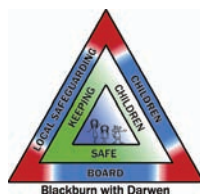


Joint protocol

Children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care



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Introduction



This protocol is important for the safeguarding of children and families across Lancashire, or those using services in the area. It should be read and implemented, where necessary, by all practitioners and managers working with children or young people who are at risk of going missing from home or care or who are already doing so.

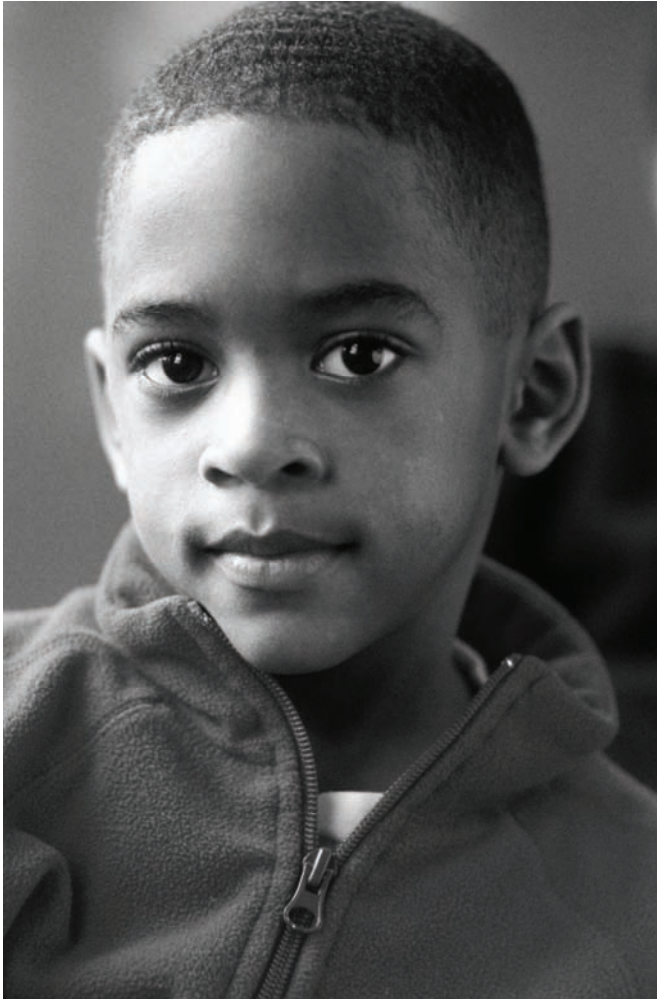
It is intended that this protocol will assist in developing robust responses to running away, which mirror the good practice already established across Lancashire with regards to children and young people (hereafter referred to as 'children') at risk of sexual exploitation. It should be used to engage partner agencies in developing preventative services for children and young people who are at risk of running away.

It has been written jointly by The Children's Society, Lancashire Constabulary, Lancashire County Council Children and Young People's Services Directorate, Blackpool Council Children's Services and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Children's Services on behalf of the Lancashire, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen Safeguarding Children Boards, who agreed the reviewed protocol in October 2009. The LSCBs will be responsible for ensuring an annual review of the effectiveness of all aspects of the protocol.

The most effective assessment and support comes through good information sharing, joint assessments of need, joint planning, professional trust within the interagency network and joint action in partnership with families.

Lancashire, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen's Safeguarding Children Boards expects all agencies working with children or young people who are missing from home or care to implement this protocol and ensure that all relevant staff are aware of it and how to use it. It should be used in all new contacts with children and young people.

Contact information



If you believe that a child is at immediate risk, this should be reported without delay to the Police service; for emergencies use 999, or for urgent/immediate reporting 0845 125 3545 as well as making contact with Children's Services:

Lancashire 0845 053 0000
 Blackpool 01253 477600
 Blackburn with Darwen 01254 587547

Reporting a child missing from care

Once a missing persons form has been completed (see supporting documents - MFH booklet), send this to the relevant Lancashire Constabulary Communications Room via one of the following methods:

- Fax
- SLEUTH on line direct reporting (where applicable)

| | | Telephone | Fax |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| A div | Blackpool | 01253 607230 | 01253 607232 |
| | Bispham | | 01253 604538 |
| B div | Lancaster/ Morecambe/ Wyre | 01524 596830 | 01524 596832 |
| C div | South Ribble/ Chorley/West Lancs | 01772 4107230 | 01772 410732 |
| D div | Preston/ Fulwood | 01772 209330 | 01772 209332 |
| E div | Blackburn with Darwen/ Hyndburn/ Ribble Valley | 01254 353730 | 01254 353432 |
| F div | Burnley/ Pendle/Colne | 01282 472130 | 01282 472132 |

Return Interview

Completed return interview forms should be sent to the relevant Lancashire Constabulary Missing Person Co-ordinators. *Please note that these email addresses are for non-urgent contact and should only be used for sending the completed return interview forms.*

- A div:** western-mfhco-ordinator@lancashire.pnn.police.uk
B div: northern-mfhco-ordinator@lancashire.pnn.police.uk
C div: southern-mfhco-ordinator@lancashire.pnn.police.uk
D div: central-mfhco-ordinator@lancashire.pnn.police.uk
E div: eastern-mfhco-ordinator@lancashire.pnn.police.uk
F div: pennine-mfhco-ordinator@lancashire.pnn.police.uk

1. Background

1.1 Over 9,000 missing person reports are made every year in Lancashire. Approximately 6,000 of these cases end up being formally investigated by the Police. The remainder tend to involve people who return home of their own accord or who are quickly traced by officers prior to the commencement of a formal investigation. The 6,200 investigations undertaken annually in Lancashire include over 77% (4,800) that involve people under the age of 18 years¹

1.2 Over 300 children in Lancashire go missing on at least three occasions a year. These children account, between them, for almost 3,200 (52%) of Lancashire's missing person investigations. Many of these cases involve children in care; particularly those resident in children's care homes operated by the three Local Authorities or by private care providers. It is also important to note that the majority of looked after children do not experience missing episodes. Moreover, most children in residential care do not go missing.

1.3 Why children go missing

The Children's Society through its research has identified the following risk factors² that can precede a missing incident:

- Arguments and conflicts
- Conflict within a placement
- Poor family relationships
- Physical and emotional abuse
- Boundaries and control
- Step parent issues

The immediate risks associated with going missing include:

- No means of support or legitimate income – leading to high risk activities
- Involvement in criminal activities
- Victim of abuse
- Victim of crime, for example through sexual assault and exploitation

- Alcohol/substance misuse
- Deterioration of physical and mental health
- Missing out on schooling and education.
- Increased vulnerability

Longer-term risks include:

- Long-term drug dependency / alcohol dependency
- Crime
- Homelessness.
- Disengagement from education
- Child sexual exploitation
- Poor physical and/or mental health

Academic research together with local analysis by The Children's Society Street Safe Lancashire Project, Local Authority staff and Police show that children who run away are often very vulnerable in the ways described above.

