



Kingston and Richmond
Safeguarding Children Partnership

KRSCP Joint Protocol for Safeguarding Missing Children

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1. Introduction

Children who go missing from home or care are at increased risk of harm. The reasons why children go missing are complex and frequently involve a number of push and pull factors which should not be viewed in isolation from a child's home circumstances or experience in care. Every missing episode warrants professional attention, and practitioners need to offer a consistent and coherent response to ensure the child is protected from harm.

This protocol is designed to support an effective and collaborative safeguarding response from all agencies involved when a child goes missing from home or care. It provides guidance for assessing both the risk of the child going missing and the risk to the child when he or she is missing. The protocol describes the appropriate actions that agencies should take to locate the child, support his or her return to home or care, and to identify issues which caused, and may continue to cause, the child to go missing. The protocol applies to all children that are absent or go missing, including:

- All children aged under 18 who go missing from their family home
- All children looked-after by the local authority placed within and beyond the local area
- All young people for whom the local authority has continuing responsibility as care leavers.

This protocol relates to protecting all children who go missing whether they go missing from home or care; however, the protocol contains additional guidance covering the specific actions which need to be taken when children go missing from a care setting.

2. Status of this protocol

This protocol has been approved by the Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership (KRSCP) i. It has been written to comply with the statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care (2014) and reflects the national Police guidance on the management, investigation and recording of missing persons (2016). It should be read and implemented by all practitioners and managers working with children who are at risk of going missing from home and care.

It is intended that this protocol will assist in the development of preventative services for children who are at risk of going missing, as well as the development of effective responses to missing children. An annual review of the effectiveness of this protocol will be commissioned by the KRSCP.

The protocol should be read in conjunction with the following statutory guidance and procedures:

- Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care (2014)
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015) and related guidance
- Children Act 1989 and related guidance
- Children Act 2004 and related guidance
- London Child Protection Procedures and Practice Guidance (2015)
- ACPO guidance on management, recording and investigation of missing persons (2010)
- ACPO interim guidance on the management of missing persons (2013)
- Metropolitan Police Missing Persons Standard Operating Procedure (2016)
- Safeguarding children who may have been trafficked (2011)
- The national minimum standards for residential and fostering agencies (2011)

Professionals should be aware that going missing may be an indicator that a child is at risk of, or experiencing exploitation, all professionals should therefore be aware of the indicators of exploitation and access the Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership (KRSCP) policies and procedures for information and guidance <https://kingstonandrichmondsafeguardingchildrenpartnership.org.uk/>

Children who are missing from education are not necessarily missing from home or care; however, children missing from school or their education placement can be an indicator of other risk factors. Any incidences of children missing education should be appropriately investigated in line with the Children Missing Education Strategy <https://kingstonandrichmondsafeguardingchildrenpartnership.org.uk/>

3. Definitions

The following definitions have been used throughout this protocol:

Absent	A child who is not at a place where he or she is expected or required to be - see paragraph 5.1 in this protocol for further information
Absent from placement without authorization	A child looked after whose whereabouts are known but who is not at his or her placement or the place he or she is expected to be and the carer has concerns about the child's safety and wellbeing.
Care leaver	An eligible, relevant or former relevant child as defined by the Children Act 1989.

<p>Child</p>	<p>Any person who has not yet reached his or her eighteenth birthday; the term child or children therefore represents both children and young people.</p>
<p>Contextual Safeguarding & Exploitation</p>	<p>Exploitative situations, contexts or relationships where a child is coerced forced or threatened into committing a criminal offence, performing a sexual act and can include the following circumstances: Sexual Exploitation, Criminal Exploitation, Drug Exploitation, County Lines, Serious Youth Violence, Knife Crime, and Harmful Sexual Behaviour. These circumstances may be push and/or pull factors leading to missing episodes.</p>
<p>Host local authority</p>	<p>The local authority in whose area a looked-after child is accommodated when he or she is placed outside of the responsible local authority's area.</p>
<p>Child looked after</p>	<p>A child who is looked-after by a local authority by reason of a Care Order or voluntarily accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.</p>
<p>Missing</p>	<p>A child whose whereabouts cannot be established and has been reported to the Police– see paragraph 5.1 in this protocol for further information.</p>
<p>Responsible local authority</p>	<p>The local authority that is responsible for a looked-after child's care and care planning. In Kingston and Richmond this responsibility has been devolved to Achieving for Children, a social enterprise company owned by the two local authorities and commissioned to deliver their children's services.</p>

