

Learning the lessons from the **Community Based Refuge (CBR) Pilot Projects**

Summary of the Pilot Project Reports

Sara Scott and Julie Harris

Every Child Matters, Young Runaways, and Targeted Youth Support

The *Youth Matters* reforms aim to re-shape and develop joined-up services for young people in order to improve outcomes. Whilst all young people should be able to access support from universal services, reforms recognise that some young people have additional and overlapping needs and will require specialist support in order to achieve the five outcomes under *Every Child Matters*. Young people who run away may be additionally vulnerable if running away from an abusive or harmful environment and/or placing themselves in unsafe locations or situations. Persistent or prolonged episodes of running away can impact negatively on longer term outcomes for young people and increase the likelihood of social exclusion as they make the transition to adulthood. Therefore, whilst not identified as a discreet group within Youth Matters it is nevertheless vital that local authorities take account of their needs when developing new services and local arrangements.



Targeted youth support, while still in the early stages of national roll-out, represents a key mechanism by which vulnerable young people should access appropriate and timely support in order to safeguard their wellbeing and address deep rooted problems, of which running away may be symptomatic. Where the support involves more than one agency, this should include a lead professional to act as a single point of contact and to co-ordinate and ensure the right support from the necessary range of agencies, and a support package that draws on mainstream and specialist services to meet individual needs.

The Pilot Projects

Since 2002 the Government has been testing different approaches to the support of young people who run away through the funding of two pilot programmes. The first of these developed 20 projects that targeted those most at risk and was funded by the Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) between 2003 and 2004.

The second programme ran from April 2004 to March 2006 and was funded from Department of Health Choice Protects for the development of six projects providing community based refuge and emergency response to runaway incidents.

This review reports on the latter, summarising the learning from the collective experience of the six Community Based Refuges Pilot projects. Each project was asked to produce an evaluation report at the end of the pilot period and this summary draws together information from these reports and attempts to highlight some key issues in the provision of services to young people who run away that may be used to inform future policy and service development. In addition to the pilot projects we have incorporated information from the Talk Don't Walk project in Warrington as it is a new initiative funded by the Treasury, developed over a similar time frame and, like the pilot projects, tests new approaches to effective intervention.

There is very little hard data in the project reports to evidence links between project interventions and outcomes for young people. The lessons described therefore, rely more upon the professional judgements of those involved in providing and evaluating these services.

Any conclusions drawn in this report are tentative and limited by the paucity and inconsistency of the data available from the reports. Each report is different in structure and content. Monitoring information has not been collected with any degree of consistency and there are gaps in the information available.

Lessons about evaluation

For this reason we would suggest that in order to maximise the learning from future pilot programmes the commissioners of services should establish a single, over-arching framework for evaluation. This would support the pilot projects in:

- Setting outcomes for the project
- Establishing baseline data with regard to individual service users and the wider context in which the service is being delivered
- Collecting and monitoring data about service users
- Recording the services provided
- Measuring outcomes for service users
- Evaluating performance.

I. Who are 'young runaways'?

The experience of the pilot projects reinforces previous research findings that there are particular circumstances that make young people more likely to run away and require professional help in order to return home or, where that is not possible, to find safe alternative accommodation and support. While there are incidents of young people running away from home as a one-off act of rebellion, or as a response to a particular family difficulty, most of these young people end up sleeping at a friend's or relative's and will return home of their own accord. On the whole, this is not a group of young people who require intensive support.

