Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Safeguarding Children Boards

Safeguarding Children and Young People who Run Away and go Missing from Home and Care

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1. RELEVANT GUIDANCE

Statutory Guidance On Children Who Run Away Or Go Missing From Home Or Care (January 2014).

It also complements Working Together to Safeguard Children 2013 and related statutory guidance:

- the Missing Children and Adults Strategy (2011);
- Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (2009);
- the Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation Action Plan (2011); and
- the Children Act 1989 (2004 also?) guidance and regulations Volumes on care planning and review

2. Introduction

This safeguarding protocol should be read and implemented where necessary, by all practitioners and managers working with children or young people who go missing or are at risk of going missing from home or care. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is a key duty for all agencies and practitioners and requires effective joint working between them. When a child goes missing or runs away they are at risk. Safeguarding children therefore includes protecting them from this risk.

It is thought that approximately 25 per cent of children and young people that go missing are at risk of serious harm. There are particular concerns about the links between children running away and the risks of sexual exploitation. Missing children may also be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, to violent crime, gang exploitation, or to drug and alcohol misuse. Looked After Children missing from their placements are particularly vulnerable. However the majority of children who go missing are not looked after and go missing from their family home. The same measures are therefore often required to protect both groups of children. This protocol sets out the steps Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and Luton Borough Council and their partners should take to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do go missing.

3. Scope of the protocol

The protocol is designed for:

- All children living within the boundaries of Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough;
- Children looked after by the Local Authority placed within a children’s home or foster home within the Local Authorities boundaries;
- Children looked after by the Local Authority who are living with parents or relatives and who are subject to a care order;
- All young people for whom Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough have continuing responsibilities under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

The Local Authority retains responsibility for children looked after placed outside the Local Authority boundaries. In these cases there is an expectation that the placement provider will comply with this protocol.

4. Definitions used in this guidance

The terms below are used throughout this document with the following definitions:
- **Child**: anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. ‘Children’ therefore means ‘children and young people’ throughout this guidance.
- **Young runaway**: a child who has run away from their home or care placement, or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.
- **Missing child**: a child reported as missing to the Police by their 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 Local Authority that is responsible for a looked after child’s care and care planning.
- **Host Local Authority**: the Local Authority in which a looked after child is placed when placed out of the responsible Local Authority’s area.
- **Care leaver**: an eligible, relevant or former relevant child as defined by the Children Act 1989.
- **Missing from care**: a looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g., school) and their whereabouts is not known.
- **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.
- **Absconder**: a child who is absent from the placement without permission and who is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process e.g. remands, curfews, tagging, conditions of residence, other bail conditions or ASBO’s or a secure order made in either civil or criminal proceedings. A child in this category must be reported to the Police without delay. If an absconder is under the age of 16, the Police will treat the case as both a missing child and an absconder.

5. **Police definitions**

Since April 2013 Police forces have been rolling out new definitions of ‘missing’ and ‘absent’ in relation to children and adults reported as missing to the Police. These are:

- **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; and
- **absent**: a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.

The Police classification of a person as ‘missing’ or ‘absent’ will be based on on-going risk assessment. Note that ‘absent’ within this definition would not include those defined as “away from placement without authorisation” above: a child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either ‘missing’ or ‘absent’ under the Police definitions. Guidance on how Police forces will apply these definitions to children was issued by Association of Chief Police Officers ACPO in April 2013. Paragraph 19 below explains how local protocols for safeguarding young runaways or children missing from home or care should reflect these definitions.

A missing person will be considered missing until located and his or her wellbeing or otherwise is established.

6. **Roles and responsibilities**

The roles and responsibilities of agencies in respect of children who are missing or at risk of going missing are set out in the statutory guidance.

7. When a child goes missing

7.1 Responsibility of Parents/Carers

Parents and those with parental responsibility are normally expected to have undertaken the basic measures as below, to try to locate the missing child if considered safe to do so. Anyone else who has care of a child without parental responsibility should take all reasonable steps to locate the child and ascertain their safety. Professionals working with families should support parents and carers in taking the following necessary steps:

• Search bedroom/accommodation/outbuildings/vehicles;

• Contact known friends and relatives where a child may be;

• Visit locations that the child is known to frequent, if it is possible;

• Calling or texting any mobile phone held by child and leaving a message asking for contact;

• Contact with school or school friends to gather any available information regarding the child’s whereabouts.

