

<b>Item No.</b> 11.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 13 July 2015	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Corporate Parenting Committee
<b>Report title:</b>		St Christopher's Missing Children Service: Update report	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Director 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. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is a key priority for Southwark and requires effective joint working between agencies and professionals. When a child goes missing or runs away they are at risk and effective safeguarding includes protecting them from this risk. Local authorities are responsible for protecting children whether they go missing from their family home or from local authority care.
3. 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.
4. The DfE statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing<sup>1</sup> 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.
5. 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

<sup>1</sup> DfE, Statutory Guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. January 2014:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307867/Statutory\\_Guidance\\_-\\_Missing\\_from\\_care\\_3\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care_3_.pdf)

help to prevent further instances of the child running away and identify early the support needed for them.

6. St Christopher's Charity were commissioned in October 2014 to provide services to missing children within Southwark. The service initially developed protocols, referral routes with the different children's services across social care. They became actively involved in responding to referrals from January 2015.
7. The report refers to the period January to March 2015. The information generally applies to looked after children who were missing during this period who were referred to the service. It is anticipated that the profile of information will change as more services across social care access the service.
8. The draft Children in Care and Care leavers Strategy 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.

## **KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

9. The following data outlines activity from January – March 2015 and references the particular activity of looked after children and services they have received.

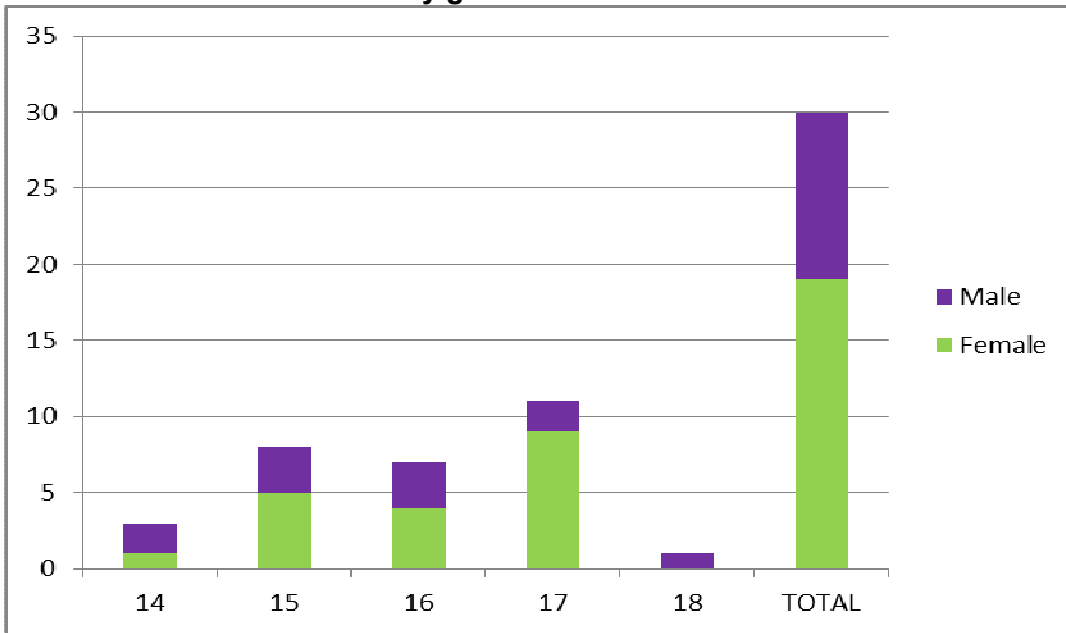
### **Referrals**

10. Of the 30 referrals made to the St Christopher's Missing Children Service between January and March 29 were for looked after children, 1 was from the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub. The majority (18) of referrals were made for unauthorised absence from their placement. This was young people staying out without the permission of the carer.
11. Seven of the referrals were one off incidents of children and young people missing for a period of time. All young people who go missing from care are offered a return interview by the service. St Christopher's Missing Children Service is in addition to other activities undertaken by the police, social worker, foster carer or residential staff. Of the thirty referrals, twenty two went missing repeatedly and on more than one occasion and generated eighty two referral notifications. Where young people have been missing for consecutive days, this has been counted as one referral.
12. The majority of cases have received an interview within the set timescale. 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 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**

13. Chart 1 shows the majority of referrals (67%) were from females. All were from those aged 14-18, with the most referrals made by females aged 17 (9).

