

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Improving Lives Select Commission
2.	Date:	9th July, 2014
3.	Title:	Young People Missing from Home and Care
4.	Directorate:	Children and Young Peoples' Services

5. Summary

This report informs Members of current national and local developments regarding young people missing from home and care.

6. Recommendations

That members accept this report and note its content.

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 Background

In January 2014 The Department of Education published new statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. The guidance makes it clear that local authorities are responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care. The guidance also comments on widespread concerns about children in care being sexually exploited.

The Joint All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Inquiry on Children Who Go Missing from Care and the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups each noted that looked after children missing from their care placements are particularly vulnerable. It was noted that children in residential care are at particular risk of going missing and particularly vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation.

It is worth noting that although looked after children are particularly vulnerable when they go missing, the majority of children who go missing are not looked after, but children who go missing from their family home.

Department for Education (DfE) guidance has always indicated that local authorities should agree with local police and other partners a protocol for dealing with children who run away or go missing in their area. Where appropriate, they should also have agreed protocols with neighbouring authorities or administrations. The protocols should be agreed and reviewed regularly with all agencies and be scrutinised by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)

Rotherham's protocol was updated last year to ensure that it is up to date with the revised guidance. It was drafted in consultation with partners including South Yorkshire Police and Safe@last and endorsed by the safeguarding board.

The regional protocol has not been updated. There are plans to address this by summer 2014.

Structures for managing children who go missing from home and/or care in Rotherham are well organised. There are good working relationships between the local authority and partner agencies and regular meetings to analyse patterns and trends. Latterly there has been some concern regarding the management of cases when children have run away more than once and with the accuracy of reporting. Each of these matters was discussed at the Child Sexual Exploitation Silver Group on 10th February with plans made to address the matters.

Structures for managing children who go missing from out of borough placements are less robust. The DfE guidance states that;

'If children placed out of their local authority run away, the local protocol should be followed, in addition to complying with other processes that are specified in the policy of the responsible local authority'.

There are concerns that independent sector care placement providers are not following this guidance. Following discussions with South Yorkshire Police and the Rotherham Children's Social Care Placements Team, the lead officer for missing children has contacted every provider with firm instructions as to what is required in relation to young people placed with them by Rotherham Council. Arrangements have been put in place throughout the rest of the year for the lead officer to visit providers to ensure the protocols are implemented effectively.

7.2 Children Missing January to May 2014.

The table below shows the number of children in total who have gone missing each month from January to May 2014.

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May		
Total no.	23	25	30	60	47		

7.3 Patterns and Trends

The figures show the total number of children reported missing in the month. Month by month reports break the data down. For example in May 2014

- 47 young people went missing
- 23 had never been missing before (49%)
- 3 had not been missing in the previous three months
- 21 had been missing in the last 3 months
- 17 of those missing were male
- 24 of those missing were female
- 33 were aged 10-16 with most of these being between 14-16
- 3 children were considered to be at medium risk of child sexual exploitation and one at high risk. Strategy meetings have been held where sexual exploitation is a concern.

The increase at age 15 reflects the national picture. There is a sharp increase at age 15 in Rotherham. The following provides an insight to the picture nationally:

- Figures compiled by the police show that the 15-17 age group are the highest number of missing persons. (Missing persons: data and analysis, NPIA 2011)
- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) state that young people are most likely to run away between the ages of 13 and 15,

At the age of 15 children may feel that they are that much more 'worldly wise' and can look after themselves, it is also a time for challenging boundaries previously accepted.

For all children, adolescence is a stressful time of dramatic physical changes, peer pressure and an emerging identity. Those with parental support are usually able to successfully navigate this period, but without it, emotions can overwhelm a child to the point that he or she believes that leaving will bring relief.

Some feel that leaving home is the only way to escape a situation in which there is frequent fighting or where they feel unwanted. A great many are fleeing situations that are physically, sexually and/or emotionally abusive. Some children run away because they're in trouble with the law and afraid their parents will find out.

The May figures reflect a pattern that is consistent with previous months. There has been a notable increase since April 2014. This reflects a change in reporting procedures rather than a change in pattern. In April 2014 the Department of Education implemented new reporting categories. These are;

Missing

- Anyone whose whereabouts *cannot be established* and where the circumstances are *out of character*, or the context suggests the person may be a *subject of crime* or at *risk of harm* to themselves or another.

Absent

- A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.

South Yorkshire Police reacted by changing their recording system which now records children missing when they have been absent from home or care for just a few hours. These cases would not previously have been recorded.

7.4 Managing children who are reported missing and specifically those considered high risk.

There are systems in place to ensure that any child reported missing is risk assessed. The risk assessment is continually updated until the child is recovered. South Yorkshire Police and the Children's Social Care Services have up to date information regarding children considered to be at the highest level of risk. This would include children with a disability, very young children and those known to be at risk of child sexual exploitation.

Forums are in place where individual cases are discussed on a weekly and monthly basis with action plans devised to manage the risk.

8. Finance

There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

It should be noted that the risk to children who go missing are not confined to child sexual exploitation. Children may come to other forms of harm.

Children missing from education are often not reported as 'missing persons'. The absence from school may trigger a visit from the school's education welfare officer but may not necessarily be referred to the police as missing person case.

The Rotherham runaways action group have representatives from health and education with regards to records and action required when children are reported missing from education.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Through their inspections of local authority children's services, Ofsted will include an assessment of measures with regard to missing children as part of their key judgement on the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

Children who run away or go missing from home or care January 2014 (DFE 2014)
APPG inquiry into children missing from care June 2012
Running Away; Ofsted 2012
Lessons to Learn: The Children's Society 2012
Still Running (three) The Children's Society 2011
Missing Children and Adults Strategy The Home Office 2011

Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing
Persons ACPO 2013

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