Swindon and Wiltshire Children Missing from Home and Care Protocol

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Immediate response where a child is missing

- All reasonable efforts to locate the child should be made. This should include searching the local area, contacting friends and family members, and trying to contact the child directly.
- If the child cannot be located within a reasonable timescale for the child's age and taking into account any vulnerabilities, they should be reported as missing to the police immediately.
- If the child has an allocated Social Worker, they should be notified (via the Emergency Duty Service out of hours). Residential homes should also notify their registration authority as appropriate.
- The police will prioritise missing children reports.

The following information needs to be provided to the police when a child is being reported as missing:

- Details about the child's family or care placement, including names of parents/carers, address and any contact details for the child, and the child's legal status
- A physical description of the child
- Information on friends and family and/or other possible locations
- Details of the circumstances of the child going missing, including the time and whom they were last seen with
- A recent photograph of the child
- Details of any mobile phone numbers/email addresses
- Any safeguarding concerns
- Any health issue which may increase the child's risk e.g. diabetes or epilepsy

1. Purpose and Scope of this Protocol

When children go missing from home or care, this is a clear signal that something is wrong in their lives. Going missing has serious implications for a child's welfare as it puts them at risk of harm in the short term and will affect longer term outcomes. Research also indicates that children who go missing are more vulnerable to Child Criminal and Sexual Exploitation, substance misuse and involvement in crime.

In January 2014, the Department for Education published statutory guidance for local authorities on children who run away or go missing from care. This protocol is intended to compliment the statutory guidance, and provide an updated and localised procedure and advice.

Wiltshire's Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership (SVPP) and Swindon's Safeguarding Partnership (SSP) have produced this protocol to ensure that all agencies work together to:

- prevent children from going missing
- take action to safeguard the welfare of children who have gone missing
- monitor and review patterns of children who go missing

The protocol covers all children and young people under 18 years old who go missing from home or care, including children who are forced out of the family home.

2. Assessing and Categorising Risk

2.1 Missing Persons definition

As outlined in College of Policing's Authorised Professional Practice 2017:

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

What if a young person goes missing?

If a child or young person has gone missing, and it is safe to do so, steps should be taken to try and find them immediately. For example:

- Calling the child or young person's mobile phone.
- Contacting their friends or relatives to see if they have seen the child or young person.
- Check the place the child or young person was last seen or was expected to be.
- Check any places that the young person is known to frequent.
- Allow the child or young person a reasonable period to return of their own accord.

Where a child or young person is believed to be immediate risk of harm then this should be reported to the police immediately.

2.2 Levels of risk

All reports of missing children sit within a continuum of risk from low through to high-risk cases that require immediate intensive action.

Professionals should refer to the table of risk levels when reporting a child as missing.

Level of risk	Definition
High	The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely
Medium	The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious
Low	The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal
Very Low	There is a very low risk of harm to either the subject or the public

https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/

2.3 Children who have absconded

If a child or young person is on bail or is the subject of a criminal court order requiring them to remain at a particular address and they are missing from that address, this will be a criminal matter and **the child must be reported as missing to the police immediately.** There may also be a need for a safeguarding/welfare response to be made alongside a criminal justice one.

2.4 Children who have been abducted

If a child is unlawfully removed from the care of anyone who is legally looking after them, whether it is a parent or foster carer or another form of childcare, **the child must be reported as missing to the police immediately via 999.** This includes any child who is the subject of an Interim Care Order or Care Order and is removed from a placement by parents or others, contrary to the care plan.

Where the child is subject to a Care Order, Emergency Protection Order or in Police Protection, Social Workers may consider seeking legal advice on obtaining a Recovery Order.

For guidance on children who have been abducted and may leave the UK, please see section 11.

