HERE TO LISTEN?
RETURN INTERVIEWS PROVISION FOR YOUNG RUNAWAYS

Help us build a safety net for children who run away from home

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1. Introduction

Running away or going missing from home or care indicates that a child may be at risk of harm. Our research shows that running away is often preceded by conflict with parents or carers; family breakdown or poor relationships; experiences of abuse and neglect; or problems at school\(^1\). There is also a risk of child sexual exploitation or involvement in crime or gangs, either as a consequence of, or a reason for, a child running away.

This is why it is important that a child is offered support as early as possible to protect them from harm and to prevent the risks from escalating further. For that reason the statutory guidance for children who run away or go missing from home or care\(^2\) requires that local authorities provide return interviews to young runaways.

A return interview is an in-depth conversation that a trained professional has with a young person following a running away episode. It aims to establish what has caused the young person to run away, what experiences and individuals the young person encountered while away and what could help resolve the issues that the child identifies.

Our direct work with children who run away or go missing shows that a return interview is an effective way of identifying children at risk of significant harm. It helps reduce, and even prevent, further episodes of running away by helping children understand the risks of being away from their families and carers. It can also help disrupt sexual exploitation or abuse and provide evidence for prosecution.

Although provision of return interviews for young runaways is a requirement under the statutory guidance\(^2\) and there are examples of good practice, evidence shows that their provision remains inconsistent and patchy across local areas\(^3\). As no standardised reporting or monitoring of return interview provision currently takes place, in December 2012 we sent Freedom of Information requests (FOI) to local authorities to establish the current level of provision for children who run away or go missing from home and from care.

Out of 152 local authorities in England, 134 responded to the FOI and this report contains our analysis of these responses.

Summary of Key Findings

- **Children who go missing from home are far more likely to miss out on return interviews.** Out of the 134 local authorities that responded, only 33 (25%) local authorities in 2011-12 and 39 (29%) in April to December 2012 offered return interviews to all children missing from home. This compares to 65 (49%) amount in 2011-12 and 66 (49%) amount in 2012 who offered interviews to all children missing from care.

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\(^1\) Rees, Gwyther (2011) *Still Running* 3 London: The Children’s Society


\(^3\) Missing Children (2013) London: Ofsted
• **A significant number of local authorities responded that they do not offer return interviews to children running away or going missing either from home or care.** Thirty (22%) local authorities in 2011-12 and 21 (16%) in 2012 did not provide any return interviews to children missing from home. In relation to children missing from care, over the same periods of time, nine (7%) and six (4%) local authorities indicated that they did not offer any return interviews.

• **Even where return interviews are provided, their number is small compared to the overall number of running away episodes.** For example, in 2011-12 in 54 local authorities, with some provision of return interviews to children missing from care, around 2870 return interviews were reported to take place. This is a small fraction compared to around 42,000 missing episodes recorded for this group across all local authorities.

• **Return interviews are mostly done via social services and not independent providers as recommended by the statutory guidance.** Only 27 local authorities in 2011-12 and 29 in 2012 offered some return interviews via an independent provider.

• **An assessment of needs is not always an integral part of return interviews.** Fifty local authorities indicated that the return interviews they provide include an assessment of need. The remaining suggested that an assessment of need is either not part of a return interview, that there is no agreed format, or that the assessment is done only if certain criteria are met. By not undertaking assessments, opportunities may be missed to understand the whole picture behind a missing episode and the needs of the child.

**Key recommendations**

• Local authorities should implement in full the statutory guidance on children missing from home and care and provide return interviews to all children who run away.

• Ofsted should monitor how local authorities implement and follow the statutory guidance on children running away or going missing from home and care as part of their inspections.

• The revised statutory guidance on children missing from home and care should specify that return interviews must be provided to children reported missing from home.

• Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards (LSCBs) should monitor their local return interview provision to ensure that children have the option to speak to an independent professional after a running away episode.

• Local authorities should develop a standard system to record key information from return interviews and processes. This information can then be shared with other agencies to flag concerns about risks to the child and in cases of criminal activity build evidence for prosecution.

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5 54 local authorities represent 49% of all local authorities that indicated some provision of return interviews for children missing from care.
2. What are return interviews and why are they important?

