



**The Unauthorised Absence and Missing Child Policy**

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## The Unauthorised Absence and Missing Child Policy

**Policy Statement:** The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015

*'The protection of children standard 12.–(1) The protection of children standard is that children are protected from harm and enabled to keep themselves safe.'*

This policy should be read in conjunction with:

- The Safeguarding Children Policy
- West Mercia Police Runaway and Missing from Home Procedures

Our Place Schools has written this policy in conjunction with advice taken from the West Mercia Police and the Joint Protocol for reporting Missing Young People.

The missing person's procedure identifies the action to be taken when a child or children are missing from the home without authority.

It is the duty of Our Place Schools to protect all children and recognize that children who abscond are very vulnerable and that the level of risk increases for them during each occasion that they run away.

### Legal Framework

Our Place has a duty to safeguard vulnerable children and the Registered Person is required to prepare and implement 'the missing child' policy under The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015- Regulation 34 (4)and (5)

Legal parameters for Missing Person's Enquiries are found in both common law and in International Law. Most specifically through the European Convention of Human Rights interpreted through the Human Rights Act, 1998.

It is important to note that the Data Protection Act, 1998, does not prevent partnership working and sharing of information to ensure the safe return of a child.

Children Homes NMS 2011states that: *Children who do go missing are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return*

### Scope of the Policy

A child or children are identified as anyone under the age of 19 years having been diagnosed with a disability. The policy itself covers all children including those children who are in the Looked After Children System and those placed in the West Mercia Police Authority Boundaries by any Local Authority, including those placed in private establishments.

In agreeing the contract to place a child at Our Place Schools the placing authorities agree to adopt safeguarding policies and procedures in place within the school for the child they are placing. This

includes the unauthorised absence procedure which adopts advice from West Mercia Police for children missing in the West Mercia Police Area.

Within the context of this Policy, "Looked after Children" refers to children accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, children subject to Care Orders including Interim Care Orders, Sect 31 and 38 Children Act 1989, and children who are otherwise provided with accommodation by Section 21 Children Act 1989.

In addition the protocol will apply to all children placed within the West Mercia Police Authority area boundaries (including those aged over 18) for whom the placing Local Authorities have continuing responsibilities under The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

### Principles of the Policy

- Our Place recognizes that it is not able to anticipate every situation but that staff employed to care for children accommodated within Our Place Schools should use their professional judgement to take any action necessary to protect the safety of the children based on a robust, detailed and current risk assessment being in place for each child.
- The school identifies that each time a child absconds from the school, they are missing and, as such, place themselves, and others, at risk and that every missing episode is potentially very serious.
- Our Place identifies that any "missing" episode should be identified as such by the professionals involved and that all professionals and carers must effectively collaborate to ensure that a consistent and coherent response is given to the child on their return.

### Protocol

- In line with the guidance from West Mercia Police, any children who are at risk of going missing and each child who is known to abscond is identified and this area is included in their risk assessment. Each child who is at risk of going missing has a specific management programme designed to minimize the risk of them being absent without authority. The procedures detailed in these management plans are approved by the Registered Manager and may include *"physical restrictions on normal movement within or from the home are not used unless this is necessary to safeguard children and protect their welfare and development. Such measures are only used where agreed with the responsible authority and the parents. Such restrictions for one child do not impose similar restrictions on other children. For children's homes that are not secure where specific measures including electronic devices are used to monitor children there is a written policy that sets out how they should be used, how they promote the welfare of children, how children will be informed of their use, how legitimate privacy of children will be protected and how children will be protected from potential abuse of such measures.* Standards Act, National Minimum Standards, Children's Homes, 2011, Standards 10.4 & 10.5). This risk assessment and specific management programme forms part of the child's placement plan and will identify factors which may increase the risk of a child going missing and risk factors when a child is missing from site.
- Our Place Schools maintains current information regarding each child accommodated within the home and school, including a recent photograph of the child. This is updated and changed, if necessary, at least every 6 months and the photograph is suitable for circulation or press release if necessary. Photographs of this type are, usually, just used by the Police, however,

the consent of the person holding parental responsibility for the child will be sought if a photograph needs to be used in the course of a missing person's investigation. If possible we will gain the young person's permission to use the photo for a missing person's investigation.

- In discussion and agreement with other professionals caring for the child including the multi-disciplinary team, Registered Person, Heads of Care And Education and relevant team members a decision will be made as appropriate in discussing with the child matters of going missing. If necessary, extra support or resources will be identified to assist in this process for example, the use of social stories.
- This policy identifies two categories of missing persons:

Unauthorised Absence  
Missing Person

Staff caring for the child need to decide which of the two categories the child falls into when missing based on consideration of:

1. Circumstances of the absence
2. The Placement Plan
3. Age and maturity
4. Disability
5. Medication needed
6. Legal Status
7. Behaviour / History
8. Danger to themselves or others
9. Vulnerability
10. Disposition towards drug/ substance abuse
11. The child running to/from someone/something
12. Immediate circumstances
13. Risk of offending
14. Influence of peer groups/families/friends
15. Predatory influences on the child eg: crime/sex/drugs
16. Risk of abduction
17. The environment including weather and time of year
18. Community events

However, through this consideration it is essential that staff keep in mind the need to locate the child and ensure that they are safe.

