# Thames Valley Missing Children's Guidance

## December 2010

## INTRODUCTION

Since the Government's Children's Safeguards Review in 1997 there has been a commitment to take action to safeguard children who run away or who go missing from home or care. This commitment is integral to the wider commitment to safeguard children as set out in the Children's Plan (2008) and embedded in legislation.

In 2008 the Government published its *Young Runaways Action Plan* and embedded the importance in *National Indicator (NI) 71: Missing From Home or Care.* In July 2009 it published '*Statutory Guidance On Children Who Run Away And Go Missing From Home Or Care'*, which support Local Authorities in meeting the requirements of NI 71. This replaced the Government's *Missing from Care and Home Guidance (2002*).

This guidance is a revision of the 2009 interim Thames Valley protocol, revised in the light of the new guidance. This document is now guidance intended to inform the short Thames Valley Missing Children Protocol which outlines what to do when a child goes missing and is attached to this document.

The guidance outlines the actions that agencies should jointly take when a child runs away or goes missing. The guidance does not cover the detail of individual agencies operating procedure, which should be referred to in addition to this guidance. Individual agencies procedures should be compatible with this guidance.

This guidance sits along side child protection procedures. Whenever there is concern that a child may need safeguarding or their welfare promoted professionals in all agencies should refer to these procedures in addition to this guidance.

Children do not run away or go missing for no reason. The reasons are likely to be complex and different for each child. Some missing children will have been:

- sexually abused;
- threatened with a forced marriage;
- trafficked;
- threatened with female genital mutilation; or
- subject to so-called honour-based violence.
- sexually exploited;
- living in a household where domestic abuse is common;
- misusing substances;

- self-harming;
- privately fostered;
- missing education.

This list is not exhaustive. Guidance should be consulted whenever such problems are suspected and the child should be viewed holistically. Moreover, child protection and other procedures should be consulted in addition to this guidance where relevant.

## RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GO MISSING

### Scope

The guidance covers:

- children who run away or are missing from the care of any local authority and placed in the Thames Valley Police area, regardless of reason or type of placement;

- children who run away or are missing from home;

- Children missing from a private fostering arrangement;

- Children missing from a residential school.

When a Thames Valley Local Authority places a child in care outside the Thames Valley Police area, agencies should liaise with the Police force responsible for where the child was placed. The arrangements in place where the child was place will take precedence over this guidance unless circumstances make it unsafe to do so.

### Definitions

③ **Child:** Someone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday.
For style purposes, the terms 'child/ren' and 'young person/people' are used synonymously in this guidance.

③ **Home:** The place of normal residence of the child.

③ **In Care:** A child who is Looked After under the Children Act 1989, whether accommodated or subject to a court order

③ **Missing Person – ACPO Definition:** "A missing person is anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance.

He or she will be considered missing until located and his or her well being, or otherwise, established."

- ③ **Runaway:** A child or young person, who is absent from their home or placement without permission for any length of time where their age and experience, background and ability make this a concern, or a child or young person who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers.

- ③ **Unauthorized absence:** Absent for a short period of time and after a careful and thorough risk assessment the absence does not raise concern for their immediate safety or that of the public. In accordance with the ACPO Manual of Guidance 2005 this period of absence should not **exceed 6 hours.**

- ③ **Absconded:** When a child or young person has gone missing who is subject to legal orders such as secure orders. Police **should** be made aware of the order under which the child has been placed in the residence and the expiry date of the order for the child to be classified as an absconder. If the expiry date of the order is not known, the child or young person will be classified as a "missing person" **NOT** an absconder.

- ③ The terms **'parent'** and **'carer'** are used interchangeably unless specified otherwise.

**Categories**

Some children absent themselves for a short period and then return and their whereabouts are known. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose or accidentally, and may be testing boundaries. This kind of boundary testing is well within the range of expected teenage behaviour, and does not fall under the remit of this guidance.

Police powers are limited and difficulties can arise when missing children are found but do not want to return to their place of residence. Under the Children Act 1989, when there is reasonable cause to believe that the child would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm, Police can take children into police protection. Police may remove the child to suitable accommodation which could include the home from where the child originally went missing. The Police are not given the power to use force to take children into Police protection. The Police will always liaise with children's social care before they consider police protection unless delay may lead to the child suffering harm.