<p>Trafficking</p>	<p>Any child transported for exploitative reasons is considered to be a trafficking victim. Children may be trafficked internally within the UK or externally to and from other countries.</p>
<p>Trigger Plan</p>	<p>A Police Safety plan which effectively assesses the likelihood of a young person being at risk of future missing episodes. The information gathered is used to create a plan and action plan. The trigger plan is used to locate them as quickly as possible, supports information sharing, and is to be shared with other Police forces, if/when the young person moves to another area. The trigger plan also facilitates the response from Police being within the MET Police Missing Person (MISPER) Unit (MPU) at the point of the missing notification, rather than held by Response Unit for the first 24-48 hours. Please note: The MPU is not a 24/7 unit therefore the missing person may be held with response team especially if reported missing overnight.</p>

4. Guiding principles

This protocol should be read as guidance as it cannot anticipate or reflect every situation. All practitioners working with children in a professional capacity should use their professional judgment to determine the actions necessary to protect and safeguard the wellbeing of a child. The following principles should be adopted by all agencies.

- The safety and wellbeing of the child is paramount. The shared aim of all agencies is to reduce the incidences of all children who go missing. Children who go missing are at more risk of harm and each missing episode is potentially serious. The reasons for their absence are often complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from the child’s home circumstances or their experience in care. Every missing episode should receive appropriate attention from the professionals involved with the child who should work together to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on his or her return.
- When a child goes missing from home or care the shared aim of all agencies is to prevent that child suffering harm by locating and returning the child to safety as soon as possible. The Police will act on any report of a missing or absent child where there is an assessed risk to the child’s safety or wellbeing.
- Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes. Child protection procedures will be initiated whenever there are concerns that a child may be at risk of significant harm. Interventions for looked-after children must be driven by and reflected in the placement information record and in the child’s care plan. Interventions must also be informed by effective return interviews.
- Statutory guidance outlines that every missing child who returns to home or care will receive an independent return interview to determine the reasons for

their missing episodes and the associated risks. The views expressed by the child in the return interview will be taken seriously by all agencies.

- Agencies will share data, information and intelligence through multi-agency meetings in order to better understand and reduce the risks to children who go missing through strengthened preventative work and interventions.
- The national minimum standards for children's homes and fostering services require all providers to have in place procedures for when a child is missing from their care setting. These procedures must be compatible with this protocol. The reporting of a child looked after as a missing person should not be used as a sanction against the child.
- Agencies will take responsibility for ensuring their workforce is trained and skilled in working with children who go missing. This will help build professional confidence, improve working practices and enable practitioners to meet their responsibilities to the highest standard.

5. Definitions of absent and missing

This protocol uses the definitions for 'missing children' and 'absent children' set out in the Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) Guidance on the Management, Investigation and Recording of Missing Persons (2010 and 2013). This definition has been adopted by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and informs their policy and standard operating procedures for the investigation of missing persons, which was updated in February 2016.

5.1 Definition of a missing child

A child is considered to be missing if his or her whereabouts cannot be established, whatever the circumstances of his or her disappearance, and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the child may be the subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.

5.2 Definition of an absent child

A child is absent when he or she is not at a place where he or she is expected or required to be. The absent category will include cases where children are not presently where they are supposed to be and where there is no apparent risk of harm. Absent cases will be monitored by the Police with consideration given to escalating the case to the missing category where there is a change in circumstances that has increased the level of risk to the child. Where a child has been identified as at risk of sexual exploitation he or she should not be considered as absent, but as missing. All children under the age of 13 reported to Police, whether "absent" or "missing", will be classified due to risk issues as "missing".

6. Agency roles and responsibilities

Local agencies must work together to identify and assess the risks to children who are missing from home and care, and to analyse data and intelligence for patterns that indicate particular concerns and risks. They should also work collaboratively to ensure appropriate measures are in place to prevent children from going missing.