- Depending on the above considerations there will come a point at which absence will give rise to justifiable concern and will require a formal missing person's report to the Police. This point is defined in terms of time by Our Place Schools in its unauthorised absence protocol. At this point residential staff should consult with senior staff on duty making this decision based on the best available information.
- Although Our Place Schools recognizes that the need to make a missing person's report should be decided on individual merit, formal missing person's reports need to be made to the Police after the timescale identified in the unauthorised procedure given the vulnerability of the children accommodated within the school as short absences for these children are as risky as lengthy ones.
- While a child is missing they continue to remain the responsibility of Our Place Schools

and therefore staff and the social worker are responsible for liaising with the Police while continuing to make enquiries and search for a child.

- In some cases if a child is very vulnerable or has been missing for a long time it may be necessary to publicise the case via the media. This is not a routine approach and usually a response to serious concerns for a child's safety. Primacy over such decisions lie with the Police however a member of the Our Place Schools Senior Management Team would be involved in the decision making process and in subsequent managing of media interest.
- The child's return must also be notified to any person who has been previously notified of their missing status under the "notification of significant events" policy and procedures.
- On return to Our Place, the child or children should be de-briefed, where appropriate to consider the reasons for them being missing. It may be necessary to conduct this de-brief with someone independent of the home or the child or child's social worker. Any reasons for the absence given by the child or children should be recorded in their schedule three file. This should be completed within 24 hours of their return.
- The purpose of the debrief is to:
  1. Discover factors leading to the missing episode
  2. Inform efforts to prevent further episodes
  3. Inform future Missing Persons Investigations
  4. Learn of activities, risk, associate and victimization involved in the episode and address those risks.

If it is not appropriate or possible to interview in detail the child as often is the case of children accommodated within Our Place Schools then staff caring for the child at the time will be interviewed and debriefed to illicit a clear picture of activities prior to the missing incident. Care reports will, also, be analysed to check for any circumstances or reasons which may have had an effect on the child causing them to go missing.

• On return the child will be seen by their social worker or the Independent Care and Complaints Advisor to consider why the child absented themselves.

• If a child or children state that they went missing because of abuse at the home, it is, immediately, considered to be a child protection issue and must be reported to a Designated Safeguarding Lead for the home: Lena Graham -Registered Person, Sarah Davies - Head of Care, Chris Coombs - Head of Education, David French- Director, Anne Conry- Safeguarding Lead for the Board of Governors who will notify the Children's Duty Social Work team, the child's placing authority and Ofsted.

- The two categories identified are defined within the policy as follows:

Definition of Unauthorised Absence and Missing Person

CATEGORIES	Unauthorised Absence	Missing Person
<b>Identification</b>	Accidentally or deliberately late home. Where the child’s whereabouts are known and does not jeopardise the safety of the child	Location or reason for absence is unknown due to these circumstances there is a cause for concern for the child or a potential danger to the public.
<b>Action</b>	<p>Staff decide whether to allow the child to remain temporarily in the location or arrange for their return. If they wish to arrange a return but feel that there will be public order difficulties the Police will assist. The child will not be categorised as missing. Before reporting this to the Police staff should try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to locate the child.</li> <li>- consider the circumstances and causation factors</li> <li>- consider the potential risks</li> <li>- contact parents/friends &amp; other service providers</li> </ul> <p>Staff report unauthorised absence to the Police for information only. Police will not proactively search for a child in this category and a missing person’s report will not be filed. A clear judgement must be made in each case as to the length of time that elapses before a child becomes categorised as missing. Any child whose whereabouts are not known and who cannot be contacted must not remain out overnight without formally being reported as missing .</p>	<p>Staff to report the child as missing providing detailed information to the Police by telephone. Staff to make clear that the child is missing. Staff will be given a Police OIS log reference number which must be recorded.</p> <p>The report will lead to the Police making a pro- active investigation locally and their response will be tailored to the circumstances. Decision about risk level in this case lies with the Police who will have essential dialogue with staff at this stage. Police will inform the National Missing Person's Helpline after:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 hrs - High risk</li> <li>72 hrs - Medium risk</li> <li>14 days - Low risk</li> </ul> <p>Staff must inform without delay:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents/people with Parental Responsibility</li> <li>Social Worker</li> <li>Emergency Duty Team for safeguarding if out of hours</li> </ul>
<b>Follow Up</b>	All action to be recorded and timed. All actions to be shared with the police in the event of the missing episode not being resolved at the early stage. 6 hours is regarded the absolute maximum for any child whose whereabouts is not known and who cannot be contacted to be classed as absent without being formally reported as missing. In many cases a shorter period is appropriate.	<p>All actions and times to be recorded.</p> <p>All actions to be shared with the police.</p> <p>On return the child should be de- briefed, to consider the reasons for going missing. It may be necessary to conduct this de-brief with someone independent of the home or the child or child's social worker. Any reasons for the absence given by the child or child should be recorded in their Schedule three File.</p>

