



Missing Child Policy

Introduction

Going missing is a dangerous activity. A child or young person who goes missing just once faces the same immediate risk as faced by a child or young person who regularly goes missing. However, children who go missing when they are young (and/or more frequently) are more likely to face longer-term problems.

Chageley Children's Homes work in conjunction with the Pan Cheshire Protocol and any further protocol that the placing authority requires to be taken into consideration. This will endeavour to develop a robust multi-agency response.

The policy aims to aid early identification of risk and vulnerability, assist in the investigation and tracing of the missing person and make valuable use of any information received from the return to care and "independent interview" to prevent further incidents. The most effective assessment and support comes through good information sharing, joint assessments of need, joint planning, professional trust between agencies and joint action in partnership with families.

Research has shown that every year approximately 77,000 under 16 year olds go missing overnight in England. Peak ages for going missing are between 13 and 16 year old and a quarter of under 11 years old (Children's Society, Still Running 1999/Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2002).

Definitions

Child

Where the policy refers to "child" or "children" these terms include young people under the age of 18 years.

Missing Person

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

Missing Child

Where the child's location or reason for absence is unknown and/or there is cause for concern for the child because of their vulnerability or there is a potential danger to the public.

Looked After Children

The term "looked after children" has a specific legal meaning deriving from Children Act 1989. Under the Children Act 1989 a child is "looked after" if he or she is:

- Provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours (Children Act 1989, Section 20 and 21) or
- Subject to a care order (Children Act 1989, Part IV)

Children who become lost

Children who because of their age or due to a degree of intellectual impairment become separated from their carers, become temporarily disorientated and become missing as a result and would wish to be found. This is clearly very frightening and upsetting for all involved.

Absent

A person not at a place where they are expected to be.

Clearly some children absent themselves for a short period and then return and their whereabouts are known. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose or accidentally, and may be testing boundaries.

Children who make telephone contact and agree a time to return, but subsequently fail to do so could also fall within this definition.

This kind of boundary testing is within the range of normal teenage behaviour and not necessarily considered a risk, although a more general response such as additional parenting support and advice may be helpful as behaviour of this nature may fall within the wider safeguarding remit for services.

Children believed to be trafficked/subject of sexual exploitation

If staff are concerned that trafficking or sexual exploitation may be the reason for underlying prolonged or repeated periods of absence, advice can be sought from the Warrington Safeguarding Board.

Recording

Throughout the process identified within this policy, a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given must be kept.

Risk assessment – planning before the event

As far as possible there should be an assessment in advance of any child who is judged to be likely to go missing.

In these circumstances there will be a planning meeting, which will discuss associated risks of the child absenting themselves. This discussion should be recorded in writing.

In assessing the significance of a child's absence either before the event or once it has happened, the following should be taken into consideration:

- The age and level of understanding of the child.
- The legal status of the child
- Previous behaviour patterns
- The emotional needs of the child e.g. whether there has been any variation in their mood or whether they have expressed any intention to harm themselves or others.
- Behaviour of the child as influenced by peer groups or others.
- Whether the child is perceived as running to someone/somewhere or running from a situation/someone.
- The risk of offending

- The risk of the child being targeted for sexual exploitation.
- The legal implications of the child breaking any court order by absconding
- The child's view.

If appropriate the child should have this policy explained to them so that they understand what actions will be taken if they absent themselves without permission.

Once a child has gone missing, the Pan Cheshire protocol should be adhered to. Police should be notified and any other agencies involved. Often such children are immediately labelled as "the problem" and insufficient consideration is given to **why** they are persistently absenting themselves. This needs to be explored particularly at the time of the post-return interview.

In relation to reasons for going missing, a range of "push" and "pull" factors have been identified. "**Push factors**" may include:

- Conflicting with carers, feeling powerless, bullying, being unhappy at home or in care
- Wanting attention by provoking a reaction to demonstrate that someone cares about them.
- A sense of boredom and a wish to "have fun".
- Testing boundaries
- Being a victim of abuse.

