**Children's Services
Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

11th March 2019

Children Missing from Home, Care and Education

Ward(s)   All

Portfolios: Cllr T Wilson – Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Public Health

Executive Summary:

This report provides an overview of the issue of missing children and return home interviews in Walsall.

Reason for scrutiny:

The report was requested by the Chair of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to provide an update for the members on the new arrangements for monitoring, oversight and management of children missing from home and care.

The report aims to provide an update for panel members to enable them to fulfil their duties and responsibilities in holding the council and its partners to account.

Recommendations:

That:

Scrutiny notes and supports the contents of the report and the current activity to respond to children who go missing from education and care in Walsall.

Background papers:

The following reports provide an overview into the issues relating to children who go missing nationally.

- Children who go Missing; Research, Policy and Practice Nina Biehal & Jim Wade Social Work Research and Development Unit University of York Department of Health 2002
- Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care January 2014 Department for Education
- Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children March 2016
- The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults Inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children *'It is good when someone cares'* Final Report May 2016

- Protocol for children and young people missing from home or care Walsall Safeguarding Children Board procedures January 2016
- Time to Listen – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children Ofsted September 2016

Resource and legal considerations:

Responding to children at risk of significant harm is a statutory duty placed on local authority Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services, LSCB Chairs and senior managers within organisations who commission and provide services for children and families, including social workers and professionals from health services, adult services, the police, Academy Trusts, education and the voluntary and community sector who have contact with children and families.

The resources required to respond to this statutory requirement come from within the existing resources across the partnership of organisations working in Walsall to protect vulnerable children and those at risk of harm.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

Strategic priority 2018-2021
- Children have the best start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.

Citizen impact:

The effective delivery of high quality services to protect children and young people from significant harm which might occur during a missing episode, including the risk of child sexual exploitation, has a direct impact on the welfare and well-being of children and young people in Walsall. It directly links to the corporate priority to Improve Health and Wellbeing and the Children's Services objective that all children in Walsall are safe and supported.

Environmental impact:

There is no environmental impact.

Performance management:

Performance is monitored by the Director of Children's Services, the Assistant Director for Social Care & Safeguarding and the Head of Safeguarding.

Walsall Safeguarding Children Board also actively monitors the performance of the partnership in supporting children and young people who go missing and are therefore at risk of child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, becoming a victim of abuse or a victim or crime, alcohol or substance misuse, missing out on schooling

and education and deterioration of physical and mental health and increasing vulnerability.

Reducing inequalities:

The co-ordinated provision of services designed to address the protection of children provides specific support for those children and young people who are at risk of significant harm by virtue of missing from home, care or education.

Contact Officer:

Sue Whitmore- Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer
☎. 01922 658921
Sue.whitmore@walsall.gov.uk

1. Introduction

1.1 Going missing is a dangerous activity. A child or young person who goes missing just once faces the same immediate risks as faced by a child or young person who regularly goes missing. When a child does go missing everyone wants the child to return home soon, safe and unharmed.

1.2 Children who go missing when they are younger and those who go missing more frequently are more likely to face longer-term problems.

1.3 The immediate risks associated with going missing include having no means of support or legitimate income leading to high risk activities; involvement in criminal activities; becoming a victim of abuse or a victim or crime; alcohol or substance misuse; missing out on schooling and education; deterioration of physical and mental health and increasing vulnerability.

1.4 There are often significant issues that lie behind the reasons children go missing. These can include problems at home, in school, with peers and it is these pressures that can lead to the risks outlined above.

1.5 Statutory Guidance on Children who run away or go missing from care was issued by Department for Education in January 2014.

1.6 This reinforced the missing and absent categorisation and outlines the actions to be taken by police in categorising the risks relating to children who are missing as 'high' or medium' and outlines the steps to be taken when a child is categorised as 'absent', including agreeing a review time and any on-going actions with child's family, carer or responsible local authority.

1.7 The same guidance states that once found the child must be offered an independent return interview to be carried out within 72hrs of their return to their home or care setting by someone not involved in caring for the child.

1.8 The definition of missing to social care and the police is slightly different but similar. For social care a child is considered to be missing if *"a child not where they should be, and their whereabouts are unknown".*

The police definition is *"anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be the subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another."*

1.9 There are similar differences in the definition of absence. For social care the definition is "A child without authorisation, is in a known location but is not where they should be".