Once the basic measures are completed it is expected that the Police will be informed without delay.

If there is any serious concern for the safety of the child at any stage, the Police should be informed immediately.

7.2 Children who repeatedly run away and go missing

Repeatedly going missing should not be viewed as a normal pattern of behaviour. For example, repeat episodes of a child going missing can indicate sexual exploitation. If a child has run away two or more times, consideration should be given to undertaking an Early Help Assessment (CBC), CAF (BBC & Luton) or if the indications are that the child is a Child in Need, a referral to Children’s Social Care for a single assessment should be made. These will enable the child, their family or both, to be offered further support and guidance.

7.3 All Agencies/Members of the Public

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. 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.

The consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation.

7.4 Role of the Police

Upon receiving a report of a child being missing from home, the Police will carry out enquiries (which are proportionate to the perceived risk) aimed at locating the child as soon as possible.
A risk assessment will be carried out for each individual on every separate occasion they are reported missing to the Police. This risk assessment, usually conducted by the initial Investigating Officer, and subsequently confirmed or revised by a Supervising Officer, will form the basis for the subsequent investigation into the child’s disappearance.

Where the Police locate a child who they believe may be missing, although not officially reported, assessment and enquiries based on the child’s account of the circumstances will be made. These should include checks of Police systems i.e. Police National Computer (PNC/ MEMEX) as well as enquiries at the home address. In the event that a missing child has not been reported by parents/carers, this should trigger further enquiries and assessment by the Police and other relevant agencies in accordance with safeguarding procedures.

If enquiries identify risk factors at the home address, safeguarding procedures will be implemented. If the Police decide not to return the child to the home address options should be discussed with Children’s Social Care to identify suitable responsible adult(s) and/or accommodation, (Emergency Duty Team to be contacted after hours) before placing a child elsewhere; PNC/MEMEX checks must be completed by Bedfordshire Police in respect of the proposed carers and address.

7.5 Recording

Bedfordshire Police must log all occasions when a child is reported missing to the Police. The log (STORM) must remain open only until the COMPACT (a software system that support and efficiently manage the many processes associated with missing persons) based missing person report is opened. However, in high risk cases the log will remain to allow for the co-ordination of resources. Once no longer required for this purpose the STORM (System for Tasking and Operational Resource Management) log will be closed, at which point the COMPACT record will be used. COMPACT missing person reports should be created as soon as possible. The carer will provide information about risk factors in the case on the missing person form (F424). After considering the available information the Police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will be high, medium or low. Bedfordshire Police, in line with ACPO Guidance, have decided that no case involving a child under 18 years will be classified as a low risk.

7.6 Risk Definition

**High**

The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their vulnerability, or may have been the victim of a serious crime, or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.

**Medium**

The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger, or they are a threat to themselves or others.

**Low**

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

7.7 Sharing Information

The Police will receive reports about children missing and record them in accordance with locally agreed procedures.
The Police will notify the relevant Children’s Social Care of all missing children recorded on COMPACT. The relevant Police Officer will also notify Children’s Social Care if there is further information on a particular case or if the Officer has concerns that need further assessment.

7.8 Review of Continued Absence

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. When a child has been absent for a period of 48 hours the Police should update Children’s Social Care of any significant developments at least every five days thereafter or earlier, if deemed appropriate.

7.9 When a child is found

It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to contact the Police and confirm that the missing child has returned.

If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the parents or carers to arrange for the child’s return. 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. The Police should not unreasonably withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport missions for vulnerable children.

7.10 Police ‘safe and well’ check

Once the child has been located, the Police will carry out a Police safe and well check. It will not be conducted over the telephone. The purpose is 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 will lead to the Police closing the missing person report on COMPACT and the case being cancelled on the PNC. This is not a return interview. (The Police will notify Children’s Social Care of the return of the child and any relevant information).

If it is apparent, on the return of the child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that has occurred whilst they were absent, then the Police will instigate further enquiries. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence.

In such circumstances, the missing child’s clothing, mobile phone and trace evidence from their body, fingernails or hair may be crucial. In cases of sexual abuse the child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the Police. The Police should advise parent or carers if they become aware of the location of a scene of any crime committed against the child, or the location of any crucial evidence (i.e. a used condom) they must notify the Police without delay. This will enable the Police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.

