**Action for Children**  
**Fostering and family based short breaks Policy**  
**Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement**

**Procedure and guidance for fostering staff and foster carers**

*This procedure should be read in conjunction with Action for Children’s policy, procedures and guidance, Safeguarding children and young people who runaway or go missing from home or placements*

**Introduction**

Children and young people who go missing or run away from care increase their vulnerability as they may be exposed to increased risk of harm or danger. Action for Children staff and foster carers need to be aware of these risk factors and the action to take if a child or young person runs away or is missing from our care. They also need to understand the distinction between a child or young person who is missing or has run away from one who is absent without authorisation (see definitions).

The purpose of this procedure and guidance is to identify how Action for Children staff and carers will ensure a consistent and multi-agency response to children and young people who run away or go missing, or are absent without authorisation, from their fostering or family based short break placement. It describes the action to be taken to enable the safe return of a child or young person to their placement. Each local authority is required to formulate a Running Away and Missing from Home and Care protocol. This will take precedence over Action for Children policies, procedures and guidance, in decision making about a particular child or young person for whom they have responsibility. The guidance also refers to the pre planning work that needs to take place prior to a specific incident of running away, going missing or absence without authorisation. Carers and fostering staff need to be familiar with section 6 of the Fostering and Short Breaks policy and procedure about making a placement, as this section details the requirements in managing risk at the outset of a placement, including children and young people at risk of running away or going missing from care. (Information about the incidence and actions of children going missing from care are outlined in Appendix 1).

**Definitions**

For the purpose of this procedure the following definitions apply for England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

- **“Child/Young Person”** A person under 18* years of age (* This can include persons under 19 years of age where the child has a special need).  

- **“Missing or young runaway”** These terms refer to children and young people up to the age of 18 who have run away from their home or care placement, have been forced to leave, or whose whereabouts are unknown (DSCF 2009).
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy

Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

“Unauthorised absence” Where a looked after child’s whereabouts is known or thought to be known but unconfirmed, they are not missing and may be instead considered as absent without authorisation from their placement (DSCF 2009).

“Absconded” When a child or young person has gone missing who is subject to legal orders such as a secure order.

In Scotland the definition is as follows:

A young runaway is a child or young person under the age of 18 who spends one night or more away from the family home or substitute care without permission or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers. However, a number of young people may abscond for shorter periods of time on a regular basis. The age and circumstances of the child or young person will be a key factor in determining the appropriate response from agencies. The welfare of the child or young person must be the primary consideration and in some cases therefore concerns may be raised about the safety of the child or young person after a shorter absence. (Scottish Executive 2003)

Procedures to follow when a child or young person goes missing or runs away, or is absent without authorisation:

Foster carers should:

• Understand the definitions of running away and missing from care and absence without authorisation and be familiar with Action for Children Missing from Care guidance for staff and foster carers.

• Be aware of the relevant local Running Away from Home and Care protocol relevant to the child or young person placed with them, including timescales for reporting.

• Take basic measures to try to locate the child or young person if considered safe to do so.

• Immediately contact the fostering service and speak to a member of staff when they become aware that a child or young person is absent without authorisation or has run away or is missing (Note: carers should ring the police service immediately if it is believed a child or young person is at immediate risk of serious harm).

• Discuss all the facts known about their absence and any current or emerging risks to the child or young person with the member of staff giving as full details as possible.
**Action for Children**

**Fostering and family based short breaks Policy**

**Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement**

- Provide necessary information to social services, school, police and other agencies as required.
- Keep up to date recordings of events.
- Be ready and available to offer the returned child or young person support as required and liaise with relevant agencies/professionals.

**Supervising social workers** should:

- Be familiar with Action for Children’s Missing from Care policy, procedure and guidance.
- Be aware of relevant local Running away and Missing from Care protocols relevant to the child or young people placed in the service, including levels of risk and timescales for reporting.
- Assess whether the child or young person has run away, is missing or is absent without authorisation and keep the categorisation under review.
- Undertake a risk assessment and consider an appropriate course of action.
- Consult with the young person’s social worker/case manager about the level of risk as required.
- Inform his/her team manager by the next working day unless the risk is deemed significantly high and immediate attention is required in which case the duty manager must be consulted if it is a weekend or holiday period (Note: the timescales for internal reporting may be dictated by the external reporting requirements outlined in the local protocol for the child).
- Report the situation to the relevant agencies in line with the protocol and take agreed action.
- Complete notifiable event documentation and pass to line manager.
- Record events on case file/CHARMS as appropriate.
- Provide support and guidance to the foster carer.
- Plan for the child and young person’s return, including a Return visit in line with the local protocol and any follow up activity or additional support required.
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy
Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

