



North East Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership

Missing from Home and Care Protocol

Updated 2021-23



1. Introduction

Children going missing from home or care is a key safeguarding issue.

When a child goes missing from home or care, it can be symptomatic of wider problems in their lives.

Children who go missing are at risk of harm in the short term which can often have long term implications. Research findings estimate that approximately 25% of children and young people who go missing are at risk of significant harm– determining which children requires professional judgement and assessment. There are concerns about the links between children running away and the risks of Child Exploitation (Sexual or Criminal).

This protocol is designed to support an effective collaborative safeguarding response from all agencies involved when a child goes missing. It aims to provide guidance for assessing both the risk **of** the child going missing and the risk **to** the child when they are missing.

This guidance sets out the actions that should be taken by professionals to locate the child, to assist with their return and to identify the issues which caused, and may continue to cause, the child to go missing.

This protocol takes account of the DfE Statutory Guidance on '**Children who run away or go missing from home or care**', January 2014.

Where there are also concerns of child exploitation practitioners would also need to review the Adolescent Risk Strategy 2021/2023 and the Child Sexual Exploitation & Child Criminal Exploitation Guidance

The protocol covers all children (defined as under 18 years old) who are missing from home or care.

2. Principles

The following principles should be adopted by all agencies in relation to identifying and locating children who go missing:

- The safety and welfare of the child is paramount
- Locating and returning the child to a safe environment is the main objective
- Child Protection Procedures will be initiated whenever there are concerns that a child who is missing may be at risk of significant harm
- This protocol should be read as guidance as it cannot anticipate every situation. Anyone working with children in a professional capacity should use their judgment to take whatever action is deemed necessary to protect and safeguard the child
- Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes and must be reflected in any care plan. The child's view will be a crucial consideration in determining the best method of engagement and intervention.

3. Multi Agency Working

3.1 Definitions

For the purposes of this protocol, the following definitions apply:

- **Child:** For the purposes of this document a child is anyone under 18
- **Missing Child:** A child reported as missing to the police by their family or carers. Any child who is away from their home or placement, their whereabouts is unknown or cannot be established and the behaviour is out of character, and/or the circumstances of the child's disappearance or the child's age and vulnerability means that there is cause to be concerned for their welfare or safety
- **Responsible Local Authority:** The local authority that is responsible for a looked after child's care and care planning
- **Host Local Authority:** The local authority in which a looked after child is placed when placed out of the responsible local authority's area
- **Unauthorised Absence: A Looked After Child** whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place, they are expected to be, and the carer has concerns
- **Abduction:** Where a child or young person has been abducted or forcibly removed from their place of residence, you should immediately contact the Police via 999. This includes children and young people who have been taken from their place of residence by unknown adults, even if the child or young person appears to have gone willingly. It also includes any child who is removed from placement by parents or others contrary to the care plan. Where the child is subject to a care order, emergency protection order or in police protection, social workers may consider seeking legal advice on obtaining a Recovery Order.

3.2 Unauthorised Absences

This category is critical to the clarification of roles of the Police and Children's Social Care.

Some children absent themselves from home or care without permission but their whereabouts are known by parents or carers, or this is a pattern of repeated behaviour where the young person returns home after a few hours or whereabouts are unknown, but the child is in contact and not considered at risk. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed as a boundary testing activity which can be considered normal teenage behaviour. An example of this may be a teenager who stays out beyond a curfew but whose whereabouts remains known to their parent or carer and/or who remain in touch during their absence.

These children are not classed as missing and should not be reported to the police unless there are risk factors present that may make the child vulnerable whilst absent (**Concerning Absences**).

However, if they continue to stay away from their home or placement, and/or their whereabouts are not able to be confirmed, they need to be reported to the police.

The police will make an assessment as to whether the child is missing.

If there is any doubt about whether a child is missing or absent, then the police should be called via 101.

For children looked after, foster carers and residential workers will need to refer to the specific advice in the child's Placement Plan.

3.3 Concerning Unauthorised Absences

If a child's whereabouts are known, then they cannot be technically 'missing'.

However, if they are known to be staying somewhere where they are in danger and it is not possible for the carer/parent to remove the child or young person, then it may still be necessary to involve Police in safeguarding them.