Additionally, in matters of sexual 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 Children’s Social Care in accordance with child protection procedures.
All children reported as missing to the Police will be reported to the relevant Children’s Social Care for screening and a decision regarding future interventions. The Risk assessment tool (Appendix 2) can be used to support assessments of children who go missing. For contact details see in Appendix 1.

7.11 Response to Escalating Concerns - Children Missing from the Community

Where there are concerns in relation to a child going missing, including escalating concerns in the event of repeat missing episodes, Children’s Social Care, in conjunction with the Police will agree the next intervention under Early Help/ Child in Need or Child Protection procedures. 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;

- Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well-being of the child.

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

Where the case is “open” or known to a lead professional (Team around the Child or a social worker), the referral from the Police will be forwarded to the lead professional or key worker who is responsible for ensuring that the return interview is completed. The parent or carer will be encouraged to support this process with the child, and the child should be seen alone wherever possible in order for the child’s views to be recorded in the return interview.

Any subsequent Team around the Child meetings, Child In Need planning meetings or Child Protection conferences should try to identify those factors which influence and encourage or offer distraction/disruption from running away for the young person concerned. In the case of factors which influence a young person to run away and where others in the community are involved in this, it may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the missing child or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs. When it is believed that an adult is adversely involved with a child going missing, the Local Authority will invoke child protection procedures and the Police may consider using enforcement tactics such as the harbouring and/or abduction legislation. (Section 2 Child Abduction Act 1984 or Section 49 Children’s Act 1989.) 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.

All meetings should be minuted and must produce a clear action plan, including timescales for action, named lead professionals, risk/contingency planning and regular review dates. The notes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited. In addition, copies should be sent to the child’s allocated Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), where the child is looked after.

7.12 Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Whilst this protocol is concerned with young people up to the age of eighteen, there is a requirement to provide differentiated services for some vulnerable young people and young adults up to 21 years of age where they are
care leavers. Young adults with learning difficulties and / or disabilities need to be assessed in line with vulnerable adult's protocols.

For children and young people with disabilities there needs to be consideration of their individual needs and vulnerabilities and the appropriate agency to provide this information in addition to parents/ carers. In terms of communication and information sharing, an advocate may be required who is familiar with the young person's individual communication needs. This will be essential if they have limited understanding due to learning disabilities, or for example very specific learning difficulties due to Autism.

In terms of vulnerability the young person may have additional or complex health needs, and/or a life-limiting condition, so time will be of the essence in locating them.

7.13 Information Sharing

Agencies should be clear with a child at the outset of contact about policies on confidentiality. He or she should be informed that where there are concerns about possible risks to themselves or others, information will be shared with recognised agencies to identify and reduce those risks. He or she should also be told that where there are high levels of risk, safeguarding procedures may be activated.

Sharing information about a child should, as far as possible and commensurate with their age, be with their permission. However, information can be shared with recognised agencies in the interest of the child’s welfare. This is information deemed to be not personally sensitive and does nothing more than identify and allow contact with the child. It should be recognised that a child is by definition not fully independent and responsible for themselves. Their welfare must take precedence over sensitivities concerning information about them. (Refer to the LSCB Information Sharing Protocol Section 2.4 http://bedfordscb.proceduresonline.com/index.htm)

In all the above circumstances, where the general expectations are not followed the decision making for alternative actions should be fully recorded.

8. Looked After Children

Looked after children are particularly vulnerable. Though the number of looked after children going missing is a small percentage of the overall number of children that go missing, it is disproportionately high compared with the children’s population as a whole.

8.1 Pre Placement

Reducing the risk of looked after children running away

Prior to placement some children will need to be placed who already have an established pattern of running away. In these circumstances it is essential that an assessment of the child/young person’s needs takes into account the factors that led to their running away and the degree of risk of a child going missing. In addition the care plan should include a strategy to minimise the likelihood of the child/young person going missing in the future, the detail of which should be included in the Keep Safe Plan.

Local Authorities have a duty to place a looked after child in the most appropriate placement available, subject to their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. Placing the child in an appropriate placement should help to minimise the risk of the child running away. The care plan should include details of the arrangements that
will need to be in place to keep the child safe (this might be referred to as the Keep safe Plan) and a strategy to minimise the risk of the child going missing from their placement in the future. This should include details of:

- the level and kind of risk presented if the child is missing;
- the level of supervision/support to be offered to the child in placement;
- any other child or adult who could be involved in this behaviour;
- the parent / carers advice on what action they feel should be taken if the child goes missing.