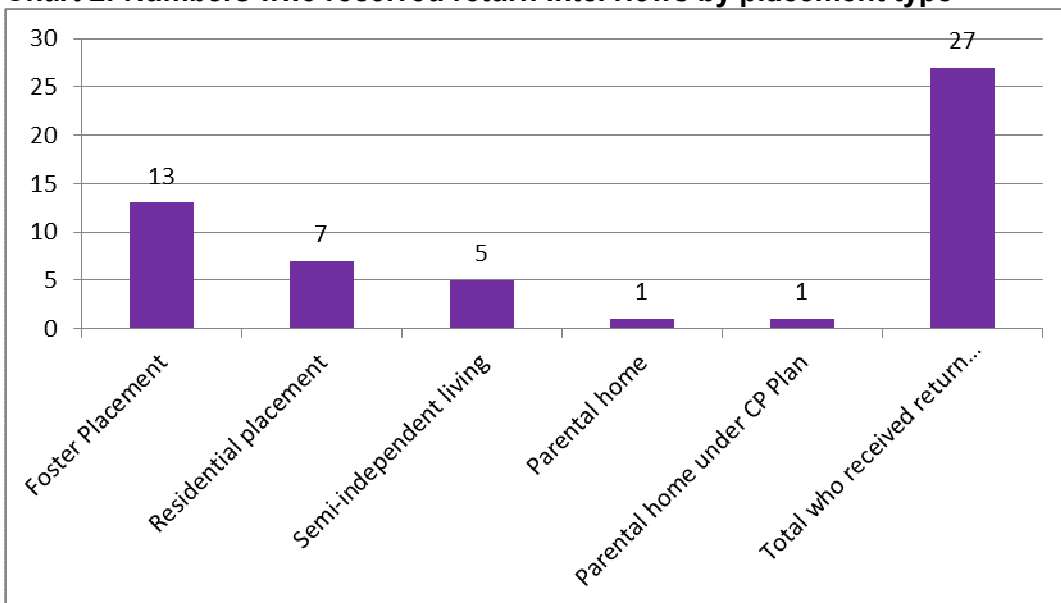
**Chart 1: Number of referrals by gender**



