Children and young people going missing from children's homes in Leeds

Final report on research study
February to June 2002

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the people who have contributed their views to this research study - the young people who filled in questionnaires, the staff in children's homes who facilitated this process and also shared their views and experiences with us, and the other professionals both inside and outside Leeds City Council who agreed to help in various ways with the research process.

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of other members of the research team. Mike Kelly provided valuable administrative support to the project. Ros Medforth undertook analysis of the questionnaires received from children's homes staff.

2
1: Introduction

In December 2001 Leeds City Council issued a tender for a short piece of research into the issue of children and young people going missing from its children's homes. The tender was awarded to the Safe on the Streets Research Team, a partnership between The Children's Society and the University of York. The research was to be carried out over a ten week period in early 2002. This report sets out the findings and recommendations from this research project.

Research aims

The aims of the research, as set out in the tender proposal were as follows:

1. To provide reliable and up-to-date information about the issue of absconding from children's homes in Leeds, including:
   a) estimates of the prevalence and incidence of young people who abscond;
   b) characteristics and profiles of young people who abscond;
   c) reasons why young people abscond (from different perspectives);
   d) experiences of young people whilst absconding;
   e) risk factors associated with absconding (from different perspectives).

2. To assess the strengths and weaknesses of the current system for monitoring and managing absconding in Leeds, taking into account the perspectives of residential staff, social workers, and police.

3. To make recommendations about ways of addressing the issue of absconding from children's home, including:
   a) providing a working definition of absconding;
   b) how instances of absconding could be reduced;
   c) potential means of improving the current system for handling absconding from children's homes in Leeds;
   d) providing information and materials which might be of value to staff in caring for children and young people placed in residential care.

Methods

Four sets of data were gathered for the research study:

1. A log of all reported missing person incidents from children's homes over a 12 month period. This data set had already been collated by the SSD and was made available to the researchers for analysis. It included details of the timing of missing incidents, the age, sex and ethnicity of the young people involved, and the home from which they went missing.

2. Self-completion questionnaires from young people in children's homes. The questionnaire covered histories of going missing, reasons for going missing, histories of and views on living in care, general life experiences and personal characteristics. It also offered young people the opportunity to contribute their views on what might help to tackle the issue of going missing.

3. Information gathering from staff in children's homes and other relevant professionals. This information was gathered by means of self-completion questionnaires to children's homes staff.
and telephone interviews with other professionals. It covered professional's perspectives on the prevalence and nature of absconding, the reasons for it, the current system for dealing with absconding, and suggestions for improvements to practice and policy.

4. Collation and review of relevant policy, practice and research literature and other written materials. This included a search for relevant literature on the issue of young people absconding or running away from substitute care. An attempt was also made to identify examples of good practice in other local authority areas which might inform the development of work with this target group in Leeds.

Following this brief introduction, the remainder of this report is divided into four main sections. First we review the UK literature on going missing from care and note some key recent policy and practice developments.

The next two sections look at the current situation in Leeds. We present the evidence we have gathered on the prevalence and nature of going missing from children's homes in Leeds, and then go on to summarise contributors’ views on the current system for dealing with going missing from children's homes.

The following section of the report draws together the main themes identified in the research and discussed some of the implications of the findings for future work on this issue in Leeds.

Finally there is a short section of concluding comments summarising the key findings and recommendations of the research.
2: The national picture

Research

The issue of young people absconding or going missing from residential care has been a prevalent theme in the research on running away which has been carried out in the UK over the last twenty years.

Prevalence of going missing from substitute care

An analysis of reported missing person incidents in five areas, Abrahams and Mungall (1992) estimated there were around 102,000 incidents of young people under 18 going missing each year in England and Scotland. Around 30% of these incidents related to young people going missing from care (the vast majority of which were from residential care). In reading this and the other statistics below it is important to bear in mind that less than 1% of the general population of young people is living in care at any given time.

More recently two studies of self-reported running away by young people have found much higher than average rates of running away amongst young people living in, or with experience of, the substitute care system. In a study carried out in Leeds in the early 1990s which included a survey undertaken in a sample of children's homes in the city, Rees (1993) found that four in five young people in residential care had run away over night at least once in their lives. In a large-scale representative UK survey (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) the rate of running away amongst young people living in residential and foster care was estimated to be around 45%. This figure compares to an estimated rate of 11% for the general population of young people.

Studies of young people using projects aimed specifically at runaways have backed up this evidence. Newman (1989) found that 29% of young people staying at the UK's first safe house for runaways had run away from care placements. Barter (1996) found that a fifth of young people at a runaways refuge in London were from substitute care, predominantly from the residential sector.

The most substantial UK study of going missing from substitute care (Wade and Biehal, 1998) found rates of going missing from children's homes within a twelve month period of between 25% and 71% in four local authorities. Other studies of young people in substitute care have also highlighted the issue of going missing. Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) reported high rates of running away and a strong association between criminal convictions and running away, in a study of over 1,000 young people in children's homes.

There is therefore conclusive evidence of substantially higher than average rates of running away or going missing amongst young people living in substitute care.

The importance of understanding the wider context of young people’s lives

At the same time the research has drawn attention to the complexities involved in understanding the issue of young people going missing from the care system. Wade and Biehal (1998) found that nearly half (46%) of young people going missing from children's homes had first gone missing whilst living with their family.

The significance of the type of residential placement has also been identified in the literature. Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) in a study of children's homes found that the wide variations in running away rates were not attributable to differences in intake and could to a large extent be accounted for by differences in culture, organisation and type of provision.
A full understanding of the issue of absconding from children's homes therefore requires a consideration of young people's histories and biographies, of care histories, and of environmental factors, as well as the current context within which young people are absconding, as shown in the figure below:

**Figure 1: The range of factors contributing to going missing from residential care**

- **Historical factors**
  - Repercussions of abuse / maltreatment
  - Pattern of running away as coping strategy

- **Placement factors**
  - Relationships with staff
    - Peer pressure
    - Bullying

- **‘Pull’ factors**
  - Wanting to be with peers outside placement
  - Wanting to be with family

- **Young person factors**
  - Problems outside the home
  - Unmet therapeutic needs

**Patterns of going missing**

There is also considerable diversity in patterns of going missing from substitute care. Wade and Biehal (1998) identified two broad groups: those who went missing to be with friends or family, and those who were running away from their placement. These groups had different experiences whilst absconding. The young people who went missing to be with friends or family were more likely to go missing alone, to stay away longer and to return of their own accord. In contrast, the young people who were ‘runaways’ tended more often to go missing as part of a group. Although many stayed with friends or relatives, some slept rough and there was a higher likelihood of young people in this group becoming involved in offending whilst away from their placement.

**Policy and practice**

Alongside the development of a body of research knowledge in this area, there have been some significant policy and practice developments in relation to young people going missing over the last few years.

Specific reference is made to the issue of going missing in the guidance on Children’s Service Plans (Department of Health / Department for Education and Employment, 1996). This guidance refers to the need for inter-agency planning, and the need to follow up on young people once they
have returned to their placement (or family) after going missing. The importance of monitoring and recording is mentioned in this guidance and has been consistently highlighted in other reports (Bridge Care Development Service 1996; Local Government Association 1997; Waterhouse 2000).

