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**Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children Board  
LSCB Briefing Note for Practitioners & Managers  
April 2016**

**‘Safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility  
If children are to receive the right help at the right time, everyone is responsible  
for identifying concerns, sharing information and taking action’**

Stoke-on-Trent has designated the Strategic Manager, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance as lead officer with primary strategic responsibility for children missing from care or home. The Local Authority (LA) works closely together with Staffordshire Police to ensure good outcomes for children who run away and/or go missing from home or care: Police will only become involved after the reporting person has completed all reasonable checks to locate the individual. Missing children remain the responsibility of the person/organisation which has Parental Responsibility (PR).

### **Children Missing From Home**

To inform the Police about a missing child **call 101**. If a very vulnerable child goes missing **dial 999**.  
**The Police will need to know:**

- The child’s name
- The child’s date of birth
- Where, when and with whom the child went missing
- What the child was wearing
- A description of the child
- Their medical history
- The time and location they were last seen
- Circumstances of going missing
- Details of any friends or associates
- Also agree to provide a recent photograph.

Anyone locating a missing child should return them to their family home. The police, within 72 hours, will conduct a return interview/’safe and well’ check to establish the child’s wellbeing/safety and establish whether they were victim of abuse or crime whilst missing. Where it is suspected a child is suffering, or may suffer significant harm, a referral should be made to the Safeguarding Referral Team (SRT) on **01782 235100**, or out of working hours, the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) on **01782 234234**. If the child is not considered to be in need of protection or a child in need the Police will still notify the LA of the missing episode and the LA will also record information from the return interview.

### **Children Missing From Care**

**Pre-placement planning:** prior to each accommodation arrangement, the social worker must consider all potential risks to the child, including an assessment of the risk for them to go missing. Missing episodes prior to the child becoming ‘looked-after’ must be taken into account.

Initial placement planning will cover:

- Trigger points for absence or missing episodes
- Risks to themselves and others during or after a missing episode including when being picked up
- What steps can be taken to reduce the likelihood of the child going missing and coming to harm or harming others
- Friends and family details and contact numbers
- Expectations of the child, e.g. curfews
- Expectations of the care provider, e.g. when police will be notified, who will collect a missing child, who conducts immediate assessments on their return and arrangements for full return interviews
- Arrangements for overnight stays at alternative venues or going on trips

**Corporate Parenting Responsibilities:** when a child is reported missing, the carers, the LA with PR and the police have a joint responsibility for protecting the wellbeing of the individual. A police officer will attend all reports of missing children and will require the carer to provide specific information, in addition to that provided for any missing child, for instance:

- Known acquaintances and addresses frequented
- Any history of being missing and circumstances where/when found
- Names and addresses of child's dentist and GP
- Details of when the child was last seen and with whom
- A recent photograph
- Child's mobile phone number, e- mail and bank details

**Responsibilities of the Reporting Individual:** The reporting individual should also identify within which of the three agreed categories the absence fits, i.e. **Missing: Away from placement without authorisation; Absconder**. Also considered at this point should be the age and maturity of the child and any physical or cognitive disability they may have. The child's care plan, their legal status and their previous history will also inform any assessment of category of absence. Some children may absent themselves for a short period and then return, or may simply be late returning. If a child's whereabouts are known or suspected, carers will decide whether to allow the child to remain or make arrangements for their return. If a child's whereabouts are unknown and they are not contactable, they should not remain categorised as absent, rather than being formally reported as missing. A clear assessment will be made by the carer as to the length of time that elapses before an absent child is categorised as missing. However, each case will be considered on its merits and a formal missing person report to the police may be actioned earlier in some circumstances than others.

**Before Contacting the Police:** all reporting individuals should take proactive steps to locate the child prior to contacting the police. Carers must also immediately inform parents/those with PR (unless the care plan states otherwise), the lead social worker or pod member (EDT if out of hours). If an absent child is subject of an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice system, they should be reported to the police as missing without delay.

**Police Responsibilities:** an initial risk assessment is made by the call-taker and used to determine the classification of the incident and the appropriate level of response. A secondary risk assessment is conducted as the result of an officer being deployed to take a missing person report. Using all information available, the police will determine the level of risk or danger to the missing person. The following set of questions should be used to define the status of the missing episode:

- What is the specific concern in this instance?
- What has been done so far to trace this individual?
- Is this significantly out of character?
- Are there any special medical needs?
- Are they likely to be subjected to crime?

- Are they likely to be the victim of abuse?
- Are they currently at risk of Sexual Exploitation?
- Are they likely to attempt suicide?
- Do they pose a danger to other people?
- Is there any other information relevant to their absence?

No child who is missing from care will ever be treated as **Low Risk**.

**Medium Risk** – “the risk posed is likely to place the child or young person in danger or they are a threat to themselves.”

**High Risk** – “the risk posed is immediate and there are grounds for believing that the child is in danger through their own vulnerability: or may have been the victim of a serious crime or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing the public is in danger.”

