

Children Missing from Home and Care Policy



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1. Introduction

Merton's Procedure for Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home is designed to support an effective collaborative safeguarding response from all agencies involved when a child goes missing. It aims to provide guidance for assessing both the risk of the child going missing and the risk to the child when they are missing. The Procedure describes appropriate staff/agency actions to locate the child, to effect their return and to identify the issues which caused, and may continue to cause, the child to go missing.

This procedure should be used in conjunction with the London Child Protection Procedures.

2. Principles

The following principles should be adopted by all agencies in relation to identifying and locating children who go missing:

- The safety and welfare of the child is paramount
- Locating and returning the child to a safe environment is the main objective
- Child Protection Procedures will be initiated whenever there are concerns that a child who is missing may be at risk of significant harm
- Notification to the Police will only take place following a Risk Assessment and in clearly defined circumstances as set out in this Procedure
- The Police will act on any report of a child missing on the understanding that a Risk Assessment has been completed.
- Every '*missing*' child who returns will be interviewed by someone other than the direct carer.
- Where the child is known to the Children's Social Care or meets the criteria for referral to the Children's Social Care, the Local Authority will ensure that there is a range of service options to address the child's needs when they return.

3. Lead Person Responsible for Children Missing From Home or Care

Children's Social Care – Head of Service MASH and First Response
Metropolitan Police – Merton Borough Commander
Catch 22 – Service Manager

4. Definitions & Other Procedures

4.1 Missing

For the purpose of this Procedure a child (i.e. a young person under the age of 18 years) is to be considered '*missing*' if their 'whereabouts cannot be established and where circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another. They will be considered missing until they are located and their well-being or otherwise is established.

Absences that cause concern are those where:

- Staff or carers have no indication as to the child's whereabouts and/or
- There is no indication that the child is likely to return within a reasonable period of time and
- There is immediate concern for the child's safety.

There may be circumstances when a child who goes missing from care is experiencing harm or is at risk of harm. This includes children subjected to fabricated or induced illness, female genital mutilation, abuse by children, abduction by family or others, domestic violence, sexually exploited children, trafficked children and asylum seeking children.

The Missing from Care Procedure should be followed in these instances and the London Child Protection Procedures should be followed, if required, on the child's return. Reference should also be made to the London Child Protection Procedures and the supplementary London multi-agency procedures relating to these specific circumstances. These procedures provide information that may help staff to recognise and manage these circumstances.

Any child aged 12 or below whose whereabouts cannot be established would automatically be classed as missing.

Any child that is at risk of CSE whose whereabouts cannot be established should be classed as missing although there should be sufficient risk indicators to support the belief that the child is at risk.

The Children's Society *Still Running* survey estimates that around 100,000 young people under the age of 16 run away from home or care each year across the UK. Many stay with friends or family members, but there are some who have no access to these networks of support and end up in harmful situations. Only a quarter of children who run away from home every year are reported as missing (SEU, 2002). The majority of children who run away do so to avoid their home circumstances, they typically see themselves as 'runaways' rather than 'missing' children. In terms of the

steps which need to be taken to locate these children and safeguard their welfare, this Procedure includes them as ‘missing’ children.

4.2 Unauthorised Absence

This category is critical to the clarification of roles of the Police and Children’s Social Care. Some children absent themselves from home or care for a short period and then return, often their whereabouts are known or may be quickly established through contact with family or friends or are unknown but the children are not considered at risk. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed as a boundary testing activity which is well within the range of normal teenage behaviour. These children have taken ‘*unauthorised absence*’, and would not usually come within the definition of ‘*missing*’ for this Procedure.

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC, formerly ACPO) definition of a missing person is:

‘A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be’.

If a child’s whereabouts are known then they cannot be ‘missing’. However, if they are known to be staying somewhere where they are in danger and it is not possible for the carer/person with parental responsibility to remove the child or young person, then it may still be necessary to involve Police and partners in safeguarding them.

Social Workers and partner agencies should always consider whether unauthorised return to family and friends, or for older young people, trips abroad place a child / young person at risk.

The police classification of a person as ‘absent’ and ‘missing’ are based on continuous monitoring and risk assessment. See ACPO guidance (2013, ratified by the Metropolitan Police Service in 2014¹) for further information on how these definitions are applied to missing children.

All cases classified as “missing” by the Police will receive an active Police response – such as deployment of officers to locate a child.

Cases where the child is classified as “absent” will be recorded by the Police and risk assessed regularly but no active response will be deployed. Absent cases will be resolved when a young person returns or new information comes to light suggesting he/she is at risk where the case will be reclassified to “missing”.

4.3 Children and Young People Missing from school

Children who are missing from school may also be missing from care or home and at risk. Education staff should follow the *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (DfE 2014)*.

¹ Interim Missing Persons Guidance 2013, <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf>

If a member of Education staff becomes aware that a child may be missing, they should try to establish with the parents or carers, what has happened. If this is not possible, or the child is missing, the Designated Safeguarding Children Teacher should, together with the class teacher, assess the child's vulnerability, as per the *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (DfE 2014)* or by completing the Risk Assessment in Appendix 3.

If it comes to the notice of a member of Education staff that a child who was missing, has returned, that member of staff should establish whether Police or Children's Social Care were involved in returning the child to their home and if not, inform Police and/ or Children's Social Care.

Children who go missing frequently place themselves at risk and the child's safety must be prioritised over any requests to keep information confidential.

4.4 Asylum seeking children and young people

There are complex issues facing Asylum Seeking children. Information about some children's whereabouts is not always maintained due to the transient nature of their accommodation arrangements. Agencies must however, be alert to the fact that some children are trafficked into, within and out of the UK for custom related reasons, to be abused and exploited for commercial gain, including through sex, for domestic servitude etc. See the London Child Protection Procedures, Section 9 and the statutory guidance on the *Care of unaccompanied and trafficked children Statutory guidance for local authorities on the care of unaccompanied asylum seeking and trafficked children July 2014* and Section 7 of the London Child Protection Procedures, Safeguarding Children from Sexual Exploitation.