For the purposes of this guidance, four categories of identification are used that call for different responses from the agencies. Local inquiries and risk assessments need to be carried out to determine which category the young person falls into.

A child is to be considered 'missing' when: **the child or young person's location is unknown to those responsible for his or her care. This applies to all children regardless of whether they are in care or not, and regardless of whether they are subject to a court order or not.** Any factors that suggests that the child is vulnerable or there is danger to the public will need to be properly evaluated in line with this guidance and other relevant procedures.

All such missing children or young people will be considered to be a child potentially in need and at risk, and therefore consideration should be given to undertaking and assessment of need under s17 Children Act 1989 or enquiries under s47. It is important that all agencies share relevant information about a missing child.

**Risk Assessment**
Police National Guidance defines the levels of risk and the required response as follows:

**High Risk** is where risk is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability; or may have been the victim of a serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger. This requires the immediate deployment of Police resources and a member of the senior management team or similar command level should be involved in the examination of initial inquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of a Senior Investigating Office (SIO).

Children assessed as **Medium Risk** (likely to place the child in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others) requires an active and measured response by Police and other agencies in order to trace the missing child and supporting the person reporting.

Children assessed as **Low Risk** (there is no apparent danger to either the child or the public) – the Police will record the information on the Police National Computer (PNC), and will advise the person reporting the disappearance that following basic enquiries and unless circumstances change, further active enquiries will not be carried out by the Police. The missing person's details will be passed to 'Missing People' in line with the national guidance. Low risk missing persons however should be kept under review as risk can increase with the passage of time.

**Thresholds for referral to social care**
All Local Authorities are required to establish thresholds for service. These are endorsed by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in each of the nine Thames Valley areas. Referral should always be made when:

- ③ evidence exists that the child has developed a repeated pattern of running;
- ③ the child has, or is likely to, experience significant harm;
- ③ the parent appears unable or unwilling to work to support and meet the needs of the child.

Please refer to each individual LSCB for full details of Children's Social Care thresholds

**Strategy**
The LSCB are charged with ensuring that relevant organisations effectively co-operate to safeguard children and promote their welfare. This includes arrangements for dealing with missing children. Each LSCB will monitor the implementation of this guidance, including its effectiveness in sharing information, compliance with NI 71 and links to other safeguarding areas. Each agency retains responsibility for its role in implementing this guidance.

**Regional arrangements and cross-border Issues**
Children who run away or go missing do will often cross local authority and Police area boundaries. It is essential that all parties liaise and share information with agencies not covered by this guidance to agree a course of action.

If a child normally resident or placed by one local authority (know as the home authority) presents themselves in another authority (know as the receiving authority) the two authorities should work together to ensure the child gets access to the help and support services they need. Responsibility for making safeguarding enquiries rests with the local authority in which the child is found, although they may negotiate that the home authority continues these enquiries.

**Out of Hours responses**
This guidance applies equally to out-of-hours services as to those operating during office hours. If there is concern that the child may be at risk if returned home, the child should be referred to the relevant Emergency Duty Team to enable an assessment of need and appropriate arrangements for their accommodation.

Local authorities will determine the most appropriate form of emergency accommodation. No child aged 15 or under should be placed in Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation.

**Alerting the Police**
In assessing a child or young person who is considered to be **missing from home** the carer will apply their own judgement with regard to the overall circumstances of the child or young person and the circumstances in which they have gone missing. If, in the carers' opinion, the absence of the child or young person is more than 'boundary testing' activity, then they will in normal circumstances alert the Police.

Some children missing from home will be **receiving services from Children's Social Care and may be subject to a child protection plan**. In these cases the responsibility to report a child missing remains with the parents or carers. If Children's Social Care assess that the parents' failure to notify the Police may lead to the child suffering significant harm they should initiate child protection procedures.

In respect of children and young people **absent from the care of the local authority**, the unauthorised absence/boundary testing behaviour requires assessment by those responsible for the care of the individual in determining when to alert the Police.

