

# Southwark SCB

## Multi-agency Protocol for children missing from home and care

Updated February 2016

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## 1. Introduction

This protocol is designed to ensure effective multi-agency action to respond to the needs of children and young people who go missing and may be at risk. The protocol outlines local arrangements as agreed by the Southwark Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB). For more details please see:

*'Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care' January 2014 DCSF*

The supplementary *'London Child Protection Procedures for Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home.'* 2007

Wherever a child is missing, the Police are the Lead Agency, working in partnership with all agencies.

## 2 Background

The Children's Society's Still Running II (2005) survey estimates that around 100,000 young people under the age of 16 run away from home or care each year across the UK. Many of these young people stay with friends or family members, but some do not have access to support and may end up in potentially harmful situations such as sleeping rough.

### **Some of the findings of Still Running II were:**

- 52 per cent of young runaways returned to their home or care placement after one night away;
- 1 in 6 young runaways sleeps rough; and
- 1 in 12 young runaways is hurt or harmed while away.

Running away is usually a sign that a crisis point has been reached. It is vital therefore, that local authorities do everything they can to engage children and young people and inform them about the risks of running away and the services available to support them and their families to resolve issues before they decide to run.

Children and young people who go missing may be victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. In addition young people who are missing may be fleeing forced marriage or honour violence.

## 3 Scope of this protocol

This protocol concerns a number of areas in which children and young people may be at risk as a result of being absent from their family home or normal residence:

- Children and young people missing from home
- Children and young people missing from care
- Children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking
- Children and young people missing from education

## 4 Prevention

It is the responsibility of all agencies to ensure they have risk assessments processes in place that assist staff in considering the likelihood of:

- a child or young person they are working with going missing and
- being at significant risk if actually becoming missing.

### Push/Pull factors

Children and young people run away for a variety of reasons, but whatever the reason, running away is often a sign that something is wrong in the child's or young person's life and a response must be made quickly.

In order to conduct a thorough assessment, it is important to ask the child' or young person the reason why they have run away, as this will inform decisions about the appropriate service intervention or response.

Research carried out by the Social Exclusion Unit Young Runaways (2002), found that the top reasons for running away are:

### **Push factors**

- Problems at home – ranging from arguments with parents to long-term abuse or maltreatment.
- Family break-up – young people drawn into their parents' conflicts are less likely to do well at school and more likely to truant or to run away from home.
- Mental health problems – a disproportionate number of young people who run away from home have mental health problem.
- Bullying – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away from school and home or care.
- Teenage pregnancy – some young women run away or are forced to leave home because they become pregnant (or fear that they may be pregnant).

They may also be in denial about their pregnancy, meaning that they are not getting the advice they need about pregnancy options. There is also a greater risk of pregnancy when girls run away, and those working with them will need to ensure they have rapid access to confidential contraception and sexual health services to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

### **Pull factors**

- Children may run to be near friends or family – especially when a young person is in care and there are problems in contact arrangements with family and friends.
- Grooming for potential sexual exploitation or child trafficking – young people may run away or go missing following grooming by adults who will seek to exploit them.

## **5 Action to be taken when a child or young person goes missing**

When a young person goes missing the police should be informed. If the young person is resident in Southwark the responsibility for investigating their disappearance rests with the Missing person unit (MPU). In Southwark this is based at Walworth Police station tel: 0207 732 6246

Where the young person is living outside of Southwark e.g. placed in a foster placement or residential unit, the responsibility for investigating the disappearance lies with the local missing persons unit in the area of the placement. In certain circumstances where the bulk of enquiries are likely to be elsewhere the two missing persons units will liaise to decide who will lead the investigation.

## **6 Responding to children and young people who go missing**

### **Police**

Where police are informed of a missing young person, the investigating officer has a duty to:

- Record all relevant details of the missing person
- Complete a MERLIN missing person report
- Conduct an initial investigation
- Conduct a preliminary risk assessment – graded High, medium or Low

#### **High Risk**

The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability; or have been the victim of serious crime; or the risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing the public is in danger.

#### **Medium risk**

The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others.

#### **Low risk**

There is no apparent threat of danger to either the subject or the public.

From the outset of the investigation police will conduct an ongoing review of the circumstances of the person's disappearance and will consider the possibility that the missing person has been the victim of crime - for example, offences of homicide, kidnap or abduction, domestic violence, child abuse, so-called honour based violence, and forced marriage.

### **Childrens Services**

The MPU notify the local Children's services of all missing persons under the age of 18 years. A MERLIN form will be sent by secure electronic mail to the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The MASH manager will carry out a

risk assessment involving data base checks and a discussion with the Missing persons police.

