South Yorkshire Missing from Home and Care Protocol 2017

For review: June 2018
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1. Introduction

1.1. Going missing can be symptomatic or indicative of wider problems in a child’s life.

1.2. Children and young people do not have the same levels of awareness or ability to keep themselves safe. Many of the children and young people who go missing consider themselves to be “streetwise” and able to look after themselves. In fact, these children are often more likely to place themselves in positions of danger such as misusing substances; committing crime; becoming victims of sexual exploitation and child trafficking; and mixing with inappropriate adults.

1.3. Doncaster Children’s Trust, Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley Councils and South Yorkshire Police have a joint responsibility to respond to all incidents of children who go missing from home or care, and are committed to working together to safeguard all such children.

1.4. This protocol fulfils these organisations’ statutory duty to have a Missing from Home and Care protocol. It sets out:

- The roles and responsibilities of services, parents, families and carers
- How the risk to the child will be assessed
- What the response will be
- How information will be shared
- How repeat missing incidents will be prevented
- Additional arrangements for looked-after children.

1.5. Each area also has more specific procedures on how these roles are carried out with regard to their local structures. These are included in the appendices.

2. Glossary and definitions

2.1. There are a number of definitions across statutory guidance and protocols relating to children who go missing or are not where they are expected to be. These are simplified and set out below for easy reference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>A person who has not yet reached their eighteenth birthday. ‘Child’ should be taken to mean ‘child or young person’ throughout this guidance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Missing person

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. ([https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/](https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/))

### Looked-after child

A child who is looked after by a local authority by reason of a care order, or being accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

### Away from placement without authorisation

A looked-after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.

### Responsible authority

The local authority that is responsible for a looked-after child’s care and care planning. When the child is placed out of area, also known as the “home authority”, “originating authority” or “placing authority”.

### Host authority

The local authority into whose area a looked-after child is placed, if not in the responsible authority’s area. Also known as the “receiving authority”.

### Care leaver

Someone who has previously been a looked-after child for a period of time. Their entitlement to support depends on how long and how long ago this period was and their current circumstances.

### Hidden missing child

A child who is or has been missing, but has not been reported to the police.

### Before reporting a child missing

3.1. When a child appears to have gone missing, their family members or carers are expected to make all appropriate efforts to locate them and return them home, or at least establish that they are safe.

3.2. Specific guidance for foster carers and children’s home staff is set out in the appendices.

3.3. The child only needs to be reported missing to the police if their whereabouts cannot be established.

3.4. If the whereabouts of a looked after child is known and there is concern that they are at risk or may pose a risk to others then a joint strategy should be agreed between the responsible authority’s children’s services and South Yorkshire Police.
4. **Who needs to know when a child goes missing**

4.1. Where a child is missing it should always be reported to the police.

4.2. Police reports should be made by dialling 101 and asking to report a missing child.

4.3. When a missing child is reported to the police, this is automatically notified to the host children’s services via a system email. The host authority should then notify the home local authority.

4.4. Pro-active reporting should also be encouraged in areas where it is known that children are less likely to be reported as missing. Examples are children from black and ethnic minority groups, children who go missing from education, and trafficked children.

4.5. When a looked-after child goes missing, their carers should report this to the police in the area in which they live and the responsible authority. If relevant, the responsible authority will inform the host authority in whose area the child lives; and, if appropriate, the child’s parents and anyone else with parental responsibility. If the host authority is made aware of a missing young person in their area by the police they should ensure the responsible authority is notified.

5. **During the missing episode**

5.1. **Assessing and categorising risk**

5.1.1. The 101 call handler asks the following questions of the person making the report of a missing child.

- Has this person previously been missing?
- What is the specific concern in this instance?
- Is this behaviour out of character?
- Is this person vulnerable for any reason?
- Does this person have any physical illness, disability or mental health problems?
- Does this person require any essential medication / medical treatment?
- Does the person pose a risk to themselves or others?
- Is there any history of self-harm or suicide?
- Is the person suspected to be the victim of a crime?
- Are they currently known to the sexual exploitation service?
- Is the person a victim or a perpetrator of domestic abuse?
- Does the person take drugs or alcohol?
5.1.2. The 101 call handler uses the totality of the information given in the initial report to assign a risk category.

