



*Working Together
to Safeguard Children*



Bedfordshire Local Safeguarding Board

Protocol for Children and young people who run away from home

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This document is available at www.bedfordshirelscb.gov.uk

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1. Introduction

1.1 Running away is a dangerous activity that puts children and young people at risk. It puts already vulnerable children/young people at even greater risk. It is linked to circumstances that may require Social Care intervention and to behaviours that may lead to social exclusion.

1.2 Research shows that the main causes of running away are family conflicts and personal problems such as relationships, substance misuse, bullying and truancy.

1.3 This protocol has been created in order to provide a joined-up response to children and young people who are absent from or missing from home or have run away. The protocol relates to all children and young people, and should fit into other locally developed procedures for specific groups of children and young people.

**This procedure will sit alongside Local Safeguarding Procedures, Children Missing from Care protocol and Children Missing from Education protocol, and your own agency's procedures.
This Protocol will not deal with children missing from Care or Education**

1.4 The following principles underpin this protocol:

- The safety and welfare of the child/young person is paramount (Children Act 1989)
- Promoting children/young people's well being and safeguarding them from significant harm depends crucially upon effective information sharing, collaboration and understanding between agencies and professionals. (Working Together, 2006)
- Safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone in the community and all children/young people deserve the opportunity to achieve their full potential
- Parents, carers or those with parental responsibility should be considered and be informed and involved if this is appropriate and in the best interests of the child.

2. Definitions

2.1 A child is any person under 18 years of age. However, as many young people would not identify themselves as a 'child' and it may sometimes be misleading to put all under 18's under a single term, the term 'young person' is also used. This is not tightly specified but refers to 16 and 17 year olds and some others approaching that age. The phrase 'child/young person' is preferred.

2.2 This Protocol uses the term 'absent' to mean that a child/young person is not in the immediate care of their parent or carer, e.g. not in their place of residence. Absences may be authorised or unauthorised. An absence becomes a 'missing' incident when it is reported to the Police.

2.3 A runaway is, as defined by the Social Exclusion Unit's Young Runaways report (2002), "a child/young person, who is absent for one or more nights from the family

home or placement without permission or who has been forced to leave by their parents or carers; or, a child/young person who is absent from their home or placement without permission for any length of time where their age and experience, background and ability make this a concern”.

3. Missing Children: Categories

3.1 For the purposes of this protocol, three categories of identification are used that call for different responses from the agencies. Local enquiries and risk assessments need to be carried out to determine which category the young person falls into.

3.2 A child or young person under the age of 18 years is to be considered ‘missing’ through:

Missing from home or run away with cause for concern

Missing from care – unauthorised absence; missing from care with cause for concern; missing in breach of Court Order, please see Missing from Care Protocol on www.bedfordshirelscb.org.uk

Missing from Education – unauthorised absence; missing from education with cause for concern; missing in breach of Court Order, please see Missing from Education Protocol on www.bedfordshirelscb.org.uk

3.3 All such missing children or young people will be considered to be a child at risk under section 47 of **The Children Act** (1989) (refer to 3.2). This section of the Act gives the power to all appropriate agencies to disclose relevant information to provide a positive outcome for the child or young person/s.

4. Additional Procedures and strategy

4.1 Agencies working with children and young people and their families and carers must use well established, comprehensive, transparent and consensual information sharing systems and processes that places the individual at the centre of how their information is used. Please refer to the Information Sharing Protocol on www.bedfordshirelscb.org.uk

4.2 All information obtained and shared in support of this protocol must be fully recorded within the organisations client management systems and be clearly referenced to the evidence and the information upon which decisions have been made. This must include details for any third parties and full details of all the information / evidence that they have supplied / been given.

Comment: Every individual has a duty to inform the authorities if a child or young person is missing. A missing child should be considered to potentially be at risk

5. Prevention - Identifying those at risk of running away.

5.1 It is impossible to establish a definitive profile of a young runaways, but research exists which suggests warning signs for some young people.

5.2 Some children and young people may talk with a worker about issues that are causing significant difficulties in their life. The worker's ability to explore this sensitively and realistically, and to consider what options the children or young person considers they have, may lead to conversations about leaving home and/or running away. Depending on your agency and the level of concerns one or more of the following assessment forms should be completed at this stage, CAF (Common Assessment Framework), Initial Assessment or Risk Assessment.

