

**11 October 2016**

**Missing from home, care or education**

**Ward(s)** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr R Burley – Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

**Executive Summary:**

This report provides an overview of the issue of children who go missing from home, care or education and provides a national and regional context where possible.

**Reason for scrutiny:**

The report was requested by Members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel to enable them to fulfil their key responsibility and duties in holding the Council and its Partners to account for its work in protecting children and young people from harm

**Recommendations:**

**That:**

Scrutiny notes the contents of the report and the current activity in relation to children who go missing from home, care or education and supports the activity to improve identification and reduction in these episodes.

**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.

### **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:**

Walsall Safeguarding Children Board 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, grooming and other high risk activities including involvement in criminal activities, becoming a victim of abuse or a victim of crime, alcohol or substance misuse, missing out on schooling and education and deterioration of physical and mental health and increasing vulnerability.

### **Equality Implications:**


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.

### **Consultation:**

This report has been prepared by Walsall Children's Services.

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## 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.

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

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 of crime; alcohol or substance misuse; missing out on schooling and education; deterioration of physical and mental health and increasing vulnerability.

1.2 In 2013 the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the College of Policing introduced the definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' to allow responses that are proportionate to the risks faced by those reported as missing and to allow more efficient use of police resources.

*A missing person is: 'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person maybe subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another'.*

*An absent person is: 'A person not at a place where expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk'.*

1.3 Statutory Guidance on Children who run away or go missing from care was issued by DfE in January 2014. 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.

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.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children concluded in April 2016. This confirmed that 37 out of 43 forces continue to use this definition; this includes 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
- that children who go missing should be categorised as low, medium or high risk on a joint basis rather than single agency with no child categorised as low risk without a joint assessment with social services
- that the Police and the Home Office should introduce a National Database for missing children that allows information to be shared across police lines
- the DfE and Home Office should develop a national information sharing protocol and best practice guidance in relation to missing children
- that the various inspectorates should include a focus on data sharing in respect of children who go missing in their joint inspection criteria

Police forces are currently waiting the Approved Professional Practice guidance from the College of Policing which is expected to address some of these issues. Regionally, under the auspices of the Preventing Violence against Vulnerable People programme, various workstreams relating to the regional response to missing children are being undertaken. These include:

- exploring what data could be shared, and how it would be shared, in relation to children risk assessed as absent rather than missing
- scoping what the impact of moving from 'absent' and 'missing' to a high, medium and low risk missing categorisation might be
- developing a regional Missing Protocol

## **2. The scale and nature of missing children:**

2.1 In December 2015, Missing People, a registered charity, reported that in 2014-15 police forces in England and Wales responded to 127,762 missing incidents relating to 66,806 children, with a further 27,374 absent episodes relating to 10,510 children also recorded.

2.2 In Walsall during the period April 2015 –March 2016 196 children were reported having gone missing and referred for an independent return interview.

When children in Walsall go missing West Midlands Police report this to both Children's Social Care and Street Teams, a Walsall based registered charity which undertakes independent return interviews with children in Walsall. This includes all children, including those in care to other Local Authorities placed in Walsall.

2.3 We know that in Walsall:

- 61% of the reported missing episodes, children are female
- missing children are most likely to be in the 14-16 range
- 71% of reported missing children are of White UK heritage

Two thirds of the children who went missing during 2015-2016 were known to Children's Services and 27% of those were Looked After Children.

In respect of the requirement for a missing child to be offered a return interview on their return, 85% of those who went missing in Walsall during 2015-16 had their interview within the required 72hrs. A further 1% were completed outside this time period.

The main reasons for non-completion within the 72hr period was because of a repeat missing episode or the parent or young person refusing an interview.

Street Teams routinely screen all children referred for a return interview for risk factors associated with child sexual exploitation and refer those children who are at risk and are not otherwise known to Children's Services to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) for further work.

### **3. Reported reasons for running away:**

3.1 Longitudinal research by a variety of different researchers and organisations have identified that children who run away from home or care usually do so for a range of reasons that can be consistently categorised and are usually described as 'push' factors and 'pull' factors. These are:

- arguments and conflicts with parents and carers
- bullying and abuse
- poor family relationships, including step parenting issues
- conflict with peers in school or the wider community
- physical and/or emotional abuse; this can include domestic violence within the family
- feeling that they are not listened to or involved in the decision making in their life
- Boundaries being set
- Peer pressure
- Wanting to spend time with friends or family members when this has not been agreed by the carer
- grooming by adults

3.2 The principal reason given by all children and young people for going missing was to have contact with other family members. This includes those children who went missing but were not in the care of the Local Authority.

