

2023 - 2024

# PAN CHESHIRE JOINT PROTOCOL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO RUN AWAY OR GO MISSING FROM HOME OR CARE



## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION  | 3  |
| 2. DEFINITIONS   | 5  |
| 3. SCOPE   | 7  |
| 4. PRINCIPLES  | 8  |
| 5. PROCEDURES FOR A CHILD MISSING FROM HOME  | 10 |
| 6. PROCEDURES FOR A MISSING LOOKED AFTER CHILD                                     | 14 |
| 7. PREVENTION INTERVIEWS   | 24 |
| 8. RETURN INTERVIEWS   | 26 |
| 10. RESPONSE TO ESCALATING CONCERNNS   | 30 |
| 11. GOVERNANCE   | 35 |
| 12. COLLECTING AND SHARING DATA ON CHILDREN WHO GO MISSING                         | 35 |
| APPENDIX 1 PROCEDURES FOR REPORTING A CHILD THAT IS ABSENT<br>MISSING OR ABSCONDED | 37 |



## 1. INTRODUCTION

This protocol is important for the safeguarding of children and young people across Cheshire, or those using services in the area. It should be read and implemented, where necessary, by all practitioners and managers, including partner agencies working with children or young people who are at risk of going missing from home or care.

This protocol is designed to provide a framework for a co-ordinated, standardised and effective response by Halton, Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington Local Authorities, police and partner agencies to reports of children who go missing and what steps local authorities and their partners should take to try to prevent them going missing again. When a child goes missing or runs away from home, care or school, they are at risk.

Many children and young people will exhibit normal adolescent behaviour in testing boundaries and it is not helpful to consider every incident of lateness or absence for all people as high risk. Young people must not be reported missing as a behaviour management tool. However, some young people will need to be treated as missing immediately due to their vulnerability. This protocol is based upon the principles of sound individual risk assessment, by carers, professionals and by Cheshire police in classifying and responding to the incident.

The most effective assessment and support comes through good information sharing, joint assessments of need, joint planning, and professional trust within the interagency network and joint action in partnership with families. Halton, Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington Safeguarding Partnership expects all agencies working with children or young people who

are missing from home or care to implement this protocol and ensure that all relevant staff are aware of it and how to use it. It should shape and form all new contacts with children and young people.

It is intended that this protocol will assist in developing robust responses to missing, which mirror the good practice already established across Cheshire. It should be used to engage partner agencies in responding, managing and reducing risk; developing preventative services and identifying gaps in provision for children and young people, who are at risk of running away.

### Contact information

**If you believe that a child is at immediate risk, this should be reported without delay to the Police service; for emergencies use 999 as well as making contact with Children's Services:**

**Halton 0151 907 8305 Out of hours Emergency Duty Team 0345 050 0148**

**Cheshire East 0300 1235010 Out of hours Emergency Duty Team 0300 123 5022**

**Cheshire West and Chester 0300 123 7047 Out of hours Emergency Duty Team 01244977277**

**Warrington 01925 444239 Out of hours Emergency Duty Team 01925 444400**



## 2. DEFINITIONS

2.1 The following definitions apply to this protocol and relate to children who run away or go missing from home or care. These definitions come from the Department of Education (January 2014) statutory guidance on children who run away who run away or go missing from home or care.

- **Child:** A child or young person under the age of eighteen. Care leavers cover young people aged 16 – 24 years.
- **Care leaver:** an eligible, relevant or former relevant child as defined by the Children Act 1989.
- **Young runaway:** A child or young person under the age of 18 who has run away from their home or placement, or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.
- **Missing child/Young person:** A young runaway reported as missing to the police by his family or carers.
- **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.
- **Responsible local authority:** the authority that is statutorily responsible for the young person's care and care planning.
- **Host local authority:** The authority in which the young person is placed when placed out of the responsible authority's area.
- **Absconder: An absconder is a child or young person who is unlawfully at large:** In a small number of cases, young people become looked after children because they are remanded to local authority accommodation by a Youth Court, having been charged with a criminal offence. This is known as a Remanded to Local Authority Accommodation (RLAA). The child may be placed in secure accommodation, but may also be placed in a non-secure children's home or foster placement. A child who goes missing when RLAA is unlawfully at large and if the court had imposed conditions to the remand the police will have powers of arrest.
- **Accommodated:** A child is accommodated if the Local Authority looks after her/him with the voluntary agreement of his/her parents or with the child if s/he is over 16 years old.

## 2.2 Missing

In line with the College of Policing guidance, with effect from 1st June 2017, Cheshire Police have adopted a risk based approach to managing incidents where children or young people go missing.

### ***Definition of 'missing'***

***'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 low risk where there is possible, but minimal risk of harm to either the subject or the public through to high-risk where the risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely.***

### 3. SCOPE

3.1 The protocol is designed for:

- All children and young people who go missing from their family home living in the boundaries of the Cheshire Local Authorities.
- Children looked after by the Local Authority who are living with parents or relatives and who are subject to a care order.
- Children looked after by the Cheshire Local Authorities placed within children's homes or foster homes (either Local Authority or independent) within the Local Authority boundaries
- Children and young people in the care of other local authorities who are placed in Cheshire. Other Local Authorities placing children within 'the host Local Authority' boundary will be required to comply with this protocol. It is possible that the child will return to the area of the responsible authority so it is essential that liaison between the police and professionals in both authorities is well managed and co-ordinated.
- Children and Young people looked after by the Cheshire local authorities placed outside of the Cheshire boundaries

3.2 When a child is placed out of their local authority area, the responsible authority must make sure that the child has access to the services they need including a missing service were appropriate. This should include full registration with a GP near to where they live. Notification of the placement must be made to the host authority and other specified services. Any information around trigger or safety plans should be shared across local authorities and with the police so that all areas can act appropriately.

3.3 Within this context, "Children Looked After" refers to children accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to Care Orders including Interim Care Orders, Section 31 and 38 Children Act 1989, and children who are otherwise provided with accommodation by Section 21 Children Act 1989. These include children on remand and children subject to a supervision order with a residence requirement.