What is a ‘return interview’?
The statutory guidance\(^2\) explains that a return interview is ‘an in-depth interview and is best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge’. It states that in addition to police ‘safe and well checks’\(^6\), local authorities should make sure young people ‘have the option of a return interview’.

The purpose of a return interview is to:
- a. Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered either before they run away or while they are missing
- b. Understand and address the reasons for running away
- c. Help the child understand that they have options and provide them with information on how to stay safe if they run away again.

Why are they important?
- **Return interviews focus on the child’s experiences**

Every year around 100,000 children run away from home or care in the UK\(^1\). Many children run away many times and the National Policing Improvement Agency reported in 2012 that around 66% of all missing incidents involve children, which adds up to around 190,000 incidents a year in England and Wales\(^7\).

Young runaways are some of the most vulnerable children in our society. Many of them are known to children’s services prior to running away\(^8\). Most often children run away from neglect and abuse, conflict, family breakdown and parental drug and alcohol misuse. These children are more likely to have learning difficulties, disabilities and be in care\(^1\). They are also more likely to have problems at school and not attend regularly\(^9\). Running away or going missing is also recognised as one the key risk factors of child sexual exploitation (CSE)\(^10\)\(^11\)\(^12\).

Research suggests that out of 84,000 children who run away in England, more than 18,000 are either hurt or harmed while away; experience sleeping rough or staying with a stranger; or steal, beg or do ‘other things’ in order to survive\(^1\).

An effective prevention and response to children running away requires a collective and concerted effort by all local agencies – children’s services, police, health and voluntary sector - to piece together and effectively share information about a child who may be at risk.

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\(^{6}\) Police ‘safe and well’ checks are carried out by the police as soon as possible after a child has been found or returned. Their purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by them or against them.

\(^{7}\) National Policing Improvement Agency (2012) Missing Persons: Data and analysis 2010-2011 Hampshire: NPIA


\(^{10}\) Out of Sight, Out of Mind (2011) London: CEOP

\(^{11}\) Jago, S et al (2011) What’s going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation University of Bedfordshire, Bedford

\(^{12}\) Smeaton, E. (2013) Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation
In practice, as evidenced by cases in all parts of the country, too many children fall through the gaps in service provision. The House of Commons Education Committee stated that 'commonly, young people 'bounced' around the system, with no one agency taking overall responsibility for their welfare or holding a comprehensive understanding of their needs'.

Children often feel powerless, unable to escape the situations of abuse and neglect while feeling they have no one to turn to for help. This is often exacerbated by professionals perceiving young people who run away and/or experience sexual exploitation as 'promiscuous' and 'streetwise', 'choosing this life style'.

Return interviews provide an opportunity to place the child’s needs and experiences at the centre, gives them an opportunity to talk and to be listened to, and to have their feelings and experiences taken seriously. The need to focus on children’s experiences in child protection processes was highlighted in the Munro review ‘...treatment children and young people as people not objects requires spending time with them to ascertain their views, helping them understand what is happening to them, and taking their wishes and opinions into account in making decisions about them.’

The return interview should be a starting point for intervention from services. The government’s ‘Missing Children and Adults Strategy’ stressed: ‘It is therefore key that full use is made of return interviews and that agencies working where possible with the voluntary sector, come together to understand the issues surrounding the young person and put in place a strategy of action.’

- Return interviews can lead to identification of abuse, neglect or exploitation

As there is no systematic way of recording data about return interviews or the interventions that followed, it is difficult to establish how many children were identified at risk of harm as a result of a return interview. Where data is collected, it suggests that a risk assessment undertaken following a running away episode leads to an identification of risk of significant harm in more than 30% of cases.

Even where a child is already known to services a return interview can be an opportunity to establish new information as the case study below explains.

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14 The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012) Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care.
Case Study A: Young person at risk of sexual exploitation

Fiona aged 14, was referred to The Children’s Society’s project in 2012, following missing episodes and her misuse of drugs and alcohol. She did not attend full time education and there were problems with alcohol misuse in her family.

She agreed to receive a service which consisted of a return interview and a follow-up programme of activities but failed to attend her appointments. The project worker persevered and eventually met with Fiona and started building a relationship with her.

