

# Plymouth Missing Young Person's Team

## Home and Communities



### INTRODUCTION:

This document sets out a multi-agency response to minimise the risk of children and young people going missing and to protect them from harm or exploitation. It should be read alongside the following:

- *Plymouth City Councils Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures*
- *Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 and Working Together March 2013*
- *Statutory Guidance on children who Run Away and go missing from Home or Care 2011*
- *South West Peninsula Child Sexual Exploitation Standard Operating Protocol*

## I. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GO MISSING IN PLYMOUTH

### I.1 Children who go missing from home or care:

It is important to understand the reasons why children and young people might go missing from home. It may be a response to an argument or other incident at home or to more serious problems either at home, at school or in the community. On the other hand, a child or young person may be running to, rather than from, something. Whatever the reason, children and young people can place themselves at significant risk. Whereas a first absence may never be repeated a second absence may denote the beginning of a pattern of response that requires examination. Similarly, the behaviour of parents to the absence – whether or not they had tried to locate the child, whether the absence was reported to the police in a timely manner, the appropriateness of their response on the child's return – all are relevant to understanding the child's behaviour and whether or not any intervention by agencies is indicated.

***The joint protocol between the Devon and Cornwall Police, Plymouth City Council's Children and Families Service and Plymouth City Council's Missing Young Person's Team sets out the joint arrangements for investigating and providing effective interventions where children and young people go missing from home and from Local Authority Care.<sup>1</sup>***

### I.2 Children and young people who go missing from care:

Children and young people may go missing from their care placements perhaps to be with family or friends or to be away from a placement where they are unhappy, either with their carers or peers. Many young people who enter care as adolescents bring with them an established pattern of going missing from home and school. Not all such absences may be described as "missing" episodes – often they represent non-compliant behaviour through a failure to return by an

<sup>1</sup>

<http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/homepage/socialcareandhealth/childrensocialcare/localsafeguardingchildrenboard/pscbchildrenandyoungpeople/sexualawarenesspscb/pscbsexualawarenessdocs.htm>

expected time. Sometimes absences trigger safeguarding procedures because of concerns about what a child or young person may be running from or to. Sometimes their likely whereabouts may be known.

It is important to understand the reasons that lead children and young people to go missing from their placement and agencies with responsibility for children and young people in care need to understand their respective roles in these circumstances.

### **1.3 Children and young people who go missing from home:**

The reasons why children go missing are varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and, for some, what may be happening at school or in the community.

#### **Every time they go missing is a cause for concern:**

- Those who go missing overnight or for longer periods are placing themselves, and sometimes others, at risk of serious harm. Others, who display a pattern of behaviour whereby they go missing for a short period and then return, are often testing boundaries and this is usually within the range of normal teenage behaviour and should not come within the definition of 'missing' for the purposes of this joint protocol.

### **1.4. Safeguarding children and young people who go missing**

Children who go missing represent a particularly vulnerable group requiring special attention in terms of their potential for maltreatment and significant harm, including sexual abuse and exploitation.

Early identification, assessment of risk and provision of support is essential.

The definition of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children includes:

- protecting children from maltreatment;
- preventing impairment of children's health or development;
- ensuring children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care;
- taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

Government guidance, *Working Together to safeguard Children from harm 2013*<sup>2</sup> emphasises that effective safeguarding systems are those where:

- the child's needs are paramount and the needs and wishes of each child should be put first, so that every child receives the support they need before a problem escalates;
- all professionals who come into contact with children and families are alert to their needs and any risks of harm that individual abusers, or potential abusers, may pose to children;
- all professionals share appropriate information in a timely way and can discuss any concerns about an individual child with colleagues and local authority children's social care;

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00030-2013>

- high quality professionals are able to use their expert judgement to put the child's needs first so that the right solution can be found for each individual child;
- all professionals contribute to whatever actions are needed and take part in regularly reviewing the outcomes for the child against specific plans and outcomes;
- local areas innovate and changes are informed by evidence and examination of the data.

For some children, only a brief assessment is required; for others the assessment needs to be more in-depth and will therefore take longer to get a clear and accurate understanding of the child's needs and circumstances.

## 2. AIMS OF THIS PROTOCOL:

### 2.1 This protocol aims to:

**2.1.1.** Promote a shared responsibility for action to reduce the incidence of children in Plymouth going missing from home and from care.

Through awareness campaigns in schools and with information, encourage parents and carers:

- To better understand the reasons why children run away and the risks they are exposed to when missing
- To be alert to any likelihood that this may happen
- To take reasonable steps to keep their children safe and know their whereabouts
- To take prompt action to locate them if they have any concerns
- To report them missing to the police as soon as possible if they are unable to locate them and remain concerned for them.