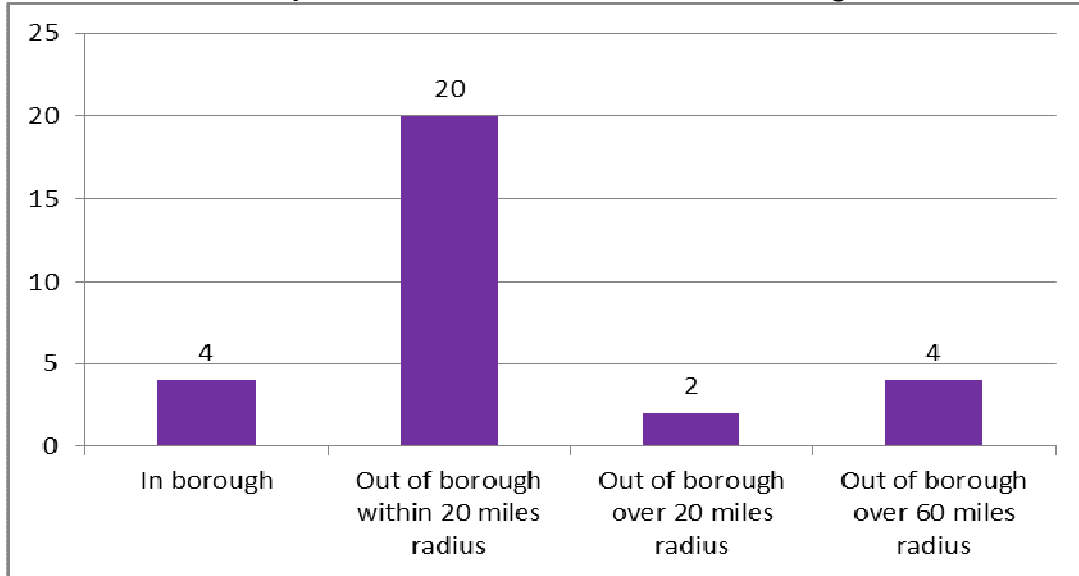
**Placement type and geography**

14. Chart 2 shows the majority of those who went missing were from foster and residential placements.

**Chart 2: Numbers who received return interviews by placement type**

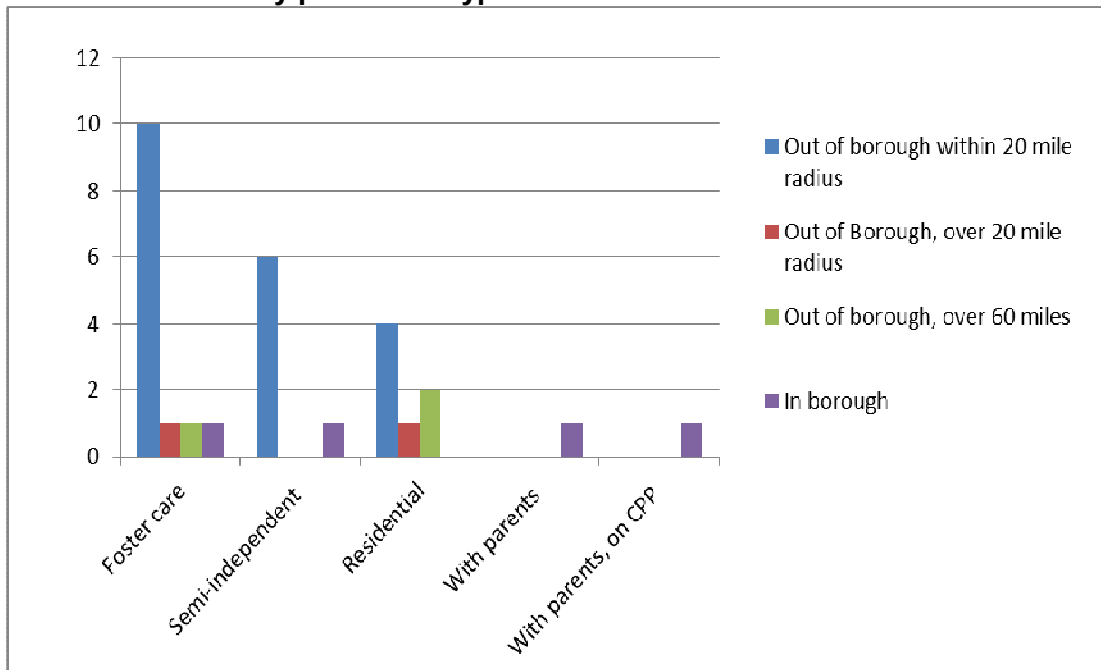


**Chart 3: Distance of placements for those who went missing**



15. Chart 3 shows that of those referred to the service between January and March 2015 most were in placements out of the borough and within a 20 mile radius. 4 were out of borough and over a 60 mile radius from Southwark. The majority of return interviews and on going support for children and young people is outside of the borough. Some of these will be placements with Southwark carers who live in neighbouring boroughs. Further analysis of the impact of being in the borough on those children in placements that do not go missing is to be reviewed.
16. The chart below shows the distance by placement type. It shows that the majority of young people who go missing are placed in foster care placements that are within a 20 mile radius of the borough and that the placements that are furthest away are residential.

**Chart 3: Distance by placement type**



## **Service development analysis**

### **Caseload summary**

17. A total of 30 young people were referred to St Christopher's Missing Children Service between January and March 2015. The majority of these cases were from the Care Services, although during this time we have also started receiving referrals from other services.
18. Of the 30 cases from this quarter 24 have received return interviews, 3 have been contacted and a return interview is being progressed, whilst the remaining 3 were unable or unwilling to engage with the service. One young person was arrested prior to the return interview being arranged; one young person was referred by other local authority and St Christopher's are trying to make contact and one young person refused to engage with the service, despite joint efforts made by their social worker and St Christopher's. This young person has difficulties engaging with services.
19. 22 young people from this cohort were identified as repeat missing persons, therefore most of St Christopher's resources have been utilised to provide on-going support to those young people who have been going missing on a regular basis.
20. 17 repeat missing persons have been receiving follow up intervention after their initial return interview. This intervention has been inclusive of further return interviews, one-to-one sessions with the young person, attendance at strategy meetings, regular liaison with care placement staff or foster carers and proactive joint working with social workers. For the remaining 5 repeat missing persons, a one-off return interview was deemed to be sufficient.
21. Since April, referrals from other services are being made. St Christopher's are re-assessing priorities and processes for the delivery of one or more return interviews to single cases.

### **Emerging Themes from missing return interviews and follow up activity Reasons for absconding and related risks**

#### **Family**

22. The most common reason for children to abscond is their desire to stay closer to their 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**

23. Another common reason for children to go missing is staying out with friends. Peer pressure and the desire for more independence are usually the main triggers. 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 (e.g. learning difficulties, addictive personality, unhealthy relationships,) and it would be easier for them to be exposed to higher risks (e.g. exploitation, substance misuse, offending).

## **Relationships**

24. Relationships are another important factor in missing episodes. Some young people would be absconding to stay with their boyfriend or girlfriend. There is one case in particular where the abusive relationship with a boyfriend would not deter a young vulnerable female from running away. This is a complex case, the young person is receiving weekly intensive support and the case is being monitored closely by the social worker and St Christopher's.