A recent photograph should be obtained if possible from the child’s family with the child’s knowledge and consent.

The child / young person, parents/ carers, those with parental responsibility and other adults involved in the child / family network will be given information concerning the plan to keep children safe; as far as possible they should agree the strategy to help prevent them running away and keep safe commensurate with their age and level of understanding, and be told what actions will be taken if he / she is missing or absent without permission. Care Plans also should inform the issues and actions which need to be taken by the carers and key professionals in the event of a child going missing.

Additionally, if the child is an unaccompanied asylum seeking child (UASC), the Social Worker should consider whether the child is particularly vulnerable to trafficking and/or other forms of exploitation.

Any decision to place a child at distance should be based on an assessment of the child’s needs including their need to be effectively safeguarded. Evidence suggests that distance from home, family and friends are a key factor for looked after children running away.

Listening to a child is an important factor in protecting and minimising the chances of a child running away. The Children’s Rights Director (2012) reported that “one of the major influences of them running away is having a sense that they are not being listened to and taken seriously”, particularly about placement decisions and moves. All looked after children should be informed about their right to be supported by an independent advocate.

8.2 Looked after children who are away from placement without authorisation

Sometimes a looked after child may be away from their placement without authorisation. While they are not missing, they may still be placing themselves at risk because of where they are. For example, they may choose to stay at the house of friends where the carer has concerns about risks of sexual exploitation. The Police may not consider this child as missing or absent, but all appropriate action to protect the child and seek their return should be taken and those with responsibility for the child/young person should be informed.

8.3 Reporting Children Missing from Care

Carers and residential staff should carry out reasonable enquiries to determine if a child is missing or absent without authorisation before reporting a child missing to the Police.

8.4 Residential Units

When a child is missing or absent without authorisation from a residential establishment it is the responsibility of the member of staff to inform the Senior Manager on duty and the child’s Social Worker (or the Emergency Duty
Team if out of hours). If the Manager has any reason to believe that a child is at risk as a result of going missing, a referral should be made to the Police and advice sought as to the next steps.

8.5 Foster carers

When a child is missing or is absent without permission from foster care, the carer should notify the Police and seek advice, inform the child’s Social Worker, or in their absence the relevant teams’ Duty Worker or the Emergency Duty Team outside office hours and their fostering social worker. The carer or foster carer should not delay in phoning the Police if they believe the child to be at risk.

The risk assessment guidance in Appendix 2 should be used to determine the level of risk/concern and action to be taken.

All missing looked after children will be considered high or medium risk.

8.6 Risk

High Risk: The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability; or may have been the victim of a serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger. The level of risk will increase depending on the length of time the child remains missing.

If the absence is considered to fall within the high-risk category the Senior Manager or Duty Officer should inform the following without delay:-

- The Police;
- The parents (and anyone else who has parental responsibility);
- The Social Worker and the Team Manager;
- The responsible Head of Service and the Assistant Director, who will in turn notify the Director of Children’s Social Care;
- Any other relevant professional e.g. Head Teacher or Head of Year Group.

Medium Risk: The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others.

8.7 Notification to the Police

When reporting the matter to the Police the following information should be made available:-

- A description of the child;
- Legal status of the child;
- When the child was last seen and with whom;
- A recent photograph (to be returned when the child has been safely located);
- Family addresses;
- Previous placement addresses;
- Known acquaintances – names and addresses;
- Any previous history of absconding;
- The name and address of the child’s GP and dentist.
Any circumstances which increase the risk to the child or to the public should be drawn to the attention of the Police.

8.8 Missing during an external activity

If a child goes missing or is ‘lost’ during an external activity (such as an outing to a theme park) the carer or member of staff in charge of the activity will:-

- Notify the Police in that area;
- Notify the relevant Children’s Social Care Team Manager or Head of Service who in turn will notify the Assistant Director if appropriate;
- Initiate a local search if staffing and circumstances permit;
- The Head of Service after consultation with the responsible staff will decide within 24 hours whether the group should return.

The Social Worker/ Senior Manager of the residential setting will ensure the child’s family and all relevant managers are informed and that the provisions of the protocol are activated as appropriate.

