Corporate Parenting Panel Supplementary Agenda

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Non-Executive Template

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel
SUBJECT:	Review of Missing Children
LEAD OFFICER:	Róisín Madden; Director, Children's Social Care
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	

SUMMARY OF REPORT:

The purpose of this paper is to update Corporate Parenting Panel regarding Missing Children and the continued improvement in performance and quality of practice including:

- Numbers of children and young people reported missing
- Missing children identified at risk from child exploitation
- Missing children in the care of the Local Authority
- Return Home Interviews
- Performance and Practice Standards
- Continuous Improvement and Development
- Examples of Good Practice

This will provide Corporate Parenting Panel an opportunity to seek clarity and raise questions whilst providing assurance that Children's Social Care and the wider partnership is making improvements to improve the quality of services provided to children who go missing.

POLICY CONTEXT/AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON:

Ensuring that our response to children who 'go missing' from home or care receive the best quality core services that we can afford, delivering evidence-based outcomes for our young residents across the child's journey through children's social care services.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There are no financial implications for the Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that Corporate Parenting Panel:

1. Note the progress made to date including improved quality of practice.

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> 2. Note the further improvements proposed, which is designed to embed further cultural and operational changes to achieve positive and sustainable change to the quality of services provided to children and families of Croydon.
>
> 3. Provide Corporate Leaders with an understanding of progress made to date and an understanding of the continuous improvements.

Review of Missing Children

1. Background

A relentless focus is essential to ensuring that our most vulnerable children and young people in Croydon including those that go Missing are safeguarded, and risk is managed in a way that is built on adolescent centred practice.

To support this work, Children's Social Care has established an operational Missing Lead, who is responsible for ensuring a coordinated response to children and young people who go missing and to provide practice guidance and support to the wider workforce to ensure consistent practice standards.

This lead role is further supported by a team of analysts for Child Exploitation and Missing alongside leadership from key operational Service Managers and Heads of Service.

A refreshed Missing Protocol has been designed, which is due to be launched in March 2022, to further support the continuous improvement journey.

2. Numbers of Children and Young People

Between 1st January and 31st December 2021, 425 children were reported missing including those who are Children in Care, which is 8% higher than for 2020; however, overall, there was a 20% reduction in the total number of missing episodes in 2021 compared to 2020.

The main factors contributing to this reduction stems from the Covid-19 restrictions in place at the beginning of 2021, with less services open and children being more likely to stay at home due to lockdown rules.

Improvements in recording and analysis of missing episodes, increased safety planning and missing strategy meetings have also assisted alongside enhanced disruption activity and interventions with oversight of the Complex Adolescent Panel (MACE), supported through improved performance information to enable senior leaders to have greater oversight.

3. Missing Children identified at risk of Child Exploitation

Of the children who have gone missing where risks associated with child exploitation have been identified, 43% (181 children) have been heard at the Complex Adolescent Panel and 37% of children who have been missing at least once have been subject to MACE protocol.

Of the cohort of children who went missing in 2021 there were risks and concerns of child exploitation evidenced / suspected with the following themes noted:

- 43% (181) of children were discussed at Complex Adolescent Panel (CAP) in 2021 due to concerns relating to exploitation.

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- 31% (130) of children missing at least once in 2021 have been subject to MACE protocol.

- 13% (53) of children missing at least once in 2021 have been subject to MACE at some point in relation to Child Sexual Exploitation.

- 25% (105) of children missing at least once in 2021 have been subject to MACE at some point in relation to Child Criminal Exploitation with concerns mainly relating to County Lines Drug Dealing.

How are we supporting Missing Children at risk of Criminal Exploitation?

- Providing tailored interventions via Gangs Prevention, Rescue and Response (inc. St Giles), Barnardo's (supporting NRM and criminal solicitor process), and YOS interventions.
- Disruption of criminal networks / gang / serious youth violence activities via targeted geographical hotspot profiling led by Violence Reduction Network and Police CCE Team and peer mapping / safety planning via Complex Strategy Meetings
- Raising awareness / training amongst the professional network in relation to identifying and reducing risk of children being linked to CCE / CSE / SYV

4. Missing Children in Care

Of the missing children in Croydon, 31% (134) of children are in the care of the local authority, which is 23% lower than for 2020.

