

Children Missing from Care Framework



Purpose of this Framework

The overall aim of this framework is to ensure that all children in the care of a local authority in England receive an appropriate and timely response when they are not where they are expected to be; and that everything possible is done by all multi agency partners to reduce risk and harm, enable a child's safe return and prevent repeat missing occurrences. To aid this, Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships should have clear and accessible Missing Children Policies and Procedures in place, alongside learning and development pathways to ensure practitioners and carers respond appropriately to missing occurrences and are confident in their decision making, together with a Missing Children Escalation Policy.

This framework should be read in line with the current *DfE Statutory Guidance for Children who go Missing from Home and Care*. It is recommended that Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships use the principles of this framework to develop their *local Missing Children Policies and Procedures* to ensure their local arrangements comply with the statutory guidance.

Who this Framework for?

This framework is primarily aimed at professionals in local authorities, police, the Fostering Network, ICHA and similar organisations and Residential Care Managers.

Introduction

Children in care are some of our most vulnerable children due to their life experiences which have often featured abuse and neglect. They are also more likely to be reported as missing to the police. The reasons as to why children go missing from care are complex. A child or young person being missing, or not being where they are expected to be, can be an indication relating to a wide range of push or pull risk and vulnerability factors, including unhappiness, wanting to be elsewhere, mental health issues, and child exploitation.

Being missing from care can increase a child's vulnerability and risk. Understanding push and pull factors and any patterns related to a child's missing occurrences can help professionals identify potential risks and harm a child may be experiencing. Any missing occurrence should not be viewed in isolation and may be an indicator that something is not right in the child's life. All absence or missing occurrences should warrant professional attention to help safeguard children.

For some children, coming into care or moving placement can be a positive experience, alternatively it can be very challenging, and the experience may contribute to an increased risk of going missing and increased vulnerability when missing. To help reduce a child's likelihood of going missing and help create placement stability, carers, the local authority, and partner agencies should adopt a coordinated, consistent, child centred and restorative approach to working with children, to reduce the likelihood of going missing for individual children, and all children in the local area.

It is important that local policies and procedures, and individual missing risk assessments and plans for children and young people provide clarity about expectations, roles, and agency responsibility for when children go missing from care; to ensure that professionals and carers respond appropriately to safeguarding concerns and reduce unnecessary police contact with children, which can negatively impact on them. ⁽¹⁾

Whilst it is appropriate to immediately report a child as missing to the police when there is concern for the immediate safety of the child or another person; carers and professionals involved with children in care should always fully consider the circumstances of a child not being where they are expected to be, and the need to immediately make a missing person report to the police.

Reporting a child as missing to the police can lead to children feeling punished, damage their relationships with professionals, and on occasion, result in children becoming unintentionally criminalised.⁽²⁾ Carers informed by knowledge of a child, the circumstances surrounding a missing occurrence, and robust placement and care planning are often in the best position to determine if the child is at risk of harm or poses a risk to others when the child's whereabouts is unknown. When to report a child as missing to the police should be agreed in the child's placement planning, and allow for a level of carer discretion, depending on the individual circumstances. A decision to report a child as missing, must always be undertaken with the best interests of the child in mind.

If the threshold of '*concern for the immediate safety of the child*' is not met, carers should undertake reasonable actions to establish the whereabouts of the child and allow the child a reasonable opportunity to return before contacting the police. If the child is not located after undertaking reasonable actions and a reasonable time has elapsed to allow the child to return of their own accord, the police should then be contacted.

Missing Children Escalation Policies should detail a clear pathway to enable partner agencies to raise issues to senior leaders with authority to resolve concerns relating to issues such as:

- concerns held regarding agency response,
- resource issues which impact on responding to children,
- over reporting of children as missing,
- concerns held in respect of whether a placement is suitable, and
- professional difference regarding responses to individual children.

This framework cannot anticipate each situation or set of circumstances which surround every missing occurrence. Responding to children looked after who are not where they are expected to be and/or who are reported as missing, should be based on high quality individualised child centred needs-led assessments of vulnerability and risk, which inform and guide professional response.

This framework covers:

- Partnerships and Accountability

- Prevention and Planning
- Responding to Missing Occurrences
- When a Child is Found or Returns

It relates to all children under the age of 18 who are in the care of the local authority and reside in a care setting in England.

