



## PAN DORSET INTER-AGENCY SAFEGUARDING PROCEDURES

### CHAPTER 3

#### 3.10 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO RUN AWAY OR GO MISSING FROM HOME OR CARE

**Procedures Effective from:      December 2010**

**Review Date:                              2012**

***If you have any comments or queries about the pan-Dorset procedures please contact your agency representative on the Pan Dorset Policy and Procedures Group or notify the LSCB using the following email addresses:***

[info@dorsetlscb.co.uk](mailto:info@dorsetlscb.co.uk)

[info@bournemouth-poole-lscb.org.uk](mailto:info@bournemouth-poole-lscb.org.uk)

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## **Introduction**

This Protocol is important for the safeguarding of children and families across Dorset, or those using services in the area. It should be read and implemented, where necessary, by all practitioners and managers working with children or young people (hereafter referred to as 'children') who are at risk of going missing from home or care or who are already doing so. It does not cover children who go missing with family members.

The Protocol will be available to members of the public on the Dorset Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Bournemouth and Poole Local Safeguarding Children Board websites.

The Procedural sections are divided into children going missing from home and children going missing from care. Readers should only need to refer to the section appropriate to an individual child's situation.

It is intended that this protocol will assist in developing robust responses to children who go missing which mirror the good practice already established across Dorset with regards to children at risk of sexual exploitation and or any other abuse. It should be used to engage partner agencies in developing preventative services for children and young people who are at risk of going missing. It is vital all involved with missing children use their professional judgement and take positive action to deal with the issues raised.

It has been compiled jointly by Dorset County Council, Dorset Police, Bournemouth Borough Council and the Borough of Poole in consultation with other statutory and independent organisations. Dorset Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Bournemouth and Poole Local Safeguarding Children Board will be responsible for ensuring an annual review of the effectiveness of all aspects of the protocol.

The most effective practice comes from good information sharing, joint assessments of need and risk, joint planning, professional trust within the interagency network and joint action in partnership with families.

The Local Safeguarding Children Boards expects all agencies working with children or young people who are missing from home or care to implement this Protocol and ensure that all relevant staff are aware of it and how to use it.

## **Contact Information**

If you believe that a child is at immediate risk, this should be reported without delay to the police service; for emergencies use 999, or for urgent/immediate reporting 01202 222222 as well as making contact with Children's Services:

Bournemouth: 01202 458000

Poole: 01202 735046

Dorset: 01305 221000

Out of Hours Services: 01202 657279.

# 1. Background

- 1.1 Across Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset there were 1130<sup>1</sup> reports of missing people in 2009. Of these, 667 were reports of missing children, either from home or from care. This includes children who go missing on more than one occasion.
- 1.2 The Children's Society through its research has identified the following risk factors<sup>2</sup> that can precede a missing incident:
- Arguments and conflicts
  - Conflict within a placement
  - Poor family relationships
  - Physical and emotional abuse
  - Boundaries and control
  - Step parent issues
  - Domestic Violence

The immediate risks associated with going missing include:

- No means of support or legitimate income – leading to high risk activities
- Involvement in criminal activities
- Victim of abuse
- Victim of crime, for example through sexual assault and exploitation
- Alcohol/substance misuse
- Deterioration of physical and mental health
- Missing out on schooling and education
- Increased vulnerability

Longer-term risks include:

- Long-term drug dependency / alcohol dependency
- Crime
- Homelessness
- Disengagement from education
- Child sexual exploitation
- Poor physical and/or mental health

- 1.3 In July 2009 the Department of Children, Schools and Families issued Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care.

- 1.4 There is a duty on Local Authorities to Report against the National Indicator NI71 which monitors multi-agency response to the needs of missing children.

<sup>1</sup> Figures from Dorset Police

<sup>2</sup> Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK, The Children's Society, 1999.

## 2. Definitions

2.1 The following definitions apply to this protocol and relate to children who go, or have gone missing. The definition of running away is taken from the Social Exclusion Unit Young Runaways report (2002) and includes reference to young people who self-define running away as being forced to leave because, for example, they do not believe they have any alternative.

**Child:** A child or young person under the age of eighteen years.

**Missing:** is anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their well being, or otherwise, established. This will include children who run away.

**Child Looked After:** A child is looked after by the local authority if they are “in care” by reason of a court order, or if they are provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by agreement with their parents or with the child if they are aged 16 or more. A child in a private fostering arrangement is not looked after.

**Unauthorised absence from care:** Absent for a short period of time and after a careful and thorough risk assessment the absence does not raise concern for their immediate safety or that of the public. This period of absence should not **exceed 6 hours**.

**Absconded:** When a missing child is subject to a court order, such as curfew or bail conditions, police **must** be made aware of the order and the expiry date in order for the child to be classified as an absconder. If the expiry date of the order is not known, the child will be classified as a “missing person” **NOT** an absconder.

### **3. Legislation**

- 3.1 The legal parameters within which missing person enquires are conducted can be found in common law, international law and the provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). Some of the provisions of the ECHR have been given legal effect within the United Kingdom by virtue of the Human Rights Act 1998.
- 3.2 Data protection legislation places certain conditions on the 'processing' of information classed as personal data. Adherence to this Agreement will therefore ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and Data Protection policies. Data Protection legislation does not prevent the police and local authority working together to ensure the safe return of a missing child. Both organisations are registered for the purpose of protecting people and therefore for disclosing information for that purpose.
- 3.3 Statutory guidance on children who runaway and go missing from home or care (Department for Children, Schools and Families) 2009.
- 3.4 Working Together to safeguard children (HM Government, 2010) Supplementary guidance Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation.