Recommendations to establish joint protocols about responding to the issue of going missing from substitute care are to be found in various sources – research reports, national Police policy guidance and forthcoming guidance from the Department of Health, as well as official reports (e.g. the Bridge report). Such protocols have already been developed in some areas between local authorities, police (and in some cases voluntary agencies). A number of these protocols have been obtained for the current research project. A summary of their core components and principles is to be found in the section on recommendations towards the end of the report. Copies of the protocols are attached as appendices.

In several areas of England ‘missing person schemes’ run by independent organisations have been set up to work with young people reported as missing either from substitute care or from home. Some of these have been funded by voluntary organisations and others by statutory funding sources (e.g. Quality Protects). Schemes working specifically with young people in substitute care are currently known to be in existence in Bradford, Birmingham and Torquay. The general idea of these schemes is that an independent person spends some time with a young person after they have returned to their care placement, discussing the reasons why they went missing and what could be done to prevent it happening again. Again, such schemes have been the recommendation of several inquiries into child abuse in residential settings (e.g. Waterhouse, 2000; Marshall K, Jamieson C and Finlayson A, 1999).

The National Missing Persons Helpline, in conjunction with the Department of Health, has set up the ‘Missing from Care’ project. This initiative aims to widen the use of protocols and encourage a better information management system in relation to going missing from substitute care.

The Department of Health has commissioned good practice guidance on children and young people who go missing from substitute care which is to be published shortly (Biehal & Wade, forthcoming).

Finally, last year the Social Exclusion Unit issued a consultation document on the issue of young people running away from home and care (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). This was followed by extensive consultation, and a further report issuing recommendations is due to be published later this year.
In this section we will present the evidence we have gathered on the prevalence and nature of going missing from children’s homes in Leeds from three sources: the monitoring data gathered centrally by the SSD, the survey of young people, and the information gathered from unit staff and other professionals.

Statistical tables illustrating many of the findings are contained in Appendices 2 and 3. Where relevant, the appropriate section of the appendix is indicated in brackets after headings.

**Monitoring data on reported missing person incidents**

The SSD agreed to provide us with access to raw data on missing incidents from children's homes gathered centrally during 2001. We have undertaken an analysis of this data and present the findings here. This data is dependent on faxed reports to central admin from children's homes staff and therefore we can not be certain that it covers every single incident during the year. However it is likely to be reasonably complete and does offer a valuable insight into patterns of going missing from children's homes in Leeds.

**Number of incidents**

In total, there were 508 recorded incidents of young people going missing from children's homes during the year. These incidents related to 82 young people. There were 95 bedspaces available in the children’s homes surveyed. However, over the 12 month period around 214 young people were accommodated in these children's homes. Taking this latter figure, the proportion of ‘looked after’ young people running away during the 12 months is around 38%.

As part of the tender brief, the Board requested comparison figures for other large cities. We have not obtained this information as we are concerned about the validity of making comparisons in this way for two reasons. First, it is clear that there are different reporting procedures in different local authorities. Some authorities report young people as missing much sooner than others. In some places there are protocols in place which delay reporting for a significant amount of time. Second, there are different approaches to residential provision in different local authority areas, and different mixes of residential and foster care provision. This means that the types of young people who end up being accommodated in the residential sector are not likely to be the same in different local authority areas. For these reasons we feel it is not valid to make comparisons. However if, having considered these issues, the Board would still like this information we would be happy to attempt to obtain it and provide it as an annex to the report.

We note from an earlier study (Wade and Biehal, 1998) that the rates of running away over a twelve month period varied from 25% to 71% across four local authority areas. The above estimated figure for Leeds is within the lower half of this very wide range.

**Frequency of going missing** (Appendix 2, Section 1)

An immediate and striking pattern in the data is the uneven distribution of missing incidents amongst the young people. The number of missing incidents per person during the year ranged from 1 to 84. The mean number of incidents per person who went missing was just over six. As a consequence of this uneven distribution it is noteworthy that roughly half of all the incidents (251 out of 508) related to just seven young people, and that the 11 young people who went missing ten
times or more during the year accounted for over three-fifths (304) of the incidents. At the other end of the scale, 34 young people were recorded as missing only once during the year.

We will return to the characteristics of these different groups of young people later in this chapter. However, first we look at the timing and duration of the incidents.

**Timing of incidents** (Appendix 2, Section 2)

There was, not surprisingly, an uneven distribution of times when young people were reported as missing. Over half of the incidents were recorded as having started between 9pm and midnight. This is likely to be a reflection of the significant number of young people who are reported as missing due to failing to return to the home at the agreed or expected time, rather than having run away.

There is less of a strong pattern in terms of the number of incidents which start on different days of the week although there is a peak on Saturdays and a relatively low point on Tuesdays.

There was no evidence of systematic seasonal variation in the level of going missing incidents.

**Duration of incidents** (Appendix 2, Section 3)

The large majority (73%) of all incidents either end on the same or the subsequent day that they began. The peak length of the average incident is between 10 and 12 hours.

**Characteristics of young people going missing** (Appendix 2, Section 4)

The monitoring data does not provide a great deal of information about the characteristics of the young people going missing. However, it does make it possible to look at patterns of going missing by age and sex.

In terms of age, going missing from children's homes in Leeds is clearly primarily a phenomenon relating to 15 and 16 year olds. Young people in this age range accounted for 70% of all incidents. A detailed look at the age distribution makes it possible to be more specific. Almost 300 incidents - well over half of the total - occurred between the ages of 15½ and 16½.

Even more striking is the distribution of incidents by gender. Over three-quarters of the missing incidents related to females.

The figures therefore suggest a profile of the most common characteristics of young people who go missing from children's homes as being females aged 15 and 16. Well over half the incidents (over 300) fall into this category. Under the age of 14, the gender distribution is fairly even, with a slightly higher number of incidents relating to males aged 10 to 13 than to females in this age range. In the 15 to 16 age group, incidents involving females outnumber incidents involving males by about six to one.

Referring back to the discussion earlier about young people who run away repeatedly, the ten young people with the largest number of missing incidents in the year were all female and all were aged between 14 and 16 during the year in the question. These ten young women accounted for almost 300 of the 508 recorded incidents during the year.

**Young people going missing alone and in groups** (Appendix 2, Section 5)

It was possible, using the data on date and time reported missing, to identify with a reasonable amount of accuracy instances of multiple related missing incidents from children's homes.
In total, there were 425 individual instances of young people being reported as missing. More than four-fifths (84%) of these instances involved just one young person. One in seven (14%) involved two young people.

Given the information presented earlier about age and gender patterns it is worth comparing the profile of young people who are involved in going missing alone with those who go missing in groups.

Again, there is a clear gender and age pattern to whether young people go missing alone or as part of a group. Two-thirds of young people under 13 went missing as part of a pair / group, whereas over three-quarters of 16-year-olds went missing alone. Around a quarter of females went missing with other young people, compared to two-fifths of males. There is no significant difference between the proportion of males of different ages who go missing as part of a group (or alone). For females, on the other hand, there is a strong age pattern, with younger females being more likely to go missing as part of a group and older females being much less likely.

All these patterns need to be thought about carefully. A small number of older females consistently running away alone are the reason for much of the differences noted.

