

# **Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**3 October 2024**

## **Missing Children**

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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 consider information and data for children who went missing during the period April 2023 - March 2024.

### Recommendation

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to note the report and the proposed areas of focus by the service as set out in section 4.16.
2. Budget and policy framework
  - 2.1 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'.
  - 2.2 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.

### 3. Background

- 3.1 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 services and Kent Police have a joint operating procedure and team guidance for children who go missing from Home and Care. This procedure was reviewed in August 2024.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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 2 return home interview officers to undertake RHIs with children that live within Medway. However, whilst an independent person must be offered, 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.
- 3.4 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 lead to ensure trends and themes are effectively gathered.
- 3.5 A daily missing report is compiled by the missing information officer and is shared with the senior leadership team and Need to Know notifications are completed for all children that are missing over 48 hours.
- 3.6 Other Local Authorities who place children in Medway are contacted for a copy of their return home interview so that we can analyse the intelligence relating to this. The exploitation lead also works with them to understand their internal processes and determine any proactive action they may be taking.

### 4. Overview of Children who go missing

- 4.1 Table A provides a 5-year (including pre-covid) overview of the number of missing incidents, the number of children that went missing and the timeliness of return home interviews.
- 4.2 The number of missing incidents in the last year has increased however the number of children has decreased and evidences significant progress in the percentage of return home interviews being completed in 72 hours.

Table A

Year	Missing Incidents	Number of Children	RHI completed in 72hrs
2023-24	1974	457	86%
2022-23	1861	466	69%
2021-22	1536	411	56%
2020-21	1271	317	64%
2019-20	1711	438	57%

- 4.3 Medway's performance figures for the period April 2023 – March 2024 show a total of 1974 missing incidents that involved 457 children over the 12-month period. This data identifies a 7% increase in the number of missing incidents and a 2% decrease in the number of children that went missing when comparing with 2022-23 data.
- 4.4 Of the 457 children went missing in Medway during the year, 98 children went missing whilst in Medway's care, 146 children who were the responsibility of another Local Authority were reported as missing in Medway. 92 children reported as missing during the year were open to a Children's service team (family solutions, children's social work teams or the assessment team). Please note that, as children with multiple missing episodes may appear in different cohorts during the year and the sum of group figures may not match the overall total.
- 4.5 For 286 children, it was their first time reported as missing. 159 children went missing for more than 24 hours and 165 children went missing 3 times or more during the year. Similarly, both figures have increased during this period when compared to 2022-2023.
- 4.6 98 children in care went missing during this period, this is in line with the national figure. This cohort of children in care have multiple incidents which make up approximately 46% of the occasions where children went missing.
- 4.7 During this period most children reported missing were male (Table B), and it was males who were more likely to have repeat incidents (Table C). This is a slight change from last year's data with a 1% increase in males and a 1% decrease for females.