3. Multi-Agency Working

All agencies will ensure that there is an appropriate level of understanding and awareness of when children go missing and what to do. To ensure a high quality of integrated working and joint responses when children go missing, all agencies will:

- Share information in a timely and lawful manner;
- Base decisions and actions on missing children risk assessments;
- Make referrals to appropriate agencies for children, including Child Protection referrals where the child is at risk of significant harm; and,
- Work jointly to share information and intelligence that enables the development of services for missing children in Swindon and Wiltshire.

Although the police have lead responsibility for locating a missing child, parents, carers and professionals may all have vital information that could help and it is important that agencies working with the child share any information they have.

Children may continue to attend school or clubs and activities or try to contact friends whilst missing. If a school or service has any knowledge of a missing child attending, being seen or contacting others, this should be shared with the police as soon as possible and the rest of the professional network.

For Children Looked After, enquiries should be made with the child's immediate and extended family or any other network of friends. It should be made clear to them that it is an expectation that they persuade the child to return to their placement in the event that they make contact.

Consideration should also be given to checking the child's email or social networking accounts to see if they are still being accessed.

4. Information Sharing and Analysis

4.1 Information sharing within a local authority

In order to ensure that children who go missing are kept safe, all agencies must share information about missing incidents and the circumstances surrounding them.

Swindon and Wiltshire Children's Services collect and collate the following information about children who go missing from home or care (including children from other areas who have been placed within Swindon and Wiltshire boundary areas):

- name of child
- dates of missing episodes and duration
- services currently working with the child
- whether the child was missing from home or care
- whether there are concerns regarding child exploitation
- whether a missing risk assessment has been completed
- whether a missing child notification has been completed
- whether a timely Return Home Interview has been carried out (see section 16 for more information)

4.2 Information sharing with other local authorities

Where it is known that a Swindon or Wiltshire child has gone missing to another local authority area, Wiltshire Police will contact that area's police force during the course of the missing person investigation. The relevant local authority will be notified by Swindon or Wiltshire's Children's Social Care. Where families go missing, Children's Social Care in the relevant Swindon or Wiltshire local authority will send notifications to all other local authorities giving details of the family in order to help locate them.

If a child from another local authority area is found in Swindon or Wiltshire, Children's Social Care in Swindon or Wiltshire as relevant will notify the home local authority.

Wiltshire Police will also share any intelligence regarding Child Exploitation with the relevant neighbouring Local Authorities.

For more information on Swindon's approach to sharing information between local authorities, see here: https://swcpp-swindon.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/children-and-families-moving-across-local-authority-boundaries-or-abroad

For more information on Wiltshire's approach, see here: https://swcpp-wiltshire.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/children-and-families-moving-across-local-authority-boundaries-or-abroad

5. Agency Roles and Responsibilities

5.1 Wiltshire Police

Wiltshire Police will:

- Collect and collate missing persons reports
- Carry out investigations to locate missing children
- Carry out a risk assessment on all children who go missing and keep the case under constant review
- Notify either Contact Swindon or Wiltshire Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) or Opal/Emerald team (as appropriate) of missing children reports
- Use Police Powers under the Children Act 1989 as required to safeguard missing children who are located
- Carry out Prevention Interviews as soon as possible when the child returns or is located Where there are Child Protection concerns, Contact Swindon/MASH will be informed, and Wiltshire Police will be involved in strategy discussions and enquiries as appropriate.

5.2 Children's Social Care

Children's Social Care has a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote children's welfare, including children at risk because of ongoing missing incidents.

Children's Social Care will:

- Carry out an assessment of children's needs where going missing is a presenting issue
- Provide an early help or statutory social work service for children who go missing, based on their assessed needs
- Receive all missing children notifications from Wiltshire Police and other agencies
- Keep a record of all children who are reported missing.
- Where a child is already known to Children's Social Care, ensure preventative planning and appropriate responses to missing incidents are included in the child's plan.
- Carry out Return Home Interviews independent of their care provider for children known to Children's Social Care, where this is the child's preference or where the child is over 10 years old and is not already known to Children's Social Care.
- When a child is Looked After, Children's Social Care will ensure the care provider has all the relevant information needed in order to produce a comprehensive missing report.
- If a child from another local authority is reported missing, Children's Social Care will share the missing person's report and PPN with the relevant local authority.

