Division(s):

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 5 OCTOBER 2017

Children Missing From Home or Care In Oxfordshire

Report by Director for Children's Services

Introduction

1.   This report provides a strategic update on the number of children reported as missing from home, care and school in Oxfordshire, including children looked after by Oxfordshire County Council. It covers the period between 1 January 2017 to 1 June 2017

2.   The report focuses on the main patterns, trends and concerns across the county, which will be of note to strategic leads. It covers best practice in line with the agreed 'joint protocol' and current risks or shortfalls and how these are being managed to ensure compliance with the relevant guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE) and the College of Policing.

3.   It is not intended to reflect the full picture of all of the work undertaken by the Missing Children's Panel and partners within the period. Many investigations and analyses are active, awaiting further intelligence development or exploration with operational partners, third party agencies, and the children and families whom we are working to safeguard.

4.   Safeguarding missing children is a key priority for the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB). The OSCB Child Sexual Exploitation Sub-Group is responsible for overseeing the partnership arrangements for missing children across the county.

5.   A wide variety of information and intelligence has informed this report. Sources include information held on both Oxfordshire County Council and Thames Valley Police databases (including crime, intelligence and missing persons), Local Authority databases and multi-agency records.

6.   There remains evidence of risks related to missing children across all of Oxfordshire with varying patterns and trends in each locality.

Exempt Information

7.   None.

Current Overview

8.   On 31 May 2017, Oxfordshire was responsible for the welfare of 625 Looked After Children (LAC), excluding Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC); this represents a 5.9% increase since the previous report. In addition, across the same period, the Local Authority supported 66 UASC; which represents an increase of 8.2%.

9.   Of these, 95 children were in residential placements, 10 in our Local Authority provision, and 85 with private providers.

10.   Increases were noted for adoptive placements (33.3%), children placed with their parents (25%) and children moving into independent living (21.7%). Children placed with Local Authority carers and kinship care has remained the same compared to the previous 6 months, with the use of IFA placements increasing by 12.4%.

Comparison and Trends (June/December 2016 compared with January/ June 2017)

11.   When the above figures are compared, the following is evident.

12.   There has been a 6.1% increase in our LAC population (including UASCs).

13.   Analysis - across the period, the number of all (LAC and non-LAC) children reported missing has risen by 16 cases, which represent a 6.7% increase for children reported missing for the first time. Out of these, 83 were LAC. Across same period, we have seen occurrences of children repeatedly reported missing decrease from 721 to 603, a reduction of 16.4%.

	July – December 2016	January – July 2017	Percentage Change
Number of children	240	256	**6.7%**
Number of episodes	721	603	**-16.4%**

14.   Of the 256 children, 157 were reported missing on one occasion only, whereas children reported missing on 2-4 occasions remained the same. There was a reduction of 4.2% for children being reported missing on 5-9 occasions, with children reported missing on 10-14 and 15-19 occasions remaining the same. In the final field, it is noted that children reported missing on 20 occurrences reduced by 5 (71.4%).

	July – December 2016	January-June 2017	Percentage Change
One Episode	135	157	**15.6%**
2-4 Episodes	68	68	**0.0 %**
5-9 Episodes	24	23	**-4.2%**
10-14 Episodes	4	4	**0.0%**
15-19 Episodes	2	2	**0.0%**
20+ Episodes	7	2	**-71.4%**

15. Conclusion – this is the third report that notes a reduction in children being repeatedly reported missing in Oxfordshire (when you consider the increased number of children currently coming into care, this represents a reduction greater than 16.4%). The strategic leads remain of the view that, on evidence presented at the Missing Children's Panel, the increase in children being reported missing for the first time is attributable to the improved understanding of the risks children are exposed to when missing and Thames Valley Police's and Children's Social Care's effective local partnerships working prior to escalation to the Missing Children's Panel forum. The strategic leads have quality assured this as part of the functionality of the Missing Children's Panel. They reaffirm that this should, therefore, be seen as effective identification of the risks, communication of the strategic plan/process, tighter Q&A/reporting, and the sharing/recording of information being used to keep children safer.

