

Missing From Home Protocol for Bexley Children's Services

This protocol has been established to meet the requirements set out in the Department for Education's "[Statutory Guidance on Children who Run Away or go Missing from Home or Care](#)" January 2014. It is guidance that should be considered alongside the multi-agency protocol set out by Bexley Local Safeguarding Children's Board entitled "[Children Missing from Home, Education and Care](#)" November 2015.

This protocol should be read in conjunction with the Bexley Children's Social Care and Bexley Borough Police Missing from Home, Care and Education, Child Sexual Exploitation Joint Operating Procedures and Practice Guidance (see [Joint Operational Policies with Bexley Police](#)).

This protocol sets out the requirements for Bexley Children's Services to manage any contact it receives in respect of children who are missing from home or care.

It introduces accountability for children who are missing and unknown to us, to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). In these circumstances the social worker in the MASH team is responsible for completing a risk assessment from the information gathered, including the return home interview (RHI) and decision on next steps.

For children who are known to social care, the risk assessment and decision is made by the allocated social worker for the missing child or young person and their manager.

For the purposes of this protocol, the following definitions will apply:

Missing - the term "missing child" means any individual less than 18 years of age whose whereabouts are unknown to their parent, family, legal custodian, or person with whom it is agreed by the parent and local authority should care for the child. This includes foster carers and children looked after by the Local Authority who reside in residential establishments.

Unauthorised Absence – when a child or young person under the age of 18 years of age is known to be staying with a friend or relative and the arrangement has not been agreed by the person/s responsible for caring for them. The term is also used when a young person under 18 years of age is known to be socialising and is out later and beyond the set time for them to have returned to their agreed residence and carer.

Absconded – when a child or young person under the age of 18 years of age purposefully leaves their place of residence without notice and without the agreement of the carer and fails to return

Unauthorised absence & Absconding

If the child or young person does not return to where they are living and it is considered to be an unauthorised absence as defined above, the manager or carer should inform the allocated social worker. A referral to the Police should only be made when it is considered that the child or young person is missing. Any unauthorised absence notified to the police will be investigated as a missing person

The requirements to conduct return home interviews will always apply in cases where a child or young person is deemed missing in accordance with the definition above. However, consideration should always be given as to whether a return home interview would be helpful in cases where a child or young person has a history of absconding or unauthorised absences. Where a child or young person is persistently and repeatedly missing, multiple return home interviews will result in desensitising the purpose of them. In such instances, a multi- professional strategy meeting should be convened to consider next best steps to protect the young person and enable their family/carers to keep them safe.

I. Missing Contacts and Notifications to Children's Services

- 1.1. When a missing notification is received by any person or agency to the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), checks will be undertaken to determine if the child or young person is currently open to any team within children's services.
- 1.2. If the missing child or young person is currently open to any social care team, the MASH will forward the notification to the allocated social worker for the child or young person who will then be responsible for creating the missing episode on Liquid Logic.
- 1.3. If the missing child or young person is currently open to Family Wellbeing (FWB) or the Targeted Youth Service (TYS), MASH will create a new contact and progress this to a referral on Liquid Logic and hold this in their "Missing Children" task tray on Liquid Logic. The MASH will then create a missing episode and start the risk assessment (but not complete it) based on the information gathered from the notification and any checks undertaken. The MASH will then task the missing episode to the FWB or YYS team, as appropriate, in order to progress the return home interview (RHI).
- 1.4. If the missing child or young person is not currently open to any team within children's services, and they have been **deemed missing for 24 hours or more**, then the MASH will create a contact and progress this to referral on Liquid Logic to be allocated to the referral and assessment team to arrange a strategy meeting. The MASH will also create a missing episode and start the risk assessment (but not complete it) based on the information gathered from the missing notification and any checks undertaken. The missing episode will then be tasked to the referral and assessment team to progress.
- 1.5. If the child or young person is not currently open to any team within children's services, and they have been **deemed missing for less than 24 hours**, then the MASH will make their usual checks create a new contact and progress this to referral on Liquid Logic. The MASH will also start the missing episode and begin the risk assessment (but not complete it) based on the information gathered to determine the level of risk and need the child or young person has at the time. This will include making contact with the child or young person and their parents or carers to help inform the risk assessment and next steps. The MASH will then decide which is the most appropriate service to progress the referral in accordance with the Effective Support for Children, Young People, and Families in Bexley guidance. If this determines the level of risk and need requires support from children's social care, then the referral along and the missing episode will be allocated to the referral and assessment team. If not, the referral will be held in the MASH "Missing Children" task tray on Liquid Logic and the missing episode tasked to FWB (if the child is 12 and under) or YYS (if the young person is 13 to 17) to complete the return home interview.
- 1.6. There will be instances where notifications regarding missing children and young people will be received outside of working hours. Where the out of hours team receives a missing child notification, they will be responsible for progressing this in accordance with the daytime procedure set out above for the MASH team with the following differences:
 - 1.6.1. Where the next working day occurs between 16 to 48 hours, the out of hours social worker will also be responsible for contacting the child or young person to determine if they would like their current worker (if allocated one) or an independent person to conduct their return home interview. Consent must also be obtained by their parents or carers (unless they are a child looked after by Bexley whereby consent is always assumed). This will be then progressed to the child's social worker (if already allocated) or FWB/YYS (as appropriate) to action further, or

