

25th January 2024		ITEM: 11
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Missing Children Report		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Mairead Morgan, Head of Service, Child Protection and Child in Need		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director of Children's Services		
This report is: Public		

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the safeguarding processes in place in relation to Looked After Children when they are reported missing from care. It also provides further information regarding the number of Looked After Children who go missing, the nature of their missing episodes, and the actions taken to locate and safeguard them.

The majority of Looked After Children who are reported missing are aged 16-17 years old and return to their placement within 24 hours of being reported missing. The most common reason for the missing episode is the young person wanting to stay out later with friends/family or extend their time with friends/family overnight. For a small number of younger Looked After Children, aged 14-15 years old who have been reported missing on several occasions, there is a clear plan in place to safeguard them and consider what support and intervention is required to reduce their risks in relation to missing and exploitation. For the majority of the younger children, the Local Authority is in Care proceedings and there is clear oversight of the plan by the Court, or they are subject to a Care Order

A Return Home Interview (RHI) is offered to every Looked After Child when they return from a missing episode. This is an opportunity to consider any risks to the child and identify any support or intervention they may require. RHI's are now being provided by dedicated in-house workers and the initial indications are that the quality and timeliness of the service provided has improved. The RHI workers are focused on developing their ability to engage with the hardest to reach young people to ensure they are provided with the opportunity to share their experiences in relation to their missing episode and receive support and intervention as required.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That members note the work undertaken to safeguard Looked After Children when they are reported as missing from care and the continued work underway to try to understand the context around individual missing episodes, reduce these wherever possible and improve the quality of the support and intervention provided.**
- 1.2 Members scrutinise the data and provide challenge to the service as required on how as corporate parents we provide appropriate services, keep children and young people safe and promote good outcomes.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 This report provides an overview of the safeguarding processes in place in relation to Looked After Children when they are reported missing from their placement.**

In addition, this report provides further detailed information regarding the context around Looked After Children who do go missing, the nature of missing episodes, and the action taken by Children's Social Care to safeguard children and to reduce the likelihood of further missing episodes.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

Missing Procedures for Looked After Children:

- 3.1 When a Looked After Child goes missing from their placement, the carer is responsible for informing the Police and Children's Social Care. If this occurs outside of working hours, the carer will also contact the Out of Hours/Emergency Duty Team, to ensure that immediate support is provided where required. Whilst missing, the carer is expected to continue to try to contact the young person, and any friends they may be with, to try to locate them.**

The social worker will try to contact the young person to ascertain their safety and wellbeing. They will also contact any family/friends and with the professional network to ascertain if anyone has seen or had contact with the young person, to try to locate them.

If the young person is missing for 12 hours, or there is an immediate concern regarding their safety, the social work team will contact the Police, health and all key professionals involved with the young person and arrange a strategy discussion. At this meeting professionals will share information and discuss any potential risk to the young person. They will devise a strategy to locate the young person and safeguard them. This may include actions such as the Police to complete phone work to try to track the young person's location, accessing CCTV to support in tracing the young person's steps to help identify where they may be and with whom, alerting other police forces

including the British Transport Police. In some cases, media coverage may be considered as a necessary step to locating the young person. If this is the case, the Executive Director of Children's Services is briefed of the situation and their consent is sought, prior to the media alert being released by the Police.

Social Work teams complete a High-Risk Notification for any Looked After Children who are missing for more than 24 hours. This is shared with the Executive Director for Children's Services and with the Lead Member for Children, to ensure they have oversight of these children and the actions being taken to locate and safeguard them.

Missing Looked After Children at risk of exploitation:

- 3.2 During the strategy discussion, the professional network will consider any additional risks to the young person, including risks in relation to child exploitation and modern slavery. Where these risks are identified, the professional network will consider the level of risk, and how this may be addressed. For a small number of young people who are victims of exploitation, their missing episodes are directly linked to exploitation, for example, children who are criminally exploited to sell drugs or run County Lines to different locations within the UK. In addition, children who are sexually exploited and are missing as a result of being groomed into sexually exploitative situations.