1.4 Since the first version of this protocol was introduced in November 2003, Lancashire County Council Children and Young People's Services Directorate, Blackpool Children's Services and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Children's Services (hereafter referred to as 'the Local Authority') the Police and The Children's Society Street Safe Lancashire Project have worked hard to address the problem. Using partnership problem-solving and performance management the incidence of repeat runaway behaviour showed an initial reduction by around 20% throughout 2005. In addition to reducing the figures this way of working has also helped to safeguard some of our most vulnerable children. However, the issue of young runaways remains a significant problem. This issue requires our very best attention if we are to protect our children from ruthlessly efficient predatory influences that exist within society and to avoid them becoming socially excluded.

¹ Figures from Lancashire Constabulary Missing Persons SLEUTH data – including Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool areas.

² Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK, The Children's Society, 1999.

2. Definitions

2.1 The following definitions apply to this protocol and relate to children who go, or have gone missing. The definition of running away is taken from the Social Exclusion Unit Young Runaways report (2002) and includes reference to young people who self-define running away as being forced to leave because, for example, they do not believe they have any alternative.

Child: A child or young person under the age of eighteen years with the exception of a former relevant child within the meaning of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; these young people continue to be the responsibility of the Local Authority up to the age of 21 (24yrs if in receipt of full time education).

Missing person – ACPO definition: “A missing person is anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance. He or she will be considered missing until located and his or her well being, or otherwise, established.”

Runaway: A child who is absent from their home or placement without permission for any length of time where their age and experience, background and ability make this a concern or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers.

Child in our care / looked after child: A child is looked after by a Local Authority if s/he is “in care” by reason of a court order, or if s/he is provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by agreement with her/his parents or with the child if s/he is aged 16 or more.

Accommodated: A child is accommodated if the Local Authority looks after her/him with the voluntary agreement of his/her parents or with the child if s/he is over 16 years old.

Unauthorised absence from residential care: Absent for a short period of time and after a careful and thorough risk assessment the absence does not raise concern for their immediate safety or that of the public. In accordance with the ACPO Manual of Guidance 2005 this period of absence should not **exceed 6 hours.**

Absconded: When a missing child is subject to a court order, such as curfew or bail conditions, Police **must** be made aware of the order and the expiry date in order for the child to be classified as an absconder. If the expiry date of the order is not known, the child will be classified as a “missing person” **NOT** an absconder.

Sexual exploitation: Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive something (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities.

N.B. For the purposes of these protocols a missing child will be defined as one where the missing episode has been reported to the Police and or recorded on the Police SLEUTH database.

3. Legislation



3.1 The legal parameters within which missing person enquiries are conducted can be found in common law, international law and the provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). Some of the provisions of the ECHR have been given legal effect within the United Kingdom by virtue of the Human Rights Act 1998.

3.2 Data Protection legislation places certain conditions on the 'processing' of information classed as personal data. Data held for policing purposes should only be disclosed for such purposes. Adherence to this agreement will therefore ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and Lancashire Constabulary Data Protection policies. Data Protection legislation does not prevent the Police and Local Authority working together to ensure the safe return of a missing child. Both organisations are registered for the purpose of protecting people and therefore for disclosing information for that purpose.

3.3 Statutory guidance on children who runaway and go missing from home or care DCSF 2009.

3.4 Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2006) supplementary guidance safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation.

4. Scope



4.1 The protocol is designed for:

- All children living in the boundaries of the Local Authority.
- Children looked after by the Local Authority placed within children's homes or foster homes (either Local Authority or independent) within the Local Authority boundaries.
- Children looked after by the Local Authority who are living with parents or relatives and who are subject to a care order.

The Local Authority retains responsibility for children looked after and placed outside the Local Authority boundaries. In these cases the Local Authority will require the placement provider to comply with these protocols and protocols local to their area.

Other Local Authorities placing children within 'the Local Authority' boundary will be required to comply with these protocols.

4.2 Within this context, "Children Looked After" refers to children accommodated under Sect 20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to Care Orders including Interim Care Orders, Sect 31 and 38 Children Act 1989, and children who are otherwise provided with accommodation by Sect 21 Children Act 1989. These include PACE transfers, children on remand and children subject to a supervision order with a residence requirement.

4.3 In addition the protocol will apply to all young people placed within the county or Local Authority boundaries (including those aged over 18) for whom Lancashire County Council, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council or Blackpool Council have continuing responsibilities under The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

4.4 For the geographical boundaries of the protocol, please see supporting documents - County boundary map.

5. Principles



5.1 This protocol should be read as guidance only and cannot anticipate every situation. Anyone working with children in a professional capacity should use their judgment to take whatever action is deemed necessary to protect and safeguard the child, based on an assessment of risk for each individual.

5.2 Our joint aim is to reduce the incidence of all children going missing. Children who go missing may place themselves and others at risk and each missing episode is potentially serious. The reasons for their absence are often varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or their experiences of care. Every “missing” episode should attract proper attention from the professionals

involved, who must collaborate to ensure a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on his/her return.

5.3 When a child does go missing our joint aim is to prevent that child suffering harm and to recover the child to safety as soon as possible. We do this by partnership working, information sharing, problem-solving and performance management.

5.4 Interventions are important in attempting to address repeat missing episodes. Interventions for looked after children must be informed by and reflected in the placement information record and in the care plan. Interventions must also be informed by effective return interviews. Children’s views and concerns will be taken seriously.

5.5 Interventions may be focused on the individual child, the child’s home, or by targeting ‘pull’ factors in the community.

5.6 The Local Authority will report a child missing to the Police according to this protocol. Lancashire Constabulary will also receive and record reports of children missing from their home. The Local Authority and the Police will monitor compliance with the protocol and monitor outcomes jointly via quarterly performance reports which is calculated over a fixed 90 day period as below:

- [Period 1 April to June](#)
- [Period 2 July to September](#)
- [Period 3 October to December](#)
- [Period 4 January to March](#)

6. Procedures for a child missing from home

6.1 Responsibility of parents/carers

6.1.1 Parents and those with parental responsibility are expected to undertake the following basic measures to try to locate the missing child if considered safe to do so. Anyone else who has care of a child without parental responsibility should take all reasonable steps to locate the child and ascertain their safety.

It is expected that the Police will be informed *without delay* when a child goes missing. Before a child is reported missing the following actions should be undertaken:

- Search bedroom/ accommodation/ outbuildings/ vehicles
- Contact known friends and relatives where child may be
- Visit locations that the child is known to frequent, if it is possible

6.1.2 Anyone who has care of a child without parental knowledge or agreement should also do what is reasonable to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. In these circumstances, they should inform the Police, Children's Services and the parents of their whereabouts and safety. If this is not complied with, the Police should consider advice or warning under the Child Abduction Act 1984, if it is appropriate.

6.1.3 Anyone who 'takes or detains' a runaway under 16 years old without lawful authority may be prosecuted under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984. The Police may formally warn a person under the abduction legislation prior to prosecution and a subsequent marker may be placed against them on their Police National Computer (PNC) record.