- 1.6.2. Where the next working day occurs in 48 hours or more, the out of hours social worker will be responsible for offering and, if accepted and consent given, conducting the return home interview with the child or young person and completing this and the missing risk assessment. This should always be done in person, unless the child is looked after and is living at a significant distance outside of the Bexley area. In this instance, the out of hours social worker will consult with their line manager as to whether it is more appropriate to offer an initial phone interview to establish their safety and well-being. Following any phone interview, the child or young person must be informed that a social worker, or worker with FWB/TYS (as appropriate), will be in contact on the next working day to offer an in person interview.

1.7. Strategy meetings (see [Strategy Meetings and Child Protection Enquiries \(Section 47\) Procedure](#)) **must be conducted whenever a child or young person has been deemed missing for 24 hours or longer in accordance with the Statutory Guidance on Children who Run Away or go Missing from Home or Care. Strategy meetings must also be conducted whenever information suggests a child or young person is at risk of significant harm due to circumstances related to why they went missing, absconded, or had an unauthorised absence.**

2. Return to Home or Care Interview

- 2.1. Once a child or young person has returned home or back to where they are living as a looked after child, a return home interview must be offered and completed within 72 hours. Therefore, it is important to determine how the return home interview should be completed and consent obtained as quickly as possible.
- 2.2. When child or young person is offered an interview it must be handled in a manner that allows them to feel as safe and comfortable as possible. This may mean being creative as to where you offer to meet them and by which means the interview takes place, such as via phone call or video call (i.e. Skype).
- 2.3. If a child or young person refuses a return home interview, this must be clearly recorded on the Liquid Logic return home interview form along with any reasons given. The worker must make their best efforts to offer further support services the child or young person can choose to access as listed in Section 4 of this protocol.
- 2.4. Consent for a return home interview must also be obtained by a child or young person's parents or carers. This does not include children who are looked after as Bexley is the corporate parent and consent will always be assumed in these cases. Where a parent or carer refuses consent, the reasons for this need to be obtained and recorded on the return home interview form on Liquid Logic. This will also need to be considered as part of the risk assessment to determine if this places the child or young person at risk of significant harm.
- 2.5. In all cases, including where a child or young person refuses an interview, their parents or carers should be spoken with and their responses included in the return home interview form on Liquid Logic before this is completed. They should always be offered some form of support, either from children's services or from another service listed in Section 4 of this protocol.
- 2.6. If the child or young person is looked after by Bexley Children's Social Care, then their social worker must contact the child or young person and ask whether they want their social worker to conduct their return home interview or an independent person. If the child or young person requests an independent person, this request must be made to the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) within 24 hours. Although consent is not required from the child or young person's foster carers or care provider to conduct a return home interview, their views must be obtained as part of the interview process. Full consideration must also be given as to

whether and when to inform children's parents that their child has returned safely to where they are living in our care.