Team managers should:

- Be familiar with Action for Children’s Missing from Care policy, procedure and guidance.
- Be aware of relevant local Running away and Missing from Care protocols relevant to the children or young people placed in the service, including levels of risk and timescales for reporting.
- Ensure action being taken in line with protocol, including the Return Interview and the identification of additional support to the placement as required.
- Report the situation to the Children’s Placement manager or senior manager on call if a child or young person is assessed as missing from care. Based on the perceived or known level of risk this should be no longer than 24 hours after the child or young person has gone missing.
- Oversee the completion of the notifiable event process.
- Record any management decisions onto CHARMS/case file.
- Advise media team in line with our Reputation Risk Management policy

Children’s Placement Managers should:

- Be familiar with Action for Children’s Missing from Care policy, procedure and guidance
- Check local Running away and Missing from Care protocols are being followed, including reporting timescales.
- Consider issues related to dealing with the Reputational Risk management policy in liaison with the media team
- Sign off the notifiable events process and inform Responsible Individual as required
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy

Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

- Have a strategic overview of the number of missing from care incidents and take action to address emerging themes

Understanding the difference between absence without authorisation and being missing or having run away from care

Some children absent themselves for a short period and return, but often their whereabouts are suspected or known. Some are testing boundaries by staying out longer than agreed. This type of behaviour is well within the range of recognised behaviour for teenagers and such children are not necessarily at risk. Patterns of absence without permission must be closely monitored and subject to continuous risk assessment as children and young people could potentially be exposing themselves to risky situations or harm.

Foster carers must keep their supervising social worker fully informed of all incidents of absence without permission. The distinction between absence without permission and being a runaway or missing is critical to the clarification of roles and responsibilities for the police and social services.

A period of six hours should normally be regarded as the absolute maximum for any child or young person whose whereabouts are not known and who cannot be contacted, to be categorised as unauthorised absence, rather than be formally reported as missing; in many cases a shorter period will be appropriate.

It will not be appropriate for any child whose whereabouts are not known and who cannot be contacted, to remain out overnight without being formally reported as missing. Local protocols should outline expectations about levels of risk and timescales for re categorising unauthorised absence to formally reporting a child or young person as missing.

The risk to children whose whereabouts are unknown requires immediate assessment. When the risk assessment process identifies the child as “missing” or “runaway” the police should be notified. Carers must discuss the situation at the earliest opportunity with their supervising social worker or his/her manager in order that necessary protocols for children who run away or go missing from their home or placement can be followed.

Fostering staff and foster carers must be familiar with the Action for Children guidance regarding children and young people who runaway which cites Social Inclusion Unit research into the push and pull factors which cause children and young people to run away or go missing.

(Note: there is separate guidance for England, Wales and Northern Ireland to Scotland)

Run away or missing from care protocols
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy

Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

Each local authority is required to implement a local protocol about children who run away or are missing from their home or placement. This sets out the roles and responsibilities of the agencies within the local authority. The protocols provide definitions of missing from home and care and guidance on levels of risk (see table 1 below). They set out timescales for reporting and for pursuing particular actions to safeguard the child or young person. Most protocols contain a quick reference guide or flow chart which is useful to download for staff and carers. Some local authorities have developed these regionally or sub regionally.

In England, all missing young people are considered to be a child at risk under section 47 of the Children’s Act 1989. This section gives the power to all appropriate agencies to disclose relevant information to provide a positive outcome for the child or young person.

Action for Children fostering services must be familiar with the protocol of the child or young person’s placing authority and, if the placement is in a local authority boundary which is different to that of the placing authority, staff and carers must be aware of both protocols and be clear which one will take precedence should a child or young person go missing.

The protocols are designed to provide guidance and a framework for dealing with situations where a child or young person is missing from care but they cannot anticipate every eventuality. Those working with children in a professional capacity are expected to use their judgement to take what action is deemed necessary to protect and safeguard the child or young person based on an assessment of risk for each individual.

The protocol should identify procedures for young people who go missing who are on remand, as conditions may be being breached by the young person which necessitates that the police arrest the young person, once located, and he or she is detained and brought before the court. For young people on remand with no conditions it may not automatically be appropriate for the young person to be brought back before the court after a period of running away or being missing from care, unless they are at risk of further offending.

