

**MISSING FROM HOME OR CARE**

**GUIDANCE FOR SOCIAL CARE PRACTITIONERS**

**DATE: March 2026**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Going missing from home or care can be an indicator for a range of harm a child may be experiencing with some children who go missing, experiencing serious harm. Children who go missing are at increased risk of being abused and/or exploited with the reasons for the children going missing often being complex. This means that those involved with children who go missing, need to ensure that missing episodes are not viewed in isolation to the child's situation and considered alongside all aspects of their life.

The safety and welfare of the child is paramount, and it is important that professionals and carers responsible for a child's care know how and when to report a child missing. The Police are partners of Children's Social Care in managing "missing" episodes and it is important those involved with the child work together.

This Guidance should be read in conjunction with the Missing Children Protocol found on the North and South of Tyne Safeguarding Children Partnership's website.

The purpose of the Guidance is to support practitioners in their understanding of the above procedures and Newcastle City Council's response to missing children. It is to support practitioners in their understanding of the Return Home Interview (RHI) process and where a referral into the Partnership Reduction Exploitation and Missing (PREM) Operational Group is required.

## **DEFINITIONS**

A 'child' is anyone who has not yet reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. 'Children' are referred to within this document and are used to refer to anyone under the age of 18.

'Missing child' refers to a child who has been reported as missing to the Police by their family or carers.

'Missing from care' refers to a Child In Care who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be and their whereabouts are not known.

### Definition of 'missing'

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until they are located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.

Northumbria Police's definition of missing refers to anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where their circumstances are out of character; or the context suggests the person may be the subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves and/or others.

## **PROCESS**

### What to do when a child is missing?

When a child goes missing and does not return home as expected, it is a distressing and worrying time for parents and carers. Parents and carers when made aware of this, should make reasonable efforts to locate the child and where this is not possible then report the child as missing to Police.

It is important when reporting a child missing, that all relevant information is passed on to the Police. Information to consider should include;

- Where the child was last seen or spoken to, their presentation, what they were wearing etc.
- The nature and reason why the child may be missing, any triggers which may have resulted in the missing episode.
- Friends/associates of the child who they may be with including addresses they have been to previously.
- Any worries or concerns the child/parents/carers may have which may increase the risk.

Once a child has been reported to Police, from the information provided to them, they will determine the level of risk involved (Please see Northumbria Police's Philomena protocol)

Where any allegation of physical or sexual abuse is made or becomes evident, or where there are concerns regarding exploitation, safeguarding procedures must be implemented.

If there is evidence that a child has been a victim or perpetrator of crime, consideration must be given to securing evidence by Police, including forensic examination (with appropriate consent). It is essential to recognise that the welfare of the child is paramount and careful consideration should be given to the potential effects of the procedures on the child.

### Children missing from Care

When the whereabouts of a child in care is not known, the carers are responsible for carrying out preliminary checks to see if the child can be located, as outlined above.

If the initial checks do not succeed in locating the child or there remain concerns, that despite contact being made with the child, that they are at risk, the Police, the placing Local Authority, parents/carers with Parental Responsibility and the Independent Reviewing Officer need to be informed.

The Philomena Protocol is a Northumbria Police initiative to help locate and return a child safely as quickly as possible when they are missing. The basis of the scheme is to ensure vital information about the child is recorded on to a form which can then be used to locate them quickly. Information such as where the child was last seen, any triggers which may have resulted in the missing episode, friends/associates and addresses they may be going to as well as contact details should be provided by the carer. This information is kept securely both by the carer and the Police. Following this information being shared, discussions between the carer and Police will take place regarding what measures are to be taken to locate the child, which will include what additional enquiries the carer will be making and also how those involved will be updated.

The carer/s should take all reasonable steps to secure the safe return of the child based on their knowledge of the child and the information within the child's placement plan.

Where any allegation of physical or sexual abuse is made or becomes evident, or where there are concerns regarding exploitation, safeguarding procedures must be implemented.