The Local Authority, Police and other agency response to an Asylum Seeking child going missing should be exactly the same as for all other children, whether they are looked after or living in the community.

5. Children At Risk Prevention and Planning

5.1 Looked After Children and Young People

Research shows that children looked after by the Local Authority are over-represented in the cohort of children who go missing. Social workers and carers should familiarise themselves with the current research on the reasons why and the circumstances in which children are likely to go missing. This may help to identify high risk factors and early warning signs and allow for early intervention to be taken.

Prior to each placement of child Children's Social Care staff (placing Social Workers, Residential Workers and Foster Carers), must assess the risks of the child absencing him/herself.

The Pre-Incident Risk Assessment form (Appendix 2) should be completed within one week of the child's reception into care (for all children aged over 12 or where a risk of the child going missing is identified at the placement planning meeting). The

risk assessment should be held on file for future reference with an up to date photograph. A copy of the information and an up to date photograph should also be provided to the carer to support the reporting of any missing episodes.

The likelihood of children absenting themselves can be reduced by improving the quality of care they receive, in particular:

- Reducing the instances of inappropriate placements, or inappropriate use of Section 20 in circumstances where family are known to be a danger to the child and known to interfere in the placement
- Use of small children's homes, which have strong leadership, proper delegation of authority and responsibility and a strong, positive staff culture
- Positive attention given to education progress as non-attendance at school and going missing are mutually reinforcing
- Children/ young people should have regular access to a trusted adult outside of the placement and access to a user-friendly complaints procedure

5.2 Preventing Unauthorised Absences of Children and Young People in Care

Where a child seeks to leave their place of accommodation without permission, every effort should be made to dissuade them. It should be made very clear that they do not have permission to leave and concern for their safety should be communicated. Research has shown that persistent persuasion, following the young person around and even exiting the accommodation with them, can be effective in preventing them from leaving.

If a child is attempting to leave without permission and there is extreme and immediate concern for their safety or that of other people, or of damage to property, these attempts may include physically stopping the child/ young person from leaving. This could include obstructing an exit, bolting a door, or holding the young person by the arm. A professional assessment of the appropriateness of this action should always be taken, in order to ensure a breach of civil liberties does not occur.

Persuasion and physical restraint should only be considered as a short-term solution to going out without permission. Follow up work should always be carried out in the form of an action plan that analyses the motivation to leave the residence. This will inform a longer-term strategy and prevent the repeated use of physical restraint.

5.3 Responding to Unauthorised Absences of Children and Young People in Care

In these cases, foster carers/ residential staff must, (as far as is practicable and as staffing levels will allow), do all that a reasonable parent would do to locate and ensure the safe return of the child/ young person. They should telephone the child, their friends or relatives to ascertain the child/ young person's location collect the child/ young person or negotiate some alternative arrangements. Before making these arrangements, the carer may wish to discuss the situation with the young person's social worker/ Emergency Duty Team (EDT). If the carer believes the child/

young person is at risk, or the carer feels that they are unable to make an informed judgment in relation to this (for example if the child is new to the placement, or if the staff on duty do not know the child well enough) they must inform the child's social worker/ team leader/ EDT immediately. The Pre-Incident risk assessment should be used to inform this process.

If it is thought that there are specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in returning the child, then action should be agreed between the police, the residential unit staff/ foster carer and the social worker/EDT. If the local authority knows, or believes it knows, the child's location and there are difficulties or dangers involved in returning the child, a Recovery Order should be considered. These circumstances would not necessarily mean the child should be categorised as 'missing'.

5.4 Children Who Go Missing From Home

It should always be remembered that children missing from home face similar risks to those faced by children missing from care and local agencies should treat all instances where children are missing, seriously. Children living in the community are often well known to Accident & Emergency Services, Schools and other Education Establishments or the Youth Service.

Children may go missing from home or care for a number of reasons. Parents/carers are expected to undertake a number of actions to try and locate a child who is missing before reporting them to the Police as long as it is safe to do so. These actions include

- Fully searching the accommodation and surrounding area/vehicles.
- Search the home for any important leads e.g. mobile phones, diaries, letters, notes explaining absence, email and website activity etc.), which may inform the investigation and/or assist in protecting or recovering the child.
- Speaking with other children in the family or who live in the home to obtain relevant information about the missing child.
- Making all appropriate enquiries regards the whereabouts of the child. This will involve trying to contact the child themselves, friends, family, associates, appropriate locations, local hospitals and the local police custody office.

For children missing from home, it is expected that the parent/carer will inform the Police without delay. When referring to the Police any relevant information that might help to find or support the child should be shared, including:

- Description of the child including their clothing
- Details of where the child was last seen and with whom.
- Recent photograph.
- Relevant addresses, known associates and addresses frequented.
- Previous history of absenteeism and circumstances of where found.
- Circumstances under which the child is absent.
- Any factors that increase the risk to the child.

5.5 Social Care Pre-incident Risk Assessment

The Social Care Pre-incident Risk Assessment (in *Appendix 2*) should be completed for all looked after children. Partners may also wish to use the form to assess children and young people who are not yet known to Children's Social Care. The key elements of the assessment should consider:

- The likelihood of the child/young person going missing, including information about previous patterns of going missing or risks associated with being missing.
- The child's view on the current placement/ stability of their relationships at home
- 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 views of those with parental responsibility 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, involvement in gangs, mental health or 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.
- Consideration of any external influences which may result in the child's removal without consent
- Recording all the contact names, addresses and telephone numbers of the places where the child/young person may return to.

It should be explained to the child what actions will be taken if he/she absents him/herself without permission. Where considered appropriate, the child should be given a copy of this pre-incident assessment. **The Social Care Pre incident Risk Assessment should be recorded on the child's file in all agencies working with the child and a copy retained by the carer/residential unit.**

It is the responsibility of the child's Social Worker to ensure that the Pre Incident Risk Assessment is completed for children in care, when a placement is approved and with every change of placement.

An up-to-date description and photograph of the child should be maintained at the establishment where they are placed or on the case record for children in other placements. In obtaining photographs, appropriate permission should be obtained from the child or parent.

