



## **Absconding/Absent without permission**

**Linked to Regulation 27 (5) and 12 (2) of The Regulated Services  
(Service Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) Regulations 2017**

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## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 This policy document is intended for the use of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough council.
- 1.2 All Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council children’s residential employees are expected to read and digest this document as they will be expected to abide by it at all times, both during and after their employment.
- 1.3 Safeguarding children is a responsibility shared by everyone in contact with children and young people.
- 1.4 This procedure provides information about safeguarding children who go missing from home or care or who are absent without authorization. It is based and should be used in conjunction with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures 2019.

## **2 Defining Absconding**

- 2.1 Absconding describes children in the Looked After System who have gone missing from care.
- 2.2 For all children, this is a serious threat to their safety and well-being.
- 2.3 All children in MTCBC children’s residential services should be considered vulnerable and as presenting a risk to themselves if they abscond. Action must be swift, professional, and co-ordinated.
- 2.4 Children looked after are extremely vulnerable and present a high risk to themselves and other people.
- 2.5 All children are made aware prior to their admission that absconding places everyone at risk.
- 2.6 A missing person is: “Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed.”  
(<https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-publicprotection/missing-persons/#definition-of-missing>)

An absent person is defined as a “person not at a place where they are expected or required to be” and perceived to be “not at any apparent risk”.  
(<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/latest-news/762-the-absent-category-safeguarding-childrenand-vulnerable-adults.html> )

- 2.7 There are some issues which are common across safeguarding practice guides and some which are specific to the safeguarding of children missing or absent from home or care:
- 2.8 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) guarantees every child the right to grow up healthy, happy and safe. This includes to be protected from harm and be appropriately supported to recover from abuse. Practitioners and professionals should adopt A Children's Rights Approach in line with the duty of due regard to the (UNCRC) and follow National Participation Standards
- 2.9 Agencies must work together to provide a joined-up response to safeguarding issues as set out in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures 2019.

- 2.10 There is a statutory Duty to Report Children at Risk on relevant partners under Section 130 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014
- 2.11 Information sharing is central to good safeguarding practice. Practitioners must share information in accordance with data protection legislation. Data protection legislation allows for the sharing of information and should not be automatically used as a reason for not doing so. One of the specific circumstances which provides for information sharing is in order to prevent abuse or serious harm to others. When information is not shared in a timely and effective way, decisions about how to respond may be ill informed and this can lead to poor safeguarding practice and leave children at risk of harm.
- 2.12 We know that sensory impaired and disabled children are at an increased risk of being abused compared with their non-disabled / non-sensory impaired peers. They are also less likely to receive the protection and support they need when they have been abused. Practitioners and professionals should explicitly recognize the increased vulnerability of sensory impaired and disabled children to abuse and neglect, as well as the barriers they may face, especially around communication and provide for any additional safeguards needed to protect them.

### **3 Guidance for Staff**

- 3.1 All children have a Personal Plan which will detail any free-time a child/young person is permitted to have and outline particular circumstances.
- 3.2 Each staff member must be clear as to what the home's specific stance is for each child regarding absconding. The staff need to know at what point a child or young person is considered missing and when to begin the absconding/missing person procedure.
- 3.3 All young people leaving the home without permission will be treated as a 'missing person' and if staff are unaware of where they are going/have gone they will begin the absconding/missing person procedure in line with protocol.
- 3.4 Times should be recorded to the exact minute.
- 3.5 The home's manager or on-call should be informed immediately after the child or young person has been established as missing.
- 3.6 Staff are to attempt to establish contact with the young person, known associates, family members and local hospitals.
- 3.7 Staff are to also, if safe to do so, check known addresses or locations the young person frequents prior to contacting the police unless there is a significant risk and agreed to search prior to this.
- 3.11 It is critical that no other children residing at the home are involved in the incident, however, may be questioned for information. Although there will be a multitude of telephone calls, it is important that only one staff member deals with the telephone calls, logging of information and paperwork while the others engage with the other children.
- 3.12 All staff will receive training on absence procedures during their induction process.

#### **4 Child's rights**

- 4.1 Children residing in our homes have the right to a childhood free of stigma, abuse and judgement of any past negative behaviour.
- 4.4 A thorough risk assessment is completed prior to a child or young person's admission to the children's home. The individual's history of absconding is carefully factored into this assessment.
- 4.6 Thoroughly trained, vigilant staff members further reduce risks to children.
- 4.7 If a child or young person does abscond, staff must consider carefully the risk posed to the community by the individual. Staff need to consider the child or young person's history and consider the nature of the individuals' criminal offences/ negative behaviours in the past in relation to the general public.
- 4.8 Ultimately staff members need to consider the vulnerability of the individual child or young person and consider the threat posed to themselves, as well as the threat posed to the community and general public.

