

INTER-AGENCY GUIDANCE
FOR RESPONDING TO MISSING CHILDREN

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1. **Purpose of Guidance**

Children go missing in a number of different circumstances. Whilst all missing children are vulnerable the response required will depend on a number of factors. The purpose of the guidance is to promote practice that will

- Reduce the number of children that go missing
- Ensure that children who go missing are appropriately supported

There is a significant difference between children that are missing and children who are not where they are supposed to be. Children may not return home at the time that they were expected, may go to places that they are not supposed to go or may go out without parental permission. Children in these circumstances are not missing. This guidance pre-supposes that agencies/families/carers will have made all reasonable attempts to establish the whereabouts of a child before identifying them as missing.

This guidance sets out the roles and responsibilities for agencies in Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City in relation to missing children, or those identified as being at risk of going missing. Although some agencies/staff groups have specific responsibilities for missing children all agencies that provide a service to children have a responsibility to work together when a child goes missing.

For further information in relation to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children please refer to the Web Pages of the Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board and the Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Board. These can be located at

www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/nscb (County)

www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/scb (City)

2. Context

This guidance has been drawn up taking into account the following

Working Together to Safeguard Children

Working Together to Safeguard Children identifies specific groups who will be particularly vulnerable if they go missing. These groups include

- Children about whom there are child protection concerns, particularly those that may be moved overseas to evade the involvement of agencies with child protection responsibilities
- Children who are subject to a protection plan
- Children missing education

The Outcomes Framework

The Outcomes Framework was developed by government to act as a basis for agreeing local priorities and planning local change. The framework shows the relationships between outcomes, aims, targets, indicators and inspection criteria. It is available at

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/files/F25F66D29D852A2D443C22771084BDE4.pdf

One of the inspection criteria in the Staying Safe outcome is that services are effective in identifying the identity and whereabouts of all children aged 0 – 16 in their area. One of the key tools that will assist in this is Contact Point, which is due to be implemented in 2009. Contact Point will be a national database that contains basic information about all children.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

The CAF is a standardised approach to conducting an assessment of a children with additional needs and deciding how those needs should be met. It can be used by practitioners across children's services in England.

The CAF will promote more effective, earlier identification of children with additional needs, particularly by staff based in universal services. It is intended to provide a simple process for a holistic assessment of a child. Practitioners will then be better placed to agree, with the child and family, about what support is appropriate.

The CAF is a tool that agencies may want to utilize when working with children who are missing, or are felt to be at risk of going missing

Local Priorities

The Children and Young People's Plan is a single, over-arching strategic document that identifies the area that agencies in a local area will focus on improving. One of the targets in the Nottingham City plan is

- Children and young people at risk of running away or going missing are supported to make safe alternative choices.

Both Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Board action plan identifies the need to have in place agreed multi-agency guidance for work with missing children.

3. The Role of The Police

The Police have a duty to investigate all missing persons reports to:

- establish whether the individual has been the victim of a crime
- establish whether the individual has suffered harm
- locate the individual before they suffer significant harm or before they cause harm to others

Nottinghamshire Police receives approximately 500 reports of missing people a month from other agencies or members of the public. A significant number of people reported missing are children and Nottinghamshire Police complies with statutory guidance by working in partnership with agencies through the mechanisms of both Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City Safeguarding Children's Boards

Nottinghamshire Police Missing Persons procedures have been developed in line with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) 2005 Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons. This defines the need for joint protocols between the police, health, social care and voluntary partners to promote effective and consistent risk assessment, reporting and response processes to missing persons reports.

4. Children who go missing from their family

Children who are missing from home may be at risk of harm as a consequence of their need for food and shelter or from the people with whom they come into contact. Risks can include physical harm, sexual exploitation, particularly prostitution, drug abuse, and involvement in a range of other criminal activities.

The primary consideration in identifying what action is required when a child goes missing from their family is the welfare of the child and their safe recovery. In the majority of cases a child/young person's family will share this motivation and will want to work with agencies to locate the child as soon as possible. For some children and young people this will not be the case. There are however some circumstances in which a child/young person's family may not be motivated to work with agencies to locate the child, or may actively undermine attempts to locate the child/young person. These include

- The relationship between a child and their family has broken down
- The child/young person has been harmed/exploited by their family.
- A young person who is at risk of a forced marriage

Children and young people in such circumstances are particularly vulnerable. It is vital that agencies work together to support them. This principle applies to the effort to locate the child/young person and the work undertaken when they have been located. There is specific guidance in relation to children at risk of sexual exploitation. This can be located in the Practice guidance section of the safeguarding boards WebPages. There is also specific guidance in relation to children at risk of forced marriage. For further guidance please see the inter-agency child protection procedures.