6.1.4 Children under the age of 16 years old are not legally considered as being able to live independently. For children over the age of 16 years old, consideration should be given to their legal status, physical and emotional needs when making a judgment as to whether they can live independently.

6.2 All agencies / members of the public

6.2.1 If it comes to the attention of any agency that a child is missing, they must advise the parent/carer of their need to report this matter to the Police. They also need to advise the parent of the agency's duty to ensure that the matter is reported to the Police and if necessary follow this up by contacting the Police to verify that the child has been reported missing.

6.2.2 The consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation. If possible the consent of the child should be gained.

6.3 Role of the Police

6.3.1 Upon receiving a report of a child being missing from home, the Police will carry out enquiries (which are proportionate to the perceived risk) aimed at locating the child as soon as possible.

6.3.2 A risk assessment will be carried out for each individual on every separate occasion they are reported missing to the Police. This risk assessment, usually conducted by the Initial Investigating Officer, and subsequently confirmed or revised by a supervising officer will form the basis for the subsequent investigation into the child's disappearance.

6.3.3 Children who have gone missing may come to the attention of the Police in a variety of circumstances. Where the Police locate a child who they believe may be missing, although not officially reported, assessment and enquiries based on the child's account of the circumstances will be made. These should include checks of Police systems i.e. PNC/SLEUTH/Storm as well as enquiries at the home address. In the event that a missing child has not been reported by parents/carers this should trigger further enquiries and assessment by the Police and other relevant agencies in accordance with safeguarding procedures.

6.3.4 If enquiries identify risk factors at the home address safeguarding procedures will be implemented. If the Police decide not to return the child to the home address options should be discussed with Children's Services to identify suitable responsible adult(s) and/or accommodation. (Emergency Duty Team to be contacted after hours) Police ICT systems should also be checked.

6.4 Recording

6.4.1 A Storm log must be opened on all occasions when a child is reported to the Police. The log **MUST** remain open until the SLEUTH based missing person report/log is opened or the child has been located. The Storm log **MUST** then be closed. Responsibility for completing a record on SLEUTH lies with the officer

deployed to take the initial missing person report. A SLEUTH missing person report **MUST** be created for all missing children.

6.4.2 SLEUTH missing person reports should be submitted as soon as possible, as the submission of the report now triggers Police National Computer (PNC) circulation.

6.5 Sharing information

6.5.1 The Police will receive reports about children missing and record them in accordance with locally agreed procedures.

6.5.2 The Police will notify the relevant Children's Services single point of contact of all missing children recorded on SLEUTH. This will be done via an automated e-mail process to the Local Authority within 24 hours.

6.5.3 The relevant Missing Persons Co-ordinator will also notify the appropriate Children's Services lead if there is further information on a particular case or they have concerns that need further assessment.

6.6 Review of continued absence

6.6.1 Throughout the missing episode, the Police are responsible for ongoing enquiries, risk assessment and proportionate actions.

6.6.2 In the event of a continuing missing episode good communication and close cooperation is essential to ensure that any significant concerns are identified and appropriate safeguarding action is taken. When a child has been absent for a period of 48 hours the Police should update the Local Authority of any significant developments at least every five days thereafter or earlier, if deemed appropriate.

6.7 Return of the child

6.7.1 It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to contact the Police and confirm that the missing child has returned.

6.7.2 If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the parents or carers to arrange for the child's return. In exceptional circumstances, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the Police may agree to requests from parents or carers to assist. The Police should not unreasonably withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport missions for vulnerable children.

6.7.3 Police 'safe and well' check - Once the child has been located, the Police will carry out a Police safe and well check. It will not be conducted over the telephone. The purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them. This will lead to the Police closing the missing person report on SLEUTH and the case being cancelled on the PNC. This is NOT a return interview. The Police will notify the Local Authority of the return of the child and any relevant information via automated systems.

6.7.4 If it is apparent, on the return of a child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent then the Police will instigate further enquiries. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence.

6.7.5 In such circumstances, the missing child's clothing, mobile phone and trace evidence from their body, fingernails or hair may be crucial. In cases of sexual abuse the child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the Police. The Police should advise parent or carers if they become aware of the location of a scene of any crime committed against the child, or of the location of any crucial evidence (i.e. a used condom) they must notify the Police without delay. This will enable the Police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.

6.7.6 Additionally, in matters of sexual exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may

have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm, a referral must be made to the Local Authority in accordance with local safeguarding procedures.

6.7.7 The Local Authority is responsible for deciding whether a return interview is conducted for each missing episode. Completed return interview forms should be sent electronically to the Police Missing Person Coordinators. The Local Authority should inform the Police Missing Person Coordinators, via the missing person return interview form (see supporting documents) where a return interview is not conducted.

7. Procedures for a child looked after

7.1 On admission to the placement

7.1.1 Each looked after child has a care plan based on a full assessment of the child's current and future needs, including potential risk to self or others. The care plan will therefore take account of any risk that the child may go missing in future and any factors which may increase the risk to the child should they go missing. Children's residential and fostering service staff should contribute to this assessment. All information should be included in the placement plan and in the child's care plan. As part of this assessment it may be appropriate for the Local Authority to consult with the Police to share information that may be of relevance.

7.1.2 The care plan will remain in the possession of the Local Authority. It is not a public document. It is not envisaged that the Police will need to view the care plan at any time. However, there may well be circumstances when it is necessary to involve the Police in aspects of the care planning process to safeguard the child.

7.1.3 Should a child go missing it is vital to the safe recovery of the child that a recent photograph of the child is made available. The photograph must be a good likeness of the child. Most commonly the photograph will be used by local Police officers to help them recognise the child when patrolling or when actively looking for the child at relevant locations. In very serious cases, where the child is believed to be at severe risk, the Police and Local Authority may decide to use the photograph more widely and even involve publishing the photograph to national or local media. If in such circumstances no such photograph were available we would be missing a vital opportunity to safeguard the child.

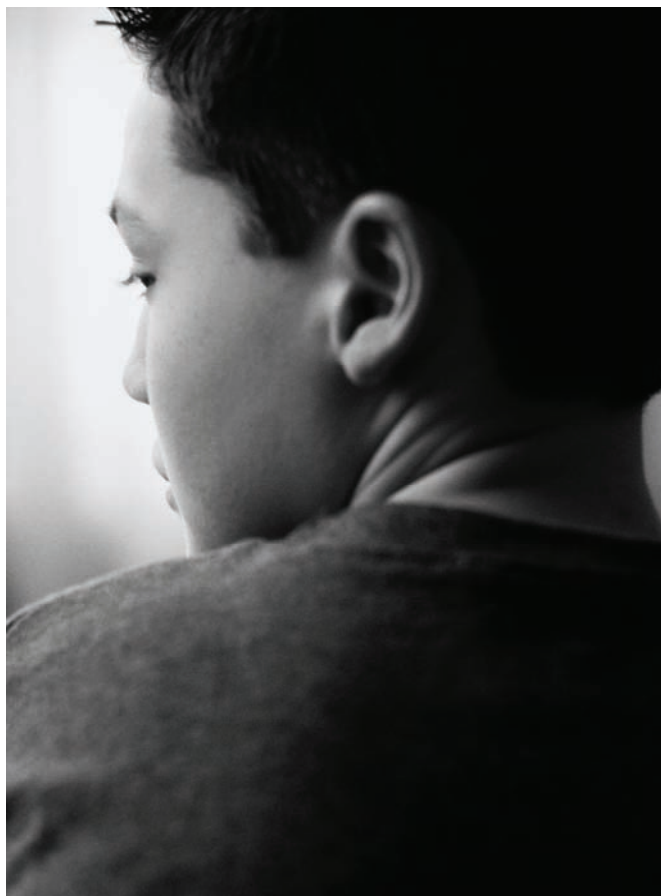
7.1.4 In respect of looked after children, a recent photograph bearing a good likeness to the child will be