The reduction in numbers of children and young people in care going missing stems from an overall reduction in the number of children and young people entering care, with enhanced edge of care provision and children being supported to remain at home through improved safety planning.

The top 20 missing children are in the care of the local authority and account for 41% of all missing episodes.

Some key findings regarding the top 20 children who repeatedly go missing are:

- 55% (11) are male and 45% (9) female
- 75% (15) are aged 17 years +
- 85% are from a Black, Asian or Minority background.
- 20% (16) are local children with 20% (4) being unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

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- 95% have been subject to MACE Protocol due to evidenced risk of either CSE or CCE.

Observations about Top 20 missing children

- We need to develop the intervention offer for repeat missing children in care aged 17+ identified at risk of exploitation in preparation for the transition into adulthood / support when leaving care.
- Complex Adolescent Panel considers children at risk of exploitation up to the age of 18 years; however, there needs to be transition planning in terms of access to housing, Adult Services, employment and training, and mental health services
- There is an over-representation of children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds in the top 20 missing children compared to the overall children in care population.

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5. Return Home Interviews

A Return home interview should be undertaken by an independent person within 72 hours of a child or young person returning home or to a care setting from being missing. This interview is an in-depth conversation with a professional whom a child or young person trusts to explore the reasons for the missing period with the aim of reducing missing episodes and / or protecting children and young people when they do go missing.

The offer of a Return Home Interview in 2021 was 93% for found missing episodes with a Return Home Interview completion rate of 49%.

The lower completion rate is due to disparity in coding, children, young people, and their carers not consenting to a Return Home Interview and changes from a dedicated RHI team to wider workforce responsibility.

Work continues to be undertaken to drive performance and practice in this area.

6. Performance and Practice Standards

Currently, a daily missing data report is sent to all operational and senior managers to ensure oversight of this cohort of children and young people, which also enables closer examination of those children who have been missing for 72 hours or longer.

The Missing Lead can use this data to track and review whether a missing strategy meeting is needed to ensure the multi-agency network for the child or young person is considering their holistic needs and is taking the necessary steps to safeguard.

A Weekly Performance Tracker Data report is also used to understand service area performance in relation to key performance indicators to enable targeted action and follow up such as in Return Home Interviews, which is monitored and scrutinised at the monthly Practice, Innovation, and Improvement Board to hold officers to account.

7. Continuous Improvement and Development

To support continuous improvement in our response to Missing Children, operational managers, senior leaders, and analysts understand what is working well and have identified areas that require further development with an agreed action plan to support practitioners and managers alike.

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Non-Executive Template

As cited, a refreshed Missing Protocol is to be launched in March 2022 alongside the delivery of practice workshops for operational staff to upskill the workforce in developing their understanding of the impact of missing for children and young people.

Weekly line of sight reporting is provided to the Director, Children's Social Care to provide updates on actions and interventions and for those children and young people who have been missing for beyond five days regular update reports are provided to the relevant Head of Service and Director for oversight.

To improve the take up of Return Home Interviews further, young people from the Children in Care Council are to be invited to co-design and produce a questionnaire template used for children and young people.

Service developments for Children in Care and those Leaving Care also includes.

- Relationship building with our children and young people emphasising the importance of relationships to enable children and young people to build trusting relationships and confidence in professionals.
- Consideration of the use of language when describing our children and young people to highlight strengths.
- Understanding trauma informed practice, which provides the workforce with a greater understanding of the impact of adverse childhood experiences.
- Targeted work undertaken by Adolescent Support Workers
- Children and young people over 18 being presented to a High-Risk Panel chaired by the Head of Service for Children in Care and Care Leavers to have a greater understanding of the needs of children and young people at risk and to provide high support and high challenge to safety planning.
- Interface with housing through Housing Panel to prevent homelessness and rent arrears and ensuring young people are housed in safe accommodation.
- Improved quality assurance through audit, supervision, and management oversight including Group supervision with the Systemic Lead.
- Staff are encouraged when working with young people to be creative and flexible in their approach.

