



south ayrshire
health & social care
partnership

Unseen Child Protocol

May 2020



CONTENTS

Context.....3

Key Practice Messages.....4

Children who are missing to Statutory Services.....5

Children who are 'missing' from home or care.....7

Information sharing.....9

Appendix.....10

Document Control

Updated areas	Officer	Date	Review Date	Version
Authored		May 2020	May 2024	1
Approved at CPC		17.05.2021		1
Lead Officer	Meg Williams			

1. Context

1.1 Describing a child or young person as 'unseen' or 'missing' can cover a range of circumstances. A child, young person or family (including unborn children) can be considered as missing in different contexts:

- **Children who are 'missing' to statutory services.** This can include a child or family's loss of contact with, or their 'invisibility' to, a statutory service, such as education (for example, home educated children), health or social work services or third sector.
- **Children who are 'missing' from home, their foster placement or children's house.** This can involve a child or young person who has run away from their home, foster placement or children's house, who has been forced to leave or whose whereabouts are unknown. This may be because they have been the victim of an accident, crime and/or because they have actively left or chosen not to return to the place where they are expected to reside.

1.2 Where a child or young person is identified as unseen or missing, an inter-agency response is required to ensure:

- Any risk to the safety and wellbeing of the child/young person is identified.
- Children and young people who require additional intervention or support due to vulnerability factors are identified.
- Additional support/measures are identified for vulnerable children and young people (for example where there are Child Protection concerns or child is subject to a Compulsory Supervision Order).
- There is a robust and consistent process of supporting children and carers.
- Evidence of non-compliance and non-engagement can be identified as early as possible.
- Effective interagency information sharing, assessment and planning is in place.

Key Practice Messages

- ❖ Children can be deemed unseen or missing because they are absent from services their home, foster placement or children's home.
- ❖ 'Missing' or unseen covers a range of scenarios.
- ❖ Where children are deemed unseen or missing, a multi-agency risk and need assessment and coordination is essential for the location of the child and any subsequent support.
- ❖ Practitioners should follow South Ayrshire's GIRFEC policy and Child Protection Processes.
- ❖ Practitioners must refer to their own agency guidance and policies for children unseen and / or missing.
- ❖ Recording must include details about contact or lack of contact with child and their family or care giver. Interagency chronologies assist with the assessment of risk.
- ❖ Where a child has not been seen or if there are concerns about non-compliance or non-engagement, single agency procedures must be followed and a referral to the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration must be considered.
- ❖ Services should not be withdrawn unless other protective measures have been put in place for the child.

1. Children who are 'missing' to statutory services

- 1.1 Where a child or young person is unseen or missing from services, agency procedures and protocols **must** be followed, as outlined in **Appendix 1**.
- 1.2 Consideration must be given to the assessment of risk and needs in line with South Ayrshire's GIRFEC policy and child protection procedures.
- 1.3 The terms 'non-engagement' and 'non-compliance' as defined by the Scottish Governments National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2014, are used to describe a range of deliberate behaviour and attitudes, such as:
- Failure to enable necessary contact (for example missing appointments) or refusing to allow access to the child or to the home;
 - Active non-compliance with the actions set out in the Child's Plan (or Child Protection Plan);
 - Disguised non-compliance, where the parent/care giver appears to co-operate without actually carrying out actions or enabling them to be effective e.g. regularly being unavailable to meet; and
 - Threats of violence or other intimidation towards practitioners.
- 1.4 The Scottish Governments National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2014, also indicates that:

“Evidence shows that some adults will deliberately evade practitioner interventions aimed at protecting a child. In many cases of child abuse and neglect, this is a clear and deliberate strategy adopted by one or more of the adults with responsibility for the care of a child” (Paragraph 476)

“Consideration needs to be given to determining which family member(s) is or are stopping engagement from taking place and why. For example, it may be the case that one partner is ‘silencing’ the other and that domestic abuse is a factor. Service users may find it easier to work with some practitioners than others” (Paragraph 478)

“When considering non-engagement, practitioners should check that the child protection concerns and necessary actions have been explained clearly, taking into account issues of language, culture and disability, so that parents or carers fully understand the concerns and the impact on themselves and their child.” (Paragraph 479)

“If there are risk factors associated with the care of children, risk is likely to be increased where any of the responsible adults with caring responsibilities fail to engage or comply with child protection services. Non-engagement and non-compliance, including disguised compliance, should be taken account of in information collection and assessment. Non-engagement and non-compliance may point to a need for compulsory or emergency measures. In what will often be challenging situations, staff may need access to additional or specialist advice to inform their assessments and plans.” (Paragraph 480)

“There is a risk of “drift “ setting in before non-engagement is identified and action taken. If letters are ignored, or appointments not kept, weeks can pass without practitioner contact with the child. If parents/carers fail to undertake or support necessary actions, this should be monitored and the impact regularly evaluated. Good records must be kept, including contacts and whether they are successful or not, particularly during periods of high risk when children are not in nursery or school, for example, Christmas and summer holidays. Staff need to be clear what action should be taken when contact is not maintained. Where the child is subject to compulsory measures of supervision, the Reporter should be notified if agencies are unable to gain access to the child.” (Paragraph 481)

- 1.5** Inter-agency communication and planning are essential. This allows practitioners to work effectively and collaboratively with each other and counter non-engagement and practitioners should follow South Ayrshire GIRFEC Policy and Child Protection Procedures. The national practice model provides the tools to assess needs and risks (Wellbeing Indicators, Resilience Matrix and the My World Triangle). The National Risk Assessment Framework can assist where a more in-depth risk assessment is required.
- 1.6** Non-engagement can sometimes involve direct hostility and threats or actual violence towards staff. Single agency procedures for violence to staff must be followed in these instances.
- 1.7** Agencies recording procedures should be followed and should include details about contact, or lack of contact, with a family and if the child or young person has been seen. It is *crucial* that the child or young person’s views are sought and recorded.
- 1.8** Records should contain a chronology where significant events are noted. This should include details of when a child or young person was seen, any non-attendance at appointments and failure of access at home visits.
- 1.9** Children’s Plans should stipulate the level of face to face contact with a child or young person and their family and who is responsible for this.

