



**Haringey Council**

<b>Report for:</b>	<b>Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee</b>	<b>Item Number:</b>	
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Missing from Care November 2012</b>		
<b>Report Authorised by:</b>	<b>Marion Wheeler</b>		
<b>Lead Officer:</b>	<b>Chris Chalmers</b>		
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>		<b>Report for Key/Non Key Decisions:</b>	
<b>Information report</b>		<b>Information report</b>	

### **1. Describe the issue under consideration**

At the Joint meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee and Children's Safeguarding Committee held on the 29<sup>th</sup> October there was discussion about signing up to the Runaway's Charter. Although this was not agreed, further assurance was sought on the process and risk assessments in place for children in care taking unauthorised leave from their placements as the past experience of some members had been that these children's whereabouts were predicted, rather than known by the care homes. The Committee agreed that a report come back to the December meeting of Corporate Parenting Committee advising on the process and risk assessments in place for children in care taking unauthorised leave from their placements and also for children missing from care. The report should also provide a sense of the figures, over the year, for children missing from care as the figures were lower than previously reported.

### **2. Recommendations**

That members note the report.

### **3. Background information**



The Children Missing from Care and from Home Scrutiny review was presented to Cabinet earlier this summer and an action plan is now being worked on following this. Since November last year the Children's Service have been working in partnership with the Barnardos and Railway Children project backed 'Miss U' project which has added expertise and specialist advice to work with missing children. Internal guidance (Social Care Procedures) offers links to updated national statutory guidance, in line with the requirements of National Indicator 71, on children who run away and go missing from home or care.

### **Definitions of Missing**

The following definitions clarify any possible blurring of understandings around those missing from care that are described as having "unauthorised absence". The service use the following definitions, which are in accordance with national guidance:

- The terms 'young runaway' and 'missing' in this context refer to children and young people up to the age of 18 who have run away from their home or care placement, have been forced to leave, or whose whereabouts are unknown.
- Unauthorised absence is where a looked-after child's whereabouts are known or thought to be known but unconfirmed, they are not missing and may instead be considered as absent without authorisation from their placement.
- Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed either on purpose or unwittingly, or fail to tell their parents/carers of their whereabouts. This kind of boundary-testing activity is well within the range of normal teenage behaviour and does not come within the definition of 'missing' for this protocol. This type of behaviour, when exhibited within a care setting such as a foster home would not trigger missing procedures either. Where, however, there is cause for concern, i.e. where there is no indication that a child is likely to return within a short space of time or where there is immediate concern for the child's safety, missing procedures will be triggered at once.
- Whenever a young person is away unplanned overnight this is recognised as the child being missing, whatever the length of time or circumstances. No assumptions are made about a child's safety whether they state their whereabouts or not. With some young people of 16 and 17 who are definitely known to spend large amounts of time at a relative's home or that of a girlfriend/boyfriend this is still viewed seriously. It is however likely that police will be less likely to act in such cases. All known addresses are visited by staff and checked regularly by police. In more difficult situations a recovery order for the safe retrieval of a young person is applied for through the court.

### **Actions when children and young people are missing**

All staff follow a clearly defined reporting and recording protocol.



- The relevant Head of Service, Team Manager and Deputy Head of Service are informed within 24 hours of a young person going missing. If this includes a period of time over a weekend then the EDT service must be notified.
- A risk assessment record form must then be completed by the social worker and their team manager as part of the 48 hour notification. This is then sent to the Head of Service, Deputy Head of Service and the Assistant Director.
- The safety and well being of our children in care are paramount and this risk assessment process will assist us with information to keep vulnerable children under close review when they are at high risk.
- A strategy meeting is held on the first available working day after the young person is reported to be missing. A review strategy meeting will then be booked within five working days of this first meeting or sooner if the risk is assessed to be exceptionally high.
- Updates are given to senior managers as routine procedure.

### **Return from Missing**

Upon the young person's return from a missing episode they will be interviewed to ascertain some detail on what the driving factors for absconding are and how their careers and social workers can work together with the young person to improve their situation. There is now a process being put into place to ensure an independent interview, at least in cases where a young person has been missing for 48 hours or more or is a regular absconder. The intention is to use that information to inform a plan of action to safeguard the young person in the future and to address areas which are worrying them and causing them to run away. Their care plan has to be updated to include any such new information including the new risk assessment. It is essential that no factors related to a young person's absence stand alone and that all relevant factors are pulled together to create a holistic, multi agency response to a young person's needs.

### **Figures for missing episodes in the last calendar year (01/11/11 – 31/10/12)**

There are 341 episodes recorded for children missing from care. These involve 83 children and young people. In 28 instances there are more than 3 episodes of missing. In 31 cases there is one instance of going missing. Across the different cases the majority of episodes (whether frequent or rare) relate to situations where young people have strong ties to family members but it has been deemed unsafe for the majority of them to return home permanently. A significant proportion also relate to placements in residential or foster care where young people have been unhappy in a placement and, on further investigation, it was agreed that they should move elsewhere. It is known that, after a considerable number of episodes of going missing, many of the young people have then settled much more securely after a move into a new placement when their missing episodes then ceased. From the list of young people over the last year around 9 (three are aged 17) are still persistent absconders where work is ongoing. Quite a few of the other more frequent absconders have moved placements successfully; some have left care and others now living in semi independent accommodation.



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## **Conclusion**

There is continual analysis of trends and safeguards with regard to children in care. Work is being undertaken to gain a greater understanding of the push factors behind young people running away from Council care and to develop a stronger strategy to address this. A study focusing on children and young people's views (both in 2006 and then updated with their views from 2012) has recently been released by the Children's Director for England. This is being used in Haringey to further develop practice in this area. A piece of work currently being undertaken is the establishment of independent return home interviews. These are to be offered by the Youth Service on the basis outlined in national missing guidance. Overall the service is working, from a number of different angles, to drive down the number of missing episodes. They are striving to listen to young people's views and to listen to, and act upon, the concerns that young people express which can then lead to them running away.