See Appendix 5 for the MERLIN triage process for missing children.

Children under the age of 11 years who go missing from home cause particular concern, especially if they go missing repeatedly. The expectation is that their circumstances would always be subject to investigation under Section 17 or more probably Section 47.

Children known to Children's Services may go missing in the following circumstances:

Children subject of a Child Protection plan or where there is an ongoing child protection investigation or assessment of need. Often these children go missing with their parents or carers. In these circumstances

- The social worker will make a report to the MPU as a matter of urgency outlining the risk factors.
- The QA unit will send out an alert to all local authorities with details of the family and contact names and addresses
- If the children are not located within 20 days a CP conference to be convened.

Looked after children (see section 8)

If children are not found within 5 days, the allocated social worker should convene a multi-agency strategy meeting to explore the situation of the absconding and ensure that all appropriate action is being taken. This should (where appropriate) involve the child/young person's parents or carers.

Where there are serious concerns about a child/young person the Missing People charity can assist with support and advice and has easy access to various media outlets for publicity.

## **7 When children are found**

A missing person investigation is never closed until the child is found. When located the child must be seen by a police officer before the investigation can be closed. The child must be seen and spoken to.

### **Police return interview**

This is carried out by the police as soon as possible after the person has returned. The police officer must if possible ascertain the following facts:

- That the child/young person is actually the child reported missing
- The reasons for going missing
- where the child went
- what they did whilst missing
- who did they go missing with
- anything else the child/young person would like to discuss with the police officer

Following the interview the police officer will complete a second MERLIN form. If the police officer has concerns about the welfare of the child these will be included on the MERLIN form.

On a daily basis the Police based within Southwark MASH provide MERLIN reports to the Children's Social Care 'Merlin Specialist worker' in MASH regarding all young people reported missing from a Southwark home address. The MERLIN specialist worker is responsible for tracking and reviewing the list of young people missing from home in Southwark.

Where the child is considered to be at ongoing risk of significant harm or has been the victim of crime, police will take immediate action - usually in liaison with social services - to safeguard that child and/or investigate any crime.

All missing children are referred to and considered by the CSE operational meeting to assess for risk of CSE.

### **Childrens Services**

Once the MASH duty officer has received the MERLIN form, they will discuss with the MPU whether there is a need for further investigation and assessment.:

1. Where children have an allocated social worker – information will be passed to the allocated worker to follow up with young person and their family.
2. When CP / safeguarding concerns are being expressed by the child/young person to the police as the reason they are running away from home, a Section 47 CP investigation would be triggered. The independent interview with the child is then conducted by a social worker as part of the Section 47 enquiry.
3. When the history on Mosaic or the police reports indicate that there are concerns within the family for example domestic violence, parental mental health or this is the third time the child/young person has run away from home, a Single Assessment would be undertaken. The independent interview would be conducted by the social worker as part of the assessment.
4. If there are no immediately identified safeguarding or child in need concerns, the Assessment and Intervention service will make arrangements for the child to have a more detailed return interview.

**Return Interview** This is a more in-depth interview – separate from the police interview - and is usually best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. Many young people who run away or go missing need to build up trust with somebody before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they

decided to run away. The role may be shared between professionals from different agencies and the process for ensuring this happens is detailed in guidance in Appendix 3. The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the Safe and Well Check (his/her medical condition should be discussed and any need for medical attention assessed).
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away.
- try to prevent it happening again.

It is good practice that this interview takes place within 72 hours of the young person being located or returning from absence. It is especially important that a Return Interview takes place when a child:

- has been missing for over 24 hours;
- has been missing on two or more occasions;
- has engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
- has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case);
- has known mental health issues;
- is at known risk of sexual exploitation; and/or
- has contact with persons posing risk to children. (*Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care, p.25*)

## **8 Looked After children**

### **8.1 Children looked after by other local authorities**

A number of children who go missing in Southwark may be children who are looked after by another local authority but placed in foster homes or residential units in Southwark. In these situations the police may liaise directly with the placing authority. However MERLINS will be sent to the Southwark R&A and will be logged. In these circumstances the duty officer should liaise with the appropriate local authority to inform them of the situation.

### **8.2 Children looked after by Southwark**

Looked after children may go missing in the following circumstances:

#### **Unauthorised absence**

This is where the child or young person is staying out longer than agreed, either on purpose or unwittingly. This kind of behaviour is within the normal range of teenage behaviour and will not usually endanger the young person. Alternatively the young person may be staying with a friend or family member without permission. In most cases the carer will know the location of the child.

Under these circumstances there does not have to be an immediate report to the police unless there is a separate reason to believe the child is at risk.

