

The Children's Society submission to the Department for Education's consultation on the statutory guidance on young runaways and children missing from home or care

1. Introduction

The Children's Society is a leading national charity, providing vital help to the most vulnerable children, young people and families in our society through a range of services. We work with over 48,000 children each year, supporting them and advocating on their behalf to tackle discrimination or disadvantage in their daily lives. Our priority is children who have nowhere else to turn, such as young refugees, children at risk on the streets, disabled children and children in trouble with the law. We seek to give a voice to children and young people and influence policy and practice so they have a better chance in life.

Our submission is based on evidence from our research and learning from our direct work with young people who run away from home or care. We have also consulted with practitioners supporting young runaways and young people involved in our projects about the draft guidance. This consultation response is informed by their views and experiences and includes their quotes.

We run nine projects working with children who run away or are at risk of sexual exploitation, supporting around a thousand of children every year. We have campaigned to protect young runaways through policy, research and practice for over 25 years.

The Children's Society is a member of the English Coalition on Runaway Children, the Refugee Children's Consortium and the NWG Child Sexual Exploitation Policy Forum. We contributed to and support their responses to this consultation. This consultation response covers issues complimentary to the joint responses from the groups mentioned above and issues specific to our work with young runaways.

In addition, 260 of our supporters wrote to the DfE to say that the guidance should clearly state that it is the responsibility of local councils to make sure all children who run away – from home or care – get a return interview. They also asked the government to publish plans for how they are going to monitor whether all children who need return interviews get them.

We welcome this important statutory guidance and believe that the requirements and provisions it contains will help better protect this very vulnerable group of young people. We have chosen to comment on issues that, in our view, require further clarifications or additional information to strengthen the messages presented in this guidance.

2. Summary of key points:

We welcome the guidance and believe that it contains important messages. We have a number of recommendations that, in our view, would strengthen this guidance further.

- **We recommend that the guidance provides clear information on how children's services are required to use the new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent without authorisation' and how these definitions will relate and interact with the new police definitions of 'missing' and 'absence'.**
- **We recommend that the guidance provides additional definitions on what constitutes 'established whereabouts' and 'circumstances out of character'**

to ensure consistency in risk assessments across the country and across different agencies working with young runaways.

- **We believe that section on young runaways and children missing from home and care protocols contains very important details that could be presented in a more structured way and with additional subheadings to make the flow of information easier to follow. The following subheadings can be used to describe the key areas that protocols should address:**
 - Arrangements to build intelligence around missing and data collection
 - Arrangements to respond to missing/ absent children
 - Arrangements to prevent children going missing
- **To address the issue of 'hidden missing' children we recommend that protocols on young runaways and children who go missing from home or care should specify how this group of children will be identified and responded to.**
- **Although a disproportionate number of looked after children run away and/ or experience sexual exploitation; we believe that the guidance needs to acknowledge explicitly the particular vulnerabilities and issues faced by young people who are living with their families at home.**
- **The introduction to the guidance could usefully include separate sections on those who go missing from home and those who go missing from care, with an explanation of the different vulnerabilities they face, and how agencies should respond to each type of case.**
- **The guidance should clearly state that protecting and safeguarding children missing from home is a responsibility of the local authorities and that local authorities must ensure that return interviews are offered to all children missing from home.**
- **We also recommend that the guidance contains recommendations on how local authorities will be inspected by Ofsted on how they meet the provisions specified in this guidance.**
- **We believe that the guidance should explain 'independence' and require that when young people are offered a return interview they should be offered a choice of what professional they would like to speak to, including the choice of speaking to a provider of independent return interviews or an independent advocate.**
- **The guidance should also provide more information about who should conduct return interviews and the training they should have.**
- **It is important that the guidance requires local authorities to have a system in place for recording and analysing relevant information discussed during return interviews which may help keep children safe from sexual exploitation. Local authorities need to set up local multi-agency information sharing processes to ensure that such information is shared with the police and other local agencies.**
- **We believe that the guidance can be strengthened by explaining the importance of listening to children, particularly through return interviews. We also believe that the guidance should acknowledge the issue of negative**

attitudes that prevent children seeking help from statutory services and recommend ways to address these locally.

