Absconding Policy

Approved by:	Lauren Meston	**Date:**	01/09/2019
Last reviewed on:	16/08/26		
Next review due by:	15/08/27		

Introduction:

At Future Pathways we are committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of every young person who attends our alternative provision. We recognise that a young person who leaves the site, a supervised activity or an agreed area without permission may be distressed, dysregulated, seeking safety, avoiding a perceived threat, at risk of exploitation, or otherwise vulnerable. Our response will therefore be child-centred, calm, proportionate and based on the level of risk presented.

This policy sets out the action staff must take when a young person leaves without permission, cannot be located during the education day, or becomes missing during an off-site activity. It should be read alongside the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, Attendance Policy, Behaviour Policy, Educational Visits Policy, Missing Child/Children Missing Education procedures, and any individual risk assessment or support plan.

Purpose and aims:

- Protect the immediate safety and welfare of the young person and others.
- Ensure a prompt, coordinated and risk-based response whenever a young person leaves without permission or cannot be located.
- Make clear when parents/carers, the commissioning or referring school, the local authority, children's social care and/or the police must be contacted.
- Ensure safeguarding concerns are identified and escalated without delay.
- Reduce repeat incidents through individual risk assessment, debrief, restorative or reflective work and multi-agency planning.
- Maintain accurate records and use patterns of absence or leaving behaviour to inform safeguarding and attendance support.

Definition:

For the purpose of this policy, Future Pathways uses the term "leaving without permission" alongside the commonly used term "absconding". A young person is considered to have left without permission when they intentionally leave the Future Pathways site, a supervised off-site activity, transport arrangement or an agreed supervised area without staff agreement, or when their whereabouts cannot be established when they should be under Future Pathways supervision.

This is different from a child who is missing education over a longer period. However, repeated unexplained absence, repeated leaving incidents or an inability to establish a child's whereabouts may also

trigger attendance, Children Missing Education (CME) and safeguarding procedures.

Legal and guidance framework:

This policy has been reviewed with regard to current national safeguarding and education guidance, including:

- Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026 (effective from 1 September 2026).
- Children Missing Education: statutory guidance for local authorities and schools, updated September 2025.
- Working Together to Improve School Attendance, statutory guidance, updated July 2026.
- Working Together to Safeguard Children.
- Restrictive interventions, including the use of reasonable force, in schools, effective from 1 April 2026.
- The Children Act 1989 and Children Act 2004.
- The Education Act 2002, where applicable.
- The Equality Act 2010 and the need to make reasonable adjustments for disabled young people and those with SEND.
- The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.

Where Future Pathways is acting on behalf of a commissioning school or local authority, the relevant commissioning and local safeguarding procedures will also be followed.

Roles and responsibilities:

Lauren Meston, Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), has overall responsibility for ensuring that safeguarding action arising from a leaving-without-permission incident is appropriately assessed, recorded and escalated. In her absence, a Deputy DSL or the most senior available member of staff will coordinate the response.

All staff and volunteers must know this policy, understand individual learner risk information relevant to their role, maintain appropriate supervision, immediately report concerns and follow the directions of the DSL or senior lead during an incident.

The staff member leading an off-site activity is responsible for ensuring that learner-specific risks, staffing, emergency contacts, meeting points and communication arrangements are considered before departure.

Prevention and individual risk assessment:

For young people known to leave, run, hide, disengage or become unsafe when distressed, an individual risk assessment and support plan should identify foreseeable triggers and agreed responses. Planning

should be trauma-informed and should not rely on punitive measures alone.

Risk assessments should consider, where relevant:

- Age, developmental level, SEND, communication needs and ability to recognise danger.
- Known mental health, emotional regulation, self-harm or suicidal concerns.
- Risk of criminal or sexual exploitation, county lines, trafficking, gang association or contact with unsafe adults or peers.
- Looked-after child status, child protection plans, court orders or social care involvement.
- Previous missing episodes, known destinations, transport routes and patterns of behaviour.
- Roads, railways, waterways, building sites, isolated areas or other environmental hazards close to the provision or activity.
- Weather, darkness, clothing, access to money, a mobile phone and safe transport.
- Whether the young person is familiar with the area and able to return independently.
- Known conflict, bullying, discrimination or other circumstances that may have prompted the young person to leave.
- Protective factors, trusted adults, agreed regulation spaces and strategies that help the young person re-engage.

Immediate response when a young person leaves without permission:

There is no automatic waiting period before action is taken. The response must begin immediately and be proportionate to the assessed risk. A fixed 15-minute threshold must not be used where there is reason to believe the young person may be at immediate risk of harm.

