

Running Away in South Yorkshire

**Research into the incidence and nature of the problem in
Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster**

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Acknowledgements

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The commissioning organisations

SAFE@Last is a registered charity whose core business is the development of services for young runaways in South Yorkshire, with a particular interest in emergency accommodation.

SAFE@Last was founded in June 2000, at which time the Trustees made a decision to dedicate the first three and a half years to research and planning leading to the commissioning of the research summarised in this report.

This decision aimed to ensure the delivery of high quality services that are entirely appropriate to the needs of young people in the region. The charity is currently (April 2004) about to begin to deliver services to young people.

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The researchers

The authors of this report are members of The Children's Society's Research Unit. Over the last five years the Unit (formerly named Safe on the Streets Research Team), in partnership with the University of York, has undertaken a programme of research and evaluation into the issue of young people running away from home. For further information about the research programme, please contact:

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1 Introduction

Background to the research

In April 2001 Safe@Last and The Children's Society began to explore the possibility of developing a broad response to the needs of young people under the age of 16 who run away in South Yorkshire. This development was set against a national backdrop of growing awareness about the issue of young people running away, and an increasing commitment to tackle the issue. In order to set the context for the research presented in this report, this introductory section provides a brief overview of key developments in terms of young people running away in the UK.

The issue of young people under the age of 16 running away in the UK, and sometimes ending up on the streets, began to be recognised by agencies in London during the 1980s. This recognition led to the establishment by The Children's Society of the Central London Teenage Project, the first UK refuge for young runaways. Subsequently Section 51 of the Children Act 1989 made legal provisions for such refuges. During the early 1990s several further refuges were established in England and Wales, and other practice responses to the needs of young people on the streets were also developed. Two initial research reports (Newman, 1989; Abrahams & Mungall, 1992) based on police missing person statistics confirmed that, even just on the basis of official reports, there were in the region of 100,000 going missing incidents involving young people each year in the UK.

The late 1990s saw further practice developments, including the establishment of schemes such as the ASTRA Project in Gloucester which provided immediate support to young people reported missing when they returned home.

In 1999, The Children's Society published the first large-scale UK study of running away (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) which estimated that one in nine young people run away overnight at least once before the age of 16 and that there are 129,000 overnight running away incidents per year in the UK.

Following this report, the Government's Social Exclusion Unit made running away one of its priority areas. This resulted in a national consultation exercise and the publication in November 2002 of a set of recommendations for developing national and local strategies to meet the needs of young people who run away. One of the intended outcomes of the report is to ensure that:

'Specific, practical action will be taken to strengthen our response to the needs of runaways and their families both before and after they run.' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: v)

Hence the issue of young people running away is currently prominent on the national policy agenda. The SEU report recommended, amongst other things, that there should be clear responsibilities and co-ordinated strategies in every local area to tackle the issue.

Within this national picture, in 2001, Safe @ Last and The Children's Society established the Runaways Action Partnership (RAP) to generate interest in partnership responses to young runaways in South Yorkshire. A further objective was to commission a research project that would provide the foundation for a practice-based project to meet the needs of young runaways in South Yorkshire. This report is the outcome of this.

Research aims

The aims of the research, as set out in the research proposal, were as follows:

1. To provide estimates of the prevalence and incidence of running away amongst young people under the age of 16 in South Yorkshire.
2. To gather the experiences and perspectives of local young people who have run away.
3. To gather the perspectives of professionals who work with young people.
4. To map relevant service provision in the area.

5. To facilitate a process of discussion within and between groups of key stakeholders in South Yorkshire.

Scope of the research

The research was carried out in Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield in a manner that ensured the generation of findings for each of the four areas of the county in addition to an overall picture for South Yorkshire.

The research focused on the issue of young people who run away from home, are forced to leave, are otherwise 'on the streets', or at risk of being in one of these situations, under the age of 16.

Research methods

The research consisted of three key components: 1) gathering perspectives of young people; 2) survey of young people; and 3) information gathering from professionals.

Consultation with young people

A great deal is already known from previous research about the causes and consequences of running away at an individual level (Newman, 1989; Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Barter, 1996; Wade et al, 1998; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Hence, the information-gathering from young people did not focus on these issues but on the identification of specific local issues relevant to young people when they run away. The consultation also had an explicit focus on gaining young people's views on models of emergency accommodation provision, as this was a key area of interest both nationally and locally.

This component of the research took the form of 13 group discussions and three individual interviews with young people from across all four areas of South Yorkshire. In total 71 young people took part in the consultation. Steps were taken to ensure that the young people consulted represented a diverse range of views. The ages of the children and young people ranged from 6 to 23 (it was seen as important and relevant to include young people over the age of 16 in the consultation as previous experience has shown that they are able to offer a useful longer-term view of the effects and impact of running away). Nineteen young people of Asian heritage and eight young people of African-Caribbean heritage were involved in the group discussions. In terms of sexuality it did not prove possible to arrange group discussions, but individual interviews were conducted with three lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. The consultation exercise was undertaken with children and young people in a variety of settings, including children's homes, pupil referral units, hostels, youth work projects, drug projects and a project that works with young people involved in or at risk of sexual exploitation.

Because of the age range of the young people consulted, it was important that the method used in the groups with children and young people could be adapted to account for the differences in age, understanding and ability. Therefore three vignettes were devised. These hypothetical scenarios, based upon three possible accommodation options for service provision for young runaways, were visually presented to the children and young people, who were asked to comment upon the positive and negative aspects of each of the options. The children and young people were also asked to describe how each of the options could be improved and to outline their preferred option. In addition, children and young people were asked for their ideas about preventative and responsive measures to running away and for their knowledge about where a young person under the age of 16 who had run away could go for help.

