Protocol for Young Runaways and Missing Children and Young People

This protocol is designed to ensure effective multi-agency practice in Wandsworth to respond to the needs of children and young people who go missing and may be at risk as a result of being absent from home or their normal residence

JUNE 2015
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1 Introduction and Background

Going missing is a dangerous activity. A child/young person who goes missing just once faces the same immediate risks as faced by a child/young person who regularly goes missing. However, children who go missing when they are young (and/or more frequently) are more likely to face longer-term problems.

The following protocol has been created to provide a joined up multi-agency response to children and young people who are missing or have gone missing from home or care.

Research has shown that:

- Over 70,000 children aged 14 and 15 run away overnight in England each year. From this, we estimate that 100,000 children and young people under the age of 16 run away in the UK each year. These numbers have not changed over the last decade.
- Family conflict and change in family structure are significant factors in children’s decisions to run away.
- A quarter of children who run away are at high risk of harm, as they may be hurt or harmed, sleep rough or beg and steal to survive.
- Most children are not known to professional agencies while away from home. Fewer than 30% are reported as missing to the police by their parents and guardians.
- Only a small minority (5%) will seek professional help while they are away – either because they do not know what is available for them, or they are worried about the consequences of asking for help.\(^1\)

Why children go missing

The Children’s Society, through its research, has identified the following risk factors that can precede a missing incident:

- Arguments and conflicts
- Poor family relationships
- Physical and emotional abuse – domestic violence/abuse
- Step-parent issues
- Boundaries and control

The Early Help Assessment using Signs of Safety and Wellbeing is key to assisting agencies to identify and respond effectively to these risk factors where going missing should be seriously considered as a possible outcome, and appropriate support put in place to prevent any potential missing incidents.

Although in many cases young people who go missing from home are already known to agencies and in receipt of support before they run away, all agencies need to be able to recognise and respond to risk factors that could lead to missing incidents.

The immediate risks associated with going missing include:

- No means of support or legitimate income – leading to high risk activities
- Involvement in criminal activities
- Victim of abuse
- Victim of crime, for example through sexual assault and exploitation
- Alcohol/substance misuse
- Deterioration of physical and mental health
- Missing out on schooling and education
- Increased vulnerability

\(^1\) Still Running III, 2011, The Children’s Society
Longer-term risks include:
- Long-term drug dependency/alcohol dependency
- Crime
- Homelessness
- Disengagement from education
- Child sexual exploitation
- Poor physical and/or mental health

All professionals involved in this field should make themselves aware and understand the most common reasons young people go missing so that they are able to recognise relevant signs at an early stage.

**Principles**

Any missing episode is potentially serious, one runaway is one too many. Therefore prevention work relating to children going missing is of paramount importance. The prevention of children and young people going missing requires an integrated multi-agency approach to vulnerable children and young people.

Existing prevention strategies will need to include the prevention of children going missing from home and care and will include:
- Awareness and training for all professionals
- Awareness and safety sessions for young people via curriculum opportunities
- Multi-agency assessment procedures, including Early Help Assessment (EHA), should include the risk indicators for running away
- Consistent implementation of this protocol across all agencies
- Monitoring and reporting of missing from home and care incidents
- Every individual has a duty to inform the authorities if a child/young person is missing

The most effective interventions are best achieved by partnership working, information sharing, problem solving and performance management.

**2 Scope**

This protocol embraces a number of areas in which children and young people may be at risk as a result of being absent from their family home or normal residence. The protocol is designed for:
- Children and young people missing from their family home
- Children and young people missing from care
- Children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking
- Young people who may be vulnerable, single and homeless
- Children who go missing from education

The principles agreed by the agencies supporting this protocol apply to all children and young people who have run away from their family home or care and include:
- The importance of available advice and support to young people who may be experiencing personal difficulties at home/care or school.
- Efficient and accurate recording by the police of reports of children and young people who have run away from home or care.
- Support to parents and carers during the period the child/young person is missing.
Efficient and sensitive independent return interview offered/made available to the child/young person once they return home.

Inter-agency working to ensure effective and cohesive support is offered where necessary.

3 Definitions

The following definitions apply to this protocol and relate to children and young people under 18 years old who go or have gone missing. The definitions of running away is taken from the SEU Young Runaways report (2002) and includes reference to young people who self-define running away as being forced to leave because, for example, they do not believe they have any alternative.

**Missing Person**

Anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well being, or otherwise, established.²

**Runaway**

A child/young person, who is absent from their home or placement without permission for any length of time where their age and experience, background and ability make this a concern or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers.

**Looked After**

A child/young person is looked after by a local authority if they are “in care” by reason of a court order, or if they are provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by agreement with their parents or with the child/young person if they are aged 16 or more.

**Accommodated**

A child/young person is accommodated if the local authority looks after him/her with the voluntary agreement of their parents, or with the child/young person if they are over 16 years old; or if they are accommodated under an interim or full care order.

