

# **Good Practice Guidance**

**To reduce Absconding and Missing From Care**

**Episodes at E. Lane.**

There is a significant correlation between young people who are in the care of the local authority and instances of missing / absconding from the identified home (placement.) The report from the APPG Inquiry into Children Missing from Care stated that children in the care of the local authority are three times more likely to go missing than any other young people. (APPG 2012) There are numerous reasons why children in care run away from their placements. Unfortunately it would appear that the reasons described by children today mirror the reasons expressed by young people in care several years ago. Listed below are some common examples of why young people in care runaway (Ofsted 2012):

- Bullied in the placement
- Want to be with their family and friends and the placement is too far away and does not facilitate this opportunity
- Too many rules & restrictions which prevent children from doing normal child / teenage things
- Poor relationships with carers / other residents
- A way to take back control over their lives
- Because its fun
- Being exploited

This document illustrates what measures the staff at E. Lane take to reduce the frequency that young people in our care go missing from the home. The staff at E. Lane understand that good practice, as illustrated below, will not stop all episodes of young people going missing, however it is envisaged that such work does reduce the frequency of such behaviour.

### **Placement Planning**

It is vital to ensure that young people feel safe and settled at E. Lane as soon as possible. On arrival at E. Lane young people are introduced to the staff team and other residents. They are shown round the building and given a welcome pack. They are guided through the fire evacuation procedure and also the complaints procedure. Young people are introduced to their key team and the role of their key workers is explained to them so that they feel more at ease within placement. Expectations within placement are set out and young people are supported to guide their Residential Action Plan according to their own wishes and feelings. All of these steps aim to create a safe and settled environment for young people residing at E. Lane to keep them safe from absconding or having missing episodes.

A placement planning meeting will be undertaken within 72 hours of the young person moving into E. Lane. At this meeting the following things are clarified:

- ◇ What are the young person's expectations from the placement; what do they want to achieve and how do they want to be supported to achieve this.
- ◇ What are the expectations of the young person by the home i.e. attend key-work sessions.

- ◇ Information regarding the young persons history & background is shared to ensure that their individual needs are known and they are offered the appropriate support (this can be shared at a separate time if it is not appropriate for the young person to be present.)
- ◇ An up to date Risk Assessment is provided by the social worker prior to any new placement commencing. Any uncertainty in the Risk Assessment is discussed and clarified at this meeting if not addressed prior.

It is also important during the placement planning process that E. Lane can establish whether a move to short term accommodation was the wish of the young person or not. It is more likely that a young person will runaway from a new placement if the placement is not of their choosing.

### **Relationships with Staff & Young People**

All staff at E. Lane make a conscious effort to spend time with new residents and try to build a rapport with them at the earliest opportunity. Young people have voiced through research forums that positive relationships with carers are key to ensuring that they feel secure and content in their home environment. Consequently this reduces the likelihood of them absconding from the placement. (McNeish and Scott 2006)

All young people placed at E. Lane are allocated a key-team which consists of two staff and one Senior Duty Officer. The key-team work with social workers to assess, plan, implement and review the needs of the young person and the work undertaken with them so far. The management team try and match young people to key-teams taking into consideration the young persons individual needs and the skills and capacity of the staff members. The quality of the key-working relationship does influence what outcomes are achieved overall for the young person as this relationship is often one of the most significant in the placement.

In the APPG inquiry into children missing from care it clearly highlights the importance of carers listening to young people and adopting a non judgemental approach. In this report it gives an example of a young person who felt judged and betrayed by a residential staff members attitude towards her after she made a disclosure. Consequently the young person did not disclose any more information in the future and was not able to trust or confide in staff in the future. (APPG 2012 p 26) At E. Lane staff understand that children in care have faced extreme adversity in their short lived lives and have typically been betrayed by the adult world. This heightens the obstacles that they have to overcome before they feel safe and able to share sensitive information such as the reasons why they may be going missing. If and when young people do share sensitive information with staff members the following actions are implemented:

- i. Listen to what the young person says (ask open questions, do not make assumptions and clarify your understanding of what is being said.)
- ii. Not dismissive of the problem and the impact it is having for the young person regardless of whether the staff member perceives the problem to be small. If something is troubling a young person and is of importance to them staff must respect that and support them through that.
- iii. Establish what the young person wants staff to do about the information that they have shared. In some circumstances procedures may override what actions need to be taken however it is still vital that staff establish what the young persons wishes are here and that it is explained to them clearly why their wishes are / are not being followed to their liking.
- iv. Explain whether the information disclosed needs to be passed onto other agencies and what should happen as a result of this.