## 4. PRINCIPLES

- 4.1 This protocol should be read as guidance only and cannot anticipate every situation. Anyone working with children in a professional capacity should use their judgment to take whatever action is deemed necessary to protect and safeguard the child, based on an assessment of risk for each individual. **Safeguarding principles are intrinsic in understanding the risk for the young person for every missing incident and must be followed alongside the missing protocol.**
- 4.2 Anyone who has care of a child without Parental Responsibility must do what is reasonable in all the circumstances to safeguard and promote the child's welfare (Children Act 1989 s3 (5)). It is likely to be 'reasonable' to inform the police, or Children's Services, and, if appropriate, their parents, of the child/young person's safety and whereabouts; This includes the person caring for the young person who is acting as a 'private foster carer' within the meaning of s66 of the Children Act 1989. Children that are not subject to Care Orders but are in kinship arrangements and formal arrangements for contact with birth parents are in place.
- 4.3 Our joint aim is to reduce the incidence of all children going missing. Children who go missing may be at significant risk and may place others at risk and each missing episode is potentially serious. The reasons for running away are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or their experiences of care. Every missing episode should attract proportionate attention from the professionals involved, who must collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on his/her return.
- 4.4 Interventions are important in attempting to address and prevent repeat missing episodes. Interventions for looked after children must be informed by and reflected in the placement information record and in the care plan. Interventions must also be informed by effective return interviews. Children's views and concerns will be taken seriously and each local authority area has independent advocacy services that can be accessed by young people where required.
- 4.5 Interventions may be focused on the individual child, the child's home, or by targeting 'pull' factors in the community.
- 4.6 Even with strong systems and services that minimise the likelihood of young people running away, some young people will still feel that they have to run. If there is concern that the child may be at risk if returned home, the child should be referred to children's social care to assess their needs and make

appropriate arrangements for their care.

- 4.7 Across Cheshire there is a helpline supported by the Missing People Charity and is open 24 hours a day 365 days per year. It is staffed by experienced Missing from Home Case Workers and fully trained volunteers. This helpline is open to young people, parents and carers there is also a variety of support for families across universal and specialist services. People can call or text **116 000** or email **116000@missingpeople.org.uk**.
- 4.8 The Local Authority, Residential and Foster Carers will report a child missing to the police according to this protocol. Cheshire Constabulary will receive and record incidents of children missing from their home or care. Local authorities must ensure that incidents are appropriately risk assessed, and record all incidents of looked after children. **See appendix 1 for further details on these procedures.**
- 4.9 The police will prioritise all incidents of missing children as highlighted in 2.2. A risk assessment is undertaken for each missing person on every separate occasion they are reported as missing. Due consideration will be given to their age, vulnerability and risks, including child exploitation, capacity or learning difficulties of the young person.



## 5. PROCEDURES FOR A CHILD MISSING FROM HOME

### 5.1 Responsibility of parents / carers

5.1.1 Children who go missing from their home may be significant at risk of harm as a result. The reasons for their missing are often varied and complex. Every 'missing' episode should be responded to effectively with professionals from all agencies and organisations involved with the child working together to ensure the child's safe return.

5.1.2 Parents and those with parental responsibility are normally expected to undertake the following basic measures to try to locate the child, if considered safe to do so, prior to reporting the child as 'missing' to the police..

- Search bedroom/ accommodation/ outbuildings/ vehicles
- Try to contact the young person on their mobile. Activate Find My Phone/ Tracker if applicable.
- Contact known friends and relatives where child may be
- Visit locations that the child is known to frequent, if possible

5.1.3 However, if there is any cause to believe that the child may have been harmed or is at risk of being harmed or the child is suspected of being currently subject to criminal or sexual offences then the police must be informed immediately.

5.1.4 Any person who has care of a child but does not have parental responsibility should take all reasonable steps to locate the child and ascertain their safety. In these circumstances it is expected that the Police will be informed *without delay* when a child goes missing.

- 5.1.5 Children under the age of 16 years old are not legally considered as being able to live independently. For children over the age of 16 years old, consideration should be given to their legal status, physical and emotional needs when making a judgment as to whether they can live independently.
- 5.1.6 Anyone who has care of a child without parental knowledge or agreement should also do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. In these circumstances, they should inform the Police, Children' social care and the parents of the child's whereabouts and safety.

## 5.2 All agencies

- 5.2.1 If it comes to the attention of any agency that a child is missing, they must advise the parent/carer of their need to report this matter to the Police.
- 5.2.2 They also need to advise the parent of the agency's duty to ensure that the matter is reported to the Police and if necessary follow this up by contacting the Police to verify that the child has been reported missing.
- 5.2.3 All staff should be aware of the need to identify children missing from education and how to notify the Local Authority where they know or suspect that a child is missing from education. Contact information and notification forms for Children Missing from Education can be found on each areas Partnership website. Schools as well as informing the parent should also contact the police in light of a missing incident.
- 5.2.4 The government has placed a duty on Local Authorities to make arrangements to establish (so far as it is possible to do so) the identities of children in their area who are of compulsory school age and not receiving a suitable education. These children are referred to as Children Missing out on Education.
- 5.2.5 Children are identified as Missing out on Education where they are of compulsory school age and are:
- Not on a school roll
  - Identified as having been out of any educational provision for a substantial period of time. For the purposes of this protocol, this is not the same as a child who goes missing from their education provision. It is important to recognise that children and young people who are not on a school roll and have been out of a provision for a substantial period of time, may have additional risks and vulnerabilities as a consequence.

