

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel
SUBJECT:	Review of Missing Children
LEAD OFFICER:	Nana Bonsu Head of Service for Systemic, Clinical Practice, Adolescent Services and Workforce Development
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	

1. REVIEW OF MISSING CHILDREN

Background

Overall numbers

Between 1st January and 31st December 2020, 392 Croydon children were reported missing (including Croydon CLA placed out of borough). These children accounted for 2,628 missing episodes in this period. The number of missing episodes reported for 2020 is 15% lower than for 2019 (3095 missing episodes in 2019). The cohort of children where there are risks of child exploitation evidenced/suspected concerns, the following themes have been noted:

- 48% were discussed at Complex Adolescent Panel (CAP) in 2020 (190 out of 392 children).
- 1 in 3 children missing at least once in 2020 have been subject to MACE protocol (which is configured within the CAP) at some point since 1 April 2019 (34%; 133 out of 392 children).
- 1 in 4 children missing at least once in 2020 have been subject to MACE at some point since 1 April 2019 in relation to Child Criminal Exploitation concerns (mainly county lines drug dealing).
- The above is indicative of a clear correlation with exploitation and children who are missing.

Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on numbers

There is a direct link between a lower volume of missing episodes in 2020 and long periods of lockdown in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. If comparing the April-December periods of 2020 and 2019 (lockdown period started in 2020 back in late March 2020) – the reduction in missing episode numbers is more pronounced – 27% reduction for that period. Greater reductions in numbers logged during April 2020 (1st lockdown), November 2020 (2nd lockdown) and December 2020 (current 3rd lockdown).

Croydon CLA missing in 2020 – Key insights

Croydon Children Looked After account for 79% of all the missing episodes recorded in 2020 (2074 out of 2628 missing episodes). Some key findings re: CLA missing cohort:

- 17yr olds account for 41% of all CLA missing episodes logged (1078 out of 2628 missing episodes).
- 16yr olds account for 28% of all CLA missing episodes logged (723 out of 2628 missing episodes)
- Therefore children aged 16+ account for 2/3's of all missing episodes.
- 55% of all the Croydon CLA missing episodes in 2020 related to children placed out of borough (1135 out of 2074 CLA missing episodes).
- 55% of all the Croydon CLA missing episodes in 2020 relate to children missing from Semi-Independent Placements.
- Of the 20-30 children repeatedly missing each month (3+ missing episodes started in month) around 85-90% are CLA.
- The above demonstrates that our CLA who are older, have an increased number of missing episodes.

Top 20 missing children – frequency of missing episodes

The top 20 missing children in 2020 account for 38% of all missing episodes in period (998 out of 2628 missing episodes). Some key findings re: the top 20 repeat missing individuals:

- 100% CLA (20 out of 20).
- 60% Male (12 out of 20).
- 85% children from BAME backgrounds (17 out of 20).
- 14 Local/6 UASC children.
- 75% have at some point been subject to MACE Protocol due to evidenced risk of either CSE or CCE.
- 19 out of 20 have been discussed at Complex Adolescent Panel in this period
- 12 out of 20 have evidenced either recent/current CCE risk via MACE Protocol.
- This data demonstrates that our CAP has good oversight of risk and social workers are duly concerned to complete referrals.

Missing Episodes lasting longer than 7 days in duration

- There were 162 missing episodes lasting longer than 7 days reported in 2020 – 80 children with at least one missing episode lasting longer than 7 days. Of these 80 children, 88% were discussed at Complex Adolescent Panel – with 66% being added to MACE Protocol.
- Again the above is indicative of the CAP having sufficient oversight of risk.

How do we compare to other authorities/London/Nationally re missing numbers?

- Based on 2019-20 benchmarking data provided via ADCS CSC Benchmarking Tool – Key findings are CLA missing were:
 - 228 Croydon CLA missing during 2019-20 FY – compared to 86 for Statistical Neighbours (Average).