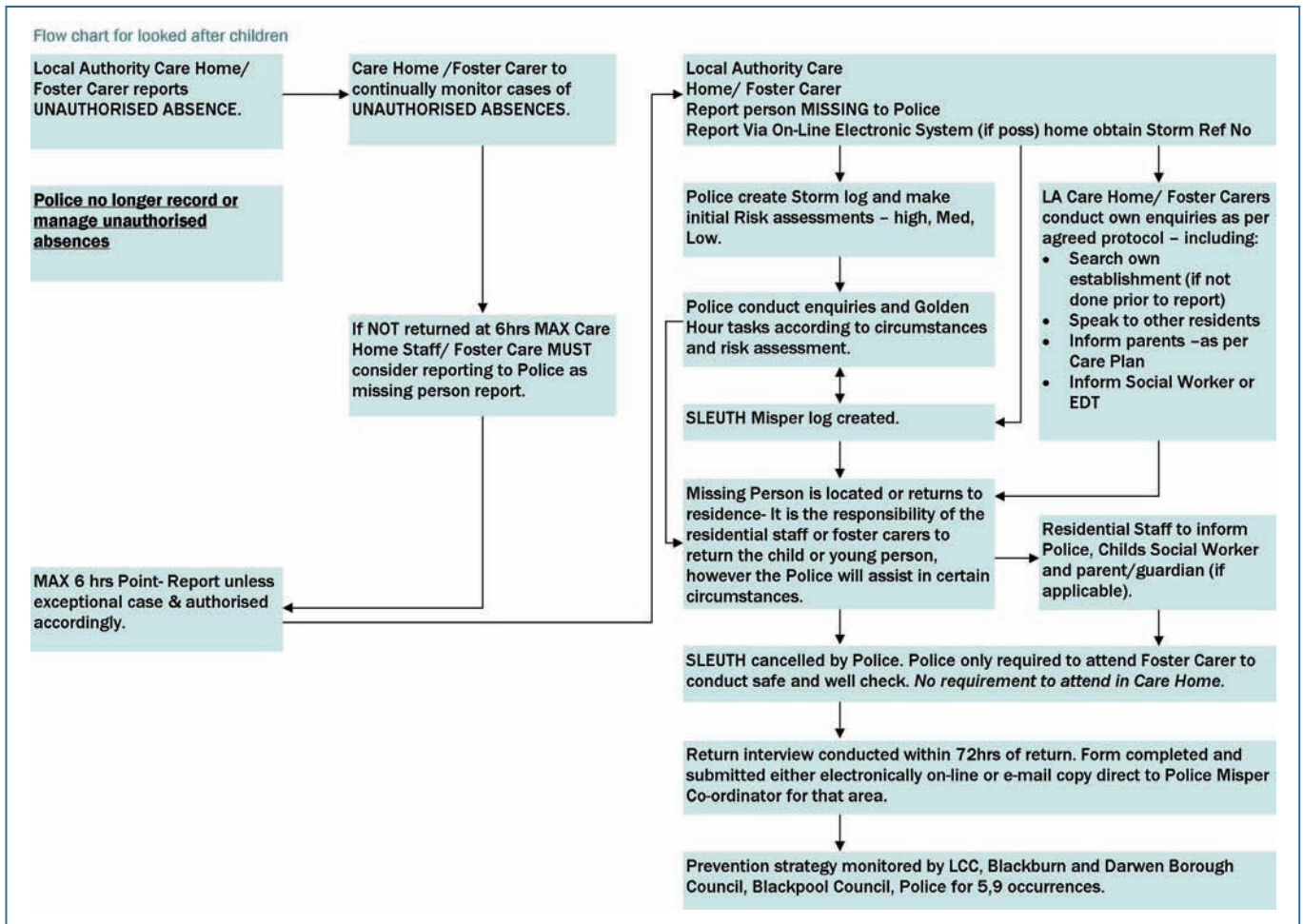
kept on record by the Local Authority. When a child is admitted to care the consent of a person with parental responsibility will be sought for a photograph to be used in any subsequent missing person investigation. If possible the agreement of the child should also be gained.

7.1.5 The Local Authority will ensure that sufficient knowledge and information about the child is recorded to enable carers to complete the missing person form (see supporting documents - MFH booklet) should the child go missing in future.

7.1.6 Where available, an electronic version of the missing from home form should be completed in advance to enable speedy and accurate reporting if and when required.

7.1.7 The residential unit manager/foster carer should consider the most appropriate ways to meet the above requirements and whether it is necessary and appropriate to discuss 'running away' with the child.





7.2 When the looked after child goes missing

7.2.1 Categories of absence have been agreed between the Police and the Local Authority. If a child is absent from a care the Local Authority will decide which of the three categories the absence will fit; **unauthorised absence, missing, or absconder.**

7.2.2 In deciding the category of absence, all staff must consider the circumstances of the child and their absence. This will include detailed consideration of:

- The circumstances of the absence.
- The child's care plan.
- The age of the child.
- The maturity of the child.
- Any physical or cognitive disability of the child.
- Any continuing or urgent need for the child to have medication or other medical treatment.
- The legal status of the child.
- Previous behaviour and history of the child.
- Danger posed by the child to themselves or others.

- General vulnerability of the child.
- The child's tendency to drug/substance abuse.
- Whether the child is perceived as running to, or running from, someone or something.
- Any circumstances within the placement, say with carers or other residents that may be relevant to the absence.
- The risk of offending.
- The influence of peer groups, families or friends.
- Predatory influences on the child. These may relate to others wanting to use the child for crime, sex or drugs.
- Any known risk of abduction.
- Environmental factors including weather, time of year, community events or tensions.

