

Division(s): N/A

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 8 November 2018

Children Missing from Home and Care in Oxfordshire

Report by Director for Children's Services

Prevalence of Children going Missing in Oxfordshire

1. Introduction

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 **01st January 2018 and 31st June 2018**.

The report focuses on the main patterns, trends and concerns across the county which will be of note to the 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.

It is not intended to reflect the full picture of all 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.

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

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

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

2. Current overview

On 31 June 2018, Oxfordshire was responsible for the welfare of 668 Looked After Children (LAC), excluding Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC); this represents a 3% increase since 31st December 2017. In addition, across the same period, the Local Authority supported 55 UASC; which represents an increase of 1% and results in a total number of 723 LAC.

Of these: 104 children were in residential placements, 86 with private providers.

Increases were noted for; children placed with their parents (25.5%) whilst children moving into independent living decreased (-16.7%). Children placed for adoption has remained the same compared to the previous six months, with children placed in foster placement or kinship care increasing (22.2%) and IFA placements increased (10.3%).

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

	LAC 31/12/17	LAC 30/06/18	Difference	% Change
LAC	701	723	22	3.1%

3. Comparison and Trends (January/July 18 compared with June/December 17)

When the above figures are compared, we can see there has been a 3.1% increase in our LAC population (including UASCs).

Analysis - across the period, the number of all (LAC and non-LAC) children reported missing has decreased by -2.0%. Across same period, we have seen occurrences of children repeatedly reported decrease -8.8%. There has also been a decrease in looked after children reported missing -3.8% and a decrease in LAC repeatedly going missing -20.1%

	Total	July – December 2017	January - June 2018	% Change
Number of children	757	450	441	-2.0%
Number of episodes	2119	1108	1011	-8.8%
Number of children whom were LAC	120	79	76	-3.8%
Number of repeat missing episodes for LAC	574	319	275	-20.1%

Conclusion – across this period, we can see that the number of children being reported missing reduced as did children reported missing more frequently. It is noted that there has been a specific reduction of both numbers of LAC reported missing and the frequency of repeat missing episodes for this cohort.

Of the 441 children, 281 were reported missing on one occasion only, a reduction of - 7.3%. Children reported missing on 2 to 4 occasions increased by 19.6%. There was also a decrease in children being reported missing on 5 to 9 occasions - 6.9%, 10 to14 occasions -18.2%, 15 to 19 100% and on 20+ occasions -71.4%.

occasions remaining the same.

	Total	July - Dec 2017	Jan - June 2018	% change
One Episode	479	303	281	-7.3%
2-4 Episodes	179	97	116	19.6%
5-9 Episodes	61	29	27	-6.9%
10-14 Episodes	16	11	9	-18.2%
15-19 Episodes	6	3	6	100.0%
20+ Episodes	16	7	2	-71.4%

Conclusion – this is the fifth report which notes a reduction in children being reported missing in Oxfordshire (when you consider the increased number of children currently coming into care, this represents a reduction greater than – 2%). The increases in the presentation of children reported missing on 2 to 4 occurrences have been explored further. These refer to a small number of children and are specially linked to periods across the Easter and May half terms school holidays and are representative of the pattern noted each year. The number was slightly higher than last year and panel are of the view that the fair warm weather in the early summer months was a contributory factor. The strategic leads are of the view that, on evidence presented at the Missing Children’s Panel, the overall decrease in children being reported missing for the first time and repeatedly, are 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 and evidences the 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 safe.

4. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

There has been a decrease in -16.7% in the presentation of UASCs across the past 12 months.

Analysis – during this period, there has been a decrease (% per person per missing report) of the number of UASCs being reported missing, with only 2 UASC being reported missing across this period and only one child reported more than once.

	Total	July - Dec 2017	Jan - June 2018	% Change
Number of UASCs	7	6	2	-66.7%
Number of episodes (UASCs)	11	8	3	-62.5%

Conclusion – the data set reported notes a sustained decrease in UASC missing episodes and the level of risk present for these children. Following the Child Exploitation Sub-Group approving the recommendation made by the strategic lead in March 2018, a Missing UASC procedure is imbedding and is now included within the Missing Children’s Joint Protocol this is being presented to Procedures Sub-Group in October 2018 and will be noted at the next available OSCB Executive Sub-Group.

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

5. Cherwell & West Oxfordshire

	July - Dec 2017		Jan - June 2018		% Change	
	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes
Northern	173	486	177	506	2.3%	4.1%

Analysis - as noted in the table above, children being reported missing and frequency of repeat missing reports has slightly increased 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 last report to the Child Exploitation Sub-Group noted that four children whom reside within this LAP accounted for the total increase in repeat missing episodes between July and December 2017, the indicators were indicated problems with the individual care planning arrangements, the pattern and trend evidencing a push factor from the providers and LPA has recorded a spike in low level anti-social behaviour linked to these reports.

