

Item No. 8.	Classification: Open	Date: 23 February 2016	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Children Missing from Care: Update Report	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Director, Children's Social Care	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the committee note the information presented in this report from St Christopher's Missing Children Service which provides independent return interviews to looked after children who go missing from home and care.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. The corporate parenting committee has previously received an information report on the St. Christopher's Missing Children Service in July 2015. This report provides an update since then.
3. Two councillor briefing sessions have taken place on children missing from care and how Southwark addresses these cases, and more have been planned.
4. When a child goes missing or runs away they are at risk. It is a key priority for Southwark to ensure they are effectively safeguarded and protected them from this risk. Local authorities are responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care.
5. Southwark Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is the point of referral for missing children. The MASH ensures intelligence is shared between all agencies and that action is taken to find young people and return them safely to their placement. Southwark's Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) has developed a multi-agency protocol designed to ensure effective multi-agency action to respond to the needs of children and young people who go missing and may be at risk.
6. Southwark has put in place processes and procedures to assess and respond to potential risks to missing children or young people, including risk of suicide/self-harm, offending behaviour and risk of sexual exploitation. A multi-agency child sexual exploitation (CSE) operational group, including St Christopher's, meet regularly to jointly oversee all children who known to be at risk or victims of CSE to ensure the right connections are being made by agencies and risks are thoroughly assessed. The CSE operational group provides reports on trends and patterns to Southwark Multi Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) for strategic oversight and action.
7. Children may run away from a problem, such as abuse or neglect at home, or to somewhere they want to be, such as visiting a girlfriend or boyfriend or to be closer to their family. They may have been persuaded to run away by someone else. There are particular concerns about the links between children running away and the risks of sexual exploitation. Missing children may also be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, to violent crime, gang exploitation, or to drug and alcohol misuse.

8. The DfE statutory guidance¹ on children who run away or go missing states that local authorities have a duty to offer children missing from home or care an independent return interview. The interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting. This should be an in-depth interview and is normally best carried out by an independent person (i.e. someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge.
9. The guidance also states that where children refuse to engage with the independent interviewer, parents and carers should be offered the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence. This should help to prevent further instances of the child running away and identify early the support needed for them.
10. St Christopher's Fellowship has been commissioned to offer an independent return interview to those children who have returned after being missing from care. St Christopher's Missing Children Service is in addition to other activities undertaken by the police, social worker, foster carer or residential staff.

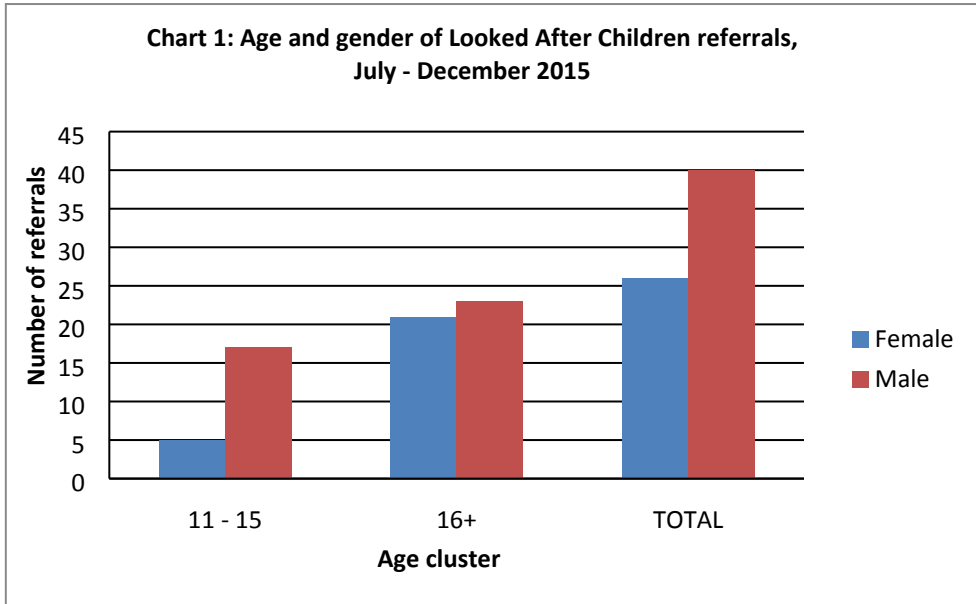
KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

