

POLICY & PROCEDURE FOSTER CHILDREN MISSING FROM THEIR FOSTER HOME



Foster Care Link

1. Statutory Framework

The statutory framework for the control of such incidents is prescribed by Regulation 13 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards – Standard 5 ‘Children Missing from Care’. In addition these procedures have been updated to include the revised Statutory Guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014

Foster Care Link operates in accordance with the London Procedure for Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home and the London Child Protection Procedures and the local ‘Runaway and Missing from Home or Care’ protocols for the area in which the foster carer lives. This can be accessed on the following link for London: http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/procedures/supplementary_procedures/safeguarding_children_missing_from_home_and_care/

For the Foster Care Link sub-office in Oldham, the Greater Manchester Child Protection Policies and Missing from Home or Care Protocol will apply and for the Midlands sub-office the Leicester City Child Protection and Protocols will apply.

(See also Foster Care Link’s Child Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation Policy and Procedure)

2. Protecting Looked after Children.

Children in the care system can be particularly vulnerable. They are at risk from child sexual exploitation, trafficking, gang and criminal activities. There is evidence that the risk of a child going missing from a placement or becoming involved in exploitation or criminal behaviour, is increased the further away the child is from their home. In addition children who do not feel they are being consulted or listened to and have their views taken seriously, particularly in relation to placement decisions and moves, are more likely to run away. It is essential that all those responsible for the child’s care, listen to the child’s views and take those views into account as far as possible. Where it is not practicable or safe to follow the child’s views, this should be fully explained to the child.

3. Timeframes and Reporting

When a child is initially placed with a Foster Care Link carer, the rules around planned and unplanned absences should be agreed. If a child has a history of absconding or is thought to be at risk of absconding, detailed written plans should be put in place so that everyone, including the child, is aware of what will happen in the event of an unplanned absence. The foster carers should, with the child’s knowledge, take a clear head and shoulders colour photograph, that can be given to the police in the event of the child going missing. Even where there is no history or expectation of unauthorised

POLICY & PROCEDURE FOSTER CHILDREN MISSING FROM THEIR FOSTER HOME



absence, foster carers should be clear about what to do in the event of such an absence. The placing authority and the local authority where the carer lives should have a 'Children and Young People who Run Away or are Missing from Home or Care' protocol. Wherever possible, carers should be provided with copies of these protocols. Planning should include how soon after the expected time of return, the child should be reported as missing by the carer to the Police and the child's social worker. The criteria for reporting the child missing should be included in the LAC Placement Plan. The role of the placing agency's emergency out of hours team, in relation to missing children, should be clearly explained to the foster carer.

Foster Carers must have clear written details of who to contact, including the Emergency Out of Hours Team for the placing authority and the area authority.

In the event that clear guidance is not provided on placement the following should be used as a general guide **only**. The **maximum** periods which should elapse before a Young Person/Child is reported missing should be:

- young person over the age of 16 - 6 hours
- young person over the age of 14 – 4 hours
- young person under the age of 14 - 2 hours
- child under the age of 11 – immediately

These maximum times are based on the assumption that the child's mental age is equivalent to their chronological age and that there is no known reason for assuming the child would come to some harm. Where a child's mental age is lower than their chronological age or there are known risks to the child, including any medical concerns, their absence should be reported immediately. If foster carers are in doubt they should speak to the child's social worker, the social workers manager, the out of hour's team or someone from Foster Care Link. Foster carers must **never** take the decision not to report an unauthorised absence, of their own volition. A decision not to report must always be done in consultation with someone from the placing agency.

Supervising Social Workers should also be informed at an appropriate time of the unauthorised absence, though primarily this will be an incident for the Child's Social Worker to manage.

The reluctance of the Police to accept frequent notifications of known persistent absconders does not affect the requirement to notify them. Notification should be made on each occasion when a child is missing. Children who go missing on a regular basis must be a cause for serious concern and the placing agency should hold a Strategy Meeting and/or a Looked After Child Review to examine the causes for repeat absences and if necessary change the Care Plan.

The Police will require a detailed description of the child, including such things as:

- clothing being worn, including type of footwear,
- height,
- build,

POLICY & PROCEDURE FOSTER CHILDREN MISSING FROM THEIR FOSTER HOME



- colour of hair and eyes,
- any significant marks, tattoo's, piercings, scars, etc.
- jewellery worn.

In addition the police will require a recent photograph, if one exists. They will want to know whether the child is in possession of a mobile phone and if so, the number of the phone. The police should be made aware if the child has social media accounts that could give indicators of where they may be. They will also ask for contact information for any of the child's family and friends. Foster carers should also check whether the young person has taken money with them, taken their passport if they have one and any other personal possessions/clothes, prescribed medication, sports bags, rucksacks or suitcases that may indicate that they are not likely to immediately return to the placement.

Carers should ensure that they have this information easily available.

4. When the Child Returns

Carers should ensure that they notify the Police and the child's social worker immediately the child returns to the placement.

Carers should be welcoming when the child returns and let the child know they were concerned about them. Children should not be punished for unauthorised absences, but must be told that it is not acceptable.

Safe and well checks should be carried out by the police as soon as possible after the child returns. This is to check to see if the child has suffered any harm, where and with whom they have been and to give them the opportunity to disclose any offending behaviour by or against them.

The placing authority should also offer the child an " independent return interview", carried out by an independent person, approved by the authority. This should be an in-depth interview carried out by someone who is properly trained and able to follow up any actions that emerge. A written record of the interview should be made and should include any recommendations for future action. A copy of the written record should be sent to Foster Care Link to enable the agency to take any necessary action or to at least be aware of any action the local authority may wish to take. If a copy of the written record is not received within 10 working days of the interview, the foster carers supervising social worker must make a formal written request for a copy.

The primary purpose of this interview is to try to ascertain why the child/young person was absent, who they were with and were they in a safe place, as well as finding out whether the child/young person has any concerns about their foster placement. It is also to try to help them understand the importance of not absenting themselves without permission. Again a written record should be made of the interview and the interviewer should ensure that Foster Care Link and the child's social worker have a copy.

POLICY & PROCEDURE FOSTER CHILDREN MISSING FROM THEIR FOSTER HOME



The social worker, the foster carer(s) and the child need to negotiate an agreement about what the child does if they do not return to the foster home at the expected time, e.g. contacting the foster carer to confirm they are safe and well, whilst making it clear that the use of such an arrangement must be the exception rather than the rule. Consideration may need to be given as to whether their current placement is the right one.

Support and advice is available at all times for the carer through their Supervising Social Worker, in line with Foster Care Link's policy on providing 24 hours support to carer's.

Policy updated Nov 2022