Following this, an agreed action plan was implemented for each child and across the past six months this has resulted in two of the children being reconnected back to their placing local authorities and a reduction of - 87% in the presentation of the other two children being reported missing. Across this period several eateries have been raised as locations of concern around missing children. The partnership has utilised intelligence gathered from missing children reports and return interviews to assist and inform a piece of multi-agency licensing work.

In addition, persons of interest in an ongoing police investigation continue to be monitored for any new information or intelligence relating to children reported missing within the LPA, whilst there are no new CSE intelligence in relation to these adults, in some cases there is evidence of other criminality/exploitation which is being managed. This resulted in several CAWNs being issued and the situation continues to be monitored.

Conclusion – As anticipated once the care planning needs of the four identified children in the previous report was better understood and an appropriate/proportionate strategy implemented by the partnership with the provider there was an evident reduction in these children repeatedly going missing. The slight increase in presentation of missing and repeat missing reports noted within the data set, refer to a small number of children and are specially linked to periods across the Easter and May half terms holidays and are representative of the pattern noted each year and the warmer weather across June 2018. To fully explore this a separate local meeting relating to missing children has been held to analyse and review the partnership responses in within the LPA. The chairs report that this was effective in agreeing local cross agency strategies, the effectiveness of which will be monitored over the next six months.

6. South Oxfordshire & the Vale

	July - Dec 2017		Jan - June 2018		% Change	
	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes
Southern	119	323	116	244	-2.5%	-24.5%

Analysis - there has been overall decrease in the number of children reported missing for the second consecutive report when comparing the previous six months, with the number of episodes relating to children reported missing more than once also decreasing. Like the North, many 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 because of returning to school or home later than expected. The previous report to the Child Exploitation Sub-Group noted intelligence gathering took place in relation to three children, which led to several joint tactical responses by the LPA and CSC, resulting in several Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) being issued. On review it is noted that all three children have either not been reported missing or have been subject to a significantly reduced number of repeat missing episodes - 76%.

Information from missing children's reports and return interviews are currently supporting an active investigation in relation to an adult who it is suspected has allowed their house to be used by groups of missing teenagers in the area. It is suspected that risky activities have taken place between the children as well as drug usage and suggestions of more exploitative behaviours.

Conclusion – The strategies put in place by the partnership, Kingfisher and LPA had an impact on the pull factors, pattern, trend and risk trajectory identified in the previous report for the three children noted and has resulted in a positive outcome as these have now either ceased or significantly reduced. In relation to the adult and the risks noted above, the LPA and Kingfisher team have worked with partners, including local schools and the CSC assessment teams, to fully analyse the risk and take safeguarding measures where necessary.

It is noteworthy to highlight that 18 months ago there were substantial concerns related to number and frequency of children being reported missing within this LPA. A year on from a targeted strategy by the LPA, CSC and Kingfisher team, has resulted in both the number of children being reported missing and repeatedly going missing reducing by - 41% and - 42% respectively when we compare a specific reference point (July 17 to June 18).

7. Oxford City

	July - Dec 2017		Jan - June 2018		% Change	
	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes	Children	Episodes

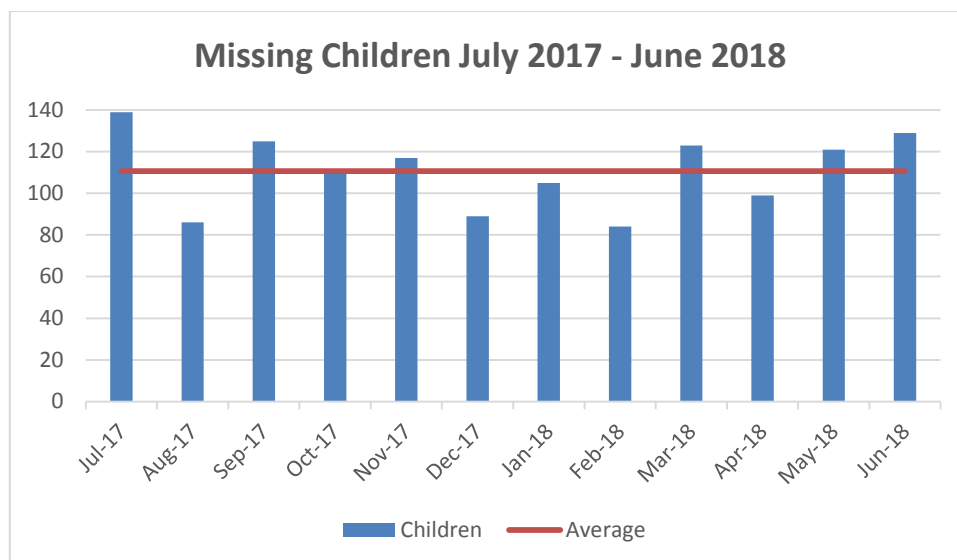
Central	157	297	148	260	-5.7%	-12.5%
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Analysis - Both initial and repeat missing reporting has reduced over the past six months. Within this reporting period most of reports are like the North and South areas of the county, relate to children reported 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 because of returning to school or home later than expected. Positive action has been taken in each case and in several cases, have resulted in Child Abduction Warning Notices have been issued to assist in managing the on-going risk, following intelligence gathering and analysis from the missing children's panel.