Children who are absent without authorisation and whose whereabouts are known, but there are significant risk factors that increase their vulnerability, should be reported to police immediately. For example:

- Their age: the younger the child the more concerning the absence
- Where they are and who they are with; is the child in danger of being abused or exploited or in contact with a person who poses a risk to children? Are they at risk from involvement in gangs, criminal activity, CSE?
- Their state of mind; are they vulnerable due to emotional or mental health difficulties or substance misuse?
- The presence of factors that may increase their level of vulnerability, for example learning difficulties, medical conditions, gang affiliation, exploitation
- A history of prolonged or frequent absences/missing episodes that may increase risk of harm.

3.4 Police Definitions

The police definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' are:

Missing

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.

and

Absent

A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be (and there is no apparent risk).

The police classification of a person as 'missing' or 'absent' will be based on on-going risk assessment.

A child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either 'missing' or 'absent' under the police definitions.

When a parent/carer/professional reports to the police they will assess whether a child is missing or absent based on the information provided. Any child who is recorded as absent, will be categorised as missing by the police after 24 hours.

Where a child is recorded by police as being absent, they will agree review times and any on-going actions with the person reporting the absence.

All persons recorded by police as absent are monitored on the police system. Monitoring is ongoing and subject to regular reviews to ensure risk levels do not change. Where information comes to light which introduces any risk to that person, then the case may be re-categorised as 'missing' and a police investigation instigated.

One of the overriding principles of 'Absent' is that police can focus resources more effectively, in accordance with the police risk assessments of 'absent' and 'missing' incidents.

From a social care perspective, we may be just as concerned about an 'absent' child as one who is formally 'missing', and the police distinction should not determine social care safeguarding actions or actions to seek to locate a child, particularly a Looked After Child.

The 'absent' category should comprise of cases of where the person is not where they are supposed to be and where there is no apparent risk. These are monitored over time by police and escalated to missing if there is a change in circumstances, or a child will be escalated to missing by police after 24 hours of being absent.

3.5 Understanding Police Risk Levels

The police will prioritise all incidents of missing children as medium or high risk, the majority being medium. Where a child is recorded as being absent, the details will be recorded by the police, who will also agree review times and any on-going actions with the person reporting.

A missing child incident would be prioritised as below:

No apparent risk

There is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public.

Actions to locate the subject and/or gather further information should be agreed with the informant and a latest review time set to reassess the risk.

Low risk	
The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.	Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.
Medium risk	
The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.	This category requires an active and measured response by the police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting.
High risk	
The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely.	<p>This category almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources – action may be delayed in exceptional circumstances, such as searching water or forested areas during hours of darkness. A member of the senior management team must be involved in the examination of initial lines of enquiry and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of an investigating officer (IO) and possibly an SIO, and a police search adviser (PoISA).</p> <p>There should be a press/media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be put in place where appropriate. The MPB should be notified of the case without undue delay. Children’s services must also be notified immediately if the person is under 18.</p>

The **high-risk** category requires the immediate deployment of police resources. Police guidance makes clear that a member of the senior management team or similar command level must be involved in the examination of initial enquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of an Investigating Officer and possibly a Senior Investigating Officer. There should be a media strategy and close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be put in place.

Being a high-risk missing person allows the police more power in tracking with a quicker response, as these are very powerful tools, police need clear evidence of the immediate risk and do not use this category lightly.

A missing child incident would be prioritised as **medium risk** where the risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others. Most missing children are under this category. This category requires an active and measured response by police and other agencies to trace the missing person and support the person reporting. This will involve a proactive investigation and search in accordance with the circumstances to locate the missing child as soon as possible.

3.6 Agency Roles and Responsibilities

Police

The police will:

- Collect and collate missing persons reports via the National Police Computer
- Carry out investigations of missing children
- Notify other agencies of missing children reports via COMPACT
- Use police powers under the Children Act 1989 as required to safeguard missing children who are located
- Carry out safe and well checks as soon as possible when the child returns.

Where there are child protection concerns, the Protecting Vulnerable Persons Team (PVP) will be informed and involved in strategy discussions and enquiries as appropriate.

Foster Carers and Residential Support Workers

Where the child is looked after by NELC or an NELC care leaver, their foster carer, residential worker or housing support worker will:

- Contribute to any plans designed to reduce the risk of running away within the care or pathway planning
- Respond to missing incidents in line with this protocol
- When child goes missing notify the Police, CSC and parents where appropriate
- Work with the police and CSC to ensure the child's safe return to placement
- Provide accurate records of incidents to inform data gathering on individual and group patterns of running away.

Residential units should have in place procedures to both prevent Children Looked After going missing and to locate, return and support Looked After Children who have gone missing.

