

## **MISSING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: UPDATE**

### **Summary**

1. The Head of Safeguarding, Children's Services has been invited to the meeting to update Members on developments in relation to Missing Children and Young People.

### **Background**

2. On 12 March 2015, the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel discussed Children Missing from Care. Members agreed that they would wish to hold a fuller discussion at a future meeting.

### **Purpose of this Meeting**

3. The purpose of this report is:

- To provide the Overview & Scrutiny Panel with information about Worcestershire's children who go missing, in particular those children who go missing from care, and those children who go missing who may be at risk of child sexual exploitation
- To advise the Overview & Scrutiny Panel of the new arrangements to ensure children who go missing have the opportunity for an interview with an independent person within 72 hours of being found
- To ensure that the Overview & Scrutiny Panel has opportunity to scrutinise the refreshed West Mercia Joint Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Protocol (2015)

### **Executive Summary**

4. There are relatively small numbers of children who go missing in Worcestershire, although there is a larger number who are 'absent' without the permission of their parent or carer for short periods of time.

5. Of the children who are reported as missing, there is no correlation or pattern emerging currently linked with any organised child sexual exploitation. There were 3 young people who went missing in 2014/15 where a link was made with a risk of child sexual exploitation and appropriate action has been taken to safeguard them.

6. The new West Mercia Joint Protocol takes account of recent government guidance in respect of working with children who are absent and missing, and is underpinned by the Care Planning Regulations and specific guidance to local authorities in respect of their duties to children who go missing from care.

7. In line with government guidance, Worcestershire has

## Background Information

## Children who go Missing in Worcestershire

commissioned an independent voluntary organisation-NYAS- to undertake Return Interviews from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015.

8. There is a shared dataset between West Mercia Police and Worcestershire Children's Services to track children who are reported as missing and a system (Compact) to ensure that Children's Social Care are informed about all missing children so that appropriate and proportionate action is taken to make sure they are safeguarded when required.

9. Data is cross-referenced with data about children who may be at risk of child sexual exploitation. This is in its early stages and will form part of the CSE Strategy to ensure any patterns are responded to for individual children or particular locations/communities.

10. The West Mercia Joint Runaway and Missing from Home or Care Protocol is signed up to by the West Mercia & Warwickshire Combined Police Force and the 5 local authorities it covers. The Protocol was recently refreshed in line with government guidance in terms of definition to aid risk assessment and risk management, and in line with guidance to local authorities on their response to children missing from care. (see Appendix 1).

11. The Protocol provides a helpful overview of the national picture in respect of missing children, and the statutory responsibilities of local authorities and the police.

12. The response to children who are missing in West Mercia is logged using a system called COMPACT to enable swift confidential information-sharing between the police and the relevant local authority to ensure that the right action is taken to address any risks.

13. Data from COMPACT is analysed on a monthly basis and is used to monitor performance and track any trends to inform service planning.

14. The new protocol provides for professional discretion to record a young person as 'absent', rather than 'missing', when their parent or carer knows where they are, but this is 'without permission', and that they are safe in that place, or where the young person has made contact to indicate that they are going to return later than had been agreed.

15. There are 128,000 children age 0-19 living in Worcestershire, and as of 11<sup>th</sup> May 2015, there were 686 looked after children in the care of Worcestershire County Council.

16. From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 437 children were recorded as missing from either home or care, with 551 'episodes'- the difference is due to some children who go missing more than once.

17. Of this number 364 were missing from home, and 73 were

**Children Missing  
who are Looked  
After by  
Worcestershire  
County Council**

missing from care.

18. This data is recorded using the definition from the previous protocol, when all children who were in care had to be reported as missing if over a certain timescale, even if the carer knew where they were.

19. There is a risk assessment undertaken by the Children's Social Care Access Team for all children who are reported missing to determine whether they need a return interview with an independent person once they are found.

20. Previous recorded performance in undertaking Return Interviews within 72 hours was not good, with an average of only 15% recorded as completed within 72hours and only 50% of the recording 'episodes' completed.

21. The reasons for this varied- children and parents may refuse the interview, or it may take some time to set up the interview at a convenient time for the family, or children who are already looked after may have seen their social worker but this was not recorded as a Return Interview.

22. Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 this service is provided in Worcestershire by the National Youth Advocacy service (NYAS). This should start to improve some of the recording issues- though early evidence is that a similar number of young people or parents refuse the offer of the independent interview. This is not enforceable. The statutory responsibility is for this to be offered.

22. We have a very small number of children in Worcestershire who go missing from care who are at risk of harm when missing, but some of these children are very vulnerable, and go missing more than once.