Where a looked after child goes missing, their allocated Social Worker is responsible for notifying Children's Social Care managers in line with local procedures and the Virtual School. Social Workers are also responsible for notifying the child's parents or anyone else with parental responsibility but ***only when the child is classed as missing*** and where this is consistent with the child's welfare.

5.3 Foster carers, residential workers and housing support workers

Where the child is looked after by Swindon or Wiltshire, a care leaver (under 18) or living in Swindon/Wiltshire young person's supporting housing (under 18), their foster carer, residential worker or housing support worker must:

- Contribute to any plans designed to reduce the risk of going missing
- Respond to missing incidents in line with this protocol
- If a child goes missing, notify Wiltshire Police, Swindon/Wiltshire Children's Social Care or Emergency Duty Service and parents where appropriate
- Provide relevant information when reporting a child missing to inform the police risk assessment, including health information that would increase a child's risk
- Carry out joint risk assessments with Social Workers of children missing from placements
- Work with the police and Children's Social Care to ensure the child's safe return to their placement
- Provide accurate and timely records of incidents to inform data gathering on individual and group patterns of running away.
- All children looked after have an individualised Health Care plan that can be shared by the foster carer to highlight any health needs that would increase the risk if they were missing.

Residential units should have procedures in place to both prevent Children Looked After going missing and to locate, return and support Children Looked After who have gone missing.

For more information, see:

Fostering Services - National Minimum Standards 2011 Standard 5
Guide to Children s Home Standards inc quality standards 2015

5.4 Emergency Duty Service

Swindon and Wiltshire's Emergency Duty Services provide a social work service to cover emergency situations arising out of office hours and will:

- Respond to notifications from foster carers, residential workers and housing support workers on behalf of Children's Social Care where a Child Looked After is reported as missing
- Provide a response for any missing child who is located by either ensuring their safe return home, to their placement or where necessary, arranging for emergency overnight accommodation
- Pass on all relevant information to Children's Social Care, Wiltshire Police or other services for further action

5.5 Schools and colleges

Schools and colleges in Wiltshire and Swindon will:

- Make referrals for children who they think are at risk of going missing to Contact Swindon/Wiltshire MASH.
- Understand that going missing is a safeguarding concern, and treat any incidents as such
- Where appropriate, refer children for support from external agencies
- Help children returning from a missing episode to settle back into education
- Conduct Return Home Interviews where school has been identified as the most appropriate agency.
- Schools will monitor the attendance of children who have been missing or who are at risk of going missing.

6. Preventing Missing Episodes

It is important that children are able to get support to prevent them from going missing, if this is something they are considering. If a child isn't known to Children's Social Care already, and a risk of going missing becomes apparent to another agency, they should refer to Contact Swindon/Wiltshire MASH immediately with all relevant information to help them assess the risk of harm to the child.

Where Children's Social Care is already working with a child who is at risk of going missing, Social Workers and the professional network will have an opportunity to work with the child to reduce the risk and create a safety plan.

Risk will be discussed in meetings such as Child in Need, Child Protection Conferences/core groups or Children Looked After reviews in order to plan what actions to take, support for the child and actions to reduce the risk of further missing episodes.

7. Children Missing from Home

7.1 Reporting a missing child to police

When a child goes missing from home, their parents/carers should report this to the police. Any failure to do so will be considered a safeguarding issue.

If a professional becomes aware that a parent/carer has not reported a child as missing, they should report the child to police immediately, particularly if there are concerns about the child's welfare, mental health or risk of harm prior to them going missing or if they have had previous missing episodes.