Young people who are placed at E. Lane are asked to be polite and respectful to both other residents who reside here and all staff members. Staff do not promote personal relationships, however, friendships often do develop of the young peoples choosing which staff support.

It is common in group living environments for disagreements to occur. E. Lane can proudly state that this is not a regular occurrence here however we acknowledge that it does happen from time to time. E. Lane has a clear anti-bullying and anti-discriminatory policy which is adhered to during such times. The following actions are taken to address any concerns of bullying or discriminatory behaviour.

- ◇ Any behaviour that is not respectful and appropriate is immediately challenged by staff. In doing this staff will explain why the behaviour is not appropriate. Depending on the nature of the incident depends whether further action should be taken.
- ◇ Staff will arrange a three way discussion if two young people have had a disagreement. They will use this space to try and resolve any issues and move forward.
- ◇ If a group of young people are targeting an individual, a young people's meeting may be arranged at short notice to address the emerging behaviours.
- ◇ Individual key-work sessions are also scheduled to take place at the earliest convenience to constructively challenge any negative activities.
- ◇ Staff will also offer support to individuals that are isolated through such action.
- ◇ If the bullying / discriminatory behaviour is persisted, staff will arranged for the local PCSO to visit the home to discuss the on-going concerns with the relevant young people.
- ◇ Professionals meetings will also been organised once alternative avenues of resolution have been exhausted and the behaviours continue.

- ◇ Young people at risk of being bullied within placement or outside of the home are spoken to by their key team and give a 'safe word' that they can use to indicate they are uncomfortable or unsafe.

Bullying and feeling unsafe at home is a reason that research with young people in care highlights to explain why children in care may choose to runaway from their placements. (Ofsted 2012) E. Lane will not tolerate bullying or discriminatory action. The staff team do their utmost to safeguard young people who may be the victim of such conduct.

## **Family & Friends**

It remains to be a challenge for children in care of the local authority to maintain contact with significant others in their lives. This is both due to the location of their placements and due to the ruling of court orders. For some young people distance from significant others and the barriers that they experience with contact impacts on whether they choose to runaway or not. In these circumstances it is highly likely that the young people run to the significant others that they are wanting to see.

Young people placed at E. Lane are aged between 12 and 17 years old, with no more than 5 years between the eldest and youngest resident. Their age and ability to make informed choices regarding contact is respected and supported by the staff team. These choices should not compromise safeguarding and child protection therefore it is important that the wishes of the young person are listened too and acted upon to prevent young people feeling like running away is their only option.

E. Lane support young people to access positive family/friends contact in the following ways:

- ◇ One to one discussions with young people inquiring about the key people in their lives. This includes who the young people would like contact with, how frequent they would like this, who would they like E. Lane staff to be in contact with re: their placement at E. Lane, what barriers do they experience with contact etc.
- ◇ Once the young person's wishes have been ascertained the key-team liaise with the young person's social worker and explore contact options. This includes discussing safeguarding concerns and how this can be managed to reduce any presenting risks (it is vital where possible for contact to be facilitated and the risks to be managed to prevent runaways.)
- ◇ E. Lane encourages young people to invite their friends and family members to the home.
- ◇ Key-teams try and develop a positive working relationship with significant others so that they can adopt a working together approach which consequently leads to better outcomes for the young people. Staff at E. Lane understand that for some people it is extremely difficult to visit the placement or to allow staff to meet them in their home

environment therefore staff try to be flexible and provide opportunities to meet people in a neutral setting of their choosing.

