

## PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 26 MARCH 2015

### SAFEGUARDING MISSING CHILDREN

#### Report by Deputy Director Children's Social Care

#### Introduction

1. This paper provides information on children in Oxfordshire who go missing including:
  - A definition of the term 'missing'
  - Exploration of the trends, Oxfordshire practice and key concerns
  - How we know that our safeguarding and management of missing children is effective, with comprehensive and robust systems in place.
2. The recently published Serious Case Review following Operation Bullfinch established that in previous years the handling of missing children/missing episodes was not as strong as it could have been in Oxfordshire. Since then there have been huge changes, as a result of lessons learned across all agencies.
3. As can be seen from the table following paragraph 10 (below), the number of missing children/missing episodes recorded has increased in recent years. However, it is very important to state that this is due to improved reporting and recording of information rather than actual increasing numbers of children going missing. The increased figures should therefore be seen as a sign of agencies (including schools and supported housing providers) being far more effective and proactive in reporting missing episodes than had previously been the case.
4. Ofsted has acknowledged that systems in Oxfordshire are of a high standard. Following its inspection of Oxfordshire County Council's children's social care teams in Spring 2014 it graded services as "Good". In its recently published annual report, it became clear that Oxfordshire County Council was one of only ten authorities in England rated "Good" (out of the 43 that provide children's social care across the country – the other 33 being graded either "inadequate" or "requires improvement").
5. Ofsted's final report, published on June 30, 2014, specifically praised the handling of missing children episodes in paragraph 39 of its report. It said: "*Good arrangements are in place to respond when children go missing from home and care. The police undertake a 'safe and well' visit when children return home and provide very prompt reports to the local authority. Social workers visit promptly after each missing episode of a child known to the service. They complete a return interview with the young person to understand the reasons for the missing episode. All missing episodes are effectively recorded and risk assessed, with appropriate plans to reduce the risk of future missing episodes. The authority has effective systems for identifying, monitoring and responding to those children who are missing from education and those who are educated at home.*"

### Definition of the term 'missing'

6. A missing child is a child who has not yet reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, who is reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.
7. The Association of Chief Police Officers released guidance in April 2013 on new definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' in relation to children and adults reported as missing to the police. These are:
  - *Missing*  
Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another
  - *Absent*  
A person not at a place where they are expected, or required, to be.
8. The police classification of a person as 'missing' or 'absent' is based on risk assessment. Absent within this definition does *not* include Looked after Children (LAC) away from placement without authorisation, and all children aged 14 and under. Assurance has been given to Oxfordshire County Council by Thames Valley Police that officers are taking into account the vulnerability of the child or young person when applying these definitions.
9. Schools have clear and comprehensive guidance on assessing risk and appropriate action when children are missing from school. Contact would be made initially with the child's parent or carer. If there is no response, or the response gives cause for concern, then the schools designated safeguarding adviser will then make a decision based on risk and vulnerability as to whether the child is absent or missing and the police will be informed

### Exploration of the trends, Oxfordshire practice and key concerns

10. The overall number of children recorded as going missing is increasing as is the number who go missing more than twice.

	Number of children going missing	Number of missing episodes	Number missing 2+ occasions	% missing 2+ occasions
April 2012 - March 2013	630	1154	77	12.2%
April 2013 - March 2014	641	1072	97	15.3%
April 2014 - January 2015	577	1290	104	18.0%
<i>April 2014 - March 2015 (extrapolated)</i>	<i>692</i>	<i>1548</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>18.0%</i>