6.1 Roles and responsibilities of the local authority

The Children Act 2004 (Section 13) requires local authorities and other named statutory partners to make arrangements to ensure that their functions are discharged in order to safeguard and protect the welfare of children. This includes planning to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do, most often by meeting with the family and child. Local authorities should name a senior children's services manager as responsible for monitoring policies and performance relating to children who go missing from home and care. The responsible manager should use all available resources to understand the risks and issues facing children missing from home and care and ensure local practice is effective in dealing with the issue. Local authority children's services in Kingston and Richmond upon Thames are delivered by Achieving for Children.

6.2 Roles and responsibilities of the Police

The Police are the lead agency for investigating and finding missing children. The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) is responsible for recording every report of a missing child and for conducting an assessment of the risk to that child and the wider public as a result of their disappearance. The MPS will actively investigate all missing children and will conduct regular reviews of unsolved missing children investigations including an on-going re-assessment of the risks to these children.

6.3 Roles and responsibilities of the Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership(KRSCP)

The KRSCP is responsible for considering the safeguarding risks and issues associated with children going missing from home and care. This requires partner agencies from children's social care, the Police, health, education and other services to work effectively together to prevent children from going missing and to act when they do. The KRSCP must ensure that there is an up-to-date and appropriate protocol in place which clearly sets out how agencies will respond to children who run away or go missing in the local area. The KRSCP should receive and scrutinise regular reports from the local authority and the Police analysing data on children missing from home and care; this should include an analysis of their return interviews and the effectiveness of their measures to prevent children from going missing. In, Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership the Quality Assurance Sub-Group is responsible for testing the effectiveness of local arrangements for missing children.

7. Risk Assessment Framework

The MPS are responsible for assessing and classifying the degree of risk when a child goes missing from home or care. The MPS will prioritise all incidents of children missing from home or care as low, medium or high risk in accordance with the risk assessment framework set out below. The Police Duty Officer (Inspector) will agree the initial risk grading of a missing child within 2 hours of the time of origin. This will follow appraisal by the initial investigating officer. Merlin (Police notification) reports will be created in all cases within 4 hours of the time of origin.

7.1 High risk

A missing child incident would be categorised as high risk where the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds to suspect that the child is in danger through their own vulnerability or may have been the victim of a serious crime. The high risk category would also be used where there are substantial grounds to believe that the public is in danger as a result

of the child's missing episode. The high risk category requires the immediate deployment of Police resources. The Merlin will be created immediately. MPS guidance makes clear that a member of the senior management team or similar command level must be involved in the examination of the initial enquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels in order to locate and protect the child as soon as possible. A (senior) investigating officer will be appointed who will lead the investigation and agree the media strategy, family support arrangements and liaison with Achieving for Children and other agencies involved with the family. High risk cases will continue to demand a Borough response and will be overseen by the Crime Manager / SLT and be resourced according to merit. Met Police guidance states:

- All high-risk cases will demand a Borough Command Unit (BCU) response whether immediate risk identified via (Metropolitan Command Complex (MetCC) first contact or later grading by London Resilience Team (LRT)/Operations Manager (Ops Mgr).
- Ops Manager to pass to Safeguarding Detective Inspector (DI) during operating hours
- Outside these hours the case will progress under leadership of senior detective, assisted by ERPT (Emergency Response Police Team).
- Merlin supervised by ERPT Sgt within 2 hours of creation.

7.2 Medium risk

A child would be prioritised as medium risk where the risk posed is likely to place the child in danger or they are a threat to themselves and others. This category requires an active and measured response by the Police and other agencies in order to trace the missing child and support the family or carers. The Police will lead a proactive investigation and search to locate and protect the child as soon as possible. Duty Officers will own medium risk missing person investigations for the initial 48 hours. Handovers during this time will ensure the risk grading remains accurate.

7.3 Low Risk

Police guidance indicates Children aged 17 and under CAN be considered in this category where established circumstances dictate. 'Regular' episodes of missing are often a sign of significant risk and therefore low risk should not be an automatic consideration without further rationale. Duty Officers will own low risk missing person investigations (adults) for the initial 48 hours. Handovers during this time will ensure the risk grading remains accurate.

7.4 Absent

All absents are subject to a rolling review for the first 24 hours. Review times are based on what the informant tells the MetCC Controller and not tied to a set timescale i.e. 3, 6 hours. Absent status only lasts 24 hours and the child will be reclassified as missing at the 24 hour mark.

