# Children who go Missing from Care Framework

# Briefing Document - West Yorkshire Pilot

# Framework

# 5th July 2023

## Introduction

The Children Missing from Care Framework has been developed by a National Multi-agency Task and Finish Group and supports best practice in responding to looked after children. It seeks to find the balance between the under-reporting or under-recording of young people as missing that can lead to lost opportunities to safeguard those children, and the premature or unnecessary reporting of looked after children as missing when they are just late home, testing the boundaries, or have just failed to inform their carer where they are going, which can lead to avoidable police contact and sometimes the unnecessary criminalisation of looked after children.

At the National Missing People Expert Reference Group (ERG), it was decided to pilot the framework in West Yorkshire.

West Yorkshire Police incorporated the Levels of Intervention Model into their Force Missing Person Policy in January 2022. West Yorkshire Police and the Local Authority owned Children’s Homes have been operating in accordance with it since then.  It is not therefore anticipated that the implementation of the pilot will make a significant difference to the way that the police respond to these incidents.  However, the launch of the pilot will raise the awareness of partners and carers from statutory and independent sectors, provide training, and will formalise an escalation process where carers can appeal to a senior officer if they feel the police have inappropriately declined to respond and record a young person as missing.

The pilot was officially launched at the NPCC National Missing People Conference on Thursday 25th May which coincided with International Missing Children’s Day. There was also an online briefing event for police, social workers, residential managers, accommodation providers, carers, fostering agencies, and relevant third sector organisations on Friday 26th May.

The framework seeks to empower carers, professionals, and police officers to make the right decision in the best interests of children when they are not where they are supposed to be.

## Key Principles

### Levels of Intervention Model

The framework introduces the Levels of Intervention Model that recognises that when a young person is late home or not where they are supposed to be, there is always some level of risk but there are different levels of intervention:

* Non-intervention - the parent or carer may decide to wait a little longer before intervening to see if the child returns home of their own accord.
* Parental/ Carer Intervention - the parent or carer may decide to go looking for their child themselves by contacting relatives, friends and searching places the child frequents.
* Police Intervention - if the parent or carer is unable to find their child after conducting reasonable enquiries that a responsible parent would complete before contacting the police, and the child has not returned home of their own accord as would be expected, the parent or carer would then report the child as missing to the police.

The model is not linear. On occasions, it will be appropriate to call the police immediately, for example where there has been a trigger incident that indicates that there is a real, immediate risk that the child will suffer significant harm.

### Trigger Plans

Where a trigger plan has been agreed by the partnership, these should be complied with at the time of the incident. The purpose of a trigger plan is to ensure a prompt, professional response that all agencies have agreed to. If the trigger plan is considered inappropriate, this should be challenged either before or after an incident, not whilst the incident is taking place.

### Identifying Risk

The framework focusses on antecedent behaviour, trigger incidents, out of character behaviour, and post-incident behaviour that may inform risk, to ensure looked after children are reported as missing to the police immediately when they are in unsafe situations and there is a real, immediate risk that the child may suffer significant harm.

Risks of exploitation should always be carefully assessed when evaluating risk. However, the circumstances must also be considered because exploited children sometimes just behave like other children and are sometimes just late home, are testing the boundaries, or have just failed to inform the carer where they are going.

### Delaying Police Deployment

Where the police assess that the level of risk lies within the parental/ carer band of the levels of intervention model, the police may decide to delay the police response. However, police officers should not get into the habit of automatically delaying police deployment in all cases. Where the reporting person has already conducted reasonable enquiries to locate the child in their care and allowed the missing child a reasonable opportunity to return of their own accord before contacting the police, the police should respond and not further delay. The police should only delay the police response when they have been contacted prematurely, so if the reporting person has appropriately delayed contacting the police until the level of risk lies within the police intervention band of the levels of intervention model, the police should not require the reporting person to conduct further enquiries and allow even longer for the missing person to return of their own accord before taking responsibility. Any practice of automatically delaying the police response will unintentionally lead to increased premature reporting as carers start to anticipate the police delaying their response so decide to contact the police earlier than is necessary.

### Philomena Protocol

The framework supports the promotion of the Philomena Protocol. That seeks to record important information about a child who may go missing to assist in assessing the level of risk and assist in locating the child if they do subsequently go missing.

### Delaying House Searches

The framework seeks to empower officers to make the right decision on when to conduct house searches and the extent of house searches. The national recommendation that house searches should be conducted in all cases is in response to lessons learnt. In some cases, house searches were not conducted, or were not conducted thoroughly, and it later transpired that the missing person was in the premises. Young children in particularly sometimes hide within the home address. On other occasions, a serious crime had been committed and the body had been secreted in the premises. When a person has disappeared, the house search can provide indications of whether the person had pre-planned their disappearance or prepared to leave. Sometimes clues to their whereabouts are found in the premises, diaries, notes, receipts, or travel documentation. Sometimes clues to why they have disappeared are found; a leaving letter, suicide note, or financial statements indicating financial difficulties. A search can determine whether there are any suspicious or concerning circumstances. A search can also determine whether the person has taken important documents with them; their passport, driving licence, or travel pass. Sometimes details of friends and associates are discovered including their addresses and telephone numbers.

