



London
Good Practice guidance
for
Safeguarding
Children Missing from
School

London Safeguarding Children Board
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www.londonscb.gov.uk

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Acknowledgement

The London Safeguarding Children Board thanks Jo Green (IRSC), the Metropolitan Police Missing Person's Unit and the DCSF for their contributions to this guidance.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Good Practice Guide is designed to support professionals in education services both within the local authority and in schools and other educational establishments, together with the Metropolitan Police, LA children's social care and health services, in their combined efforts to safeguard children who are missing from school ¹.

This guidance addresses particularly the second of the five outcomes set out in the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) – that all agencies and their staff should seek to maximise opportunities and minimise risks to children's well-being in relation to their:

- Physical and mental health and emotional well-being;
- Protection from harm and neglect;
- Education, training and recreation;
- The contribution made by them to society; and
- Social and economic well-being.

The guidance is offered with the aim of providing a minimum standard of safety for children who are registered with London schools and who are or go missing from school, and give rise to concern that they may be classified as missing whereabouts unknown. It provides:

- a) A timescale for taking steps to safeguard a child who is missing from school;
- b) A description of the steps which can be taken; and
- c) A framework for consideration of relevant issues at each stage – with a view to helping practitioners to identify situations where a child is vulnerable to harm, or is being harmed, and in need of a specific safeguarding response.

1.2 Linked guidance and procedures

This guidance should be used in conjunction with the *London Child Protection Procedures* (London Board, 2007), and, where appropriate, the London supplementary procedures for *Safeguarding Trafficked and Exploited Children* (London Board, 2006) and *Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home* (London Board, 2006).

2. Principles

- 2.1 The principles which should be adopted by all agencies (including Local Authorities who are corporate parents), who are responsible for locating children who go missing from school, include that:

- The safety of the child is paramount
- Parents are the custodians of the welfare and well-being of their children when the children are not in school

¹ This guidance should be read in the context of the statutory duties upon local authorities and parents as set out in the Education Acts 1996 and 2002, the Children Acts 1989 and 2004. In particular the guidance provides for professionals seeking to exercise their duty under Section 175 of the Education Act 2002 and Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure that their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Additionally, this guidance seeks to ensure that the duty to co-operate to improve the well-being of children under section 10 of the Children Act is discharged.

- The primary objective is for local (and other) agencies to work together to locate and return the child to a safe environment
- Child protection procedures are triggered where there are any concerns that a child may be at risk of harm or suffering harm
- Agency actions under this guidance will link as appropriate with actions required under related protocols, such as the *London Child Protection Procedures*
- Services will be put in place to ensure that when a child is found s/he receives the necessary ongoing support to enable her/him to live in a stable, safe environment and attend school

2.2 The London Child Protection Procedures

Sections 4. and 5. of the *London Child Protection Procedures (London Procedures)* provide information which may help staff to recognise and/or manage circumstances in which children who are missing from school may be experiencing harm or be at risk of harm. These include: children subject to fabricated or induced illness or female genital mutilation; abuse by children, domestic violence, missing children and families, sexually exploited children, trafficked children and asylum seeking children. For several of these circumstances there are supplementary, detailed London multi-agency procedures, these, and the *London Procedures* can be accessed on the London Safeguarding Children Board's website: www.londonscb.gov.uk

Research shows that children looked after by the local authority are over-represented in the cohort of children who go missing from school.

Section 11. of the *London Procedures* addresses issues relating to families moving across borough boundaries.

3. Acting to safeguard a child who is missing from school

Enquiries into the circumstances surrounding a child who is missing from school can be effectively supported by schools adopting an admissions procedure which requires a parent/carer to provide documentary evidence of their own and the child's identity and status in the UK, and the address that they are residing at. These checks should not become delaying factors in the admissions process.

3.1 Timescale

Schools and other agencies will always seek to engage parents and carers as partners in ensuring that their children are safe and able to attend school.

In the first four weeks that a child does not attend school, the school and other agencies, will make enquiries and assess the child's circumstances and their vulnerability by following the Process Steps at 3.3 below. In some cases the situation will be resolved between the school and the parent/carer. For other cases the timescale for initiating a multi-agency response will depend on the school's view of the vulnerability of the child.

Concern for a child may be so high that a referral may be made to the police immediately the child is found to be missing. Alternatively, information may emerge over the course of time which raises the level of concern about a child's welfare and a referral should then be made to the police and LA children's social care (the LA education welfare service and/or LA nominated child protection adviser is likely to already be involved by this stage).

The length of time that a child remains out of school could, of itself, be an alerting factor of risk of harm to the child. Accordingly if a situation is not resolved within four weeks, then referrals should be made to the police and LA children's social care, as appropriate.

Extended leave of absence

Extended leave of absence should be authorised by the headteacher, at which point a return date is set. In these cases the time line for enquiries starts from when the child does not attend school on the expected return date, not from the day the extended leave started.