Once the young person engaged with the project, the true extent of her risk taking became apparent. Fiona was associating with a number of older males, ranging from 16-63 years old, including a known drug dealer. She would often drink alcohol or party with these males whilst missing. She also made an allegation of rape against an extended family member and an allegation of sexual assault against a local shop keeper. The information was shared with relevant agencies and allegations of rape and sexual assault were investigated by the police.

The project undertook work and discussions with Fiona around risks, including drugs and alcohol, grooming and sexual exploitation, healthy and appropriate relationships and risky relationships. As a result, Fiona’s missing episodes have greatly decreased and she says that she is no longer using drugs or alcohol.

As requested by Fiona, the project worker who worked with her through the return interview and all follow up activities will also support her through the court proceedings relating to the alleged rape and sexual assault.

- **Return interviews can help with building intelligence around child sexual exploitation and evidence for prosecution**

The Home Affairs Select Committee, in its report on localised grooming earlier this year, noted that ‘the [return] interview is useful not only for identifying the most effective type of follow-up support the child should receive but can also be a very useful tool for social services and police to collect intelligence about perpetrators and locations where grooming might be taking place’\(^\text{18}\).

From our direct work with young runaways we know that return interviews can help with prosecution of child sexual exploitation cases in two ways. Firstly, it may help children understand that they are in an exploitative relationship and disclose abuse. Our practice shows that children often do not recognise that they are exploited or feel reluctant to talk about it with services.

**Case study B – Helping children to understand healthy relationships**

Catherine aged 14 was referred to The Children’s Society’s project for a return interview in May 2011. Catherine was going missing, drinking alcohol, associating with other vulnerable young people and visiting addresses which are considered unsafe for children in different parts of the city where she lived.

Planned sessions with Catherine covered work about grooming, internet safety, alcohol, feelings, family and sexual health. Catherine stated that she could now recognise potential grooming scenarios that had already occurred and felt she would also be able to identify risky grooming situations in the future.

Secondly, information shared by children in return interviews can help with identifying ‘hot spots’ – areas where children are going missing to – and individuals who target children for sexual exploitation. Return interviews allow workers to explore with a child what connections they make, where they go and what happens during a missing episode.

‘It’s not just ‘boyfriend’ grooming, you see other girls and boys grooming young people, and taking other young girls to sex parties or parties where they can get drink and drugs.’ A project worker in the Midlands

Availability of such evidence can help the police with their investigations and the Crown Prosecution Service with building a criminal case. It can also help protect other children from potential risks.

**Case study C: SCARPA, The Children’s Society in Newcastle**

SCARPA has been delivering services to young people who run away from home or are at risk of sexual exploitation in Newcastle for over five years.

SCARPA’s Programme Manager chairs the Missing, Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking (MSET) subgroup of the LSCB and ensures that any intelligence from return interviews that might be useful for disrupting sexual exploitation and building evidence for prosecutions is fed through to the police and local authority staff who are also represented on this group.

Due to the strong links between running away and CSE, during the return interview SCARPA staff talk to young people and ask them questions to determine whether they are at risk of sexual exploitation. This includes asking questions about where they spent time while away and who they were with.

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Taking into account any data protection or safeguarding responsibilities, the MSET chair shares relevant information with the subgroup (which includes the police, health and social services) who monitor these locations and people. If the young people have been with any individuals who are known to pose a risk to children, then their names are passed on immediately to the police who take action.

The intelligence the Northumbria police receive from the return interviews has helped them produce a ‘problem profile’ or picture of offenders and their behaviour in the local area. They then analyse this information for any patterns and trends and have shared this information with the public at a large scale public event. Having a shared understanding of the type of information each agency needs has improved the quality of information collected.

Based on the success of their current work in Newcastle, SCARPA has just received funding to roll-out their runaways and CSE service in every local authority in the Northumbria police district, except one.

• **Return interviews can lead to savings**

  The financial and social cost of children running away to public services and wider society is high. It is estimated that each missing person’s investigation costs the police between £1325 and £2415. Even at the lower bracket of this estimate dealing with 190,000 episodes of missing children under the age of 18 in England and Wales would amount to around £250 million every year. This is just the police cost. The long-term cost of unresolved issues that make children run away, is much higher, both to the individual and to society.

