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**Absent and Missing Children Policy**

Relevant Regulations and standards

Regulation 12: The protection of children standard

Guide to the protection of children standard

Regulation 34: Policies for the protection of children

Regulation 40: Notification of a serious event

**Policy Aim-**

For everyone to be aware of how they can work together to reduce the risk of Children and Young People going missing from care and how to respond if a Child or Young Person leaves their placement without authorisation.

**Additional reading and relevant policy/guidance-**

2.20 Children missing from care, home and education

Department for Education statutory guidance Children who run away or go missing from home or care (2014)

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8. **Policy**

It is very important that everyone is aware of how to respond to Children and Young People who become Absent Without Authorisation or Missing. This behaviour is very high risk, and everyone has a responsibility to ensure that young people are protected from harm and minimise any potential risks.

Our policy is that we must take every missing episode seriously. We recognise that Child or Young Person who has gone missing on a number of previous occasions is just as at risk as if it was the first occurrence and should be responded to in the same way. Short Absences should be taken as seriously as lengthy ones and patterns of behaviour must be investigated fully to ensure that Children and Young People are safeguarded.

Clear policy and procedure must be in place to reduce the likelihood of all Children and Young People going missing, and if they do, to reduce the risk of them suffering harm ensuring that they are recovered to safety as quickly as possible. This must be done through multi agency working, clear communication and risk management.

1. **Definitions**

Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care (2014) uses the following definitions:

• Missing Child or Young Person: A Child or Young Person reported as missing to the police by their family or carers;

• Missing from Care: A Looked After Child or Young Person who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g. school) and their whereabouts are not known;

• Away from Placement Without Authorisation: A Looked After Child or Young person whose whereabouts are known but who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be, and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police;

• Young Runaway: A Child or Young person who has run away from their Home or care placement or feels they have been forced or lured to leave;

• Missing: Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another;

• Absent: A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be. “Absent” young people should not be reported to the police unless otherwise stated in their care plan after consultation with the Police. The young person’s Trigger Plan and Missing from Care Procedure will give details as to when the young person should be reported to the police as “Missing”.

1. **Prevention**

Each home strives to create an environment and culture in which the Children and Young People feel cared for. All staff members are responsible for creating a nurturing environment in which the Children and Young People feel valued and respected. The homes ethos and values should be set out within the homes Statement of Purpose.

The views, wishes, and feelings of each child must be heard and listened to. Key Work consultations, Children’s meetings, LAC Reviews and day to day conversations must give the Child or Young Person an ability to raise their concerns and provide them with appropriate feedback. Children and Young People should be offered access to an independent person and/or advocacy service to ensure they have someone external to their placement to raise any concerns they have to.

Children and Young People are to be engaged in a structured activity planner, giving them the ability to enjoy and explore their hobbies and interests.

Should the Child or Young Person be deemed at risk of absenting themselves or going missing then tailored key work with the Child or Young Person should be undertaken to explain the risks involved, possible ramifications and explore alternative coping strategies.

An Impact Risk Assessment should be completed at the point of referral. This Risk Assessment should consider the likelihood of a Child or Young Person absenting themselves or going missing as well as ensuring that appropriate risk management strategies are in place to mitigate the risk.

Each Child or Young Person must have an Individual Risk Assessment in place which considers the risk of the Child or Young Person Absenting themselves or going Missing.

Each Child or Young Person should have a positive handling plan in place, this must detail de-escalation strategies that help the Child or Young Person calm at times of crisis as well as safe and legal physical interventions that can be used (where applicable).

Each home must have a Safe Area Report in place. The Safe Area Report should give details of any known risks in the areas surrounding the home and the home’s strategies to mitigate the risk.

1. **Actions to be taken**

**4.1) Increased Risk Factors**

If a Child or Young Person indicates that they intend to leave the home without authorisation, members of staff should explore this with the Child or Young Person and assess any relevant antecedents that may give an indication of the support that the Child or Young Person requires.

Staff members should follow the Child’s Positive Handling Plan in relation to de-escalation strategies to be used with the Child or Young Person in times of distress and crisis, making use of the de-escalation strategies to try and re-direct the Child or Young Person from absenting themselves.

Staff members are responsible for taking all reasonable steps in line with the Care Plan to prevent a Child or Young Person from leaving.

