



# Bristol Multi-Agency Protocol for Missing Children



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**Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership**  
**Bristol multi-agency protocol for Missing Children**

**Document Control**

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<b>Authors job title(s):</b>	Safer Options Advanced Practitioner, Safer Options Manager, Consultant – People’s Services
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## Bristol Multi Agency Protocol for Missing Children

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# Bristol Multi-Agency Protocol for Missing Children

## 1. Purpose

This protocol explains the arrangements agreed between Children's Services, Avon & Somerset Police, and other partners for dealing with children who go missing. The purpose of the protocol is to assist practitioners across all agencies to develop a robust response to children and young people who go missing. This will include preventing the child suffering harm and recovering them to a place of safety as soon as possible.

Children who are missing from home, care or their placement may be at greater risk of harm because of their basic need for food, safety, and shelter not being met and/or from the people with whom they may come into contact. Risks can include physical harm, criminal and sexual exploitation, drug abuse and involvement in a range of other criminal activities. Additional vulnerability due to their age, level of understanding or the significance and seriousness of the circumstances that led to the missing episode may also be present. **Missing episodes should always be treated as a clear indication that something is not right in a child's life.**

## 2. Scope

The protocol covers all children under the age of 18 who are absent or go missing, including:

- All children who go missing from their family home including those subject to a child in need or child protection plan.
- All children in the care of Bristol City Council placed in the local area.
- All children in the care of Bristol City Council placed outside of Bristol with a host local authority.
- All children in the care of a responsible local authority who are placed in Bristol City Council.
- All children admitted to hospitals and mental health units in Bristol City Council.
- Children from other Local Authority areas who are at risk of significant harm.

## 3. Related procedures

**The guidance in this protocol should not be read in isolation.** Additional guidance should be followed alongside this document and can be found at the Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership website <https://bristolsafeguarding.org/policies-and-guidance/> and at the South West Child protection procedures [www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/bristol](http://www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/bristol)

This is particularly significant when working with missing children who are at additional risk/vulnerability due to:

- Child sexual exploitation.
- Child criminal exploitation including being exploited to engage in criminal activity or drugs/County Lines.
- Domestic abuse.
- Self-harm.
- Children with disabilities.
- Extra familial abuse, and/or
- Previously trafficked children.

## 4. Agency leads for missing children

The Police Missing Persons Co-ordinator at the Police Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit can be emailed at [LSUDMBristol@avonandsomerset.police.uk](mailto:LSUDMBristol@avonandsomerset.police.uk)

The Police's Missing Children Thematic Lead is Superintendent Leanne Pook, and the Deputy Police Thematic Lead is Victoria Caple, Safeguarding Partnership Manager.

The local authority Missing Children Strategic Lead is the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service Manager

### **Barnardo's BACE - Barnardo's Against Child Exploitation**

Bristol City Council and Barnardo's have formed a strategic partnership in relation to responding to exploitation risk and children who are reported missing.

The current arrangement states that all MRC's will be completed by Barnardo's BACE in line with the timeframes outlined within this protocol.

The service also provides specialist one to one or group-based support for those young people who are deemed at high risk of both Sexual Exploitation and Criminal Exploitation.

Barnardo's BACE will:

- Complete MRC for all young people who are reported missing that live within Bristol or are in the care of Bristol City Council and placed out of area.
- Respond to MRC requests that a referred via First Response and LCS only. Placement, Parents or Professionals are not able to contact BACE directly to request the completion of an MRC.
- Triage all MRC requests to ensure a timely response.
- Only complete MRC for those children who are classified as 'missing' rather than 'absent' and anyone under the age of 18.
- MRC's will be recorded directly on to LCS to ensure they help to inform the wider safety plan for children and young people who are reported missing.
- Record if a MRC is refused.

Any comments or complaints should be directed to the BACE management group via the Old Market Inbox – [Oldmarketservices@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:Oldmarketservices@barnardos.org.uk) rather than to an individual BACE worker or Manager.

### **Criteria**

BACE complete MRC for:

- Children who are reported 'Missing' from home, placements or their main place of residence. The service will not complete an MRC if the child is deemed to be 'Absent'
- All children under the age of 18.
- All young people who reside in Bristol or are under the care of Bristol local authority who are placed out of county. The service will not complete MRC's as standard for children who are placed in Bristol and are the responsibility of another or neighbouring local authority.
- If a child or parent refuses an MRC, BACE will record this as refused and inform the allocated Social Care worker (Social Worker, FIF, Strengthening Families- if the child is open to Social Care). Good practice would be for this worker to explore the reasons the child was reported missing and incorporate steps to mitigate this and increase safety into their overall safety plan.

## **5. Definitions**

An **absent child** is a child in care whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be (absent) and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority (usually to the Social Worker or Supervising Social Worker).

A **missing child** is a child whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggest the child may be subject of crime or risk of harm to themselves or another and whose family or carers have reported them as missing to the police.

The **responsible local authority** is the local authority that is responsible for a child in care and their care planning.

The **host local authority** is the local authority in which a child in care is placed when placed out of the responsible local authority's area.

A child who has **absconded** is a child who is missing and is subject to a court order, such as curfew or bail conditions.

A **Police Prevention Interview** is carried out by the police as soon as possible and within 4 hours of a child being found to establish whether the child has come to any harm whilst missing. This is in line with police duties to 'protect life and investigate crime'.

A **Missing Return Conversation** is an in-depth interview with the child that is arranged by either the local authority or commissioned service and should be undertaken within 72 hours of a child returning. It is offered in all cases where the child is looked after, subject to a child protection or child in need plan.