  The Ofsted thematic inspection on missing report quotes a 30% reduction in missing children incidents over a year as a result of return interview provision in Worcestershire. Our practice also demonstrates that an effective return interview and intensive support work can reduce the number of missing episodes and in many cases stop children running away altogether, as they get help dealing with the issues that originally caused them to run.

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20 Dr. Karen Shalev Greene and Dr. Francis Pakes (2012) *Establishing the Cost of Missing Person Investigations report from the University of Portsmouth*. Portsmouth: University of Portsmouth
**Examples from our practice**

**Street Safe, The Children’s Society in Lancashire**
The project ran a three month pilot responding to every missing from home incident of children aged of 11 to 17 within a specified area of Lancashire. They offered an independent return interview to the young person which included an assessment of need.

Following up the return interview, and with the young person’s agreement, the project helped young people to access services and seek solutions to the issues that made them run away.

Three months after the pilot had finished, 72% of young people the project worked with had not gone missing again (some had previously gone missing from home 18 times), 16% had gone missing only once more (again, these were children that had been going missing regularly) and 12% had gone missing from home two more times.

**SCARPA, The Children’s Society in Newcastle**
The project conducts return home interviews and provides intensive support to young runaways. It aims to help young people to be safe from harm, reduce risky behaviour and exit situations of exploitation. The project also works with the parents or carers of young people to create family situations that help reduce young people not going missing.

Around 78% of young people offered targeted support by SCARPA engage with their project worker and 60% show a reduction or cessation in going missing and risky behaviours.
3. Return interviews for children missing from home

What provision is currently available for this group of children?
The responses received to our FOIs indicate that the provision of return interviews to children missing from home is falling far short of what is needed and that many local authorities do not follow the requirements set out in the statutory guidance\(^2\). In our FOI requests to local authorities we asked whether they offer children who run away or go missing from home a return interview after each episode of running away. This information was asked in relation to two periods of time: April 2011 to end of March 2012 and April 2012 to end of December 2012. The results of the 134 local authorities who responded are shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Return interviews provided to children missing from home**

Local areas with interviews offered to ALL children missing from home

- In 2011-12, only 33 (25%) of local authorities offered return interviews to all children missing from home.\(^2^1\) In the period from April 2012 to December 2012 that number rose slightly to 39 (29%).

\(^2^1\) Where responses indicated that return interviews are not offered after each missing episode, we carried out a further analysis of answers to reflect all provision that was available. Hence, the final analysis includes categories ‘offered to all children’ – based on positive responses to this question, ‘some children’ where some criteria
• Even where provision is available responses indicate that the actual number of children who receive these interviews is still quite low. Across the 24 local authorities that could provide information on numbers, around 2440 return interviews were conducted in 2011-12. In the period from April to December 2012, responses indicate that around 2600 return interviews were provided in the 30 local authorities that could provide data.

• The uptake rates also seem to be very different across different areas, indicating the importance of finding the right approach to engage children.

A South West local authority: ‘Out of 580 missing episodes recorded 8 return interviews were conducted although each episode was followed up with a phone call and an offer of an interview’.

An East Midlands local authority: ‘263 return interviews were offered but only 91 took place’

A London borough: ‘28 return interviews were offered and 20 took place’

Local areas with interviews offered to SOME children missing from home
• 54 (40%) local authorities in 2011-12 and 57 (43%) in April to December 2012 offered return interviews to young people running away from home if they met certain criteria. The list below presents the criteria mentioned in responses.

List of criteria mentioned in responses
• Outcome of the police safe and well check
• Missing for the first time
• Missing for 24 hours or overnight
• Missing twice in 28 days
• Missing three times in 90 days
• Only high risk cases
• Believed to have been a victim or perpetrator of crime whilst missing
• Have been hurt
• Two or more episodes
• Known mental health issues
• Known risk of sexual exploitation
• Known risk of contact with persons posing risk to children
• Incidents that have generated assessment of needs via Common Assessment Framework (CAF), section 17 or section 47 of the Children Act 1989
• Known mental health issue
• School year 6 or below
• If a child is subject to child protection plan or a child in need
• Child known to service
• Child has an active key worker
• If requested by a child
• Depending on manager’s decision

needed to be met for an interview to be offered and ‘no children’ where answers indicated that return interviews are not offered to children at all, as illustrated in examples.
Those identified in weekly missing from home meetings.

