CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

MISSING FROM

LOCAL AUTHORITY FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

Version 1

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CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE

Introduction

This joint protocol is written to help you make good decisions when children or young people, looked after by the Local Authority, go missing from their foster placement. .

Often the period where this happens is very short and the child/young person returns unharmed. Indeed there may be a pattern of such behaviour so good professional practice measured by common sense needs to be exercised so that resources are not wasted and inappropriate action taken. However, in all such matters the safety and protection of the child/young person, and indeed that of the wider community, are the most important factors when determining what to do and when to do it.

Together, the Police and Council Social Work Service have statutory duties and responsibilities to fulfil. There is also a duty of care to children and young people and to the wider community.

This protocol cannot take account of every exigency or circumstance. It addresses action steps that incorporate principles of child protection, community safety, collaborative decision-making, statutory responsibility and duty of care. Nevertheless, no two situations are the same so all staff concerned need to exercise sound professional judgement which acknowledges the differences between situations and the evolution of such situations once they arise. The protocol places **joint evaluation and decision-making** between the Police and the Social Work Service firmly at the centre of operational practice in this matter. Through this we can best tailor our responses to circumstances as they develop and do so in a way which is coherent and professionally responsible.

It is hoped that this document will aid you in doing so. In this way both the Social Work Service and the Police can jointly and effectively manage situations where children or young people, whatever the circumstances, go missing from their Local Authority foster placements.

General Guidance

- The purpose of this protocol is to help all staff match their responses to the needs of particular situations as they arise and as they develop.

- It is hoped that over-reaction can be deterred but also that under-reaction likewise can be avoided.

- The safety and protection of children/young people and that of the wider community is our central concern.

- Making a decision to respond should be based solely on the needs of the situation and not on the availability of resources.

- Through implementing this protocol and using our professional judgement in effective collaboration, we can identify situations which become a regular pattern and joint problem. Our approach to resolving repeated absconding/absences should likewise be a joint one. Allowing a child/young person to establish a pattern of regularly going missing is not in the interests of that child/young person, the community or the agencies concerned. Where this looks likely, then collaborative efforts need to be made to meet the needs of these children/young people, and that of the wider community.

- Even where children/young people do go missing repeatedly, each incident needs to be considered in its own right and the circumstances properly evaluated. It would not be justifiable to dismiss the importance of a particular absence because of a previous history and leave the child/young person at risk because the full circumstances have not been properly addressed. Likewise, **it is not permissible to automatically over-react (for example by putting every incident at Code Red) in order to "cover our own back".**

- This protocol is intended as a framework in which sound professional judgement can be used to meet properly our joint responsibilities and to ensure the protection of children/young people and the interests of the wider community.

IMPORTANT

The focus of negotiation, discussion and agreement between Police and foster carers'/Social Worker should be the known circumstances at the time and the risk/urgency indicated. Both Police and Social Work Service staff should provide full information and reasons for particular classifications of risk and the course of action implied by it so that there is maximum opportunity for joint agreement. Mechanisms for a full, regular exchange of information should be agreed and used.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviated/generic terms are used: -

- **SWS** – Social Work Service of the Local Authority responsible for Social Work Services

- **WSSS** – West of Scotland Social Work Standby Service (that part of the Local Authority responsible for out of hours Social Work Services)

- **Police** - Strathclyde Police

- **Foster Carer –** An approved foster carer who looks after children and young people placed by Argyll and Bute Council in their own home.

- **Social Worker** – A person who will have the lead responsibility for managing the care of a child/young person in local authority care and will represent the Social Work Service at Children's Hearings in respect of that child

- **Senior Social Worker** – A person who has line management responsibility for the Social worker.

- **Link Worker –** A social worker with responsibility to supervise and support foster carers.

The protocol outlines **three** different categories of risk:-

Green

Amber

Red

and the sorts of expected response staff will make in each. It also requires each situation, irrespective of which category it is in at initiation, to be reviewed and subsequent steps decided to reflect the circumstances as assessed at the time.

