

West Mercia Joint Runaway and Missing From Home and Care Protocol

Protocols to govern all organisations working with children and young people in West Mercia.

Outlining expected practice for Police, Children Services, all staff in residential children's homes and foster carers for managing episodes of missing children.

Written by	West Mercia Missing Children Multi-Agency Task and Finish Group
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Children's Society 'Still Running' surveys estimated around 100,000 children under the age of 16 run away from home or care each year across the UK.
- 1.2 Many of these children stay with friends or family members, however some do not have or cannot access such support systems therefore tend to stay in harmful environments and in some cases engage in activities that may put them at risk. (*DFE - Statutory Guidance on children who run away and go missing from care or home January 2014*).
- 1.3 This protocol has been revised in conjunction with the statutory guidance.
- 1.4 There are strong links between children involved in sexual exploitation and other behaviours ie. running away from home or care, bullying, self-harm, teenage pregnancy, truancy and substance misuse. Some children are particularly vulnerable, eg. Children with special needs, those in residential or foster care, those leaving care, migrant children, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, forced marriage and those involved in gangs.
- 1.5 Sexual exploitation of children and young people has been identified throughout the UK, in both rural and urban areas. It is a form of sexual abuse which has a serious impact on every aspect of the lives of children and families involved. It must be stressed that it also affects boys and young men as well as girls and young women.
- 1.6 In the region of 6,000 missing person reports a year are made across Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Worcestershire. Approximately 3,400 of these cases are formally investigated by the police.
- 1.7 In order to protect children from harm it is vitally important that, if a child is regularly going missing a full assessment of risk is undertaken by the Protecting Vulnerable People (PVP) missing person co-ordinator. The purpose of this role is to work in partnership with all agencies in order to reduce risk and repeat episodes, especially by individuals or at locations that are 'high risk' in order to protect the vulnerable.
- 1.8 It is also important to highlight the fact that the majority of looked-after children do not experience missing episodes; in fact most children in residential care do NOT go missing.
- 1.9 Academic research together with local analysis by Police and local authority staff show that children who run away are often very vulnerable; exposing themselves to heightened risk eg. becoming victims of crime, sexually exploited, involved in substance misuse or crime and disorder.
- 1.10 Research shows that the level of risk to the individual child increases each occasion that they go missing. This is contrary to the misconception that the risk decreases as the young person is 'street-wise' and therefore at a consequent lesser risk. The reality is quite the reverse.
- 1.11 Since the first version of this protocol was introduced in 2003, the constituent Local Authorities and Police within the West Mercia Policing area have worked effectively together to address the problem. Using partnership, problem solving and performance management the incidents of 'repeat' runaway behaviour have been reduced.

- 1.12 This approach has also helped to safeguard some of our most vulnerable children whilst reducing the demand on resources – an improving picture.
- 1.13 However, agencies must not become complacent as the issue of young runaways remains a significant problem. This issue requires continued focus and ‘working together’ to ensure our children are protected from predatory influences that exist within society.

2. Scope

2.1 The terms child and children refer to any young person under the age of 18.

2.2 This procedure is designed for: -

- All children and young people under 18 years of age who go missing from the parental home.
- Children and young people looked after by the constituent Local Authorities placed in Local Authority Children's homes within the West Mercia Policing area boundaries.
- Children and young people looked after by ANY Local Authority placed with foster carers within the West Mercia Policing area boundaries.
- Children and young people looked after by ANY Local Authority and placed in private establishments or with agency foster carers within the West Mercia Policing area boundaries, where compliance with the protocol is specified in the contract or placement agreement.
- All children and young people placed within the West Mercia Policing area boundaries (including those aged over 18) for whom the constituent Local Authorities have continuing responsibilities under The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

2.3 From this point forward in this document, the Local Authorities within the West Mercia Policing area are:

- Worcestershire County Council.
- Herefordshire Council
- Shropshire Council
- Telford & Wrekin Council

These will be termed "Children's Services."

2.4 For the purposes of this procedure "Parent" is defined as the parents, friends, relatives, or those providing private fostering arrangements who look after the child at their current place of residence. IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT PARENTS WOULD NOT UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES SEE THIS PROTOCOL.

3. Legislation and Definitions

- 3.1 The legal parameters within which missing person enquiries are conducted can be found in the common law, international law and especially 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. Data Protection legislation places certain conditions on the 'processing' of information classed as personal data. Data held for policing purposes should only be disclosed for such purposes. Adherence to this Agreement ensures compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998.
- 3.2 In January 2014 the Department for Education published statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care supporting local authorities to meet the requirements of National Indicator 71. Guidance was issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which means that, except in exceptional circumstances, local authorities must comply with this.
- 3.3 The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (March 2011) strengthens the role of the Independent Reviewing officer (IRO) and extends the role of the Independent Visitor. Both have key roles in relation to children who go missing from care.

Categories of Missing

3.4 Unauthorised Absence

3.4.1 West Mercia and Warwickshire Police working practise as absent below but only applies to children in care for a period of up to 6 hours. There is no requirement to report unauthorised absences to the Police.

3.4.2 There are a number of situations where children and young people will be considered as absent without authority, most commonly when they are accidentally or deliberately late home to the placement, or when they run away from a placement following an incident or occurrence at the placement, or when their whereabouts are known AND there are minimal risks to their safety or well-being.

3.4.3 Before a child or young person becomes categorised as missing, a clear judgement needs to be made. The initial responsibility for this judgement must rest with the carer. Police do not need to be made aware of unauthorised absences from care homes.

3.5 Absent

3.5.1 Absent – A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and/or the behaviour is not out of character and there is no apparent risk. Absent will not apply to children in care.

3.5.2 It has been agreed by West Mercia Police that six hours should be regarded as the absolute maximum for any child or young person to be categorised as absent, rather than being formally reported as missing.