- 2.7. If a child or young person is looked after by Bexley Children's Social Care, then their social worker must also ensure that the supervising social worker with the fostering or placements team are informed, dependent on whether the placement is with a Bexley foster carer or an external fostering agency or care provider.
- 2.8. Where a return home interview is referred to NYAS, the social worker will open the Liquid Logic return home interview form and complete as many details as possible, including selecting "NYAS" as the service completing the interview. The form should then be closed and left uncompleted on Liquid Logic until the interview notes have been returned from NYAS.
- 2.9. If after 72 hours the social worker has not received a response from NYAS, they must follow up with them to determine if the interview took place and a brief detail of the outcome. This should be noted in a case note on the child's record along with when NYAS expects to send the detailed notes from the interview.
- 2.10. If the social worker has not received any response from NYAS after three working days following the date of which the return home interview was to take place, they must inform their line manager in order to progress the matter further with their counterpart in NYAS.
- 2.11. Once the return home interview notes have been returned from NYAS, the social worker or their business support (as appropriate) must input these details into the Liquid Logic return home interview form and then mark it as completed.
- 2.12. If the child or young person is open to any other children's social care team, then their social worker must contact the child or young person and ask whether they want their social worker to conduct their return home interview or an independent person. If the child or young person requests an independent person, then this referral will be made to the appropriate service listed in Sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 according to the child or young person's age.
- 2.13. If the child or young person is open to Family Well-being or Targeted Youth Service, then the allocated worker will contact the child or young person and ask whether they want their allocated worker to conduct their return home interview or an independent person. If the child or young person requests an independent person, then this referral will be made to the alternate service listed in Sections 1.4.1 or 1.4.2 to undertake this.
- 2.14. If a return home interview is being offered by Family Well-being or Targeted Youth Service, and the MASH team have not received the completed interview form after 72 hours, the MASH must follow up with the worker responsible for the interview to determine when this is expected to be completed and the missing episode on Liquid Logic will be tasked back to MASH to complete the risk assessment.
- 2.15. If a child or young person, or their parents or carers, refuse a return home phone or in person interview with the out of hours worker, and they have an open case with any children's services team, the out of hours worker must inform both the child or young person and their parents or carers that this information will be passed onto their allocated worker who will follow up with them on the next working day. This will then be recorded on the child or young person's return home interview form on Liquid Logic outlining the reasons the interview was offered within 72 hours but declined. The return home interview form cannot be completed until the child or young person's allocated worker follows up with them on the next working day to again offer the return home interview and seek consent.
- 2.16. If a child or young person, or their parents or carers, refuses an independent interview with the out of hours worker, or their parents or carers do not give consent, and the child does not

have an open case with any children's services team, a decision will need to be taken based on the outcome of the risk assessment as to whether the child or young person should be referred to children's social care because there is risk of harm or further harm or whether advice and support is offered with no further role for children's services.

- 2.17. All offers for a return home interview made to a child or young person must be made in a sincere and non-leading manner. For example, it is never acceptable to say to a child or young person, "You probably don't want to speak with me do you as you don't know me anyway", or "You can speak with me, but you probably want to wait until you can speak with your regular worker, right?" A return home interview is an opportunity for a child or young person to speak with someone outside of their home about any worries or difficulties they are facing. It is also an opportunity for us to help assess this, be clear about the level of risk or danger they may be in, and offer any advice or support to them and their family or carers to help make their life safer and better.

3. Assessing Risk and Uncertainty

- 3.1. Whenever a child or young person has been deemed missing, the missing risk assessment must be started based on the information received in the missing notification or contact. This will assist the receiving social worker in identifying what the current level of risk or danger is for the child or young person, and what the next steps should be to help manage the risk and how to best support them.
- 3.2. The risk assessment cannot be completed until the return home interview has taken place or the child or young person, or their parents or carers, have refused all offers of an interview. Once the interview has taken place, the information will be placed on the return home interview form on Liquid Logic and the responsible social worker must then complete the outcome of the risk assessment. The social worker will then recommend any of the following outcomes to their line manager as to what the next steps should be:
- i. Refer back to Children's Social Care for assessment
 - ii. Continue with current support (TYS, FWB, CP, CIN, Children Looked After)
 - iii. Convene strategy meeting
 - iv. Convene legal planning meeting
 - v. Refer to Targeted Youth Service (TYS)
 - vi. Refer to Family Well-being (FWB)
 - vii. Refer to community service (no further role for children's services)
 - viii. Offer of support declined (no further role for children's services)
- 3.3. Outcome i. will result in a referral back to children's social care (where there was no previous open case) for consideration of a single assessment. Outcome ii. will result in continuing with the current level of support and service that was already in place with the child or young person at the time the missing contact was received. Outcomes iii. and iv. are to be offered in instances where there are serious concerns the child or young person is believed to be at risk of significant harm. Outcomes v. and vi. relate to referrals being made to either service for ongoing support to the child and family. Outcomes vii. and viii. result when referrals or offers of support are made to community services outside of children's services (i.e.: Porchlight, Runaway Helpline, Family Lives)
- 3.4. The final stage of the risk assessment will be to indicate that the social worker has completed the serious incident notification to be sent by their line manager to the deputy director of children's services. This will be required in all cases where a child or young person who is looked after, has a child in need or protection plan with Bexley Children's Social Care, or has been missing for 24 hours or more. This is in accordance with the [Serious Incident Notification](#)