7.2.3 Children who are absent from their placement can be a matter of considerable concern to their carers and there is a need to locate them and ensure they are safe. The children can be thought of as being

on a continuum, with there being little cause for concern at one end, and with significant cause for concern at the other. Children who are a few minutes late home from school would not normally give rise to concerns; they may have missed the bus, or they may be exhibiting normal adolescent testing out, to establish the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, or to show their disagreement with aspects of their placement. **It is not helpful to consider every momentary absence as warranting a formal missing person report.**

7.2.4 However, at some point, depending upon the child and the circumstances, the child's absence will give rise to justifiable concern and require a formal missing person report to the Police. Whilst there can be no substitute for a considered judgement, based on a sound assessment of the child and the circumstances, it is the purpose of this framework to assist carers to structure their thinking with regard to the three categories of absence. This decision should not be taken in isolation, residential staff should consult with the senior member on duty and foster carers should liaise with the child's Social Worker or EDT staff. The situation should be kept under constant review and changes in circumstances taken into account. If the child is receiving support from CAMHS professionals, Educational Psychologists and so on, it may be advisable to discuss the case with them. However, if they are not readily available a decision must be made on the basis of the best available information. In cases of doubt it may also be appropriate to discuss the case with a local Police supervisor.

7.2.5 Each case must be decided on merit and a formal missing person report to the Police may be actioned earlier in some circumstances than in others. Indeed for a small number of young people it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. Normally this will have been previously agreed as part of the Care Plan because of the child's vulnerability.

7.2.6 The fact that the child may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce

the risk. In fact, children who repeatedly go missing are often being enticed away from their placement by activities that they see as exciting or by predatory influences. Furthermore, short absences may be as risky as lengthy ones.

The categories and consequent actions are outlined below:

7.3. Unauthorised absence

7.3.1 Clearly some children absent themselves for a short period and then return, with their whereabouts known to the carer. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose to test boundaries, or accidentally. Examples of situations where unauthorised absence will apply are:

- Running away after a dispute.
- Failing to return on time
- Staying at a known location with a friend.

7.3.2 If the carer assesses that the child is at risk due to any factor/s known to the carer, then the child should be reported **missing** without delay and the believed risk communicated to the Police. If the assessment of the carer is that there is **no apparent risk** for their immediate safety but are away from home without permission it is still important that staff/carers record these incidences as unauthorised absences in the child's record. In addition to this staff/carers should always start a dated/timed record of their contacts, risk assessment and decisions throughout the episode from the point that they are aware of the child's absence, in case the level of risk changes and decisions are auditable. **A period of six hours should normally be regarded as the absolute maximum for any child whose whereabouts are not known** and who cannot be contacted, to remain categorised as unauthorised absent, rather than being formally reported as missing; in many cases a shorter period will be appropriate. It will not be appropriate for any child whose whereabouts are not known and who cannot be contacted, to remain out overnight, without being formally reported as missing.

7.3.3 If the child's whereabouts are known or suspected, the Local Authority staff will decide whether to allow the child to remain at that location,

albeit temporarily, or to arrange for their return. If the decision is to arrange their return and there is reason to believe that there may be public order difficulties, the Police will assist. Police assistance in these circumstances does not mean that the child is categorised as missing. Each such occurrence needs to be evaluated based upon the factors mentioned in para 7.2.2 and upon other information gleaned from the child, friends, family and associates.

7.3.4 It is expected that the first response by providers of their care along with any relevant staff from their responsible authority, which could include the child's Social Worker in circumstances where a child is late home will be to take all steps a responsible parent would take, to try to locate the child and to make a careful assessment in accordance with para 7.2.2

7.3.5 Instances of unauthorised absences should NOT be reported to the Police. Lancashire Constabulary will NOT record instances of 'unauthorised absences'.

7.3.6 The responsibility for managing this type of absence lies with the staff of the residential home or

carer. It is not the responsibility of the Police to influence or determine the decision of whether a person is missing or unauthorised absence.

7.3.7 A clear assessment needs to be made by the carer in each individual case as to the length of time that elapses before a child who is unauthorised absent becomes categorised as missing. An unauthorised absence must be kept under regular review by the appropriate carer. It is important to consider whether the circumstances of the disappearance would now render the child at risk of harm, for example:

- The child requires medication at a set time
- or
- Weather conditions have severely deteriorated

7.4 Missing

7.4.1 Where the child's location or reason for absence is unknown and/or due to the circumstances, there is cause for concern for the child or potential danger to the public.



7.4.2 Reporting a young person missing involves providing detailed information to the Police on the missing person form (see supporting documents - MFH booklet). This will be done electronically where possible – via direct on line reporting. The form will always be supported by a telephone call. It is important that the carer makes it clear to the Police that they are reporting the child as **missing**. The carer should always ask for, and record a Police log reference number. This will cause the Police to record the case as a missing person on the Storm command and control system. It will lead to a proactive Police investigation managed locally by the Police on the ‘SLEUTH’ computer system. Moreover, the individual will be circulated nationwide via the Police National Computer System. (See also para. 10.1 if the child is an absconder).

7.4.3 When receiving a missing person report the Police will tailor their response to the circumstances. If information is available to suggest a possible location of the missing child, and this gives rise to concerns about the safety of the child, the Police response will be to immediately address those concerns, perhaps postponing the administrative recording duties for a short time in favour of safeguarding.

7.4.4 Premises search: For a child missing from a child's home or foster placement (not a residential children's home), a premises search will be undertaken by Police officers. For a child reported missing from a residential home, the Police will ask the senior care manager responsible for the unit to verify that a thorough premises search has been conducted by care staff.

7.4.5 Whilst the decision to categorise an absent child as ‘missing’ ultimately lies with the carer, the decision about the risk level attributed to the case lies with the Police. In making both decisions, dialogue between carers and Police is paramount.

7.4.6 The carer will provide information about risk factors in the case on the missing person form. Where applicable the direct electronic reporting form will be

used. After considering this and other information the Police will decide the risk level to be assigned to the case. This will be **high, medium** or **low**. Lancashire Constabulary have decided that no case involving a child under 16 years will be classified as low risk.

| Risk | Definition |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| High | The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability, or may have been the victim of a serious crime, or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger. |
| Medium | The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger, or they are a threat to themselves or others. |
| Low | There is no apparent risk of danger to either the subject or the public. In Lancashire, NO child aged 15 or under is ever considered to be at low risk. 16 and 17 year olds rarely could be classed as low risk. |

7.4.7 In accordance with the Police Code of Practice for Missing Persons data (2009) the Police will also inform the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB) of the case:

- In high-risk cases after a period of 3 hours has elapsed.
- In medium-risk cases after a period of 72 hours has elapsed.
- In Low risk cases after a period of 72 hours has elapsed.

The MPB of the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) is the only national agency with a remit to analyse missing persons as a central service in support of the investigative and preventive operations of Police forces within the United Kingdom.



7.4.8 Carers must also inform without delay:

- The parents/those who have parental responsibility (unless indicated otherwise on the care plan)
- The Social Worker or the accountable team manager
- The emergency duty team if out of hours and the Social Worker and accountable team manager the next working day

7.5 Absconder

7.5.1 An Absconder is a child who is absent from the placement without permission and who is subject to an order or requirement resulting from the criminal justice process (e.g. remands, curfews, tagging, conditions of residence, other bail conditions, PACE detention or ASBO's), or a secure order made in either civil or criminal proceedings. A child in this category must be reported to the Police without delay.