Thurrock Exploitation and Missing Team provide support to allocated Social Workers and practitioners in identifying and assessing risk in relation to exploitation. They also have specialist intervention workers who are able to provide one-to-one support to the young person. We recognise the importance of relationship-based practice, and developing trusting relationships with young people, in order for them to feel safe and able to talk about their experiences.

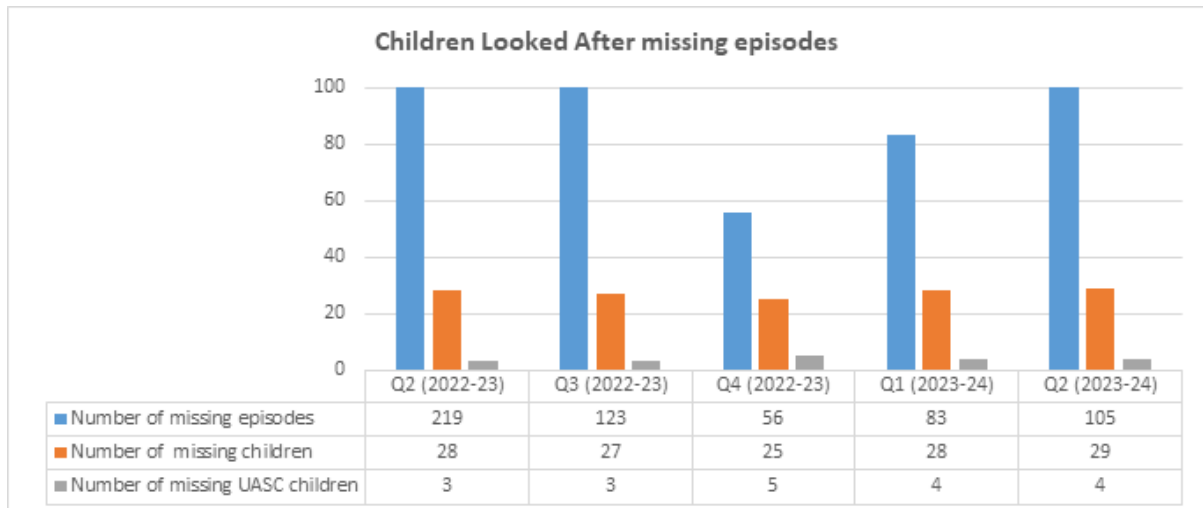
Children and young people who are assessed as medium – high risk of exploitation, are presented at the monthly Child Exploitation Tracking Panel, which is a multi-agency panel, chaired by the Head of Service for Child Protection and Child in Need and the Head of Service for YOS and Prevention. This panel enables the multi-agency network to review the safety plan in place for each individual child/young person and enables regular senior leadership oversight of the most vulnerable young people.

Children Looked After missing episodes:

- 3.3 The graph below shows the number of missing episodes started and the count of the individual children who went missing between July 2022 and end of September 2023. The most common reasons for children going missing is that they have stayed out past their expected return home time with friends or are with their families.

In Q1 2023/24 there were 83 missing episodes relating to 32 children, and in Q2, there was a slight increase to 105 missing episodes, relating to 33 children. The chart below demonstrates that there was a decrease in the number of

episodes in Q4 (2022/23) and Q1(2023/24) however the number of children these missing episodes relate to remains consistent. The number of missing episodes remains lower than both Q2 and Q3 (2022/23). This decrease is reflective of the work completed within the service to better understand where young people are when they are not in their placement, and reduce the number of missing episodes

