

# **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**1 DECEMBER 2021**

## **MISSING CHILDREN**

Report from: Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People

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### Summary

This report provides an overview of Medway's Children Services response to Children that go Missing from Home and Care. The paper will share how the process is managed and provide data for the period April 2020 to March 2021. This report will be the first in a series of annual reports that will be presented to this committee going forward.

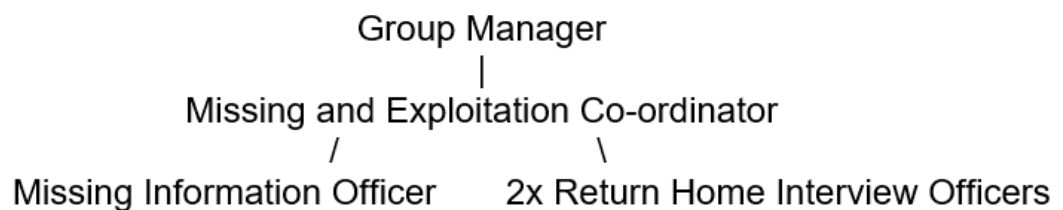
#### 1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1 Medway Council's missing from home and care joint operating procedure has been created in line with Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (Jan 2014). The guidance provides steps for all local authorities and their partners to 'prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they go missing'.
- 1.2 The guidance is issued under section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which requires local authorities in exercising their social services functions to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. Local authorities must comply with the guidance when exercising these functions, unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons that justify a variation.

#### 2. Background

- 2.1. A child can be reported as missing for a number of reasons. It could be that they have failed to return home and are safe and with friends but their safety and whereabouts is unknown to their carer. However, it could be more serious where the child has run away or is lost.

- 2.2. Medway children's services and multi-agency safeguarding partners understand that children who go missing from home or care are particularly vulnerable and potentially at serious risk of harm. In 2018, children services and Kent Police created a joint operating procedure and team guidance for children who go missing from Home and Care (Appendix 1: Child/young person Missing from Home and Care process). This procedure was last reviewed in October 2021.
- 2.3. Medway children's services and Kent Police have adopted the definition of missing: *Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.*
- 2.4. From June 2018, the response to children who go missing from home and care has been managed within First Response, led by the Head of Service for First Response and Targeted Services. A 'Missing' team, created in February 2020 alongside the development of the Adolescent service, now responds to concerns about children who go missing from home and care.
- 2.5. The missing team consists of 4 practitioners who manage the day-to-day missing process, led by the Group Manager of First Response and the Adolescent Service.
- 2.6. Team Structure:



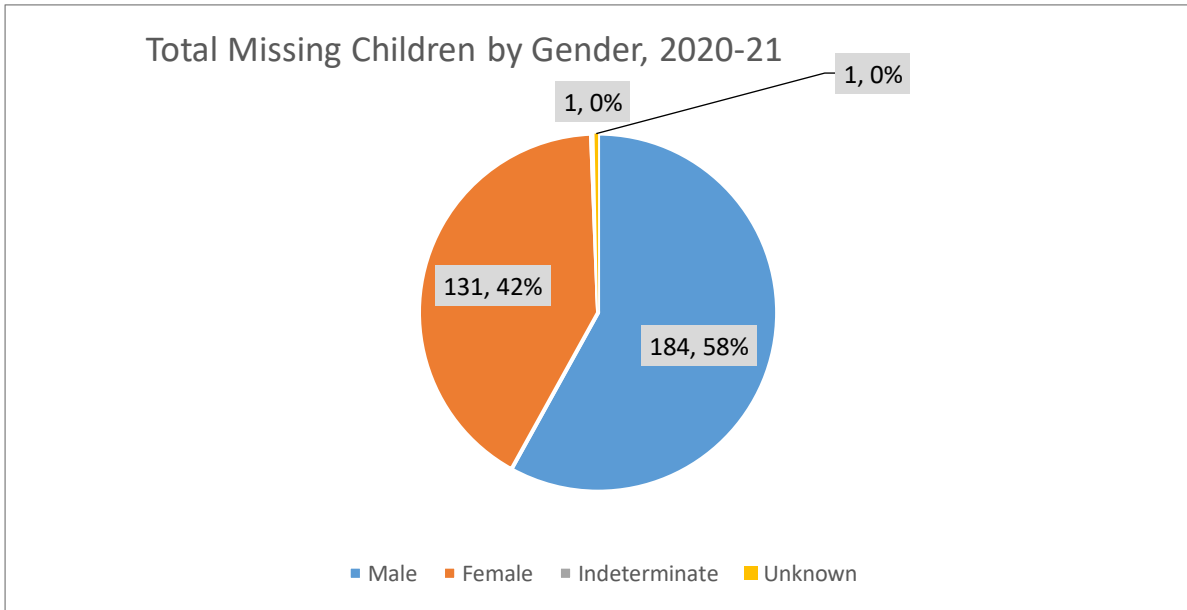
- 2.7. The missing information officer receives daily missing notifications for children from Kent Police (and from Police forces throughout the country for Medway's children placed out of area). These are missing notifications for all children, living in Medway, placed within Medway by other local authorities and for Medway's children placed out of area.
- 2.8. The missing information officer identifies whether the child is known to Medway children's services and identifies the appropriate pathway. (see flowchart outlining process in the Missing from Home and Care procedure (Appendix 1)).
- 2.9. When a child is found, Kent Police will carry out a safe and well check as soon as possible and notify the missing information officer, who requests that a return home interview to the child is completed.
- 2.10. A return home interview (RHI) should be completed within 72 hours of a child being found. All children should be offered an independent return home interview. Children's services have 2 return home interview officers to

undertake RHIs to children within Medway. However, a child may request their own allocated worker to do this, if they have one or this could be for example a youth worker or a teacher.

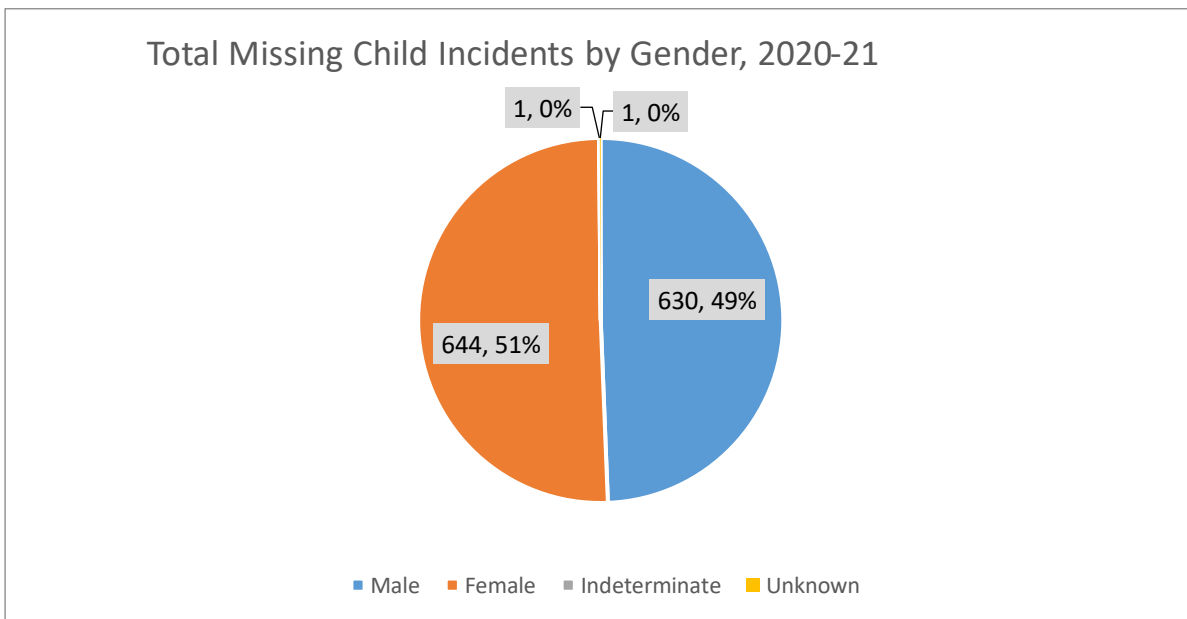
- 2.11. The return home interview provides a child with a safe space to talk. They explore with the child why they went missing, what happened during the time that they were missing and discuss what needs to happen to prevent them from going missing again. They record this information, and it is reviewed by the missing and exploitation co-ordinator to ensure trends and themes are effectively gathered.