College of Policing guidance states children can be categorised in one of four ways¹, though it is unlikely a missing child would ever be categorised as ‘no apparent risk’:

- **High risk**: “The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely”.
- **Medium risk**: “The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious”.
- **Low risk**: “The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal”.
- **No apparent risk (absent)**: “There is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public”.

5.1.3. It should be noted that, where a child is ‘wanted’ (e.g. for breach of bail or on warrant without bail), they still fall under this risk assessment process and will be categorised and responded to in the same way. ‘Missing’ status should not be removed due to the child being ‘wanted’.

5.1.4. The report is immediately passed to the relevant local policing team, where the Sergeant will check the public protection systems, consider local intelligence, and verify or change the risk category as required.

5.1.5. Risk assessments and categories are reviewed throughout the missing episode based on any new information. Ongoing missing child cases are also reviewed through the daily tasking process.

5.1.6. Risk assessments for missing children are reviewed every 8 hours. The frequency of review for children assessed as ‘No apparent risk’ is agreed with the reporter, but no more than 24 hours.

5.2. Sharing information

5.2.1. When a missing report is filed, the appropriate team in children’s services is automatically notified by email.

5.2.2. In addition, the South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigators share a daily list of missing children, including their risk category, with the local children’s services.

5.2.3. Each area has different provisions for collecting information held on the child and sharing it with the police to aid their investigation (see local procedures in appendices).

5.3. Responses

5.3.1. Police response is based on the assessed risk category. In brief:

- **Missing – high risk:** 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 and a police search advisor. There should be a press/media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be in place where appropriate. The Missing Person’s Bureau should be alerted without undue delay. Children’s services must also be notified immediately.

- **Missing – medium risk:** 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.

- **Missing – low risk:** Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.

- **No apparent risk (absent):** 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.

5.3.2. The South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigators monitor and evaluate all reports of missing children on the missing from home system, and review risk assessments. During a missing episode, they liaise with partner agencies and ensure the necessary information is shared.

5.3.3. Certain groups face specific risks if they go missing, such as children with learning difficulties who may have little understanding of their actions or the risks to them, previously trafficked children who may be at risk of returning to exploitation or children in care. Such factors are taken into account in the assessment of risk. For previously trafficked children, responses will include
liaising with the UK Borders Agency and referral to the National Referral Mechanism.

5.3.4. Managing a missing episode is not solely the responsibility of the police, and a multi-agency response should be presented. All agencies involved with the child and/or their family should be alerted to the fact that the child is missing, actively seeking to make contact, and sharing relevant information between them. This could include both children’s and adult social care, early or specialist intervention services, youth offending teams, educational establishments, children missing from education teams and health agencies.

5.3.5. NHS staff, on becoming aware that a child or family is missing, complete a form to ensure this is flagged on their patient records. This flag is then removed when the child or family is found. See the South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw missing children and families alert system in the appendices.

5.3.6. If a child is missing for 72 hours or more, or this is their third missing episode in 28 days, and/or there is felt to be a risk of significant harm, a multi-agency strategy meeting must be held (see 6.3.2 below). If the child is still missing, the strategy meeting will consider what plans need to be put in place for their return.

5.3.7. The South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigators act as a contact for the child’s family during the missing episode and can make referrals for them to other support services.

6. When a child returns

6.1. Police safe and well checks and notification of return

6.1.1. Local policing teams carry out a safe and well check as soon as possible upon the return of a child who was categorised as missing. Further information relating to safe and well checks can be found in the 2014 DfE statutory guidance: [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care)

6.1.2. This is to allow police to set eyes on the child and be sure they are physically safe. The police will record their demeanour, their physical state, any disclosures about where they have been and what they have done, and any other factors that may be relevant later. They will provide information about Independent Return Interviews and will also consider any forensic opportunities, such as the recovery of mobile phones.

