

Children and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

2 December 2025

Missing Children Annual Report 2024-25

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Summary

This report provides an overview of Medway's Children Services response to children who go missing from home and care. It examines data and practice themes for the period April 2024 to March 2025, highlighting patterns, challenges, and areas for development. The analysis includes quantitative data on missing episodes, qualitative reflections from practitioners, and multi-agency contributions, with a focus on safeguarding outcomes and service improvements.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1. The Committee is asked to note the report and the proposed areas of focus for the service, as set out in section 4.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1. Medway Council's Missing from Home and Care Joint Operating Procedure has been developed in accordance with the statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (January 2014). This guidance outlines the responsibilities of all Local Authorities and their partners to:
 - Prevent children from going missing.
 - Protect children when they do go missing.
- 2.2. The guidance is issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which mandates that Local Authorities, when exercising their social services functions, must act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. Compliance with this guidance is expected unless exceptional local circumstances justify a deviation.

3. Background

- 3.1. This report provides an overview of Medway's Children Services response to children who go missing from home and care. It examines data and practice themes for the period April 2024 to March 2025, highlighting patterns, challenges, and areas for development. The analysis includes quantitative data on missing episodes, qualitative reflections from practitioners, and multi-agency contributions, with a focus on safeguarding outcomes and service improvements.
- 3.2. Medway Children's Services and multi-agency safeguarding partners, including Kent Police, recognise that children who go missing from home or care are highly vulnerable and at greater risk of harm. A joint operating procedure and team guidance is in place, this was last reviewed in August 2024, to support a coordinated Multi agency response.
- 3.3. Children may be reported missing for various reasons. In some cases, they may be safe i.e. with their friends, but when their whereabouts are unknown to their carers this does trigger concerns for their wellbeing which may be safeguarding concerns.
- 3.4. All children who go missing are offered an Independent Return Home Interview (RHI) within 72 hours of being found.
 - Medway has three RHI officers who conduct interviews for children living in Medway and those in care placed outside the area but near Medway.
 - While independence is encouraged, children may request their allocated worker, a youth worker, or a teacher to conduct the interview.
- 3.5. RHIs provide a safe space for children to discuss:
 - Why they went missing
 - What occurred during the missing episode
 - What support or changes are needed to prevent recurrence
- 3.6. The information is recorded and reviewed by the Missing and Exploitation Lead to identify themes and trends. A daily missing report is compiled by the Missing Information Officer and shared with the Senior Leadership Team hence good knowledge of who those children are and Need to Know notifications are completed for children missing for over 48 hours.
- 3.7. Over the past three years, the number of missing incidents involving Medway children, including those in our care placed outside the area, has steadily increased.

The data also includes children in care placed in Medway by other Local Authorities; however, it is the placing local authority's responsibility to conduct their Return Home interviews.
See table A.

3.8. In 2024/2025, common push and pull factors identified during Return Home Interviews include:

- Exploitation (Child Criminal Exploitation & Child Sexual Exploitation)
- Disengagement from education
- Family conflict
- Substance misuse
- Mental health concerns (e.g. anxiety, self-harm)

These findings highlight the need for strengthened multi-agency responses, particularly around contextual safeguarding, reducing parental conflict, education engagement, and mental health support.

Year	Missing Incidents	Number of Medway Children	Number of Children placed by other LAs	RHI completed in 72hrs (Medway children)
2024-25	2222	351	112	86%
2023-24	1998	317	146	86%
2022-23	1862	362	105	69%

Table A

3.9. During the 2024–2025 period, Medway maintained strong performance in completing Return Home Interviews (RHIs), with 86% being conducted within 72 hours of a child returning. This consistency reflects positively on the timeliness and responsiveness of services following missing episodes which means children and young people are getting the right support at the right time which impacts on their wellbeing with the aim of reducing their missing episodes.

3.10. Across the year, 134 children were reported missing for more than 24 hours, and 150 children experienced three or more missing episodes. Encouragingly, both figures represent a decrease compared to the previous year, suggesting improvements in early intervention, support, and/or multi-agency coordination.

3.11. For children in the care of Medway, 110 were reported missing an increase of 12 compared to 2023–2024. However, while the number of children increased, the proportion of missing episodes attributed to this cohort accounted for approximately 41% of all incidents, which is a 5% reduction from the previous year. This indicates that although more children in care went missing, the frequency of their missing episodes declined.