11. The following data outlines activity from July – December 2015 and references the particular activity of looked after children and services they have received.
12. 159 children and young people were referred to the St Christopher's Missing Children Service between July – December, comprising of 322 missing episodes. Children who were missing from their care placement or absent without permission of their carers (unauthorised absence) accounted for 65% of all missing episodes.
13. Where young people have been missing for consecutive days, this has been counted as one referral. More than half of all notifications concerned children and young people who had been re-referred, and the vast majority of these concerned looked after children (182 out of 216 re-referral notifications). There are a number of open cases of those young people who go missing on a regular basis, who want to visit their family or their partners. In the last quarter (October – December 2015) almost 33% of referrals were for only five looked after children.
14. All young people who go missing from care are offered a return interview by the service. The majority of cases have received an interview within the set timescale. In order to be responsive to the on-going needs of young people St Christopher's have weekly or fortnightly one-to-ones with the young people and provide support alongside their social worker.

Age and gender

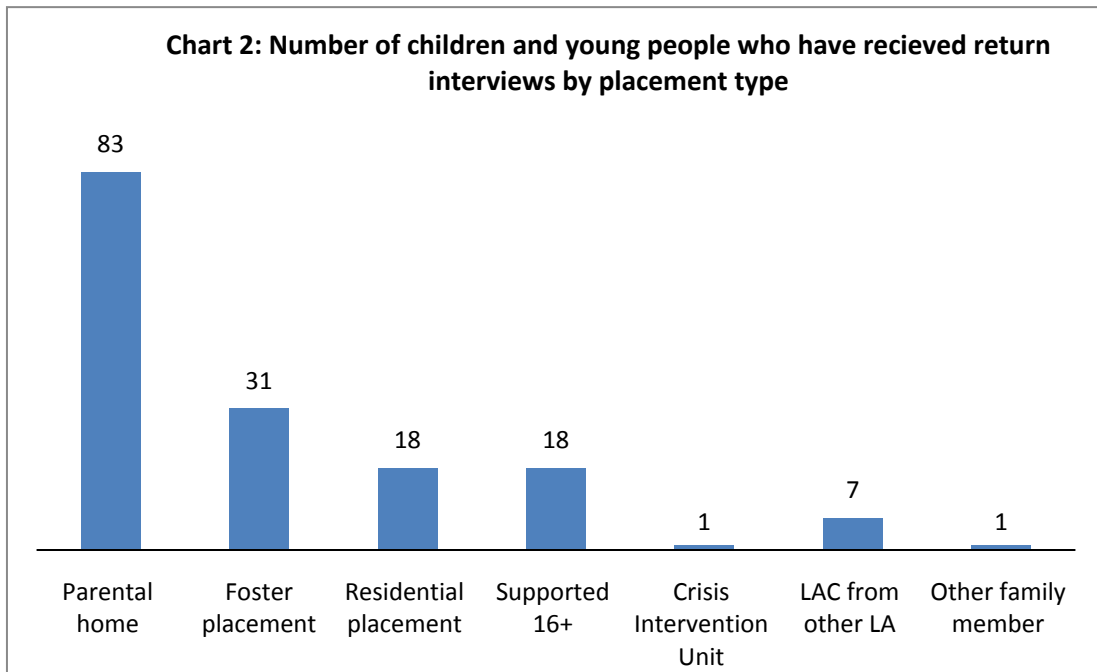
15. More referrals are made about males than females and males made up 60% of looked after children (LAC) referrals. Chart 1 shows most LAC referrals were for those aged 16 and older and males aged 16 and older comprised a third of all LAC referrals (23 referrals). A high number of referrals were made concerning females aged 17 (17 referrals). Significantly more referrals were therefore received for older looked after children.