The term carer in this document relates to foster carers, children’s home staff, and extended family, parents, and friends when children are placed with them under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) regulations 2010.

1. Partnerships and Accountability

- 1.1 Effective local partnerships should ensure that all professionals and agencies are aware of their roles and responsibilities in prevention, planning, and response to children missing from care.
- 1.2 To aid this, local safeguarding children partnerships should have multi-agency Missing Children Policies and Procedures in place and a local Missing Children Escalation Policy, to enable agency accountability and where relevant, improve practice and service delivery.
- 1.3 Multi-agency learning and development opportunities should also be available to staff to ensure that they are confident in responding to children who go missing and are knowledgeable about the complexities relating to why children go missing, push and pull factors, contextual safeguarding, how best to work with children to prevent missing occurrences, how to recognise antecedent behaviour, trigger events and post incident behaviour, and how to respond to missing children who return, together with an understanding of individual agency roles and responsibilities.

2. Prevention and Planning

- 2.1 Many children who are in the care of the local authority have experienced significant abuse and trauma and have multiple vulnerabilities. They can be particularly vulnerable to going missing and extremely vulnerable when they are missing. The reasons as to why children in the care of the local authority go missing are often complex and multi-layered. It is therefore important that professionals and carers work with children to prevent missing occurrences where possible, know how to respond if an incident does occur, and know when to report a child as missing.
- 2.2 To effectively safeguard children looked after who go missing, requires carers, the police and local authority staff to work together collaboratively; to keep the child in focus, to ensure that the child’s wishes and feelings are heard and that their needs are at the centre of safety and care planning.

- 2.3 To keep children safe, professionals need to be proactive to help prevent missing episodes. Reporting a child as missing to the police does not resolve the reasons or reduce the recurrence as to why a child was not where they were expected to be. Every effort should be made to prevent a child from going missing in the first place.
- 2.4 Local authority staff, the police and carers need to provide children with accurate information from the outset of their involvement with the child, acknowledging that children may need time and multiple opportunities to develop enough trust to share any concerns or fears that they may have. Agency investment in building and maintaining trusting relationships enables effective and meaningful professional response to children according to their individual needs and circumstances and helps children feel safe and cared for; thereby reducing the likelihood of missing occurrences.
- 2.5 As outlined in Working Together 2018, ⁽³⁾ children have said that they need:
- vigilance: to have adults notice when things are troubling them,
 - understanding and action: to understand what is happening; to be heard and understood; and to have that understanding acted upon,
 - stability: to be able to develop an ongoing stable relationship of trust with those helping them,
 - respect: to be treated with the expectation that they are competent rather than not,
 - information and engagement: to be informed about and involved in procedures, decisions, concerns, and plans,
 - explanation: to be informed of the outcome of assessments and decisions and reasons when their views have not met with a positive response,
 - support: to be provided with support in their own right, as well as a member of their family,
 - advocacy: to be provided with advocacy to assist them in putting forward their views,
 - protection: to be protected against all forms of abuse and discrimination and the right to special protection and help if a refugee.

These principles should inform all professional involvement, planning with and for, and response to, children looked after, including when focusing on missing.

Placement Planning

- 2.6 Local authority placement planning for children in their care should include consideration of whether missing episodes are a known vulnerability for a child and whether a child is likely to go missing.
- 2.7 Where missing episodes are a known vulnerability for a child, a multi-agency Missing Risk Assessment form, Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and Management Plan should be completed together with the child's carer(s) in line with local procedures, (e.g. in a placement planning meeting). The responsibility

for the completion and review of the documentation should be agreed between the child's social worker and carer(s) during the initial placement planning meeting.