**Child**

A child/young person under the age of 18 years.

**Unauthorised Absence**

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 for a short period and then return, often their whereabouts are known or may be quickly established through contact with family or friends or are unknown but the children are not considered at risk. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed as a boundary testing activity which is well within the range of normal teenage behaviour. These children have taken an unauthorised absence and would not usually come within the definition of missing for this procedure. Unauthorised absences must be carefully monitored as the child/young person may subsequently be considered as missing. The London Child Protection Procedure (LCPP) gives a time span of 48 hours for an unauthorised absence as long as it is subject to ongoing risk assessment, after which they would be deemed missing.

² ACPO, 2010
Absconded

When a child/young person has gone missing who is subject to legal orders such as secure orders. Police must be made aware of the order under which the child/young person has been placed in the residence and the expiry date of the order for the child/young person to be classified as an absconder. If the expiry date of the order is not known, the child/young person will be classified as a "missing person" NOT an absconder.

Children Missing from School

Children who are missing from school may also be missing from care or home and be at risk. Education staff should follow the London Guidance on Safeguarding Children Missing from School (LCPP). If a member of education staff becomes aware that a child/young person may be missing, they should try to establish with the parents or carers, what has happened. If this is not possible, or the child/young person is missing, the Designated Safeguarding Children Teacher should, together with the class teacher, assess the child/young person's vulnerability, as per the Guidance on Safeguarding Children Missing from School (LCPP). Based on the assessment they may complete the Police Referral Form (see above for the definition of missing). If it comes to the notice of a member of education staff that a child/young person who was missing, has returned, that member of staff should establish whether police or children’s social care were involved in returning the child/young person to their home and if not, inform police and/or children's social care. Children who go missing frequently place themselves at risk and the child/young person's safety must be prioritised over any requests to keep information confidential.

Trafficked Children and 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. (See Safeguarding Trafficked and Exploited Children, LCPC 2015 and Safeguarding Children Abused through Sexual Exploitation, LCPC 2015).

The local authority, police and other agency response to an asylum-seeking child/young person going missing should be exactly the same as for all other children, whether they are looked after or living in the community.

Children and Young People at Risk of Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation incorporates sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Sexual exploitation of children and young people can take many forms, from a seemingly consensual relationship where sex is exchanged for gifts, money, accommodation or affection, to serious, organised crime and child trafficking. In all cases those exploiting the child/young person always hold some kind of power over the victim. As a result of being sexually exploited children and young people should be treated as victims of sexual abuse and suffering significant harm.

The London Child Protection Procedures

The London Child Protection Procedures (LCPP) provides information which may help staff to recognise and/or manage circumstances in which children who are missing may be experiencing harm or be at risk of harm). There are also several supplementary procedures focussed on specific issues, such as

- Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home
- Safeguarding Children Missing from School
- Safeguarding Trafficked and Exploited Children
- Safeguarding Children Abused through Sexual Exploitation

These, and the London procedures can be accessed on the website: www.londoncp.co.uk
4 What to do when a Child/Young Person goes Missing from Home

Responsibility to report: parents/carers, agencies and voluntary sector

Parents and carers are expected to undertake the following basic measures to try and locate their child/young person if considered safe to do so:

- Search bedroom/house/outbuildings/vehicles
- Contact known friends and relatives where child/young person may be
- Visit locations that the child/young person is known to frequent, if it is safe to do so.

All children who go missing from home should be reported to the police. Children and young people who go missing under the age of 16 are not legally considered as being able to live independently away from home. For children and young people over the age of 16, consideration should be given to their physical and emotional needs when making a judgment as to whether they can live independently away from home.

If a child goes missing from home who is subject to a child protection plan, a strategy meeting must be arranged within 7 days if the child or young person has not returned home during this time.

See quick reference guide 1 (over the page)
5 What to do when a Child/Young Person goes Missing from Care

This protocol requires all care providers, both local authority and private sector, to inform the local police of any new children's homes being established within borough boundaries prior to the placement therein of any children and young people. This will enable local policing procedures/policies to be prepared should children subsequently be reported missing from such an address.

Responsibility to report

When a child/young person goes missing from care it is expected that their carer(s) will act in their capacity as a 'good parent'. This means that:

- When a child/young person is reported missing, the local authority and the police have a joint responsibility for protecting the wellbeing of the individual.
- The act of reporting a child/young person missing to the police does not absolve the carers from their duty of care to the individual, and carers must take proactive steps to trace the child/young person's whereabouts.
- Children/young people must not be reported missing as a behaviour management tool.

Every reasonable effort will be made to locate the child/young person prior to them being reported to the police and throughout the length of the enquiry. This should include local searches, and making early contact with family and friends to establish their location where possible, unless this puts themselves or others at risk.

If there is suspected risk of harm to the child the carer/s should liaise immediately with the police.

