



**North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee**  
**Multi-Agency Guidance**  
**Unseen Child**

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**First published: October 2012**  
**Reviewed: March 2017**

Document Control Information		
Document Details		
Document Name:	Multi-Agency Guidance – Unseen Child	
Document Version Number:	V2	
Document Status:	LIVE	
Document Owner:	North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee	
Prepared by:	Jillian Ingram	
Target date for approval by NACPC	October 2012	
Version History		
Version Number	Date Completed	Changes/Comments
V1 V2	25/10/2012 06/03/2017	Learning from Declan Hainey FAI incorporated
Distribution List		
Name	Version	Approval (A) /Information (I)
North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee		A

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## 1. Preface

North Ayrshire Child and Public Protection Chief Officers Group are pleased to endorse this multi-agency guidance for effective response to the “Unseen Child”.

This development of this document has been driven by the learning identified following the death of Declan Hainey in Renfrewshire.

Amongst many other findings, the review into the death identified that a significant issue was the level of failed contact with the child and therefore the catalogue of missed opportunities to directly assess how he was developing and the quality of parenting being provided by his mother.

It is incumbent upon us to do everything we can to utilise learning from such sad circumstances in order to better protect children in the future. This guidance document will help staff across services in North Ayrshire identify and respond to children who may be “unseen”, supporting a consistent shared approach to this type of concern.

Thus, we commend this guidance document to all who plan, manage and deliver services in North Ayrshire, in order that we continue to work collectively to promote, support and safeguard the well-being of all children and young people.

Elma Murray  
North Ayrshire Council  
Chief Executive

John Burns  
NHS Ayrshire & Arran  
Chief Executive

Paul Main  
Police Scotland  
Divisional Commander

Anne Houston  
Independent Chair  
North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee

## 2 Equality and diversity

North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee promotes equal access and opportunities to all individuals. All partners are committed to treating people respectfully, fairly and equally and to tackling discrimination in all of its forms. No one should be discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, gender or age. All partners within the Committee value diversity and actively challenge discrimination and prejudice. Those who participate in services should be listened to and respected and should have access to services which are fair, consistent and accessible to everyone, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, disability, gender, age, religious belief or sexual orientation.

## 3 Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is designed to support both adult and children's services in working effectively to promote, support and safeguard the well-being of children and young people. This will include everyone involved in delivering GIRFEC and those supporting adults. The guidance will be particularly relevant for those with direct contact with children and/or their parents/carers.

## 4 Purpose of this guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to provide clarity around expected practice in relation to "unseen" children. It sets out both the definition of "unseen" and recommended courses of action.

## 5 Introduction

**This guidance applies to all children and young people in North Ayrshire, not only to those in the child protection system.**

This guidance can be used as an independent document or to support any single agency guidance you may have on the same topic.

This guidance note sits alongside:

- Children Missing from Education Guidance (NAC Education & Skills)
- Missing Families Alert (NHS Ayrshire & Arran)
- Missing Children for whom there are child protection concerns (NACPC)

## 6 Definition

The unseen child is a child who may fall into the following categories:

- Address unknown
- Access is not possible because the parents fail to keep appointments
- Access is specifically denied by the parents
- The parent has repeated explanations for the child's absence, e.g. asleep, with a relative, unwell, outside playing
- There is no reply when calls are made at home

## 7 Identification/Awareness

Staff may become aware of an “unseen” child in a number of ways. While not exhaustive, the following are provided for guidance:

- In responding to a reported concern about a child or providing an agreed service to a child, staff have been unable to see the child, possibly due to reasons/explanations given as per definition above.
- During ongoing contact with a family, staff become aware that a particular child has not been seen in the course of contact with the family for a period of time.
- Concern is shared by another professional that they have been unable to see a child.

## 8 Evaluating Concern – Initial Guidance

When staff become aware of an “unseen” child, an initial evaluation of the level of concern must be undertaken. An “unseen” child is not necessarily in itself a concern. Each case is unique and it is the *significance* of being “unseen” that needs to be assessed. This will particularly focus on the vulnerability of the child in terms of age and stage of development.

Determining the level of concern in relation to an “unseen” child requires multi agency information sharing and assessment. This will need to take into account any known or suspected risks to the child, the length of time since the child has been seen and the nature of involvement of all agencies.

The response to such initial assessment should be proportionate to the identified needs and risks for the individual child.

Where there are no existing concerns about a child but those involved with a family become aware that an existing child has not been seen for a period of time during their contact with a family, the staff member must in the first instance discuss these circumstances with their line manager.

