

## **FORTH VALLEY INTER AGENCY YOUNG RUNAWAYS PROTOCOL**

### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this protocol is to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people across Stirling who are at risk of going missing from home or care or who are already doing so.
- 1.2 It is intended that this protocol will assist in developing robust responses to children and young people who run away and should be used to engage partner agencies in developing preventative services for children and young people who are at risk of running away.
- 1.3 It is acknowledged that the most effective assessment and support comes through good information sharing, joint assessments of need, joint planning, professional trust with interagency network and joint action in partnership with families.

### **2 Definitions**

- 2.1 The following definitions apply to this protocol and relate to children and young people who go, or have gone missing –
  - **Child:** A **child** or **young person** who has not attained the age of 16 years or a child over the age of 16 years who has not attained the age of 18 years and in respect of whom a supervision requirement is in force.
  - The meaning of a **child** is extended to cover any person under the age of 18 in cases concerning: Human Trafficking; sexual abuse while in a position of trust (Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009) and the sexual exploitation of children under the age of 18 through prostitution or pornography (Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005)
  - **Missing Person/Concern for Person – Police Scotland Definition:**

A **Missing Person** is anyone whose whereabouts is unknown and

    1. The circumstances are out of character **OR**
    2. The context suggests the person may be subject to crime **OR**
    3. They are at risk of harm to themselves or another.

In addition, a **Concern for Person** is a person whose whereabouts are known or believed known and there are concerns of risk of harm to the individual.
  - **Runaway:** A child or young person who is absent from their home or placement for any length of time where their age and experience, background

and ability makes this a concern or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers

- **Looked after Children:** A child whereby the Local Authority has a statutory responsibility for their care by reason of a court order, or if they are provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by agreement with a person with parental responsibilities.
- **Residential establishment:** An establishment (whether managed by a local authority, by a voluntary organisation or by any other person) which provides residential accommodation for children for the purposes of the Children's (Scotland) Act 1995 or the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968.

**N.B.** For the purposes of this protocol a missing child or young person will be defined as one where the missing episode has been reported to the police.

### **3 Scope**

3.1 This protocol is designed for:

- All children and young people living in the boundaries of Forth Valley, excluding those who are Looked After by external local authorities and placed in the Forth valley area;
- Children and young people looked after by Forth Valley Local Authorities placed within children's homes or foster homes (either Local Authority or independent) within the Forth Valley area boundaries;
- Children and young people looked after by the Local Authority who are living with parents or relatives and who are subject to a Supervision Order.

3.2 The Local Authority retains responsibility for children and young people looked after and placed outside the Local Authority boundaries. In these cases the placement provider will be required to comply with relevant protocols local to their area.

### **4 Principles**

4.1 This protocol should be read as guidance only and cannot anticipate every situation. Anyone working with children and young people in a professional capacity should use their judgement to take whatever action is deemed necessary to protect and safeguard the child or young person, based on an assessment of risk for the individual.

4.2 Our joint aim is to reduce the incidence of all children and young people going missing. Children and young people who go missing may place themselves and others at risk and each episode is potentially serious. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or their experiences of care. Every "missing" episode should attract proper attention from the professionals involved who must collaborate to

ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child or young person on his/her return.

- 4.3 When a child or young person does go missing our joint aim is to prevent that child or young person suffering harm and to trace them and return them to safety as soon as possible. We do this by partnership working, information sharing and problem solving.
- 4.4 Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes. Interventions for looked after children must be informed by and reflected in the placement record and care plan. Interventions must also be informed by effective Return Interviews. Children and young people's views and concerns will be taken seriously.
- 4.5 Interventions may be focused on the individual child and young person, their home or by targeting community issues.

## **5 Procedures for Missing Children / Young People**

- 5.1 All agencies will continue to respond to initial reports of missing children in accordance with current agency procedures.
- 5.2 Upon receiving a report of a missing child or young person, the police will carry out enquiries (which are proportionate to the perceived risk) aimed at locating the child/young person as soon as possible.
- 5.3 A risk assessment will be carried out for each individual on every separate occasion they are reported missing to the police. The risk assessment is carried out by a supervising officer and will form the basis for the subsequent investigation into a child's disappearance. The risk assessment is subject to regular review by the supervisory officer and may dictate the manner in which the investigation to trace the child/young person progresses.
- 5.4 Where a child has been located or returned home police will conduct a "safe and well" check. It will not be conducted over the telephone. The purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against them. A Return Interview will thereafter be conducted at a suitable time and location, to provide the child or young person with an opportunity to discuss the missing episode in more detail.
- 5.5 If it is apparent or suspected, on the return of the child, that they have been a victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent then the Police will instigate further appropriate enquiries.
- 5.6 If during enquiries risk factors are identified within the home address, which would impact upon the child's ability to safely return home, options will be discussed with

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the local Children and Families Social Work service (Emergency Duty Team to be contacted after hours).