2. Children who are 'missing' from home or care

- 3.1 A child or young person who has run away, and cases where children/young people have been 'thrown out' by their parents or carers, are both covered by the term '**runaway**' (though the individual circumstances and needs of the child or young person may vary considerably).
- 3.2 Children and young people who go missing remain vulnerable from the factors that resulted in them going missing (for example, domestic abuse in a care environment) as well from the associated risks of being missing (for example, homelessness).
- 3.3 In extreme cases this can result in young people experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough, engaging in crime, drugs and being at risk of sexual exploitation.
- 3.4 The National Guidance on Child Protection 2014 outlines circumstances where children may go missing and where there is a need to consider a multi-agency response. The reasons for a child's absence may not be apparent. A number of circumstances in which children or young people may be termed as missing are listed below:
- **Parental abduction.** A parent may fail to return or remove a child from contact with another parent, in contravention of a court order or without the consent of the other parent (or person who has parental rights). This can occur within national borders as well as across borders.
 - **Stranger abduction.** A child may fail to return because they have been the victim of a crime.
 - **Forced marriage.** A child or young person may go missing due to being forced into marriage abroad or within the UK.
 - **Trafficked children and young people.** A child or young person may go missing due to being trafficked and later being removed from a placement. Asylum-seeking children are particularly vulnerable to vanishing. Their substitute care may feel unsafe, and many do not have a trusted adult to advocate for them.
 - **Sexual exploitation.** A child or young person may go missing due to sexual exploitation.
 - **Young runaways and those 'forced to leave' or thrown out.** Children who go missing from home or care may do so because they are running away 'from' a source of danger or have been forced to leave; or because they are running 'to' something or someone. They can be at significant risk as they may need to find a safe alternative place to stay, often with few resources. This can result in begging or stealing or staying with a stranger.

- **Vulnerable young people.** Such young people are identifiable by their criminal or risk-taking behaviour, poverty, disengagement with education, being looked after, self-harming, mental health issues and/or experience of abuse. They may take steps to escape from their situation.
- **Transition.** Young people moving from children to adult services need processes in place to manage this experience, maximising support and minimising risk. Transition can be a difficult time for young people and their parent/carer, or carer or staff in residential care. Some express their negative emotions through high risk and sometimes offending behaviour; they may also be vulnerable to alcohol and/or drug misuse and sexual predators. These cases are very challenging to manage effectively and call for a collaborative approach that includes offender management services.
- **Home-educated children.** A child may be unknown to services as a result of their removal from mainstream education or never having been enrolled within an education authority. Where this is the result of a decision being made to educate them at home this should not, in itself, be regarded as a child protection concern. For further information, see the Government's [Home Education Guidance](#).

- 3.5** Multi-agency working is central to risk assessment and management and effective practice with 'missing children'. Each agency has its own policies and protocols to manage risk and track missing children (see Appendix 1).
- 3.6** Single agency Guidance is clear on specific procedures to be followed for those missing from home and those missing from care, due to the specific statutory responsibilities in respect of children missing from local authority care.
- 3.7** Inter-agency communication and planning through South Ayrshire GIRFEC staged intervention approach and Child Protection Procedures is essential to identify needs and risks. The national practice model provides the tools to assess needs and risks (Wellbeing indicators, resilience matrix and the My World Triangle). The National Risk Assessment Framework can assist where a more in-depth risk assessment is required.
- 3.8** When a child or young person returns home or to their care address following a period of being 'missing' a return interview should take place. The child should have the opportunity to speak to someone independently regarding the reasons for their absence and support they may require going forward. The person who should speak with the child will be determined dependent on the circumstances and could be for example a Who Cares? Worker, Residential Worker, Police Officer, Barnardo's Advocate or Social Worker.

4. Information Sharing

Single Agency Guidance on information sharing must be followed along with CPC Information Sharing Protocol and Effective Communication Guidance.

APPENDIX

Getting it right for every child in South Ayrshire – Good Practice Guide

<https://www20.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/sites/practioners/Shared%20Documents/girfec%20good%20practice%20guidance.pdf>

Getting it right for every child in Ayrshire – Practitioners Guide

<https://www20.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/sites/practioners/Shared%20Documents/GIRFEC%20Practitioner%20guidance%20June%202017.pdf>

Management Guidelines on Children Missing from Education

<http://www20.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/clw/education/Education%20Management%20Guidelines/MG%20-%20Children%20Missing%20from%20Education%20-%20Version%201.pdf>

NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde – Procedure for the Tracking of Missing Families/Children (Health)

<https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/media/215323/procedure-for-the-tracking-of-missing-familieschildren-health-2.pdf>

National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2014) Additional Notes for Practitioners Protecting Disabled Children from Abuse and Neglect

<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2014/05/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2014-additional-notes-practitioners-protecting-disabled-children-abuse-neglect/documents/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2014-additional-notes-practitioners-protecting-disabled-children-abuse-neglect/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2014-additional-notes-practitioners-protecting-disabled-children-abuse-neglect/govscot%3Adocument/00450942.pdf>

Children and Young People missing from Local Authority Care

<https://www20.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/clw/children/childrenandfamilies/Procedures/Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Missing%20from%20Local%20Authority%20Care.pdf>