

Missing People's response to the Department for Education's consultation on statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, September 2013

Summary of our response to the consultation

Missing People is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Department for Education's consultation on draft statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. We welcome this guidance which should be a valuable tool to ensure local authorities, LSCBs and other agencies work effectively to respond to young people who go missing or run away. In addition, the guidance provides useful information about what should be included in local authority protocols for children who run away or go missing, and on collecting and sharing data.

However, we believe that, for clarity, the guidance needs to be restructured around the journey of a young person before, during and after the missing episode, highlighting good practice and specific agencies' responsibilities at each stage. We also believe that the guidance should have a greater emphasis on measures to prevent young people running away or going missing, and a greater emphasis on young people who run away or go missing from home, rather than care.

About Missing People

Missing People's mission is to be a lifeline when someone disappears. We provide free 24 hour confidential support, help and advice by phone, email, text and online, for missing children, missing adults and their families. We coordinate a UK wide network of people, businesses and media to join the search for the estimated 250,000 people who go missing each year. We undertake research into people's experiences of missing, and policy and campaigns work into improving the support available to missing people and their families. We are a national organisation, which also works on a local level. We work in partnership with the police, local authorities, CEOP, the UK Missing Persons Bureau and other agencies to safeguard and support missing people. All of these aspects of our work mean that we have knowledge and expertise on the issues covered by the guidance.

Our detailed response to the guidance

Structure and emphasis of the guidance

A clearer structure

The current structure makes the guidance difficult to follow. The guidance would be clearer if it was structured around the journey of a young person who goes missing or runs away. This revised structure should include three sections that focus on before, during and after the missing episode. Focussing on these different stages of a missing journey would help increase professionals' understanding of the risks, experiences and vulnerabilities of young people at each stage, and help ensure that professionals are equipped to respond to young people's different needs at different points in the journey. This three section structure would also make it easier to include information about different agencies' specific roles and responsibilities at each stage of the process; currently missing from the main guidance.

The guidance would benefit from more information about how it fits into the wider context of policy, regulation and strategy. This guidance will need to link in with the Cross Government Strategy on Missing Children and Adults¹, which has a similar structure to that suggested above, under the themes of prevention (reducing the number of people who go missing), protection (reducing the risk of harm to those who go missing) and provision (providing missing people and their families with support and guidance). Furthermore, the guidance should also refer to the Government's National Group on Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People.²

Focus on prevention

We believe that the guidance should have a stronger focus on preventative measures. At present, the guidance is strongly focused on responding to missing/running away episodes, even though much can be done to prevent young people running away or going missing. A "before the missing episode" section could include more information about the role of schools, youth workers, health services and others in helping young people understand the risks of running away; and the roles of different agencies in providing the support and services young people need to deal with the push and pull factors causing them to be at risk of running away.

Greater emphasis on children missing from home

There should be more emphasis in the guidance on children who are missing or run away from home. As the guidance acknowledges (paragraph 61) the majority of

¹ *Missing Children and Adults, A Cross Government Strategy*, 2011, The Home Office

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-violence-against-children-and-vulnerable-people-national-group>

young people who run away or go missing are living in their family home rather than in care. However, the guidance is much more focused on young people who go missing from care. Young people who run away or go missing from home may have vulnerabilities that statutory agencies are not aware of, potentially making them at particular risk of harm. At some points, the guidance refers to children who go missing from care when it should in fact refer to all missing children and young people. As an example, paragraphs 22 and 23 outline the need for local authorities to collect, analyse and report on children reported missing from care. In order to ensure local authorities have a complete picture in terms of local issues and hotspots, this data collection and analysis must also include children who run away or go missing from home.

Professionals' response to children

We recommend that the guidance should have a greater focus on the way professionals work with children and young people. Children and young people who run away or go missing say that the attitude of professionals and the way they are treated are incredibly important, and can have a big impact on how willing they are to engage with and open up to those professionals.³ The draft guidance does mention the need for care staff to effectively listen to children and take their concerns seriously, and the need to respond to children in a warm and consistent way when they return from a missing episode (paragraphs 65 and 83). However, we believe that taking a supportive approach to young people, actively listening and responding to their individual needs must have far greater prominence in the guidance to address the issue that in many cases, children and young people do not want to engage with, or open up to professionals including police officers, social workers and care home staff.

Examples of good practice

The guidance would benefit from including examples of good practice throughout. As an example, paragraph 28 provides a useful checklist of what a local authority missing protocol should include. However, this would be enhanced further if it included examples of good practice, on topics including how return interviews are organised and conducted, and effective preventative approaches to avoid further instances of missing. The Cross Government Strategy on Missing Children and Adults⁴ includes a number of relevant good practice case studies, which could be referenced in the guidance.

³ *Running from hate to what you think is love*, 2013, Barnardo's and Paradigm Research

⁴ *Missing Children and Adults, A Cross Government Strategy*, 2011, The Home Office

Contents of the guidance – what’s missing?

Push and pull factors

The introduction would benefit from more background information to make those using the guidance fully understand why young people run away or go missing, and the range of risks they face. We suggest that this information should include both push *and* pull factors (that is, factors that cause children to leave home, and those that draw them away, respectively), recognising that some children will be running away from threats and problems, such as neglect or domestic violence. In fact the Cross Government Strategy on Missing Children and Adults states that the most frequent reason given by young people for going missing is “problems at home.”⁵

Focusing on the missing incident and thus pull factors, as the draft guidance largely does at present, compromises practitioners’ abilities to solve the root causes of running away. Furthermore, although child sexual exploitation is an important issue, children and young people are vulnerable to a wide range of other, often inter-related risks and forms of exploitation both before and when they are missing, including gang exploitation, drug and alcohol misuse and violent crime and this should be reflected in the introduction and throughout the document.