6.1.3. These police officers input the information into the missing from home system in as much detail as possible.
6.1.4. The child’s return is then automatically notified to the relevant children’s services via a system email. Details from the police safe and well check are passed on in these notifications.

6.2. **Independent return interviews**

6.2.1. When a missing child is found, they must be offered an independent return interview. South Yorkshire Police pass details of missing children to the four Children’s Services for the purpose of carrying out these interviews.

6.2.2. There are occasions when an independent return interview is not appropriate; for example if, during the police return interview, the child has disclosed they have been the victim of an offence, or there is otherwise an ongoing police investigation which needs to make active progress. The South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigators scan the return notifications and let the relevant Children’s Services know as soon as possible where this applies.

6.2.3. The interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child’s return, by someone not involved in their care, who has the necessary training and skills to carry out such interviews and who is able to follow up any actions required. It should be held in a neutral place where the child feels safe.

6.2.4. Before carrying out the interview, the interviewer obtains as much information as possible about that child and their situation. This involves reviewing the circumstances of the latest missing episode; checking to see if the child has gone missing before; and making checks on relevant databases to see if they are known to services.

6.2.5. Each area has different provisions for carrying out the interviews and following up afterwards, but there is a common purpose, namely to understand and address the reasons for going missing; identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered; and to help the child understand their options as an alternative to going missing again. This information is be gathered through open, probing questions and recorded on a form (see appendices for local procedures and forms).

6.2.6. If the child declines the opportunity of an interview, or cannot be contacted despite persistent efforts, the allocated return interview officer can still record information they have gained through their attempts, such as conversations with parents/carers, the child’s appearance and demeanour etc. However, the source of and evidence for this information should be clear, and clearly distinguishable from the voice of the child.

6.2.7. In open social care cases, return interview forms are routinely shared with the South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigators and with any
professionals working with the child and/or their family, in order to reduce repeat missing episodes, subject to local protocols.

6.2.8. In other cases, essential safeguarding information gained from the interview must be shared, and the full return interview form is stored and shared according to local protocol (see appendices).

6.3. **Ongoing assessment, response and information sharing**

6.3.1. A missing episode should not be seen as an isolated incident, and will almost certainly be symptomatic of other issues in the child’s life. It may also be related to occasions when other children have gone missing, in terms of common ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors. It is important to assess and join up all available information to create the full picture, both for individual children and for networks, in order to tackle the underlying issues and prevent future missing episodes.

6.3.2. Child protection procedures apply: if there are concerns that the child is “in need” (as defined in Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) or “is suffering or is likely to suffer serious harm” (as defined in Section 47 of the same Act), a referral to the relevant children’s social care department must be made. This will prompt consideration and decision on assessment and action in accordance with *Working Together to Safeguard Children*.

6.3.3. Irrespective of any other procedures underway, a multi-agency missing young person strategy meeting needs to be held if one or more of the following conditions are met:

- The child has been missing for 72 hours or more
- The child has been missing three times or more within a 28-day period
- The child is felt to be at risk of significant harm as a result of their missing episode(s); or
- There is any other pattern of behaviour which causes concern

6.3.4. Each area has different provisions for arranging missing strategy meetings (see local procedures), but they should always involve a South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigator, a representative from every service involved with the child (and their family/household where applicable), as well as any that would likely be involved in work to prevent future missing episodes and stabilise risk. It may also be relevant to invite the person who completed the most recent Return Home Interview, particularly if the child engaged well and/or disclosed new information.

6.3.5. South Yorkshire Police collate and update a “trigger plan” for any child who has been missing more than once, or where there is thought to be significant risk of them going missing. The purpose is to direct initial enquiries when a
child goes missing, and includes information such as key people in the child’s life; any known contact numbers, social media profiles and addresses of interest; recent missing episodes, where they were found and with whom; and vulnerabilities and risks, including any sanitised police intelligence that can be shared, and any ongoing criminal investigations.

