

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 JUNE 2022

MISSING CHILDREN

Report from: Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People – Children and Adult Services

Author: Kelly Cogger, Head of First Response and Targeted Services.

Summary

This report provides an overview of Medway's Children Services response to Children that go Missing from Home and Care. The paper will consider information and data for children who went missing during the period April 2021- March 2022. The last updating report was delivered to this committee in December 2021 and going forward, reports will be presented annually.

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 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. Children's services and Kent Police have 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.

- 2.2 A child can be reported as missing for several 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.
- 2.3 All children who go missing must be offered the opportunity of an independent return home interview. A return home interview (RHI) should be completed within 72 hours of a child being found. Children's services have two return home interview officers to undertake RHIs with children who live within Medway. However, whilst an independent person must be offered, a child may request it is done by a professional known to them, for example their own allocated worker or a youth worker or teacher.
- 2.4 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, and appropriate action taken in response.

3 Overview of Children who go missing

- 3.1 Medway's performance figures for the period April 2021 – March 2022 show a total of 1536 missing incidents that involved 411 children over the 12-month period. This highlights an increase when comparing with 2020-21 data in both number of incidents (1271) and number of children (317).
- 3.2 Within the 411 children, there were 85 children in care who are the responsibility of Medway and 91 children in care who are the responsibility of other local authorities but are placed in Medway. The data evidences an increase in both number of children and incidents of missing for children in care. 167 children were open to Children's service; family solutions, children's social work teams or the adolescent team and 68 children that were not known went missing from their family home.
- 3.3 For 266 of children, (an increase of 80 from 2020-21) it was their first time reported as missing. 113 of these children were missing for more than 24 hours and 121 children went missing 3 times or more during the year. Both figures have increased during this period when compared to 2020-2021.
- 3.4 176 Children in Care went missing during this period, which is in line with the national figure. This cohort of Children in Care have multiple incidents which make up approximately 63% of the occasions where children went missing. This is in line with national trends, which evidence that children in care go missing more frequently than other children in the community.

3.5 During this period most children reported missing were male (Table A), however unlike last year it was males who were more likely to have repeat incidents (Table B)..

