

**From:** Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education

Matt Dunkley, Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education

**To:** Corporate Parenting Panel – 29 January 2018

**Subject:** **YOUNG PEOPLE MISSING FROM PLACEMENT**

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Summary:** This report provides an analysis of the response of Kent County Council and its partner agencies when children who are looked after go missing from care. The vast majority of looked after children do not have any missing episodes. The proportion of looked after children who frequently go missing is small and there is a comprehensive multi-agency risk management response for these children. This report looks at the enhanced services that are on offer to support risk management and the reduction in the number of missing episodes.

**Recommendation:** The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to CONSIDER AND COMMENT on the current practice challenges faced when looked after children go missing and the work being undertaken to better understand the circumstances that lead to missing episodes and the steps being taken to mitigate risks as much as possible

- 1.1 A report was commissioned by Corporate Parenting Panel to review the response of Kent County Council and its partner agencies when children who are looked after go missing from care. Analysis was undertaken in November 2017 and the results of relevant audits, working groups and policy changes have been brought together to produce this report.
- 1.2 The period reviewed in this report is 12 months from November 2016 to October 2017. In this period the number of children who are looked after including Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) decreased. The influx of UASC in 2015 had a significant impact on the number of looked after children in Kent; however many of these young people have now reached the age of 18 years and have moved into the Leaving Care Service. The number of citizen looked after children has remained relatively consistent around 1400; nevertheless our focus and scrutiny around missing episodes and the risks associated with these is now

firmly embedded in our operational practices and is updated and adapted in accordance with local and national learning.

- 1.3 The rate of looked after children going missing has increased over the last year; however this increase is largely attributable to the changes we have made to the way in which the data is captured and reported rather than an actual increase. During Ofsted's inspection in March 2017, the inspectors commented that they were very impressed with Kent's dataset for missing children, referring to it as a 'gold standard for recording missing episodes'.
- 1.4 Kent routinely offers returner interviews to children that have gone missing. This helps to develop our understanding of why a child has gone missing from their point of view so that interventions can be tailored to their individual needs.
- 1.5 This report investigates whether there are any specific areas requiring further focus for looked after children who go missing. The main aims are:
  - To review whether current performance is consistent with, or improving on, historical performance;
  - To investigate the factors contributing to a child going missing; and
  - To inform Corporate Parenting Panel of the current practice challenges.

## **2.0 Impact of Other Local Authority Activity**

- 2.1 At the end of October 2017, Kent had 1742 open looked after children cases including both citizen and UASC children. Other local authorities (OLAs) had 1337 children placed in Kent.
- 2.2 The high number of other local authority children placed in Kent's independent sector causes a scarcity in foster placements. This means there is competition in the recruitment of foster carers and pressure on local resources with increased numbers of children in the county. The issue of local authorities placing children in Kent has been raised with the Department for Education and also the Children's Commissioner. Kent liaises with local authorities whose children go missing to advise of safeguarding risks and ensure that the Care Planning Regulations<sup>1</sup> have been adhered to.
- 2.3 Other Local Authority children have been excluded from further analysis as Kent advises a child's home local authority of any missing episodes we are made aware

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/441643/Children\\_Act\\_Guidance\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/441643/Children_Act_Guidance_2015.pdf)

of and these should then be managed by the home local authority. Kent does not have responsibility for conducting the return missing interviews for these children.

### **3.0 KCC's Practice Response to Missing Children**

3.1 KCC has a robust multi-agency response to children and young people that go missing. At the point of notification, a number of databases are cross-referenced (including Youth Justice, Children Missing Education and 'Risk of CSE' flags) to highlight any associated risks for that young person so that the level of response is appropriate and the right professionals can be involved to manage any risks.