---

Table 1: Example risk table form Lancashire Local authorities joint protocol, Children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability, or may have been the victim of a serious crime, or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>The risk posed is likely to place the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy

Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>There is no apparent risk of danger to either the subject or the public. In Lancashire, NO child aged 15 or under is ever considered to be at low risk. 16 and 17 year olds rarely could be classed as low risk.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early Risk assessment

It is known that going missing from care can be dangerous for children and young people. The immediate risks associated with going missing include:

- No means of support or legitimate income – leading to high risk activities.
- Involvement in criminal activities.
- Victim of Abuse.
- Victim of crime, for example through sexual assault and exploitation.
- Alcohol/substance misuse.
- Deterioration of physical and mental health.
- Missing out on schooling and education.
- Increased vulnerability

Longer-term risks include:

- long-term drug dependency / alcohol dependency.
- crime.
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy
Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

- homelessness.
- Disengagement from education.
- Child sexual exploitation.
- Poor physical and/or mental health.

Pre-Planning - At the time of the referral and at the placement agreement meeting, the vulnerability and associated risk of a child/young person going missing or running away, is considered via an early risk assessment. Multiple episodes of going missing or running away from placements are assessed and particular attention is given to this behaviour in the plans. Where regular running away is anticipated, carers and staff may consider the involvement of the local police at the pre-planning stage.
If there have been previous concerns about the child/young person going missing or running away, the plan includes:

- The likelihood of the young person going missing or running away in the future.
- The level of supervision/support offered to the young person.
- The parents/placing authorities advice on what action they feel should be taken if the young person goes missing or runs away.
- The level of risk presented if the child/young person is missing or has run away; the individual risk assessment will identify the levels of risk.

The Action for Children social worker gives a copy of the leaflet “Information for Children and Young People – What Will Happen If You Go Missing” to children and young people, which explains the actions to be taken if they go missing or absent themselves from the placement.

Significant factors in assessing absence and risk

When considering whether to report a child or young person as missing or whether it is an unauthorised absence, it is expected that the response will be that of a typical parent. Such a parent thinks about what to do having regard to a number of factors. Carers are expected to undertake basic checks to try to locate the child or young person if considered safe to do so. Every reasonable effort will be made to locate the child or young person at the outset of the absence and throughout the length of the enquiry. This includes:
Action for Children  
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy  
Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

- Searching the child’s bedroom / house / outbuildings / vehicles.
- Contacting known friends and relatives where child/ young person may be.
- Visiting locations that the child is known to frequent.

However, a child or young person in care may have particular needs or vulnerabilities so in assessing the significance of a young person’s absence, all staff and carers must consider:

- Guidance already agreed in the young person’s Care Plan and Placement Plan which may supersede the normal process of phoning round or looking for the child or young person.
- The age and maturity of the young person. Some protocols automatically define children as missing or absconded by virtue of their age.
- The legal status of the young person i.e. whether they are the subject of a court order and any conditions of the order.
- Previous behaviour patterns/history of going missing or running away/history of self harm or injury.
- The vulnerability of the young person due to any mental or physical condition.
- Group behaviour.
- Whether the young person is perceived to be running to, or from, someone or a situation.
- State of mind and level of general vulnerability at time of going missing.
- Whether the young person is at risk of sexual exploitation.
- Whether the young person is involved in criminal activity.
- Environmental factors such as the time of day, weather conditions, and community events.
- Particular circumstances that may have triggered the absence e.g. an argument.
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy

Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

Overnight absence

Where a young person’s absence continues overnight, those responsible in each agency for the review of the case must consider the need for a strategy meeting. The team manager or supervising social worker can request a strategy meeting if this has not been convened. The purpose is to discuss whether any further action is required and to devise a contingency plan in the event of the young person’s return. Out of hours service for the local authority should be advised on the contingency plan.

Over-riding factors which will necessitate informing the police immediately

Children who fall within the category of “unauthorised absence” need to be the subject of continuous risk assessment by Action for Children staff. During their absence circumstances may change and carers and fostering staff need to be in a position to respond accordingly.

In this phase fostering staff and carers need to take all reasonable and practical steps, which a good parent would take, to establish the whereabouts or destination of a young person, or the location of any persons with whom he/she is likely to be associating. Arrangements need to be made for these places to be checked.