Survey of young people

In order to provide reliable estimates of the scale of running away in South Yorkshire, a questionnaire survey was undertaken, covering a representative sample of young people aged 14 to 16. This survey was completed in 13 randomly selected secondary schools (three in Rotherham, four in Barnsley and six in Sheffield). The total number of questionnaires returned was 1688. Schools in Doncaster were not included as 505 young people in four schools in this area had been included in an earlier survey (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) which had confirmed that running away rates and patterns in Doncaster were in line with the national picture.

To supplement the schools survey, 21 young people in a pupil referral unit also completed questionnaires. In addition, in order to explore links with issues at a slightly older age, a separate survey of young people was conducted in hostels, supported housing projects and a project for young people involved in or at risk of sexual exploitation in South Yorkshire. Forty-four young people completed this questionnaire.

Information gathering from agencies

Over 80 agencies in South Yorkshire working directly with children and young people, or providing services for children and young people, were contacted by telephone, e-mail and in writing, as part of an initial information gathering process of professionals' perspectives on local issues and needs, and as a mapping exercise of local provision for young people.

From this initial process, a set of key informants was identified. Thirty nine key informant telephone interviews were then conducted with representatives from social services, the police, education welfare, the Children's Fund, children's rights services, youth offending teams, youth services, Connexions, education, health and representatives from the voluntary sector who work with young people in relation to sexual exploitation, substance misuse, domestic violence, housing and homelessness issues.

Feedback meetings were also held in Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. The purpose of these feedback meetings was two-fold: first, to feedback the preliminary findings from the consultation with professionals; and second, to generate further discussion and views by asking professionals for their comments on the preliminary findings.

Language and definitions

Young people

In this report, the term 'young people' refers to children and young people under the age of 16.

Running away

The term 'running away' is used throughout this report (unless otherwise specified) to describe any circumstance in which a young person under the age of 16 stays away from home either without the permission of the parent/carer, or as a result of being forced to leave.

The structure of the report

The remainder of this report is divided into four chapters. Chapters 2 to 4 present, in turn, the findings from the survey of young people, the consultation with young people, and the consultation with professionals. The final chapter provides a summary of the key findings of the research and discusses the implications for responding to the needs of young people who run away in South Yorkshire.

2 Survey of young people

Estimates of prevalence and incidence

A total of 244 young people (around one in seven) out of the main survey sample of 1688 said that they had run away at some point in their lives. Using the more restrictive criteria of running away incidents lasting at least one night, at least 144 young people (8.5%) had run away overnight.

These percentages are under-estimates of the prevalence of running away under the age of 16 in South Yorkshire for two reasons.

First, a schools survey necessarily under-represents young people who truant regularly or are not attending a mainstream school. These young people have higher than average rates of running away. The small survey we carried out in a pupil referral unit as part of this research study found that just over half (11 out of 21) young people had run away overnight. Earlier national surveys of pupil referral units also showed much higher than average rates of running away (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Second, the age range of young people surveyed (primarily 14- and 15-year-olds) means that some of these young people will have run away after the survey but before the age of 16. Over a third (34%) of the schools survey sample were aged 14. We can take the age factor into account by looking at the different rates of running away amongst 14- and 15-year-olds. Amongst 14-year-olds only 6.8% had run away overnight, whilst amongst 15-year-olds the figure was 10%. This developing age trend indicates that the percentage of young people who run away overnight in South Yorkshire is likely to be in the 10% to 11% region – very close to national UK estimates from 1999.

Whilst running away rates in the three area samples varied somewhat, much of this variation was attributable to different age profiles across these samples. Taking this factor into account there was no evidence of significant variation in running away rates between the areas. The prevalence rate for the Doncaster survey in 1999 was also within the same range. We would therefore estimate that the 10% to 11% prevalence rate is applicable across the whole region.

Young people who had run away or been forced to leave were asked how many times this had happened. The majority of overnight runaways had been away on more than one occasion. Forty one percent had been away once, 45% had been away two or three times and one in seven (14%) more than three times. This means a minimum average rate of two incidents per person.

Finally, young people were asked if they had run away in the past 12 months. Eighty eight young people said that they had, including at least 66 who had run away overnight. This is a prevalence rate of just under 4% of the total sample.

On the basis of the above analysis, Table 1 provides some rough estimates of the prevalence and incidence of running away in South Yorkshire:

- Column 2 shows population figures for each area drawn from the 2001 census.
- Column 3 shows the estimated number of first time runaways each year. This is based on the 10% estimate above. These are young people who at some point before the age of 16 run away overnight although this may not happen during the first running away incident.
- Column 4 shows the estimated number of young people aged 14 to 15 who run away overnight each year, based on the 4% figure above. This includes all young people running away at this age (i.e. those who runaway for the first time and those who also ran away when younger) – it is an estimate of people not incidents.
- Column 5 provides a very rough estimate of the number of running away incidents per year. This figure only counts incidents reported by young people who ran away overnight on the most recent occasion, but it should be noted that some of these young people's earlier incidents may have been in the daytime only.

These figures (and particularly the incidence figure in column 5) should be seen as indicative only, as the survey sample size and structure does not permit precise estimates to be made. However they are fairly conservative given the age distribution of the survey as discussed earlier.

Table 1: Estimates of annual prevalence and incidence of running away in South Yorkshire

	Total Population (aged 0 to 15)	First time runaways	Runaways aged 14 to 15	Running away incidents
Barnsley	44,332	270	210	540
Doncaster	59,972	400	320	800
Rotherham	52,231	340	260	680
Sheffield	97,969	590	460	1180
South Yorkshire	254,504	1600	1250	3200

Characteristics of young people who run away

Age of first incident

Young people were asked for the age at which they first ran away. Around a fifth (20%) of overnight runaways had first run away before the age of 11. The majority of overnight runaways (58%) had first run away as teenagers, and the true proportion is likely to be a little higher than this due to the age profile of the survey (see discussion above). This is broadly in line with previous UK research.