The Police define absence as *"a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk".*

1.10 The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children concluded in April 2016. At that time

37 out of 43 police forces were using a definition which included 'absence'; this included the West Midlands Police. They made a range of recommendations including that the separate 'absent' category should be abandoned by the police and missing children should instead receive a proportionate response based on the risks they face.

1.11   In response to the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group, West Midlands Police have been working on a revised policy and procedural guidance since this time and intend to cease using this at some, as yet, unspecified future date.

1.12   A key aspect of the intended change is the adoption of four categories of risk assessment: High Medium, Low and No Apparent Risk for missing persons. The current category of absence will be removed. The new categories are;

- No Apparent Risk - There is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public.
- Low Risk – The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.
- Medium Risk – The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.
- High Risk - The risk of serious harm* to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely.

Risk of serious harm has been defined as: 'A risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible.' Where the risk cannot be accurately assessed without active investigation, appropriate lines of enquiry should be set to gather the required information to inform the risk assessment. (Home Office 2002 and OASys 2006).

1.13   An expected consequence of the change in risk assessment categories is an increase in the number of missing cases and therefore an increase in the number of missing cases recorded essentially due to there no longer being an 'absent' category.

1.14   For Walsall, this may mean that on average the missing team will get an increase of 2 additional notifications daily. Interim contingency plans have been put in place should this occur to ensure that we continue to offer missing return home interviews within the 72-hour framework.

2.   The scale and nature of missing children

2.1   In May 2018 Missing People published figures relating to the number of people who are reported missing every year.

The latest figures report that someone in reported missing every 90 seconds in the UK. 180,000 people are reported missing every year and there are 340,000 reported missing incidents every year. Children are more likely to be reported missing that adults with 1 in 2000 children being reported as missing every year compared to 1 in 5000 adults being reported as missing every year. The May 2018 report by Missing People states that of the 180,000 people that go missing over 80,000 are children, and of the 340,000 incidents 210,000 relate to children.

2.2   Between January 2017 – December 2018 West Midlands Police estimated that Walsall had 1437 missing persons reports (adults and children combined); the monthly average in Walsall is currently 60 adults and children which averages approximately 2 reports every day.

2.3   The most frequent reason given by young people who have gone missing is 'problems at home'. Children in care are particularly at risk of going missing and three times more likely to run away. 25% of missing children and young people reported mental health problems, with 5% citing mental health problems as the reason for running away.

2.4   Young people with drugs and alcohol problems are at least four times as likely to run away as those without. *(Missing Children and Adults: a cross government strategy (December 2011) paras 3.6-3.10)*

2.5   Children in care report that they go missing for different reasons. These include being unhappy, missing family or not being able to participate in specific activities. Some children also 'run for fun'; staff may know where they are and they come back. Other children are running away from something intolerable; this could be bullying or abuse, a feeling that they are in the wrong place or not feeling 'listened to'. Some children are running 'back' to where they want to be with family or friends. The reasons for children going missing are often referred to as the "push pull factors ".

2.6   The evidence presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into children missing from care also suggested there is a strong link between children in care who go missing and those being groomed or sexually exploited. *(APPG inquiry into children missing from care 2012, paras 5 and 7).*

2.7   Each instance of a child going missing or being absent is taken seriously in Walsall, to understand the issues that may have led to the episode and issues that may arise from it.

3.   Operational Response

3.1   In November 2018 the way that Walsall responded to children who went missing from care or home changed with the end of the contract with Street Teams the previous provider that competed return home interviews for children who were missing.

3.2   An in-house team was established to respond the missing episodes and deliver return home interviews; the team consists of two dedicated return home interview workers who respond daily to the missing notifications that are received.

3.3   The team's purpose is to provide the child with a return home interview within 72 hours of the child's missing episode in line with statutory guidance. A return interview is an in-depth conversation with a young person who has been missing.

3.4   A return home interview helps us to understand and address the reasons a child may run away, it helps us identify any harm that may have occurred whilst the child was missing, it

also enables us to identify future supports and actions to reduce or prevent further missing episodes as well as provide children with information to help them keep safe if they do go missing again, i.e. helpline numbers.

4. Performance

4.1 Prior to November 2018 Street Teams were commissioned to undertake return home interviews for Walsall Council.

4.2 They reported that in Quarter 1 (April and June 2018) there were 87 children who went missing with 44% of return home interviews completed within timescales and 16% being completed outside of timescales and 40% of children declining a return home interview.