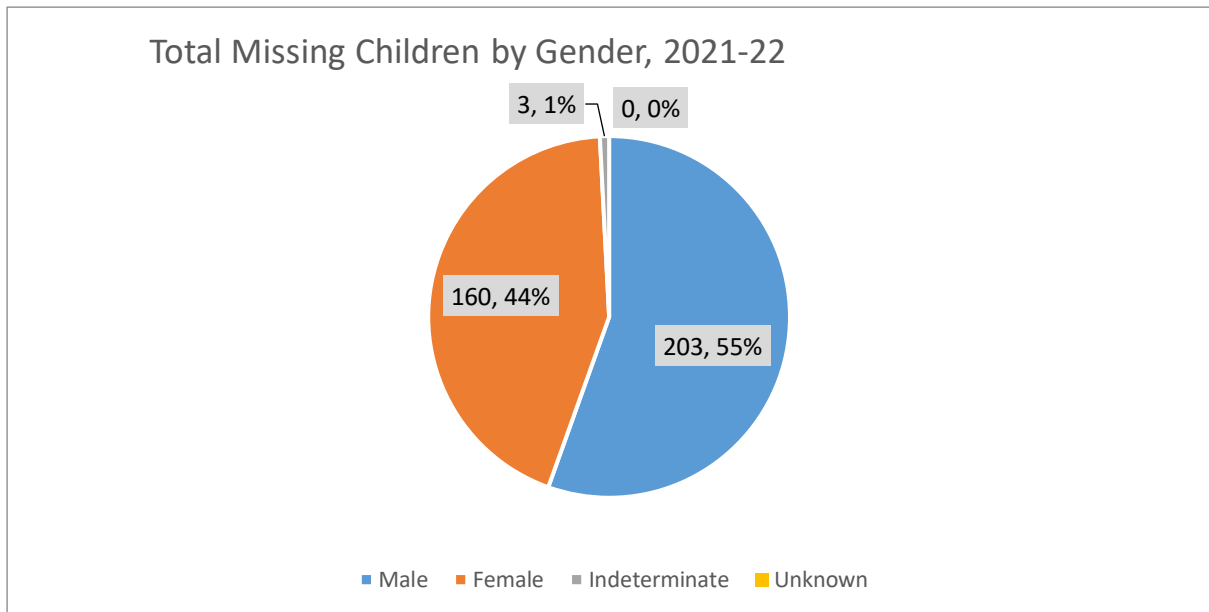


Table A

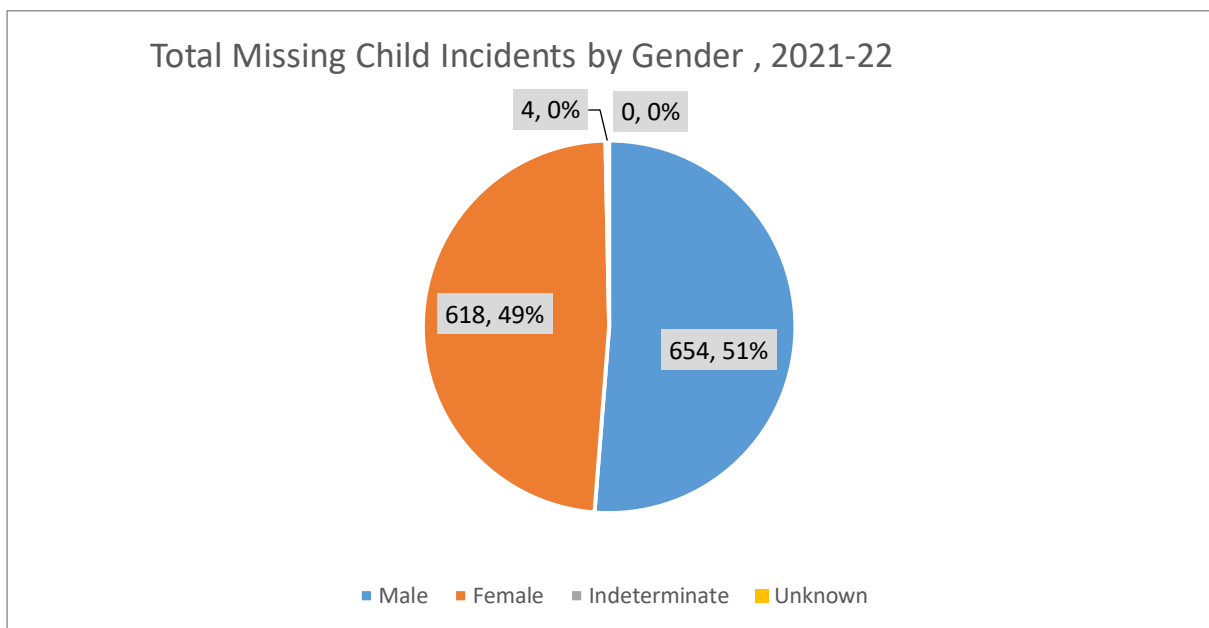


Table B

3.6 Children aged 15 years and over were those most frequently reported as missing (Table C) and those that had the most repeated missing incidents (Table D). It is very unusual for children under 10 to go missing and this is evident within the data.

3.7 During this period it was children aged between 13 and 15 years old who went missing most (195 children), and 16- and 17-year-olds accounted for the highest number of missing incidents (768 incidents).

