



# Wakefield Operating Guidance for Children Missing from Home and Care

This document provides supplementary guidance to practitioners in Wakefield and District to support the local implementation of the Joint protocol of the West Yorkshire safeguarding Partners in Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield. (December 2018)

## 1. Context

When a child or young person goes missing, this can be reflective of other safeguarding issues affecting him / her. Some of the risks associated with children who are missing from home and care include:

- The child or young person being in unsafe places, with unsafe or risky adults;
- Being more likely to be involved in substance misuse;
- Being more likely to be involved in anti-social or criminal offending behaviour;
- More likely to be involved in child trafficking or child sexual exploitation;
- Less likely to be socially / educationally engaged.

This means that children who go missing, particularly where this is a sustained feature of their behaviour and / or connected with other types of vulnerability are more likely to be suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm. For this reason, it is important that Social Care and Early Help services identify, understand and address missing episodes for children, in ways that reduce risk and vulnerability.

Our aim in working with children in these circumstances will always be to reduce future missing episodes and to reduce the risk that children are exposed to. The below sets out the way in which social workers and Early Help staff in Wakefield should work with missing children and young people.

## 2. Glossary and definition

There are a number of definitions across statutory guidance and protocols relating to children who go missing or are not where they are expected to be. These are simplified and set out below for easy reference:

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Term	Definition
Child/young person	A person who has not yet reached their eighteenth birthday. 'Child' should be taken to mean 'child or young person' throughout this guidance.
Missing person	Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action.
Children in Care. (CIC)	A child who is looked after by a local authority by reason of a care order, or being accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.
Away from placement without authorisation (Absent)	A looked-after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.
Responsible authority	The local authority that is responsible for a looked-after child's care and care planning. When the child is placed out of area, also known as the "home authority", "originating authority" or "placing authority".
Host authority	The local authority into whose area a looked-after child is placed, if not in the responsible authority's area. Also known as the "receiving authority".
Care leaver	Someone who has previously been a looked-after child for a period of time. Their entitlement to support depends on how long and how long ago this period was and their current circumstances.
Hidden missing child	A child who is or has been missing, but has not been reported to the police.

## 3. The Process to Follow

All staff becoming aware that a child is missing should ensure that this has been reported to the responsible police authority after all reasonable attempts have been made to find the child. The child only needs to be reported missing to the police if their whereabouts cannot be established.

If the whereabouts of a looked after child is known and there is concerns that they are at risk or may pose a risk to others then a joint strategy should be agreed between the responsible authority's' children services and West Yorkshire Police. For more details on making a report of a missing child, see the Joint protocol.

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In Wakefield, all Missing from Home or Care notifications will be made by the responsible Police Authority to the MASH.

The MASH Team will create a record of the child's missing episode in the electronic social care file (missing notification module). Where the child is already known and allocated to a social worker or Early Help Worker, an electronic notification of the missing episode will be sent to that worker.

At the same time, the missing episode will be re-assigned to the CVE Missing young people team using the missing young people inbox. The Missing Coordinator will view the missing episode and will ensure that the young person is discussed in the daily missing briefings and that the Return Home Interview task can be allocated and carried out (after the child is found).

In the event that a child is not already known / allocated to a social worker and the missing episode raises a safeguarding concern about a child, the MASH Team will undertake usual screening activity and determine the appropriate service provision for the child (Social Care, Early Help or Universal Services). The Return Home Interview will be triggered in the way described above.

Where a child has been screened by the MASH team and has determined case closure the case will transfer to the CVE Team to enable the Return Home Interview to be completed.

When the child has been found, the Police will notify the MASH staff and they will record this on the child's file.

If a child is looked after and placed in Wakefield by another Local Authority then the information will be sent to the correct Local Authority by the missing person's police office. The police will also provide details of these children to the daily missing meeting.

If the nature of the case means that any form of media interest or briefing is required or likely, the Team Manager must provide a serious notification form to the Service Director, Corporate Director CYPS, their Head of Service and Safeguarding Partnership Manager. Where this happens outside office hours the on call Out of Hours Team/Managers will notify Service Directors / Corporate Director CYPS.

A serious notification form should be provided/completed when any child has been missing for 72 hours. This should be sent to the Relevant Heads of Service, the Service Director and the Director of Children's Services.

The MASH team should be notified of any missing notification for Wakefield Children placed in another authority. The MASH team will notify the Missing Coordinator, the

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allocated social worker who will ensure that the return home interview task can be allocated and carried out.

