



Worcestershire Children First Fostering

Children Missing from Foster Carers' Home

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1. Introduction

Sometimes children or young people go missing from foster carers' homes. There may be a number of reasons why this happens, but we know that children and young people who are looked after and go missing are more vulnerable; exposing themselves to heightened risk e.g becoming victims of crime, sexually exploitation, involved in substance misuse and drawn into criminal behaviour. Research also shows that the level of risk increases on each occasion that a child or young person goes missing. It also has a negative impact on their physical health and emotional wellbeing.

It is important that foster carers are prepared and know what to do should they have a child or young person who is at risk of going missing or has gone missing.

This policy will:

- Promote the prevention of children going missing from foster care.
- Ensure effective safeguarding of those children and young people who are missing from their foster home.
- Set out how foster carers support the Police to locate and return children who are missing.
- Help foster carers understand the actions the Police and the Local Authority will take when children are missing.
- Promote the exchange of accurate and consistent data about children and young people who are missing from home.

It should be read in conjunction with the West Mercia Joint Protocol for Reporting Missing Children and Young People which can be found at: [West Mercia Joint Protocol for Reporting Missing Children and Young People](#)

2. Legal Framework

[Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#) (Department for Education, January 2014)

Regulation 13 (3) of the Fostering Regulations 2011 state:

The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written procedure to be followed if a child is missing from the foster parent's home.

Standard 5 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering (2011)

This sets out the requirements for a fostering agency to have a policy and procedures which seeks to minimise the risk of children and young people going missing and minimise the risk of harm if they go missing. [FOSTERING STANDARD 5 - Children Missing from Care](#)

This policy sets out for foster carers what they should do if a child or young person goes missing and what action they are expected to take, and it is compatible with the Local [Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)

3. Definitions

Missing from care: a looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be and their whereabouts are not known.

Away from placement without authorisation: a looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they should be, most commonly when they are accidentally or deliberately late home, or where their whereabouts are known and there are minimal risks to their safety and wellbeing. This is often referred to as **absent**.

There is a third definition which may apply to a small number of children and young people.

Absconded: When a child or young person is subject to a court order, such as a curfew or bail conditions and goes missing. In these circumstances the child or young person's social worker and the police should be informed immediately.

For the purposes of this policy a child or young person is defined as anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. With the exception of a former relevant child within the meaning of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; these young people continue to be the responsibility of the Local Authority up to the age of 21 (24yrs if in receipt of full time education) and may be living with their former foster carer under a Staying Put arrangement.

In the first instance children who are **truanting** from school should be dealt with as children missing from education unless there is concern that the child is believed to have suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm when an investigation as a child missing from care would be warranted.

4. Placements of Children and Young People

When children or young people are placed with foster carers it is important that foster carers are given all the information on that child and young person, this includes any history of going missing or being absent either from a previous placement or from home.

When there is a concern that a child or young person may go missing this should be discussed with the foster carers prior to placement and at the Placement Planning Meeting. It should be included in the individual child or young person's Safer Caring \Risk Assessment Plan which should also identify strategies for reducing or preventing young people going missing.

In completing this Plan consideration needs to be given to:

- the child or young's person view on the proposed placement
- previous history of going missing/being absent, including frequency and any patterns such as certain times, with certain people, or to certain places
- the degree of risk to the child if they go missing with reference to their age, vulnerability, capability, disability and mental capacity
- whether there is any external influences which may result in the child's removal from the fostering home without the consent of the Local Authority

Expectations of carers should be set out in the plan and this would include who they need to inform and any timescale for this. If the child is of an age and understanding they should be involved in the discussion and know what actions will be taken if they go missing or are absent.

Information about the child's and young person's family and network of friends where children and young people may go to should be shared with foster carers.

When children and young people go missing and there has been no previous history consideration should be given to a Management of Risk Meeting. If there is more than one missing episode, or there are concerns arising from the Return Interview or other sources, then a meeting should be held, and the Safer Care \Risk Assessment Plan should be updated.

When caring for any child or young person foster carers should be talking to children and young people, as age appropriate, about keeping themselves safe and what they should do when they find themselves in different situations. This can range from what they should do if they are going to be late returning, to the risks of meeting up with people they have "met" on the internet. This is what any good parent would do and should not be done in a negative or frightening way. Understanding risk and having strategies for managing it are part of growing up and we want our looked after children and young people to have those skills.

5. Deciding whether a child or young person is Missing or Absent

5.1 If a foster carer has concerns that a looked after child may be missing or absent, they should undertake the following basic measures to try to locate the child and young person if it is safe and appropriate to do so

- Search the house\outbuildings and vehicles
- Contact known friends and relatives where they think the child might be
- If possible, visits locations that the child is known to frequent while ensuring someone remains in the foster home in case the child returns
- The foster carer should also consider checking with the local Accident and Emergency department and the local police station as in some circumstances the child may have been arrested and refused to give their name or address to the police.

5.2 If these initial enquires are not sufficient to locate the child, the carer will need to decide whether they are missing or absent. When reaching this decision, the foster carer needs to take into consideration the Child and Young Person's Safer Caring\Risk Assessment and their own knowledge of the child and young person.

For example, if a child or young person is frequently late home from school because they are kicking a ball around with friends, a foster carer may allow more time for them to return before reporting them missing than a child or young person who has previously always returned on time. The foster carer should also think through the following:

- Has anything happen that may have upset the child or young person, for example family time being cancelled or a disagreement with the foster carers.
- The presentation of the child or young person, was the child or young person upset or distressed when last seen, have there been any recent changes in the child or young person's behaviour.
- The time that the child was last seen and by whom.
- Has the child or young person any medical issues which may increase the risk to them? For example if they are diabetic.
- Is the child or young person known to be vulnerable to exploitation of any kind?
- Has the child or young person previously self harmed or posed a risk to others.
- Are there concerns that the child and young person have issues with drugs or alcohol use?
- Is there any indication that the child is not expected to return within a reasonable time limit for example there are clothes and other personal items missing that they would not normally carry with them.