A significant number of answers indicate that local authorities rely on information and risk assessments done by the police via ‘safe and well’ checks to decide whether to offer a return interview.

This is a worrying trend considering that the recent Ofsted thematic inspection of services for missing children concluded that ‘there was a lack of evidence in nearly all the local authorities visited of the ‘safe and well’ checks being undertaken regularly. There was little evidence that the outcomes and content of those checks that were done were being shared with relevant professionals.’

A Yorkshire and The Humber local authority: ‘When the information from the police indicates the risks of the child going missing again are low the Young People’s Service will write to the child and the family to inform them of appropriate activities within their community for young people. When the information indicates that there is a likelihood the child may go missing again the Young People’s Service will allocate a worker to the child. The worker will visit the child and family to discuss activities within the community and actively support the young person to engage’.

There does not seem to be consistency across local areas in relation to groups of children who may be considered more vulnerable. For instance, some areas offer return interviews to all new runaways, while in other places repeat runaways are considered as more vulnerable.

A Yorkshire and the Humber local authority ‘Return interviews are offered to all new runaways, we don’t automatically offer R.I.’s to repeats’

A North West local authority: ‘We have a service offering interventions to repeat runaways and occasionally does return interviews’

A South East local authority: ‘All Children who run away from home or care who are known to Children’s Services have access to a return interview conducted by children’s services.’

A North East local authority: ‘If a child does not have an active key worker in Children’s Social Care, they will not be offered a return interview following a running away / missing episode unless the episode generated a referral to Children’s Social Care which was subsequently progressed for assessment.’

Some local authorities that offer return interviews to children missing from home were also able to provide information on the number of return interviews that took place (see Figure 1). The number of return interviews in those local authorities added up to around 1170 in 2011-12 (based on answers from 21 LAs) and around 1190 from April to December 2012 (based on answers from 26 LAs).

Local areas with NO interviews offered to children missing from home

- In 2011-12, 30 (22%) local authorities answered that they do not offer return interviews to children missing from home. In 2012 their number decreased to 21 (16%).

A Yorkshire and the Humber local authority: ‘Police have the responsibility for return interviews for children and young people who are missing from home (not Looked After Children).’

A London borough: ‘We do not keep records of children who run away from, or are missing from their own family home as they are frequently not reported to Children’s Social Care. You may want to approach the police on whether they have records regarding this.’

An East of England local authority: ‘We do not currently have a process in place to routinely interview children who go missing from home, although every child should be seen by the Police during a ‘safe and well’ checks’

An East Midlands local authority: ‘The usual procedure would be contact to be made with parent/carer to discuss the episode and offer advice / services’

Local areas that could not respond

The remaining 13% of local authorities responded that they could not provide answers or that this data is not collected. Considering that some of the questions were not about numbers but about local policy and provision, it is worrying to encounter local authorities who are not able to answer questions about provisions stipulated in government guidance.

Why are return interviews for children missing from home important?

Research shows that the majority of missing children are children living with their families. Many of them have been known to local agencies and services prior to running away. Research indicates that they usually do not seek help and may not be getting support in a consistent way from children’s services unless they meet thresholds for statutory intervention.

Children running away from home often have few professionals involved in their lives and often are not referred for support. For example, children who are absent from school are more than three times as likely to have run away. But schools staff often fail to spot the signs when a young person is running away but still attending school – such as tiredness, lateness, dirty clothes, being hungry or displaying challenging behaviour – and they may not treat unauthorised absences as a sign that a child needs help.

Cuts to education welfare officers in local authorities have also meant that professionals no longer do home visits when children are absent or having problems at school to identify vital safeguarding risks and provide support to

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families\textsuperscript{25}. This is a concern because running away is often linked to problems at home.

For this group of children, a return interview following missing episodes provides an opportunity for early intervention. The fact that such a small number of local authorities provide return interviews to children running away from home makes the introduction of new police definitions of ‘missing’ and ‘absent’ even more worrying\textsuperscript{26}. This is because children classified as ‘absent’ may not even receive a police ‘safe and well’ check and thus will have fewer chances to be referred for further support. This means relevant information that could have been gathered during this check, or a return interview, may not come to light until the situation in the child’s life worsens or after a considerable delay.