### 4. Daily Missing Briefing

The Missing Coordinator, a representative from the MASH team and their counterpart in the West Yorkshire police will discuss the children who have been reported missing and agree on actions that need to be taken.

It is the responsibility of the MASH representatives to gather relevant background information for the missing briefing in order to assist in the decision making for the child.

When the missing young person has an allocated social worker the Missing Coordinator will invite the relevant Team manager/allocated social worker where appropriate to participate in the missing briefing.

The Missing Coordinator upon reviewing the missing episode will determine if it is necessary to invite any other agencies to the Missing briefing such as the Early Help Manager.

The Missing Coordinator will notify the relevant Team Manager/allocated social worker if the missing episode has met the requirement for a strategy discussion and will record this on the Child's electronic file.

The Missing Coordinator will notify the Team Manager that they should complete a serious notification form when a child who is allocated to their team has been missing over 72 hours and record this on the Child's electronic file.

### 5. Return Home Interviews

When a missing child has been found, they must be offered a Return Home Interview, which should be carried out within 72 hours of notification that the child has returned home or to their placement. These will usually be carried out by staff who are independent of the case management and care provision for the child. In Wakefield, the return home interview will be carried out by the Children Vulnerable to Exploitation Team.

Wakefield children who are placed some distance from Wakefield District other arrangements for the Return Home Interview may be made, including with the host Local Authority or an independent provider. Where no alternative arrangements are

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available the return home interview will be carried out by the Children Vulnerable to Exploitation Team.

The Return Home Interview may be carried out by a known adult (social worker or other professional) if the child expresses this wish.

Consideration should be given to the venue in which the Return Home Interview takes place, so that children are helped to talk as freely as possible about the issues involved.

The purpose of the Return Interview is to understand and address the reasons for the missing episode, identify and understand any harm the child has suffered, and help the child find strategies to minimise future missing episodes. Return Home Interviews should be recorded on the child's electronic record. The information gained should be included within the Find me Plan

The worker who has undertaken the interview will liaise with the Child's social worker to share any relevant details. If the return home interview identifies any concerns about a child that is not currently an open case to Wakefield, the case will be reviewed in line with the Local Safeguarding partnership thresholds and Early Help Pathway to determine whether referral to another service is required.

When the Missing episode has triggered a requirement for consideration of a strategy meeting. The person responsible for authorising the return home interview module will take steps to enquire if the meeting has taken place, or that management oversight is added as to why one was not considered necessary at that time prior to closing the module. Where there is any disagreement this will be raised with the appropriate Service Managers.

## 6. Practice Guidance for Return Home

A Return Interview must be carried out for every child who has been logged as 'missing'

They will be carried out for children who have been missing from home as well as missing from a placement

The Interview will normally be carried out by a designated worker from the Children Vulnerable to Exploitation Team (CVE). Where possible we will endeavour to provide consistency of worker for young people who have been missing on repeated occasions.

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The interview should be carried out within 72 hours of notification that the child has returned home or to their placement

Following allocation to a worker in the CVE team they should contact the child's allocated Social Worker where applicable to inform them of the planned Return Interview and to obtain any relevant background information. This will also include how best to make contact with the young person and any health and safety issues that may impact on the Return Interview.

Make contact with the young person's carer to arrange the interview

Conduct the interview and record it using the return home interview template.

A key purpose of the Return Interview is to identify:

- If there are any underlying issues that have led to the child going missing? This could include difficulties with relationships within the home and placement, abuse or neglect, issues of bullying etc.
- If there are any safeguarding or child protection concerns due to the child going missing e.g. risk of abuse or child exploitation etc.

Where the child has an allocated Social Worker any information should be shared with them so that appropriate steps can be taken to protect the young person. This includes any issues in relation to the quality of care provided to a child in care.

If the young person does not have an allocated social worker the worker who has conducted the return home interview will need to consider whether any information that has come to light warrants a referral to Wakefield Children's Social Care or to the Early Help Hub.

It is particularly important to ensure that the young person is listened to and their views and opinions recorded in the form so that steps can be taken to consider what they have said.

If a young person refuses a Return Home Interview then with worker will make every effort to engage the young person and ensure that their attempts and reason for the refusal is clearly recorded.

When the young person is not wanting to engage with the return home process it is important that information is gathered from their carer in order to increase our understanding about what may have led to the missing episode. This information should be recorded within the return home interview template and shared with the allocated social worker or Team manager.