3.6 Missing/Absconded

3.6.1 A child or young person will be categorised as 'Missing' when their whereabouts cannot be established and/or the circumstances are out of character and the context suggests the person is subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.

3.6.2 An absconder is a child or young person who is absent from the placement without permission and who is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process, or a secure order made in either civil or criminal proceedings. A child or young person in this category must be reported to the police without delay.

3.6.3 If an absconder is under the age of 18 years, or if the absconding does not involve a power of arrest, the Police will treat the case as BOTH a Missing Person AND an absconder. This means that it will be necessary to provide detailed information to the Police on the Missing Person form. The paragraphs in section 8 and section 9 of this protocol will apply. When the person is traced, it is likely that they will also be arrested or dealt with by the police in relation to any offence or breach.

3.6.4 However, if the person is aged 16 or over and is liable to arrest the Police will treat the person solely as an absconder and not as a Missing Person, unless there are grounds to suspect that factors other than the absconders desire to evade justice are involved in their disappearance. If the Police treat the case solely as one of absconding, in these circumstances they will actively seek the absconder for arrest. Notwithstanding, absconders in this category must also be reported to the Police without delay.

Additional Statutory Responsibilities

- 3.7 Anyone who has care of a child or young person without parental knowledge or agreement should do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's or young person's welfare. In these circumstances, they should inform the police, Children's Services and the parents of the child/young person of their whereabouts and safety. If this is not complied with, the Police could consider advice or warning under the Child Abduction Act 1984, if appropriate.
- 3.8 Anyone who 'takes or detains' a runaway under 16 without lawful authority may be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984.
- 3.9 It is important to understand that children and young people who go missing under the age of 16 are not legally considered as being able to live independently away from home. For children and young people over the age of 16, consideration should be given to their physical and emotional needs and the potential risk of harm when making a judgment as to whether they can live independently away from home.

4. Principles

4.1 This revised protocol has been agreed between:

- West Mercia Police
- Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board
- Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board
- Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board
- Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Board

This protocol should be read as **guidance**, which cannot anticipate every situation. Police, parents, Children's Services staff and foster carers should take any action that is deemed necessary to protect the safety of the child or young person, based on a robust and objective assessment of risk for each individual child.

- 4.2 Children and young people who go missing may place themselves and others at risk. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and their experiences of care. Every "missing" episode should attract proper attention from the professionals involved with the missing person and they **MUST** collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the missing person on his/her return.
- 4.3 Nationally, there is a problem of 'Looked after Children' going missing repeatedly from their placements. This applies also in the West Mercia Policing Area.
- 4.4 Every missing episode is *potentially* serious.
- 4.5 Our joint aim is to reduce the incidence of all children and young people going missing and / or absent.
- 4.6 When a child or young person does go missing our joint aim is to prevent them suffering harm and to recover them to safety as soon as possible.
- 4.7 We do this by partnership working, information sharing, problem solving, and performance management.
- 4.8 Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes. Interventions must be informed by and reflected in the care plan.
- 4.9 Interventions must also be informed by effective return interviews with returning children. A child or young person's concerns will be taken seriously.
- 4.10 Interventions may be focused at the individual child or young person, their parents, the care establishment or by targeting 'pull' factors in the community. It is important that any relevant information obtained is shared with all partner agencies, to ensure effective future safeguarding.
- 4.11 Parents, Children Services and/or Carers should report a child or young person missing to the police according to this protocol.
- 4.12 Children Services and/or Carers and the police will monitor compliance with the protocol and monitor outcomes jointly.
- 4.13 Together we will take steps to ensure improved responses and practice thereby delivering better outcomes for children and young people.

5. Parents and Guardians

Stage 1: Initial Action and Notification

- 5.1 Should parents identify that they do not know the location of their child in their care they should make an initial judgement as to whether the child is [Unauthorised Absent \(see 3.4\)](#) with no apparent risk or [Missing \(see 3.6\)](#). The Duty Sergeant/Inspector of the local policing area can be contacted for advice if the parents have any doubts as to the status of the absence or the risks involved.
- 5.2 If the child whose location is not known is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process they will be classed as [Absconded \(see 3.6\)](#).
- 5.3 Within this initial judgement (5.1), basic measures to try to locate the child or young person should always be undertaken if considered safe to do so, including:
- Search bedroom / house / outbuildings / vehicles
 - Contact known friends and relatives where child/ young person may be
 - Visit locations that the child is known to frequent.
- 5.4 In deciding the category of absence, the parent are advised to consider the circumstances of the child or young person and their absence. This will include detailed consideration of:
- The circumstances of the absence.
 - The age of the child or young person
 - The maturity of the child or young person.
 - Any physical or cognitive disability of the child or young person.
 - Any continuing or urgent need for the child or young person to have medication or other medical treatment.
 - Previous behaviour and history of the child or young person or young person.
 - Danger posed by the child to themselves or others.
 - General vulnerability of the child or young person.
 - The child or young person's disposition towards drug/substance abuse.
 - Whether the child or young person is perceived as running to, or running from, someone or something.
 - The risk of offending.
 - The influence of peer groups, families or friends.
 - Predatory influences on the child or young person. These may relate to others wanting to use the child or young person for crime, sex or drugs.
 - Any known risk of abduction.
 - Environmental factors including weather, time of year, community events or tensions.
- 5.4 The fact that the child or young person may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk. In fact, children or young people who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by risky activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Furthermore, short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.
- 5.5 Any child who is deemed to be Absent for 6 hours without contact should be automatically judged to be Missing (see 3.5.4).

5.6 If the initial judgement made by parents is that the child is Missing, or the child has not been contacted for 6 hours and is therefore judged to be missing, it is considered a reasonable step for parents to inform the police and Children's Services that their child or young person is missing.

Stage 2: Assessment and Classification

5.7 While it is the responsibility of the Police to officially assess and classify the missing episode in order to inform their operation, parents will be required to support investigations.