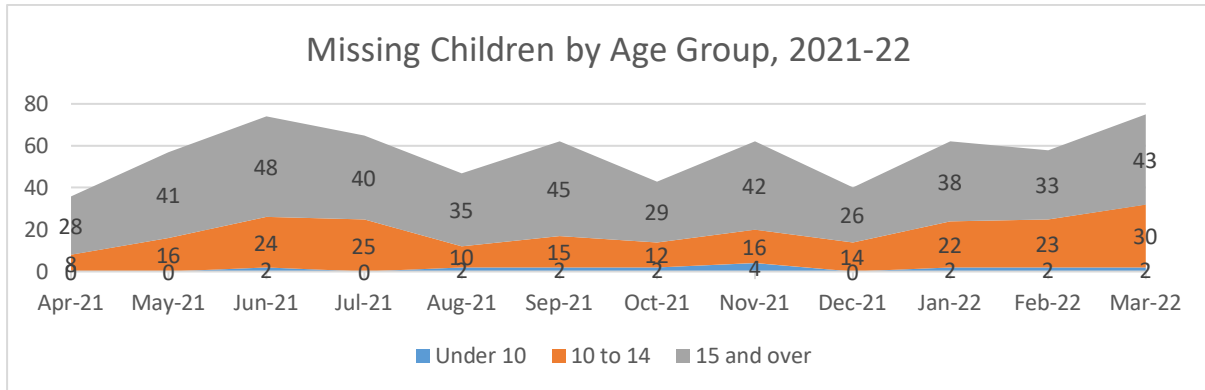


Table C

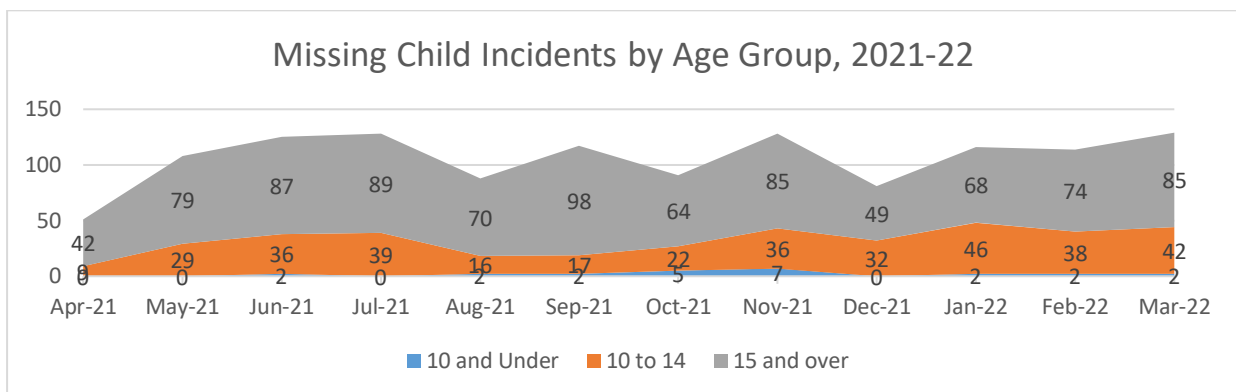


Table D

3.8 The 2021-22 data suggests that white British children in Medway are the largest cohort of missing children at 69% (Table E) and those that have most repeat incidents at 73% (Table F). The second largest cohort of children to go missing and to have repeat missing incidents are those with a mixed ethnicity at 9% (Table E) and 8% (Table F). This is the same as 2020-2021 data. 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).