\textsuperscript{25} AEWM (Association of Welfare Managers) survey of spending cuts affecting members ‘Truancy warning over education welfare cuts’ \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12733520} [accessed 13/08/13]

\textsuperscript{26} From April this year police forces are implementing new definitions of missing and absent: Missing: Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another; andAbsent: ‘A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be’.
4. Return interview provision for children running away or going missing from care

What provision is currently available for children missing from care?
The number of local authorities that indicated that they offer return interviews to all or some children running away from care is much higher than the number providing interviews to children running away from home. However, the provision of return interviews to this group of children is still falling far short of what is needed because many local authorities do not follow what is required of them in the statutory guidance.

Figure 2: Return interviews provided to children who go missing from care

Local areas with interviews offered to ALL children missing from care
- During both periods of time 49% of the local authorities who responded said that they provided return interviews to all children missing from care.

It is encouraging to see that almost half of the local authorities that responded to our FOI request are following the statutory guidance and offering return interviews to this vulnerable group of children.

- Out of 65 local authorities offering return interviews to all children missing from care, 38 could provide information on the actual number of return interviews conducted with children missing from home in 2011-12 and 38 for the period between April to December 2012. The numbers they provide add up to 2250 in 2011-12 and 2320 from April to December 2012.
Local areas with interviews offered to SOME children missing from care

- 45 (34%) of local authorities in 2011-12 and 47 (35%) respectively in 2012 indicated that they offered return interviews to some young people in care who run away. This is a positive trend showing that more areas realise the importance of this intervention.

Some of the answers explain that in order to qualify for a return interview a young person who runs away from care has to meet some additional criteria such as:

**List of criteria mentioned in responses**

- If identified as requiring this service
- If missing for more than 24 hours or overnight
- Missing three time or more in a month
- Missing twice in 28 days
- Social worker will determine whether they need return interview
- High risk
- If a child requests a return interview.

An East of England local authority: ‘safe and well visits are conducted ....for looked after children. In most instances the initial response to a child on return will be the responsibility of the carer, but this may depend on the circumstances of the return. Depending on the specific circumstances the episode may trigger an urgent visit from the allocated social worker to explore any issues with the young person, or this may be followed in their next scheduled visit. However we have the option of referring a child to our local advocacy service should the child wish for this’.

A South West local authority: ‘Wherever possible and feasible a social worker would be tasked to interview the young person following a missing episode longer than 24 hours’.

A Yorkshire and the Humber local authority: ‘if a child requests interview’

- Sixteen local authorities in 2011-12 and 23 in 2012 could provide information on the number of return interviews provided during the two periods. In 2011-12 the total reported number of return interviews was 619 and in 2012, the numbers added up to 665.

Local areas with NO interviews offered to children missing from care

- 7% of local authorities in 2011-12 and 4% in 2012 did not provide return interviews to children missing from care.

A North West local authority: 'Responsibility for conducting return interviews with children who go missing from home or care lies with the Police, who may hold this information'.
**Why children running away from care should have a return interview**

Last year’s joint inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked after Children and Care Leavers into children going missing from care highlighted the particular vulnerability of these children. Many of them have had difficult starts to their lives and experienced neglect, abuse or trauma. As a consequence, these children are often in great danger of physical or sexual abuse and exploitation. Around 10,000 children are estimated to go missing from care each year, many on multiple occasions adding up to 42,000 incidents each year. Children in care are three times more likely to run away than other children.

Children run away from care for a variety of reasons. Issues such as not being heard, not being happy in their placements and not being able to cope are often quoted by young runaways from care as the main reasons for running away.

’All they see looking after as – in my eyes – is making sure they are eating, making sure they are clean. The main thing for a child in care is like they need love and attention, that is what kids in care need, they have obviously gone into care for a reason where there hasn’t been love and attention, for them to understand would be so much better, not to just understand just half of it, but understand all that we have got to say’. (Young person who gave evidence to the APPG inquiry)

There is also evidence that children’s homes are often targeted by sexual predators aiming to exploit the vulnerability of children placed there. Very often the children are groomed to believe that they are in a relationship with the person who is exploiting them which makes it more important that an independent person is able to talk to them.