### 5.3 Role of the Police

- 5.3.1 Upon receiving a report of a child being missing from home, the Police will carry out enquiries aimed at locating the child as soon as possible.
- 5.3.2 It is important that in undertaking their investigative role the police has the full support of other agencies and other organisations and adopts an effective multi-agency approach in their efforts to trace the missing child.
- 5.3.3 The police will carry out a risk assessment for each individual on each separate occasion they are reported missing. This risk assessment will form the basis for the subsequent investigation into the child's disappearance.
- 5.3.4 In the event that a 'missing' child has not been reported by parents/carers and enquiries identify risk factors at the home address then relevant safeguarding procedures will be implemented.
- 5.3.5 The Police will notify the relevant Local Authority's Children's Services department of all missing children. This should normally be done as soon as possible but in any case within 24 hours of the report.
- 5.3.6 Throughout the missing episode, the Police are responsible for on-going enquiries, risk assessment and proportionate actions. In the event of a continuing missing episode good communication and close cooperation is essential to ensure that any significant concerns are identified and appropriate safeguarding action is taken.
- 5.3.7 When a child has been reported as missing for a period of 48 hours the Police will update the Local Authority of any significant developments. Contact will be made with the Local Authority at least every five days thereafter or earlier, if deemed appropriate. If the child is missing for 48 hours a strategy discussion should be held. If the child remains missing then there should be weekly strategy meetings held.

### 5.4 Return of the child

- 5.4.1 The attitude of parents, carers and professionals, such as police and social workers, towards a child who has been missing can have a big impact on how they will engage with subsequent investigations and protection planning. However confident they may appear, they are children and may be extremely vulnerable to multiple risks. A supportive approach when a child returns, actively listening and responding to their needs, will have a greater chance of

preventing the child from going missing again and safeguarding them against other risks.

- 5.4.2 Where a missing child is found then they should be returned to their parents / carer or other person with parental responsibility.
- 5.4.3 Where a child is returned or has returned ‘home’ of their own accord it is the responsibility of the parent or carer to contact the Police and confirm that the missing child has returned.
- 5.4.4 It is the responsibility of the parents or carers to arrange any necessary transportation for the child to return to their home. In exceptional circumstances, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the Police may agree to requests from parents or carers to assist.
- 5.4.5 In all cases, once the child has been located, the Police will need to undertake a ‘prevention interview’ to ensure that the child is ‘safe and well’ and to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them. This is **NOT** a ‘return interview’ (see paragraph 8.1 below) and the ‘check’ must not be conducted over the telephone.
- 5.4.6 Additionally, in matters of child exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, a referral must be made to the Local Authority in accordance with local safeguarding procedures.



## 6. PROCEDURES FOR A MISSING LOOKED AFTER CHILD

### 6.1 Procedures

6.1.1 Care should be taken when establishing where the child or young person should be accommodated:

- Is the home “right” for that individual?
- Will that individual fit into the existing structure of that home?
- How will a new resident interact with existing residents?
- Are there external factors in the area of the residence which need to be taken into account when considering the placement?

6.1.2 Prior to any placement, a written Placement Information Record (PIR) should be completed, outlining expectations about how it will meet the child’s needs, how positive routines will be maintained, and how they will be supported to achieve their potential. Every looked after child must have a care plan, subject to regular review, that sits alongside the PIR. This process must include an evaluation of whether a child is likely to run away. Where this is likely, strategies should be put in place to minimise risk. This should also be considered with young people who reach the age of 18 and are in semi-independent accommodation.

6.1.3 Each looked after child has a care plan based on a full assessment of the child's current and future needs, including potential risk to self or others. In respect of the risk for the child going missing, the Placement Plan should cover:

- Trigger points for missing episodes;
- Risks to themselves, the public and/or the carer before, during or after a missing episode including when being picked up;
- What steps can be taken to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing and coming to any harm or harming others;
- The views of parents/carers on their child needs and the action that needs to be taken if the child is absent;
- Friends and family details and contact numbers as well as addresses commonly found at;
- Expectations of the young person:
  - I.e. curfew; when and how to make contact; consequences of lateness etc.
  - The young person's view
- Expectations of the care provider:
  - I.e. at which point the Police will be notified, what processes will follow an incident, who will collect a child if they are missing, details of who conducts immediate assessments on their return and arrangements for full return interviews etc.
  - Agreements around rules for staying overnight at friend's houses or going on trips

6.1.4 Children's residential and fostering service staff should contribute to this assessment. All information should be included in the placement plan and in the child's care plan. These plans should reference that the Cheshire protocol will be followed. As part of this assessment it may be appropriate for the Local Authority to consult with the Police to share information that may be of relevance.

6.1.5 A trigger plan (action plan), applicable to that child, should be formulated to cover the event of the child going missing. This trigger plan should be agreed by all relevant parties including the local authority, police and placement provider. The relevant Local Authority needs to ensure that the child's main plan incorporates all risk and mitigation.

- 6.1.6 The care plan will remain in the possession of the Local Authority. It is not a public document. It is not envisaged that the Police will need to view the care plan at any time. However, there may well be circumstances when it is necessary to involve the Police in aspects of the care planning process to safeguard the child.
- 6.1.7 The residential home manager/foster carer should consider the most appropriate ways to meet the above requirements and whether it is necessary and appropriate to discuss 'running away' and the requirements of this protocol with the child.
- 6.1.8 Carer's, including staff acting in a parenting role in care homes, are expected to accept normal parenting responsibilities and undertake reasonable actions to try and establish the whereabouts of the individual. For example, a child who is late home from a party should not be regarded as missing until the carer has undertaken enquiries to locate the child.
- 6.1.9 The fact that the child 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.
- 6.1.10 Clearly some children are absent for a short period and then return, with their whereabouts known to the carer. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose to test boundaries, or accidentally. Examples of situations are: running away after a dispute, failing to return on time, staying at a known location with a friend.
- 6.1.11 If the carer assesses that the child is at risk due to any factor/s known to the carer, then the child should be reported as missing without delay and the believed risk communicated to the Police. If the assessment of the carer is that there is no apparent risk for their immediate safety but the child is away from their placement it is still important that staff/ carers record these incidences as away from placement in the child's record and consider if there are changes required in the care of the child that reflects the response and behaviour. This does not need to go to the police. In addition to this staff/ carers should always start a dated/ timed record of their contacts, risk assessment and decisions throughout the episode from the point that they are aware of the child's absence, in case the level of risk changes and decisions

are auditable. All episodes of away from placement should be recorded by the carer and reported to the relevant social worker at the local authority and the social worker should inform the Independent Reviewing Officer/ Manager.