### 3 Overview of Children who go missing

- 3.1 Medway's performance figures for the period April 2020 – March 2021 show that the total of 1271 missing incidents involved 317 children over the 12 month period. This represents 71 children in care who are the responsibility of Medway and 77 children in care who are the responsibility of other local authorities but are placed in Medway. The remaining 169 children were missing from their family home.
- 3.2 For 186 of these children it was their first time reported as missing. 89 of these children were missing for more than 24 hours and 111 children went missing 3 times or more during the year.
- 3.3 Children in Care made up approximately 49% of the children that went missing during this period, which is slightly higher than the national figure. The 148 Children in Care have multiple incidents which make up approximately 67% of the occasions where children went missing. This is in line with national trends, as children in care go missing more frequently.
- 3.4 During this period most children reported missing were male (Table A), however it was females who were more likely to have repeat incidents (Table B).



**Table A**



**Table B**

3.5 Children aged 15-17 were those most frequently reported as missing (Table C) and those to have repeated missing incidents (Table D). It is very unusual for children under 10 to go missing and this is evident within the data. During this period, the country experienced three national lockdowns due to the covid pandemic. At the start of the pandemic, between April and June 2020, there was a decrease in the incidents of children going missing. This gradually increased again after the first national lockdown (ended on 10<sup>th</sup> May). Similarly, this is evident in November (second lockdown) and again in January 2021 (third lockdown).

3.6 During this period it was children aged between 13 and 15 years old who went missing most (153), and 16 and 17 year olds accounted for the highest number of missing incidents (691).