## **4. Scope**

4.1 The protocol is designed for:

- all children living in the boundaries of Dorset, Poole and Bournemouth.
- children looked after by the Local Authority placed within Children's homes or foster homes (either Local Authority or independent) within the Local Authority boundaries.
- children looked after by the Local Authority who are subject to a care order and who are living with parents or relatives.

The Local Authority retains responsibility for children looked after who are placed outside the Local Authority boundaries. In these cases the Local Authority will require the placement provider to comply with these protocols as well as protocols local to their area.

Other Local Authorities placing children within the Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset boundary will be informed of this protocol.

4.2 Within this context, "Children Looked After" refers to children accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to Care Orders including Interim Care Orders, Section 31 and 38 Children Act 1989, and children who are otherwise provided with accommodation by Section 21 Children Act 1989.

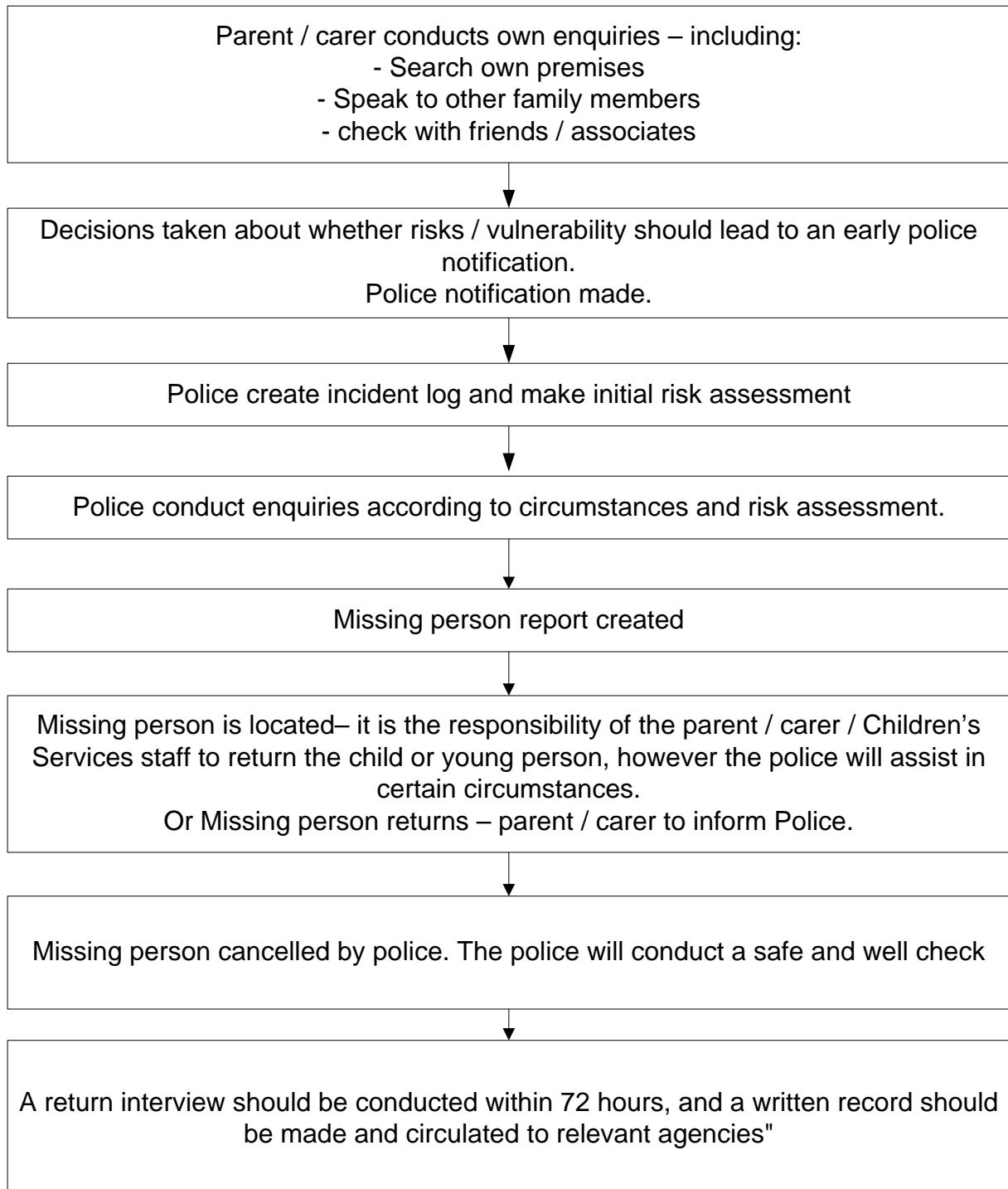
## **5. Principles**

- 5.1 This protocol cannot anticipate every situation. Anyone working with children in a professional capacity should use their judgement to take whatever action is deemed necessary including information sharing to protect and safeguard the child, based on an assessment of risk for each individual.
- 5.2 Our joint aim is to reduce the incidence of children going missing. Children who go missing may place themselves and others at risk and each missing episode is potentially serious. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or their experiences of care. Every 'missing' episode should attract proper attention from the professionals involved, who must collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on his/her return.
- 5.3 When a child does go missing our joint aim is to prevent that child suffering harm and to recover the child to safety as soon as possible. We do this by partnership working, information sharing, risk identification, risk assessment, risk management, action planning and performance management.
- 5.4 Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes. Interventions for Child Looked After must be informed by and reflected in the placement information and the care plan. Effective return interviews will inform practice and children's views and concerns will be taken seriously.
- 5.5 Interventions may be focused on the individual child, the child's home, or by targeting 'pull' factors in the community.
- 5.6 The Local Authority and the police will monitor compliance with the protocol and monitor outcomes jointly via Quarterly Performance Reports.