## 6. Response from Parents/Carers to a missing child

Children may go missing from home or care for several reasons. Parents/carers are expected to undertake several actions to try and locate a child who is missing before reporting them to the Police **as long as it is safe to do so**:

- Fully search the accommodation and surrounding area/vehicles.
- Search the home for any important leads e.g., mobile phones, diaries, letters, notes explaining absence, email and website activity etc., which may inform the investigation and/or assist in protecting or recovering the child;
- Speak with other children in the family or who live in the home to obtain relevant information about the missing child.
- Make all appropriate enquiries regarding the whereabouts of the child. This may involve trying to contact the child themselves, friends, family, associates, appropriate locations, local hospitals, and the local police custody office.

**For children missing from home**, it is expected that the parent/carer will inform the Police without delay if they cannot be found. When referring to the Police any relevant information that might help to find or support the child should be shared, including:

- Description of the child including their clothing.
- Details of where the child was last seen and with whom.
- Details of social media use and profiles.
- Recent photograph.
- Relevant addresses, known associates and addresses frequented.
- Previous history of absenteeism and circumstances of where found.
- Circumstances under which the child is missing.
- Any factors that increase the risk to the child.

**For children in care**, it is expected that foster carers or care home managers will contact the allocated social worker, the Fostering Service or Emergency Duty Team (out of hours) for advice, before contacting the Police if the child cannot be found after all reasonable steps have been made to locate them. Reasonable steps include those which are listed above, i.e., fully search the accommodation etc.

If the Missing Child is a child in care, then there will be an expectation on the carers identified by the Local Authority, as there would be on any other individual with Parental Responsibility, to assist with

the efforts to locate the missing child. This includes undertaking physical checks of locations, contacting friends and being proactive to locate them.

## **7. Missing Response**

### **7.1 Initial Reporting**

If a child is missing and there are concerns for their safety, this should be reported to Police requesting assistance. 101 should be used for non-emergency calls and 999 for emergency calls where:

- There is information to indicate there is a danger to life or violence is being used / threatened.
- A crime is in progress;
- A person suspected of a crime is present.
- The Police have a duty to investigate Missing People (as outlined in the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Children's Act 1989):
- Where there is a concern that a missing person has been, or is likely to be, a victim of a serious crime (such as murder, abduction, rape, child sexual offences, false imprisonment, or serious assault).
- Where there is a concern that the person has suffered, or is likely to suffer, death, serious injury, degrading treatment or a prolonged period of pain or distress.
- Where there is a concern that a person is dangerous and poses an imminent risk of death or serious injury to another person; and
  
- Where the police have assumed a duty of care by agreeing to look for the missing person.

### **7.2 Police Response:**

The Police will respond to all reports of missing children using a nationally agreed continuum of risk ranging from low through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. In Bristol, Avon and Somerset Constabulary will only use the definitions 'medium' or 'high' for a missing child. The Police definition of 'missing' is based on continuous monitoring and a dynamic risk assessment<sup>1</sup> process. When receiving a missing person report in relation to a child, the Police will tailor their response to the circumstances and the risk assessment.

To establish the child's vulnerability, assess the level of risk, and determine an appropriate response the Police will seek to explore the following:

- the child's level of vulnerability (including any learning difficulties)
- whether the child is a risk themselves or others; and
- the child's physical vulnerability.

They will also explore any wider contextual concerns relating to:

- the child being a victim of a serious crime;
- the child being involved in any recent arguments or disagreements;
- the child having been the victim of a recent violent, domestic, homophobic or racist incident;
- self-harm;
- bullying;
- child sexual exploitation;
- criminal exploitation, modern day slavery / trafficking, so called Honour Based
- Violence, Forced Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation or Stalking;

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<sup>1</sup> College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice Missing Persons <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/>

- Whether the child is likely to visit someone who may be violent, sexually abusive, is known to pose a risk to children or likely to supply them with drugs or alcohol.

Levels of risk should be reviewed within discussions with Bristol City Council social workers and a shared assessment on the level of risk agreed by the agencies building on the information held across both services.

During the day missing investigations are managed by Operation Topaz and out of hours missing investigations are managed by neighbourhood response teams.

### 7.3 Searching for a Missing Child

In all cases, checks must be made to determine if the missing child is in hospital or custody. Consideration should also be given to checking educational establishments. In line with Authorised Professional Practice (APP), Police should immediately notify Bristol Social Care that a child has been reported missing, if:

**The child is known to be a child in care.** This information should be provided by the person reporting them missing.

**The child is open to a Social Worker in the Local Authority.** This information should also be provided by the person reporting them missing and is also available to the Police on Connecting Care, via the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit.

**The child has been assessed by Police as a High-Risk Missing Person,** either previously or currently.

These investigations will be made by the investigating team (Response or Investigations) as a routine part of the enquiry to locate the child (much like hospital or custody checks). They are likely to be in the form of a phone call to First Response 0117 903 6444 or EDT 01454 615165 (out of hours) or the named Social Worker if the details are available (this can be found on the Connecting Care system). This discussion needs to ascertain any current changes to the child's life that might have precipitated a missing episode, or any relevant historical information that will inform this investigation.

### 7.4 Multi-agency Child Protection Strategy Meeting

Where a child is believed to be the victim of significant harm whilst missing or on return from being missing a multi-agency Child Protection Strategy must be called within 24 hours. This will include situations such as where it is believed that the child has been the victim of forced marriage; trafficking; or where it is believed that children have gone missing as result of abuse or neglect. Police, health, or social care can request that children's social care convene a child protection strategy meeting.