1 CODE GREEN

When a child or young person goes missing from a Local Authority foster placement, the following circumstances may be among those which will place that occurrence, initially, into the **Code Green** category.

- Child/young person unlikely to be at risk while missing (because of age, maturity, knowledge of where they may be)

- Child/young person known to need some time to themselves away from Unit (using information re previous history)

- Other absences have not resulted in harm and there are no significant differences this time

- The absence is following some appointment that is known about

- There is no known health or safety risk associated with the absence

- The child/young person is likely to be found by foster carers/SWD staff, the child/young person truants regularly and is likely to return at the end of the school day

These are only examples, not an exhaustive list.

This decision is taken by the foster carers and allocated social worker for the child if during office hours or WSSS if out of hours. In reaching a decision, in the initial stage, that a **Code Green** is likely to apply, foster carers and Social Work staff must take into account known facts and information.

1.1 SOCIAL WORK SERVICE RESPONSE

1.1.1 CHILD/YOUNG PERSON MISSING FROM FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT

Foster carers will: -

- Record the absence, make local searches in the vicinity, contact any known friends where child might be, particularly parents, extended family

- Advise child's Social Worker during office hours (or WSSS out of hours)

- Agree with allocated social worker or WSSS appropriate timescale for reviewing absence (at least every 6 hours)

- Consult with a senior worker or WSSS if they feel unsure of the level of risk for the child

- Record all steps, decisions, personnel involved and timescales in log in the child's file

- No need to advise police at this stage

The reason why a Code Green is considered the most appropriate response needs to be clearly recorded within a framework of risk assessment.

1.1.2 FOLLOW UP ACTION – SOCIAL WORK

Where a child/young person has been missing and has been found or returned foster carers (or Social Worker where agreed) will: -

- Follow up periods where a child/young person has been missing with a full discussion with the child/young person concerned at the earliest appropriate opportunity following their retrieval/return

- Assess the reason for the absence

- Determine what occurred during the period of absence (not only what the child/young person had been doing but also what may have happened to them)

- Re-iterate limits and expectations with the child/young person for the future

- Identify what further action needs to be taken, with whom and when

- Record all further action to be taken and the plan for implementing this

- Implement further action as necessary

- Offer the child/young person the opportunity to discuss their situation with an independent person such as the Children and Young People's Rights Officer or the 'Who Cares' officer

Where there is need for further inquiry or interview the request for such will be made to the Police Duty Officer.

If it is suspected/known that the child/young person has committed or been the victim of a criminal offence during the absence the Police should be informed immediately. A decision not to report such an incident would only be made where an existing multi-agency protocol is in place allowing for this course of action.

If there is reason to suspect/believe that the child has been abused, exploited or suffered harm then the Child Protection Guidelines should be consulted and followed as appropriate.

1.2 POLICE RESPONSE

There is no need for any **active** Police response at this time because no routine notification will be given to the Police.

BUT

If the Police come across a child/young person whom they believe to be missing from Foster Care but is not recorded as such on Police National Computer they will: -

- Contact the foster carers (if known) and confirm the status/situation of the child/young person

- Advise the foster carers of the current location of the child/young person

- Agree with foster carers immediate uplift of the child/young person (and from where)

- Take child/young person to agreed location (usually Police Station) for uplift as agreed

- Out of hours these steps should be taken with WSSS

If, however, it becomes apparent that the child/young person may have been involved in the commission of offences or been the victim of crime during their absence, the appropriate course of action should be taken. The foster carers/Social Worker/WSSS should be immediately informed and involved as necessary.

If there is reason to suspect/believe that the child has been abused, exploited, or suffered harm then the local Child Protection Guidelines should be consulted and followed as appropriate.

Requests for further inquiry or interview of that child will be accommodated.

