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Society

# Developing local safeguarding responses to young runaways

Planning guide for professionals

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# Introduction

When a child goes missing or runs away, it is a clear indication that they are at risk of harm. Local authorities must therefore provide a safeguarding response.

Children run away and go missing from all parts of the country. Every year around 100,000 children run away from home or care in the UK. Around a quarter of them are at risk of significant harm<sup>1</sup> such as sleeping rough, being sexually exploited or becoming involved in crime or gangs.

Research shows that children run away from conflict or problems at home or school, neglect or abuse, or because children are being groomed by predatory individuals who seek to exploit them. Many run away on numerous occasions.

Local authorities and Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) have a duty under the Children Act 2004 to safeguard children and young people and to promote their welfare.

That is why our **Make Runaway Safe Charter** asks local authorities to take a series of actions - **Count, Think, Act** and **Prevent** - to ensure they keep young runaways safe in their area.

This resource was developed to help local authorities and LSCBs plan and develop local safeguarding responses to young runaways to ensure that vulnerable children are identified early and protected from the risks associated with running away. It provides a checklist of actions local authorities should undertake and links to useful resources including statutory guidance<sup>2</sup> which sets out the main responsibilities of local authorities and the LSCBs in relation to young runaways.

## Definitions of runaway, missing and absent children

The revised statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care<sup>2</sup> defines:

**A young runaway:** A child or young person under the age of 18 who has run away from their home or placement, or feels they have been forced or lured to leave, or whose whereabouts are unknown.

**A missing child/young person:** A young runaway reported as missing to the police by their family or carers (see Section A).

**Missing from care:** A looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (eg school) and their whereabouts is not known.

**Away from placement without authorisation:** A looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.

## Why is it important to **COUNT** young runaways in your local area?

The Working Together<sup>3</sup> guidance states that 'local agencies need to have a clear understanding of the collective needs of children locally when commissioning effective services'.

In order to plan and commission local services for children who run away or go missing, those responsible for safeguarding young runaways need to have a good understanding of how many young people in their area run away or go missing both from home (ie those living with their family) and care (including children in children's homes and foster care).

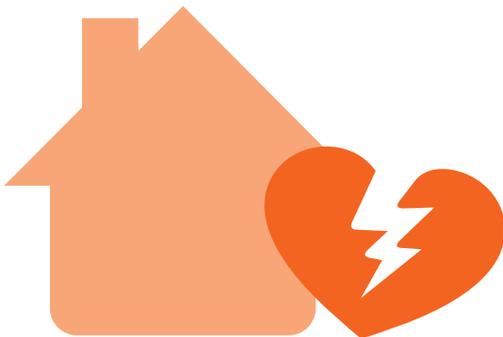
The data collected should also include any patterns in the young person's running away behaviour such as the frequency and length of missing episodes.

The statutory guidance on runaways<sup>2</sup> states that data about children and young people who go missing from home or care should be included in regular reports to council members, especially to the Lead Member for Children's Services and in local authority reports to the LSCB.

LSCBs should also review regular reports from children's homes used by the local authority or within the local authority area on the effectiveness of their measures to prevent children from going missing.

## **COUNT** checklist:

- Children under 18 recorded as 'missing' by the police, including those living with their families and those in care placements
- Children under 18 recorded as 'absent' by the police, including those living with their families and those in care placements (see Section A)
- Children reported to the police as missing from their care placement, including those in placements within and outside the local authority boundaries<sup>2</sup>
- Children who have been recorded as away from their care placement without authorisation<sup>2</sup>
- The number of Common Assessment Framework (CAF) assessments undertaken following a running away episode
- The number of Section 17 (Child in Need) assessments undertaken following a running away episode<sup>4</sup>
- The number of Section 47 (Child at Risk of Significant Harm) assessments undertaken following a running away episode<sup>5</sup>
- The number of notifications received about running away episodes of looked after children who are the responsibility of your local authority and placed outside of the borough<sup>2</sup>
- The number of notifications about running away episodes of looked after children placed in your local authority by other local authorities<sup>2</sup>.