8. Responding to children missing from home or care

8.1 Reporting children missing from home and care

If an agency is informed that a child is missing from home or care, they must advise the parent/carer or residential care provider to report the missing episode to the Police. They

should also advise the parent/ or carer or residential care provide of their agency's duty to ensure that the incident is reported to the Police and, if necessary, follow this up by contacting the Police directly to verify that the child has been reported missing.

Parent/carer or residential care provider will be expected to undertake basic measures to try to locate the missing child and ascertain his or her safety. Before a child is reported missing to the Police, Parents/carers are also encouraged 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. These actions include:

- Fully searching 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.
- Speaking with other children in the family or who live in the home to obtain relevant information about the missing child.
- Making all appropriate enquiries regards the whereabouts of the child. This will involve trying to contact the child themselves, friends, family, associates, appropriate locations, local hospitals and the local police custody office and the school.
- 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.
 - Recent photograph.
 - Relevant addresses, known associates and addresses frequented.
 - The name of the school and the school setting.
 - Previous history of absenteeism and circumstances of where found.
 - Circumstances under which the child went missing.
 - Any factors that increase the risk to the child.
- Professionals working with a child who is believed to be missing from home have a duty to support the parent to report the child as missing. If, for some reason, the parent does not undertake this action then the professional should contact the police themselves and have the above information to hand.

If this immediate action does not result in the child being found, the matter should be reported to the Police.

If the whereabouts of the child are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the parent/carer or residential care provider to arrange for the child's return home. Anyone who has care of a child without parental knowledge or agreement should do all that is reasonable to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of the child. In these circumstances they should inform the parents, carers, Police and/or Achieving for Children about the whereabouts and safety of the child.

Foster carers and residential care providers must be given a copy of this protocol which must be followed when a child goes missing from their placement. They should be provided with training, supervision and support in the use of this protocol and develop skills to enable them to divert children from going missing.

Children subject to Section 17 section 47 or a child looked after has a care plan based on a full assessment of their current and future needs, including potential risks to themselves and to others. The care plan will therefore take into account any risk that the child may go missing and any factors that may increase risk should they go missing. All risk information should also be included in the child's placement plan. Relevant information about the risks that a child may go missing should be shared with the placement and the Police. If there are grounds to suspect that a child is likely to go missing from his or her placement, a multi-agency preventative meeting should be held to reduce the risks.

The risk assessment should consider:

- The likelihood of the child going missing (push and pull factors)
- The risks the child is likely to face whilst absent
- Control measures to reduce these risks
- The actions that need to be taken if a child goes missing

Should a child go missing then a recent photograph of the child will need to be made available to the Police. Most commonly the photograph will be used by Police officers to help them identify the child when actively looking for the child at relevant locations. In serious cases the Police and Achieving for Children may decide to use this photograph more widely as part of a media strategy to locate the child. A recent photograph bearing a good likeness of a looked-after child must be kept on record by Achieving for Children for every child. When a child becomes looked-after, the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any missing person investigation. Achieving for Children will also ensure that sufficient knowledge and information about the child is recorded to enable a detailed Police report to be made should a child go missing from care.

8.2 Unauthorised absence from placement

The foster carer or residential unit manager should determine if the child is missing from placement. Not all absences from a care placement will warrant a missing report. A child who is half-an-hour late returning from school would not usually be considered a missing person; neither would a child be missing if they are known to be staying safely with a friend for a short period and are likely to return home. Definitions of absence are set out in paragraphs 5.1 and 5.2 of this protocol.

Factors to consider

In determining whether a child is absent from placement (unauthorised), the foster carer or residential unit manager must consider the circumstances of the absence and the risk to the child. This decision should not be taken in isolation. Residential unit managers should consult with the team manager responsible for looked-after children or Emergency Duty Team (EDT). Foster carers should consult with the child's allocated social worker or EDT. Making this decision will require a consideration of the following factors:

- The circumstances of the child's absence
- The legal status of the child and his or her care plan
- The age and maturity of the child
- Any physical or cognitive disabilities or medical requirements
- Previous behaviour and historical concerns
- The child's tendency to substance misuse

- Any circumstances within the placement relevant to the absence
- The risk of offending
- The influence of peer groups, friends and family members
- The risk of sexual exploitation or predatory influences on the child
- Any known risk of abduction
- The general vulnerability of the child.