Emergency Duty Team

NELC's Emergency Duty Team provides a social work service to cover emergency situations arising out of office hours and will:

- Respond to notifications from foster carers, residential workers and housing support workers on behalf of CSC where a looked after child is reported as missing or where there are concerns for the safety of a child who is absent without authorisation
- Provide a response for any missing child who is located by either ensuring their safe return home or to their placement or where necessary arranging for emergency overnight accommodation
- Pass on all relevant information to CSC or other services for further action.

NELC Safeguarding Children's Partnership

The Safer Partnership will:

- Co-ordinate the development of a multi-agency strategy on missing children in North East Lincolnshire
- Scrutinise the multi-agency response to children who run away or go missing
- Support agencies to examine the links between contextual safeguarding and missing episodes.

5. Prevention

5.1 Preventing and Understanding why Children go Missing

It is important that children who are at risk of going missing can speak to someone about their situation and get support to help them deal with issues that may cause them to go missing.

Professionals who are concerned that a child they work with is at risk of going missing should work with the child to understand why they have gone missing or are thinking of going missing, work with the child and family to address these issues, and if there are safeguarding concerns a referral to MASH be made.

If the child is already open to Children's Social Care and is at risk of going missing, social workers and the professional network will also have an opportunity to work with the child to understand why they have gone missing or are thinking of going missing, to reduce the risk and plan for any incidents.

If there is a risk of missing/unauthorised absence then strategies need to be incorporated into the **Child In Need / Child Protection / Looked After Child Plan** for the child and family. It should also include strategies to reduce the duration and risk of missing episodes.

Some **examples** of the reasons children and young people may run away are:

Push factors

- Problems at home – ranging from arguments with parents to long-term abuse / maltreatment to bereavement
- Family break-up – young people drawn into their parents' conflicts are less likely to do well at school and more likely to truant or to run away from home
- Mental health problems – a disproportionate number of young people who run away from home have mental health problem
- Bullying – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away from school and home or care
- Personal Problems – running away to escape a relationship, teenage pregnancy – some young women run away or are forced to leave home because they become pregnant, or fear that they may be pregnant. Those working with them will need to ensure they have access to sexual health services.

Pull factors

- Children may run to be near friends or family – especially when a young person is in care and there are problems in contact arrangements with family and friends
- Grooming for potential sexual exploitation or child **Trafficking** – young people may run away or go missing following grooming by adults or peers who seek to exploit them
- County Line involvement – gangs and/or older organised criminals recruit vulnerable young people to act as couriers and sell drugs. There are various 'lines' out of London. This deliberate movement of a child can be seen as a form of child trafficking
- Being gang associated – involved in criminal activity, potential drug running and exploitation.

5.2 Preventing Missing from Care and Unauthorised Absences

As well as assessing the risks to include understanding the reasons why a Looked After Child is going missing as above, Local authorities have a duty to seek to place a looked after child in the most appropriate placement to safeguard the child and minimise the risk of the child running away. The care plan and the placement plan should include details of the arrangements that will need to be in place to keep the child safe and minimise the risk of the child going missing from their placement. Remember:

- The Care Plan – should include strategies to avoid unauthorised absences and/or a child going missing, where this is an identified risk. It should also include strategies to reduce the duration and risks associated if the child does have unauthorised absences/go missing
- The Placement Plan – should include strategies for preventing the child from taking unauthorised absences/going missing; and clear advice to the carers as to the steps to take and persons to be contacted if a child is absent or missing from placement
- A pre-incident risk assessment should be completed by the allocated social worker for all children for whom there is concern that they may run away, and this document should be shared in advance with the foster carer, fostering agency, police, school, EDT, and other local authorities as appropriate. Distance from home, family and friends should be considered as a risk factor
- Provide the child with advice about an independent advocate and take the child's views into account.

Statutory reviews should consider any absences and revise strategies to prevent repeat absences and/or missing incidents and the care plan should be revised accordingly.

6. Philomena Protocol

The social worker will receive an alert if the child is flagged as going missing. Philomena Packs for children who are looked after should be completed by social workers if their child goes missing and updated at least every 3 months or when new information is known such as a change in associations/locations/length of missing for example. This form helps police to decide about risk and enables them to start their missing investigation promptly.

Care placements are also expected to complete these for the young people in their care who go missing. The placements should already know about these via the police and complete as part of their routine paperwork.