If a Social Worker becomes aware that a child has not been reported as missing, parents should be contacted and encouraged to file a missing report or Children's Social Care will report the child as missing.

7.2 Carrying out a risk assessment

Where a child goes missing, Wiltshire Police will carry out the risk assessment at the time of the report being made, based on the information they are given and any information about that child that they already hold.

7.3 Referring children and families for services

All missing children who are not already known to Children's Social Care should be referred by the police to Contact Swindon or Wiltshire MASH where a decision will be made within 24 hours on what action to take and what services are most suitable to support the child on their return.

Children's Social Care will refer children and families to the most appropriate service to undertake an assessment once the child returns.

7.4 Child protection concerns

Children's Social Care will consider convening a Section 47 Strategy Discussion meeting when any of the following criteria is met:

- There are concerns that the child is or may suffer significant harm whilst away or on their return.
- Has been missing for 24 hours or more.
- Has had three missing episodes in 90 days.
- Is under 13 years of age.
- Where a pregnant woman goes missing and there are concerns for the welfare of the unborn child. Please see Swindon and Wiltshire Pre-Birth Protocols.
- Where a family goes missing and there are concerns about the welfare of a child because of the presence in the household of a person who poses a risk to children, or is already known or suspected to have harmed the child.
- Where a child is missing and suspected of being a victim of trafficking.

8. Children Missing from Care

8.1 Recording missing incidents

As in 2.1, if a child or young person has gone missing, and it is safe to do so, steps should be taken to try and find them immediately.

Foster carers and workers must keep accurate records of:

- The date, time and location the child goes missing from;
- any relevant circumstances, incidents or identified risks;
- action taken to locate or contact the child;
- date and time of when reported to the police and the log number;
- details of any conversations and agreed actions taken with social workers and police; and,
- if the child was in the company of others, including their details and descriptions.

8.2 Children living outside of Swindon/Wiltshire

Although carers and workers in the host authority will follow their own local procedures, this protocol applies to all children who are looked after by Swindon/Wiltshire regardless of where they are placed to live.

Children Looked After who are living far away from their home local authority are more likely to be at risk of Child Exploitation (including Child Sexual Exploitation and Criminal Exploitation), substance misuse and involvement in criminal activity than those who are living closer to home. It is important that their vulnerability be recognised when planning for placements and that Social Workers remain vigilant to the increased risks during placement.

A Notification of Placement form is to be shared with police, health and education in the area the child has been placed in.

Children's Social Care staff involved in commissioning and choosing placements for Children Looked After who are living out of the area must contact receiving local authorities to get information about the local area and whether there will be any increased risks to the child, especially where the child has a history of going missing.

8.3 Children living in Wiltshire or Swindon from another local authority area

Where children are placed in Wiltshire or Swindon from another local authority area, it is their home local authority's responsibility to offer a Return Home Interview if that young person goes missing. If they deem that a strategy meeting is requires, it is also the home local authority's responsibility to arrange this, and invite Wiltshire or Swindon, as the host local authority.

8.4 Philomena Protocol

Once the Philomena Protocols have been completed, there is an expectation that parents/carers should complete their own basic checks to ensure children actually missing before reporting to police.

The Philomena Protocol aims to ensure that, when a child goes missing from care, everything possible is done by all partners to reduce risk and harm, enable their safe return, and prevent repeat missing occurrences.

What if a young person goes missing?

If a child or young person has gone missing, and it is safe to do so, steps should be taken to try and find them immediately. For example:

- Calling the child or young person's mobile phone.
- Contacting their friends or relatives to see if they have seen the child or young person.
- Check the place the child or young person was last seen or was expected to be.
- Check any places that the young person is known to frequent.

Allow the child or young person a reasonable period to return of their own accord.

9. Children Missing from Hospital or Child Mental Health settings

Hospital staff will usually only report a person missing where they identify a risk to the patient or others. Generally, children will come into this category and so the police will be informed of a child that has gone missing from inpatient care and specifically where there has been no plan for discharge.