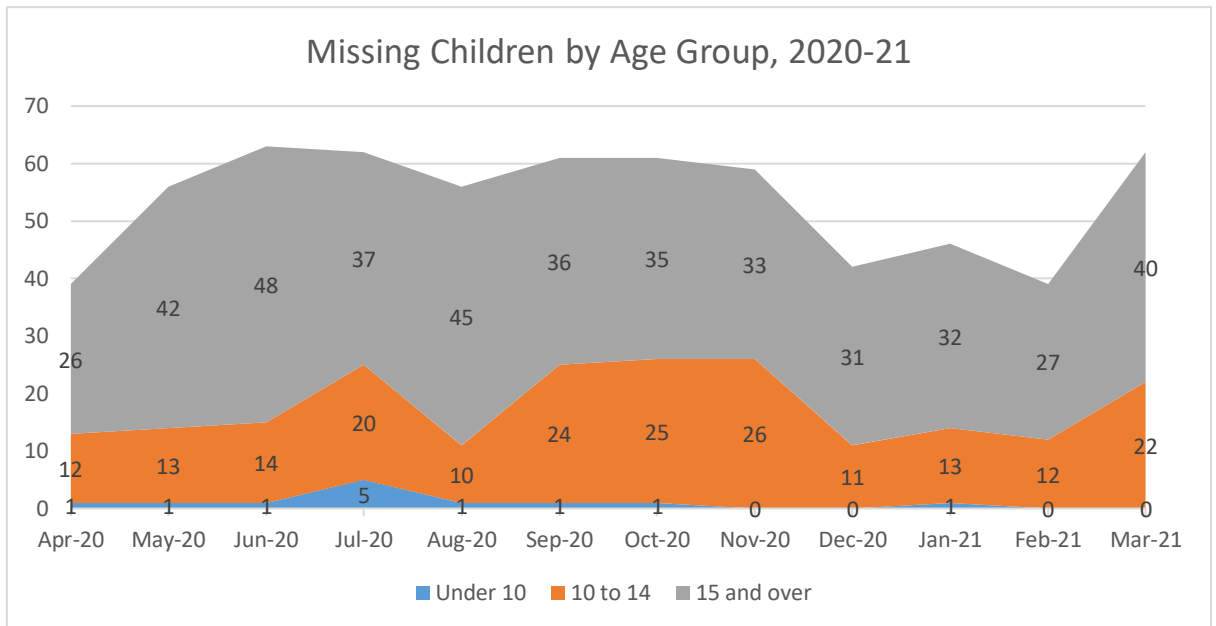


Table C

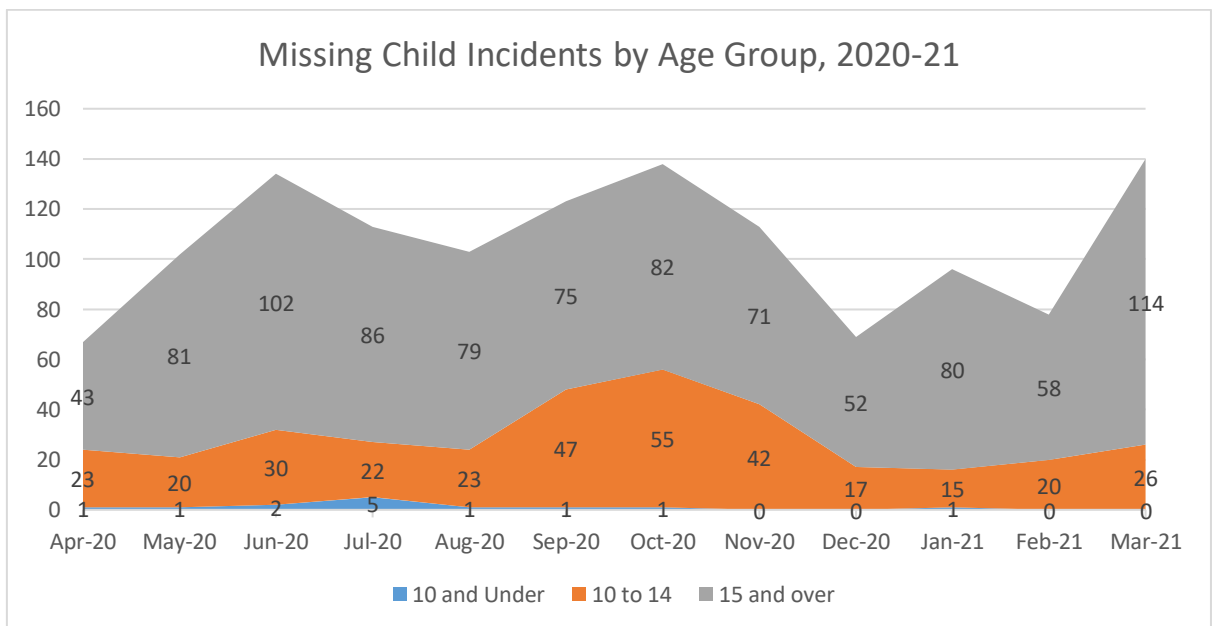
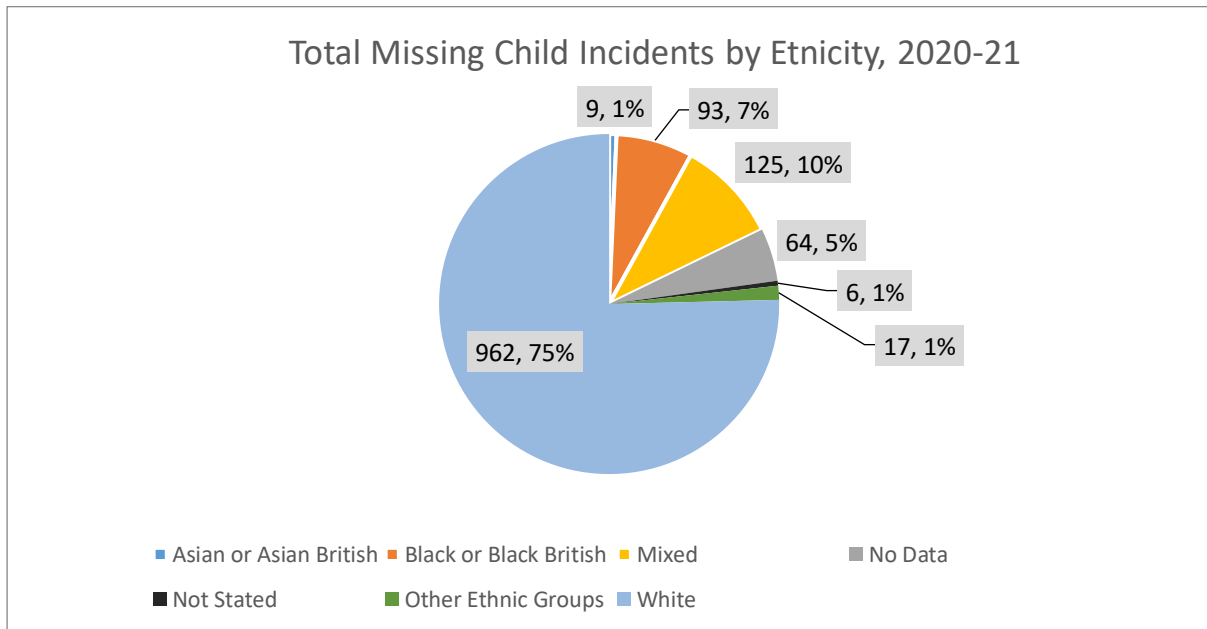
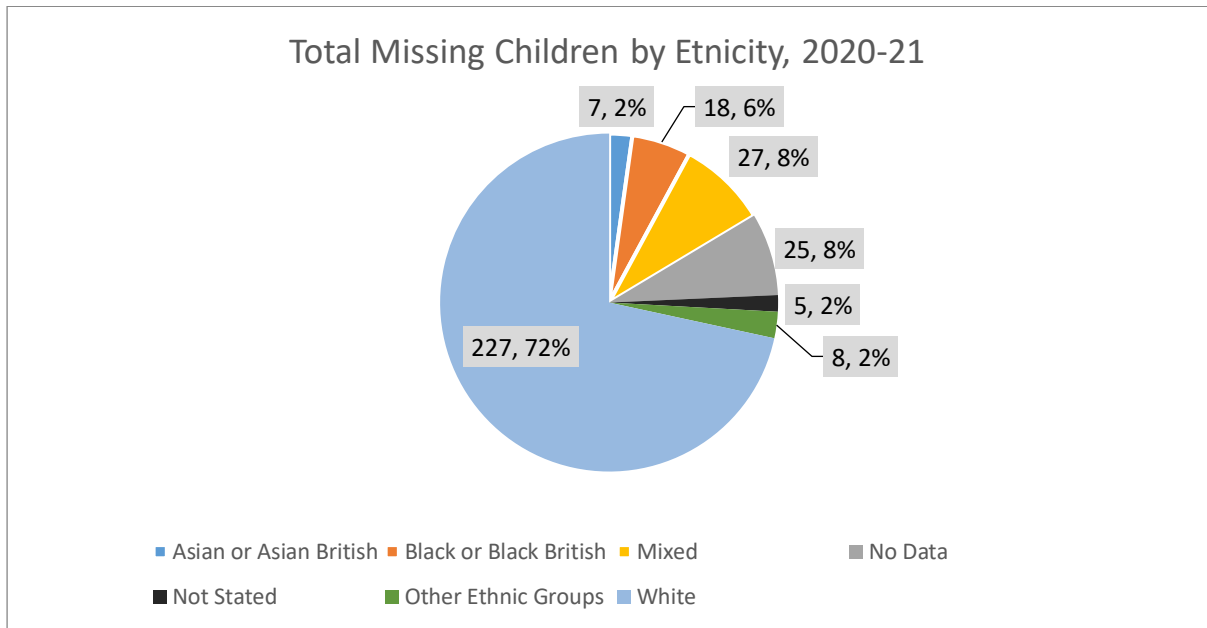


Table D

3.7 The 2020/21 data suggests that white British children in Medway are the largest cohort of missing children at 72% (Table E) and those that have repeat incidents at 75% (Table F). The second largest cohort of children to go missing and to have repeat missing incidents are those with a mixed ethnicity at 8% (Table E) and 10% (Table F). Where no data has been recorded, it is

likely that this was a first-time missing incident where this data was not captured (refer to 3.11).