## 6. Procedures for a child missing from home

Please note section 7 covers procedures for a child missing from care.

### Flow chart for a child missing from home



## **6.1 Responsibility of parents/carers**

- 6.1.1 Parents and those with parental responsibility are expected to undertake the following basic measures to try to locate the missing child if it is considered safe to do so. Anyone else who has care of a child without parental responsibility should take all reasonable steps to locate the child and ascertain their safety. It is expected that the police will be informed *without delay* when a child goes missing. However, before a child is reported missing the following actions should be undertaken:
- search bedroom/ accommodation/outbuildings/ vehicles
  - contact known friends and relatives where child may be
  - visit locations that the child is known to frequent, if it is possible
- 6.1.2 A person who has care of a child without parental knowledge or agreement should also do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. In these circumstances, they should inform the police, Children's Services and the parents of the child's whereabouts and safety. If this is not complied with, the police should consider advice or warning under the Child Abduction Act 1984, if it is appropriate.
- 6.1.3 A person who 'takes or detains' a runaway under 16 years old without lawful authority may be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984.
- 6.1.4 Children under the age of 16 years are not legally considered as being able to live independently. For children over the age of 16 years, consideration should be given to their legal status, physical and emotional needs when making a judgement as to whether they can live independently.

## **6.2 All Agencies/Members of the public**

- 6.2.1 If it comes to the attention of any agency that a child is missing, they must advise the parent/carer to report this matter to the police. They also need to advise the parent of the agency's duty to ensure that the matter is reported to the police.

## **6.3 Role of the Police**

- 6.3.1 Upon receiving a report of a child being missing from home, the police will carry out enquiries (which are proportionate to the perceived risk) aimed at locating the child as soon as possible.
- 6.3.2 A risk assessment will be carried out for each individual on every separate occasion they are reported missing to the police. This Risk Assessment, usually conducted by the Initial Investigating Officer, and subsequently confirmed or revised by a supervising officer will form the basis for the subsequent investigation into the child's disappearance.
- 6.3.3 Children who have gone missing may come to the attention of the police in a variety of circumstances. Where the police locate a child who they believe may be missing, although not officially reported, assessment and enquiries based on the child's account of the circumstances will be made. These should include checks of National and Local Police Databases as well as enquiries at the home address. In the event that a missing child has not been reported by parents/carers this should trigger further enquiries and assessment by the Police and other relevant agencies in accordance with safeguarding procedures.

6.3.4 If enquiries identify risk factors at the home address safeguarding procedures will be implemented. If the Police decide not to return the child to the home address options should be discussed with Children's Services to identify suitable responsible adult(s) and/or accommodation. (Out of hours to be contacted after office hours). Police databases should also be checked.

## **6.4 Recording**

6.4.1 An incident log should be opened and a risk assessment conducted on all occasions when a child is reported to the police. The log should remain open until the missing person report is opened or the child has been located. A missing person report must be created by the investigating officer for all missing children.

6.4.2 Missing person reports should be submitted as soon as possible, as the submission of the report now triggers Police National Computer circulation.

## **6.5 Sharing Information**

6.5.1 The police will receive reports about children missing and record them in accordance with locally agreed police procedures.

6.5.2 It is acknowledged that for some children who go missing there are concerns about home circumstances and good sharing of information will ensure that assessments and decisions about the return of the child are well-informed.

6.5.3 The police will notify the relevant Children's Services by completing a C112. This will be sent to the Local Authority within 72 hours. The Children's Service will make an assessment of the information shared by the Safeguarding and Referral Unit by the C112 and decide what action they will take.

6.5.4 The relevant officer/supervisor or control room supervisor for the area will also notify the relevant manager in Children's Services if there is further information on a particular case or they have concerns that need further assessment.

## **6.6 Review of continued absence**

6.6.1 Throughout the missing episode, the police are responsible for ongoing enquiries, risk assessment and proportionate actions and reviews.

6.6.2 In the event of a continuing missing episode good communication and close co-operation is essential to ensure that any significant concerns are identified and appropriate safeguarding action is taken. When a child has been absent for a period of 48 hours the police should update the Local Authority. Any significant developments should be reported at least every 5 days, or earlier if deemed appropriate.

## **6.7 Return of the child**

6.7.1 It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to contact the police and confirm that the missing child has returned.

6.7.2 If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the parents or carers to arrange for the child's return. In exceptional circumstances, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the police may agree to requests from parents or carers to assist. The police should not unreasonably

withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport missions for vulnerable children.

- 6.7.3 Once the child has been located, the police will carry out a police 'safe and well check'. It will not be conducted over the telephone. The purpose is: to confirm that it is safe for the child to return home; to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them. This will lead to the police closing the missing person report, and the case being cancelled on the Police National Computer. This is NOT a return interview. The police will notify the Local Authority of the return of the child and any relevant information.
- 6.7.4 If it is apparent, on the return of the child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent then the police will instigate further enquiries. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence.
- 6.7.5 In such circumstances, the missing child's clothing, mobile phone and trace evidence from their body, fingernails or hair may be crucial. In cases of sexual abuse the child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the police. The Police should advise parents or carers that if they become aware of the location of a scene of any crime committed against the child, or of the location of any crucial evidence they must notify the police without delay. This will enable the police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.
- 6.7.6 Additionally, in matters of sexual exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, a referral must be made to the Local Authority in accordance with Local Safeguarding Procedures.