## Section A

### New police definitions of 'missing' and 'absent'

Local authorities and LSCBs should be aware that from April 2013 new definitions of missing have been rolled out by police forces across the country. An explanation of how police respond to young runaways and these new definitions are contained in the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and National College of Policing interim guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons 2013<sup>6</sup>.

According to this guidance, a missing person is: 'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.'

An absent person is: 'A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.'

All cases classified as 'missing' by the police will receive an active police response – such as deployment of police officers to locate a child.

Cases where the child was classified as 'absent' will be recorded by the police and risk assessed regularly but no active response will be deployed.

The absent case will be resolved when a young person returns or new information comes to light suggesting that he/she is at risk. In the latter instance, the case is upgraded to 'missing'.

ACPO have specified that roll out of these new definitions is conditional on police forces having a Missing Person Co-ordinator in place.



## What issues do you need to **THINK** about?

The statutory guidance<sup>2</sup> requires local authorities to regularly analyse relevant data on young runaways.

When analysing this data it is important to look for patterns in the behaviour of individual children as well as any emerging local patterns, such as addresses that children are running away from or places where runaway children are found.

Recent cases of child sexual exploitation have shown that going missing, even for short periods, and frequent episodes of going missing are both indicators that a young person could be at risk of sexual exploitation.

Analysing patterns in relation to individual children and taking action may also disrupt sexual exploitation by helping to identify adults who may be targeting vulnerable children and to build evidence for successful prosecutions. Analysing patterns in locations where children are running from may also help identify families or children's homes that are being targeted for sexual exploitation.

## **THINK** checklist:

- Regularly analyse data on all young runaways missing both from home and care in order to map problems and patterns<sup>2</sup>
- Develop safeguards for children recorded as 'absent' by the police such as: joined up processes for initial and ongoing risk assessment; make sure that consideration is given to a child's age, vulnerability, previous history of running away, adults the child is running away to, and networks of friends
- Supplement and cross-reference data on runaway children with other data sources, eg child protection registers, mental health referrals, GP records on sexually transmitted diseases, school absence data, etc, to identify children who may be at risk of significant harm
- Gather local intelligence on places and people children run away to, to identify local hotspots<sup>2</sup>
- Analyse information about all children's homes in the area and patterns of children running away from care.



## How can you ACT to safeguard young runaways?

The statutory guidance on working together<sup>3</sup> and runaways<sup>2</sup> states that safeguarding children is the responsibility of all local agencies. The role of local authorities is to agree ways of working together across all local agencies to safeguard young runaways. This should be set out in local and regional protocols which outline responsibilities and procedures for sharing information across different agencies and responding to young runaways.

The role of LSCBs is to oversee local safeguarding practices in their local authority and to hold them to account.

To ensure good multi-agency working, all local agencies responsible for safeguarding young runaways should adopt the same definitions of 'young runaway' and 'missing children' to enable them to effectively collect and share information about these vulnerable children. The key definitions are in the statutory guidance<sup>2</sup> and at the beginning of this resource.

The guidance states that all local authorities must offer an independent return interview to all young people who have run away or gone missing from home or care. This includes children who have been classified as 'absent' by the police.

A return interview is crucial to help agencies understand why a young person has gone missing and identify the most effective follow-up support. It can also prevent future missing episodes, aid the disruption of sexual exploitation, and reduce further risks to young people.

When a child is missing they should be able to easily access information on where to go for help, such as support services, helplines or emergency accommodation. This should be available at any time, day or night. The guidance states that that bed and breakfasts are not an appropriate place for any child or young person under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup>

## ACT checklist:

- Appoint a named senior manager within your children's services to lead on monitoring policies and performance relating to children who go missing
- Develop a common set of Runaway and Missing from Home or Care protocols with your police force and other local partners, which set out the local definitions of young runaways and missing children; risk assessment frameworks; and agencies' responses to young runaways, 'missing' and 'absent' children
- Develop protocols on responding to children in care who are the responsibility of the local authority, those in placements within and outside their local authority and those who are placed in the area by other local authorities<sup>2</sup>
- Ensure that foster carers and staff in all local agencies, such as children's services, children's homes, the police, schools and health care, share the same understanding and processes in relation to young runaways
- Ensure that children who have gone missing, are 'absent' repeatedly, or are known to be at risk have access to an independent return interview and follow-up support to help them resolve the problems causing them run away (see Section B)<sup>2</sup>
- Put processes in place for effective sharing of information among different agencies about children who go missing from home and care
- Ensure that the needs of young runaways are part of local strategic needs assessment and provisions are made via Health and Wellbeing strategies to commission the support services they need
- Ensure that children who run away or go missing have access to support services, emergency helplines and accommodation<sup>2</sup>.