Following initial discussions between the allocated children's social care worker and the police, they should agree an immediate strategy for locating the child and an action plan. This to include a range of actions to locate and ensure the safe return of the child, including:

- Arrangements for attempts to be made to contact the child on a daily basis by, for example, calling their mobile phone or the phones of friends or relatives that they may be with;
- The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) should also try and contact the child;
- Visiting their parents' address/es and of any friends or relatives with whom they may be staying;
- Police should consider requesting a trace on the child's mobile phone and/or oyster card.

Within 3 days, a missing from care meeting/telephone discussion between relevant parties should take place and include the police, the child's social worker and the provider. The action plan and risk assessment should be reviewed and updated.

- Missing from care meetings/discussions should be held at least monthly to update the action plan and share information;
- The Assistant Director should be notified within 3 days of the child going missing. They will notify the Lead Member and Corporate Parenting Board within 7 days of the child going missing;
- The authority responsible for the child should ensure that plans are in place to respond promptly once the child is found and for determining if the placement remains appropriate.
Quick reference guide 1:
Child/young people missing from home process flowchart

**Identify child/young person is missing**
Parents/carer/responsible adult identify time by which the child/young person should be at the address. Parents/carer/responsible adult should make enquiries to locate the missing child/young person with relatives/friends. This should include searches of the residence and local area if the child/young person is not located.

**Report to police**
Parents/carer/responsible adult should telephone police with details of the missing person. Details required: child/young person’s name/DOB/where, when and who missing with/what child/young person was last wearing/description of child/young person/recent photo/medical history/time and location last seen/circumstances of going missing/details of friends and associates.

**Officers conduct a risk-assessment forming the basis for resulting proportionate actions**
Enquiries are then on-going. Sharing of information between the police, parents and other agencies as appropriate.

**If a child goes missing from home who is subject to a child protection plan, a strategy meeting must be arranged within 7 days If the child or young person has not returned home during this time.**

**Young person is located or returns to home address**
When a missing child/young person is located by family or friends etc., it is their responsibility to return the child/young person to the home address. Where a risk is present, a police officer may accompany the family or the police may be requested to collect and return the child/young person to the place of residence only if it is safe to do so. Parents must inform the police when a child/young person returns of their own accord.

**The police should conduct an interview known as a safe and well check to establish the child/young person’s wellbeing and safety, and to establish whether they were the victim of crime or abuse whilst missing.**
If warranted, police should refer child/young person to children’s services via normal safeguarding channels.

**Children’s services or runaway/missing person service to carry out a return interview and assessment of need**
Information established from interview to support assessment of need, to be carried out using the Early Help Assessment (EHA) (check whether Early Help Assessment already exists.) Lead professional to be appointed.

**Young person offered relevant support by either statutory or voluntary services depending on what is available in the local area, (EHA) to be updated regularly. In some cases, specialist assessment may be required should it appear that the child/young person has complex needs.**
Child/young person in care missing/absent on external activity

If a child/young person goes missing during an external activity arranged by the residential home (or in a similar situation), the person in charge of the activity will:

- Notify the local police in that area
- Notify a senior manager at the residential home
- Institute a local search if staffing levels permit
- The manager of the home and the person in charge of the party will decide within 24 hours of the absence whether the party should return to the home
- Ongoing communication regarding the missing child/young person will be maintained between the home and the local police where the absence occurred
- For children in foster care, the foster parent should immediately contact the child/young person’s social worker or team manager or the emergency duty team who will notify the local police

The senior manager at the residential home will be responsible for ensuring that the general procedures in relation to a missing child/young person are followed i.e.:

- Notify the child/young person’s parents, if the child/young person is a looked after child
- Notify the social worker with case worker responsibility for the child/young person, if there is one and
- Notify the social services emergency duty team for any local authority which holds case responsibility for the child/young person

Parents/Carers and those with Parental Responsibility

Parents and any other persons with parental responsibility (PR) must be informed as soon as possible that their child/young person is missing, unless there are good reasons connected with the child/young person’s welfare for this to be inappropriate. At the point where the responsible authority is informed, agreement must be reached as to which professional will be responsible for informing the child/young person’s parents/persons with PR – this will usually be the child/young person’s social worker. A record must be made as to when parents have been informed and what information has been given to them.

See quick reference guide 2 (over the page)
**Quick reference guide 2:**
**Child/young people missing from care process flowchart**

**Missing**

Residential staff/foster carers should make enquiries to locate the missing person with relatives/friends. This should include searches of the accommodation and local area.

- Foster carer then telephones police with details of the missing person.
- Residential staff e-mail the reporting forms to the police control room and follow up with a phone call as per local agreement.

Details required:
- Child/young person’s name
- DOB
- Where, when, who missing with?
- What child/young person was last wearing
- Description of child/young person
- Recent photo
- Medical history
- Legal status

All efforts to locate the child/young person must be recorded and auditable.

**Police**

- Officers to perform a risk assessment which will form the basis for the resulting proportionate actions.
- Sharing of information between the police, parents and other agencies as appropriate.

