

From: Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education
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To: Corporate Parenting Panel – 29 January 2019

Subject: **YOUNG PEOPLE MISSING FROM PLACEMENT**

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report provides an analysis into the response of Kent County Council and its partner agencies when children who are looked after go missing from care. It looks at the enhanced services that are on offer to support risk management and the support provided to try and reduce the number of missing episodes for children and young people in our care.

Recommendation: The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to **NOTE** Kent's current position for Children in Care who go missing and the work being undertaken to better understand the circumstances that lead to missing episodes, alongside the steps being taken to mitigate risks as much as possible.

- 1.1 The vast majority of children in care do not have any missing episodes. The proportion of looked after children and young people that frequently go missing is small and there is a comprehensive multi-agency risk management response for these children.
- 1.2 A report was commissioned by the 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 2018 and the results of relevant audits, working groups and policy changes have been brought together within this report. This analysis forms part of our annual reporting to the CPP and compliments the wider performance monitoring agenda for our Children in Care.
- 1.3 There continues to be a national focus on children that go missing. There were three joint targeted area inspections (JTAs), carried out by Ofsted in the spring of 2018 that examined 'the multi-agency response to child exploitation and children missing from home, care or education'. The results were released in

November 2018 as an addendum to the 2016 report: 'Time to listen – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children'.¹

- 1.4 The report recognises that much has been done by agencies to address child sexual exploitation, but it calls for agencies not to underestimate the scale or level of risk posed by criminal exploitation of children and county lines. The report also comments that “family-focused services are not always appropriate for dealing with the exploitation of children outside of a family setting – agencies need to be flexible and respond quickly to changing risks”. KCC is in the process of developing a district-based multi-agency adolescent service, which will enable better understanding and identification of extra-familial risk. This model has been informed by a pilot run in Ashford in the first half of 2018, which successfully managed to reduce missing episodes for adolescents involved in the pilot.
- 1.5 The period reviewed in this report is 12 months from November 2017 to October 2018.

2 The Situation in Kent

- 2.1 Over the last 12 months (to the end of October 2018) the total number of children who are looked after has decreased by 9%. The influx of UASC in 2015 had a significant impact on the number of looked after children in Kent; however, the number of UASC looked after children has been reducing since 2015 as these young people reach the age of 18 years and have moved into the Leaving Care Service. This has resulted in a 28% reduction in the number of UASC looked after children over the last year to 243 at the end of October 2018. The number of citizen looked after children has reduced by 5% over the last 12 months to 1,339.
- 2.2 Kent's performance for the outcomes and stability of our looked after children is generally good in comparison to other local authorities, 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.
- 2.3 When comparing the last 12 months to the previous year's data, the number of looked after children that went missing in Kent has reduced from 380 to 367.
- 2.5 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 and ensure we listen to the voice of the child and learn from their feedback.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-inspections-of-child-sexual-exploitation-and-missing-children>

- 2.6 This report investigates whether there are any specific areas requiring further focus for children in care who go missing. The main aims are:
- To review whether current performance is consistent with, or improving on, historical performance;
 - To investigate the risks factors associated with children that go missing; and
 - To inform Corporate Parenting Panel of the current practice challenges.

3 Impact of Other Local Authority Activity

- 3.1 At the end of October 2018, Kent had 1,582 open looked after children cases including both citizen and UASC children. Other local authorities (OLAs) had 1,347 children placed in Kent.
- 3.2 Kent liaises with other Local Authorities whose children go missing to advise of safeguarding risks and ensure that the Care Planning Regulations² have been adhered to.
- 3.3 Other Local Authority children have been excluded from further analysis as, once Kent has advised a child's home local authority of any missing episodes, these should then be managed by the home local authority. Kent does not have responsibility for conducting the return missing interviews for these children.

4 KCC's Practice Response to Missing Children

- 4.1 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 Child Sexual Exploitation' flags) to highlight any associated risks for that young person so that the level of response is appropriate. Where appropriate, risk assessments are conducted to ensure that there is a good plan to manage any risks and the right professionals can be involved.
- 4.2 Kent has a robust process for recording data related to missing children. With the single point of contact at the Front Door ensuring that all relevant databases are cross referenced at the point when missing notification is raised. This ensures that Children's Services are made aware of all incidents relating to our looked after children. Combining this approach with the work that we have done with