**2.1.2.** Provide information, personal, health and social education within Plymouth schools to reduce the incidence of children who run away and the harm to them arising from it.

**Plymouth Missing Young Person's Team will deliver, in partnership with other services, a brief intervention service to children to reduce the likelihood of further running away and missing episodes.**

### 2.1 Definitions:

**2.2.1** The terms *missing young person* and *young runaway* refer to children up to the age of 18 who have run away from their home or care placement, have been forced to leave, or whose whereabouts are unknown.

- The target group for support from the Plymouth Missing Young Peoples Team are aged 10 – 17 years.

**2.2.2.** A child is **missing** where:

- His or her whereabouts or reason for absence is unknown; and/or

- There is cause for concern for his/her vulnerability;
- Or because there is a potential danger to the public.

***A child in this category must be reported to the police.***

**2.2.3 Absent without permission** is when a child fails to return home at the time requested or expected. A caring parent will take all reasonable practical steps to find out where the child is, where they are going or who they are with and, if necessary arrange for those people and places to be checked out.

- Any such absence must be carefully monitored as the child may subsequently become a missing person
- Having regard to the age and ability of the child, their usual behaviour and the circumstances of the absence, a caring parent will decide at what point their child should be considered a “missing person”
- The absence of a child under the aged 13 and under should always be considered as a missing person episode
- No absence should ever continue beyond 24 hours – if the child has not returned or his or her whereabouts identified and well-being confirmed, a missing person report should be made.

***It is acknowledged that such decisions are made by parents – this sets out what the agencies party to this protocol consider a caring parent should do and is the basis of any advice or information given to them.***

<b>2.3 Risk Assessment:</b>
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**2.3.1.** The police are the lead agency in relation to finding and securing the safe return of missing persons.

- There is a presumption that all missing children are vulnerable unless a risk assessment determines otherwise.

**2.3.2.** In undertaking a risk assessment, the police will have regard to information available to them from partner agencies, including Plymouth Missing Young Persons Team They will be alert to the potential significance of repeated absences running away and will consider:

- The age of the child;
- Previous behaviour and history;
- The emotional needs of the child, e.g., whether there has been any variation in their mood or whether they have expressed any intention to harm themselves or others;
- Behaviour of the child as influenced by peer groups or others;
- Whether the child is perceived as running to/running from someone/something;
- The risk of offending;
- The risk that the child may be targeted for economic or sexual exploitation.

**2.3.3.** Often such children are immediately labelled as the problem and insufficient consideration may be given to why they go missing on more than one occasion. **Persistent running away needs to be explored, particularly at the time of return interviews.**

A range of 'push' and 'pull' factors may be reasons for being absent:

### **Push factors**

- Problems at home – ranging from arguments with parents to long-term abuse or maltreatment.
- Family break-up – young people drawn into their parents' conflicts are less likely to do well at school and more likely to truant or to run away from home.
- Mental health problems – a disproportionate number of young people who run away from home have mental health problem.
- Bullying – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away from school and home or care.
- Teenage pregnancy – some young women run away or are forced to leave home because they become pregnant (or fear that they may be pregnant).
- They may also be in denial about their pregnancy, meaning that they are not getting the advice they need about pregnancy options. There is also a greater risk of pregnancy when girls run away, and those working with them will need to ensure they have rapid access to confidential contraception and sexual health teams to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

### **Pull factors**

- Running to be near friends or family – especially when a young person is in care and there are problems in contact arrangements with family and friends.
- Grooming for potential sexual exploitation or child trafficking – young people may run away or go missing following grooming by adults who will seek to exploit them.

## **2.4 Incidents of Specific Concern:**

**2.4.1.** Patterns of running away/going missing from children's placements should be discussed regularly with local police representatives and other agencies as part of the wider strategy for keeping children safe. If the running away/going missing of a child is causing specific concern, eg, by its frequent repetition or indicators of particular risk such as contact with an offender who poses a specific risk to a child, there should be a multi-agency strategy meeting to discuss the combined response to such incident and concern. This meeting should be attended by:

- A representative of the police;
- A representative of the local authority responsible for the child's care of sufficient seniority to be able to take authoritative decisions about the steps needed to locate and protect the child;
- The registered manager of the children's home or the manager of the fostering team/ team
- The child
- Where the child is not placed within the boundary of their responsible authority – a representative from the authority in which the child is currently living – perhaps from the local team responsible for child protection;
- Other relevant agencies - e.g., representatives from the Youth Offending Team, Harbour Young Peoples Team, CAMHS, Youth Team.

## 2.5 Response by Devon and Cornwall Police:

**2.5.1.** The police will investigate all cases falling within this protocol and will respond in accordance with Police Missing Persons policy.