Table B

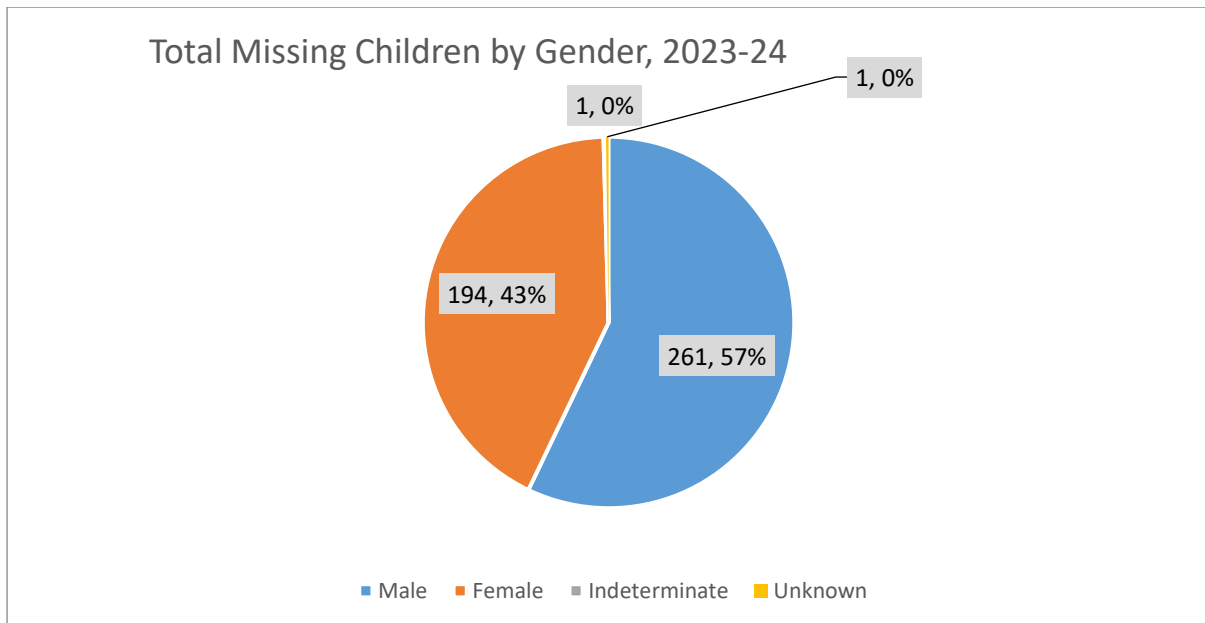
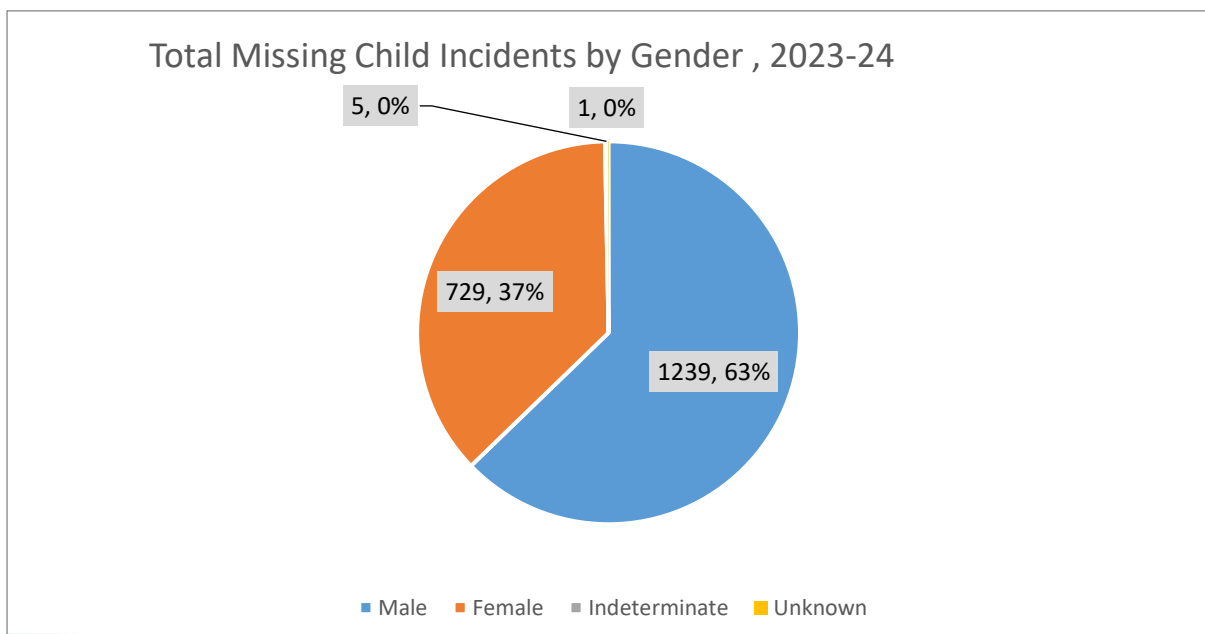


Figure 1

Table C



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

4.9 During this period it was children aged between 13 and 15 years old who went missing most (214 children), and 16- and 17-year-olds accounted for the highest number of missing incidents (1084 incidents). Which remains in line with last year's data.