16. There has been an 8.2% increase in the presentation of UASCs.

17. Analysis – during this period there has been an increase (% per person per missing report) of the number of UASCs being reported missing (this accounts for 16% of all missing reports across the period). This is significant as it relates to just 14 children.

	July – December 2016	January – June 2017	Percentage Change
Number of UASCs	11	14	**27.3%**
Number of episodes (UASCs)	29	41	**41.4%**

18. Conclusion – the Local Authority has committed to supporting an additional 15 UASCs this year through the transfer scheme in addition to those that are located or present to the Local Authority spontaneously. As reported in January, a continued and sustained growth in UASC missing episodes would raise concern about the level of risk for these children and challenge the partnership in terms of resourcing and capacity. The strategic leads have recently met with the Deputy Chair of the CSE Sub-Group and Children's Social Care managers to review the UASCs at Risk Trafficking Protocol to

ensure that it is fit for purpose. It is my recommendation that Thames Valley Police appoint a senior officer to oversee this area of partnership working. The Missing Children's Strategic Leads have agreed to be a point of contact for case escalation in the interim.

19. Analysis - when we compare the data from June to December 2016 to that of January to June 2017, we can see that numbers of children coming to the attention of the Local Authority have risen in all key vulnerable cohorts. As hypothesised, overall numbers have increased, albeit it at a slower rate and we are now placing more LAC in Oxfordshire than we have previously.

20. Conclusion – due to numbers of LAC increasing and following an internal review; Children's Social Care has formed an 'Entry to Care Panel' which will ensure that children and young people's needs are consistently met through the right intervention at the right time in a safe and stable setting that will deliver improved outcomes. The Panel will act as the gateway for all entries to care and placements.

21. The reporting of missing children within Oxfordshire has been divided into the following geographical areas in line with District Council Authority boundaries

- Cherwell & West Oxford
- South Oxfordshire & Vale of the White Horse
- Oxford City

Cherwell & West Oxfordshire

	July - December 2016		January - June 2017		% Change	
	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes
Northern	81	195	82	188	**1.2%**	**-3.6%**

22. As noted in the table above, children being reported missing has remained about the same, with the frequency of repeat missing reports decreasing across the past six months. The pattern and trend as noted in the previous report remains; with the majority of children reported missing on only one occasion; often reported from school or by a parent due to challenging behaviour in line with the child's age and development, or as the result of returning back to school or home later than expected. The 11 children noted in the last report, which accounted for 47% of all reported episodes between June-December 2016, have all seen reductions in the frequency that they were previously going missing and an increase in the MARAMP framework within the RMO. The partnerships are aware that there is disproportionate concentration of residential providers (72.4% of all currently provided in

Oxfordshire) in this area so missing children reporting is anticipated to remain higher in the North when compared to other areas in the county. The strategic leads work in close partnership with LPAs and the area Children's Social Care team to ensure that, when required, cross border work and challenge is applied with placing local authorities and police forces. In January it was identified that some children were at risk of drug and gang related crime and some exploratory work has been undertaken with senior Children's Social Care managers and police officers and is covered later in this report. Safeguarding discussions between the area teams, LPA, Kingfisher Team and Missing Children's Panel representatives continue on a weekly basis, considering both the individual missing reports, and the wider links with emerging risk areas relating to drug running and gang related crime.

South Oxfordshire & the Vale

	July - December 2016		January- June 2017		% Change	
	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes
Southern	55	148	70	159	**27.3%**	**7.4%**