5.3 A Children's Society report, ***Living on the Edge; the experience of detached young runaways***, describes experiences of under sixteen year olds who have been forced to leave home or who ran away and who have become detached from any legitimate support. Half the interviewees had not had any previous experience of running away and almost all had no contact with support agencies. The detailed interviews identified some consistent themes;

- Family change and disruption through separation, divorce or bereavement
- Negative experience of parenting and high levels of family conflict
- Parenting capacity because of drug use, mental illness, domestic violence, physical illness
- Difficulties with school through exclusion, self exclusion, bullying.

5.4 Other research indicates that there are particular groups that may have a higher prevalence of running away;

- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people
- Children and young people with disabilities, particularly learning difficulties/disabilities.

6. Supporting children and young people who are thinking of running away

6.1 Some children and young people may disclose that they are thinking of running away to an adult that they trust. This may be testing out their ideas or a clear statement of intent to run away. It is important to take the conversation seriously and to explore what their thoughts are and to be clear about the risks and possible consequences of running away. It is important to ensure the child or young person knows and understands the limits of confidentiality around high risk situations.

6.2 For some, the theoretical risks of running may seem less than the risks they are experiencing at home. If the worker has any concerns that the child is at risk at home they should begin safeguarding procedures. The worker should explore the reasons why the child/young person is considering running away and where they might go.

6.3 Schools, youth groups, family centres and drop in centres etc. are encouraged to display information, leaflets and posters including Young Runaways Helpline details. The list of agencies providing local and national support and helplines is detailed in Appendix 4

7. Assessing Risk in relation to children and young people who are missing

7.1 A risk assessment should include the chronological age and/or the emotional and social development of the child or young person. Multi-agency implementation of the **Common Assessment Framework** will provide a common language for agencies working with children and families. This will assist in defining concerns for a child and thus identifying whether the intervention of Children's Services, or other agencies, is necessary and appropriate.

7.2 Factual records should be kept by all agencies and a supervisor/ manager should be informed if there appear to be concerns that the child or young person may run.

7.3 There is always a level of risk when a child or young person is thought to be missing, practitioners will always need to be aware that there have been instances where people thought not to be at risk have come to serious harm, including death.

7.4 Practice guidance in relation to undertaking a risk assessment is included as Appendix 1 and a Risk Assessment Guide is attached as Appendix 2.

7.5 The first person to identify a missing child or young person has to make judgements that will have a significant effect on the progress of any future enquiries/investigation. The difficulty is in separating what is routine but important from what might appear unimportant but may be significant.

7.6 Consideration must be given to the nature of the information being given, bearing in mind that this might be the first report of:

- a serious crime
- an indication of a child or young person being at risk of significant harm.
- an indication of a child or young person having suffered significant harm

7.7 If information indicates risk of harm it is essential to consider with whom this information is shared and to act upon this by referring to other agencies as appropriate.