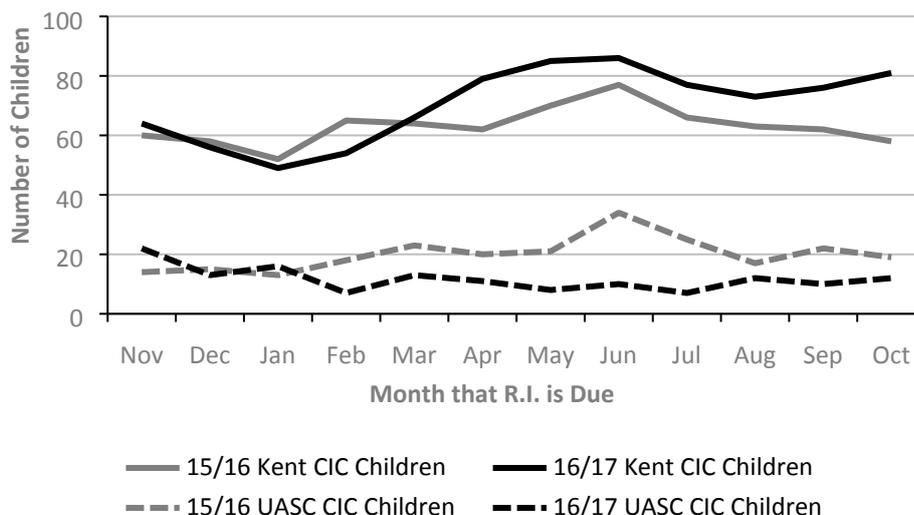
### **4.0 Analysis Results**

4.1 Between October 2016 and September 2017, 20% of all KCC's looked after children were recorded as missing at least once (379 children). 59% of these children had only one or two missing episodes over the course of a year. When compared to those statistical neighbours of KCC that also have 'good' Ofsted judgements, KCC has the median number of missing or absent incidents per looked after child (0.71). KCC is also below the average for England (0.79) and the South East (0.75).

4.2 There was an increase in the number of citizen looked after children going missing between May and October 2017 when compared to the same period in the previous year. This may be due to an improvement in recording as there has been a drive to ensure that all periods where a child is missing from placement are reported even if they would have previously only been considered 'absent'. Also, through effective cross-agency working, the data capture of missing episodes has also become much more robust.

4.3 The number of UASC looked after children going missing has reduced by 57%. This is in part due to the fact that the numbers of UASC entering the UK in Kent dropped between 2016 and 2017 and also the impact of the National Transfer Scheme which means that young people are only in Kent for a relatively short space of time.

Number of CLA That Go Missing Each Month



4.4 As part of Ofsted’s report published in June 2017 from their inspection of children’s services, they commented that: “Arrangements for tracking missing unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are rigorous. A panel provides management oversight of those children who are missing, or at high risk of harm, to ensure that risks are understood and minimised when possible. “ The same process is applied to citizen looked after children that go missing.

**5.0 Returner Interviews**

5.1 In line with national guidance, it is KCC’s policy that children should be offered a returner interview within 3 working days of them returning to their placement. This is not always possible if a child goes missing again within 3 working days of returning. Of those episodes where there was not a subsequent episode within 3 working days, returner interviews were offered in 98% of episodes.

5.2 87% of the returner interviews completed for citizen looked after children occurred within the 3 working day timescale. The majority of the remainder are completed within a week.

5.3 Young people do, however, have the option to refuse a returner interview. The proportion of citizen looked after children wanting a returner interview has remained fairly constant at around 74% over the last 2 years.

5.4 As part of a Missing Children Focus Group that took place in April 2017, one of the young people made the following comments about timescales:

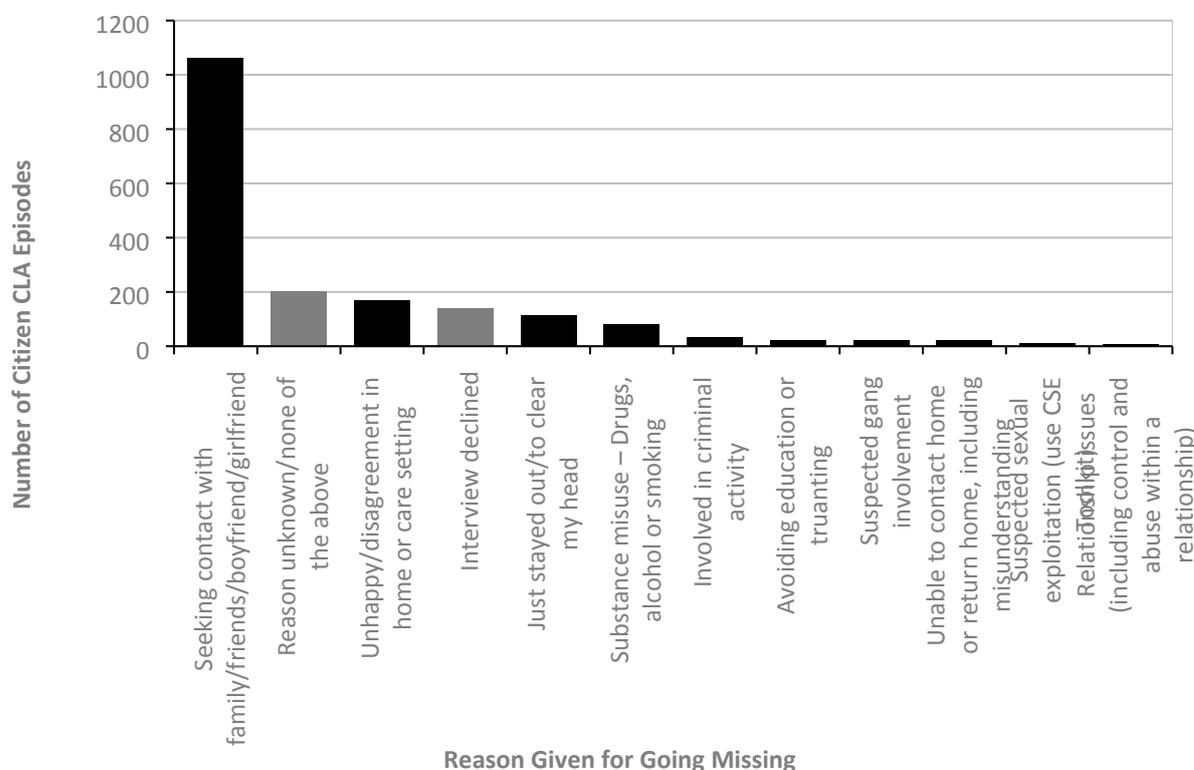
*“It’s not helpful to ask us to talk about why we went missing as soon as we return. We might not feel like talking about this straight away as we will have our own feelings to deal with – give us some space before asking us to talk.”*

In some of the cases it is helpful for a young person to have more time to process their thoughts, enabling them to be clearer and more open about why they went missing.

5.5 As a result of this, the Young Lives Foundation offer (which is available to young people to have independent returner interviews) is now being extended to offer extra returner interviews outside of the 3 working day timescales in order to get a more general and considered view of why the young person is going missing and what could be put in place to avoid it.

## 6.0 Reasons Why Citizen Looked After Children Go Missing

Top 12 Reasons that Citizen CLA Go Missing  
(between Oct '16 and Sep '17)



6.1 56% of citizen looked after children missing episodes occur because the child was seeking contact with family/friends/boyfriend/girlfriend. This reason is more than 5 times more common than the next significant reason. It has become an increasing feature in the reasons for being missing and SCS are working hard to ensure that arrangements are in place for children and young people to remain connected to their families wherever possible.

6.2 Improvements to placement arrangement meetings rolled out in July 2017 are part of a strategy to improve placement stability. These improvements include greater consideration of contact arrangements and important family member relationships,

which are particularly important in tackling the biggest reason for looked after children going missing.

- 6.3 We would not expect to see an immediate impact from this as it will only impact those children who have moved into a new placement since July 2017. Regular reporting and auditing is used to monitor the completion and quality of these placement arrangement meetings. With time and continued focus on the practice of these meetings, we expect to see a reduction in the frequency and duration of missing episodes for looked after children.