When it is discovered that a child has absented him/herself without permission from a placement, staff will refer to the young person's individual risk assessment in considering whether the young person is "unauthorised absent" or "missing" as defined by these procedures. In cases of doubt the home manager or manager on call will be consulted.

The fact that the young person may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk. In fact, children who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.

At some point, depending upon the child and the circumstances, the young person's absence will give rise to justifiable concern and require a formal missing person report to the Police.

**Reporting**

The decision to report a child as missing should not be taken in isolation. Staff should consult with the senior staff member on duty and foster carers should liaise with the young person's social worker or Emergency Duty Team staff. Any decision should incorporate information from the child/young persons' risk assessment. The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances taken into account. If the young person is receiving support from CAMHS professionals, Educational Psychologists and so on, it may be advisable to discuss the case with them. However, if they are not readily available a decision should be made on the basis of the best available information. In cases of doubt it may also be appropriate to discuss the case with a local Police supervisor.

Each case should be decided on merit and a formal missing person report to the Police may be actioned earlier in some circumstances than in others. For a small number of young people, it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. Normally this will have been previously agreed as part of the Care Plan because of the young person's vulnerability.

If the absence is considered to fall within these procedures the relevant staff member, i.e. child's social worker, duty social worker, Emergency Duty Service social worker, residential child care worker, will as soon as practical inform:

- the child/young person's parents/and those with parental responsibility; and
- the Police.

**Roles and Responsibilities**
Where, initially, the decision was made that this absence **does not** fall within this procedure this decision will be reviewed **every hour** throughout the period of unauthorised absence (to a **maximum of 6 hours**) if the child does not return or his/her whereabouts are not known.

If such a period of absence continues for 6 hours it will automatically be considered to fall within these procedures. NB: This is the maximum period; and in most situations much shorter periods will be appropriate.

***Parent / Carer***
The parent/carer should take reasonable steps to find the child and report the matter to the Police. If the child is the subject of a Care Order or is accommodated by the Local Authority, or is subject to a Child Protection Plan Children's Social Care should also be informed (Emergency Duty Team if out of hours) by the alerter; the Police should confirm with children's social care if they receive a report that a child in these categories is missing.

***Residential care Staff***
Residential care staff are responsible for the day to day care of young people resident in their home. They should make an assessment of whether the incident falls within the boundary-testing arena and conduct a preliminary search of the premises before notifying the Police of the occurrence as a missing person report.

***Foster Carers***
Foster carers are responsible for the day to day care of young people resident in their home. They should make an assessment of whether the incident falls within the boundary-testing arena and conduct a preliminary search of the premises before notifying the Police of the occurrence as a missing person report.

***Children's Social Care***
Children's Social Care have responsibilities to assess children in need, make enquiries if it appears that a child may be at risk of significant harm and provide accommodation for those children and young people who need it. If they receive a referral concerning a child who is, or is a risk of going, missing they should consider:

- ③ Making an assessment under s17 Children Act 1989 to determine if s/he is a child in need and to ensure services are provided to meet these needs;
- ③ If, at any time during this assessment it appears that the child may be in need of protection they should make enquiries under s47 Children Act 1989, and if necessary take action to protect the child;

If at anytime during assessments or enquiries it appears that the child has gone missing, they should ensure that carers carry out their roles outlined above and if necessary report to the local Police.

***All Agencies, including Voluntary Organisations***

If it comes to the attention of any agency or voluntary organisation that a young person is missing from home they should:

Advise the parent/carer of the organisation's duty to ensure the matter is reported to the Police; and if necessary follow this up by contacting the Police to verify that this has occurred. Any organisation that considers the child may have additional needs can initiate a CAF (see below)

***Police***

The Police will, upon receiving a report of a child or young person being missing from home or care, carry out pro-active enquiries to locate, trace and return the subject as soon as possible.

All children or young persons reported missing from home or from care are risk assessed by the Police. An officer will attend the home to gather the information required to inform such an assessment. This will then be the subject of discussion with a supervisor prior to the initial risk assessment level being assigned. The risk assessment level can be modified throughout the life of the investigation.