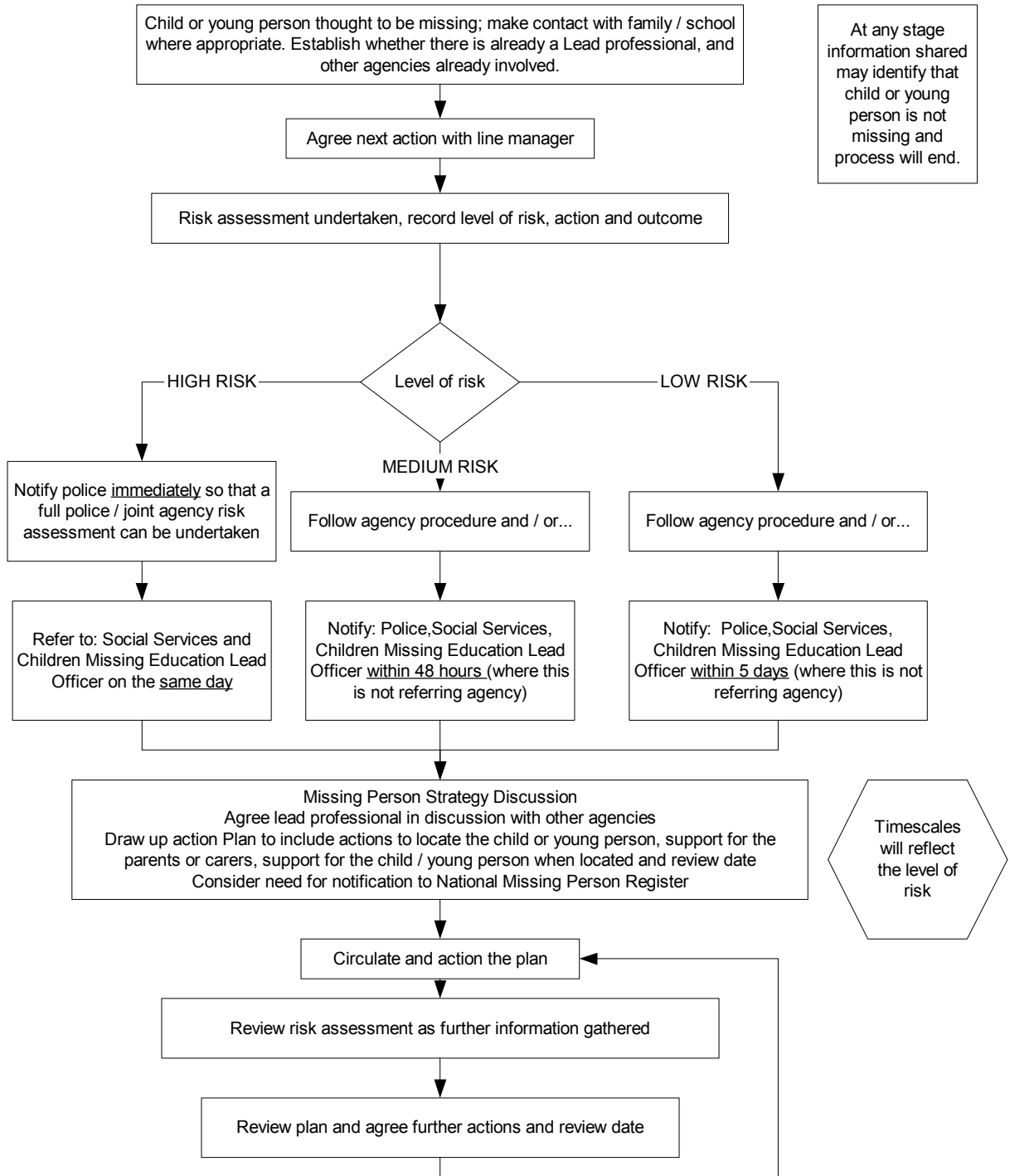
7.8 There is always a level of risk when a child or young person is thought to be missing, practitioners will always need to be aware that there have been instances where people thought not to be at risk have come to serious harm, including death.

7.9 Based on information from enquiries **remember if in doubt; assume the worst until the contrary is proved**. Relevant questions need to be asked to identify any potential risk to the missing child or young person so that an appropriate response can be made. The risk assessment must be the subject of continuous review to ensure that the information that is currently available is properly considered.

<p style="text-align: center;">Risk Assessment</p> <p>Factors to be considered should include:</p>

- Risk of abduction
- Forced marriages
- Bullying
- Medical considerations, e.g. Epilepsy/diabetes
- Age of the child
- History of self-harm and / or mental health issues
- Home environment/family history
- Previously assessed level of vulnerability
- Time of day/night
- Pregnant teenager/teenage parent
- Physical / learning difficulties/difficulties
- Previous history or patterns of going missing or running away
- Any agreement reached regarding staying out beyond the usual time
- Where the child is believed to be staying
- His/her likely associations while missing
- State of mind at time of going missing
- Do they have any money
- Any other particular circumstances at the time of the incident
- Concerns around sexual exploitation
- Length of time missing
- Children subject to a Child Protection Plan
- Any other relevant factors
- History of substance misuse
- Excessive use of chat rooms or being on line.