Stage 3: Child is Located

5.8 It is the responsibility of the parent to contact the Police and to confirm that the missing child or young person has returned to home. If there are concerns that the child has been the victim of a crime or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent, this should be reported to the Police at this point.

5.9 When the whereabouts of a child is suspected, or becomes known, it is the responsibility of the parents to arrange for the child or young person's return. In exceptional circumstances the Police, in conjunction with Children's Services, may assist in the return of the child where there are specific concerns which require the safe and speedy return.

6. Foster Carers, Residential Care Provider and Responsible (Placing) Authority

Children Services and carers should adopt a consistent approach to the planning and assessment of “looked after children”.

Stage 0: Planning, Placement and Prevention

- 6.1 The West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment form (from this point forward referred to as the Risk Assessment and available in [Appendix A](#)) should be completed prior to the placement being made, or at a minimum within 72 hours of an emergency placement. The Responsible Authority should complete the risk assessment with the care provider.
- 6.2 The Risk Assessment is the initial foundation of a potential serious enquiry. It should be regarded as a detailed, considered and evidential process.
- 6.3 The completed Risk Assessment should be retained by the Responsible Authority and the Care Provider. When missing or unauthorised absence episodes are ‘anticipated’ with the Risk Assessment, The child’s Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) must be informed of any anticipated risk to ensure safeguarding arrangements are properly considered in care planning.
- 6.4 A copy of the completed Risk Assessment should be sent securely to West Mercia Police Missing Person Co-ordinator within the appropriate Harm Assessment Unit (HAUNorth@westmercia.pnn.police.uk for children placed in Shropshire or Telford & Wrekin and HAUSouth@westmercia.pnn.police.uk for children placed in Herefordshire and Worcestershire). The Missing Person Co-ordinator will ensure this information is available on COMPACT in preparation for a potential missing episode.
- 6.5 The Care Provider should undertake appropriate actions to minimise the risks to the child of going missing outlined within the Risk Assessment. Such actions should be included within the child’s care plan based on a full assessment of the child or young person’s current and future needs, including potential risk to self or others. It may also be necessary to notify other safeguarding partners if there is a likelihood that the child or young person might go missing from another setting (e.g. Hospital), and what action they must take if this occurs.
- 6.7 The Responsible Authority and Care Provider must ensure that a recent photograph is available to assist the process of finding the child. When a child or young person is admitted to care the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any potential subsequent missing person investigation. If possible the agreement of the child or young person should also be gained.
- 6.8 When missing or unauthorised absence episodes are ‘anticipated’ by the Care Plan, the child or young person should have explained to them. A resource prepared for children and young people is in Appendix D.

Stage 1: Initial Action and Notification

- 6.9 Should care providers identify that they do not know the location of a child in their care they should make an initial judgement as to whether the child is [Unauthorised Absent \(see 3.4\)](#) with no apparent risk or [Missing \(see 3.6\)](#).
- 6.10 This initial judgement should be made in partnership with the Responsible (Placing) Authority’s Children’s Services department. The Police Control Room (101) can be

contacted for advice if the parents or foster carers have any doubts as to the status of the absence or the risks involved. In addition, if the child or young person is receiving support other professionals (e.g. CAMHS professionals, Educational Psychologists) 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.

- 6.11 If the child whose location is not known is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process they will be classed as [Absconded \(see 3.6\)](#).
- 6.12 Within this initial judgement (6.9), basic measures to try to locate the child or young person should always be undertaken if considered safe to do so, including:
- Search bedroom / house / outbuildings / vehicles
 - Contact known friends and relatives where child/ young person may be
 - Visit locations that the child is known to frequent.
- 6.13 If a child or young person becomes absent whilst on an external activity member of staff in charge will;
- Arrange an initial search of the area the child or young person was last seen.
 - Notify the local Police immediately. This should be the Police Force who are responsible for the area where the child or young person was last seen. This must be undertaken immediately and not be delayed until the group has returned to the care placement.
 - Notify the child or young person's social worker or the accountable team manager both locally and within the placing authority.
 - Notify the senior manager at home (if applicable)
 - Notify the emergency out of hours duty team (if applicable)
- 6.14 In deciding the category of absence, the care provider and the Responsible (Placing) Authority's Children's Services department must consider the circumstances of the child or young person and their absence. This will include detailed consideration of:
- The circumstances of the absence.
 - The child or young person's care plan.
 - The age of the child or young person
 - The maturity of the child or young person.
 - Any physical or cognitive disability of the child or young person.
 - Any continuing or urgent need for the child or young person to have medication or other medical treatment.
 - The legal status of the child or young person.
 - Previous behaviour and history of the child or young person or young person.
 - Danger posed by the child to themselves or others.
 - General vulnerability of the child or young person.
 - The child or young person's disposition towards drug/substance abuse.
 - Whether the child or young person 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 or young person. These may relate to others wanting to use the child or young person for crime, sex or drugs.
 - Any known risk of abduction.
 - Environmental factors including weather, time of year, community events or tensions.
- 6.15 The fact that the child or young person may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk. In fact, children or young people who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by risky activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Furthermore, short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.
- 6.16 Where a child has been deemed to be Unauthorised Absent for 6 hours the care provider should contact the police.
- 6.18 Missing person reports are to be made to West Mercia Police Control Room (101) An aide memoir is included in Appendix E highlighting the questions you will be asked by police when making the missing person report.

Stage 2: Assessment and Classification

- 6.19 While it is the responsibility of the Police to grade the missing person report as High or Medium. The care provider and responsible authority (remain responsible for the child or young person in their care) will be required to support the activity to find the child
- 6.20 The child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) must be informed of the missing episode, what steps have been taken to find them, and when found the circumstances of this. The IRO will consider whether it is appropriate to reconvene the LAC Review as a result.