3. Definitions

We welcome the introductory section of the guidance which provides definitions to the terms used throughout the guidance and reflects the variety of terms applied to this group of children by different agencies. We also welcome the references to the new police definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' that have been rolled out since April 2013.

- ***The interrelation between the police definitions and definitions used by children's services***

We believe that this section of the guidance should be accompanied by simple flowcharts explaining how and when these definitions will be applied by different agencies. This is particularly relevant in relation to definitions and the corresponding data collection on children who run away from care. The guidance should explain more clearly how the police are going to use the 'absent' definition and how this police definition is going to interact with the definition of 'looked after children absent from their placement without authorisation' used by social services and carers.

The guidance is not clear on whether 'absence without authorisation' has to be reported to the police. Paragraph 33 seems to imply that absences without authorisation will be reported to the police while paragraph 17 and the flow charts at end of the document imply the opposite.

The guidance is also not clear on how the police are going to apply their new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent'. The section on the role of the police (paragraphs 42-45) explains how the police are going to classify all missing episodes of as either high or medium risk. While we agree that it is true in relation to cases reported to the police and classified by the police as 'missing', we believe that the guidance also needs to explain the police 'absent' category as many cases reported to the police by parents or carers as missing will be classified as 'absences'.

Simple flow charts or diagrams explaining how these definitions will be applied to children missing from home or from care will be helpful. In our view, the flow charts at the back of the document are not easy to follow and contain information that is not in the main text of the guidance.

Flow chart on children missing from home

For example, if a child runs away from home and is reported to the police as missing the police will undertake a risk assessment at the point of reporting and classify the child as either 'missing' or 'absent'. A 'missing' child may further be seen as a high or medium risk case and the response will involve deployment of a police officer and actions to locate the missing child. If the police classifies the child as 'absent', no immediate actions will be taken until the next review of the case, at which point the case may be reclassified as 'missing' or remain 'absent'. The details of the responses to children who run away from home and are reported to the police as missing – the timings for reviews in case of 'absence', risk assessments, escalation from 'absent' to 'missing' - will be decided by local protocols but the simple pathway for children running away from home will be the same across all areas where the police implemented these new definitions. Therefore, we believe it is important to include information on how these definitions will be applied to children reported missing from home.

Flow chart on children missing from care

For children missing from care the pathway will be different. If a child is not at their placement at the agreed time, the carer will act in accordance with the child's placement plan and the placement's missing protocols. We believe it is important that the final guidance includes references to the changes regarding placement plans that are currently the focus of consultations on improving safeguarding of looked after children and on children's homes. At this point the carer may decide to record this as 'absence without authorisation' and undertake actions in line with good parenting, such as trying to get in touch with the young person, checking with friends etc. Clarification is needed whether this 'absence without authorisation' should be reported to the police. If a child does not return, the carer will act in accordance with agreed protocols and report a child as missing to the police. The police will then undertake their own risk assessment at the point of a child being reported missing and classify as case as either 'missing' or 'absent'.

We hear anecdotal evidence from our practice that interaction between these different definitions is very complex on the ground. We have heard of cases where there is a disagreement between the carers and the police in relation to how the child is classified at the point of missing as they approach risk assessment differently and also of cases of vulnerable children being left without any response for too long.

Example from practice

A young person in care persistently running away to her mum was reported missing by the care home staff. The young person was classified by the police as 'absent' despite the fact that there was a child protection order in place and that her mum was a person with no fixed abode and had a range of mental health and substance misuse issues.

We recommend that the guidance provides clear information on how the children's services are required to use the new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent without authorisation' and how these definitions will relate and interact with the new police definitions of 'missing' and 'absence'.

- ***Additional definitions***

We also recommend that the guidance spells out what constitutes 'established whereabouts' or 'circumstances out of character' which form part of the 'missing' definition. These conditions for missing classification are often interpreted differently by the police and care staff. Often it is due to the lack of understanding of risks of running away by the police.