## **Missing**

Where staff or carers have no indication that the young person is likely to return in a short space of time or where the child's location is unknown. When a child or young person is clearly missing the police should always be informed.

N.B. It should be appreciated that the police definition of a missing person is: 'Anyone whose whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance.' The police definition does not include the consideration of 'unauthorised absence' and they will consider a young person missing until they are located and their well-being or otherwise established.

Where children are missing from care, the risk assessment form in appendix 4 should be used to assess the potential risk to the child or young person.

Where the young person is missing for longer than 24 hours a Missing from care notification form should be completed by the social worker and a strategy meeting should be set up. The time-scale for the strategy meeting will depend on the assessed risk level but should be held at the latest within 5 working days to share information and ensure that all appropriate action is taken. This meeting would normally be chaired by the Advanced Practitioner and would involve the parents/carers of the young person unless the young person has no contact with them. The child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) should be invited to this meeting.

## **Return interview**

When a looked after child is located by the police, the police will always conduct a return interview/debrief as above. The more in depth second return interview may be carried out by the allocated social worker, by a Children's Rights worker or by an independent service.

From October 2014 Southwark is commissioning St Christopher's to provide an independent return interview service for children who run away from home or care.

Depending on the circumstances of the missing episode the social worker and their manager together with the child's Independent Reviewing Officer should consider whether to:

- convene a multi-agency strategy meeting;
- arrange an early looked-after child review;
- review any prevention/support work currently being undertaken with the child.

It should be noted that it is always good practice for the carer to have recent photographs of children in their care – especially if they have a history of absconding.

## 9 Children missing education

Referrals about children missing education may be received from a number of sources. Schools will send a referral if a child goes missing from their register and there is no known destination. Other local authorities will also make referrals if they know that a family have moved to the Southwark area but it is not known if a school place has been sought. Referrals may also come from other agencies involved with the family and the list is in no way exhaustive.

See Southwark CME procedures for action in these circumstances.

## 10 Important Services and Helplines

In an **emergency** call the Police on **999**.

Southwark Police Missing Persons Unit: **0207 232 6246**

### Children's Services

London Borough of Southwark  
Children's Services  
Assessment, Safeguarding and Family Support Services  
MASH  
Sumner House  
Sumner Road  
London SE15 5QS

MASH - 0207 525 1921

Email: [MASH@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:MASH@southwark.gov.uk)

Fax: 0207 023 4804

**Missing People Helpline** provides publicity to help trace missing children and young people, a network of street workers and advice and support from case managers.

Freefone: 0500 700 700 (from the UK)

Tel: +44 (0)20 8392 4527 (outside the UK)

Email: [mfc@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:mfc@missingpeople.org.uk)

Website: [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

### Contacts for (Children missing education) CME Team:

[earlyhelp@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:earlyhelp@southwark.gov.uk)

Early Help duty desk 020 7525 2714 (9am -5pm weekdays)

Early Help duty manager 020 7525 3893 (9am -5pm weekdays)

## **Housing**

[housing.options@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:housing.options@southwark.gov.uk)

**Tel:** 020 7525 5950

**Fax:** 020 7525 4039

Housing Options Service, 25 Bournemouth Road, London, SE15 4UJ

## Appendix 1 - Young people missing from home process flowchart

### Identify child/young person is missing

Parents/carer/responsible adult identify time by which the child should be at the address. Parents/carer/responsible adult should make enquiries to locate the missing young person with relatives/friends. This should include searches of the residence and local area if the child or young person is not located.



### Report to police

Parents/carer/responsible adult should telephone police with details of the missing person. Details required: child's name/DOB/where, when and who missing with/what child was last wearing/description of young person/recent photo/medical history/time and location last seen/circumstances of going missing/details of friends and associates.



### Officers conduct a risk-assessment forming the basis for resulting proportionate actions

Enquiries are then on-going. Sharing of information between the police, parents and other agencies as appropriate.



### Young person is located or returns to home address

When a missing child is located by family or friends etc, it would normally be their responsibility to return the child to the home address. Where a risk is identified, a police officer may accompany the family or the police may be requested to collect and return the child/young person to the place of residence only if it is safe to do so. Parents must inform the police when a child returns of their own accord.



**The police should conduct a return interview** to establish the young person's well-being and safety, and to establish whether they were the victim of crime or abuse whilst missing. **If warranted, police should refer child or young person to Children's Services via normal safeguarding channels.**



### Children's Services or runaway/missing person service to carry out a more detailed Return Interview and Assessment of Need

Information established from interview to support assessment of need, to be carried out using the CAF (check whether CAF already exists.) Lead Professional to be appointed.



