

**Wakefield Operating Guidance for Children Missing from Home and Care**

This document provides supplementary guidance to practitioners in Wakefield and District to support the local implementation of the Joint protocol of the West Yorkshire safeguarding Partners in Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield. (December 2018)

**1. Context**

When a child or young person goes missing, this can be reflective of other safeguarding issues affecting him / her. Some of the risks associated with children who are missing from home and care include:

* The child or young person being in unsafe places, with unsafe or risky adults.
* Being more likely to be involved in substance misuse.
* Being more likely to be involved in anti-social or criminal offending behaviour.
* More likely to be involved in child trafficking or child sexual exploitation.
* Less likely to be socially / educationally engaged.

This means that children who go missing, particularly where this is a sustained feature of their behaviour and / or connected with other types of vulnerabilities are more likely to be suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm. For this reason, it is important that Social Care and Early Help services identify, understand, and address missing episodes for children, in ways that reduce risk and vulnerability.

Our aim in working with children in these circumstances will always be to reduce future missing episodes and to reduce the risk that children are exposed to. The below sets out the way in which social workers and Early Help staff in Wakefield should work with missing children and young people.

**2. Glossary and definition**

There are a number of definitions across statutory guidance and protocols relating to children who go missing or are not where they are expected to be. These are simplified and set out below for easy reference:

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| **Term** | **Definition** |
| Child/young person | A person who has not yet reached their eighteenth birthday. ‘Child’ should be taken to mean ‘child or young person’ throughout this guidance. |
| Missing person | Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from ‘no apparent risk (absent)’ through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. |
| Children in Care.  (CIC) | A child who is looked after by a local authority by reason of a  care order or being accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. |
| Away from placement without authorisation (Absent) | A looked-after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place, they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police. |
| Responsible authority | The local authority that is responsible for a looked-after child’s care and care planning. When the child is placed out of area, also known as the “home authority”, “originating authority” or “placing authority”. |
| Host authority | The local authority into whose area a looked-after child is placed, if not in the responsible authority’s area. Also known as the “receiving authority”. |
| Care leaver | Someone who has previously been a looked-after child for a period of time. Their entitlement to support depends on how long and how long ago this period was and their current circumstances. |
| Hidden missing child | A child who is or has been missing but has not been reported to the police. |
| Graded level of intervention | Levels of intervention model applied by the police when a child is reported missing. |

**3. The Process to Follow**

All staff becoming aware that a child is missing should ensure that this has been reported to the responsible police authority after all reasonable attempts have been made to find the child. The child only needs to be reported missing to the police if their whereabouts cannot be established.

If the whereabouts of a looked after child is known and there are concerns that they are at risk or may pose a risk to others, then a joint strategy should be agreed between the responsible Authority’s’ Children Services and West Yorkshire Police. For more details on making a report of a missing child, see the Joint protocol.

In Wakefield, all Missing from Home or Care notifications will be made by the responsible Police Authority to the Integrated Front Door (IFD) and CVE/Missing Team.

The CVE/Missing Team administrator will create a record of the child's missing episode in the electronic social care file. Missing episodes can be located in the additional section on Liquid logic. The initials MISP will appear under the child’s name until they have been found. A line through the MISP will show once the Child has been found.

Where the child is already known and allocated to a Social Worker or Early Help Worker. The CVE Team Administrator will create the missing episode and a notification will be sent to that worker.

The Missing Coordinator will view the missing episode and that the Return Home nterviewI (RHI) task can be allocated and carried out (after the child is found). The CVE administrator will generate the RHI form and allocate this to the worker who has been designated to carry out the interview.

In the event that a child is not already known / allocated to a Social Worker a police notification is sent to the IFD to determine the appropriate action. The IFD Team will undertake usual screening activity and determine the appropriate service provision for the child (Social Care, Early Help or Universal Services).

When the child has been found, the Police will send an updated notification to the CVE/Missing Team and they will record this on the child's file. The CVE Administrator will update the missing episode to indicate that the child has been found.