Significance of Children & Young People Missing from Home & Care

There is an expectation that parents/ guardians will report their child/ young person is missing. **Failure to do so may be raised as a child protection issue and the London Child Protection Procedures must be followed.**

5.6 Harboursing

In order to safeguard children who repeatedly go missing and are found to be with the same person, the police may issue a written warning to any persons considered to be harboursing a young person who has run away. Repeated incidents may lead to their arrest and prosecution under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984.

6. Responding to an Incident

Summary of Response Steps:

- 1) Decide whether the child is 'missing'
- 2) Complete the Social Care Missing Alert & Risk Assessment
- 3) Notify the Police as soon as possible

6.1 Category of Absence

Proper consideration needs to be given to whether the child's circumstances are an '*unauthorised absence*', or whether he/she is '*missing*'.

The agency first alerted to the child's absence should (together with the child's parents, if the child lives at home), decide whether the child is having an '*unauthorised absence*', or whether he/she is '*missing*'. In order to inform this judgment the agency should (together with the child's parents, as appropriate), attempt to locate the child and encourage him/her to return as quickly and safely as possible, ensuring he/she is treated positively on return.

6.2 The Social Care Missing Risk Assessment

For Looked After children the Missing Child Alert & Risk Assessment (in Appendix 3) should be completed within 24 hours of a child being confirmed missing and sent to all relevant agencies including the Safeguarding Standards Service by the social worker.

This should be updated immediately on every occasion a child is 'missing' (even if it has previously been completed as part of a previous missing event).

Practitioners should use their professional judgment when carrying out the risk assessment and should take into consideration any factors, which might have a bearing on the level of risk to the child or to others.

The Missing Child Alert & Risk Assessment is an aid to action, and to information sharing and recording. It is a tool to inform single and multi-agency decision making and planning to locate a 'missing' child and provides an indication of:

- The urgency of inquiries
- Areas of inquiry e.g. where drugs are available or locations and networks that certain adults frequent, country of origin or country children are trafficked on to etc.
- Type of specialist knowledge that might be needed
- The supervision that may be required
- Agencies who may be first alerted e.g. local Accident & Emergency services

6.3 Aid for information sharing and recording

At the time that a child goes '*missing*' the completed Missing Child Alert & Risk Assessment should be shared with all agencies working with the child and kept on the child's file in each agency. **In cases where new information becomes available and/or the child remains absent for a protracted period, the risks should be reassessed led by the agency which has current or most recent responsibility for the child.** The new risk assessment should be shared with the agencies and kept on the child's file in each agency. The most recently completed Missing Child Alert & Child Risk Assessment should remain on the child's file in all agencies working with the child.

- **Missing episodes and unauthorised absences should be recorded on the Children's Social Care IT system on the day that the notification is received.** This system should also be used to record information on children placed in Merton by other LA's.

6.4 Looked After Children going Missing

Whoever discovers that a child is absent without permission from a residential unit or foster home, should immediately inform the Residential Unit Manager/Shift Leader/Supervising Social Worker on duty.

The allocated social worker in consultation with the residential unit Manager/Shift Leader/Foster Carer should complete the Missing Child Alert & Risk Assessment. Where, initially, the assessment indicates that the child's circumstances are an '*unauthorised absence*', they should take all reasonable and practical steps, which a

good parent would take, to secure the safe and speedy return of the child e.g. visiting addresses where the child may be or telephoning around known friends.

Children who fall within the category of '*unauthorised absence*' must be the subject of continuous risk assessment whilst they remain absent. During their absence circumstances may change and the Social Worker/Emergency Duty Team and the Residential Unit Staff/Foster Carer need to be in a position to respond accordingly. The child's parents must be kept informed.

The allocated social worker should alert the Independent Reviewing Officer when a child or young person is reported as missing from their placement.

Any unauthorised absence in excess of 24 hours should be reported to the Head of Service and for any unauthorised absence over 48 hours the Missing procedures should be followed.

If there are thought to be specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in returning the child, then action should be agreed between the Police, the Residential Unit Staff/Foster Carer and the Social Worker/Emergency Duty Team. (If the Local Authority think they know where a looked after child is, they should actively consider approaching the courts for a Recovery Order).

6.5 Social Work Notifications When Children and Young People Go Missing From Foster Care

The foster carer/s should inform the child/young person's social worker, Unit Manager or EDT, unless it has been decided previously at the placement agreement meeting that the foster carer should contact the police directly. In an emergency situation the foster carers must call the police immediately.

6.6 Social Work Notification for Children living at home who are subject to a child in need or child in need of protection plan who go missing.

The parent/s should notify the police immediately. The parents should then contact the child/young person's social worker or EDT.

6.7 High risk children/young people

The following children/ young people should automatically be considered as high risk and reported immediately to the police by the foster carer/ residential staff. The carer/ residential staff should then immediately inform the child's social worker / EDT.

The high risk groups are;

- Any child/ young person who presents an immediate risk to themselves or to other people
- Any child who is 12 years old or younger whose whereabouts are unknown

- Any child deemed vulnerable due to learning &/ or physical disabilities, mental, emotional or physical health problems
- Any child/ young person who is subject to a Child Protection Plan
- Any child/young person where there are concerns relating to Sexual Exploitation
- Any child/ young person who is abducted from care
- Any young person who is subject to a curfew and goes missing beyond the end of their curfew

The Head of Service and Assistant Director CSC&YI should be notified of all missing children/young people on the day that the notification is received. This notification should be presented in the form of a briefing note that clarifies specific risk factors relating to the individual child/young person. The communication should also provide the date of the strategy meeting.

The need to inform senior managers of what has happened must not be allowed to delay action to locate and safeguard the child.

6.8 Notifying the Police

The Police should be notified by telephone as soon as possible, together with the information from the completed Risk Assessment.

The Police will conduct an investigation into all reports of 'missing' children.

6.9 Working with the Police

Police are the lead agency for the investigation of missing children. Children's Social Care is responsible for the planning and safeguarding of all children who are known to them.