For example, it would be absolutely inappropriate to consider the whereabouts of a young person known if he/she can only be contacted on the phone. We know of instances where children were held against their will in situations of high risk and had access to their phone. Also it is not uncommon for a child to be unable to recognise that a situation is high risk until it reaches a crisis points. Clear guidance on this is needed.

As recent high profile child sexual exploitation cases have demonstrated frequent missing/absent episodes can be an indicator of abuse and sexual exploitation and should be treated as a signal that there may be problems in child's life that require immediate intervention. We welcome that the guidance explains the importance of seeing frequent missing episodes as a risk factor. We believe it is important to reference this in relation to the interpretation of 'circumstances out of character'.

The inclusion of these additional definitions in the definitions section will help establish a common understanding of risk factors and children's vulnerability and enable consistent good practice across all areas. It will also impact on local protocols and the interpretation of risk by local agencies.

We recommend that the guidance provides additional definitions on what constitutes 'established whereabouts' and 'circumstances out of character' to ensure consistency in risk assessments across the country and across different agencies working with young runaways.

4. Protocols and procedures

We welcome the section on protocols and procedures which includes a list of issues that the protocols need to address.

We believe that this section contains very important details that could be presented in a more structured way and with additional subheadings to make the flow of information easier to follow. The following subheadings could be used to describe the key areas that protocols should address:

- **Arrangements to build intelligence around missing and data collection**
- **Arrangements to respond to missing/absent children**
- **Arrangements to prevent children going missing**

Focusing protocols in this way would allow local authorities to think of a range of issues that they need to address to ensure that young runaways are effectively safeguarded. Our Runaways' Charter which was created in collaboration with practitioners and young people in 2012 identifies key actions needed at the local level - Count, Think, Act, Prevent – to safeguard individual children who run away and to make sure that different local agencies work together and plan ahead to protect children. These actions set out the safety net which children and young people who run away need. Our Runaways' Charter for local authorities is a tool that allows them to assess if there are any gaps in knowledge and interventions at a local level and plan responses to keep runaways safe.

In September 2013 The Children's Society published a report looking at examples of local authorities using the Charter to improve their local responses to young runaways¹. Together with the report we have also published a planning guide for safeguarding professionals in local authorities and Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs)². We believe that both resources can help local authorities plan their services and implement the statutory guidance on young runaways. We would welcome their inclusion in the reference section of the guidance.

The young people we consulted with on this guidance also told us that effective responses to young runaways in addition to the response at the time the child goes missing should include preventative and follow-up measures. Such measures would help reduce the number of young people running away altogether and reduce the number of missing episodes in cases of repeat runaways.

Quotes from young people on the importance of prevention:

'Young people should know what the risks are, they need to have them drilled down'

'If you need help you should be able to ask for help'

'There need to be places where you can go and know that you are not going to be judged'

'It's like grooming – I learnt about it here in the project'

¹ *Making Runaways Safer: Building a safety net for young runaways* (2013) London: The Children's Society

² *Developing local safeguarding response to young runaways: Planning guide for professionals* (2013) London: The Children's Society

Sex education should provide education about running away and risks'

'Don't move people out of borough'

Quotes from young people on responses during missing episodes

'Tell the police not to judge us until they know the full story'

'Explain to us how they feel – about getting your family worried'

'They need to start learning how to work with us'

Quotes from young people on the importance of follow up activities

'Don't give up on us. Offer us help persistently until we agree'

'It should be different workers talking to family and to kids'

'I am a changed person. SCARPA helped me change'

'One social worker used to visit after each running away episode. It is good when someone cares'.

- **Pathways for 'hidden missing' to add to protocols**

We welcome the reference to 'hidden missing' children in this guidance (paragraph 24). Our research shows that many children are not reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.³ Our practitioners report that they receive referrals for children who have run away from home or care but have not been reported as missing to the police. These children can come to the attention of the police when they are found on the streets; to the attention of health services when they attend A&E department, or education services when they miss school or turn up dirty and hungry.