- 6.1.12 If the child's whereabouts are known or suspected, the staff will decide whether to allow the child to remain at that location, albeit temporarily, or to arrange for their return. If the decision is to arrange their return and there is reason to believe that there may be public order difficulties, Police assistance will be sought. Police assistance in these circumstances does not mean that the child is categorised as missing. The care plan needs to confirm that the young person can stay away from the agreed placement.
- 6.1.13 Care Leavers may be particularly vulnerable to going missing. Care leavers are required to live in suitable accommodation and any risk assessment should take account of whether care leavers feel safe in their accommodation and the area where it is located. Pathway Plans will set out where a young person may be vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or going missing, and support services to minimise this risk should be put in place

## 6.2 Missing

- 6.2.1 If the decision is that of the child being 'missing' then Cheshire Constabulary will complete Form 200036, 'Report of Missing Person' (**Form 36**).
- 6.2.2 Staff / foster carers will telephone Cheshire Police (101) and inform them that a child is missing from their establishment / home, giving details of the location where the child was last seen, the circumstances in which the child is missing, any immediate concerns that there may be for the child's safety and the reasons why they are being reported as 'missing'.
- 6.2.3 Cheshire Constabulary must get details of the placing responsible Local Authority from the staff or carer in case this is outside of the Cheshire boundaries. All correspondences will then take place with the responsible Local Authority but the relevant host Local Authority will also be notified for information purposes only.

- 6.2.4 The carer will provide information to the police about any risk factors associated with the child on the missing person form.
- 6.2.5 Staff / foster carers will request that the Police ‘incident number’ is given to them. The Police ‘incident number’ must be recorded on the Form 36.
- 6.2.6 Staff / foster carers will then forward the Form 36 to the Police Force Control Centre email via [force.control@cheshire.pnn.police.uk](mailto:force.control@cheshire.pnn.police.uk) (or fax via 0845 359 5909). If staff / foster carers do not have access to the internet or to a fax then an officer must call and collect the form.
- 6.2.7 The Local Authority will ensure that sufficient knowledge and information about the child is recorded to enable carers to complete the missing person form should the child go missing in future.
- 6.2.8 Where available, an electronic version of the missing from home form should be completed. It may be that in cases of ‘persistent’ episodes, sections of the form can be completed in advance to enable speedy and accurate reporting if and when required.
- 6.2.9 When receiving a missing person report the Police will tailor their response to the circumstances. If information is available to suggest a possible location of the missing child, and this gives rise to concerns about the safety of the child, the Police response will be to immediately address those concerns, perhaps postponing the administrative recording duties for a short time in favour of safeguarding.
- 6.2.10 In circumstances where a child is reported missing from a residential home, the senior care manager responsible for the unit will ensure that the following basic actions are undertaken;
- Conduct a thorough search of the premises (For a child missing from a foster placement (not a residential children’s home), a premises search will be undertaken by Police officers).
  - Refer to the young person placement plan around other people to contact
  - Speak to any known friends and relatives where child may be
  - Speak to other residents or other persons who may be able to assist with the investigation
  - Speak to other (previously on duty) colleagues and care staff who may have had some form of earlier contact with the missing child

6.2.11 Carers must also inform without delay:

- The parents/those who have parental responsibility (unless indicated otherwise on the care plan)
- The Social Worker or the accountable team manager
- The emergency duty team if out of hours and the Social Worker and accountable team manager the next working day

6.2.12 Where there is a Child in Care that is placed within the Cheshire Local Authority (host) boundaries but comes from another local authority the residential staff or foster carer will inform the police and the placing responsible authority but also pass this information on to the relevant host Local Authority.

6.2.13 Before any final decision is made, the Police will discuss any publicity of a child or young person missing from care with the child's care provider and social worker, who should involve their Senior Managers as appropriate. This will be done in sufficient time for Children's Services to notify the child's parents / next of kin. Care providers or the Local authority with parental responsibility should have on file a recent photograph of each child that can be used in these circumstances.

### **6.3 Absconder / Unlawfully at Large**

6.3.1 A child is to be considered as having 'absconded' or being 'unlawfully at large' when he / she is absent from their placement without permission and is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process (e.g. where the child has appeared before a youth court and has been remanded into Local Authority accommodation). A child in this category must be reported to the Police without delay.

6.3.2 If the child is under the age of 16 years the Police will treat the matter as BOTH a missing child case AND an unlawfully at large case. This means that it will be necessary to provide detailed information to the Police on the Form 36. When the child is traced however, it is likely that they will also be arrested or dealt with by the Police in relation to any offence or breach. It is essential however, that they are also viewed as a child in need of protection and safeguarding, and any risks exposed to during their absence must be reviewed fully. In most cases where children are remanded

by the courts into local authority accommodation they will also be open to the Youth Justice Service and may be subject to statutory court ordered supervision so regular sharing of information and coordinated planning between Police, Local Authorities and Youth Justice Service is important.

- 6.3.3 However, if the child is aged 16 or over, the Police will treat the child solely as a person unlawfully at large and not as a missing child, unless there are grounds to suspect that factors other than the child's desire to evade justice are involved in their disappearance.