23. There has been overall increase in the number of children reported missing for the first time when comparing the previous 6 months, whilst the number of episodes relating to children reported missing more than once has remained at a comparable level. Similar to the North, the majority of children reported missing went missing on only one occasion, often reported from school or by parents due to challenging behaviour in line with the child's age and development, or as a result of returning back to school or home later than expected. There remains a pattern linking children aged 13-17 who are reported missing with intelligence links to drug running activities. The last report noted evidence of underreporting by some parents due to intelligence mapping indicating that children were being found who had not been reported missing with other children that had been reported missing. On review, this evidence has significantly reduced, which is supported by the increase in children being reported missing for the first time and evidences the impact of the partnership work by the LPA and Children's Social Care on working with local schools and parents to develop greater parental curiosity and scrutiny regarding missing children related risks. As noted in the previous report, intelligence gathering took place in relation to a number of individuals associated with drug related risks, anti-social behaviour and other risk areas e.g. prevalence of CSE. This led to a number of joint and tactical responses by the LPA and Children's Social Care, with a number of Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) being issued and an address of interest (which was being visited by missing children) being searched and the occupants removed. At a local level, work continues between the Children's Social Care,

the LPA, and housing to disrupt the behaviour, which includes the suspected links to drug related crimes.
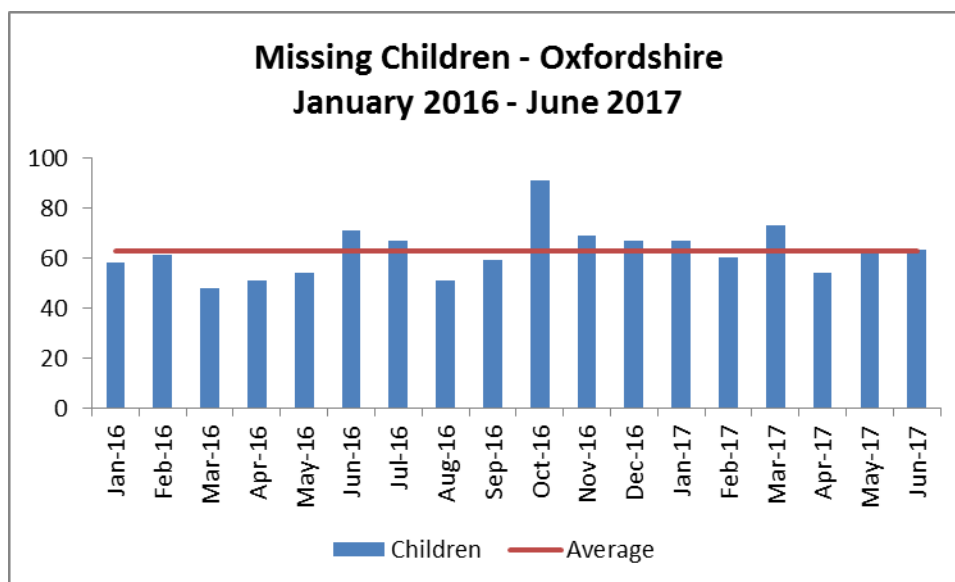
Oxford City

	July - December 2016		January - June 2017		% Change	
	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes
Central*	99	373	104	254	5.1%	-31.9%

24.   Both initial and repeat missing reporting has reduced over the past six months.

25.   In addition, the LPA has started work on Operation Buffer, which is focusing on children being at risk of being exploited through drug running. The missing children's strategic leads met with the SIO for Operation Buffer to look at both the risks within the LPA and a wider analysis of these risks across the county. The outcome of this will be covered later in this report.

26.   As reported in January, the LPA and Children's Social Care undertook an intelligence mapping related to the risk posed to a young girl who had been going missing from a residential provision, which had led to the perpetrator being arrested and remanded to custody. The LPA, with support from the residential home, Children's Social Care area team and the Kingfisher Team worked alongside the Crown Prosecution Service in taking this case to trial. This resulted in the imprisonment of the perpetrator for two years and being made subject to a 10 year sexual harm prevention order which will ban him from having any contact with girls under 16 and going on social media.

27.   During the reporting period, there was a joint response to the abduction of a 17 year EU national from Norway. She was traced as a missing child by Thames Valley Police and Children's Social Care to an address in Oxfordshire. This case was reviewed by the strategic leads and there was a strong evidence base to demonstrate how the LPA, Children's Social Care, the Border & Passport Agency worked together to safely trace the child. The LPA and Children's Social Care also worked creatively in locating the child's parents and supporting the child overnight to reunify her with her family in Norway. The perpetrator was unknown to the partnership at the time of this occurring and he was subsequently arrested. This occurrence also triggered a wider intelligence gathering process targeting the perpetrator as a person of interest and other associations connected to him.