Our research show that some children who run away from home or care may still attend school during the day as the case study below explains.⁴

Case study: Shelly⁵

Shelly's life changed when her mum's new boyfriend started abusing her. She decided to run away and spent six weeks staying with friends or in the park. One night she was so frightened of men who were drinking in the park that she hid in a bush.

Shelly started to miss school. When she did attend, she was tired, hungry and dirty and often told off by teachers for not paying attention and dozing in class.

Shelly did wonder why none of the teachers noticed the change in her at school:

'I went from being a hard-working well-behaved pupil who never got told off to one who was a mess and always being pulled up for something. I mean, did they [school staff] never wonder why I was so different?'

³Rees, G. *Still Running 3* (2011) The Children's Society : London

⁴ Williams, N., *Lessons to Learn: Exploring the links between running away and absence from school* (2012) The Children's Society: London

⁵ Williams, N., *Lessons to Learn: Exploring the links between running away and absence from school* (2012) The Children's Society: London

We agree with the guidance's requirement that local authorities and the police should be proactive where they believe underreporting may be more likely. In addition to tackling under-reporting there is a need for a clear pathway in relation to responses this group of children will receive from different agencies, specifying the referral routes to statutory services, risk assessments that will be undertaken and follow-up support services available to this group of children. Our practitioners report that in many areas there are no provisions in place to collect and analyse information about these children or support services available to them. As a consequence, their needs may remain hidden until the situation reaches crisis point.

To address the issue of children who are not reported missing, we recommend that protocols on young runaways and children who go missing from home or care should specify how this group of children will be identified and responded to.

5. Children missing from home

The guidance needs a greater focus on children who go missing from home. As the guidance acknowledges (paragraph 61), the majority of young people who run away or go missing are living at home. Research also confirms this.⁶ Furthermore, the majority of young people who are sexually exploited live in their family home.⁷ Research indicates that they usually do not seek help and may not be getting support in a consistent way from children's services unless they meet the thresholds for statutory intervention.

Children running away from home frequently have few or no professionals involved in their lives and often are not referred for support. For example, children who are absent from school are more than three times as likely to have run away. But schools staff often fail to spot the signs when a young person is running away but still attending school – such as tiredness, lateness, dirty clothes, being hungry or displaying challenging behaviour – and they may not treat unauthorised absences as a sign that a child needs help.⁸ In many cases statutory agencies have not had previous contact with these young people and are therefore unaware of their vulnerabilities.

Cuts to education welfare officers in local authorities have also meant that professionals no longer do home visits when children are absent or having problems at school to identify vital safeguarding risks and provide support to families⁹. This is a concern because running away is often linked to problems at home.

We are particularly concerned that children who go missing from home are far more likely to miss out on return interviews in comparison to children missing from care. Out of the 134 local authorities that responded to our freedom of information (FoI) requests, only 33 (25%) local authorities in 2011-12 and 39 (29%) in April to December 2012 offered return interviews to all children missing from home. This compares to 65 (49%) in 2011-12 and 66 (49%) in 2012 who offered interviews to all children missing from care.¹⁰

In local authorities that do offer return interviews to some young people running away from home - 54 (40%) local authorities in 2011-12 and 57 (43%) in April to December 2012 – the offer of a return interview is often conditional on information and risk assessments done by the police via a 'safe and well' checks. This is a worrying trend considering that Ofsted's recent thematic inspection of services for missing children concluded that *'there was a lack of evidence in nearly all the local authorities visited of the 'safe and well' checks being*

⁶ Rees, Gwyther (2011) *Still Running 3* London: The Children's Society

⁷ Accelerated report on emerging findings from the Inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups with a special focus on children in care, Office for the Children's Commissioner, June 2012

⁸ Williams, N., *Lessons to Learn: Exploring the links between running away and absence from school* (2012) The Children's Society: London

⁹ AEW (Association of Welfare Managers) survey of spending cuts affecting members 'Truancy warning over education welfare cuts' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12733520> [accessed 13/08/13]