However, there are also young people who run away as a response to major difficulties in their lives and within this broad group research identifies some distinct sub-groups including:

- Young people who have run away because of family conflict
- Young people who are forced to leave home rather than leave of their own accord
- Young people who run away from neglect or abuse or whose parents are experiencing difficulties such as substance and alcohol misuse or domestic violence
- Young people who repeatedly go missing from care and who have often established a pattern of running away prior to going into care
- Young people who run away from home or care in response to other problems such as peer pressure or bullying
- Young people who have been forced out from home under the age of 16 and have subsequently become isolated from parents, carers and other forms of support, known as 'detached' young people.¹

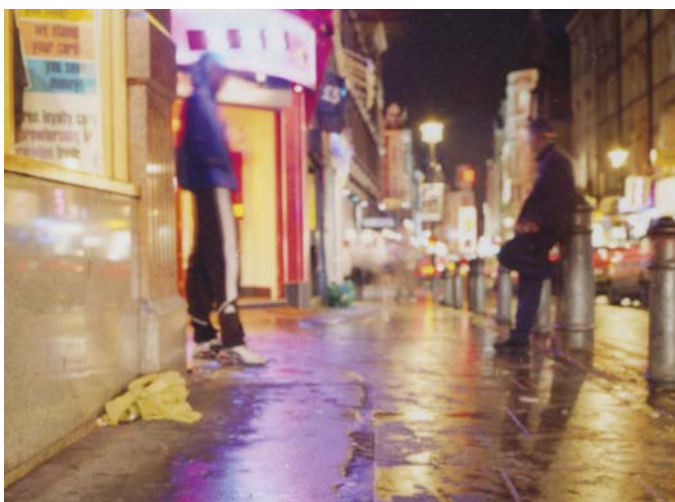
Young people who go missing from home are generally defined as having run away if they are under 16. Over the age of 16 they have an independent right to assistance from the welfare state with housing and income support. However, for young people who are in care, the local authority has responsibility until the age of 18.

The law does not generally regard young people under the age of 16 as being able to live independently away from home. In practice, young people who run away under the age of 16 will usually be returned to those who have parental responsibility for them, unless to do so would be placing them at risk of significant harm. Young people over the age of 16 who have run away or consider themselves to be estranged from their families may apply to a Housing Authority for help with obtaining accommodation, who may need to seek the assistance of the Local Authority children's services. Where young people up to the age of 18 are in care or are care leavers (i.e. "eligible" or "relevant" children as defined by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000) then their responsible local authority must support and maintain them.

Young people aged 14 to 16 are particularly vulnerable through running away as there are few services available to them and they have no right to independent financial support from the State. They are therefore more likely to develop risky survival strategies and become 'detached.'

Young people that run away at a very young age should be regarded as particularly vulnerable and there is evidence that 25% of those young people that run away repeatedly, first ran away before the age of 11.²

The increased serious risks for vulnerable young people who run away can include becoming a victim of sexual exploitation, becoming involved in alcohol or substance misuse, getting into trouble with the law, experiencing mental health difficulties and depression, going into care or becoming 'detached' from services.



Given the diversity of cause and experience, the starting point for planning any response to young people who are additionally vulnerable through running away is to ensure that it addresses their underlying needs and difficulties and isn't simply a response to the running away behaviour. Their needs should be met via a range of agencies that bespoke runaway services alone may not be able to provide, although they would certainly be part of the solution. It is the aim of the **Targeted Youth Support** reforms to ensure that more intensive support is accessible to young people who are especially vulnerable. In most respects, the needs of young people who run away are no different to those of other young people with complex personal and family difficulties. Therefore it could be that if an effective system for identifying, assessing and providing services to vulnerable young people existed locally, there would be no need for specialist services for runaways. To a considerable extent, specialist runaway services act as a safety net for young people in crisis when they have dropped out of, or been missed by other services. As one service manager interviewed put it:

"If social work did what it should do better, and had the resources to do so, refuge might not be needed. This is indisputably true."

However, it could also be argued that mainstream social services and youth provision will inevitably fail or miss some young people e.g. unreported runaways, and building in an extra safety net resource in the shape of a service for runaways is a legitimate response. There is no evidence available from these pilots to suggest that any single method works best and it may be that a combination of approaches is effective.

