

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins

Ymateb gan Gwasanaeth Eiriolaeth Ieuenctid Cenedlaethol | Evidence from National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)

Proposed amendments to the all-Wales practice guide for safeguarding children who go missing from home or care

While good practice is happening across Wales, there is too much variation in the way stakeholders safeguard and respond to children and young people in Wales who go missing, specifically when offering and providing 'return home interviews'. This has resulted in an inequality of access to support for missing children depending on where they live in the country.

Dyfed Powys Police, Gwent Police and South Wales Police/PCC each commission 'return home interviews' across their entire police force area, encompassing all local authority areas within. However, the six local authorities within the North Wales Police force area separately provide their own in-house or commissioned return home interview services.

Given the lack of statutory requirement to offer a child a 'return home interview' and the variation in provision across Wales, there is no guarantee that a child is offered the opportunity to talk about their missing episode, meaning that a crucial safeguarding opportunity is missed to try and prevent repeat missing episodes and to ensure that children and young people receive the right follow-up support.

Additionally, not all areas across Wales collate data on their 'return home interviews', meaning that opportunities are lost to evaluate the effectiveness of 'return home interviews' and to use the information that they capture to identify and map patterns in each area and across the nation.

In recognition of the risks that children and young people face when they go missing, other Welsh Government guidance mentions

the moment when they return home as potentially being crucial to identifying risk or harm. Missing periods are referenced in All Wales Practice Guides including Safeguarding children from Child Criminal Exploitation, Safeguarding children who may be trafficked, and Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation. However, the crucial opportunity presented by a return home interview is not being consistently applied.

As part of our ongoing work, NYAS Cymru and the Children's Society have been calling for the Welsh Government guidance relating to 'return home interviews' to be strengthened. We are part of the all-Wales 'Missing the Point' campaign steering group, convened by NYAS Cymru, and these guidance proposals have been prepared in consultation with the wider steering group of third sector organisations, Police and Crime Commissioners and others. The 'Missing the Point' campaign is working to end the cycle that disproportionately affects care-experienced young people with missing episodes and criminal exploitation.

The views of children and young people on 'return home interviews' have informed this work. Specifically, the Missing the Point steering group has gathered views on –

- The use of terminology and a move away from 'return home interview'
- Who conducts the 'return home interview' and the child having a say in that decision
- Where the 'return home interview' takes place and the child having a say in that decision
- When the 'return home interview' takes place and the child having a say in that decision
- What is talked about during the 'return home interview'.

Their views on these points have informed the changes that we are proposing to the current practice guide, which can be found in the table below. We believe that the amendments we are suggesting would ensure more consistent and equal provision of 'return home interviews' across Wales to safeguard children and young people. These amendments would also ensure that children are more empowered in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. For example, children would have more choice within the 'return home interview' process, thereby ensuring that it is a child-centred process. We have also included notes in **green text** that we hope can be considered as part of the ongoing Welsh Government commissioned research project.

<p>What a 'return home interview' is</p>	<p>No definition or description of what is a 'return home interview'</p>	<p>Insert – “A 'return home interview' is an opportunity for a child to talk about their missing episode, whether they were missing from home or care. This can include what led to the child going missing and what happened during the missing episode.</p>

		<p>The child must have involvement and choice in the 'return home interview' process. This means that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They can refuse the offer of the 'return home interview' • They have a say on who will provide the 'return home interview' • They have a say on where the 'return home interview' will take place • They have a say on when the 'return home interview' will take place"
Terminology	'Return home interview' is the terminology used in the practice guide.	<p>Insert – “When communicating with children and young people, stakeholders should use terminology which differs from ‘return home interview’. Alternatives might include “talk”, or “coming home chat”.</p> <p>[We encourage Welsh Government commissioned researchers to strengthen this further through their findings so that Return Home Interviews are rebranded consistently in child-friendly language].</p>
Should a missing child be offered a return home interview?	“The child or young person [missing from care] may be offered a return home interview and follow on support by a missing children advocate or worker working with the police and they will be provided with information about this.”	Remove current content and insert – “When a child is found or returns from a missing episode, either from home or care, they must be offered a ‘return home interview’.”
What is the eligibility criteria for a Return Interview?	“These [return home interview] services are usually made available to children where there is an identified risk of child sexual exploitation and/or because a child is looked after.”	Remove current content and insert - “When a child is found or returns from a missing episode, either from home or care, they must be offered a ‘return home interview’.” [Same as above, no need to repeat in guidance but included here as shows universalism of eligibility]
How is information from Return Interviews collated and	No guidance	Insert – “Welsh Government should receive and scrutinise regular reports from the local authority/‘return home interview’ providers for the purposes of analysing data on children missing from home and from care. Welsh Government should also share findings between regions to build a