## **6.8 The Return Interview**

- 6.8.1 'Return Interview' is the term applied to the safety, needs and risk assessment carried out by Children's Services and/or their partners (not the police). It should include an exploration of the reason the child left their home, what risks they were exposed to whilst missing, and what can be done to reduce the risk of future missing episodes. The 'Return Interview' is distinct from the police 'Safe and Well' check.
- 6.8.2 If one or more of the following factors apply, a return interview should be undertaken (with the agreement of the child and parent as appropriate).
- The child has been missing for over 24 hours.
  - The child has been missing on two or more occasions in the last 3 months.
  - The child has been engaged (or is believed to have been engaged) in criminal activities during their absence.
  - The child has been hurt or harmed (or is believed to have been hurt or harmed) during their absence.
  - The child has known mental health issues.
  - The child is at a known risk of sexual exploitation or has had contact with persons posing a risk to children.
- 6.8.3 Appropriate Safeguarding procedures should be followed where there are safeguarding concerns.

- 6.8.4 If during a return interview a child discloses that a crime may have taken place, this should be referred to the police.
- 6.8.5 It is acknowledged that a returning child may well share different parts of their experience with different people. It is the responsibility of all agencies therefore, to attend to issues of immediate safety, future support and safeguarding needs, and information shared in a way that respects and safeguards children and young people.
- 6.8.6 The return interview should be conducted by a professional who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge. It may be helpful to arrange for someone independent from those currently working with the child to undertake the interview. Account should also be taken of any preference the child has for the conducting of the return interview. The interview should be conducted within 72 hours, or as soon as possible after this.
- 6.8.7 The purpose of the interview is:
- to better understand the reasons why the child went missing.
  - to explore the circumstances which led to the missing episode(s).
  - to inform future prevention strategies.
  - to inform any future missing person investigation should that child go missing again.
  - to learn of the activities, associates, risks and victimisation involved in the missing episode, and where possible to address those risks with appropriate and proactive strategies such as the use of the harbouring warning notices under the Child Abduction Act.
  - to identify and address any harm that the child has suffered – including harm that may have not already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check.
- 6.8.8 A written record should be made of the return interview, which should be circulated to relevant agencies.
- 6.8.9 The outcome of the return interview will inform whether a planning meeting involving family and professionals is needed

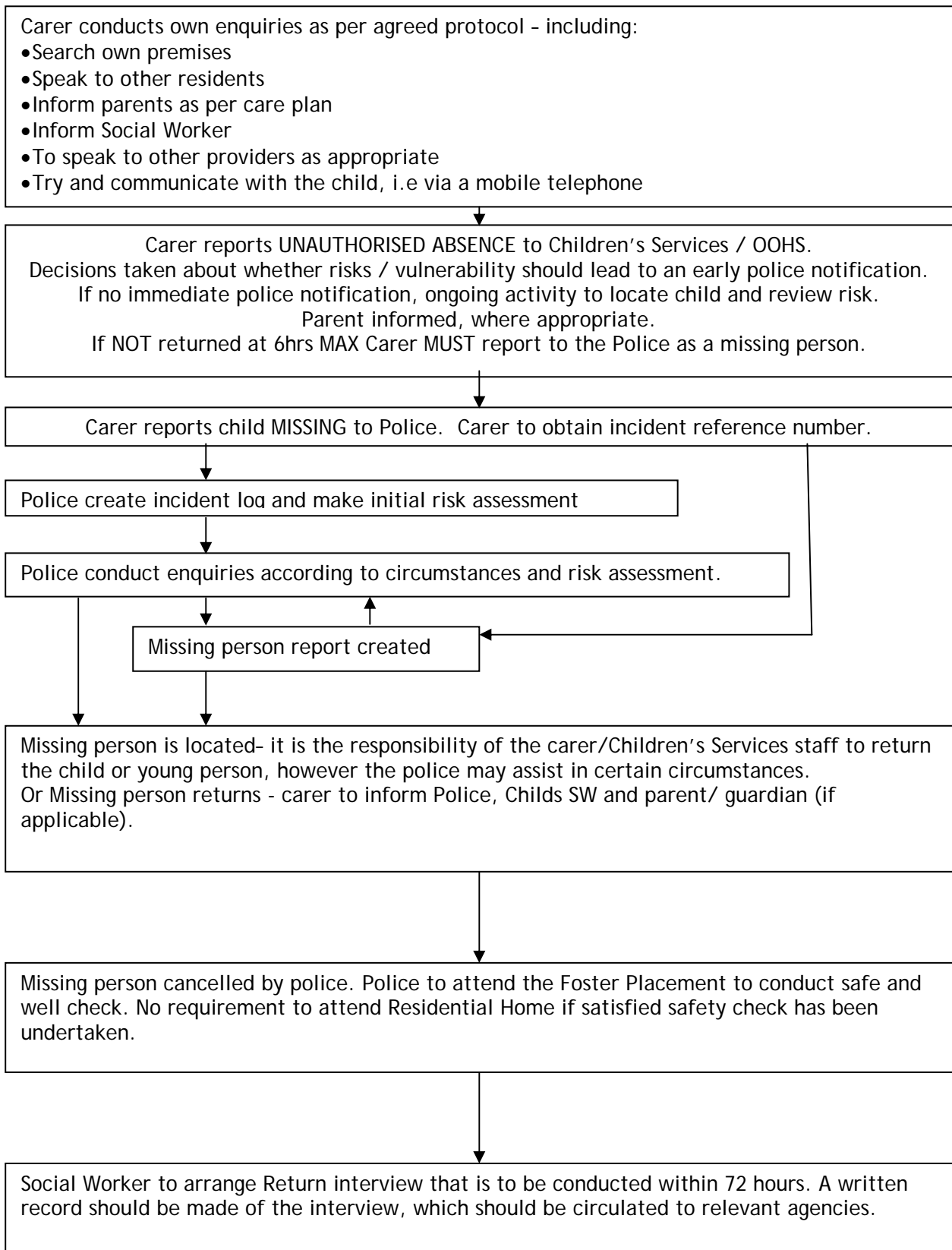
## **6.9 Planning to reduce risks**

- 6.9.1 The following are examples of reasons to initiate a planning meeting:
- Any case where the risks involved in even a single future missing episode are very high.
  - Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well being of the child.
- 6.9.2 The agency that convenes the meeting will be responsible for Chairing and minuting the meeting. The meeting MUST produce a clear Action Plan, including timescales for action, named lead professionals, risk/contingency planning and timescale for review.
- 6.9.3 The meeting should try to identify any 'push' or 'pull' factors in the case. Where 'pull' factors are identified it may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the missing child or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs.
- 6.9.4 The notes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited.