Gender

Females were more likely to run away than males. Amongst 15-year-olds, around 12% of females had run away overnight compared to around 8% of males. This also is in line with previous UK research.

Ethnicity

Around one in nine (11%) of young people in the survey sample identified themselves as being in a minority ethnic group. This included 1.9% of Black (African/Caribbean/other) origin; 4% of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin; 3.3% of mixed origin; and 2% of other (non-white) origin. This is broadly representative of the ethnic profile of young people in South Yorkshire. For example, in Sheffield, the sample included 13% young people from minority ethnic groups and a summary of census figures in Sheffield (Sheffield City Council, 2003) reports that 15% of young people are of non-white origin.

Running away rates amongst young people from minority ethnic groups were about 2% lower than for white young people. However this difference was not statistically significant and so there is limited evidence that there are variations in running away rates amongst young people in different minority ethnic groups in South Yorkshire. This is notable because previous UK research has found substantially lower running away rates amongst young people from minority ethnic groups. However, the sample size of the current survey makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions on this issue.

Family backgrounds of young people who run away

Previous research (Rees & Rutherford, 2001) has found significant differences in running away rates according to the family form that young people live in. In the current survey, young people living in lone parent families and step families were much more likely to have run away than young people living with both birth parents. Amongst 15-year-olds the figures for overnight runaways were 19% in lone parent families, 15% in step families, and 6% in families with both birth parents. This pattern is slightly different to that found in previous UK research where the highest rates have been seen in step families.

Reasons for running away

We asked young people to classify their reasons for running away under four broad categories: problems at home, problems at school, personal problems, and other reasons. Young people were able to select more than one option. Responses are shown in the table below. Overall, around three-quarters of runaways gave 'problems at home' as one of the reasons for running away. This proportion was higher (80%) amongst overnight runaways and considerably lower (58%) amongst daytime runaways.

Table 2: Broad reasons given by young people for running away

Reason for running away	All runaways		Overnight only		Day only	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Problems at home	162	72%	115	80%	47	58%
Problems at school	39	17%	31	22%	8	10%
Personal problems	81	36%	61	43%	20	25%
Other reasons	25	11%	10	7%	15	19%

Notes: Percentages add up to more than 100% because some young people gave more than one response

Daytime runaways were more likely to cite 'other reasons', and these were sometimes relatively minor issues:

'My mum grounded me and said I couldn't go swimming.'

'Because I was caught having a cigarette and I felt as if I had disappointed my mum'

However even amongst daytime runaways there was evidence of more serious reasons for running away:

'I didn't get on with my parents and I didn't like the atmosphere in the household. I don't feel like my parents understand me and I don't get on with my step father.'

'I ran away because I found out that my mum was taking drugs and when I asked she turned around and shouted at me and put her fist to my face and pushed so hard. So I ran away because I couldn't tell her how she was making me feel.'

Specific reasons for running away amongst overnight runaways

We also asked young people an open-ended question about the reasons why they had run away or been forced to leave. Previous research has indicated that the most common reasons for running away are conflict and violence at home. This is also apparent in the current survey, with arguments and/or violence being reasons mentioned most often by overnight runaways (see quotes in Figure 1). But there are also a wide range of other reasons, mostly of a serious nature, which prompt young people to run away overnight, as the selection of quotes from the survey in Figure 1 indicates.

Run away or forced to leave?

Finally, in terms of reasons for being away from home, we asked young people whether they felt that they had run away or had been forced to leave. Around 18% of the overnight runaways felt they had actually been forced to leave home, with the proportion being even higher (20%) amongst 15-year-olds. This is in line with earlier UK research findings.

A recent UK-wide research report (Rees & Siakeu, 2004) has identified conflict, violence and family change as common factors leading to young people being forced to leave home, and these themes are evident also in young people's responses to the current survey:

'Because I was arguing with my step father and he kept hitting me. I was too scared to tell my mum, so my mum asked me to leave for being stroppy and argumentative.'

'I had a bad argument with my mum and step dad which became out of control. My mum started shouting at me to get out and get to my dads.'

Figure 1: Selection of quotes from the survey giving reasons for running away (overnight runaways)

Conflict

'Cos I have problems with my mum sometimes which turn into arguments.'

'Arguing with mum and dad and getting fed up.'

Violence

'My mother was drinking and was getting violent.'

'Because I had enough of my dad hitting me and shouting at me.'

Rejection

'I was fed up - I felt like they didn't love / care about me anymore.'

'Couldn't cope with parents and we just didn't get on because they never wanted me from the day I was born.'

Emotional abuse, neglect and scapegoating

'Because I was getting bullied and the house is dirty and unhygienic.'

'I became left out because my sister got all the attention.'

'My parents don't listen. They are always putting me out and putting my other sisters first.'

'I was always getting the blame for everything and got threatened to go live with my father.'

Parental problems

'I was very depressed because my parents were always arguing. I was getting bullied and there was nothing being done about it so in an attempt to get away from it all I ran to my nana's house.'

Split family issues

'Because I was having trouble with my parents because they split up. I ran away to my dad's although I am now living with my mum.'

'Because I didn't like my step-dad (he's left now).'

School issues

'Getting bullied at school and the area I live in.'

'Because I was scared to go home because of problems at school and I was stressed.'

Personal problems and issues

'Because my family didn't like my boyfriend so I went to see him.'

'Was depressed, cutting myself.'

'I'm not telling it's too private.'

'Because I was very stressed and confused.'

In trouble

'Lost my temper and caused some damage.'

Experiences of running away

We asked young people a number of questions about their experiences on the most recent occasion that they ran away or were forced to leave home, and present these findings in this section.

