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| Kent County Council |
| National Alerts Protocol |
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| Amy Lawes – Social Work Standards Officer, KCC8-22-2023 |

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# Background

In May 2022, the Government committed, as part of its initial response to the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, to work with the sector to develop a National Framework.

A fundamental aspect of strategies and responses to missing children subject to Child Protection Plans is multi-agency and partnership working. The Government intends to set greater national direction for children’s social care. An aligned, national response to children subject to Child Protection Plans who go missing would aid the process and support local authorities and agencies to locate a vulnerable child at risk as quickly as possible.

Kent County Council invited local authorities to discuss the benefits of a shared response and structured process to National Alerts. It was agreed that a protocol, including a set of principles, for local authorities to adhere to would ensure a cohesive and structured response to children subject to Child Protection Plans who go missing with no known whereabouts.

# Purpose

The expectations for National Alerts are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018.

Each local authority has its own policy, therefore, there is no standard protocol for:

* The process for sending alerts.
* A central database of Local Authorities with agencies email addresses where alerts should be sent.
* The commitment and expectations for each local authority; the expected actions, such as how often or where searches will be undertaken; and who will be informed.
* The shared expectations around information sharing.
* The process for de-alerting when a child is found.

# Key principles

The following safeguarding principles should be adhered to in relation to identifying and locating children for whom a National Alert has been completed.

1. The safety and welfare of the child is paramount, and locating and returning the child to a safe environment is the main objective.
2. All local authorities have a duty to use their local knowledge, systems, and multi-agency networks to advise and assist where possible.
3. The National Alerts notification system is from Child Protection Custodian to Child Protection Custodian (or Designated Officer). It should not simply be an administrative task.
4. All local authorities agree to the timescales set out within the National Alert protocol.
5. It is the responsibility of the local authority where the child/young person normally resides, to send updated alerts and a de-alert to all local authorities once the child /young person/unborn has been found, so as all searches in that area cease.

# Criteria for a National Alert

National Alerts are issued on children (including unborn babies), who are subject to a Child Protection Plan who go missing from their residing area.

Each National Alert notification should be subject to the simple threshold test outlined below:

Are the family really missing? - If they are known to be in a particular locality, but their address is not known, this does not constitute a National Alert.

How do you know the child/family is missing, and for how long? – A National Alert cannot be completed until the child has been missing for 3 weeks. However, key questions should be considered and answered first:

* Are the family temporarily absent/ missing from their address?
* Are they staying with family/friends or away on holiday?
* Do friends/neighbours/family believe that they are “missing”?
* Do any of the key agencies have any knowledge of the family’s whereabouts?
* Does the Police have any information?

Exceptional alerts may be appropriate in the following circumstances and when all the threshold information above has been satisfied first:

Children who have disappeared immediately before, during or immediately following a section 47 investigation of serious allegations of significant harm where Social Care considers that there is evidence of sufficient danger to justify a National Alert.

Children on a Care Order who are deemed to be in danger because they have been abducted by a parent/individual who poses a significant risk of harm to the child and whose whereabouts are not known.

Children accommodated following significant child protection concerns who are deemed to be in danger because they have been removed without notice by a parent/individual who poses a significant risk of harm to the child and whose whereabouts are not known.

# Sending a National Alert

Given the child is subject to Child Protection Procedures the level of risk will be categorised as medium or high. The level of risk will be clearly stated within the National Alert and should be aligned with the decision made by the police in accordance with the national decision model (NDM) (See Appendix 1). The NDM is used by everyone in policing and therefore will ensure continuity of risk assessment across all local authorities.

Each local authority will provide an email address where National Alerts should be sent. This will form a National Alerts Database that will sit on the Association of Directors of Childrens Services (ACDS) website. Each local authority is responsible for ensuring the correct email address is provided to ACDS. This will ensure the process of sending and receiving an alert is streamlined.

The National Alert must identify if a media strategy has been considered or is necessary and appropriate, given a family’s right to privacy. If the media are going to be informed, an updated alert will need to be sent.

Consideration should be given to whether the child or their family has links to areas either within the UK or abroad. This should be clearly documented within the National Alert.

# Updating alerts

An alert update should be completed four weeks after an initial National Alert has been issued.

However, an alert update can be sent and distributed at any time. Each situation should be treated on a case-by-case basis. Examples an alert update should be sent may be the child/young person or unborn has been sighted/linked to a particular area or the level of risk has changed.

At a minimum, an alert update should continue to be sent every three months.

# De-alerts

A de-alert should be completed and sent to the National Alerts Database in the following circumstances:

* If the child/young person or unborn has been located, physically seen, and is no longer classed as missing.
* If the child/young person or unborn passes away.

The de-alert should be sent within 3 working days of one of the circumstances being considered.

# Receiving a national alert

As agreed in the key principles, upon receiving a National Alert, each local authority must have a mechanism in place for undertaking local checks with partner agencies. This should include but not be limited to their local police force, NHS trust and education department.

It may not be necessary to complete local checks upon every alert update received. Discretion should be used by each local authority to determine this.

# Information sharing, retention, and storage

The purpose of sharing information is to safeguard children and young people and for reasons of public safety.

All local authorities should ensure information shared is relevant and proportionate. Data protection concerns should not be used as a justification to withhold information where there is a necessary reason for sharing it.

Sharing of personal information may be considered legally proportionate if the processing is necessary to protect the vital interests of the individual (in a case where the individual’s consent cannot be given or reasonably obtained) or another person (in a case where the individuals consent has been reasonably withheld).

Each Local Authority is responsible for keeping child protection records confidential and stored securely and will have their own guidance for the retention of child protection information. In England, Scotland and Wales, the file should be kept until the child is 25 (Information and Records Management Society (IRMS), 2019) unless deemed exceptional circumstances.

# Legislation reviewed and considered

Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (2014)

Working Together to Safeguard Children and related statutory guidance (2013)

The Missing Children and Adults Strategy (2011)

Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (2009)

Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation Action Plan (2011)

The Children Act 1989

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# Appendix 1

Please find a summary of the National Decision Model taken from the College of Policing. For more information please look at [National decision model | College of Policing](https://www.college.police.uk/app/national-decision-model/national-decision-model)