In relation to children who go missing from an Emergency Department it will depend on whether there is a specific risk to the child and whether they need further assessment or treatment. As such, it is important to investigate, risk assess and record these in line with this protocol.

10. When a Child Does Not Return Within 24 Hours

Where a missing child has not returned within 24 hours, relevant senior managers should be informed. Senior managers should be sighted on the case to make informed decisions when allocating relevant resources to locate and safeguard the child in cooperation with senior police officers.

11. Informing the Media

For high-risk missing children, the police may consider using media coverage to increase the chances of quickly locating the missing child. This will be discussed with parents and social workers in advance.

Where a child lives at home, any decision to inform the media will be taken by the child's parents in consultation with the police.

Where a child is accommodated by Children's Social Care, this decision will be taken jointly by the Director of Children's Social Care, following consultation with the allocated social worker and their manager, the police and the child's parents.

If the child is on a Care Order, the Director of Children's Social Care will make the decision to inform the media but will inform parents in advance where this is in the child's best interests.

12. The Child's Return

12.1 Prevention Interview

Once a child returns home, the police will conduct a Prevention Interview to establish what has happened to the child whilst missing and check their general welfare. This will also look at whether the child:

- Has suffered any harm.
- Has been the victim of any offence.
- Has committed any offence.

If the child is returning home, the police should also establish whether there are any child protection issues, and if it is safe for the child to return there. As a result of these checks, the police will decide if in addition to the Police Missing Report that is sent to Contact Swindon/MASH, there is a need for a Police Protection Notice to be submitted to Contact Swindon/MASH with further information.

12.2 Return Home Interview

A Return Home Interview (RHI) should be offered to all children within 72 hours of their return, unless it is assessed and recorded by Contact Swindon/Wiltshire MASH/the Social Worker that it is not appropriate. An example of this would be that one parent has agreed for a child to stay out but not communicated this to the other parent.

The purpose of the RHI is to give the child an opportunity to speak to someone about why they go missing – known as the 'push and pull factors' - and explore what help and support they need, address their reasons for going missing, and provide them with information on how to stay safe.

It is important that the interview is in depth and carried out by someone independent of the child's care but also someone that the child has a good relationship with and feels comfortable talking to. Children should always be given the opportunity to speak without the presence of a parent or carer, but the RHI should, where possible, include the views of the parent/carer.

Where a young person declines to engage in a RHI, they should be offered the opportunity to talk to another trusted adult. The individual responsible for the RHI should obtain relevant information from the parents or carers. Information from the RHI should be used to inform case planning and future risk assessment.

RHIs will be shared with the police when consent to do so is given by the child. If any safeguarding concerns are identified during the RHI, they should be referred into Contact Swindon/MASH.

If you wish to see a copy of the Return Home Interview forms, please contact either svpp@wiltshire.gov.uk or safeguardingpartnership@swindon.gov.uk .

12.3 Further work to be completed on the child's return

Where the child has gone missing from a care placement, their Social Worker and their Independent Reviewing Officer will discuss the Care Plan and whether any adjustments are needed to manage the child's vulnerabilities related to going missing.

They may convene a Child Looked After review to discuss what support is needed to avoid further missing episodes.

13. Children Missing in Specific Circumstances

13.1 Children at risk of Child Exploitation

Unauthorised absences, returning home or to placements late, and going missing on a frequent basis are all possible indicators of sexual and criminal exploitation. Patterns and frequency of absence or going missing may increase as the child becomes more involved in exploitation.

Professionals should refer to the Swindon Safeguarding Partnership and Wiltshire Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership websites for information on indicators and what action to take when there are suspicions of exploitation.