8.9 Initial Police procedures

On referral from the Social Worker or carer, a Police Officer will visit the residential or foster placement home to take details as described above as soon as possible depending on the seriousness of the report. The Officer will then make inquiries concerning the child with all known family members, acquaintances, and with school and hospitals as appropriate. Management remains with the Local Policing area in which the incident has occurred until such time it is either transferred to another area, or the Missing Persons Unit (MPU) agree they will take primacy in the investigation. The point of contact for all partner agencies should be the MPU regardless.

8.10 Action Planning

Whenever a child’s absence is considered high risk a joint action plan should be developed between the Social Worker and Team Manager (or EDT) and the Police based on the level of risk that is now identified, this should include:-

- Further visits to the child’s family and any other place the child may be;
- Information needed to be given to other Police units and Children’s Social Care;
- Support to the family/carer of the child;
- Contact with the school or other agencies;
- Any publicity needed at this stage;
- Any legal action to recover or secure the child.

It is the responsibility of the Social Worker to establish what has happened and use those resources available to the agency to locate the child. In all cases the Social Worker, in conjunction with the Team Manager and the Police where appropriate, will assess that all actions which should be taken are being taken to locate the child and decide on any further action.

All missing Looked after Children should be brought to the notice of the relevant Children’s Social Care Manager, Head of Service and the Missing Persons Unit without delay. They will then assess that all actions which should be taken are being taken and decide on any further action. If a child is not located, a strategy meeting must take
place within 24 hours of the child going missing and at a minimum of every 48 hours thereafter if the child is not located.

8.11 Communication

Where a child is accommodated within a residential unit, should the child remain missing, and after Police, Social Worker and parents have been informed, the Senior Manager of the home should inform all children and staff (normally within a 12 hour period) to avoid distressing rumours and to obtain any additional information about the child’s whereabouts. Foster carers should have a similar discussion within the family.

During the period a child is missing, the Social Worker should be in daily contact with the Police, the child’s placement and family if possible. Where the child is placed in another authority area, the Social Worker should inform that authority and where possible work with them to recover / locate the child and as far as possible in accordance with these procedures. A strategy meeting should be convened to review the actions to be taken alongside partner agencies in the area where the child is placed.

The Social Worker will contact the child’s school and local hospital in case they have, or can obtain information about a child’s whereabouts. Local hospitals should be contacted in respect of any admissions. Any such information should be passed on to the Police.

8.12 Strategy Meetings

A strategy meeting should be planned within the first 24 hours of the absence. The strategy meeting should:

- Pool all information concerning the child’s movements;
- Assess whether all possible actions are being taken in respect of the absence;
- Record a risk assessment in relation to the child;
- Confirm an action plan;
- Agree a time to review the plan;
- Ensure minutes of the meetings are kept which include the latest risk assessment.

8.13 Missing Child over 24 hours known to Children’s Social Care

Where an absence lasts over 24 hours, the Conference and Review Service should be notified by the Manager and a request considered for an alert to be sent to other Local Authorities.

The joint action plan should be followed and support offered to the family and carers of the child. Frequent contact should be maintained between the Social Worker, Police, the child’s family and placement, and the relevant Head of Service, in consultation with the Police and Assistant Director, may involve the media.

If the absence continues past 24 hours, the case should be subject to on-going strategy meetings, statutory reviews should also continue and Child Protection meetings if the child is subject to a Child Protection plan. This is particularly important to ensure that plans are in place to facilitate the safe return of the child.

Notification of all outstanding missing persons should be sent by the Police to the National Crime Agency (NCA) within 72 hours of them being reported missing or immediately if there is a significant cause for concern. Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB) within 14 days. However the Police will not be precluded from
forwarding additional information to the NCA PNMPB in a shorter time if a particular case appears to warrant more urgent attention.

The cases of all children who remain missing from placement should be subject to continuous review by the Police and Children’s Social Care until their whereabouts and welfare can be established.

8.14 Care planning and review

Care plans should include a detailed assessment of the child’s needs, including the need for the provision of an appropriate placement that offers protection from harm. Where a child goes missing from a placement, a statutory review of their care plan can provide an opportunity to check that it addresses the reasons for an absence. The review should result in the development of a strategy to minimise a repeat of the missing episode. In particular, any issues relating to the vulnerability of the child to sexual exploitation, trafficking or criminal or gang involvement should be identified. Actions to address these needs and ensure the child is kept safe should be clearly set out in the care plan. The Police and other relevant agencies should be given the opportunity to contribute to the review.