Provide feedback to the child's Social Worker/parent and carer where applicable and record this on the return home interview template.

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The interventions we know are effective in reducing the risks associated with going missing are based on building a positive relationship with the young person, ensuring that they are encouraged to participate in activities that will raise their self-esteem and promote social inclusion. Consideration to how these are identified and implemented should be contained within the safety plan and discussed at Core Group/Child in Need and Team Around the Child Meetings. Provide feedback to the child's Social Worker/parent and carer where applicable and record this on the return home interview template.

## 7. Risk Reduction and Keeping Children Safe

A missing episode should not be seen as an isolated incident, and will almost certainly be symptomatic of other issues in the child's life. It is important that missing episodes are considered as events that may increase risk / vulnerability for children. Repeatedly going missing should not be viewed as a normal pattern of behaviour. If a child goes missing (especially when this happens repeatedly) the allocated social worker should consider what action is needed to help to protect the child.

When missing episodes occur, **allocated case workers** should consider:

- Whether or not the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm, and in the event that this is the case, convene a strategy meeting and carry out a Section 47 investigation.
- Whether or not the missing episode(s) are significant and require the updating of assessments, care plans and any additional or alternative activity to help and support the child.

It will be appropriate to involve the worker who has undertaken the Return Home Interview in the above activity in order to ensure that all available information is shared and considered. The updating of assessments, care plans and convening of strategy discussions is a part of usual Social Work functions and is the responsibility of the allocated social worker / Team Manager.

It is important that assessments, investigations and plans address the root cause of the missing episodes taking place and ultimately aim to reduce the risks of further missing episodes.

Remember to consider whether or not the missing episodes could be linked to Child Sexual Exploitation and or criminal exploitation and trafficking, and refer to the CSE

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indicators and the Children Vulnerable to Exploitation Team, should you need advice or help with this.

## 8. Missing Strategy Meetings

A Strategy meeting is required when:

- A child has been missing for 24 hours. A further strategy meeting will be convened if a child has continued to be missing by the 72 hour point (as a minimum).
- When a child has been missing **four** times within a 28 day period (missing episodes only-NOT absent episodes).
- When a child has had six missing episodes within a 2 Month period.
- When a child has been assessed as being of **High Risk** of significant harm then consideration should be given if a strategy meeting is required and when the decision has been made for this to not be undertaken then the rationale for this decision should be clearly recorded on the young person's electronic records.

These should be regarded as minimum standards, and judgement will need to be exercised with regard to the specific circumstances, level and nature of risk understood in individual cases. Where children are known to be at higher risk (either through vulnerability to exploitation or from other risk factors) more frequent liaison may be required. It is the responsibility of the Team Manager to notify relevant attendees.

A Strategy Meeting should therefore be held at any time if there are significant concerns that the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (in line with legislative duties to investigate), irrespective of the number of missing episodes. The worker who has undertaken the Return Interviews for the child should always be invited to attend.

## 9. Children in Care living outside the Wakefield area

Carers reporting young people missing or absent to their local Police Authority should establish if the local Police will be alerting West Yorkshire Police Authority. If not the

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carer should ensure that they alert Wakefield (EDT if out of hours) in order that the allocated Social Worker is notified as soon as is practicable.

Where a child is defined as “missing” by the Police following completion of their risk assessment, MASH/EDT should always be informed about this (including out of hours).

Care providers should check periodically with their Police Authority regarding any updates and status of the episode and ensure the placing authority is fully updated.

On the child’s return the relevant Team Manager and / or allocated Social Worker should ensure that a return home interview is commissioned in line with local procedures. The allocated Social Worker should ensure that notification of the missing episode and return of the child is communicated to MASH and the CVE Missing inbox in order that the young person can be considered at the daily missing meeting.

## 10. Knowing the Child

In order to make sure that children who go missing are found and safeguarded as quickly as possible it is important that our records contain up to date information. The “Find Me Plan” should be kept up to date at all times in order to collate and share relevant information about where and with whom missing children may be, and details of activity to find children during the missing episode should be recorded on case notes. All children who are open to Social Care in the local authority where there are concerns about missing episodes should ensure that the “Find Me Plan” is completed and shared with the relevant police authority. The purpose of this is to ensure that the police are able to assist and respond appropriately to missing incidents.

