

REPORT TO: POLICY COMMITTEE ON 5 MARCH 2008

SUBJECT: ARRANGEMENTS FOR MISSING PERSONS SEARCH REQUESTS

BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to approve new arrangements for responding to requests from other authorities to trace missing persons.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to Committee in terms of Section A(44) to exercise the statutory power of the council to advance wellbeing under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 2003.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 **The committee is asked to approve the new arrangements for responding to requests from other authorities to trace missing persons.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The increasing number of requests from local authorities, police forces and other authorities to help trace and monitor Children Missing from Education (CMEs) and other missing persons have created a need to centralise procedures.
- 3.2 Within social work, education and community services departments there are several databases, such as Carefirst, Phoenix, iWorld, that are interrogated as part of our response to requests. As the relevant services, such as social work, education, housing and community care, all have exclusive access to their own databases, there are no formal arrangements for cross-checking when undertaking searches for the requesting authorities. This has led to unnecessary double-checking by departments, and lack of certainty that a corporate-wide response has been supplied.
- 3.3 For children who are missing from education The Moray Council adopted national guidelines, issued by the Scottish Executive in 2005, when the Children Missing Education (Scotland) service (CME) was established.
- 3.4 Under CME guidelines (see **appendix 1**), when a child of school age goes missing from a Moray school, our dedicated CME officer, a Senior Quality Improvement Officer based at headquarters, is informed by the school. A local search is then conducted by contacting Social Work, home/school link personnel, friends and family and, if deemed necessary, the police. If this proves negative in terms of a finding the youngster locally, all information, including suspected locations beyond our immediate boundaries, is passed to CME (Scotland) in Edinburgh. CME (Scotland) will then widen the search area, especially if possible location clues are available. At that point our involvement ceases and the matter is dealt with by CME (Scotland) from Edinburgh. There are no changes proposed to this procedure.

- 3.5 Requests from police forces are normally sent to staff in the Corporate Policy Unit who deal with Freedom of Information and Data Protection requests. These are sent to relevant departments who check their databases and report the findings back to the Corporate Policy Unit (CPU) staff, who then respond to the police force requesting the search.
- 3.6 Missing persons requests from social work departments and community care offices across the country are being received by different Moray Council departments for answering. These have been dealt with by the departments the requests have been sent to but, with little formal cross-checking with other databases held by the authority, there is a risk of an incomplete search.
- 3.7 As requests are received in a random fashion there is currently no single person or section responsible for ensuring that the requests are valid, the correct departments are targeted, and that the requests are answered efficiently.
- 3.8 To compound the situation, local authorities from across the UK have adopted the habit of blanket-emailing every other authority with requests for checks on databases for missing persons - as well as CMEs. There have been instances when the requesting authority has not carried out the most basic of local searches before emailing every council in the UK. The volume of requests is dominating staff time, and in most cases there are no connections between the persons sought and the Moray area. The time-consuming search confirms this. Some missing persons have many aliases and each has to be entered into the database for searching. One missing person being sought recently by an authority came with a total of 65 different aliases and all had to be entered into our databases. He was not located in Moray.
- 3.9 Clearly when The Moray Council responds to missing person requests from outwith our area we need to be sure that an answer is provided on behalf of the whole authority. Most importantly we need to be absolutely sure that the person sought does not slip through our net, particularly where vulnerable children are concerned.
- 3.10 To ensure we meet our obligations and carry these out most efficiently, the following changes are proposed.
- 3.11 Recent changes to the way The Moray Council deals with Freedom of Information, Data Protection and Environmental Information requests have proved successful – currently 97 per cent of all requests are answered within the 20-day limit imposed by legislation. It is proposed that the same Corporate Policy Unit (CPU) staff who handle these matters within Chief Executive's office will co-ordinate all missing persons requests.
- 3.12 This will entail all requests from other authorities being processed by the CPU. Requests from organisations within Moray will continue to be dealt with via existing and successful local social work and education networks.

- 3.13 With the exception of police force requests - which are mandatory - all requests are to be screened by the CPU staff for missing details. The further information required by The Moray Council will include, but is not limited to:
- Are there any connections between the missing person and the area, i.e. relatives, residency or otherwise, that raises the possibility they could be in Moray?
 - Have all other reasonable checks been made by the local authority in their own area seeking the information?
- 3.14 Once these have been responded to in the positive CPU staff will enter the requests into the databases held by housing, social work, community care and education and respond with the results. If detailed responses are required then staff within the departments will interrogate their respective databases and send the responses will to requesting authorities. Otherwise CPU will search the databases and respond.
- 3.15 There is a small risk that this screening will not show people that are about to be recorded, such as those who have submitted paper application forms or requests for services. The databases will also not log that a person is being sought, so subsequent entries may not be matched. However, there have been no examples of this scenario to date.
- 3.16 It is expected that centralising this operation will bring significant time benefits to departments. Furthermore, by bringing all such requests through a central point within the organisation we can be more confident that a corporate and prompt response has been made. This procedure will meet our responsibilities under the Corporate Parenting initiative from the Scottish Government.

4. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

- (a) Corporate Development Plan/Community Plan/Service Improvement Plan** This report complements the objectives within the social programme of the Corporate Plan.
- (b) Policy and Legal** There is a legal obligation to assist with helping to find missing persons who may be residing in the area.
- (c) Resources (Financial, Risks, Staffing and Property)** Basic training in the operation of the specialised databases will be required for CPU staff. It is envisaged there will be savings in staff time by implementing these changes.
- (d) Consultations:** The Corporate Policy Unit Manager, Head of Children and Families service, Chief Housing Officer, Director of Community Services, Director of Education and the Principal Solicitor have all read the report and agree with the proposals. CME (Scotland) office has been informed of this proposal and is agreeable to the procedures.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The committee is asked to approve the new arrangements for responding to requests from other authorities to trace missing persons.**

Author of Report: Peter Jones, PPR and Communications Officer

Background Papers: CME (Scotland) guidelines 2005

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