Table D

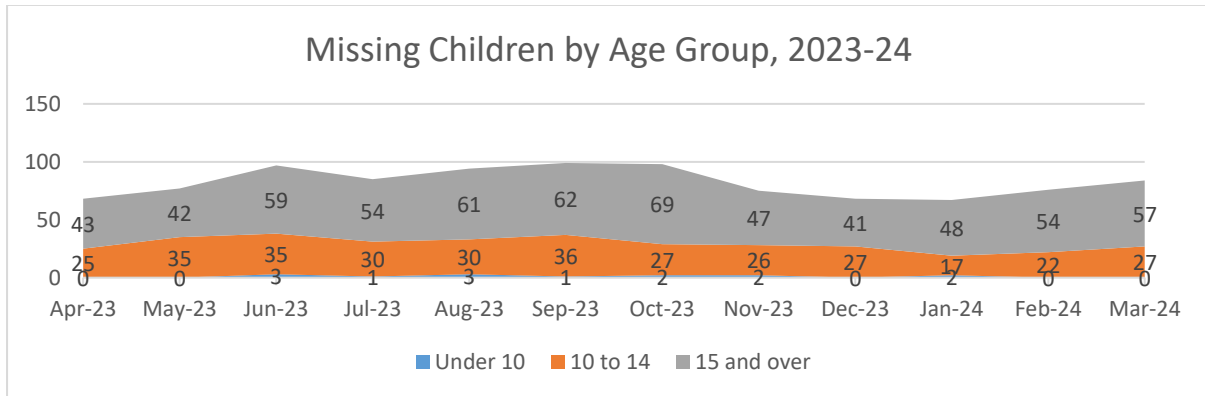
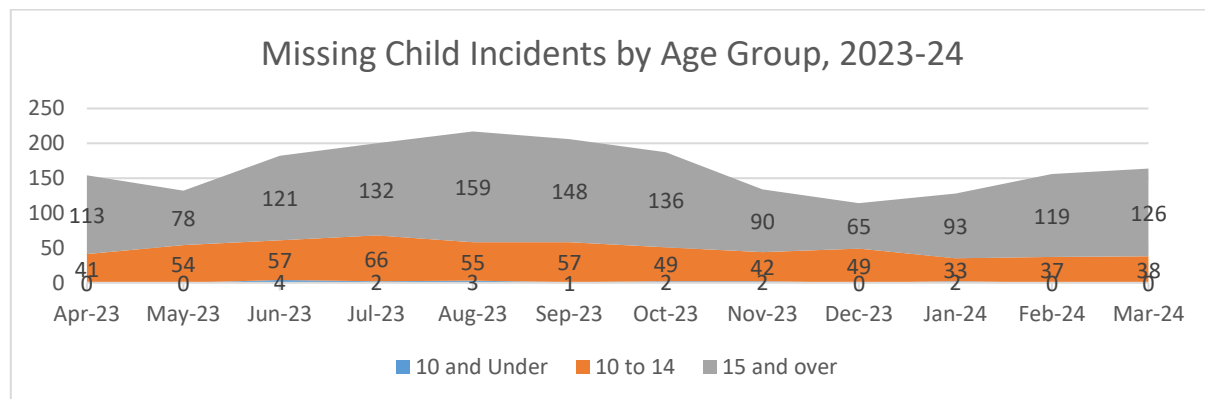


Table E



4.10 The 2023-24 data suggests that white British children in Medway were the largest cohort of missing children at 73% (Table F) and those that have most repeat incidents at 81% (Table G). The second largest cohort of children to go missing and to have repeat missing incidents are those with a mixed ethnicity at 9% (Table F) and 11% (Table G). This remains in line with 2022-2023 data. Where no data has been recorded, it is likely that this was a first-time missing incident where this data was not captured.