#### **6.4 Roles and responsibilities**

- 6.4.1 The local authority has a range of corporate parenting duties in relation to children in care and should always apply the "reasonable parent" test when planning and making decisions in relation to the children in its care. This means having the same interest as any reasonable parent would have for their own children in relation to safeguarding and promoting welfare. Both the relevant Safeguarding Partnership and the Corporate Parenting Boards have a key role in monitoring the incidents of children and young people who go missing from care.
- 6.4.2 After reporting a child missing, Children's Services remain responsible for the child in their care. This responsibility is not absolved when the child has been reported missing to the Police.
- 6.4.3 Carers and the child's Social Worker will be responsible for liaising with the Police, taking an active interest in the investigation and passing on all information, which may help to inform the investigation and assist in protecting the child while absent.
- 6.4.4 Carers and the child's Social Worker should continue to make appropriate enquiries with other residents or by telephone with all persons who may be able to assist with the investigation unless they are requested not to do so by the Police. All information gleaned from these enquires should be passed to the Police.
- 6.4.5 Once a child is reported missing to the Police, the Police will have primacy in respect of the investigation to trace the child.

- 6.4.6 The Police will normally conduct all physical enquiries away from the premises from which the child is missing.
- 6.4.7 In certain circumstances the Police may need to revisit the duties initially performed by care staff. When necessary they will do so in liaison with appropriate children's services staff and will do so sensitively, causing as little disruption as possible to the establishment and residents.
- 6.4.8 Throughout the process in this protocol, residential carers and social workers must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given.
- 6.4.9 Independent Reviewing Officers/ Managers (IRO/ M's) should be informed about all episodes of missing or away from placement where relevant so that these can be addressed via review meetings.

## 6.5 Review of continued missing episode

- 6.5.1 When a child has been reported missing for a period of 48 hours a strategy meeting should be held and the social worker should inform the relevant senior manager as per the Local Authority protocols via the usual line management route.
- 6.5.2 Throughout the missing episode, carers and the Police will continually review the case weekly. After the child has been missing for five days, or earlier, if deemed appropriate, an urgent case review meeting will be held. It will involve Police officers, carers, the child's Social Worker, and any other professional involved in the care of the child. The meeting will review:

- What action has been taken so far by the Police and other professionals
- What action needs to be taken by the Police and professionals
- Decide whether the child should return to that placement when located
- Consider any other relevant information
- Whether further such review meetings will take place and the time scales for such review meetings (it is suggested that a period of at least every five days thereafter or earlier, if deemed appropriate).

## 6.6 Return of the child

- 6.6.1 Where a missing child is found then they should normally be returned to their placement.
- 6.6.2 It is the responsibility of the Local Authority to arrange for transportation for the child to return to their placement.
- 6.6.3 There may be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the Police are requested to assist the Local Authority in returning the child. The Police should not unreasonably withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport missions for vulnerable children. However, the Police will not agree to requests to provide escorts for missing children, which would unreasonably involve officers leaving their normal areas of patrol.
- 6.6.4 Where a child is returned or has returned of their own accord it is the responsibility of the carer to contact the Police and confirm that the missing child has returned.
- 6.6.5 In circumstances where a missing child has returned to their residential home but has not been seen by a police officer, the Police will normally accept confirmation from care professionals that the child is 'safe and well' without the need for an officer to attend the home and visit the returnee.
- 6.6.6 If it is apparent, upon the return of a child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst missing including their possible exploitation or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were missing then the Police must be called and asked to attend without delay.
- 6.6.7 Additionally, in matters of child exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, the allocated social worker and the Independent Reviewing Officer must be informed.
- 6.6.8 Where the child is in foster placement, the Police will verify the child's safe return in person.

## 6.7 Asylum Seekers and Trafficking

- 6.7.1 Unaccompanied asylum seeking children are likely to be placed in the care of the local authority. If they subsequently go missing, they are to be treated as missing children, not failed asylum seekers or illegal immigrants. Many of this group may have been trafficked into the UK for criminal purposes. Young people at risk from / having been trafficked present a high level of risk of going missing following coercion and threats from traffickers. Young people may be unable to provide information about missing periods due to fear of retribution to them or their family from their traffickers. Anyone who believes that a person who is/was missing may have been trafficked should make reference to the procedure on children who are victims of Modern Slavery, Trafficking and Exploitation.
- 6.7.2 Practitioners should not be blind to the fact that “trafficking” does take place between differing areas of Britain, and even areas of Cheshire or within an Authority, and the victim of trafficking may not necessarily be from abroad.
- 6.7.3 The publication ‘Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked’ contains practical guidance for agencies likely to encounter, or have referred to them, children and young people who may have been trafficked. Where it is suspected that a child has been trafficked, the local authority should refer them to the UK’s victim identification framework, the National Referral Mechanism. The Trafficked Children Toolkit, developed by the London Safeguarding Children Board, has been made available to all local authorities to help professionals assess the needs of these children and to refer them to the National Referral Mechanism.
- 6.7.4 The NSPCC Child Trafficking Advice Centre provides specialist advice and information to professionals who have concerns that a child may have been trafficked. Phone 0808 800 5000 Monday to Friday 09-30AM to 04-30PM. Alternatively, email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk).
- 6.7.5 Advice can be sought from the United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre (Tel: 0114 252 3891 or 08447782406). This is an advice line that is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can also visit the National Crime Agency website for more information on trafficking.



## 7. PREVENTION INTERVIEWS

- 7.1 Cheshire Police will carry out a Prevention Interviews on all children and young people who have been categorised as missing, as soon as practicable after they are found and should be completed within 24 hours of the person being located. The details will be recorded on VPA and passed on to the relevant Local Authority Children's Social Care.
- 7.2 When a child or young person has been located following an episode deemed 'Missing', statutory guidance requires that 'The police will undertake a prevention interview to establish whether there are any indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them'.
- 7.3 The objective of the prevention interview requires a Police Officer to physically see and speak to the missing child or young person as soon as possible after they are found. Where viable the Police Officer should speak to the young person independent of the parent or carer. The Police should also speak to the child or young person's parents or carers to satisfy themselves that the child or young person is safe. The key aims will be to:

- Determine the reasons why the child or young person went missing and in particular, if they have been subject to violence, exploitation, abuse or bullying;
- To establish if they have been the victim of or committed any crime whilst missing, including as a result of their possible exploitation or trafficking;
- To obtain information which may lead to their early location should they disappear again;
- To put in place any support and preventative measures to avoid such a recurrence;
- To inform the child or young person and their parents and carers, if appropriate, that:
  - a. the relevant Local Authority Children's Social Care has been notified of the missing episode; and
  - b. that they will be contacted by an Officer of the Local Authority and offered an Independent Return Interview

7.4 Where a child or young person goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable for the Police to conduct a prevention interview and a different approach may be more appropriate. In these cases, discussion should take place between the Police and the child's parent or carer or, if Looked After, their allocated Social Worker, to agree the frequency of such checks. Given the established link between frequent missing episodes and serious harm, which could include gang involvement, forced marriage, bullying or exploitation, agreements not to conduct a prevention interview should be recorded by both Police and Social Care. The Police Sergeant on duty must sign off with a rationale where there was no prevention interview conducted.