It is also interesting to look at the timing and duration of lone and group incidents. There is a peak in the occurrence of group missing incidents in the early evening. On average, incidents involving more than one young person are of significantly shorter duration than those involving only one young person.

The survey of young people

The survey of young people was conducted in 13 children's homes during April 2002. All young people, whether they had ever gone missing or not, were offered the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. Young people who returned a questionnaire were given a £5 payment either in cash or in the form of a gift voucher at the discretion of the unit staff.

A total of 76 questionnaires were returned out of a possible 90. This is a very high return rate (84%) and we are very grateful to the staff who helped to facilitate the survey and to the young people themselves for participating in such a positive way.

The survey offers valuable first-hand insights, from young people's viewpoint, of the issue of going missing.

Rates of going missing (Appendix 3, Section 1)

Over four-fifths (81%) of the young people surveyed had gone missing at some point in their lives and almost half (47%) of the young people had gone missing during the last year. This is higher than the estimated rate of 38% from the survey. However it is likely to be explained by the fact that young people who have been in the care system a long time are likely to be over-represented numerically in a snapshot survey, and these are also going to be young people who are more likely to have run away from care (by virtue of their having been in care for longer).

The survey also asked young people for more detailed information about the most recent occasion on which they had gone missing. Almost all of the young people had gone missing from a children's home on the most recent occasion, usually the one they were currently living in.

Characteristics of young people going missing (Appendix 3, Section 2)

Looking first at the age of the young people, due to the accumulation of experiences it is almost inevitable that the likelihood of ever having gone missing will increase with age and this pattern
was evident in the data. More interestingly there was no evidence from the data that older young people were more likely to have gone missing in the last 12 months. This pattern seems to be due to the fact that young people under 12 and those aged 17 were relatively unlikely to go missing. The peak age for going missing appears to be in the 15 to 16 age range as suggested by the monitoring data.

In terms of the number of times young people had gone missing, as you would expect older young people up to the age of 16 had run more often, although this trend was not strong enough to be statistically significant. The 17-year-olds in the survey had very low rates of running away. These were young people who were currently preparing for independent living and may have had different care experiences than the other young people in the survey. The patterns of going missing within the last 12 months match those seen in the monitoring data with a peak in activity at 15 to 16 years of age. Over a third (36%) of the young people aged 15 and 16 reported having gone missing more than five times in the last 12 months compared to 18% of under-13-year-olds and 11% of 14- to 15-year-olds.

The strong patterns of going missing for females and males which were evident in the monitoring data are also present in the survey. Females (93%) were significantly more likely than males (73%) to have ever gone missing. They were also much more likely to have gone missing in the last 12 months - 67% of females compared to 33% of males. Females were more likely to have gone missing a large number of times in their lives - almost two-fifths had lost count of the number of times - and to have gone missing regularly in the last 12 months.

In summary then the age and sex patterns of going missing seen in the monitoring data are confirmed by young people's own reporting in the survey.

The survey also asked young people to define their ethnic origin. Unfortunately due to some missing data for this question and the small sample size it is not possible to say anything definitive about this issue. Young people from minority ethnic groups were more likely to have ever gone missing and to have gone missing in the last 12 months than white young people but the differences were not statistically significant.

**Histories of going missing** (Appendix 3, Section 3)

Whilst the survey reflects a high level of going missing amongst the young people currently living in children's homes in Leeds, by no means all of these young people had begun going missing whilst in the residential care system. Around 30% had first run from family and around 20% from foster care, thus leaving just under half of the young people who had first run from residential care.

The average age of first going missing was notably young. Over a third had gone missing before the age of 11. This is somewhat higher than the pattern amongst young people who run away generally where the proportion is around a quarter (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Many of the young people reported numerous incidents of going missing and around a third of those who had gone missing had lost count of the number of times this had happened.

In respect of the above points some further patterns were apparent in the data. Young people who had first run away from family were significantly more likely to have run away more times. Ten out of these 16 young people (62%) had lost count of the number of times they had gone missing. Young people who had first run from family also appeared somewhat more likely to have gone missing in the last 12 months although these differences were not large enough to be statistically significant.

The survey also asked young people what was the longest time that they had ever gone missing for. Around half of the young people had only ever gone missing either during the day or for a single
night, a further quarter had gone missing for two to six nights at the most, and a quarter had gone missing for longer than this.

**Reasons for going missing** (Appendix 3, Section 4)

Given the research brief, one of the aims of the questionnaire was to explore young people's own definitions of going missing. Young people were asked to indicate whether they had run away, had not come back or stayed out without permission, or whether they would they describe the incident in a different way. Just over two-thirds of the young people said they had 'run away' and the remainder (31%) said that they had failed to return. This issue of definitions is something we will return to in more detail when considering the views of unit staff and other professionals later in the report.

Young people were asked to select from a list of statements about why they had gone missing. Apart from the general statement about being 'unhappy with life' the most common factors chosen by young people were what can be termed 'pull' factors - pressure from other young people to go missing, wanting to be with family, and wanting to be with someone else outside the home. Some of the additional comments made by young people illustrate this:

- To go to see my mum
- Because I wanted to be with my boyfriend and I also wanted to go clubbing
- For the fun of it
- Wanting to be with friends
- I got drunk and messed about with friends / boyfriend
- Because my ex-boyfriend wanted to sort things out because we had an argument
- Wanted to go to friend's house and staff wouldn't let me go out
- I find it difficult to say no
- Because I wanted to live at my nanas

'Push' factors - unhappy with placement, arguments with staff, and bullying were also common in many cases.

- Because people were picking on me
- No, but I'm telling you something. I don't think I should have to come in at a time that my little 11 year old sister goes in. It's proper tight.
- When I had an argument I ran away, not for long though.

For some young people there were also other triggers for running away:

- I went missing because I had an argument with grandparents and walked out

There is considerable diversity, then, in the immediate reasons for a particular running away incident, although it seems that factors outside the immediate residential environment can play a significant part in many incidents of going missing.

**The context in which young people go missing** (Appendix 3, Section 5)

Research has shown that whilst there are usually immediate reasons - or 'triggers' - for an incident of running away or going missing there are also usually a range of longer term underlying contributory factors. These factors make young people more or less likely to go missing.
Other research in the past has emphasised the need to view going missing from children’s homes within a wider historical and institutional context. There are limitations in what can be asked in self-completed questionnaires and we did not feel that it was practically or ethically possible to ask young people about their experiences before moving into care. This may have rekindled memories for young people in a situation where we were not able to offer any support. It also seemed likely that young people who had entered care at a young age might be unable to recall much about their life before entering care and the data may not be that reliable.

However we were able to gain information about a number of other contextual factors which are related to going missing:

- Young people who had run away before entering the care system were more likely to go missing repetitively once in care
- Young people who had experienced more placement movements in care were more likely to go missing regularly
- There was some evidence that young people who had a more positive view of their current placement were less likely to go missing from it
- There was a strong link between regular truanting and the likelihood of going missing. All 14 young people who said they had regularly truanted also said that they had gone missing.
- We asked young people to say whether they felt they had problems in any of the following areas: getting angry, feeling low or depressed, drugs, alcohol, getting in trouble with the police, hurting themselves, food or eating. Young people who said that they had more of these problems were more likely to have gone missing.