If the child is a Looked After Child then Children's Social Care are responsible for children in their care at all times and this responsibility is not absolved when a child is reported missing to the Police.

Appropriate application of the risk assessment process by other agencies should allow the Police to be confident that all children reported to them as '*missing*' fit the agreed criteria. Referring professionals should supply the Police with a copy of the Risk Assessment.

Relevant agencies must provide sufficient information to the Police to enable all the risk factors to be considered. Following this a full investigation should be conducted by the Police.

The Police will ensure that information on every missing child is passed to the Merton MASH. This information will be reviewed by an Assistant Team Manager or Team Manager and a decision made as to whether an assessment (CASA/Single Assessment) should be completed.

Until such time as a child is no longer missing, regular liaison and communication should take place between the Police and referring/involved agencies, including the Social Worker and management of the placing Authority, for a Looked After Child.

6.10 Information to be Made Available

When reporting a missing child to Police (or other agencies, as appropriate), the person making the referral should provide the minimum information as follows;

- A description of the child (name, date of birth, physical appearance). Recent photograph, if possible
- When the child was last seen and with whom
- Family addresses
- Known acquaintances
- The basis of the risk assessment and classification of High Risk
- The name and address of the child's GP and Dentist

The allocated Social Worker should provide the risk assessment to the Police within 24 hours of a missing episode.

The Police will want to search the address at which the missing child was last seen, this should be negotiated so as to cause minimum disruption to the child's family home/residential unit/foster carer's home.

If the Police or other referring agency additionally believes that the circumstances surrounding the child's going missing put the child at risk of significant harm, then they should discuss these concerns with Children's Social Care. Such situations might include:

- If the parents appear to show a lack of concern or inappropriately failed to report their child missing.
- Where a child under five years has a missing from home episode, Police and other practitioners should consider whether the level of supervision afforded to the child is adequate.
- Where a child under ten years has a missing from home episode and it is suspected that parental issues (e.g. substance abuse, domestic violence) may have been a factor
- Repeated (more than three within 28 days) missing from home episodes, especially where there appears to be a lack of appropriate parental response
- Where a child or young person is vulnerable (e.g. has a learning disability, physical disability, history of self-harm, has a medical condition that makes them vulnerable)

- Where a child runs away to be at an address or with adults who give cause for concern
- Where there are concerns around possible sexual exploitation

6.11 Children for Whom there is a Child protection Plan who go Missing

Children who have a Child Protection Plan or who are subject to a Section 47 enquiry need additional action to that required for other children. This includes:

- Ensuring that a Strategy Meeting is arranged - as soon as practicable and in any event within 3 days, the social worker should arrange a strategy meeting if the child is **still** missing. Representatives from both the Police Missing Persons Unit and Child Abuse Investigation Team and education and health should attend the strategy meeting, as well as other practitioners involved with the child. (*See Section 8, Best Practice Child Protection Conferences of the London Child Protection Procedures, part B1*)
- Where a child with a Protection Plan has gone missing with/without their family, Children's Social Services must implement the London Notification of Missing Children/Persons Procedure sending out a national alert to all other local authorities.

6.12 Children & Young People Not Known to Children's Social Care

In cases, where a child is not known to social care and there are repeated missing incidents (three times in 28 days) Children's Social Care will consider initiating a single assessment (dependent on risk this will be completed under S17 or S47 Children Act 1989..

If the child is returned within 24 hours but the Police believe that the child is potentially falling within the high risk categories they should make a referral to the MASH even after the child is returned home. A CASA (Common and Shared Assessment) or single assessment should then be considered.

6.13 National Missing Person's Helpline

Local Authorities in England and Scotland together fund the Helpline's Missing from Care Team which provides a specialist service to Children's Social Care when any of their 'looked after' children go missing, including asylum seeking children. This working arrangement with local authorities forms the basis of an information sharing agreement with Social Care. The Missing from Care Team can be contacted on 020 8392 4527.

The National Missing Persons Helpline (NMPH) is dedicated to helping missing people, their families and those who care for them. It has information sharing agreements with the police.

The NMPH 24-hour Freephone confidential Helpline 0500 700 700 takes calls from families and police reporting missing people.

NMPH's Runaway Helpline 0808 800 70 70 is a national 24 hour Freephone Helpline for anyone aged 17 or under who has run away or been forced to leave home. Confidential advice is given, referrals made to other organisations and it can help a child or young person get to a place of safety or pass on a message.

7. Children Who Go Missing During External Activities

Children living in the community and Looked After Children participate in external activities. If a child goes missing whilst involved in an external activity, the person in charge of the activity will:

- Notify the local Police in that area (the investigation will be conducted by the missing persons unit where the child normally resides with the assistance of the unit where the child went missing)
- Notify their Manager
- Notify the child's parents and If the child is a Looked After Child, those who care for/have responsibility for the child – Residential Unit Staff/Foster Carer/
- If the child is a Looked After Child, notify the Social Worker with case work responsibility for the child
- If the child is a Looked After Child, notify the Social Care Emergency Duty Team for any Local Authority which holds case responsibility for the child
- Look around the local area, known favourite locations as staffing levels permit

If the child is a Looked After Child the Manager of the Residential Unit and Supervising Social Worker for the Foster Carer will be responsible for ensuring the general procedures in relation to a child going missing are followed.

The person in charge of the party of children and the child's parents (or if he/she is a Looked After Child, the Manager of the Residential Unit and Supervising Social Worker), must decide within 24 hours of the child's absence whether to return the party of children to their parents/residential unit/foster carers. For Looked After Children, where possible, this should be done in consultation with the missing child's social worker.

Communication regarding the missing child must be maintained between all those who have been notified and the Police (where the child normally resides).

8. Missing Child Strategy Meetings

In the cases outlined above, Children's Social Care must, in addition call a face to face Strategy Meeting as soon as possible and within no more than three working days of the missing event , involving representatives from all relevant agencies.