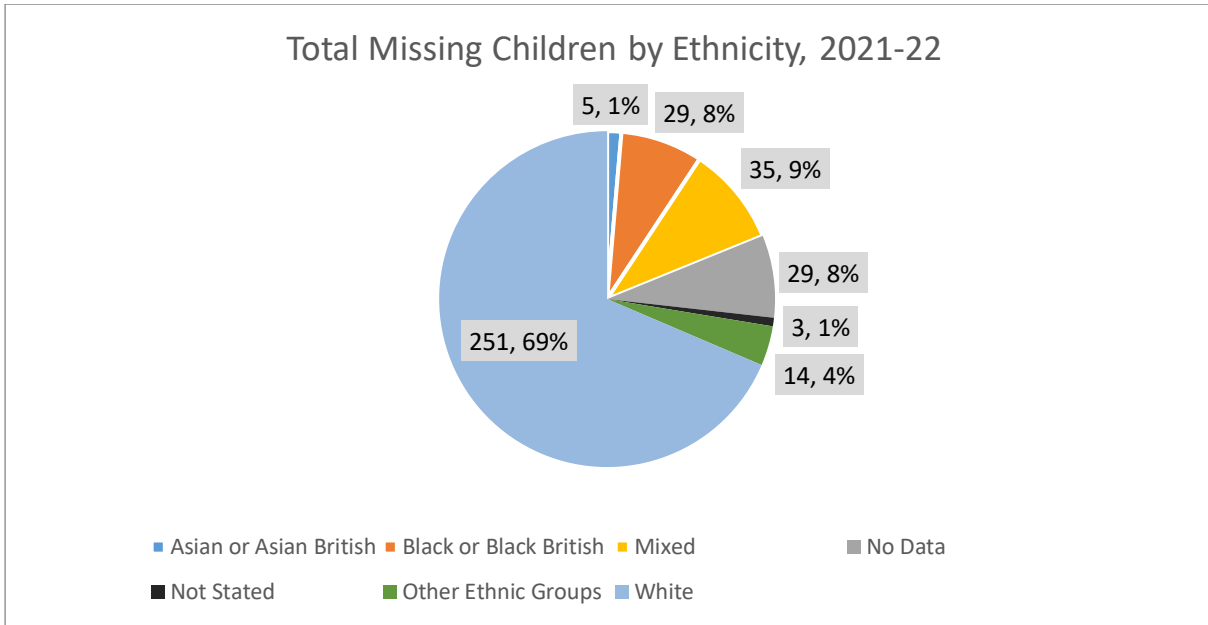


Table E

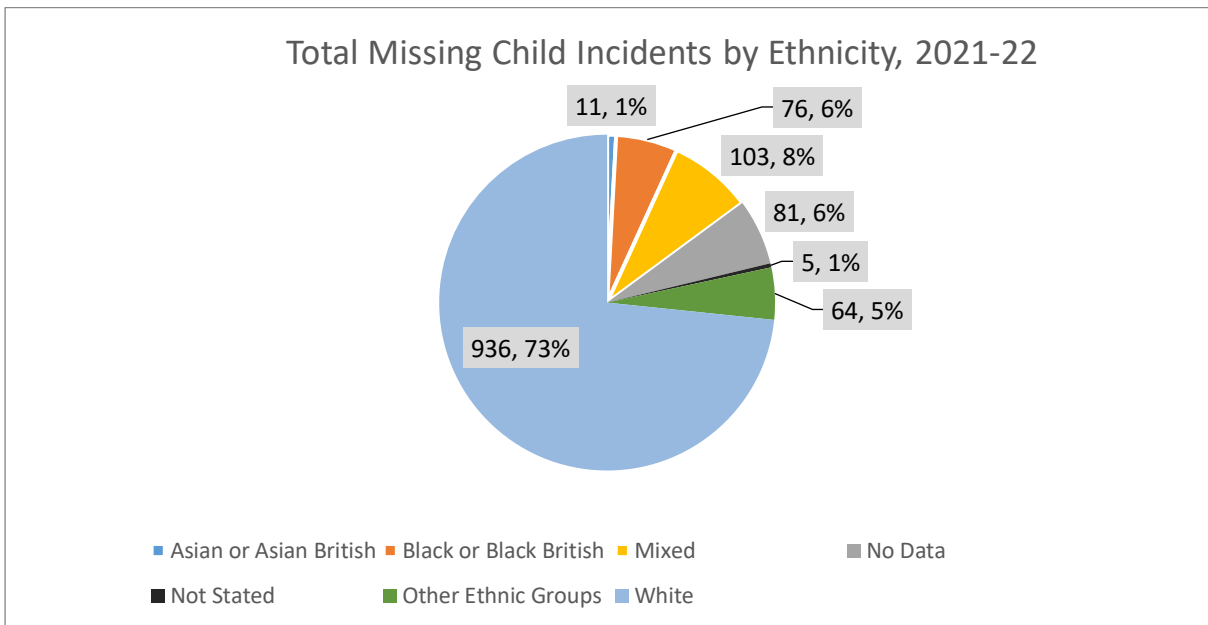


Table F

3.9 The data (Table G) identifies that during 2021-22 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.

3.10 Children’s services has a specific process for managing those children who experience longer periods of absence. This cohort, in common with 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.

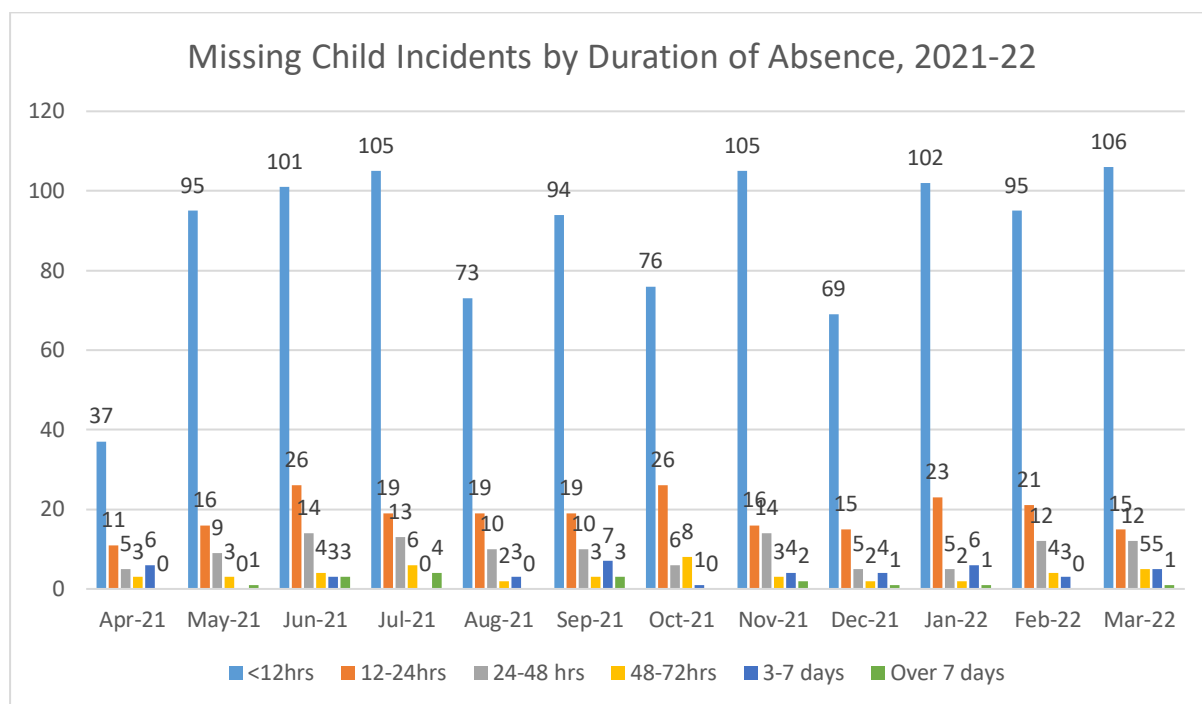


Table G

3.11 In the period April 2021 – March 2022, the number of young people that were eligible for a return home interview (RHI) was 1262 (this number excludes 274 missing incidents relating to other local authority’s missing children as they have responsibility for these). The number of return home interviews offered was 1218 with 1168 accepting (96%).

3.12 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.