Where young people had run away from

Ninety two percent of runaways in the survey had run away from their family home on the most recent occasion, 4% from foster or residential care, and 4% from other places. This is reflective of the fact that the large majority of runaways are running away from their family. However it does mean that our findings will not necessarily be representative of young people running away from care.

Length of time away from home

Just over half (55%) of overnight runaways only spent one night away from home on the most recent incident, a quarter (25%) were away for two to six nights, and one in six (17%) for longer than this. The remaining 3% were unable to remember how long they had been away.

Where young people went

Young people were asked whether they had gone outside their local area whilst away. Overall around a quarter (26%) of runaways said that they had gone outside their local area. Not surprisingly the proportion is significantly higher (33%) for overnight runaways than for daytime runaways (13%).

Where young people gave more information, most of the locations they went to were within South Yorkshire. Seventeen young people (12% of the overnight runaway sample) went outside the region. There were a wide variety of destinations with seaside and rural areas seemingly as popular as large cities. Only two young people went to London.

Going outside the local area was linked with length of time away. Young people who were away for more than one night were roughly twice as likely to go further afield as young people away for one night only.

Where young people slept whilst away

We asked overnight runaways where they had slept whilst away from home on the most recent incident. A half (51%) of the young people said that they had slept at a friend's house, 31% had slept at a relative's and a quarter (25%) had slept rough (some young people had slept at more than one place whilst away). The rate of sleeping rough is that same as in national research findings (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999)

Risks whilst away

We asked young people if they had been hurt or harmed whilst away from home. Around 10% of overnight runaways said that they had. Most of these young people had slept rough or at the place of someone they had just met.

These young people provided very little further information about what happened whilst away from home but some commented on how they felt about the whole experience:

'It was scary and I needed help.'

Seeking help

We also asked young people to identify people who they had gone to for help whilst away from home. Fifty two young people did not identify anyone they had asked for help. The majority of these young people had not run away overnight. In total, 32 daytime runaways (33%) and 18 (13%) of overnight runaways had not sought help from anyone whilst away. The responses for the remainder of young people are shown in the table below.

Table 3: Where young people went for help whilst away (most recent incident)

Who went to for help	All runaways		Overnight only		Day only	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Friend	127	73%	96	77%	31	63%
Boyfriend/girlfriend	53	30%	37	30%	16	33%
Relative	47	27%	34	27%	13	27%
Stranger	8	5%	6	5%	2	4%
Social worker	9	5%	9	7%	0	
Police	7	5%	7	6%	0	
Telephone helpline	7	5%	7	6%	1	
Other	12	7%	7	5%	5	10%
Total	174		125		49	

Notes: Percentages add up to more than 100% because some young people gave more than one answer.

By far the most common source of help was peers with over three-quarters (77%) of overnight runaways turning to a friend whilst away and almost a third (30%) turning to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Relatives were the next most common people from whom to seek help (27%) In total only 21 young people (12%) went to a professional agency (social worker, police or telephone helpline whilst away).

Reported as missing to the police

We asked young people whether (as far as they knew) they had been reported as missing to the police by their parents whilst away from home. We can't be sure how accurate this information is, but the results make interesting reading:

Based on young people's knowledge, around two-thirds (65%) of overnight runaway incidents were not reported to the police, and in a further 13% of cases young people were not sure whether they had been reported or not. Less than a quarter (22%) of overnight runaways said that they had definitely been reported missing on the most recent occasion that they were away from home.

There were relatively few patterns evident in the likelihood of young people being reported as missing, with no significant differences in terms of gender, number of times run away, where slept (this lack of discernible patterns may be partly due to small sample size).

What happened in the end?

Young people were also asked to select from a list of descriptions of how the most recent incident of being away from home ended (there was an 'other' category for any young people who felt that none of the descriptions fitted their circumstances). Most young people (58%) said that they had decided to go back home, 20% were found by family and returned home, 10% were found by the police and returned home, and 11% didn't return home but went to live with someone else (e.g. another relative or a friend). Thus roughly nine out of ten overnight runaways returned to the place from which they had run away or been forced to leave. Although the sample size of young people forced to leave overnight is relatively small it is interesting that they make up the majority of young people who went to live with someone else.

Longer-term outcomes

Relatively little is known about the longer term outcomes of running away although two small UK research studies (Craig & Hodson, 1998; Centrepoint, 1998) have found a link with youth homelessness and this is backed up by US research findings (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991). As part of the current research we undertook a survey of older young people in hostels, housing and streetwork projects as described in the introductory chapter. The sample size (44 young people) was smaller than hoped for, but it is nevertheless indicative of the potential long-term outcomes of running away that

over half (26) of this sample had run away under the age of 16. This limited evidence suggests that in South Yorkshire, as elsewhere, there is a link between running away under the age of 16 and having housing problems as a young adult.

Comparison of South Yorkshire findings with earlier national research

One of the primary purposes of this survey was to provide what would be perceived to be reliable figures for the South Yorkshire region. The research team had conducted a national survey in 25 areas of the UK (including Doncaster) in 1999 which had concluded that patterns of running away did not vary significantly across different kinds of areas. However, there remained a concern amongst local policy makers that specific local figures were not available for Barnsley, Rotherham and Sheffield.

We have already made comparisons with the earlier national research at various points above. To summarise these comparisons, the findings of the current research paint a very similar picture to that of the earlier UK-wide research. The overall rates of running away in both pieces of research are in the region of 10% to 11% and both studies show broadly the same findings in most detailed respects (e.g. gender split, age profiles of first time runaways, length of time away from home, proportions of young people sleeping rough). The two key differences between this new research and the earlier UK research are in terms of rates of running away amongst different ethnic groups and in different family forms (see earlier discussions).