3.8 The data identifies that during 2020-21 most missing incidents for children were for less than 12 hours, followed by 12-24 hours. For those children missing over a 24-hour period, a contact and referral must be made to Medway's First Response by the missing information officer and will be

assessed in line with the level of need for that child. For those children missing for 48-hour period (and it has not been already convened), a multi-agency strategy discussion will be convened to agree co-ordinated partnership working amongst agencies to ensure the safe return of the child.

3.9 Children’s services has a specific process for managing those children who experience longer periods of absence. This cohort, as experienced by other local authorities, mainly refers to Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). There are many additional factors to consider for these children and close working with UK Immigration and Police is important.

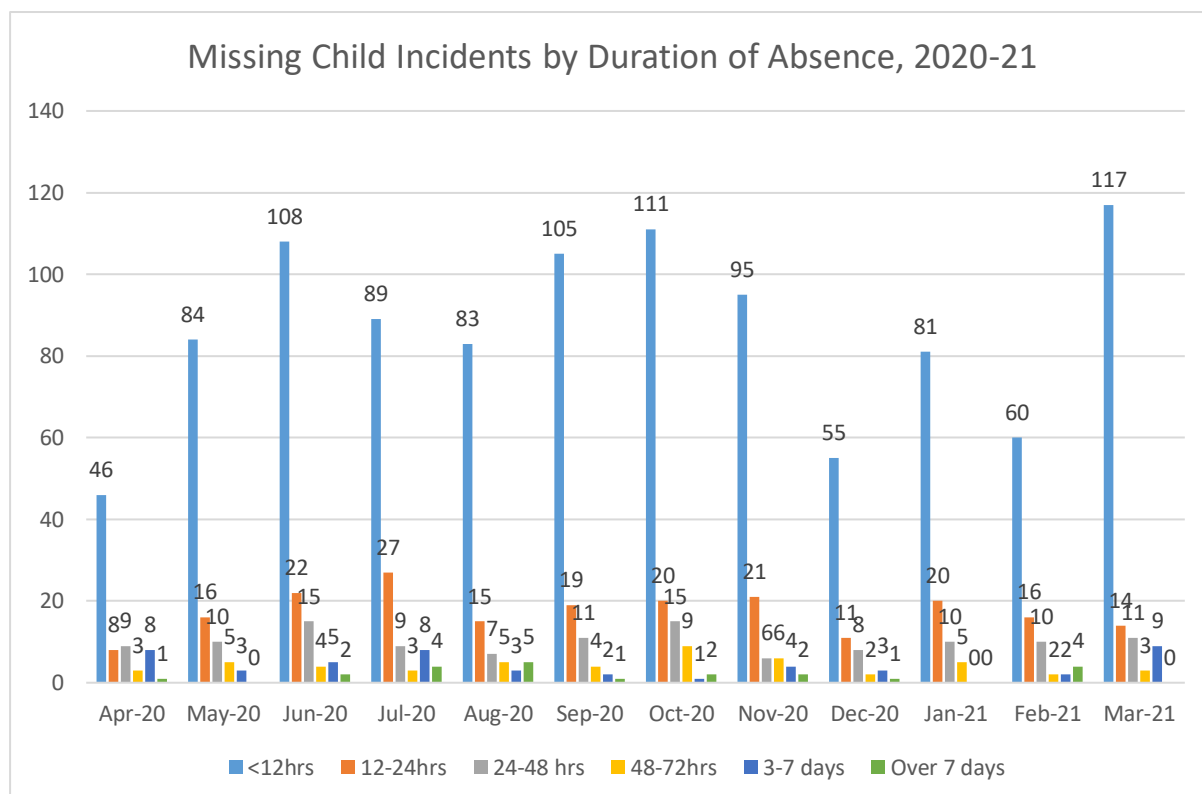


Table G

3.10 In the period March 2020 – April 2021, the number of young people that were eligible for a return home interview (RHI) was 964 (this number excludes 306 which were missing incidents relating to other local authority’s missing children as they have responsibility for these). The number of return home interviews offered was 881 with 828 accepting (94%).