In these situations, the KBSP Strategy Guidance should be followed (this multi-agency strategy guidance currently being updated and will be uploaded as a link in February 2025). Consideration should be given to involving key professionals in that child's life for example Youth Justice Service (YJS), education, Barnardos BACE. A child protection strategy will include agreeing:

- Any investigation approaches, including the creation of a 'Missing Trigger Plan'.
- Steps to ensure the safety of other children at risk.
- Agree a place of safety for a child upon them being found.
- Review medical involvement and consider whether child protection medical is required.
- Agree legal powers to be used (Police and/or social care) for example Emergency Protection Order/Forced Marriage Prevention Order/Secure Welfare Order.
- Information sharing with other Police forces and local authorities.



Situations requiring a Strategy Discussion, by their very nature, are likely to be high risk and therefore should be “owned” either by Police Investigations teams, or the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit, who would complete the Strategy Discussion. Neighbourhood officers can liaise with the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit for guidance and support in relation to this, if required.

For children missing for more than 72 hours a strategy meeting needs to be convened, but where risk is high, dynamic, and changing, this may need to be sooner. For a child who is missing for more than 72 hours the social workers need to initiate regular strategy meetings (for children who at the time of the missing episode a step-in needs to be requested) which include the wider professional network (Barnardo’s, SFT, Mentor and allocated investigating team) If the child continues to be missing regular missing strategy meetings should take place to review new information and intelligence, agree the current assessment of risk and, where appropriate, revise the response strategy. This should be held a minimum of weekly but for many children, where risk is dynamic and changing, this may be daily. All missing children will be discussed daily at the morning intelligence briefing to ensure there is ongoing oversight of all missing children including those missing for longer periods of time. This should be recorded on both the police Niche system and Social Care LCS/EHM system. If the child is not allocated the police should consider discuss the child’s situations with First Response if concerns for their safety escalate following the initial notification and agree whether there are any actions that the local authority could take to support the police in locating the child or agree a joint response to their return.

Bristol Local Authority is responsible for convening strategy meetings for at child who is suspected of suffering significant harm in their area including children in care placed in Bristol who have gone missing in Bristol.

Where a Bristol child in care is suspected of experiencing significant harm out of area, Bristol will request the relevant local authority convenes an urgent child protection strategy meeting to which Bristol social care is invited.

If any child protection concerns have arisen whilst the child was missing, the responsibility for making Section 47 enquiries is with the **Local Authority where the alleged abuse took place**, unless they are delegated to the placing local authority. In nearly all cases it will be most appropriate for Bristol local authority to lead on section 47 enquiries for their children in care placed out of area.

### **Multi-agency Child Protection Strategy Meeting**

The Police have responsibility for considering whether to use or inform the media of a missing child. However, when it is a child in care discussion must take place between senior representatives from the Police and local authority to agree a media strategy before any media announcements are made. Police and the local authority should agree who will inform the child’s parents of the planned media strategy unless to do so places the child at higher risk. Unless it is necessary the child should not be identified as a child in care.

In all other case where a child has an allocated local authority social worker, the Police should inform the child’s social worker and the child’s parents prior to any publicity.

### **8. Once a child is located**

If a child is located by their parent/carer or returns of their own accord the police need to be updated with this information as a priority.

In Bristol, we advocate that a trauma-informed response to a child being reported missing to the police is most appropriate. Children should receive a calm and welcoming response from parents/carers to encourage them to share why they did not feel able to return home.

There is advice for parents/carers of children who go missing on [PACE website](#) and the [Children’s Society website](#)

## **8.1 Police Action once the Child is Located:**

At the point the child is located there is a responsibility on Police to ensure that the person is safe and well and has an opportunity to disclose any relevant issues, including matters that can inform activity to help prevent them being harmed, or going missing again.

This is achieved by a Police Prevention Interview (PPI) (previously known as a 'Safe and Well' check) and will be completed by an officer/s from the team owning the Missing Investigation. This could be an officer from Response, Neighbourhoods or Investigations and in certain circumstances could also be the Police Missing Persons Coordinator. Information from the Police Prevention Interview will be documented on the police's Niche system and shared as relevant with appropriate partners. For children who are repeatedly reported missing it is good practice to identify a single officer who can undertake the Police Prevention Interviews so that they build a relationship with the young person. This should be identified in the Missing Trigger plan (see below).

Police must visit a child within 4 hours of their return to conduct a Police Prevention Interview, unless the child:

- Is a mental health patient and requiring health care.
- Is in the care of the local authority and a prior Prevention Check strategy has been agreed between the Missing Person Co-ordinator and Children's Social Care; or
- It is considered in the circumstances more appropriate to make a mutually convenient appointment for example it is the middle of the night, and the child has fallen asleep.

Authorised Professional Practice states that a Police Prevention Interview should:

- Identify any ongoing risk or factors which may contribute to the person going missing again.
- Find out useful information that may indicate harm suffered by the returning person.
- Identify details that may help trace the person in the event of a future missing episode.
- Check for any indications that the person has suffered harm.
- Identify where and with whom they have been.
- Give them an opportunity to disclose any offending against or by them.
- Gather as much information as possible to inform any prevent work required.
- If information is disclosed indicating that the person has been harmed or is at risk of harm, appropriate action should be taken.
- Missing children may be unwilling to engage with this process. If this is the case, it is important to record their demeanour, physical state, clothing, and any other factors that may be relevant to any ongoing investigation of a crime, their care, and safeguarding plans.
- If a child is reported missing more than three times in a 28-day period, a Missing Trigger Plan should be created to inform professionals of the actions to be taken should they be reported missing again. This is a joint responsibility between Police (normally the Missing Persons Coordinator, with support from other partners as necessary), and the Local Authority. It will be stored on both Niche and LCS/EHM to inform any future missing episodes and should be updated, as necessary.