It is not possible to be prescriptive about what length of time is significant for “unseen” children in these circumstances. Managers should support staff to reflect on their practice and, as part of this process, to consider whether an “unseen” child may raise a concern.

Questions to consider include:

- Are there factors’ impacting on this individual’s parenting capacity?
- Is there a way for me to see this child as part of my contact with the family that would help me identify whether I have concerns?
- How long is it since I have seen this child and would I have expected to have seen them more recently?
- Do I know who else is involved with this family and whether they have seen this child?
- Has any other person shared concerns with me about the child?
- Do I need to share any information in order to ensure any needs/risks for this child are identified and addressed?

If there are no factors impacting on parenting capacity, no concerns expressed about the child and the service provided does not typically involve seeing the child, then such an “unseen” child would not typically warrant any further action.

However, if during discussion with the line manager, it is agreed that there may be a concern associated with this child being “unseen”, the following action should be taken:

- Contact other agencies who may be involved with the family – typically health and education.
- Explain your involvement and the background to your concern, ie an “unseen” child.
- Seek information on the nature of involvement of other agencies, including whether and when they have seen the child, and whether there are concerns either about the child or about factors that may impact on parenting.
- If anyone has seen the child, information about the child’s presentation must be discussed and taken into account in assessing current circumstances.

Following such information gathering and initial assessment, if concern about the child remains or is established, then an integrated assessment of the child’s needs and risks should be initiated.

The professional who first became aware of the concern about the “unseen” child must initiate the integrated assessment and make a referral to social services.

On receipt of any referral of a child or young person who is known or believed to be “unseen”, social services must immediately prioritise this referral and respond immediately, the same working day.

## 9 Evaluating Concern – Priority Cases

There are some circumstances where any period of a child being “unseen” is potentially significant.

Specifically, this would be the case where there are existing concerns about a child, including, but not limited to, child protection concerns.

Many contacts with families are planned – either at home or in an office/clinic environment. **The frequency of such contact should be specified in the Child’s Plan.** This then provides some guidance in respect of individual children when determining at which point an absence of contact becomes “significant”.

For children on the child protection register, whenever there is **any** failed contact (eg. failed to attend appointment, unable to gain access to the home, not able to see the child) responsive action must be taken immediately.

In these cases, if the child has not been seen within one day of attempted contact, then this must be brought to the attention of the Lead Professional and consideration given to convening a multi agency meeting. For children on the child protection register, this would typically be a core group meeting. For all other children, this would be a planning meeting or a professional discussion.

The person who is raising the concern is responsible for speaking directly to the Lead Professional / Social Worker and ensuring action is agreed. This may involve following up the initial sharing of concern with further phone calls.

Multi agency meetings can then consider all known information and agree actions to secure the assessment of the child's risks and needs. This can include legal measures such as a Child Protection Order.

If there is a concern about the immediate safety of an "unseen" child, legal measures can be considered immediately, prior to any multi agency meeting.

## **10 Information Sharing**

Where concern about a potential "unseen" child has been raised by another professional all staff involved with a family must give consideration to how they can share information in order to contribute to any assessment of risk and need for that child.

Services must share information about their involvement with a family; whom they have had contact with and when; any family issues that may impact on children; when any child in the family was seen and how they presented; and current and planned contact/involvement with the family. This allows for the most effective assessment of a child's needs and helps to ensure a proportionate response is provided.

In some circumstances, concern about an "unseen" child may escalate to the point that a child is reported missing to the police or a national search is initiated. In these cases, all information must be shared with Social Services who will take the lead role in such decisions.

## **11 Summary of responsive action**

1. In the case of home visits, arrange to return later in the day if possible.
2. In the case of office/clinic appointments, attempt to contact the family to obtain an explanation for failure to attend.
3. Contact all other relevant agencies contributing to the Child's Plan or known to be involved with the family to share information about the failed contact and identify if any other professional has seen the child. Seek information about any current concerns.
4. Where possible, explain clearly to parents the need to see the child.
5. If applicable, return to the house as arranged.
6. If, at this stage, the child remains unseen by any professional, this must be discussed with the Lead Professional/Social Worker and a plan of action agreed. (If the worker is unavailable, speak to the Team Manager)
7. The discussion and action agreed with the Lead Professional / Social Worker must be confirmed in writing within 24 hours and shared with all agencies involved with the family. This includes updating the Child's Plan and sharing utilising AYRshare.
8. Social Services must prioritise any referral of an unseen child or young person and respond immediately.



## STAFF

*Where a concern is raised about a child, professionals:*

*See them*

*Establish their immediate well-being; **and***

*Take any necessary protective action”*

Framework for Standards 2:3 (Scottish Executive 2004)