6.3.6. Where a particular risk or concerning behaviour is identified, the South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigator makes a referral (GEN117) which goes to the to the relevant children’s social care department.

6.3.7. If additional needs are identified, through the independent return interview or other information sharing, the return interview provider, missing persons investigator or other lead professional may make further referrals to services that can support the child and/or their family.

6.3.8. In addition to responses to individual cases, the return interview providers also collate intelligence across the interviews in order to identify common themes, any ‘hotspot’ areas, and any links between missing children and adults they are spending their time with.

6.3.9. This type of intelligence is shared at regular meetings in each local area between the return interview provider, South Yorkshire Police missing persons investigators and children’s services.

6.3.10. South Yorkshire Police ensure that all relevant police powers are used robustly in dealing with perpetrators involved with children who go missing. Arrest and other positive approaches are taken towards any adult found with a missing child. The Protecting Vulnerable People team in each area collates information about suspected perpetrators and coordinates further action such as Child Abduction Warning Notices.

7. Additional arrangements relating to looked-after children

7.1. Prevention and planning

7.1.1. Appropriate placement is a key factor in preventing looked-after children from going missing, and particularly whether the child feels that their views about placement are being listened to and taken seriously. A placement to which the child objects, especially one at a distance from their home, friends and family, should only be made when absolutely necessary to meet their other needs.

7.1.2. Where there is a possibility that a looked-after child will go missing, their placement plan should include a strategy to minimise this risk, and set out what the response will be if they do. The child’s social worker and carers will involve the child in developing this strategy, helping them to understand the
risks and dangers involved and making them aware of how to seek help if they do go missing. Where the child is placed outside of the responsible authority’s area, this strategy should be shared with the host authority.

7.1.3. The child’s carers will maintain a single record of information that will be useful in the event of them running away, known as a “history document”. This includes recent photographs of the child; details of family members, friends and associates, and key professionals involved with the child; medical information; any known risk-taking behaviour and vulnerabilities; and a summary of previous times they have gone missing and what happened then. This needs to be a “live” document that is updated every time anything changes. It can then be shared with police and other agencies without delay if the child goes missing so that there can be a quick and appropriate response.

7.1.4. Each children’s service area shares the list of children placed into their area by another local authority and where a risk is identified with South Yorkshire Police. This allows South Yorkshire Police to cross-reference it with missing reports (and other safeguarding concerns) and liaise appropriately with the responsible local authority and relevant police forces.

7.2. Before reporting

7.2.1. When a looked-after child appears to have gone missing, their carers are expected to make all appropriate efforts to locate them and return them home, or at least establish that they are safe.

7.2.2. If the child’s whereabouts are known, a missing person report is not necessary, and they can be categorised as “away from placement without authorisation” instead. This does not need reporting to the police unless there are immediate safeguarding concerns however this would not be a missing person report. Specific guidance is set out in local protocols.

7.3. Reporting

7.3.1. When a looked-after child goes missing, their carers should report this to the police in the area in which they live and the responsible authority. If relevant, the responsible authority will inform the host authority in whose area the child lives; and, if appropriate, the child’s parents and anyone else with parental responsibility.

7.3.2. If a looked-after child is away from their placement without authorisation, this needs to be reported to the responsible authority.

7.4. During a missing episode

7.4.1. During a missing episode, responses to looked-after children generally follow those for all children as set out in section 5.3 above. However, all agencies
will take into account the extra vulnerabilities which looked-after children (and care leavers) tend to have, and adjust their risk assessments and responses accordingly.

7.4.2. The police will maintain a close liaison with the carers and children’s services team responsible for a missing looked-after child, consulting them on any decision as they would for the family if the child was not looked-after. This includes gaining prior approval before taking any steps to publicise a child as missing (e.g. on social media).

7.4.3. The carers and children’s services team responsible for a missing looked-after child will continue to pro-actively try to locate or make contact with the child and to persuade them to return home.