## Section B. Safe and well checks and independent return interviews: what is the difference?

There is often confusion about the difference between safe and well checks and return interviews.

The statutory guidance<sup>2</sup> states that safe and well checks should be 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. Further guidance is available in the ACPO guidance<sup>6</sup> on missing persons.

A return interview is an in-depth interview and is best carried out by an independent trained person that the young person is comfortable speaking with and who can follow-up any actions that emerge. It is the responsibility of the local authority to ensure that return interviews take place. Return interviews must be available to children who go missing both from home and care.

Contact should be made with the child within 72 hours of their return, to arrange an independent return interview. A return interview is important as it provides an opportunity to hear from the child why they went missing (for the first time or repeatedly) and to understand the risks and issues faced by the child while missing. This could include exploring issues where a child:

- Has been reported missing on two or more occasions (this should still include children classified as 'absent' by the police)
- Is frequently away from their placement without authorisation
- Has been hurt or harmed while they have been missing
- Is at known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking
- Is at known or suspected risk of involvement in criminal activity or drugs
- Has contact with persons posing risk to children
- Has been engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence.

## What can you do to **PREVENT** children becoming at risk?

Our research shows that children running away do not turn to agencies or adults for help, either because they do not trust them or they do not know what help is available.

It is important for agencies to work with young people so they do not feel they need to run away.

It is also vital to raise awareness among young people about the risks of running away.

It is not always possible to prevent a child running away for the first time. However, more must be done to help young people resolve any problems they may have to prevent them from putting themselves at risk again. This can be through one-to-one support and advice as well as return interviews.

The statutory guidance also requires that the outcomes of safe and well checks and return interviews are recorded on case files.

1. Rees, G. (2011) Still Running 3: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways London: The Children's Society

2. Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, DfE, (2014) London: HM Government

3. Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, DfE, (2013) London: HM Government

4. Each local authority has a duty to 'safeguard and promote the welfare' of children who are assessed as being in 'need' under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. A child is deemed as 'in need' if they are disabled or unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of health or development unless services are provided.

5. Under section 47 of the Children Act 1989, a local authority must investigate if a child in their area is suffering or likely to be suffering significant harm and take any steps, as reasonably practicable, to ensure that the child is safeguarded.

6. ACPO, College of Policing (2013) Interim Guidance on Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons

## PREVENT checklist:

- Run a programme of activities for young people to raise awareness of the risks of running away, eg sexual exploitation and grooming, involvement in crime and drugs or alcohol
- Raise awareness among teachers and education welfare staff of the signs of running away\*
- Make sure that information is available to parents about what to do if their child runs away\*
- If a child runs away from care, make sure that: the Care Review and Planning Guidance is followed and running away is discussed at the care review meetings; the child's Independent Reviewing Officer is informed; and any history of running away is built into the child's safety plan
- Make sure that each child in care is informed about their right to be supported by an independent advocate to express any unhappiness about their care placements or other decisions
- Provide return interviews to children and make support services easily available and accessible<sup>2</sup>
- Make sure that education welfare officers (or equivalent) in local authorities analyse data on children missing from education to identify patterns of absence and identify children and families who need support
- Challenge negative attitudes about young runaways among professionals to make sure that they are always seen as children who need help and not as children who are causing trouble
- Work together with voluntary sector organisations with expertise in supporting vulnerable children.

\*Please visit our website to download our guides for parents and professionals on what to do when a child goes missing:

[www.childrenssociety.org.uk/resources](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/resources)

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