3.12. A deeper analysis of the data shows that children aged 15 and over were the most frequently reported as missing and also had the highest number of repeat incidents. In contrast, it remains very rare for children under the age of 10 to go missing, and this trend is clearly reflected in the data.

3.13. In terms of ethnicity, White children continue to represent the largest cohort of missing children in Medway, accounting for 66% of all cases and 62% of repeat incidents. These figures are consistent with the data from 2023–2024. Where ethnicity data is missing, it is likely due to the incident being a first-time report where demographic details were not captured. See table B.

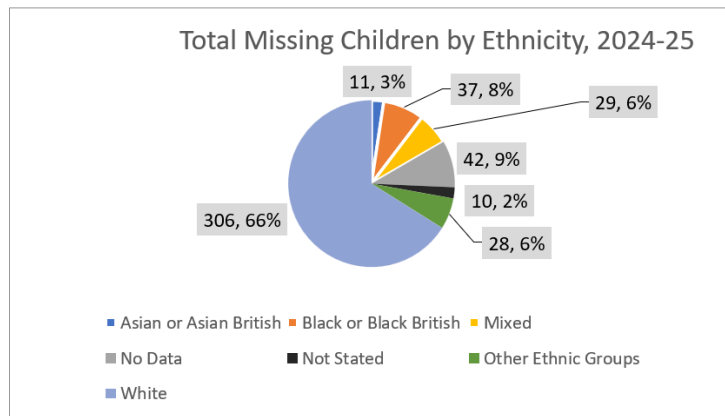


Table B

- 3.14. Analysis of data for the year 2024–25 shows that the majority of missing incidents involving children lasted less than 12 hours, with the next most common duration being between 12 and 24 hours. These shorter episodes are typically resolved quickly, but longer periods of absence require a more structured safeguarding response. For children who remain missing for over 24 hours and are not currently open to Children’s Services, the Missing Information Officer makes a contact to Medway’s First Response. This contact will be assessed in accordance with the identified level of need for the child, ensuring that appropriate support and intervention are considered.
- 3.15. Where a child has been missing for 48 hours and a multi-agency strategy discussion is convened. This discussion enables coordinated partnership working across agencies, with the shared goal of ensuring the child’s safe return and addressing any underlying risks or concerns. Medway Children’s Services also operates a specific process for managing cases where children experience longer periods of absence. This process is designed to provide a consistent and robust safeguarding response, tailored to the complexity and risk associated with prolonged missing episodes. These children are brought to Senior Leaders attention and a Need to Know is completed with the aim of sharing knowledge but also problem solving.
- 3.16. Between April 2024 and March 2025, a total of 1,420 young people were eligible for a Return Home Interview (RHI) following a missing episode. This figure excludes 803 missing incidents involving children from other Local Authorities, as responsibility for those cases lies with the home local authority. Of the eligible cohort, 94% were offered an RHI. However, 506 interviews were declined, leaving 822 that were successfully conducted. Notably, 706 of these were completed within the recommended 72-hour timeframe, representing 86% of those undertaken. See table C.