¹⁰ Pona, I. (2013) Here to listen? Return interview provision for young runaway. The Children's Society

undertaken regularly. There was little evidence that the outcomes and content of those checks that were done were being shared with relevant professionals.¹¹

For this group of children, a return interview following missing episodes provides an opportunity for early intervention. The fact that such a small number of local authorities provide return interviews to children running away from home makes the introduction of new police definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' even more worrying.¹² This is because children classified as 'absent' may not even receive a police 'safe and well' check and thus will have fewer chances to be referred for further support. This means relevant information that could have been gathered during this check, or a return interview, may not come to light until the situation in the child's life worsens or after a considerable delay.

The number of local authorities offering no interviews to children missing from home is also concerning. In 2011-12, 30 (22%) local authorities answered that they do not offer return interviews to children missing from home. In 2012 this number decreased to 21 (16%). The answers to our FOI requests indicate that in some areas the safeguarding responsibility for children missing from home is not acknowledged fully by the local authorities despite the guidance on missing children clearly stating that.

Examples from FOI responses:

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

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

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

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

Although a disproportionate number of looked after children run away and/ or experience sexual exploitation we believe that the guidance needs to acknowledge explicitly the particular vulnerabilities and issues faced by young people who are living with their families at home.

The introduction to the guidance could usefully include separate sections on those who go missing from home and those who go missing from care, with an explanation of the different vulnerabilities they face, and how agencies should respond to each type of case.

The guidance should clearly state that protecting and safeguarding children missing from home is a responsibility of the local authorities and that local authorities must ensure that return interviews are offered to children missing from home.

6. Return Interviews

¹¹ *Missing Children* (2013) London: Ofsted

¹² From April this year police forces are implementing new definitions of missing and absent: Missing: 'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another'; and Absent: 'A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be'.

We welcome the guidance's acknowledgement of return interviews as a useful tool for understanding the reasons behind the missing incident, as well as for identifying and dealing with any harm a child may have experienced, and to prevent further harm (paragraphs 49-54).

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

As there is no systematic way of recording data about return interviews or the interventions that follow, it is difficult to establish how many children were identified as at risk of harm as a result of a return interview. Where data is collected, it suggests that a risk assessment undertaken following a running away episode leads to an identification of risk of significant harm in more than 30% of cases.¹³

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

Case Study: Young person at risk of sexual exploitation

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Home Affairs Select Committee, in its report on localised grooming earlier this year, noted that *'the [return] interview is useful not only for identifying the most effective type of follow-up support the child should receive but can also be a very useful tool for social services and police to collect intelligence about perpetrators and locations where grooming might be taking place'*.¹⁴

¹³ *Make Runaways Safe: The local picture. Findings from Freedom of Information requests to local authorities, Local Safeguarding Children Boards and police constabularies* (2013) London: The Children's Society

¹⁴ The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2013) *Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming Second Report of Session 2013-14*. London : House of Commons

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

Case study – Helping children to understand healthy relationships

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

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

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

‘It’s not just ‘boyfriend’ grooming, you see other girls and boys grooming young people, and taking other young girls to sex parties or parties where they can get drink and drugs.’ A project worker in the Midlands¹⁵

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

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

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

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

Due to the strong links between running away and CSE, during the return interview SCARPA staff talk to young people and ask them questions to determine whether they are at risk of sexual exploitation. This includes

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

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

¹⁵ The Children’s Society (2011) *Make Runaways Safe Launch Report* London: The Children’s Society

event. Having a shared understanding of the type of information each agency needs has improved the quality of information collected.

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

- ***Return interviews can lead to savings***

The financial and social cost of children running away to public services and wider society is high. It is estimated that each missing person's investigation costs the police between £1325 and £2415.¹⁶ Even at the lower bracket of this estimate, dealing with 190,000 episodes of missing children under the age of 18 in England and Wales would amount to around £250 million every year. This is just the police cost. The long-term cost of unresolved issues that make children run away is much higher, both to the individual and to society.