Stage 3: Child is Located

- 6.21 It is the responsibility of the care provider to contact the Police and to confirm that the missing child or young person has returned to home. If there are concerns that the child has been the victim of a crime or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent, this should be reported to the Police at this point.
- 6.22 When the whereabouts of a child is suspected, or becomes known, it is the responsibility of the parents to arrange for the child or young person's return. In exceptional circumstances the Police, in conjunction with Children's Services, may assist in the return of the child where there are specific concerns which require the safe and speedy return.
- 6.23 Upon receipt of a found notification, the Responsible Authority's Children's Services should undertake a return interview unless there is a defensible reason not to and consider further children's services intervention.

7. Semi Independent Living Providers

- 7.1 The legal and practice framework for the provision of 16+ semi-independent living arrangements for Looked After and Relevant young people is specified in Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers of The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations (revised May 2014)
- 7.2 These arrangements are classed as 'unregulated' and not covered by the regulations that apply to fostering and residential placements. This is to enable semi-independent provision to realistically prepare young people for their transition to adulthood; for example, via the planning stepping down of monitoring and support. Semi-independent accommodation includes:
- Supported Board and Lodgings
 - Supported Housing projects (whether commissioned via Children's Services or Supporting People)
 - 16+ flats and house share arrangements.
- 7.3 Care leavers aged 16 or 17 in semi-independent living arrangements may be Eligible (subject to S.31 Care Order or S.20 Accommodated) or Relevant (no longer S20 Accommodated) under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.
- 7.4 The Volume 3 Guidance and Regulations do not reference care leavers going missing from semi-independent living arrangements.
- 7.5 In practice most semi-independent arrangements allow for care leavers to have periods of time, including overnights, away from their accommodation. This will be included in the placement plan, individual placement agreement (IPA) or the occupational licence; and a clear agreement reached between the provider, the care leaver and the 16+ social worker. In setting out these arrangements relevant risk assessments will be shared with semi-independent accommodation providers.
- 7.6 Whilst care leavers aged 16 and 17 have a greater degree of independence and self-determination than younger looked after children they are not adults and are subject to safeguarding procedures. It should be noted that for some care leavers the journey to adulthood may increase their level of vulnerability; for example to sexual exploitation or substance misuse.
- 7.7 Unplanned/unauthorised absences from a semi-independent living arrangement should be responded to as above in 6. Foster Carers, Residential Care Provider and Responsible (Placing) Authority.
- 7.8 16 and 17 year olds who are S.20 Accommodated and have 'capacity' can withdraw their consent to be accommodated – refusal of permission to 'stay out' beyond agreed limits can be a trigger for this. It is in the best interests of care leavers to remain in suitable accommodation. Therefore in such circumstances a LAC Review chaired by an IRO should be held to explore this decision with the young person and their support network - with the aim of maintaining the semi-independent living arrangement.

8. Police

Stage 1: Initial Action and Notification

- 8.1 On receipt of the West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment form the Missing Person Co-ordinator ensures this information is available on COMPACT in preparation for a potential missing episode.
- 8.2 The Risk Assessment is the initial foundation of a potential serious enquiry. It should be regarded as a detailed, considered and evidential process.

Stage 2: Assessment and Classification

- 8.3 Children missing from care should never be categorised as 'Absent' according to the ACPO definition as this Unauthorised Absence protocol will be followed should this be the case. Where the protocol has associated risks are identified, the police will always progress a missing investigation.
- 8.4 The missing episode should be recorded, completed on COMPACT and an officer deployed to investigate and inform children's social care.
- 8.5 A police officer will attend all reports of missing children or young people.
- 8.6 Police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will always be High or, Medium.

Stage 3: Child is Located

- 8.7 The Police will attend for a face-to-face contact in order to complete a West Mercia Police Found Report (incorporating a Safe and Well Check). Should any safeguarding concerns become apparent the police officer must make an appropriate referral in line with the [West Mercia Child Protection Procedures](#). Specific consideration should be given to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child who went missing.

9. Host Authority Children's Services (for the area in which the missing episode originates)

Children Services and carers should adopt a consistent approach to the planning and assessment of "looked after children".

Stage 0: Planning, Placement and Prevention

9.1 The local authority must have a Children Missing from Education (CME) Officer and a system of recording and notification in relation to children who are known to be missing education. Separate policies exist for the management of cases of Children Missing from Education in addition to the 'Children Missing Education: Statutory guidance for local authorities', published by the Department for Education in 2013.

10. Schools and Organisations Running Organised Activities

Stage 0: Planning, Placement and Prevention

10.1 This protocol applies to Children who are missing on from education are more likely to be vulnerable in one way or another – they may be from disadvantaged families or at risk of neglect or abuse. Certain groups of vulnerable children are more likely than others to go missing from education:

- Young people who have committed offences;
- Children living in women’s refuges;
- Children of homeless families, perhaps living in temporary accommodation;
- Young runaways;
- Children with long-term medical or emotional problems;
- Looked After children;
- Children with a gypsy/traveller background;
- Young carers;
- Children with transient families;
- Teenage mothers;
- Children who are permanently excluded from school;
- Migrant children, whether in families seeking asylum or economic migrants; and
- Trafficked children

10.2 Schools have specific duties under the Department for Education 2013 statutory guidance “Children Missing Education” must engage with Children’s Services Children Missing from Education Officer and notify the officer of any child known to be, or suspected to be, missing education.

Stage 1: Initial Action and Notification

10.3 If it comes to the attention of any agency (including schools and voluntary organisations) that they are unaware of the location of a child or young person they have responsibility for, they must advise the parent/carer of the organisation’s duty to ensure that the matter is reported to the police and if necessary follow this up by contacting the police to verify the reporting by the parent / carer has occurred.