Every effort should be made to visit young people on every occasion that they have been missing from home. Where a person goes missing frequently, particularly from a care setting, it may not be practicable to see them every time they return. An example of this may be where they go missing on several occasions each day and it would be more effective to see them just once in each day, at a convenient time.

## **8.2 Information Sharing once a child has been found.**

The Police Missing Persons Coordinator will inform First Response of all missing children reports within one working day via secure email. The missing episode is uploaded onto LCS which alerts the social worker (for children who are open) and Barnardos to initiate a missing return conversation.

The Police will send the Missing Person's Report to the child's education setting and health within one working day. Education and health providers should use this information to obtain or give appropriate support to the child and promoting the engagement with education and health provision as a protective factor.

It is important that the Police receive an outcome and detail of the independent Missing Return Conversation (MRC) from Barnardos (including if the child declined) so they can jointly factor this into any future response and risk management. Barnardo's BACE should download the form and send it to the [MissingPersons@avonandsomerset.police.uk](mailto:MissingPersons@avonandsomerset.police.uk) mailbox, for onward sharing with the Missing Persons Coordinator and Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit Decision Makers as required. Updates from MRCs will be added to the Safeguarding Management Occurrence for the child, and/or the Missing Person's Report for the relevant missing episode.

If the child discloses information to their parent/carers on return, or as part of Police Prevention Interview or MRC which suggests that they have been a victim of serious crime (e.g., child exploitation or trafficking) then an urgent Child Protection Strategy Meeting should be held, and police should take steps to secure any evidence.

### **8.3 Missing Return Conversations (formerly Return Home Interview)**

Children do not like the language of 'Return Home Interview', as this implies they will be interrogated by professionals. Some children will also not view themselves as having been missing, particularly those who see themselves as having been with their friends or who have developed strategies for being away from home to manage their emotional regulation. Even when children do not perceive themselves as having been missing this does not mean they have not been at risk whilst out of the home or have not been harmed. Many young people who run away or go missing need to build up trust with somebody before they will discuss in depth the circumstances that led to the missing episode. In Bristol we use relationship-based practice, and we should show curiosity and care when we speak to children about why they were reported missing and what can be done to reduce the risk associated with this. Practitioners should use their engagement and assessment skills to have a conversation with a child about their experiences of going missing.

All children should have the opportunity to have a missing return conversation (known as an Independent Return Home Interview in statutory guidance). This is a more in-depth conversation than a Police Prevention Interview and will be carried out by Barnardo's BACE. If a child or parent/carer explicitly requests an alternative professional or refuses the MRC, BACE will record this as refused and inform the allocated social care worker (Social Worker, FIF, Strengthening Families-if the child is open). Good practice would be for this worker to explore the reasons the child was reported missing and incorporate steps to mitigate this and increase safety into their overall safety plan.

Missing return conversations should explore the contributory (push/pull) factors that led to a child going missing as well as any risk and vulnerability factors which increase the risk of them going missing again. Research has shown that children who are reported missing are at increased risk of having been harmed at home and/or in the community. Missing return conversations should include exploring with the child:

- whether they have been hurt or harmed.
- any concerns around Sexual Exploitation, Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Child Criminal Exploitation
- any concerns about culturally harmful practices (e.g. Forced Marriage, so called Honour Based Violence and/or Female Genital Mutilation)
- any harm the child may have experienced in their peer relationships.
- any offending behaviour and/or substance misuse.
- whether the child has had any contact with people who could be considered to pose a risk to them.

- the frequency of the missing episodes.
- the location and contextual circumstances of the missing episodes.
- any on-going risk or vulnerability factors that may impact on the child going missing again, and
- any risk or vulnerability factors the child may be experiencing at home or in their placement or in their education and social settings.

To do this, practitioners may find tools such as the 'Runaway road', a form of words and pictures which allows young people to talk through their missing episode and the decisions and influences that occurred on route, or the Karen Triesman Therapeutic Treasure Deck helpful for opening conversation.

Even if a child does not feel able to share any information about what led them to be reported missing to the police, a missing return conversation provides the opportunity to explore alternative strategies to help prevent further missing occurrences and undertake risk reduction interventions on how risk can be reduced when the child is out of the home, for example identifying safe locations, peers or guardians in the community, alcohol/drug use safety strategies or supporting the child to build risk identification skills so they are able to recognise a situation that is escalating or becoming unsafe. It can also determine if any referrals for services are required. If this information is relevant, it can then be used to inform the Missing Trigger Plan.

It is a statutory requirement that the Missing Return Conversation should be completed within 72 hours of the police notifying that the child has been found. The missing return conversation should be held in a neutral place, where the child feels safe. If there are issues with contacting the family or the child's wider professional network Barnardo's need to liaise with the child's case coordinator e.g. social worker or early help worker. If concerns remain the escalation policy needs to be followed.

Missing Return Conversations should be written up against the relevant missing record on LCS. It should include intelligence such as nicknames, methods of transport, locations as well as details of any disclosures. A copy should be downloaded and sent to the police Missing Persons Coordinator as part of the safeguarding response for the child. Practitioners should always be open and honest with children about how their information will be used to try and keep them safe. Information needs to be shared sensitively ensuring that information is relevant, concise, and timely. Where there is particularly sensitive information on the MRC a Barnardo's manager should provide a level of oversight about the need for the information to be shared.