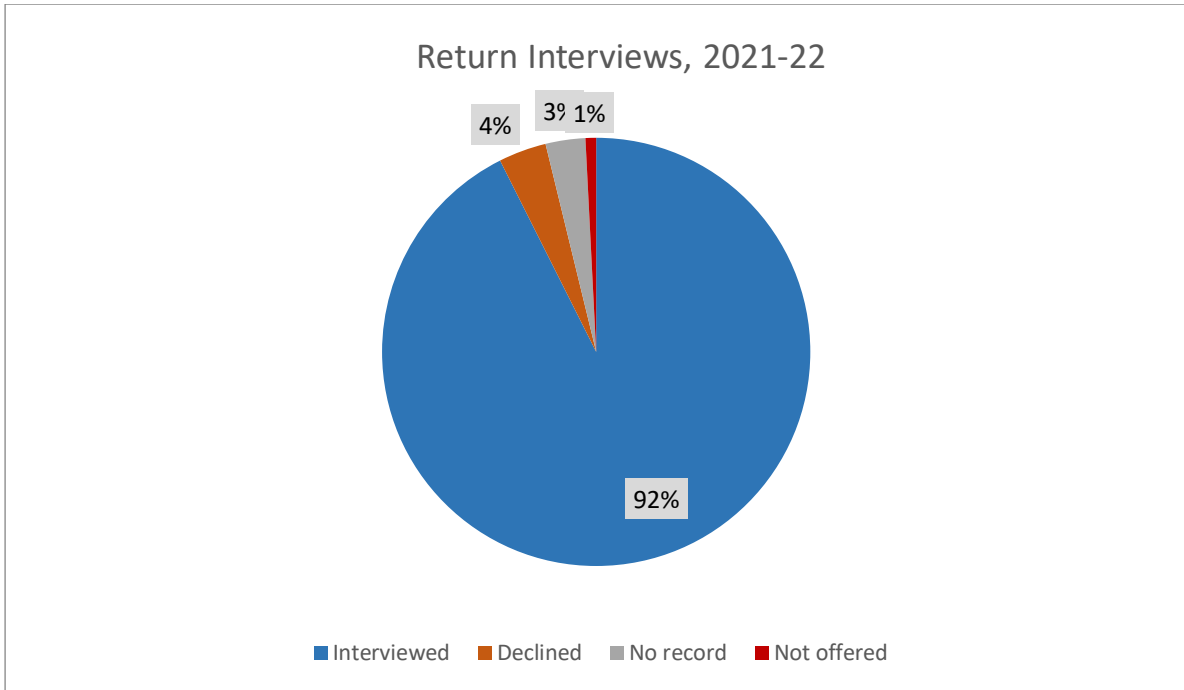


Table H

3.13 Out of the 1168 RHIs conducted, 533 (56%) were completed in the 72-hour timescale.

3.14 Children’s services are aware that the return home interview performance for children in care (50 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 323 missing incidents during this period (3.11). The number of Medway’s children placed at a distance increased by 4 during 21-22 and the number of missing incidents increased by 35. The distance from Medway and the number of repeat missing incidents for this cohort of children impact on achieving the 72-hour timescale.