The operational Missing Lead also undertakes a range of activity across the Practice System to support practitioners and managers by:

- Reviewing children and young people where there are concerns regarding repeat missing and making recommendations for strategy meetings to be take place.
- Ensuring safety planning is implemented at strategy meetings and within Return Home Interviews.
- Discussions with social workers regarding whether a child is missing, late home, or away from placement without authorisation and giving support and practice ideas for intervention.
- Offering guidance and practical support to social workers and team managers on how to respond when a child is missing including how to record the information on their file.
- Requests regular updates on long time missing episodes and what actions have been taken to try and communicate / locate the child or young person who is missing from home / care by the professional network.
- Reviews completed Return Home Interviews and provides feedback to Adolescent workers to motivate and develop practice.
- Return Home Interview practice meetings held monthly to explore challenges and themes arising from missing episodes.

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8. Examples of Good Practice

<u>Example 1: Child A – 13 years of age, male, first time missing episode.</u>
<u>Missing details: -</u>

- Child A was reported missing in early February and returned home 7 days later.
- This was Child A's first recorded missing episode. Child A was known to be missing with a mixed group of peers; one of whom was his girlfriend.
- Child A was allocated to an Adolescent worker via the duty rota, due to this being his first recorded episode and not previously known to CSC.

<u>Return Home Interview worker: - Worker1</u>

<u>Outcomes following Return Home Interview (RHI)</u>

- Worker 1 was able to contact Child A and mum quickly to offer a RHI. The first RHI was completed within timeframe and Child A formed a good working relationship with Worker 1.
- The first RHI was completed over 2 sessions, one of which was a joint session with the social worker. Having the SW present allowed Worker 1 to have time alone with Child A.
- Child A was able to share a lot of information regarding events whilst he was missing, and general information about his lived experience. The RHI addresses risk with respect to locations Child A went with peers, his age, and gender and he reflects how things are different for 13-year-olds now than when Worker 1 was 13. Worker 1 can show that she has professional curiosity but is also able to challenge his ideas around sex and relationships.
- Child A's mum has also been able to build confidence in Worker 1 and has shared a lot of her worries and concerns that she has in terms of education, locations, and peers.
- Worker 1 along with Child A's social worker was able to contribute risks and concerns held for Child A and his peer group at the review complex strategy meeting held subsequently and the Complex Adolescent Panel.
- Whilst Child A has had subsequent missing episodes in February, he has started to form strong professional relationships with a trusted adult, which has allowed for further RHI's to be completed to understand not only the extra familiar harm Child A is exposed to but also the harm and risk within the home. This has led to further joint work between Worker 1 and the social worker, to assess risk and implement safety plans for Child A and family.

<u>Example 2: Child B, 17-years old, Female</u>
<u>Missing details: -</u>

Child B was reported missing twice in January 2022. She was open to the assessment team, following disclosures of physical abuse in the home. Child B's first missing episode resulted in her sleeping in a local park and presenting herself to a homeless provision in another London borough. Her second missing episode resulted in her travelling to another major city in England, to meet an older male she had met online. Prior to Child B meeting the Adolescent worker, phone contact was made directly to her, and she made allegations that indicated that she was at continued risk of physical and emotional abuse at home. The police were called to intervene and support Child B throughout the weekend.

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Return Home Interview worker: - Worker 1 and Worker 2

Outcomes following Return Home Interview (RHI): -

- Child B alleged throughout her RHI's that she was significantly unhappy at home and subjected to physical and emotional abuse, which we hypothesised was a significant push factor into her missing episodes.
- Child B disclosed that she has had a limited support network outside of the home and could only identify one friend (male) that she had met on social media. Child B had met him once before in London and subsequently went to meet him in the other city.
- Multi-agency and teamwork were implemented to support the social work team understand Child B's concerns and risk identified.
- The adolescent worker identified risk within the RHI and advocated for a joint housing assessment with social care and housing and continued Adolescent intervention.
- Whilst recognising that being placed into care is not the ideal situation for Child B, this was her wish. The social worker tried to stabilise and support Child B to remain at home with Edge of Care intervention; however, Child B has entered the care of the local authority
- To date Child B has not been reported missing since January 2022.

2   LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

N/A

3   HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

N/A

4   EQUALITIES IMPACT

N/A

5   ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT
N/A

6   CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

N/A

7   DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

7.1   WILL THE SUBJECT OF THE REPORT INVOLVE THE PROCESSING OF 'PERSONAL DATA'?

NO

8   Approved by: Róisín Madden Director Children's Social Care

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APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT
None