’The reason I was running away as bad as I was because I had a boyfriend then. At the time you don’t get any attention from the workers when you are in a care home, because there are loads of other people to deal with, so to me that was the person who would give me the attention, so I would just go back to there, it is just attention isn’t it, and that’s what I wanted’. (Young person who gave evidence to the inquiry)

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27 The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012) *Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care*


30 The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012) *Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care*. 
5. Who provides return interviews?

How are return interviews provided?

Providers

- Even though the statutory guidance recommends that return interviews should be provided by an independent professional whom the child trusts, FOI responses reveal that independent providers only operate in a small number of areas.

Figure 3: Providers of return interviews

- **Social services**: The vast majority of local authorities (102 out of 134 in December 2012) use social services to provide return interviews to both children who go missing from home and care. This is most commonly done through the child’s social worker. This is despite the guidance stating that the interview should be conducted by someone who is independent.

- **Independent providers**: Responses indicate that the number of independent providers remains small and that they are slightly more likely to provide return interviews to children who go missing from home. Answers also indicate that some of these providers are only commissioned to deliver return interviews on a pilot basis to a small number of cases or to carry out preventative work with families.

- **Police**: Some responses indicated that return interviews are provided by the police. This was more likely to be reported in relation to children missing from home as the graph above indicates. From some answers it is clear that return interviews are often confused with police ‘safe and well’ checks, or this answer was given because the initial decisions about whether to offer a young runaway a return interview was based on the outcome of the police ‘safe and well’ check’.

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• **Other providers**: A small number of local authorities are using advocacy, children’s rights services or independent reviewing officers within their local authority to deliver return interviews to children who go missing from care. A minimal number are using this for children who go missing from home (seven over both periods) compared to 17 and 15 local authorities for those missing from care over the same two periods of time.

**Changes**

- There is a small improvement observed during the two periods of time in the number of local authorities that have either started or expanded their return interview provision to a larger group of children. However, this should be viewed with caution because, in many areas, provision of return interviews is not stable. Work is often introduced for a specific period of time and then scrapped the next year or only introduced on a pilot basis.

**Figure 4: Changes in interview provision for children missing from home (MFH) or care (MFC) from April 2010- 2011 to April to December 2012**

**Assessments**

- FOI responses suggest that return interviews are not always utilised fully and information collected through interviews is not recorded consistently. 50 local authorities indicated that the return interviews they provide include an assessment of need. The remaining answers indicated that an assessment of need is either not done, that there is no agreed format to conduct and record the interview, or that the assessment is done only if certain criteria are met.

This supports the findings by Ofsted that ‘the capacity of professionals to learn more about the reasons and risks behind children missing episodes was
undermined in nearly all local authorities by a failure to undertake and record interviews with children after they had either been found or had returned home\textsuperscript{3}. 
Why return interviews are better provided by independent services

Research and evidence from our practice has found that professional attitudes to children that run away as ‘timewasters’ and ‘troublemakers’ or that those who run away repeatedly are ‘streetwise’ is a barrier that both prevents children from seeking help and from being seen as vulnerable children in need of support.

The APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group) inquiry into children who go missing from care found that attitudes to children who had been run away and been sexually exploited as ‘promiscuous’ or ‘slags who knew what they were getting themselves into’ prevents professionals from effectively supporting victims of this horrific crime. This is often due to a lack of understanding about the nature of sexual exploitation and how they should support victims.\(^{32}\)

If a child goes missing from care because they are not happy with the quality of their placement or relationship with their social worker, this also makes it difficult for them to talk about issues if no independent professional is available.

Young runaways find it difficult to engage with the police or social workers and ‘feel more secure [talking to other services], because they need to have your permission to tell anyone, unless they think you’re at risk’\(^{3}\).

Young people involved in The Children’s Society’s project working with young runaways reported that they valued having a genuine choice of support. They report many other services ‘tell them what to do’ and that they needed staff to be persistent and not give up on them.

The case study below provides a useful example of how persistence through the return interview process can allow familiarity with the young person to develop, leading to their gradual acceptance of support.