- 2.8 If a child is subsequently moved to a new placement, the multi-agency Missing Risk Assessment form, Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and Management Plan should be shared with the new placement prior to the placement move if the move was planned, or as soon as practicable following an emergency placement. This is to assist the new placement to review these documents taking into account any new contextual factors or risks.
- 2.9 Children should be informed of how their carer(s) may respond if their whereabouts becomes unknown. Where appropriate children should be actively involved in producing their Missing Risk Assessment form, Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and Management Plan, so that they can have input in their own planning and are fully aware of the expectations of them, what professionals are worried about and what actions may be taken by agencies if they are not where they are expected to be, and /or they are reported as missing.
- 2.10 Where relevant, the Missing Risk Assessment form, the Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent), the Management Plan, information obtained from Police Missing Person Incident reports, information from Prevention Interviews and Return Home Discussions, should be used to inform placement agreements, and to outline expectations, roles and responsibilities in the event that a child goes missing.
- 2.11 Missing Risk Assessment forms and the Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) should clarify if there is a pattern to previous missing occurrences, if antecedent behaviour has been identified, consider known trigger events, places or people the child should not visit or have contact with, together with known risk and vulnerability factors, such as child exploitation, substance misuse, offending behaviour, peer groups, and locations of concern.
- 2.12 Missing Risk Assessment forms, Philomena Protocol forms (or local equivalent) and Management Plans should capture prevention planning and actions required to be undertaken if a child's whereabouts is unknown. It should also make certain that appropriate resources are available to respond to children to ensure their safety.
- 2.13 Missing Risk Assessment forms, Philomena Protocol forms (or local equivalent), Management Plans, and Police Missing Incident reports, should be reviewed regularly in multi-agency meetings, involving at a minimum Children's Social Care, the police, the child's carer(s), and a health professional. They should also be reviewed in the child's Looked After Review meetings, by the child's Independent Reviewing Officer, and always after any missing occurrence.
- 2.14 Not all risks to children are necessarily known and information required to inform decision making when responding to a child who is not where they are expected to be is often contextual and relative to the area they reside in and/ or people that they may have more recently come into contact with.

2.15 Where a local authority places a child in an out of area placement, the responsible local authority should in all instances inform the 'host' local authority that a child has moved into their area and share relevant missing and exploitation documentation. It is best practice for carers to clarify with a child's social worker that, where applicable, the host local authority and the local police force(s) are aware that a child has moved into, or out of an area. It is also best practice if the host local authority shares information on contextual risks relating to the area that the accommodation is located with the local authority placing the child and that is used to inform risk planning.

3. Responding to Missing Occurrences

Levels of Intervention			
Assessed level of concern		Intervention	Actions and Outcomes
No Immediate Intervention Required	The carer is not significantly concerned for the child's safety at this time, or the safety of others based on the information they have about the child and the circumstances of the absence.	Based on the information known about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence, the carer makes an informed decision to wait some time, to see if the child returns of their own accord.	<p>Actions Recommended</p> <p>(a) The carer waits a reasonable time to see if the child returns of their own accord.</p> <p>Outcomes</p> <p>(a) The child returns of their own accord.</p> <p>(b) The child contacts the carer (or another) and child agrees to either return home independently or be collected by the carer.</p> <p>(c) The child contacts the carer and what the child says raises the level of concern to either carer intervention or police intervention.</p> <p>(d) The carer receives information that raises the level of concern to either carer intervention or police intervention.</p> <p>(e) The child does not return within a reasonable time, so the level of concern raises to carer intervention.</p>

<p>Parental/ Carer Intervention</p>	<p>The carer has some concerns about the child and their whereabouts, but at the outset of the missing occurrence the carer does not have any immediate concerns about the child's safety or the safety of others that would warrant contacting the police immediately.</p>	<p>The carer takes responsibility for trying to locate the child and ensure their safe return.</p>	<p>Actions Recommended</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) The carer considers if there has been any antecedent behaviour, trigger incident or out of character behaviour that warrants the child being immediately reported to the police as missing. (b) The carer/child's social worker tries to contact the child by phone, text, and social media. (c) The carer undertakes a search of the home and surrounding areas (or agrees with the child's social worker who will do this if they are unable to). (d) The carer undertakes a search of the place the child was expected to be and the place the child was last seen (or agrees with the child's social worker who will do this if they are unable to). (e) The carer/child's social worker contacts family and friends. (f) If possible and safe to do, the carer/ child's social worker visits locations and addresses where the child may be. (g) The carer and the child's social worker continue to liaise until the child is found or returns. <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) The child returns of their own accord. (b) The child contacts the carer (or another). (c) The carer contacts the child. (d) Contact is made and the child agrees to return home independently.
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<p>Police Intervention</p>	<p>Based on the information the carer has about the child and the circumstances of the missing occurrence, the carer is worried about the child’s safety. The</p>	<p>The carer/child’s social worker reports the child as missing to the police.</p>	<p>Actions Recommended</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) The carer/child’s social worker shares their concerns with the police. (b) Where applicable, the child/ child’s social worker shares the child’s Missing Risk Assessment form, Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and Management Plan with the police.