2. How can we ensure young people get access to services?

Young people who are especially vulnerable, may have difficulties which have been missed by professional agencies, or they may have been in receipt of services which have failed in resolving their problems. When they run away, they are likely to be in crisis and even more at risk. It is therefore critical that young people are able to access appropriate support at this point. The experience of the pilot projects suggests the following:

Learning points about accessing services

- A large proportion of young people who run away do so at night or at weekends. Therefore, an effective **out of hours response** is needed. In most cases, this response falls to the police and the social services Emergency Duty Team, who need to have the capacity to respond appropriately. Their ability to respond varies, as does the nature of the response. It is likely that an important role played by specialist services is helping to ensure a more consistent approach within their area.
 - The majority of referrals to the pilots were made via the police and social services. It is therefore important that these agencies have a **good understanding of the role of specialist projects**, where they exist, and that there are effective protocols in place for ensuring a swift and appropriate response.
 - Most of the projects encouraged **self referrals** from young people but the level of these was generally low. It is unclear to what extent greater publicity and direct promotion would increase self referrals. Previous research suggests that services attract more self referrals as they establish themselves over time, although the pilot projects provided no evidence for this either way.
 - **Helplines** are one means of enabling direct access by young people and were used by most of the pilots. Two areas set up a local helpline, but, in most instances, dedicated local helplines may prove prohibitively expensive and unlikely to be cost-effective.
 - Projects reported good links with the national helplines such as the National Runaways Helpline (to whom some helplines transferred calls during unstaffed hours) and Childline, and said they provide a vital link between young people and their local children's services particularly out of hours when only Emergency Duty Teams are available.
- However, the effectiveness of national helplines can be curtailed by high thresholds for intervention or lack of social workers to provide a response and these issues need to be addressed at local level.
 - According to the National Missing Person's Helpline (NMPH) most young people using the Runaway Helpline are never reported missing. This service is therefore succeeding in reaching many of the young people that the pilot projects expressed concern about not reaching.
 - It takes time and work to raise **professional awareness** of any new provision, even when it is an addition to an established service. Most projects dedicated time to developing relationships with a range of agencies in order to encourage appropriate referrals. This time needs to be built in to the planning of any new provision.



3. What kind of community refuge services should be provided?

One particularly contentious element of service provision to young people who run away seemed to be the provision of dedicated emergency accommodation or “static refuge”. In an emergency some young people may require accommodation and may be at significant risk if safe provision is not quickly and locally available. Drawing on their experience from the pilot projects some interviewees argued that emergency accommodation is needed in only a very small number of cases and that, when required, it can be provided without the necessity of a specialist refuge i.e. within mainstream emergency foster or residential care. However, it might also be said that a key benefit of specialist provision is in the avoidance of statutory care.

There is not enough evidence from the pilot projects to reach a firm conclusion on whether particular localities should or should not provide refuges for young people who run away. Only one of the projects (the London Refuge) had certificated refuge status under the Children Act (section 51) during the pilot period. However, our analysis suggests the following about providing emergency accommodation:

Learning points about accommodation

The Children’s Society surveys estimate that one in nine young people across the UK runs away overnight at least once before the age of 16³, however the proportion of these that require emergency accommodation is small, as these pilots demonstrated. This can make the cost of providing refuge quite high per young person which raises an issue about overall cost-effectiveness. However, if the right emergency response is not provided at the time of need, this can lead to other longer term costs for local services.

For those young people in need of emergency accommodation, the importance of a place of refuge and/or a breathing space should not be under-estimated. The challenge, therefore, is how to meet this relatively small demand from a highly vulnerable group of young people in a way which is both sensitive to their needs and cost-effective:

- The experience of the pilots suggests that even when young people do initially present as requiring emergency accommodation, more often than not some alternative arrangements can be made, provided staff are available to offer appropriate support and, if necessary, mediation.

- For most Local Authorities, being the sole provider and funder of a fixed refuge means that the costs may not be justifiable in the face of competing demands on resources.