Finally on this issue, it is interesting to note the link between age first going missing and age of first being in care. In total, almost half the young people who had gone missing had first done so within a year of first being in care. For young people who first entered care after the age of 7, the proportion is even higher (60%). Thus it seems that there is a link between first going missing and entering care - with either event potentially triggering the other. The tendency of going missing to trigger professional interventions has been noted in the literature (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). The potential for entering care to trigger going missing is a less well-explored issue but was the subject of some comment from professionals contributing to this research (see later).

**Experiences whilst away** (Appendix 3, Section 6)

The diversity of triggers and motivations may also be reflected in the places that young people stay when they go missing. The majority of young people stayed with a friend, boyfriend or girlfriend. However, over a quarter of those who stayed away overnight said that they had been on the streets or slept rough. This is broadly in line with patterns for runaways in general, but concerning nevertheless.

Over a third of young people (38%) said that they had only been away during the day on the recent occasion that they had gone missing, and the same proportion had only been away for one night. Taken together these figures are broadly in line with both the monitoring data presented earlier. The pattern is comparable with that amongst runaways in general (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) which suggests that whilst young people living in children’s homes in Leeds do go missing more often than the general population, they do not stay away longer than average when they do go missing.

The survey asked young people a few other basic questions about their experiences whilst away. 17% of young people said that they had been involved in stealing whilst missing on the most recent
occasion, 11% said that they had begged, and 5% had been involved in other unspecified survival strategies. Just over a quarter of the young people said that they had been hurt or harmed on the most recent occasion that they had gone missing. Whilst the numbers in the sample were small, this information provides an indication of some of the potential risks to which young people may be exposed whilst away from the homes. This is another point which is also reflected in professionals' comments, as discussed later.

**Returning to the children's home** (Appendix 3, Section 7)

Finally, young people were asked how the most recent going missing incident ended. Around half said that they had decided to come back of their own accord, whilst the other half said that they had been found and brought back. The proportion who were found and returned is considerably higher than for young runaways in general (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

**Information from staff in children's homes and other relevant professionals**

Questionnaires were issued to all staff in the 13 Children's Homes in April 2002. A total of 19 questionnaires were returned. In addition, interviews were conducted with a total of 16 relevant professionals including police officers, field social workers and workers from voluntary agencies.

**Definitions of going missing**

A key point emerging from the questionnaires from children’s home staff the distinction between absconding/going missing and staying out late/not returning. There was a general feeling that incidences of absconding/going missing were much lower than those of staying out late/not returning.

**Reasons for going missing**

There was a substantial amount of overlap in staff’s perceptions of the reasons given to account for going missing/absconding and staying out late/not returning. However, views were also expressed about some differences for the two groups. In essence the reasons for young people absconding were often seen as being person-centred (e.g. running away from personal problems rather than face them) or placement-centred (e.g. to escape bullying). Reasons given for staying out late/not returning on the other hand were often seen as relating to ‘pull’ factors to do with peers (in and out of the home, and family. However, the distinction between the reasons for going missing between these two groups was quite blurred. It does not seem that there is sufficient consensus on this point amongst professionals to enable a clear case to be made.

We will therefore go on to describe the comments from staff on the various factors identified for going missing as a whole, referring back to the broad categories of factors identified in Section 2 of this report. Whilst we have attempted to break down the reasons given by staff into particular categories, it is clear that many of the issues are inter-related.

**Historical factors**

Many young people placed in care have come from chaotic backgrounds where there is a lack of control and boundaries. Staff felt that, as a consequence of this, young people often find it difficult to adhere to the rules set in the home and want to escape the rules and restrictions and engage in activities that are not permitted in the home. They therefore choose to stay out late with friends who have less control placed on them and participate in activities that are forbidden in the children's home.
Teenagers who have come from chaotic backgrounds without set boundaries may find it hard to adjust to a routine of being home at a certain time. In some cases young people stay out so they can drink alcohol and may become involved in criminal activities.

This problem can be exacerbated if a young person already has a history of running away prior to living in the children's homes (as the evidence presented earlier has illustrated). Staff felt that it is difficult to break this cycle of absconding. If there are other patterns of behaviour which began at an early age and are not allowed in the children's home, for example drinking alcohol, young people stay out in order to participate in those activities forbidden in the home.

In addition, it is recognised that for some young people there are very deep-rooted reasons why they go missing and that it is not always possible to give the young person the right support at the right time as they are not ready for it. In relation to going missing, the importance of examining the larger picture of what happens to young people/children in general was emphasised on a number of occasions. There was a recognition that children who live in care are doing the same things as children who live with their family but that the response of the corporate parent to issues such as staying out late can be quite different.

Personal issues

Staff expressed concerns about young people who had low self-esteem. They felt that these young people are particularly susceptible to peer pressure which can lead to their going missing and being at risk.

It was also felt that females who had been sexually abused in the past feel that being used for sex by local youths is "all they are good for" and so choose to stay out with them and enjoy the sense of belonging to a group.

Sometimes it seems that going missing can perform a more positive function for young people. Staff felt that on some occasions young people went missing to cool off when they are angry, to rebel when they were upset and to gain power or control over their own lives. If these incidents are for short periods (e.g. just during the day) and don’t expose young people to any great risks they may be seen as a legitimate coping strategy when living in a residential group setting.

Placement / care-centred factors

Staff felt that, to an extent, the very fact that young people have being placed in care can explain their going missing. Some of the pull factors related to family are discussed in the next section. In addition, young people often feel bad about living in care, feel undervalued living there, and feel the need to escape that environment and have a break from it. Often young people perceive being placed in care as a form of punishment:

"Despite efforts to make residential units as homely as possible, some young people still believe they are being punished by being in care and feel justified in attempting to 'escape'"

Group dynamics were also identified as key factor. There were concerns about bullying, peer pressure and general tensions within the home playing a key role in many incidents of going missing.

A connected issue is the consequences of the way in which bed-spaces are sometimes allocated. Staff felt that shortages sometimes led to inappropriate placements which upset the dynamics of the home - included here are emergency placements which can be disruptive both to the young person placed and the other residents in the unit. The practice of placing another young person in an absconder's bed was viewed as a very negative practice because of the message it sends out to the
young person who returns to the unit after going missing to find someone else in their bed and can
influence their decision to go missing again.

The inflexibility of rules and patterns in the house can cause conflict which is linked to going
missing. There are clear differences between rules and regulations in institutional life and home
life. Conflict can arise around issues such as the timing of meals that could be avoided if there was
more flexibility within each home. Staff felt that there is not enough freedom within the home for
staff to adapt the rules for older young people and negotiate with them.

A number of staff felt that the level of staffing meant that it was not possible for them to spend time
organising activities and this lack of activities leads to boredom amongst the young people which
exacerbates their desire to run away.

* A lack of funding for activities may mean that people wish to stay out because there
  are not other activities which they can take part in.

Some people also argued that if a number of other staffing issues were addressed through, for
example, strong leadership backed by management with firm policies set in place and consistency
across shifts, absconding rates would be lower.