7. Data Collection and Monitoring

It is very important that all missing episodes are added to Liquid Logic and completed once returned. All information regarding the missing episode and risk of the child needs to be filled in correctly by the Missing Coordinator/MASH EDT. This information can then be used to inform any data analysis.

The Missing Coordinator will monitor the actions, plans and outcomes for children considered to be high risk missing by Children's Social Care (CSC).

Escalation forms are required for all Children Looked After who are reported missing, have a pattern of missing incidents and are considered to be high risk. Senior Managers need to know about who is missing and when.

8. Information Sharing with Other Local Authorities

- Where it is known that a NELC child has travelled to another local authority area, the police will contact the police in that area
- Where families go missing, NELC Safer Partnership will send out notifications to all other local authorities giving details of the family
- If a child from another area is found in NELC, the police will notify the home local authority
- If a child is placed out of area and has a Philomena Pack then this is to be shared with local authority and police;
- Please see **Section 12.9, Out of Area Placements, and Section 12.10, Children Placed in NELC from Other Local Authorities**, for further information on children placed out of area and children from other local authorities placed in NELC.

9. Reporting a Child as Missing

The following information needs to be provided to the police when a child is being reported as missing:

- Details about the child's family or care placement, including names of parents/carers, address and any contact details for the child, and the child's legal status
- A physical description of the child
- Information on friends and family and/or other possible locations
- Details of the circumstances of the child going missing, including the time and whom they were last seen with:
 - A recent photograph of the child
 - Details of any mobile phone numbers/email addresses/social media accounts
 - A copy of the Philomena Pack that has been undertaken.

The police will prioritise missing children reports and their response; please see table in **Section 3.5, Understanding Police Risk Levels**.

10. Missing Child Strategy Meetings Guidance

Timescales and procedures for strategy meetings must be followed as set out below. The meetings should involve representatives from all relevant agencies involved, including the Police Locate Team.

- If you believe a child is at risk of significant harm, regardless of the length of time missing, a strategy meeting should be convened
- If a child has been missing for longer than 72 hours a strategy discussion to be convened.
- If a child has had more than 3 missing episodes in 90 days a strategy meeting is to be considered, in line with the wider context around the missing episodes. This decision and consideration is to be made by the Case Team Manager

The Strategy Meeting must consider the following for further details and who to invite to the meeting:

- Involvement of parents if appropriate to the child's welfare, and all relevant professionals
- Making further attempts to contact the child/young person's known relatives, friends, regular places of visit etc. Consideration should be given to writing to relatives and

friends regarding the local authority's concerns and the expectation that the relatives/friends will inform the local authority should they obtain any relevant information

- Writing to other local authorities and local agencies with the information about the missing child/young person. Partner agencies should receive information from each other based on their need to know and in order to take action to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child
- Use of publicity. This is done through the police. The child's parents must be informed prior to a press release being made and consent should be received from them and/or those with parental responsibility. For a Looked After Child, the Director's approval will need to be sought also. Legal Services should be consulted with if there are any issues regarding obtaining consent. Social workers should be aware that it is an offence for a person to publish material which is intended to, or is likely to identify a child as being involved in court proceedings under the Children Act 1989. However, the court can give leave for this restriction to be waived if the child/young person's welfare requires it
- Seeking a **Recovery Order** and deciding how the order should be exercised i.e. should there be a joint visit with police and Social Care staff. Legal Services will need to be consulted if the Local Authority need to obtain an order to safeguard a Looked After Child
- Notifying national authorities and agencies, such as Department for Work and Pensions and Child Benefit agencies
- Appropriate legal interventions if there is any suspicion that the child may have been removed from UK jurisdiction
- Whether a further strategy meeting should be called before the child / young person has been missing for 7 days
- Planning for the child's return.

The decisions of the strategy meeting and the timescales must be clearly recorded and minutes sent out to all professionals involved. Further Strategy meetings can be called whenever the professionals involved wish to hold one and must be within timescales set out below.

11. Response to Children Missing from Home

11.1 Reporting to the Police

When a young person goes missing from home the police should be informed by the parents or those with a **Parental Responsibility**. It is expected that they should have made all appropriate enquiries to locate the child before reporting them to the police if it is safe to do so. Failure to report their child missing is a safeguarding issue that would need to be addressed with them.

If a parent/carers has not reported them missing, then any professional can report them via the 101 police telephone service. If the child has an allocated social worker, and the parents or carers are unwilling to report their child missing, the social worker or duty worker should report the child missing to police.