There were three approaches to flexible refuge demonstrated by the pilot projects:

- The ‘crash pad’ approach, piloted in Torquay, hinges on the availability of an appropriate host organisation. If the Local Authority has a pre-existing partnership agreement with a drop-in centre for young people or similar, then this arrangement can work well. A strength that this model shares with others where only one young person is accommodated at one time (or in one place) is in limiting the exposure of young people to the chance of learning new risky behaviours. However, previous research has identified that this model may not be popular with young people⁴ and there is a perceived stigma attached to its use. There are also staffing and confidentiality of address, and therefore safety issues.
- The Durham arrangement of emergency beds attached to existing social services provision has the benefit of flexibility of staffing although this model also carries a significant risk of stigma.
- The specialist fostering arrangement was piloted by Bradford and Leicester. It makes use of existing foster carers, minimises the stigma of a fixed location, and makes flexible use of resources. However, due to low take-up this model remains largely un-tested and there is a concern about young people who are unknown and un-assessed being placed in family homes. There is also an issue for young people of stigma attached to going into care. Additional challenges for Local Authorities lie in guaranteeing the availability of beds when placements are pressurised.



A key challenge lies in the staffing and supervising of flexible refuges. This may be approached through the use of sessional staff and volunteers, although it can prove difficult to sustain this arrangement with low take-up of the emergency facility. In some areas it may be possible to extend existing roles to incorporate overnight staffing as required (as was the case in Durham) and this arrangement may have fewer resource implications. The Glasgow 'Running Other Choices' (ROC) project was not part of this pilot programme but provides a useful example of how a flexible staffing arrangement on an 'on call' basis can be used to support a fixed refuge, reducing costs considerably.

A suggestion raised by some respondents in our national interviews, which has the potential to address the above challenge, is the option of building on the experience of the national Nightstop network to meet the needs of younger teenagers who need emergency accommodation, as well as the older group of young people Nightstop currently serves. The pros and cons of such an approach (including the legalities) would need to be explored, but a 'Nightstop-plus' arrangement of specially recruited and trained Nightstop hosts may be one approach to meeting the needs of young people without placing further pressure on foster care placements.

Whichever approach or combination of services to meet the need for emergency accommodation is adopted by a Local Authority, there are two key supporting elements which need to be in place:

- There needs to be a clearly understood and well-communicated set of criteria for the use of emergency accommodation to ensure that it is only used for those young people for whom it is really needed. When it is needed young people need to access it easily and safely.
- Local Authorities need to have effective systems of support for young people who run away or are forced to leave home, both to prevent young people from needing to use emergency accommodation in the first place, and to provide the follow up support required to meet the needs of young people once they have used emergency accommodation.

Good emergency accommodation needs to be underpinned by the following principles:

- It needs to be safe, confidential and provide a setting that assists young people to consider their best interests at a point of crisis.
- It needs to be viewed as an acceptable offer of accommodation to the young people, who are often both in crisis and disadvantaged.
- It should be easy to access and local.

- Young people should not feel stigma attached to its use.
- It needs to be accompanied by the capacity to offer intensive personal support to the young person.
- It should be accompanied by support in the form of family mediation and advocacy in the short term.
- It should also include the direct provision or brokerage of longer term support.



4. What kinds of support benefits young people who run away?

The project reports provide little descriptive detail on the methods used to support young people and families. However, the following common themes emerge from the interviews with the pilot projects:

Learning points about support

- It is important to provide a swift response to a young person who has run away.
- Projects highlighted the benefits of having staff who could provide consistency of support - in picking the young person up, providing immediate help and giving some planned follow up support over the next few days;
- Staff should be able to conduct an assessment to take account of child protection issues.

- It is important to be able to provide a service to young people who may not ordinarily reach the threshold for support from social services in order to intervene early and prevent escalating needs.
- Mediation skills are important in negotiating a sustainable return home.
- A concern frequently raised was the threshold criteria for young people to receive a service from social services. Young people who may benefit from early intervention may not get a service until their difficulties escalate. Specialist runaways-focused support has a potential advantage in being able to dedicate time to such young people.
- There was consensus among our informants of the importance of direct work with young people which is genuinely young person-centred. This means giving some time to listen to the young person's own assessment of their situation and looking at the range of issues in their life to understand the circumstances leading to their running away and working with the young person and their family to arrive at a workable solution.