Pull factors

So far we have primarily discussed factors which may contribute to young people going missing
from children’s homes. However, as discussed in several other parts of the report, ‘pull’ factors
which encourage young people to go missing in order to be somewhere else or with somebody else
are also a significant issue for young people in children’s homes.

* In my experience I have found young people to 'run to' rather than 'run from'. they
  find a form of excitement from their rebellious behaviour

Staff mentioned three sources of these ‘pulls’ which could contribute to going missing:

- other young people in the home,

  *Young people who live in the home do influence and encourage others to abscond.
  The stronger-willed young people do sometimes pressure weaker-willed young people
to run away*

- people in the local community including groups of local young people and also particular
relationships which young people develop

  *They've been asked to return at a certain time but outside influences, i.e. local
youths with alcohol/drugs and cars hold too much attraction to the young people
(especially girls) and they choose not to return on time.*

- and, finally, the young person’s family.

Other reasons

A few other reasons for going missing were also mentioned by staff.

- For those in trouble with the police, they choose not to return because of fear of arrest
- They are unable to return as they do not have the means, money or transport, to do so

It should also be recognised that young people may be reported missing when they are actually in
police custody.
Experiences of young people whilst missing from children's homes

Staff members and other professionals were aware that young people, whilst away from the residential unit, stay at a range of types of places, including;

- with friends who have their own flats
- with family members
- with boyfriends
- on the streets
- in derelict/empty buildings
- in public places where it is free to enter
- with "inappropriate adults", i.e. older adults who offer somewhere to stay with the aim of exploiting the young person.

Staff and other professionals felt that there were a number of potential and actual risks for a young person whilst missing; often these risks are linked to where a young person was staying whilst away.

_They are putting their overall safety at risk. They are vulnerable and can mistake kindness from a stranger for something else. If they consume alcohol / drugs with others, apart from the obvious risks, they can be at greater risk of accidents due to awareness levels._

The risks identified included:

- Being physically harmed including physical or sexual assault,
- Being bullied
- Being abducted
- At risk of accident whilst under the influence of alcohol or drugs or whilst trespassing in derelict buildings.
- Becoming ill through malnutrition, hypothermia or dehydration.
- Being drawn into risky behaviour such as becoming involved in drugs, crime, begging or the sex industry.
- Putting trust in people who are not to be trusted and being exploited or taken advantage of by older people - especially girls being vulnerable to sexual encounters when under the influence of drink or drugs.
- The psychological fear of being out on one's own, feeling lonely, scared or frightened of returning.

It is clear that there was a high level of concern amongst staff about these very real risks to young people’s immediate and long-term welfare. Several professionals also expressed concerns that young people are not themselves seem aware of, or willing to accept, the risks:

_They do not appear to feel that they are unsafe and vulnerable. This leads to all sorts of risk-taking._

It was also recognised that, by going missing, young people faced the risk of gradually becoming ‘detached’ from the care system supportive networks. As research has shown this can lead to
young people being totally adrift from any legitimate support networks for periods of six months or more (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).
4: Views on the current system of responding to going missing from children’s homes in Leeds

The findings in this section are based primarily on the information gathering from residential staff and other professionals. First we present findings related to the handling of individual going missing incidents. We then go on to discuss wider issues of case management and issues related to the residential care system in Leeds.

Immediate responses to going missing

Many professionals felt that a strength of the current system is that there is a fairly high degree of consistency. Young people are efficiently reported as missing to the police and also to parents, social workers and other people as appropriate.

However, perhaps the most common comment from professionals was about the drawbacks of the current system of reporting missing young people:

- It was felt that current reporting practices tended to inflate the figures (for example by including young people whose whereabouts were known and those returning slightly late) and led to large amounts of paperwork for unit staff and police. This caused frustration, particularly for the police, potentially jeopardised relationships between police and children’s homes, and generated a task which realistically the police could not fulfil.

  *The police are rarely interested in 'another care kid' going walk about. And to be fair who can blame them when they are so short-staffed. It’s the same young people time after time choosing not to come home.*

  It also meant that there was a danger that particularly high risk incidents could get lost in the crowd.

- Many contributors therefore felt that there was a need for a better risk assessment system and a more flexible system of reporting. For example, there was a feeling that older young people could be handled in a different way

  *Things should be more flexible for over 16s.*

- In effect, a certain element of risk assessment does take place through additional comments which are written on the missing persons form which is sent to police. Several people suggested that a specifically designed pro forma would be a helpful tool.

  *When we know 100% that the young person hasn't been kidnapped and is quite happy to be away from home, there should be a 'social services missing resident form' and a team of Social Services staff to retrieve them. The police are sick of the same young people choosing to go and them being used as a taxi.*

- Several social services staff felt that there were sometimes differing perceptions of risk between social services and the police.

  *The police do not always take into consideration the age of the children.*

  *The current system does not allow for any priority to be given to one misper report over another (e.g. a missing 16-year-old is categorised in the same way as a missing 11-year-old). The police do not always consider a 'child in care' to be as significant a misper as a child from the wider community*
There were concerns that police were less willing to see the young person as being at risk if they had gone missing to be with family, even though the risk within the family had been the reason for their entry into care.

Several contributors in social services and police felt that currently reporting was seen as an end in itself and a way of ‘covering your back’:

*Everybody does what they’re supposed to do* (Professional)

It was pointed out that reporting was not an effective or sufficient response to the issue of going missing, although it may provide temporary reassurance for staff, and that it should not be seen as a substitute for other actions to safeguard the welfare of young people.

### Ongoing responses whilst young people were missing

There clearly is a commitment amongst staff to take appropriate actions whilst young people are away. These commonly include:

- ensuring that all other relevant people are informed that the young person is missing as appropriate, with an emphasis on maintaining a good relationship with the young person’s family
  
  *Parents are grateful to be kept informed which is good for relationships between us and them*

- searching for young people when possible and attempting to contact them by telephone / mobile phone

- attempting to gather information about the young person’s whereabouts (e.g. contacting school)
  
  *Sometimes by ringing around the young people’s friends we find the missing person.*

These actions were often effective in facilitating a quick return from going missing and giving the young person (and other young people in the home) a clear message that staff care about their well-being.

On the other hand, staff were often frustrated at the lack of progress in some cases, and also at the limitations which were experienced as a result of the resources available within SSD and the Police.

*Sometimes if the police were able to offer us a little more help at an earlier stage then it may help to prevent absconders*

Several staff suggested that the SSD should set up a freephone telephone number for young people who go missing.

The importance of information exchange between professionals whilst young people were missing was also emphasised. There had been cases where some professionals were actively seeking young people whilst other professionals were aware of their whereabouts.

### Responses when young people return from going missing

Staff and other professionals commented on the good practice which already occurs when young people return – catering for young people’s immediate practical needs, showing concern and being available to listen to them. Some contributors felt that more could still be done to ensure that young people felt welcomed rather than punished when they returned. People also commented on the difficulty of showing appropriate concern whilst not being too heavy-handed.

Staff felt that having more flexibility to deal with young people when they return from going missing and being given scope to negotiate could help to prevent future missing incidents.
Staff were concerned that, due to resource issues, it does not always prove possible for police or social workers to visit young people soon after they return to the home. A number of people suggested the need for independent interviews for young people when they return (instead of, or as well as, the standard police interview).