- 6.9.5 Review of the plans to reduce the risk of running away will continue until the child is no longer running away. At each meeting, or in the planning for meetings the level of risk will be considered to ensure that the level of meeting and the attendees is appropriate to address the concerns.
- 6.9.6 Some cases will meet the threshold for the monthly meetings of missing children causing greatest concern, chaired by the Police or other appropriate agency (see section 10).
- 6.9.7 If any one agency or professional has concerns for a child's wellbeing or safety then they may ask Children's Services to consider a strategy meeting (under safeguarding procedures) at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process can be initiated, or a referral to Children's Services can be made where relevant.

## 7. Procedures for a child looked after

### Flow chart for Child Looked After



## 7.1 On Admission to the placement

- 7.1.1 Each child looked after has a care plan based on a full assessment of the child's current and future needs, including potential risk to self or others. The care plan will therefore take account of any risk that the child may go missing in the future and any factors which may increase the risk to the child should they go missing. Children's carers should contribute to this assessment. All information should be included in the placement plan and in the child's care plan. As part of this assessment it may be appropriate for the Local Authority to consult with the police to share information that may be of relevance.
- 7.1.2 The care plan will remain in the possession of the Local Authority. It is not a public document. It is not envisaged that the police will need to view the care plan at any time. However, there may well be circumstances when it is necessary to involve the police in aspects of the care planning process to safeguard the child.
- 7.1.3 Carers and the Local Authority should have up-to-date photographs of children who are looked after. If a child goes missing it is vital to the safe recovery of the child that a recent photograph of the child is made available. The photograph must be a good likeness of the child. Most commonly the photograph will be used by local police officers to help them recognise the child when patrolling or when actively looking for the child at relevant locations. In very serious cases, where the child is believed to be at severe risk, the police and local authority may decide to use the photograph more widely and even release the photograph to national or local media.
- 7.1.4 The Local Authority will ensure that sufficient knowledge and information about the child is recorded to enable carers to have immediate access to the information they would need to make a referral to the police should the child go missing.
- 7.1.5 The residential unit manager/ foster carer should consider the most appropriate ways to hold the relevant information and whether it is necessary and appropriate to discuss the risks of going missing with the child.

## 7.2 If the Child Looked After goes missing.

- 7.2.1 Categories of absence have been agreed between the Police and Local Authority. If a Child is absent from care the Local Authority will decide which of the three categories the absence will fit; **unauthorised absence** (see section 7.3), **missing** (see section 7.4) **or absconding** (see section 7.5).
- 7.2.2 In deciding the category of absence, all staff must consider the circumstances of the child and their absence. This will include detailed consideration of:
- the circumstances of the absence.
  - the child's care plan.
  - the age of the child.
  - the maturity of the child.
  - any physical or cognitive disability of the child.
  - any continuing or urgent need for the child to have medication or other medical treatment.
  - the legal status of the child.
  - the child's previous behaviour/ history .
  - danger posed by the child to themselves or others.
  - general vulnerability of the child.

- the child's tendency to drug/substance abuse.
- whether the child is perceived as running to, or running from, someone or something.
- any circumstances within the placement, say with carers or other residents that may be relevant to the absence.
- the risk of offending.
- the influence of peer groups, families or friends.
- predatory influences on the child- may relate to others wanting to use the child for crime, sex or drugs.
- any known risk of abduction.
- environmental factors including weather, time of year, community events or tensions.

7.2.3 Children who are absent from their placement can be a matter of considerable concern to their carers and there is a need to locate them and ensure they are safe. The children can be thought of as being on a continuum, with there being little cause for concern at one end, and significant cause for concern at the other. Children who are a few minutes late home from school would not normally give rise to concerns.

**It is not helpful to consider any short absence as warranting a formal missing person report.**

7.2.4 However, at some point, depending upon the child and the circumstances, the child's absence will give rise to justifiable concern and require a formal missing person report to the police. Whilst there can be no substitute for a considered judgement, based on a sound assessment of the child and the circumstances, it is the purpose of this framework to assist carers to structure their thinking with regard to the three categories of absence. This decision should not be taken in isolation, residential staff should consult with the senior member on duty and foster carers should liaise with the child's social worker or Out of Hours Services (OOHS) staff. The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances be taken into account. If the Child is receiving support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service professionals, Educational Psychologists and so on, it may be advisable to discuss the case with them. However, if they are not readily available a decision must be made on the basis of the best available information. In cases of doubt it may also be appropriate to discuss the case with a local police supervisor.

7.2.5 Each case must be decided on merit and a formal missing person report to the police may be actioned earlier in some circumstances than in others. For a small number of vulnerable children it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. Normally this will have been previously agreed as part of the Care Plan.

7.2.6 If the child has gone missing before, this does not reduce the risk. In fact, children who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Furthermore, short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.