## 8. RETURN INTERVIEWS

- 8.1 A return interview is the term applied to the safety, needs and risk assessment carried out in the form of a formal discussion with the child. The interview provides an opportunity to hear from a child or young person about why they went missing and to understand the risks and issues faced by them whilst missing. Children and young people sometimes need to build up trust with a person before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they ran away.
- 8.2 It should be conducted by a person who is independent of the child's home / placement and who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge. The responsible local authority should ensure the return interview takes place, working with the host authority where appropriate. Within Cheshire there is a commissioned service that will undertake return interviews; however social workers or other identified practitioners where appropriate can undertake return interviews following a discussion with the commissioned service.
- 8.3 Account should also be taken of any preference the child has for the conducting of the return interview if the intervention plan identifies the need for a particular key worker then they should conduct the interview.
- 8.4 When it is not practicable for a return interview to be conducted by the most suitable person, or an independent person, it is better that an interview is conducted by a nominated care professional than no interview being conducted at all. The following table highlights the return interview arrangements within Cheshire

| Pan Cheshire Local Authority Return Interview Arrangements  |   |
|---|---|
| Circumstances of the child or Young Person  | Return Interviewer  |
| For a child or young person living within Cheshire Local Authorities not an open case to Children's Social Care                           | The notification of the missing incident will come via the police. <b>The Cheshire Commissioned Service</b> is responsible for undertaking the return interview. This interview will inform whether the child or young person is in need of services or at risk of harm   |
| Cases with an allocated Worker (Children In Need and subject to a Child Protection Plan)  | The notification of the missing incident will come via the police. <b>The Cheshire Commissioned Service or relevant Social Worker</b> (unless there is a suitable professional that the child would prefer) is responsible for undertaking the return interview.  |
| For a child or young person 'looked after' by the Cheshire Local Authorities placed up to approximately 20 miles within Cheshire boundary | It is the <b>social workers</b> responsibility to inform the Cheshire Commissioned Service of the missing incident.<br><b>The Cheshire Commissioned Service will complete if the child has previously known to the service</b> or relevant <b>Social Worker</b> (unless there is a suitable professional that the child would prefer) is responsible for undertaking the return interview. A record of the interview will be provided to the IRO.   |
| For a child or young person 'looked after' by Cheshire Local Authorities placed further than 20 miles away from Cheshire boundary.        | At point of placement the social worker (were missing is identified from the risk assessment) is responsible for ensuring access to a local independent advocacy/ missing service should a missing episode occur. The Cheshire Commissioned Service or relevant Social Worker (unless there is a suitable professional that the child would prefer) is responsible for undertaking the return interview Details should be available on the Placement Plan which is accessible and known to the carer. |
| For a child or young person 'looked after' by another local authority placed within the Cheshire Local Authorities                        | The notification of the missing incident will come via the police. <b>The Cheshire Commissioned Service or relevant Social Worker</b> (unless there is a suitable professional that the child would prefer) is responsible for undertaking the return interview. A record of the interview will be provided to the responsible local authority.   |

8.5 The purpose of the interview is:

- To better understand the reasons why the child went missing
- To explore the circumstances which led to the missing episode(s)
- To inform future prevention strategies
- To inform any future missing person investigation should that person go missing again
- To learn of the activities, associates, risks and victimisation involved in the missing episode, and where possible to address those risks with appropriate and proactive strategies such as the use of the Child Abduction Warning Notices.
- To identify and address any harm the child has suffered
- To provide information on how to stay safe; including helpline numbers

8.6 The ‘return interview’ is different from the Police ‘prevention interview’, it must not be viewed as a routine or administrative task.

8.7 Every child that goes missing from home or care will be offered a return interview. Where a child or young person goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable to conduct a return interview for each episode and a different approach may be more appropriate. In these cases, discussion should take place between the Police and the child’s parent or carer or, if Looked After, their allocated Social Worker, to agree the appropriate engagement with the young person.

8.8 The return interview should be conducted in all instances **within 72 hours** of the child’s return, unless there are exceptional circumstances which should be clearly stated on the return interview. The return interview should be uploaded onto the child’s record and shared with the police.

8.9 Appropriate safeguarding procedures should be followed where there are safeguarding concerns for example:

- Where the child has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case)
- Where there is known or suspected risk of child exploitation, trafficking or contact with persons posing risk to children

- 8.10 It is acknowledged that a returning child may well share different parts of their experience with different people. It is the responsibility of all agencies therefore, to attend to issues of immediate safety, future support and safeguarding needs, and information-sharing in a way which respects and safeguards children and young people. The acceptable minimum in the event of a single missing episode is that the missing episode is risk assessed following information gathered and cross referenced from the child, the carers and the Police.
- 8.11 In some circumstances the child may make extremely sensitive disclosures that need particularly careful management that should be recorded separately but referred to on the return interview form. In such circumstances it may be appropriate for the interviewer to discuss the information with relevant professionals.
- 8.12 Where a return interview leads to an identification of a safeguarding issue that needs specific action, for example, to safeguard the child or investigate a crime the matter should be referred to the Local Authority and/or the Police.
- 8.13 For looked after children it remains the responsibility of the relevant Social Worker to ensure completion of the return interview. There is an additional responsibility on the child's placement to monitor that they are conducted within agreed timescales. In the event that the return interviews are not conducted within 72 hours, then the carer should alert the relevant Manager in Children's Services.
- 8.14 If the child or young person refuses to take part in the Return Interview, parents and carers must be offered the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence. This should help to prevent further instances of the child running away and identify the support needed for them going forward. If the child/ young person is open to social care then options should be explored for the social worker of the child/ young person to undertake the return interview. Return interview template and guidance can be accessed via each areas Safeguarding Partnership websites.