7.4.4. Where a child placed outside the responsible authority area runs away, there needs to be close liaison between the responsible authority and host authority as the child may be in either area. The responsible authority should ensure the relevant children’s services team in the host authority is aware of a missing episode, and vice versa.

7.4.5. If a looked-after child is away from their placement without authorisation, their carers should make proportionate attempts to persuade them to return home. In exceptional circumstances (i.e. if there are concerns for the safety of staff or the child), police assistance might be needed to recover the child. The child should not be reported as missing.

7.5. **After the child’s return**

7.5.1. Looked-after children who have returned after a missing episode must be offered an independent return interview, as outlined in section 6.2 above.

7.5.2. It is the responsible authority’s responsibility to ensure this happens, but it will often be more practical and useful for someone from the host authority region to actually carry it out if the child is placed out of area. The four South Yorkshire authorities have an agreement that they may, therefore, share these arrangements for children placed within another South Yorkshire authority area should resources allow.

7.5.3. Within South Yorkshire, the underlying principle of work across borders in relation to missing young people is one of co-operation, and best practice will be followed in relation to sharing information in relation to specific vulnerabilities.

7.5.4. The host authority will initiate a conversation with the responsible authority to agree who is best placed to complete the independent return interview and how information and actions arising will be shared
7.5.5. It should be noted that, as the interviewer should not be someone directly involved in their care, this precludes a child’s usual social worker or carer(s). However, if a child expresses a clear preference to talk to their social worker or carer rather than an independent person, this should be facilitated and the information collected and submitted on a return interview form in the usual way.

7.5.6. Independent reviewing officers for looked after children should be informed by the responsible local authority of all missing episodes and away from placement without authorisation events. This ensures that cases can be reviewed, and that care plans are revised in response if necessary.

7.5.7. Child protection conference chairs should be informed by the responsible local authority of all missing episodes and away from placement without authorisation events where a child is subject to a child protection plan. This ensures that child protection plans are revised in response if necessary.

7.5.8. All information collected about missing children identifies if they are looked-after and, if so, if they are placed outside the responsible authority. This allows patterns and trends to be analysed separately by these factors.

8. Information and information sharing

8.1. The four areas complete a quarterly data return, to enable comparison and to allow South Yorkshire Police to aggregate a county-wide data set. This is a subset of information collected in each local area, but extracts the data that is most readily comparable across the county.

8.2. This comprises numbers of:

- Missing children and episodes
- characteristics such as age group, looked-after status and duration of episode
- triggers for strategy meetings and strategy meetings held
- independent return interviews required, offered and carried out
- reasons for missing episodes as identified in independent return interviews

8.3 Data will be shared regularly with South Yorkshire Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards and the South Yorkshire Senior Governance Group for children who go missing from home. A full performance return template is provided in the appendices.
9. **Signatories**

9.1. This protocol is signed and accepted by the lead people in each organisation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Name and role</th>
<th>Signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncaster Children’s Services Trust</td>
<td>Pauline Turner Director for Performance, Quality and Innovation (job share)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheffield City Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Yorkshire Police</td>
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</tbody>
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Appendices

Performance return

Guidance to foster carers and children's home staff

Return interview best practice guidance

Local procedures
Barnsley:
http://www.proceduresonline.com/barnsley/scb/chapters/p_ch_fam_missing.html

Doncaster:
https://federation.doncaster.gov.uk/adfs/ls/?wa=wsignin1.0&wtrealm=http%3a%2f%2fdoncasterchildrenstrust.co.uk%2fintranetadfs&wctx=rm%3d0%26id%3dpassive%26ru%3d%252fsites%252fcommon%252fPrivate%252fCommunity_View.aspx%253fid%253d394%2526pageid%253d4505&wct=2017-04-06T10%3a40%3a34Z

Rotherham:
http://rotherhamscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_sg_ch_missing.html

Sheffield:

NHS South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw missing children and families protocol