	<p>carer has been unable to contact the child, or they have made contact, but have assessed that the child or others are not safe.</p>		<p>(c) The police complete a risk assessment and either record the child as missing or inform the carer/ child's social worker that they disagree that level of risk lies within the police intervention band of the levels of intervention model and delays police deployment.</p> <p>(d) If the police have recorded the child as missing, the police undertake enquiries to locate the child.</p> <p>(e) The carer /the child's social worker continues to try and locate /contact the child.</p> <p>(f) If the police have delayed police deployment and the carer/ child's social worker disagrees with that decision, the carer/ child's social worker escalates the case to a Senior Police Officer on duty who has operational command responsibility.</p> <p>(g) The police, the carer and the child's social worker continue to liaise until the child is found /returns.</p> <p>(h) When the child has returned or has been located, a Prevention Interview and Independent Return Interview takes place in accordance with locally agreed processes and any specific arrangements previously agreed and recorded.</p>
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3.1 Responding effectively to a child missing from care requires a partnership approach in which the police, carers, the local authority, and other partner agencies work together in the best interests of the child to ensure their wellbeing and safety.

- 3.2 Each individual missing occurrence should be considered and responded to by all professionals involved with full knowledge of the child, an understanding of the child's individual set of circumstances, known risk factors, the local context and the circumstances of the incident.
- 3.3 Agency response to individual children and any missing occurrence should be informed by professional judgement and up to date multi-agency needs-led assessments, to ensure that missing children are responded to appropriately, their voices are heard, and that they are safeguarded from harm.
- 3.4 The level of intervention required when a child is not where they are expected to be should therefore be proportionate to the concerns held, together with the child's assessed vulnerability and the risk relating to the missing occurrence. Antecedent behaviour, trigger incidents and out of character behaviour that justify contacting the police immediately should be recognised. It should be acknowledged by all involved in responding to a missing child that the assessed risk to a child and the situation can alter rapidly. Carers and agency actions and responses therefore need to adapt accordingly.
- 3.5 When a child is not where they are expected to be, their carer holds the initial responsibility to contact and locate the child to ensure their safety and wellbeing and where possible their return, as outlined in the above Levels of Intervention model. This includes undertaking an initial search of the child's home and any grounds; as well as attempting to contact the child's friends, family members and known associates (where appropriate) to establish the child's whereabouts, unless there is Concern for the Immediate Safety of the Child for the child's welfare or safety that justifies contacting the police immediately. Carers making the enquires should keep a record of all the actions that they undertake, which should also include notifying the child's social worker as soon as possible after realising a child's whereabouts is unknown. Arrangements about contacting a child's family if the child's whereabouts is unknown to the carer should be outlined in the placement plan.
- 3.6 Where a carer due to practical reasons is unable to undertake physical searches, contingency planning regarding how and who should undertake these should have been agreed in the child's Placement Planning so that there is no requirement to rely on the police to assist when the level of risk lies within the parental/ carer band of the Levels of Intervention Model. Unnecessary police involvement can result in negative experiences for the child. Where prior agreement is not in place (i.e., a first missing occurrence) the carer should discuss how physical searches can be undertaken with the child's social worker/local authority.
- 3.7 When a child who is in the care of the local authority is not where they are expected to be, carers should always discuss with the responsible local authority available support to help locate the child and to develop a plan for when the child returns. This should include arrangements to collect the child if the child is located some distance away from their home. The child's social worker should be kept informed throughout the time a child's whereabouts is unknown/ they are missing.

- 3.8 If the whereabouts of a missing child is known and there is a concern that they are at risk of harm and/or may pose a risk to others, and/ or their location is assessed by the carer /child's social worker to pose a risk to professionals, the local police force should be contacted so that an agreement as how best to proceed can be reached. All agreements reached should take full account of the welfare and safety of the child and of others.
- 3.9 Where a child is placed outside of their home local authority area, the 'host' local authority's Children's Social Care department should liaise with the child's social worker/home local authority regarding the child being missing, and of their return.
- 3.10 If a child is missing outside of office hours, the carer should notify the Children's Services Out of Hours duty team (or equivalent) in the responsible local authority, and where applicable, 'host' local authority; and if relevant, of their return.
- 3.11 It is important that shared responsibility is assumed for all children who go missing from care by partner agencies, and that appropriate information is shared in a timely manner and that this is continuous until the child's safe return.