analysed?		national picture of issues, trends and best practice.”
<p>Do there need to be multi-agency arrangements when a child goes missing?</p>	<p>No requirement in the guidance for the need of multi-agency arrangements for when a child goes missing. Instead, it refers to practice that is happening in parts of Wales – “In some areas of Wales third sector missing children workers work in partnership with the Police. They provide support to children who meet service criteria to provide Return Home Interviews and aftercare. They may also carry out work with a child to reduce the likelihood of them going missing in the future.”</p> <p>There is guidance on multi-agency working with regard to stakeholders reporting under Section 130 of the SSWB Act – “When a child has been reported under section 130, the local authority must consider whether there are grounds for carrying out an investigation under section 47 of the Children Act 1989. Social Services of the local authority in which the child is located should make a decision on the evidence on whether to convene a multi-agency strategy discussion, to inform a decision on a response for the child, including whether to hold a</p>	<p>Remove paragraph in blue, and insert - “A multi-agency approach should be taken by stakeholders to respond collectively when a child or young person goes missing and for when a child or young person returns or is found after a missing episode, which should describe arrangements for offering and providing ‘return home interviews’.”</p> <p>To add to the guidance on reporting a child or young person under Section 130 of the SSWB Act, insert – “The information gathered from a multi-agency approach to responding to a missing episode, such as information gathered from ‘return home interviews’, should be used to inform the decision-making process of reporting a child or young person under Section 130 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act, and/or carrying out an investigation under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989.” [This section may also benefit from reference to the Wales safeguarding pathway which is being revised].</p>

	multi-agency Strategy Meeting. Representatives of each local authority relevant to the child and any Youth Justice Service relevant to the child should be involved in the multi-agency strategy discussion. There should be no delay in responding to information about a child at risk because the child is not ordinarily resident in the local authority where the safeguarding issue is identified.”	
How quickly should a Return Interview take place?	No guidance	[We encourage Welsh Government commissioned researchers to explore this point and create proposals].
Where should the Return Interview happen?	No guidance	[We encourage Welsh Government commissioned researchers to explore this point and create proposals].
What is discussed in a Return Interview and what happens next?	No guidance	[We encourage Welsh Government commissioned researchers to explore this point and create proposals - After speaking with the 4Cs' Young Commissioners about what should be discussed during a 'return home interview', they said that “the discussion should be an opportunity be able to talk about not only why they were missing but any other things that may be bothering them too”, and that “discussion should be focused on preventing future issues and dealing with worries that may have caused them to be missing.” Regarding actions after a 'return home interview' has happened, the Young Commissioners said that children and young people should “consulted on what happens next to make change positive.”].
What happens if a child refuses to	[No guidance specifically on what happens if a child refuses a return	Insert after paragraph - “Where a child refuses a ‘return home interview’, the child, parent(s) or carer(s) should be given details of how to contact the

<p>take part in a Return Interview?</p>	<p>home interview, but there is guidance on who the child may wish to speak with about their missing episode - This could be used as part of guidance for what to do if a child refuses a 'return home interview']</p> <p>"The child may be comfortable to talk to their parent(s) or carer(s) and parent/carers should be given details of how to share any information that could be used to protect the child or another child from future harm."</p>	<p>'return home interview' provider or other key contacts at a later date if they change their mind. Signposting options, including independent advocacy support, should be available."</p>
<p>Who should conduct the Return Interview and do they need to be independent of the child's care?</p>	<p>No guidance</p>	<p>Insert – "The child should have a choice in who they speak with about their missing episode/who will conduct the interview. This might be an independent provider, the child's parent or carer, or the child's social worker. If the child has a positive relationship with their parent, carer, or social worker, arrangements should be made to ensure that the child can speak about their missing episode with a person whom they trust/have the 'return home interview' conducted by a person whom the child trusts. The local 'return home interview' provider should offer guidance and support to whoever is conducting the interview. The 'return home interview' provider remains responsible for collating the information gathered and sharing that information with partners when appropriate."</p>
<p>Who is responsible for a Return Interview if a child lives 'out</p>	<p>No guidance</p>	<p>Insert – "There must be agreement between the corporate parent local authority and 'host' local authority on the arrangements in place for when a young person returns from a missing episode or is found after a missing episode, including the provision of 'return home interviews'." [We encourage Welsh Government commissioned researchers to explore this</p>

of area'?		point and strengthen it, potentially on the basis of current 'out of area' arrangements in child advocacy, where the corporate parent's commissioned service "will be accessible to children and young people across the region including children looked after and young people placed by the local authorities in other parts of Wales or the UK (out-of-county placements)": https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-07/statutory-advocacy-for-children-and-young-people.pdf
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