



Phoenix Community Care Ltd Policy & Procedure

Child Missing From Care

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1. Introduction

Children in the care of the Local Authority often have a history of inconsistent parenting and poor adult role modelling which may lead them to display behaviours which can place them, and sometimes others, at risk.

One such behaviour is absconding, going missing or staying out beyond agreed times. The reasons for such absences are varied and complex and should not be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and experience of care.

Every effort should be made to ensure the safety and well being of [Looked After Children](#) and young people. Each incident where a child/young person is missing must therefore require immediate attention from all the professionals involved including foster carers. The professionals must collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent action plan is drawn up to secure the return of the child/young person.

When a child/young person goes missing from care, the Police are always involved and it is therefore, important that Social Care and the Police work together.

2. Definition

There are various different terms which are used in relation to missing children:

[Statutory Guidance On Children Who Run Away Or Go Missing From Home Or Care \(January 2014\)](#) uses the following definitions:

- **Missing Child:**
A child reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.
- **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 are not known.
- **Away from Placement Without Authorisation:**
A Looked After Child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.
- **Young Runaway:**
A child who has run away from their home or care placement, or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.

[The Police \(ACPO Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons \(2013\)\)](#) categorise children as either Missing or Absent.

- **Missing:**
Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.
- **Absent:**
A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be.

The police classification of a person as 'Missing' or 'Absent' will be based on on-going risk assessment. [Absent](#) within the police 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.



Police will not be sent to cases where children/young people are defined as being 'absent'. Instead the onus will be on care providers to take steps to locate the child/young person, with monitoring by the police and escalation to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk. It is expected that all reasonable steps should be taken to locate the child/young person prior to making a report to the police. Where they remain absent, and you feel that they may be at risk of harm, then a report should be made to the police.

Police will attend reports of 'missing' children/young people'.

Absences which cause concern are those where staff or carers have no indication that a child/young person is likely to return within an agreed period of time, their whereabouts are unknown or there is immediate concern for their safety.

However there may be other situations when you will have to make a judgement about whether this would fall within the remit of this procedure. Examples of this would include when a child/young person continually fails to return at agreed times and there are reasons to be concerned about their safety. You must make every effort to record details of child/young person's whereabouts.

If the child/young person does not return home at the agreed time, you must try to contact them if you know where they are. If you are able to contact the child/young person or you know where they are, you may go and collect the child/young person or negotiate some alternative arrangements. Before making these arrangements you should contact your supervising PCC worker or contact Duty Team, 07891 427157. This team operates from 5pm to 9am Monday to Friday and at weekends. However, if you believe the young person is at risk, you must inform the child's social worker or the placing authority's emergency duty team immediately.

The same principles and procedures apply for children who have been 'snatched' from Local Authority Care by parents/carers.

3. Risk Management

The [Care Plan](#) of the child/young person should be drawn up prior to their admission to a foster placement in the case of planned placements or within 72 hours of their admission in the case of emergency placements.

As part of the process consideration must be given to any associated risk factors in relation to the child/young person absencing him/herself or regularly returning home late following which, there should be a written agreement as to the action to be taken. This assessment must be recorded as part of the Care Plan and should include:

- The likelihood of the child/young person going missing, including information about previous patterns of going missing or risks associated with being missing.
- The level of supervision/support available to the child/young person. This may, for example in extreme cases, include additional one-to-one support.
- The parents or those who hold Parental Responsibility's views on what action should be taken if the child/young person goes missing or regularly returns home late.
- The level of risk presented if the child/young person goes missing – for example, a history of alcohol abuse, sexual exploitation, mental health, learning difficulties.
- Details of any medical condition and treatment that the child/young person is currently undergoing and the implications of this in terms of their absence.

- All the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the places where the child/young person may return to.

In addition, consideration should be given as to whether to advise the child/young person and their parents what actions will be taken if s/he absents her/himself without permission. In cases where there are serious concerns regarding the risks associated with a child/young person going missing, consideration should be given to informing the local Police and the Local Authority Social Care if the child/young person is placed out of borough at the point of admission or once the particular concerns are identified.

In assessing whether the child/young person is at risk, the following should be taken into consideration:

- Guidance already agreed and incorporated within the child/young person's Care Plan.
- The age and/or legal status of the child/young person.
- Time of day/night.
- Any special needs.
- Previous behaviour patterns, including patterns of missing, absconding, self harm, sexual exploitation, drug or alcohol abuse, offending.
- State of mind/perceived risk at the time of missing.
- Whether the child/young person is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation.
- Any other relevant information or particular circumstances.

When a child/young person goes out they should always be asked where they are going, who they will be with and at what time do they expect to return. This is standard good practice and a principle of good parenting.

When a child/young person seeks to leave their place of accommodation without permission every effort should be made to dissuade them. It should be very clear to the child/young person they are going out without permission and concern for their safety should be communicated. If there is extreme concern for a child/young person's immediate safety these attempts may include physically stopping the child/young person from leaving. The appropriateness of this action should be assessed within the context of guidance in relation to restraint and holding.

4. Notification of Absence

Where there is concern that a child/young person may absent her/himself without permission from foster care, you should inform the child/young person's social worker or Team Manager or out of hours, Social Care Emergency Duty Team, unless it has been decided previously at the Placement Agreement meeting that you should contact the Police directly. In an emergency situation you should call the Police immediately.