### 7.3 Unauthorised absence

- 7.3.1 Some children absent themselves for a short period and then return, with their whereabouts known to the carer. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose to test boundaries, or accidentally. Examples of situations where unauthorised absence will apply are:
- Running away after a dispute.
  - Failing to return on time.
  - Staying at a known location with a friend.
- 7.3.2 If the carer assesses that the child is at risk due to any factor/s known to the carer, then the child should be reported as missing without delay and the perceived risk communicated to the Police. If the assessment of the carer is that there is **no apparent risk** for their immediate safety but they are away from home without permission it is still important that staff/ carers record these incidences as unauthorised absences in the child's record. In addition to this staff/carers should always start a dated/timed record of their contacts, risk assessment and decisions throughout the episode from the point that they are aware of the child's absence, in case the level of risk changes and decisions are auditable.
- 7.3.3 **A period of 6 hours should normally be regarded as the absolute maximum for any child whose whereabouts are not known** and who cannot be contacted, to remain categorised as unauthorised absent, rather than being formally reported as missing; in many cases a shorter period will be appropriate. It will not be appropriate for any child whose whereabouts are not known and who cannot be contacted, to remain out overnight, without being formally reported as missing.
- 7.3.4 If the child's whereabouts are known or suspected, the Local Authority staff will decide whether to allow the child to remain at that location, albeit temporarily, or to arrange for their return. If the decision is to arrange their return and there is reason to believe that there may be public order difficulties, the police may be asked to assist. Police assistance in these circumstances does not mean that the child is categorised as missing. Each such occurrence needs to be evaluated based upon the factors mentioned in paragraph 7.2.2 and upon other information gleaned from the child, friends, family and associates.
- 7.3.5 It is expected that the first response by carers along with any relevant staff from the child's responsible authority, will be to take all steps a responsible parent would take, to try to locate the child and to make a careful assessment in accordance with paragraph 7.2.2.
- 7.3.6 **The responsibility for managing unauthorised absence lies with the carer and the Local Authority.** It is not the responsibility of the police to influence or determine the decision of whether a person is missing or unauthorised absence.
- 7.3.7 A clear assessment needs to be made by the carer in each individual case as to the length of time that elapses before a child who is unauthorised absent becomes categorised as missing. An unauthorised absence must be kept under regular review by the appropriate carer. It is important to consider whether the circumstances of the disappearance would now render the child at risk of harm, for example:
- the child requires medication at a set time (consider impact of not taking medication); or
  - weather conditions have severely deteriorated.

## 7.4 Missing

- 7.4.1 Missing is where the child's location or reason for absence is unknown and/or due to the circumstances, there is cause for concern for the child or potential danger to the public.
- 7.4.2 Reporting a young person missing involves providing detailed information to the police. It is important that the carer makes it clear to the police that they are reporting the child as **missing**. The carer should always ask for and record a police log reference number. This will cause the police to record the case as a Missing person on the command and control system. It will lead to a proactive police investigation managed locally by the police on the computer system. Moreover, the individual's details will be circulated nationwide via the Police National Computer System. (See also paragraph 7.5 if the child is an absconder).
- 7.4.3 When receiving a missing person report the police will tailor their response to the circumstances. If information is available to suggest a possible location of the missing child, and this gives rise to concerns about the safety of the child, the police response will be to immediately address those concerns, perhaps postponing the administrative recording duties for a short time in favour of safeguarding.
- 7.4.4 Premises Search:  
For a child reported missing from a residential home, the Police will ask for verification that a thorough premises search has been undertaken by family/carers/care staff.
- 7.4.5 Information provided by the carer will inform the risk assessment undertaken by the Police.
- 7.4.6 The carer and the Local Authority will provide information about risk factors in the case. After considering this and other information the police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will be **High, Medium or Standard**.

Risk	Definition
<b>High</b>	The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial 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 that the public is in danger.
<b>Medium</b>	The risk posed is likely to place the child in danger, or they are a threat to themselves or others.
<b>Standard</b>	There is no apparent risk of danger to either the child or the public. <i>No child aged 15 or under is ever considered to be at standard risk 16 and 17 year olds rarely could be classed as standard risk.</i>

- 7.4.7 Carers must also inform without delay:
- The social worker or the accountable team manager or the Out of Hours Services if outside of office hours.
  - The parents/those who have parental responsibility (unless indicated otherwise on the care plan).

## 7.5 Absconding

- 7.5.1 An absconder is a child who is absent from the placement without permission and who is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process (e.g. remands, curfews, tagging, conditions of residence, other bail conditions, PACE detention or ASBO's), or a secure order made in either civil or criminal proceedings. A child in this category must be reported to the police without delay.
- 7.5.2 If an absconder is under the age of 16 years, or if the absconding does not involve a power of arrest, the police will treat the case as BOTH a missing child case AND an absconder. This means that it will be necessary to provide detailed information to the police on the missing child form.
- 7.5.3 This will lead to a proactive police investigation managed locally by the police on the computer system. Moreover, the individual's details will be circulated nationwide via the Police National Computer system. When the child is traced however, it is likely that they will also be arrested or dealt with by the police in relation to any offence or breach. **It is essential however, that they are also viewed as a child in need of protection and safeguarding, and any risks they have been exposed to during their absence must be reviewed fully.**
- 7.5.4 If an absconder is aged 16 or over and is liable to arrest the police will treat them solely as an absconder and not as a missing child, unless there are grounds to suspect that factors other than the absconder's desire to evade justice are involved. If the police treat the case solely as one of absconding they will actively seek the absconder for arrest. Absconders in this category must also be reported to the police without delay.