If there is evidence that a child has been a victim or perpetrator of crime, consideration must be given to securing evidence by Police, including forensic examination (with appropriate consent). It is essential to recognise that the welfare of the child is paramount and careful consideration should be given to the potential effects of the procedures on the child.

Where children are in Local Authority care the Social Worker and Team Manager should decide in consultation with the carer and the child, whether they should convene a statutory review of the child's care plan.

For missing episodes lasting longer than 24 hours, where a child is placed within a residential provision, care workers within the children's home must inform their Registered Manager or Deputy Manager if the Registered Manager is not available. The Registered Manager/deputy must inform the Service Manager, Corporate Parenting.

### Care Leavers

From the age of 16 children in care are referred to as Care Leavers, however the Local Authority have the same duties and responsibilities towards 16- and 17-year-old children with regards to responding to episodes. It is important to note that the Local Authority will continue to have a range of responsibilities for Care Leavers until

the Care Leaver turns 25 years. It is good practice to follow the above guidance whilst a young person remains 'leaving care'.

Care Leavers, particularly those who are 16 and 17 years old are vulnerable to exploitation and may be when they are missing from their home. The Local Authority should ensure that any vulnerability to exploitation is clearly set out within the young person's Pathway Plan and that support is identified to minimize this risk.

Care Leavers who are over 18 years where there are concerns about missing, exploitation and vulnerabilities associated with this, an Adult Safeguarding Referral should be considered.

### Child in Care in Out of Area placements

When a child is placed out of authority, the responsible authority must ensure that the child has access to relevant support services in advance of the placement being made, wherever possible. Notification must be made to the host authority to ensure they are aware of the child in care placed in their area.

If the child placed out of authority goes missing, this procedure must be followed in addition to other processes which may be set out within the policy of the host authority. It is possible that the child may return to the responsible authority's area, therefore it is imperative that there is close liaison between the Police and professionals across both areas. We need to ensure that the response to the missing episode is co-ordinated and managed well. Where going missing has been a concern previously for a child, how this will be managed and responded to, should be detailed within the care plan and placement plan.

### Children Missing from Home

Children missing from home are vulnerable to the same risks as those children who are in care, therefore the response to missing episodes are as outlined within this procedure.

When a child is reported missing to Police, a Public Protection Notice (PPN) is submitted to Children's Social Care and a decision will be made as to whether a response from Children's Social Care is required for those children who do not have an allocated Social Worker. This decision is made by the Team Manager within the Screening Team. All children in such instances will be offered a Return Home Interview by Newcastle's Missing Support Workers who are within the ROTH Team.

Following the Return Home Interview being completed, this is returned back to the Screening Team Managers for further consideration. If at this point, concerns are noted and further support and intervention is required, the Screening Team Manager will determine whether a Family Help Assessment is required.

If at any point during this process, there are concerns that the child is at risk of harm, child protection procedures must be implemented.

A multi-agency strategy discussion or meeting must be held within three days of a child going missing and not returning, involving the police, Children's Social Care, health, and the Assistant Team Manager or Team Manager from the ROTH Service (Missing Children's Co-ordinator), to review the risk assessment and update the plan to locate the child. The Manager must inform the relevant Service Manager once the child has been missing for more than 48 hours, and the Service Manager will then notify the Assistant Director.

Where a child missing exceeds 72 hours, a strategy meeting should be held at a minimum every 72 hours until the child is found.

It is important to note that when making the decision as to when a multi-agency strategy discussion/meeting is held that additional vulnerabilities are taken into consideration, such as.

- Children who regularly go missing from home or their care placement, where concern has been expressed about their safety and wellbeing. This may involve children involved in escalating, potentially serious, alcohol or substance misuse.
- Children involved in serious incidents of self-harm or where there has been a deterioration in their emotional and mental health.
- Children whose behaviour or emotional/mental health difficulties place themselves or others at risk or in danger.
- Children where there are concerns around sexual and/or criminal exploitation, trafficking, or modern-day slavery.
- Children requiring care who from the nature of their disabilities - physical or emotional or learning disability.