2 CODE AMBER

Code Amber would apply when a child/young person goes missing from any foster placement and the circumstances preclude them from being classified as Code Green. This may include the following:-

- There is no particular pattern of absences in the past
- It is not clear why the child/young person may have absented him/herself
- He/she is not likely to be with known person while missing

But

- Not seen as likely to come to physical harm
- Poses no serious threat to the community
- Not prone to self injury
- Not likely to commit a serious offence

These are only examples, not an exhaustive list

In reaching a decision, in the initial stages, that a **Code Amber** is likely to apply, all foster carers and Social Work staff must take into account all **known** facts and information.

2.1 SOCIAL WORK SERVICE RESPONSE

2.1.1 CHILD/YOUNG PERSON MISSING FROM A FOSTER PLACEMENT

Foster carers will: -

- Initially attempt to locate the child by:

  - carrying out a search of the building and any grounds
  - contacting parents
  - phoning known contacts
  - checking by phone or visiting any other possible locations where it is reasonable to believe the child/young person may be

- Consult with Children and Families Team Social Worker or WSSS and agree what is to be done, who will do it and timescales.

Child's Social Worker or WSSS will:

- Complete Police Missing Person Form indicating proposed Code Amber

- Telephone and advise Duty Officer that the Police Missing Person Form is about to be faxed proposing Code Amber. They should request confirmation of receipt. If office has no fax facility then arrangements should be made to have the Police Missing Person Form delivered immediately to the Police.

- On receipt of completed Police Missing Person Form, the Duty Officer will telephone the referrer to confirm receipt and conduct a joint discussion in respect of the situation and proposed Code Amber. This joint discussion should include: -

  - sharing all necessary and expedient information held by both agencies regarding the child/young person and their circumstances

  - agreeing the appropriate code to match the current circumstances where Amber or, if information indicates otherwise, Codes Green or Red

There will be cases when during discussion the category of absconder will not be agreed**. If this situation arises the absconder will be dealt with in the higher risk category**. For example where the person making the report assesses that an absconder should be graded **Red** and the Police consider that grade Amber is more appropriate, the **Red** response will operate.

  - agreeing timescale for review (a review should take place at least every 4 hours)
  - agreeing any other action to be taken and who is to undertake this

- Record the outcome and decision of joint discussion

- Review, at least every 4 hours with Duty Officer (as per agreed plan arrived at in joint discussion) the developing circumstances

- Consider, in review, whether it is necessary (on the basis of all current available information) to increase code (and action) to Code Red, remain at Code Amber, or decrease to Code Green. (For example, in circumstances where the child or young person has been missing for more than 24 hours)

- Record outcomes and decisions of reviews, who participated, and any timescales for further review

- Continue this process as circumstances indicate appropriate

- Advise WSSS of Code Amber situations and relevant action undertaken, if situation occurs/continues out of hours

The focus of negotiation, discussion and agreement between Police and Social Worker/Foster Carer should be the known circumstances at the time and the risk/urgency indicated. Both Police and Social Work Service staff should provide full information and reasons for particular classifications and the course of action implied by it so that there is maximum opportunity for joint agreement. Mechanisms for a full, regular exchange of information should be agreed and used

2.1.2 FOLLOW UP ACTION – SOCIAL WORK

Where a child/young person has been missing and has been found or returned, Foster Carers or Social Worker where agreed) will:-

- Follow up periods where a child/young person has been missing with a discussion with the child/young person concerned at the earliest opportunity following their retrieval/return

- Assess the reasons for the absence

- Determine what occurred during the period of absence (not only what the child/young person had been doing but also what may have happened to them)

- Re-iterate limits and expectations with the child/young person for the future

- Identify what further action needs to be taken, with whom and when

- Implement further action as necessary

- Record all further action to be taken and the plan for implementing this

- Offer the child/young person the opportunity to discuss their situation with an independent person such as the Children and Young People's Rights Officer or the 'Who Cares' officer.

- The Duty Officer should be informed and arrangements will be made to have the Child/Young Person interviewed by the Police.

If it is suspected/known that the child/young person has committed or witnessed a criminal offence during the absence the Police should be informed immediately.

If there is reason to suspect/believe that the child has been abused, exploited or suffered harm then the Child Protection Guidelines should be consulted and followed as appropriate.