If a child is looked after and placed in Wakefield by another Local Authority a missing episode will be created on the child’s electronic records by the CVE/Missing Team Administrator and the information will be sent to the correct Local Authority by the missing person’s police officer. It remains the responsibility of the placing Authority to undertake the RHI unless there is a reciprocal agreement in place.

If the nature of the case means that any form of media interest or briefing is required or likely, the Team Manager/Service Manager must provide a serious notification form to the Service Director, Corporate Director CYPS, their Head of Service and Safeguarding Partnership Manager. Where this happens outside office hours the on-call Senior Manager will notify Service Directors / Corporate Director CYPS. A serious notification form should also be provided/completed when any child has been missing for 72 hours.

The IFD/ Emergency Duty Team should be notified of any missing notification for Wakefield Children placed in another authority. The IFD team/Emergency duty team will notify the Missing Coordinator via the missing \_young \_people in box, and the allocated Social Worker. All Wakefield children placed outside of the Authority require a missing episode to be entered onto their electronic record each time that they are reported missing. It is the responsibility of the allocated worker to notify the CVE/Missing Team. The CVE/Missing Team administrator will create a record of the child's missing episode in the electronic social care file. A worker from the CVE/Missing Team will normally undertake the RHI unless it is considered that another identified person is more appropriate.

**4. Reporting a child missing.**

If a child is believed to be missing it is the responsibility of his/her parent or carer to take reasonable steps to locate the young person and allow the child a reasonable opportunity to return prior to reporting the incident to the police, unless **it is believed that the child is at risk of significant harm.** If the threshold of ‘concern for the immediate safety of the child’ is not met, and the child has not returned and cannot be located then the police should be contacted.

Once the incident is reported to the police a discussion should take place with the reporting person of the level of intervention that they will apply. No child will be treated as a cause for concern but will continue to be monitored via the level of intervention model.

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| **NON-INTERVENTION**  **Level of Risk is Low and is Tolerable by the Parent or Carer**  The parent or carer decides to wait for the person to return of their own accord |
| **PARENTAL OR CARER INTERVENTION**  **Level of Risk is Moderate and Unacceptable to the Parent or Carer**  The parent or carer accepts responsibility for searching for the vulnerable person in order to bring them home.  However, the level of risk does not justify police intervention at this time |
| **POLICE INTERVENTION**  **Level of Risk is High**  There is an urgent need to locate the vulnerable person before they suffer harm.  The police have a duty to assist the parent or carer |

It is important that the reporting person is clear about which stage is being applied to the young person at the time of reporting and that they regularly update the police whilst the child remains missing.

Young people who are 16 and 17 years old and those who are care leavers are no less vulnerable than young children and are equally at risk, particularly of sexual exploitation or involvement with gangs. In some cases, they may present as homeless and would require an assessment of their needs under the

**5. Weekly Missing Briefing**

The Missing Coordinator and their counterpart at West Yorkshire Police will discuss once a week any High-Risk missing children and agree on action’s that need to be taken.

The Missing Coordinator will notify the relevant Team Manager/allocated Social Worker if the missing episode has met the requirement for a strategy discussion and will record this on the Child’s electronic file.

The Team Manager/Service Manager should complete a Serious Incident Notification form when a child who is allocated to their team has been missing over 72 hours and record this on the child’s electronic file.

When a child has been reported to the police as missing, but the police have deemed this as a cause for concern only and not as a missing episode, then a missing episode is entered onto the child’s electronic record and no RHI is required. It is important to understand the circumstances of why the incident was classified in this way and if it is considered that there are concerns then the normal process should be followed.

**6. Return Home Interviews**

When a missing child has been found, they must be offered a RHI, which should be carried out within 72 hours of notification that the child has returned home or to their placement. These will usually be carried out by staff who are independent of the case management and care provision for the child. In Wakefield, the RHI will be carried out by the CVE/Missing Team.

Wakefield children who are placed some distance from Wakefield District other arrangements for the RHI may be made, including with the host Local Authority or an independent provider. Where no alternative arrangements are available the RHI will be carried out by the CVE/Missing Team. All Wakefield young people who have been reported missing should be offered a RHI regardless of where they are placed.