**Prevention of going missing**

Staff commented on practices which are already in place which they felt had been effective in reducing going missing. These included:

- The building of supportive relationships within the home
- Diversionary activities and incentives to not go missing

  *We try and keep them occupied, get them involved in things within the home and take them out on activities*

  *It is a sad fact that young people will always feel it is exciting to run away. I believe that in the majority of cases they are not running from a bad or difficult situation but running to a situation that they feel drawn to precisely because it does contain elements of danger and risk. The real challenge is trying to provide them with other activities which they would view as more ‘fun’ and exciting than running away.*

  *We have on occasion offered bus fare the following day if they return by 11pm if they have been missing frequently. This has worked quite well for a period of time.*

As mentioned earlier, staff often felt restricted in undertaking this kind of diversionary work due to limitations on resources.

Unit staff felt that, where external individuals / organisations came into the home to work with young people on specific issues, this had a positive impact on levels of going missing, and that this was an area where more work could be done.

*We could have some outside support by 'task-centred' groups, that come into the home to talk with young people and do activities, etc.*

**Case management**

For young people who go missing repeatedly there is clearly potential for adopting a strategic approach to dealing with the issue on an ongoing basis. Several examples of good practice in Leeds were identified through the research:

- In some cases residential and field social workers call strategy meetings when young people go missing regularly. These involve all key individuals, including police, teachers, and so on.
- An initiative is being developed in South Leeds between police and SSD to introduce a system of intervention meetings between police and social workers –and, where appropriate, profiling meetings – for young people who have been reported as missing three times or more.

These are positive developments and it was felt that there may be a case for introducing such initiatives systematically on a city-wide basis.

**The residential care system**

Unit staff and other professionals commented on some issues related to the wider organisation of the residential care system which they felt had an impact on going missing levels:
The practice of using bed-spaces vacated by young people who had been missing long-term was recognised as being bad practice as it sent out negative messages to the young people when they returned.

Inappropriate referrals, and emergency intakes were felt to have a negative impact on home dynamics and on levels of going missing.

The ‘mix’ of residents within homes and the difficulties in maintaining control over this could also exacerbate patterns of going missing.

“It would help if you didn’t send children who have had problems with the police and who are regular mispers and they might not influence other children in the home”

(Young person)

These issues are symptomatic of the pressure on resources within the residential care system in Leeds.

There were also a number of comments about the need to support staff in developing and maintaining skills in responding to the issue of going missing. It was felt that guidance and training in trying to prevent going missing and in responding to young people when they return needed to be seen as an ongoing process in order to refresh the skills of existing staff and induct new staff.
5: Suggestions and recommendations

The data gathered in Leeds, and the evidence from research, indicates that going missing from substitute care is a complex and diverse phenomenon. Young people go missing for a variety of reasons, and there is a link between going missing and a whole range of current and historical factors in young people’s lives. This complexity means that tackling the issue is a considerable challenge. An effective strategy will require a range of actions and initiatives at different levels.

It is clear that residential staff and managers in Leeds, in conjunction with the police and other professionals, are already making efforts to tackle the issue, and that there are a number of examples of good practice. At the moment these often happen in relation to particular young people or in particular areas of the city.

It is also clear that the issue of going missing, and exploring ways of tackling it, is of real concern, both to professionals and to young people:

"There's a girl who lives with us who keeps running away for nights or coming back at 1am or 2am every night and it’s really getting annoying because we all miss out on our sleep because when she gets let in the house she … wakes everybody up and staff are really tired on a morning." (Young person)

On the basis of the information we have gathered, we would make the following suggestions of potential ways forward in tackling the issue of young people going missing from Leeds children’s homes. These suggestions include the extension of good practice which is already in evidence. These recommendations are grouped under the following headings:

a) Definitions of going missing
b) Responses to individual incidents
c) Responses to individual young people
d) Wider system responses
e) The development of joint protocols

Definitions of going missing

One of the terms of the tender brief was to inform the development of a definition of going missing. It is clear from the information we have gathered that the terms ‘absconding’, ‘going missing’ and ‘running away’ overlap and cover a diverse range of events. We have chosen to use the term ‘going missing’ as it is the most common in the policy and research literature and seems to have the most general scope.

Incidents of going missing can include those of only a few hours as well as those which span one or more nights away. They may cover instances where young people have chosen to leave the home and those where young people have failed to return when expected. This latter point was one raised by many professionals. There seems to be an important distinction to be made between ‘running away’ / ‘absconding’ and ‘failing to return’. Professionals often expressed the view that there were, in effect, two very different categories of young people going missing from children’s homes. The distinction between these two broad types of going missing also seemed to be acknowledged by young people.

Whilst it is clear that being aware of this distinction may be an important aspect for developing an understanding of going missing, it may not be that helpful in practical terms for several reasons.
First, it may only be possible to categorise some incidents retrospectively. Second, whichever category young people fall into, professionals may or may not know their whereabouts and may or may not consider them as vulnerable or at risk whilst away.

In terms of a concrete definition, therefore we would suggest that the definition of a missing person proposed by ACPO may be a helpful one:

"A missing person is anyone whose whereabouts are unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well being or otherwise is established."

This definition focuses on the two key issues of knowledge about young people’s whereabouts and concern for their well-being whilst away. It is notable that this definition excludes people whose whereabouts are known. Currently some young people reported as missing from children’s homes fall into this category. As discussed in more detail later, there are examples of joint protocols in other local authority areas which identify three categories of incidents:

1. ‘Absconded’ – “an absconder is a child who is missing and is looked after as a result of a criminal court order … or a secure order”
2. ‘Missing’ – “where the child’s location or reason for absence is unknown and/or there is cause for concern for the child because of their vulnerability or there is potential danger to the public”.
3. ‘Unauthorised absences’ – a holding category which may be used whilst information about young people’s whereabouts are being sought or, in some protocols, where the young person’s whereabouts are known.

Using this categorisation, a young person would not be immediately regarded as missing when their absence was noted. Except in cases where there was cause for immediate concern, they would initially be regarded as an ‘unauthorised absence’ until steps had been taken to ascertain their whereabouts. We discuss the application of this definition in more detail later in this section, and further details are to be found in the example protocol agreements attached as appendices.

Responses to individual incidents

Consideration should be given to the development of a more planned approach to handling individual missing incidents. Such an approach would include deterrence, risk assessment, reporting, and actions which are taken when young people return to the placement.

1. Government guidance suggests that residential staff should be encouraged to attempt to deter a young person from going missing, and research indicates that this kind of intervention can be effective. Some staff who contributed their views to the research reported on the beneficial effects of this approach. Information-sharing amongst staff in different homes may be helpful in developing consistent and effective practice in this respect.

"Getting persuaded to not run off"
(Young person’s response to the question: What would stop you going missing?)

2. Social Services and Police could work together to establish a joint risk assessment framework in relation to young people going missing from children’s homes. This might include the development of a customised form for the reporting of missing incidents from residential care.

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2 The quotes in this and the following paragraph are taken from Children Missing from Local Authority Accommodation / Children Missing from Home – Joint Protocol between Torfaen Social Services and Heddlu Gwent Police.
This was a topic for considerable comment amongst contributors and is potentially a priority area for consideration as part of any strategy which is developed. Examples of risk assessment systems from other local authority areas are referred to later in this chapter.