In all cases where a child is identified as missing (see section 1 above) the police should be notified. The amount of time that should elapse before a child goes missing will depend on an assessment of the child's vulnerability. This will take into account a range of factors such as the age of the child, whether the child has a disability, risk of sexual exploitation, risk of being unlawfully removed overseas, of drug or alcohol misuse, history of self harm. The risk assessment will also consider potential risks to the public.

School aged children should be reported to the Children Missing Education Officer (see section 8 below).

As indicated in the joint protocol re Children Missing from Public Care (see section 7 below) all children who go missing from public care will be reported to the police within 6 hours of them being identified as missing. All other children will be reported to the police no longer than 24 hours after they have been identified as being missing. In most cases the child will be reported as missing much sooner than 24 hours after being identified as having gone missing. Decisions made about the point at which a child should be reported missing to the police should be made in discussion with the child's parents. All such decisions should be based on an

assessment of the child's vulnerability, which takes into account issues such as the child's age, any disability contact with adults that may pose a risk to children etc.

Where a child is known to Children's Social Care a strategy discussion should take place in order to plan the enquiries that will need to be made and decide whether this should be a joint enquiry by the Police and Children's Social Care. The strategy discussion should include all agencies working with the child and family

Where a child is missing and not currently known to Children's Social Care, Police officers need to consider that Children's Social Care or other agencies may have relevant background information that may assist with a safe recovery.

A further strategy discussion will take place whenever a child is missing for a longer period, and certainly within a maximum of 7 days, in order to review actions to date to ensure that all possible steps are being taken to locate and return the child. Where a child is subject to a protection plan there is a requirement to convene a Review Child Protection Conference within the next seven days of the child being identified as missing as long as the child/young person has not returned.

Decisions to inform the media will be taken following discussions between the Police and Children's Social Care at a senior level (Inspector – Service Manager/Head of Service). Where a strategy is agreed, the Police will take a lead role in informing/advising the media.

Parents, Police, Social Worker and anyone else informed that the child is missing should be informed on the child's return. It is important to give the child the opportunity to talk about their experiences as well as to ascertain why they ran away.

Whenever a child goes missing the police will consider what additional support that the child and/or family may need. If the child is not known to Children's Social Care then it may be appropriate to involve them. A referral to Children's Social Care could be appropriate on the first occasion that a child goes missing. If a child goes missing on more than one occasion and Children's Social Care were not involved on the first occasion then the need to involve them will be re-evaluated on each subsequent occasion. If a child goes missing on 3 occasions the police will always liaise with Children's Social Care to discuss whether the threshold for the child becoming a child in need has been reached.

5. Children who go missing who may be at risk of harm

There are two broad categories of children that would come under this category

- Children and young people that do not have an allocated social worker
- Children and young people that have an allocated social worker, including those children that are subject to a protection plan

Children without an allocated social worker

This situation will arise where an agency/organisation is working with a child/young person and/or their family and they have concerns about the child that had either

- Not previously reached the threshold where a referral to Children's Social Care was felt necessary
- Been referred to Children's Social Care but the involvement of Children's Social Care has come to an end.

If the child/young person and their family go missing then the agency should review their assessment about the level of concern they have in relation to that child. This should be done in consultation with the agency's lead for child protection, if the agency has such a post. If, based on this review, the concern is felt to reach a point where the child may be at risk of significant harm then this should be referred to Children's Social Care. The guidance set out below in this section in relation to children that go missing who are the subject of enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 will then be followed.

If the agency's review considers that the risk of significant harm threshold has not been met then the agency should liaise with the child/young person's school to ensure that this matter is brought to the attention of the Local Authority Children Missing Education officer, see section 8 below.

Children with an allocated social worker

If a child/young person goes missing in these circumstances then the social worker should make enquiries with other agencies and ensure that the process set out in section 4 of this guidance is being followed. The team manager should ensure that the fact that the child has gone missing is reported to the police.

If a child/young person and their family goes missing, the child has an allocated social worker but is not at that point

- Subject to enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 and/or
- Subject to a protection plan

The social worker and their team manager should review the assessment of the child. The views of all other agencies involved with the family should be sought.

Following this

- If the conclusion reached is that the fact that the child/young person and their family are missing does not mean that the child is at risk of - harm this should

be communicated to all involved agencies. If the child is of statutory school age then the social worker should ensure that this information has been passed to the Local Authority Children Missing Education Officer.

- If the team manager concludes that the fact that the child/young person and their family are missing does mean that the child is at risk of significant harm enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 should commence.