## **Exploitation**

Children in Care of the Local Authority are more vulnerable to exploitation in all formats. Running away and absconding from placements are one of the many risk indicators that staff can use to identify if young people are being exploited. If staff at E. Lane suspect that a resident is experiencing any form of exploitation they will action the following:

- ◇ Have key-work sessions with the young people to talk about the concerns. (Young people are expected to attend a minimum of one key-work session a week with staff. These sessions along with one to one discussions are often used to address concerns that have arisen such as a noticeable change in pattern of behaviour / attitude. As previously mentioned, E. Lane does work in a transparent way with young people and the staff team will respond immediately to anything that they observe or interpret to be potentially concerning.)
- ◇ Have safeguarding key-work sessions with the young people exploring exploitation and what it is.
- ◇ Information concerning the risks and presenting behaviour to be shared with all relevant professionals (staff to liaise on a near daily basis with PC Sam Flint & PCSO Simon Smith with anything that could be relevant for policing purposes.)
- ◇ Arrange and attend strategy / professionals meetings. Identify an action plan and arrange for this to be reviewed at a future meeting within one month.

## **Rules & Restrictions / Having a Voice**

E. Lane is a short term (3 month) assessment residential home for young people aged 12 to 17 years old. Staff appreciate that some young people require freedom as part of their adolescent development however there are still clear expectations and boundaries in place that must be adhered to by all young people who reside at the home for the safety of themselves and others. The expectations are stated in the young people's welcome pack and are explained to all young people as part of their admission into the home.

E. Lane encourage all young people to voice their expectations of the home and staff team both prior to their move and throughout their stay. Young people's meetings, individual key-work sessions, staff questionnaires & exercising the right to make a complaint are all forums which promote participation and give young people the space to express their wishes and feelings. It is envisaged that participation helps create a sense of belonging

and a higher sense of self-worth. Open and honest communication does also reduce conflict and confusion within the home.

In addition to the support that the staff team provide, all young people residing at E. Lane are offered advocacy support provided by Barnardo's. This service is strongly promoted by the staff team; it gives young people the confidence to express their voice in both formal and informal settings so that they can impact on the decisions that are being made about their lives.

### **Constructive Day Time Activity**

Young people are at greater risk of going missing / absconding from their placements if they have too much free time. There is a strong correlation between young people in care and NEET. (Ofsted 2012, APPG 2012) Staff at E. Lane work particularly close with two services that support young people to access education and employment in the community. Bill Connors (Futures) and Jamie Shrivastava (Rise project) work extremely well with looked after young people within the education / employment market. Together they offer a range of services including:

- ◇ Interview skills and one to one practice sessions
- ◇ Support to complete hand-written and online application forms; both for college / training and employment opportunities
- ◇ Support them to attend interviews (and will offer to be present inside or outside of the interview room as a physical support)
- ◇ Provide work experience opportunities in the community
- ◇ Provide employment based workshops i.e. what is expected of people within all work places
- ◇ Will find courses that provide young people with the necessary skills to pursue a career of their choosing i.e. CSE cards for construction
- ◇ Liaise with employers if young people are struggling with the job itself or are involved in a dispute or some sort

Staff encourage the residents of E. Lane to access the support offered by Bill and Jamie if they are not already engaged within a form of training / employment. On occasions staff attend employment fairs with young people too.

As well as accessing employment / training, staff encourage young people to engage in additional activities within the community that reflect their personality and interests i.e. attend sports clubs / children in care council. Additional activities help young people towards developing a constructive routine. They also offer a sense of achievement and provide forums for meeting different people in the community. Young people are offered practical support such as money / transport etc to access these activities. Confidence building and work exploring self-esteem is also delivered through key-work sessions to help people on an emotional level engage with such opportunities.

E. Lane and the other residential homes have recently started working with the Magdalena Project which is a charitable organization that has been specifically set up to work with female young people in care, however male residents have also been invited to join in on the sessions. These sessions invite young people to spend time in the outreach room and enjoy beauty therapies in order to build their self esteem and worth, as a result from these positive sessions it is hoped that this will help reduce young people absconding from care. In the few sessions that have already taken place the young people have engaged positively and look forward to forthcoming sessions and ensure they are available when the sessions are planned to take place.