Some of the "**pull factors**" identified may include:

- Wanting to be with family or friends.
- Peer pressure to conform to established patterns of behaviour
- The attractions of street life or people who may present a risk

For some children the concerns will be increased because they fall within groups who may be targeted by adults who pose a risk, for example unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or other children who may be trafficked either from abroad or within the UK for the purpose of sexual or other forms of exploitation. Children in the care system are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, with evidence to suggest that some abusers will target residential units specifically. Responses to a child going missing from a care placement should be agreed and incorporated within the child's care plan.

In addition to the planning processes above, where there is a likelihood that a child in care may go missing from their establishment placement the social care pre-incident assessment should be used to assess the likelihood that the child might go missing and the risk they may face as a consequence. All information should be included in the placement plan and in the child's care plan.

This assessment should include information on the following:

- The likelihood of the child going missing
- The child's view
- The level of supervision/support that care staff propose to provide for the child
- The views of other agencies on the child's needs and the action that needs to be taken if the child is absent.
- The risk of harm to the child and his/her vulnerability if he/she is absent.
- Consideration of any external influences which may result in a child's removal without consent.
- The likelihood of the child being harboured.

Once again the child should have this policy explained to him/her and the potential dangers that they may encounter so that he/she understands the implications of running.

When a child is placed by an authority they will be subject to a Looked After Children (LAC) procedure, which includes their local authorities and any other agencies involved with the child and must ensure that robust planning is in place should a child go missing.

Planning to address incidents of specific concern

If the running away/going missing of a child or young person is causing specific concern e.g. by its frequent repetition or indicators of particular risk such as contact with a person who poses a risk to children, there should be a meeting to discuss the combined response to such incident and concern. This meeting should be attended by:

- A representative of the police
- A representative of the local authority responsible for the child's care of sufficient seniority to be able to take authoritative decisions about the steps needed to locate and protect the child
- The registered manager of Chaigeley Children's Home
- The child's social worker
- The parent/carer if appropriate
- Other relevant agencies – e.g. Youth Offending Team, Drugs Action Team, CAMHS service etc.

Response

The responsibility for responding to reports of children who go missing and undertaking enquiries to locate them and ensure their return to a safe care environment lies with the Police.

Anyone may report a child as missing to the Police; they do not have to be a parent/carer, or other relative. Any report of a missing child must be recorded by the police receiving the report.

Chaigeley Children's Home staff will be expected to assist the Police in finding the child and to work cooperatively with Police during any enquiry.

Even after reporting a child missing, staff should recognise that Chaigeley Children's Home staff are responsible for children in their care at all times, and this responsibility remains after they have reported a child missing to the Police.

When a child or young person is missing from Chaigeley Children's Home or has become detached from staff at the Homes, the priority must be ensuring immediate safety of the child by finding them and returning them to the Children's Home, providing this does not place any child at greater risk of significant harm.

Information to be made available

When reporting to Police, the person taking the report will need the following information:

- A description of the child and their clothing
- Details of when the child was last seen and with whom

- A recent photograph (if available)
- Family addresses
- Known associates and addresses frequented
- Personal details of the child
- Any previous history of absconding/absenteeism and circumstances of where found
- The names and addresses of the child's GP and dentist
- The circumstances under which the child is absent
- Any factors which increase the risk to the child
- Chaigeley Children's Home address
- Contact details of carer (where appropriate)
- Where a Looked After Child, the name of staff member who has completed a search of the Home for the child (NB Police reserve the right to conduct further searches).

Notification of absence for a child in care

When a member of the Chaigeley Children's Home staff realise that a child is missing their care they should consider which definition the absence falls within. Support and advice can be gained from the Registered Manager.

If the child is considered to fall within the definition of missing, the residential staff must without delay inform:

- The Police
- The parents and those who have parental responsibility
- The social worker or the team manager
- The emergency duty service if out of hours and the social worker or the team manager the next working day.

If the child is considered to fall within the definition of absent, the decision to record the child as such, together with the evidence supporting that decision must be recorded.