Reporting a Child as Missing to the Police

- 3.12 When a child looked after is not where they are expected to be, there is an expectation that their carer(s) considers what action is required in accordance with the child's care plan, local missing policies and procedures and their knowledge of the child together with, the individual circumstances of the missing occurrence. During the placement planning process, consideration should be given to how to empower carers, at the time of an occurrence, to make the decision on whether the level of risk lies within the parental/ carer band of the Levels of Intervention Model, or whether it is appropriate, proportionate and in the best interests of a child to contact the police.
- 3.13 A significant number of children looked after are reported as missing from care to the police on more than one occasion, some repeatedly. Whilst carers and other professionals should be mindful not to fall into a pattern of automatically reporting children whose whereabouts are frequently unknown as missing to the police, the multi-agency response should always be based on knowledge of a child, their assessed level of risk and vulnerability, their Missing Risk Assessment form, Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and Management Plan, and the circumstances of the missing occurrence.
- 3.14 Unless there has been antecedent behaviour, a trigger incident or out of character behaviour that creates concern for the immediate safety of the child or another person, and /or there is an agreed multi agency Missing Management Plan which indicates due to a child's vulnerability the police should be contacted from the outset of a missing occurrence, there is an expectation that a child's carer undertakes all reasonable actions to contact, locate and where possible arrange for a child's return, as outlined in the Level of Intervention model.

- 3.15 In circumstances where a carer is concerned about the length of time a child whereabouts has been unknown, and there is increasingly concern for the child's safety, the carer, or the child's social worker should report the child as missing to the police.
- 3.16 If a child is reported as missing and the police question the appropriateness of the report, the police should engage with the reporting person to discuss actions taken and the concerns held. Professional disagreement regarding as to whether a report is warranted or not, should not result in the concerns held by the carer / local authority not being fully considered, nor should it lead to no action being taken to locate the child and to ensure their safety.
- 3.17 The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Missing Children Escalation pathway should include a pathway whereby the carer/ child's social worker can immediately escalate the matter to the Senior Police Officer on duty who has operational command responsibility, where the carer/ child's social worker believes there is concern for the immediate safety of the child or another person and the police have refused to respond or deploy an officer.
- 3.18 On occasions where the carer is unable to undertake action to locate the child due to exceptional circumstances, the police may need to act in the best interests of the child. Once professionals are assured of a child's wellbeing, where required, the police and the reporting agency should arrange a follow up conversation to discuss any concerns about the carer being unable to undertake action and/ or the basis of any other disagreement. If there are ongoing concerns regarding agency action or inaction, these should be escalated via the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Missing Children Escalation pathway.
- 3.19 Where the carer or responsible local authority has not undertaken reasonable action to establish the child's whereabouts, and there is no concern for the immediate safety of the child or another person that warrants immediate police intervention, the police may delay the police response to enable the carer or responsible local authority to undertake reasonable action to establish the child's whereabouts and to give the child a reasonable opportunity to return of their own accord.
- 3.20 Where a carer has undertaken reasonable enquires and the child has not returned or been located, and the carer remains concerned about a child's welfare or the welfare of others, the Police should respond to the carer's concerns, record the child as missing, and undertake appropriate enquiries to locate the child.
- 3.21 Following a missing child report being made to the police, there remains an expectation that the carer and the responsible local authority will continue to try and make contact, locate, and ensure the safe return of the child.
- 3.22 Once the police have recorded a Missing Person's report, they will, as a minimum:
- liaise with the carer about what actions have been undertaken,
 - contact the child's social worker /responsible local authority Children's Social Care department/ the Children's Services out of hours duty team, to ascertain the child's risk and vulnerability,

- complete a risk assessment and use this to inform what actions will be taken,
- create and record a plan of immediate actions,
- agree a way of ensuring the carer/child's social worker can share any increased concerns directly with the responding Police Officer/relevant Senior Officer,
- agree joint actions and pathways for maintaining contact and information sharing,
- set a time to review the Police Risk Assessment and activity (a review of the risk and circumstances may take place before this time if the police receive new information which suggests the risk of harm to the child or others has increased).