[Policy](#). The notification form can be found under templates in Microsoft Word and must be uploaded under documents in the child or young person's record on Liquid Logic.

- 3.5. All assessments of risk about missing children and young people must be completed by a qualified social worker. This will be done either by the child or young person's allocated social worker, or in cases where there is none, by a social worker in the MASH team.**

4. Additional Considerations

- 4.1. Where the MASH receive a missing notification about a child or young person who is looked after by another local authority (the home authority) but they are living in accommodation in Bexley (the host authority), the MASH will create a new contact and the missing episode on Liquid Logic for that child or young person with the details from this notification. MASH will inform the home authority to ensure they are aware of the missing notification and then close the contact and complete the missing episode without conducting the return home interview or risk assessment sections, as this is the responsibility of the home authority. If the child or young person was not previously known to Bexley Children's Social Care, the child or young person will need to be created on Liquid Logic following the usual process, and under "Other Local Authority CLA Details" the "Add a CLA period under another Local Authority" should be selected on Liquid Logic. This will create the "CLA E" flag for that child on Liquid Logic, indicating they are looked after by another local authority.
- 4.2. Where the home authority decides to convene a strategy meeting as a result of one of their looked after children going missing, there should be good cooperation between the home and host authorities in order to share information and provide the best level of support and safety to that child or young person.
- 4.3. Where Bexley Children's Social Care have received four or more missing notifications about a looked after child from another local authority, or any notification which indicates that the child or young person by virtue of where they are or who they are with is at risk of harm or significant harm, the MASH will follow the same process as Section 4.1, make urgent contact with the home authority and will also complete the director's letter to advise the Director of Children's Services in the home authority of this. A copy of this letter will also be uploaded into document on the child or young person's record in Liquid Logic. Any such letter must be presented to and signed by the Director or Deputy in their absence on the same working day that the decision to write is made.
- 4.4. All reports of children missing from home or care, including those who are looked after by another local authority and living in Bexley, will be discussed at the weekly Bexley Missing and Sexual Exploitation Monitoring Meeting.
- 4.5. Where a child or young person is looked after by Bexley Children's Social Care and living in another local authority area, the responsibility for completing any strategy meetings, risk assessments, or return home interviews for our children is the responsibility of Bexley Children's Social Care, the child or young person's social worker and their manager. It is important to establish good working relationships and collaboration with the local police and support services relevant to providing care and safeguarding our children living in another local authority's area. Whomever is caring for a child or young person who is looked after by Bexley Children's Social Care is responsible for notifying the police in their local area as well as their supervising social worker and the child or young person's allocated social worker when a child or young person they are looking after has gone missing.