*See also Appendix A: Missing Return Conversations – Question Ideas*

#### **8.4 Child not known to social care.**

For a child with no allocated social worker First Response will receive the notification from the Police and create a missing person record. First Response will assess whether a service is required using the Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership Threshold Guidance.

For all children with no allocated social worker the contact information about the missing episode will be triaged by First Response and sent to Barnardo's for a Missing Return Conversation. All children will be offered a Missing Return Conversation as this is an opportunity to provide early support.

#### **8.5 Child in Need or with a Child Protection Plan**

The missing episode is put on LCS by First Response. This information is accessed by Barnardo's. The Barnardo's worker allocated the missing episode is required to make contact and offer a return home conversation to the child within 72 hours.

## 8.6 (a) Children we care for

The missing episode is put on LCS by First Response. This information is accessed by Barnardo's. The Barnardo's worker allocated the missing episode is required to make contact and offer a return home conversation to the child within 72 hours.

For children we care for the Independent Reviewing Officer will be automatically informed of every child who is reported as missing through the uploaded episode on LCS and will maintain oversight of the local authority's response and the suitability of the care plan.

## 8.6 (b) Risk Management Plans/Meetings

Where a pattern of going missing is established, the child's care plan should be accompanied by a Risk Management Plan and Child's Safety Plan. The Risk Management Plan is a multi-agency plan for minimising the likelihood of the child going missing in the future and should be devised through multi-agency Risk Management meetings (see below) held at least 6-weekly. The Police's Missing Trigger Plan will also be updated through Risk Management meetings. The child's placement plan should reflect the risk management plans and Child in Care reviews will regularly review the suitability of the plan and the level of risk. *See Appendix C: Risk Management Meetings, Missing Response Plans and Intervention Strategy.*

Where a child in care has been missing from their home for more than 48 **Hours the relevant Head of Service must be informed by the relevant Service Manager. The Director of Children and Families must be informed of any who is missing and assessed to be high risk by the relevant Head of Service.**

The Director of Children and Families will receive weekly reports on children who have gone missing from care.

## 9. Repeat Missing Children

It is important that professionals do not become complacent about the level of harm a child is experiencing when they are reported missing, even if this is for short periods and the child has always returned. The chronology of missing episodes should be used to inform the assessment of risk and the likelihood that this is an indicator that the child is being exploited. If it is suspected that missing episodes are linked to abuse in the home, child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, radicalisation or serious youth violence, a Child Protection Strategy Meeting should be held to agree the immediate action required to safeguard the child, the investigation/disruption approach, and the response to the abuse. When a child is known to be at risk of exploitation and a plan is in place to reduce this (e.g. Child in Need Plan, Risk Management Plan or Child Protection Plan), but their missing episodes increase, change, or sustain at a concerning pattern, a child protection strategy meeting should be called.

If a child we care for goes missing repeatedly a Risk Management Meeting should be held with relevant professionals, parents/carers, and the child where appropriate, to agree a risk management plan to work together to reduce the risks faced by the child. In most instances this will be following a child protection strategy meeting. The plan should include who will offer the child a missing return conversation in order that they might begin to build a trusted relationship with that person and where possible identify a lead Police officer for that child. *For further guidance see Appendix C: Risk Management Meetings, Missing Response Plans and Intervention Strategy.*

A Risk Management Meeting about a child who is regularly reported missing should include at least the social worker or the lead professional, parent/carer, Barnardo's practitioner (if open for one to

one support), and the Police Missing Persons Coordinator to review the pattern of missing episodes, share information and intelligence to identify any people who may be harming the child in the

community, and agree intervention and support to reduce the risk of the child being reported missing again.

As part of the risk management plan the Police will agree a Missing Trigger Plan. Ideally this will also include the parent/carer and the child where possible. The Missing Trigger Plan will assist in the police investigation to locate the child, returning them to a safe location once found and should highlight any potential evidential considerations. Trigger plans should be stored electronically on Niche and LCS systems, at the point they are implemented, with amended versions uploaded as required. These plans will also be shared with the relevant Police Neighbourhood Beat Manager for local awareness and safeguarding, which may then trigger involvement at Local Tasking Meetings.

Police contribution to Trigger plans should be provided through the Police Missing Persons Coordinator. This may include the following (but is not restricted to):

- Agreement on timescales, methods and circumstances for when a child is reported missing, e.g. duration of time lapsed past a curfew before reporting, use of 101/999 etc.;
- Contribution to the partner expectations of those with Parental Responsibility for 'appropriate actions and enquiries' prior to contacting Police;
- Consideration and identification of a named officer, where appropriate;
- Evidential lines of enquiry to be considered following a missing episode, e.g. forensic opportunities or intelligence;
- Agreement of appropriate place for child to be returned to when found and arrangement for any police checks;
- Agreement for required information markers/flags on child's Niche or Storm records;
- Best approaches for communicating with the child;
- Best method for managing ongoing risk.

## 10. Missing Oversight Meeting

The missing oversight meeting chaired by the Service Manager for Safer Options and includes Barnardos, Police Missing Coordinator, Locality and FiF managers, Through Care managers and Safer Options will meet fortnightly to review the response to repeat missing children and identify areas for improvement for individual children or across the system. This meeting has its own terms of reference.

## 11. Bristol Children in care in out of authority placements

An Out of Authority Placement is a placement of a child by one local authority:

- In a residential placement that is located in another local authority area, (the host authority);  
or
- With foster parents who live in another local authority area (the host authority).

