

## **Performance Scrutiny Committee - 5 November 2015**

### **Missing Children in Oxfordshire: April to September 2015**

#### **Report by Director for Children's Services**

#### **Introduction**

1. This report provides a summary update on the number of children reported as missing from home in Oxfordshire, including children looked after, by Oxfordshire County Council.
2. The report shows the emerging patterns and trends for Oxfordshire's children and families. It cites evidence to illustrate: emerging patterns and trends relating to missing children in Oxfordshire; best practice in line with the agreed 'joint protocol'; risks/shortfalls; and how these are being managed and challenged to ensure compliance with the relevant guidance issued by Department for Education (DfE) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).
3. The matter of missing children 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.

#### **Background and Context**

##### *The current position*

4. At 30 September 2015 Oxfordshire was responsible for the welfare of 577 Looked after Children (LAC), including supporting 47 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).
5. Of these, 91 children were in residential placements, 12 in our local authority provision, and 79 in private residential placements, many of whom are more than 20 miles from the young person's home address. This is an increase of 36.2% since 1 April 2015.
6. 103 children were placed with an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA), an increase of 10.7% since 1 April 2015, of whom 45 were in Oxfordshire. If a young person goes missing from such a placement the local authority must be notified in line with the Missing Children's Strategy published in August 2014.

Comparison and Trends (based on the last 12 months)

7. When the above figures are compared with September 2014, the following trends are observed:
- There has been a 10.7% increase in our LAC population
  - There has been a 17.5% increase in the presentation of UASCs
  - There has been a 19.7% increase in the placement of children in private residential placements
  - There has been a 9.6% increase in the placement of children within Independent Fostering placements (IFAs)
8. This illustrates a significant upward trajectory in all key cohorts relating to our most vulnerable and risky children and families.

**Numbers of missing children.**

9. The table below shows the total number of children who have been reported as missing to Thames Valley Police (TVP) in the period 1 April - 30 September 2015. To better understand the context and frequency of the missing episodes reported, they have been organised into 4 escalation scales (fewer than 5 episodes, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19 and 20+).

Number of episodes	Number of Children	
	01/04/14 to 30/09/14	01/04/15 to 30/09/15
Fewer than 5 episodes	327	463
5-9 episodes	22	27
10-14 episodes	2	3
15-19 episodes	1	1
20+ episodes	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>356</b>	<b>495</b>

10. This shows over the two year period 2014 -2015:
- A 39.0% increase in overall Missing Children's reports being made to TVP.
  - Of these, 40.6% are open cases to Children's Social Care (CSC)
11. The Missing Childrens Panel is of the view that this increase is attributable to improved reporting and recording of information rather than 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 hitherto.

12. It is evident that the number of children with 10-20+ repeat missing episodes has actually reduced. When set against the significant increases in our LAC population and the increased use of statutory placements, this suggests that we are managing our repeat missing children cohort more effectively by using Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Plan (MARAMP) processes.
13. The missing children’s strategic leads for both TVP and CSC recently scrutinised two missing children cases where significant risks were signposted as a result of over 15 reported episodes. In both cases there was good evidence of multi-agency working to manage and reduce the likelihood and severity of risk for these young people. .

**Return interviews**

14. When a child who has been reported missing is traced, a ‘safe and well’ check is immediately undertaken by TVP. This is followed up with a return interview. Statutory guidance issued in January 2014 states that return interviews should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning. In all instances, the child should be offered the opportunity to have an independent advocate complete the return interview. If the child is not known to CSC, then the Early Intervention Service (EIS) will make contact and carry out the interview.

	% with a return interview	% interviews in 72 hours
Children known to CSC going missing	90.4%	53.0%
Children not known to CSC going missing	93.8%	37.4%

15. To be compliant with statutory guidance, we require that 100% of return interviews are carried out within the timescales. This is monitored by the strategic lead for missing children, as is the quality of interviews. After escalation to the Children, Education and Families Directorate Leadership Team an action plan is being implemented to address the shortfall.

**Recommendations and Actions**

16. This year has seen a significant increase in UASCs and missing episodes from this cohort. Currently, when a UASC is reported missing, the agreed joint protocol is implemented, and colleagues from the immigration team at TVP are included as part of this process. The Missing Children’s Panel is making the following recommendations to CSC.

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- i. If there are immediate concerns on completion of the Human Trafficking Screening Tool and the Initial Age Assessment indicates an age of less than 18 years, then an immediate strategy discussion is to be held and a determination of if this needs to be escalated to Section 47 enquiry.
  - ii. Following the strategy discussion/S.47, the Corporate Parenting Manager and the Placement Service will need to consider what the most appropriate placement is for the child in order to meet the safeguarding needs identified by the social worker.
17. The Corporate Parenting Service has successfully completed the first missing/return interview and MARAMP training for our Early Intervention Service (EIS), enabling them to identify trigger factors for risky behaviour, breaking risks down into likelihood and severity and how, then, to implement control measures to reduce risk levels. There has been a noted improvement in the quality and timeliness of return interviews being completed by EIS since the training has been given. This training is now being planned for our designated teachers and other key teaching staff.
18. The strategic leads for missing children for TVP and CSC have also made a quality assurance challenge to those authorities which place their LAC in Oxfordshire, wanting to ensure that, as the host authority, the same safeguarding bench mark is applied to all LAC in Oxfordshire.
19. Our two local authority children's homes continue to show a reduction in missing episodes. For all the children in this cohort, there has been a decrease in missing episodes over the last two months.
20. The missing children's joint protocols and OCC residential children's homes policies are being reviewed by TVP and CSC to ensure they are up to date, and to see if they can be translated into an easy reference document for response supervisors, CSC, care providers and the Emergency Duty Team (EDT).
21. The Joint Missing Children's protocol between TVP and CSC underpins both our Missing Children's Strategy and Residential Missing Children's Policy, all of which are in line with the DfE and ACPO 2014 Statutory Guidance Frameworks. Feedback presented to the CSC and TVP strategic leads for missing children drew attention to the fact that the protocol is often interpreted differently by our frontline staff and officers or not fully understood in terms of each other's duties and powers. A joint training programme is therefore being developed which will be run as a series of joint operational briefings for TVP and CSC staff. It is anticipated that bringing our frontline staff together will create the forum needed for them to debate, understand and problem solve the challenges we are facing.

22. Both TVP and CSC will increasingly come under pressure to ensure that appropriate resources are directed towards safeguarding those children who are repeatedly missing, That response needs to be balanced, proportionate and targeted. The Placement Strategies Operational Task Group (TVP and CSC) will be working on this topic, and ensuring that reporting procedures are fit and proper.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

23. **The Performance Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to note the report.**

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