The Strategy Meeting must consider the following:

- Making further attempts to contact the child/young person's known relatives, friends, regular places of visit etc. Consideration should be given to writing to relatives and friends regarding the Department's concerns and the expectation that the relatives/friends will inform the Department should they obtain any relevant information.
- Writing to other local authorities and local agencies with the information about the missing child/young person. Partner agencies should receive information from each other on the basis of their need to know and in order to take action to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.
- Use of publicity. This will require appropriate agreement with the Assistant Director who will assess the individual case circumstances. The Council's press office and the Police will also need to be consulted. The child's parents must be informed prior to a press release being made and consent should be received from them and/or those with parental responsibility. Legal Services should be consulted with if there are any issues regarding obtaining consent.

Social workers should be aware that it is an offence for a person to publish material which is intended to, or is likely to identify a child as being involved in court proceedings under the Children Act 1989. However, the court can give leave for this restriction to be waived if the child/young person's welfare requires it.

- Contacting the Missing Person's Helpline. This group provides a specialist service to Children's Social Services when any of their looked after children go missing, including asylum seeking children. This working arrangement with local authorities forms the basis of an information sharing agreement with Social Services. The Missing from Care Group can be contacted on **020 8392 4527**, 24 hours a day.
- Seeking a Recovery Order and deciding how the order should be exercised i.e. should there be a joint visit with police and Social Care staff.
- Notifying national authorities and agencies, such as Department for Work and Pensions and Child Benefit agencies
- Appropriate legal interventions if there is any suspicion that the child may have been removed from UK jurisdiction.
- Whether a S47 investigation should be completed (including completion of a Single Assessment).

- Agree supports to be offered to the family. During the missing episode support will be offered by the police, CEOP and Children's Social Care. On return Catch 22 will provide support to the family.
- Whether a further strategy meeting should be called before the child/ young person has been missing for 7 days. The Missing Child Alert & Risk Assessment should inform this decision.

The decisions of the strategy meeting and the timescales must be clearly recorded; a copy should be kept on the child's case record.

Further strategy meetings can be called whenever the professionals involved wish to hold one, but must take place at a minimum, once per month if the child is missing for an extended period.

9. Communication

Should a child's absence continue, the Residential Unit Manager should make arrangements to inform all children and staff within the unit. Foster carers should talk to any other foster children they may have placed with them. For children in the community and known to local services, the agencies involved will need to decide who should be told.

The child's school should always be informed; they may have valuable information which would assist in establishing his/her whereabouts. Any such information should be passed immediately to the Police.

9.1 Informing the Press

For a child who is missing from home, the parents and the police will liaise with the child's parents about informing the press. For a Looked After Child who is missing a decision to publicise by press and/or television will be made by the Police in consultation with the Social Worker/Team leader/Residential Unit/Foster Carer's Agency Manager, and with prior warning in order to allow the child's parents to be informed. This may be arranged at a local level, by the Borough Commander (or nominee).

9.2 Recording

If a child's absence continues beyond a few hours and falls within this Procedure, all agencies should note their discussions, decisions, actions taken and messages received/given; and the child's Social Worker (or other agreed key worker/lead professional) should keep a single agreed record on the child's file. Residential Unit Staff and Foster Carers should record the information in the daily log/diary, with a duplicate entry for the child's file (e.g. photocopies).

9.3 MASH Weekly Missing Meeting

A weekly meeting will be hosted by the MASH to consider the children and young people that have been reported in the previous 7 days. This meeting will ensure that cases are being dealt with in a timely manner and in line with joint protocols. The meeting will also support the organisation of strategy meetings and the facilitation of return home interviews on individual cases.

The membership of the meeting is set out in the Terms of Reference.

9.4 The Merton Missing Children's Panel (MMCP) functions:

The MMCP will meet on a monthly basis in order to undertake the following tasks:

1. Review the data collected by the Police on the cohort of young people who have gone missing in the previous month. The panel will also have oversight of any child/young person who has been reported missing more than twice in a 12 month period, or missing for lengthy single periods, who may be involved in serious criminal activities, vulnerable to sexual exploitation, have additional vulnerability due to age or additional need to;
 - a) Review the profile of where children and young people are going missing from
 - b) To identify the Local Authority which has responsibility for the young person's welfare
 - c) The characteristics (age, ethnicity, legal status etc.) of the children and young people
 - d) The pattern of their missing behaviour
 - e) The type and degree of risk they are believed to be facing and any emerging patterns of their going missing
 - f) Actions which should be taken on the basis of the overall profile.
- 2 Compare Police data with that collated by partners in order to obtain the best possible data about missing children and young people and ascertain and remedy any problems with reporting missing children and young people by the agencies concerned.
- 3 The MMCP will not duplicate the work undertaken by the MASE Panel. Those young people who are at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation and are also placing themselves at risk through their missing behavior will be considered at the MASE Panel
- 4 The Head of Service MASH and First Response and the Public Protection Desk Manager will agree cases that need to be presented to panel. These will be cases where specific vulnerability or risk is identified (i.e. age, learning disability, several missing episodes); this will include children and young people placed in Merton by other local authorities. The social worker will be asked to attend the panel and present the care plan and risk assessment.

- 5 The MMCP will consider:
 - a) Whether the missing protocol has been followed to ensure a robust response to the case being presented
 - b) Whether there are training or practice issues needing to be addressed with the referrer, or other involved agency
 - c) The nature and degree of risk to each child or young person
 - d) Actions which should be taken and services offered in order to reduce the risk to the particular child or young person
 - e) The need for a specific strategy meeting, child protection conference, or sexual exploitation meeting
 - f) Action which will be taken to detect and disrupt adults who encourage or allow children or young people to place themselves at risk by going missing, or who harbour children or young people who are missing
 - g) To review actions taken and monitor the progress of the children and young people concerned
- 6 To report regularly to the Director, the Executive Director and the Safeguarding Children Board on children missing from care and home on a 6 monthly basis and make recommendations to the Board and local agencies or partnerships, as required.
- 7 The membership of the meeting is set out in the Terms of Reference.

10. Longer Episodes of Being Missing and Escalation Process

The relevant Head of Service and Assistant Director CSC &YI must be informed immediately of all LAC and high-risk cases (see definitions in 5.8)

The Director Social Care and Youth Inclusion and the Director Children's Schools and Families should always be informed of any child who has been missing for 48 hours. The Head of Service should review the case and then escalate the matter to the Director.