7.9 Flowchart of actions to be taken when a child or young person is thought to be or known to be missing



8. Looked After Children

8.1 Children and young people who are looked after by the local authority are far more likely to go missing than the general child and youth population. There is a specific protocol for this group, *Children Missing from Care*, which should be read alongside this protocol

9. Children & young people who absent themselves from home.

9.1 Clearly, some children and young people absent themselves from home and / or care for short periods of time and then return; often their whereabouts are known. These children and young people are not considered at high risk and usually they are testing boundaries. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed either on purpose or unwittingly. This kind of boundary testing activity is well within the range of normal teenage behaviour and may not come within the category of 'missing' from this protocol. However, each individual child should be subject to risk assessment based on individual circumstances and vulnerability.

9.2 In considering a child or young person who is deemed to be missing from home by their parent, carer or guardian, they will apply their own judgement with regard to the overall circumstances of the child or young person and the circumstances in which they have gone missing. If, in their opinion, the absence of the child or young person is more than 'boundary testing' activity, then they will, in normal circumstances, alert the police who will then apply a risk assessment to the report being made and deal accordingly.

10. Information Sharing

10.1 Agencies should be clear with a child/young person at the outset of contact about policies on confidentiality. He or she should be informed that where there are concerns about possible risks to themselves or others, information will be shared with recognised agencies to identify and reduce those risks. He or she should also be told that where there are high levels of risk, safeguarding procedures may be activated.

10.2 Sharing information about a child/young person should, as far as possible, be with their permission. However, information can be shared with recognised agencies in the interest of the child/young person's welfare. This is information deemed to be not personally sensitive and does nothing more than identify and allow contact with the child. It should be recognised that a child is by definition not fully independent and responsible for themselves. Their welfare must take precedence over sensitivities concerning information about them.

10.3 Please refer to the LSCB Information Sharing Protocol at www.bedfordshirelscb.org.uk

11. Responsibilities when a child or young person runs away

11.1 Role of Alerter (the person/agency who becomes aware of the disappearance of a child/young person)

The agency first alerted to the child's absence should (together with the child's parents, if the child lives at home), decide whether the child is having an 'unauthorised absence', or whether he/she has runaway. In order to inform this judgement the agency should (together with the child's parents, as appropriate), attempt to locate the child and encourage him/her to return as quickly and safely as possible, ensuring he/she is treated positively on return

Alerting relevant agencies

<p>Parent and or Carer</p>	<p>There is an expectation that parents/ guardians will report their child/ young person has runaway. Failure to do so may be raised as a child protection issue. Advise the parent/carer to notify/report to the Police.</p>
<p>All agencies including Voluntary and community Organisations</p>	<p>If it comes to the attention of any agency or voluntary/community organisation that a young person is a runaway they must:</p> <p>Advise the parent/carer of the organisations' duty to ensure the matter is reported to the police who will ensure search, locate and return procedures are activated; and if necessary follow this up by contacting the police to verify the reporting by the parent/carer has occurred.</p> <p>In responding to and managing an individual child/ young person's absence from home agencies should be alert to the potential significance of repeat missing episodes by a child. Often children who repeatedly run away are viewed as 'a problem' and insufficient consideration is given to the reason why they keep absenting themselves.</p> <p>Children and young people missing from home often present themselves for health care at various health services e.g. Accident and Emergency Departments, Walk-in Centres, GP Surgeries.</p> <p>The Identifying agency will circulate a missing child alerts to all other agencies within Bedfordshire.</p> <p>If any practitioner becomes aware that a child may have runaway, they should first establish with the parents/carers what has happened. A Common Assessment Framework is completed including information gained from using the Risk Assessment on page 7. If the risk threshold is reached then Police and/or Social Care should be informed.</p> <p>If the missing child or young person has a Child Protection Plan or there are any safety concerns identified at the time of reporting, there must be immediate implementation of LSCB Interagency Safeguarding procedures</p> <p>Accurate records must be kept of actions taken, information acquired and discussions held.</p>