- Other Children's Trust partner agencies will work collaboratively to assist them with their duties.

**2.5.2.** Police powers are limited and difficulties can arise when missing children are found but do not want to return to their placement.

**2.5.3.** Under the Children Act 1989, where there is reasonable cause to believe that the child could suffer significant harm the police can take the child into police protection under the Children Act 1989, and remove to suitable accommodation which could include the home from which the child originally went missing. The police are not given the power to use force to take children into police protection. This is, however, a difficult area, with conflicting advice as to what the police can do in terms of using reasonable force to prevent children suffering significant harm.

**2.5.4.** There will be occasions when a child is found in a location that may be considered unsuitable, but where there would not be legal grounds for taking them into police protection. In such cases, police and the accountable manager from the local authority will need to liaise to discuss what steps may be necessary in order to safeguard the child's welfare.

**2.5.5** A **Safe and Well Check** should be carried out by the police as soon as possible after the child has returned. Its purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them.

- Where a person goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable to see them every time they return. In these cases, a reasonable decision should be taken with regard to the frequency of such checks.
- Every effort should be made to visit those children missing from home on every occasion.

**2.5.6** If the child makes an allegation of crime that occurred whilst they were missing or that contributed to him/her running away, the Police will record this allegation and take appropriate action.

**2.5.7** When the safe and well check is complete, the police will notify the child's absence to children's social care

## **2.6 Response by Plymouth Missing Young Persons Team:**

**2.6.1** Plymouth Missing Young Person's Team will receive notifications from the police of all children reported missing from home in Plymouth.

**2.6.2.** On receipt of information, the team will check with social care to see if the child is known:

- Where this is found to be the case, the team will liaise with the case responsible worker to ascertain whether or not services are required

**2.6.3.** Plymouth Missing Young Persons Team will work with children's social care and other teams where children are already known and receiving teams

- It is primarily an early intervention team responding to needs identified by missing person report

**2.6.4.** The Return Interview will be carried out by practitioners from the Team who will make contact with the child and/or parent(s) within a maximum 48 hours, but ideally within 24hours, where:

- The child is aged under 13 years
- The safe and well interview or other information about a child indicates that they are vulnerable
- Irrespective of the outcome of a safe and well check, where a child has gone missing for a second or subsequent time.

**2.6.5.** It is especially important that the Return Interview takes place when a child:

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

**This is to be reflected in the Return Interview form and CSE 2**

**2.6.6** The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the Safe and Well check (his/her medical condition should be discussed and any need for medical attention assessed);
- Understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away;
- Try to prevent it happening again

**2.6.7** Where an allegation of physical or sexual abuse is made or becomes evident, child protection procedures must be implemented and contact made immediately with the police Child Protection Unit where the child is living.

**2.6.8** If there is any suggestion that the child has been a victim or perpetrator of crime, consideration must be given to securing evidence by police including by forensic examination.

- This should also include securing clothing and delaying washing/bathing in relevant cases. It must be remembered that all necessary permissions are obtained from the child's parents and/or those with parental responsibility.
- The child cannot give consent to these procedures taking place. It is essential to recognise that the welfare of the child is paramount and careful consideration might be given to the potential effects of the procedures on the child.

**2.6.9** The interview could lead to a pre-CAF initial assessment subject to agreement with the child and family:

- Unless the pre-CAF indicates otherwise, the child should return home
- Where this is not appropriate or not achievable, the alternative placement will normally be with the extended family or friends (kinship)

**2.6.10.** The pre-CAF may lead to a full CAF<sup>3</sup> assessment and an offer of service for up to 3 months or signposting to other more appropriate teams.