**LA risk assessment**

- Registered manager of children’s home or fostering services to be informed as soon as possible.
- Foster carer/residential staff to notify social worker/team manager.

**Action required by LA**

- Within 3 days, a missing from care meeting/telephone discussion should take place. The action plan and risk assessment should be reviewed and updated.
  - The Assistant Director should be notified within 3 days of the child going missing.
  - They will notify the Lead Member and Corporate Parenting Board within 7 days of the child going missing;
  - Missing from care meetings/discussions should be held at least monthly to update the action plan and share information;

**Parents to be informed as agreed.**

**Young person is located or returns to the residence**

- When a missing child/young person is located, it is the responsibility of residential staff or foster carers to collect the child/young person in the first instance, unless the circumstances pose a risk to them. Where a risk is present, a police officer may be requested to accompany them, or the police may be requested to collect and return the child/young person to the place of residence.

- The police will conduct a safe and well check to establish the missing person’s wellbeing, and to establish whether they were the victim of crime or abuse whilst missing.

**Foster carer/residential staff to:**
- provide positive non-judgemental return
- check child/young person’s medical condition and make necessary arrangements

Placement staff to inform the social worker and team manager of the young person’s return.

**Arrangements for return interview to be agreed in consultation with the child/young person.**

**Care plan to be updated.**

**Consider whether to:**
- convene a multi-agency strategy meeting
- arrange an early looked-after child/young person review
- review any prevention/support work currently being undertaken with the child/young person
6 Reporting and Responding to Risk

When it is discovered that a child/young person has left their placement without permission, staff will consider the child/young person’s individual level of risk in deciding whether the child/young person is an “unauthorised absent” or “missing” as defined by these procedures. In cases of doubt the home manager or manager on call will be consulted.

The fact that the child/young person may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk. In fact, children who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Furthermore, short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.

However, at some point, depending upon the child/young person and the circumstances, the child/young person's absence will give rise to justifiable concern and require a formal missing person report to the police. Whilst there can be no substitute for a considered judgement, based on a sound assessment of the child/young person and the circumstances, it is the purpose of this framework to assist carers to structure their thinking with regard to the two categories of absence.

**Missing from home/care notification form**

It is important to assess the level of risk for individual young people. Staff/carers need to be clear what the risks are for the particular child/young person and/or the risks they pose for the public.

When a child/young person goes missing from a foster home or care, the local authority will decide upon which category of absence applies to the child/young person. Staff will use the missing from care notification form.

Consideration should be given to the following in terms of inquiries when considering missing children:

- Areas where drugs are available
- Locations and networks that certain adults frequent
- Country of origin or country children are trafficked on to
- Type of specialist knowledge that might be needed
- The supervision that may be required
- Agencies who may be first alerted e.g. local accident & emergency services

**Aid for information sharing and recording**

At the time that a child/young person goes ‘missing’ the completed notification should be shared with all agencies working with the child/young person and kept on the child/young person’s file in each agency. In cases where new information becomes available and/or the child/young person remains absent for a protracted period, the risks should be reassessed, led by the agency which has current or most recent responsibility for the child/young person. The new notification should be shared with the agencies and kept on the child/young person’s file in each agency. The most recently completed notification should remain on the child/young person’s file in all agencies working with the child/young person.

**Reporting**

The decision to report a child/young person as missing should not be taken in isolation, staff should consult with the senior staff member on duty and foster carers should liaise with the child/young person’s social worker or emergency duty team staff. The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances taken into account. If the child/young person is receiving support from CAMHS professionals, educational psychologists and so on, it may be advisable to discuss the case with them. However, if they are
not readily available a decision must be made on the basis of the best available information. In cases of
doubt it may also be appropriate to discuss the case with a local police supervisor.

Each case must be decided on merit and a formal missing person report to the police may be actioned
earlier in some circumstances than in others. For a small number of young people, it may be appropriate to
immediately report them as a missing person. Normally this will have been previously agreed as part of the
care plan because of the child/young person’s vulnerability.

If the absence is considered to fall within these procedures the relevant staff member, i.e. child/young
person's social worker, duty social worker, emergency duty team social worker, residential care worker, will
as soon as practical inform:

- the child/young person’s parents and those with parental responsibility
- the police

**Risk assessments**

Research shows that children looked after by the local authority are over-represented in the cohort of
children who go missing. Prior to placement of a child/young person, children's social care staff (placing
social workers, residential workers and foster carers) must consider within the care planning process all
potential risks to the child/young person, including an assessment of the potential for them to go missing.
The child/young person and their parent/carer (if appropriate) should be involved in the assessment and
planning process. Missing episodes prior to the becoming “looked after” need to be taken into account
during the assessment and care planning stages.