The RHI may be carried out by a known adult (social worker or other professional) if the child expresses this wish.

Consideration should be given to the venue in which the RHI takes place, so that children are helped to talk as freely as possible about the issues involved.

The purpose of the RHI is to understand and address the reasons for the missing episode, identify and understand any harm the child has suffered, and help the child find strategies to minimise future missing episodes. RHIs will be recorded on the child’s electronic record using the RHI form.

The worker who has undertaken the interview will liaise with the Child’s social worker to share any relevant details. If the RHI identifies any concerns about a child that is not currently an open case to Wakefield, the case will be reviewed in line with the Local Safeguarding partnership thresholds and Early Help Pathway to determine whether referral to another service is required.

When the Missing episode has triggered a requirement for consideration of a strategy meeting. The person responsible for authorising the RHI module will take steps to enquire if the meeting has taken place, or that management oversight is added as to why one was not considered necessary at that time prior to closing the module. Where there is any disagreement, this will be raised with the appropriate Service Managers.

**7. Practice Guidance for Return Home**

A RHI must be offered to every child who has been recorded as ‘missing’.

They will be carried out for children who have been missing from home as well as missing from a placement

The Interview will normally be carried out by a designated worker from the CVE/Missing Team. However other professionals maybe best placed to carry out the RHI with the child/young person. Where possible we will endeavour to provide consistency of workers for children/young people who have been missing on repeated occasions.

Following allocation to a worker in the CVE/Missing Team they should contact the child’s allocated Social Worker where applicable to inform them of the planned RHI and to obtain any relevant background information. This will also include how best to make contact with the young person and any health and safety issues that may impact on the RHI.

Make contact with the child/young person’s parent/carer to arrange the interview

Conduct the interview and record it using the RHI template.

A key purpose of the RHI is to identify:

* If there are any underlying issues that have led to the child going missing? This could include difficulties with relationships within the home and placement, abuse or neglect, issues of bullying etc.
* If there are any safeguarding or child protection concerns due to the child going missing e.g. risk of abuse or child exploitation etc.

Where the child has an allocated Social Worker, any information should be shared with them so that appropriate steps can be taken to protect the young person. This includes any issues in relation to the quality of care provided to a child in care.

If the young person does not have an allocated Social Worker the worker who has conducted the RHI will need to consider whether any information that has come to light warrants a referral to Wakefield Children’s Social Care (IFD) or to the Early Help Hub.

It is particularly important to ensure that the young person is listened to, and their views and opinions recorded in the form so that steps can be taken to consider what they have said.

If a young person refuses a RHI, then with worker will make every effort to engage the young person and ensure that their attempts and reason for the refusal is clearly recorded.

When the young person is not wanting to engage with the return home process it is important that information is gathered from their parent/carer in order to increase our understanding about what may have led to the missing episode. This information should be recorded within the RHI template and shared with the allocated Social Worker or Team Manager. The worker who has carried out the RHI will provide feedback of the outcome to the parent/carer.

The interventions we know are effective in reducing the risks associated with going missing are based on building a positive relationship with the young person, ensuring that they are encouraged to participate in activities that will raise their self-esteem and promote social inclusion. Consideration to how these are identified and implemented should be contained within the safety plan and discussed at Core Group/Child in Need and Team around the Child Meetings. Provide feedback to the child’s Social Worker/parent and carer where applicable and record this on the RHI template.

**8. Risk Reduction and Keeping Children Safe**

A missing episode should not be seen as an isolated incident and will almost certainly be symptomatic of other issues in the child’s life. It is important that missing episodes are considered as events that may increase risk / vulnerability for children. Repeatedly going missing should not be viewed as a normal pattern of behaviour. If a child goes missing (especially when this happens repeatedly) the allocated Social Worker should consider what action is needed to help to protect the child.

When missing episodes occur, **allocated case workers** should consider:

* Whether or not the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm, and if this is the case, convene a strategy meeting and carry out a Section 47 investigation.
* Whether or not the missing episode(s) are significant and require the updating of assessments, care plans and any additional or alternative activity to help and support the child.