**Young person offered relevant support by either statutory or voluntary services depending on what is available in the local area, CAF to be updated regularly. In some cases, specialist assessment may be required should it appear that the child or young person has complex needs.**

## Appendix 2 - Young people missing from care process flowchart

### Missing

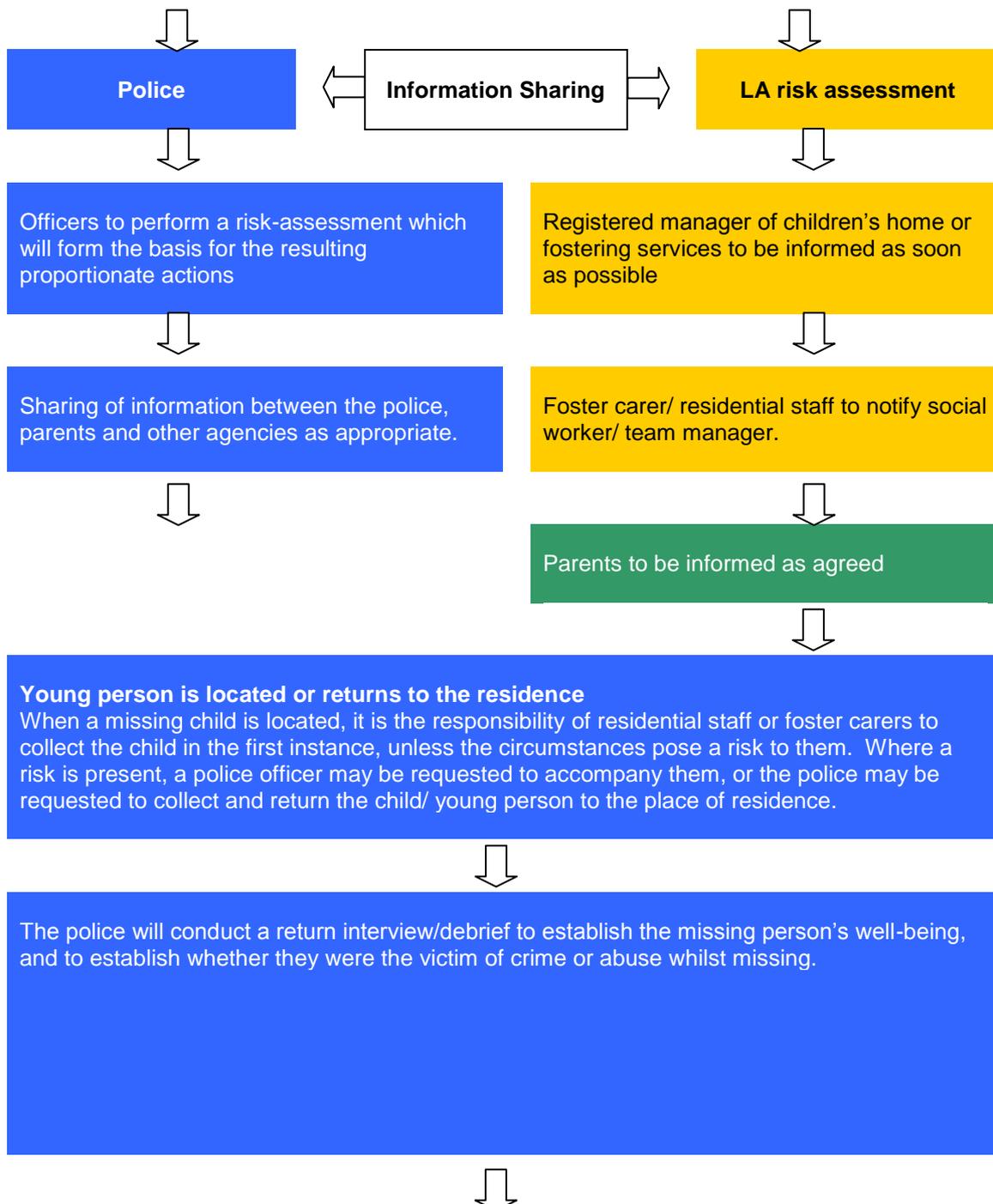
Residential staff/foster carers should make enquires to locate the missing person with relatives/friends. This should include searches of the accommodation and local area.

Foster carers and residential staff then telephone police with details of the missing person.

*Details required:*

- Child's name
- Description of young person
- DOB
- Recent photo
- Where, when, who missing with?
- Medical history
- What child was last wearing
- Legal status

All efforts to locate the child/young person must be recorded and auditable.