The above additional vulnerabilities are not an exhaustive list and each missing episode needs to be viewed in the context of the child's situation and considered alongside all aspects of their life.

Where a child regularly goes missing, Police will complete a Trigger Plan detailing information regarding what Police need to do when the young person is missing and includes information about the child, their vulnerabilities, associates etc. If the child is in care the Philomena Protocol will also be completed which considers the child/young person's needs, the potential risks posed to them when missing, key contacts and actions to consider.

### Actions to be taken when a Child has been found

When a child returns to their home or placement following a missing episode, a number of actions need to be taken.

#### *Safe and well checks*

Safe and well checks are carried out by the police as soon as possible after a child reported as missing has been found. Their purpose is to check for any indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give the child an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them.

Where a child goes missing frequently, it may not be practical for the police to see them every time they return. In these cases a reasonable decision should be taken in agreement between the police and the child's parent or carer, or their social worker, with regard to the frequency of such checks, bearing in mind the established link between frequent missing episodes and serious harm, which could include gang involvement, criminal exploitation, forced marriage, maltreatment or abuse at home, bullying or sexual exploitation. An assessment of whether the child might go missing again should be based on information about their individual circumstances, family circumstances and background history as well as push and pull factors such as exploring the motivation for going missing, potential associates and places they may go to. The circumstances in which the child was found or returned and any individual risk factors, i.e. age, vulnerability, emotional/mental health issues, learning disability should also be considered.

#### *Return Home Interviews (RHI)*

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2014) 'Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care' states that when a child is missing from home or care, in addition to a Police 'Safe and Well Check', arrangements should be made by Children's Social Care for a 'Return Interview' to be conducted. This includes children known to Children's Social Care on a child in need plan, a child subject to child protection procedures and children in care. The guidance suggests the Return Interview is best conducted by an Independent Person, who should talk with a child on their return from a missing episode to ensure an initial or updated safety, needs and risk assessment is carried out. The Return Interview is important in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child, or young person at risk of going missing in the future and should not be considered a routine or administrative task.

The purpose of the **Return Home Interview** is:

- To ensure the child is safe in his or her home or care placement, and to identify any harm they may have suffered prior to, or whilst missing
- To discuss any medical condition the child may have, and assess any need for immediate medical attention

- To assist the child to identify issues leading to them going missing to reduce/avoid the likelihood of them going missing in future
- To explore strategies for improving personal safety and promote safe behaviour if a child remains at risk of going missing in future
- To undertake and update a need and/or risk assessment, and agree and identify actions to address need and avoid/reduce further missing episodes
- To gather information to facilitate finding a child if they go missing in future.
- To gather intelligence to share with Children's Social Care and Police regarding children missing from home and care.

The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the 'safe and well check' – either before they ran away or whilst missing.
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child was reported as missing.
- help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away.
- provide them with information on how to stay safe if they choose to go missing again, including helpline numbers.

Independent return interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home. The interview should be arranged **within 72 hours** of the child returning to their home or care setting.

Where a child refuses to engage with the interview, parents and/or carers should be provided with the opportunity to provide any relevant information and intelligence they may be aware of. This should support in the prevention of further missing episodes and identify where additional support may be required.

All Return Home Interview's are completed by Newcastle's Missing Support Workers who are based within the Risk Outside The Home (ROTH) Service. In some circumstances, this may not be the most appropriate option for the child. In these



cases, a professional already involved with the child may be asked to complete the Return Home Interview instead. This decision will always be made on an individual basis, in the best interests of the child.

Return Home Interviews when completed are reviewed by a Team Manager. Where a child has an allocated Social Worker, it is expected that any issues or support needs identified within the Return Home Interview are acted upon and progressed by the Care Team/Core Group. Where a child does not have an allocated Social Worker, the Screening Team Manager will consider the information within the Return Home Interview and determine whether further intervention is required from Children's Social Care.