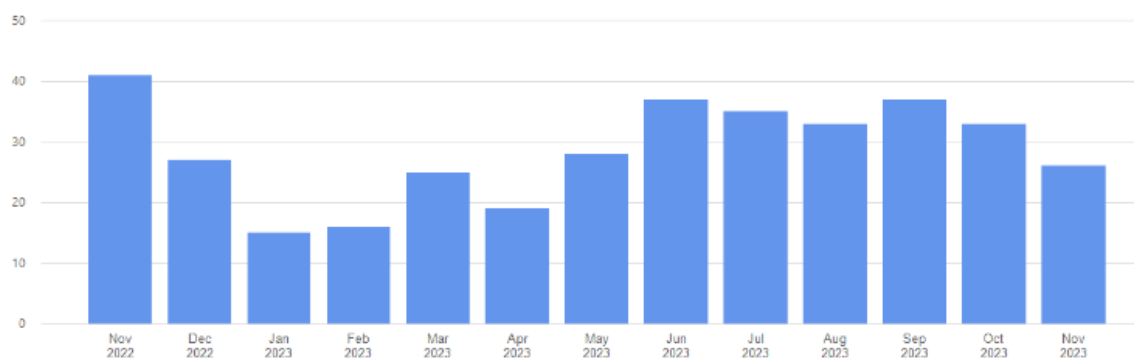


The majority of children going missing remains for short periods of time and relates to older children (16 and over) staying out later than an agreed return home time. Younger children who are missing are reported to the Police at an earlier stage of the day and risk assessed. Strategy meetings continue to track reasons for missing episodes, with the majority stating that they are spending time with friends and/or family or are seeking to spend extended periods of time with friends/partners.

When children are reported missing the majority return within 24 hours, i.e. if reported at 11pm they are back in placement by the next day, most have returned before the next morning. The majority are aged 17. Small numbers of children may spend longer periods away from placement. This is further considered below.

Missing CLA Episodes Started - Volume

This chart shows the number missing episodes started within month for children on an open CLA plan



	Nov 2022	Dec 2022	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Apr 2023	May 2023	Jun 2023	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Total
Total	41	27	15	16	25	19	28	37	35	33	37	33	26	372

For the purpose of this report, we have considered the data in more detail between August – November 2023, to provide a clearer picture of the number of Looked After Children who go missing, their age, and the length of time they are missing for. We have looked more closely at this 4-month period to provide a snapshot of the most current data. Currently, this involves reviewing the data manually, therefore a smaller timeframe has been considered.

August 2023:

Number of missing episodes	33
Number of children	15
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from two young people under the age of 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes.
Returned within 24 hours	66% of all episodes

September 2023:

Number of missing episodes	37
Number of children	15
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from four young people under the age of 16 years old.
Returned within 24 hours	70% of all episodes

October 2023:

Number of missing episodes	33
Number of children	17
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from three young people under the age of 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes.
Returned within 24 hours	72% of all episodes

November 2023:

Number of missing episodes	26
Number of children	11
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from one young person under the age of 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes.
Returned within 24 hours	69% of all episodes

For those children that are missing for more than 24 hours, the safeguarding processes outlined previously are in place, and Children's Social Care work closely with the other agencies to locate and safeguard each child. For the children outlined above aged under 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes, there are clear plans in place to try to reduce the risks in relation to their safety and wellbeing. For each of these children the Local Authority is in care proceedings due to wider concerns regarding their safety and wellbeing, to make appropriate decisions in relation to their safety and wellbeing, which is overseen by the Court.

We have seen a reduction in missing episodes for these children, when they feel more settled and secure in their placement and have developed positive relationships with the professionals involved in their day-to-day care, and in providing them with support.

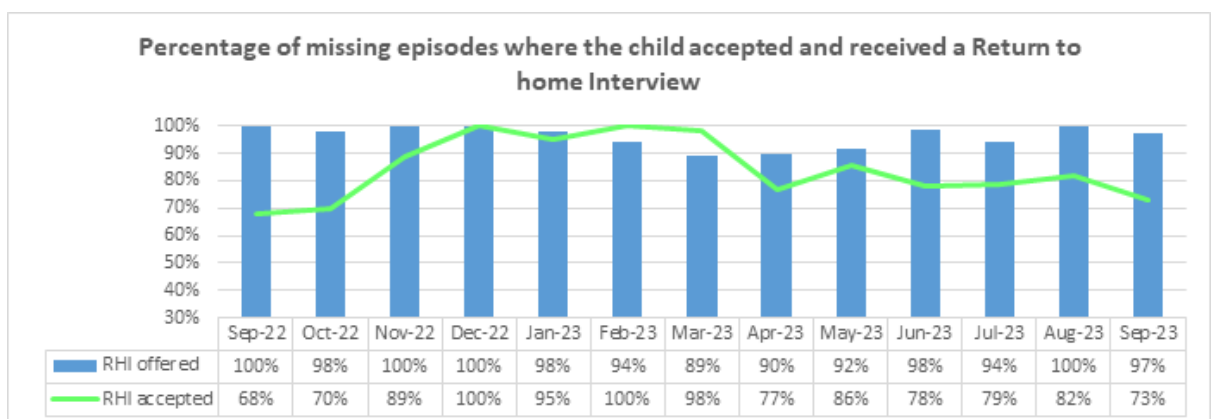
Children Looked After return to home interview (RHI)