## 7.6 Roles and Responsibilities

- 7.6.1 After reporting a child missing, Children's Services remain responsible for the child in their care. This responsibility is not absolved when the child has been reported missing to the police.
- 7.6.2 Once a child is reported missing to the police, the police will have primacy in respect of the investigation to trace the child.
- 7.6.3 Carers and the child's social worker will be responsible for liaising with the police, taking an active interest in the investigation and passing on all information, which may help to inform the investigation and assist in protecting the child while absent.
- 7.6.4 Carers and the child's social worker should continue to make appropriate enquiries with other residents or others who may be able to assist with the investigation unless they are requested not to do so by the police. All information gleaned from these enquiries should be passed to the police.
- 7.6.5 The police will normally conduct all physical enquiries away from the premises from which the child is absent.
- 7.6.6 In certain circumstances the police may need to revisit the duties initially performed by carers. When necessary they will do so in liaison with appropriate children's services staff and will do so sensitively, causing as little disruption as possible to the establishment and residents.

- 7.6.7 Throughout the process in this protocol, carers and social workers must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given. Police will likewise keep a record of all aspects of the investigation on the Missing Person Case Management System.
- 7.6.8 Media Strategy: In some cases, particularly where a missing child is felt to be especially vulnerable or where they have been missing for a long period of time, it may be necessary to publicise the case via the media. Such an approach is not routine but is usually a response to very serious concerns for the child's safety. Either carers or the police may suggest such an approach. Normally, such decisions to publicise will be jointly made, and where appropriate, in consultation with parents and Children's Services. However, for operational reasons primacy over such decisions must lie with the police.

The Police may also utilise the website facility of the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB) ([www.missingkids.co.uk](http://www.missingkids.co.uk)) to publicise the absence of the child.

- 7.6.9 If the case falls within the criteria for 'Child Rescue Alert' then any decision to publicise the case is likely to be urgent. It will be made in accordance with nationally agreed procedures by a police officer of the rank of Detective Superintendent.

## **7.7 Review of Continued Absence**

- 7.7.1 When a child has been absent for a period of 48 hours the social worker should inform the relevant senior manager as per the local authority protocols via the usual line management route.
- 7.7.2 Throughout the missing episode, carers, Children's Services and the police will continually review the case. After the Child has been missing for 5 days, **or earlier, if deemed appropriate**, an urgent planning meeting will be held. This will involve carers, police and Children's Services and any other professional involved in the care of the child.

The meeting will review:

- What action has been taken so far by the police and professionals.
- What action needs to be taken by the police and professionals.
- Decide whether the Child should return to the same placement when located.
- Consider any other relevant information.
- Minutes will be taken and distributed by the agency that has convened the meeting.

Further such reviews will take place at least monthly for the first 6 months and there after as deemed appropriate.

## **7.8 Return of the Child Looked After**

- 7.8.1 If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the Local Authority to arrange for the child's return.
- 7.8.2 However, there will be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the police may agree to requests from the Local Authority to assist. The police should not unreasonably withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport missions for vulnerable children. However, the police

will not agree to requests to provide escorts for children, which would unreasonably involve officers leaving their normal areas of patrol.

- 7.8.3 It is the responsibility of the carer to contact the police by telephone and to confirm when a missing child has returned. For children in residential placements, the police will accept confirmation from care professionals without the need for an officer to attend the home and visit the returnee. This will lead to the police closing the missing person investigation and the case being cancelled on the Police National Computer. **For children in foster placements, the police will verify the child's safe return in person.**
- 7.8.4 If it is apparent, upon the return of a child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent, the police must be called and asked to attend without delay. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence. In such circumstances, the child's clothing, mobile phone and trace evidence from their body, fingernails or hair may be crucial.

In cases of sexual abuse the child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the police.

- 7.8.5 If carers become aware of the location of the scene of any crime committed against the child, or of the location of any crucial evidence, they must notify the police without delay. This will enable the police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.
- 7.8.6 Additionally, in matters of sexual exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, referral must be made under the Local Safeguarding Children's Board Policy Guidance and Procedures.

**It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi-agency strategy meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.**

## **7.9 The Return Interview**

- 7.9.1 'Return Interview' is the term applied to the safety, needs and risk assessment carried out by statutory Children's Services and/or their partners. It should include an exploration of the reason the child left their placement, what risks they were exposed to whilst missing, and what can be done to reduce the risk of future missing episodes. The 'Return Interview' is distinct from the police 'Safe and Well' check.
- 7.9.2 A return interview should be offered following every instance where a child looked after goes missing.
- 7.9.3 Appropriate Safeguarding procedures should be followed where there are Safeguarding concerns. If during a return interview a child discloses that they have been abused, the child should be referred to Children's Services without delay.

- 7.9.4 If during a return interview a child discloses that a crime may have taken place, this should be referred to the police.
- 7.9.5 It is acknowledged that a returning child may well share different parts of their experience with different people. It is the responsibility of all agencies therefore, to attend to issues of immediate safety, future support and safeguarding needs, and information sharing in a way which respects and safeguards children and young people.
- 7.9.6 The return interview should be conducted by a professional who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge.

This may be the child's social worker, residential social worker, or another suitable professional. It may be helpful to arrange for someone independent of Children's Services to undertake the interview. The interview should only be conducted by the child's immediate carer if it would not otherwise take place. Account should also be taken of any preference the child has for the conducting of the return interview. The child's social worker is responsible for ensuring that the return interview takes place. The interview should be conducted within 72 hours, or as soon as possible after this.