Overall, we would conclude that the extent and nature of running away in South Yorkshire is broadly similar to the average national picture. This conclusion also supports the earlier national research finding of a lack of significant variation in running away patterns between geographical areas (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999: 33-34).

Young people's ideas

At the end of the questionnaire we asked young people their views about what should be done to help young people who run away. The two main categories of responses given by young people can be broadly classified as 'someone to talk to' and 'somewhere to stay', both of which were mentioned by a large minority of young people who responded to the questions.

The responses relating to somewhere to stay are particularly noteworthy because they often go beyond simply calling for accommodation, and give indications of the nature of provision which young people would be hoping for. The quotes shown below illustrate some of the main themes – safety, accessibility, location, and empathic support.

Figure 2: A selection of responses by young people who felt that there should be somewhere to stay for young people who run away from home

'They should have a place to stay so they aren't sleeping rough.'

'Give them somewhere to go for advice or stay for the night if they need to. It needs to be easy access and in the local area.'

'Make a place where people can go and stay overnight to calm down.'

'Set up shelters with people who will listen and not judge.'

'Make places that they can go to for support without their parents ever finding out.'

'Give us somewhere to go and be safe.'

3 Consultation with young people

As explained in the introduction, the main focus of the consultation with young people was to discuss various options for emergency accommodation for young runaways in South Yorkshire. In this section we first present feedback from young people on this issue and then summarise some of the other more general points about provision for young runaways that they made during discussions.

Emergency accommodation options

In order to stimulate discussion, young people were presented with three different models of refuge provision and were asked to comment on what they perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

The three options presented were:

1. The 'fixed refuge' option
2. The 'crash pad' option
3. The 'foster carer' option

These three options, as they were presented to young people are described below and we then go on to summarise young people's feedback.

Fixed Refuge option

The defining characteristics of the fixed refuge were presented as follows:

- one refuge for the whole of South Yorkshire
- refuge in a confidential location
- refuge open 24 hours a day
- refuge staffed 24 hours a day
- provision of six beds in the refuge

Crash Pad option

The crash pad was described as follows:

- flat above a project providing drop-in, information and support for young runaways
- project open 9am – 5pm
- access to the flat between the hours of 9am – midnight
- staff in the flat whenever there was a young person staying in the flat
- provision for two young people to stay in the flat at any given time
- one crash pad in each of the four areas

Foster Carer option

This option was described to children and young people in the following manner:

- a foster carer system separate to the foster care provided by social services
- accommodation provided in the home of an adult or adults who had received training to enable them to provide a high quality level of support to children and young people who had run away
- access through the young person phoning a helpline number and being picked up and taken to the foster carers
- access to the service between 9am and midnight
- two sets of foster carers in each of the four areas of South Yorkshire

In considering the relative merits of the three options young people were concerned with five key issues: availability, accessibility, confidential location, safety within the provision, and the nature of the care being offered. We summarise young people's comments under these five topics below.

Availability

Availability was a key concern for many of the young people. The fact that there might be somewhere for young runaways to go to that provides safe accommodation and support was welcomed because it was seen as a need presently not met:

'You've got somewhere for young people under the age of 16 to go to as there isn't anything for young people under the age of 16.'

However, young people felt that the proposals might not be sufficient to meet the need for emergency accommodation in South Yorkshire. There was a consensus amongst all groups that there should be a lot more than six beds for the whole of South Yorkshire.

Accessibility

Young people emphasised the importance of being able to access emergency accommodation 24 hours a day. This was seen as a major positive aspect of the 'fixed refuge' option, and evidently there would be ways in which the other two options could be modified to take this consideration into account.

Although not directly relevant to the provision of emergency accommodation, many young people liked the idea of having a daytime drop-in project for young runaways in as they could benefit from having somewhere to go and someone to talk to when in distress:

'If someone's in distress, they're not going to want to talk to someone on the phone, are they? They're going to want to talk face-to-face ... If they're talking on the phone, there isn't the reassurance that something's going to be done. They might feel safe when they're talking on the phone but what are they going to do when they come off the phone?'

On the other hand it was felt that some young people – especially younger children – may not feel confident enough to walk into a project and approach staff there.

Confidential location

The third important aspect was a confidential location. Young people felt this was vital for two reasons. First, so that parents or carers would not be able to come to the refuge to attempt to return the child home. It was felt by a majority of Asian young people that Asian young people who ran away would not access a refuge because of concerns that they would be found. Second, so that young people could feel safe from others who might want to cause them physical harm or engage them in activities which they did not want to be involved with. In this respect both the 'fixed refuge' and 'foster carer' options were seen as having an advantage over the 'crash pad' option, although there were concerns that over time the location of the fixed refuge would become known within the region. Young people felt the 'crash pad' option could be improved by separating its location from the drop-in facility.

Safety within the provision

Safety within the provision was another key concern, particularly for young people in minority groups and younger children. Lesbian, gay and bisexual young people thought that any young person in this group under the age of 16 would be hesitant about staying in a refuge because they would not know the other young people in the refuge and there would be too much fear of homophobic abuse. The experience of the lesbian, gay and bisexual young people interviewed was that they were likely to be both physically and verbally assaulted in mainstream hostel or refuge accommodation. As one young person said:

'I can't stay in any of the hostels in Doncaster because I will get battered because of the way I am.'

Young people of African-Caribbean heritage were concerned that any child or young person of non-white background may be subject to racism from other young people in the hostel, at worst, or feel isolated if they were the only non-white person in the refuge.

In order to combat victimisation of minority groups young people suggested a number of measures. Young people from African-Caribbean heritage suggested that the staff team should be multi-cultural and that there should be cultural awareness training for all staff. To combat homophobic and racist abuse, young people suggested, as soon as a young person entered the refuge, that it should be made clear that racism and homophobia were not tolerated at any level and that anyone exhibiting such behaviour would be told to leave the refuge. It was also suggested that there should be a part of the refuge where a young person who felt at risk from other young people could go to and be safe.