3.2 Recording actions

Information known or received, people spoken to, decision and actions – and the reasons for taking them, should be recorded contemporaneously. If the child is subsequently reported missing to the police, or is found to be a victim of crime, full records will be required.

3.3 Process steps

3.3.1 Day One

The school identifies that a child is not in school.

1. A staff member trained to do so, telephones the child's home to seek reasons for the absence and reassurance from a parent/carer (person with parental responsibility for the child) that the child is safe at home.
2. The results of this telephone call could be that:
 - a) There was no answer at the home
 - b) The person who answered was not the parent/carer and the school is not reassured that the child is at home or safe
 - c) The parent/carer answered the call, the child is not with them or safe and the parent is concerned
 - d) The parent/carer answered the call, the child is not with them or safe and the parent is not concerned
3. In the case of a), b) and d) the staff member who made the telephone call should consider, with the school's nominated child protection adviser², the degree of vulnerability of the child; using the guidelines in 3.3.2 below.
4. In the case of c) the staff member who made the telephone call should advise the parent to:
 - Contact all people and places the child is known to talk to and visit to tell them that the child is missing and ask if they can help to find the child, by providing information which may shed light on the child's whereabouts or actively searching for the child
 - Contact the family GP and Accident and Emergency Centres near where the child lives and goes to school, in case he/she has sustained an injury and been taken in for medical treatment
 - Contact the local police station to inform them that the child is missing

² Also known as the 'designated teacher for child protection'

Schools will need to make arrangements for communicating with families who use English as a second language, e.g. schools may liaise with their local LA children's social care services to establish access to interpreters qualified and experienced in working with children and their families.

3.3.2 Assessing a child's vulnerability: immediate response

1. Assessing vulnerability requires a combination of professional knowledge and experience of child welfare issues and knowledge of local circumstances. Considering the following questions could assist the process. If in doubt a practitioner should always consult with managers.
2. **If the answer to any of the following questions is yes**, the police should be informed, as well as, the LA children's social care services, the LA education welfare service and/or LA nominated child protection adviser:

See section 3.3.3 below. Police Contact and Response

1. Is there good reason to believe that the child may be the victim of a crime?
2. Does the child have a formal child protection plan (used to be defined as being on the Child Protection Register)?

3. **If the answer to any of the following questions is yes**, the LA children's social care, and the LA education welfare service and/or LA nominated child protection adviser should be informed:

1. Is the child in care i.e. looked after by the local authority?
2. Is there planned or current LA children's social care or LA adults' social care services involvement? e.g. s.47 enquiry about to start
3. Is there a person present in or visiting the family who poses an ongoing risk to children³, or who is suspected of previously harming a child?
4. The following questions will give an indication that the family may be avoiding contact and therefore the quicker the response the more likely they will be traced. Delay may well exacerbate the risk of harm to the child for the child/young person.
 - Has there been LA children's social care or LA adults' social care or Criminal Justice System involvement in the past?
 - Is there a history of mobility?
 - Are there immigration issues?
 - Have the parents been subject to proceedings in relation to attendance?
 - Is there a history of poor attendance?

³ Replaces the term Schedule 1 Offender

4. The answers to further questions could assist a judgement whether or not to inform LA children's social care and the police:

1. In which age range is the child? – younger children are more at risk.
2. Is this very sudden and unexpected behaviour?
3. Have there been any past concerns about the child associating with significantly older young people or adults?
4. Was there any significant incident prior to the child's unexplained absence?
5. Has the child been a victim of bullying?
6. Are there health reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g.
 - Does the child need essential medication or health care?
 - Was the child noted to be depressed prior to the child's unexplained absence?
7. Has the child gone missing with their family?
8. Are there religious or cultural reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g.
 - Rites of passage or forced marriage planned for the child?
9. Have there been past concerns about this child and family which together with the sudden disappearance are worrying? e.g.
 - Is there any known history of drug or alcohol dependency within the family?
 - Is there any known history of domestic violence?
 - Is there concern about the parent/carer's ability to protect the child from harm?
10. Has there been any change in the child/family's financial circumstances?
11. Has the child special educational needs?

5. **If the answer to any of these further questions is yes**, the LA children's social care, the LA education welfare service and/or LA nominated child protection person should be informed, and reporting to the police should be considered.
6. **If the school can obtain no information about the child or family on Day One**, and there is reason to believe that the child is at risk of harm, the LA children's social care, the LA education welfare service and/or LA nominated child protection person should be informed, and reporting to the Police should be considered.

7. **If the judgement reached on Day One is that there is no reason to believe that the child is at risk of harm**, then the school may well delay further action.

See Appendix 1 for extracts from the DfES guidance: *'Identifying and Maintaining Contact with Children Missing or at Risk of Going Missing from Education'* LEA/0225/2004; providing additional information which practitioners may find helpful.