Ofsted's thematic inspection on missing quotes a 30% reduction in missing children incidents over a year as a result of return interview provision in Worcestershire.¹⁷ Our practice also demonstrates that an effective return interview and intensive support work can reduce the number of missing episodes and in many cases stop children running away altogether, as they get help dealing with the issues that originally caused them to run.

Examples from our practice

Street Safe, The Children's Society in Lancashire

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

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

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

SCARPA, The Children's Society in Newcastle

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

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

¹⁶ Dr. Karen Shalev Greene and Dr. Francis Pakes (2012) *Establishing the Cost of Missing Person Investigations report from the University of Portsmouth*. Portsmouth: University of Portsmouth

¹⁷ *Missing Children* (2013) London: Ofsted

The guidance should require local authorities to have a system in place for recording, analysing and sharing relevant information discussed during the return interviews which may help keep children safe from sexual exploitation.

The return interview should be a starting point for intervention from services. The government's 'Missing Children and Adults Strategy'¹⁸ stressed : *'It is therefore key that full use is made of return interviews and that agencies working where possible with the voluntary sector, come together to understand the issues surrounding the young person and put in place a strategy of action.'*

- ***Return interviews provision remains patchy***

Although the previous guidance on missing children also recommended that the local authorities should provide return interviews, the provision remains patchy. Significant numbers of local authorities do not offer return interviews to children running away or going missing either from home or care. 30 (22%) local authorities in 2011-12 and 21 (16%) in 2012 did not provide any return interviews to children missing from home. In relation to children missing from care, over the same periods of time, nine (7%) and six (4%) local authorities indicated that they did not offer any return interviews.¹⁹

We believe that the guidance can be strengthened by clearly stating that local authorities are required to offer return interviews to all children, including those missing from home and from care.

We also recommend that the guidance contains recommendation on how local authorities will be inspected by Ofsted in relation to have they meet the provisions specified in this guidance.

- ***The 'independence' of return interviews***

Return interviews work best when young people trust the person undertaking them, and feel confident about opening up to them. Research shows that this is more likely when the interviewer is from a non-statutory agency such as a voluntary sector project to support young runaways.

Furthermore, it is crucial that people undertaking return interviews are trained in spotting the warning signs of sexual exploitation and trafficking, as listed in the Office for the Children's Commissioner November 2012 interim report on sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. Young people who have been victims of child sexual exploitation may not acknowledge that they have been exploited, and may be very reluctant to speak about their experiences. Well-trained, experienced, truly independent interviewers are therefore pivotal to the success of return interviews.

The term 'independent', as our practitioners report, is interpreted in different way by local authorities. Some, for example, consider that carers/ or placement providers are 'independent' as they are not part of social services working with a child. This is contrary to research and practice which shows that relationships with carers and problems at placement are often the cause of children running away from care.

We believe that the guidance should explain 'independence' and require that when young people are offered a return interview they should be offered a choice of what professional they would like to speak to, including the choice of speaking to an independent return interviews provider or an advocate.

¹⁸ Home Office (2011) *Missing Children and Adults: A Cross Government Strategy* London: HM Government

¹⁹ Pona, I. (2013) Here to listen? Return interview provision for young runaway. The Children's Society

The guidance should also provide more information about who should conduct return interviews and the training they should have.

7. The importance of listening to children

The guidance does mention the need to listen to young people, to take their concerns seriously, and to offer them warm and consistent support (paragraphs 65 and 83). However, because taking a supportive approach to young people and responding to their individual needs is so central to providing effective support, we believe it must have far greater prominence in the guidance.