## 9. RESPONSE TO ESCALATING CONCERNS

- 9.1 If a child has gone missing two or more times, agencies should consider if there is requirement to hold a recorded discussion, either with the child, their family or both, to offer further support and guidance. Actions following earlier incidents should be reviewed and alternative strategies considered. Access to and timeliness of independent return interviews should also be reviewed. A strategy meeting is to be held for all children missing for a period of 48 hours or more, trigger meeting are used for young people that have continued missing episodes over a period of time i.e. 90 days. Trigger meetings should not replace strategy meetings, a strategy meeting should always be considered if a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm.
- 9.2 Where there are concerns in relation to a child going missing multi-agency meetings under Early Help Assessments, Child in Need, Care Planning under section 17 or 47 should be in place and followed in line with child protection procedures, as good practice, to address these issues and to ensure the right information is shared with agencies.
- 9.3 Trigger meetings, in response to escalating concerns must take place in the event of repeat episodes of children going missing and following the first missing episode if there are concerns in relation to exploitation. For these meetings to work, and thereby improve our collective responses, appropriate attendance and clarity of purpose are essential. The trigger meetings should be held **within a week** of any trigger episode, this could require a separate meeting outside of any care planning meeting already established.

9.4 The agenda of the trigger meetings should cover the following areas:

- Details of missing from home/ care episodes
- Danger statement
  - Ensure that professionals feel that their worries have been listened too and that parents understand the concerns.
  - Ask family and professionals if the statements accurately reflect their worries for the child when they are missing.
  - Ask if the child would agree with them, what would they be worried about?
  - Use discussions to update the danger statement.
- Safety goal
  - Ask parents do they agree that these should be our goals.
  - Ask if the child would likely agree with these goals. What would they likely include?
  - Are professionals satisfied that this is what we should be aiming for?
  - Use the discussion to update the safety goal.
- Review of the MFH plan
  - Go through each action systematically – what has been the impact on the child of actions completed?
  - Is the existing plan sufficient, do we need to make any additions/ amendments? What are the return interviews telling us? What do we need to do differently?

9.5 The plan should be agreed by all parties that attend the meeting **within 5 working days** of the meeting taking place. In addition, copies should be sent to the child's allocated IRO, where the child is looked after, and the Children's Services Lead Manager.

9.6 The trigger 1 meeting will take place after three episodes within a 30-day rolling period. This level of trigger intervention meeting is the crucial stage in avoiding serious escalation and must, therefore, be given high priority by all concerned.

9.7 The meeting should be chaired by a Children's Services Manager, attendees should include:

- Child\*
- Social Worker or relevant lead professional
- Local Police Missing Person Co-ordinator
- Parent and or carer, residential worker or foster carer
- Fostering Social Worker
- Person who conducted return interview if different to above
- Other relevant professionals (For example Health, Education, Youth Offending Teams)

\*Discussion should take place between the chair and the child's Social Worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

9.8 **The trigger 2 meeting will take place after nine episodes within a 90-day rolling period or where concerns about a young person are at an agreed level that a second stage trigger intervention meeting is required.** The meeting should be chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer or a Senior Children's Services Manager, attendees should include:

- Child\*
- Social Worker or relevant lead professional
- Local Police Missing Person Coordinator and champion (Chief Inspector)
- Parent and or carer, residential unit manager or fostering manager
- Person who conducted return interview if different to above
- Other relevant professionals (For example Health, Education, Youth Offending Teams)

\*Discussion should take place between the chair and the child's Social Worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

- 9.9 The process around trigger meetings are minimum standards. Agencies would want to ensure that following a trigger 1 meeting that subsequent child in need, child protection and children in care planning meetings consider the actions to ensure the risk is being managed. If the risk's/ concerns warrant a further formal trigger meeting then one can be called earlier. The second stage trigger meeting should also quality assure compliance with the protocols and the efficacy of the 1st stage trigger meeting and return interviews.
- 9.10 If the child continues to be reported missing beyond this level the Senior Manager for the area in consultation with the police Chief Inspector must consider the case and direct further intervention. Further frequent recorded discussions should continue to be managed by the Senior Manager / Police Chief Inspector until the risks to the child have reduced and/ or the missing episodes have been reduced or ceased.
- 9.11 It should be noted, however, that the volume of missing episodes is not the only reason to launch an intervention or to escalate the level of intervention. The following are examples of other reasons to initiate or escalate interventions:
- Any case where the risks involved in even a single future-missing episode is very high
  - Any case where child exploitation is a factor
  - Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well-being of the child

N.B. In cases of a child going missing from an out-of authority placement the responsible authority calls a professionals' meeting involving the relevant organisations from the host authority, to determine action, and to ensure change. When a child who has a history of going missing is moved to an out-of-authority placement, the host authority should be informed of the risk, and as part of the placement agreement, appropriate details should be shared to support the Local Authority to manage the risks to inform care planning for the individual child.

- 9.12 It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi-agency strategy meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.

- 9.13 When it is believed that an adult is adversely involved with a child going missing the Local Authority will invoke safeguarding procedures and the Police may consider using enforcement tactics such as abduction legislation. [Section 2 Child Abduction Act 1984 or Section 49 Children's Act 1989]
  
- 9.14 Alternatively the Local Authority and/or parents, supported by the Police, may decide to institute civil proceedings to obtain an injunction preventing any particular adult having any contact with a named child.