Consideration will need to be given to:

- The degree and level of risk for the child should they go missing
- Child's view on current placement/stability of their relationship at home
- The level of supervision/support offered to the child and the actions to be taken by the foster or
  residential carer, based on the risk assessment, which can be taken to prevent a child/young person
  running away
- The parent, guardians or social worker's advice (where appropriate) on what action they feel should be
taken if the child/young person goes missing
- Any known addresses that the child/young person may frequent
- Any adults known or involved where the child/young person may be at risk
- Any peer networks/behaviours where the child/young person may be at risk

This information should be reviewed and revised, as appropriate, at placement reviews and looked
after reviews.

All information should be included in the placement plan and in the child/young person’s care plan. As part
of this assessment it may be appropriate for children's social care to consult with the police to share
information that may be of relevance. Where there is a high risk of a child/young person going missing, it is
good practice for residential unit staff/foster carers to complete a ‘missing from care and home –
assessment and plan’, containing the information the police and other agencies will need to locate the
child/young person if they do go missing. This form should always be provided to the police at the time of
reporting a looked after child/young person as missing.

Whoever discovers that a child/young person is absent without permission from a residential unit, semi-
independent accommodation or foster home should immediately inform the residential unit manager/shift
leader, supervising social worker on duty or the emergency duty team.

If the child/young person has gone missing from foster care and a missing from home risk assessment has
not been completed in advance, then the foster carer must contact the child/young person’s social
worker/duty social worker or emergency duty team (if it is out of hours), who will assist completion of the
missing from home/care notification form and advise on reporting the child/young person to the police.
Responding

Where, initially, the decision was made that this absence does not fall within this procedure (i.e. an unauthorised absence) this decision will be reviewed every hour throughout the period of unauthorised absence (up to a maximum of six hours) if the child/young person does not return or their whereabouts are not known.

If such a period of absence continues for six hours it will automatically be considered to fall within these procedures. This is the maximum period, and in most situations much shorter periods will be appropriate. If during a period of unauthorised absence the person who reported the child/young person as missing becomes aware of the location of the missing person, they should make every effort to have the missing person return to the place of residence without police involvement, unless there are safety issues, in which case a report should be made to the police.

If the child/young person is subject to a care order, and refuses to return voluntarily to their placement, then police assistance may be requested. If the child/young person is “accommodated”, then a risk assessment is to be undertaken in consultation with the local authority children’s social care, and if police attendance is warranted, the use of a police protection is to be considered if there is an immediate risk present. The use of powers of police protection should be jointly considered by police and children’s social care. If the missing person is in no immediate risk, the police should liaise with the carers/children’s social care regarding any further action.

Whilst reporting to the police of the absence of a child/young person is an essential part of the overall process, having done so does not absolve carers of their corporate parenting responsibilities for the child/young person, and such carers should take all necessary actions to attempt to locate the missing person. This would include where possible:

• Searching the missing person’s room within the residence
• Immediate searches of the local area
• Making contact with the missing person’s family and friends to establish if the missing person is with them, or has been seen since by them, since the time that the person was identified as being absent.

7 When the Missing Child/Young Person is Found/Returns Home or to Care

It will be necessary to consider when the child is located:

• Will the child/young person return to the previous placement/home address?
• How will they be conveyed there?
• Do the police wish to interview the child/young person before they are returned to the placement?
• Who will be an appropriate independent person to talk to the child/young person when they are located/return?
• Children who have repeated ‘unauthorised’ absences should also be offered an independent person to talk to. Consider activating this when a set number of absconsions are exceeded in a given period, such as three occasions in 28 days.

If there are concerns of safety or public order difficulties, the police will assist in the recovery and return of a child/young person. Otherwise, the child/young person’s staff/carers should make arrangements for their return.

Detention in a police station overnight shall not be regarded as a satisfactory arrangement.

The police will conduct a “safe and well” check for ALL children reported missing.
Parents and carers must be immediately informed that the child/young person has been found. When the child/young person is located by agencies other than the police, or returns to their home address, the attending adult (parent/guardian/carer) is to notify the police of the child/young person's return (and location) without delay.

The locating agency will remind the child/young person and the parent/carer that they will be spoken to by the police, the purpose of this interview being to confirm their wellbeing, and to discover whether they have been the victim of any crimes whilst missing.

The locating agency should ensure that on the child/young person's return, their medical condition is discussed with the child/young person and their parents/carers immediately, and an offer made to arrange medical attention if necessary. A medical examination would be particularly beneficial for very young children and those with communication difficulties.

If any information is gathered during the course of enquiries which indicates a child/young person is at risk on their return home, the police and children's social care must be informed immediately, so that they may take appropriate action.

A risk assessment should be carried out by police (and social worker) to ensure that it is safe for the child/young person to return to their placement/parental home. In order to help prevent further runaway episodes and after careful consideration of the individual child/young person's issues, a restorative justice approach may be adopted and a family meeting convened. This has proved particularly effective for children missing from home.

