



Haringey Council

Scrutiny Review - Children Missing from Care and from Home

TUESDAY, 24TH JANUARY, 2012 at 18:30 HRS - CIVIC CENTRE, HIGH ROAD, WOOD GREEN, N22 8LE.

MEMBERS: Councillors Alexander (Chair), Amin and Ejiofor

Co-Optees: Ms Y. Denny (church representative), Ms S.Young (Parent Governor), Mr. A. Dauda (Parent Governor), Mrs. M. Ezeji (Parent Governor)

AGENDA

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**
2. **URGENT BUSINESS**
3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

A member with a personal interest in a matter who attends a meeting of the authority at which the matter is considered must disclose to that meeting the existence and nature of that interest at the commencement of that consideration or when the interest becomes apparent.

A member with a personal interest in a matter also has a prejudicial interest in that matter if the interest is one which a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the member's judgment of the public interest and if this interest affects their financial position or the financial position of a person or body as described in paragraph 8 of the Code of Conduct and/or if it relates to the determining of any approval, consent, licence, permission or registration in relation to them or any person or body described in paragraph 8 of the Code of Conduct.

4. **MINUTES (PAGES 1 - 8)**

To approve the minutes of the meetings of 18 October and 29 November 2011.

5. CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND FROM HOME

To receive evidence from members of Haringey Foster Carers Association.

6. FUTURE MEETINGS/PROGRESS OF REVIEW (PAGES 9 - 10)

To note the future programme of meetings of the Panel and consider progress with the review.

7. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

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17 January 2012

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 children's 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

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

TUESDAY, 18 OCTOBER 2011

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.

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

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

TUESDAY, 18 OCTOBER 2011

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.

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

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

TUESDAY, 18 OCTOBER 2011

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 prio to the next meeting.

Clr Karen Alexander
Chair

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

TUESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2011

Councillors Ejiófor (In the Chair)

Also Councillor Weber
present:

LC8. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Karen Alexander and Yvonne Denny (church representative). It was noted that the meeting was inquorate. It could nevertheless continue to receive evidence although any decisions would need to be confirmed by a quorate meeting of the Panel.

LC9. URGENT BUSINESS

None.

LC10. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

LC11. MINUTES

As the meeting was inquorate, it was noted that the minutes of the meeting of 18 October would have to be submitted to the next meeting for formal approval.

LC12. CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND FROM HOME

Paul Davies, from the Police Missing Persons Unit, gave an overview of the work that was undertaken by his team in dealing with children and young people who went missing from home and from care.

He circulated London wide statistics for missing people, which included children and young people. The definition of missing was that the whereabouts of the individual was unknown. This was determined by whoever had reported the instance. Prior to 2010, Haringey had the highest number of missing persons of any London borough. This was mainly due to loose interpretation of the relevant guidelines and definitions and, in particular, the distinction between missing and unauthorised absence. A lot of instances of unauthorised absence had previously been recorded incorrectly as missing. This had been addressed in consultation with the Council's Children and Young People's Service (C&YPS). This had enabled Haringey to move from having the highest levels of missing people in London to 11th. highest. This represented a considerable achievement.

The biggest change had come from children who had been reported missing from care homes, where there had been an 88% reduction. There was now a much better grasp of the guidelines and this had enabled more focussed work to be undertaken with children and young people who were at risk. It was noted that the statistics referred to instances and not individuals.

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

TUESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2011

Wendy Tomlinson from C&YPS reported that the key challenge was risk assessment. Whilst there were often instances where there was no concern for the safety of individuals, there were others where there were considerable concerns. This was not necessarily restricted to those children and young people classified as missing. For example, there were cases of unauthorised absence that were a source of concern. It was noted that the statistics included figures for the two care homes run by the Council. There was a large number of children's residential homes within the borough – approximately 16/17. Debbie Haith from C&YPS reported that, as part of the risk assessment, the placement was responsible for reporting any incidents to the allocated social worker. If there were concerns, the Police could be involved and the risk assessment reviewed.

Mr Davies stated that the police were working with care homes within Haringey to reduce the number of unauthorised absences. Training had been undertaken with Police officers and the care homes. However, the risk assessments undertaken by the Police were different to that which was undertaken by care homes.

It was noted that Police involvement did not just come from the Missing Persons Unit. Amongst others, the Vice Unit could also be involved. There were limited powers in many cases unless court action was taken. In order for this to be successful, risk of immediate harm needed to be demonstrated clearly. In some instances, children and young people had been placed a long way from London to reduce the risk of them absconding. There was nothing that prevented care homes from taking action themselves to locate children or young people that had gone missing. However, they needed the necessary resources to be available in order to do this. Their responsibilities did not end with reporting the fact that a child or young person was missing. The Police had to assess the level of risk and also balance this against resources that were available to them.

Ms Haith felt that assessments had improved and especially the assessment of risk. There was no longer an over reliance on Police action. Mr Davies stated that there were still challenges that needed to be addressed. Some residential homes were staffed by temporary staff and work had to be undertaken to ensure that they were aware of their responsibilities and the fact that missing children were not just the responsibility of the Police.

Ms Tomlinson reported that every care home provider had a policy on missing children. The Council followed the London wide procedures. Reference to relevant procedures was part of staff induction. Risk assessments included a list of actions that could or should be taken. Revisions could be undertaken at strategy meetings. It was noted that the issues faced by other boroughs were very similar to those experienced by Haringey.