Children who go missing who are the subject of enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989

If there is any difficulty in gaining access to the child, this must be tackled vigorously, with the help of other agencies where necessary. If access to a child is not gained, for whatever reason, the social worker should communicate with other involved agencies and contingency plans must be discussed and agreed with the team manager and recorded

There will be a strategy discussion in every case where Children's Social Care does not know the whereabouts of the child who is the subject of section 47 enquiries. The strategy discussion will be held in line with the requirements set out in the inter-agency child protection procedures. The strategy discussion will take into account relevant information held by all agencies that work with the child and/or other family members. It will consider the need for, and timing of, a strategy meeting.

If there is reason to believe that any person has information as to the whereabouts of the child, the team manager will consider the need to seek advice from Legal Services about whether to apply for a Court Order requiring this to be disclosed (Children Act 1989 Section 48(1)).

Where it is appropriate that specific premises are entered and searched for the purpose of furthering the enquiries the team manager will consider the need to:

- Ask for the Police to use their immediate powers in circumstances where this is warranted, - i.e. it is believed that there is an immediate risk of significant harm; or
- Ask Legal Services to apply direct to the Family Court for entry and search powers (Children Act 1989 Section 48(4))

If a child who is the subject of Section 47 enquiries (or subject to a child protection plan) goes missing by removal to an unknown address all agencies will work together and make every effort to locate the child. A strategy discussion will be held

- The strategy discussion should establish with the Police who will make enquiries of neighbours and other known contacts, and what other steps the Police may take.
- Where the child (ren) and parent(s)/carer(s) are believed to have moved to another area, the team manager should alert the service manager. When enquiries have been made and the child still cannot be located the team manager will ask the Service Head Safeguarding (City) Service

Head Safeguarding and Independent Review (County) to effect a Missing Child Notification. Identifying details and reasons will be required for internal and/or external circulation of such notifications.

If a team manager or other senior officer considers that more information or action is required to make or affect any of the decisions above, but cannot, in conjunction with the Police, see an available means of achieving that, advice should be sought from Legal Services.

In all cases, where there are difficulties gaining access to a child/or a child goes missing, the Children's Service Manager with line management responsibility for the case must be informed as soon as is practicable and in all cases within 24 hours.

Children who go missing who are subject to a child protection plan

The principles set out in the preceding section of this guidance all also apply to children missing who are the subject of a child protection plan.

The following additional measures also apply

- The team manager will ensure that all members of the core group are alerted to the fact that the child is missing as soon as is practicable, and in any event within 24 hours
- A Review Child Protection Conference within the next seven days as long as the child/young person remains missing

6. Asylum Seeking Families and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Asylum Seeking Families.

Asylum seeking children accompanied by their families may be more vulnerable to going missing following a negative decision on their immigration claim. Families who go missing with children will be reluctant to access Health, Education, Social Care, and Police for protection.

The UK Border Agency will liaise with Social Care prior to any action being taken with families and always prior to any removal action. There is also consultation with Police child protection officers. UKBA also has a Children's Champion office who examine whether removal is appropriate and, if so, that all appropriate actions are considered and work done before the family is removed.

Services have a professional responsibility to report families who go missing to the Police in the first instance.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children .

All Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire are registered on the National register for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (NRUC). Children who go missing must be reported to the register. Other Local Authorities are able to access this information and liaise with the primary Local Authority.

All Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who have been age assessed are Looked After children and are provided with services under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The guidance set out in chapter 7 of this document should therefore be followed if an unaccompanied asylum seeking children goes missing.

Nottingham City

Nottingham City Asylum and Reception team are designated as a Single Point of Contact in respect of unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC). They can be contacted on 0115 9159681/2/3/4. Further advice on matters concerning asylum seeking families who have gone missing can be obtained from the Asylum Seeker/Refugee Support Team in Children's Services (Tel: 0115 9150787 or 9157846)

7. Children Missing from Public Care

A joint protocol has been agreed between Nottinghamshire Police, Nottinghamshire Children's Social Care Department and Nottingham City Children's Services Department. It set out the responsibilities of each of these agencies when responding to situations when children in the care of a Local Authority go missing from Children's Homes or foster homes.

The protocol is based on a risk assessment model, which identifies the vulnerability of the child that has gone missing. It sets out the response required in situations where a child has been identified

- Unauthorised absence
- Missing
- Absconder

The protocol emphasises the importance of planning in reducing the likelihood of a child going missing and identifying the actions required should this happen, including those cases where a child goes missing repeatedly. The protocol also sets out what action should be taken when a child is located, including the process for conducting return interviews

All independent providers of residential care based in Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City are required to adhere to the joint protocol.

A full version of the protocol can be obtained on the Boards WebPages

8. Children Missing Education

Context

Any child or young person missing education is at risk of not achieving their educational potential and is placing their safety and welfare at risk.