3. The importance of the nature of response to young people when they return from going missing is emphasised in the research literature and by young people’s comments:

   People not to get mad because that would make things worse and they would go missing again
   Staff not to get mad and to listen to you
   Just to talk to my key worker or staff
   If staff just said nice to see you back instead of sending us up to our rooms and then asking to speak to us.
   Not to be punished and to sort out why I went missing

   (Young people’s responses to the question: What would help when you come back?)

4. Giving priority to spending time with young people to discuss the reasons why they went missing and attempt to ascertain any risks whilst they were away is an important element of good practice. There was a feeling amongst some contributors that unit staff would welcome more guidance and support in terms of this area of practice.

5. In conjunction with the last point, consideration should be given to the establishment of a system of independent interviews for all young people going missing from children’s homes when they return. There is evidence that young people are more likely to openly discuss issues relating to going missing with an independent person. This kind of intervention can also provide a safeguard against any serious issues within children’s homes and has been a recommendation of several inquiries into child abuse in residential settings as discussed earlier in the report. As referred to in Section 2, schemes of this kind are already in operation in a number of local authority areas.

Responses to individual young people

Beyond responses to specific incidents of going missing, there is clearly scope to undertake work with young people who go missing or are at risk of going missing, as a part of a case management approach to their issues and needs.

1. Given the fact that many young people have already gone missing before entering care, it may be helpful to carry out a risk assessment, including gathering information about any history of going missing, when the young person first enters substitute care. This may raise awareness of residential and field staff and facilitate targeted preventative work with individual young people. The information gathered could also form part of the ongoing child care planning process. The indications of links between first entering care and first going missing (see Section 3) also suggest the need for, and potential value of, this kind of early intervention.

2. Where a pattern of going missing begins to appear, this could be seen as a potential trigger for a joint profiling or strategy meeting involving key professionals. This could facilitate the sharing of information and the development of a consistent, coherent and individualised response to young people’s needs. This already happens on an ad hoc basis in some cases.

3. Residential staff should be supported to establish negotiated approaches to spending time away from the home, particularly with older young people. As shown above, many of the reported incidents amongst these young people are due to their failing to return when expected. There is
a need here to strike a balance between safeguarding young people’s welfare and responding to their wishes.

"Being able to stay out a little bit longer or being able to sleep out at my mate’s house to get some time on my own."

(Young person’s response to the question: What would stop you going missing?)

4. In conjunction with a process of risk assessment, it may be possible to reduce the incidence of going missing amongst these young people by allowing them more flexibility within safe limits. Such approaches could substantially reduce rates of reporting, thus allowing more attention and time to be focused on other going missing incidents. There are already some examples of this approach being operated successfully in Leeds.

5. There is evidence that the likelihood of going missing is inversely related to the strength of young people’s attachments to those around them. Thus an ongoing commitment to ensuring young people have one or more strong and positive attachments can play an important role in preventing going missing. On the evidence of the survey of young people, this could include independent visitors, learning mentors and teachers in schools, and links to parents, siblings and extended family.

Wider system responses

There are also a number of measures that could be taken on a system level which could contribute to a reduction in the incidence and prevalence of going missing from children’s homes

1. The possibility of group work and educational approaches to the issue of going missing should be considered. This could include looking at alternatives to going missing, and raising awareness of the risks inherent whilst away. This may succeed in reducing the incidence of going missing and/or minimising the harm that young people experience.

   Things would stop me like knowing what can happen to you on the streets.

   (Young person’s response to: What would stop you going missing?)

   Some initiatives of this kind have been established in other local authority areas. Again, there are already some examples of good practice in this respect within Leeds.

2. A number of professionals pointed to the possibility of diversionary strategies to going missing. It was felt that an increase in recreational activities within units could be an important disincentive to going missing.

   If there were more things to do in the evening

   (Young person’s response to: What would stop you going missing?)

   Staff commented that their desire to provide such opportunities was often frustrated by lack of resources.

3. Consideration should be given to a system of monitoring and review of rates of going missing from homes on a regular basis, involving senior managers. This could enable ‘hot spots’ of going missing to be identified and targeted support to be given to unit managers and staff to tackle the issue.

This study and other research in the UK also points to the way in which other issues within children’s homes and the general management of standards of care can have an impact on rates of going missing. It was far beyond the scope of the current study to review these issues in Leeds. However we briefly note some of the key issues identified in the literature and some of the current examples of relevant practice in Leeds.
General standards of care and management in children’s homes

Research indicates that the maintenance and improvement of standards of care in children’s homes can play an important part in reducing the incidence of going missing. Thus any general enhancements to provision may have a beneficial impact on the rates of going missing.

There is also evidence from research that clarity of purpose, strong leadership by unit managers, and high levels of support for residential staff can enhance their ability to intervene effectively in relation to young people going missing.

The mix of residents in children’s homes

Wherever possible careful attention should be paid to the mix of young people in children’s homes, as there is evidence that an inappropriate mix of young people with differing backgrounds and issues can lead to young people being drawn into going missing behaviour.

As pointed out in feedback from the SSD, there is a difficult balance to be struck here between the desire to achieve an appropriate mix of young people and the desire to make best use of the resources available within the residential system. It must be recognised that any additional level of control over the mix of young people is likely to be realised at the cost of increased vacant bed-spaces. Therefore success in this area is dependent on a reduction in the number of young people coming into the residential system. The SSD already has a strategy (outlined in its ‘Quality Protects’ plan) which aims at maximising support for children and their families within the community in order to reduce the need for them to be ‘looked after’.

Bullying

Whilst bullying does not appear to be one of the more common triggers for going missing from children’s homes in Leeds, it was a key factor for some young people. Measures which succeed in reducing bullying may therefore have a positive effect on running away rates. We understand from the SSD that all children’s homes in Leeds have a bullying policy which have been developed in consultation with young people.

Schooling

There are well-established links between school attendance and going missing. Often young people will simultaneously be truanting and missing from care. Any measures which encourage school attendance and strengthen attachments to school are likely also to be successful in reducing rates of going missing. Again we would note that this issue is already being attended to in Leeds. Each home has a member of staff who takes a lead responsibility on education issues, and similarly each school has a designated teacher who has a responsibility towards ‘looked after’ pupils.

Therapeutic needs

Some young people within care have major therapeutic issues which require targeted long-term interventions. Without these kinds of interventions it is unlikely that these young people’s going missing behaviour can be effectively addressed. Again we have received feedback from the SSD that this is an area to which increasing attention has been paid over the last few years. Each home now has a designated link person for contact with therapeutic services.

The development of joint protocols

Many of the above suggestions, particularly responses on an incident and individual case basis, could be incorporated into a joint protocol between Social Services, the Police and any other
relevant agencies. Such protocols are a recommendation of various policy documents, including the Bridge report which was set up in response to the West case in Gloucester. Protocols have already been developed in a number of local authority areas.

Protocols of this kind need to be framed carefully. The amount of administrative time taken up in dealing with missing person reports has already been noted. Some professionals in Leeds have expressed concern that policies or protocols could add to the ‘red tape’. Thus, any protocol would need to allow discretion and flexibility on the part of staff and managers involved with individual young people.

