



Leaving the Service Unexpectedly (Absconding) Policy and Procedure

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1. POLICY STATEMENT

The Learning Sanctuary is committed to supporting service users safely while respecting their autonomy, rights, dignity, choices and freedom of movement. This policy sets out the action staff should take where a service user leaves, or attempts to leave, The Learning Sanctuary, a community activity or another agreed location unexpectedly and there is concern for their safety.

The term “absconding” is retained in the title because it is commonly used in risk and care documentation. In practice, The Learning Sanctuary will normally use person-centred language such as “leaving the service unexpectedly”, “leaving an agreed area” or “missing from the service”.

This policy must be read alongside The Learning Sanctuary Safeguarding Adults Policy and Procedure, Mental Capacity Act 2005 Policy and Procedure, Positive Support, De-escalation and Physical Intervention Policy, individual support plans and risk assessments.

2. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE – WE DO NOT USE FORCE

The Learning Sanctuary does not use force to make a service user remain at, or return to, the service simply because staff disagree with the person’s decision to leave. Staff will use communication, relationships, reassurance, de-escalation, observation, individual risk planning and the least restrictive response available.

Physical intervention must never be used for punishment, convenience, to enforce compliance or simply to stop an adult with capacity from leaving. Any exceptional emergency action must be consistent with The Learning Sanctuary Positive Support, De-escalation and Physical Intervention Policy and the applicable legal framework.

3. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This policy applies to directors, employees, agency staff, volunteers and other people working on behalf of The Learning Sanctuary.

It applies when a service user:

- leaves the main service unexpectedly;
- leaves an agreed community activity, venue or meeting point;
- moves away from staff supervision in circumstances that create a significant safety concern;
- cannot be located when they were expected to remain with staff under an agreed support arrangement; or
- indicates an intention to leave and staff identify a foreseeable risk of serious harm.

4. INDIVIDUAL RISK ASSESSMENT AND PREVENTION

Where there is a known history or foreseeable risk of leaving unexpectedly, this must be addressed through an individual risk assessment and support plan (Herbert protocol) The plan should be proportionate and should promote positive risk-taking rather than unnecessary restriction.

Where relevant, the plan should identify:

- known triggers, patterns and early warning signs;
- communication needs and preferred ways of being supported;
- places the person may be likely to go and known community risks;
- road safety, vulnerability to exploitation, self-harm, environmental or other risks;
- what level of supervision has been agreed and why;
- who should be contacted and in what circumstances;
- what staff should do if the person leaves unexpectedly;
- any relevant crisis, safeguarding or multi-agency arrangements; and
- what would trigger an urgent review of the person's support.

5. MENTAL CAPACITY, CONSENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE

Capacity and risk are different questions. Under the Mental Capacity Act 2005, a person aged 16 or over must be presumed to have capacity unless it is established that they lack capacity for the specific decision at the particular time. Staff must take all practicable steps to support the person to make the decision themselves. A person is not to be treated as lacking capacity merely because they make an unwise or risky decision.

Where a service user has capacity to decide whether to leave, their decision must normally be respected. Staff may explain foreseeable risks, offer alternatives, encourage the person to remain or return voluntarily and take appropriate safeguarding or emergency action where separate duties arise, but capacity must not be overridden simply because staff, relatives or carers disagree with the decision.

Where there is a genuine reason to doubt capacity for the specific decision about leaving, staff must follow The Learning Sanctuary Mental Capacity Act 2005 Policy. If the person lacks capacity, any act or decision on their behalf must be in their best interests and the least restrictive option available. Sections 1, 4, 5 and 6 of the Mental Capacity Act are particularly relevant.

A best-interests decision does not provide a general authority to detain or restrain a person. Repeated or significant restrictions on a person's freedom of movement may raise restraint or deprivation-of-liberty issues. Staff must inform the Director and seek advice from the person's social worker, placing authority and/or relevant legal or safeguarding professionals where this may arise.

6. IMMEDIATE STAFF RESPONSE

If a service user leaves unexpectedly, staff should respond according to the individual circumstances and level of risk. Staff should:

- remain calm and avoid confrontation, threats or actions likely to increase distress;
- attempt to communicate with the person and encourage them to remain or return voluntarily;
- alert the Director or senior person responsible as soon as possible; who will contact the service users emergency contacts
- check the person's current support plan, risk assessment and any agreed missing-person or crisis procedure;
- where safe and appropriate, maintain sight of the person or follow at a safe distance without active pursuit;
- take a mobile phone when leaving the service or venue and maintain communication with colleagues;
- not place themselves, the service user, other service users or members of the public at unreasonable risk;
- consider immediate environmental risks such as traffic, water, unfamiliar locations, severe weather, self-harm or vulnerability to exploitation;
- ensure appropriate staffing remains available for other service users; and
- record significant decisions and actions.

7. WHEN THE PERSON REMAINS NEARBY

Where the person remains nearby and can be safely observed, staff should normally maintain an appropriate distance, use known de-escalation strategies and allow time and space. Active pursuit may increase distress or cause the person to move into a more dangerous situation and should therefore be avoided unless the circumstances clearly require a different emergency response.

Staff should continue to assess risk and seek to maintain communication. The aim is to support the person to return voluntarily or reach a safe outcome, not to force compliance.

8. WHEN THE PERSON CANNOT BE LOCATED OR RISK IS HIGH

There is no single fixed time period that is safe or appropriate for every service user. The response must be based on the person's individual risk, circumstances and agreed plan. Staff must not wait for an arbitrary period where there is an immediate or serious risk.

