

Youngsters 'vanishing' from care

By Richard Smith

Home affairs correspondent, BBC News

More than 150 children placed in care in the South East have vanished in the last three years.

According to figures obtained by BBC South East Today 65 children who arrived at Gatwick Airport in Sussex on their own since 2004 have disappeared.

The figures released after a Freedom of Information request also show that 69 vanished from Kent and 27 from Surrey.

Social workers say they are doing all they can but campaigners say they fear the children are being trafficked.

They said more must be done to stop the missing youngsters being forced into domestic slavery and prostitution.

Police and social services believe nearly a thousand unaccompanied minors have arrived at Gatwick Airport since 2004.

Some genuinely want to claim asylum but it is thought that many others have been forced to come to the UK from Africa, and increasingly China.

The children are put on planes by one set of traffickers who arrange for them to be picked up at Gatwick Airport by another set who then take them away, Sussex Police believe.

Prostitution is a likely occupation.

Social workers at Gatwick often spot the victims before the traffickers do and are able to place them into care in Sussex.

However the authorities also fear that many of these youngsters are later snatched back by the slavers.

Unaccompanied children that are picked up at Gatwick are currently looked after by foster carers or placed in hostels.

But for five years there was a safe house in the county, where youngsters could be hidden.

West Sussex County Council closed the centre in 2003 because they said its location had been discovered and children could be better cared for elsewhere.

'Nowhere entirely safe'

Lynne Chitty, who used to help run the safe house for children, said: "It's just so sad that we're not able to protect young people. These are children after all who are here through no fault of their own.

"These children have families, they have parents, they have brothers and sisters. But they have got nobody at all to speak up for them to make everybody aware of what is happening."

Ms Chitty said she was upset by the rise in disappearances.

"I am very, very angry at that, because we were keeping young people safe. And I'm just amazed, angry and shocked that they're allowing it to go up again."

John Leaver, West Sussex County Council's deputy director of children and young people's services, said nowhere was entirely safe.

He added: "Traffickers...are very, very determined.

"We can call it a safe house, we can call it a foster home or a hostel. If they want to make the contact, whatever we do, it's sometimes very difficult to avoid that contact being made."

International problem

Asked if he thought people would be shocked that 60 people could go missing in Sussex, John Leaver said: "Yes I accept that.



Nearly 1,000 minors have arrived at Gatwick on their own since 2004

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Lynne Chitty

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Campaigners fear the missing youngsters are being trafficked

"I accept it on the basis that people should be shocked and understand some of the issues that a comfortable county like West Sussex has to face at times.

"It does happen to have an airport, a large international airport within the county and these are international issues that we're trying to deal with," he added.

Det Supt Russ Whitfield, of Sussex Police, said: "We're trying everything we can to do something about it. This is an international problem that is landing in Sussex, and we're doing all that we can."

"But without the necessary international agreements, without the education in some of those countries to prevent the children coming over there's not a lot more else we can do."