3.3.3 Police contact and response

1. Step one:
 - Contact the local police station (24 hour response).
 - Explain that you are reporting a child missing.
 - Any suspicion/evidence of crime must be clearly stated.
 - The circumstances and all available information regarding the child and family will be required. See Appendix 3.
2. Step two:
 - The missing person report will be risk assessed and the local police response team will carry out immediate actions.
 - The investigation will be progressed by the police response team, in conjunction with either the local Missing Persons Unit and/or the CID.
3. Step three:
 - The missing person report will generate a notification to the relevant police CAIT.
 - The CAIT work with, and refer information to, LA children's social care.
 - LA children's social care, who must be contacted ASAP in these circumstances, will also liaise with the CAIT in order to identify, and act upon, any suspicion of child abuse or child related crime.

3.3.4 Reasonable enquiry

1. The process of 'reasonable enquiry'⁴ has not been identified in regulations, however this guidance suggests that it starts with the questions in 3.3.2 above, and includes school staff checking with all members of staff who child may have had contact with, and with the pupil's friends and their parents, siblings and known relatives at this school and others. School staff should also make telephone calls to any numbers held on record or identified, sending a letter to the last known address, home visits by some school based staff and consultation with local authority staff.
2. If the above is unsuccessful, the school should then contact their local authority. The process of reasonable enquiry will then be conducted, in most cases by the LA education welfare service and should include, assessing a missing child's vulnerability (including revisiting the questions in 3.2.2 above). The local authority should make enquiries by visiting the child's home and asking for information from the family's neighbours and their local community – as appropriate. The LA education welfare service should also check databases within the local authority, use agreed protocols to check local databases, e.g.

⁴ The Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 1995 (S.I. 1995/2089), Regulation 9(1)(c) requires schools and local authorities to make 'reasonable enquiries' to locate pupils who have been absent for 4 weeks or more before they can be deleted from the register.

LA housing, health and the police; check with agencies known to be involved with the family, with the local authority the child moved from originally, and with any local authority to which the child may have moved.

3. When making enquiries to another local authority in England, staff should telephone first and make contact with the correct person and then ensure that personal information is shared securely (secure messaging is available using s2s)⁵.
4. Where concern for the child's welfare is high the local authority should also consider obtaining information from the Inland Revenue, Child Benefit Office. (See Appendix 2 for LASSL(2005)3).
5. The DfES has been working with local authorities during 2005 to identify good practice in defining 'reasonable enquiry'. DfES are hoping to produce a guidance document in the near future, which incorporates this good practice.

3.3.5 Days two to twenty-eight

1. If the judgement on Day One is that there is no reason to believe that the child is at risk of harm, and the school delays further action, the process of reasonable enquiry should be repeated and enhanced, including reviewing the responses to the questions in 3.3.2 above, for up to four weeks. This should be undertaken jointly between the school and the local LA education welfare service and/or the LA nominated child protection adviser.
2. If the school has enough information to judge that the child is not at risk of harm, however the child has not attended for 10 days and the absence is unauthorised, the LA education welfare service and/or LA nominated child protection adviser should be informed⁶.

3.3.6 Child missing from school for more than four weeks

1. If a child continues to be missing from school for four weeks and the local authority has exhausted enquiries and has been unable to locate the pupil and her/his family, under current regulations, it is permissible for the child's name to be removed from the school roll and details of the child up-loaded to the DfES Lost Pupil Database⁷.
2. However, if concerns remain in relation to the safety of the child, the LA education welfare service and/or the LA nominated child protection adviser should continue to pursue reasonable enquiries and missing person activity in accordance with local procedures.
3. If the LA education welfare service or any other agency becomes aware the child has moved to another school the service should ensure all relevant agencies are informed so that arrangements can be made to forward records from the previous school.

Christine Christie, London Safeguarding Children Board Manager

⁵ Local Authorities and schools can send secure messages via School to School (s2s), the electronic transfer system which schools use to transfer pupil records and other educational data securely across local authority boundaries. See www.teachernet.gov.uk/s2s

⁶ The Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 1995 (S.I. 1995/2089), Regulation 13(1) requires all schools to inform their local authority about every pupil who fails to attend regularly or has been absent without reason for at least 10 days continuously. Schools are also required to inform the local authority about every child who has left the school to be educated otherwise (regulation 13(1)). DfES Exclusions guidance (DfES 0345/2004) also requires schools to inform the local authority of pupils who are permanently excluded before that exclusion takes effect.

⁷ Information about the Lost Pupil Database can be found at: www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/ims/datatransfers/

Appendix 1

Extracts from Good Practice Guide *LEA/0225/200*, DfES: Identifying and Maintaining Contact with Children Missing or At Risk of Going Missing from Education

Process Steps

Identify child at risk of going missing from education

There is general agreement that some children who have experienced certain life events are more at risk of going missing from education.