The Director will inform the Lead Member for Children's Schools and Families and the Chief Executive.

In high-risk cases, the manager of the residential unit should notify the registration authority (Ofsted).

The child's carer/ residential staff should always inform the child's school and they may have valuable information that could assist in locating the child's whereabouts. Any such information should be passed immediately to the police, the child's social worker and any other involved agency as appropriate.

The Head of Service must be updated weekly by the Social Worker on all missing children and informed of progress against the action plan. The Head of Service must update the Assistant Director on a weekly basis.

11. Locating the Child and their Return

11.1 Planning for when the Child is Located and their Return

If a child is '*missing*' the Police and parents, Social Worker, Residential Unit Staff/Foster Carer and Police should commence contingency planning for when the child is located. Plans should include:

- Will the child return to the placement/home address or are they safe in the location where they are found?
- If the child is to return, how will s/he be conveyed to their placement/home address?
- Do the Police wish to interview the child where they are located or after they have returned their placement/home address?
- Confirming who will talk to the child when s/he is located/returned.

Normally the Residential Unit Staff/Foster Carer or Social Worker/Emergency Duty Team out of hours will make arrangements for the transportation of a child to his/her placement/home address.

The police are however not given the power to use force to take children into Police Protection. There will be occasions when a child is found in a location that may be considered unsuitable, but where there would be no legal grounds for taking them into police protection or where to do so would be unsustainable because of the child. Children's Social Services will need to liaise to discuss what steps may be necessary in order to safeguard the child's welfare.

11.2 Interviews

Safe and well checks are conducted by police officers and are supported by Catch 22 who undertake return home interviews.

Police interview: the Police will interview all children when they return. The interview consists of a simple series of questions about where the child was whilst missing, where they went, what they did, who they were with etc. If the child makes an allegation of crime that occurred whilst they were missing or that contributed to him/her running away, the Police will record this allegation and take appropriate action.

Independent interview: children should be informed that they would be expected to talk about their absence to someone independent of their parents/carers on their return. Providing children with an opportunity to talk is key to safeguarding them. The interview and the actions that following from it must:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has incurred (his/her medical condition should be discussed immediately and any need for medical attention assessed)

- Understand and address the reasons the child ran away (the child's living arrangements/placement might need to be reviewed)
- Try to avoid it happening again
- The child must receive the interview with the independent person within 72 hours of being located or returning from absence:

For Looked After Children, it is the responsibility of the residential unit Manager/Supervising Social Worker and placing Authority to ensure that this happens

For children living in the community, the Police and Children's Social Services have responsibility for ensuring that opportunity for an independent interview is provided.

In most cases the independent person will be a representative from Merton's commissioned CSE and Missing Service provided by Catch22. The child should be asked who they wish to speak to and this could be a social worker other than the child's social worker, if they have one, or a teacher, school nurse, or YOT Worker, a voluntary sector practitioner or a police officer whom the child knows and trusts. The independent interview should be with someone the child trusts and who is separate from the police interview.

The actions that follow from it must:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has incurred (his/her medical condition should be discussed immediately and any need for medical attention assessed)
- Understand and address the reasons the child ran away (the child's living arrangements/placement might need to be reviewed, a CASA may need to be completed)
- Try to avoid it happening again

Copies of the interview should be filed in the child's electronic file within 48 hours of the interview by the Social worker.

11.3 Communication & Further Action

The child's parents/carers and all agencies informed of the absence should be advised of the child's return without delay.

Involved agencies should decide whether a Strategy discussion is required or should be requested (*See the London Child Protection Procedures, Sections 5 to 8*).

12. Longer Absences

12.1 Strategy discussions and keeping Cases Open

Whenever a child is missing for more than 28 days, regular strategy discussions should be held, arranged by Children's Social Care and the Police invited (if the child has a Child Protection Plan, then officers from the Missing Persons Unit and the

Child Abuse Investigation Unit or if not then the Missing Persons Unit only) (See *the London Child Protection Procedures, Sections 8-9*). All agencies who attend/are invited to this meeting are responsible for ensuring that there is a clear statement of the actions being taken in respect of the child's absence and should satisfy themselves that all that should be done is being done.

For Looked After Children or those known to Children's Social Care, whilst the child remains absent, his/her case should be identified as 'open' on the Children's Social care client database by the case social worker. Child should not be de-accommodated whilst missing unless this is an agreed plan endorsed by the Children Missing from Care Panel who will put in place a multi-agency plan to safeguard the child and promote their best interests.

All Police missing person's files will remain 'live' until the child is located and returned to their home, or whose circumstances are considered to be appropriate.

13. Information Sharing

The Head of Service MASH and First Response is the Named Person with responsibility for Missing Children.

Children's residential units should supply monthly information to the Commission for Social Care Inspection about children who have gone missing.

Partner agencies should receive information from each other on the basis of their need to know and take action to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. There should be regular interagency meetings to monitor the implementation of this Procedure and exchange information. There should be regular reports on children who go missing to the senior management, elected members, trustees and/or governors of all partner agencies.

A report on children missing from home and care will be presented to the MSCB on a 6 monthly basis. This report will monitor outcomes and analyse patterns including those children placed in the area by other local authorities.

Appendix 1

Current Research Findings in Relation to Children Going Missing from Care and Home

The majority of children under the age of 16 who go missing are runaways.

1. Prevalence:

1. Research has shown that every year approximately 100,000 under 16s run away.
2. 52% of young runaways returned to their home or care placement after one night away.
3. One in six young runaways sleep rough and one in 12 are hurt or harmed while they are away.