## **7.0 Risk Management for Young People that Go Missing**

- 7.1 Children in care are some of the most vulnerable people in society due to their experiences of abuse, neglect and trauma which means that, if they go missing, it can leave them susceptible to further physical and sexual abuse, child trafficking or exploitation.
- 7.2 As a result, these issues are taken very seriously by Specialist Children's Services and the Kent Safeguarding Children Board. Among other things, there is an effective multi-agency coordinated response and the interfaces are now well established between social workers, Missing Children Liaison Officers (MCLOs), the Child Sexual Exploitation Team (CSET) and the Missing Children Exploitation Team (MCET).
- 7.3 In order to identify these risks, which are often concealed, it is vital that returner interviews remain meaningful. Good practice is constantly being reinforced to frontline staff through: supervision; dedicated Practice Development Officers; regular joint delivery of returner interview workshops with Kent police; and the new 'CSE & Missing Newsletter' that goes out to all SCS staff.

## **8.0 Conclusions**

### **8.1 What's Working Well?**

- 8.1.1 Kent has a robust process and comprehensive practice response for children going missing. There are well established interfaces between social workers, the Child Sexual Exploitation Team and relevant partner agencies including police and health colleagues. Data is used effectively to cross-reference multiple systems when a missing notification comes in, so that the social worker is aware of any other relevant factors.
- 8.1.2 There is much evidence of collaborative working across agencies. In a multi-agency audit published by the Kent Safeguarding Children Board it was highlighted

that engagement with young people was effective where professionals: planned their work together; were persistent and skilled in engaging with young people; and understood their specific needs and strengths as well as the impact of abuse and trauma.

- 8.1.3 Children are being routinely offered returner interviews in nearly all cases. There is evidence that the methodology underpinning Signs of Safety is being implemented and the tenacity and perseverance of professionals is evident throughout.
- 8.1.4 The proportion of UASC looked after children who went missing over the last year has reduced.
- 8.1.5 The proportion of children refusing returner interviews has not increased over the last year. Of the returner interviews that occur, 87% are completed within 3 working days, with further completion just outside of the 3 day timescale.

## **8.2 What are We Worried About?**

- 8.2.1 The number of children looked after children going missing has recently increased. We have seen this level out over the last few months and we will expect this to reduce as other initiatives start to show results.
- 8.2.2 Young people who frequently go missing are more likely to be putting themselves at risk of exploitation. Awareness around this issue is being firmly embedded within the frontline, to make sure they exercise their professional curiosity and ask the right questions to identify these issues.

## **8.3 What is Happening?**

- 8.3.1 The response to missing children has been a continual focus for Specialist Children's Services and the practice, processes and structures within the service and its partners are being continuously improved to ensure Kent's children are being kept safe.
- 8.3.2 As part of the recent Police restructure, Missing Children Exploitation Teams (MCET) have been set up. There are 3 area teams focused particularly on the risk to missing children. This should ensure that there is greater awareness of the risk of exploitation to missing children as well as the specialist skill to work with these children.
- 8.3.3. The Young Lives Foundation offer (which is available to young people to have independent returner interviews) is being extended to offer extra returner interviews

outside of the 3 working day timescales in order to get a more general and considered view of why the young person is going missing and what could be done about it.

- 8.3.4 The use of 'Missing Family Group Conferences (FGCs)' has been established since April 2017. The aim is to get all appropriate people around the child to create a safety plan for the young person to prevent them from go missing or, if that fails, help them do it in a safe way. Only a handful of children have been through this process so far; however there have already been successes. On average, the children had 6.1 missing episodes in the 3 months prior to their FGC and 1.8 missing episodes in the 3 months after their FGC.
- 8.3.5 The current Lifelong Links and Sense of Belonging projects are also likely to help young people who often go missing from care. The Lifelong Links project helps looked after children to have contact with appropriate members of their family to build positive long-term relationships. This will help reduce the need for these young people to run away to seek contact with their family. The Sense of Belonging project aims to make young people feel happy and at home in their foster placements, which should also reduce their desire to go missing.

## 9.0 Recommendation

**9.1 Recommendation:** The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to NOTE the current practice challenges faced when looked after children go missing and the work being undertaken to better understand the circumstances that lead to missing episodes and the steps being taken to mitigate risks as much as possible.