11. Oxfordshire Children Social Care receives a daily missing children's report from Thames Valley Police which is checked against the case management systems in the council. All children on the list are immediately referred to their allocated worker, or where unallocated to Children's Social Care or the Youth Justice Service, to the Early Intervention Service for follow-up actions. When Looked After Children from other authorities, placed in Oxfordshire go missing, the referral is sent to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, who liaise with the placing Local Authority
12. When a child who has been reported missing is traced, a safe and well check is immediately undertaken by Thames Valley Police. This is then followed up with the return interview. Statutory guidance was issued in January 2014 which states that return interviews should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning. If the child is known to Children's Social Care or the Youth Justice Service, the interview will be carried out in 72 hours. If the child is not known, the Early Intervention Service or school carry out the interview. The interview should be recorded within 5 working days and then sent to the missing person co-ordinator at Thames Valley Police.
13. Looked after children placed outside their home area may be at increased risk if they runaway or go missing. This would include not knowing the area, no access to friends or support networks, and being unaware of local risks. Great care is taken when considering placing a child or young person in another authority (or indeed an in County placement outside the child's own locality) and only placements with a 'good' rating are considered. In particular the placing social worker assesses any risks including running away behaviours of other children and young people in the placement. Oxfordshire County Council will ensure that the child's Placement Plan and Risk Management Plan are as detailed as possible, including specific behaviour management strategies where there is a known risk that the child or young person may runaway.
14. The care provider is responsible for following their local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care procedures, and contacting the child's social worker in Oxfordshire who will consider the need for a strategy discussion to include local police and ensure that a return interview is conducted within 72 hours of the child returning. An early LAC review may be convened to address issues for the child and placement and where there are safeguarding concerns, a visit to the child is arranged immediately.
15. A copy of the relevant procedure from the host LSCB area is held on the child's file and missing return interviews are actively followed up by the strategic lead for missing children.
16. Oxfordshire hold a monthly multi-disciplinary Missing Children's Panel meeting; which is jointly chaired by Thames Valley Police and Children's Social Care. Social workers, Local Police Area (LPA) representatives, Missing Person's Police Co-ordinator, providers and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector agencies are required to attend and report to the panel when a young person is repeatedly reported missing. This is not just a review of the number of missing episodes; it is a multi-agency analysis and challenge session, ensuing there is an effective Multi-Agency Risk Assessment

and Management Plan (MARAMP) in place and that we are taking into account the child's story when trying to understand missing reports for each young person.

17. Intelligence and information from return interviews informs this risk assessment and management plan. There is an analysis of the previous risk assessment and management plan, and a judgment made on its effectiveness, concluding with future recommendations.
18. The return interview format has been developed to include a section on why the child went missing. The data selection will be based on information received from a recent sounding board with Looked after Children where one of the questions was about why they feel they run away. As well as capturing the 'push' factors such as problems at home, it will also include 'pulls' such as wanting to spend time with friends/boyfriends etc. A similar exercise will be carried out in the Early Intervention Service so that richer intelligence can be produced.
19. In line with our response to the All Party Parliamentary Group June 2012 report into Children Missing from Home and Care, and as statutory agencies shift to a culture of looking after and keeping our riskiest young people closest (alongside an increasing Looked After population), we expect to see an increase in missing episodes and frequency in 2015-2016.
20. The missing children agenda is a key priority for the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB). The OSCB Child Sexual Exploitation subgroup is responsible for overseeing the partnership arrangements for missing children across the county. A bi-monthly report on missing children is produced and presented to the group by the strategic lead for missing children which includes the following:
  - i. Overall numbers of missing children and the proportion missing on 3 or more occasions
  - ii. Children missing from LAC placements
  - iii. A breakdown of children going missing who were known to Children's Social Care and the Early Intervention and Youth Justice Services
  - iv. Children missing where there is a risk of Child Sexual Exploitation
  - v. Children going missing for more than 24 hours
  - vi. Monitoring of return interviews within statutory timescales
21. Regular prevalence and performance data is produced for CEF management. A weekly report is circulated to team managers and senior managers which details any outstanding return interviews or missing episodes for immediate follow up.
22. There has been an increase in missing children's reports made by schools. On scrutinising the missing reports and return interviews, panel has assessed this is a result of a greater awareness amongst teachers and carers of the dangers children face when missing following the various awareness initiatives that the OSCB has instigated. This is supported by missing person's panel data, which shows an increase in the quality and detail of missing and return interview reports from schools.