¹ DfE, January 2014, Statutory Guidance: Children who run away or go missing from home or care



Placement type

16. Although many children and young people went missing from their parental home, over 40% of those who went missing were from foster or residential placements.



Timeliness of return interviews

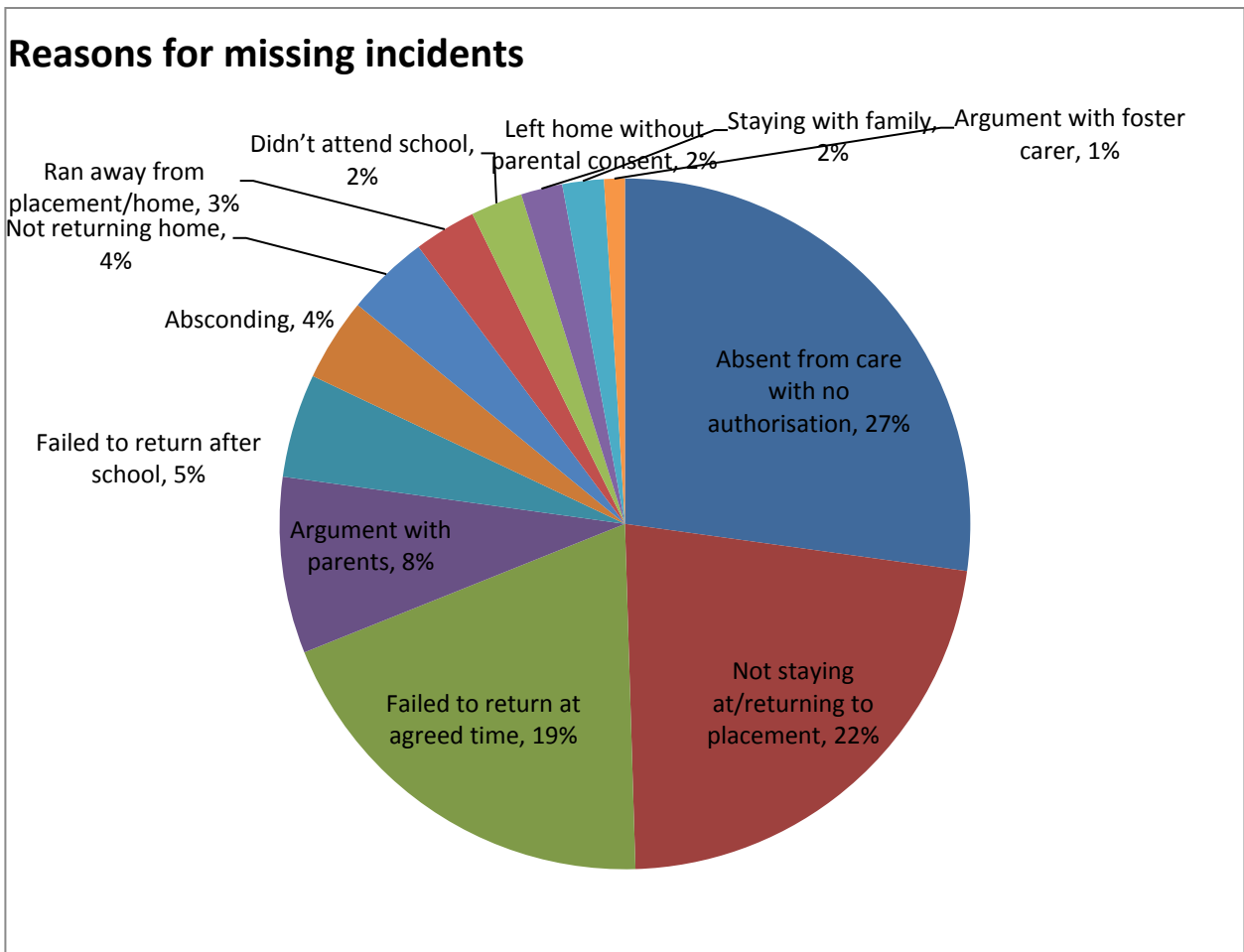
17. St Christopher’s has been making contact with the parent or the carer of the child within 24 hours from receiving the referral in order to adhere to the recommended timescale of 72 hours for the delivery of independent return interviews. However, a number of factors have been identified that may delay the process, including:

- The child is a frequent missing person who spends very limited time at home or at the placement
- The child is still missing at the time of referral
- The child is absconding from a pending court order and is due to be arrested upon being found or returning to care / home
- The agreed time for a return interview would have to fit with the existing schedule of the child's commitments (e.g. education, visits from other professionals, etc.)
- Parents or carers might have limited availability due to other commitments
- Parents or carers might be unable to answer our initial calls
- Contact details may be unavailable or incorrect
- Missing person reports received from the police might take a few days before they are processed.

18. St Christopher's have worked with the local authority to review the timeliness of return interviews and will be taking a number of steps to reduce the delay and maintain the effectiveness of interventions, including exploring regular meetings with frequent missing persons to provide ongoing support with the aim of reducing the number of missing episode and prevent further incidents.

Reasons from missing episodes

19. There are a number of reasons why children or young people may be missing. In addition to the main reasons below, children and young people also report arguments with siblings as a reason.



Emerging themes from missing return interviews

20. The following emerging themes are evident from missing return interviews:

- Family - Most looked after children who have been referred to our service are placed in other local authorities and would often return to their family in Southwark when going missing.
- Friends and Peer Pressure – Staying out with friends, peer pressure and the desire for more independence are another common reason for missing incidents. While some of these young people might be ready to manage their lives more independently and become more settled once they move on from their current care placement, in most cases though they may still be very vulnerable and exposed to higher risks
- Relationships – Some young people would be absconding to stay with their boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Criminal Activity – involvement with criminal activities is a determining factor for repeat absences of some children and young people, including drug dealing and gang related activities.

Policy implications

21. Southwark's *Children in Care and Care leavers Strategy 2016-19* prioritises developing services and our understanding of the needs of looked after children who are missing from care and those vulnerable children and young people who are missing from home.

Community impact statement

22. Southwark Looked After Children services works to promote the best possible outcomes for children in care. The care population is diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity and we closely monitor these protective characteristics to ensure we understand specific needs and are able to deliver services that address these needs. It is recognised that placement stability, engagement in education, access to leisure and healthy lifestyles all help to build resilience for young people to successfully achieve economical wellbeing and make a positive contribution. Effective performance monitoring supports these objectives and enables us to identify areas where improvements may need to be made.

Legal implications

23. Section 13 of the Children Act 2004 requires local authorities and other named statutory partners to make arrangements to ensure that their functions are discharged with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. This includes planning to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do.

24. Southwark's return interview service provided by St Christopher's is in accordance with the duty to offer children missing from home or care an independent return interview as specified in DfE's statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care.

25. 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.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Corporate Parenting Committee: St Christopher's Missing Children Service: Update report (Item 11)	160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH	Paula Thornton 020 7525 4395
Link: http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ielistdocuments.aspx?CId=129&MId=5148&Ver=4		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson, Director, Children's Social Care	
Report Author	Tasneem Mueen-Iqbal, Policy Officer, Children's and Adults' Service	
Version	Final	
Dated	10 February 2016	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Director of Law and Democracy	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Governance	No	No
Cabinet Member	No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team	10 February 2016	