7.5.2 If an absconder is under the age of 16 years, or if the absconding does not involve a power of arrest, the Police will treat the case as BOTH a missing child case AND an absconder. This means that it will be necessary to provide detailed information to the Police on the missing child form (see supporting documents - MFH booklet). The paragraphs in section 9 and section 10 of this protocol will apply. This will lead to a proactive Police investigation managed locally by the Police on the 'SLEUTH' computer system. Moreover, the individual will be circulated nationwide via the Police National Computer system. When the child is traced however, it is likely that they will also be arrested or dealt with by the Police in relation to any offence or breach. **It is essential however, that they are also viewed as a child in need of protection and safeguarding, and any risks exposed to during their absence must be reviewed fully.**

7.5.3 However, if the child is aged 16 or over and is liable to arrest, the Police will treat the child solely as an absconder and not as a missing child, unless there are grounds to suspect that factors other than the absconders desire to evade justice are involved in their disappearance. If the Police treat the case solely as one of absconding, in these circumstances they will actively seek the absconder for arrest. Notwithstanding, absconders in this category must also be reported to the Police without delay.

7.6 Roles and responsibilities

7.6.1 After reporting a child missing, Children's Services remain responsible for the child in their care. This responsibility is not absolved when the child has been reported missing to the Police.

7.6.2 Carers and the child's Social Worker will be responsible for liaising with the Police, taking an active interest in the investigation and passing on all information, which may help to inform the investigation and assist in protecting the child while absent.

7.6.3 Carers and the child's Social Worker should continue to make appropriate enquiries with other

residents or by telephone with all persons who may be able to assist with the investigation unless they are requested not to do so by the Police. All information gleaned from these enquiries should be passed to the Police.

7.6.4 Once a child is reported missing to the Police, the Police will have primacy in respect of the investigation to trace the child.

7.6.5 The Police will normally conduct all physical enquiries away from the premises from which the child is absent.

7.6.6 In certain circumstances the Police may need to revisit the duties initially performed by care staff. When necessary they will do so in liaison with appropriate children's services staff and will do so sensitively, causing as little disruption as possible to the establishment and residents.

7.6.7 Throughout the process in this protocol, residential carers and Social Workers must keep a full record of all actions taken and messages received and given. Police will likewise keep a record of all aspects of the investigation on the 'SLEUTH' computerised missing person case management system.

7.6.8 Media Strategy: In some cases, particularly where a missing child is felt to be especially vulnerable or where they have been missing for a long period of time, it may be necessary to publicise the case via the media. Such an approach is not routine but is usually a response to very serious concerns for the child's safety. Either carers or the Police may suggest such an approach. Normally, such decisions to publicise will be jointly made, and where appropriate, in consultation with parents and Children's Services. However, for operational reasons primacy over such decisions must lie with the Police.

The Police may also utilise the website facility of the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB) (www.missingkids.co.uk) to publicise the absence of the child or young person.

7.6.9 If the case falls within the criteria for 'Child Rescue Alert' (see supporting documents - criteria for launching child rescue alert) then any decision to publicise the case is likely to be urgent. It will be made in accordance with nationally agreed procedures by a Police officer of the rank of Detective Superintendent. Where practicable, Lancashire County Council, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council or Blackpool Council will be consulted in advance.

7.7 Review of continued absence

7.7.1 When a child has been absent for a period of 48 hours the Social Worker should inform the relevant senior manager as per the Local Authority protocols via the usual line management route.

7.7.2 Throughout the missing episode, carers and the Police will continually review the case. After the child has been missing for five days, **or earlier, if deemed appropriate**, an urgent case review meeting will be held. It will involve Police officers, carers, the child's Social Worker, and any other professional involved in the care of the child.

The meeting will review:

- What action has been taken so far by the Police and professionals
- What action needs to be taken by the Police and professionals
- Decide whether the child should return to that placement when located
- Consider any other relevant information

Further such reviews will take place at least every five days thereafter **or earlier, if deemed appropriate**.

7.8 Return of the child

7.8.1 If the whereabouts are known or suspected, it is the responsibility of the Local Authority to arrange for the child's return.

7.8.2 However, there will be circumstances when, in the interests of the safe and speedy return of the child, the Police may agree to requests from the Local Authority to assist. The Police should not unreasonably

withhold assistance in cases involving local recovery and transport missions for vulnerable children. However, the Police will not agree to requests to provide escorts for missing children, which would unreasonably involve officers leaving their normal areas of patrol.

7.8.3 It is the responsibility of the carer to contact the Police by telephone and to confirm that the missing child has returned. For children in residential placements, the Police will accept confirmation from care professionals without the need for an officer to attend the home and visit the returnee. This will lead to the Police closing the missing person investigation and the case being cancelled on the Police National Computer. **For children in foster placements, the Police will verify the child's safe return in person.**

7.8.4 If it is apparent, upon the return of a child, that they have been the victim of a crime whilst absent, or that they may be in danger or at risk from any person arising out of circumstances that have occurred whilst they were absent then the Police must be called and asked to attend without delay. This is vital for the protection of the child and for the speedy recovery of evidence.

7.8.5 In such circumstances, the missing persons clothing, mobile phone and trace evidence from their body, fingernails or hair may be crucial. In cases of sexual abuse the child should be discouraged from washing and immediate advice sought from the Police. If carers become aware of the location of the scene of any crime committed against the child, or of the location of any crucial evidence (i.e. a used condom) they must notify the Police without delay. This will enable the Police to take steps to secure and preserve evidence.

7.8.6 In sexual cases the Police have access to specially trained officers, doctors and facilities designed to care for the victim and obtain evidence.

7.8.7 Additionally, in matters of sexual exploitation, or any other situation which indicates that the child may have been subject to, or at risk of, significant harm,

referral must be made under the Local Safeguarding Children Board policy guidance and procedures – see supporting documents - Guidance on child sexual exploitation.

It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi-agency strategy meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.

7.8.8 When a child returns to the placement it is the responsibility of the carers to notify any person of the missing episode under para 7.4.

8. Return interviews: safety, assessment and information gathering

8.1 **'Return Interviews'** is the term applied to the safety, needs and risk assessment carried out by statutory Children's Services and/or their partners. It should include an exploration of the reason the child left their home or placement as well as what risks they were exposed to whilst missing. The 'return

interview' (see supporting documents - Missing person return interview form) is different from the Police 'safe and well' check.

8.2 The return interview is important in safeguarding the child in future. It must not be viewed as a routine or administrative task.

8.3 The Local Authority are responsible for deciding whether a return interview (see supporting documents) is conducted for each missing episode.

8.4 Return Interviews should be offered for every instance of running where a child has:

- Been missing for over 24 hours;
- Been missing or has runaway on two or more occasions;
- Engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
- Known mental health issues;





For a looked after child a return interview should always be conducted.

Appropriate safeguarding procedures should be followed where there are safeguarding concerns for example:

- Where the child has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case)
- Where there is known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or contact with persons posing risk to children

8.5 It is acknowledged that a returning child may well share different parts of their experience with different people. It is the responsibility of all agencies therefore, to attend to issues of immediate safety, future support

and safeguarding needs, and information-sharing in a way which respects and safeguards children and young people.