However, in some cases of repeat young missing persons, the background information and circumstances of the incident do not suggest any suspicious circumstances. The missing person is expected to return of their own accord and there are no indications that they have disappeared or left home. The missing behaviour is not out of character. The reason why the young person has been reported as missing is because of the risks that they will be exposed to whilst absent such as criminal exploitation or self-harm. In these cases, it may not always be necessary to immediately conduct a thorough house search as the police will already be in possession of intelligence relating to relatives, friends, associates, places frequented, risk factors, and modes of travel. A trusted adult or professional will have already checked the house to confirm the missing person is not in the premises. The child will have no motive to hide in the premises and will be too old to be able to do so without being found by the carer. There will be no suspicious circumstances that suggest the trusted adult or professional is trying to obscure a serious crime or body on the premises. In these cases, the proportionate police response may be to delay the house search or only conduct a partial search of the missing child’s bedroom or personal space. Instead, it may be a more effective and professional response to prioritise searches of places frequented and concentrate those initial enquiries on address checks of friends, associates, and suspected exploiters. That does not mean that the house search will not be completed if the young person does not return or is not located as expected, but it does mean that police officers can exercise their professional discretion to delay the house search to an appropriate time if they do not anticipate that the child is hiding on the premises and it is unlikely that any useful information will be ascertained from a search. For example, in one case, a 16-year-old child in care was involved in county lines and was living with foster carers. He was going missing two or three times a week to deliver drugs. The police had identified several associates and suspected exploiters. The boy had never been missing for more than 24 hours. However, on every occasion, officers were searching the home address in the middle of the night including the loft. The loft hatch was in the bedroom of the 13-year-old daughter of the foster carer. She was repeatedly being woken up in the middle of the night to enable the search to take place. Everyone knew that the 16-year-old boy was not in the house and that he had no reason to hide in the loft. No useful information was ever ascertained from the search. This was a ‘tick box’ exercise. It was appropriate for the officers attending to accept the word of the foster carer that the boy was not in the house and instead prioritise enquiries with associates and suspected exploiters to locate the boy before he suffered harm. If the boy had not been located during the night or had not returned home the following day as expected, the police could then have returned to search the home address at a reasonable time. However, experience had shown in this case that searching the house during the middle of the night was not necessary and was also an inefficient use of police time.

This flexibility that allows professional discretion to be exercised to delay the house search should not be abused. The house search should not be delayed in those cases where a person has unexpectedly disappeared, or the behaviour is out of character. It should not be delayed if there are suspicious circumstances. It should not be delayed where the missing person is a small child who may be hiding on the premises. Any officer who decides to delay a house search should also inform their Sergeant or Inspector to check that their supervisor agrees with their decision.

### Escalation Policy

Fundamental to the success of the implementation of the framework is an effective escalation policy both at the time of the incident and afterwards.

#### Escalating at the time of the Incident

Carers must have a right to escalate the incident whilst it is ongoing to the on-duty District Operational Commander at Chief Inspector or Superintendent level if they strongly disagree with a decision of an Operational Inspector to delay the police response which they think then places a child at risk.

In respect of escalating an incident whilst it is ongoing, the reporting person should request to speak to the District Inspector who made the decision to delay deployment to an incident. The District Inspector should contact the reporting person at the earliest opportunity and seek to find agreement on the level of risk and whether immediate police deployment is appropriate. If for any reason the District Inspector cannot contact the reporting person within a reasonable time due to other operational ongoing incidents, a Sergeant should contact the reporting person on behalf of the Inspector. If agreement cannot be found, the carer can ask the District Inspector or Sergeant to escalate the matter to the District Operational Commander (Chief Inspector or Superintendent) for that day. The District Inspector/ Sergeant should then brief the District Operational Commander who should contact the reporting person **within one hour of the request to escalate**.

#### Escalation after the Event

There must also be a partnership escalation and review process after the event to consider:

* Concerns of Social Workers who think Inspectors are repeatedly failing to recognise risk and refusing to deploy when it would be appropriate to do so.
* Concerns of Police Officers who think certain carers are reporting children as missing when the risk lies within the parental/ carer band of the Levels of Intervention Model either because of inappropriate reporting or because insufficient staff are working to adequately look after and search for the children in their care.
* Concerns of Inspectors who think certain carers are repeatedly inappropriately escalating incidents to the District Operational Commander when the level of risk does not justify immediate police deployment.

Police District Senior Leadership Teams should agree with senior colleagues in their Local Authority the precise mechanism for escalating issues after the event relating to the implementation of the framework through their existing partnership arrangements. The key thing is to ensure police officers, staff and partners agencies are all aware of how to escalate incidents after the event if issues are identified.

## Training

A multi-agency National Training Package has been developed by Dialogue, a specialist safeguarding company, that works with organisations to understand how they work with young people and designs relevant courses.  The intention is to run a series of training courses through our Local Authority Learning and Development Academies for police, social workers, Children’s Home’s Managers, fostering agencies, and any relevant representatives from third sector organisations. Further details will be provided in due course.

## Evaluation of the Pilot

Although not yet confirmed, the Home Office and NPCC Crime Committee have indicated that they will fund an independent evaluation of this pilot to ensure there are no unintended consequences and to ensure children are safeguarded. The evaluation will be conducted by a collaboration of universities co-ordinated by the University of South Wales and the national charity Missing People. The findings of the evaluation will be considered by the Department for Education and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services and will inform the national agenda and the national response to children who go missing from care. Further details will be provided in due course.