Good Social Work records will contain the following:

- An up to date photograph of the child;
- Up to date contact information about the child's friends / family and significant others;
- Information about where the child is likely to go in the event they are missing;
- The child's mobile phone number and any other means of contacting him / her;
- The place where the child should be returned to when he / she is found.

This information should be made available to the police in the area the child has gone missing or in the area the child is suspected to be, including when a looked after child is placed out of area.

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### 11. Updating Assessments and Plans

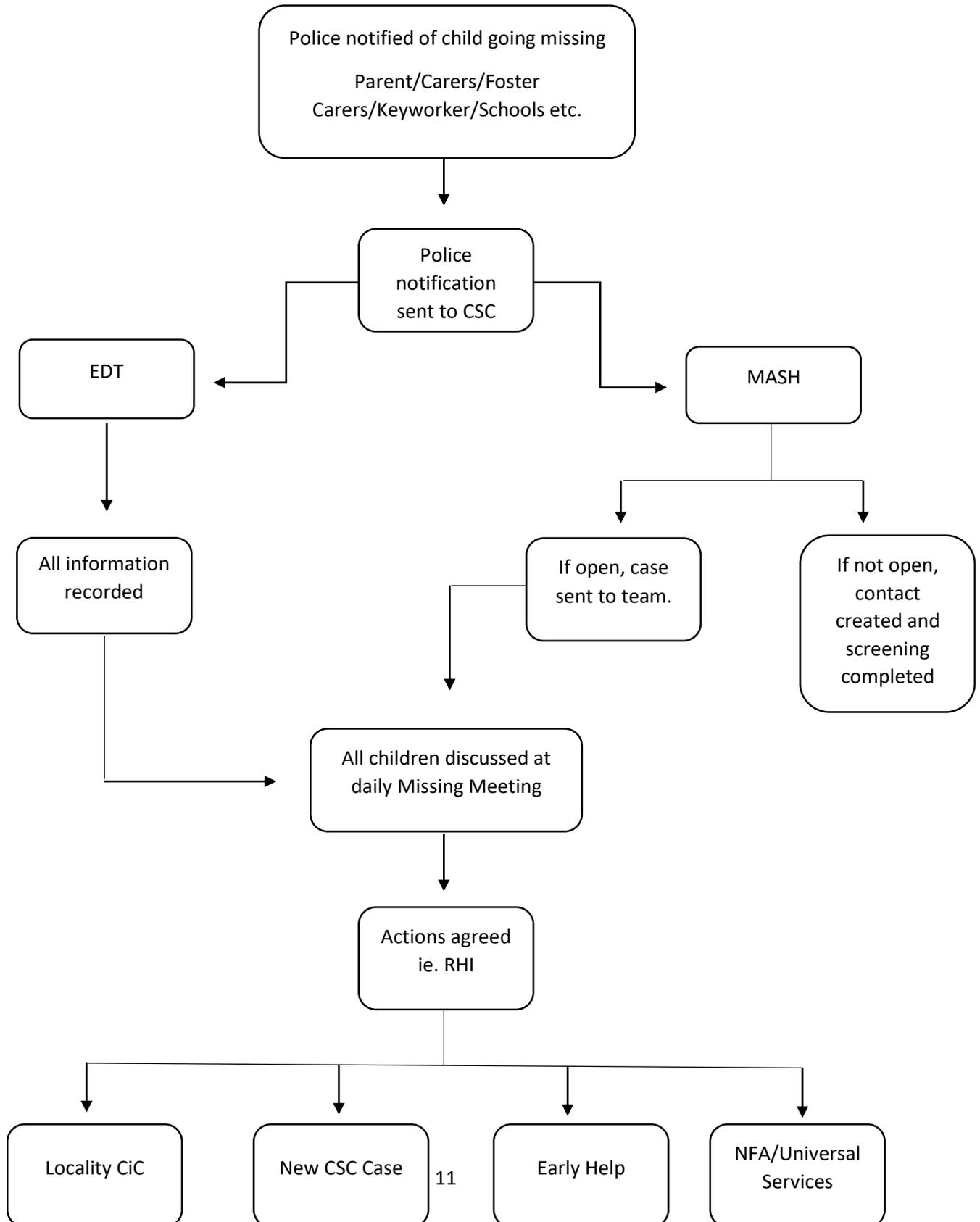
It is important that allocated Social Workers inform themselves (through discussion and reading of relevant documents) about the issues which give rise to missing incidents for a child. In particular, the information obtained from return home interviews, needs to be understood by the responsible Social Worker so that it is considered in assessment activity and addressed by the child's plan. It is important that when children go missing, the subsequent intervention with them addresses that issue, working to mitigate the risk that repeated missing episodes will occur. It is therefore important that those involved with the young person (CVE Social Workers, those carrying out return home interviews, and the case holding Social Worker) work closely together to agree the cause of the child's missing episodes, the help that is most likely to make a difference and the role of each in providing that help

