

Missing Persons

This policy will seek to give guidance on dealing with a situation when a child is missing. The reasons for a child running away/going missing will vary from situation to situation, and cannot be isolated from their home circumstances or experience of care. All children missing from Hampshire's care are automatically a cause for concern. However, the circumstances in which the child or young person is missing and their individual needs determines if and when they are reported missing to the Police.

A child will be defined as missing if:

- Their location and reason for absence is unknown and there is concern for the young person because of their vulnerability.
- The child's whereabouts are known or suspected and there is extreme concern for their welfare.
- There is potential danger to the public, in which case the Police should be informed immediately.

Some children absent themselves for a short period then return, e.g. staying out longer than agreed either intentionally or accidentally, and may be testing out to establish the boundaries of acceptable behaviour or to show their disagreement with aspects of their placement. This type of boundary testing may be considered within the norm of teenage behaviour and would not necessarily be considered a risk. This should initially be reported to the child's Social Worker (or Out of Hours service outside of office hours) and the risk assessed as to if and when a report to the Police may be necessary. A more general response and work with the child may be more appropriate in this situation and should be discussed with the child's Social Worker and foster carer/s' Family Placement Social Worker.

Principles

- The common aim for all professionals, including foster carers, working with a child is to prevent and/or reduce the incidences of the child going missing.
- When a child goes missing the joint aim is to prevent the child suffering harm and recover the child to safety as soon as possible.
- Foster carers and those working with the child should actively work towards addressing repeat missing episodes. The fact that a child may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk. Those children may be more vulnerable particularly if enticed away from their placement by activities that they see as exciting, or by predatory influences. Missing children are vulnerable to exploitation on a number of levels.

- Reasons for missing episodes should be considered and recorded in the placement information and used to inform ongoing work with the child.
- The child's views must be taken seriously.

Expectations

- Foster carers will give children in placement clear guidelines of their expectations of knowing the child's whereabouts at all times. This will need to take into account the child's age and level of understanding.
- If a carer, Social Worker or any other professional has reason to suspect that a child may go missing an assessment should be undertaken as part of the Care Plan to assess the potential risk of the child going missing, taking into account their age and level of understanding. Any actions agreed from the assessment should be recorded in the Placement Plan.
- Foster carers are expected to take active steps to try to dissuade a young person from running away where at all possible. This may involve blocking the doorway where safe to do so, while attempting to reason with the child. Any steps taken should not put the child or themselves at risk. All attempts should be recorded by the foster carer.
- Foster carers should inform the child's Social Worker (the Out of Hours Service evenings, weekends and Bank Holidays) when a child goes missing. They will then advise on the process for contacting the Police and who should do this.
- The Police will decide the level of risk attributed to the child missing, but this may change at any time, e.g. if further information becomes available. Foster carers must pass on any new information and keep the Police and Department updated at all times.
- Before reporting a child as missing foster carers are expected to take all reasonable steps to locate the child or ascertain their safety e.g. search their home, contact friends and family or other places the young person might have gone. The Police should be informed of the outcomes of any contacts made.
- Foster carers may decide to be more proactive in searching for the child, but should never attempt to coerce the child in returning against their will or if they are thought to be staying with someone who may use force to prevent the child returning . In this situation the child's Social Worker and Police should be informed.
- Foster carers must keep a record of all actions they have taken after the child has gone missing, e.g. who they have spoken to and contacted. A copy of this record should be given to the child's Social Worker.

If a young person remains missing or is reported as missing 3 times within 90 days or where there are concerns about the risks of violence, known associates who pose a risk etc, a High Risk strategy meeting will be held, which foster carers should be invited to attend, to consider what else can be done to protect the child.

Reporting a child as missing

The following information will be needed:

- A description of the child and what they were wearing, and personal details e.g. name, DOB, legal status
- Details of when last seen and with whom
- Recent photograph
- Family address and next of kin
- Friends contact details and addresses
- Any previous history of going missing
- Circumstances around the child's absence and any particular vulnerability
- Child's mobile phone number – if they have one

Planning for Return

It is important that once found the child feels welcomed back to their placement and are not worried about being penalised by their carers for going missing. Some children may have been missing for some time and it is important that foster carers offer something to eat, a chance to clean up and have a sleep, and a chance to talk. The exception would be if a young person is suspected of being the victim or perpetrator of a crime and where such actions might destroy forensic evidence. The child should be seen by a Social Worker within 72 hours of their return to discuss the reasons for going missing, any concerns or worries they may have, where they were and with whom, anything that could be done to help prevent future running away. A children's review meeting may be convened following the return interview to consider future support.