

Good Practice Guidance
To reduce Absconding and Missing from Care
Episodes at M. Street and S. Road

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 it's fun
- Being exploited

This document illustrates what measures the staff at M. Street take to reduce the frequency that young people in our care go missing from the home. The staff at M. Street and S. Road 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

Admissions to the home are planned, unless there is an extreme circumstance leading to an emergency admission. Prior to admission, the Home Manager would take into consideration information from the EO1 (placement referral form) and risk assessment to complete a matching toolkit and group risk assessment. Once completed, a decision would be made as to whether a young person should be placed at the home. For example, the home would not match young people who had similar risks of missing from care and CSE concerns as this would increase the risk of both young people.

It is vital to ensure that young people feel safe and settled at M. Street and S. Road as soon as possible. On arrival at either home 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 M. Street or S. Road 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 M. Street or S. Road. 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 person's 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 M. Street and S. Road can establish whether a move to long term accommodation was the wish of the young person or not. It is more likely that a young person will run away from a new placement if the placement is not of their choosing.

Relationships with Staff & Young People

All staff at M. Street and S. Road 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 M. Street and S. Road are allocated a key-team which consists of three named staff and one Assistant Manager. 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 person's 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 M. Street and S. Road 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 person's 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 M. Street and S. Road 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 people's choosing which staff support.

It is common in group living environments for disagreements to occur. M. Street and S. Road can proudly state that this is not a regular occurrence here however we acknowledge that it does happen from time to time. M. Street and S. Road have 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 run away from their

placements. (Ofsted 2012) Neither M. Street or S. Road 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 run away 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 M. Street and S. Road are aged between 11 and 18 years old, and we aim to follow good practise and not have more than a 5 year age gap between the young people. 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.

M. Street and S. Road 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 M. Street and S. Road staff to be in contact with re: their placement at M. Street or S. Road, 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.)
- Both M. Street and S. Road encourage 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 M. Street and S. Road 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 M. Street or S. Road 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, M. Street and S. Road do 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.
- Complete a CSE toolkit following this key work session.
- Information concerning the risks and presenting behaviour to be shared with all relevant professionals, including LAC Police Officer PC Sam Flint.
- Arrange and attend strategy / professionals meetings. Identify an action plan and arrange for this to be reviewed at a future meeting within one month.
- Consideration to a “striver” form being completed, for a discussion at professional networks meeting.

Rules & Restrictions / Having a Voice

Both M. Street and S. Road are settled care homes for young people aged 10 to 18 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.

M. Street and S. Road 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 M. Street and S. Road are offered advocacy support provided by the Childrens Society. 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 M. Street and

S. Road work particularly close with two services that support young people to access education and employment in the community. Futures 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.

When a young person is of school age, they must have 25 hours of education in place. The home will liaise closely the Virtual School to ensure that this is in place, and wherever there may be short falls, what will be put into place to protect the minimum 25 hours. For example, a tutor.

If a young person refuses to attend education, staff will make every effort to engage young people in activities that will enhance their life skills or compliment their education.

Staff encourage the residents of M. Street and S. Road to access the support offered by Futures 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.

All young people who reside at M. Street and S. Road 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

When a young person's whereabouts is unknown, staff are to complete a "whereabouts unknown" form. This will detail what efforts have made to contact the young person and locate them.

When a young person returns to the home, staff will take note of the young person's appearance, emotional state and physical state. Staff are to welcome the young people back to the home adopting a non-judgemental approach, and staff are encouraged to discuss informally with the young person where they have been and personal safety.

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.

Staff also monitor the young person's frame of mind and try to provide distractions to prevent the young person from going missing again.

An independent person will always offer a young person a return interview on their return.

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)

M. Street and S. Road are Nottingham City Council residential homes. 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 M. Street and S. Road we do distinguish a difference between 'missing' and 'staying out.' Due to the age group of the young people who reside at M. Street and S. Road, 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 M. Street and S. Road 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 the home.
- 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