Table F

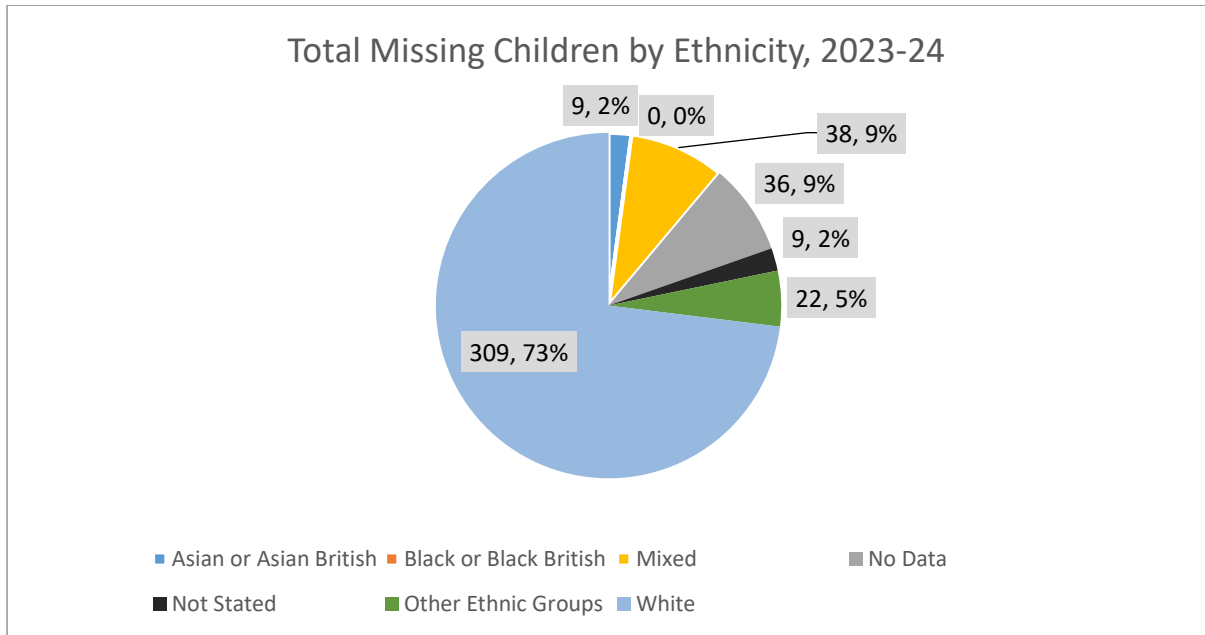