The principal 'push' factors recorded in Walsall were to have contact with family members and conflict within the family.

The principal 'pull' factor recorded in Walsall is to have contact with family.

One hypothesis for contact with family being the principal reason for going missing for all children, including those not looked after by the Local Authority, could be the prevalence of reformed and reconstituted families. Another might be that children and young people feel this would be an acceptable reason to give to the adult asking questions about the reasons the child went missing.

#### **4. Operational response**

4.1 When children are reported as missing from home or care West Midlands Police notify Walsall Children's Services. If the child is already known to either social care or early help services, the allocated worker is required to consider the current intervention plan and risk assessment with their manager to ensure that any new risks arising from the missing episode are considered and that the plan remains fit for purpose.

4.2 For children who go missing 5 times in 30 days or 3 times within a 90 day period the response will include a Missing Intervention. This is designed to be a multi agency meeting to consider any known triggers for the missing episodes, any information arising out of the return interviews and to develop interventions to mitigate the risk of the child going missing again.

In all these activities the allocated social worker has a responsibility to meet with the child or young person and discuss the missing episode, associated risks and

explore what need to happen to reduce the risk of further missing episodes. This does not replace the Return Interview.

- 4.3 Multiple missing episodes should result in a referral to CMOG (Child sexual exploitation and Missing Operation Group). Work is in place to ensure that this action is managed consistently across Children's Services and the wider partnership.
- 4.4 In respect of those Walsall Looked After Children who are placed out of authority and at a distance of more than 20 miles work is underway to assure ourselves that they are receiving a return interview by the host Local Authority, that the outcome of such a return interview is shared with the Walsall social worker and then that the actions previously outlined in respect of children in Walsall are taken.
- 4.5 An enhanced clause in the current contracts used when children are placed with external and independent providers has been agreed with Commissioners to strengthen our expectations in relation to notification of missing and return episodes. It also clarifies that we expect any independent return interview carried out and shared with the provider to be forwarded to the Walsall social worker. Opportunities to reinforce this further also exist in the regional work outlined later in this report.
- 4.6 Further work is being undertaken to ensure that where Looked After Children placed by other Authorities in Walsall go missing we consistently ensure that the outcome of their return meeting is shared with their home authority.
- 4.7 Work undertaken on a regional basis to develop an agreed protocol will provide opportunity to reinforce expectations relating to sharing completed return interviews.

## **5. Missing from Education**

- 5.1 As at the end of August 2016 there were 93 children missing education who had been taken off a school roll and who do not currently have a named mainstream or special school place. The majority of these 93 children are being educated at the New Leaf, mainstream Pupil Referral Unit or in alternative provision. In a small number of cases, children are missing education because parents have chosen not to send their child to their named school. Of these 51 are primary phase, including 20 in nursery education and 42 secondary phase education.
- 5.2 The Fair Access protocol which has been agreed by secondary Headteachers should resolve the majority of issues in relation to the placing of secondary age pupils in schools. The appointment of a chair person for the first panel and a date for the panel to meet is awaited to move this forward.

Having successfully developed the Fair Access Protocol for secondary phase pupils, the steps needed to develop, agree and implement a similar protocol for primary age pupils should be a relatively straight forward process. Completing this task will address the issues in relation to primary age pupils currently without a named school and is planned for completion by October half term. None of the children or young people currently active on the Children Missing Education panel is a Looked After Child.

- 5.3 There are currently 28 children for whom we have no known school destination. The Admissions Team have completed all the standard checks to locate these children including contacting NHS England to try and trace new registrations with General Practitioners elsewhere in the UK and other Local Authority Admissions Teams without success. None of the children or young people currently without a destination is a Looked After Child or a child for whom there is an assessed child sexual exploitation risk.

The Walsall Local Police Partnership Office were asked to see if they could secure information from the UK Border Agency regarding whether any of these children have left the country as the Border Agency refuses to provide this information to any Local Authority. The Border Agency are also currently refusing to provide this information to the police on the basis that other than not being in school there is no evidence that the child/children concerned are suffering or likely to suffer any risk of significant harm. Work is ongoing to try and secure a resolution to this issue.

There are no national comparator figures in relation to the number of children without a known school destination and there is no national guidance relating to how long a Local Authority should retain the names of children who are without a school destination. In Walsall the names of these children are retained until the summer of their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Some Local Authorities choose to remove the names of all such children from any list at the end of each school year, effectively starting a new list each academic year. Walsall Children's Services does not believe that this is safe practice.