- Higher proportion of all Croydon CLA (20%) had at least one missing episode in 2019-20 FY compared with Stats Neighbours (13%), London (15%), and England (11%).
- Average number of missing episodes per looked after child reported missing during 2019-20 FY was higher for Croydon CLA (12 episodes per child) than stats neighbours (7 episodes per child), London (8 episodes per child) and England (7 episodes per child).
- We have to be mindful however we do not know the diligence of recording of our comparators, so direct comparisons regarding practice is unclear.

Children missing – engagement with Return Home Interview Process

- In terms of RHIs 98% missing episodes occurring during 2020 where RHI was offered to child.
- RHI completion rate was 71% for missing episodes occurring during 2020 (where child returns from a missing episode and accepts RHI).
- However, RHI completion rate varies widely depending on age of child/where they are residing/type of placement for CLA:
 - CLA in Croydon – 77% (742 out of 960)
 - CLA out of borough – 64% (721 out of 1124)
 - CLA – In-House Fostering – 83% (253 out of 305)
 - CLA – Agency Fostering – 77% (417 out of 541)
 - CLA – Semi Independent Living – 64% (729 out of 1148)
 - CLA – Semi Independent Living – Out of Borough – 60% (436 out of 731)
 - CLA – Local Children – 65% (943 out of 1450)
 - CLA – Local Children – White British – 55% (182 out of 331)
 - CLA – Local Children – BAME – 68% (761 out of 1119)
 - CLA – UASC – 82% (520 out of 634)
 - CLA – UASC – Albanian – 84%(250 out of 297)
 - All – Male – 71% (922 out of 1294)
 - All – Female – 68% (541 out of 790)
 - All – Aged 12 or Under (78% 63 out of 81), 13-15 (77%; 419 out of 542), 16 (70%; 593 out of 844), 17 (69%; 807 out of 1174), 17 (last three months before 18 64%; 204 out of 319)
 - The data above indicates that if a young person is residing out of borough, is white British and aged 17, there is a less likelihood of a RHI being completed.

Ethnicity Disproportionality Findings – Missing/CE Data – 2020-21 Q1

- Black Caribbean children disproportionately over-represented in relation to the below areas when compared against the Croydon Secondary School Population - Missing from Home episodes, Missing from Home children, Complex Adolescent Panel, Child Sexual Exploitation (via MACE) & Child Criminal Exploitation (via MACE).
- More pronounced disproportionality in relation to Black Caribbean males - Compared to 2019-20 FY –Black Caribbean males are becoming more disproportionately over-represented in all our vulnerable adolescent groups.

- White British females disproportionately over-represented in relation to the below areas when compared against Croydon Secondary School Population, Missing from Home episodes, Complex Adolescent Panel, Child Sexual Exploitation (via MACE)
- White British males under-represented in majority of vulnerable adolescent cohorts mapped compared against Croydon Secondary School Population.
- Albanian and Eritrean UASC children disproportionately over-represented in relation to missing episodes compared to the UASC CLA population.
- The disproportionality for Black Caribbean children on all indices of risk, is potentially informed by unhelpful racist ideas regarding crime and children from this ethnic background. These ideas will inevitably influence practice and we are aware of the need to address these. The systemic training, the foundation of our practice framework; is one means of doing so. The training enables self-reflexivity, curiosity, with attention to power and difference. The race equality board at a strategic level is also looking at matters pertaining to matters of racial discrimination and impact.
- In conjunction with this, one has to be mindful of social economic factors that adversely impact sections of the communities we serve and consider how well services are ameliorating these inequalities.