2.2.1 POLICE RESPONSE

The Police will not mount a search or carry out an inquiry at this stage.

BUT

On receipt of Police Missing Person Form from the Foster Carers, Social Worker or WSSS, the Divisional Duty Officer, or a person nominated by them, will: -

- Acknowledge receipt with the sender and confirm the details
- Enter the child/young person's details on Police National Computer
- Create open incident on STORM
- Circulate details of the child/young person to local police stations including that which covers the area covering the child/young person's home address
- If the child/young person originates from outwith the Strathclyde area, a telex or fax will be sent to the Police Force within whose area the child/young person's home address is located

On receipt of the telephone call from the Social Worker/or WSSS, the Duty Officer will:

- Participate in a joint discussion in respect of the situation and the proposed Code Amber

This joint discussion should include: -

- sharing all pertinent information held by both agencies regarding the child/young person with reference to their circumstances
- agreeing the Code appropriate to the current situation whether Amber or, if information indicates otherwise, Codes Green or Red

There will be cases when during discussion the category of absconder will not be agreed**. If this situation arises the absconder will be dealt with in the higher risk category**. For example where the person making the report assesses that an absconder should be graded **Red** and the Police consider that grade Amber is more appropriate, the **Red** response will operate.

- agreeing timescale for review (a review should take place at least every 4 hours)
- agreeing any other action to be taken and who is to undertake this

The focus of the joint discussion/review between Police and Foster Carer/Social Worker should be the known circumstances of the child and the risk/urgency indicated. Negotiation, where necessary, should lead to mutual agreement giving highest consideration to the protection of the child/young person and/or the protection of others from harm or injury.

Both Police and Social Work Service staff should provide full information and the reasons for considering particular codes and courses of action so that there is a maximum opportunity for joint agreement. The review mechanism for a full and regular exchange of information should be agreed and used.

- Record outcome and decisions of joint discussion, who participated and agreed timescale for review on STORM

- Review, at least every 4 hours, with the Social Work officer who participated in the joint discussion

- Consider, in the review, whether it is necessary (on the basis of all current available information) to increase code (and action) to Code Red, or to decrease to Code Green. **(For example, in circumstances where the child or young person has been missing for more than 24 hours)**

- Record outcomes and decisions of reviews, who participated, and any further timescale for review on STORM

- Continue this process as circumstances indicate appropriate

2.2.2 FOLLOW UP ACTION – POLICE

- On retrieval of a child/young person reported missing under Code Amber, the Duty Officer should immediately be notified and arrangements made for the child/young person to be interviewed. Where possible this interview should be conducted by the officers trained to interview children under terms of the National Guidance. Full consideration should be given to involving social work staff in interviews. Once interview carried out ensure relevant entry on PNC updated and cancelled.

- Following this where there is cause to believe that the child/young person may have been involved in the commission of crime, or as a witness or victim of crime, the Senior CID officer on duty should be notified and arrangements made for the child/young person to be interviewed by a detective officer.

- Where there is cause to believe that the child/young person may have been abused, physically or sexually (including involved in sexual exploitation), the Child Protection Guidelines should be consulted and implemented as appropriate.

If it seems that a pattern of such absences is becoming established, arrangements should be made to debrief information jointly so that the management of future absences can be properly addressed. Consideration should be given as to what can be done to minimise the possibility of the child/young person going missing in future.

3 CODE RED

In some circumstances the level of concern is immediately high when children/young people fail to return or leave a Foster Placement without proper authority. Risk factors may be: -

- Child/young person is vulnerable to physical harm or exploitation/abuse by others
- Child/young person may injure himself if not found quickly
- Child/young person is likely to act recklessly or dangerously putting self or others at risk
- Child/young person likely to commit a serious offence
- Age of child means they are unable to sustain themselves or have adequate regard for their own personal safety and protection

These are only examples of indicators of risk, not a definitive or exhaustive list.

