Report to the Children's Social Care and Learning Select Committee

Title:	Missing Children
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Purpose of Agenda Item

Information - The committee requested an update on missing children including children missing from education. This report updates the Committee on what systems and joint working is in place to support children and young people who become vulnerable during the time they are reported as or seen to be missing.

1. Background

Local authorities are responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care. Missing children are vulnerable to exploitation including sexual exploitation, violent crime, gang exploitation, or drug and alcohol misuse. Although looked after children are particularly vulnerable when they go missing, the majority of children who go missing are not looked after however due to their vulnerability they are the responsibility of the Local Authority.

The definitions of absent and missing are as follows:

- *Absent:* a child not at a place where they are expected or required to be.

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

2. Numbers in Buckinghamshire

In Buckinghamshire the senior children's service manager responsible for monitoring policies and performance relating to children who go missing from home or care is Amanda O'Borne, Head of Service First Response. In order to be successful in safeguarding children it requires a multi-agency approach.

Between the 1st December 2015 and 29th February 2016 there have been a total of 434 "Missing Persons" episodes recorded on LCS for Buckinghamshire Children/Young People.

Missing Status	Looked After Children	December	January	February	Total
Away from placement without authorisation	Yes	22	25	22	69
	No	24	42	46	112
Total		**46**	**67**	**68**	**181**
Missing	Yes	7	15	10	32
	No	79	54	88	221
Missing Total		**86**	**69**	**98**	**253**
Grand Total		**132**	**136**	**166**	**434**

3. Overview of the current working arrangements.

There are positive relationships with Thames Valley Police and Barnado's R U Safe Service. In partnership, risk assessments of children missing from home or care are discussed and data analysed to establish any patterns that may indicate particular concerns, risks and action needed. There are currently three key protocols that Buckinghamshire County Council, Thames Valley Police (TVP) and Barnardo's "R U Safe" project are working within.

1. D of E Statutory Guidance on Children who run away or go missing from home (January 2014)
2. Thames Valley Police Protocol
3. Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children's Board

The process - All referrals for children who go missing (either from home or from care) or who are reported as absent are recorded by the Police. These referrals are then shared with Children's Social Care First Response Contact & MASH team. Only the missing children aged 11 to 17 are referred by the Police to "R U Safe". Missing episodes are then recorded on the electronic data base for Children's records (LCS). When a case is deemed to be high risk, this is escalated to the relevant Head of Service and the Children's Social Care Director.

Outside of Office hours, the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) receives notifications of any concerns for children and ensures their immediate safety is assured with hand over to day staff. Few need immediate accommodation as most of the time children turn up on their

own volition. When the child is notified of being found the Police and EDT try to resolve the issue and return the child to the placement / home if safe to do so and send a formal notification to social care.   The Police do a 'safe and well' check when the child returns home and R U Safe are commissioned to do an independent return interview within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting. This is typically held in a neutral place where the child feels safe and is an opportunity to hear from the child about why they went missing and to understand the risks and issues faced by the child while missing. Safe and well checks and independent return interviews provide an opportunity to inform case planning, for wider strategic planning and for professionals to take into account children's views.

Partnership meetings - There are monthly M-SERAC meetings (Missing, Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference) which have a good attendance from key partners. These are co-chaired by an Inspector from Thames Valley Police and Children's Social Care Head of Service. The agenda is set to consider any child that is deemed "High Risk" of being missing in line with the Statutory Guidance that is when a child/young person goes missing on 3 occasions within 90 days.

The purpose of the meeting is to ensure full agency information sharing and to ensure each child/young person has a plan in place to address their needs, linked to the concerns arising from missing episodes. This meeting relates only to children who are currently living in Buckinghamshire. This includes children who are placed here by other Local Authorities. Buckinghamshire children who are placed on other Local Authorities and go missing would have their needs considered by similar arrangements to M-SERAC in that Local Authority. Strong links made with other Local Authorities can minimise risks both to Buckinghamshire's children placed elsewhere and those placed here by other authorities. Many of Buckinghamshire children placed out of County and subsequently go missing gravitate back to Buckinghamshire.

In March there was a two week trail of daily multi agency meetings (chaired by Chief Inspector of Child Abuse Investigation Unit) involving personnel working with the Swan Unit (Police, Health, Education, Social Care and R U Safe). These meetings focused on all children missing within last 24 hours (missing from care or missing from home). Whilst this was a time consuming exercise it was felt to be extremely useful. An extended trial of a full month is planned for May.

Recording - From the 18th March improvements were made in LCS for the recording of missing children. It is important that all missing and absent children (including children missing or absent from home or missing or absent from care) are recorded on LCS as this is a very vulnerable group of children and it is essential that people at all levels of the organisation are aware and managing the potential risk to these children. This will enable us to report accurately, we will be relying on this information for reporting to Ofsted and for providing statistical returns to government.

There is still some work to do in relation to this process e.g. recording of strategy meetings specifically related to missing and return interviews and will be working on this in the coming weeks. A user guide will also be produced.

4. Reducing the risks

Early and effective sharing of information between professionals and local agencies is essential for the identification of patterns of behaviour and exploring trends, demands and ways of reducing risks to children. There is a strong commitment for all agencies to work together and continually improve the situation for these vulnerable children.

The attitude of professionals, towards a child who has been missing can have a big impact on how they will engage with subsequent investigations and protection planning. However "streetwise" they may appear, they are children and may be extremely vulnerable to multiple risks. A supportive approach, actively listening and responding to a child's needs, will have a greater chance of preventing the child from going missing again and safeguarding them against other risks.

5. Children Missing Education (CME)

Children Missing Education is defined as "children who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school." The Department for Education has recently launched a consultation on improving reporting measures for children missing education (ends 7th March). This has been generated by increasing safeguarding concerns raised by Sir Michael Wilshire following the Trojan Horse inquiry into Birmingham schools.

Prior to June 2013, Buckinghamshire County Council discharged its duties to support CME via a combination of specialist business support and the Education Welfare Service. In June 2013, due to efficiencies in the Education Welfare Service, a new post was created allowing a radical change to the way we recorded, identified and tracked CME; creating a more effective system which satisfied Ofsted's scrutiny in the 2015 inspection. This resulted in an initial increase in CME which was attributed to better scrutiny and a raised profile.

Numbers have continued to rise:

Academic Year = CME cases open during the year
2011-12   = 104
2012-13   = 174
2013-14   = 432
2014-15   = 640

Referrals from other Local Education Authorities have increased year on year which may reflect the higher profile in national press; particularly around CSE/Prevent. Referrals from schools remain relatively constant. In the last two years there are improved links with the

NHS and there are approximately 35 referrals a year. We need to ensure a focus on accurate recording and awaiting the response from the DfE consultation.

Further work needs to be done to investigate this trend to establish if this is a regional issue and how other Local Authorities are responding. The Director for Education is leading a 'deep dive' into children missing education and exclusions from school. It is essential that the trends and patterns in behaviour are explored and supportive in a holistic way. All service and partners need to be aware of trend data, the risks associated with vulnerable children and what support is available.