## **Criminal Activity**

25. For other young people the involvement with criminal activities would be a determining factor for their repeat absences. In one particular case there have been growing concerns about the pattern of missing episodes for young male who is deemed at risk of involvement in drug dealing and gang related activities. This young person receives intensive support and monitoring to assist him to change his behaviours and to share in reducing risk. He is nearly eighteen years and therefore the focus is on how to enable him to protect himself and organise his activities to achieve in education or employment.

## **Actions being taken**

26. We recognise that more children and young people want to be near their families, this is an issue that has been highlighted through Speakerbox and feedback from those in care, that is why our key strategic priorities focus on ensuring more children and young people live closer to home, in provision that meets their needs in which they feel safe and secure.
27. Southwark has received £317,000 from the DfE Innovation Fund to support its approach to improving outcomes for children and young people on the edge of care and help keep more families together. The funding has supported:
  - The 'keeping families together' team which responds immediately to families whose young people are at risk of being accommodated.
  - Reshaping services to provide interventions to families at an earlier stage
  - Reduced bureaucracy for front line workers to enable them to concentrate on direct work with children and families.
28. The department has set up a weekly Recourses Panel which scrutinises requests for care packages and offers alternative family focused solutions where possible.
29. In delivering our strategic priorities we will continue to reduce the use distance placements, increase the number of local foster care placements, and those who can support teenagers, remodel existing in-borough provision and continue to emphasis a child-centered approach in the delivery of care services.
30. We also recognise that in becoming more independent young people will want to visit friends and boyfriends/girlfriends without causing alarm and these incidents need to be managed appropriately. We will continue to support carers to recognise and manage risk and potential risk.
31. The following further actions are being taken to deliver positive outcomes for

children and young people who go missing:

- Ensuring that all children and young people have a missing return interview within the 72 hour time frame stipulated in statutory guidance.
- To further roll out the missing project to all social care services.
- To develop information and training for staff and partner agencies to understand the impact of missing behavior on children and young people and their exposure to potential risks of CSE and gang related activity.
- To ensure that data and qualitative information is regularly reviewed and incorporated into service developments through the Looked After Children Strategic Group.
- Recruit a female worker so those who feel more comfortable working with a female member of staff can access this direct support. It should be noted that this has not been raised as a reason for non-engagement to date and St Christopher's have been asking families and young people if they would prefer to speak to a female worker in their correspondence.

## **Summary**

32. St Christopher's continues to develop the missing service within Southwark Social Care. The service has raised the profile of the management of missing episodes and collaborative working with Child Sexual Exploitation services. Training has been rolled out to all service areas and groups. Involvement in strategy meetings, joint working with police, education and health enables greater monitoring, risk management and prevention of further missing/unauthorised absences. Data management and qualitative information is starting to build up a profile of key themes from which we can learn and develop future service provision. Further improvements will be made to the monitoring pro forma to enable us to make the best use of this intelligence.
33. St Christopher's are now received more referrals via the MASH and the police, and it is likely that their case load will increase in the next quarter. Looked after children remain the priority and St Christopher's will work to ensure that where they can make safe and empowering referrals, to local schemes like mentoring services for example, or arrangements to spend more time with their families, they will do this with agreement for the young person and their social worker. They will continue to prioritise those who are most at risk and do not operate a waiting list. They will reassess their case load in the next quarter to ensure they have capacity to meet the service need.

## **Community impact statement**

34. 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.

## BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

## APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Case studies

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Lead Officer</b>	Rory Patterson, Director, Children's Social Care	
<b>Report Author</b>	Jane Scott, Head of Care.	
<b>Version</b>	Final	
<b>Dated</b>	2 July 2015	
<b>Key Decision?</b>	No	
<b>CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER</b>		
<b>Officer Title</b>	<b>Comments Sought</b>	<b>Comments Included</b>
Director of Legal Services	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services	No	No
List other officers here		
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	No	No
<b>Date final report sent to Constitutional Team</b>	2 July 2015	



## **Case studies**

## **APPENDIX 1**

Child A is living in a residential setting in South London. Child A is a repeat missing person and, despite engaging well with our service, in the last few months the pattern of missing episodes has been increasing.

The main reason for Child A to run away is to be with their family. Thanks to an intensive effort from all parties involved and the observation provided by the case worker following from one-to-ones with Child A., it has now been possible to make a written agreement that allows the young person to spend weekends at the parental home.

Child B's placement is over 20 miles radius of Southwark. It was deemed safer to be living faraway from London due to risk of CSE.

Child B was flagged up as a repeat missing person and met with our case worker once. Child B engaged well with the return interview and found it helpful to re-focus on priorities (i.e. education, future employment, independence). We have not received missing person notifications since.