All young people who reside at E. Lane have a weekly planner. This is ideally written by the young person and their key-team. The planner should illustrate all the young persons appointments for the week including key-work sessions. The weekly planner helps young people organise their diaries and also provides them with an opportunity to develop a positive routine. Young people are encouraged to follow their planners however due to their age and sometimes busy / monotonous lifestyle this does not happen.

### **Missing Return Interviews**

On the occasions when young people do go missing from the home, staff at E. Lane, following the joint Nottingham City Council/ Nottinghamshire County Council & Police missing from care protocol.

When young people return, staff try where possible, to complete a return discussion document with the young person. This document covers details such as the young person's whereabouts whilst they were out, whether the young person was asked to do anything against their will, why the young person went missing & whether they are likely to go missing again. Staff are encouraged to have this discussion informally with the young person (not sit with the document and record directly onto it as this can cause a barrier) and to reiterate that the discussion is about keeping them safe and not to tell them off. During this discussion young people are asked if they would like to talk to someone independently from the home such as their social worker or an advocacy worker. It is vital that young people are offered this alternative option as young people may not feel able to talk about the reasons for them going missing if it is connected to the home.

Once a return discussion has taken place, staff try to resolve any outstanding issues that have risen from the discussion (with the young persons consent.) Staff also monitor the young persons frame of mind and try to provide distractions to prevent the young person from going missing again.

### **Staff Training & Development**

In the APPG report it states that residential care workers feedback that lack of training and development opportunities influenced their ability to manage and feel confident to address sensitive issues such as running away from placements with young people. Staffing levels i.e. a high turnover of staff and high sickness rates were also a correlating factor with runaways. (APPG 2012)

E. Lane is a Nottingham City Council residential home. The staff are provided with the following opportunities to enhance individual and service development:

- Yearly full and midway appraisals – identify targets and actions
- Monthly supervision
- Opportunities to complete NVQ and Diploma courses
- Internal training opportunities are provided by the City Council and external providers are contracted in to address any identified needs
- Shadowing opportunities of other professionals are available

### **Staying Out NOT Running Away**

In 2012 Ofsted published 'Running Away.' This document identifies a significant difference between children who 'run away' and those who choose to 'stay out late.' In many residential homes staff mistake 'missing' to be the same as 'staying out late' due to misinterpretation of the policies and procedures that are in place to support their practice.

Fortunately at E. Lane we do distinguish a difference between 'missing' and 'staying out.' Due to the age group of the young people who reside at E. Lane, it is quite common for young people to stay out later than staff would ideally want and for them to stay out at their friends without permission. A part of young people's development is taking appropriate steps to keep themselves safe in the community at all times. Young people at E. Lane are encouraged to take the following steps to minimise the level of risk that they are placing themselves in by choosing to 'staying out.'

- ◇ Remain in verbal telephone contact with staff (frequency varies on the individual young person)
- ◇ Young people encouraged to know the contact number for E. Lane
- ◇ Young people to give location / address of their whereabouts in the community (if they do not want to be specific, young people to share what area they are in)
- ◇ Young people to introduce staff to their friends and to share friends parents / carers home telephone numbers
- ◇ Young people to agree with staff an estimated return home time and to update staff if this changes

As well as taking appropriate safeguarding steps to keep young people safe whilst out in the community, staff also discuss the 'Missing from Care Protocol' with young people. It is important that young people have a clear

understanding of this and the procedures that need to be followed by all staff as it helps reduce misunderstandings and conflict as well as enables them to make informed choices regarding their behaviour and the consequences it has.

## **Reference**

APPG (2012) *Report from the Joint Inquiry into Children who go Missing from Care* The Children Society

McNeish D and Scott S (2006) *Missing from Care in Staffordshire 'A report prepared by Barnardo's for Staffordshire Children and Lifelong Learning Directorate'* Barnardo's

Ofsted (2012) *Running Away 'Young People's views on running away from care supported by the Children's Rights Director for England'* Manchester: Ofsted