These include:

- Young people who have committed offences
- Children living in women's refuges
- Children of homeless families perhaps living in temporary accommodation, house of multiple occupancy or bed and breakfast
- Young runaways
- Children with long term medical or emotional problems
- Unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees or children of asylum seeking families
- Looked after children
- Children with a gypsy/traveller background
- Young carers
- Children from transient families
- Teenage mothers
- Children who are permanently excluded from school

'What to do if you're worried a Child Is Being Abused' (DfES, 2003) contains guidance on what actions an individual should take to safeguard a child about whom there are concerns.

Looked After Children

All schools will have a designated teacher for looked after children. These teachers are ideally placed to assist when identifying those looked after children currently in school who may be at greater risk of going missing from education.

If a looked after child goes missing from their care placement, the relevant local authority Children's Social Services Department will follow the guidance set out in *'Children Missing from Care and Home - A Guide to Good Practice'* (DfES, 2002). This requires them to liaise with the Police in the area from where the child went missing to agree the strategy for finding the child and providing them with any necessary support.

Children with formal Child Protection Plans (used to be defined as being on the Child Protection Register)

The local authority Children's Social Services has responsibility for children with formal Child Protection Plans (used to be defined as being on the Child Protection Register). If a child one of these children goes missing, the relevant Children's Social Services Department will take steps

to locate the child. This may involve contacting Child Protection Managers in other local authorities.

Children in Need

Where a child has been assessed by the local authority Children's Social Services as being 'in need' and their family is working with Children's Social Services, Children's Social Services will liaise with the Police in the area from where the child went missing to agree the strategy for finding the child and providing them with any necessary support.

Appendix 2

LOCAL AUTHORITY SOCIAL SERVICES LETTER LASSL(2005)3

To: The Chief Executive
County Councils)
Metropolitan District Councils) England
Shire Unitary Councils)
London Borough Councils
Common Council of the City of London
Council of the Isles of Scilly

The Director of Social Services

01 February 2005

ACCESSING INFORMATION FROM INLAND REVENUE TO ASSIST WITH ENQUIRIES ABOUT A CHILD'S SAFETY AND WELFARE

1. SUMMARY

When the Child Benefit Office was part of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), it had the legal authority to share information in the public interest, including for the purposes of assisting with child protection enquiries. Following its transfer from DWP to the Inland Revenue, the Child Benefit Office was legally prohibited from sharing information for such purposes. This is because of the strict confidentiality laws which exist to protect the privacy of data provided by the Inland Revenue's customers.

Section 63 of the Children Act 2004 amends Schedule 5 of the Tax Credit Act, meaning that the Inland Revenue now has lawful authority to provide local authorities with the limited amount of information relating to children, i.e. names and address(es). This information can only be requested where it is needed in order for the local authority to fulfil their statutory responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Such enquires will generally be made under s47 of the Children Act 1989, which requires local authorities to make enquiries where they suspect a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. Full details of the provision at s63 of the Children Act 2004 can be found at www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2004/20040031.htm

Section 63 mirrors the other information-sharing gateways in Schedule 5 of the Tax Credit Act 2002, all of which contain provisions to ensure that the information is used only for the purposes for which it is provided. It is intended that local authorities should only access information from the Inland Revenue in a very small number of cases, i.e. where there are urgent concerns about

a child or family who is missing and all other possible sources of information, e.g. schools, health services, etc have been exhausted. This is because, in many cases, the information held by the Inland Revenue may be inaccurate or out of date.

2. ACTION

Authorities are asked to familiarise themselves with the provisions of s63 of the Children Act 2004 and, in particular note the following:

- ◆ information should only be sought from the Inland Revenue where there are urgent concerns about a child or family that is missing and all more immediate sources of information have been exhausted
- ◆ information obtained from the Inland Revenue under s63 should only be passed on to other agencies for the purposes for which it was obtained (i.e. enquiries about a child's safety of welfare) It is an offence to disclose this information for any other purpose and, if a person is found guilty, they can be liable to a fine or imprisonment.

Should your case meet the criteria for making a request of the Inland Revenue for information you should contact the local authority Section of the Child Benefit Office (contact details below). Please do not contact other parts of the Inland Revenue.

Local authority Section

Child Benefit Office(GB)

Waterview Park

Washington

NE38 8QA

Telephone: 0191 225 1986

3. ENQUIRIES ABOUT THIS CIRCULAR

In the first instance, enquiries about this Circular should be made to James Addy at the Children's Safeguards Unit, in the Department for Education and Skills.

Tel. 0207 972 4074

Fax. 0207 972 4627

Email. james.addy@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

From: Children's Safeguards Unit, Department for Education and Skills, Wellington House, 133-155 Waterloo Road SE1 8UG.