

1 December 2014**Agenda Item: 5**

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

CHILDREN WHO RUN AWAY OR GO MISSING FROM CARE

Purpose of the Report

1. The report provides the Sub-Committee with information regarding children who run away or go missing from care. An annual report with regard to children going missing from both home and care was presented to the Children and Young People's Committee on 14 July 2014 and is available as a Background Paper.
2. The report also seeks approval to bring an annual report to the Sub-Committee regarding children who run away or go missing from care.

Information and Advice

Background

3. Children who go missing from care remain a particularly vulnerable group of children and young people. They may come to harm in a variety of ways including through sexual exploitation as a number of high profile national reports have highlighted.
4. The governance of children missing from care (and home) is through a multi-agency steering group, which meets quarterly and reports to the Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB). There is also annual reporting to the Children and Young People's Committee and oversight by senior officers. In March 2014 a multi-agency audit of cases of young people who had been missing included an enhanced number of looked after children cases. The outcome, whilst allowing for areas for development, was relatively positive evidencing good multi-agency work and that good and adequate work led to positive outcomes for young people.

Data – key information

5. The key information available is that:
 - in common with national research children are more likely to go missing from care than from home.
 - the numbers of individual children going missing from care increased from 94 in 2012/13 to 124 in 2013/14. The total number of missing episodes recorded also

increased from 281 to 372. This is in contrast to missing from home numbers, which decreased. This LAC increase is potentially attributable to improvements in reporting and an ageing LAC population. This is being monitored during 2014/15.

- 76% of LAC children received a return interview in Quarter 2 July to September 2014/15; reflecting continued improvement in this area. 81% of these were completed in 72 hours, which is positive.
- 83% of multi-agency meetings are recorded as being held which is also an improving picture.
- 2013/14 data indicates that children are more likely to go missing from independent fostering and residential placements or if placed outside Nottinghamshire. This may be a reflection of the challenges that these young people present with, rather than necessarily a reflection about the quality of the placement.
- the reasons why children go missing from care are varied including relationship difficulties, boundaries, school based or drug or alcohol related issues. Social workers can work to support and address the issues if they know what the problem is.

National and Local Strategy and Partnerships

6. Strategically and operationally there is collaboration between a number of different agencies, as well as service areas within Nottinghamshire County Council. This includes the Children Missing Officer, the children's social care strategic lead, the placements service, looked after children's social workers and team managers, independent reviewing officers, LAC nurses, in-house fostering and residential services, the police, independent placement providers and colleagues from other local authorities where our children are placed out of county.
7. In January 2014 the Department for Education published revised 'Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care', which incorporated the Association of Chief Police Officers guidance (April 2013). As a result, the local NSCB inter-agency protocol *Children Who Go Missing from Home, Care or Education (2012)* was revised and published in October 2014. There is also a local strategy and action plan which reflects the guidance.
8. One of the most significant changes arising from the revised national documents is the introduction of new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' by the police as well as an amended 'away from placement without authorisation' category. The changes to the police definitions were implemented locally in early November 2014. It will be important for there to be a consistent approach to responding to children missing from care which promotes safeguarding. The creation and input of the police missing co-ordinators roles which have been permanently in post since October are already perceived to have improved communication.
9. An important consequence of the adoption of the new police definitions is that information about those deemed 'absent' will be shared manually as opposed to through the automated system that operates for those children deemed 'missing'. The timeliness of the manual sharing of information may be a challenge but will be monitored.

10. The Local Authority has also considered the Ofsted 'From a distance' report which has implications for children who go missing. It recognises that children who are placed at a distance from home are more vulnerable to going missing and to exploitation. The Local Authority placement strategy is to place children within the County and close to home where possible.

Current Service Provision

11. Operationally the Local Authority, with partner agencies, continues to respond robustly to children who are reported to the police as missing from care. The Local Authority is able to evidence this work through the multi-agency audit, comprehensive data collection, monitoring and tracking and analysis including through a multi-agency 'hot-spots' meeting.
12. The risk of children going missing or from child sexual exploitation is considered as part of the young person's risk assessment within their residential or fostering placement. Missing issues are very much on the agenda of independent reviewing officers (IROs) who chair the Looked After Review meeting and monitor and have oversight of the child's placement.
13. When looked after children are recorded as missing by the police, a series of actions follow including trying to locate the child and complete a 'safe and well check'. The information is shared with the Children Missing Officer who subsequently requests the relevant social worker to complete a return interview. This is a discussion with the young person as to why they have gone missing and to plan support to prevent or reduce further episodes. From early November, with the introduction of the new NSCB protocol, some of the police aspects of the process changed for those children deemed 'absent'. However, there continues to be scrutiny and support for the young person via their social worker.
14. Nationally there is a challenge in relation to information sharing when children placed out of their own local area go missing, as there is no automated process for the host police authority to liaise with the placing authority. The children missing officer is reliant on other parties informing him/her of the episode and therefore in order to maximise the flow of information he/she is advised of out of county placements and he/she then endeavours to make contact with key people in the other local authority and other agencies.
15. The missing children protocol and the importance of the issue of missing children and sexual exploitation is promoted through a number of different ways across agencies. Information is, for example, cascaded through to independent fostering agencies and private residential providers through the social care placements team and key expectations are written into their contracts.
16. In terms of training, the issue is raised at NSCB 'What's new in safeguarding events' NSCB child sexual exploitation courses and through Placement Service training events. Before March 2015 there will be four children missing from home and care training events, two of which will focus in detail on looked after children. All of this work is intended to support the policy and practice guidance and improve outcomes for children.

Key Priorities for 2014/15

17. Currently the views of young people are being sought in relation to the return interview process. This is through a paper questionnaire, the web based Survey Monkey and face-to-face interviews. Looked after young people have been consulted about the design of the questionnaire. As part of this, the viability of an ongoing method to gain young people's views will be considered as well as whether or not information could be extracted on a regular basis by means of the social care case audit process.
18. The 'hot spots' and multiple missing meetings will also continue to identify and respond to any looked after children that are going repeatedly missing. This will include identifying any particular children's homes or foster carers where there are particularly high instances of children going missing as this may reflect standards of practice and care.

Summary

19. The issues relating to children who go missing from care are considered in a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary way. Where children go missing from care they are responded to robustly by the people involved in their care. It is recommended that an annual report is brought to the Sub-Committee for scrutiny.

Other Options Considered

20. No other options have been considered.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

21. The issue of children going missing from care is relevant to the Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee.

Statutory and Policy Implications

22. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (Public Health only), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, service users, sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

RECOMMENDATION/S

That:

- 1) the information relating to children who run away or go missing from care be noted.
- 2) annual reports on children who run away or go missing from care be brought to the Sub-Committee.

Steve Edwards
Service Director, Children's Social Care

For any enquiries about this report please contact:

Terri Johnson
Service Manager Safeguarding (Strategic)
T: 0115 9773921
E: terri.johnson@nottscc.gov.uk

Constitutional Comments (LM 19/11/14)

23. The recommendations in the report fall with the terms of reference of the Corporate Parenting Sub Committee.

Financial Comments (KLA 19/11/14)

24. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Children who go missing from home or care: end of year report 2013/14 – report to Children and Young People’s Committee on 14 July 2014

Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care – Department for Education, January 2014

Children who go missing from home, care or education – Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board inter-agency protocol, October 2014

From a distance: looked after children living away from their home area – Ofsted, April 2014

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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