2. Profiles of the children:

- Peak ages for running away are between 13 and 16 years old and a quarter are under 11 years old. The risk of harm to a child is increased the younger the child is, and the more frequently they run away
- The main causes of running away are family conflicts and personal problems such as relationships, substance misuse, bullying and truancy. Children who run away from care are often unhappy with their placement or are influenced by others and do so to 'fit in' with the group
- Girls are more likely to run away from home than boys, but boys are likely to first run away at an earlier age and to run away more often
- Among children who go missing from care, those assessed as having emotional and behavioural difficulties are a high risk group often. They go missing at a younger age, more often and to stay away longer. They are far more likely to have been excluded from school and to have past convictions for offending than others who go missing

3. Patterns of going missing:

- Four out of five children who run away do so only once or twice
- Twenty percent of children going missing under the age of 16 are pushed away or forced to leave home
- Very few children go outside their local area while away
- Children under 16 are most likely to run away because of abuse and neglect. Whilst those who first run away or are forced to leave at the age of 16 or 17 are more likely to do so for reasons of family conflict and breakdown
- Children in residential placements were likely to have gone missing more often in the past than those going missing from foster placements. Children aged 14 and 15 tended to stay away longer

- For children who go missing often, there is a progressive risk of detachment from family, carers and school (exclusion or non attendance)
- Evidence would suggest that once patterns of school non attendance and running away become established they are mutually reinforcing
- Children who go missing often are also more likely to have problems with depression, drugs and alcohol and to have involvement in offending
- Children with previous convictions were far more likely to run away than those who had none

4. Reasons for going missing:

Push Factors

Problems at home: for those who ran away repeatedly, particularly high levels of family problems and disruption were identified.

Family Break-up: conflict with parents or stepparents is the most common reason given by children for running away. The need to escape difficulties between parents including domestic violence, drug and alcohol problems and persistent arguments were a major influence for some young people; as were boundary and control issues and feelings of unfair treatment for others. Running away was rarely motivated by the need for excitement

Over a quarter of the children in the *Safe on the Streets* survey were attempting to escape physical and emotional abuse, rejection or neglect. British and American studies support the finding that abuse and neglect are important factors underlying the decision to run away, especially for children who first run away from home before the age of 11; and even among those who have run away only once or twice

Mental Health problems: a disproportionate number of young people that runaway from home have some sort of mental health problems

Bullying: children who are severely bullied are more likely to run away from school, home and care. Problems at school are only likely to be a direct trigger for running away for a relatively small minority of children.

Pull Factors

Running to be near friends or family – especially when a young person is in care and there are problems in contact arrangements with family and friends.

Grooming for potential sexual exploitation or child trafficking – young people may run away or go missing following grooming by adults who will seek to exploit them.

5. Follow up Schemes:

Follow up schemes which provide children who run away with an opportunity to talk about their reasons for running away, and link children who run away and their families into longer term help if they need it, have been successful in reducing the

numbers of young people who run away repeatedly by up to two thirds and have also achieved a reduction of one fifth in the number of runaways arrested.

Appendix 2

Social Care Pre Incident Risk Assessment

The Social Care Pre Incident Risk Assessment should be recorded on the child's file in all agencies working with the child.

Wherever possible staff should enhance their ability to make a Social Care Pre Incident Risk Assessment by acquainting themselves with the current body of knowledge about children who go missing (*See Appendix 1: Current Research Findings in Relation to Children Going Missing from Care and Home*).

<i>Factor Impacting on the likelihood of a child going missing</i>	<i>Details and Explanation</i>
<i>Child's view on current placement/stability of their relationships at home</i>	
<i>Level of Supervision/support that care staff propose to provide for the child</i>	
<i>The degree of risk to the child if they do go missing – using the Social Care Risk Assessment Record at Appendix 3</i>	
<i>The views of parents/carers in their child's needs and the action that needs to be taken if their child is missing</i>	
<i>Consideration of any external influences which may result in a child's removal without consent (See also Safeguarding Trafficked and Exploited Children, London Board 2006)</i>	

Appendix 3
Missing Child Alert and Risk Assessment Record

Child's full name and DOB: (Alias if known)	Next of Kin relationship, name & address:
Date and Time child was last seen:	
With whom:	
Address where child currently resides (Family home, Residential Unit, Foster Carer)	
Address where child has gone missing from (if different from above)	
Residential Unit/Foster Carer Contact Tel No's	Contact Name:
Doctor:	Dentist:
Child's Oyster card number:	Child's email address if known:
Child's Mobile Phone Number: Blackberry Pin number if known/relevant:	Child's N.I. Number:
Occupation/School/College:	Occupation/School/College contact number:
Description of the Child	
Ethnic Origin & Ethnic Appearance:	
Height & Build:	Gender:
Appearance incl. Clothing, eye colour, hair, glasses, tattoos, piercings, facial hair, other distinguishing features (include a recent photograph):	

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Family History (Brief details):

Information about friends and relatives etc, visited/ spoken to:

Date	Time	Name/Phone Number & Address	Result of enquiries

Missing Child Risk Assessment Record

Risk Factors	Details and Explanation
10 years old or under	
11 to 14 years of age	
15 up to 18 years of age	
Has a Child Protection Plan	
Needs essential medication or treatment not readily available to them e.g. asthma inhaler, insulin.	
May not have the physical ability to interact safely with others or in an unknown environment, e.g. visually impaired, history of abuse or inappropriate adult/stranger relationships, Down's Syndrome etc.	

Lacks reasonable awareness of the risks associate with running away, incl. Learning disabled.	
Known to associate with adults or children who present a risk of harm e.g. Sexual Offenders, Offenders Against Children.	
Mental illness or psychological disorder that may increase risk of harm to themselves or others.	
Drugs and/or alcohol dependency	
Suspicion of abduction	
Suspected suicide or self harm	
Involved in violent and/or racial incident or confrontation immediately prior to disappearance.	
Concerns about state of mind e.g. unusual behaviour prior to disappearance or disappeared with no prior indication, or seemed troubled etc.	
Inclement weather conditions where exposure would seriously increase risk to health.	
Family/relationship problems or recent history of family conflict/abuse.	
Employment Problems	
Financial Problems	
School or college problems	
Ongoing Victim of bullying, harassment, or exploitation e.g. racial, sexual etc.	
Previously disappeared and suffered or was exposed to harm whilst missing.	

Victim or potential victim, of forced marriage, FGM or trafficking, including sexual exploitation,	
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Risk assessment outcome;
Is this child a high risk case?