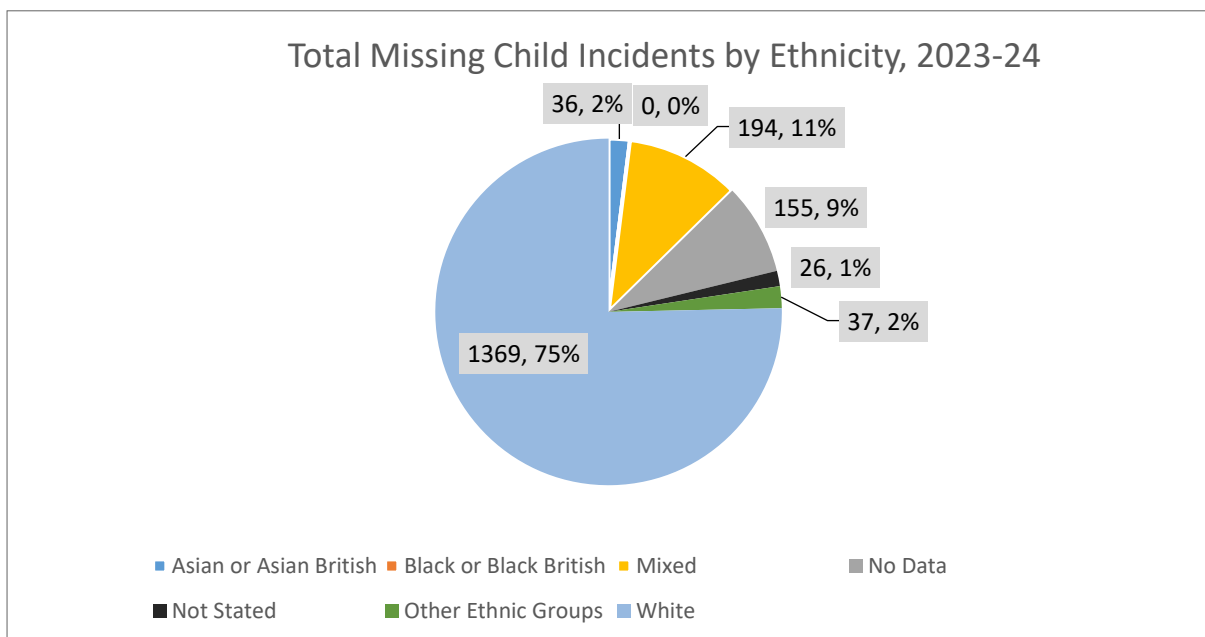
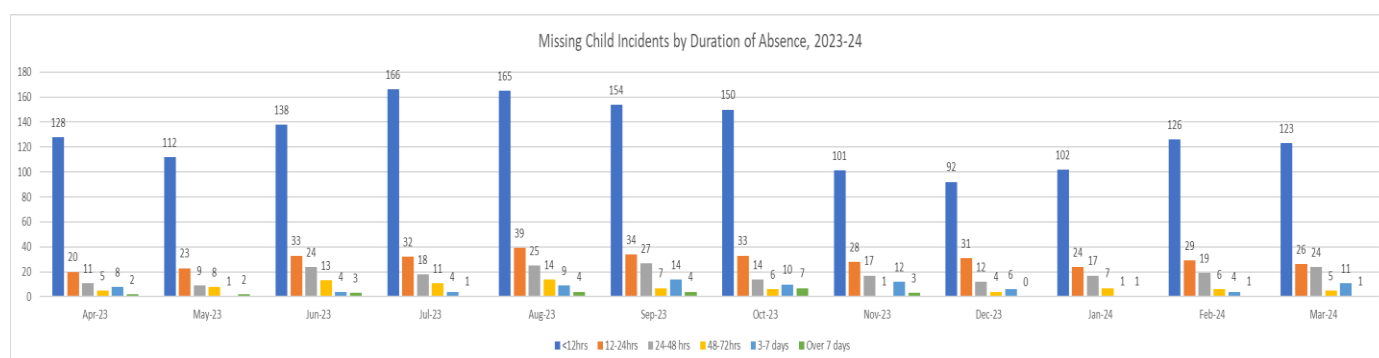