Where a child already has an established pattern of running away, the care plan should include a strategy to keep them safe and minimise the likelihood of the child running away in the future. This should be discussed and agreed as far as possible with the child and with the child’s carers and should include detailed information about the responsibilities of all services, the child’s parents and other adults involved in the family network. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) should be informed about missing and away from placement without authorisation episodes and they should address these in statutory reviews.

8.15 Out of area placements

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

If children placed out of their Local Authority run away, this protocol should be followed, in addition to complying with other processes that are specified in the policy of the responsible Local Authority. 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. A notification process for missing and away from placement without authorisation episodes should be agreed between responsible and host Local Authorities.

8.16 Media communications

It is for the Police to advise the media regarding a child missing from the care of the Local Authority. A decision to publicise by press and/or television must be made with the responsible Head of Service and the Assistant Director (advising the Director of Children’s Social Care) in conjunction with the Communications Team in each authority this decision may be taken within 24 hours.

8.17 Recording

Throughout the process identified in this protocol, a full record should be kept of all actions taken. Messages received/given by all parties searching for a missing child will be kept:-
• On the Police missing persons form;
• The home’s or carer’s logbook with a duplicate (photocopy) entry on the child’s file.

These records will be accessible to both parties who should maintain individual histories of the situation.

8.18 Planning for the child’s return

If a child’s absence continues beyond two hours and falls within this protocol then commence contingency planning for when the child is located.

Plans should be made as to what actions needs to be taken when a child is located. For those children whose absence is unauthorised or the period of absence is short, planning should involve the Social Worker and Team Leader in consultation with the Setting Manager, or family placement worker, parents / carers and Police.

Such plans should include:-

• Whether the child will be placed with the current carers or transfer to another placement;
• How s/he will be conveyed;
• Whether the Police wish to interview formally the child before s/he is returned to his/her placement;
• Whether an independent person is engaged to talk to the child after his/her return;
• The support required by the child to ensure they are settled back in the placement.

The Police will co-operate in the arrangements made by Children’s Social Care to return a child to his / her place of residence and where appropriate may assist in this. Any photograph used in searching for a child will be returned to the placement (or Social Worker where appropriate).

Police will interview the child on return to obtain information concerning his/her whereabouts, who she/ he was with and any other relevant information.

In the event of a child being in Police custody having committed offences while absent, plans will be reviewed depending on Police action.

Occasionally, if a child is over 16 years old and is being looked after by the Local Authority, the Police may have limited power to enforce a return if the child resists this and is not apparently at any risk. If risk factors are identified, legal advice may be necessary in considering options.

The Police could need to speak to staff or carers in connection with the incident and the reasons a child is missing.

8.19 Return to Placement

A professionals meeting should be considered and organised where appropriate within a reasonable timescale following the child’s return to agree what support is needed and to ensure that the reasons the child had for going missing are fully considered.

The child should be told:-
• That we would expect him / her to talk to an independent person or an appropriate friend or person the child trusts about the absence;

• He/she should be advised that the independent person would normally be the Social Worker (so that appropriate support is offered to ensure that the child settles and does not run away again) but if he / she wishes, it could be another professional, independent, visitor, or an appropriate friend;

• In addition, it is the responsibility of the Social Worker to interview a young person within 72 hours of the incident;

• On return the child’s medical condition should be discussed and an offer made to arrange medical attention;

• Parents, Police, Social Worker and all others informed of the absence should be advised of the child’s return without delay.

All unauthorised absences and missing episodes should be recorded and a full report of their circumstances made available for the child’s next Looked After Review.

Regular or persistent absences should be discussed with the IRO with a view to an early review being called if necessary.

The Review will update the risk assessment in relation to the missing episodes and how risks in relation to the child can be diminished and the Care Plan updated with contingencies to keep the child safe.

9. Return Interviews

Return Interviews’ is the term applied to the safety needs and risk assessment carried out by statutory Children’s Social Care. It should include an exploration of the reason the child left their home or placement as well as what risks they were exposed to whilst missing. The ‘return interview’ is different from the Police ‘safe and well’ check.