#### **5 Child Information Form**

- 5.1 Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established should be considered as missing until located and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. However, reasonable efforts to locate a child and establish their whereabouts should be taken before a child is reported as missing to the police.
- 5.2 The "Child Information Form" details relevant information for each young person, inclusive of their apparent risk if they were to abscond.
- 5.3 The purpose of completing and sharing the form is to provide the police and partner agencies with relevant and detailed information so that they can make decisions about categorising the risk for each young person.
- 5.4 Incorporated within the Child Information Form is the necessary staff procedures required to be followed by staff to "actively" search and locate a young person.
- 5.5 The Child Information Form should be kept current and up to date with a current photograph. Any changes should be in line with the most up to date information for the young person and in line with their placing authority care plan.
- 5.6 The Wales Safeguarding Procedures 2019 recommend that a Child Information Form should be used for all children who are looked after.

#### **Evidence base**

- 6.0 The reasons why children go missing are varied, complex and unique to individual children: They may be reacting to an event or change in their lives such as a change in family circumstances or a bereavement. We know that children who go missing from home or care often report problems at home or at the home where they have been placed because they are looked after. They may be unhappy about decisions being made about them by their parents or carers and they may not feel listened to. They may go missing to areas where they have family or connections. They may be experiencing neglect or abuse at home. They may also be encouraged or coerced to go missing by dangerous adults or by other children.

- 6.1 Children in some circumstances are more likely to go missing than their peers:
- 6.2 Children looked after are three times more likely to go missing than other children  
(The Children’s Society (2011), Make Runaways Safe, p.7).
- 6.3 Children placed outside their local area are at particular risk of going missing  
(<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/appg-absent-inquiry-final-report-may-2016.pdf>)
- 6.4 On 31 January 2016, Europol reported that 10,000 unaccompanied children are unaccounted for after arriving in Europe, with many feared to be exploited and abused for sexual or labour purposes (Shavev Greene and F. Toscano, 2016, Summit report: best practices and key challenges on interagency cooperation to safeguard unaccompanied children from going missing [https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/portal/files/3591754/report\\_SUMMIT\\_Safeguarding\\_Unaccompanied\\_Migrant\\_Minors\\_1mrt1.pdf](https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/portal/files/3591754/report_SUMMIT_Safeguarding_Unaccompanied_Migrant_Minors_1mrt1.pdf))
- 6.5 It is estimated that 60% of suspected child victims of trafficking in local authority care go missing (House of Commons, Home Affairs Committee (2009) The Trade in Human Beings: Human Trafficking in the UK Sixth Report of Session 2008–09, Volume 1 London: House of Commons)
- 6.6 Almost two thirds of trafficked children are never found (CEOP (2010) Strategic Threat Assessment: Child Trafficking in the UK London: CEOP)
- 6.7 We know that when a child goes missing they may be exposed to a range of emotional, physical and sexual risks: They may engage in offending behaviour to survive or because they are being exploited by adults. We know that children with multiple missing episodes and those who go missing for prolonged periods are at high risk of child sexual exploitation and/or criminal exploitation and may be trafficked while they are missing.
- 7.0 **What to do when a child is absent or goes missing**
- 7.1 Reasonable efforts to establish the whereabouts of a child.  

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established should be considered as missing until located and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. However, reasonable efforts to locate a child and establish their whereabouts should be taken before a child is reported as missing to the police.
- 7.2 Attempt to make contact with the child and to check on the whereabouts of the child with the people and at the places where you think they might be. If the child is located and is in a place where they are not considered to be at risk then it will not be necessary to report the child as missing.
- 7.3 If there is a care and support or child protection plan in place for the child there may be agreed actions contained in the plan in the event that the whereabouts of the child cannot be established. It will be expected for the

carers to follow these agreed actions. Residential providers should ensure that all staff are familiar with any plans and agreed actions in relation to individual children.

- 7.4 There should also be a discussion with the child to ensure that they understand the actions agreed in relation to their care.
- 7.5 Arrangements should be made for the child to return to the place where they live or to another agreed place where they will be safe.
- 7.6 If there are any specific issues of safety or public order difficulties involved in returning them, then the Police will make a decision on whether they can assist in the recovery process.

## **8.0 When a child goes missing**

- 8.1 A missing person is “Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed.”
- 8.2 If a child is not where they are expected to be and all reasonable efforts to make contact with the child or to locate them are unsuccessful then the child should be reported as missing to the police.
- 8.3 Should the person reporting the child as missing be aware of any details that suggest that the child might be at risk of significant harm, it is imperative that these details are passed onto the Police including any information that has led to these concerns.
- 8.4 Where a child has identified care and support needs or is looked after then parents, carers and residential staff have the responsibility to report a child as missing and are expected to take reasonable steps to assist in locating the child.
- 8.5 The failure to report a child as missing or inappropriate delays in reporting a child as missing should be considered as a safeguarding concern and may suggest that a parent, carer or provider is not able to provide for the safety of the child.
- 8.6 Where it is established that a child is missing from care (where they are a looked after child) there is a duty to:
  - o Notify the Police
  - o Notify the parents and anyone else with Parental Responsibility
  - o Notify the Local Authority responsible for the child, Social Worker
  - o Notify the Registered Home Manager/on call Manager
- 8.7 If the child is looked after by the Local Authority the allocated social worker will inform the team manager of the missing episode



