

Children Missing from Home or Care in Somerset

This protocol should be used in
conjunction with the South West
Child Protection Procedures



CONTENTS:

IF YOU ARE
CONCERNED THAT
A CHILD MAY BE AT
RISK OF, OR MAY
BE SUFFERING
SIGNIFICANT HARM
CALL US ON

0300 123 2224

Purpose of the protocol	2
Definitions	2
Reporting a child as missing	3
Risk assessment	3
Children who are at risk of going missing or who repeatedly go missing	4
Returning children and follow up interviews	4
Timescales	6
Use of public media	7
Longer absences	7
Monitoring and review	7



USEFUL RESOURCES:

[Child Exploitation Screening Tool](#)



[South West Child Protection Procedures](#)

[Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset](#)

PURPOSE OF THE PROTOCOL

Children who go missing from home or care may be at risk of harm. The reasons for their absence are varied and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances or their experiences of care. Every missing episode should be robustly responded to agencies in Somerset, and professionals must work together to ensure a consistent and effective response is given to the child upon their return.

This multi agency protocol aims to support this and highlight how all agencies working with children in Somerset must work together to reduce risk and ensure children are safeguarded.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and children looked after by the Local Authority who go missing are also included in this protocol.

DEFINITIONS:

For the purposes of this protocol, and to focus resources on children who are most vulnerable to exploitation and risk, the following categories are used.

MISSING (from home or care):

Missing (from home or care) when their whereabouts cannot be established and the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests that the person may be subject to crime or is at risk from themselves or others.

ABSENT (from home or care):

(from home or care) when a child is not at a place where they are expected or required to be but are not considered to be at apparent risk. Police will not routinely be sent to investigate such occurrences. Instead, the parents or carers (including care provision staff) will be asked to carry out some checks on where the child is. If there are concerns that the child is or may be experiencing significant harm, a multi-agency strategy discussion may be convened.

Government guidance on the definition of county lines exploitation and criminal exploitation:

GOV.UK guidance: [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>

If a carer or parent does not notify the police that a child is missing, this will require investigation in relation to any further safeguarding concerns. This may be through a request for CSC involvement or a disciplinary investigation (in the case of a professional carer not notifying).

Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset - follow this link

Children who are missing from education or hospital/health settings do not fall under the remit of this document - [see South West Child Protection Procedures for more information.](#)

REPORTING THE CHILD AS MISSING:

Missing children must be reported to the police as soon as the concern is raised (related to age / understanding / vulnerability). The parent or carer / care provision who notifies the police should make available:

- A description of the child/young person
- Where they were seen and by who
- When the child was last seen and with who
- A recent photograph, family addresses and known acquaintances
- Any previous history of absconding and information about where they were found
- The name and address of the child's GP and Dentist
- The name and address of the child's school
- Circumstances which increase the risk to a child, and the nature and likely imminence of that risk, should be drawn to the attention of the Police

For children considered absent but not missing, basic checks on their safety and whereabouts should be made before consideration of a missing report being made to the police. For care providers and professional carers such as fosterers, the [Philomena Protocol](#) should be utilised to ensure all basic steps to confirm a child's safety have been taken before making a missing notification to the police.

This will always be subject to individual safety plans made by the professional team around the family and in specified circumstances an immediate missing report may be made even where a child's whereabouts are known but they are not where they are expected to be. As an example – a child subject to exploitation known to be in a high-risk area / situation indicating immediate risk of harm.

RISK ASSESSMENT:

It is the responsibility of parents and carers to determine the whereabouts of their children and secure their safe return wherever this is possible. Parents and carers must provide clear information about the child's vulnerability and circumstances (see section above) to assist the police to safely determine if the child is **Absent** or **Missing** as defined on [page 2](#).

Police will undertake a risk assessment of the child as a part of taking the initial details. It is important that carers give the police robust information about the child's vulnerabilities and needs to assist them in determining the level of response required.



CHILDREN WHO ARE AT RISK OF GOING MISSING OR WHO REPEATEDLY GO MISSING:

Where children go missing repeatedly (three or more occasions in a 28 day period), consideration should be given to creating a Trigger Plan for the child to consider the risk of further episodes and how this can be reduced. Exploitation (including Child Sexual Exploitation), should always be considered.

Effective Multi-agency collaboration and partnership working is required to support and protect children who are at risk of missing episodes. Where children are known to be at risk of going missing from home or from care it is important that consideration is given to using resources from across the partnership which may include consideration of an Early Help or Child and Family Assessment, or undertaking Section 47 enquiries.

Where a **Child Looked After** is at risk of going missing, or repeatedly goes missing, their Care Plan must reflect this and include clear risk management measures, mitigating actions and resources required to prevent absconding. This includes Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC), who go or may go missing.

RETURNING CHILDREN AND FOLLOW UP INTERVIEWS:

When a child is reported as **missing**, the police will inform Somerset Direct who will send a notification to any allocated Social Worker or Family Intervention Service worker or manage the information as a safeguarding referral where there is no allocated worker.

Parent, carers and the police should agree actions in respect of the safe return of the child to include safety of the home or placement and support required for the child on their return. The attitude of professionals has a significant impact on how the child will engage with support in the future and the most 'streetwise' children are often the most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

When the child is found, the Police will undertake a **Safe and Well Check** and decide if it is safe to return the child to their home or care home placement. Where it is not considered safe, Police will liaise with Children's Social Care or the Emergency Duty Team if out of hours to find investigate alternative provision or put in place services to safely maintain the home until day-services can re-engage.