The acceptable minimum in the event of a single missing episode is that the missing episode is risk assessed following information gathered and cross-referenced from the child, the carers and the Police.

8.6 It is the responsibility of each locality Children's Services Team Manager to ensure that the return interview is carried out to a suitable standard by a person approved to do so. Central Government guidance suggests that ideally it is conducted by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge. Account should also be taken of any

preference the child has for the conducting of the return interview. If the case is one under referral to StreetSafe Lancashire Project and the intervention plan identifies the need then a project worker should conduct the interview. It should not be conducted by a Police officer except in exceptional circumstances, and by the agreement of both agencies.

8.7 When it is not practicable for a return interview to be conducted by the most suitable person, or an independent person, it is better that an interview is conducted by a nominated care professional than no interview being conducted at all. It is the responsibility of the Local Authority to inform the Police Missing Person Coordinator via the missing person return interview form (see supporting documents).

8.8 The return interview should be conducted in all instances within 72 hours of the child's return, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

8.9 The purpose of the interview is:

- To better understand the reasons why the child went missing
- To explore the circumstances which led to the missing episode(s)
- To inform future prevention strategies
- To inform any future missing person investigation should that person go missing again
- To learn of the activities, associates, risks and victimisation involved in the missing episode, and where possible to address those risks with appropriate and proactive strategies such as the use of the harbouring warning notices under the Child Abduction Act (see supporting documents)
- To identify and address any harm the child has suffered – including harm that may not have already been disclosed as part of the safe and well check.

8.10 The interview will be recorded on the missing person return interview form shown in supporting documents. **ALL** return interviews must be signed off by a Children's Services Team Manager after presentation by the relevant professional.

8.11 A copy of the return interview should be sent to the Lead Manager within Children's Services. The Missing Persons Co-ordinator will ensure that details from the return interview are added to the SLEUTH missing persons record. The signed copy should be kept and stored in accordance with the Local Authorities administrative procedures and not sent to the Police.

8.12 In some circumstances the child may make extremely sensitive disclosures that need particularly careful management that should be recorded separately but referred to on the return interview form. In such circumstances it may be appropriate for the interviewer to discuss the information with relevant professionals.

8.13 Where a return interview leads to a disclosure that needs specific action, for example, to safeguard the child or investigate a crime the matter should be referred to the Local Authority and/or the Police.

8.14 For looked after children it remains the responsibility of the relevant Social Worker to ensure completion of the return interview. There is an additional responsibility on the child's placement to monitor that they are conducted within agreed timescales. In the event that the return interviews are not conducted within 72 hours, then the placement should alert the relevant Senior Manager in Children's Services.

9. Police powers



9.1 The Police have significant powers to safeguard vulnerable children. These include powers to enter premises, to recover children and to make Police protection orders.

9.2 When a missing child is found or known to have been in company with an adult during any missing episode, in circumstances which afford reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence has been committed by that adult relating in any way to that child (i.e. child abduction, sexual offence, drug offence, assault, aid, abet, counsel or procuring child to commit an offence etc) the incident will be taken seriously throughout the process of reporting, investigation and provision of follow up care. The Police priority is the safety and well being of the child; thereafter, the Police will take positive action against any perpetrators, hold them accountable for their actions and prefer charges where appropriate.

9.3 It is recognised that children who have been the victim of a serious offence may not always see themselves as victims or be willing to assist in the investigation, particularly in the early stages. Likewise those whom others have used for criminal purposes may not be willing to assist the Police. A complaint from a victim is not required to make an arrest. Usually reasonable suspicion is enough to arrest. When such an offence has occurred and a power of arrest exists, the offender should normally be arrested. An officer should be prepared to justify a decision not to arrest in these circumstances.

9.4 Without prejudice to the welfare of any child, the Local Authority will support the Police in taking appropriate action against those who commit crimes against children and/or involve children in their offending behaviour.

10. Prevention strategy

10.1 The LSCBs expect all agencies and professionals working with children who are missing from home or care, or at risk of being missing from home or care, to implement this protocol to ensure that all staff are aware of it and how to use it. It should be considered by professionals and agencies in all new and existing contacts with children. Together we will take steps to raise awareness, ensure improved responses and practice thereby delivering better outcomes for children.

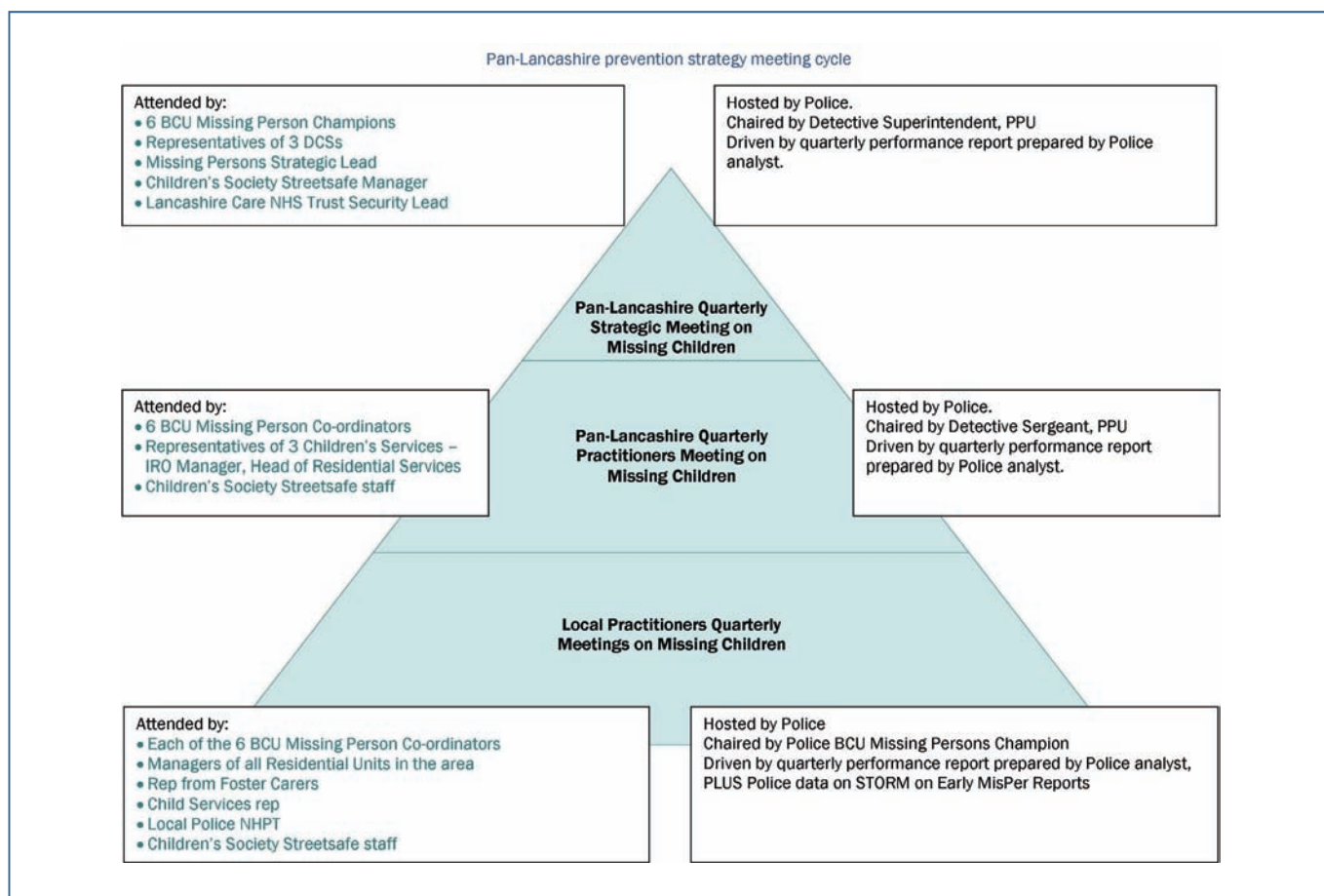
10.2 It is intended that this protocol will assist in developing robust responses to running away, which mirrors good practice already established across Lancashire. It should be used to engage partner agencies in developing preventative services for