- 8.8 When the Police receive a report that a child is missing they will carry out a risk assessment based on the information they receive and any information they already hold about the child and this will inform their decision on the appropriate response to the report that has been made. The Police assess cases of missing persons against a continuum of risk
- 8.9 Whilst the child is missing all agencies involved should liaise with one another and discuss what ongoing actions will be taken to try and locate the child. Timely and effective information sharing is key to a robust safeguarding response.
- 8.10 Police forces are required to submit case details to the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB) in relation to all: people reported missing in the UK who are still missing after 72 hours; foreign nationals reported as missing in the UK (via INTERPOL or any other means) and UK residents reported as missing abroad. Foster carers' responsibilities when a child or young person goes missing
- 8.11 Try to contact the child or young person yourself and check with people and at places where you think they might be. If you can't locate the child or young person phone the police on 101. Contact the police immediately if you are worried that the child or young people may come to harm.
- 8.12 You should give the police all the information you can about what the child looks like, who they might be with, places they go and how they were feeling when they went missing. You must also share any information or worries you have because they have been in danger in the past or because of something that makes you think they are in danger.
- 8.13 You should inform social services that the child has gone missing. If a plan has already been agreed about what to do when the child or young person goes missing you should follow the actions in the plan.
- 9.0 **When a child is found**
- 9.1 When a child who has been missing (whereabouts unknown) is located the Police will decide whether they need to conduct a Safe and Well Check and complete a Public Protection Notification (PPN) or their force equivalent which shares information surrounding the child and incident with relevant partner agencies. A Safe and Well Check is not a Return Home Interview.
- 9.2 Parents/carers, Police, Social Services and anyone else who has been informed that the child was missing should be informed that the child has been located.
- 9.3 If there is no information to suggest that it is unsafe for the child to return home or to stay at home if they have already returned there, the Police should provide information to the child and to their parent/care giver about sources of information, advice and assistance that they can access locally as part of the Safe and Well Check if one is completed.

- 9.4 If any agency has concerns related to the circumstances under which the child went missing or about the capacity of the parent or carer to keep the child safe without assistance the child should be referred to Social Services as a child who may have care and support needs with the parents consent under Part 3 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act or as a child at risk under Part 7 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act.
- 9.5 The child should, where appropriate, be conveyed direct to their placement and not to or via a police station, unless any information suggests that a direct return is not in the child's interests (for example, if a return to the placement raised concerns about their safety or well-being). The police do not automatically have power to detain a child.
- 9.6 Social Services should only seek the assistance of the police to use their 'powers of protection' in exceptional circumstances and where there is insufficient time to seek an Emergency Protection Order or other reasons prevail relating to the child's immediate safety. When Police Powers of Protection are used, an independent officer of at least Inspector rank must act as the designated officer. The powers of protection can last up to 72 hours.
- 9.10 If it is believed that a looked after child, a child subject to an Emergency Protection Order, or that a child in police protection has been unlawfully taken away or is being kept unlawfully from the responsible person, then under Section 50 of the Children Act 1989, an application can be made to the Court

## **10 When a child or young person returns home – guidance for carers**

- 10.1 The police will carry out a 'Safe and Well Check' to make sure that the child or young person is ok. When a child or young person returns after they have gone missing or is returned by the police it is important to make them feel safe and comfortable. They might find it easier to talk to someone other than their carer about why they went missing or about what has happened to them while they have been missing. If children and young people feel that adults are angry and upset and with them this might encourage them to go missing again or delay them in returning if they do go missing again.
- 10.2 The police should leave a leaflet for your child/the child you care for with information about services they can contact to talk to someone about any worries they have.

## **11 Approach following an episode when a child has been missing**

- 11.1 When a child has been missing and they return back to their home or placement it is important that they are made physically comfortable and are received in a way that makes them feel safe.
- 11.2 Children have said that the fear that parent(s) or carer(s) will be angry with them when they return can delay their decision to return home or to their placement.

- 11.3 If the child requires medical treatment, discloses that they have been the victim of a sexual or physical assault which requires examination and/or is under the influence of alcohol or drugs this should be dealt with in line with child protection processes and before they are asked detailed questions about what has happened to them.
- 11.4 When they are ready children should be given the opportunity to talk to about their experience of going missing. This should happen in a place where and at a time when the child is comfortable to talk.
- 11.5 The child may be comfortable to talk to staff who should be given details of how to share any information that could be used to protect the child or another child from future harm.
- 11.6 If the child is at immediate risk of significant harm contact the Police on 999.
- 11.7 Where there is already a care and support plan there should be a multi-agency strategy discussion to decide whether a Strategy Meeting is necessary to inform the development or review of a plan for the child. This is managed by the relevant childcare social work team.