**2.6.11** Where a service is offered, this will be in order to:

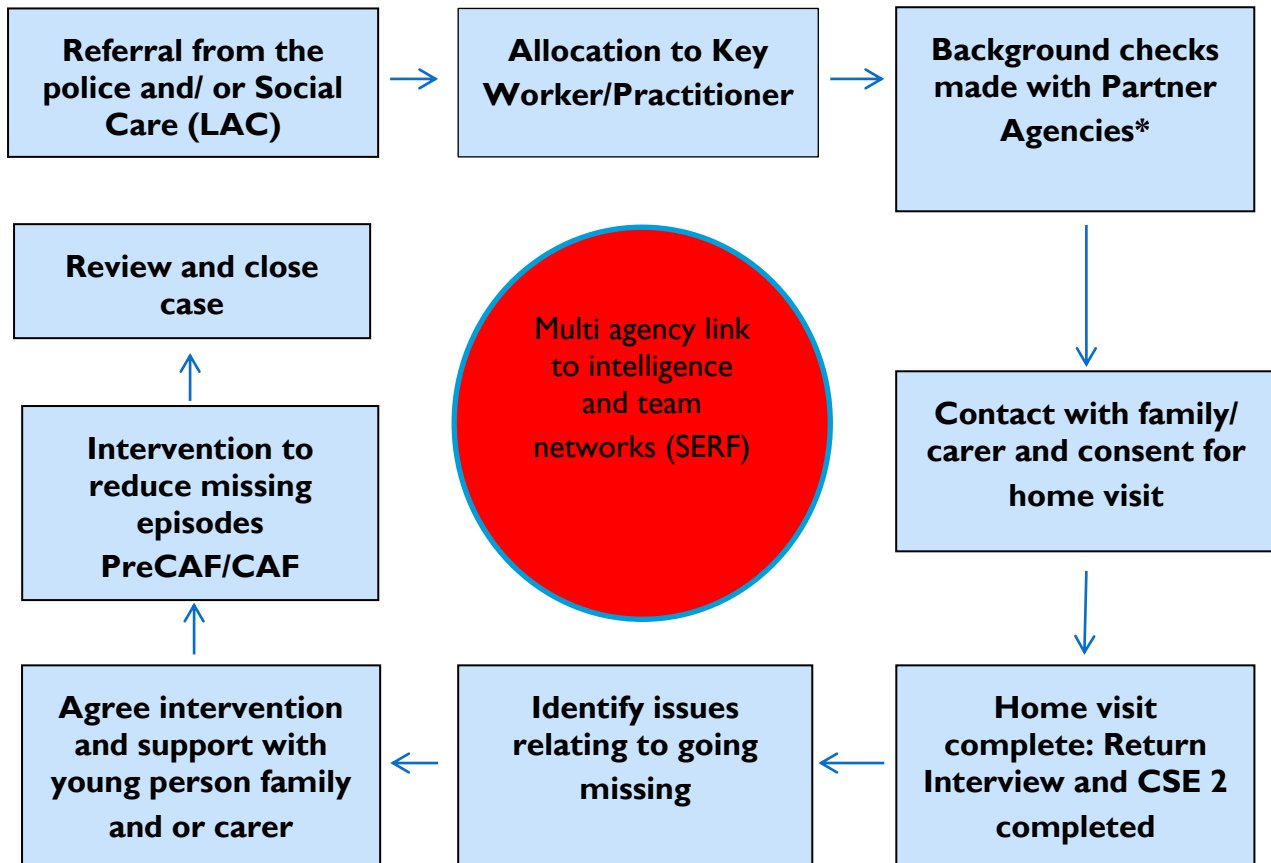
- Increase the child's awareness of the dangers of running away and the issues young missing persons face
- Build up a trusting relationship with him or her leading to opportunities to identify the issues that made them run away from home or care
- To help the child to seek safer solutions to deal with their issues other than running away
- Enable him or her to feel safe to ask questions if they don't understand something or want to find answers to their questions.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/cafmultigencythresholdguidance.pdf>



## Plymouth Missing Young people's Team Process



### \* List of Partner Agencies attached

The PMYPT practitioner aims to provide short term intervention of up to 3 weeks initially depending on need. Consideration will be made to engage the CAF process, if appropriate.

### 2.7 Recording:

Throughout the process in this protocol, the police, social care and Plymouth Missing Young Person's Team must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given. Police will likewise keep a record on the appropriate missing person report.

For children in care, alongside the care plan, a Placement Information Record (PIR) should be completed between the local authority and the provider of the child's placement. The expectations as to how they will meet the child's needs should be set out in the PIR, which must describe how the provider will maintain the child's positive routines as part of their commitment to enable the child to experience a constructive placement, supporting them to achieve their potential. It should include details about:

- Any specific behaviour-management strategies that the provider is expected to follow;
- The provider's role in meeting the child's health needs;
- The provider's role in supporting the child's education; and
- The provider's role in supporting contact with the child's family, including information about any restrictions of contact.

## **2.8 Considerations for success**

Ultimately the success of the partnership will be determined by the extent to which children come to trust and have confidence in the working partnership between staff and the agencies and can see that it exists for their benefit and not for the benefit of others. This means that a child centred approach is crucial and needs to be adopted. It also means that practitioners should not disclose personal information about a child to the police except with his/her agreement, unless the police need to have that information to carry out their statutory duties or to assist with a plan to safeguard the child's welfare.

**PARTNER AGENCIES:**

Police

Children's Social Care

CAF Coordinators

CAMHs

Local GP Surgery/ Hospital

Education Psychology Team

School /College provision

Education Welfare

Youth Offending Team

Probation

Youth Service

Other agencies known to the child/young person