Children and young people in care

In all cases the social worker must visit and meet with the child/young person alone within 72 hours of their return. Where this is not possible, e.g. the child/young person is placed at a distance from Wandsworth or the social worker is not available, a team manager may agree that the child/young person is interviewed at a later date, or by an alternative person. The arrangement and reasons for this must be fully recorded. The social worker will ask the child/young person if they wish to speak to an independent person of their choice, this could be a teacher, school nurse, Connexions, youth or YOT worker, a voluntary sector practitioner or a police officer whom the child/young person knows and trusts. If the social worker is not available it is the responsibility of the team manager to arrange the visit. In all cases consideration will be given to the need to convene a strategy meeting. A record of the independent return interview should be made using the appropriate local form provided.

8 Individual Needs & Risk Assessment

Where an individual needs assessment (usually carried out using the Early Help Assessment or identified using the independent return interview proforma) indicates the child/young person may be at risk of harm, a referral should be made to children's social care. An evaluation of whether the child/young person is likely to run away from home in the future will be one of the factors that informs the level of risk posed to the child/young person, and the decision as to whether a referral to children's social care is appropriate. The assessment of whether a child/young person might run away again should be based on information about their:

- individual circumstances, including family circumstances in which the child/young person has gone missing;
- motivation for running;
- possible destination;
- recent pattern of absences (if any).
When young people missing from home are located but have not been reported missing to the police by their families, further investigation might be warranted. It may be necessary to inquire into whether there are any continuing safeguarding concerns, or whether the child/young person and their family should be offered family support services.

Consideration should be given to carrying out a new assessment every time a child/young person runs away. Repeat runaways should be viewed with as much concern as children who run away for the first time. The persistence of this behaviour would suggest at least that the action following from earlier assessments should be reviewed and alternative options considered.

Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care:
https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/missingchildren

9 Police Role & Responsibility

Interviewing a child/young person on their return from a missing episode is necessary to understand why the person went missing or ran away in the first place. There are two stages to the process, the Safe and Well Check and the Independent Return Interview. These are known by a variety of names, but for the purpose of this guidance and to achieve some standardisation, will be referred to as such.

Notifying the police

The police should be notified as soon as possible. The police will conduct an investigation into all reports of ‘missing’ children.

Working with the police

Police are the lead agency for the investigation of missing children. If the child/young person 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/young person is reported missing to the police.

Relevant agencies must provide sufficient information to the police to enable all the risk factors to be considered. Following this a full investigation should be conducted by the police.

Until such time as a child/young person is no longer missing, regular liaison and communication should take place between the police and referring/involved agencies, including the social worker and management of the placing authority, for a looked after child.

See quick reference guide 3 (over the page)

Police safe and well check

This is carried out by the police as soon as possible after the person has returned. Its purpose is to check for any indications that the child/young person has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them.

Where a person goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable to see them every time they return. In these cases, a reasonable decision should be taken with regard to the frequency of such checks. This will mainly apply to young people missing from care who are likely to have other people responsible for their welfare to check this. Every effort should be made to visit those young people missing from home on every occasion.
Quick reference guide 3:
Police initial investigation flowchart

Subject identified as not being present – is the subject missing/unauthorised absent?

NO

Subject listed as “unauthorised absent”
Delay for period agreed specifically for this individual (not exceeding six hours).

YES

After agreed delay period (not exceeding six hours) subject must be classified as missing.

YES

Report subject missing to the police, quoting subject’s MP reference number, if known.

Call received. CAD incident log number created.
As soon as the missing person is reported as missing on the CAD system officers are requested to attend the address, search it, and complete a missing person report.

Criminal Records Bureau
Missing person is circulated nationally within 60 minutes of the initial call being received.

Officer attends the scene, searches it, obtains details for the missing person report and conducts local enquiries. If there is still no trace of the missing person officer returns to the station and circulates details of the missing person to the Criminal Records Bureau, who fully circulate the missing person nationally on the PNC system and also obtains a photograph of the missing person. The officer and his/her supervisor also agree a risk assessment.

Low risk
Consider some or all of the following actions:
1. Contact family and friends
2. Review previous missing history
3. Check medical/mental state
4. Attempt to contact the missing person via his/her mobile phone
5. Search local parks and places known to be frequented
6. Check all local hospitals
7. Check local custody records
8. Inform CCTV operators
9. Inform PNMPB after seven days
10. Check school
11. Identify habits & hobbies
12. Check banks and access to money
13. Inform Missing People charity after 14 days

Medium risk
In addition to those listed for low risk, consider some or all of the following actions:
1. Consider DWP checks
2. Inform Missing People charity after 72 hours
3. Consider obtaining items for DNA/fingerprint identification
4. Consider use of Search Managers
5. Consider use of certain ‘golden hour’ tasks
6. Consider a press strategy

High risk
In addition to those listed for low and medium risk, consider some or all of the following actions:
1. Notify CID immediately
2. Notify relevant managers
3. Consider use of mountain rescue teams
4. Consider use of underwater search teams
5. Inform Missing People charity after four hours
6. Consider ALL golden hour tasks
7. Consider child rescue alert
8. Consider pinging mobile phone
9. Immediate press release and adopt a press strategy
Independent return interview

This is a more in-depth interview and is usually best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews, and is able to follow up any actions that emerge. Many young people who run away or go missing need to build up trust with somebody before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they decided to run away. The role will be shared between professionals from different agencies and the process for ensuring this happens is detailed in Independent Return Interview Guidance for Professionals (Appendix 2). The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- identify and deal with any harm the child/young person has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check (their medical condition should be discussed and any need for medical attention assessed).
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child/young person ran away.
- try to prevent it happening again.