Conclusion – In two cases the use of CAWNs was achieved due to the prompt evidence gathering by the LPA from missing children's reports, return home interviews and other intelligence mapping. This is reflective of the improved recording practices an increased awareness by the partnership of the notices being utilised as a tactical option. In both these cases exploitation and missing children associated markers were evident. The notices provided an effective degree of safeguarding in a problematic situation, as whilst there were concerns no disclosure of a crime was made by either child. The CAWN issued in relation to these two males provided an effective tool in combatting the exploitation and missing risk present and since they have been served there has been a marked reducing in missing reports and no further known contact with the persons of interest subject to the CAWN, this remains under close monitoring by the partnership.

8. Countywide:

Analysis - across this period, most children reported missing were aged 13-16 years of age and, in the main, were first identifications. When we compare the data from July to December 2017 vs January to June 2018, we can see that the number of children coming to the attention of the Local Authority has risen in all key vulnerable cohorts and we are now placing more LAC in Oxfordshire than we have previously. In the same period, the overall number of LAC, non-LAC and UASC reported missing has reduced. The Missing Children's Panel continues to scrutinise the partnership's operational responses and risk assessment processes, which is maintaining a robust risk management benchmarking. The reductions in children that are repeatedly reported missing reflect the work being undertaken by CSC and the LPA with families in the localities and multiagency risk management plans.



9. Reporting of Out of County LAC Missing Episodes

There is a set procedure for providers commissioned by CSC 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 CSC of any missing episode. As previously reported, a new process has been implemented that allows IROs to retain oversight of children being reported missing out of area to ensure appropriate quality assurance of the local care planning arrangements. In October 2017, an IRO reported that an Oxfordshire LAC placed out of area was frequently being reported missing from his residential placement and that the provider was not adequately keeping the LA update on these events.

Analysis - Following the last report a review was undertaken by CSC which indicates improved reporting to the local authority by providers. This will be kept under close monitoring and further analysis will be undertaken in December to review if the improvements are being sustained.

10. Reporting of Out of Area LAC Children placed within Oxfordshire

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 benchmark is applied to all children in Oxfordshire.

11. Return Interviews

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 improved (99%), they are not always being recorded within the 72-hour timeframe (57%). 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.

The new missing children workflow within CSC's I.T system has been designed and completed and has a go live date of 01st September 2018. This new workflow automatically sends the completed return home interview to a dedicated Police Team which is now set up within CSC I.T systems.

	% completed	% recorded within 72 hours
Central	98.1%	57.6%
Northern	99.2%	56.0%
Southern	98.4%	57.5%
Disability	100.0%	**0.0%
Total	98.7%	56.7%

** the reason this is such a low % is because it relates to two (2) missing reports in total

The CSC strategic lead for missing children has completed an options appraisal to identify if a system could be commissioned to deliver a more effective solution to the completion and recording of return home interviews within a 72-hour period. This is being taken forward by the CSC Joint Commissioning Service to determine if a provider can be procured to undertake this function, it is anticipated that feedback will be available by early 2019.

12. Conclusion

This prevalence report is an assessment of the emerging patterns and trends in Oxfordshire as of 01st July 2018.

The Missing Children's Panel are of the view that the overall reduction in both missing and repeat missing episodes can be attributed to improved reporting and recording of information and are a sign of families, 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.

It is evident that the number of children reported missing or repeatedly missing has reduced across the reporting period. When set against the increases in our LAC population, and more children placed in 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. The new I.T cross-agency framework for sharing information in a timelier manner, specifically return home interviews with TVP, will improve the current arrangements and the overall effectiveness of safeguarding children and families. The first report on the new system will be undertaken in December 2018 and a report available from February 2018.

There continues to be a daily reporting interface between TVP and CSC to ensure effective individual risk management, strategic oversight, escalation and reporting systems to senior officers within both agencies.

There continues to be robust evidence of improving practice within the partnership around children who go missing, exposed to child exploitation and other risks, are appropriately managed. All missing children processes continue to be monitored and quality assured on a daily basis, including the implementation of strategy discussions for those children that meet the threshold.

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 be balanced, proportionate and targeted.

13. RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is RECOMMENDED to note the report.

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