The decision to initiate a Code Red should be decided:-

- In the case of foster placements by an Team Leader, Area Manager or Service Manager of Argyll and Bute Council or WSSS.
- and in the case of the police by a Duty Officer or above

In reaching a decision, in the initial stages, that a Code Red is likely to apply, **all Social Work staff and officers involved must take into account known facts and information**

3.1 SOCIAL WORK SERVICE RESPONSE

3.1.1 CHILD/YOUNG PERSON MISSING FROM A FOSTER PLACEMENT

Foster Carers will: -

- Report the child/young person missing to the police immediately

- Report the action to the allocated Social Worker, Team Leader or WSSS if out of hours.

Child's Social Worker, Team Leader or WSSS will:

- Complete Police Missing Person Form indicating Code proposed Code Red

- Telephone and advise Duty Officer that the Police Missing Person Form is about to be faxed proposing Code Red. They should request confirmation of receipt. If no fax facility then arrangements should be made to have the Police Missing Person Form delivered immediately to the Police.

- In office hours, contact the team Leader in the Children and Families Team responsible for the child/young person to advise them of the circumstances. Agreement should be reached as to:

  - what tasks require to be undertaken (including contacting parents, friends, known contacts, known haunts, etc) by whom; and when

  - timescales for reviewing the position (a review should take place at least every 2 hours)

  - who will act as designated liaison officer with the Police regarding the situation and search

- Outwith office hours, contact WSSS

- Report all incidents involving Code Red to the Senior Manager with responsibility for the Foster Service within normal working hours on the same day or next working day

- A Police Officer (on receipt of the Police Missing Person Form) will be sent as soon as possible to take full details from the Foster Carer. Staff will convey full details and background to this officer

- On receipt of the initial report from the reporting officer(s) the Duty Officer at will telephone the agreed designated Social Work Liaison Officer/WSSS to conduct a joint discussion (as per Code Amber). In Code Red this joint discussion should include: -

- sharing all necessary and expedient information held by both agencies regarding the child/young person and their circumstances

- agreeing the Code appropriate to the current situation whether Red or, if information indicates otherwise, Codes Green and Amber

There will be cases when during discussion the category of absconder will not be agreed**. If this situation arises the absconder will be dealt with in the higher risk category**. For example where the person making the report assesses that an absconder should be graded **Red** and the Police consider that grade Amber is more appropriate, the **Red** response will operate.

- agreeing timescale for review (a review should take place at least every 2 hours)

- agreeing any other action to be taken and who is to undertake this (including joint sharing of tasks where appropriate)

- action to be taken as part of an active inquiry

NOTE: -

In Code Red, the Police will assume the lead role in the conduct of any subsequent inquiry (reporting back to the designated Social Work Liaison Officer as part of agreed review process).

The focus of negotiation, discussion and agreement between Police and foster carers/Social Worker should be the known circumstances at the time and the risk/urgency indicated. Both Police and Social Work Service staff should provide full information and reasons for particular classifications and the course of action implied by it so that there is maximum opportunity for joint agreement. Mechanisms for a full, regular exchange of information should be agreed and used.

3.1.2 FOLLOW UP ACTION – SOCIAL WORK

Where a child/young person has been missing and has been found or returned, Social Worker will:-

- Follow up periods where a child/young person has been missing with a discussion with the child/young person concerned at the earliest opportunity following their retrieval/return

- Assess the reasons for the absence

- Determine what occurred during the period of absence (not only what the child/young person had been doing but also what may have happened to them)

- Re-iterate limits and expectations with the child/young person for the future

- Identify what further action needs to be taken, with whom and when

- Implement further action as necessary

- Record all further action to be taken and the plan for implementing this

- Notify the Duty Officer who will decide who is to interview the child/young person OR follow the Child Protection Guidelines (where there is cause to suspect that the child/young person has been abused)

It is possible that the need for the Child Protection Guidelines to be invoked may only arise once the return interview is conducted as a result of information gained.

The designated Liaison Officer within the Social Work Service will:-

- Ensure with the foster carer/Social Worker that the child/young person is offered the opportunity to discuss their situation with an independent person such as the Children and Young People's Rights Officer or the 'Who Cares' officer.