### **Risk Outside the Home**

Where concerns are raised regarding a child with complex needs being at risk of going missing, and/or vulnerable and at risk of harm as a result of exploitation, safeguarding procedures should be followed and a multi-agency strategy discussion/meeting held.

As part of the strategy discussion/meeting consideration needs to be given as to whether there are Risk Outside the Home concerns and if a Child Exploitation Screening tool needs to be completed.

The Child Exploitation Screening Tool (attached to the Safeguarding referral) can be completed by any professional who has concerns about exploitation and where a child is not open to Children's Social Care, the Screening Tool will be submitted and support the referral into Children's Social Care.

Where a child has an allocated Social Worker, consideration needs to be given as to whether a Child Exploitation Screening Tool is required for support from the monthly ROTH panel.

For CSC colleagues working with 17-year-olds at risk of going missing or experiencing abuse, Safeguarding Adults referrals should be submitted at the earliest opportunity, the transition protocol must be followed, and consent is not required.

### **Partnership Reduction Exploitation and Missing (PREM)**

Please refer to the Partnership Reduction Exploitation and Missing process flowchart March 2026 put in place to ensure a co-ordinated response to those children deemed to be vulnerable to exploitation.

For complex cases where intervention and disruption attempts have not been successful at reducing the risk for the child and professional concern continues to escalate a PREM referral is required.

A PREM referral assesses whether the child is at low, medium or high risk of exploitation and looks at what disruption activity is required to safeguard the child. When developing the disruption plan, it is important to consider issues of disclosure in relation to disruption activity e.g. details of potential perpetrators, addresses of potential concern etc. The disruption plan needs to be clear regarding what has and has not been shared with the child and their carers.

On completion of the PREM referral those deemed to be at medium or high risk of exploitation, copies of the Assessment need to be shared with the Police PREM Mailbox ([premmaibox@northumbria.pnn.police.uk](mailto:premmaibox@northumbria.pnn.police.uk)) **AND** CSC ROTH inbox ([Roth@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:Roth@newcastle.gov.uk)) to enable the child to be discussed at the PREM Operational meeting.

PREM is a Police-led, multi-agency problem-solving meeting chaired by a Detective Chief Inspector. Its purpose is to reduce identified risks and harms related to exploitation and missing episodes. The changes were introduced by the Police to standardise processes across all six Local Authorities. PREM is outcome-focused, with progress tracked throughout, and aims to include adult services in the process. In addition to focusing on the victim, PREM also considers the offender and the location to address and resolve the underlying challenges.

It is expected that any actions agreed at the Operational Group are taken forward by the responsible agencies. A decision will also be made as to whether the Operational Group will maintain monitoring of the risk and disruption activity, escalate the risk to the Strategic Group via the PREM Chair or exit from PREM providing a rationale and risk plan.

Where PREM Operational Group advise of the need to maintain oversight of the risk, the Social Worker will be asked to complete review paperwork which will be discussed at the next PREM meeting.

It is important to note that the ROTH procedures, ROTH Panel process and PREM process should be integrated into other relevant statutory safeguarding procedures – it is not intended to replace these.

## **GOVERNANCE**

The Assistant Director of Children's Social Care is the named senior officer responsible for monitoring policies and performance relating to children who go missing from home or care.

In fulfilling its statutory role North and South of Tyne Safeguarding Children Partnership will give due consideration to the safeguarding risks and issues associated with children missing from home or care. To do this it will periodically audit return interviews and support and challenge the effectiveness of the arrangements.

## **IMPORTANT LINKS**

[Missing Children Protocol procedure found on the North and South of Tyne Safeguarding Children Partnership's website.](#)

[Newcastle missing reporting process flowchart](#)

[PREM Flowchart and Terms of Reference 2026](#)