The police will refer to Somerset Direct who will contact the Family Intervention Service (FIS) Preventing Missing and Exploitation team (PMEX) to arrange the missing return interview (MRI). Recording of MRIs is on the LCS case recording system.

The MRI will be undertaken by a worker who is not the parent or (usually) professional carer. PMEX will be asked to undertake the interview although, where the child expresses a preference to speak with someone other than the PMEX worker arrangements will be made to allow this to happen. This may include a professional care worker, a social worker or other responsible adult with who the child has a positive and established relationship.

The allocated PMEX worker should determine who is best placed to undertake the interview, ensure that it takes place in a timely way and review the outcome of the interview for

relevant action and support, including requesting the involvement of other relevant services to meet identified needs. Where a child is placed in Somerset by another local authority, Somerset Direct will liaise with the allocated worker from the placing authority to decide these actions.

The MRI template should be used to structure the discussion and to support a consistent approach across the area. It is important that following the return interview, the outcome is seen swiftly by a line manager to determine any further actions which may be required. If the child is receiving support through a multi-agency plan, other involved agencies will be notified of any identified needs.

The template contains questions relevant to needs and risks for the child, including push and pull factors, and should be reviewed by the allocated worker (usually PMEX) and their manager in order to consider the need for further action. This might include the completion of a Team Around the Family meeting, Early Help Assessment or Children and Families Assessment, a Strategy Discussion or referral to other processes and services.

All missing children will have a record maintaining in the CSC case management system (LCS), showing the actions taken to support the child and or investigate further concerns.

Where a child is open to a Social Worker, LCS will also be used to record the Social Work response to the missing episode(s) and the Social Work meaningful contact post a return for all children who are working with a Social Worker at the time of going missing.

Other involved agencies should add relevant alerts to their record systems to highlight any risks to the child, in line with their agency policy.



TIMESCALES

(for Police and Children's Social Care actions)

Once all reasonable attempts have been made to locate a child, if whereabouts are unknown or high risk identified, the missing child must be reported to the police.

For absent children, a police report should be made when all attempts to contact the child have been exhausted, or where significant risk is evidenced regarding the child's known whereabouts to be unsafe.

The duty Police Inspector will determine and / or confirm the Missing or Absent status and allocate resources as appropriate.

Police and carers and parents should agree to communicate regularly during the Missing or Absent period and share information that may be relevant to the child's vulnerability and safety.

Somerset Children Looked After who are missing for more than **24 hours** should be reported to the relevant CLA Operations Manager and planning meetings will be convened as necessary.

The Social Worker should notify their line manager of a Child Looked After who is missing as soon as this is known. If a Somerset child is residing in another area and goes missing, their care provider should notify Somerset Children's Social Care.

Case Escalation

After **48 hours** of missing, a multi-agency strategy discussion including Children's Social Care, Police, Education, Health and any other involved agency must be convened to plan strategies to return any child who is open to CSC social work or FIS teams. This will be convened by agreement between the police and Children's Social Care.

There will be further review strategy discussions convened every **24 hours** until the child is returned.

If a child is missing for **14 days**, a further multi-agency strategy discussion should be held, convened by the Reviewing Detective Inspector, attended by Children's Social Care Operations Manager and Head of Service, together with other appropriate staff from both and other agencies. At this meeting these senior officers should reach a clear position about the actions being taken in respect of the child and should satisfy themselves that all that should be done is being done.

USE OF PUBLIC MEDIA:

It is for the Police to advise the media regarding a child missing from the care of the local authority. If the child is deemed medium risk and a medial appeal is thought to be of benefit, this needs to be authorised by a Chief Inspector. A decision to publicise by press or television will always be made in consultation with those who have Parental Responsibility.

LONGER ABSENCES:

A missing child/young person should be notified to the Police National Missing Person's Bureau as per Avon and Somerset Constabulary policy. All missing reports are also circulated on the Police National Computer.

Whilst a Child Looked After remains missing, their case should be identified as "open" on the Children's Social Care database (LCS) and the Director of Children's Services, or nominated senior manager, should formally review all cases where children have been absent for six months or more and should be satisfied about the actions taken to recover the child. Relevant updates and information should also be shared with the child's Independent Reviewing officer and the Child Looked After health team.

All Police missing person's files will remain "live" until the person is traced or until the Basic Command Unit's Detective Chief Inspector is satisfied that all lines of enquiry have been exhausted.

MONITORING AND REVIEW:

The Director of Children's Services and the Detective Superintendent with responsibility for Child Protection, ICB Chief Nursing Officer (SSCP Executive) and senior managers in all partner agencies are responsible for ensuring adherence to this protocol.

The effectiveness of the protocol and associated multi-agency safeguarding arrangements will be monitored through the Child Exploitation subgroup. This will ensure that safeguarding action on individual cases is robust and that strategic safeguarding action for missing children is appropriately progressed. The chair of the subgroup will provide a report to be included in the SSCP annual report with the purpose of assessing effectiveness and identifying recommendations for improved practice.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children will be monitored in line with other missing children.



Somerset Safeguarding
Children Partnership

This publication has been produced by the
Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership

www.somersetsafeguardingchildren.org.uk

Published: June 2023