Thames Valley Police will contact Children Social Care (Emergency Duty Team when out of normal hours) to determine the status of the child re any existing child protection plan. Additionally Thames Valley Police will notify Children's Social Care of all missing children each working day. Police will inform all parents / carers of the fact that the case will be notified to Children's Social Care.

In addition to specific internal actions to locate and trace the missing person, the following timescales are of relevance:

**Within 2 hours the Police National Computer (PNC)** will be updated with the subject's details.

- Regular contact with the person reporting (alerter) is to be established as soon as possible and maintained until the child or young person is returned.

- Liaison with partner and other agencies to be established as soon as possible.
- Continual risk assessment to be applied.
- PVP Central Referral Units will have a designated Missing Person Coordinator who will oversee the investigation and provide a Single Point of Contact for other agencies as the investigation progresses. All initial reports should be made to the Police Enquiry Centre who will record the details on the Missing Person Database.

**If Missing for 24 hours**: Forward case to Child Abuse Investigation Unit referral manager to review case and consider whether child protection procedures should be invoked.

**If Missing up to 5 days:**

- Missing People to be informed.
- Close contact with partner and other relevant agencies to be maintained.

**If Missing over 5 days:**

- In line with Child Protection Procedures a strategy discussion or meeting will be held.
- All missing Children and Young Persons to be considered for High Risk assessment (as per National Definition) if not already assessed at this level before this time lapse.

**If Missing over 14 days:**

- Police National Missing Persons Bureau to be informed – if not already actioned.

**If Missing for over 10 weeks**:

- Ensure the Police National Computer report on the subject is extended for further year period (minimum).

## CHILDREN WHO RUN AWAY AND GO MISSING FROM HOME

Children who live with parents and carers and run away or go missing are vulnerable. This group also includes children who are privately fostered (when parents privately arrange for their children under 16 to be cared for by someone who is not their parents or a close relative).

In each case Police and other involved professionals should consider whether the child's circumstances meet the threshold criteria for a referral to Children's Social Care, and if so a referral should be made. Children's social care will consider whether further enquires or assessment should be undertaken. Responsibility for leading the investigation to find the child rests with the Police.

**CAF**
If professionals decide that the criteria for referral are not met or if Children's Social Care decide not to carry out an initial assessment or s47 enquires, an assessment under the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) should be considered. Where it is decided that a child needs support from several agencies, a CAF is a way of engaging relevant agencies to meet the child's needs.

The CAF is a consent-based tool for assessing a child in a holistic way to identify their additional needs. The CAF form is a way of recording conversation(s) between the practitioner and the child or young person. The level of detail in each part will vary according to the child's needs and circumstances. If any child protection issues arise, the usual safeguarding procedures should be followed immediately.

A number of professionals are able to undertake a CAF and training is widely available. Information about the CAF and Lead Professional, including examples of emerging good practice can be found at on individual LSCB/Local Authority websites and at:
http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/integratedworking/caf

**CHILDREN WHO RUN AWAY OR GO MISSING FROM LOCAL AUTHORITY CARE**

**Planning Before the Event**
Children in public care (Looked After Children) depend on the local authority to act as their corporate parent. The Local Authority should have the same interest in the progress and attainments of these children as a reasonable parent would have for their own children.

Each child in care has a Care Plan and a Placement Information Record (sometimes referred to as a Placement Plan) based on an assessment of current and future needs, including risks to self and others. The Care Plan will therefore take account of any risk that the child may go missing in future and any factors which may increase the risk to the child should they go missing. Children's residential and fostering service staff will contribute to this assessment. All information should be included in the Placement Plan and in the child's Care Plan.

If the child already has an established pattern of running away, the Care Plan and Placement Plan (PIR) should detail a plan to prevent further running away and steps to be taken, preparation in the event that the child does go missing, and plans to recover the child should they go missing with clear roles and accountabilities. This should be shared with the child and their family where practicable.