11.2 Children not Open to Children's Social Care

If the young person does not have an allocated social worker, the missing report will be recorded on the system as a contact which will be considered by the Assistant Team Manager. These cases are screened by the Integrated Front Door who consider current and

historical factors. Actions may be a referral to Early Help services, allocation for a Child and Family Assessment or the circumstances may require a strategy discussion to be held. A Missing Strategy Meeting must be held within one working day.

When a report of a missing child is received from police, the missing logs should be checked by the IFD Manager to see if a child has previously been reported missing. This will also be monitored by the Missing Coordinator, and any repeat missing episodes or other concerning cases will be recommended for assessment.

If the child is returned within 24 hours but the police believe there are concerning issues, they should make a referral to CSC even after the child is returned home.

11.3 Communication with Parents and Professionals

Unless there are concerns that this would increase the risk, it is good practice and can in some cases be crucial for information sharing to invite the parent/carer of the child to the Missing Strategy Meeting.

If a child is on a child protection plan or subject to Section 47 enquiries, then the CP Chair, Quality Assurance Team and CP Designated Nurse needs to be notified. The child's school should always be informed and invited to strategy meetings as they may hold valuable information.

It is important also to remember to communicate with all professionals that a child has returned home, and brief updated information (where known) about why they were missing, where they were located, and any change to the safeguarding or support plan as a result.

11.4 Publicity

When publicity is appropriate/needed, the police will liaise with the child's parents to get permission to seek publicity. Social worker to liaise with police regarding publicity and if granted social worker to help police identify areas where putting up publicity may be useful. Electronic publicity pictures can also be sent to relevant agencies.

11.5 Longer Absences

For children subject to child protection plans, the decision to end a child protection plan can only be made by the chair, and it is very unlikely that a missing child subject to a child protection plan would not continue to remain at risk, with the case remaining open until the child is found.

For other children known to Children's Social Care, whilst the child remains absent, his/her case should remain allocated with regular strategy meetings and actions to seek to find and safeguard the child for at least three months. If the child continues to remain missing, and there are no further actions that can realistically be undertaken by Children's Social Care, a Service Manager should review the case before any decision for closure to satisfy him/herself on the actions taken to recover the child.

In such cases, the Missing Coordinator should be notified that the case has been closed to Children's Social Care. The case will remain open to the police until the child or young person is found. The Missing Coordinator will continue to have regular liaison with the police on a minimum monthly basis and can provide any requested information or attend any strategy

meetings called by the police. When the child is found the case would be re-opened and allocated for assessment.

12. Response to Children Missing from Care

Research shows that children looked after by the Local Authority are over-represented in the cohort of children who go missing (Ofsted, Missing Children, 2013)

12.1 Philomena Packs

A Philomena pack will need to be completed by social workers if their child goes missing and updated at least every 3 months or when new information is known such as a change in associations/locations/missing episodes, for example. This form helps police to decide about risk and enables them to start their missing investigation promptly.

Care placements are also expected to complete these for the young people in their care who go missing. The placements should already know about these via the police and complete as part of their routine paperwork.

12.2 Responding to Unauthorised Absences

The following children / young people should automatically be considered as at risk and reported immediately to the police by the foster carer / residential staff:

- Any child / young person who presents an immediate risk to themselves or to other people
- Any child who is 12 years old or younger
- Any child / young person who has an exploitation case status
- Presence of factors that may increase their vulnerability, such as learning difficulties, gang affiliation, medical conditions
- Any child / young person who is abducted from care
- Any young person who is subject to a curfew and goes missing beyond the end of their curfew and there are contextual harm risks.

Where a child is absent without permission from a residential unit or foster home all reasonable and practical steps should be taken to secure the safe and speedy return of the child. The residential unit / foster carer should discuss with EDT On call Manager for advice.

Before reporting a child, foster carers / residential staff must, (as far as is practicable and as staffing levels will allow), do all that a reasonable parent would do to locate and ensure the safe return of the child / young person. They should telephone the child, their friends or relatives to ascertain the child / young person's location, collect the child / young person or negotiate some alternative arrangements.

If the carer believes the child / young person is at risk, they must inform the child's social worker / Service Manager/ EDT immediately.

The staff should also refer to their organisation's procedures. The residential staff must then inform the child/young person's social worker or EDT. In an emergency the residential staff must call the police.