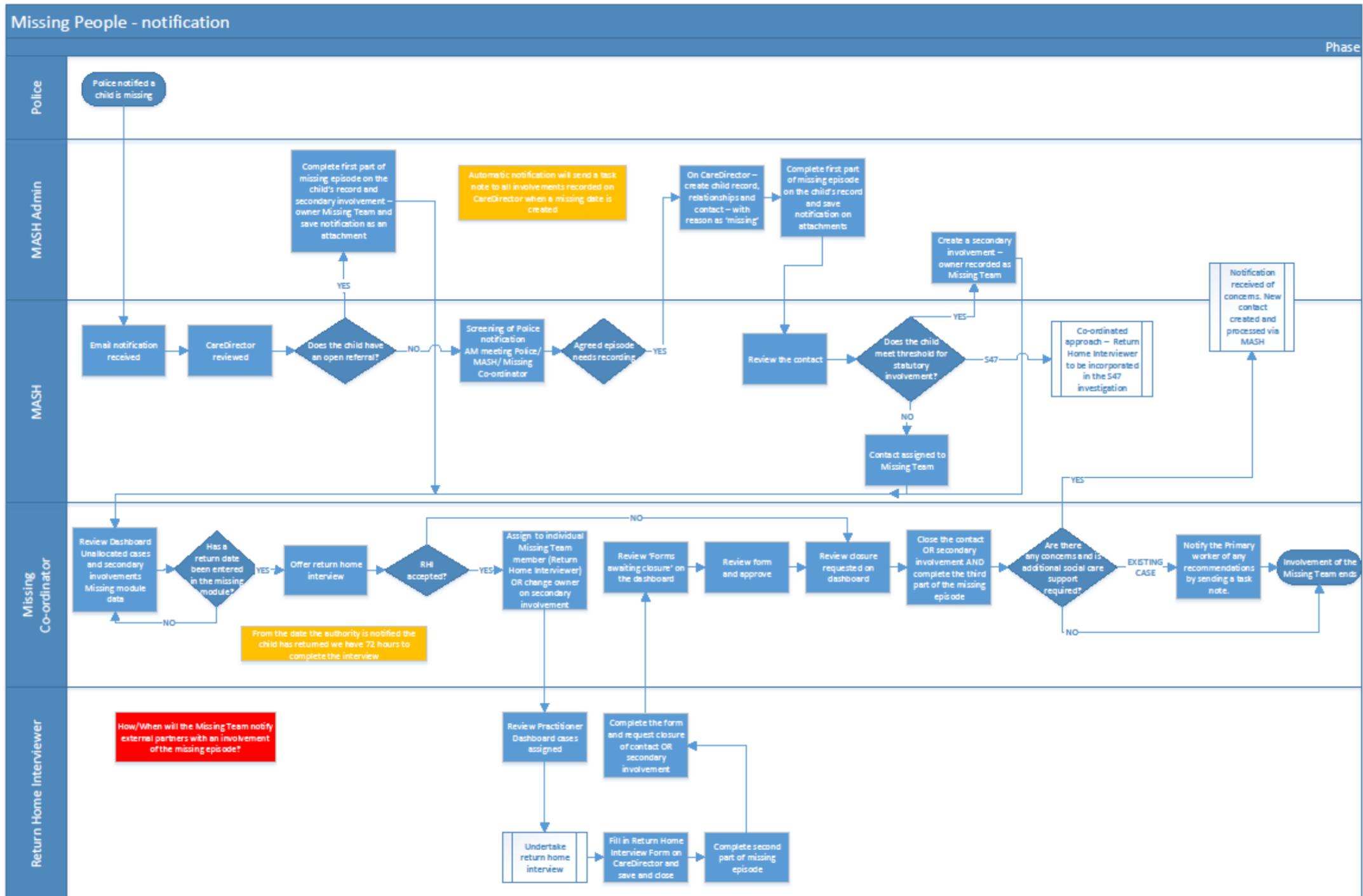
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## Appendix

### MISSING FLOW CHART





# Missing People- Return Home Date Entered

Phase