In responding to and managing an individual child/young person missing from care, both Social Care and Police staff should not dismiss the potential significance of multiple periods of being absent without permission. Sometimes such children/young people are labelled as "the problem" without considering the reasons for them persistently absenting themselves. Many of these children/young people put themselves in situations of extreme risk whilst being missing.

Whilst notifying the police of the absence of a child or young person is an essential part of the overall process, having done so does not absolve you of your corporate parenting responsibilities for the child, and you should take all necessary actions to attempt to locate the missing person including where possible, searches of the missing person's room within the foster home, immediate searches of the local area, and making contact with the missing person's family and friends to establish if the missing person is with them, or has been seen since by them since the time that the person was identified as being absent.

Once it is established that the child/young person is missing and a risk assessment has been carried out, the following steps should be taken immediately:

- Child/young person's social worker or Team Manager or the Emergency Duty Team should alert the Police.

Please note: Once the child/young person's social worker or Team Manager has alerted the Police, the Police may want to phone you/parents for more information.

- A description of the child/young person.
- Legal/Immigration Status.
- When the child/young person was last seen and with whom.
- A recent photograph.
- Telephone numbers including the child/young person's mobile phone number if she/he possesses one.
- Names of family, known friends/acquaintances, addresses and telephone numbers.
- Details of previous absconding behaviour.
- Any prevailing medical condition for which the child/young person is requiring on-going treatment together with name, address and telephone number of their GP.
- Any other circumstances which increase the risk to a child/young person including information from previous risk assessments.
- Details of other people the child/young person may be with, including descriptions, approximate age or names, if possible.
- Any information given to the Police that is not detailed in the standard Police form should be recorded.

Please note the social worker should gather the above information as much as possible before phoning the Police. For all the Looked After Children a photograph and Legal Orders should be kept accessible in the child/young person's file.

5. Searches

As part of the process of reporting the child/young person to the Police, you should confirm with the child/young person's social worker that you have conducted a search of your home to ensure that the child/young person is not in hiding there. You should also check the child/young person's bedroom to see if there is any information that may assist in locating the child, e.g., missing person effects, diaries, emails and similar documents.

The Police may request to undertake a more detailed search of the foster home including the child/young person's bedroom. This will be the subject to an agreement between a Head of Service and the Crime Manager.

6. Communication

Should a child/young person's absence continue for more than 48 hours, you should inform members of the foster home. In this way distressing rumours may be avoided and additional information might be obtained. You may seek the support of the child/young person's social worker/Supervising Social Worker.

7. Looked after Child - Over 16 years

If the young person is over 16 years old and is Looked After, the Police may have limited powers to enforce a return home to you, if the young person resists and is not apparently at any risk. In such situations, the Head of Service will have to consider whether any further action needs to be taken, in discussion with Legal and Police.

8. Planning for Return

Contingency plans for when the child/young person is found should be made, such plans should include:

- Will the child/young person return to the previous placement?
- How will they be taken there?
- Do the Police wish to interview the child/young person before s/he is returned to his/her placement?
- When should the allocated social worker talk to the child/young person after his/her return?
- Will be it more appropriate for the child/young person to talk to an independent person?
- Should the child/young person have a medical?
- Who will inform parents or any other person with Parental Responsibility?
- Who will inform other agencies, for example, school, the children/young people's Guardian?
- Should further legal action be taken, for example, an application for a [Secure Order](#)?
- Who will review the lessons learnt?

The Return

The child/young person should always be welcomed back following a period of being missing and inquiries made as to their previous whereabouts. Any information given should be treated sensitively. If the return occurs in the middle of the night, it should be followed up in more detail as soon as it practicable.

When the child/young person returns you should immediately inform PCC staff, the child/young person's social worker or Team Manager or Emergency Duty Team, Supervising Social Worker etc. The Police should also be informed either by the child/young person's social worker or you. The Police will conduct a "Safe and Well" check for ALL children reported missing. The parents must also be informed immediately by the child/young person's social worker, Team Manager or Emergency Duty Team.

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

The locating agency should ensure that on the child's return, his/her medical condition is discussed with the child and his/her parents / and you immediately.

The child's Local Authority will arrange a meeting within 48 hours with all the key people, including parents or those with Parental Responsibility. The decision to call the meeting should be made by the Social Work Team Manager. The meeting should consider whether a full medical should take place. The child/young person's social worker should arrange this. If a child/young person refuses to have a medical then legal advice should be sought.



The child's social worker must visit and meet with the young person alone within 72 hrs of his/her return. Where this is not possible, e.g. the child is placed at a distance from his placing authority or the social worker is not available, a team manager may agree that the child is interviewed at a later date, or by an alternative person. The arrangement and reasons for this must be fully recorded.

The child's social worker will ask the young person if they wish to speak to an independent person of their choice, this could be a teacher, school nurse, Youth or YOT worker, a voluntary sector practitioner or a police officer whom the child knows and trusts. If the social worker is not available it is the responsibility of the Team Manager to arrange the visit.

9. Statutory Reviews

During the period child/young person is missing, [Statutory Reviews](#) must continue to take place and the child's placing authority will do this.

10. Recording

Throughout the process, you must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received/given. The child/young person's social worker and Team Manager must also keep a full record of all the events/meetings and actions/decisions taken in the child/young person's file.