If it is thought that there are specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in returning the child, then action should be agreed between the police, the residential unit staff

/ foster carer and the social worker/EDT. If the local authority knows, or believes it knows, the child's location and there are difficulties or dangers involved in returning the child, a **Recovery Order** should be actively considered and sought. *These circumstances would not necessarily mean the child would be categorised as 'missing' by the police*, however that does not mean that protective action is not required. Team managers need to consider if a strategy meeting is required.

12.3 Responding to Missing from Care

Where a child is deemed 'missing' it is essential to act promptly so that professionals can work together to locate the child as quickly as possible.

The foster carer or residential unit should inform the local Police and report the child as missing. Philomena pack should be shared with Police.

The child's social worker or EDT also needs to be informed. Foster Carers should inform their supervising social worker. The parents and any other person with parental responsibility should be contacted unless it is not appropriate for the child's welfare. The social worker will then inform the child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and their team manager if they are not already aware.

If the child remains missing for 72 hours the Assistant Director must be informed. If the child remains missing for 7 days, the Director and the lead member of the Corporate Parenting Board need to be informed.

12.4 Working with the Police

The Police may want to search the address at which the missing child was last seen, this should be negotiated to cause minimum disruption to the residential unit / foster home.

Police are the lead agency for the investigation of missing children. Where the child is a Looked After Child then Children's Social Care are responsible for children in their care at all times, and this responsibility is not absolved when a child is reported missing to the Police. Social workers, foster carers, and other professionals should do all that a good parent would do to find their child, including undertaking their own searches as far as is possible, safe, and appropriate. Actions from strategy discussions and meetings need to be urgently progressed.

Children's social care should provide relevant information about the missing child to the police to enable all the risk factors to be considered.

12.5 Publicity

When publicity is appropriate/needed to safely locate and safeguard a missing child, the police will liaise with the local authority and the child's parents to get permission to seek publicity. For Looked After Children the Director's approval will need to be sought also. The Social worker will need to liaise with police regarding publicity and if this is appropriate and agreed the social worker may need to help police identify areas where putting up publicity may be useful. Electronic publicity pictures can also be sent to relevant agencies.

12.6 Communication with Parents and Professionals

Unless there are concerns that this would increase the risk, it is good practice and can in some cases be crucial for information sharing to invite the parent/carer of the child to the Missing Strategy Meeting. Where this is not appropriate, parents must be kept updated.

For Looked After Children, the IRO should also be notified as soon as possible. If there are ongoing **Care Proceedings**, the **Children's Guardian** should also be informed, and they may wish to attend meetings also. The child's school should always be informed and invited to strategy meetings as they may hold valuable information.

It is important also to remember to communicate with all professionals that a child has returned to their placement, and also share brief updated information about why they were missing, where they were located, and any change to the safeguarding or support plan as a result.

12.7 Out of Area Placements

Notification of the placement must be made to the host authority and other specified services.

All children where there are existing concerns that they are likely to go missing, or at risk of Exploitation or youth crime should be notified to the local police service and local missing coordinator and Exploitation Team. If needed support for how to contact other authorities and police forces can be sought from the Missing Coordinator, and the Exploitation Lead, Exploitation Team Manager will make any necessary referrals to the local MACE panel.

If children placed out of area run away, this protocol should still be followed. It is very possible that the child will return to NELC, so it is essential that liaison between the police and professionals in both authorities is well managed and coordinated. A notification process for missing / absent episodes should be agreed between responsible and host local authorities as a part of the care plan and the placement plan, and as above information about risks should be shared in advance where this is known.

It is also possible that the area of the placement may contain new or further risks to young people, particularly those already identified as at risk of exploitation or youth crime. As far as possible, when considering placement options, the social worker should seek information about the local area and local risks. If it is not possible to risk assess information in advance, this should still be sought once a placement has been made. This includes seeking information from the local Exploitation Team and any other local resource such as a community safety officer for youth crime or youth violence panel.

12.8 Children Placed in NELC by another Local Authority

Where a young person Looked After to another Local Authority has been reported missing from an NELC placement, notification is given to the responsible local authority via the police. Data in relation to this will also be monitored by the Missing Coordinator.

If a child is at risk of Contextual Harm or known to another Local Authority's MACE panel, once the child is moved to NELC then as above contact should be made by the host authority with NELC's relevant coordinators, and where appropriate a referral to NELC's MACE will be made so the case can be monitored locally.