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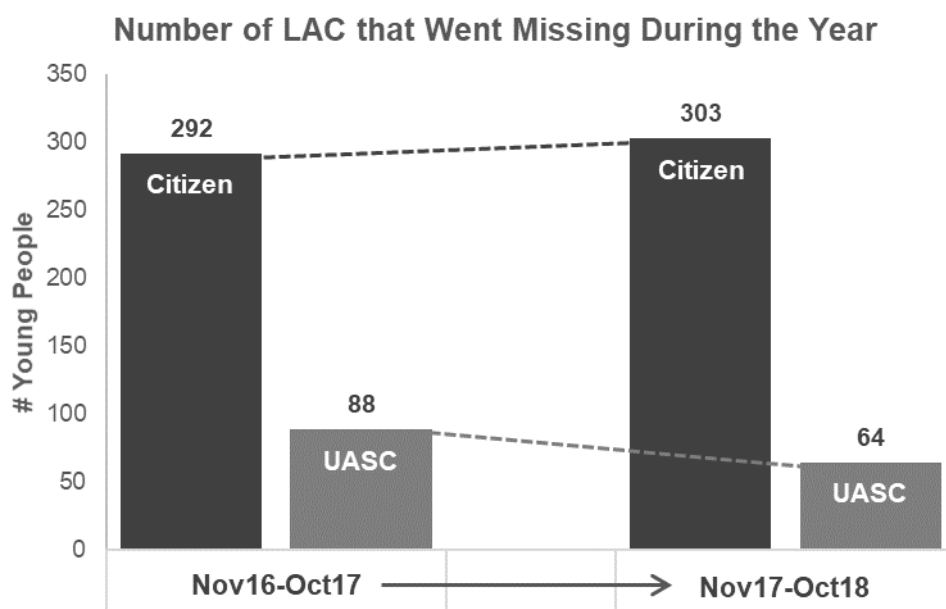
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/441643/Children_Act_Guidance_2015.pdf

care providers to improve reporting of missing episodes means that KCC has one of the most comprehensive missing datasets in the country.

5 Analysis Results

5.1 It is unusual for a Kent citizen child in care of to go missing. Between November 2017 and October 2018, 85% of all KCC's children in care did not have any missing episodes.

5.2 For the children in care that have gone missing at some point during the year, it is usually isolated incidents rather than a consistent pattern of going missing, which would be associated with a higher risk of exploitation. Of the 15% of looked after children that did go missing at some point during the year, 49% had only one or two missing episodes over the course of a year.



5.3 When comparing the last 12 months to the previous year, the number of UASC looked after children going missing at least once during the year has reduced by 27%. This is due to the fact that the number of UASC looked after children has reduced by 28% over the same period.

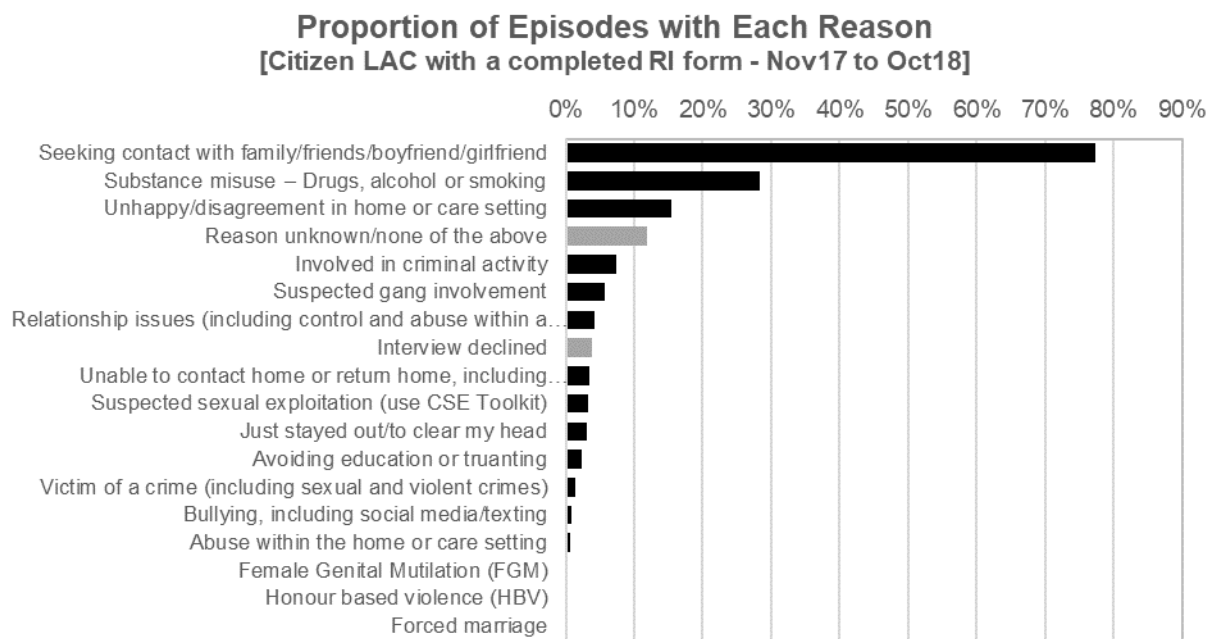
5.4 There was a 4% increase in the number of citizen looked after children that went missing at least once during the year and the average number of episodes per young person has increased. This is primarily driven by a small number of young people that have gone missing numerous times. Between November 2017 and October 2018, 85% of looked after children didn't have any missing episodes. Just 45 young people accounted for over half of all looked after children missing episodes (despite only being 1.9% of the looked after children cohort open during the year). This is similar to what has been seen in previous years.