The plan should include information on the following:

- ③ Likelihood of child going missing
- ③ Child's view on current placement
- ③ Level of supervision/support that care staff propose to provide for the child
- ③ Views of parents/carers on their child's needs and the action that needs to be taken if the child is absent without permission
- ③ Risks of harm to the child and their vulnerability if they run away
- ③ Consideration of any external influences which may result in the child's removal without consent
- ③ Likelihood of others are preventing returning home, or colluding with the child to remain missing.

The Care Plan will remain in the possession of Children's Social Care. It is not a public document. It is not envisaged that the Police will need to view the Care Plan as a matter of course. However, there may well be circumstances when it is necessary to involve the Police in aspects of the Care Planning process to safeguard the child.

All children who are looked after by the local authority will receive an age appropriate information guide, which clearly states:

- ③ What procedure will be followed if they go missing;
- ③ That there is an expectation that a Police officer will speak to the child on their return; That where possible they will be offered the opportunity to speak to an independent person identified and arranged by each local authority.

When a child arrives at a care home or foster placement it is essential to prepare relevant information in the event the child goes missing. This information should be updated on a regular basis.

Should a child go missing it is vital to the safe recovery of the child that a recent photograph of the child is made available. The photograph should be a good likeness of the child. Most commonly the photograph will be used by local Police officers to help them recognise the child when patrolling or when actively looking for the child at relevant locations. In very serious cases, where the child is believed to be at severe risk, the Police and local authority may decide to use the photograph more widely and even involve publishing the photograph to national or local media.

A recent photograph bearing a good likeness to the child will be kept on record by Children's Social Care. If appropriate, the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation. If possible the agreement of the young person should also be gained, however the refusal of the young person to grant such consent will not prevent the disclosure of any photograph to the Police.

**Notification of Absence**
A child Looked After will usually fall into one of three categories when absent from a children's home or foster placement:

- ③ Unauthorised absence - such as when boundary-testing activity is occurring, or the location of the child is known but not approved.
- ③ Missing - where the location of the child is not known but no order or requirement resulting from the criminal law is in place
- ③ Absconder where the location of the child is not known and a legal requirement / order is in force

Where, initially, the decision is made that this absence is classified as absent without authority, the matter will be reviewed every hour if the child does not return or his/her whereabouts are not known.

It is not usually expected that the first response of a carer in circumstances where a child is late home will be to report the child as missing to the Police. It is the duty of a carer to exercise sound judgement at to the status of the missing child. Where the carer is of the view that it is necessary to report the disappearance to the Police it is expected that care home staff and/or foster carers will make reasonable enquiries before doing so. These enquiries could include phone calls, visits to addresses where the child is likely to be etc. The carer should, within the constraints of the care setting, take all steps a responsible parent would take, to try to locate the child and to make a careful assessment in accordance with known risks faced by the child. Carers will specifically:

- ③ Thoroughly search any premises and its grounds to verify that the child is in fact absent. (This search will be repeated by Police.)
- ③ Search the premises for any important leads (e.g., mobile phones, diaries, letters, notes explaining absence, email and website activity etc), which may inform the investigation and/or assist in protecting or recovering the child.
- ③ Speak with other residents to obtain relevant information about the missing child.
- ③ Make all appropriate telephone enquiries regarding the whereabouts of the child. This will involve trying to contact the child themselves, friends, family, associates, appropriate locations, local hospitals and the local Police custody office.

If the above enquiries fail to recover the missing child, the case will be reported to the Police, together with the details of enquiries completed.

If the young person's whereabouts are known or suspected, the carer/care home staff will decide whether to allow the young person to remain at that location, albeit temporarily, or to arrange for their return. If the decision is to arrange their

return and there is reason to believe that there may be public order difficulties, the Police will assist the attending social worker. Police assistance in these circumstances does not mean that the young person is categorised as missing.

If the absence is considered to fall within these procedures, the manager on duty in the children's home or the foster carer notify the following within six hours, or sooner if appropriate:

- ③ The local Police;
- ③ The Local Authority responsible for the child's placement. Telephone notification should be followed by written communication to the accountable manager in the local authority; and
- ③ The child's social worker will inform the child's parents, those with parental responsibility and anyone else with a legitimate interest. This will include family members, education staff, health staff and other involved with the child.