10.4 The best practice expectation is that once a school (or organised activity) establishes that a child is not attending that day and if the school hasn’t had a notification from a parent/carer that the child will not be attending, they should contact the parent to ensure that the child is at home rather than missing.

10.5 If a child or young person becomes absent whilst on an external activity member of staff in charge will;

- Arrange an initial search of the area the child or young person was last seen.
- Notify the local Police immediately. This should be the Police Force who are responsible for the area where the child or young person was last seen. This must be undertaken immediately and not be delayed until the group has returned to the care placement.
- Notify the child or young person's social worker or the accountable team manager both locally and within the placing authority.
- Notify the senior manager at home (if applicable)
- Notify the emergency out of hours duty team (if applicable)

11. Informing the Media

- 11.1 In some cases, particularly where a missing child or young person is felt to be especially vulnerable (High Risk) or where they have been missing for several days it may be necessary to publicise the case via the media. Such an approach is not routine but is the usual response to serious concerns for the child or young person's safety. Either carers or the Police may suggest such an approach. Decisions to publicise should be jointly made and a meeting to discuss a media release should be convened with Police, Children's Services, care home managers, and if appropriate, the child or young person's parents.
- 11.2 However, in urgent cases primacy over such decisions must lie with the Police to ensure operational effectiveness. This will be by exception and in these cases every effort should be made to contact Children's Services and parents in an attempt to jointly agree details of the press release. The child or young person will not be identified as a child in care unless absolutely necessary.
- 11.3 If it is believed that the case involves the abduction of a child in care, then any decision to publicise the case is likely to be urgent. This decision will be made in accordance with nationally agreed procedures by a Police officer of the rank of Superintendent. Where practicable, Children's Services will be consulted in advance and any information released will be jointly agreed.

12. Return Interviews

- 12.1 Statutory guidance includes that a Return Home Interview should be carried out to explore the reasons children run away and to identify support needs. It should be carried out by an independent person and completed within 72hrs of return.
- 12.2 Evidence from young people suggests that children who go missing tended to be helped most when professionals and agencies generally worked together. This includes considering what support is offered to families and carers
- 12.3 Although it is desirable for an independent person to undertake the return home interviews this will not generally be the case. Return home interviews will generally be carried out via staff who know the young people and who they may already have a good relationship with. If this is not the case the open case manager should be aware that they can request a colleague within their team to undertake the return interview or if appropriate a third person such as learning mentor or Targeted Youth Support practitioner.
- 12.4 It is important for staff to complete the Return Interview process fully and to gather any appropriate information in such a way that this can be used as evidenced in any other arena as required, For example this could be used when requesting a section 2 Harbours notice if this is required in order to keep the young person safe.
- 12.5 If during the Return Interview discussion information is disclosed concerning harm to or from the young person then the staff member needs to take the relevant steps to report this either to the police and/or to the local authority if safeguarding concerns are raised. This may lead to other assessment processes including EHAF, Social Work Assessment or s47 investigation.
- 12.6 The West Mercia Joint Protocol for Missing Children adopts the Children's Society criteria for Return Interviews.
- 12.7 The relevant criteria are that:
- The child has been missing on 2 or more occasions;
 - The child has engaged or is believed to have engaged in criminal activities;
 - The child has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing or this is believed;
 - The child has mental health issues;
 - The child lives in a household where there are mental health, child protection, domestic abuse and/or substance misuse issues;
 - The child is at risk of or thought to be at risk of sexual exploitation;
 - The child has had contact with persons posing a risk to children, including boyfriends/girlfriends/partners that are more than two years older than the young person.
- 12.8 A Return Interview is an in depth conversation led by a trained professional whom the young person can trust. They should be able to help identify the reasons for running away, such as neglect, or any form of abuse and highlight any exploitation that may have occurred whilst the young person was missing. They also allow professionals to take immediate action to prevent further risks.

If the Return Interview is not undertaken.

- 12.9 There will be some cases in which it is felt by the case manager and their line manager that a return interview is not required or appropriate for whatever reason. It

is very important in these cases that both the case manager and manager have a discussion about this and confirm that no return interview is going to take place. This needs to be recorded clearly along with the reasons for this.

13. Police Powers

- 13.1 The Police have significant powers to safeguard vulnerable children.
- 13.2 These include powers to enter premises, to recover children whilst exercising their powers of protection.
- 13.3 There are a number of options available to police in order to address any circumstances that may suggest a crime has been committed with the second half of 5.4 It is recognised that children or young people 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.
- 13.4 Prosecution of Individuals Harboured Children: Anyone who “takes or detains” a runaway under 16 without lawful authority may be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984. Where children or young people are persistent absconders and continue to be harboured by the same individual consideration should be given to prosecution under the Child Abduction Act.
- 13.5 West Mercia Police have developed a warning notice for harbourers which can be used at an early stage prior to any prosecution. (See Appendix E)
- 13.6 If the harbourer is suspected of sexual exploitation or other abuse consideration should be given to securing evidence to prosecute at the earliest opportunity.
- 13.7 If evidence suggests that the harbourer has no malicious intent then the primary intent is to ensure that the warning notice is effective so that their behaviour changes and a prosecution is not necessary.

