

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW - CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND FROM HOME
MONDAY, 13 FEBRUARY 2012

Councillors Alexander (Chair) and Ejiofor
:

Co-opted Member: Ms. Y. Denny (Church representative)

LC22. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Ms. Ezeji (parent governor).

LC23. URGENT BUSINESS

None.

LC24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

LC25. MINUTES

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting of 24 January 2012 be approved.

LC26. CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE AND FROM HOME

The Panel received evidence from the following representatives of private fostering agencies and residential providers:

- Tim McArdle and Urs Biemann from Capstone Vision Foster Care;
- Remi Johnson from Xcel 2000 FosterCare Services;
- Karen Thompson from Young Generation Children's Home;
- Sandra Russell from Haringey Park Children's Home;
- Ntombi Kibutu from Muswell Hill Hillfields Children's Home;
- Valerie Osborne from Kindercare Fostering; and
- Chris Emeruwa from Coppetts Road Children's Home

In addition, written evidence was received from Richard Cross of Five Rivers Child Care, who was unable to be present at the meeting.

The Chair welcomed those present to the meeting. It was noted that the definition of "missing" that was being used for the purposes of the review referred to situations where it was not known where child or young person was.

The following views were expressed by those present:

- It was hard to be precise the reasons why young people absconded from care. The issue of engagement was nevertheless important. Young people in care did not come from a secure background and often sought solace with their peers. It

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normally took them time to develop a bond with carers. Where a bond had been established, young people might be less tempted to stay out late or run away as they did not want to let their carer down. Many young people in care had become very independent, which could contribute to the problem. In addition, they may not be inclined to worry about potential risks. A lot of young people in care did not trust adults. Some had the attitude that foster carers were just doing a job. To some extent, dealing with runaways was just part and parcel of working with young people in care. Absconding was not normally a reflection on care or carers – it was more an indication of where the young person came from.

- Peer pressure played an important role and arguments with family could also be a factor that led to young people going missing. Sometimes they might not want to go home. The fact that they ran away might be one of the reasons why they were in care in the first place. In addition, they may have been suffered previously from a lack of boundaries. Some young people could feel oppressed by support from carers. Young people could feel as if they were invincible. Running away could be exciting at first but it could be difficult to step back from such behaviour. They often did not wish to appear disloyal to their peers. Sometimes they did not want to be in care in the first place and preferred to be with their family.
- For a small number of young people, there was a pattern of running away. It was nevertheless not a widespread issue. If it was out of character, there were higher levels of concern. If it was a regular occurrence, this could be less alarming. Whilst there were broad and general reasons why young people ran away, they could also be individual ones.
- It could be hard to change patterns but it was not impossible. It was necessary to engage with the young person to establish the reasons why they were running away. This needed to involve the young person's wider network. Foster carers had a particular role to play by developing their relationship with the young person. Part of this could involve emphasising the benefits of not absconding.
- The role of the foster carer when young people went missing was not passive. In addition to contacting the social worker and, if appropriate, the Police, carers could contact friends and other contacts as well as looking for them. They should immediately phone the out-of-hours social work team and report each and every instance.
- The experience of residential children's homes was broadly similar to that of foster care agencies. The priority was to make sure young people were safe. All young people were provided with a mobile phone so that the home could at least call and speak to them if they went missing. Homes tried to negotiate with and encourage young people. However, the draw of the peer group was difficult to break. They tried to provide a safe haven that young people knew they come back to. Getting them to come back home earlier was progress. Boredom could also be a factor as the homes could not always provide them with the activities that they wanted to do. Some young people could be used to being out late and it could take a long time to change their behaviour.
- The Police were the key agency in dealing with missing young people. They had their own procedures which included a distinction between unauthorised absence

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and missing. The Police response could be variable but their resources were finite and often over stretched. The response of the Police Missing Persons team was likely to be different to that of other Police officers. Services were proactive in assessing risk whilst the Police had a more reactive role.

- The process for dealing with missing children could become taxing and a greater level of joined up thinking would be welcome. It could appear that not all agencies and organisations were pulling in the same direction.
- If young people were continually absconding, a meeting was normally arranged with their allocated social worker. Not all social workers addressed the issue in the same way. Sharing of information was important and placement planning meetings could facilitate this. It was particularly helpful that these involved foster carers.
- All services were focussed first and foremost on the child or young person. Residential homes would have regular one-to-one sessions with them and try to build up a relationship. It was important to make them understand that services had their welfare at heart. If a child or young person went missing who was considered to be high risk, the home would try to look for them straight away. The Police could not do this due to the need to go through their procedures.
- There were differences between age groups and plans needed to reflect this. Whilst it was possible to provide activities for 16 – 18 year olds, they often did not want to join in. They preferred to be with friends and such attitudes could be ingrained. They may have only been in care for a short period and mix with young people who were living semi-independently. In such circumstances, it was difficult to enforce specific times that young people should return by and this could result in them being classified as missing.
- 17 year olds could be difficult to place and sometimes they were not given the best placement but merely the best available. Semi independent accommodation was not always in the best location. It could also be very difficult to impose boundaries on young people of that age.
- Where it was known where a young person was, they were not classified as missing. However, this could still mean that the young person was at risk. In such circumstances, it was necessary to liaise with the Police but they were generally less willing to act. It could be difficult and potentially dangerous for foster carers and residential staff to go looking for young people in such circumstances. The Police were better placed to act but did not always have the resources to do so.
- The aim of risk assessments was to minimise risk. There had to be a threshold for each individual. The structures that were currently in place did not allow the same thresholds to be used for children in care as for other children.
- Fostering agencies could sometimes be more concerned about young people than local authorities appeared to be. Social workers often had very heavy caseloads. It could sometimes take time for Emergency Duty Teams (EDTs) to report incidents back to social workers and it could be necessary for agencies to follow

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up reports themselves to ensure that action was taken. It was rare for allocated social workers to ring up the next day after an incident had been reported.

- The social worker played an important part in the young person's life. However, there was often a lack of continuity with frequent changes in the allocated social worker. Although it was a big issue in Haringey, it was also an issue in other areas. This was mainly due to heavy turnover of social workers. Contact from social workers was important and regular contact could matter a lot to young people, even if it was just through regular phone calls. As soon as the social worker changed, the relationship was lost. After two or three changes in social workers, young people could stop bothering to engage.
- There was not much difference in how individual authorities dealt with missing children though some could be slightly more proactive than others in their approach. Follow up meetings to discuss missing children did not always take place with some authorities. Although authorities had different procedures, they were all broadly similar. Any differences generally arose from how they were interpreted. Procedures were felt to be generally sound and issues were normally more concerned with their application and personnel matters. In particular, approaches were not always consistent. Good quality placement meetings could help to prevent problems arising.
- Foster carers received considerable amounts of training with between three and ten sessions taking place every year. In terms of missing children, training sessions would look at the wider position and how to best engage with the young person and address their emotional well being. Children who absconded could deter carers and cause them considerable anxiety.

It was noted that all local authorities were required to have a register of looked after children who have been missing from care for over 24 hours. It was agreed that a copy of the draft review report would be circulated to the fostering agencies and residential providers who had attended the meeting.

The Panel thanked the foster care agencies and residential providers for attending.

LC27. FUTURE MEETINGS/ PROGRESS OF REVIEW

The Panel noted progress with the review and the future programme of activity. The following additional information was requested:

- Anonymised case studies on children and young people that had run away, including (if possible) details of any follow up action;
- Relevant data on social worker turn over; and
- Information on patterns of absconding, including details on the numbers of children who ran away on a regular basis.

LC28. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

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Cllr Karen Alexander
Chair