5. Monitoring

- 5.1. Team managers are responsible for checking all children and young people who are known to be missing and allocated within their respective teams to the Boxi report to ensure the information is accurate. As long as a child or young person is known to be missing in their team, the team manager must check the Boxi report daily for accuracy. Team managers also must be satisfied that a child or young person's social worker is liaising with police and any other relevant family and professionals in an effort to locate the child or young person and have them return safely to their home or care. When a child or young person is no longer missing, team managers must also ensure they have been offered a return home interview and that a risk assessment has been completed in accordance with this protocol. Team managers will also provide a daily update to their service manager on the circumstances of every missing child or young person within their team.
- 5.2. All children's social care service managers will check the Boxi report on missing children on a daily basis and consult their respective team managers to ensure the report accurately reflects all children and young people missing. Service managers must be able to provide the following update to their head of service on all children and young people missing in their service area:
- i) How many are currently missing
 - ii) How many missing episodes they have had in the last six months
 - iii) The duration they have been missing
 - iv) When they have returned home or to care
 - v) When a return home interview has been offered
 - vi) When a return home interview has been conducted or declined
 - vii) When or whether the parents or carers have been properly engaged about next steps
 - viii) When the risk assessment has been completed
 - ix) What the next steps are in supporting and safeguarding the child from harm
 - x) Any issues related to contextual safeguarding (i.e.: county lines, CSE, gangs, etc)
 - xi) When the serious incident notification was sent (where appropriate)
- 5.3. Children's social care service managers will also be responsible for attending and providing a weekly update to the Missing from Home, Care and Education monitoring meeting of multi-agency professionals who are responsible for reviewing and monitoring the operational effectiveness and practice in safeguarding children and young people who go missing. Where these meetings identify concerns regarding the effectiveness of the multi-agency practice and ability to support and safeguarding children and young people who go missing, service managers must report this back to their respective head of service with any recommendations as to how to address these concerns.
- 5.4. All children's social care heads of service will check the Boxi report on missing children on a daily basis and liaise with their respective service managers where they have any concerns about the safety and welfare of any missing child or young person in their service area. They will also be responsible for ensuring an accurate update of known information contained in Section 5.2 for missing children and young people. Heads of service are responsible for providing this update to the deputy director when requested on all missing children and young people where:
- i) A serious incident notification has been sent or ought to be sent
 - ii) Concerns are identified with the effectiveness of the operational effectiveness and practice of the multi-agency partnership in supporting and safeguarding children and young people who go missing,
 - iii) A director's letter is to be sent in accordance with Section 4.3
 - iv) A child who is looked after or has a child protection plan persistently goes missing
 - v) There are concerns being identified in relation to safeguarding concerns originating outside of the child's home environment (contextual safeguarding) that suggest a more

coordinated approach with other local authorities and their multi-agency partners who are responsible for safeguarding missing children should be considered

- 5.5. The deputy director of children’s social care is responsible for having oversight of all matters outlined in Section 5.4 of this protocol and providing an update as requested to the director of children’s services and council members as to the overall operational effectiveness and ability to support and safeguard children and young people who go missing from home or care in Bexley. This will include any recommendations regarding any policy or operational changes to be considered by Bexley Children’s Social Services or the Bexley Safeguarding Partnership for Children and Young People aimed at enhancing the ability of all practitioners and multi-agency partners to support and help safeguard children and young people who go missing from home or care.

6. Recommended Support Services

Service and Contact Details	Type of Support Offered
Porchlight Tel: 0800 567 7699 Email: bass@porchlight.org.uk	Offers the Bexley Adolescent Support Service (BASS) to young people ages 10 to 17 around a variety of issues to help support them with any worries or difficulties they are experiencing.
Runaway Helpline Tel or text: 116 000 www.runawayhelpline.org.uk	Free 24/7 helpline that supports children and young people who are thinking of or have run away from home. Online chat only available from 14:30 to 21:00.
Childline Tel: 0800 1111 www.childline.org.uk	Free 24/7 helpline and online 1-2-1 chat for children and young people to talk to someone about any difficulties or worries they may have. Lots of free advice and support online on a variety of issues (i.e.: bullying, CSE, body image, relationships, sexuality)
Family Lives Tel: 0808 800 2222 www.familylives.org.uk	Provides a free 24/7 helpline to parents and carers who are facing difficulties or have worries about their children and family. Lots of free advice and support online.
Bexley Targeted Youth Service	Provides a variety of support and mentoring services to young people ages 12 and over who are at risk of going missing, gang involvement, experience domestic abuse, substance misuse, or have mental health difficulties.
Family Well-being	Provides a variety of support to children, young people and their families where they experience parental domestic abuse, mental health difficulties, learning difficulties, substance misuse, or where children are at risk of school exclusion or experience low level neglect or physical chastisement. This service is not a statutory service and parental consent to engage must be obtained in order for contact and work to commence.
National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)	Bexley has a contract with NYAS to provide independent interviews, visiting, and advocacy services to children and young people in our care. This requires a referral to be completed.

Children Missing From Home or Care Flowchart