**6. Elective Home Education (EHE)**

6.1 As of 1 September 2016 there are 214 children registered in Walsall as receiving Elective Home Education. During 2015/16 there were 277 children who had been registered as EHE during the year. This is a cumulative total of children and young people known to being home educated. There has been a rising trend of numbers of registered EHE children and although there is no national data available colleagues in other Local Authorities have indicated rising numbers also.

Walsall numbers of Elective Home Education by year:

2012/13	184
2013/14	207
2014/15	220
2015/16	277

6.2 As there are no statutory powers in relation to Local Authorities monitoring the quality of home education on a routine basis the relationship between the Local Authority and those families electing to educate at home is extremely important. In Walsall the relationship is largely positive with each family offered at least three visits in the first year. Many families who have made the decision to home educate as a lifestyle choice and it is in line with their philosophy and beliefs. There are some very good examples of Walsall families who make excellent educators and it is important that this is celebrated and recognised.

There are a number of self supporting groups where families can socialise and network with each other. Additionally, Walsall advertises events and facilities available for home educators through a seasonal newsletter and holds an annual event to celebrate Elective Home Education. The event this year was called ‘workshop ‘til you drop’. This theme was developed through feedback from EHE families who had suggested workshops on; writing, handwriting, drama, problem solving and music. The event was held at The Hub, Walsall College and was attended by families and their 34 children.

6.3 When Elective Home Education Officers identify a situation where there is no suitable education taking place the first step is to offer additional support, advice and guidance in respect of a suitable education until there is evidence of this. Support is also offered to assist the family to register their child on a school role. If these interventions fail then the child is referred to the Children Missing Education Panel. Currently there are 12 EHE children who have been referred to the Children Missing Education Panel.

6.4 All 16 year olds and families are invited to a meeting to establish post 16 places and liaison with local colleges has been a positive move for KS4 students. There are now 7 colleges and one training provider offer programmes or courses to EHE students and help this transition.

6.5 The reasons for opting for EHE are recorded on the Capita One education management system. Specialist officers liaise with Headteachers where parents are indicating they wish to return to school and help this transition.

6.6 None of the children currently receiving Elective Home Education is a Looked After Child or a child for whom there is an assessed child sexual exploitation risk. In respect of each new referral, lateral checks include notification to MASH, School Health and EWO and each are requested to provide relevant information to the Specialist Officers for EHE. The Specialist Officers contribute to multi-agency forums when invited to do so.

## **7. Absence from School**

7.1 Ninety two percent of Walsall schools commission weekly support from the Education Welfare Service to help them manage absence. The process for that support is via a targeted approach aimed at identifying children at risk of becoming a persistent absentee and then supporting improved attendance via warning letters, meetings, Attendance Panel and ultimately prosecution.

7.2 In 2015 -2016 there were 169 children presented to Attendance Panel. Of these 51 warranted a further investigation; all cases were resolved without formal prosecution.

It is not known how schools who manage their own attendance are assessing risk for persistent absentees or responding to this issue.

7.3 Work undertaken this year has been complimented by the Walsall Truancy Patrol which has stopped 843 pupils. The project was funded through Troubled Families Programme and as this funding is now devolved to Locality Panels, the decisions of the 4 chairs is now sought to continue in 2016/17. Early indicators are that approximately 50% of those stopped have improved attendance when reviewed. All Walsall cases are followed up by the Attendance Officers supporting schools. Schools who do not commission attendance support are informed of the circumstances so they are able to conduct their own enquiries.

**8. Absence figures**

8.1 Persistent Absence: from September 2015 the measure for recording Persistent Absence (PA) changed from 15% + absence to 10% + absence and therefore the target group of 'at risk' children was widened to capture this change. Early indications are that primary PA has reduced in 2015/16. Using raw data and the new measure of 10% or more absence for Autumn and Spring term indications are that primary PA has reduced by 3.8% from 11.13% in 2014/15 to 9.18% in 2015/16. Secondary PA has reduced by 2.05% from 15.22% in Autumn and Spring 2014/15 to 12.33% during the same period in 2015/16.

8.2. Secondary overall absence (OA) and persistent absence (PA) has decreased over an 8 year trend and at the end of 2014/15 secondary PA is 0.10% better than the national average. In 2007 secondary OA was 8.18% and has reduced to 5.3% by 2015. Secondary OA is now in line with the national average. There are still challenges around primary persistent absence as this remains below the national average but early indicators for persistent absence at the 10% measure for Autumn and Spring terms have improved for 15/16.