14. Prevention Strategy

- 14.1 Children's Services and Police will monitor the absences of individual children and young people and absences from each residential establishment. This monitoring will be presented in a quarterly report prepared by a Police analyst and shared with Children's Services.
- 14.2 West Mercia Police and Children's Services will operate an escalating system of interventions to reduce the likelihood of a child or young person repeatedly going missing. There is no expectation that workers have to progress through each stage in sequence.
- 14.3 Intervention meetings should take place in the event of repeat episodes of children or young people going missing from care. The intervention meetings can be convened by either Children's Services or the Police but will be chaired by Children's Services responsible for the child or young person. These meetings must include Police representation.
- For these meetings to work, and thereby improve our collective responses, appropriate attendance and clarity of purpose are essential.
- 14.4 These meetings can be deferred or suspended if the police and Children's Services agree this and work is already being conducted by any partner agency to address the missing episodes.
- 14.5 The intervention meetings should be held within a week of any trigger episode. The meetings should be chaired and recorded and the increased levels of concern reflected in the seniority of those attending as follows:-
- 14.6 One Individual having Three Missing Person Episodes in 90 Days:
- 14.7 PVP Missing Person Co-ordinator to arrange Inter-Agency Meeting with relevant partner agencies (e.g. key social worker, care home manager, parents if appropriate and other relevant or interested parties) to review placement, patterns of Missing episodes, individual 'push-pull' factors and strategies to eliminate problem(s).
- 14.8 Alternatively, where the PVP Missing Person Co-ordinator (or equivalent) is available – social worker (chair), local Police Officer, residential social worker or foster carer/family placement worker (as appropriate), person who conducted return interview if different to above.
- 14.9 This meeting should try to identify any 'push' or 'pull' factor in the case and any other voluntary or statutory agency, which has an interest, or may take an interest, in the Missing Person's welfare and circumstances. In the case of 'pull' factors it may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the Missing Person or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs.
- 14.10 One individual having between Four and Six Missing Episodes in One Year:
- 14.11 PVP Missing Person Co-ordinator to arrange Inter-Agency Meeting with relevant Partner Agencies i.e. team manager from Children's Services, residential unit manager/assistant or family placement manager (as appropriate), social worker, representatives from health and/or education (as appropriate) person who conducted return interview (if different to above). The purpose of the meeting is to review placement, patterns of missing episodes, individual 'push-pull' factors and strategies to eliminate problems(s).

- 14.12 This level of intervention meeting is the crucial stage in avoiding serious escalation and must, therefore, be given high priority by all concerned.
- 14.13 One individual having between Seven and Nine Missing Episodes in One Year:
- 14.14 PVP Missing Person Co-ordinator to arrange Inter-Agency Meeting with relevant Partner Agencies i.e. team manager from children's services, Local Police Sergeant, residential manager or family placement manager (as appropriate), social worker, representatives from health and/or education (as appropriate) person who conducted return interview if different to above. The purpose of this meeting is to review placement, patterns of Missing Episodes, individual 'push-pull' factors and strategies to eliminate problem(s).
- 14.15 Meetings at this level should be rare provided that this protocol has been followed with regard to earlier intervention meetings and return interviews. Additionally, should this level of missing episodes be apparent, this is clear evidence that the placement is not working. If it is not working, then it fails everyone including the child.
- 14.16 In addition to seeking to reduce future missing episodes and reduce any apparent risks to the child or young person, these meetings should also quality assure compliance with the protocols and the efficacy of earlier intervention meetings and return interviews.
- 14.17 At this stage a report about the case should be forwarded to the Force Missing Persons Strategic Lead, as the case will feature in the quarterly analysts report on Missing Persons.
- 14.18 If the child or young person continues to be reported missing beyond this level the Senior Management Team for the policing area should discuss the case and consider whether it is appropriate them to intervene further or for the Assistant Chief Constable (SO) to be asked to intervene.
- 14.19 It should be noted, however, that the volume of cases is not the only reason to launch an intervention or to escalate the level of intervention. The following are both examples of other reasons to launch or escalate interventions:
- 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 person.
- 14.20 A record shall be made of all interventions on the police COMPACT Missing Person system.
- 14.21 When Children's Services or police believe that an adult is adversely involved with a child or children who are going missing from home, in addition to any action taken under section 14 of this protocol, the Police and Children's Services will consider what more can be done to protect the child(ren).
- 14.22 This may involve the making of a formal witness statement by the local authority manager, specifically prohibiting that adult from having any contact with named children or young people, without exceptions. The Police would then show the adult a copy of the statement, a photograph of the child or young person (which they would not be allowed to keep) and serve upon that adult a warning harbouring notice prohibiting the adult from having any contact whatsoever with the child or young

person and explaining any breach would be dealt with by arrest under section 2 Child Abduction Act 1984.

- 14.23 Alternatively the relevant local authority, supported by the Police, may decide to institute civil proceedings to obtain an injunction preventing any particular adult having any contact with a named child or young person.
- 14.24 Should an establishment have in excess of twenty Missing Episodes in any one year period an organisational review will be undertaken by Children Services to provide assurance to the local safeguarding children board, Police and to commissioners of the service that appropriate and effective prevention measures are being used.
- 14.25 PVP Missing Persons Co-ordinator to assist the local policing Superintendent to arrange and chair an Inter-Agency Meeting with relevant partners to review placement, patterns of Missing Episodes, individual 'push-pull' factors and strategies to eliminate problem(s). At the conclusion of same, the chair to review overarching factors to decide and report upon suitability to provide care 'in loco parentis'.
- 14.26 If doubt exists, the local policing Superintendent should commission an evidenced report for onward transmission to the Assistant Chief Constable (SO) for review. If a clear case for concern exists, the ACC (SO) may then authorise a report direct to OFSTED (formerly the National Commission for Social Care and Inspection).

15. Monitoring the effectiveness of the Joint Protocol

- 15.1 West Mercia Police will notify Children's Services of all reports of Missing and 'absent' children or young persons in their area. These notifications will be automatically generated by COMPACT and sent as an email to the nominated email address for each of the Children's Services.
- 15.2 In addition Children's Services will receive monthly data about all missing children and young people (with outcomes) in their area.
- 15.3 Children's Services are responsible, with their Local Safeguarding Children Board, for using this data to respond to the needs of individual children and young people and to identify patterns and trends and to develop preventative strategies to address these.
- 15.4 Review of Arrangements: This joint protocol will be reviewed 12 months after implementation by senior managers from West Mercia Police and all 4 local authorities.