### 10.0 Lead Officer

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### 11 Background documents: none

## Appendix 1: Missing Children's Process Flow Chart

### Child/Young Person (CYP) Missing from Home and Care Process Flow Chart

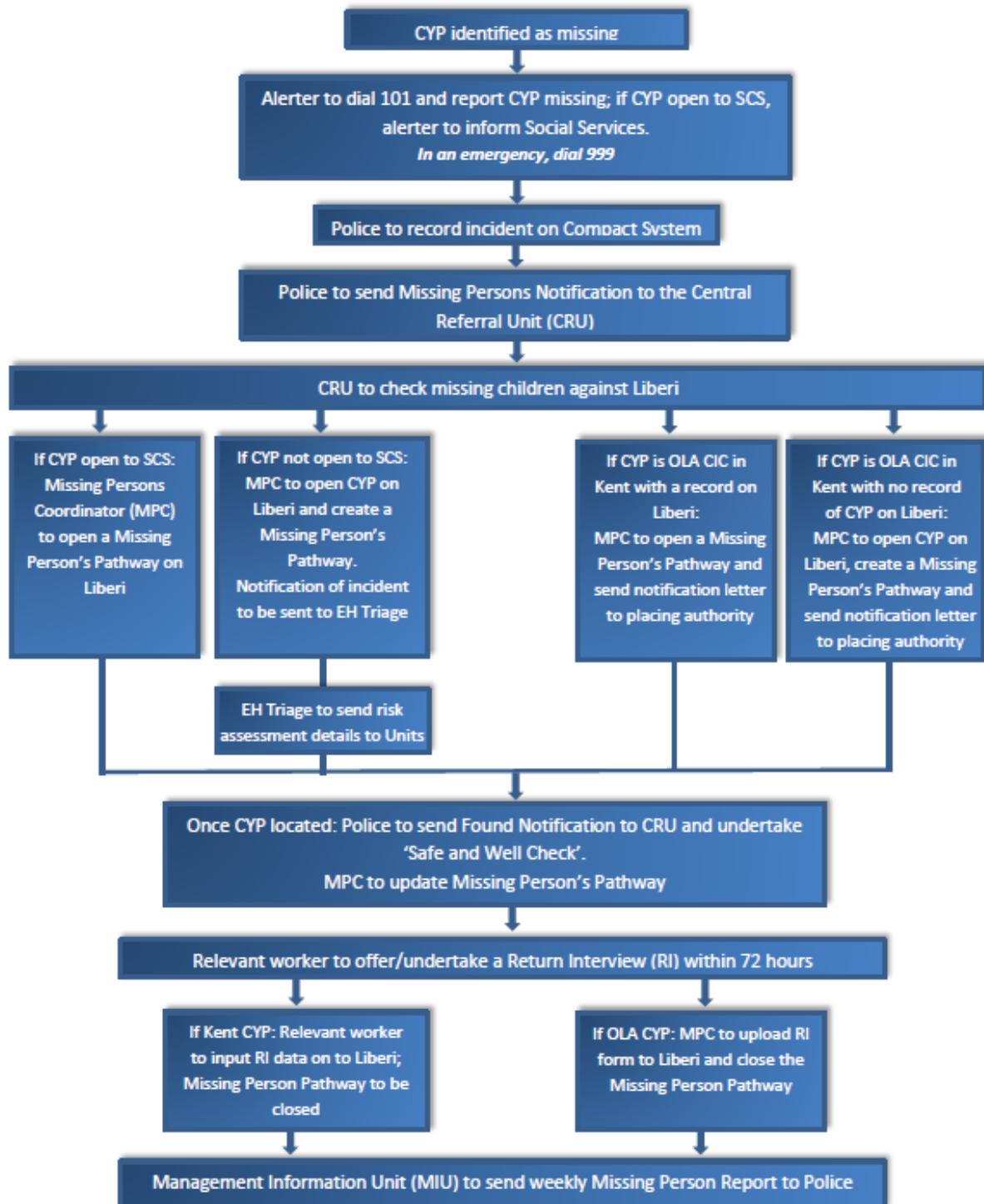


Figure 1: KSCB process flow chart for children missing from home or care