Children should be offered the opportunity to talk about their absence to someone independent of their carers on their return. Providing children with an opportunity to talk is key to safeguarding them. Return interviews are designed to support a child in exploring his or her feelings and concerns. They should be gentle and inquisitive, not adversarial or seeking to attribute blame.

9.1 For children in the community

Return interviews should be offered for every missing episode where a child has;

• Been missing for over 24 hours;
• Been missing on two or more occasions;
• Is believed to have engaged in criminal activity;
• Known mental health issues;
• Hurt or harmed whilst missing;
• Is at known risk of sexual exploitation;
• Has contact with persons posing risk to children.

A return interview should be conducted within 72 hours.
9.2 For Children Looked After

A Return Interview should be conducted after each episode of the child having been reported missing. The interview should be conducted within 72 hours (i.e. 3 working days) of the child’s return.

It is noted that unauthorised absences or late returns will not necessarily constitute a missing episode and as such discretion can be used to define the nature of the absence. Periods of absence of any sort should be fully considered in a child’s review.

Child protection 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 sexual exploitation or contact with persons posing a risk to children.

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 the child.

The acceptable minimum in the event of a single missing episode is that the missing episode is risk assessed by Children’s Social Care following information gathered and cross-referenced from the child, the carers and the Police.

It is the responsibility of each Local Authority to ensure that the return interview is carried out to a suitable standard and any emerging issues are followed up. Account should be taken of any preference the child has for the conducting of the return interview.

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 return interview should be conducted in all instances within 72 hours of the child’s return, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

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 harbouring warning notices under the Child Abduction Act;
- To identify and address any harm the child has suffered - including harm that may not;
- Have already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check.

The interview will be recorded and a copy held or recorded on the appropriate child’s record.
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. The child or young person should be informed of the need and rationale to share such information in the best interests of their safety.

Where a return interview leads to a disclosure that needs a specific action, the matter should be followed up by the relevant Children’s Social Care and/or the Police, in the interest of openness and transparency, the child should be informed.

For looked after children it remains the responsibility of the allocated 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 placement should alert the relevant Manager in Children’s Social Care.

9.3 Additional Monitoring Arrangements

Across Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Luton, representatives of the Police, Children’s Social Care and partner agencies meet together on a monthly basis to consider all cases of children and young people who persistently go missing or where there are concerns about their whereabouts or activities during a missing episode and all cases where the missing event has been assessed as high risk. These meetings ensure that a co-ordinated response is made to children and young people at risk through running away.

A strategic group (Children Missing from Home and Care Strategic Group) meets on a regular basis to co-ordinate the strategic response to missing children. In addition the Local Safeguarding Children Boards will receive reports of partnership activity in line with their responsibility to monitor information on children who go missing and assure themselves that children in this vulnerable group are safeguarded.

9.4 Children at risk of sexual exploitation

For those children for whom the risk of sexual exploitation has been identified, the child protection procedures in respect of child sexual exploitation must be followed.

(In Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough all looked after children over 12 years of age will be subject to a CSE risk assessment on a six monthly basis. The outcome of these assessments will be reported to in the child’s record and identified at the child’s looked after children review where safety planning needs to be considered.)

9.5 Care Leavers

Care leavers, particularly 16 and 17 year olds may go missing from their home or accommodation and face the same risks as other missing children. Young people should feel safe in their accommodation and the areas where it is located. Social Workers and their Managers should ensure that pathway plans set out where a young person may be vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or going missing, and put in place support services to minimise this risk.)
9.6 Looked after children who may have been trafficked from abroad

Some looked after children are unaccompanied asylum seeking children or other migrant children. Some of this group may have been trafficked into the UK and may remain under the influence of their traffickers even while they are looked after. Trafficked children are at high risk of going missing, with most going missing within one week of becoming looked after and many within 48 hours. Unaccompanied migrant or asylum seeking children who go missing immediately after becoming looked after should be treated as potential victims of trafficking.

The assessment of need to inform the care plan will be particularly critical in these circumstances and should be done immediately as the window for intervention is very narrow. The assessment must seek to establish:

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

In conducting this assessment, it will be necessary for the Local Authority to work in close co-operation with the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) and immigration staff familiar with patterns of trafficking into the UK. Immigration staff who specialise in trafficking issues should be able to advise on whether information about the individual child suggests that they fit the profile of a potentially trafficked child.

