
EARLY INTERVENTIONS FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with information regarding children who are Looked After and who experience missing from home episodes.

Summary

2. At the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held on 16 April 2018, Members requested a report be submitted to the Committee being held on 2 July 2018 which addressed the interventions in place for children who are looked after and who experience missing episodes, and the reasons why these children go missing.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Members acknowledge and note the contents of this report.

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Director of Children and Adults Services

Background Papers

There were no background papers used in relation to this report.

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S17 Crime and Disorder	Nil impact
Health and Well Being	Nil impact
Carbon Impact	Nil impact
Diversity	Nil impact
Wards Affected	Nil impact
Groups Affected	Nil impact
Budget and Policy Framework	Nil impact
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	Nil impact
Efficiency	Nil impact
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Whilst this report is in relation to Looked After Children, it is for information only and therefore there is no impact on this group or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

4. BACKGROUND

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is a key duty on local authorities and requires effective joint working between agencies and professionals. When a child or young person goes missing they are at risk. Safeguarding children and young people therefore includes protecting them from this risk. Local authorities are responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care.

5. REASONS WHY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GO MISSING

It is known that children and young people who go missing from home or care may:

- Run away from a problem, such as abuse or neglect at home
- Or return to somewhere they want to be
- They may also have been coerced to run away by someone else

6. THE LINK BETWEEN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GO MISSING AND EXPLOITATION

It is thought that approximately 25% of children and young people that go missing are at risk of serious harm (“Still Running 3: Early Findings from the Thirds National Survey of Young Runaways;” The Children’s Society: 2011). There are particular concerns about the links between children and young people running away, and the risk of sexual exploitation. Missing children and young people may also be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation such as violent crime, gang exploitation, or to drug and alcohol misuse.

7. CHILDREN AND YOUNG WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER AND GO MISSING

Children who are looked after and who are missing from their placements are particularly vulnerable. Although Looked After Children are particularly vulnerable when they go missing, the majority of children who go missing are not looked after, and go missing from their family home. They can face the same risks as a child missing from local authority care. The same measures are often required to protect both groups of children and young people.

8. OFSTED FEEDBACK REGARDING MANAGEMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GO MISSING FROM HOME AND CARE

In the Ofsted inspection held in 2018 for services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, the following positive feedback was received regarding the local authority's arrangements for managing children and young people who go missing from home and care:

"The response to children who go missing from home, care...and those who have been, or are at risk of being, sexually exploited is prompt, effective and well-coordinated. Timely return home interviews are undertaken by a dedicated missing from home family worker...Information is shared effectively and data is carefully analysed to identify trends, patterns, hotspots and risky individuals or groups and to inform appropriate protective action. Levels of risk are regularly reviewed for individual children, and all of this ensures that children are safeguarded and protected." (Ofsted: 21 May 2018).

9. INTERVENTIONS IN PLACE TO ADDRESS AND REDUCE MISSING EPISODES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Darlington Borough Council's procedures for managing children and young people who go missing

The procedures that are in place for responding to and managing children and young people who go missing are the same for children living at home and children in the care of the local authority. The process follows:

- If a young person is reported to the Police because they are missing from home or placement, the Social Worker and Missing from Home Coordinator will receive an e-mail from the Children's Access Point detailing the time the episode started and concluded.
- The Missing from Home Coordinator will complete a missing from home interview with the child or young person within 72 hours of them returning.
- The Missing from Home Coordinator and the Social Worker will develop a missing from home action plan which considers the recommendations and information gathered in the return home interview.

- If the child or young person has 3 or more missing episodes in a rolling 90 day period, the Social Worker and Team Manager will review the case to determine if it is appropriate to hold a multi-agency meeting to include the Police, education, health and any other partners involved with the child or young person. This meeting would discuss the issues that are known about and also further develop the missing from home plan in an effort to keep the child or young person safe and reduce the number of missing episodes.
- If the child or young person has multiple missing episodes the Social Worker will complete an ERASE intelligence form and attend the multi-agency Missing and Exploited Group to share the known risks in relation to the child or young person, including the reasons for going missing, localities visited, the other young people they are known to be associating with during these episodes, any links to child sexual exploitation, crime or anti-social behaviour, mental health or substance misuse.
- If the Social Worker has concerns that a child or young person may be at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE), they will arrange a multi-agency meeting to ensure that an appropriate plan is put in place to reduce the risk of CSE. This meeting will be chaired by the Team Manager. During this meeting a CSE risk matrix will be completed to determine the level of risk.
- If the level of risk for CSE is medium or high, the Social Worker will forward the matrix to the ERASE team, make a referral to Barnardos for inclusion of the young person on the CSE awareness programme, and attend the Missing and Exploited Group to discuss the child or young person.
- If the level of risk is low, and the child or young person is looked after, it is an expectation that the foster-carers/residential workers will complete the CSE awareness raising work with the child or young person.

Placement suitability

A number of children and young people have been accommodated into local authority care directly because of their level of missing episodes and concerns regarding child sexual exploitation in an effort to safeguard them. In these cases, family have either not acknowledged the significant risk to their child or do not have the ability to protect their child and agree to the child being accommodated for their own safety.

As a local authority, we have a duty to place a Looked After Child in the most appropriate placement available. Placing a child or young person in an appropriate placement should support in minimising the risk of them going missing. In the majority of cases this is successful.

Every individual child or young person has a care plan which includes details of the arrangements and strategies that need to be put in place to keep the child or young person safe, and minimise the risk of the child or young person going missing from their placement.

The type of placement identified for each child or young person is based on an assessment of their needs. Some young people are accommodated into specialised residential provision who have expertise in working with this cohort, others are placed into mainstream residential homes and foster homes.

Placing children and young people away from the Darlington area is also an option that has to be considered. This option is considered if a child or young person continues to experience high levels of coercion from the same individuals who had encouraged them to abscond when living at home following their accommodation. Therefore, in some cases where young people continue to experience high levels of missing episodes whilst in care, options such as placing a young person further away are considered. This option does work in the majority of cases as reductions in episodes are experienced. However, this decision has to be carefully balanced between the need to safeguard and the need for the young person to maintain relationships with their family, and maintain links with their education.

Secure Order

In the event that all available options and strategies have been exhausted, and a young person routinely goes missing and continues to place themselves at significant risk despite all strategies being implemented, the local authority can consider legal proceedings to obtain a Secure Order. This is very much a last resort but is necessary with some young people. At the present time there are no young people in Darlington subject to a Secure Order.

A Secure Order (section 25 of the Children Act 1989 and the Children (Secure Accommodation) Regulations 1991) can be obtained by a local authority from Court if:

- The child has a history of running away and is likely to run away from accommodation which is not secure
- If the child runs away, they are likely to suffer significant harm, or
- If the child is not in secure accommodation they are likely to injure themselves or someone else

In order to have a Secure Order agreed, all options for the child or young person must have been exhausted as this means depriving a child of their liberty for a period of weeks or months, and as aforementioned is very much a last resort. During their time in secure accommodation, the young person will be encouraged to engage in assessment work and therapy in order to begin to address the complex presentation of the child or young person.