Before a **Bristol child is placed in an out of authority placement**, the Placement Team should check with the residential / foster care agency provider that local area missing children's protocols are in place and are appropriate arrangements for safeguarding Bristol children. As part of the placement planning meeting, the placement provider should be fully informed and an agreement reached regarding what actions are required to be taken if a child is reported as absent, missing or away from placement without authorisation from their placement. Missing return home conversations for children Bristol care for who are placed out of area will be undertaken by Barnardo's. A missing return conversation must be completed within 72 hours of the child being found / returning. For a child placed out of area a copy of the MRC record needs to be sent to the relevant missing person coordinator in the local police force area where the child has gone missing from.

In line with statutory requirements, the social worker must inform the host authority of a child in care moving into their area and their child in care plan.

Where a child has been reported missing before, the local Police force should be informed that they are being moved into the area. Avon and Somerset Police will do this once informed of the move by Bristol City Council. They will share relevant information including an up-to-date Missing Trigger plan.

The placement provider /agency should contact the child's social worker or Bristol's Out of Hours Service and the children's placement team as soon as it is confirmed that a child is absent, missing or away from placement without authorisation. EDT will inform First Response the next morning who will create a missing record on the child's file.

The child's social worker must inform the child's parent or any other person with parental responsibility within 24 hours of the child being reported as absent, missing or away from placement without authorisation.

## **12. Child in care where Bristol is the host Local Authority**

If a child from another Local Authority is placed within Bristol and goes missing, this practice guidance and protocol should be followed. The placing authority and the placement provider should liaise regularly and take all reasonable and practical steps to establish the whereabouts of the child. This will include contacting any persons whom he/she is likely to be associating with and arranging for those places to be checked. If the location of the child is known or suspected, the placing authority and placement provider must liaise to agree responsibility for locating and returning the child. However, if there are thought to be specific issues of safety in returning the child, then action should be agreed between the Police and Children's Services.

First Response will provide the missing report from the Police to the relevant social work team for the child. The allocated social worker will be responsible for arranging the missing return conversation as they will have a relationship with the child. Should the placing authority request that Bristol undertake this conversation on their behalf, and this is agreed to be appropriate, this can be arranged through First Response and will be coordinated by Barnardo's.

Placing authorities should provide copies of missing return conversations (Return Home Interviews) to First Response and the Lighthouse Police Missing Persons Coordinator so that these can be recorded on the child's LCS record and relevant safeguards put in place by police and patterns and trends identified.

## **13. Children in care who may have been trafficked from abroad.**

Children in care who have been exploited and trafficked are at high risk of going missing, and unaccompanied migrant or asylum-seeking children whose whereabouts cannot be established after becoming a child in care should be treated as potential victims of trafficking.

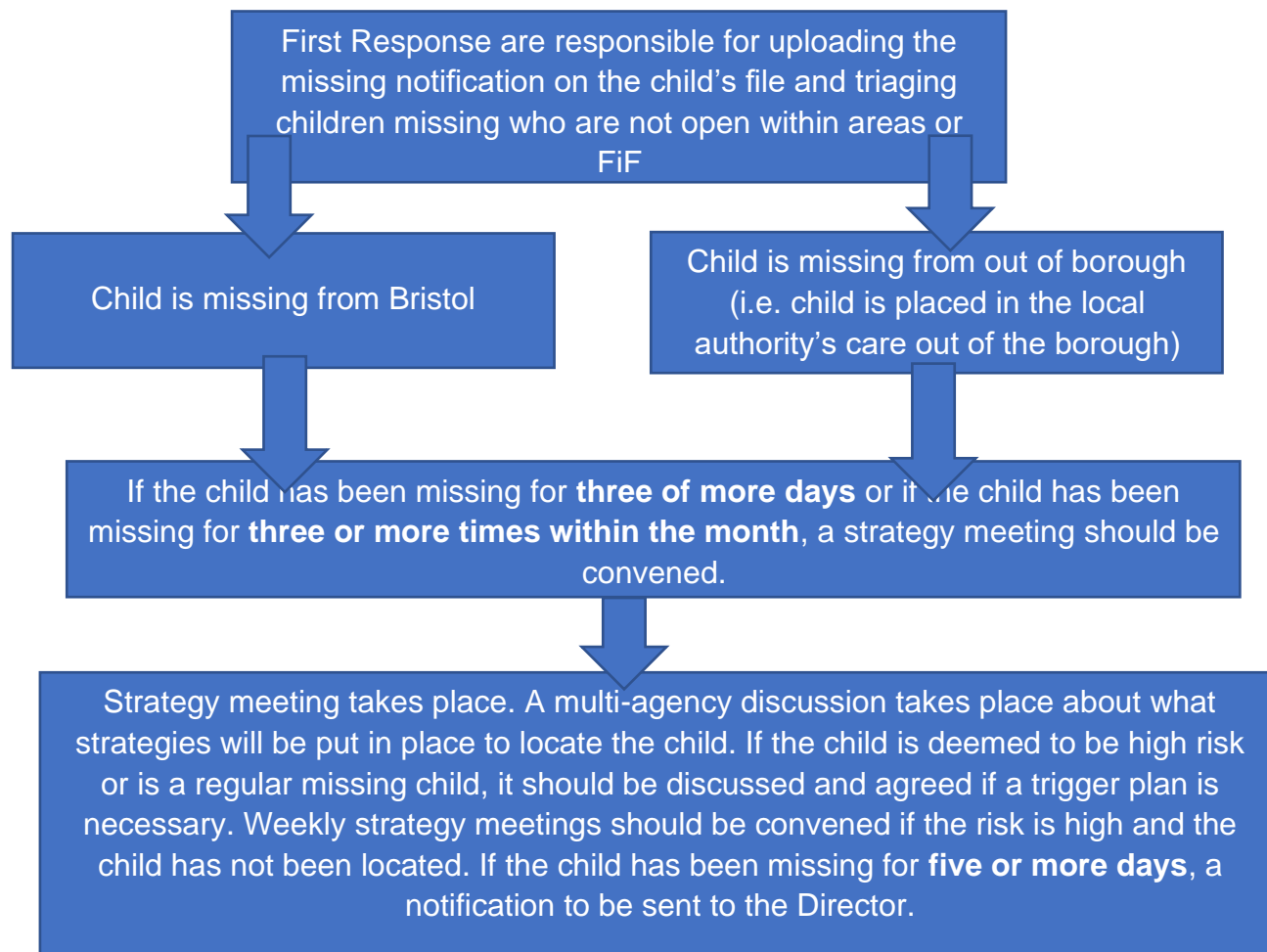
Proportionate safeguarding measures should be put in place to minimise the risk of the child going missing from care, or from being contacted by those who seek to exploit them. These will need to give consideration to the child's accommodation location only being shared on a need-to-know basis.