Details of children who are absent should still be notified to the Police in order that a record of the child's absence can be made, and agreement reached on what needs to be done, and who will do what.

Although there is an expectation that residential staff should continue to make reasonable enquiries to locate the child, it may also be appropriate for the police to initiate some enquiries as well.

Residential staff should continue to regularly review the circumstances in the light of any enquiries made or information received and inform the Police of any developments. If the period of absence continues for six hours, consideration should be given as to whether the child should still be regarded as absent, or whether they should now be considered as missing. One hour should be regarded as the maximum period before reconsideration, and in many cases a shorter period would be more appropriate.

Any case of an absent child which causes significant concern, or gives rise to the suspicion of harm, should be brought to the attention of the Registered Manager.

Informing the media

The Principal is responsible for advising the media regarding children missing from the Children's Home, together with support from the Police, however decisions to publicise will always be made in consultation with the children's social care who will consult parent/carers.

Police Powers

Police powers are limited and difficulties can arise when missing children are found but do not want to return to their placement.

When there is reasonable cause to believe that the child could suffer significant harm the police can take the child into police protection under the Children Act 1989, and remove to suitable accommodation which could include the home from which the child originally went missing. The police are not given the power to use force to take children into police protection. This is, however, a difficult area, with conflicting advice as to what the police can do in terms of using reasonable force to prevent children suffering significant harm.

There will be occasions when a child is found in a location that may be considered unsuitable, but where there would not be legal grounds for taking them into police protection.

In such cases, police and the Registered Manager will need to liaise to discuss what steps may be necessary in order to safeguard the child's welfare. This should involve consideration of possible offences being committed under the Child Abduction Act 1984.

The return

The child should be given the opportunity to talk to someone independent of their Home about their absence. In some instances this person could be a police officer. It may be however that the child would prefer to speak to a social worker.

The Registered Manager should be responsible for organising a return interview or an independent return interview. If there are concerns that a child ran away as a result of circumstances relating to their family or their placement then this interview would need to take place prior to the child's return. Otherwise it should take place within 72 hours of his/her return from absence.

Where an allegation of physical or sexual abuse is made or becomes evident, safeguarding procedures must be implemented and contact made immediately with Warrington Safeguarding team and the Safeguarding Team at the authority where the child is living.

If there is any suggestion that the child has been a victim or perpetrator of crime, consideration must be given to securing the evidence by police including forensic examination. This should also include securing clothing and delaying washing/bathing in relevant cases. It must be remembered that all necessary permissions must be obtained from the child's parents and/or those with parental responsibility. It is essential to recognise that the welfare of the child is paramount and careful consideration must be given to the potential effects of such procedures on the child.

Carers, police, social workers and line manager should decide in consultation with the Children Home staff whether they should convene a statutory review of the child's care plan.

Longer absences

A meeting will be called to develop a strategy whenever a child is missing for a longer period. This will be based on the assessment and will depend upon the child's individual circumstances.

The meeting will involve:

- The local authority manager responsible for the child's care
- The local Police Liaison Officer
- Other relevant staff representatives from agencies involved with the child
- The registered manager from the Children's Home

This meeting will review the action taken up to this point, and satisfy themselves that all possible steps are being taken to locate and return the child.

If a child becomes absent outside their area e.g. on holiday or an activity, the Children Home staff will:

- Arrange a search in the area where the child became absent
- Notify the local Police for that area
- Notify the child's parents or guardian in consultation with the registered manager.
- Notify the child's social worker
- Notify the Youth Offending Team if the Child or Young Person is on remand
- Notify the emergency duty team if out of hours.

Children who go missing abroad

Any reports of missing children overseas will, in the first instance, be investigated by the Children's Home Registered Manager.

The Police should be informed and they may decide to commence their own enquiries and/or investigation.

Should it be necessary for the Children Home staff to liaise directly with their overseas counterparts, of if there is a need to visit the country conducting the enquiries is identified, the first approach should be made through the Interpol Bureau in London. Interpol will then advise on the most appropriate approach to be made and through which channels.