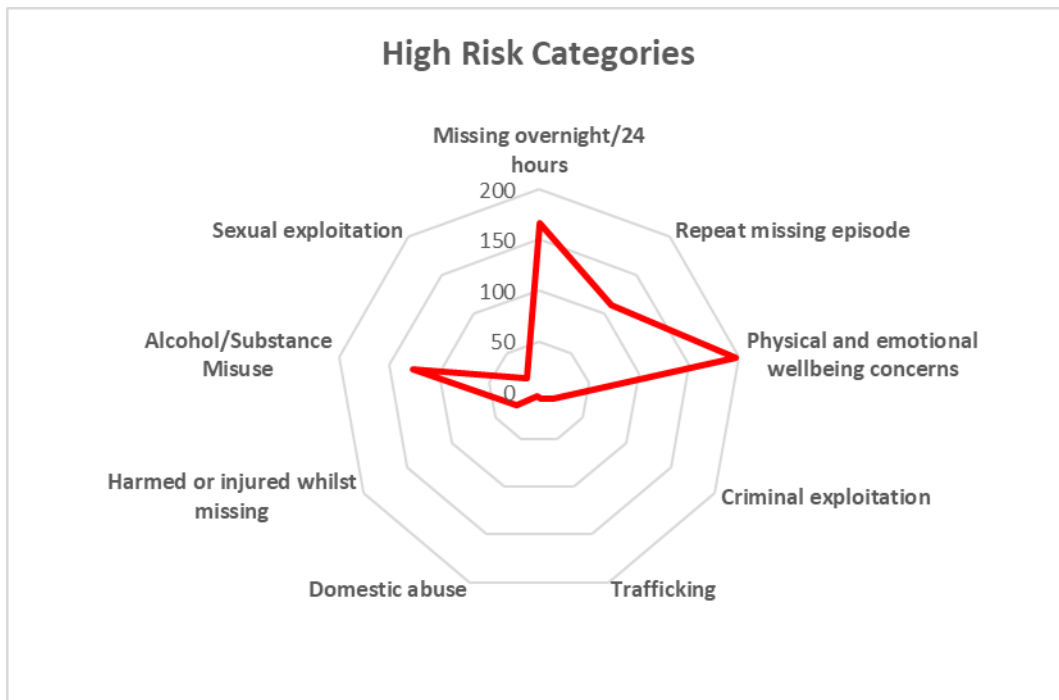
Category	Total
Sexual Exploitation	351
Criminal Exploitation	358
Self-Harm	351
Offending Behaviour	350
Misuse Of Substances	381
Trafficking/Modern Slavery	344
Physical & Emotional Presentation	342



High Risk Categories

40. The most common theme identified for high risk factors was physical and emotional wellbeing concerns which related to 197 return home interviews so 40.96%. Other noticeable figures from the data were concerns around Missing overnight/24 hours (34.72%), substance misuse (26.40) and repeat missing episode which was a concerning feature on at least 111 occasions (23.08%).

Category	Total
Missing overnight/24 hours	167
Repeat missing episode	111
Physical and emotional wellbeing concerns	197
Criminal exploitation	15
Trafficking	7
Domestic abuse	4
Harmed or injured whilst missing	26
Alcohol/Substance Misuse	127
Sexual exploitation	18



Practice developments

41. A Return Home Support Worker role is now established within the Specialist Support Team as a dedicated resource. The Return Home Support Worker works 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.
42. The Return Home Support Worker gathers intelligence and advocates on behalf of young people to help understand how we can effectively safeguard them and prevent further missing episodes.
43. Since the appointment of the Return Home Support Worker, RHI engagement rates have improved along with evidence of high-quality interventions. The Return Home Support Worker has a regular presence in our Children's Homes and Young people have requested her support at CAMHS and other wellbeing related appointments.
44. Young people have shared intelligence in relation to concerning activities in the community such as underage alcohol sales which have been reported to the relevant authorities who have responded accordingly.
45. The Safeguarding Partnership Executive Group has oversight of all young people who are considered high risk.
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. The dedicated Return Home Support Worker has had a significant impact in influencing the uptake of RHI.
48. Missing from Care co-ordinators from the police are involved in placement information meetings in our residential homes and are included in writing and updating risk assessments of young people in placement.
49. Police and RHI Manager are routinely invited to strategy meetings where missing is a feature.
50. The RHI Manager is an active participant in the weekly Multi Agency Exploitation Hub meetings. The purpose of this meeting is to share information with police, health, adult & children's services, Changing Lives, Bright Futures and SCARPA.
51. Police and Children's Services present a joint report as a standing agenda item to the Gateshead Joint Strategic Exploitation Group.

Recommendation - it is recommended that Corporate Parenting Board Members:

- (i) note and comment on the information provided in the report

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