## Missing Person Procedure

1. The member of staff working with the child will inform the senior on site of the child's name, what they are wearing, their current mood and where they were last seen and their current medication status i.e. what time are they next due to take any medication, emergency medication. They should also provide information about the activity the person was engaging in prior to them going missing.
2. The senior staff on site will co-ordinate a search of the home, the school building and the grounds. They will inform the site that a child is missing and call on all available staff to assist in the search. They will also contact the police to inform them that we are currently looking for a child, not for the police to come out but just so that they are aware we may need assistance. Police call centre **0300 333 3000**. If it is out of office hours or a weekend, the senior on site will contact the on call manager to inform them of the situation and that the protocol has been followed at this stage they will make the decision as to the status of the child (e.g. unauthorised absence or missing person) as per the Unauthorised Absence Policy for children missing from care in the West Mercia Police Area.
3. The senior on site will, at this point, get the missing person's information sheet from the Missing Person file in the Team Office and or school office, off- site the 'missing children's' documents are stored in the glove compartment of each car; which will include any information regarding health diagnosis and safety awareness/risk management.
4. Whilst staff are searching the site, the senior staff on duty will telephone Our Place's Schools immediate neighbours to inform them that there is a child missing and will give a brief description of the child to those people contacted and ask them to contact the school if they may see the child. Provide the home's contact telephone number.
5. The senior on site will then instruct the staff involved in the search to extend the search to the immediate area off site should the child not be found on site, which will involve the use of some vehicles. The senior will give staff members specified areas to search based on the maps also stored in the missing person's file in the Team Office. Staff involved in the search should keep the senior on site informed using the mobile radios of where they have searched and the results. It is essential that while a search of the site and immediate area is carried out that all other radio traffic ceases except for emergency / assistance calls to ensure that information is relayed clearly. Staff searching off site must take an Our Place Schools mobile phone with them to ensure that information can be relayed effectively back to the site.
6. If, after a maximum of 15 minutes a child has not been found, the senior on site will contact the Police on **0300 333 3000** (Police Call Management Centre) reporting the incident, giving information about the child as detailed on the missing persons information sheet and giving the status of the child.
7. The manager on- call or on duty will make the telephone calls necessary to parents/carers and Placing Authority social worker for the child.
8. Staff searching for the child need to continue the search until advised by the senior on duty or the Police to scale down the search or until the child is found.
9. Once a child is returned to the site and is checked to ensure that they are medically fit the senior on site will inform anyone notified of the missing status that the child has returned and the outcome of the incident.
10. The senior on site will arrange for the child to be debriefed (if appropriate) and the staff member responsible for the child prior to them being missing regarding the incident within 24 hours of the incident happening regardless of the length of time a child has been missing. The senior will write a report on the incident or appoint another member of staff to do this and will include information from the debrief session in this.
11. At this point further action will be decided and the risk assessment for the child updated. A copy of the debrief information and incident report should be forwarded to the Police when they have been involved in an incident.

## Monitoring

The Registered Person monitors absences from the home and the Police monitor reported absences from each establishment. The Police will instigate formal reviews if children show continual missing episodes including a full organisational review if one individual has three missing episodes in a 90 day period or the establishment is shown to have in excess of 12 missing episodes in one year.

For all missing person's reports the Police contact number is:

Police Call Management Centre

**Contact- 0300 333 3000**



## Missing Person Procedures Flow Chart

**Staff member working with child informs Senior on Site that the child is missing**

**Senior on Site informs the whole site and organises a search of grounds, school building and home and informs 1. Police 0300 333 3000 that we are looking for a child 2. On Call Manager**

**Senior collects child's front page from Missing Person's File in the Team Office and copies for use by Police as the missing person's information sheet if necessary.**

**The senior on site will inform Our Place's neighbours that we are looking for a child. Phone numbers in Missing Person's File Team Office.**

**Search extended to cover local area, Senior organises into groups based on locality map areas stored in Missing Person's File in Team Office. Staff take Our Place mobile phones and cars – staff must relay which areas are/have been searched.**

**After 15 minutes Police informed that child is still missing and that we require assistance. Police call centre **0300 333 3000** – the nature of the severe learning disabilities of the child must be stressed and the risk to themselves and the public.**

**Search is continued until child is found - all staff are to continue to search until informed by the Senior on Site or the Police to stop. They **MUST NOT** discontinue the search until one of the above tell them the child has been found.**

**The On Call Manager will inform the parents (or those with parental authority) and the Social Worker for the child.**

**Once found the child will be checked to ensure they are medically fit and be debriefed as appropriate. The staff member in charge of the child at the time of them going missing will be debriefed within 24 hours of the incident. Copies of the incident reports will be forwarded to the Police if they were involved in the search. The child's risk assessment is updated.**

## Sub Note

NB: Worcestershire Police Authority have asked us to notify them of the disappearance of a child at an earlier time than that stated in the 'registered missing from the home' procedures due to the severe risk and vulnerability of children with a severe learning disability and the location of Our Place School.