Signatories to the Joint Protocol:

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

SIGNED.....Date.....

NAME

JOB TITLE & ORGANISATION.....

LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S BOARD

SIGNED.....Date.....

NAME

JOB TITLE & ORGANISATION.....

WEST MERCIA POLICE

SIGNED.....Date.....

NAME

JOB TITLE & ORGANISATION.....

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Appendices

WEST MERCIA MISSING CHILDREN RISK ASSESSMENT

(Demographics)

Name of young person:	Any Aliases or otherwise Known as?	Date of Birth:
Date of admission:		Date form completed:

Is there a photograph available? Yes No

What is their care status? Please specify:

YP Mobile phone number: (check correct at each missing episode):

Name and address of GP:

Name and address Dentist:

Ethnicity (please tick relevant box)

<input type="checkbox"/> White British	<input type="checkbox"/> Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> White/Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean
<input type="checkbox"/> White Irish	<input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/> White/Black African	<input type="checkbox"/> African
White Other (Specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/> White/Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> Black Other (Specify)
	Asian Other (Specify)	Mixed Other (Specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese
			Other ethnic group (Specify)

Address of residential unit or foster carer including contact details:

Placing authority:

Date placed:

Name of allocated Social Worker and or Manager including contact details:

Details of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO):

Please rate Vulnerability of young person: LOW MED HIGH

Explain:

Does the young person have a Statement of Educational Needs: Yes No

Which LA maintains the Statement?

Should the young person be considered **MISSING** and never **ABSENT**: Yes No

Reasons for missing category:

Has the Young person a history of going missing? Yes No

The likelihood of the young person going missing: LOW MED HIGH

Is it generally out of character? Yes No D/K

If they have gone missing before have they been exposed to harm? Yes No

Brief explanation:

The risk to the young person should they go missing: LOW MED HIGH

Reasons for risk level (inc issues of self harm, suicide, the prospect of being the victim of crime)

The risk to the young person of sexual exploitation: : LOW MED HIGH

Explain:

The risk to others should the young person go missing: LOW MED HIGH

Reasons for risk level (include Is this child a Sex offender or perpetrator of sexual exploitation, do they have access to weapons, explain the nature of the risk including any criminality)

Potential addresses to which the young person may head inc Occupiers name

Address 1: (Parental address/s)

Address 2:
Address 3:
Address 4:

Individuals with whom the young person may meet. Please indicate Adult/Child if known.	
Individual 1	
Individual 2	
Individual 3	
Individual 4	

General issues of vulnerability including potential of being harmed:
 (Are they subject to bullying or harassment, racial abuse, homophobia, or any other local community concerns prior to disappearance?)
 Please specify:

Any individuals the young person *should not* associate with. Please detail with reasons:

THIS SECTION IS TO BE COMPLETED UPON EACH EPISODE OF MISSING.
 THIS SECTION SHOULD BE ATTACHED TO THE PRECEEDING INFORMATION AND RELATE TO THE SPECIFICS CONCERNING THIS PARTICULAR MISSING EPISODE.

Name of young person: Are you able to supply a photograph?	Date of birth:
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Date of Missing Episode:	Time last seen:
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Number of previous episodes:

Please now complete the following section including comment on all identified factors, including specific other details relating to the young person going missing at this time.

Please give details of what they were last seen wearing:

What actions have been taken to locate them:
--

Where are they likely to go?

Did they go with anyone else?

Is this out of character?

Are they vulnerable?

Are they likely to commit an offence, if so what?

Is there a risk of self harm (suicide)?

Do they have access to weapons?

Have they previously gone Missing?(anything significant to note?)

Have they experienced harm on previous Missing episodes if so what?

Have they been a victim of crime previously?
--

Do they have a disability physical illness or other health issue?

Do they need essential medication?

What are the effects if medication is not taken?
--

--

Have they prepared to go missing, and How?
--

What were they going to do at last contact with you?
--

Do they have money?

Any family issues to be aware of?

Information completed by	
Designation	
Date	
Form to be forwarded to	
Police Email address	HAUNorth@westmercia.pnn.police.uk

Missing From Care Process Map

This process map shows the main steps that need to be taken when a child goes missing from local authority care, and where responsibility lies for those steps. It should be read alongside the full West Mercia Joint Protocol for Missing Children and Young People, and is not intended to be a comprehensive list of actions.

The Joint Protocol and Process Map have been based upon the Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care 2014.