Sharing information and data

We welcome the guidance’s focus on collection and sharing of information to help identify local risks and issues (paragraphs 30-32). The section on protocols (paragraph 28) also helpfully points out the need for clear arrangements for information sharing with local agencies and with other local authorities, as well as clarity about what data will be analysed on a regular basis, and who will be responsible for this analysis. It would however be worth pointing out that police forces are expected to produce local problem profiles of missing reports⁶, so local authorities should consider undertaking this work jointly. The guidance would also be enhanced by including good practice examples of multi-agency safeguarding hubs and other local systems for improving information sharing and joint working.

Responsibilities to children classified as “absent”.

The guidance needs to spell out more clearly what local authorities’ responsibilities are to children who are classified by the police as “absent”. In paragraph 28, the guidance helpfully suggests that local authority protocols should include an agreed inter-agency framework for assessing and classifying the degree of risk for missing or

⁵ Page 11, *Cross Government Strategy on Missing Children and Adults*, 2011, the Home Office

⁶ *Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons*, 2013, ACPO and the College of Policing

absent children as well as information about agencies responses to different degrees of risk, and what assessments will be carried out following missing or absent episodes. In addition to this information, it would be useful if the guidance explained local authorities' safeguarding responsibilities for young people classified as absent, and included some information about good practice in terms of local authorities taking a proactive response to safeguarding young people classified as absent, working in partnership with, the police and other agencies, including care home staff where appropriate.

Assessing the impact of the guidance

The guidance should provide information about how its impact will be assessed. It should explain how Ofsted will use the guidance to help in its assessment of Children's Services, Care Homes and LSCBs. It should also state how the Department for Education will review the extent to which the guidance has been implemented on a national level.

Comprehensive list of voluntary sector support

The guidance would benefit from a comprehensive list of national voluntary sector organisations that support young people who run away or go missing, as well as their families. It would also be helpful for the guidance to suggest that local authorities should maintain links with local voluntary sector projects, and should share these with care homes, foster carers and others where applicable. At present, the associated resources section of the guidance includes information on some but not all of the voluntary sector organisations that provide support. Missing People provides free 24 hour confidential support, help and advice by phone, email and text through our 116000 helpline for missing children and their families, including the ability to reconnect (through for example 3 way calls with young people and their social worker, or a police officer). We can therefore play an important role in safeguarding and reconnecting young people, and should be included in the list of associated resources.

Local reporting on performance and implementing policy

Local authorities should have a named senior manager responsible for *reporting on* as well as monitoring policies and performance. We welcome the statement in paragraph 21 that states that there should be a named senior manager within Children's Services responsible for taking the lead on monitoring policies and performance relating to children and young people who go missing. However, we believe that this manager should also provide regular reports to the Director of Children's Services, the LSCB and relevant Council Members regarding the implementation of the guidance, and performance in supporting young people at risk

of or who have gone missing or run away. This report would complement the data report on the local nature and scale of missing, as outlined in paragraph 31.

Out of area placements

The guidance needs to highlight the risks of out of area placements in terms of missing. Paragraphs 68 and 69 outline procedures for information sharing between the host and responsible authority. However, the guidance does not highlight the risks associated with out of area placements – including that young people may run away from an out of area placement than a local placement, in order to reconnect with their local network of friends, family and other support.⁷ In addition, the guidance does not reference the proposals to amend the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, that aim to ensure that children are only placed out of area if there has been sufficient scrutiny to establish that this is an appropriate response to their needs, and is a safe choice for the child concerned.

Return Interviews

Missing People welcomes the guidance's focus on the importance of independent return interviews (paragraphs 49- 54), and the actions that should follow them. We also agree with the guidance that the interviews should be arranged promptly after a child returns, and in a neutral place where they feel safe (paragraph 52).

However, the guidance is not clear about what independent means in terms of who should conduct return interviews. The flowcharts that accompany the guidance suggest that a police officer or social worker could be suitable for conducting the return interviews. However, research shows that young people are more likely to open up and provide information if the interviewer is from a non-statutory agency, such as a voluntary sector young runaway service and is effectively trained in communicating with young people.⁸ The guidance should also point out that return interviews should be conducted following a young person's first missing incident, as this can be the best window of opportunity for preventing further incidents, and preventing the young person coming to harm.

Accommodation

Missing People believes that bed and breakfast accommodation is never a suitable choice for young people. The guidance states that bed and breakfast accommodation is not appropriate for young people under the age of 18, and therefore should only

⁷ *Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care*, 2012, The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

⁸ *Here to Listen, Return Interviews Provision for Young Runaways*, 2013, The Children's Society; *Running from hate to what you think is love*, 2013, Barnardo's and Paradigm Research; page 11, *Cross Government Strategy on Missing Children and Adults*, 2011, the Home Office

be used in exceptional circumstances. However, in guidance issued under the Housing Act and Children's Act (point 2.16, page 6) it states: "*Bed and breakfast accommodation is not considered suitable for 16 and 17 year olds even on an emergency accommodation basis*".⁹ We therefore believe that the phrase "and should only be used in exceptional circumstances" should be removed from the guidance.

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⁹https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/8260/Provision_20of_20accommodation.pdf