The relevant Head of Service, Assistant Director Social Care & Youth Inclusion and Director of Children, Schools and Families must be informed of all children/young people who are reported missing and information provided in respect of significant risk factors detailed below;

- Any child/ young person who presents an immediate risk to themselves or to other people
- Any child who is 12 years old or younger whose whereabouts are unknown
- Any child deemed vulnerable due to learning &/ or physical disabilities, mental, emotional or physical health problems etc
- Any child/ young person who is subject to a Child Protection Plan
- Any child/young person at risk of Sexual Exploitation
- Any child/ young person who is abducted from care
- Any young person who is subject to a curfew and goes missing beyond the end of their curfew

Summary of Risk (Summarise the risks in a couple of sentences)

Summary of Actions Taken (Include attempts to talk to child on mobile phone and attempts to contact family & friends)

Review Date for Actions Decided

Completed by, full name

Signature

Date:

This Risk Assessment is an aid to action and for information sharing and recording.

Aid to action: As an action tool the purpose of the Risk Assessment is to inform single and multi-agency agency decision making and planning to locate a **'missing'** child. The Risk Assessment provides an indication of:

- The urgency of inquiries

- Areas of inquiry e.g. where drugs are available or that certain adults frequent, country of origin or country children are trafficked on to etc.
- Type of specialist knowledge that might be needed
- The supervision that may be required
- Agencies who may be first alerted e.g. local Accident & Emergency services

Aid for information sharing and recording: At the time that a child goes '*missing*' the completed Risk Assessment should be shared with all agencies working with the child and kept on the child's file in each agency. In cases where new information becomes available and/or the child remains absent for a protracted period, the risks should be reassessed, shared with the agencies and kept on the child's file in each agency. The most recently completed Risk Assessment should remain on the child's file in all agencies working with the child.

Appendix 4

Children Missing from Care and Home: Return Questionnaire

Introduction

Children who go missing may sometimes be running from something which places them at risk and may run into or to, situations which also place them at risk. Children may be to talk about these issues; however professionals need to find out why the child goes missing in order to safeguard them.

Who Interviews the Child

Professionals must liaise to ensure that children are not interviewed more than is absolutely necessary about the same thing. The Police will interview all children when they return. In addition all children should be offered the opportunity to talk to an independent person whom they trust.

According to the *Young Runaways Report (SEU, 2002)* the professionals most closely involved with the child are often frustrated by the child's behaviour which means that children are likely to receive a negative response when they return. This response can stop the child talking about their experience and exacerbate the situation rather than resolve it for the child.

The independent person could be a social worker other than the child's social worker, in the same team, or a teacher, school nurse, Youth Offending Team Worker, a voluntary sector practitioner or a police officer whom the child knows and trusts.

The allocated social worker where involved should take the lead in organising the interview, and ensure that this questionnaire is completed within 48 hours of the child's return and copies circulated to all relevant parties and inputted into ICS.

The child should be asked who they wish to speak to.

The following points need to be considered when interviewing a missing person:

- Try to determine the reason why the person went missing and in particular, if they have been subject to violence, abuse or bullying.
- Establish whether they have been a victim of crime before or while missing.
- Establish if they have been committing Crime whilst missing
- Discover where and by whom they have been harboured (obtain pars if possible)
- Obtain information which may lead to their early discovery should they go missing again.

- Put in place any support and preventative measures to avoid such a recurrence. (consider CAMHS, Children’s Social Care, YOT).

Areas to be covered

The fullness of the interview will depend on the circumstances and the degree of risk to the child.

1. Is the child happy where they are living, or are they worried/upset about anything?		
2. Where was the child and who were they with?		
3. What did the child do whilst they were missing?		
4. Did the child feel safe and looked after?		
5. What does the child want to have happen now – short term/long term?		
6. What happened when the child got home?		
7. Parents/Carers view of the incident?		
8. The interviewer should provide the child with information about how they can access further or ongoing support services. Record the information here:		
Interviewer Name	Designation	Date

Appendix 5

Escalation of Information to Senior Management

The relevant Head of Service and Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion must be informed about all missing children and young people. Information should include reference to specific risks as set out below;

- Any child/ young person who presents an immediate risk to themselves or to other people
- Any child who is 12 years old or younger whose whereabouts are unknown
- Any child deemed vulnerable due to learning &/ or physical disabilities, mental, emotional or physical health problems etc
- Any child/ young person who is subject to a Child Protection or Sexual Exploitation Plan
- Any child/ young person who is abducted from care
- Any young person who is subject to a curfew and goes missing beyond the end of their curfew

The Director Children, Schools and Families should always be informed of any child who has been missing for **48 hours**. The Missing alert and Risk assessment at Appendix 3 should be forwarded to the relevant Head of Service. The Head of Service should review the case and then escalate the matter to the Assistant Director.

Where required the Assistant Director will inform the Director, Chief Executive and Lead Member.

The process for escalation is as follows:

1. The social worker/Unit Manager should fully complete the Missing alert and Risk assessment at Appendix 3 (timescales for this are set out clearly above).
2. This report should be sent to the relevant Head of Service and the Service Manager QAPD should also be copied in for information.
3. The Head of Service will quality assure the information and send the briefing onto the Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion.
4. The Assistant Director will in turn forward the information onto the Director Children, Families and Schools, and when required, the Chief Executive and the Lead Member.
5. The Team Manager should notify their Head of Service and Assistant Director immediately upon the child's return

Appendix 5

Useful Contacts

Metropolitan Police Missing Person Reporting

Tel: 0300 123 1212

Email: missingpersonrisk@met.pnn.police.uk or
znmispers@met.pnn.police.uk

MASH:

Tel: 020 8545 4226

EDT:

Tel: 020 8770 5000

Catch 22

Tel: 020 37018641

Merton Youth Justice Team

Tel: 020 8274 4949

CAMHS

Tel: 020 8254 8061

Missing Persons Charity:

Tel: 0208 392 4527

HOSPITALS:

St George's – 0208 672 1255

St Helier – 0208 296 2000