In every case where, following consultation with the Police, the level of risk to the child is deemed to be high, then the matter should be brought to the attention of the appropriate Service Manager Children's Social Care and the LPA Commander (Police) or their nominees without delay.

Where a missing child is classified as an absconder, Police will follow the following procedures:

- ③ If an absconder is under the age of 16 years, or if the absconding does not involve a power of arrest, the Police will treat the case as BOTH a missing person case AND an absconder. This will lead to a proactive Police investigation managed locally by the Police. When the person is traced, it is likely that they will also be arrested where such a power exists or dealt with by the Police in relation to any offence or breach.

- ③ If the person is aged 16 or over and is liable to arrest the Police will treat the person solely as an absconder and not as a missing person, unless there are grounds to suspect that factors other than the absconders desire to evade justice are involved in their disappearance. If the Police treat the case solely as one of absconding, in these circumstances they will actively seek the absconder for arrest.

16- and 17-year-olds who run away or go missing are not necessarily any less vulnerable than younger children. They are likely to need just as much support to get their lives on track and make a successful transition into adulthood. Even if it is assessed that the reason for running away is to evade justice, young people's needs should be fully addressed when they return.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

Once a child is reported missing to the Police, the Police will lead the investigation to trace the child. The Police will keep the child's social worker, the accountable social care manager and any others with a legitimate interest informed of progress with the case.

The carer is responsible for reporting the child missing, but even after doing so, the carer remains responsible for the child in their care. This responsibility is not absolved when the child has been reported missing to the Police. Carers and the child's social worker should continue to make appropriate enquiries with other residents or by telephone with all persons who may be able to assist with the investigation unless they are requested not to do so by the Police. All information gleaned from these enquiries should be passed to the Police.

It is important that agencies work closely together before a child goes missing, while they are missing and after they return. Carers, social workers and other professionals should keep the Police informed of any new information they discover that throws light on the child's whereabouts, or reasons for their going missing.

If the case falls within the criteria for 'Child Rescue Alert' (e.g. child abduction) then any decision to publicise the case is likely to be urgent. It will be made in accordance with nationally agreed procedures by a Police officer of the rank of Detective Superintendent. Where practicable, the appropriate Local Authority will be consulted in advance.

If the whereabouts of a missing child are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the carer/staff to arrange for the young person's return. However, Thames Valley Police may in some circumstances assist in the case of local recovery and transport of vulnerable children.

When a child or young person returns to a care placement, it is the responsibility of Children's Social Care to notify any person notified of the missing episode (e.g. parents).

**Informing the Media**

It is the responsibility of the Police to advise the media regarding a child or young person missing from local authority accommodation, with close co-operation from the key agencies who have safety and welfare concerns. Unless considered urgent, this will be arranged at local level, by direction of the Area Commander (or Senior Investigating Officer). Any decision to inform the press or media will, unless urgent, be made in consultation with the Local Authority.

**Recording**

Throughout the process identified within this guidance a full report should be kept of all actions taken and messages received/given. In the case of a child missing from a residential establishment, this will be made in their log book. In the case of

a child missing from a foster placement the carer should record in their incident/events note pad. There should always be an entry on the child's Electronic Social Care Record about the incident, this may include a copy of log or note pad entries.

The Police will record all details of contacts and enquiries made as a part of the investigation into tracing, locating and the return of the child or young person.

## LONGER or SIGNIFICANT ABSENCES

Whilst the child remains missing/ absent, his/her case will remain open to Children's social care. All Police missing person's files will remain live until the person is traced and assessed as being safe and well. Police missing person Co-ordinators will pro-actively manage individual cases and the PNC missing report will be renewed every three years if necessary.

It is the duty of the Police missing persons coordinator to maintain regular contact with parents and carers.

Any agency can call an emergency meeting to discuss a specific child at any time.

### Health

Children and young people missing from home or care often present themselves for health care at various health services e.g. Accident and Emergency Departments, Walk-in Centres, GP Surgeries.

The local Designated Professionals (Doctor, Nurses etc.) will co-ordinate the circulation of missing child alerts, and ensure that the relevant health services are alerted.