As a last resort, this can include the use of physical intervention if a child may be putting themselves at risk of injury by leaving the home to carry out gang related activities, use drugs, or to meet someone who is exploiting them or intends to do so. Consideration must be given to:

* whether staff members believe there may be an immediate risk;
* whether staff members believe that by leaving the home there is a risk of injury (physical or psychological);
* Staff must consider the Positive Handling Plan for individual Children or Young People, which may state that specific strategies must be used.

If a Child or Young Person attempts to leave staff member supervision unauthorised, then the staff member must continue to try and communicate with the Child or Young Person. They must try to explore the Child or Young Person’s point of view and encourage them to use alternative coping strategies. This will include, where safe, reasonably practicable and in line with the individual behaviour management plans of the Child or Young Person; following the young person or using communication technology.

**4.2) In the event of Absenting/Missing episode**

It is expected of staff members to accept normal parenting responsibilities and undertake reasonable actions to try and establish the whereabouts of the Child or Young Person. Children and Young People who are breaching boundaries should not be dealt with by police unless there are other risks. For example, a Child or Young Person who is late home from unsupervised time should not be regarded as missing until the staff member has undertaken enquiries to locate the Child or Young Person unless it is specifically stated otherwise in their relevant plans.

In the event that a Child or Young Person cannot be located, and where it is safe to do so, basic steps taken to locate and establish wellbeing might include:

* Search of the area the Child or Young Person was last seen;
* Search the bedroom/house/outbuildings/vehicles;
* Contact known friends, associates and relatives where the Child or Young Person may be;
* Visit locations that the Child or Young Person is known to frequent;
* Attempt to contact the Child or Young Person on the telephone, via text or social media;
* If applicable checking with the school, college, other education provider or work placement.

However, in the event that a Child or Young Person cannot be located and the staff member has any concern about their whereabouts or safety or a risk the Child or Young Person may pose to others, there should be no delay in calling the police and reporting the Child or Young Person as Missing (**see chapter 4.3 Risk assessments and Notifications**).

The Homes manager/on call manager must be consulted when a Child or Young Person Absents themselves or is Missing.

The Child or Young Person’s Trigger Plan and Missing from Care Protocol will give guidance as to when a child should be reported as Missing to the police, this will be in line with relevant guidance (**see chapter 4.3 Risk assessments and Notifications**).

**The police have their own protocol for assessing risk and categorising episodes of missing.**

When contacting the police to report a child as Missing the staff member must, where possible, provide the following information:

* The circumstances around being unable to locate the child.
* The age, basic details and description (including last known clothing).
* The maturity of the child or young person.
* The possible reasons for the child going missing and their likely intentions.
* Whether the child is running from or too anything.
* Medical needs or need for urgent or ongoing medical treatment.
* Whether they use or are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.
* The influence of peer groups/family.
* Patterns of criminality or offending.
* Any learning or physical disability of the child.
* Environmental factors such as weather, time of year, community events or tensions.
* Any known risk of abduction.
* Previous behaviour and history of the child.
* Danger posed by the child to themselves and others.
* General vulnerability of the child.
* Predatory influences on the child including others wanting to use them for crime, sex or drugs.
* Any other known information which suggests the child may be at risk.

It is the responsibility of the person reporting to the police to give as much detail as possible in regard to any potential risk to the young person. They must also share all relevant information that may help the police assess the risk to the young person.

**4.3) Risk Assessments**

The manager or appointed individual will complete a missing from care risk assessment as part of the admission process. This will provide an indication of the initial risk rating, factoring in the young person’s level of understanding and additional needs. Should the Child or Young Person Absent themselves or go Missing an ongoing dynamic risk assessment should be completed, and risks should be re-assessed at a minimum of two hourly periods and should continue to assess whether the Child or Young Person is at Medium or High risk based on available information.

**Upon reporting the young person as Missing to the police; the police will complete their own risk assessment and may categorise the young person as “Medium Risk” or “High Risk”. This is separate to the aforementioned Home’s Risk Assessment as above that is completed by the manager or appointed individual but will take into account any risk factors shared with the Police.**

Special Consideration should be given as to whether any looked after child should be deemed as “Low Risk”. Given the additional risks for young people who are looked after and any additional risks as per their Care Plan, leading to them being accommodated, Shropshire Council Residential Services do not feel it is appropriate for the young people within our care to be assessed as “Low Risk”, unless this has been agreed by the Child’s Social Worker and Head of Service.