The protocol could also form part of a strategy to improve communication and information exchange in relation to young people going missing. This was a common suggestion amongst professionals in Social Services and the Police for improving practice.

Examples of good practice can be found in the protocol agreements provided in Appendix 4. Most protocol agreements include the following:

- Pre-planning – assessing the likelihood of a young person going missing
- Responding to an incident
- Risk assessment
- Categorisation based on levels of concern
- Notification of absence
- Information made available to the police
- Informing the media/publicity
- Recording
- Action when a young person is located
- Action when a young person returns
- Monitoring the protocol

Three of these areas – pre-planning, risk assessment, and categorisation based on levels of concern - seem particularly central components of the protocols and are discussed in more detail below.

**Pre-planning**

The element of pre-planning and assessing the likelihood of a young person going missing is not represented in all of the examples of protocol agreements but, in light of recommendations made by professionals in relation to preventative work, can be regarded as an important feature of any protocol agreement. The South Wales protocol agreement, which covers 7 local authorities, includes action to be taken in relation to pre-planning. It is stated, in the protocol agreement, that both vulnerability and any associated risks of a young person going missing will be addressed in the care plan and at placement meetings. Where there are instances of concern about a young person going missing, the care plan will include:

- The likelihood of the young person going missing.
- The level of supervision/support offered to the young person.
- The parents’ advice on what action they feel should be taken if the young person goes missing.
- The level of risk presented if the child goes missing.
The impact of any conditions imposed by the courts e.g. curfew.

The South Wales protocol agreement also recommends giving the young person a copy of that part of the protocol that explains action to be taken if he or she goes missing. If the young person regularly absconds, it may also be appropriate to involve the police in the pre-planning stage. The importance of addressing the underlying reasons for going missing is also emphasised:

*Police and social workers should beware of dismissing multiple incidents of missing from care by a young person, thereby labelling the child as “the problem” and failing to analyse the underlying cause for going missing.*

**Risk assessment**

As previously mentioned, it is good practice to incorporate assessment of risk into pre-planning and this should form part of a young person’s care plan. Individual risk assessments will enable staff to be clear about the potential risks for the young person and/or the risks they pose to the public, assist staff in making decisions about reporting the young person as missing and conveying full and accurate information to the police. When assessing risk, the following factors can be taken into consideration:

- Guidance agreed in the young person’s care plan
- Age and maturity of the young person
- The legal status of the young person
- History of absence
- Vulnerability of young person due to any mental or physical condition
- History of self harm
- Concerns about substance misuse
- State of mind at time of going missing
- Whether a young person is perceived as running to, or from, someone or a situation
- Time of day
- Whether a young person is at risk of sexual exploitation
- Whether a young person is involved in criminal activity
- Group behaviour
- Whether the young person is on the Child Protection Register
- Any other particular circumstances at time of incident

**Categorisation based on levels of concern**

Having undertaken a risk assessment, it should then be possible to decide into which category a young person’s absence falls, thus defining and identifying action.

1. *Unauthorised absence*

Unauthorised absence refers to incidences where young people absent themselves for a short period of time and then return. Young people that fall into this category are thought to be testing boundaries and are not necessarily thought to be at risk. Whilst a young person is classed as an unauthorised absence, they will not be reported to the police as missing. Whilst absent, a young
person must be the subject of continuous risk assessment. During this phase steps should be taken to establish the whereabouts of the young person. Categorisation may be reconsidered in light of any new information, or if the young person fails to return within a certain time scale. When the risk assessment process identifies the young person as “missing” or “absconded”, the police should be notified and the young person reported as missing.

2. **Missing**

When a young person’s location or reason for absence is unknown and there is cause for concern because of the young person’s vulnerability or potential risk to the public, the young person is classified as missing and should be reported to the police.

3. **Absconder**

This category refers to a young person who is “missing” and “looked after” to a young person who is accommodated either with the co-operation of parents or as a result of a court order. A young person in this category should be reported to the police immediately. The Police have the power of arrest without warrant when a young person is absent without permission from the responsible person for him or her.

As a result of the risk assessment process, the police can be sure that all young people reported to them fit the above criteria and that a full investigation is necessary.
6: Concluding comments

In this final section we briefly summarise some of the key findings from the research study, and some of the main recommendations to emerge from it.

The prevalence and nature of going missing

The study has gathered evidence on going missing from children’s homes in Leeds from three main sources: SSD monitoring data, a questionnaire survey of young people, and information gathering from unit staff and other professionals. Some of the key points to emerge from this evidence are:

- In 2001, there was a prevalence rate of going missing of around 38% from children’s homes in Leeds. Comparisons with other areas are difficult, but there are no indications that the rate in Leeds is unusually high.
- A large number of missing incidents relate to a small group of older, mostly female young people. Over half the incidents were accounted for by ten young people. Therefore measures to tackle the issues faced by this small group of young people could potentially have a significant impact on the overall rate of reporting.
- Whilst young people often do go missing for reasons to do with their placements, this study has again illustrated the complex set of factors which interact to cause going missing. These include young people’s background and history of running away before entering care and ‘pull’ factors related to young people within and outside the home, and the young person’s family.
- The research provides clear cause for concern about the risks faced by young people whilst they are missing, both in terms of young people’s feedback (which highlighted the incidence of sleeping rough, being harmed, stealing and begging whilst away) and the views and experiences of unit staff.

The current system of responding to going missing

The study gathered the views of a range of professionals on the strengths and weakness of the current system of responding to young people going missing from children’s homes in Leeds. Key points made were as follows:

- The current system has a strength in ensuring that all incidents are efficiently reported as appropriate. However it generates a large amount of work for both social services and police whilst often failing to distinguish between different kinds of going missing incidents and different levels of potential risk. As a consequence there is a high degree of frustration with the system amongst professionals in both agencies.
- There was more positive comment on the kinds of actions taken whilst young people were missing, which were often effective in facilitating young people’s return. The need for a commitment to information exchange was emphasised.
- The importance of sensitive responses to young people when they return to the home was commented on by a number of unit staff, and this was backed up by comments from young people.
- Staff felt that more could be done to offer young people positive experiences within the home which could divert them from going missing. In this respect, the limitations imposed by resources for activities within units was highlighted.
There are some examples of good practice in particular areas of Leeds, involving calling strategy or profiling meetings when young people go missing regularly.

**Recommendations**

On the basis of the evidence gathered locally, and some of the research, practice and policy developments covered earlier in the report, the following are some of the key recommendations stemming from this study:

- There is potential for a better developed system of risk assessment and reporting, following examples from other parts of the country.
- Consideration should be given to establishing a system of independent individual interviews when young people return from going missing.
- There is scope for wider use of a preventative approach to going missing as part of ongoing case work with young people, including early risk assessment, joint strategy meetings, and strengthening of significant attachments.
- For older young people, who make up a substantial proportion of reported missing incidents, there is potentially scope for the negotiation of flexible approaches to the issues which lead to their being reported as missing.
- There are also a number of measures which could be taken at a wider systems level including educational approaches and the development of diversionary strategies.
- Many of the above key points, and other recommendations could be incorporated into a joint protocol between social services, police and any other relevant agencies.

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2nd July 2002
Appendix 1: References