If a child initially discloses that they have run away, then the Health Professional needs to advise the parent/carer of the organisation's duty to ensure the matter is reported to the Police. If necessary they should follow this up by contacting the Police to verify the reporting by the parent/carer has occurred.

Health professional should consider carrying out a CAF if appropriate.

### Education

Teachers and other education officials may hear information about a child who is missing. If they do they should report this to the Police without delay.

Teachers should also be aware that children missing from education may also be vulnerable, and this could be an indication that they are also missing from home. Staff should refer to local missing from education procedures in such cases.

## RETURNING HOME

This section applies to all children unless noted otherwise.

The purpose of the guidance is not just to return the child to a safe environment and discover what happened to them whilst they were missing but also to ascertain the reason for their leaving in the first place. This may not always be apparent nor may the child immediately disclose the true reason. It may take some time to ascertain and requires professionals to continue to work closely together.

Interviewing a child or young person on their return from a missing episode is necessary to understand why the person went missing or ran away in the first place. There are two stages to the process, the Safe and Well Check and the Return Interview.

### The Safe and Well Check

If any information is gathered during the course of enquiries which indicates a child will be at risk on their return home, the Police and Children's Social Care should be informed immediately, so that they may take appropriate action. The Police will always carry out a Safe and Well check to give the child or young person an opportunity on their own to raise any concern.

The Safe and Well check is carried out as soon as possible after the person has returned and always within 24 hours. It needs to consider the child's health and welfare. Some children will need to be seen by a doctor, e.g. those with diabetes or pregnant teenager. The interview will also ascertain whether the child is safe and well, whether they have suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them, and ensure as far as possible that it is safe to return to their home or care placement.

### The Return Home Interview

This is a more in-depth interview and is usually best carried out by a trained person who is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. If the child is in care the interviewer should be independent of the placement. Many young people who run away or go missing need to build up trust with somebody before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they decided to run away. The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- ③ identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the Safe and Well Check
- ③ understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away.
- ③ Consider how best to prevent it happening again.

It is good practice that this interview takes place within 72 hours of the young person being located or returning from absence. A Return Interview is recommended when a child:

- ③ has been missing for over 24 hours;
- ③ has been missing on two or more occasions in six months;
- ③ has engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
- ③ has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case);
- ③ has mental health issues;
- ③ is at risk of sexual exploitation;
- ③ has contact with persons posing risk to children

The information gathered at the Return Interview will be used to support any assessment or plan and, if the young person is in care, will feed into the review of the Care Plan.

Each Local Authority is responsible for identifying who will undertake the return interview and for making the necessary arrangements. The Return Interview will also explore steps to minimise the likelihood of the child going missing again.

If the child is not known to Children's Services but has been missing three or more times within a 90 day period, or if the child is considered vulnerable or at risk Children's social care will undertake an Initial Assessment. In all cases, if it appears that the child may be in need (including in need of protection) a referral should be made to children's social care.

**Actions Following Return Home**

The Police will cancel any circulation of the child or young person's details. They will inform all agencies that have been involved in the incident.

If the child is Looked After the child's social worker will inform all those involved of her/his return.

Where serious concerns remain, a meeting should be convened to consider the circumstances of the child going missing, their return and the events during the intervening period, and any identified criminality that may have occurred. If the child is in care, the child's looked-after review meeting will be convened as soon as possible after the child's return and any issues around the child going missing will be discussed and addressed.

## MONITORING AND PREVENTION

This section provides the strategic framework for a prevention strategy. Each area has different needs and will need to establish operational systems for

carrying out this strategy, but will need to liaise with other LSCBs and constituent partner agencies as missing children frequently cross local authority boundaries.

Children's Social Care and Police have joint responsibility for monitoring missing children and measures to prevent future episodes of going missing. Monitoring will take place with regular meetings to review local area missing children data provided by the Police. This meeting will also monitor individual children who have been missing with a view to preventing repeat incidents. This meeting needs to consider issues outlined in National Indicator 71.

The Police should also present an annual report to the LSCB.