A summary of government guidance on children who run away or go missing from local authority care

For care workers and foster carers
This summary has been developed by the government for care workers and foster carers and is an overview of the full statutory guidance published in July 2009 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families entitled Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care.

Although many of the processes in place for children who run away from home are similar, this summary only applies to practitioners who work specifically with young people who run away from local authority care.

The new guidance helps local authorities implement a new government requirement that statutory agencies work together better to support children and young people who go missing or run away from both home and local authority care.

This booklet has been developed to complement local multi-agency protocols. If you are not already familiar with them they will be available from your local authority.

More information about the processes outlined in this document can be found in the full government guidance which can be found at: www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/safeguardingchildren/youngrunaways/youngrunaways/
Why has the government published this new guidance?
A lot has changed in the past decade in the way we work to support and safeguard children and young people. There is now a much greater focus on ensuring that all children are happy, healthy and safe and that they fulfil their potential and make a positive contribution to society. To do this, all those who work with children and young people work in a much more joined-up way and this new guidance reflects that, and helps to ensure that everybody knows what their responsibilities are when a child or young person runs away or goes missing.

Why do young people run away?
Young people run away from home or care for a variety of reasons but when they do it usually means that something in their life isn’t right. They are usually unhappy; they might be unhealthy, and they could end up spending time with adults who are seeking to exploit them in some way, or are on the streets and won’t be safe.

What’s different about the new guidance?
Most of the changes in this guidance simply reflect the way we now work together better but there are a few things that are new. For example there is now much clearer guidance about what needs to happen when children run away or go missing from their family homes, as opposed to the care of local authorities. For those working with children who are looked after, there is also a renewed emphasis on making sure children and young people are offered the chance to talk about the reasons why they decided to run away with somebody they perceive as independent, and who is specially trained to conduct these interviews. These are known as ‘Return Interviews’.

What do you mean by the terms ‘runaway’ and ‘missing’ exactly?
The terms ‘young runaway’ and ‘missing’ refer to children and young people up to the age of 18 who have run away from their home or care placement, have been forced to leave, or whose whereabouts is unknown. Your local protocols will provide you with more detailed information about definitions.

Unauthorised absence
When a child or young person has failed to return to their placement but you know, or have a good idea about where they are they should not automatically be considered as missing. At this stage they should be considered as absent without authorisation, often referred to as Unauthorised Absence. Although these young people are not missing there are important steps to take to confirm their whereabouts and return them to a safe care arrangement. Your local procedures and/or protocols will outline the actions and expectations of carers in these circumstances but new government guidance states that you should only report a young person in your care to the police when they are actually missing and not when they are absent without authorisation.
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What are local protocols and where can I get them?

Your local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols, which will sometimes simply be known as missing from care protocols or processes, will provide you with practical information about what you should do if a young person goes missing from your care.

They will have been developed and agreed by your local authority, the police and other any organisations in your area that support young people who run away or go missing.

These processes and protocols will be specific to your local area but will have been developed to meet the government’s requirements and should be reviewed at least every two years.

This summary provides you with more general information which can be applied to all areas across the country.

Your local protocols should cover the following:

- a clear definition of ‘unauthorised absence’ and ‘missing’;
- details of when you should inform the emergency duty team and your managers that a child in your care is missing;
- in what circumstances you should make missing reports to the police;
- details of when and who should carry out return interviews;
- how the information obtained during the return interview and any further assessment should be used to update Care Plans and Placement Information Records (PIRs);
- how and when information should be shared between team managers, social workers, police, parents and other agencies; and
- processes for reviewing actions taken.

If you think your local area does not have a protocol in place for runaway and missing children then you should refer them to the detailed government guidance which contains further information and example case studies, the link for this can be found on page 2 of this document.

What should I do if a child in my care runs away?

Your local protocols will outline what actions and expectations are made of you in the event that a child or young person in your care goes missing or runs away.

If you are caring for a child or young person placed with you by a local authority other than your home authority it will be important to understand the expectations of you as a carer by both the home and host authority, and if necessary discuss any duplication or inconsistencies as part of the child’s placement plan.

It is important that you are familiar with your local protocols and procedures and in particular are clear as to when and who you should inform if a child in your care is missing. This will include the responsible social worker or other local authority representative, and the police.

As the carer you are likely to have the most recent and relevant information to inform any risk assessment and/or decision to refer a missing child to the police. Your responsibilities in relation to this will be outlined in your local protocol or in your service level agreement/commissioning contract.

If it becomes necessary to refer a missing child to the police it will probably be necessary to provide the police with a recent picture of the child or young person and to provide details about their appearance so these issues should be considered in any prevention and or action planning.
“I’ve run away more than 50 times, first when I was nine, I remember I just wanted to hide from it all”
Ayesha, 14, Surrey

Some areas will have a specialist project which helps locate and support young runaways and vulnerable young people. If this is the case in your area further details of how and when they should become involved will also be explained in your local protocol.

What will happen next?