A child identified as at risk of sexual exploitation should not be considered absent but as missing. They will be flagged automatically by Police as missing.

Review of absence

The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances should be taken into account. If the child is receiving support or services from CAMHS professionals or other agencies it would be advisable to discuss the case with them to inform the decision; however, if they are not readily available a decision must be made on the basis of the best available information. A review should be conducted and recorded at a minimum of **six-hourly** intervals except during the night when a review should be conducted and recorded at 2300 hours and again at 0800 hours on the following morning. For a small number of children and young people it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. This should be part of the child's care plan and will normally be due to his or her vulnerability.

Where the assessment of the foster carer or residential unit manager is that the child is at risk from being absent from his or her placement, the child should be reported as missing to the Police.

Escalation

Where there is a difference of opinion between Achieving for Children and the Police over the appropriate category of absence, the Police will make the final decision about the Police response; however, the Police Officer should refer all such cases of dispute to the Duty Inspector. Where Achieving for Children are not satisfied with the decision of the relevant Inspector, the matter should be reported to senior managers in both agencies for resolution in line with escalation procedures.

Recording, if in care

If the assessment of the foster carer or residential unit manager is that there is no apparent risk to the child's immediate safety, he or she should record the absence as absent from placement without authorisation in the child's record, and inform the child's allocated social worker or EDT (Emergency Duty Team). The record should be dated and timed including a log of any contact made or attempted with the child, the child's response (or lack of response) and an indication of the assessed risk. Responsibility for managing this type of absence remains with the carer and the allocated social worker.

If the carer and/or allocated social worker know the child's whereabouts they will need to make a decision about whether to allow the child to temporarily remain at that location or make arrangements to facilitate the child's return.

If the child repeatedly remains away from his or her placement without authorization, the child's individual missing risk assessment and care plan must be reviewed and updated to reflect the issues and risks. For any child who has been missing more than once, there should be a planning meeting with the child, parents and carers (as appropriate) to determine a plan

to halt missing episodes. Achieving for Children should keep accurate records of all episodes of children being away from placement without authorization. For individual children this should include the length of time they are away from their placement, whether they return of their own accord or are found, and the locations they are found at, together with any other relevant information. The child's Independent Reviewing Officer must be informed of all instances of a child being absent or away from placement without authorization. The care plan should be reviewed to include details of arrangements required to keep the child safe and minimise the future risk of the child going missing from his or her placement.

If a foster carer or residential unit manager assesses that an absent child is at risk, then the child should be reported as missing immediately and the perceived risk(s) reported to the Police. The carer must also immediately inform the child's allocated social worker and/or the relevant team manager. Out of normal working hours contact should be made with the EDT and the allocated social worker or team manager should be contacted on the next working day.

The allocated social worker should inform the child's parent(s) or the adult(s) holding parental responsibility no later than 24 hours after the child was reported missing, unless indicated otherwise in the child's care plan. The child's Independent Reviewing Officer must also be kept informed of all incidences of a missing child or a child absent from placement without authorisation.

8.3 Multi-agency response

The Police will complete an initial risk assessment for each individual child on every separate occasion he or she is reported missing. A risk level grading of either low, medium or high will be used.

A Merlin PAC will be created and sent to the Single Point of Access (SPA) in Achieving for Children. It is the responsibility of the SPA to ensure that all relevant professionals in Achieving for Children are alerted to the missing episode. This should include the allocated social worker, the team manager and the Independent Reviewing Officer. The Merlin PAC will remain open until the child has been located. Whilst the SPA team review the missing episode and determine threshold, the SPA manager at the point of receiving the Merlin, should send to the Return Interview Service to arrange the Return Interview and to have oversight of all the reported missing children within Kingston and Richmond boroughs.

The MPS will carry out enquiries aimed at locating the child. Foster carers, residential unit managers, practitioners and all relevant agencies will be expected to help the Police to locate the child and to work cooperatively during the investigation. Throughout the process the Police, foster carers, residential unit managers and social workers must keep a full record of all the actions taken and the messages received and given. The MPS, in consultation with Achieving for Children, will be responsible for agreeing and implementing any media strategy to help locate the child. Where appropriate the child's parent(s) will be included in this decision-making.