It is good practice that this interview takes place within 72 hours of the child/young person being located or returning from absence. It is especially important that an independent Return Interview takes place when a child/young person:

- has been missing for over 24 hours;
- has been missing on two or more occasions;
- has engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
- has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case);
- has known mental health issues;
- is at known risk of sexual exploitation;
- has contact with persons posing risk to children.

Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care:
https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/missingchildren

10 Information Sharing

Each local authority should have a named person with responsibility for missing children within children’s services. The named person must be informed of all children who go missing and will record the details on the social care client database. In Wandsworth the named person is Michele Harris.

Managers of children’s residential units are expected to maintain records of each occasion when a looked after child is identified and ‘missing’ or having taken ‘unauthorised absence’. These records should be made available for inspection under the Children Act 1989. Foster carers should record similar information.

Partner agencies should receive information from each other on the basis of their need to know and take action to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child/young person. The Children and Young People who Go Missing from Care and Home sub-group will meet on a bi-monthly basis to monitor the effectiveness of this procedure and exchange and analyse information. There should be regular reports on children who go missing to the senior management, elected members, trustees and/or governors of all partner agencies.
11 Publicity/Media Strategy (home and care)

It is the responsibility of the police to advise the media regarding any missing child/young person. Whether the child/young person is missing from public sector or private care providers, the decision to publicise by press and/or television will always be made in consultation with the child/young person's social worker and the assistant director, children’s social care, however the Metropolitan Police reserve the right to publicise the child/young person if there are serious concerns for the welfare of that child/young person.

Such publicity will be arranged at local level, by direction of the borough commander (or nominee). Prior to any publicity the child/young person’s social worker will be informed in order to allow the parents to be informed.

Additionally, the police will automatically inform the “Missing People” charity of all high-risk missing persons within four hours of them being reported; medium-risk missing persons within 72 hours of them being reported; and low-risk missing persons within 14 days of them being reported.

The police may also utilise the website facility of the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (www.missingkids.co.uk) to publicise the child/young person.

Photographs

Should a child/young person go missing it is vital to the safe recovery of the child/young person that a recent photograph of the child/young person is made available. The photograph must be a good likeness of the child/young person, and the date the photograph was taken should be endorsed on the back of it to identify its relevance to the enquiry. The photograph will be used by the police to help them identify the child/young person whilst conducting enquiries. In very serious cases, where the child/young person is believed to be at severe risk, the police and local authority may decide to use the photograph more widely, including publishing the photograph to national or local media, and circulation on the police/ICMEC website. (www.missingkids.co.uk)

On admission to care, the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation. If possible the consent of the child/young person should be gained.

The children’s home manager/foster carer should consider the most appropriate ways to meet the above requirements and should ensure that the child/young person is made aware of what will happen if they go missing, including their right to be interviewed by an independent person on or prior to their return, and be given a choice as to who that may be. They should be given information leaflets and contact details of advocacy services/other services that they can access or that can be accessed on their behalf.

12 Important Services and Helplines

In an emergency call the police on telephone number 999.

Metropolitan Police – non-emergency number: 0300 123 1212.

Children’s Social Care

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
Telephone: (020) 8871 6622
Fax: (020) 8871 6333
Email: mash@wandsworth.gov.uk
Address: 2nd Floor, Town Hall Extension
Wandsworth High Street
London SW18 2PS

Outside of normal office hours (after 5pm weekdays or on weekends): (020) 8871 6000.
**Missing from Care Helpline** provides publicity to help trace missing children and young people, a network of street workers and advice and support from case managers.

- **Freephone:** 0500 700 700 (from the UK)
- **Telephone:** +44 20 8392 4527 (outside the UK)
- **Email:** mfc@missingpersons.org
- **Website:** www.missingpersons.org

**Other useful contacts**

**Local Authority Named Lead for Missing Children & CSE**
Michele Harris  
Head of Family Recovery Project  
4th Floor, Town Hall Extension  
Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 2PS  
- **Telephone:** (020) 8871 5268  
- **Email:** mharris@wandsworth.gov.uk

**Education Welfare Service (EWS)**  
4th Floor, Town Hall Extension  
Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 2PS  
- **Telephone:** (020) 8871 8306  
- **Email:** eenquiries@wandsworth.gov.uk

**Youth Support Service**  
Matt Comins  
Head of Service  
Town Hall  
Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 2PU  
- **Telephone:** (020) 8871 8112  
- **Email:** mcomins@wandsworth.gov.uk

**Housing**  
Homeless Persons Unit  
17-27 Garratt Lane  
London SW18 4AE  
- **Telephone:** (020) 8871 7830  
- **Email:** housingadvice@wandsworth.gov.uk
13 Monitoring and review of protocol
The Children and Young People who Go Missing from Care and Home sub-group
• meets at least quarterly.