<p>Police</p>	<p>The police will, upon receiving a report of a child or young person having runaway from home, will invoke their procedures to locate, trace and return the child as soon as possible.</p> <p>When reporting a child/young person missing, the Police will ask for details. The type of information they will ask for will be;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ a full description of the child/young person ➤ the child's ethnicity and accent/language ➤ what clothes they were/may be wearing ➤ any tattoos or piercing ➤ any street name or alias ➤ the child's legal status ➤ relevant medical conditions ➤ relevant mental health issues ➤ a recent photograph (vital for police, outreach services and local and national media) ➤ family address(es) ➤ known friends'/acquaintances' addresses ➤ the name and address of the GP and dentist ➤ any previous link with street-based agencies ➤ efforts already made to locate the child ➤ relevant information from the most recent risk assessment ➤ can you provide the source of a DNA sample, e.g. a toothbrush
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12. Action Planning and Review

12.1 When children and young people go missing or runaways it is essential that following a risk assessment a Missing Person Action Plan is drawn up by the agencies involved. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) Action Plan may be an appropriate tool.

12.2 The identified lead professional or Social Worker will ensure that the Plan is circulated and reviewed and will act as a main contact point for any information sharing.

12.3 The Plan should outline the actions to be undertaken in order to locate the child or young person, who is responsible for each action and, where appropriate, timescales for completion of tasks.

12.4 The Plan should also include an outline of actions should the child or young person be located.

12.5 A review date of the Plan should be set and adhered to so that the outcome of actions can be reviewed and new actions set. It is likely that a plan will be reviewed frequently at the beginning of a period of a child or young person being missing.

13. Family Liaison and Support

13.1 An important consideration that professionals may have to address during the process is how to provide support to the family and carers of the runaway.

13.2 Contact with family/ carers will be necessary at an early stage to:

- Support and clarify risk assessment
- Obtain further information about the runaway.
- Ensure that the agencies/ organisations are informed when the child or young person returns.

13.3 In all cases arrangements should be made to ensure the family or other appropriate parties are provided with the name of the lead professional who must be capable of co-ordinating a response. The nature of this response should be identified in the action plan.

13.4 The trauma associated with some runaways may place families and workers under immense pressure at a time when the needs of the investigation are making heavy demands on them for detailed information. In some cases the public interest generated by the event may mean that the media will also make further demands. Planning may be needed to address these issues.

13.5 Agencies and organisations who work with children and young people while they are runaways are outlined in Appendix 4.

13.6 If a young person is found and doesn't want their whereabouts disclosed to parents / carers / Police / Children's Social Care then this request will be considered within the Information Sharing Policy of the organisation / agency to whom the information has been disclosed. Young People will be encouraged to allow disclosure of some information, even if it is just that they are alive, well and receiving services.

13.7 Where information is not shared this may result in ongoing efforts to locate a child or young person, wasting time and resources.

14. Follow up for found children and young people

The purpose of the protocol is not just to return the child/young person to a safe environment and discover what happened to them whilst they were a runaway but to ascertain the reason for their leaving in the first place. This may not always be apparent nor may the true reason immediately be disclosed by the child/young person. It may take some time to ascertain and requires professionals to continue to work closely together.

14.1 When a child or young person is found the priority should be to meet any health or welfare needs they have, such as providing them with medical attention, food and drink, clean clothes as necessary.

14.2 Where a child or young person returning makes an allegation or it is suspected / evident that they have experienced abuse, Safeguarding Procedures must be implemented and contact made immediately with the Police Child Abuse

Investigation Unit and the Intake and Assessment Team for the authority where the child or young person is found or lives.

14.3 “Young people who go missing on their own don’t always know how to resolve conflicts or problems they face in their lives, or where to turn for help. They often believe that running away is their only option.” (taken from the school resource pack “Running away a cry for help? Lessons and activities” produced by the National Missing Persons help line). Talking through the reasons why they ran away is essential in ensuring their needs are taken into account and to put into place interventions necessary to reduce risk and prevent a repeat.

14.4 The child or young person must be given the opportunity to talk to someone independent about their absence. In some instances this person could be a police officer. It may be that the child or young person would prefer to speak to a social worker or to an independent agency. Their preference should be taken into account, recorded and agreement reached.