Police ‘Safe and Well Checks’
When the young person returns home or is found the police will usually carry out something called a ‘Safe and Well Check’. These short interviews are always carried out by police officers. The purpose is to check for any indications that the young person has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against them.

Return Interviews
Regardless of whether a police check has been carried out when a young person in your care returns from a missing episode it will be very important that they are offered a Return Interview. In some areas these interviews are known as welfare interviews or de-briefs. Return Interviews are different from police checks as they are more concerned with finding out why the young person ran away and their welfare more generally. Sometimes it takes a while to really find out what the problem is but we know that when Return Interviews are conducted thoroughly they can be very effective in identifying the causes which can then be addressed in the day to day care of the child or young person and in their longer term care planning.

Government guidance states that Return Interviews are usually best carried out by an independent person who has been trained to conduct them, and it is good practice for these interviews to take place within 72 hours of the young person being located or returning.

Many young people say they prefer to speak to somebody different from their usual foster carer, care staff or even their social worker about the reasons why they decided to run away, so you should not feel that this is a judgement on the care you provide. In some areas specialist projects often run by the voluntary sector carry out these interviews.

Your local protocols will provide more detailed information about who should carry out the Return Interviews and how information obtained from them will be shared.

Updating Care Plans and Placement Information Records
When a child or young person goes missing their care plan and placement information record should be updated with strategies to minimise the chances of them going missing again. Statutory reviews provide an opportunity to discuss your concerns with the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and running away should be on the agenda if a child or young person repeatedly runs away or goes missing.

Simply moving the young person to another placement is not an adequate response to their going missing. All staff must work to identify the reasons for the young person going missing and devise a plan to address these issues. Any change of placement must be agreed as part of the young person’s Care Plan or Pathway Plan. It is particularly inappropriate to consider a change of placement when the reasons for the young person going missing lie outside the placement.
What should I do if the young person keeps running away?

Multi-Agency Risk Management Meeting

Your local protocols will contain specific information on how to escalate the issue if a child in your care repeatedly runs away or has been missing for a long period of time.

In most cases a multi-agency risk management meeting will need to be arranged involving the carer and representatives from the police, children’s social care, the placement provider and other children’s services that have, or may have a role in locating/returning the young person or working to prevent them running away again. Consideration should be given to inviting the parent of the young person especially where they have sole or shared parental responsibility with the local authority and where there is a regular contact plan in place.

The purpose of these meetings will be to agree a strategy which prevents the young person from running away and deals with the reasons why they keep running away. Where the young person is still missing the meeting will agree a multi-agency action plan to locate and return the child as soon as possible.

If the young person returns prior to the meeting being held consideration should be given to carrying on with the meeting and inviting the young person to attend. The purpose then would be to identify what support the young person and carer can be given to prevent any further instances of running away.

These meetings will be particularly important when groups of young people run away together, are involved in substance misuse, or there are concerns that they are being sexually exploited.

A record of these meetings should be kept which outlines agreed actions with timescales and responsible persons recorded for each. All parties should retain a copy of this document.

What happens if the young person is spending time with an inappropriate person?

Your local protocols should give you information about what to do when you are concerned that a young person is spending time with an inappropriate adult but it is very likely that a multi-agency meeting will need to be arranged to agree how best to manage this situation.

Many police forces are successfully using legal powers under the Children Act 1989 and Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act to tackle instances where a young person runs away and is found with an inappropriate person or someone who encourages them to stay away from their home.

Local authorities who hold parental responsibility for the child or young person may consider whether to send a letter of non-agreement. This is a written statement by the local authority that the young person is a looked-after child, that the local authority does not consent to his/her remaining away from the placement, and that if he/she remains in the care of the person in question, legal action will be taken.

Both approaches have been very effective when used with young people who are thought to be at risk of sexual exploitation.
“If have a good reason to run away nothing will stop me, but if I feel bad as have good relationship with staff and don’t want to upset or distress them, this makes me contact them and come back sooner as I know they care and are worried.”

Gracie, 13, London

Will Ofsted ask about run away and missing children during inspection?

Ofsted inspect residential children’s care homes and fostering services against the relevant regulations taking into account the National Minimum Standards (NMS).

The National Minimum Standards state that care homes and foster care services should have processes in place to support young people who go missing or run away. Ofsted will inspect to check that this is the case. They may also ask to look at records kept and individual care plans to see that action is being taken to try and prevent young people from running away, where this is an issue.

In April 2009 Ofsted introduced inspections of safeguarding and looked-after children’s services. Local authority’s arrangements for identifying and responding to missing children and young people will be inspected as part of these inspections.

What happens to the information I give to my managers and the local authority?

You should keep thorough records about the young people in your care who are absent without authorisation and who go missing. This information should then be made available on request to:

- your senior managers within the fostering service or children’s home;
- managers in the local authority that placed the child;
- social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers;
- Ofsted inspectors; and
- your area might have a dedicated runaway’s project. If this is the case, there may also be an agreement about what information should be shared with them.

The information you provide will be used by the local authority to monitor patterns of running away across the area so that funding and support services can be properly targeted.