children and young people who are at risk of running away.

10.3 The Local Authority and Police will monitor the missing episodes of all children. This will be presented in a quarterly performance report prepared by the Police and shared with the Local Authority.

10.4 Lancashire Constabulary, the Local Authority will operate an escalating system of interventions to reduce the likelihood of a child repeatedly going missing. Strategically, the meeting cycle shown below operates across the three Pan-Lancashire authorities, to maximise prevention opportunities and monitor trends.

10.5 LSCBs will undertake a local needs analysis to identify specific local prevention measures to support the working protocol. Local Safeguarding Children Boards are charged with ensuring children and young people 'stay safe from harm' (Children Act (2004) Section 11.)



11. Response to escalating concerns

11.1 Where there are concerns in relation to a child going missing multi-agency meetings under CAF, Child in Need or Care Planning should be in place, as good practice, to address these issues.

11.2 Formal intervention meetings, in response to escalating concerns must take place in the event of repeat episodes of children going missing. For these meetings to work, and thereby improve our collective responses, appropriate attendance and clarity of purpose are essential. The intervention meetings should be held within a week of any trigger episode. It is the responsibility of the Police missing person's coordinator to alert children's services of the need for an intervention meeting. It is the responsibility of children's services to arrange that meeting.

11.3 The scheduling of intervention meetings will be initiated by the Local Authority and will be determined by missing person reports recorded on the SLEUTH database.

N.B. In cases of a child going missing from an out-of-authority placement the responsible authority calls a professionals' meeting involving the relevant organisations from the host authority, to determine action, and to ensure change.

When a child who has a history of going missing is moved to an out-of-authority placement, the host authority should be informed of the risk, and as part of the placement agreement, appropriate details should be shared to support the Local Authority to manage the risks to inform care planning for the individual child.

11.3 After five episodes within a 90-day rolling period: This is the first stage intervention meeting. This level of intervention meeting is the crucial stage in avoiding serious escalation and must, therefore, be given high priority by all concerned. Within four working days of the last episode (reaching the threshold level) these meetings **MUST** be held and representatives from each organisation or interested party must be present. The meeting should be chaired by a Children's Services Manager, attendees should include:

- Child*
- Social Worker or relevant lead professional
- Local Police Missing Person Coordinator
- Parent and or carer, residential worker or foster carer
- Fostering Social Worker
- Person who conducted return interview if different to above
- Other relevant professionals (For example Health, Education, Youth Offending Teams)

* Discussion should take place between the chair and the child's Social Worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

11.4 This meeting should try to identify any 'push' or 'pull' factor in the case and any other voluntary or statutory agency, which has an interest, or may take an interest, in the missing child's welfare and circumstances. In the case of 'pull' factors it may be necessary to target those in the community who harbour the missing child or exploit them with regard to crime, sex or drugs. The meeting should be minuted and **MUST** produce a clear action plan, including timescales for action, named lead professionals, risk/contingency planning and regular review dates. The notes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited. In addition, copies should be sent to the child's allocated IRO, where the child is looked after, and the Children's Services Lead Manager.

11.5 After nine episodes within a 90-day rolling period: This is the second stage intervention meeting.

Within four working days of the last episode (reaching the threshold level) these meetings **MUST** be held and representatives from each organisation or interested party must be present. The meeting should be chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer or a Children's Services Manager, attendees should include:

- Child*
- Team Manager
- Social Worker or relevant lead professional
- Local Police Missing Person Coordinator and champion (Chief Inspector)
- Parent and or carer, residential unit manager or fostering manager
- Person who conducted return interview if different to above
- Other relevant professionals (For example Health, Education, Youth Offending Teams)

* Discussion should take place between the chair and the child's Social Worker or relevant lead professional about whether it is appropriate for them to attend.

11.6 Meetings at this level should be rare provided that this protocol has been followed with regard to the 1st stage intervention meeting and return interviews. The meeting should be minuted and **MUST** produce a clear action plan, including timescales for action, named lead professionals, risk/contingency planning and regular review dates. The notes of the meeting should be copied to all professionals invited. In addition, copies should be sent to the child's allocated IRO, where the child is looked after, and the Children's Services Lead Manager. In addition to seeking to reduce future missing episodes and reduce any apparent risks to the child, this meeting should also quality assure compliance with the protocols and the efficacy of the 1st stage intervention meeting and return interviews.

11.7 The chair of the meeting will forward the notes to the relevant Children's Services Manager. If the child continues to be reported missing beyond this level the Senior Manager for the area must consider the case and direct further intervention. Further strategies should continue to be managed by the Senior

Manager until the risks to the child have reduced and/or the missing episodes have been reduced or ceased. If there is no reduction in the missing episodes the senior manager must take responsibility for escalating the case up the management hierarchy.

11.8 It should be noted, however, that the **volume** of missing episodes is not the only reason to launch an intervention or to escalate the level of intervention. The following are examples of other reasons to initiate or escalate interventions:

- Any case where the risks involved in even a single future-missing episode is very high
- Cases where it has been identified that immediate action is necessary to ensure the well being of the child

11.10 It should be noted that if any one agency or professional has increased or serious concerns for a child's well-being or safety then they may call a multi-agency strategy meeting at any time, regardless of the number of missing episodes.

11.11 A record shall be made of all interventions on the SLEUTH missing person 'intervention' system by the Police Missing Person Coordinator.

11.12 When it is believed that an adult is adversely involved with a child going missing the Local Authority will invoke safeguarding procedures and the Police may consider using enforcement tactics such as the harbouring and/or abduction legislation. [Section 2 Child Abduction Act 1984 or Section 49 Children's Act 1989 (See supporting documents for specimen statements and notices)]

11.14 Alternatively the Local Authority and/or parents, supported by the Police, may decide to institute civil proceedings to obtain an injunction preventing any particular adult having any contact with a named child.

