

Item No. 7.	Classification Open	Date: 18 February 2010	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Adolescent and Aftercare Service Children missing from care	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Head of Service for Children in Care Children's Specialist Services	

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 The Corporate Parenting Committee to note current practice and policy with regards to children missing in care.
2. The Corporate Parenting Committee to note incidences during last calendar year of children missing from care, duration and age, gender and ethnicity

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. As a corporate parent a child missing from care is one of the most worrying circumstances faced by Children's Services needing prompt and coordinated management.
4. Children missing from care are recognised as being the most vulnerable children in the community and are recognised as a specific group in Southwark's overall strategy for "missing" children – other significant groups include children who are trafficked and those who are not on any school roll (ref: Victoria Climbié).
5. The DCSF have issued new statutory guidance as to how children who are missing from care or run away from home should be managed which necessitate staff procedures and guidance for carers/placements, police response and management overview until the child is found. Current and new guidance identifies specific issues and responses relating to children in care.
6. Carefirst has been modified to enable missing children to be immediately logged to facilitate communication with other agencies where the child may present especially the out of hours services. Carefirst also enables management overview reports to be provided to look at trends over a period of time.
7. Procedures require that if a child has been missing for seven days, then a detailed report is required for the Assistant Director of Specialist Services to overview all actions being taken by agencies to locate the child and secure their safety.
8. There are also resources available through the 1989 Children Act where it is an offence for an adult to knowingly harbor a looked after child. Southwark would be able to access the relevant part of the Act in partnership with the police to obtain an order to enter premises and remove the child.

9. It should also be noted that a child who is not residing at their placement but insists on living elsewhere without the permission of the Local Authority is deemed to be "missing". These situations are more difficult to manage as usually the young person is aged 16 or 17 and is insistent that they should determine where they should live and with whom. Whilst Southwark would adopt a very flexible approach in pursuing its kinship policy for older children whereby more informal arrangements can be validated following appropriate assessments and checks, on occasion the assessment would indicate that the household does not afford a looked after child sufficient protection or appropriate living environment. These situations cannot be easily resolved by asking the police to forcefully remove a young adult who would only return to the address at the earliest opportunity.
10. Foster carers have clear training and guidance relating to reporting children missing from placement if they fail to return home at an agreed time which involves notification to the police, out of hours social work service and emergency on call fostering service.
11. There is a standing police protocol in place where they will not trigger an urgent response relating to a child who is late home from placement unless the age of the child or information from the carer would indicate they were in some form of immediate danger.
12. The Metropolitan Police have a Pan London agreement with all Boroughs where they may communicate a wish to access support from the media to advertise and raise public awareness as to a child who is missing from care. The police cannot pursue a publicity campaign without the approval from the relevant Assistant Director of Specialist Services.
13. Any external placements purchased by Southwark Council for children in care have clear contractual components which require children missing from care to be immediately reported to local police and the allocated social worker.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

14. The attached chart (Appendix 1) outlines the numbers of children who were recorded as missing children during the 2009 calendar year.
15. This represents a total of 8 children who are missing from care aged between 14 and 17 years of age.
16. The gender split for the 8 children concerned are 5 female and 3 male.
17. The ethnicity breakdown is 7 white and 1 dual heritage.
18. A missing from care monitor is produced in Southwark every month for the Assistant Director to ensure that the procedures and protocols are being pursued and that monitoring reports are being provided. Appendix 2 outlines current procedures concerning children missing from care.
19. The Service Manager for the Adolescent and Aftercare and allocated Team Manager for the child missing from care monitor the arrangements to locate the child on a continuous basis until the child is found. Once a child has been found and returned to their placement or an alternative placement then a review is undertaken to consider any underlying issues and what steps can be taken to provide a more stable and consistent placement environment. This review is undertaken by the Team Manager and further considered by the Independent

Reviewing Officer at the next statutory review (NB: a new review is immediately commissioned should there be a change of placement).

20 This review will also take into account the possibility that occasionally a child may abscond from a placement as a result of abuse from their main carer.

21 Given the vulnerability of Southwark children in care and the abusive and chaotic lifestyles they have frequently experienced prior to admission, it is a strong testament to the quality of placement provision that the number of children missing from care is relatively low.

22 It should also be noted that none of the children who went missing during the last calendar year were unaccompanied minors.

23 A strategic group including Southwark police has been established to implement the new statutory guidance.

Weblink:

Statutory Guidance on Children who run away and go missing from home or care <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/download/?id=6178>

24 The key points of the new guidance are as follows:

- **Definitions** – what do we mean by ‘runaway’ we must be careful that this guidance only applies to those who have runaway or who are missing for an amount of time and where there is intention to have runaway. It is not for unauthorised absence or where a child has not returned home on time
- Unauthorised absence is different. Figures can be inflated by describing children as ‘missing’ when they are not ‘missing’
- What are we recording when we note the missing children – are we clear if they are missing or just absent without authorisation
- **Individual Case Management** – including return interviews for runaway/missing children by an independent person
- The need for a Strategic Planning for Missing Children as a Group
- Reporting to relevant agencies
- Prevention
- Quarterly Reports to Partners and the SSCB
- Links to Trafficking and Forced Marriage
- Link to children missing education.

Policy implications

25 Southwark has correct procedures and protocols in line with statutory guidance issued by the DCSF and 1989 Children Act.

Community impact assessment

26 Southwark residents should be confident that children who enter into public care

are secured in permanent placements and as Corporate Parent's we are aware of their whereabouts at all times.

Resource implications

27 None.

Consultation

28 None.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Protocol currently being written	Children's Specialist Services, SSCB	Malcolm Ward 0207 525 3733

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Report from 2009 Children missing from care
Appendix 2	Procedure and Practice Guidance from Southwark's Social Work Handbook (to be circulated separately)

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson, Assistant Director Children's Specialist Services & Safeguarding	
Report Author	Chris Saunders, Head of Services for Children in Care	
Version	Final	
Dated	8 February 2010	
Key Decision?	Yes	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	No	No
Finance Director	No	No
Executive Member	-	-
Date final report sent to Constitutional Officer	8 February 2010	