



Issue No.9

Adrian Over

Children who run away or go missing from home or care

FAO All Head teachers and Designated Safeguarding Leads

Dear colleagues

As you know, *Keeping Children Safe in Education (DfE 2015)* highlights that a child going missing from education is a potential indicator of abuse or neglect and that staff should follow the school's or college's procedures for dealing with children that go missing from education, particularly on repeat occasions, to help identify the risk of abuse and neglect, including sexual exploitation, and to help prevent the risks of their going missing in future.

The guidance goes on to state that it is essential that all staff are alert to signs to look out for and the individual triggers to be aware of when considering the risks of potential safeguarding concerns such as CSE, travelling to conflict zones, FGM and forced marriage.

In addition to children missing from education, paragraph 29 of *Keeping Children Safe in Education* highlights a number of other 'Specific Safeguarding Issues'.

Those issues include **children who run away or go missing from home or care**. The link in para 29 opens up the '**Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care**' (DfE 2014).

That statutory guidance established a requirement that every Missing Young Person must be offered a Return Home Interview within a period of 72 hours of their return.

It highlights that Return Home Interviews have critical importance because, by being absent from their normal residence, young people are potentially vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, offending and placing themselves in positions of physical harm.

It is intended that RHIs should ascertain the factors that triggered the young person's absence. Those factors may include difficulties at home, in school and in the community. The short timescale of 72 hours is imposed in order to ensure that the RHI remains relevant to the young person and enables any required action to be initiated at the earliest opportunity.

The guidance requires that Return Home Interviews should be undertaken by professionals who are Independent in order to facilitate a discussion with the young person that is as open as possible. To that end, Warwickshire County Council has

established a team of Missing Children Practitioners, located within the Multi-Agency Child Sexual Exploitation team.

As soon as notification that a young person has gone missing from home or care, letters are sent to parents seeking their consent to a Return Home Interview with their son/daughter. These are then followed by direct contact to make arrangements for the interview. It is also an expectation that young people will be spoken to directly to ascertain whether they will accept an interview.

The Missing Children Practitioner team is a small team covering a large county. In order to fulfil the timescale of within 72 hours, it is essential that all opportunities to interview young people are utilised. You will appreciate that that needs to include times during the school/college day.

In order to safeguard vulnerable young people as effectively as possible and to comply with the requirements of the statutory guidance, it is essential to secure the support and co-operation of schools and colleges in facilitating Return Home Interviews wherever possible, both in terms of releasing the young person from their normal timetable to participate in an interview and in providing an appropriate and safe space on the school/college site for the interview to take place.

To that end, Missing Children Practitioners will sometimes need to liaise directly with schools and colleges in advance in order to arrange interviews and so that appropriate rooms can be booked. Their arrival should therefore always be anticipated by the school/college.

Upon arrival, the Missing Children Practitioner will present their photo identification as required by *Keeping Children Safe in Education*. They should be treated as visitors and therefore escorted to the booked interview room in the usual way after signing in.

NB Please note that there is no requirement for the school to obtain written confirmation that the County Council has undertaken all pre-employment checks that the school would undertake if the school was employing the Missing Children Practitioner. The Missing Children Practitioner will be operating under the auspices of inter-agency safeguarding procedures in the same way that social workers and Police Officers operate.

Schools and colleges are asked to inform reception and office staff of this arrangement so that time is not lost and confusion not caused by reception staff asking to see DBS certificates or letters from employers similar to the ones carried by staff who work in schools on a regular basis.

It is appropriate for schools/colleges to check with the Missing Children Practitioner whether or not parents have given their consent to the interview. Young people aged 16 and 17 years old are generally considered to be able to consent and withhold consent to their own information being shared. With reference to the Fraser Guidelines, younger children may also be deemed able to consent.

Parents will not always respond to the letters sent out by the MCP team. In order to comply with the within 72 hours requirement, it will not always be practicable for the MCP team to pursue parents for consent. However, if the school/college is uncomfortable about facilitating a Return Home Interview without a parent's consent, it would be reasonable for the school/college to contact the parent and seek to secure their consent.

Once signed in and escorted to the interview room, there is no requirement that young people should be accompanied by school staff in the interview unless the young person requests that and/or the parent has made that a condition of consenting to the interview. There may be occasions when parents wish to accompany their son/daughter in interviews and schools/colleges are asked to facilitate that as appropriate.

You will all appreciate that Return Home Interviews need to be conducted as sensitively as possible so that young people experience them as helpful, supportive and non-judgemental. The purpose of the interview is to determine the reasons for the young person going missing and care is taken not to be critical of the young person for going missing. Schools and colleges are asked to support the process with similar sensitivity. The statutory guidance can be found at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care_3.pdf

Any other queries in relation to the Missing Children Practitioner Service and Return Home Interviews can be directed to the CSE/MCP administrator on 01926 418305

Many thanks in anticipation of your support and assistance in facilitating this vital aspect of safeguarding vulnerable young people in your schools and colleges.

Best regards

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