8.4 Planning for the child's return

When a child has been missing for a period of **24 hours** and/or consideration is given to multiple incidents within a 3 month (90 day period) (for example, a young person missing 3

times in 90 days (3x90days)), Achieving for Children will initiate a s47 Missing strategy meeting with the Police and other relevant agencies. Please be advised that professional judgement should be given based on risk even if the multiple incidents are not met and therefore, this may be subject to review of timescale if a meeting is needed earlier than 24 hours, due to concerns and risk. The meeting will bring together a multi-agency chronology of significant events to inform a risk assessment, and either work along the statutory guidance for a Section 47 child protection investigation or support for a child in need provided under Section 17 (Children Act 1989). The meeting will also agree the safety plan and consideration of the Police utilising their Trigger Plan, for the child and agree the actions that are necessary to facilitate his or her return home/placement. This may involve contingency planning such as identifying suitable alternative short-term accommodation for the child. Further meetings should be held at least every **seven days** or until the child is located. The initial meeting should determine whether the second or any subsequent meetings should be held before the child has been missing for seven days. This decision should be informed by the Police risk assessment and the risk assessment generated from the multi-agency chronologies. The minutes from meetings should be circulated to all agencies attending the meeting and recorded on the AfC internal information system, ICS/ Liquid Logic.

8.5 Return home

It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to notify the Police immediately to confirm that a missing child has been located and/or returned home.

Police Safe and Well check

The Police will complete a Safe and Well check in person within **one hour** of the child's return home/placement if they are classified as high risk, and will carry out a 'S' Grade response. All other Safe and Well checks will need to be completed within **three hours**.

Met Police Policy states - Conduct a Prevention Interview (Safe and Well check) for all persons located/ returned from missing.

Returned home/located high-risk cases will generate a face-to-face prevention interview by an officer best placed to complete at time of being located or within 1hr of notification of return.

In line with a proportionate policing response, the circumstances of each low and medium risk case will dictate the methodology of the prevention interview. Within 24 hours of misper location or notification of return, MPS staff will apply the following:

Police liaise via telephone with the parent/carer/medical professional in charge of the subject and confirm wellbeing. (No deployment, follow aide-memoire, Merlin updated)

Police liaise directly via telephone/video call with subject and confirm wellbeing (No deployment, follow aide-memoire, Merlin updated)

Police deploy and conduct formal face-to-face prevention interview (follow aide-memoire, Merlin updated).

If Children are found in circumstances where they are at risk of immediate significant harm, consider police protection

It is common for children to be unwilling to engage in this process. If a child refuses to engage, it is important for the Police to record the child's manner, their physical appearance and any other factors that may be relevant as part of any on-going investigation. The purpose of the Safe and Well check is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, identify where they have been and with whom, and to give them the opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them. This is not the return interview. The Police must always conduct a Safe and Well check with a child who was categorised as missing when they return or are located, no matter how many times the child has been missing before.

The Police will notify the SPA that the child has returned home and any identified risks using a Merlin PAC. The Merlin PAC will also be used to confirm the missing status of the child: whether the child was missing or absent in line with the definitions set out in this protocol. The information provided is provided to and recorded by the Return Interview Service, within the Missing Episode on Liquid Logic.

If the child has been the victim of a crime during their missing episode then the Police will instigate further enquiries. If the situation indicates that the child has been exploited or has been subject to significant harm (or the risk of harm), a referral must be made to the SPA in accordance with local safeguarding procedures.

Returning home

The parent or carer is responsible for collecting the child and returning him or her home. If the child has an allocated social worker, he or she may be able to assist with the child's return. If there are thought to be specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in collecting and returning the child, then coordinated action should be agreed with the Police. The parent or carer should only request Police assistance to collect a child if:

- The parent or carer is being prevented from obtaining access to the child
- There is evidence to suggest that the child is at immediate risk of harm
- This is necessary to prevent a public order incident due to a threat of violence or disorder

If the Police locate a child they should not leave them at a location where he or she is likely to be exposed to the risk of harm or from where they are likely to go missing again, prior to the child's parent(s) or carer(s) being able to make arrangements to collect the child. In some circumstances, the Police may need to consider returning a child direct to his or her home or taking the child to a local Police station after confirming a collection time with the parent(s) or carer(s).