3.11. The following factors need to be taken into account when looking at the performance data;

- Repeat missing children who are reported missing again before the RHI can happen
- RHI refusals for older children
- Parent/carer refusal – when a child is reported missing from home and it is refused. We have no powers to insist unless there is suspected risk of significant harm.

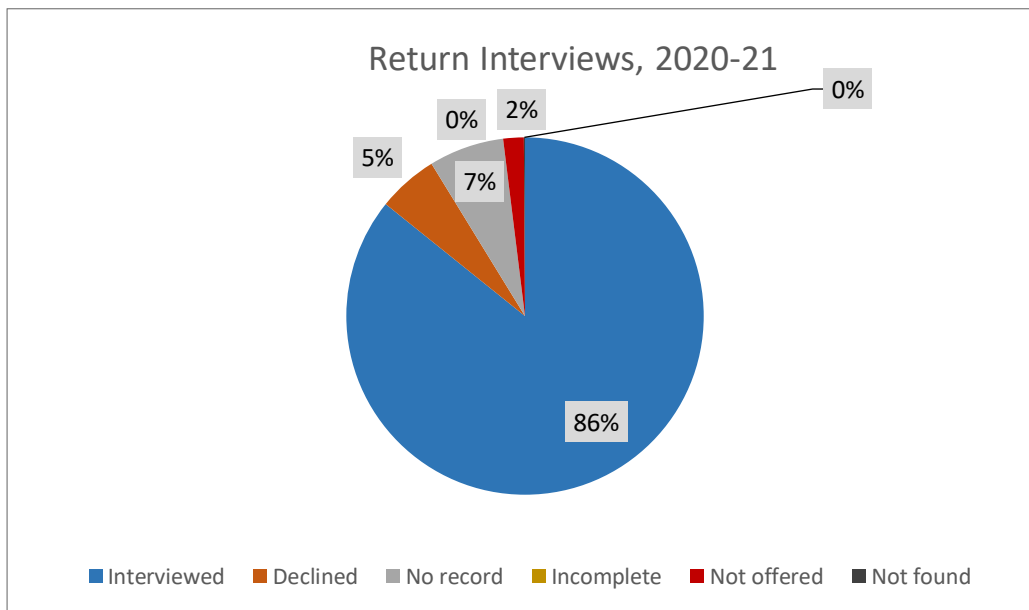


Table H

3.12 Out of the 828 RHIs conducted, 533 (64.4%) were completed in the 72-hour timescale.

3.13 Children’s services are aware that the return home interview performance for children in care (46 children during this period) who are placed at a distance from Medway is less strong. Medway’s children in care placed at a distance had 280 missing incidents during this period (3.11). The distance from Medway and the number of repeat missing incidents for this cohort of children impact on achieving the 72 hour timescale.