Provision may need to be made for the child to be in a safe place before any assessment takes place and for the possibility that they may not be able to disclose full information about their circumstances immediately. The location of the child should not be divulged to any enquirers until their identity and relationship with the child has been established, if necessary with the help of Police and Immigration Services. In these situations the roles and responsibilities of care providers must be fully understood and recorded in the placement plan. Proportionate safety measures that keep the child safe and take into account their best interests should also be put in place to safeguard the child from going missing from care or from being re-trafficked.

It is essential that the Local Authority continues to share information with the Police and Immigration staff, concerning potential crimes against the child, the risk to other children, or other relevant immigration matters.

'Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked' provides practical guidance for agencies which are likely to encounter, or have referred to them, children and young people who may have been trafficked. [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-who-may-have-been-trafficked-practice-guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-who-may-have-been-trafficked-practice-guidance)

Where it is suspected that a child has been trafficked, they should be referred by the Local Authority into the UK’s victim identification framework, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms)

The Trafficked Children Toolkit11, 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 NRM. [http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/trafficking/](http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/trafficking/)

9.7 Forced marriage
All professionals should be mindful of the issues of Forced marriage. Some young people run away because they are at risk of abuse. Forced marriage in particular can lead to young women running away from home.

**Appendix 1**

**Contact Information**

If you believe that a child is at immediate risk this should be reported without delay to the Police. For emergencies use 999.

**Children’s Social Care**

**Bedford Borough Council** - tel 01234 718700 or email multiagency@bedford.gov.uk

**Central Bedfordshire Council** - tel 0300 300 8585

**Luton Borough Council** - tel 01582 547653

**Emergency Duty Team** (outside office hours and at weekends) – tel 0300 300 8123

Reporting a Child Missing from Home - Reports are expected to reach Bedfordshire Police by normal public reporting methods, using the following number 101

**Other useful address and contact information**

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 9.30am to 4.30pm; email help@nspcc.org.uk; or web [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/research_wda48228.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/research_wda48228.html)
Appendix 2 - Eastern Safeguarding Project

Guidance for assessing vulnerability and risk

Risk factors to inform decision making for children/young people who runaway/go missing.

This risk factor framework is to be used by Police, Social Care, Children and Young People Services, Education/Learning and Partner Agencies.

Completion of the framework is to assist any existing risk assessment based on levels of concern and not necessarily the period of time that the person is missing. The framework is to be used flexibly and to gather evidence to support professional judgement and best practice.

### Risk factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Factors to be considered</th>
<th>Details and circumstances</th>
<th>High Risk</th>
<th>Medium Risk</th>
<th>Low Risk</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Is the person vulnerable due to age or disability/medical condition or any other similar factor?</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Behaviour that is out of character is often a strong indicator of risk; are the circumstances of going missing different from normal behaviour patterns? Any history of missing?</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Is the young person suspected to be subject of a significant crime in progress e.g. abduction?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Is there any indication that the person is likely to commit suicide? History of harm and/or self-harm?</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Is there a reason for the person to go missing? Circumstances at the time of disappearance?</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Are there any indications that preparations had been made for an absence?</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>What was the young person intending to do when last seen e.g. going to the shops or catching a bus and did they fail to complete their intentions?</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Are there family or relationship problems or recent history of family conflict and/or abuse? History of harm?</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Are they the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence? History of harm?</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Does the missing person have any physical illness or mental health problems? State of mind/body.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Are they the subject of a Child Protection Plan?</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Previously disappeared and suffered or was exposed to harm?</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Belief that the person may not have the ability to interact safely with others or in an unknown environment? Resilience of young person to changing circumstances and/or learning disability. Communication and language considerations.</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Do they need essential medication that is not likely to be available to them?</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>On-going bullying or harassment e.g. racial, sexual, homophobic or local community concerns or cultural issues etc.?</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Were they involved in a violent and/or racist/homophobic incident immediately prior to disappearance?</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>School/college/university/employment or financial problems? Reported as missing from education or home educated?</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Drug or alcohol dependency?</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Other unlisted factors which the officer/practitioner or supervisor considers should influence risk assessment? – For example:</td>
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<td>▪ Is there reason to believe the child is being trafficked?</td>
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<td>▪ Is the child from another Local Authority?</td>
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<td>▪ They are a Looked After Child/young person?</td>
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