**Planning for Return:** when a child is reported as ‘missing’, the social worker, carer(s) and placement provider should commence planning for the time when he/she is located. Such plans will include:

- Whether the child will return to the same placement.
- How and by whom they will be conveyed there.
- Do the police need to interview the child prior to their return to placement?
- Create a sensitive environment for the child’s return.
- Identify and arrange for an appropriate and independent professional person to talk to the child prior to return.
- Police will conduct a ‘safe and well’ interview with the child

**Longer Absences:** when a child has been absent for more than 48 hours, the social worker should inform the relevant strategic lead for their service (or immediately if there is significant concern). After the child has been missing for three days, or earlier if appropriate, the social worker, police and other relevant care professionals should hold an urgent case review meeting.

The meeting will review:

- What action has been taken so far by the police and care professionals?
- What action needs to be taken by the police and care professionals?
- Whether the child should return to that placement when located.
- Any other relevant information.
- Date of further meeting should the missing episode continue.
- Decide if procedures should be invoked under section 47 of the Children Act 1989.

**Return of the Child:** if their whereabouts are known or suspected it is the responsibility of the LA or independent provider to arrange for the child’s return. The police can provide assistance in cases where there may be a perceived risk. **It is the responsibility of the carer to contact the police to confirm that the missing child has returned.** The police may still conduct a ‘safe and well’ check under these circumstances.

**Child Protection Concerns:** If the child may have been victim of a crime while absent or they are in danger or at risk from any person as the result of a missing episode, the police must be asked to attend without delay. A parallel section 47 child protection referral is also required.

- **In cases of suspected sexual abuse:** the police have specially-trained officers, doctors and facilities designed to care for the victim and obtain evidence. The child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the police. Clothing, mobile phone, and trace evidence from body fingernails or hair may be crucial.

If carers become aware of the scene of **any** crime committed against the child, they must inform the police without delay.

**The Return:** carers should make clear their relief that the child is safe and well. Medical attention, if necessary, and food and drink should be a priority. The safety and wellbeing of the child should also be ensured and parents/those with PR, police and social workers informed without delay. Consideration should be given to whether a section 47 strategy meeting is required, especially if a pattern of going missing is developing.

**Independent Return Interview:** this will be carried out by an appropriately-trained practitioner independent from the carer; a visit will be carried out by a Brighter Futures worker who will liaise with the lead social worker to follow up any actions identified and inform any future care planning or risk management. (The child should be consulted when seeking to identify the appropriate person to carry out the return interview).

The purpose of the return interview is to:

- Identify factors which led to the missing episode
- Prevent further missing episodes
- Inform any subsequent missing person investigation
- Share intelligence and information
- Give particular attention to children who may be suspected of being involved in, or at risk of trafficking or exploitation

The child's consent should be sought prior to sharing information and with whom this is to be shared. It is crucial that any information gained through this interview is fed back to the police and to any intervention meetings. This should only be done if consent is given and the information is crucial to safeguard the person from harm.

**Scaled Intervention: the role of care planning:** every looked-after child must have a care plan based on comprehensive assessment and be kept under regular review. Any review should consider the adequacy of the care plan in light of any, and in ensuring strategies are in place to address future, missing episodes. Intervention meetings should take place **within five working days** in the event of repeat episodes of children going missing from care and should be chaired by a social worker. In cases where children are placed in Stoke-on-Trent by other LAs these meetings will be convened by the placing social worker.

**After three episodes or 72 hours within a 90-day period:** the young person and advocate, their parent or those with PR, the social worker, police, carer(s) and the person conducting the return interview(s) should meet and agree a plan of action. This meeting will identify any factors relevant to the child's welfare and, if necessary, to target those who harbour missing persons or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs.

**After five episodes or 120 hours within a 90-day period:** further professionals will be involved in the meeting, including the relevant practice manager (chair), team manager from Children's Social Care (CSC), representatives from health or education as appropriate.

**After nine episodes within a 90-day period (or 5 days):** the Strategic Manager Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, police missing person co-ordinator/champion and CSC managers should attend such meetings.

These meetings may be convened under other circumstances, including:

- Any case where the risks involved even in a single future episode are very high
- Where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure a child's wellbeing
- A quick succession of episodes eradicating the need for 90 days to elapse

**Out of Area Placement:** children 'looked after' by Stoke-on-Trent but placed out of area should be subject to equal rigour of care planning as those placed within the city and to similar standards for escalation meetings and reporting requirements as those identified above. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) will report the number of missing episodes and the adequacy of responses following each statutory review.

**Other Local Authority Placement:** all independent providers operating provision within Stoke-on-Trent will be provided with a copy of these procedures and will be informed of training provided by the LSCB. Other LAs placing children within Stoke-on-Trent will inform the LA of their placement and the record of the child and their placement will be recorded on CareFirst. All missing episodes will be reported to the police and the placing LA will be informed in writing by the SRT. Where a child placed by another LA is identified as suffering, or at risk of suffering, significant harm, child protection procedures will be enacted. If a child placed by another LA has gone missing 9 times in a 90-day period, the Head of Strategic Safeguarding in the placing LA will be informed in writing and asked to ensure all appropriate measures are in place for the future care and safety of that child. A copy of the letter will be forwarded to the missing person co-ordinator/champion within Staffordshire Police.

**Please take time to read the full Procedure:**

### **D08 Children Who Go Missing From Home Or Care**

**This can be accessed via the SCB website and contains action-planning and assessment proforma, sample letters, flowcharts and matrices which will be useful to consider.**

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