

# **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 11<sup>th</sup>. 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)**