4.3 Within Quarter 2 (July – September 2018) 71 children were reported missing with 32% return home interviews being conducted within timescales and 16% being completed outside timescales with 52% declining. In October 2018 27 children were reported missing.

4.4 Since November 2018 the in-house team have dealt with an average of 28 children each month who go missing. Our aim has been to undertake return home interviews within 72 hours of a child being found; on occasions this has not been achieved due to a child going missing again within that 72 hour period.

4.5 Since November 2018 the way the team capture and report missing episodes has changed and the new process counts a child who has gone missing again before a return home interview has taken place as a declined interview. This new process challenges the team to ensure that we make attempts to contact repeat missing children within a shorter timescale. For children with such repeat missing episodes the missing officers liaise with the allocated social worker and Police to make sure that repeat missing episodes are considered under statutory safeguarding processes and to look at what disruption work can be done to reduce the missing episodes.

4.6 Between November 2018 and January 2019 there were 53.1% return home interviews declined. This figure includes children who have not had an interview within 72 hours due to repeat missing episodes and those children who have said that they didn't wish to participate in a return home interview.

4.7 Children who decline a return home interview within the 72 hours are contacted 3 times either by phone or text to give them the opportunity to reflect and change their minds should they so wish about having an interview. We are currently considering how we respond to children who decline an interview and looking at alternative creative ways to ensure we can capture the child's voice when they have been missing.

4.8 Of the 76 children who did accepted a return home interview 68% was completed within timescales and 32% were completed outside of timescales.

4.9 Every child who goes missing and with whom we work, is expected to have a risk assessment in place which identifies as specific risks in relation to drugs, alcohol or

exploitation following a missing episode. The risk assessment is updated at least every three months or when circumstances require it. This will guide carers and social workers as to what action to take.

5   Missing from Education

5.1   In January 2019 a cross directorate task force was established to develop practice guidance to outline the process for professionals who work with children, young people and families within Walsall to support and to safeguard children who are missing from education and toe ensure that they attend school regularly. This will also ensure that there is an effective mechanism for collecting information and monitoring performance in relation to children missing from education.

5.2   We know that effective information sharing between parents, schools and local authorities is critical to ensuring that all children of compulsory school age are safe and receiving suitable education.

5.3   Children missing from education can be vulnerable and it's essential that services all work together to identify these children Children who are missing / disengaged from education are potentially exposed to higher degrees of risk such as anti-social behavior and/or sexual exploitation, regular school attendance is an important safeguard and unexplained non-attendance can be an early indicator of problems, risk and vulnerability.

6.   Governance

6.1   Governance for activity to safeguard young people who go missing from care and home sits as part of the Children Missing Exploited and Trafficked (CMET), a sub group of the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board.

6.2   Accountable to the CMET sub-committee, a multi-agency Exploitation Delivery Group was developed with membership including Children's Social Care, West Midlands Police, Youth Justice Services, Education, Licensing, Legal Services, voluntary organisations, and partners from health.

6.3   The purpose of the Delivery Group is to operationalise, support, develop, monitor and evaluate the impact of the Child Exploitation Strategy and in doing so improve the multi-agency response to safeguard and protect children who are at risk of or who are being exploited which includes children who go missing.

7.   Conclusions

7.1   The new team in Walsall will bring significant opportunities to us being able to robustly tackle missing children within the Borough; it will also support the early identification of risks that are associated with going missing for example trafficking, sexual and criminal exploitation.

7.2   In doing so we hope that by providing early help and intervention to missing children it will reduce the number of children who may become exploited. It will enable us to understand any risk the child may have been exposed to and work closely with partners within the police and education to tackle any harm a child may have come to.

7.3   As we develop our data on missing episodes we will be able to develop our understanding regarding any trends that are apparent and develop strategies to tackle these.

7.4   We are seeking to develop strategies that will enable earlier intervention to prevent missing episodes from increasing by putting in early help and prevention services.

7.5   Having the new in house service has enabled us to put in place more efficient information systems and work flows that support social work assessments and planning, and social workers now get information in relation to a child's missing episode in a more timely way.

7.6   We will continue to develop and strengthen links with children who are missing from education and we hope that in doing so will provide children with pastoral support within schools that will support and address any difficulties that are identified