- 7.9.7 The purpose of the return interview is;
- to better understand the reasons why the child went missing.
  - to explore the circumstances which led to the missing episode(s).
  - to inform future prevention strategies.
  - to inform any future missing person investigation should that child go missing again.
  - to learn of the activities, associates, risks and victimisation involved in the missing episode, and where possible to address those risks with appropriate and proactive strategies such as the use of the harbouring warning notices under the Child Abduction Act.
  - to identify and address any harm that the child has suffered – including harm that may have not already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check.
- 7.9.8 A written record should be made of the return interview, which should be signed off by the Team Manager. The record should be circulated to relevant agencies.
- 7.9.9 The outcome of the return interview will inform whether a meeting involving family and professionals is needed.

## **7.10 Planning to reduce risks**

- 7.10.1 The following are examples of reasons to initiate a planning meeting:
- Any case where the risks involved in even a single future missing episode are very high.
  - Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well being of the child.
- 7.10.2 The meeting should be minuted and MUST produce a clear Action Plan, including timescales for action, named lead professionals, risk/contingency planning and timescale for review.
- 7.10.3 The meeting should try to identify any 'push' or 'pull' factors in the case. Where 'pull' factors are identified it may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the missing child or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs.

- 7.10.4 Review of the plans to reduce the risk of running away will continue until the child is no longer running away. At each meeting, or in the planning for meetings the level of risk will be considered to ensure that the level of meeting and the attendees is appropriate to address the concerns.
- 7.10.5 The notes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited.
- 7.10.6 In cases of a child going missing from an out-of-authority placement the responsibility for arranging the meeting lies with the local authority responsible for the child. They will involve the relevant organisations from the host authority, to determine action, and to ensure change.
- 7.10.7 When a child who has a history of going missing is moved to an out-of-authority placement, the host authority should be informed of the risk, and as part of the placement agreement, appropriate details should be shared to support the local authority to manage the risks to inform care planning for the individual child.

## **8. The role of the Out of Hours Services**

- 8.1 The OOHS provides emergency services when the Local Authority Children's Services Offices are shut, overnight, at weekends and bank Holidays. The OOHS will
- assist Police in work to assess risks to young people by accessing children's services records,
  - take part in discussions and risk assessment of where a child or young person who is found should be returned to, and in some cases OOHS may need to find appropriate short-term accommodation for them.
  - play a part in the assessment of the welfare of a child or young person found out of hours.
- 8.2 The first point of reference for Foster Carers/Residential Homes outside of office hours should be the OOHS Services. There needs to be a discussion in respect of the unauthorised absence regarding the risks and vulnerability of the child and a decision taken whether to report to the police as a missing child. If there is no immediate police notification there should be ongoing activity to locate the child and review the risks. If the child has not returned within a maximum of 6 hours the carer MUST report to the police as a missing person.
- 8.3 The OOHS has a particular role in working with carers of children who are looked after when they go missing.
- 8.4 Where emergency accommodation is used for a child or young person, OOHS will use foster carers or residential placements in preference to B&B accommodation and no child aged under 16 will be placed in B&B unaccompanied.
- 8.5 Without prejudice to the welfare of any child, the Local Authority will support the police in taking appropriate action against those who commit crimes against children and/or involve children in their offending behaviour.

## **9. Police Powers**

- 9.1 The police have significant powers to safeguard vulnerable children. These include powers to enter premises to preserve life. Additional Police powers can be obtained through the Court with the use of warrants.
- 9.2 If a missing child is found or known to have been in the company of another person during any missing period and a criminal offence has been committed positive steps will be taken against any perpetrators. Examples of offences are child abuse, sexual offence, drug offence, assault, aid, abet, counsel or procuring child to commit an offence. The primary concern is always the safety of the child and also to hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions and deal with them appropriately.
- 9.3 It is recognised that children who have been the victim of a serious offence may not always see themselves as victims or be willing to assist in the investigation, particularly in the early stages. Likewise those whom others have used for criminal purposes may not be willing to assist the police. A complaint from a victim is not required to make an arrest. Usually reasonable suspicion is enough to arrest. When such an offence has occurred and a power of arrest exists, the offender should normally be arrested. An officer should be prepared to justify a decision not to arrest in these circumstances.

## **10. Prevention Strategy**

- 10.1 The LSCBs expect all agencies and professionals working with children who are missing from home or care, or at risk of being missing from home or care, to implement this protocol, and ensure that all staff are aware of it and how to use it. It should be considered by professionals and agencies in all new and existing contacts with children. Together we will take steps to raise awareness, ensure improved responses and practice thereby delivering better outcomes for children.
- 10.2 It is intended that this protocol will assist in developing robust responses to children who go missing, which mirror good practice already established across Dorset. It should be used to engage partner agencies in developing preventative services for children and young people who are at risk of going missing.
- 10.3 The Local Authority and police will monitor the missing episodes of all children. This will be presented in an annual report to the LSCB. Good practice would indicate that this should be a standing item on the agenda of the LSCB Executive Board (Working Together 2010).
- 10.4 Dorset Police and the Local Authority will operate an escalating system of interventions to reduce the likelihood of a child repeatedly going missing. Strategically, the meeting cycle shown below operates across the three pan-Dorset authorities, to maximise prevention opportunities and monitor multi-agency trends of children causing concern.
- 10.5 LSCBs will undertake a local needs analysis to identify specific local prevention measures to support the working protocol. Local Safeguarding Children Boards are charged with ensuring children and young people 'stay safe from harm' (Children Act (2004) Section 11.)

- 10.6 The Local Authority and police will monitor the missing episodes of all children. This will be presented in a quarterly performance report to the LSCB.
- 10.7 Dorset Police and the Local Authority will operate an escalating system of interventions to reduce the likelihood of a child repeatedly going missing. Strategically, the meeting cycle shown below operates across the three pan-Dorset authorities, to maximise prevention opportunities and monitor multi-agency trends of children causing concern.

