



DERBY CITY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING JOINT SUB-COMMISSION 23 February 2005

Report of the Director of Social Services

Children Missing from Care

RECOMMENDATION

1. To note the progress of partner agencies in working with children and young people who go missing from care. This is a summary of work undertaken and proposed future actions.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Policy Context

- 2.1 In 1997, Sir William Utting's Report 'People Like Us – The review of the Safeguards for Children Living Away from Home' highlighted the need to be concerned about children who go missing. It emphasised that services for missing children should be planned for, and the reasons that children go missing should be identified, so that they can be properly safeguarded.
- 2.2 The Government's (1998) response to the Children's Safeguards Review included a commitment to develop guidance on the action to be taken when a child goes missing.
- 2.3 In November 2002, the Department of Health issued its guidance 'Children missing from Care and from Home: A Guide to Good Practice: This was based on various research reports including research commissioned by the Department of Health from York University 'Children Who Go Missing, Research Policy and Practice (2002)', and built on the joint report by the Local Government Association (L.G.A) and Association of Chief Police Officers (A.C.P.O.) published in 1997.
- 2.4 The Department of Health's guidance covers young people missing from home and care, on the basis of the similar needs of these two groups. The Department of Health's good practice guidance was issued as Local authority Circular L.A.C. (2002) 17 under Section 7 of the Local authority Social Services Act 1970. Compliance with this provision became part of the Social Services Inspectorates' process of inspecting Local authority Children's Services.
- 2.5 In line with the above requirements, a 'Joint Protocol for Children Missing from Care in Derbyshire' was developed by the Derbyshire Constabulary, Derbyshire County Council and Derby City Council in 1998. This protocol combines aspects of police and Local authority procedures in respect of young missing persons, and services to ensure that the responsibilities of the different agencies are clear. This protocol is the foundation of Derby's response to Derby children missing from care.

Nature of the Issue

- 3.1 The Protocol defines a child or young person as 'missing' if s/he is absent from her/his place of residence, the reasons for the absence are unknown, there is concern for the safety of the young person and/or there is a potential risk to the public.
- 3.2 Such children/young people differ from those children/young people who absent themselves for short periods of time before returning, and where it is not believed they are at risk, or that immediate action is necessary to ensure their return. Such absences are referred to as 'unauthorised absences'.
- 3.3 They also differ from the absences of those young people who are looked after as a result of the Court remanding them to the care of the Local authority or bailing them to live at accommodation provided by the Local authority. These young people are referred to as 'absconders'. The police have the power of arrest when such young people are absent without permission.
- 3.4 In assessing the significance of any child/young person's absence carers and other social care staff are encouraged to apply the above definitions, and to take into account the degree of risk to the young person, and the meaning of any patterns of absence.
- 3.5 It is noteworthy that only a very small number of those children/young people who go missing are from foster care; the majority being from residential care. This enables closer targeting of responses.
- 3.6 Since the introduction of the Protocol, it is reported that there has been a general reduction in the number of children/young people in Derby who go missing from care. However, during the first nine months of 2004, there was a significant increase in the number of children/young people who went missing, compared with the previous year. Specifically, during 2003, Derby had a monthly average of 389 looked after children, with an average of 18 being reported missing each month. Between January – September 2004, Derby had a monthly average of 390 looked after children, with an average of 35 being reported as missing each month.
- 3.7 Preliminary examination of this increase suggests that the increase is related to:
 - the accommodation of a small number of young people who go missing on a repeated/regular basis
 - the accommodation of a small number of young women who are believed to be on the fringe of prostitution
 - the development of a risk averse reporting strategy by some residential care staff

Action Taken to Respond to Young People Who Go Missing from Care

- 4.1 At a strategic level, the main action taken in responding to children and young people who go missing from care has been the development and implementation of the Joint Protocol. The local authority has also identified a named person with responsibility for young people who go missing. In addition, information about young people who go missing is collected and collated on a routine basis, and regular meetings take place between the Head of Service for Residential Services and the Police. Efforts have also been made to ensure that residential care staff and foster carers are aware of the policies and procedures they should follow when children/young people go missing.
- 4.2 As part of the Joint Protocol, special arrangements are in place for addressing those rare occasions when children/young people remain missing for 28 days. In these circumstances, a senior manager from Social Services and the Divisional Detective Superintendent from the Police are required to hold a strategy meeting to ensure that everything possible is being done to effect the safe return of the child/young person. There was no necessity for such a meeting during 2003 or so far this year.
- 4.3 At an individual case level, the primary emphasis is on the development of local plans, policies and strategies to prevent children running away, and to co-ordinate better services for those who go missing. With regard to looked after children, this includes the development and implementation of constructive care plans for these children and young people, and the provision of good quality supervision, support and training for their carers. The contribution of organisations such as 'Young Runaways' and 'The Edge' are also very important.
- 4.4 When children/young people do go missing from care, the Protocol emphasises the importance of assessing the significance of the child's absence, as well as the actions required of Social Services staff and the Police in attempting to locate and ensure the safe return of such young people. In addition, good practice highlights the importance of support for young people returning, including opportunities for them to talk to independent persons.

Achievements to Date

- 5.1
 - Notwithstanding the increase during 2004, there has been a significant decrease in the number of children/young people who go missing from care since the introduction of the Joint Protocol.
 - The Joint Protocol, supplemented by complementary in-house procedures and training for Social Services staff has resulted in social care staff taking a greater degree of responsibility for assessing risk, and effecting the safe return of children/young people who go missing from care.

Future Challenges

- 6.1 - to complete research into the reasons for the increase in the number of children/young people who have gone missing from care during 2004.
- to reduce the number of children/young people who go missing from care.
 - to build on current good practice.
 - to continue to strengthen inter-agency liaison and partnership working.
 - to contribute to the development of Information Sharing and Assessment (I.S.A) in order to facilitate the early identification of children likely to run away

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

1. This report has no financial implications.

Legal

2. The Authority has a duty to provide services to children in need, to safeguard children and to provide accommodation to children on a voluntary or compulsory basis under the terms of the Children Act 1989. The D H Local Authority Circular (2002) 17 identifies the specific guidance for children and young people missing from care.

Personnel

3. Social Services responses to children missing from care are drawn from existing resources.

Equalities impact

4. The vulnerability of looked after children, particularly those who go missing from care, necessitates a targeted protocol and a partnership response; both of which are in place.

Corporate objectives and priorities for change

5. This report comes under the Council's objectives of
 - protecting and supporting people
 - improving life chances for disadvantaged people and communities.

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