- 5.5 The issue of young people who frequently go missing has been reviewed at the county group of children in care managers. It was agreed that all the young people who have had multiple episodes will be audited to ensure that robust plans are in place to mitigate risks. Many of these young people have had family group conferences to identify ways to reduce the need for them to go missing or to at least ensure their safety if they do. Kent is also engaging our partner agencies to help this specific group of vulnerable young people. Their details have been shared with their designated nurses, so that they can have a conversation at the young person's health assessment about whether there is any additional support that could help and reduce risk.
- 5.4 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."

6 Returner Interviews

- 6.1 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 are offered in 98% of episodes.
- 6.2 76% 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 – 94% are completed either on time or less than a week overdue.
- 6.3 Young people do, however, have the option to refuse a returner interview. The proportion of citizen looked after children wanting a returner interview has increased compared to last year to 77%.

7 Reasons Why Citizen Looked After Children Go Missing



- 7.1 77% of citizen looked after children missing episodes have ‘seeking contact with family/friends/boyfriend/girlfriend’ as either a primary or secondary reason. This reason is almost 3 times as common as the next most 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.
- 7.2 ‘Missing Family Group Conferences (FGCs)’ are being used for young people that frequently go missing. The use of Missing FGCs has been established since April 2017. Missing FGCs get all appropriate people around the child to help understand the reasons why the young person is going missing and to create a safety plan for the young person to prevent them from going missing or, if that fails, help them do it in a safe way. For those that had their Missing FGC prior to August 2018, the young people had a 39% reduction in the number of missing episodes in the 3 months after their FGC compared to the 3 months prior.

8 Risk Management for Young People that Go Missing

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 As a result, these issues are taken very seriously by Integrated Children’s Services and the Kent Safeguarding Children Board. An alert is sent to the

Directors for Integrated Children's Services if a child is missing for more than 48 hours or where an Assistant Director is concerned for any other reason. 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).

- 8.3 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 Integrated Children's Services staff.

9 Conclusion

What's Working Well?

- 9.1 Kent has a robust process and comprehensive practice response for children going missing. Our Missing procedures have recently been updated to take into account learning from local and National reviews and ensure that multi-agency practice is channelled through the CSET and MSET as appropriate. 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.
- 9.2 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.
- 9.3 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.
- 9.4 The proportion of children refusing returner interviews has reduced over the last year. Of the returner interviews that occur, 76% are completed within 3 working days, with further completion just outside of the 3-day timescale.
- 9.5 In line with recommendations from recent Joint Targeted Area Inspections work is underway with The Young Lives Foundation to engage young adults from our

leaving care service so that we can identify what we can do to make our response to missing episodes more effective particularly when responding to the small yet significant cohort who frequently go missing.

- 9.6 'Missing Family Group Conferences' are successful in helping young people that frequently go missing by creating whole-family solutions to the reasons that they go missing.

What are We Worried About?

- 9.7 The average number of missing episodes per young person has increased. This is due to a small number of young people that account for the majority of all missing episodes for children in care. The 'missing plans' to support these young people have been improved and are now being reviewed even more frequently.
- 9.8 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.

10 What additional support is being provided?

- 10.1 The response to missing children has been a continual focus for Integrated 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.
- 10.2 Those children that go missing most frequently are regularly reviewed at Adolescent Risk Management meetings and have missing plans to ensure they are kept as safe as possible.
- 10.3 All young people are offered an independent returner interview through the Young Lives Foundation offer. This has been 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.
- 10.4 KCC's lead officer for missing children met with the Head of the Care Leavers Service and the Young Lives Foundation to discuss creative responses for working with the children that go missing most frequently. These discussions included how to make returner interviews more meaningful and the benefits of working with young people when they are more stable. There has also been some work conducted with young people from the 18+ service that have

previously gone missing to understand from the factors that were important to them and what they experienced when they went missing. This will support learning in practice and our young people are much more likely to share their experiences, when they are older and more stable.