14.5 The objectives of any “found discussion” are:

- a) to determine the reason why the child or young person ran away and in particular, if they have been subject to violence, abuse or bullying;
- b) to establish whether they have been a victim of crime while away;
- c) to put in place any support and preventative measures to avoid a recurrence;
- d) to discover where and with whom they have been staying;
- e) to obtain information which may lead to their early discovery should they run away again;
- f) to establish if they may need legal advice, for example if they have been involved in criminal activity whilst away.
- g) to discover whether they have been misusing drugs or alcohol whilst away.

14.6 Practice guidance for use by practitioners when conducting return interviews is included in Appendix 1.

14.7 When runaways do not want their whereabouts disclosed or they do not wish to return to their home, contact with statutory agencies is essential to ensure that all aspects of the child or young person’s welfare are considered and appropriate, planned actions taken, with due regard given to the wishes and feelings of the child or young person.

15 Independent Interview - Children under 13

- Children under 13 will be offered an independent interview arranged through Children’s Services. The younger the child, the more at risk they may have been and a child in need assessment may be required. All agencies carrying out independent interviews should be recognised by their local Children’s Social Care and able to review the interview against a child-in-need assessment criteria.
- The purpose of the assessment is to ascertain whether a child/young person’s welfare will be at risk unless appropriate services are provided. The agency should be clear about when it is appropriate to request an

assessment and the effective use of the criteria will help to establish the credibility of such requests.

16. Independent Interview - Young People 13-18

- Young people over 13 year should be offered access to an independent interview through the Connexions service to assess their need with regard to advice, information and support and to agree an appropriate response. A Connexions Personal Advisor will make contact with the young person and their carer as soon as is practicable and in any event within 72 working hours. The young person's views should be taken into consideration in guiding the decision as to which agency might best offer the necessary "independent perspective".

17. Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

- This protocol is concerned with individuals up to the age of eighteen. However, there is a requirement to provide differentiated services for some vulnerable young adults up to 24 years of age. Young people with learning difficulties and /or disabilities need to be assessed in line with vulnerable adult's protocols.

Appendix 1 : Practice Guidance to assessing risk when a child or young person is a runaway

1. The determination of the level of risk and the subsequent conduct of any investigation are bound together and should be developed as such.
2. All reports of runaways should be subject to a risk assessment process designed to determine what level of risk (high, medium, or low) to assign to the child or young person runaway. This assessment is based upon the information available at the time and is subject to supervision and review should the child or young person remain a runaway or not wish to have their whereabouts disclosed to their carer.
3. A risk assessment includes a judgement about the likely reason for the child or young person having runaway, and should result in decisions about which further action needs to be taken and why.
4. A risk assessment and decisions should be recorded, showing what is being done and why, including whether and when to make a referral to the Police and Children Social Care. The accuracy and means of recording can be crucial in any future investigations.
5. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) may be a format used to collate information about the child or young person and record the risk assessment.
6. When making such an assessment the information that leads to the determination of the level of risk must be recorded. The origins of this information must also be recorded, to include the person giving the information, which may have other motives or may not be in full possession of the facts. No assumptions, however, should be made until the facts are ascertained and detailed and accurate information has been obtained from the child, young person on their return or the person making the report.
7. In undertaking the risk assessment, assume the worst, there have been instances where people who were thought to be at 'no risk' have come to serious harm, including murder.
8. Relevant factors in risk assessment are:
 - Current circumstances of child or young person
 - Opportunity for child or young person to run away
 - Age of child or young person
 - Knowledge or likelihood of anyone else being involved, e.g. friend / family member
 - Ability to manage on their own
 - Mental health
 - Physical health

- Previous patterns of behaviour
 - Culture
 - Language / communication skills
 - Weather conditions
 - Learning disabilities/difficulties
9. Such factors will enable any subsequent investigation to establish the priority of lines of enquiry and determine the appropriate response required.
10. Voluntary departure tends to be for reasons that should be readily identified; common reasons include:
- Fear of chastisement
 - Absconding after offending
 - Following on from truancy and family discord
 - Fear of abuse
 - Pregnancy
 - Rejection of persons they see as disrupting the family, e.g., parent's new partner
11. Risk of suicide can be assessed against family and medical advice, previous running away behaviour, the presence or absence of medication, recent evidence of state of mind and so forth.
12. **Minimum information required for initial risk assessment of missing children and young people**