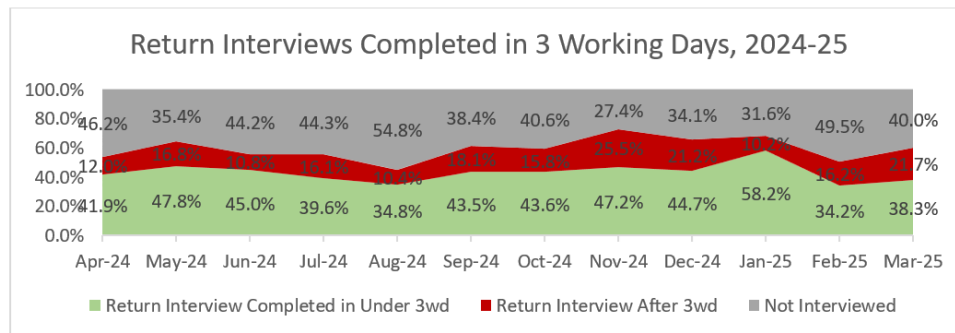


Table C

- 3.17. When reviewing performance data, several contextual factors must be considered. These include instances where children go missing repeatedly before an RHI can be arranged, as well as refusals from older children who may be less inclined to engage. Additionally, there are children where parents or carers decline the interview. In such situations, unless there is a suspected risk of significant harm, the Local Authority has limited powers to insist on participation, however we try and work alongside those parents to encourage agreement to an interview particularly if the child goes missing more than once.
- 3.18. Return home interviews can be more difficult to arrange with children in our care who are placed at a distance, this can complicate timely interview arrangements, however their completion is closely monitored. These are expected to be completed by the allocated Social Workers however this means at times they can lack some independence.
- 3.19. Return Home Interviews tell us that in Medway concerns continue regarding young people frequenting abandoned buildings and engaging in anti-social behaviour, particularly along Chatham High Street. These are issues that are being discussed in multiple multi agency meetings including the Contextual Safeguarding Panel held monthly with representation from several agencies including Medway Community Safety Partnership and Kent Police.
- 3.20. The push and pull factors influencing missing episodes among Medway children remain consistent with previous reporting periods. Placement related issues such as boredom, lack of engagement, frequent moves, and feeling unheard continue to be significant. Home-related factors include family conflict, breakdowns in relationships, being grounded, and a lack of belonging. Educational disengagement, suspensions, and dislike of school also contribute.
- 3.21. Mental health concerns ranging from anxiety and low mood to self-harm and suicidal ideation are prevalent. Substance misuse, particularly involving cannabis and cocaine, is increasingly noted. Sexual relationships, including underage and unprotected sex and anxiety linked to court proceedings, are also relevant. Some children report going missing for the thrill or to explore abandoned buildings. Finally, exploitation both criminal and sexual remains a concern.

4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1. The joint operating procedures and guidance between Medway and Kent Police for responding to children missing from home or care remains firmly in place. These procedures are reviewed annually to ensure they continue to support professionals effectively, and a review is currently underway.
- 4.2. During this period, performance data shows a consistently positive response to missing incidents. Specifically, 86% of children from Medway who go missing are offered a return home interview (RHI) within 72 hours of their return, reflecting a timely and coordinated approach across Children's Services.
- 4.3. Senior management oversight of missing children remains robust. A live daily missing report is generated via Power BI and shared with senior leaders and partner agencies, ensuring visibility and accountability at all levels. In addition, the missing performance dashboard provides a sharper overview of practice. It enhances and supports focused responses to key lines of enquiry and areas for development.
- 4.4. Themes, trends, and patterns identified through RHIs are analysed by the Missing & Exploitation Lead and compiled into a quarterly report. This report is shared with the Children's Services Management Team (CSMT) and the Performance, Management & Quality Assurance (PMQA) group. It also informs the quarterly submission to the Joint Exploitation Group for Kent and Medway, helping to shape strategic responses and improve multi-agency practice.
- 4.5. A key priority for 2025/26 is to ensure that all children in Medway's care, including those placed outside the local area, receive an independent return home interview (RHI). To support this, an additional RHI Officer has been approved in the 2025/26 budget.
- 4.6. Our aim is to improve the timeliness and coverage of RHIs, setting a target of 90% completion. This will enable earlier intervention and help reduce risk by ensuring children have the opportunity to share why they went missing, what occurred during their absence, and what might prevent future episodes.
- 4.7. Our aim is to improve the timeliness and coverage of RHIs, setting a target of 90% completion. This will enable earlier intervention and help reduce risk by ensuring children have the opportunity to share why they went missing, what occurred during their absence, and what might prevent future episodes.
- 4.8. Increased collaboration between the Missing Team and Commissioning to further consider the push factors identified for the children in our care.

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 Children that live in Medway	Work is underway to improve this through our commissioning arrangements and budget considerations for expanding the team.	CIII

For risk rating, please refer to the following table):

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

6. Climate change implications

6.1. There are no direct climate change implications arising from this report.

7. Financial implications

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

7.2. For the financial year ending March 2025, two RHI officer posts were included in the children's services staffing establishment, with an additional RHI officer post approved as part of the 2025/26 budget build. There are three RHI officer posts built into the 2025/26 children's services staffing establishment costing approximately £115,000 per annum. As at the round 2 monitoring, this service is forecasting a slight underspend as one of the RHI posts was vacant for part of the year but at the time of writing all three RHI officer posts are occupied with permanent employees.

8. Legal implications

8.1. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None