The crash pad was seen as having advantages over the fixed refuge in this respect:

'The crash pad is not as intimidating as the refuge and it's a safer environment.'

As well as these issues for minority groups, it was acknowledged that with a mix of young people using refuge provision, there would be a number of issues being experienced by the young people and that this could have consequences for others in the refuge. An issue that concerned some young people was that of substance use. For those young people who had an identified substance misuse problem, there was a concern that there would be stigma attached to this by other people due to a lack of awareness of drug issues. It was also acknowledged that drugs could be brought into the refuge and young people who previously had not used drugs may, through peer pressure, begin using.

In relation to the above discussions, the 'foster carer' option was seen as the safest of the three by young people.

The nature of the care being offered

Finally, the nature of the care being offered was the subject of discussion. One of the perceived advantages of the refuge was that there would be professionals available 24 hours a day – if a young person needs someone to talk to, or general support, there are professionals there who can provide it at any time of the day or night.

Similarly the foster care option could offer one-to-one care and support:

'With a foster carer, you're going to be talking to them constantly, aren't you? They're going to notice if something is wrong.'

However there were mixed feelings about the family style nature of the 'foster carer' option. For some young people this could be a positive but others might find it intimidating or uncomfortable:

'It's not like it's your house or your family's house. It would be their house. I'd feel cheeky and wouldn't even dare go to the toilet or go get a drink.'

Another drawback to the foster care option was that older teenagers might not want to live by other people's rules in a home environment.

On the other hand the 'foster carer' option could offer choice to young people of different backgrounds if steps were taken to recruit a diverse range of carers.

Summary

In summary, young people's views on the relative merits of the above three options are summarised in the table below.

Young people were asked the question 'If you could only choose one of the three options to provide emergency accommodation for young runaways in South Yorkshire, which option would you choose?'

Almost without exception, the children and young people chose the fixed refuge option. The main exception was that the three lesbian, gay and bisexual young people did not choose the fixed refuge option because of safety issues. They felt that the foster carer option was a much safer option than both the crash pad option and the fixed refuge.

Table 4: Young people's views on the advantages and disadvantages of the three emergency accommodation options

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Fixed refuge	24 hour accessibility Always a professional available to talk to Confidential location	Fears of being subjected to abuse (minority groups) Potentially not sufficient to meet the demand
Crash pad	Safer and less intimidating	Not a confidential location Not open 24 hours a day 'Walk-in' access could be a barrier for younger runaways
Foster carer	Safe and confidential 'Home' environment would be good for some young people	Some young people may not feel comfortable in a 'home' environment

However, from the group discussions, it emerged that children and young people favoured a combination of two options – fixed refuge and foster carer. The majority of young people recognised that the foster carer option was probably more appropriate for more vulnerable children and young people, either because of age, mental state, ethnicity or sexuality. They also acknowledged that some people would not want to stay with foster carers and would prefer the fixed refuge option. Children and young people thought that it was important to offer the choice to meet the differing needs of young runaways. It was also suggested that some children and young people may benefit from staying with foster carers at first, moving on to refuge accommodation once they had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with what was happening in their lives.

General themes arising from the consultation with children and young people

Alongside addressing the issues of emergency accommodation provision, a number of themes were highlighted in the group discussions and interviews.

The extent of running away in South Yorkshire

Many of the children and young people who participated in the consultation had experience of running away or being thrown out of home. A significant number had been out on the streets and engaged in a number of risky survival strategies. Some of these young people had experienced abuse and had found themselves in very frightening circumstances. Young people reported that many children and young people run away in South Yorkshire and that it is a problem that affects young children as well as older teenagers.

Lack of appropriate service provision for young runaways

Young people felt that there is nowhere to go in South Yorkshire for under-16-year-olds who run away or are thrown out of home. The majority of young people were not aware of services to approach for help if they found themselves in one of these situations.

A number of young people in the upper age groups knew that social services were the statutory agency who held responsibility for providing services, but many had negative perceptions of social services and said they would not approach their social worker, if they had one, and would not want social services involved. Some children and young people felt that for those running away from home, matters would be made worse if social services were involved as this may make parents angry with negative consequences for the child or young person. Some young people also stated that they had not wanted to get social services involved because, even though they were having problems with their parents that included abuse directed at the young person, they did not want to be taken away from the family home and risk splitting the family.

A few of the children and young people had approached a teacher at school or recommended that anyone needing help go to someone at school. However, for the majority of children and young people, this was not something they would consider because of negative experiences of schooling.

Preventative measures

Children and young people thought that it would be better if there were preventative measures in place so that young people did not have to run away in the first place. There was a common acceptance that children and young people ran away because of difficulties with parents, for example, because of problematic substance misuse or because of abuse. Young people also recognised that their parents were under stress and pressure and that there ought to be help for them with parenting and with problems that they themselves were facing.

A popular idea for preventing running away amongst under 16s was for people who had experienced running away to go into schools and youth clubs to talk to children and young people and tell them about their experiences, including what it was like to be on the streets. Young people felt that it would be beneficial for children and young people to hear first hand from someone of a similar age to themselves, or slightly older, about running away, using drugs, being involved in crime and sexual exploitation. This would enable anyone considering running away to be more realistic about what could happen to them whilst away from home, potentially act as a deterrent or ensure that they have somewhere to go rather than ending up on the streets.

Responsive measures to running away

Once a young person had returned from running away, young people thought the best response would be to listen to what the child or young person had to say:

'Young people under 16 don't know things. They don't know that things can get sorted or that really bad things can happen to them. They might be confused and scared. I think they just need someone to talk to.'