23. Many of our children in Worcestershire have been reported missing because they have returned late back to their foster home or residential home, or have stayed with someone without permission.

24. We are reducing the number of times that a carer needs to report this by working with young people and their carers on agreements about what is a 'reasonable' time for return and increasing the delegated responsibility that carers have to enable them to use their discretion as a reasonable parent would make as to when young people may have overnight stays.

25. Some young people become looked after because they are in crisis and are already exhibiting risky behaviour, whilst others use running away as a means of managing their feelings and problems. It can take some time to work with them to help them become more stable, but social workers and their foster carers or residential staff work together to enable them to develop trusting relationships with

**Children Missing  
who are Looked  
After by another  
Local Authority**

their carers until they no longer feel they need to go missing.

26. The staff in our children's homes and our foster carers are especially pro-active, working with young people who are often come in feeling unsafe and unboundaried. They will go to find them, pick them up, keep in touch and just stay alongside until they settle.

27. When a child is missing for over 24 hours the Head of Service is always informed as is the Director of Children's Services and Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children & Families. Social workers and the police are very pro-active in locating the child and sharing information about known locations where the child may be.

28. If a child cannot be located after 72 hours a formal Strategy Meeting between the police and children's social care is held. This will determine future actions including whether the media is engaged or legal orders are required in order to recover a child when found.

29. On rare occasions a young person is feeling so out of control that their risky 'missing' behaviour cannot be managed in the community. They then meet the criteria for secure accommodation. It is a serious matter to deprive a young person of their liberty and so we have to gain the permission of the court if we think a young person needs to be in secure accommodation for more than 72 hours.

30. In 2014/15 to date only 3 young people met the criteria for a period in secure accommodation where going missing was a contributory factor. They also had other difficulties such as mental ill-health and drug dependency. These are the young people who often have multiple episodes in a short space of time.

31. Worcestershire does not have a legal responsibility for following up return interviews for looked after children who are placed in Worcestershire by other local authorities. We do have a duty to hold a strategy meeting if there is a child protection enquiry associated with the missing episode, but none have been required to date this year.

32. There are no longer any children's homes owned by other local authorities in Worcestershire's borders, but there are a number of privately owned children's homes and independent fostering agencies with children placed from out of county.

33. When a child from another local authority goes missing the other local authority is notified and they organise the return interview.

34. Since November 2014 we have kept a record of the number of children missing from other local authorities and this information is included in our tracking of vulnerable children for assessment as to

## What the data tells us

whether there is evidence of child sexual exploitation. There has been no link established to date.

35. A report on Missing Children is produced monthly and performance is scrutinised by the Children's social Care Performance Board and by the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board. The 2014/15 analysis tells us that:

- 73 children were reported as missing from care in 2014/15
- 30 were missing for 5 hours or less in
- 28 children who went missing were over 16
- The longest time a child was missing from care was almost 4 days
- No child went missing who was placed at home under the Care Planning Regs. with their parent
- 16 children were reported missing from a LA children's home
- 3 children were reported missing from an independent residential home inside the county and 3 placed outside the county
- 6 children were reported missing from in-house foster placements - 4 of whom were with relative/friends carers
- 11 children were reported missing from some form of independent foster placement inside the county
- 16 young people were reported as missing from some form of independent living
- In total 7 children were reported missing who were placed outside the county

## Conclusions

36. The Joint Protocol ensures that the response to addressing the risks for children who go missing in Worcestershire is robust and joined up between agencies.

37. There is further work to do with NYAS to encourage more children and families to take part in a Return Interview, and with social workers to ensure they encourage and provide the right information to enable timely interviews with looked after children.

38. Information about children who go missing from home or care is being triangulated with information about children flagged as at risk of child sexual exploitation. There is no current pattern emerging, but this is in its early stages and will continue to be monitored.

39. Children who are placed outside the County need to be included in our monthly reporting in order to track any emerging issues.

## Supporting Papers

Appendix 1- West Mercia Joint Runaway and Missing from Home or Care Protocol

Appendix 2- Missing Children Performance Report March 2015 (redacted to remove any information that may identify individual children)

## Contact Points

### County Council Contact Points:

County Council: 01905 763763

Worcestershire Hub: 01905 765765

Email: [worcestershirehub@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:worcestershirehub@worcestershire.gov.uk)

### Specific Contact Points for this Report:

Siobhan Williams, Head of Children's Social Care (Assessment & Intervention) Tel 01905 766894

Email: [Sawilliams2@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:Sawilliams2@worcestershire.gov.uk)

## Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Children's Services) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.