	Care Provider: Children's home or foster carer See Section 6 for more detail.	Police See Section 8 for more detail.	Responsible Authority Children's Social Care See Section 6 for more detail.	Host Authority Children's Social Care See Section 9 for more detail.
Children Services and carers should adopt a consistent approach to the planning and assessment of "looked after children"				
Stage 0 Planning, Placement and Prevention	The Care Provider should undertake appropriate actions to minimise the risks to the child of going missing outlined within the West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment form and record these in the Care Plan. They must also keep, and regularly update, a photograph.	On receipt of the West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment form the Missing Person Co-ordinator ensures this information is available on COMPACT in preparation for a potential missing episode.	Convene Placement Planning meeting to include the care provider within 72 hours of placement. The West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment form should be completed at the meeting. The completed West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment must be retained by the Responsible Authority and the Care Provider and a copy sent to West Mercia Police.	
Stage 1 Initial Action and Notification	In partnership with the Responsible Authority, review the risk assessment to decide if the child may be initially deemed as Unauthorised Absence. In such cases, the care provider should take such actions as any reasonable and diligent parent would undertake. Basic measures to try to locate the child or young person should be undertaken if considered safe to do so, including searching home and vehicles, contacting known friends and relatives and visiting locations that the child is known to frequent. Carers will report that the child or young person is missing to the police and Children's Services in the Responsible Authority via the missing episode section of the West Mercia Missing Children Risk Assessment. Additional responsibilities exist if the child becomes absent whilst on an external activity.	In partnership with the Care Provider, review the risk assessment to decide if the child may be initially deemed as Unauthorised Absence.		
Stage 2 Assessment and Classification	Children missing from care should never be categorised as 'Absent' according to the ACPO definition. Therefore the police will always progress a missing investigation: Record episode, complete COMPACT Missing report, deploy officer to investigate and inform children's social care. A police officer will attend all reports of missing children or young people. Police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will always be High or, Medium. This decision should give specific consideration to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child.		The Responsible (Placing) Authority's Children's Services remain responsible for the child or young person in their care. To that end, and throughout the process, the allocated social worker will continue to review the case and engage the appropriate child protection procedures as appropriate. During the missing episode, or if not possible on its conclusion, the child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) must be kept informed of the details of the missing episode.	
Stage 3 Child is Located	It is the responsibility of the care provider to arrange for the child or young person's return. There may be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child or young person, the Police may accede to requests from Children's Services to assist.	The Police will attend for a face-to-face contact in order to complete a West Mercia Police Found Report (incorporating a Safe and Well Check). Specific consideration must be given to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child. Any safeguarding concerns become apparent the police officer must make an appropriate referral in line with West Mercia Child Protection Procedures.	Upon receipt of a found notification, children's social care should undertake a return interview unless there is a defensible reason not to and consider further children's services intervention (e.g. initial assessment). This should give specific consideration to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child	
Data and Analysis	Children's homes should be prepared to provide information on missing incidents to those conducting independent visits to monitor the effectiveness of the home.	Data on missing episodes, including intelligence from return interviews, should be analysed regularly by all relevant partners to map problems and patterns. Regular reports should be provided to council members and the LSCB.		Data on missing episodes, including intelligence from return interviews, should be analysed regularly by all relevant partners to map problems and patterns. Regular reports should be provided to council members and the LSCB.
Data for children missing or away from placement without authorisation should be reported to the Department for Education by the responsible authority through their annual data returns on looked after children.				

Missing from Home or School Process Map

The following process map shows the main steps that need to be taken when a child goes missing from home or school, and where responsibility lies for those steps. It should be read alongside the full West Mercia Joint Protocol for Missing Children and Young People, and is not intended to be a comprehensive list of actions.

The Joint Protocol and Process Map have been based upon the Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care 2014.

	Home See Section 5 for more detail.	Police See Section 8 for more detail.	Children's Social Care See Section 9 for more detail.	Other Agencies (inc Schools) See Section 10 for more detail.
Stage 0 Planning and Prevention	Children who are missing from education are more likely to be vulnerable in one way or another and are at higher risk of going missing. Schools have specific duties under the 2013 statutory guidance "Children Missing Education" (DfE 2013).			
Stage 1 Initial Action and Notification	An initial judgement should be made as to whether the child is <i>Unauthorised Absent</i> (see West Mercia Protocol section 3.6 for detail) with no apparent risk. The Duty Sergeant/Inspector of the local policing area should be contacted for advice if the family have any doubts as to the status of the absence or the risks involved. Basic measures to try to locate the child or young person should always be undertaken if considered safe to do so, including searching home and vehicles, contacting known friends and relatives and visiting locations that the child is known to frequent. Any child who is <i>Unauthorised Absent</i> for 6 hours without contact should be automatically judged to be <i>Missing</i> . If the initial judgement made by parents is that the child is Missing, or the child has not been contacted for 6 hours and is therefore judged to be missing, it is considered a reasonable step for parents to inform the police and Children's Services that their child or young person is missing.	If it comes to the attention of any agency (including schools or voluntary organisations) that a child or young person is missing, they must advise the parent/carer of the organisation's duty to ensure that the matter is reported to the police and if necessary follow this up by contacting the police to verify the reporting by the parent / carer has occurred. The best practice expectation is that once a school establishes that a pupil is not attending that day and if the school hasn't had a notification from a parent/carer that the child will not be attending, the school should contact the parent to ensure that the child is at home rather than missing. Additional responsibilities exist if the child becomes absent whilst on an external activity.		
Stage 2 Assessment and Classification	On receipt of report that child or young person is 'missing' undertake risk assessment and apply the ACPO definitions to determine if the child is: Missing Record episode, complete COMPACT Missing report, deploy officer to investigate and inform children's social care. A police officer will attend all reports of missing children or young people. Police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will always be High or, Medium. Absent Maintain monitoring of case. Recategorise as missing if necessary. All cases of absent children will be concluded within 6 hours, upgraded to a Missing Person report if child is not found. <i>During this assessment specific consideration must be given to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child.</i>			
Stage 3 Child is Located	It is the responsibility of the parent to contact the Police and to confirm that the missing child or young person has returned to home and report if they have been the victim of crime. It is the responsibility of the parent to arrange for the child or young person's return. There may be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child or young person, the Police may accede to requests to assist.	Consider Safe and Well check (proportionate to the circumstances) with specific consideration should be given to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child Record any decision not to undertake a Safe and Well check to include the rationale for that decision	Complete Return Interview (independent unless clear rationale that a known person is in child/YP's best interest) within 72 hours of the child/YP being located. This should give specific consideration to the increased risk of Child Sexual Exploitation to the child Where a child/YP has not been reported as missing to Police encourage parent/carers to always do so in future. Consider threshold for statutory assessment (if one has not already been initiated) and record decision (with rationale).	
Data and Analysis	Children's homes should be prepared to provide information on missing incidents to those conducting independent visits to monitor the effectiveness of the home.	Data on missing episodes, including intelligence from return interviews, should be analysed regularly by all relevant partners to map problems and patterns. Regular reports should be provided to council members and the LSCB. Data for children missing or away from placement without authorisation should be reported to the Department for Education by the responsible authority through their annual data returns on looked after children.		