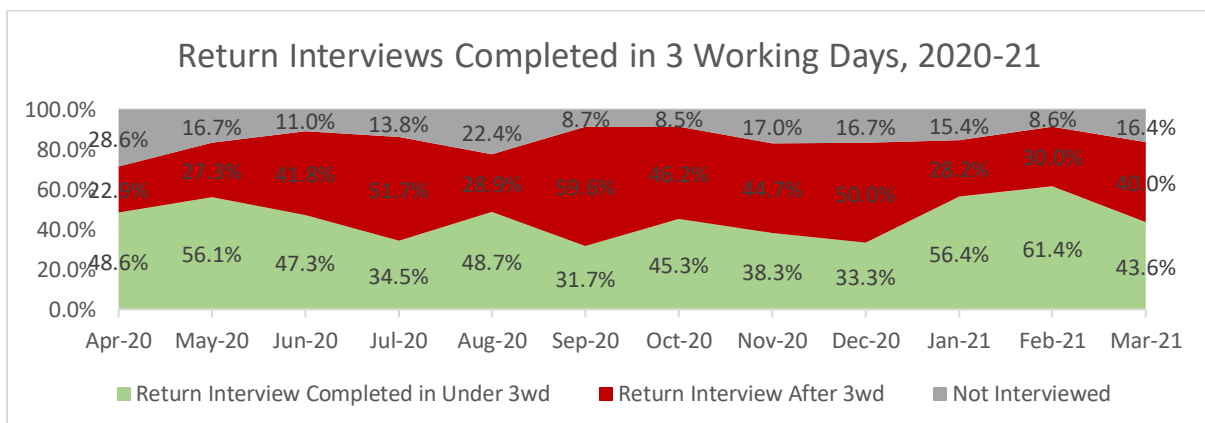


Table I

3.14 The most significant areas of risks identified for Children who went missing relates to substance use, exploitation and mental health.



#### 4. Summary of achievements and actions to be taken

- 4.1 Clear operating procedures and guidance are in place to support professionals responding to concerns regarding who go missing from home or care in Medway.
- 4.2 The new missing information officer and return home interviewer roles established in 2021 have enhanced the response to children who go missing.
- 4.3 Practitioners from the missing team support more robust practice across children's services supporting practitioners to understand the process and the importance of quality and timely return home interviews.
- 4.4 A daily missing children report ensures senior managers are briefed in respect of children who are missing.
- 4.5 The service continues to strengthen its strategic response to children who go missing in Medway. This includes regular reporting on missing statistics, return home interviews, themes/trends, places and spaces. This is currently shared with Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership subgroups (Medway and Kent Joint Exploitation Group and Performance Management Quality Assurance).
- 4.6 Further work is needed to create a performance dashboard, which provides a sharper overview of our response to missing children. This would support a shared line of sight to practice and focus the partnership response to key lines of enquiry, or areas for development.
- 4.7 We need to strengthen our response to our children in care, placed at a distance. This was an area for development identified at the Ofsted focused visit in May 2021. The challenge here is that the delivery of the response to children placed out of area is not supported by Medway's return home interviewers. It can be difficult to ensure return home interviews are carried out in a timely manner, and are effectively reported to the service. Work is underway to improve this, through our commissioning arrangements and through oversight of care planning for children.
- 4.8 A further area for development is how we respond to children who go missing repeatedly. These children's circumstances present challenges as they often return but not for sufficient time to enable a return home interview to take place. This creates some recording challenges and work is needed to simplify these processes, and to ensure a more consistent approach to practice.

## 5. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
A continual challenge to undertake timely RHIs to Medway's children placed outside of Medway.	Performance information identifies that RHI to Children in Care placed outside of Medway is not as strong as for Children that live in Medway	Work is underway to improve this through our commissioning arrangements and oversight of care planning for children.	C2

## 6. Financial implications

6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## 7. Legal implications

7.1 Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 requires local authorities, in exercising their social services functions, to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State.

7.2 Section 7D of that Act establishes that if the Secretary of State is satisfied that a local authority has failed, without reasonable excuse, to comply with any of its duties which are social services functions (other than a duty imposed by or under the Children Act 1989, section 1 or 2(4) of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 or the Adoption and Children Act 2002]), he may make an order declaring that authority to be in default with respect to the duty in question, and may make such directions as he deems necessary to ensure compliance with the duty, such order being enforceable by mandamus.

7.3 Statutory Guidance concerning children who run away or go missing from home or care was published by the Department for Education on 17 January 2014.

## 8. Recommendations

8.1 The committee are recommended to note the report and the proposed areas of development by the Council, as set out in section 4.

## Lead officer contact

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## Appendices

Appendix 1 - Missing from home and care – joint operating procedures and team guidance

Background papers

None