It will be appropriate to involve the worker who has undertaken the RHI in the above activity in order to ensure that all available information is shared and considered. The updating of assessments, care plans and convening of strategy discussions is a part of usual Social Work functions and is the responsibility of the allocated social worker / Team Manager.

It is important that assessments, investigations, and plans address the root cause of the missing episodes taking place and ultimately aim to reduce the risks of further missing episodes.

If a child has run away two or more times, it is important that a discussion is held, either with the child, their family or both, to offer further support and guidance. Actions following earlier incidents should be reviewed and alternative strategies considered.

For young people who go missing on more than one occasion it may be useful to consider additional support that can be offered to young people and their families from designated voluntary services for missing people such as missing people charity they can link young people and their families with longer-term help if appropriate. They may also be able to provide support to children while they are away from home or care. [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

Young people who are 16 and 17 year old and those who are care leavers are no less vulnerable than young children and are equally at risk, particularly of sexual exploitation or involvement with gangs. In some cases, they may present as homeless and would require an assessment of their needs under the **Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people, who may be homeless and/or require accommodation**

Remember to consider whether the missing episodes could be linked to Child Sexual Exploitation and or Criminal Exploitation and Trafficking and refer to the CSE indicators and the CVE/Missing Team, should you need advice or help with this.

**9. Missing Strategy Meetings**

A Strategy meeting is required when:

* A child has been missing for 24 hours. A further strategy meeting will be convened if a child has continued to be missing by the 72 hour point (as a minimum).
* When a child has been missing **four** times within a 28 day period.
* When a child has had six missing episodes within a 2 Month period.
* When a child has been assessed as being at **High Risk** of significant harm then consideration should be given if a strategy meeting is required and when the decision has been made for this to not be undertaken then the rationale for this decision should be clearly recorded on the child/young person’s electronic records.

These should be regarded as minimum standards, and judgement will need to be exercised with regard to the specific circumstances, level and nature of risk understood in individual cases. Where children are known to be at higher risk (either through vulnerability to exploitation or from other risk factors) more frequent liaison may be required. It is the responsibility of the Team Manager to notify relevant attendees.

A Strategy Meeting should therefore be held at any time if there are significant concerns that the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (in line with legislative duties to investigate), irrespective of the number of missing episodes. The worker who has undertaken the RHI for the child should always be invited to attend.

**10. Children in Care living outside the Wakefield area**

Carers reporting young people missing or absent to their local Police Authority should establish if the local Police will be alerting West Yorkshire Police Authority. If not, the carer should ensure that they alert Wakefield (EDT if out of hours) in order that the allocated Social Worker is notified as soon as is practicable.

Where a child is defined as “missing” by the Police following completion of their risk assessment, IFD/EDT should always be informed about this (including out of hours). This information should then be sent to the missing \_young\_ person inbox where the CVE/Missing Team administrator will create the missing episode on the young person’s electronic record.

Care providers should check periodically with their Police Authority regarding any updates and status of the episode and ensure the placing Authority is fully updated.

On the child’s return the relevant Team Manager and / or allocated Social Worker should ensure that the CVE/Missing Team are notified. All children regardless of their placement location should be offered a RHI within 72 hours of their return. It is only the child who has the right to refuse the RHI. The CVE/Missing Team administrator will ensure that the episode is closed, and a RHI is commissioned in line with local procedures. The allocated Social Worker should ensure that notification of the missing episode and return of the child is communicated to the Missing \_young\_ people inbox in order that the young person can be considered at the daily missing meeting.

Children placed outside of Wakefield still remain the responsibility of the placing authority and the operation guidance still applies. The timescales for holding a strategy discussion may vary between police forces and it should be the responsibility of the allocated Social Worker to liaise with the police force where the young person resides as to when this should take place. A serious incident notification form will still need to be completed if the child is missing for more than 72 hours or if the incident is likely to generate media interest.

**11. Knowing the Child**

In order to make sure that children who go missing are found and safeguarded as quickly as possible it is important that our records contain up to date information.