13. Planning for when the Child is Located and their Return

If a child is missing the police and parents, social worker, residential unit/foster carer should also commence contingency planning for when the child is located. Plans should include:

- Will the child return to the placement/home address or are they safe in the location where they are found?
- If the child is to return, how will s/he be conveyed to their placement/home address?
- Do the police wish to interview the child where they are located or after they have returned their placement/home address?
- For a child missing from home, or who refuses a IRHI worker, who will be an appropriate 'independent person' to talk to the child when s/he is located/returned?

There will be occasions when a child is found in a location that may be considered unsuitable, but where there would be no legal grounds for taking them into **Police Protection** or where to do so would be unsustainable because of the child unwillingness to co-operate.

In these cases police and the accountable manager from Children's Social Care will need to liaise to discuss what steps may be necessary in order to safeguard the child's welfare. If orders will need to be sought to safeguard the child, Legal will need to be informed and consulted.

14. Actions when Returned

14.1 Police Safe and Well Checks

Once a child is found or returns home, the police will conduct a safe and well check to establish what has happened to the child whilst missing and check their general welfare. This is usually very brief and is not a Return Home Interview. The safe and well check will also look at whether the child:

- Has suffered any harm;
- Has been the victim of any offence;
- Has committed any offence.

If the child is returning home, the police should also establish whether there are any child protection issues and if it is safe for the child to return there. As a result of these checks, and any disclosures made, the police will decide what further action to take in terms of referring the child on for services.

A safe and well check will be carried out for all children returning home.

14.2 Return Home Interview

All children who come under North East Lincolnshire local authority who are classed as missing by police will be offered a **safe and well** interview within 72 hours of their return. The Local Authority will then offer an **independent return home interview**.

The purpose of the interview is to give the child an opportunity to speak to someone about why they were missing, explore what help and support they require and discuss safety planning. It is also an opportunity to gather information which can help assess the risk the

child is at, can be used in the event of them going missing again and helps the police and social care see patterns and trends emerging.

It is important that the interview is carried out by someone independent of the child's care but also that the child has a good relationship with and feels comfortable talking to the interviewer about their experiences. Information from the return home interview can be used to inform case planning.

Where a young person refuses to engage in a return home interview, the worker should obtain relevant information from the parents or carers.

Where a child declines, it should be explored if the child would prefer to talk to another trusted professional in the professional network. If the child still declines, or if the child were to specifically request to speak to the social worker, then the social worker should still carry out the interview as far as possible, and certainly will need to continue to discuss concerns for the child going missing and support to reduce missing episodes with the young person.

14.3 Return Home Interview – Review and Information Sharing

It is very important that IRHIs are read carefully by Social Workers, Managers, and the Missing Coordinator. In many cases they will contain useful information, that should be shared with their parents or carers to help prevent them going missing again or reduce the risks to them when they are missing. The information should also be used to update their missing risk assessment and information sharing forms and should inform longer term planning to safeguard and support the child.

The Missing Coordinator will collate identified themes, adults and contexts of concern from the Independent Return Home Interview, to ensure that there is greater understanding around the contextual risk and to enable relevant co-ordinated action to be taken to increase safety in these areas.

Key relevant information from the IRHIs that has immediate bearing on risk should also be shared quickly with police, and any other appropriate professionals, such as school YOS worker. Otherwise, the information should be shared as part of updating risk assessments and information sharing forms, and in informing children's plans.

Due to this information sharing it is crucial that the interviewer goes through confidentiality with the child before the interview commences.

If a child declines a IRHI then this needs to be recorded on Liquid Logic, and as above every effort should be made to seek to continue to explore the issues with the child.

15. Children Missing In Specific Circumstances

15.1 Trafficking/Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

There are complex issues facing Asylum Seeking children. Information about some children's whereabouts is not always maintained due to the transient nature of their accommodation arrangements. Agencies must however, be alert to the fact that some children are trafficked

into, within and out of the UK for custom related reasons, to be abused and exploited for commercial gain, including through sex, for domestic servitude etc.

Some of the children who local authorities look after may be unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or other migrant children, and some of this group may have been trafficked into the UK and may remain under the influence of their traffickers even while they are looked after. Trafficked children are at high risk of going missing, with most going missing within one week of becoming looked after and many within 48 hours.

Unaccompanied migrant or asylum-seeking child who goes missing immediately after becoming looked after should be treated as children who could be victims of trafficking.

With consideration of Op Innerste, the following is agreed by NELC Children's Services, Humberside Police and Border Force as an agreed joint response to presenting unaccompanied asylum seekers.

A strategy discussion is to be held with all partners; Humberside Police Locate Team will attend along with the Missing Coordinator. As part of the plan for the Section 47 enquiry, The Police Team will complete a pre-missing interview, meet the child, and promote a proactive approach to prevent missing episodes.