\(^{32}\) Smeaton, E. (2013) Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation London: Barnardo’s and Paradigm Research
Case study D: The need to offer help persistently

Laura, aged 13, first came up on the police log in August 2011. After going missing overnight, she had been picked up at a ‘party’ where she was drinking alcohol and was with other unsupervised older young people. The girl had refused to return home and became uncooperative and so was arrested by police. Laura did not fully engage with the return interview and refused the offer of any services.

Her mum did not report her missing because she was worried about the police response. The project worker had a discussion with Laura’s mum and stressed the importance of reporting her child missing in a timely manner. The project worker made a safeguarding referral to children’s social care regarding the concerns about girl’s missing incident going unreported for around 20 hours.

In September 2011, Laura went missing again. The project worker contacted her by telephone and she was much more engaged in the discussion. She refused a return interview but stated that the incident was a ‘misunderstanding’ and that she did not feel at risk. Her mum also advised that things were a little better at home; she was very supportive of project becoming involved if her daughter could be persuaded.

In October 2011, Laura had a further missing incident. At this point, children’s social care visited the family and undertook an initial assessment. The project worker persuaded Laura to engage in a return interview. This was the third time she had spoken with the project worker and the young person seemed more relaxed. She stated that she would like a service from the project, which was provided.
7. Conclusions and recommendations

Our analysis of responses to FOI requests has once again shown that local responses to missing children are not adequate. Although some positive trends over the two periods of time are observed in some local areas, the data presented here highlights that a bigger push and greater accountability is needed both at the central level and the local level to ensure that the statutory guidance on missing children is implemented fully. It is also important to ensure that children running away from home are not missing out on this important intervention.

Recommendations

• Ofsted should monitor how well and fully local authorities implement and follow the statutory guidance on children running away or going missing from home and care as part of their child protection and looked after children inspections.

• Ofsted should inspect local authorities on how well they provide return interviews to a) children missing from home b) children missing from care. These should be two separate descriptors in their key judgement on child protection.

• The revised statutory guidance on children missing from home and care should explicitly say that local authorities LSBCs are equally responsible for safeguarding children running away from home and from care placements.

• The Minister for children and families should write to local authorities and LSBCs to remind them to apply the guidance to children missing from home.

• The guidance must specify that return interviews must be provided to children reported missing from home.

• LSCBs should monitor their local return interview provision to ensure that children can speak to an independent professional in their return interview to ensure that they can talk about the reasons that made them run away or disclose abuse and neglect.

• Local authorities should develop a standard system to record key information from return interviews and processes. This information can then be shared with other agencies to flag concerns about risks to the child and, in cases of criminal activity, build evidence for prosecution.

• The guidance should specify the standard of interview and assessment that has to be met in return interview provision.

• Return interviews should not be the end of the running away episode but the beginning of follow-up work with a child that will resolve the situation, help a child build resilience and disrupt exploitation.

• Local authorities should ensure that the child has a choice of who to speak to following a running away episode and that this includes an option to speak to an independent professional.

• As recommended by the Home Affairs Select Committee in its report on localised grooming, the revised statutory guidance on children who run
away or go missing from home or care should require local authorities to conduct return interviews to all children who run away or go missing from home or care, within 72 hours of a missing incident.

- Young people should be offered a choice of speaking to an independent professional in their return interview and should always be informed about this choice.

Our [Make Runaways Safe Campaign](http://www.childrens-society.org.uk/runaways) asks all local authorities to sign up to our Runaways’ Charter which outlines the importance of providing return interviews to all children who go missing from home and care.
If you’re a councillor, please adopt the Runaways’ Charter. To find out more about what this will do for your council, contact the campaigns team at campaigns@childrenssociety.org.uk, on 020 7841 4643 or at Campaigns Team, The Children’s Society, Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street, London, WC1X 0JL

More ways to help

1. Join the campaign and share it with your networks http://action.makerunawayssafe.org.uk/page/s/petition
2. Email your council and ask them to adopt the Runaways’ Charter http://makerunawayssafe.org.uk/
3. Join our Facebook group – www.facebook.com/childrenssociety
4. Spread the word on Twitter. Use #makethemsafe and ask your followers to sign up and follow us @childrenssociety

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