3.23 For local areas where there is a multi-agency team/triage response to missing children, the actions outlined above may be discussed and agreed in these teams/discussions.

3.24 Where the carer (or another) has undertaken a comprehensive search of the child's home and immediate surrounding area and shared what actions they have undertaken with the police, the need for the police to repeat these searches should be discussed and an agreement reached about if and when further searches may be required to be undertaken, and by which agency /professional.

4. When a Child is Found or Returns

4.1 From the moment it is apparent that a child looked after is missing, all those responsible for their welfare and safety should liaise, to start planning for the child's return.

4.2 When a child is located, but does not return of their own accord, the responsibility for their safe return lies with the carer and the responsible local authority. If there is a known or assessed risk associated with this, how to proceed should be discussed with the police, to determine if a safeguarding response is required.

4.3 On their return a child should always be warmly welcomed, and any immediate physical and mental health needs they may have should be attended to. Post incident behaviour that indicates that the child may have been a victim of a crime should be recognised and responded to appropriately. Children can be a victim of a crime, even if they also appear to be a perpetrator of a crime. Where it is suspected that a child may have been a victim of a crime, carers should seek to preserve any physical evidence and notify the police of their concerns.

4.4 Where a child who was reported to the police as missing returns, without the knowledge of the police, the police should be notified immediately.

4.5 Arrangements for an Independent Return Interview should be confirmed between the child's social worker and carer, together with an agreement as to who will notify professionals and the child's family (where appropriate) of the child's return. This should be agreed prior to any missing occurrence as part of placement planning.

Prevention Interviews

- 4.6 The police have a responsibility to ensure that a Prevention Interview is undertaken when a child who was reported as missing, is located, or returns. The purpose of a Prevention Interview in relation to individual children is to: identify any ongoing vulnerability or risk factors which may have contributed to the child going missing and could contribute to repeat occurrences; to try and establish if the child has suffered any harm whilst absent; and to establish information that may assist in locating the child if they go missing again. More widely, the information gained can inform strategic activity, and disruption activity against perpetrators.
- 4.7 A Prevention Interview should normally be carried out in person as soon as practicable. A record of the interview should document the child's emotional and physical presentation, where the child went, who they spent time with, any safeguarding concerns to inform the child's care and safeguarding plan; and any information which may be relevant to the investigation of a crime.
- 4.8 Although Prevention Interviews will normally be carried out in person by the police, on some occasions this may not be practical. On other occasions it may be considered unnecessary if the child was located after a short period of time and the carer is satisfied that the child was just late home, testing the boundaries or had just failed to inform the carer where they were. On other occasions it may not be in the best interests of the child as it may be counterproductive by exposing the child to avoidable interaction with the police. Local Partnership Missing policies and procedures and missing management plans for individual children should therefore set out arrangements for undertaking Prevention Interviews. For some children it could be that it is assessed as appropriate for their carer or a named trusted adult in a child's life to undertake the Prevention Interview and/or this is in line with the child's wishes where there are no concerns that the child may have gone missing because of problems with the carer or placement.
- 4.9 Local Partnership Missing Children policies and procedures should also detail a Prevention Interview information sharing pathway, and associated guidance to ensure where a carer or another professional undertakes the Prevention Interview and concerns arise in relation to a child's safety or wellbeing whilst they were missing, these are shared in an appropriate and timely manner with the police and with the agency who will be providing the Return Interview. In these circumstances the police should make every effort to speak with the child in person. Relevant safeguarding information from the Prevention Interview should be recorded on police systems and shared with the Social Worker.

Independent Return Interviews

- 4.10 All children who have been reported as missing to the police must be offered an Independent Return Interview. This should be arranged by the responsible Local Authority to occur within 72 hours of a child's return. Only a child has the right to refuse their Return Interview.
- 4.11 Return Interviews should be carried out by a trained professional not involved with care of the child. They should provide the child with a safe space in which they can talk about any worries or fears that they may have. They also provide a key opportunity to learn about the reasons why a child went missing, to support and safeguard a child, identify risk, and to reduce the risk of future missing episodes. A Return Interview should therefore be a child centred conversation which takes a supportive, active listening approach.
- 4.12 For children looked after Independent Return Interviews should explore how the child feels about their placement and determine if the placement is a 'push' factor with regards to the child going missing. Any information received which suggests it is a factor should always be shared with the child's social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer, through agreed local partnership Return Interview information sharing pathways.
- 4.13 Information gained from Return Interviews should inform a child's Missing Risk Assessment form, the Philomena Protocol form (or local equivalent) and the Risk Management Plan, together with their care and safety planning, and it should be considered in the child's Looked After Reviews.
- 4.14 Information gained in Return Interviews that is relevant to safeguarding a child, or others, should be shared with the police by the child's social worker or independent provider in accordance with Local Safeguarding Partnership Information Sharing Protocols, to inform not only the professional response to the individual child, but also to inform the local multi-agency area problem profile.

