

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW - CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND FROM HOME

TUESDAY, 18 OCTOBER 2011

Councillors Alexander (Chair), Amin and Ejiofor

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LC1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Yvonne Denny (church representative).

LC2. URGENT BUSINESS

None.

LC3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

LC4. CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND FROM HOME

Debbie Haith, Deputy Director of the Children and Young Peoples Service (C&YPS), gave a presentation introducing the issue of children missing from home or from care and providing some background information.

It was noted that the terms 'young runaway' and 'missing' referred to children and young people up to the age of 18 who had run away from their home or care placement, had been forced to leave or whose whereabouts were unknown. There was an important distinction between this and unauthorised absence, which was where the whereabouts of looked-after children were known or thought to be known but unconfirmed. In such circumstances, they were not considered to be missing but instead classified as absent without authorisation from their placement. This was in order to ensure a proportionate response. The distinction was overridden if there were any child protection concerns as the safety of children and young people was paramount.

Little detailed research had been undertaken on the issue except by the Children's Society. They had recently asked C&YPS to identify a link officer for some further research that they were undertaking on the issue. Such research that was available showed that many children ran away repeatedly and a significant proportion were away for long periods - 10% ran away for more than four weeks. Children could be coerced into running away and 25% of children said that they ran away because they were told to or were physically forced to go. The vast majority – two thirds - were not reported to the Police as missing. Refuges were now required to notify social services if missing children arrived at their premises. They had previously been required to inform parents.

The Police Missing Persons Unit had primary responsibility for dealing with children who were reported as missing. As part of this duty, they were required to notify relevant social services departments. In Haringey, they would notify the First Response Unit. However, any involvement of childrens social care services did not override their overall responsibilities. Following notification, the Police would try to gain an understanding of the circumstances and make an assessment of this situation

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including whether the child was at risk. There was normally some sort of reason why children or young people ran away. This could be difficulties at school, drugs or alcohol problems, trouble with the Police or the breakdown of relationships between parents. Although children in care were three times more likely to run away, they only made up 2% of the total number of runaways.

There were London wide procedures on safeguarding children missing from care or from home. There was a large concentration of children in the capital which made it essential for there to be clear expectations of all agencies working within the capital. The most important issue was the need to mitigate against risk.

Each local authority had to have a named officer responsible for children and young people who go missing or run away. In Haringey, this was Wendy Tomlinson, the Head of Commissioning and Placements. The day-to-day responsibility was carried out by case managers. Data was kept and used to analyse any patterns.

More children and young people went missing from residential care than fostering placements. If potential issues were identified, consideration was given to what support could be provided. In the case of unauthorised absence, a risk assessment was undertaken to determine the level of intervention required.

It was noted that statistics that were kept referred to the number of children involved and not the number of episodes. The statistics were examined regularly by officers. Some children were only missing for a short period of time. There were approximately 3-4 instances during a week. The figure was sometimes higher in summer. Most instances were just overnight. However, some could be absent for 3-4 weeks but in such cases it was often known where they were likely to be.

Haringey's statistics for children missing from its care were not much different to those of other boroughs despite the fact that it had around twice as many looked after children as many outer London boroughs. Great lengths could be gone to in order to get back children who were absent. This included court orders allowing children to be recovered from addresses and jailing individuals who were unwilling to divulge where a child or young person was.

The legal status of children missing/absconding since April 2011 was as follows:

- Interim care order: 14
- Full care order: 18
- On remand: 1
- Section 20; 18

It was noted that children looked after under Section 20 of the Children Act were not under a care order. This applies where parents have asked for help because, for some reason, their child can no longer stay at home. In such circumstances, suitable accommodation for the child was found but parental responsibility remained with the parent/guardian.

The placement of children when they had gone missing or absconded was as follows:

- Semi-independent 11
- Residential 14
- Agency Foster Care 12

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- Haringey Residential 11
- Task-Centred foster care 2
- Placed at home 1

The statistics referred to children and not instances of them going missing. It was noted that there were currently 620 looked after children. Of these, 588 were placed local to Haringey. Over 900 children were looked after by the Council over the course of a year.

If need be, looked after children could be placed away from their home area in order to reduce the risk of them absconding. Sometimes expensive out-of-borough placements needed to be used for this purpose. This included, for example, some placements in Shropshire. These could be used for young people who were in gangs and who could prove difficult to deal with. Such young people often did not respond well to foster care. It was also occasionally necessary to place children in secure accommodation. Social services could agree for this to happen for any period up to 72 hours. Any period longer than this had to be agreed by a court. This was generally undertaken just as a temporary safety measure.

Social workers tended to be risk averse. Strategies were developed to address the needs of individual children. The average age of children who went missing was 15/16. However, children of 12/13 could also go missing and posed a more significant risk. Although risk could be minimised, it could not be eliminated completely. It was important to keep channels of communication open and develop good and trusting relationships with children and young people.

There was no distinction made in procedures and responsibilities between which local authority or organisation ran a residential children's home within the borough. This meant that the Council had not only to consider its own children and young people but also those that were placed within the borough by other local authorities. This was particularly relevant to Haringey due to the comparatively large number of children's residential homes within the borough.

The Police undertook a lot of information gathering and a needs analysis was currently in the process of being undertaken. There was also a strong relationship with Barnardos, who had undertaken a lot of work on this issue. They had a contract with the borough to undertake independent interviews with children and young people after they had run away.

The national indicator that had been introduced in respect of missing children – NI 71 – had been set up in order to bring in monitoring. The Missing from Care and from Home Action Plan was linked directly to this. The national indicator had now been scrapped by the government but the Action Plan was being kept by the Council. The Police Missing Persons Unit kept full statistical information as well as intelligence. The Council only kept information on children missing from their own care. Risk management was undertaken as part of a normal child protection assessment.

Residential homes were required to keep a record of any children that went missing from them. This was required by OFSTED and kept in manual format. If a child went missing, it was the responsibility of the home to notify the emergency social worker and, if appropriate, the Police.

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It was noted that the three categories of children that it was proposed that the review focus upon were as follows:

1. Children missing from the Council's care including those who are fostered as well as those placed in residential homes within the borough.
2. Children missing from the care of other local authorities who have been placed in Haringey. Haringey's protocols and procedures apply to these.
3. Children missing from home

It was noted that powers to intervene and restrain were very limited. There was generally very little that social work professionals could do without a court order. Although distant placements could be used and, in extreme cases, children could be locked up, this was of very limited long term benefit. The quality of relationships and engagement was of far greater importance as well as a proactive approach. It was often the case that children and young people had been brought up without proper boundaries.

The Panel requested anonymised data relating to missing children and unauthorised absences. It was noted that it would be feasible to produce aggregate figures for the whole year. It would also be possible to provide anonymised examples. If individual cases were causing serious concern, the head of service and the Cabinet Member were informed.

The Panel was of the view that it would be useful to obtain an indication of the views of young people. This could be through listening to professionals that worked directly with them or by speaking to them directly. One possibility would be to talk to care leavers who had absconded in the past. It was noted that most children and young people who ran away were not engaged with services or came from a stable environment so involving them directly was likely to be challenging.

The Panel thanked Ms Haith for her presentation.

LC5. DRAFT SCOPE AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

AGREED:

That the draft scope and terms of reference be updated in the light of the discussion on the previous item and re-circulated to Members of the Panel for comment.

LC6. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

LC7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was noted that a date for the final meeting of the review still needed to be arranged and agreed that a suitable date would be identified by Panel Members prior to the next meeting.

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Clr Karen Alexander
Chair