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 placed a new duty on all local authorities in England and Wales for them to make arrangements to identify children missing education in their area. The duty came into force in England on 27th February 2007. The new duty applies to children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll, and who are not receiving a suitable education otherwise than being at school (for example, at home, privately, or in alternative provision).

The duty does not apply in relation to children who are registered at school who are not attending regularly, as it complements and reinforces existing duties for schools to monitor attendance

Nottinghamshire County Council and Nottingham City Council will meet their statutory duty by ensuring that children, who are deemed as missing education, or at risk of doing so, will be identified and tracked.

The role of other agencies

If a member of staff from any agency in Nottinghamshire works with, or receives information about, a child who is not on the roll of a school and is not receiving suitable education in any other setting/circumstance, they should bring this to the attention of the relevant Children Missing Education Officer

Contact Details

The Children Missing Education Officers can be contacted at: -

Nottinghamshire County Council, Meadow House, Littleworth, Mansfield, Notts NG18 2TA Tel. 01623 433321

Nottingham City Council, The Sandfield Centre, Sandfield Road, Lenton, Nottingham NG7 1QH Tel. 0115 9150863

Further guidance

Nottinghamshire County Council and Nottingham City Council have agreed policies and procedures in relation to this area of practice. Full details of these can be obtained on the Boards WebPages

9. Services for children and young people who have run away

There are a range of services offering support to young runaways throughout the City and the County. Evidence has shown that the majority of young runaways tend to remain close to their local area, so that they can access services that are known to them. When a young person is located the services set out below will be relevant.

There are a range of service providers that work with young people who are homeless. Information re the services that operate within the county has been placed on the NSCB WebPages

Services available throughout the County and the City

1: Council – Homeless Division

When a young person presents himself or herself as homeless at a District Council Office the protocol agreed between Nottinghamshire Children's Social Care and the district council will be followed. This sets out the roles and responsibilities of each agency in relation to homeless young people. In both Nottingham City and County the following procedures will be followed:-

Under 16 years of age

When a young person under the age of 16 presents themselves as homeless a referral will be triggered to Children's Social Care.

Over 16 years of age

- Every case is looked at individually and a full assessment is made to establish the reasons why the child has become homeless.
- Contact will be made with parent/carer to try to reunite the family, by mediation, if it is safe to do so.
- If the negotiation with the family fails and the young person still remains homeless, the District Council will then search for supported housing for them.

2: The Police

The Police have procedures and protocols in place for young people under the age of 18 who go missing.

The parent/carer or care home must report the young person as missing in order to trigger a response from the Police.

When the young person is identified the police will complete a missing person form, which includes the young person's details and is used for monitoring action taken during their absence.

After a young person is returned home the Police have an obligation to carry out a safe and well check. In order to follow this procedure the Police

have to physically see the child and talk to them about the reasons they decided to runaway in the first place. The discussion could lead to a referral to the Home and Away project for follow up support.

3: Supporting People

The Supporting People Partnership in Nottinghamshire brings together the County Council, District Councils, Primary Care Trusts and the Probation Service to direct housing related support services in the County.

Supporting People offer supported housing for young people over the age of 16 who are homeless

4: Non statutory Services

- **Home and Away Project**

The Home and Away project is aimed at 9-16 year olds. It is a partnership between the Police and the NSPCC.

The project works with young people who live at home with their families in the City and the Boroughs of Gedling, Broxtowe and Rushcliffe.

The project is aimed at 9-16 year olds who have recently run away from home and have been returned to their family.

Home and Away work to support the young person and their family in understanding and addressing the underlying issues that led to the young person running away in the hope that it will reduce the likelihood of the young person running away again.

City

- **Base 51 Under 18's Service**

BASE 51 is a charitable trust and a limited company. Base 51 Under 18's Service provides specialist support for young people who are 12-19 years old through a range of services. The service is part of the holistic ethos of BASE 51 and works with the multi-disciplinary team to provide an integrated service to young people.

Services and support available from the BASE 51 Under 18's Service include:

- Weekly individual sessions
- Group work opportunities
- Accreditation opportunities

- Housing and benefits advice (16 and 17 years)
- Support for young people excluded, or at risk of exclusion from school
- Support for young people who are running away from home, school or care
- General information and advice

10: Quality Assurance processes

The Quality Assurance sub-group of Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Board and Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board will consider information in relation to missing children on a quarterly basis. This will consist of the number of children reported missing to the police broken down by:

- Gender of the child
- Age of the child
- Locality that the child went missing from
- The type of accommodation the child went missing from

This information will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of inter-agency work. It will be supported by an agreed program of auditing individual cases that will be commissioned by the quality assurance sub-groups of each board.