Countywide

28. Review - across this period, the majority of children reported missing were aged 13-15 years of age and, in the main, were first identifications. As noted in the previous report, there was a spike in missing and repeat missing children reports from October – November 2016. It was hypothesised, based on probability, that this increase was a reaction to a Police investigation into the alleged abduction and rape of a young girl in the Oxford area as it was of significant public interest. As noted in the graph below, the numbers of children going missing has reduced back to the anticipated average expected for the Oxfordshire demographic. Missing Children's Panel continues to scrutinise the partnership's operational responses and risk assessment processes and this is maintaining a tight risk management benchmark. The reductions in children that are repeatedly reported missing reflect the work being undertaken by Children's Social Care and the LPA with families in the localities.

**Missing Children - Oxfordshire
January 2016 - June 2017**

| Children | Average |

Reporting of Out of County LAC Missing Episodes

29. There is a set procedure for providers commissioned by Children's Social Care to report on missing Oxfordshire LAC placed out of county. Under the current contract arrangements, a missing episode is a notifiable event and, therefore, providers (IFA and residential) must notify Children's Social Care of any missing episode. In March 2016, it was reported that the Missing Children's Panel highlighted that providers are not all fully adhering to these procedures and an action plan was implemented to reduce this risk. We continue to review evidence which supports a continuation and sustainability of the developments reported in January 2017. A new process has been implemented that allows IROs retain oversight of children being reported

missing out or area to ensure appropriate quality assurance of the local care planning arrangements.

Reporting of Out of Area LAC Children placed within Oxfordshire

30.   In addition to the example of the EU national noted above, the strategic leads for missing children continue to make quality assurance challenges to those authorities which place their LAC in Oxfordshire, ensuring that, as the host authority, the same safeguarding bench mark is applied to all children in Oxfordshire.

Return Interviews

31.   As reported in January, the maintenance of ensuring timely completion of return interviews in line with statutory guidance remains a challenge for the partnerships. Whilst overall the completion of return interviews across the past six months has stayed about 93%, they are not always being recorded on the ICS within the 72 hours timeframe. It will take a continued joint effort from senior management to fully embed these processes to strengthen accountability; including on-going training for staff, resourcing considerations, discussion at meetings and oversight of quality and performance.

32.   As noted in the last report, the Children's Social Care strategic lead has met with the Deputy Director to look at how improvement can be implemented. Following this, an alternative solution has been designed and accepted by the Local Authority's ICS provider. This is currently being constructed, with testing of the new system planned for October/November 2017.
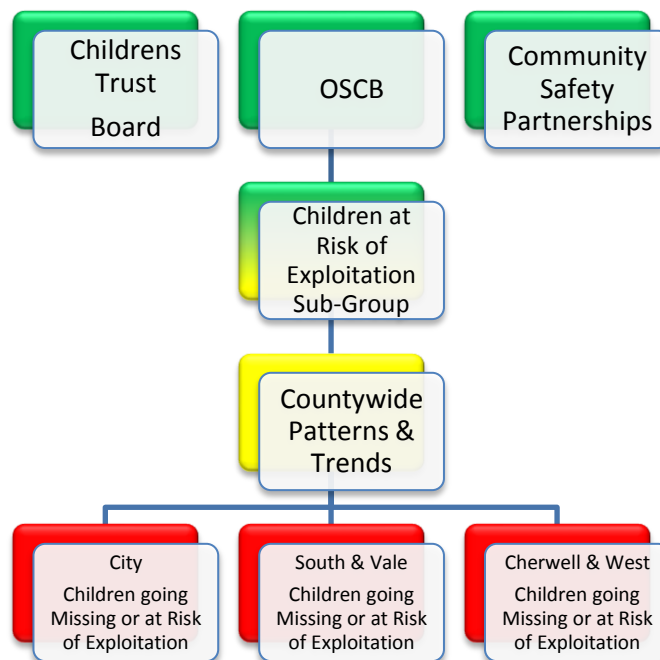
	July - December 2016		January - June 2017	
	% Completed	% Recorded within 72 hours	% Completed	% Recorded within 72 hours
Central	91.7%	67.5%	91.3%	62.5%
Northern	95.4%	54.3%	91.0%	54.4%
Southern	95.9%	45.1%	94.3%	53.3%
Disability	80.0%	75.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	**93.5%**	**59.2%**	**92.0%**	**57.7%**