Many of the young people who were consulted felt that often they were not listened to by their families, social workers and the police, and that their feelings and views were not taken into consideration when decisions about their lives were being made. Therefore when a young person returned from being away, there should be someone who they can talk to, someone they are comfortable with, who can help to address any problems in their life or refer them to projects that can offer support about specific issues.

Working with diversity

For some of those young people who were from minority ethnic groups or whose sexuality was other than heterosexual, it was important to achieve a balance between meeting the needs of these children and young people and treating them differently:

'To meet the needs of young people who are 'different', don't treat them differently; just make sure they are safe.'

In relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, one gay young person said:

'They [lesbian, gay and bisexual young people] should receive no special treatment, just as long as they are safe and have someone to talk to.'

Young people recommended five key measures to work effectively with the diverse range of young runaways:

- Ensuring that services were promoted as being for everyone
- Backing this up by ensuring a safe environment for all young people using the service.
- Having a diverse staff team
- Ensuring that all staff are culturally aware
- Referring young people onto specialist services when appropriate.

4 Consultation with professionals

In this section we summarise the consultation with professionals under three broad headings: comments about the issue of running away and issues which connect with it; comments on current practice and service provision in South Yorkshire; and professionals' recommendations.

Knowledge and awareness about running away and related issues

Running away as a hidden problem

As in the rest of the UK, running away is largely a hidden problem in South Yorkshire. There are substantial numbers of missing person reports to the police each year, yet it is likely that the majority of running away incidents are not reported and hence running away is largely a hidden problem. At the time of consultation with professionals, no organisation consulted, except the police, kept any monitoring information in relation to running away. One project based in Barnsley reported that it was going to begin monitoring incidents of running away from April 2003 as there was an acute awareness of how many young people approaching the project had run away or been thrown out of home.

Links with sexual exploitation

Within South Yorkshire there are strong links between running away and young people being sexually exploited, particularly for young females. This is a significant problem in Doncaster, Sheffield and Rotherham that is formally acknowledged and of immense concern to the police, social services and agencies with a remit of providing services for young people at risk of or involved in sexual exploitation. Whilst there is no formal acknowledgement of young people being involved in sexual exploitation in Barnsley, it is an issue that was raised during the course of the research, alongside frustration at the lack of acknowledgement of the problem.

Professionals cited evidence of young girls aged 13 – 14 in South Yorkshire being groomed into prostitution. According to practitioners, there is national evidence of trafficking and asylum seekers going missing and the police are aware of some evidence of this in Sheffield.

Practitioners who work with young people involved in prostitution in South Yorkshire believe that there is the potential for this problem to grow, and that strategies should be set in place to address the issue. The increasingly covert nature of the sex industry makes it very difficult to intervene. There are strong links between vice and drugs in South Yorkshire and a recognition that to address either issue, it is necessary to tackle drugs and vice concurrently.

Links with drugs issues

A further concern when a young person goes missing is that they may become involved in the drug scene. Across South Yorkshire there are different patterns of drug use but much of it is linked to heroin and crack cocaine. On the whole, female drug use is linked to vice. Males are more likely to become involved in drugs through peer pressure, and tend to fund their drug use through petty street crime.

Links with social deprivation

Across South Yorkshire there are pockets of social deprivation with high levels of poverty, unemployment, crime and teenage pregnancy. Many professionals believe that these factors are indirectly linked to running away in the region. Professionals working with young people have reported the pressure that some young people under the age of 16 face to bring income into the home, or young people who have no family or home life, who do not get fed at home and basically return home only to sleep, attending breakfast clubs and youth facilities to get fed. Whilst these children and young people do not appear on child protection lists, they are, nevertheless, children in need.

Running away from care placements

Professionals consulted from social services, the police and children's rights services often made a distinction between young people who run away from care and runaways from the general population. Many young people run away from care placements in South Yorkshire because they are not happy with the care placement they are living in. Reasons for this include: not wanting to be away from home; not wanting to be in a particular placement; problems with other residents; conflict with unit staff; and trouble with other people in the neighbourhood. The police reported that repeat absconders from care constituted a significant proportion of young people reported missing. There is obviously an element of frustration felt by the police when responding to repetitive reports of the same young person:

'It takes an inordinate amount of time to deal with the report as we have to go through the process because we have a legal and moral duty to do so. But we know as soon as we return the young person back to the home, we'll be going through the same process and returning the young person once again in two days time.'

The police have informal agreements with some of the children's homes in South Yorkshire in relation to dealing with incidents of late returning, absconding and going missing and are in the process of working out further protocols to distinguish between these. The police request that discretion is used before reporting a young person as missing by assessing vulnerability of the young person concerned. From the perspective of the police, if the young person returns late, the police should not be informed. Often the whereabouts of a young person who has run away from care is known, yet the young person is reported as missing and police resources are called upon to collect the young person and return them to the children's home.

Diversity and cultural issues

Previous research has revealed that Asian and African-Caribbean young people often run away for similar reasons as white young people (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) but that running away is often more hidden due to fear of racism and a lack of appropriate services. There are also additional issues for Asian and African-Caribbean young people and their experiences whilst away also often differ.

A number of professionals highlighted the impact of western culture upon Asian families, resulting in conflict between first, second and third generations. Examples of conflicts provided by professionals in the consultation included disagreements over arranged marriages and young females having relationships with non-Asian men.

The lack of understanding of the culture and language of asylum seekers and the tendency to address issues from a western perspective with western ideals was recognised as sometimes exacerbating problems between young people and their families when professional intervention is set in place.

Comments on service provision

The lack of service provision

At the time when the research was carried out, there was no specific service provision for young people who run away in South Yorkshire. There are, however, a number of generic projects across South Yorkshire that are able to address many of the issues faced by runaways, provide support, and make referrals to other agencies. As well as identifying the lack of provision for young runaways, professionals pointed to young people's lack of knowledge about existing support:

'There aren't really the services to address the issue and what there is, young people don't really know about them.'