Risk Factors that must be considered when assessing the risks to the Child, Young Person or others:

* Any guidance agreed within the Child or Young person's Care Plan or Placement Plan;
* Vulnerability due to age;
* Particularly vulnerable (e.g. Learning/Physical disability, on Child or Young person subject to a child/young person Protection Plan);
* In need of regular medication (e.g. diabetic);
* Previous history of being missing;
* History of self-harming;
* Possible involvement in crime;
* Health, including mental health;
* Weather (e.g. severe cold or heat), or geography (e.g. remote area);
* Dependency on drugs and/or alcohol;
* Known vulnerability of the Child or Young Person, raising concern that they may have been led into danger, including sexual exploitation;
* Known associates that give rise to heightened concerns over the missing Child's or Young Person's safety (e.g. associates known to be involved in criminal activities);
* Degree of risk to the public;
* Recent significant events, contributory factors and the Child or Young Person's state of mind at the time of the absence;
* Time of day/night;
* Legal status.
* Out of character/unusual behaviour prior to disappearance;
* Absence with no prior indication;
* Possibility of exploitation or being drawn into offending behaviour.

A child/young person is automatically High Risk in the following circumstances;

* If the Child or Young person has been Absent/Missing for 12 hours;
* The Child or Young person may be at risk of serious injury or harm, e.g. from adverse weather conditions or the Child or Young Person's inability to stay safe;
* The Child or Young person requires essential medication/medical attention;
* The Child or Young person is likely to suffer Significant Harm;
* The Child or Young person may come into contact with a person who may pose them a risk.
* The Child or Young person may be injured, including self-injury, and require medical attention;
* There is a warrant for the Child or Young person's arrest;
* The Child or Young person may commit a violent or criminal offence;
* The Child or Young person may be abducted;
* If the Child's or Young person's name is on the list for a child/young person subject to a Child Protection Plan;
* The Child or Young person is subject to Police Protection;
* The Child or Young person is subject to an Emergency Protection Order or Recovery Order.

**4.4) Notifications**

Wherever possible and practicable the home’s manager or on call manager must be consulted before making notifications.

Regardless of below notification stages, it may be advisable to contact the Child or Young Person’s social worker and parents or the police if a child is Absent or Missing in order to share information in a multi-agency approach. This decision will be made in consultation with the home’s manager.

Should there be a Child Protection or Safeguarding concern at any time then notifications should be made in line with the Child Protection procedure.

**Absent -** If the Child or Young Person is Absent -

Notifications: Social Worker and parents may be consulted or verbally notified, for information, but there is no official requirement to notify them formally.

The police do not recognise the category of “Absent”, this should not be reported to the police.

Risks must be reviewed every two hours by staff or as circumstances change. If a Missing Child or Young person remains in the Medium Category for a total of 6 hours he or she automatically becomes High Risk.

**Missing** - If a Child or Young Person is assessed as High Risk they should be considered “Missing” by the home:

The Police in the area where the child/young person became absent must be formally notified;

The Social Worker or EDT must be notified as soon as practicable. The Social Worker should decide whether to notify the parent(s) and, if so, who should do so.

**4.5) Throughout an Absenting/Missing Episode**

Throughout an Absenting or Missing episode staff members will continue to make attempts to contact the child or young person and attempt to establish the child or young person’s whereabouts. This might include:

* Attempting to contact the Child or Young Person on the telephone, via text or social media;
* Visiting areas the Child or Young Person is known to Frequent;
* Contact known friends, associates and relatives where the Child or Young Person may be.

Where the Child or Young Person is absent without authority but their whereabouts are known then staff members must, where safe to do so, attempt to complete regular welfare checks with the Child or Young Person and encourage them to return.

The home will continue to update and work alongside agencies and individuals as necessary including police, social worker and parents; sharing any key information. When a Child or Young Person has been reported as Missing the home should consult the Police and Social Worker regularly to review the strategies and protocols that can be adopted to find or return the Child or Young Person.

If a Child or Young Person is missing for 72 hours then a Strategy Meeting should be called by the Child or Young Person’s Social Worker, this should be chaired by a Shropshire Council Manager. The Police officer leading on the missing report, representative from the Children’s Home and Shropshire Council Missing Children Lead should be invited, along with any other relevant agencies involved with the child.

