

Performance Scrutiny Committee 12 November 2020

SAFEGUARDING MISSING CHILDREN

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to note the report.**

Executive Summary

2. This paper provides an executive summary of children reported as missing from home and children cared for by Oxfordshire County Council during the period 1st January 2020 to 30th June 2020.
3. The paper provides an analysis of the primary patterns, trends and concerns across the county, the actions being taken to address these and recommendations to consider implementing to mitigate and address new risk and needs.
4. This paper is not intended to reflect the full picture of all the work undertaken by the Children at Risk of Child Exploitation and Missing 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.
5. As well as central data and intelligence gathering, this paper is also informed by the discussions held with the Network Meetings and Children at Risk of Child Exploitation and Missing Panels and wider partnership membership. It draws on a wide variety of information and intelligence. 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.

Summary

6. The data suggests that across the reporting period, less children have gone missing less often within Oxfordshire when compared to statistical neighbours, regional and nationally.
7. In Oxfordshire, there are more instances of boys going missing compared to girls and the majority of them are aged between 14yrs – 16yrs. All children reported missing more than once had a completed Child Exploitation (CE) screening tool, which reassures that children frequently being reported missing are known and or open to CSC services and that the CE screen tool is widely adopted within the reviews of children whom are repeatedly going missing.
8. There are clear and robustly monitored processes in place for Oxfordshire children placed out of area who are reported missing.
9. Particular focus and attention is required for those areas that the data reveals have proportionately higher numbers of missing children than in other areas of the county and to ensure there is targeted action to reduce the numbers. The nature and concentration of fostering and residential children's homes within the area, means that the issues will not dissipate quickly. Partnership arrangements with placement providers require regular review to ensure that there are effective and robust strategies in place to safely and proportionately manage the joint responses required to safeguard children who go missing children. The LPA Detective Inspector and Children's Social Care (CSC) Strategic Lead remain in regular contact to ensure this is kept under review.
10. When return home interviews are completed, they provide detailed context and are a rich source of intelligence for the partnership, which informs partnership activities and safeguarding responses. However, not all children have a return home interview recorded within statutory timeframes, this needs to be addressed promptly to ensure that all children who go missing are appropriately safeguarded, and that there is provision of services available in support for reducing the numbers of children who go missing in the county.

11. Recommendations

- The Children at Risk of Child Exploitation and Missing Panel chair and OCC strategic lead for CE and Missing Children review the arrangements currently in place to escalate, monitor and scrutinise safeguarding plans with placing authorities. Where evidence of patterns or trends occur in missing episodes for this cohort of children consideration is taken for the effectiveness of cross border management plans between the placing authority, provider, neighbourhood policing team and child exploitation specialist within OCC.
- The CE subgroup to undertake analysis of the missing episodes of adolescents (predominately boys) frequently going missing and review this in context of the partnership's development of a vulnerable adolescent strategy.

- Partnership analysis of the pattern and trend of children going missing from foster care and residential care within the Cherwell and West LPA. That the analysis considers evidence for consistency of local practice within provisions as within other LPAs, to identify whether reporting levels are being influenced by unauthorized absences of children, (and actions taken by the parent/carer) or due to other risks or concerns. This will help identify and understand effectiveness of local strategies in managing the identified issue and need.
- Return Home Interviews is an area of fluctuating performance over the past 24 months. The CSC strategic lead for missing children should consider reviewing and revisiting with CSC directorate leads options to commission RHI provision and delivery as a solution for improvements to for the Local Authority to fully discharge its responsibilities in line with national guidance.

12. **Financial and Staff Implications**

There are no current financial and staff implications.

13. **Equalities Implications**

Our work with children who are missing focuses on some of our most vulnerable children and who are most at risk in terms of safeguarding and exploitation.

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