If it is suspected/known that the child/young person has committed or witnessed a criminal offence during the absence the Police should be informed immediately.

If there is reason to suspect/believe that the child has been abused, exploited or suffered harm then the Child Protection Guidelines should be consulted and followed as appropriate.

3.2.1 POLICE RESPONSE

On receipt of the Police Missing Person Form from the Foster Carer/Social Worker/Senior Social Worker the Divisional Duty Officer, or a person nominated by them, will: -

- Acknowledge receipt of the Police Missing Person Form with sender and confirm details

- Log details of child/young person on PNC

- Create an incident on STORM

- Circulate details of child/young person to local police stations, including that which covers the area from which the child/young person originates. If the child/young person originates from outwith the Strathclyde force area, a telex or fax will be sent to the Police within whose area their home address is located

- Send, as soon as possible, officers to the reporting Social Worker to note information and full detail

The Duty Officer will: -

- Be responsible for the initial assessment of the circumstances and co-ordination of at least the initial stages of the inquiry

- Telephone (on receipt of the Police Missing Person Form indicating Code Red) the designated Social Work liaison officer to conduct a joint discussion (as per Code Amber). In Code Red, this joint discussion will also include: -

  - sharing all pertinent information held by both agencies regarding the child/young person with reference to their circumstances

  - agreeing the Code appropriate to the current situation whether Red or, if information indicates otherwise, Codes Green or Amber

There will be cases when during discussion the category of absconder will not be agreed**. If this situation arises the absconder will be dealt with in the higher risk category**. For example where the person making the report assesses that an absconder should be graded **Red** and the Police consider that grade Amber is more appropriate, the **Red** response will operate.

- Agreeing timescale for review (a review should take place at least every 2 hours during the first 24 hours and thereafter at regular intervals not exceeding 4 hours)

- Agreeing any other action to be taken and who is to undertake this (including joint sharing of tasks where appropriate)

- Action to be taken as part of an active inquiry

- The child/young person is thereafter treated as a Missing Person as per the Standard Operating Procedures and the investigation will evolve as developing circumstances dictate

NOTE:

In Code Red, the Police will assume the lead role in the conduct of any subsequent inquiry (reporting back to the designated Social Work Liaison Officer as part of the review process).

The focus of negotiation, discussion and agreement between Police and Unit/Social Worker should be the known circumstances at the time and the risk/urgency indicated. Both Police and Social Work Service staff should provide full information and reasons for particular classifications and the course of action implied by it so that there is maximum opportunity for joint agreement. Mechanisms for a full, regular exchange of information should be agreed and used.

3.2.1 FOLLOW UP ACTION – POLICE

- On retrieval of a child/young person reported missing under Code Red, the Duty Officer should immediately be notified and arrangements made for the child/young person to be interviewed. Where possible this interview should be conducted by the officers trained to interview children under terms of the National Guidance. Full consideration should be given to involving social work staff in interviews. Once interview carried out ensure relevant entry on PNC updated and cancelled.

- Following this where there is cause to believe that the child/young person may have been involved in the commission of crime, or as a witness or victim of crime, the Senior CID officer on duty should be notified and arrangements made for the child/young person to be interviewed by a detective officer.

- Where there is cause to believe that the child/young person may have been abused, physically or sexually (including involved in sexual exploitation), the Child Protection Guidelines should be consulted and implemented as appropriate.

The interviewing officer (whether the same or other than the officer who holds the inquiry) **will: -**

- Share any information/intelligence gained during the interview, with the designated Social Work Liaison Officer. This will include, as necessary, a full and proper debrief of the incident between the SWS and the Police.

- Where there is cause to believe that the child/young person may have been involved in the commission of crime, or as a witness or victim of crime, the senior CID officer on duty should be notified and arrangements made for the child/young person to be interviewed by a Detective officer.

If it seems that a pattern of such absences is becoming established, arrangements should be made to debrief information jointly so that the management of future absences can be properly addressed. Consideration should be given as to what can be done to minimise the possibility of the child/young person going missing in the future.