Good Social Work records will contain the following:

* An up to date photograph of the child.
* Up to date contact information about the child's friends / family and significant others.
* Information about where the child is likely to go in the event they are missing.
* The child's mobile phone number and any other means of contacting him / her.
* The place where the child should be returned to when he / she is found.
* It should consider known trigger events and vulnerability factors such as substance misuse, exploitation, mental health, etc. Anyone whom the child should not associate with or locations of concern. Their peers and previous missing incidents and locations.

This information should be made available to the police in the area the child has gone missing or in the area the child is suspected to be, including when a Looked after Child is placed out of area. Where missing episodes are a known vulnerability for a child who is cared for by the Local Authority. A Philomena Protocol form should be completed together with the child’s carer(s) in line with local procedures, (e.g. in a placement planning meeting). The responsibility for the completion and review of the documentation should be agreed between the child’s Social Worker and carer(s) during the initial placement planning meeting.

It is important that the Philomena Protocol should be reviewed regularly in multi-agency meetings, at a child’s looked after review meetings and always following a missing episode.

**12. Updating Assessments and Plans**

It is important that allocated Social Workers inform themselves (through discussion and reading of relevant documents) about the issues which give rise to missing incidents for a child. In particular, the information obtained from RHIs, needs to be understood by the responsible Social Worker so that it is considered in assessment activity and addressed by the child’s plan. It is important that when children go missing, the subsequent intervention with them addresses that issue, working to mitigate the risk that repeated missing episodes will occur.

It is therefore important that the effective safeguarding of children who go missing requires those involved with the young person, Social Workers, those carrying out RHI, police, education, etc., to work collaboratively together to agree the cause of the child’s missing episodes, the help that is most likely to make a difference and the role of each in providing that help. It is important that intervention keeps the child in focus, to ensure that the child’s wishes, and feelings are heard and that their needs are at the center of safety and planning.

**Wakefield Children in Care living outside the Wakefield area**

Young people placed outside of Wakefield in another local authority who are reported missing will require a missing episode to be entered onto their electronic record and a RHI should be offered within 24 hours of the time that they return back to their place of residence.

Carer/residential staff following reporting a child as missing will inform the allocated social worker and if out of hours EDT

The allocated social work for children placed outside of Wakefield will notify the CVE team that a child is missing

RHI raises safeguarding concerns

RHI worker will notify the allocated social worker

No concerns identified NFA

The allocated social worker will invite the RHI worker/CVE TM to the strategy meeting

The CVE team will notify the allocated social worker and TM if a strategy meeting is required and will record this on the child’s electronic records

EDT/IFD

Send notification to the missing \_young \_ person in box

Case allocated for RHI

CVE team Administrator will check the inbox and create the missing episode on LL

**All Children Missing from Home and Care in Wakefield**

IFD/EHP will screen cases which are not open

Information is of:

Concern/high risk/ or strategy meeting required the case will be sent to area social work team

Police notified as child going missing

Notification sent to IFD and

CVE/Missing Team

The police will notify the responsible LA of any child who has been reported missing in Wakefield

Children placed in Wakefield by another LA. Missing episode will be created. Concerns will be passed to the responsible LA by the Police.

RHI remains the responsibility of placing authority

CVE concerns identified/ follow the referral pathway for RAM

CVE team Administrator will check the inbox and create the missing episode on LL

The CVE team will notify the allocated social worker and TM if a strategy meeting is required and will record this on the child’s electronic records

The allocated social worker will invite the RHI worker to the strategy meeting

The missing person coordinator will view the details and discuss the young person at the daily missing meeting

Allocated social worker/TM will be invited to the meeting

Case allocated for RHI to the most appropriate professional to complete the RHI

RHI worker will notify the allocated social worker

RHI raises safeguarding concerns

No concerns identified NFA

CVE concerns identified/ follow the referral pathway for RAM

**Philomena Protocol**

The Philomena Protocol is aimed at safeguarding children in care at risk of going missing. It encourages carers in children’s social care and children’s homes to compile useful information which could be used in the event of a young person going missing from care, and will include:

* Known risks
* Key contacts
* Places frequented.

This Philomena protocol is aimed at protecting vulnerable children to prevent missing episodes occurring, but if they do there is a protocol in place that will assist in finding the child quickly.