Young runaways are some of the most vulnerable children in our society. Many of them are known to children's services prior to running away.²⁰ Most often children run away from neglect and abuse, conflict, family breakdown and parental drug and alcohol misuse. These children are more likely to have learning difficulties, disabilities and be in care.²¹ They are also more likely to have problems at school and not attend regularly.²² Running away or going missing is also recognised as one of the key risk factors of child sexual exploitation (CSE).^{23 24 25}

Research suggests that out of 84,000 children who run away in England, more than 18,000 are either hurt or harmed while away; experience sleeping rough or staying with a stranger; or steal, beg or do 'other things' in order to survive.²⁶

Children often feel powerless, unable to escape the situations of abuse and neglect and feel they have no one to turn to for help. This is often exacerbated by professionals' perceptions of young people who run away and/or experience sexual exploitation as '*promiscuous*' and '*streetwise*', '*choosing this life style*'.²⁷ Research evidence suggests that professionals' wrongly perceive teenagers as more resilient and able to cope with maltreatment than young children and that this affects how cases of older children are assessed and whether protection is offered to them.²⁸ The Education Select Committee in its report 'Children First. The Child Protection System in England' (2012) reported evidence from different organisations that older children are often not treated and assessed the same way as younger children for child protection purposes.

Return interviews provide an opportunity to place the child's needs and experiences at the centre, give them an opportunity to talk and to be listened to, and to have their feelings and experiences taken seriously. The need to focus on children's experiences in child protection processes was highlighted in the Munro review '*...treating children and young people as people not objects requires spending time with them to ascertain their views, helping them understand what is happening to them, and taking their wishes and opinions into account in making decisions about them.*'²⁹

²⁰ *Make Runaways Safe: The local picture. Findings from Freedom of Information requests to local authorities, Local Safeguarding Children Boards and police constabularies* (2013) London: The Children's Society

²¹ Rees, Gwyther (2011) *Still Running 3* London: The Children's Society

²² Williams, N., *Lessons to Learn: Exploring the links between running away and absence from school* (2012) The Children's Society: London

²³ *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (2011) London: CEOP

²⁴ Jago, S et al (2011) *What's going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation* University of Bedfordshire, Bedford

²⁵ Smeaton, E. (2013) *Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation*

²⁶ Rees, Gwyther (2011) *Still Running 3* London: The Children's Society

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

²⁸ Rees, G., Gorin, S., Jobe, A., Stein, M., Medforth, R., Goswami, H. (2010) Safeguarding young people: responding to young people 11-17 who are maltreated.

²⁹ Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro review of child protection. Part one: a system analysis*

It is important that the guidance stresses the importance of treating young people with respect and providing them with an opportunity to talk about their experiences.

The young people we consulted with told us that this is not always how they experience interaction with professionals.

'Social workers are there because they have to be not because they want to be'

'Where I am now they won't come to pick you up. You have to make your own way back home'

'They don't report children missing if someone does it very often'

'The police they shout at you 'you are wasting our time'. They should be more sympathetic. Should find out the reasons young person is running away'

'The police say 'we are not a taxi service'. Don't pick us up then.'

'They [the police] are too proud to apologise even when they were wrong'

'Young people have different reasons for running away. They [social workers] do not understand and it gets worse'

'They need to understand why and not to punish us'

'Safe places should be available – somewhere nice, not like a police cell.'

'We are the kids. They are the staff. They can shout at us but we cannot shout back'

'Stop treating us as criminals'

Example from practice

A young person, age 14, is involved in one of The Children's Society's projects. He explained that as a punishment for running away he was not allowed to use his mobile. He was also not allowed to use his pocket money unsupervised to stop him running away from his placement. He believed that stopping him from using his mobile phone was not going to make any difference. He could still use phones in supermarkets and public phone boxes or could ask friends to use their phones. And he had managed to run away without money in the past. Additionally to not have money or a mobile phone when out was putting him at additional risk as he had less opportunity to contact someone for help if needed. The young person felt that these measures made no difference. He believed that it would be more helpful for staff to talk to him and try and understand his behaviour as well as explain him about the risks he faced when he was running away.

We believe that the guidance can be strengthened by explaining the importance of listening to children, particularly through the return interviews. We also believe that the guidance should acknowledge the issue of negative attitudes that prevent children seeking help from statutory services, or from professionals putting support in place, and recommend ways to address these locally.

For more information please contact Iryna Pona, Policy Adviser – iryna.pona@childrenssociety.org.uk 0207 841 4400