5.3 If the current whereabouts of the child are known or can be easily identified and they are not considered to be at risk then they are absent from their placement without authorisation and are not a missing person. There is a judgement to be made by carers.

5.4 If a child or young person who is absent does not return to placement or is not located, the assessed level of risk must eventually increase. The foster carer will need to make a judgement based on their knowledge of the child or young person and their Individual Safer Caring Policy when to contact the child's social worker or EDT if out of hours. The maximum time they should allow the child or young person to be absent is 3 hours, however they should not leave it that long if they have any concerns, consider that the child maybe in a situation which puts them at risk or there is a possibility of abduction. A decision will be taken on whether the child or young person should be reported as missing to the Police or agree a time to review.

5.5 An exception would be if the child in question is **twelve years of age or younger**, they should be reported as missing as their age is considered to be a high risk factor.

6. What to Do if a Child or Young Person is Missing

6.1 If the child is considered 'Missing', the foster carer must make a missing person report to the Police without delay. The foster carer must also report the missing incident to the child's social worker, their supervising social worker or the Emergency Duty Team. The following document may be helpful to gather information before reporting the child or young person missing: Please see the **Guidance for Parents/Carers for reporting your child as missing** document.

6.2 The Police are the lead agency for investigating and finding missing children. To assist the Police with their risk assessment it is important that foster carers are able to give detailed and accurate information about the child or young person. A recent photograph\ or a description of the young person will be required and details on what clothes they were last seen wearing. If the child or young person has a mobile phone the police will also need the number.

If possible, the carers will need to provide answers to the following questions:

- The circumstances of the absence.
- The age of the child or young person
- The maturity of the child or young person.
- Any physical or cognitive disability of the child or young person.
- Any continuing or urgent need for the child or young person to have medication or other medical treatment.
- Previous behaviour and history of the child or young person

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- Any danger posed by the child to themselves or others.
- General vulnerability of the child or young person.
- The child or young person's disposition towards drug/substance abuse.
- Whether the child or young person is perceived as running to, or running from someone or something.
- The risk of offending.
- The influence of peer groups, families or friends.
- Predatory influences on the child or young person. These may relate to others wanting to use the child or young person for crime, sex or drugs.
- Any known risk of abduction.

6.3 As part of reporting the child or young person as missing the foster carer will need to confirm that they have conducted a search of their home, any attempt they have made to contact the child or young person by phone and details of any family member or friend that they have contacted. The Police may undertake a more detailed search of the foster carers' home and the child or young person's bedroom.

6.4 If they have not already done so the foster carer must notify the child's social worker, their supervising social worker or EDT if it is out of office hours.

6.5 Communication. It is very important that foster carers keep in contact with the police and social worker\EDT. They should inform them if they have any contact with the child or young person or obtain any information from another source such as a family member or another child in the household. All parties should be updated immediately if the child or young person returns to the placement. Foster carers also need to be available so that they can be contacted by the Police and\or social worker.

7. What Happens Next

7.1 Based on the information that the foster carer has provided; the Police will make their own risk assessment on whether to classify as Medium or High and respond proportionately.

7.2 If a child or young person is missing for 72 hours a multi-agency strategy meeting will be held which will review the level of risk and formulate an action plan for the child or young person's safe recovery. This may happen sooner if the young person is identified as High Risk. The meeting will agree when they should reconvene to review the action plan if the child or young person has not been found or returned.

7.3 Consideration may be given to alert the public and it is important that the foster carer has a recent photograph.

8. Child or young person is located

8.1 It is the responsibility of the foster carer to inform the Police and the child's social worker\EDT if the child or young person returns to their home. If they are concerned that the child or young person may have been at risk or a victim of crime while missing they need to pass this information on. The Police will undertake a safe and well visit to the child or young person.

8.2 If the foster carers become aware of where the child or young person is, and it is safe to do so, they should collect the child or young person. Where there are concerns they should liaise with the child's social worker\EDT and the Police.

8.3 Worcestershire Children First have Children's Missing Officers who are based at the Family Front Door. They undertake Welfare Return Interviews (WRI) with children and young people who go missing from home or care. Welfare Return Interviews must be offered to all children and young people and completed within 72 hours of the child or young person being found.

8.4 If it is believed that it is in the child or young person's best interest their allocated social worker or a trusted adult may undertake this meeting. Please see the **A guide to your welfare return home interview** document.

9. Recording

It is important that foster carers record all the actions they take when a child or young person is absent. This should include who they spoke, the time line and what information they shared. They should inform supervising social worker as soon as possible even if the child or young person returns within a few hours.

10. Additional Information

Missing Intervention Meetings are held for any child or young people who have 3 missing episodes in a three month period. This is an opportunity to look at the factors that are causing young people to go missing. The meeting should formulate a multi-agency plan on how to reduce missing episodes and respond to them when they happen.

Multi Agency Criminal Exploitation (MACE). With some children and young people who go missing, there is concern that they may be at risk of abuse or criminal exploitation, and may also need to be subject to a MACE meeting. These are multi-agency meetings which focus on sharing information and intelligence to support, protect, disrupt and intervene where children and young people are being criminally exploited and need very specific targeted multi agency responses. These meetings are chaired by a Team Manager and

the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Practice lead and CSE Police based in the MASH must be invited to attend. This is part of Worcestershire's Get Safe initiative.