Conclusion

33.   This prevalence report is an assessment of the emerging patterns and trends in Oxfordshire as of 1 June 2017.

34.	The Missing Children's Panel maintain the view that the increases in children being reported missing for the first time 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 children and correct identification of possible risks they are exposed to.

35.	It is evident that the number of children with two or more repeat missing episodes continues to reduce. When set against the increases in our LAC population and more children placed Oxfordshire than we have previously as we keep our most vulnerable and riskiest children close to home; it suggests that we continue to manage our repeat missing children cohort more effectively across the partnerships by using the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Plan (MARAMP) process, which is now embedded into the RMO in NICHE.

36.	There continues to be a daily reporting interface between Thames Valley Police and Children's Social Care to ensure effective individual risk management and strategic oversight of all children reported missing within the previous 24 hours. In addition, there are daily escalation and reporting systems to senior officers within both agencies.

37.	There continues to be strong evidence of improved practice and appropriate management within the partnership; around children who go missing, are exposed to CSE risks or other associated risks. All missing children processes continue to be monitored and quality assured on a daily basis, including the implementation of strategy discussions for those children who meet the threshold.

38.	The strategic leads for missing children continue to highlight that the partnership will increasingly come under pressure to ensure that appropriate resources are directed towards safeguarding those children who are repeatedly missing. Responses need to balanced, proportionate and targeted.

39.	In January, the CSE Sub-Group requested the missing children's strategic leads to create a task group to explore growing evidence to support an emerging pattern of a cohort of children who are at risk of exploitation from Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) in relation to drug running and gang related activities. A risk escalation report proforma was designed and the strategic leads recommended that the CSE Sub-Group built on what it had achieved and developed as best practice; by broadening its scope to evolve into a 'Children at Risk of Exploitation Sub-Group'. Following this recommendation being agreed in principle, the strategic leads for missing children have met

with senior partners within Thames Valley Police, Children's Social Care, Health, YJS and Education to explore this further. The outcome is that the Missing Children's Panel is to be disbanded and replaced by the structure noted below. The remit of the three new area panels would be to oversee the operational decision making and response of frontline officers and professionals on a monthly basis, building on best practice established by the Missing Children's Panel. It will cover LPA missing children's cases and also children at risk of exploitation, reporting to a countywide patterns and trend oversight panel every three months, whom then produce a bi-annual prevalence report for the new Children at Risk of Exploitation Sub-Group.

Key:
Green = Strategic
Yellow = Governance/Scrutiny/QA and Challenge
Red = Operational and Decision Making

40. The new structure builds on the significant progress made by Oxfordshire's partners whom are engaged in the development of an operational and governance process which broadens out its focus of CSE and missing. This remit will include child drug exploitation (CDE), trafficking and other forms of exploitation, to develop an improved local understanding of the issues facing the children and families of Oxfordshire.

41. The decision to widen this scope simply reflects the fact that children and families will often face multiple risks. Dealing with the response to certain threats in isolation can potentially hinder the understanding of the

vulnerabilities that frequently interrelate and intersect e.g. CSE and drug related crime.

42. The structure remains responsible for maintaining a clear oversight on both the strategic and operational response to CSE and missing children, whilst being further tasked with focussing on a wider range of associated vulnerabilities that children and families are exposed to in Oxfordshire. This will ensure that operational responses and reporting are both fit for purpose and sustainable.

43. The terms of reference and membership of the area operational and countywide panels are being discussed and constructed, which should be available for review by October 2017.

Financial and Staff Implications

44. As noted above.

Equalities Implications

45. None

RECOMMENDATION

46. The Committee is RECOMMENDED to note this report.

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Background papers: None

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