## 10. GOVERNANCE

- 10.1 This protocol will form part of the Pan Cheshire Safeguarding Children Procedures. The relevant Local Safeguarding Children's Partnerships and other assurance frameworks are responsible for co-ordinating the activities of member agencies in relation to the effective implementation of this strategy.



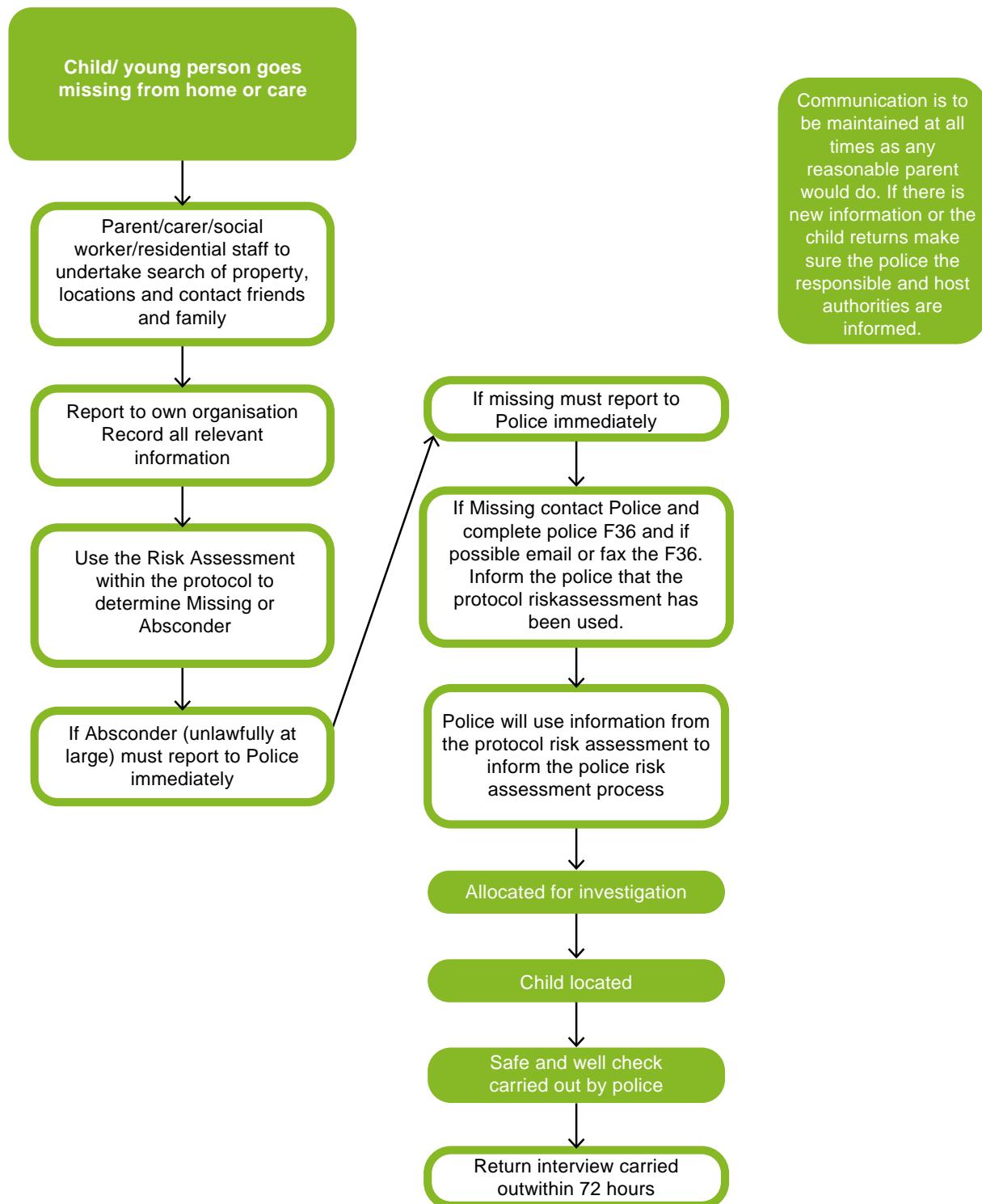
## 11. COLLECTING AND SHARING DATA ON CHILDREN WHO GO MISSING OR ABSENT

- 11.1 Early and effective sharing of information between professionals and local agencies is essential for the identification of patterns of behaviour. This may be used to identify areas of concern for an individual child, or to identify 'hotspots' of activity in a local area.
- 11.2 Data about children and young people who go missing from home or care should be included in regular reports to Council members, especially to the Lead Member for Children's Services. Each local authority with regard to looked after children will record all missing and away from placement episodes through their relevant social care case management system.
- 11.3 Compliance visits will also be undertaken with residential providers and part of this will be to review data/ records of absence and missing young people.

- 11.4 Cheshire Constabulary will work and share information with other police forces and local authorities as required to ensure effective cross boundary working with missing cases including the transfer of primacy and the originating force to keep the incident open until the child/ young person has been located.
- 11.5 The commissioned service provides regular reports to local authority around the activity of commission this includes further data on reasons for young people running, associates that they run with as well as highlighting positive outcomes for young people.
- 11.6 The sharing of data will help organisations across Cheshire to identify risks in their area, such as exploitation, gangs or crime related activity that might not be apparent. It will also help identify trends, for example, whether children are going missing from a particular children's home or other patterns across the local authority. This will enable organisations to have a proactive approach to the needs of children and young people across Cheshire.

## APPENDIX 1

### Procedures for reporting a child that is Missing or Absconder (unlawfully at large)



If children placed out of their local authority run away the host local authority Missing Protocol should be followed. A notification process for missing/absent episodes should be in place between the responsible and host local authorities



Cheshire East Safeguarding  
Children's Partnership



Cheshire West and Chester  
Safeguarding Children  
Partnership