Table G



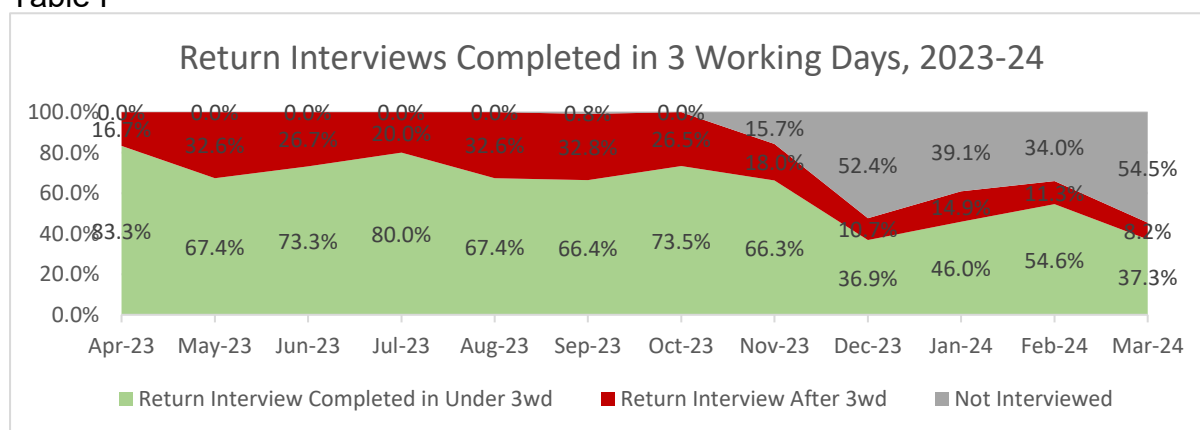
- 4.11 The data (Table H) identifies that during 2023-24 most missing incidents for children were for less than 12 hours, followed by 12-24 hours. For those children missing over a 24-hour period and are not open to Children’s services, a contact and referral must be made to Medway’s First Response by 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 must be convened to agree co-ordinated partnership working amongst agencies to ensure the safe return of the child.
- 4.12 Children’s services have a specific process for managing those children who experience longer periods of absence.

Table H



- 4.13 In the period April 2023 – March 2024, the number of young people that were eligible for a return home interview (RHI) following an incident was 1303 (this number excludes 619 which were missing incidents relating to other local authority’s missing children as they have responsibility for these). 96% of children were offered return home interviews, and 469 return home interviews were declined. Table I shows that out of the 826 conducted (63%), 707 (86%) were completed in 72 hours.
- 4.14 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.
  - Children in Care placed at a distance

Table I



4.15 The most significant areas of risks identified for children who went missing relates to exploitation, substance misuse and mental health.

### Summary of achievements and areas of focus

4.16 Joint operating procedures and guidance remain in place to support professionals responding to concerns regarding children who go missing from home or care in Medway.

4.17 There is clear evidence that when children from Medway go missing, they are offered a return home interview upon their return.

4.18 Across Children's services there has been a 17% increase in the number of return home interviews being completed within 72 hours. This is ensuring that Medway's children, those living in Medway and those placed at a distance, are being seen timelier following their return. This ensures children are provided with the opportunity to share the reasons why they went missing, to share what happened whilst they were missing and to explore what may prevent them from going missing again.

4.19 There is now a live missing report available via Power Bi which is used to create the daily missing children report which ensures senior managers are briefed in respect of children who are missing.

4.20 The missing performance dashboard is now in place and provides a sharper overview of our response to missing children. This supports a shared line of sight to practice and focuses the partnership response to key lines of enquiry, and areas for development.

4.21 There is a continued focus on the quality of the return home interviews undertaken with children and a drive for the independent return home officers to complete more RHI's for Medway children in care placed outside of Medway. This will ensure that any risks identified will support intelligence



gathering in respect of themes/trends, places and spaces. As well as strengthen our response to children who go missing in Medway and to Medway's children placed at a distance by ensuring robust multi-agency safety planning and reducing the number of missing incidents.

## 7. Risk management

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Action to avoid or mitigate risk</b>	<b>Risk rating</b>
1) 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
2) Quality of RHIs for children in our care.	RHI interviewers do not currently have capacity to undertake these.	Training, Support and audit of those being undertaken by other staff is underway.	C2

<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Impact:</b>
A Very likely	I Catastrophic
B Likely	II Major
C Unlikely	III Moderate
D Rare	IV Minor

## 8. Climate change implications

8.1 There are no climate change implications.

## 9. Financial implications

- 9.1 The Council's work to deliver the missing from home and care joint operating procedure is funded from the Children's Services budget. The activity delivered and planned as set out in this report can be met from the existing resources.

## 10. Legal implications

- 10.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

### Lead officer contact

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### Appendices

None.

### Background papers

None.