- 5.7 Police will submit a Vulnerable Person report in respect of all missing children/young people and this will be screened in accordance with the Ministerial Framework for non-offence based referrals and referred to the local Children and Families Social Work service and the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (if appropriate).
- 5.8 The Young Runaway co-ordinator within Forth Valley Division, Police Scotland will ensure that the foregoing processes are complied with and be responsible for ensuring robust information sharing occurs.

## **6 Return Interviews**

- 6.1 "Return Interviews" is the process to ensure the safety, needs and risk assessment in respect of young runaways are met. It should include an exploration of the reason the child left their home or placement as well as what risks they were exposed to whilst missing. The "Return Interview" is different from the "safe and well" check.
- 6.2 **The "Return Interview" is important in safeguarding the child or young person in the future. It must not be viewed as a routine or administrative task.**
- 6.3 Police Scotland have committed to carrying out a Return Interview for every missing episode and the Young Runaway coordinator will monitor this and share all relevant information gained with partners.
- 6.4 The return interview should normally be conducted in all instances within 72 hours of the child or young person's return, unless there are exceptional circumstances.
- 6.5 The "Return Interview" will be conducted in accordance with the Scottish Government Guidance on Interviewing Child Witnesses (separate guidance has been issued to police officers involved in this process). Consideration should also be given to having any interview video recorded, where the circumstances require this.
- 6.6 Staff conducting "Return Interviews" should ensure the child's circumstances are fully understood and seek appropriate supports for the child during the interview. These should include communication aids, for example, use of translators, assistance from Speech and Language or specialist staff working with the child.
- 6.7 The purpose of the interview is:
  - To better understand the reasons why the child went missing;
  - To explore the circumstances which led to the missing episode(s);

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- To inform future prevention strategies;
- To inform any future missing person investigation should that person go missing again;
- To learn of the activities, associates, risks and victimisation involved in the missing episode, and where possible to address those risks with appropriate and proactive strategies;
- To identify and address any harm the child has suffered – including harm that may not have already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check.

6.8 The child must be provided with contact information for the officers conducting the “Return Interview” to facilitate future contact if required.

6.9 The interview will be recorded on the Police Missing Person Report (electronic system used by Forth Valley Division). All return interviews must be signed off by the Young Runaway coordinator who will assess the information on the Missing Person Report and Vulnerable Persons reports. This will then be shared with the local Children and Families Social Work service or the relevant Named Person and the Scottish Children’s Reporters Administration (if appropriate).

6.10 Where professionals from other agencies (e.g. Social Work, Health or Education) have been involved in the return interview copies of the interview notes will be retained by that agency.

6.11 In some circumstances the child may make extremely sensitive disclosures that need particularly careful management that should be recorded separately but referred to on the return interview record. In such circumstances it may be appropriate for the interviewer to discuss the information with relevant professionals.

6.12 Where a return interview leads to a disclosure that requires specific action, for example to safeguard a child or investigate a crime, this matter should be progressed in line with existing agency procedures.

6.13 In the event of a looked after or accommodated child/young person being reported missing and who has social work involvement from outwith Forth Valley a return interview will be carried out. The Young Runaways Co-ordinator will share the results of this with the child/young persons allocated social worker. If the child/young person is subsequently reported missing then the Young Runaways Co-ordinator will remain in contact with the allocated social worker to share any relevant information.

## **7 Response to Escalating Concerns**

7.1 Where a child/young person has been missing on 2 occasions the police Young Runaway coordinator will consider the need to instigate a formal Young Runaways Discussion (YRD), involving the 4 core agencies, Social Work (Children and

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Families Services) Health, Education and Police (Refer to existing IRD Procedure).