8.3 Primary Overall and persistent absence has reduced over a eight year varying trajectory but not reduced by a greater margin as the national averages. In 2007 OA was recorded by DfE as 5.46% reducing to 4.4% by 2015. Early indicators are showing that the focus on primary PA during 2015/16 has had a positive impact.

**9. Part time timetables**

9.1 The Education Welfare Team collect data termly from every school in Walsall and this is then fed back to the Access Team for transfer onto a tracking sheet.

Once confirmation is received that all schools have reported their position the list is then passed onto the Exclusion & Reintegration Officer in order to identify vulnerable groups and students at risk. Schools are then challenged regarding strategies and plans to increase a pupils hours within school and move back to full time attendance. This is then monitored on a termly basis.

9.2 In the academic year 2015/2016 the reported numbers of pupils on a part time timetable was as follows:

New Cases by Term 2015/16	Autumn	Spring	Summer
	131	54	n/a

The trend was for a reduction in the number of pupils on reduced hours as the

year progressed.

The request for information will be collated again over the autumn term in order that the same process can be followed throughout the 2016/17 academic year.

## **10. Children missing or absent during the school day**

All schools have internal procedures for staff to report and manage children who go missing or absent themselves for lessons or from school during the school day. They are not required to report these episodes to the Local Authority but are required to follow their own procedures which are specific to each school and agreed by each Governing Body. If children go missing from a primary setting, having followed their procedures, schools will contact the episode. Audits of policy, procedure and processes followed are then undertaken and feedback provided to the Headteacher and Governing Body.

## **11. Plans for improvement and/or filling any shortfalls in assurance**

11.1 Walsall Children's Services CSE and Missing Co-ordinator is currently preparing a series of workshops for the social care and early help workforce in which issues relating to the risks of going missing, best practice on interventions and the subsequent recording of this activity will be revisited. The intention is to complete this work by December 2016. This will result in improved practice in utilising the information gathered as a result of completed return interviews. It will result in improved recording practice which in turn will improve our ability to report on the missing activity and associated outcomes. It will also re-inforce an understanding of the trigger points for referral to CMOG which will, in turn, enable CMOG to further improve its ability to collate relevant information in relation to children who go missing from home or care.

11.2 The Head of Safeguarding for Walsall Children's Services will continue to work with Children's Services commissioners to further strengthen the current contractual arrangements for children who are placed out of authority in order that there is greater assurance that Walsall children placed out of authority receive a return interview if they go missing and that the outcome of that interview is shared with the relevant social worker.

11.3 The Head of Safeguarding for Walsall Children's Services will also undertake a piece of work to improve the response to ensure that the outcomes of return interviews with Looked After Children placed in Walsall by other authorities are routinely shared with their placing authority.

11.4 Work is underway to enable Street Teams, the current provider of Return interviews in relation to children who go missing in Walsall, to be able to input these directly onto the child's electronic file thus improving the flow of information between the provider and the social worker or early help officer.

11.5 Walsall Children's Services will actively contribute to the regional work currently being undertaken.

11.6 Work will continue to monitor the use of part time timetables by schools and strengthen our ability to capture and understand any additional risk factors for a child that may be present or exacerbated by a part time timetable.

11.7 Activity in relation to children who are missing from home, care or education will continue to receive oversight from the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board

## **12 . Conclusions**

12.1 Children missing from home, care and education continues to be a complex picture. Tracking children who are at risk of missing and thus at risk of associated safeguarding is being further strengthened by improved alignment of data and recording. A small working group has been established to work on addressing these issues.

12.2 The high challenge/high support approach of weekly reports of children who go missing from home or care are having impact on ensuring the required workflow steps are completed which will improve our ability to report on this issue. The same approach will be taken to the Missing workshops planned for the Autumn period.

12.3 Elective Home Education numbers continue to increase; however, the relationship the Local Authority has with these parents and their engagement with the process remains positive.

12.4 It is not possible to benchmark the number of children without an education destination in Walsall with other authorities, other than anecdotally; without statutory guidance regarding how long the names of such children should be retained different authorities take differing approaches. The status of the Walsall children in this cohort will be kept under constant review.

12.5 Work will continue to strengthen and improve our knowledge of and response to Looked After Children who are placed out of Walsall Borough in order to meet their care needs.