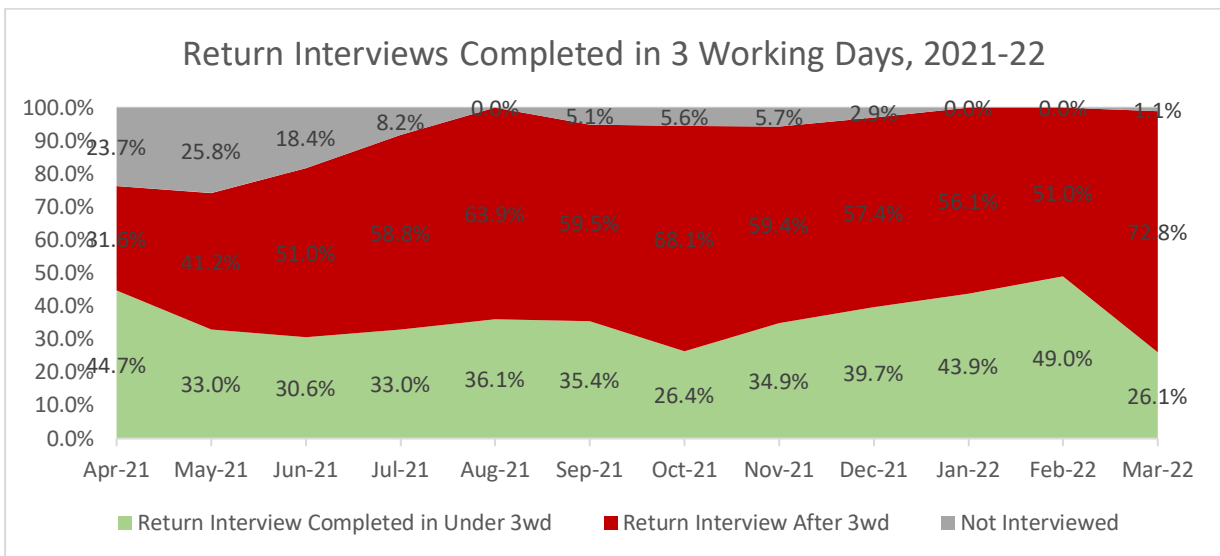


Table I

- 3.15 Table I shows a positive progressive decline in the number of children that were not interviewed during 2021-22, however evidences the need to focus and improve the number of interviews completed with 72 hours.
- 3.16 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 areas of focus

Achievements

- 4.1 Joint operating procedures and guidance are in place to support professionals responding to concerns regarding children who go missing from home or care in Medway. These are set out at appendix 1 to the report.
- 4.2 The two return home interviewer roles established in 2021 have enhanced the response to children who go missing. There is clear evidence that when children in Medway go missing, they are offered a return home interview upon their return.
- 4.3 The data shares that whilst return home interviews are not consistently completed within 72 hours, that once they are undertaken episodes are completed on the electronic recording system as there are no incomplete return home interviews for this period. This has previously been an issue identified within our performance data.
- 4.4 A daily missing children report ensures senior managers are briefed in respect of children who are missing.

Areas of focus

- 4.5 As shared in the December 2021 report, work is being progressed to develop a performance dashboard; this will provide a sharper overview of our response to missing children. This will support a shared line of sight to practice and focus the partnership response to key lines of enquiry, or areas for development.
- 4.6 Given the increase in the number of missing children and missing incidents during this period, numbers need to be monitored closely over the next year to ensure the current staffing resource of 2 return home interviewers meets the needs of Medway's children.
- 4.7 There will be continued focus on the quality of the return home interviews undertaken with children. This will ensure that any risks identified will support intelligence gathering in respect of themes/trends, places and spaces. There will be continued strengthening of our response to children who go missing in Medway and to Medway's children placed at a distance, to support robust multi-agency safety planning aiming to reduce the number of missing incidents.

- 4.8 When placing our children in care at a distance, we will ensure robust care planning is in place in respect of any potential missing incidents and plan how they will be managed prior to a child going missing to avoid responding in crisis. Work is underway to improve this, through our commissioning arrangements and through oversight of care planning for children.
- 4.9 Medway's Contextual Safeguarding meeting will continue to take place monthly This will be a multi-agency meeting.

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 As set out in paragraphs 1.1 and 1.2 of this report there is Statutory Guidance produced under the provisions of Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. Medway Council's missing from home and care joint operating procedure has formulated in line with that guidance.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 The committee is recommended to note the report and the proposed areas of focus for the Council, as set out in section 4.

Lead officer contact

Kelly Cogger, Head of First Response and Targeted Service

Tel: 01634 335618

Email: kelly.cogger@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Missing from home and care - Joint Operating Procedures and Team Guidance

Background papers

None