If the location of the young person is known or suspected, then it is the responsibility of the fostering staff and/or carer to return the child. If, however, there are thought to be specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in returning the young person, then appropriate action should be agreed between the police and fostering staff. These circumstances would not mean the child requires categorising as missing. A child categorised as “unauthorised absence” should be considered “missing” after a period of no more than 6 hour if their whereabouts are not known or there is no established contact with them.

Even after reporting a young person as missing, carers remain responsible for children in their care at all times. That responsibility is not absolved after they have reported a young person missing to the police. The child or young person’s school should be informed at the earliest opportunity.

Information required for police

When the carer reports a missing young person the following information, where known, is to be made available:

- A full description of the child/young person.
- When the child/young person was last seen and with whom.
Action for Children
Fostering and family based short breaks Policy

Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement

- Clothing the young person is wearing.
- Family addresses.
- Any previous history of absconding.
- The legal status of the child, including any restriction or conditions of the order.
- The name and address of the child/young person’s GP and dentist.
- Circumstances which increase the risk to a young person should be drawn to the attention of the police e.g. contact with a potentially dangerous adult, history of self harm or injury.
- Mobile phone details, if known.

The carer will be required to complete a missing person form in conjunction with the police. All subsequent information received should be continuously shared with the police and other relevant parties. This may include a recent photograph of the child or young person if required by the police.

Media Liaison

The local Run Away and Missing from Home and Care protocol will outline expectations of relevant agencies with regard to liaison with the media and the timings of press releases as sensitivity and caution are needed. In the case of young people placed with our Action for Children service, the team manager will liaise closely with the social worker responsible for the young person. The team manager and supervising social worker need to consult our media management policy.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON BE RELEASED BEFORE WRITTEN PERMISSION IS GIVEN BY THE ACTION FOR CHILDREN OPERATIONAL DIRECTOR (OR SENIOR MANAGER ON CALL) IN LIAISON WITH THE RELEVANT SENIOR MANAGER IN THE PLACING LOCAL AUTHORITY.

Record keeping

The supervising social worker/duty worker must make a full record of all circumstances and actions in the child’s file and the carers’ file and ensure that the procedure relating to “Notifiable Events” is followed.
**Action for Children**

**Fostering and family based short breaks Policy**

**Safeguarding children and young people who run away or go missing from placement**

**The roles of other agencies**

These will be outlined in the local Running away and Missing from care protocols. Where an activity or action is not our prime responsibility, our role is to liaise and follow up with the relevant agency if required or anticipated action is not being taken.

**Return of the child or young person**

Parents, all relevant agencies and other parties informed of the young person’s absence, are advised of the young person’s return without delay. Protocols typically identify the role of the police to undertake a ‘Safe and Well’ interview with all children and young people who have been missing from care.

**Return interview**

The local protocol should outline the process and timescales for arranging for an independent person, not directly involved in the day-to-day care of the child or young person or of the service provision or of the management of the service, to carry out an early interview. The Return interview is important in safeguarding the child or young person in the future and is not to be viewed as a routine or administrative task. If this is not clear the team manager or supervising social worker should liaise with the local authority social worker/case manager to check the arrangements for the Return interview.

The child or young person is encouraged to participate in this discussion in order to:

- Provide re-assurance to the child or young person that it is “safe” to talk about anything worrying them.
- Enable them to talk about what they are running away from or to.
- Provide personal support to help them disclose or address any such concern.
- Ensure that appropriate action is taken in response to any harm or risk of harm the child or young person is exposed to.

*Reference should be made to the Action for Children, ‘Children who run away or go missing from care’ guidance to familiarise themselves with the expectations of return interviews within each nation.*

**Follow up work**
In all cases, we need to ensure that an assessment of the absence is undertaken in line with the local protocol. This assessment should take account of the young person’s mental and physical condition. The young person’s medical condition should be noted and an offer made to arrange medical attention, if necessary.

In particular, an assessment considers the young person’s:

- Explanation of the absence.
- Physical symptoms, suggestion of physical or sexual assault.
- Possession of large amounts of money or expensive items.

In some cases an inter-agency meeting will be required to review the young person’s needs and care plan. This is particularly important in the case of multiple instances of a child going missing.

The record of the Notifiable Event is updated and the monitoring form of the Notifiable Event is completed.

Additional reading:

The Children’s Society, Stepping Up report- www.childrenssociety.org.uk
DfES, Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care
DfES guidance on children who run away or go missing from local authority care for care workers and foster carers
ACPO guidance on Missing People- www.acpo.police.uk/asp/policies/Data/missing persons