Child or young person's details
Name
Age
Language Spoken
Ethnic origin if known
Mobile Number
Home address
Child or young person's relationships
Person/s with parental responsibility and contact addresses and numbers if known
Details of known contacts
Family and /or friends
Details of running away
Date and Location of running away
Circumstances of running away
Child or young person subject to any statutory orders?
Is this behaviour out of character, has it happened before if so when and reasons if known
Assessment of the above by person reporting
Name, address and telephone number of the person reporting

Appendix 2 : Children and young people runaways risk assessment / decision making guide

- Consider all of the questions below in order to determine the level of risk and to inform the action plan.
- Record details and circumstances

Recent events

- Is there a reason for the child or young person running away?
- Are there any indications that preparations have been made for their absence?
- What was the child or young person intending to do when last seen e.g. going to the shops or catching a bus and did they fail to complete their intentions?
- Has the child or young person been involved in a violent, homophobic and/or racist incident or confrontation immediately prior to disappearance?

Vulnerability

- Is the child or young person vulnerable due to age, mental ill health, learning Disability/difficulty or any other similar factor?
- Is there any indication that the child or young person is likely to commit suicide?
- Has the child or young person suffered or been exposed to harm when a runaway previously?
- Is there a belief that the child or young person may not have the ability to interact safely with others or in an unknown environment?
- Does the child or young person runaway have any physical illness?
- Do they need essential medication that is not likely to be available to them?
- Are there inclement weather conditions that would seriously increase risk to health?
- Excessive amount of time spent in chat rooms/online

Behaviour

- Is this behaviour out of character?
- Are the circumstances of going missing different from normal behaviour patterns?

Crime

- Is the child or young person suspected to be the subject of a significant crime in progress e.g. abduction?

Background

- Are their family or relationship problems or recent history of family conflict and/or abuse?
- Are they subject to a Child Protection Plan?
- Are they the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence?
- Has the child or young person been involved in ongoing bullying or harassment, e.g., racial, sexual, homophobic or local community concerns or cultural issues?
- Has the child or young person been experiencing difficulties at school, college, university or in managing their finances?
- Has the child or young person experienced drug or alcohol dependency?

Other

- Are there other unlisted factors which should influence risk assessment?

Risk Level

In consideration of the above factors, their likelihood and seriousness, what level of risk do you consider to be adequate?

- LOW RISK
- MEDIUM RISK
- HIGH RISK

Analysis

Record reasons to substantiate this level of risk.

Appendix 3 : Practice Guidance for Return Interview

A return interview might gather the following information:

1. Reason for disappearance

2. Circumstances of return:

- Time returned
- Date returned
- Returned of own accord
- Found by police / Arrested
- Found by family
- Other
- Physical Injury
- Location found
- Not known / Not disclosed
- Other

Account of circumstances whilst a runaway

- Stayed with friend / family
- Went to place previously lived/frequented
- Hotel/other commercial premises
- Went to location with no previously known connections
- Stayed with person they met while a runaway
- Met up with other runaways
- Slept rough
- Involved in prostitution
- Involved in criminal activity
- Not known / not disclosed

Record

- who was the agency worker dealing with the return
- Action plan agreed and with whom
- The notification process undertaken
- The information from the interview

Appendix 4 : Local and National support networks

Runaway: free phone 0808 800 7070. Helpline for under 18 year olds who have run away. Advisors available 24hrs a day. www.runawayhelpline.org.uk

Message Home Service: 0800 700740. Will send a message to family or friends. www.missingpersons.org

Children's Service Bedford: 01234 223599

Children Services Dunstable: 01582 818499

Bedfordshire Police: 01234 841212

Housing Advice - Over 16 01234 221785

Connx4U. Links to a number of websites. www.connx.org.uk/connx4u/

Referencing

1. 'Young Runaways' Report by Social Inclusion Unit (November2002)
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk
2. 'Living on the edge: The experiences of detached young runaways' (2005)
Author Emilie Smeaton Children's Society
www.childrenssociety.org.uk
3. 'Running Away: A cry for help' Educational resource produced by the National Missing Person's Helpline and Children & Youth Partnership Foundation.
www.astraproject.org.uk