Further information can be found in the KBSP Procedures Manual section *Children from Abroad, including Victims of Modern Slavery, Trafficking and Exploitation*.

## Appendix 1 - Child missing flowchart

### Operational Activity - Child Missing: Response

Whereabouts of the child unknown. The child has been reported missing from Bristol to the police. For children missing from home or placed in Bristol, this information is shared with First Response daily by the Police. For Looked After Children placed out of borough, notifications are received from the Out of Hours Emergency Duty Team (EDT).





## Operational Activity - Child Returned: Response

The professional network has been notified that the child has been located (this notice may come from the police, family, social worker, placement or another professional)

First Response, will update the missing notification on LCS to reflect that the child has been located and notify Barnardo's

Barnardo's will assign the MRC (children missing from home and care will have the MRC undertaken by Barnardo's)

Once the MRC is completed, this will be shared with the social worker and will be uploaded on to LCS by Barnardo's Any significant issues raised will be shared in an email to the social worker

The MRC should inform the child's plan and provide further information and intel to the professional network to assist with reducing the risk of harm to the child. The child's views, wishes and feelings should be taken into consideration as part of this process

A **missing child** is a child whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggest the child may be subject of crime or risk of harm to themselves or another and whose family or carers have reported them as missing to the police.

## **Appendix B: Suggested opening questions for Missing Return Conversation**

These are some questions you might use when you speak to young people who have been missing. They are just some ideas and you may just pick a few of them, always concentrating on the responses you get and building on what you know about the young person and your connection with them.

### **Problem Free Talking – think about connecting with the young person and use what you already know about the young person to start off the conversation.**

How have things been since you got back? What have you noticed?  
Did you have any ideas about us meeting today? What did you imagine we might talk about?  
If I were to be helpful to you right now, what would I be doing?  
Have you been seeing anyone else since you got back? How's that been?  
How would I know that our conversation was going well or not going well? What would I notice?  
What questions should I be asking you if we were going to talk about what happened? Do you want me to talk about it with you or tell you what I know first?

### **Opening spaces – think about asking questions that help to open up conversation and create connections.**

When you went missing, we were really worried about your safety – does that make sense to you?  
What do you think we were most worried about?  
What would be important for us to know about what's happened to you whilst you were away from home?  
Who missed you the most do you think? Did this surprise you?  
What was it like for you while you were away?  
What do you think I most need to know about? Is there a way in which it's okay for you to tell me about this?  
Who was on your mind when you were away? Did you think going away was helpful?  
Were you thinking about leaving again what might you say to yourself?  
What could your carer/parents do differently when you want to leave?  
Do you know of other people who go missing? Do you think they see things like you do?  
What are the bad points about being reported missing? Who can you talk to about that?

### **Future Orientated Questions – think about asking questions that are linked to the future moving away from the present difficulties future together.**

Who could you speak to in future before leaving?  
If you do go, what are you going to do to keep yourself safe?  
What ideas do you have about who can help you stay? What do they need to be doing?  
Where are the safe places that you go and hang out? Where are the unsafe places?  
If you had a friend who was in a similar situation to you or going missing what would you want them to know about and do? What would you share with them?

## **Appendix C: Legal Powers and Duties**

It is permissible to physically intervene to prevent a young person running away from care, however any action will need to be justified by an assessment of the risk that a child might experience and physical intervention does not offer a long-term risk management strategy. Building trusting and respectful relationships with children is paramount.

### **Recovery Order**

The local authority may apply to the Court for a Recovery Order (under Section 50 (1) of the Children Act 1989[11]) when a child is subject to an Interim or Full Care Order and it is clear that the child is in immediate danger of Significant Harm.

Has been unlawfully taken away or is being unlawfully kept away from the responsible person;  
Has run away or is staying away from the responsible person; or is missing.

A Recovery Order:

Operates as a direction to a person able to do so to produce the child on request to an authorised person;  
Authorises the removal of the child by an authorised person;  
Requires a person who has information as to the child's whereabouts to disclose it, if so requested, to a constable or an officer of the court;  
Authorises a constable to enter any premises specified in the order and search for the child, using reasonable force if necessary.

### **Emergency Protection Order:**

Under Section 44 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority can apply for an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) where there are reasonable grounds for believing there is an immediate risk of Significant Harm to a child.