Please also see the following for more information:

- Guide for practitioners produced by the Department for Education in 2017.
- Home Office County Lines Guidance
- County Lines posters and leaflets

13.2 Trafficked children

The illegal and secretive nature of trafficking can mean that traffickers may take all possible steps to stop the child from coming into contact with agencies and professionals in an effort to hide their activities and maintain control over the child.

One method of achieving this is to move the child on quickly. Trafficked children may also be moved on because the nature or location of the exploitation changes over time. As a result, a national approach is needed to ensure that information is shared across the country if necessary. This should be done through a referral to the National Referral Mechanism.

13.3 Children from other local authority areas

A child from another area may come to the attention of Wiltshire Police or approach Children's Social Care for help. In these circumstances, Wiltshire Police or the Children's Social Care team will contact the child's home authority and negotiate with them to arrange their safe return. Out of hours, this will be carried out by the Emergency Duty Service.

If the child is in immediate danger or at risk of significant harm, the police and Children's Social Care will use statutory powers of intervention under the Children Act 1989 to ensure the child's immediate safety and welfare before referring the matter back to the home authority.

13.4 Forced marriage, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and abduction from the UK

If it is suspected that a child has been or may be abducted by a parent/carer and removed from the UK, the parent/s should be advised to contact Wiltshire Police for details on what action can be taken.

Forced marriage involves the obtaining of consent to marry by duress, threats and violence. If there are concerns that a child has gone missing because of a suspected forced marriage, Social Workers and professionals should refer to the government guidance on Forced Marriage for details of what action to take. Professionals should also contact the Forced Marriage Unit based in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if they think a child is likely to be taken out of the UK due to forced marriage.

Legislation in the Marriage and Civil Partnership Act 2022, states that it is illegal to marry under the age of 18 or to make a child believe they are married even if the arrangement is not legal i.e. a cultural service or promise https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/28

If there are concerns that a girl may be removed from the UK for the purposes of FGM, professionals should follow the Swindon Safeguarding Partnership or Wiltshire Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership guidance and contact the police and Children's Social Care as a matter of urgency. Information is available from the government information website.

13.5 Missing from education

Accessing a suitable education is a protective factor and can support the safeguarding arrangements of children and young people. If anyone has concerns about a child or young person not accessing education provision please discuss with:

Swindon School Attendance Support Team at attendance@swindon.gov.uk

Wiltshire contact: pupilmove@wiltshire.gov.uk

13.6 Prevent duty

Local authorities are vital in the prevention of young people being radicalised. Going missing may be a sign that a child has been radicalised. Workers should be mindful of this when assessing the needs of children who go missing.

One of the key requirements of the Prevent Duty is that staff know how to identify people at risk of radicalisation or extremism and the safeguarding pathways they should use. If you are concerned that an individual may be at risk of radicalisation, you should treat this as you would any other safeguarding issue; and escalate it using your normal, internal procedures, such as informing your safeguarding lead and Contact Swindon/MASH.

14. Further Resources and Support

For children who go missing, the following resources are available for parents, carers and children.

The Philomena Protocol is a scheme that asks carers to identify children and young people who are at risk of going missing, and to record vital information about them that can be used to help find them quickly and safely https://www.wiltshire.police.uk/police-forces/wiltshire-police/areas/about-us/about-us/philomena-protocol/

Childline www.childline.org.uk 0800 1111

Forced Marriage Unit: fmu@fcdo.gov.uk 020 70080151 (see link in section 13.4 also)

Missing people www.missingpeople.org.uk 116000

Working with young people and adults who go missing and their families. Advice and information for professionals working with young people who run away or go missing.

Muslim Youth Helpline www.myh.org.uk 020 7435 8171

Reunite www.reunite.org.uk 01162 556234

Advice and help for parents whose children have been removed from the UK.

Railway Children www.railwaychildren.org.uk 01270 757 596
Advice, support and outreach work for young people on the streets and advice for adults working with them.

15. Review of Protocol

This protocol will be reviewed on a 24-monthly basis. Next review due December 2026