References

1. The national protocol on reducing unnecessary criminalisation of looked-after children, (November 2018) [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765082/The_national_protocol_on_reducing_unnecessary_criminalisation_of_looked-after_children_and_care .pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765082/The_national_protocol_on_reducing_unnecessary_criminalisation_of_looked-after_children_and_care.pdf)
2. Ending the criminalisation of children in residential care, The Howard League for Penal Reform (2017)
3. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018, Department for Education.

Appendix - Identifying Risk

Carers, social workers, police and other professionals need to recognise antecedent behaviour, trigger incidents and post-incident behaviour if we are to effectively safeguard vulnerable children. This is about getting to know the child and understanding their individual behaviour so that we can better assess risk.

Antecedent Behaviour

This is behaviour that a child who goes missing repeatedly engages in just before they go missing. This will vary from one child to another and what is considered antecedent behaviour for one child may not amount to antecedent behaviour for another child. For example, for one child, turning their mobile phone off may be a clear indicator that they are going to meet an exploiter and do not want to be tracked, whereas for another child, they may simply turn their mobile phone off every time they are annoyed with the carer even though they intend to return home.

Examples of Antecedent Behaviour include:

- A child at risk of child sexual exploitation putting make-up on prior to going out when it is known that the child usually does this prior to going to meet an exploiter and rarely puts make up on at other times.
- A child being very active on their mobile phone and being secretive before going out, when it is known from previous incidents involving this child that this type of phone activity often precedes the child going to meet their exploiters.
- A child not taking their mobile phone with them when they go out when it is known from previous incidents, that this child always takes their mobile phone with them except when they intend to go missing and do not want to be tracked.
- A child suffering from mental health issues becoming distressed on a key anniversary of the death of a parent or relative and then leaving home unexpectedly.

If a child has engaged in antecedent behaviour immediately prior to going absent, it will normally be appropriate for the police to immediately take responsibility for locating the child irrespective of whether the carer has already completed their own enquiries to locate the child.

Trigger Incidents

Trigger incidents are incidents that indicate that a child may not be safe.

Examples of trigger incidents include:

- A child being seen to get into an unknown car, or a car linked to an exploiter.
- A child being seen in the company of another child at risk of child sexual exploitation when it is known that when these two children meet up together, they usually go to meet an exploiter.

- A child being seen entering a hotel with an unknown adult.
- A child suffering from mental health issues sending texts, social media messages, or emails saying goodbye to their friends and relatives.

If there has been a trigger incident immediately prior to going absent, it will normally be appropriate for the police to immediately take responsibility for locating the child, irrespective of whether the carer has already completed their own enquiries to locate the child.

Post Incident Behaviour/ Indicators

Post incident behaviour is behaviour that suggest something adverse has occurred whilst a child was absent irrespective of whether they had permission to be absent. This recognises that vulnerable children and children at risk of exploitation are not only at risk when they are missing, but they are also at risk when they have permission to go out.

Examples of post incident behaviour on a child's return include:

- A child appearing upset or withdrawn.
- A child changing or hiding underwear.
- A child having unaccounted injuries.
- A child being in possession of expensive gifts.
- A child being very evasive about where they have been.

Where a child exhibits post incident behaviour, this should be investigated, as it may suggest that the child has been exploited or suffered harm whilst absent, irrespective of whether the child had permission to be absent.

Out of Character Behaviour

When a child behaves out of character, this may indicate that they are worried, troubled, or distressed. It may indicate that something has gone wrong. Stereotypical assumptions should not be made. Even if the behaviour is typical of other children, if the behaviour is out of character for that child, then it should be taken seriously.

The family and carers know the child best and their level of concern for the missing child is often the best indicator of the real level of risk. The family and carer are best able to recognise whether the behaviour is out of character for that child.