Pan Bedfordshire LSCB Multi-agency Missing Children and Young People Audit 2018 Summary

This summary (briefing) is aimed at managers and practitioners working with children and young people. Information about missing children and young people and key findings & recommendations from the audit is presented. Please share this with colleagues.

Background
Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) requires Local Safeguarding Children Boards to evaluate multi-agency working through joint audits of case files. The issue of children and young people who go missing is a key area of focus for all 3 of the Bedfordshire LSCB’s and therefore it was agreed that a Pan Bedfordshire Multi-Agency audit should be carried out to evaluate current practice within this area. It captures the learning which will support improvements in practice aimed at strengthening the safeguarding of children and young people. The audit included accuracy of case details, underpinning this was the 'Voice of the Child' and compliance to procedures.

Definition
During November 2016, the College of Policing released new guidance in relation to how missing people are categorised. A missing person is defined as someone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject to crime, or at risk of harm to themselves or another. When someone is reported missing, they will be categorised as either low, medium, or high risk. The risk level will be regularly reviewed and amended if necessary. An absent person is defined as someone who is not in a place where they are expected or required to be and where there is no apparent risk.

Methodology
3 cases were picked from each of the 3 LSCB areas by the Local Authority Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Missing Single Points of Contact (SPOC). Criteria for choosing the cases to be audited: 1 X Low Risk, 1 x Medium Risk, 1 x High Risk cases and 1 of the cases should be known to the local Youth Offending Service.

Why do children and young people go missing?
There are a wide range of reasons with varying levels of intentionality, and often more than one cause. Among the most common reasons for children and young people to be missing are:

- Conflict, abuse and neglect at home: more than half of missing children/young people has experienced this and 1 in 5 children/young people felt forced to leave home.
- Sexual exploitation: 7 in 10 children/young people who have been sexually exploited have also been reported missing.
- Mental health issues: at least 1 in 10 missing children/young people contacting our helpline are (in order of commonality):
  - Problems at home
  - Abuse, domestic abuse or child sexual exploitation
  - Mental health issues including risks of suicide or self-harm
  - Living in care.

70% of children and young people who are sexually exploited go missing or run away.
Audit Process:
The cases were circulated to partner agencies including schools along with an audit tool for them to complete for each case they'd had contact with. The audit responses were collated into information packs for each case. On 9th July partners came together for an audit event and were separated into 3 Panels consisting of partners from across the three LSCB areas, each Panel reviewed 3 cases (1 from Bedford, 1 from Central Bedfordshire and 1 from Luton and answered the following questions for each case. What did Agencies know about the child/young person's lived experience? What is your view on Multi-agency information sharing? What interventions were putting place? Were they appropriate? Is there evidence of quality engagement with the young person and family? Do you think actions could have been taken earlier? What do you think went well? What didn’t go so well? Where were the gaps identified?

Agencies who took part in the audit:
Central Bedfordshire Council Children’s and Early Help Services – Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group – Cambridge Community Services – East London Foundation Trust - CAMHS – Luton Borough Council Children’s Services, School Improvement Team and Early Help Team – Bedford Borough Council Public Health, Children’s Services and Early Help Team – Bedford Hospital (provided information but unable to attend on the day) – Luton & Dunstable Hospital – Bedfordshire Police and Schools – NSPCC – Barnardo’s

Summary of Key Themes:
• Good evidence of multi-agency working on some quite complex cases, evidence of lots of interventions being put in place and evidence of listening to the child/young person.
• Practitioners had a good understanding of the step up and step-down process and they appeared to work well.
• Good examples of information sharing – although it was not always clear what agencies did with the information received.
• Overall it was clear that return home interviews are being completed however there was little evidence within the audit around the quality and outcomes of the interviews taking place.
• Evidence of creative interventions which focused on the voice of the child/young person, for example interventions put in place for a child young person who was mute.
• Good evidence that practitioners were aware of local services available and accessed them for the young people they were working with.
• It was noted that some of the children/young people had a high number of placement moves and some of these were miles away from their networks which led to an increase in missing episodes. It was also noted that some 16+ residential homes are in vulnerable locations and that the commissioners (outside of Beds) are not aware of this when it comes to identifying the placements. Commissioners and practitioners should be considering what else needs to be done to safeguard these children/young people.
• Whilst not necessarily in the audit notes, through practitioners’ knowledge of the young people it was noted that all the children/young people had experienced some form of rejection or trauma in their lives.
• There were patterns of inappropriate relationships evident within the cases.
• In several cases the children/young people were placed with family members as it was deemed in the best interest of the child/young person at the time of placement however it was evident that assessments of these placements were not as robust as those for adoption or fostering placements.
• If a child had additional needs it didn’t appear these were considered when assessing/analysing the reasons why the child/young person had gone missing.
• In some cases, it wasn’t clear that a think family approach was taken.
• All the cases were known to services for a long time, but it wasn’t clear why they were going missing and therefore it wasn’t clear why the issues for the child/young person going missing had not been resolved.
• It was noted that some cases had, had a frequent number of social worker changes.
• A question arose as to how practitioners’ assumptions about different cultures (i.e. Roma) impacted on their analysis and decision making.
• Not all agencies had the same understanding in relation to categories of missing and their associated risk.

Actions:
1) There is a common understanding that LAC children tend to be a large proportion of the missing cohort. It may be helpful to audit cases of LAC children who do not go missing in order to understand what are the protective / resilience factors that prevent the behaviour
2) The Missing Children Procedures and Essential Information Form were reviewed and relaunched last year. There was little evidence of people knowing about them or using them. There is therefore a need to promote awareness about them
3) Ask each Local Authority to audit 5 cases of where Return Home Interviews have to evaluate the quality (unless a similar audit has been completed in the last 3 months)
4) How do commissioners of Return Home Interview Providers quality their service.

For access to the Pan Bedfordshire procedures on Safeguarding Children who Run Away and Go Missing from Home and Care please go to http://bedfordscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_missing_home_care.html