- 10.4 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 improve placement stability through working with foster carers and young people at times of crisis, which should also reduce their desire to go missing.

Recommendation: The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to **NOTE** Kent's current position for Children in Care who go missing and the work being undertaken to better understand the circumstances that lead to missing episodes, alongside the steps being taken to mitigate risks as much as possible.

11 **Background documents:** none

12 **Lead Officer**

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Appendix 1: Missing Children's Process Flow Chart

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

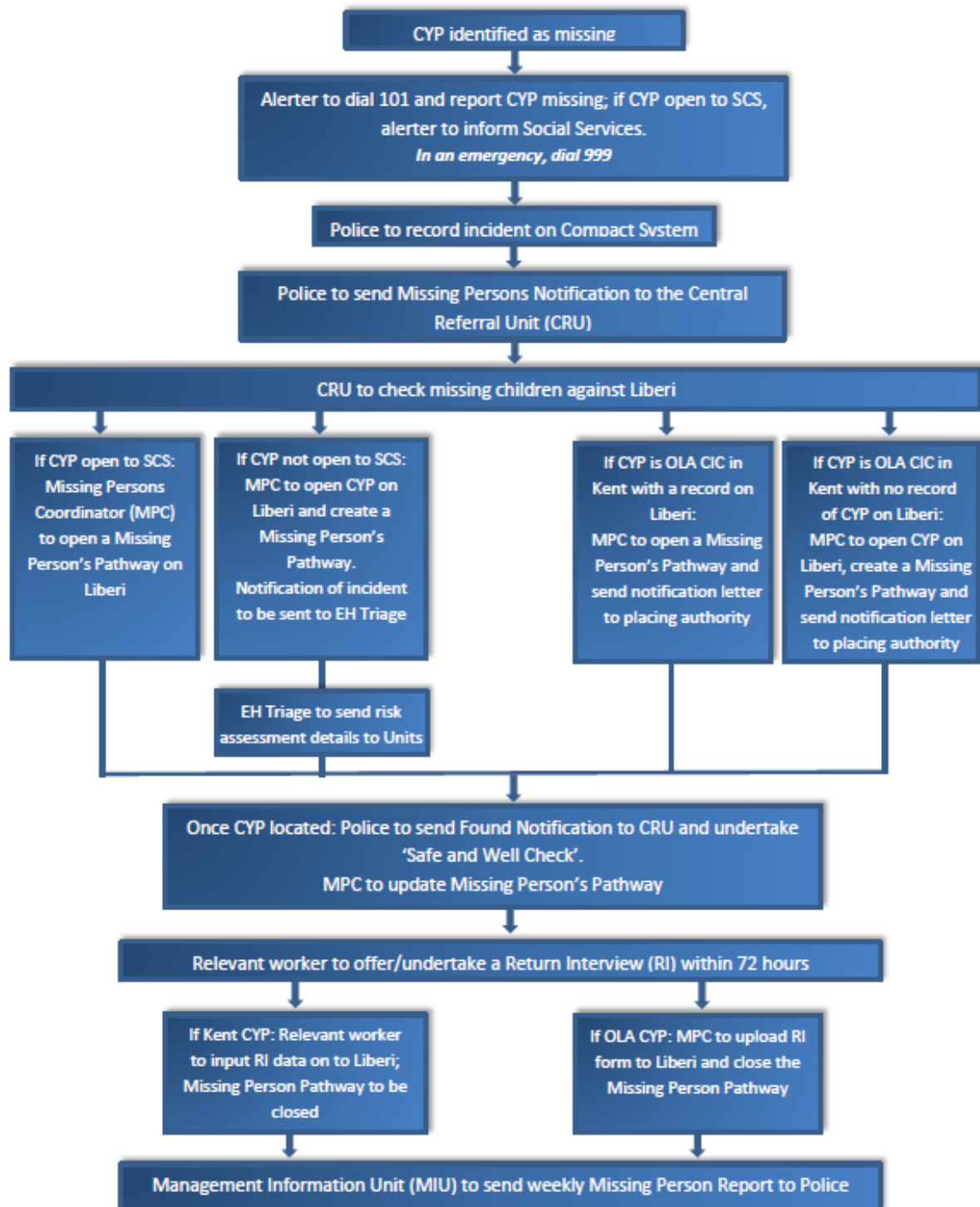


Figure 1: KSCB process flow chart for children missing from home or care