1. Remain calm. Use familiar, non-confrontational language and make reasonable attempts to encourage the young person to stop, return or move to a safer location.
2. Immediately alert another member of staff and inform the DSL, Deputy DSL or senior lead. Do not manage a significant incident alone where support is available.
3. Maintain visual contact where it is safe and proportionate to do so. Staff must not place themselves, the young person or other learners in additional danger by running into traffic, entering unsafe locations or undertaking an unsafe pursuit.

4. If the young person remains visible, monitor from a safe distance where appropriate and continue calm attempts to re-engage. Consider sending a staff member with whom the young person has a trusted relationship.
5. If visual contact is lost, establish the last known location, time, direction of travel, clothing, likely destination, mobile telephone details and any immediate risk information.
6. Undertake a proportionate search of the site and immediately adjacent areas where safe to do so, while maintaining safe supervision of other learners. Staff must not leave other young people inadequately supervised.
7. The DSL/senior lead will decide on immediate notifications and escalation using the risk factors in this policy. Parents/carers and the commissioning/referring school should be informed promptly; notification must not be delayed simply to allow a set period of time to pass.
8. Call 999 without delay if the young person is believed to be in immediate danger, at risk of significant harm, has indicated suicidal intent or serious self-harm, is in or approaching a dangerous location, is believed to have been abducted or exploited, or there is another emergency requiring an immediate police response.
9. Where there is no immediate emergency but police assistance is required to locate or safeguard the young person, contact the police in line with local procedures and follow police advice.
10. Where there are safeguarding concerns, the DSL must consider referral to children's social care and any relevant multi-agency safeguarding arrangements without delay.

Risk-based escalation:

The following indicators require a heightened or immediate response and should lower the threshold for contacting emergency services or safeguarding partners:

- The young person is very young, has significant SEND, lacks road or danger awareness, or cannot communicate effectively.
- There is a known or suspected risk of self-harm, suicide, exploitation, abuse, violence, substance use or unsafe adults.
- The young person has gone towards a road, railway, water, height, isolated area or other significant hazard.

- The young person is missing in an unfamiliar area, during darkness, severe weather or an off-site visit.
- The young person requires medication or has a health condition that creates additional risk.
- The young person is subject to safeguarding plans, is looked after, or there are specific instructions from social care or police.
- Their behaviour is significantly out of character or staff have information suggesting an immediate threat.
- Contact has been lost and staff cannot reasonably establish the young person's whereabouts.

Contacting parents/carers and the commissioning or referring school:

Parents/carers and the commissioning/referring school or local authority must be informed as soon as reasonably practicable, taking account of the urgency of safeguarding action. Staff should provide clear factual information, explain what action is being taken and agree how updates will be shared.

Where contacting a parent/carer could increase risk, for example because of a safeguarding concern involving that adult, staff must seek advice from the DSL and follow the Child Protection Policy before making contact.

Contacting the police:

When police are contacted, staff should be ready to provide:

- The young person's full name, date of birth and a recent photograph where available.
- A clear physical description, including height/build, hair, clothing and footwear.
- The exact last known location, time last seen and direction of travel.
- Whether the young person has a mobile phone and the number if known.
- Known likely destinations, addresses, friends, family contacts or transport routes.
- Specific vulnerabilities, SEND, medical needs and any immediate safeguarding concerns.
- Known risks of self-harm, exploitation, violence, substance use or unsafe associates.
- Actions already taken to locate and contact the young person.
- The name and contact number of the Future Pathways lead coordinating the incident.

Staff must follow police instructions and record the incident or reference number where one is provided.

Use of physical intervention / reasonable force:

Future Pathways prioritises prevention, de-escalation and relationship-based practice. Staff must not use physical intervention simply as a routine means of stopping a young person from leaving.

Any restrictive intervention or use of reasonable force must be lawful, necessary, proportionate and used only in accordance with current Department for Education guidance, staff training and Future Pathways procedures. It may be appropriate where immediate action is necessary to prevent a young person or another person from being harmed. Staff must consider the young person's SEND, disability, communication needs, trauma history and any known medical risks.

Any significant incident involving force must be recorded and reported in accordance with current statutory requirements and Future Pathways procedures, including notification to parents/carers unless an applicable safeguarding reason means this should be handled differently.

If a young person leaves during an off-site activity:

The trip/activity leader must apply the same risk-based procedure, with additional consideration given to the unfamiliar environment and the safety of the wider group.