Key Issues identified from the data

- **Linked to the data above – the key issues Croydon currently faces in relation to missing children are:**
- **High volume of missing episodes/children despite pandemic lockdown (although lower than 2019).**
- **High proportion of all episodes for Croydon CLA.**
- **High proportion of Croydon missing children at risk of criminal exploitation.**
- **Practice issues to be addressed with regards to compliance in recording of missing risk assessment forms and missing strategy meetings.**
- **Top 20 repeat missing account for large volume of episodes.**
- **Issue with RHI compliance/engagement with CLA 17+/Semi Independent/Out of Borough placements.**
- **Over-reporting of CLA missing episodes via Emergency Duty Team**
 - Possible issue with over-reporting of CLA episodes via EDT – argument that thresholds are too low for some of these episodes to be reported as missing.
 - The challenge here is ensuring that every EDT notification regarding a CLA child is counted as missing. There is an expectation that the social worker can rectify this on CRS, if it transpires the young person was away from placement without authorisation. A current hypothesis is that social

workers are perhaps not rectifying the child's file and this accounts for an over inflation of recording.

- The culture of practice, whereby placements are only contacting CSC via EDT and not police adds to a challenge with accurate reporting.
- Operation Philomena, a joint initiative by the police and social care, is in place to encourage placements to take more responsibility in their corporate parenting in undertaking an assessment when children and young people are missing from placements, to discourage a reliance and responsibility being held by CSC and the police.
- Operation Philomena Initiative needs to continue to gain momentum. This is a joint initiative with our police colleagues to encourage placements to make use of 'grab packs'. Social workers should ensure that every child placed, where this is appropriate the placement has completed a 'grab pack'.

High volume of Other LA CLA missing from Croydon based placements

- The great unknown – initial findings suggest around 150 additional missing episodes each month linked to Other LA CLA residing in Croydon.
- Need a process map for analysing OLA CLA data including DPIA update.

Ethnicity disproportionality across repeat missing/long duration and CE cohorts via CAP/MACE

- **Black Caribbean children over-represented in all CE/Missing cohorts** compared to resident/LAC teenage populations
- Albanians over-represented (missing episodes)
- (Disproportionality, against resident populations)

Options/Recommendations

- These recommendations will need to be overseen in tandem with a broader scope of practice development as a result of the realignment of the adolescent service. Analysis needs to be undertaken of the top 20 children who have been missing for a long duration and cross reference this analysis with the VAR undertaken. It is possible that recurrent themes may be indicative of changes needed in practice improvement and resource alignment.
- Encouraging greater mobilisation of Operation Philomena protocol to reduce a potential inflated number of reported missing episodes to police/EDT. It is important that regardless of the type of placement a young person resides in, there is agreed expectations regarding curfew times and the process of contacts to be made to try and ascertain the young person's whereabouts. These arrangements will need to be ongoing collaborative conversations with young people that are subject to reviews.
- Changing the threshold for a CLA episode to be regarded as missing – cut down on over-reporting CLA 17+ short episodes as missing

- Change the process for RHIs being administered for Out of Borough CLA – less spot purchasing more case ownership from social workers. Identify specific young people where the data is clearly indicating concerns with respect of missing, with an outreach approach privileging relationships as a means of addressing matters of risks.
- Revise the RHI interview template so that key data is reportable and insights can be gathered quickly rather than a manual trawl. Deciphering information to ascertain trends is key in early identification of needs.
- Amalgamate the missing/CE risk assessment/CAP forms so that social workers can complete one form rather than several to evidence/update on risks.
- Refresher training on Missing strategy meeting forms/discussion – emphasise the importance of these meetings taking place, even if the police are not able to attend. Workshops are imminently to be rolled out to all managers to consider themes and best practice with respect to matters pertaining to missing and exploitation.
- CAP/MACE to have oversight of all CE/missing risk regardless of placement in or out of the borough.
- Consideration of 17+ CLA panel – maybe slightly different to CAP with focus/membership around transition to leaving care/housing/adult services /18-25 CAP.
- Consider utilising more voluntary sector/regional resources for missing/CE given the local financial constraints.
- Ethnicity disproportionality findings to be reviewed as part of the race equalities board.
- Engage the views of our young people as a means of enabling them to be collaborators with respect to best practice guidelines.

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