- 3.4 In April 2020, Inspire Youth Hub were commissioned to undertake independent Return Home Interviews (RHI). From April 01 2023, the RHI Service transferred from Inspire to an 'In House' provision via the Child Exploitation and Missing Team. Two RHI workers have been recruited and have been in post since October 2023. Although it is early days the RHI workers have had a positive impact on the service, ensuring that 100% of children who went missing in November were offered a RHI within 72 hours of returning, with the aim of understanding the young person's circumstances and the reasons why they go

missing. Key Workers from placements, Foster Carers and Social Workers will also discuss missing incidents with children. There is a network of support provided to children to try to engage with them and understand the reasons for their missing episodes. The Participation Team have been able to engage and seek feedback from young people and this has been invaluable.

As at the end of September 2023, the percentage of children offered a return to home interview was 97% of which 73% accepted and received an interview. The offer of an RHI is not always accepted by young people for several reasons, including not wanting to reveal their whereabouts when missing and not believing that they were missing but were 'out'. All young people who have a missing episode are reviewed at the weekly Missing Children Panel, which reviews the risks to the young person and the actions taken to locate and safeguard them.

The graph below shows the percentage of return to home interviews taken up by young people since September 2022 and shows, in the main, a reasonably consistent picture of children accepting and receiving a RHI. There continues to be a small number of CLA who have consistently refused return home interviews, however they are still spoken with by their social worker, and placement, and their safety is assessed.



The Exploitation and Missing Team are working hard to consider how best to engage our most hard to reach children who decline a RHI, to ensure that wherever possible children who do go missing are able to talk about their experiences whilst they were missing and receive the support and intervention they require. With the RHI workers now being in-house, we hope to see that more Looked After Children are supported to engage with an RHI and access the support available from the team.

4. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

4.1 Not applicable

5. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

5.1 The term Corporate Parenting has been enshrined into legislation through the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It clarifies corporate parenting principles which Local Authorities and partners are required to adhere to. Corporate parenting and is a term used to describe how the council and its partners collectively carry out their responsibilities and support all children and young people who are in our care. It places collective responsibility on the Local Authority to achieve good parenting for all children in care. When Looked After Children go missing from care, the Local Authority has a corporate parenting responsibility to ensure that every possible step is taken to locate and safeguard the child.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

No direct financial implications. The services are supported through the Children Looked after budget of £3.5m.

6.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

The Council is subject to a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child it is looking after. In relation to children who go missing the Council should have regard to the “Statutory Guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care” [January 2014] This guidance requires that data and analysis of children who go missing should be included in regular reports to members as well as in reports to the LSCP.

6.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

There are no direct diversity and equality implications arising from this report. However, the service does collect diversity monitoring data for looked after children, which is provided within the Children’s Social Care Performance Report Q2 (2023-2024). The data is utilised to consider issues of equality and

to ensure that performance considers the impact on children with protected characteristics.

6.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

The Local Authority has a duty to safeguard children who go missing and those at risk of exploitation. As such, the Local Authority is required to follow safeguarding procedures to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to identify and address such risks. This involves working with multi-agency partners, both internal and external, including Police, health, education, the Youth Offending Service, and community safety.

7. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- Not applicable

8. **Appendices to the report**

- None

Report Author:

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Children's Services