Under S48 (3) an Emergency Protection Order authorises the applicant to enter premises specified by the order and search for the child with respect to whom the order is made.

Under s44(1)(a) the court may only grant the order under this ground if it is satisfied that there is reasonable cause to believe that the child is likely to suffer Significant Harm if either:

They are not removed to accommodation provided by or on behalf of the applicant; or  
They do not remain in the place where they are being accommodated.

### **Power to use Reasonable Force or Physical Restraint:**

If a constable has reasonable cause to believe that a child would otherwise be likely to suffer Significant Harm, the constable may remove the child to a place of safety and keep the child there (S46 Children Act 1989).

The Children Act legislation implies the power to use reasonable force in appropriate circumstance to take a child into police protection or to keep the child at a place of safety (Home Office Circular 44/2003).

### **Police Powers of Protection:**

Under Section 46 of the Children Act 1989, the police have the power to remove children to a safe location for up to 72 hours to protect them from "significant harm". Police do not require a court order to take such a step.

## **Power of Entry to Recover Child/ Young Person:**

### **Under S17 (1) (e) Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984:**

A constable can use reasonable force, but in some circumstances a Recovery Order would be required to enter premises. The welfare of the child/young person is paramount and where there are grounds to believe a vulnerable missing child/young person is on premises and access is being refused, there should be no hesitation in gaining entry under this provision. The reason why there is no power of entry under the Children's Act 1989 to take a child/young person into police protection is because the power under S17 (1)(e) was considered sufficient.

### **Under S17 (1) (b) Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984:**

A Police Officer can use reasonable force to enter premises to arrest someone for an indictable offence. Therefore, where there is another person on the premises who is preventing access, consideration should be given to entering to arrest that individual for abduction of a child contrary to S2 Abduction Act 1984 or S49 Children Act 1989.

### **Child Abduction Warning Notices:**

These can be served on individuals who allow children and young people to stay at their homes without informing the parent or carer, or directly or indirectly encourage them to go missing and stay away from their carers.

Avon and Somerset Police complies with Authorised Professional Practice (APP) and has established a local policy and procedure to provide clear standards and guidelines, to reduce repeat incidents of children and young people going missing from the care of those responsible for their welfare and reduce the risk that this exposes them to.

The issue of a Child Abduction Warning Notice, on those over the age of 18 in relation to a child or young person under the age of 16 years (under 18 if in local authority care) is a safeguarding measure and may also serve as a disruption tactic to prevent association with suspects / associates who are believed to place the child or young person at risk.

The serving of a Child Abduction Warning Notices is a formal indication of the parent or carer's wish that they do not want the child to associate or visit the person named in the notice.

### **Breach of the Peace:**

Under Common Law, the police have a power of entry to prevent a breach of the peace.

### **Warrant:**

Under S48(9) Children Act 1989, a warrant can be obtained authorising a constable to use reasonable force to enter and search premises if a person trying to exercise powers under an Emergency Protection Order is being prevented from doing so by being refused entry to those premises.

## **Appendix D: Risk Management Meetings, Missing Response Plans and Intervention Strategy**

### **Areas for consideration at a Risk Management meeting:**

Consider the 'push and pull factors for the child, which are assessed to be influencing absent, missing or away from placement without authorisation occurrences

Review the action taken to reduce the risk to the child, their vulnerability and future absent /missing occurrences.

Review missing and absent occurrences, to determine if there is a pattern to the occurrences, who the child visits /associates with when absent/missing/away from placement without authorisation

Identify what action now needs to be taken, by who and timescales.

Identify the most appropriate person to undertake Police Prevention Interviews

/Missing Return Conversations with the child when they are found or return

Review what the child has shared in their PPI/ Missing Return Conversations and take what the child and their parent /carer is saying into account.

Consider whether it is appropriate and safe to return the child to their home address and consider if there is a need for alternative accommodation to be identified

Agree a Trigger/Find Me Plan

Accurate decisions of records should be made.

### **A Risk Management Plan should include:**

An assessment of the harm that the child is experiencing;

A reporting strategy – which should include guidance to parents/carers as to when to report the child as absent and when to report them as missing;

Outline the minimum enquiries to be conducted by the local authority, parents or carers, prior to reporting the child as missing;

Recommendations on the minimum enquiries to be conducted by the Police;

A missing return conversation strategy, and

An intervention approach to address long-term risk and vulnerability factors.

Missing interventions seek to reduce the risks that a child may be exposed to and prevent the likelihood of further incidents of the child being absent / missing / away from placement without authorisation.

### **Common intervention strategies include:**

Disrupting the child's contact with adults or peers suspected of being involved in grooming, abuse, coercion, trafficking, violence, use and supply of illegal substances, illegal activities and exploitation;

Gathering evidence to prosecute those suspected of being involved in grooming, abuse, coercion, trafficking, violence, use and supply of illegal substances, illegal activities and exploitation;

Listening and taking account of the child's wishes and feelings;

Promoting positive relationships with family, friends and carers;

Identifying ways of physically protecting the child;

Ensuring contact is maintained with a child whilst absent;

Enhancing the return procedure to ensure it is a positive experience;

Setting clear boundaries and developing contracts regarding expectations and responsibilities;

Motivating positive behaviour;

Empowering the parent / carer;

Building the child's self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth through the provision of positive activities;

Raising awareness of the risks associated with running / staying away or being missing;

Meeting any physical, emotional, mental health needs the child might have;

Working with the carers or parents to make the child's home a place where they want to be;

Working with education and training providers to meet the child's needs; and • Providing specialist support through multi agency partnerships.