Should the Child or Young Person be absent, or the Child or Young Person’s whereabouts are known but they are refusing to return to their Children’s Home for over 7 days, then a multi-agency meeting should be arranged to include the Homes Manager, Police and Child or Young Person’s Social worker. The purpose of this meeting will be to share information and discuss strategies moving forwards to find or return the young person. This may be held as a Strategy Meeting if applicable.

1. **Recovering/Returning Children or Young People**

If a Child's or Young Person's whereabouts become known, staff members should consult the Social Worker/EDT and Police about the safest and most appropriate way to return and recover the Child or Young Person to the home or safe place. If safe and appropriate to do so, this should be with the co-operation or by negotiation with the Child or Young Person.

If a Child or Young Person wishes to speak to a professional before returning to their placement this should be facilitated and the Child or Young Person should have the opportunity to talk to an independent representative, this may be achieved through an advocacy service.

Upon the Child or Young Person’s return to the home staff members must offer a warm and welcoming environment; ensuring that the Child or Young Person’s physical and emotional health is discussed with the Child or Young Person and medical assistance offered where required. The offer of food and a drink must be made available and the Child or Young person is given the opportunity to discuss any concerns or worries they have.

The Police and Child or Young Person’s Social Worker must be informed when the Child or Young Person returns as well as anyone else who had been notified of the Absence/Missing episode.

At the request of the Child or Young Person or where there are concerns about a Child or Young Person who frequently becomes absent or missing, the Home's Manager should consider arranging a meeting between the Child or Young Person and their Social Worker. This meeting should consider the reasons for the Child or Young person going missing and create strategies to prevent further incidents.

The Police may wish to carry out a 'Safe and Well' check, to check for any indications that the Child or 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.

An Independent Return interview should be carried out by an independent professional, for example, a Social Worker, teacher or health professional, who does not usually work with the Child or Young Person. The person conducting the interview should usually be independent of the Child or Young Person's placement and of the local authority. An exception may be made where a Child or Young person has a strong relationship with a carer or Social Worker and has expressed a preference to talk to them, rather than an independent person, about the reasons why they left the home. The local authority will ensure the Return Interview takes place. Contact should be made with the Child or Young Person within 72 hours of them being located or returning from absence, to arrange an Independent Return interview in a neutral place where they feel safe.

If there are concerns that the Child or Young Person has been involved in Exploitation or the Home’s Manager has any other serious concerns, then Ofsted must be notified.

1. **Information Sharing and Recording**

The Police and Child or Young Person’s Social Worker must be updated as to any change of circumstance or contact with the Child or Young Person.

All incidents of Absenting or Missing Children or Young People should be recorded on an incident report in Liquid Logic. The incident report should be updated as to any relevant information, contact with the Child or Young Person and strategies used to try and prevent the Child from Absenting themselves or locate the Child once absent or missing.

All Contact with the Child or Young Person must be recorded in the homes log book and Child or Young Person’s daily records.

The Child or Young Person’s Record of Location must be amended where a child is absent for over 24 hours.

1. **Follow up and Review**

Following any period of absence or Missing Episode the Child or Young Peron’s relevant Risk Assessments and Placement Plan should be reviewed and updated. All information gained following the Absenting or Missing Episode will need to be incorporated into relevant paperwork including Risk Assessments, Missing from Care Protocol and Police Trigger Plan. Focussed key work consultations may be needed with the Child or Young Person to discuss risks and explore alternative coping strategies.

Missing Intervention Meetings (MIM): Whenever a child goes missing 3 times in a 90-day period they hit the trigger for a MIM. Missing intervention meetings should be organised by the allocated Social Worker and should be chaired by the Team Manager. All agencies involved with the child should be invited and (if felt appropriate) the young person themselves. Missing Intervention Meetings will focus on strategies to prevent the risk of further Missing Episodes.

If a Child or Young Person is persistently Absent without permission or Missing from the home and/or the Manager considers that the Child or Young Person is at risk of harm, the Manager will arrange a Care Planning meeting in consultation with the Child or Young Person’s Social Worker. The Manager will consult the Child or Young Person's Social Worker and Independent Reviewing Officer with a view to reviewing the Care Plan.