## Appendix 2 - Young people missing from care process flowchart (cont.)

Foster carer/residential staff to:

- provide positive non-judgemental return;
- check young person's medical condition and make necessary arrangements.



Placement staff to inform the social worker and team manager of the young person's return.



Arrangements for Return Interview to be agreed in consultation with the child.  
Care plan to be updated.



Consider whether to:

- convene a multi-agency strategy meeting;
- arrange an early looked-after child review;
- review any prevention/support work currently being undertaken with the child.

## **Appendix 3 - Independent Review Interview Guidance for Professionals**

### **Independent Return interview guidance for professionals**

*Return interviews should be carried out by an 'independent' person i.e. not the parent or main carer, who is able to build up trust with the young person and to identify*

1. The purpose of the return interview is to:
  - identify and deal with any harm the child / young person has suffered, including harm that may not have been disclosed by the child / young person at the police welfare check
  - understand and try to address the reasons why the child / young person ran away
  - try to prevent it happening again
  - to ensure follow up of any emerging issues, including sharing of relevant information with other agencies, including police, as appropriate
2. It is good practice for the interview to take place within 72 hours of the young person being located.
3. What the interview should cover:
  - i) The interviewer should be clear with the young person about confidentiality and boundaries of the discussion.
  - ii) If possible the interviewer should get an idea of the circumstances of the young person's absconding. Is it a one off or is it a more frequent occurrence?
  - iii) The interview could look at:
    - the child / young person's individual circumstances (including family circumstances)
    - the motivation for running
    - possible destination
    - who else may be involved
    - pattern of absences (if any)
    - emotional presentation of the child / young person (eg anxious; nervous; angry; stressed; low affect; withdrawn)
    - physical presentation of the child / young person
    - level of vulnerability
    - capacity to understand the risk they may be placing themselves in
    - potential risk of sexual exploitation
    - any health concerns

Possible areas to be explored with the child / young person are

- where they have been staying
- who were they with
- have they run away before

- how did they pay for things while away and how did they get access to money
  - did anything happen at home / are there issues at home which made them want to run away
  - did anything happen at school or in the community which made them want to run away
  - were they safe while they were away
  - were they a victim of crime while away e.g. have they been hurt / assaulted / stolen from
  - what could be done to help them in their personal life to prevent them running away again
4. After the interview the interviewer needs to be clear about what will happen next.
- It may be that there is no further action required.
  - The interviewer must indicate that they have to make a report back to Children's Services about the interview.
  - It may be appropriate to recommend referral on to another agency – e.g. youth services, police.

**Appendix 4 - Risk assessment grid: for children and young people who run away from home or care.**

Name of child or young person: ..... CF: .....

Date of Birth: ..... Age: ..... Legal Status: .....

Risk Indicators	Risk Assessment	Higher	Lower
Length of time missing? When was the c/yp last seen? Who was the last to see the c/yp? Have they gone on their own or with others?	(e.g. c/yp has been absent for over 6 hours and left on their own)		
What are the circumstances of the c/yp going missing? I.e. is the young person running to someone or from a situation? What time of day or night did they leave?			
Age and level of maturity i.e. has this c/yp shown signs of being able to make protective decisions about themselves or others? Was there any discussion or agreement reached about time to return?			
Do they have access to any money and how if necessary will they obtain this?			
Previous history of running away i.e. how recent? For how long? Where did they go? i.e. with family or friends or with people who are unknown or undesirable and where are they now believed to be staying?			
Past method of return i.e. via family /or on their own?			

Risk Indicators	Risk Assessment	Higher	Lower
Risk of suicide/self-harm and what are the indicators of this? What was c/yp's state of mind when they were last seen? Likely use of drugs/alcohol/solvents and what type and amount?			
Likely involvement of offending and in what form? Is the c/yp a risk to the community and in what way?			
Risk of sexual exploitation and have sexual exploitation protocols been activated? Any previous harm suffered while absent?			
Are they experiencing bullying / racial and/or homophobic abuse? Any signs or indicators that child is experiencing difficulties or abuse in the placement?			
Any concerns about new friends / boyfriends/ associates?			
Any concern of abduction or being prevented from returning. Is there a risk of forced marriage?			
Medication/ medical condition?			
Physical or learning disability/difficulties?			
What is the c/yp's legal status? Is this c/yp on the Child Protection register?			
Lack of information or knowledge			



# MERLIN TRIAGE (MISSING CHILDREN)

\*ST CHRISTOPHERS DISCUSS ALL MISSING CHILDREN AT MONTHLY OPERATIONAL CSE GROUP  
 \*MPU PRODUCE MONTHLY MISSING LIST TO OPERATIONALCSE GROUP