- Inform the DSL/senior lead immediately and give the precise location and circumstances.
- Maintain safe supervision of the remaining group; do not leave other learners unsupervised to search.
- Maintain visual contact where safe and continue calm attempts to re-engage.
- Use the agreed meeting point and local search arrangements where these are safe and appropriate.
- Call 999 immediately where the young person may be in immediate danger or at risk of significant harm.
- Inform parents/carers and the commissioning/referring school promptly in accordance with the assessed risk.
- Keep a clear chronology of actions, calls, sightings and decisions.
- Follow instructions from police, venue security, transport staff or emergency services as appropriate.

If a young person is not located or does not return:

The DSL/senior lead must keep the level of risk under continuous review. Future Pathways will continue reasonable enquiries and maintain communication with the parent/carer, commissioning/referring school, local authority and police as appropriate. The provision will not

assume that responsibility has transferred simply because another agency has been informed.

Where the incident also raises concerns about unexplained absence or a child potentially missing education, the DSL/senior lead will ensure that relevant attendance and CME procedures are followed and that information is shared with the home local authority where required.

When the young person returns or is located:

The priority on return is to confirm the young person's immediate safety and wellbeing. Staff should welcome the young person back calmly and avoid an immediate punitive or confrontational response.

- Check whether urgent first aid, medical attention, food, drink, warmth or other immediate support is required.
- Inform the DSL/senior lead, parent/carer, commissioning/referring school and any agency involved in the search that the young person has been located.
- Consider whether there are disclosures or indicators of abuse, exploitation, bullying, self-harm or other safeguarding concerns and respond under the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.
- Offer the young person an opportunity, when regulated and able to engage, to explain what happened and what might help prevent a recurrence.
- Avoid treating the debrief as an interrogation. The young person's account should be listened to and recorded factually.
- Where appropriate, support restorative or reflective work and repair relationships without minimising any safeguarding concern.

Post-incident actions:

Following every significant leaving-without-permission incident, staff must:

- Complete the required Future Pathways safeguarding/concern record (including a CFC form where this remains the setting's agreed recording process).
- Record a clear chronology of the incident, including times, locations, actions, decisions, contacts and outcome.
- Notify the DSL and ensure relevant safeguarding information is recorded on the learner's file.
- Review and update the individual risk assessment, support plan and off-site arrangements where required.
- Consider whether an Individual Healthcare Plan, SEND support, behaviour support or pastoral plan needs review.
- Share proportionate information with staff who need it to safeguard the young person.

- Consider whether the incident indicates bullying, discrimination, exploitation, unmet SEND, trauma, mental health difficulty or another underlying need.
- Consider whether a multi-agency meeting, Early Help, social care referral or other professional involvement is required.
- Review staffing, supervision, premises security and environmental factors where these contributed to the incident.
- Identify learning from the incident and communicate any changes in practice to relevant staff.

Attendance, repeated incidents and Children Missing Education:

Repeated leaving, unexplained absence or patterns of non-attendance must not be viewed only as a behaviour issue. Absence can be a safeguarding indicator, including possible neglect, abuse, criminal exploitation or sexual exploitation. Future Pathways will work with the commissioning/referring school and local authority to ensure attendance information is accurate and concerns are escalated.

Where the whereabouts of a child cannot be established, or there is reason to believe they are no longer receiving suitable education, the relevant school/local authority CME process must be followed. Future Pathways will provide information and cooperate with reasonable enquiries in accordance with its role and commissioning arrangements.

Recording, monitoring and review:

The DSL will monitor incidents for patterns involving individual learners, times, locations, activities, peer groups, triggers and safeguarding themes. Information will be used to improve risk management and the quality of support offered to young people.

This policy will be reviewed at least annually and sooner following a serious incident, significant change in legislation or statutory guidance, or where monitoring identifies that procedures require improvement.

Key principles for staff:

- Act immediately and assess risk - do not wait for an arbitrary time threshold.
- Safeguarding comes before behaviour management.
- Remain calm, curious and non-confrontational.
- Do not undertake an unsafe pursuit or leave other learners unsupervised.
- Keep the DSL/senior lead informed throughout.
- Call 999 where there is immediate danger or risk of significant harm.
- Record decisions, actions and times accurately.

- Listen to the young person after the incident and address underlying causes.
- Review the risk assessment and support plan after significant or repeated incidents.

Related Future Pathways policies and procedures:

- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Attendance Policy
- Behaviour Policy
- Anti-Bullying Policy
- Educational Visits Policy
- Health and Safety Policy
- SEND Policy
- Use of Reasonable Force / Restrictive Intervention procedures
- First Aid and Medical Needs procedures
- Children Missing Education / Missing Child procedures where applicable