Sylvia Chew, the Head of First Response, reported that multi agency screening of referrals was undertaken. Earlier intervention was currently being looked at. She reported that between 1 April and 15 November, 119 children were reported as missing on 135 occasions. These figures included unauthorised absence. However, future reports would distinguish between missing children and unauthorised absences. The clearer distinction would assist in highlighting the specific cases that required intervention.

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

TUESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2011

Many children who were recorded as missing had become separated from the parents in Wood Green Shopping City and found quickly. A number others had been testing boundaries. Of children under the age of 11 who had gone missing, 13 children had been lost in a public space, 2 had been reported as not in school and 4 had returned late from a school related activity.

Missing children generally fell into the following three categories and procedures reflected this:

- Children who returned home late from a school or for an arranged day time activity and had been reported missing by the parents. These were categorised as unauthorised absences.
- Children who returned home late from an evening activity and reported missing. These could indicate that young people were pushing boundaries but could also possibly mean unhappiness or risk at home or in the community including, in some instances, gang related activity or sexual exploitation. In such instances, there would be discussion with parents to see if the incident constituted unauthorised absence or a missing episode.
- Children who were missing for longer including overnight. The lead agency for this was the Police.

The aim of procedures was to facilitate early intervention where appropriate. All instances were logged and scrutinised on a weekly basis. Various interventions could be used. The service worked closely with the Youth Service. They were also developing links with the Barnardos Miss U Project that had recently begun operating within the borough. This had a number of specific functions:

- Working with young people who regularly went missing;
- Undertaking return interviews for children and young people who went missing from the two children's residential homes run by the Council;
- Providing training and group work on keeping safe;
- Assisting other agencies with complex pieces of case work; and
- Working with schools to provide awareness training.

The project was sponsored by Aviva and had funding for three years.

All cases were screened when referred. However, the service was reliant on cases being reported which was not always the case. Schools and the Education Welfare Service were particularly good at flagging up issues of concern. It was noted that the UK Border Agency were responsible for dealing with any cases of trafficking. Some children had been repatriated and there were good links with the Bulgarian and Romanian authorities. The service had access to a Roma specialist, who was currently working with 25 families within Haringey.

Ms. Haith stated that it was important not to make assumptions about children and their relationships. There had been instances where children had been sold on a number of times. In such circumstances, it was important to verify identity. There were very good relationships with partners and there was now a multi agency safeguarding hub.

Ms Tomlinson reported there was now greater clarity about whether there was cause for concern through the effective use of risk assessments. It was frequently the case that professionals were reasonably sure about the whereabouts of a child although it

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

TUESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2011

might not be possible for them to be absolutely certain. It was noted that there was a London wide protocol for dealing with children missing from care and from home.

Mr Davies stated that risk could be present irrespective of whether children or young people were missing. All Police officers were trained in how to deal with missing children. Ms Chew stated that regular contact and engagement with residential care providers was important. In particular, it was important that they had a proper understanding of how instances of unauthorised absence should be dealt with. Work also needed to be undertaken concerning return briefings.

It was noted that an appropriate time for young people to return to care homes should be decided before they are placed and included in the risk assessment. Advice could be obtained by the care home manager from officers in C&YPS and, where appropriate, parents or guardians. If there was any doubt about the whereabouts of a young person, residential social workers tended to ring the Police.

There were mixed views amongst providers regarding whether they should seek to find young people who had not returned themselves. Sanctions could also be used to discourage young people from going missing again. If they persisted in running away, their care plan could be re-visited and, where appropriate, a planned move to another residential home could be considered. It was possible that there might be something in the children's home that they were placed in that they did not like that was behind them running away. It might also be possible that they were absconding to a specific place for a reason. It was necessary to analyse the available information and identify any patterns.

Ms Haith reported that there was a multi agency officer steering group that monitored practice issues relating to instances of children and young people who went missing and issues of concern where reported to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee and the Local Childrens Safeguarding Board (LCSB).

It was rare for missing children or young people to not be located and unusual for professionals to have no ideas regarding where a missing child or young person might be. It was occasionally necessary to take action against parents to compel them to co-operate. A proactive approach was used.

The Panel thanked Mr Davies, Ms Haith and Ms Tomlinson for their assistance.

LC13. FUTURE MEETINGS/PROGRESS OF REVIEW

It was agreed that a meeting of the Panel would be arranged for 13 February at 2:30 p.m.

LC14. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

Cllr Joe Ejiofor (In the Chair)

Scrutiny Review – Children Missing from Care and from Home**Programme of Remaining Meetings**Meeting 3:

Date: Tuesday 24 January (6:30 p.m.)

Aims/Objectives:

To obtain an understanding of the reasons why children and young people might run away and how well statutory agencies address the issue.

Possible Witnesses:

Foster carers

Meeting 4:

Date: Monday 13 February (2:30 p.m.)

Aim/Objective:

To receive evidence on how residential care providers and private fostering agencies address the issue

Possible Witnesses:

Residential care providers, including Council run homes
Private fostering agencies.

Meeting 5:

Date: Tuesday 6 March (1:00 p.m.)

Aim/Objective:

To receive evidence from Barnardos on the Miss U project for missing children in Haringey

Possible Witnesses:

Barnardos

Meeting 6:

Date: Tuesday 13 March (6:30 p.m.)

Aims/Objectives:

- To consider further any issues that may have arisen in the course of evidence gathering sessions
- To consider appropriate conclusions and recommendations for the review

Background Information:

A digest of evidence received and key issues raised in the course of the review

Possible Witnesses:

C&YPS

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