Children should not be returned to the place they are reported missing from until their safety and wellbeing is fully evaluated. If there are concerns that to do so would mean a child is likely to suffer significant harm, a referral must be made to Achieving for Children for the consideration of section 47 child protection enquiries. The Police may consider the use of

Police Protection powers to ensure the safety of the child until child protection enquiries are undertaken, including applying for an Emergency Protection Order or applying for a Recovery Order.

An independent return interview, undertaken by the Return Interview Service should be completed for each missing episode within 72 hours of the child returning home. Completed return interview forms should be sent electronically to the Police and other agencies and should be recorded on the ICS. They should be considered at any subsequent meetings about the child, including missing children meetings and Multi Agency Risk Vulnerability Exploitation (MARVE) meetings. This is further discussed in section 9.

8.6 Review of the plan

When a looked-after child who has been missing has been located, the allocated social worker and team manager should decide in consultation with the Independent Reviewing Officer, carers and child whether they should convene an early statutory review of the child's care plan. The statutory review will provide an opportunity to check that the care plan has been appropriately amended to address the reasons for the child's absences and include an intervention strategy to prevent future missing episodes.

8.7 Missing episodes during external activities or outings

If a looked-after child goes missing during an external activity or outing, the responsible adult in charge of the activity, outing or holiday will:

- Arrange a search of the area where the child went missing
- Notify the local Police for that area

The Police for the area where the child went missing and the Police for the area where the child normally resides will decide which Police Force and division will take responsibility for managing the investigation. This will normally be the Police Force and division that covers the area where the majority of enquiries are likely to be conducted. The Police will notify the responsible local authority of their decision. The relevant team manager will be responsible for ensuring the protocols in relation to a missing looked-after child are followed. Ongoing communication must be maintained between the allocated social worker or team manager and the Police Force responsible for managing the missing person enquiry to support the investigation. The child's electronic social care record must reflect all the actions and discussions undertaken. The social worker should inform the child's parents or any other person with parental responsibility within **24 hours** of the child going missing.

8.8 Children subject to Placement with Parents regulations

A child living at home and subject to Placement with Parent regulations is still a looked-after child. It is the responsibility of the parent(s) to inform the allocated social worker or team manager (or the EDT) and the Police when it is evident that the child has gone missing from home. This responsibility should be discussed with the parent(s) before the placement is made and must form part of the placement agreement. The senior manager who approved the placement should be informed of the incident within 24 hours. The social worker must ensure that the child has been reported as missing to the Police and must record the incident on the child's electronic file.

8.9 Out-of-borough placements

An out-of-borough placement is a placement made by the local authority in a residential placement that is located in another local authority area (the host local authority); or is a foster care placement made with foster carers who live in another local authority area.

Before a child is placed in an out-of-borough placement, the social worker for the responsible local authority (Achieving for Children) should check with the residential unit or foster care provider that local protocols are in place that are consistent with this protocol, and if not, that the provider agrees to comply with this protocol. The provider should be fully informed and agree to the actions required to be taken if a child is reported as missing or absent from the placement without authorisation.

Where a looked-after child placed out-of-borough is missing from his or her care placement and is identified as at risk of exploitation, a referral must be made to the Multi-Agency Risk Vulnerability Exploitation (MARVE) panel or equivalent meeting in the host local authority area. The MARVE in the responsible local authority must also have oversight of the actions taken to protect the child by the MARVE in the host local authority.

9. Independent return interviews

It is the responsibility of the Return Interview Service, within Achieving for Children and based within the Single Point of Access Team to decide whether an independent return interview is completed for each missing episode. Independent return interviews should be offered to all children, who have been reported as missing.

The return interview is a safety, needs and risk assessment completed when a missing child has returned home or to his or her care placement in order to identify and understand any risks and issues experienced by the child. The interview should be initiated and completed within **72 hours** of the child returning to his or her home or care setting. It should be held in a neutral space where the child feels safe. The return interview is different from the Safe and Well check completed by the Police. The Achieving for Children proforma for the interview should be used which is located with the Missing Episode on the AfC internal information system, ICS/ Liquid Logic.

Appropriate child protection procedures should always be followed where a child has been harmed, or believed to be harmed, whilst they have been missing, and where there is a known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation.