The Director should consider contacting the police or emergency services immediately where, for example:

- there is an immediate risk to life or serious harm;
- the person is believed to be at risk of self-harm or suicide;
- the person is highly vulnerable, disoriented or unable to keep themselves safe;

- there is significant risk from traffic, water, weather, strangers, exploitation or another identified hazard;
- the person's whereabouts are unknown and their individual risk assessment indicates urgent action;
- there is reason to believe a crime, abuse or exploitation may be occurring; or
- the person's crisis or multi-agency plan requires emergency escalation.

Where the risk is not immediate, the Director will use the person's individual plan and professional judgement to determine appropriate escalation. **Relevant family members, carers, representatives, social workers, commissioners or other professionals should be contacted in accordance with the person's consent, legal arrangements, support plan, safeguarding requirements and information-sharing duties.**

9. SAFEGUARDING

Leaving unexpectedly may be a safeguarding indicator rather than simply a behavioural issue. Staff must consider whether the incident is connected to abuse, neglect, self-neglect, exploitation, coercion, fear, domestic abuse, mental health deterioration, criminal exploitation or another safeguarding concern.

Where abuse, neglect or exploitation is suspected, staff must follow The Learning Sanctuary Safeguarding Adults Policy and Procedure and the current West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and City of York Joint Multi-Agency Safeguarding Adults Policy and Procedures. Immediate danger or serious harm requires immediate protective action.

The person's wishes and desired outcomes should be sought and respected as far as possible. Having capacity does not remove a person's right to safeguarding support, and a capacity assessment must never be used as a substitute for safeguarding action.

10. DISTRESS, SELF-HARM AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Where leaving unexpectedly occurs alongside significant distress, threats or acts of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, serious deterioration in mental health, risk to others or other crisis indicators, staff must treat the situation as an urgent welfare and risk issue rather than simply an absconding incident.

Staff should follow any individual crisis plan and seek urgent professional or emergency assistance where required. Where repeated incidents suggest escalating complexity or risk of mental health hospital admission, The Learning Sanctuary should liaise with the person's social worker, health team or other responsible professionals so that appropriate multi-agency support and escalation arrangements can be considered.

11. PHYSICAL INTERVENTION

The Learning Sanctuary's starting position is that physical intervention will not be used to stop a service user leaving. Where a person lacks capacity, section 6 of the Mental Capacity Act is relevant to restraint: an act involving restraint can only fall within the Act's protection where the person taking the action reasonably believes it is necessary to prevent harm to that person and the restraint is proportionate to the likelihood and seriousness of that harm.

Any emergency physical intervention must be exceptional, necessary, proportionate, the least restrictive option available and stopped as soon as the immediate danger has passed. It must be reported and recorded in accordance with the Positive Support, De-escalation and Physical Intervention Policy. Inappropriate or excessive intervention may constitute a safeguarding concern.

12. WHEN THE SERVICE USER IS FOUND OR RETURNS

The immediate priority is the person's safety and wellbeing. Staff should respond calmly and avoid blame, punishment or confrontation. Where necessary, first aid or medical assistance should be sought.

When the person is ready and able to engage, staff should seek to understand what happened from their perspective, including why they left, what they were trying to communicate, what helped or did not help and what they would like staff to do differently in future.

The person should be supported to participate as fully as possible. Communication adjustments should be used where required.

13. RECORDING, NOTIFICATION AND REVIEW

The incident record should include, as applicable:

- date, time and location;
- circumstances and events immediately before the person left;
- known risks and the person's presentation;
- actions taken to communicate, de-escalate and locate the person;
- times and details of contacts with the Director, police, emergency services, family/carers or professionals;
- where and when the person was located or returned;
- the person's views and wishes where obtainable;
- any injury, safeguarding concern or emergency intervention;
- whether capacity or best-interests considerations arose; and
- actions required following review.

After a significant or repeated incident, the Director will ensure that the individual risk assessment and support plan are reviewed. The review should identify learning and whether changes are

required to staffing, supervision, communication, environment, activities, crisis planning or multi-agency involvement.

14. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Director is responsible for ensuring this policy is implemented, significant incidents are reviewed, safeguarding and Mental Capacity Act issues are escalated appropriately, and relevant professionals are involved where risks exceed what The Learning Sanctuary can safely manage.

All staff and volunteers must know the person's relevant risk and support arrangements, respond calmly and proportionately, work within their role and competence, maintain accurate records and report concerns promptly.

15. RELATED POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- The Learning Sanctuary Safeguarding Adults Policy and Procedure (August 2026).
- The Learning Sanctuary Mental Capacity Act 2005 Policy and Procedure (August 2026).
- The Learning Sanctuary Positive Support, De-escalation and Physical Intervention Policy (August 2026).
- Individual support plans, risk assessments and crisis plans.
- Mental Capacity Act 2005 and Code of Practice, including sections 1, 4, 5 and 6.
- Care Act 2014 and Care and Support Statutory Guidance.
- Human Rights Act 1998.
- Equality Act 2010.
- Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR.
- Current West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and City of York Joint Multi-Agency Safeguarding Adults Policy and Procedures.

16. MONITORING AND REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed at least annually and sooner where legislation, North Yorkshire safeguarding or Mental Capacity Act arrangements, commissioning requirements or The Learning Sanctuary's service model changes. Where current law or local safeguarding requirements set a higher or different standard, the current requirement will take precedence.