23. The Missing Children's Panel has also noted a significant increase in missing reports over the last 6 months from our supported housing providers and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector partners, including our privately run residential children's homes. (Two new provisions have opened in Oxfordshire in the past 18 months).
24. The Missing Children's Panel reviews new children who fit the criteria for the first time (repeatedly going missing, or for whom there are specific concerns of risk or vulnerability) . In all cases where a child has recently become Looked After, discussions are held with the Local Area Police and Children's Social Care; and objective scrutiny given to the intelligence gathered within the return interviews. In all but a few cases, this evaluation by the multi-agency group has determined that these young people were being under reported by their parents/carers, and current reporting is now more accurate. The risks are therefore understood and more effectively managed.
25. The police Missing Person's Co-ordinator is also a member of the Kingfisher (Child Sexual Exploitation) Team. This provides an effective operational link between missing children and children at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation. However, it is important to recognise that Child Sexual Exploitation is only one key indicator of the risks facing missing children. The fact that the child has gone missing is an indicator that something is not right in their life. As such links are then made between the missing children, human trafficking, and child sexual exploitation strategies; alongside the Youth Justice Services strategic plan, including crime and substance misuse, and the absent from school roll arrangements, with each informing the others.

### **How we know what we do is effective**

26. The Missing Person's Panel recently scrutinised two missing children cases where significant risk was identified. In both cases there was evidence of good multiagency working to manage and reduce the risk of these young people. This was jointly managed with education and health using the risk assessment model under the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Plan (MARAMP) framework. This led to 1 child being successfully stepped back down to their family home within a couple of months, and another case recently stepping back to the community following a period in secure accommodation. Both these very high risk young people have currently have a sustained record of no missing reports since their respective MARAMPs have been implemented.
27. On the 19<sup>th</sup> May 2014 as part of Oxfordshire's Childrens Social Care area inspection, Ofsted undertook a real time Missing Childrens quality assurance audit. The inspectorate analysed and explored the most recent 10 missing children reports between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> May 2014. These included the last 5 LAC and non-LAC missing children reports made to Thames Valley Police. This audit individually scrutinised:
- the multi-agency response and risk assessment completed at the point of the missing reports being made
  - the process of tracing the child
  - the safe and well check once traced

- the process of the return interviews.

In all cases the inspectorate judged that the multi-agency response, actions, and follow up were “good”.

28. We have successfully completed the first missing/return interview and MARAMP training for foster carers, link workers, advocates and supported housing providers, enabling them to identify trigger factors for risky behaviour, breaking risks down into likelihood and severity and how to implement control measures to reduce risk levels. Following this training being delivered Panel has noted a reducing number of 1<sup>st</sup> time missing children being reported from our in county foster placements, with just six new children in the last quarter. This data set is tentatively being linked to an increase in the use of the MARAMP framework, and a full audit will be carried out to compare these two data sets by early April.
29. Further training is now being planned for delivery to Early Intervention workers and designated teachers in early 2015. Discussions have taken place with the Youth Justice Service to identify how they can support MARAMP training and take a lead on strategies and control measures around managing public risk. Following a report presented in December 2014 to the Child Sexual Exploitation subgroup of the Board detailing the progress made, and risk indicators noted above, the Board has agreed to resource a task group to specifically look at this joint area of work.
30. The strategic lead for missing children will be chairing an operational task group to discuss the implications of the placement strategy at an operational level. This task group will link in with the duty sergeants and inspectors; considering the MARAMP and the specific responses proportionate to risk and need with regards to repeat missing reports in a given LPA. Thames Valley Police will be represented by the Thames Valley Police strategic Lead for missing children, and 3 LPA inspectors.
31. As part of a recent review at an extended Missing Children’s Panel Meeting, the Terms of Reference were reviewed and an update drafted. Following this the following changes were made to the panel process:
  - i. The Panel will be completing an annual review to measure its effectiveness. Given the current trends/patterns and anticipated trajectory for our overall missing children cohort, the panel would welcome suggestions from the Performance and Scrutiny Committee regarding 3 priority areas to focus and report back on next year.
  - ii. Given the current trend in repeat missing episodes and the tentative positive data relating to the MARAMP framework, the panel is recommending that at the point any child is reported missing 3 or more times in a 90 day period, (including 1 extended episode); the relevant worker, (Social worker; Early Intervention worker; Youth Justice worker; Teacher; Private provider) and the LPA attend panel to present an updated MARAMP as part of an analysis and challenge session. This presentation will then consider and implement a multiagency response, target resources to achieve this, and agree timeframes to report back to panel on the overall effectiveness of these interventions.

**RECOMMENDATION**

**32. The Performance Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to:**

- (a) note report:**
- (b) become actively involved in priority setting process for the Missing Children's Panel; and**
- (c) receive an annual report on work with missing children**

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