It is the responsibility of the relevant team manager in Achieving for Children to ensure that the return interview is completed to a suitable standard by an appropriate professional. Government guidance states that this must be completed by an independent person who is trained to conduct these interviews and is able to follow up any resulting issues or actions. The child's view on who should conduct the return interview should also be considered.

The purpose of the return interview is to better understand the reasons for the child going missing including exploring the circumstances that led to it and the risks involved in the missing episode. It should be used to inform prevention strategies and future missing person

investigations should the child go missing again. The interviewer should discuss with the child:

- The frequency of the child's missing episodes
- Whether the child has been hurt or harmed
- The child's risk of exploitation
- Whether or not the child has been forced, coerced, or threatened to be involved in a criminal act or use of substances
- Whether the child has had contact with adults who pose a risk to children
- On-going factors that may influence the child going missing again
- Any risk factors the child may experience in his or her home

During the return interview, the interviewer needs to help the child to feel safe and understand that he or she has options to prevent repeat missing episodes . It should provide the child with information on how to stay safe if they choose to leave home again (including telephone helplines). A copy of the return interview should be recorded on the ICS and sent to the Police

For every return interview, parents and carers will be given an opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence. Where children refuse to engage in a return interview, parents and carers should be offered the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence in any case. This could help to prevent further instances of the child running away and identify the support needed for them.

10. Missing Children Panel

The MISPER panel will be held every 2 weeks. It will review data of children who have been missing over the last previous 2 week period. The data used will be received via the Single Point of Access (SPA) and collated by the Return Interview Team manager. This will include children missing from care and children missing from home. The MISPER panel will have multi-agency representation including Health, Education, Police, and Children's Services. The panel will be chaired by either the Head of Permanence or the Permanency Service's Associate Director at AFC.

The meeting will consider for each case:

- Whether the missing protocol has been followed to ensure a robust response to the case being presented.
- The nature and degree of risk to each child or young person and review actions that have been taken in order to reduce the risk.
- The MISPER panel will identify any children at a high risk of harm and escalate to the MARVE panel for their risk management oversight.

10.1 Operational Process

The MISPER panel will sit from 12.30 – 1.30pm on Wednesdays, every 2 weeks.

The manager of the Return Interview Team will send to the MISPER Business Support inbox the data on the Friday before the Wednesday meeting. MISPER Business Support will notify attendees, via email, by the Monday lunch time prior to the meeting that the data is ready to view. External agencies will be sent the data via secure email.

The representative from the Children's Service responsible for reporting on the case will come to the meeting with an update on responses and actions taken in relation to the missing child or young person. Managers should review all return interviews and any decisions made regarding the missing episode recorded within 24 hours. If there is no involvement from Children's Services the Return Interview Team manager will lead on reporting in relation to the child or young person.

The panel Chair will agree the minutes by the Thursday following the meeting. The MISPER Business Support then will email attendees on the Friday following the meeting the panel minutes.

10.2 Escalation to MARVE

Children who meet criteria for MARVE panel will be noted as such in the minutes and actions. The Return Home manager will ensure that these cases are taken to MARVE and the MARVE Business Support will also add the cases to the MARVE agenda.

The attending representative from Children's Service and responsible manager will have responsibility to ensure that action points from the meeting are undertaken and updates provided to Business Support MISPER inbox within 1 week of the MISPER panel.

For cases open to Children's Services, Social Care, the key discussions and actions will be entered onto the child or young person's case note under heading of MISPER meeting by the MISPER Business Support.

11. Information sharing

Whenever there are concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing, it is necessary for agencies to share information with each other in a timely manner. The Data Protection Act 1998 enables sensitive information to be shared if it is necessary to protect a child or detect a crime. In addition, section 11 of the Children Act 2004 sets out the duty of the Police and children's social care services to share information. The procedure is formalised and governed by a multi-agency Information Sharing Agreement – www.kingstonandrichmondscb.org.uk/news-resources/policies-and-procedures.

12. Specialist support organisations

Barnardo's - www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's deliver a number of support programmes and interventions for children at risk of exploitation as a result of going missing from home or care. Achieving for Children has a contract in place with Barnardo's to provide this support.

Missing People - www.missingpeople.org.uk/runaways

Missing People provides a free 24-hour confidential helpline to children who have run away and their families (0500 700 700). The runaway helpline also provides 24-hour helpline support to any young person who has run away or been forced to leave home (0808 800 70 70).