The S47 investigation and subsequent assessment will be critical to inform the care plan and this should be done immediately as the window for intervention is very narrow. Advice should be sought from the Missing Coordinator, Exploitation Lead & Humberside Locate Team to best support this. The S47/assessment must seek to establish:

- Relevant details about the child's background before they came to the UK;
- An understanding of the reasons why the child came to the UK; and
- An analysis of the child's vulnerability to remaining under the influence of traffickers.

As it is not possible to ascertain whether these children/young people have either been smuggled or trafficked into the UK. It is necessary to consider all unaccompanied minors as trafficked. As part of the S47 investigation, an application for the **National Referral Mechanism (NRM)** is to be made.

Vulnerable children from the UK can also be at risk of trafficking around the country.

15.2 Abduction

If it is suspected that a child has been or may be abducted by a parent and removed from the UK, normally due to disputes over residency or custody, parents should be advised to call the police and contact the Child Abduction Unit in the Official Solicitor's Office for details on what action can be taken. See **Official Solicitor and Public Trustee (GOV.UK)**.

Any concerns for abduction by a stranger, or unsafe known adult, would constitute a Strategy Discussion and **Section 47** investigation and responded to accordingly.

Any concerns for abduction of a child from Local Authority Care would also constitute a Strategy Discussion and Section 47 investigation and responded to accordingly. Legal services should be immediately informed, as well as the Assistant Director.

15.3 Forced Marriage

Forced marriage involves the obtaining of consent to marry by duress, threats and violence. If there are concerns that a young person has gone missing because of a forced marriage, social workers and professionals should refer to the government guidance **GOV.UK: Forced Marriage (2017)** on what actions to take. For Looked After Children, Legal Services should also be consulted and orders sought to protect the child.

If it is feared that the child may be removed from the UK for the purposes of forced marriage, professionals should contact the **Forced Marriage Unit based in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Victims of forced marriage**.

15.4 Female Genital Mutilation

If there are concerns that a young girl may be removed from the UK for the purposes of female genital mutilation (FGM) professionals should follow the guidance set out in **Multi-agency statutory guidance on female genital mutilation (2016, GOV.UK)**.

Concerns for FGM must be reported to the police.

The FGM Unit, based at the Home Office, co-ordinates work on FGM across government and offers outreach support to local areas. Please note the unit does not handle individual cases.

The NSPCC have an FGM helpline: 0800 028 3550

15.5 Radicalisation

The harm children and young people can experience from radicalisation ranges from a child adopting or complying with extreme views which limits their social interaction and full engagement with their education, to young children being taken to war zones and older children being groomed for involvement in violence.

If there are concerns that a child who is missing has been radicalised, or a child is likely to go missing where there are concerns of radicalisation, then the channel process must be followed and also police must be sighted on your concerns in relation to this. A strategy meeting should also be considered due to level of risk associated with this concern.

15.6 Child Criminal/Sexual Exploitation (CCE/CSE)

As mentioned, going missing is a risk indicator of CCE/CSE, and where there are linked concerns to a child going missing and also being at risk of exploitation it is very important that all possible actions are taken to safeguard and support the child, and that the risks are fully considered in all aspects of planning and support. In these cases **Strategy Meetings** and Risk Management Meetings are particularly crucial to ensure that all relevant information is shared and acted upon and that actions to investigate crime, disrupt activity, and support the young person are being progressed. Please see **NEL Adolescent Risk Strategy** for more information.

Information will also be shared between the Missing Coordinator and Exploitation Lead. 'Mapping' of young people's family, friends, wider associates and the locations that they visit

is also crucial to protecting young people. This should be completed and updated regularly. Completed ecomaps should also be shared with the Exploitation Lead.

National Referral Mechanism, if there are concerns that the child's missing episodes are linked to criminal or sexual exploitation. A referral to the Single Competent Authority (SCA) will need to be made. The Exploitation Lead will be able to assist in making the referral and will quality assure this.

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Contact details

If you believe a child is at immediate risk this should be reported without delay to the Police; for emergencies ring 999.

Contact should be made via the main switchboard number as follows 101 The missing person's officer can be reached on 01724 241711 (Ext: 1711)

The details for contacting children and family services are:

Children Assessment Safeguarding Service 01472 326292 – option 2

MASH 01472 326292 option 2

Through Care Service 01472 325232

YPSS 01472 325252