5. Is it possible to use preventative education to reduce the incidence of running away?

A lack of evidence makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of preventative education in schools and preventative interventions are, in general, difficult to measure and so a formal process for doing so needs to be incorporated into the design of such programmes. However, the following issues have been identified in the evaluation reports:

Learning points about prevention

- Young people most at risk of running away are those with multiple problems and are unlikely to be deterred from running away by a workshop in school. Some of the most vulnerable will not be accessed via school at all so, in order to be most effective, preventative programmes also need to target alternative environments (such as Pupil Referral Units or residential children's homes).
- However, if the aim is to provide young people with information about what to do if considering running away and where to go if they do run, then school based workshops may be a sensible option. The projects who implemented these workshops aimed to reach out directly to young people and increase self referrals. There is, however, little evidence of a rise in self referrals subsequent to the education work.

- Feedback from staff in schools was generally positive, and it may be argued that work in schools raises the awareness of teachers, alerting them to those young people who may be at risk of running away and thereby enabling them to signal the need for early intervention. However, for this benefit to be sustained, the outreach to schools probably needs to involve more than just providing relevant materials that need to be regularly topped up and this is potentially resource intensive.

6. How should agencies work together to provide for young people who run away?

Good inter-agency working is a prerequisite for effective support to young people who run away. Projects identified the following learning about inter-agency working:

Learning points about working together

- All Local Authorities should have protocols with the police relating to young people who run away and these should encompass both running away from care and from home. These should promote the use of the Common Assessment Framework as the appropriate method to identify young people's needs, unless there is a need for an immediate referral to a specialist service e.g. there are child protection issues.
- These protocols should contain procedures for properly assessing levels of risk so that unauthorised absence is not recorded as a missing incident, hence avoiding inappropriate referrals. These procedures are of particular importance for staff caring for young people who are looked after.



- All projects reported favourably on the value of good inter-agency working although there were also a number of tensions reported between voluntary and statutory sector agencies. These included concerns about response times and levels of response to referrals. It may therefore benefit the various parties to include guidelines on this issue in local protocols.
- Co-operation from the local police in developing more sophisticated methods of data collection with regard to missing incidents is essential in developing an accurate local picture so that services can be targeted appropriately.
- While the police and social services are key, it is important to ensure that all agencies working with young people are aware of the triggers and risks for young people who run away.
- Mainstream social services provision can be more stigmatising for young people and hence less acceptable, particularly to young people who slip through the net of statutory services. This raises the question of whether a voluntary sector partnership is the best way of reaching these young people, although the issue may be less about who provides and more about how it is provided.



7. What else could make a difference?

- Ensuring adequate provision, based on a clear understanding of the needs of young people who run away and the underlying causes for this behaviour, should be part of the Children and Young People's Plans for Children's Trusts, based on a review of need in each locality.
- Plans for the development of targeted youth support for young people who run away should take into account the need for a wide range of access routes to services and alternative ways of engaging effectively with young people such as outreach, helplines, emergency response, individual work and longer term family support.
- There is no single best solution to meet the needs of young people who run away. Some areas will judge that the need in their area warrants the provision of fixed or flexible refuge. Others will make use of normal foster and residential care provision on a case by case basis.
- Either way, clear and effective protocols need to be in place to ensure a prompt and young person-centred response for all young people who run away. The Common Assessment Framework should be used to identify the support needed by young people, unless an immediate specialist assessment is necessary.

References

- 1 Smeaton, E (2005) *Living on the Edge: the experiences of detached young runaways*. London. The Children's Society.
- 2 Stein, M., Rees, G, and Frost, N (1994) *Running the risk: young people on the streets of Britain today*. London: The Children's Society.
- 3 Safe on the Streets Research team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*. London. The Children's Society.
- 4 Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the streets in the UK*. London. The Children's Society.
- 5 Smeaton, E. & Rees, G (2004) *Running away in South Yorkshire*. London. The Children's Society.