- 7.2 In addition to the current information sharing and areas for consideration, the participants of the YRD will decide the most appropriate intervention for the child or young person (single agency/joint visit/TAC etc) and the timescales for this to be concluded.
- 7.3 The police Young Runaway coordinator will be responsible for completion and sharing of the YRD documentation and ensuring that all information gathered during the return home welfare interview is shared appropriately with all participants of the YRD.
- 7.4 Formal intervention meetings, in response to escalating concerns must take place in the event of repeat episodes of children going missing. For these meetings to work and thereby improve our collective responses, appropriate attendance and clarity of purpose is essential. The intervention meetings should be held within a week of any trigger episode where practicable. However if the child/young person already has a Looked After Meeting or Team Around the Child Meeting organised and is being held within a reasonable timescale of the missing person episode, consideration will be given to the Young Runaways Co-ordinator attending this meeting to reduce the number of meetings to be attended. The intervention meetings should be held within a week of any trigger episode. It is the responsibility of the police Young Runaway coordinator to alert children's services of the need for an intervention meeting. It is the responsibility of children's services to arrange that meeting.
- 7.5 The scheduling of intervention meetings will be initiated by the Local Authority and will be determined by missing person reports recorded by the police.
- 7.6 **After five episodes:** This is the first stage intervention meeting. This level of intervention meeting is the crucial stage in avoiding serious escalation and must, therefore, be given high priority by all concerned. Within five working days of the last episode (reaching the threshold level) these meetings **MUST** be held and representatives from each organisation or interested party must be present. The meeting should be chaired by a Children's Services Team Manager, attendees should include (although this is not exhaustive):
- Child\*
  - Social Worker or relevant lead professional
  - Police Young Runaway Coordinator
  - Parent and or carer, residential worker or foster carer
  - Fostering Social Worker (if appropriate)
  - Person who conducted recent return home welfare interview if different to above
  - Named Person
  - Other relevant professional (For example education or workers from other agencies who are already in place to support the young person or their family)

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\*Discussion should take place between the chair and child's Social Worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

7.7 This meeting should try to identify both the principle reasons why the child ran away and where they went and also any other voluntary or statutory agency which may have an interest in the child's welfare. It may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the missing child or exploit them in any way. The meeting should be minuted and **MUST** produce a clear action plan, including timescales for action, named lead professional, risk/contingency planning and regular review dates. The minutes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited.

7.8 **After nine episodes:** This is the second stage intervention meeting. Within five working days of the last episode (reaching the threshold level) these meetings **MUST** be held and representatives from each organisation or interested party must be present. The meeting should be chaired by a Children's Services Manager, attendees should include (although this is not exhaustive):

- Child\*
- Team Manager
- Social Worker or relevant lead professional
- Police Young Runaway Coordinator and supervisor
- Parent and or carer, residential worker or foster carer
- Fostering Social Worker (if appropriate)
- Person who conducted recent return home welfare interview if different to above
- Named Person
- Other relevant professional (For example education or workers from other agencies who are already in place to support the young person or their family)

\*Discussion should take place between the chair and child's Social Worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

7.9 Meetings at this level should be rare provided that this protocol has been followed with regard to the first stage intervention meeting, YRD and return interviews. The meeting should be minuted and **MUST** produce a clear action plan, including timescales for action, named lead professional, risk/contingency planning and regular review dates. The minutes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited. In addition to seeking to reduce any apparent risks to the child, this meeting should also quality assure compliance with the protocols and the efficacy of the first stage intervention meeting and return interviews.

7.10 If a child/young person is reported missing on more than 9 occasions the Young Runaways Co-ordinator will remain in contact with the allocated/duty social worker as appropriate. If there are any further meetings arranged for the child/young

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person consideration will be given to the Young Runaways Co-ordinator attending to share police information in relation to the missing person episodes.

7.11 It should be noted, however, that the **volume** of missing episodes is not the only reason to escalate the level of intervention. The following are examples of other reasons to escalate interventions:

- Any case where the risks involved in even a single future-missing episode is very high
- Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well being of the child.

7.12 It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi agency strategy meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.

## **8 Quality Assurance**

This process must be robustly monitored and reviewed on a regular basis by the Stirling Child Protection Improvement Group. The chair of this group will provide regular reports to Stirling Child Protection Committee and the Chair of the Forth Valley G5 Reporting Group.

## **Contacts**

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