Appendix 1: Children & Young People Missing from Home – Guidance

The following is guidance for duty staff on how to respond to young people who are ‘young runaways’.

In any case of a child who goes missing, the police are the lead agency to investigate the circumstances and seek to find the child/young person. The fact that a child or young person is missing should always be reported to the police.

Children under the age of 11 years who go missing from home cause particular concern, especially if they go missing repeatedly. The expectation is that their circumstances would be subject to investigation under Section 17 or more probably Section 47.

Children and young people over 11 years will need to be followed up as per these guidelines.

The Government has introduced new guidelines in dealing with children and young people who run away from home or care but this procedure is specifically to deal with those that run away from home. There is an established protocol for how to respond when young people who are looked after run away from their care placements. (DfE Statutory Guidance on Children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014)

A child or young person who runs away from home and returns voluntarily or is located and returned by the police must be provided with an ‘independent return interview’ outside the family home. This does not need to be undertaken by a social worker but can be a teacher or a professional from another agency that knows the young person, and taking the young person’s wishes into account where possible.

The independent return interview should be arranged as soon as possible to establish the reasons why the young person ran away and if there are any issues within the home situation that caused them to leave. It is important to have a clear procedure to ensure that all young people are offered this opportunity.

In practice, when a child/young person reported missing the police are the lead agency. The police undertake a welfare visit if the child/young person returns home or is located and returned home. The police then send a Merlin Report to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), Department of Education and Social Services, (DESS).

On receipt of the Merlin, the duty manager checks the history of running away from home and the details of the police report on the home situation and decides what further action is required.
The options would be as follows:

1. Children with an allocated social worker – information passed to allocated worker to follow up with young person and their family.

2. When CP/safeguarding concerns are being expressed by the child/young person to the police as the reason they are running away from home, then Section 47 CP process would be enacted. The independent return interview with the child is then conducted as part of the Section 47 enquiry.

3. When the history on Framework or the police reports indicate that there are concerns within the family (for example domestic violence, parental mental health or this is the third time the child/young person has run away from home) then an Initial Assessment would be undertaken. The independent return interview would be part of the initial assessment.

4. If there are no safeguarding or child in need concerns that necessitate a referral for assessment by Children’s Social Care (CSC), then a contact should be opened on Framework and the independent return interview will be undertaken by another agency (e.g. the EWS, if the child/young person is not attending school, the school or another agency known to the young person). To ensure that young people have access to an independent return interview, the initial contact worker contacts the relevant agency* to request the independent return interview is undertaken.

If a child/young person comes into reception and has run away from home due to family breakdown, the independent return interview is undertaken by the initial contact worker as part of the ‘referral on process’ to the youth support teams. This information should be passed to EWS/school when the child/young person is of school age.

If a child/young person remains missing, it is the responsibility of the duty worker to call a missing child meeting. The timescale will depend on the vulnerability factors relating to the particular child or young person, but must be held (at the latest) when the period missing reaches 14 days.

*EWS for those of statutory school age and CNXS/YST for those over school age
Appendix 2: Independent Return Interview Guidance for Professionals

Independent return interviews should be carried out by an ‘independent’ person (i.e. not the parent or main carer) who is able to build up trust with the child/young person and to follow up any actions that emerge.

The purpose of the return interview is to

- identify and deal with any harm the child/young person has suffered, including harm that may not have been disclosed by the child/young person at the police welfare check
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child/young person ran away
- try to prevent it happening again
- to ensure follow up of any emerging issues, including sharing of relevant information with other agencies, including police, as appropriate

Preparation for interview

- history/knowledge of child/young person
- clarity with child/young person re: boundaries (i.e. confidentiality etc.)

A risk assessment needs to be made taking into account

- the child/young person’s individual circumstances (including family circumstances)
- the motivation for running
- possible destination
- who else may be involved
- pattern of absences (if any)
- emotional presentation of the child/young person (e.g. anxious; nervous; angry; stressed; low affect; withdrawn)
- physical presentation of the child/young person
- level of vulnerability
- capacity to understand the risk they may be placing themselves in
- potential risk of sexual exploitation
- any health concerns

Possible areas to be explored with the child/young person are

- where they have been staying
- who were they with
- have they run away before
- how did they pay for things while away and how did they get access to money
- did anything happen at home/are there issues at home which made them want to run away
- did anything happen at school or in the community which made them want to run away
- were they safe while they were away
- were they a victim of crime while away e.g. have they been hurt/assaulted/stolen from
- what could be done to help them in their personal life to prevent them running away again