This echoes more general findings about young people's lack of awareness of local services highlighted in national research about running away (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Many professionals made the link between youth homelessness after the age of 16 and running away under the age of 16, commenting on the difficulties in finding accommodation for young people in housing need aged 16 and above. There is a general consensus that there is not enough emergency

provision for this age group and no short-term accommodation for young people under the age of 16 other than that provided by social services:

'The whole area of working with young people and homelessness, in its broadest sense, is difficult enough for 16- to 18-year-olds and it's even more difficult for the under 16s.'

For professionals working with young people, the lack of appropriate accommodation exacerbates difficulties in providing the support that young people need in relation to other issues. If a young person does not have anywhere to live, the resulting instability makes it difficult for them to engage in any work to address issues they may have.

As well as the lack of appropriate accommodation for children and young people who have run away, professionals also reported that there is a lack of formal recognition that young people live in inappropriate accommodation and hence a lack of resources to address this issue.

A number of professionals highlighted the lack of provision for children and young people in general, both within the local community and wider society. As one professional said:

'I think there are gaps all over the place in terms of provision for young people in general ... I don't think there is enough for young people to do.'

Views such as this stem from a belief that in order to address running away amongst under 16s, alongside tackling those issues that directly trigger running away, it is necessary to address the issue holistically and from a starting point that emphasises prevention in its widest sense. This could be achieved by investing more in young people, by making them feel valued as an important part of society who have a lot to contribute and whose views and opinions are worthy. Many professionals felt that there were not enough places for young people to engage in the activities that they were interested in or the space provided for young people to go to just hang out with their friends.

The role of social services

Social services are generally viewed by professionals as the agency with the remit of providing for young people who have run away or been thrown out of home. However, there exists a common belief that foster and residential care is not always appropriate for a young person. It is also widely acknowledged that there are massive resource issues for social services. A number of professionals have described how when they have contacted Emergency Duty Teams to report a young person who is away from home and at risk, social services have not responded immediately and/or have been unable to arrange for a social worker to meet with the young person for one or two days. There is a common acceptance that more resources should be made available to social services to enable them to meet the needs of young runaways and provide appropriate provision. A number of professionals believe that a recruitment and retention problem in relation to social services staff who deal with child protection issues affects the services delivered to young people and the collection of data in relation to looked after children.

The role of the police

Nationally, the police have a responsibility to undertake interviews with young people reported as missing, when they return home. South Yorkshire Police takes its social role very seriously and regards running away as an issue of great concern. South Yorkshire Police have a protocol agreement with social service departments clearly setting out procedures to follow when a young person is reported missing. The police are the agency that may hold the most information about a young person but are not the appropriate agency to provide support to a young person nor to pursue a long-term intervention. They address an immediate and urgent situation and then refer to an appropriate agency, flagging up any issues to agencies that should be involved. In addition, running away is one of many issues that the police have to deal with. Where the police may become actively involved is if they take a Police Protection Order when there is any degree of danger or risk to a young person.

Some professionals outside the police force believe that parents do not always report their children as missing because they are unsure of the response they will receive from the police or because they have received a negative response from the police, specifically if the young person being reported goes missing on a regular basis. It was also felt that incidences of repetitive running, whilst taken

seriously, might not always meet with the fullest response. To ensure against complacency in relation to missing persons reports, the police re-examine procedures:

'Every so often we do tend to review our procedures. Because of the number of missing person's reports we get, it can become routine; there's a danger of becoming a little bit blasé. So we always take stock to ensure that we treat [missing persons reports] with the seriousness it deserves.'

South Yorkshire Police are involved with young people in preventative and diversionary strategies to discourage young people from engaging in criminal activity, but this work does not cover running away. Although they have preventative strategies and techniques in place, the vast majority of their resources are reactive:

'Although prevention is better than detection, we are a reactive force in essence.'

A multi-agency approach

The consensus amongst professionals in South Yorkshire was that a multi-agency approach is crucial to addressing running away in the region. As one professional expressed:

'There needs to be a proper structural approach to multi-agency working and a proper referral system ... between agencies, ensuring all appropriate agencies are part of the process.'

There are examples of good practice in relation to inter-agency working within the region. Yet a number of professionals felt that multi-agency approaches were not sufficiently embedded in working culture and that the onus often falls upon individuals to instigate co-ordinated responses. Multi-agency work should be established at a more formal level and in a structured manner to ensure that agencies are automatically included.

In practice there are also real and potential difficulties with multi-agency working as agencies do not always share the same practice principles and work ethic. In addition, the referral process itself can cause anxieties in relation to child protection issues, confidentiality and service delivery.

Thresholds

Following on from the above point, the importance of setting thresholds in relation to child protection issues is widely accepted in South Yorkshire. In practice, there are different thresholds between the four areas of South Yorkshire. Some practitioners believe that running away is not always a child protection issue and should not automatically be referred to social services, whilst other practitioners believe that running away is always a child protection issue and should always be referred to social services.

Recommendations made by professionals

Building on the above comments on the local picture in terms of needs and current provision, the consultation with professionals highlighted a number of recommendations for addressing running away in South Yorkshire.

Putting someone in charge

A general suggestion was that there should be an appointed person in each area whose role it is to set procedures and protocols, ensure that they are followed, guide practice and ensure that monitoring of running away is undertaken and that appropriate responses to running away are adhered to:

'It's about having a dedicated worker, or workers, who co-ordinate and oversee responses, working in a multi-agency setting to establish agreed procedures and protocols so that we all do the same thing about children who run away.'

Many professionals felt that because of their lack of knowledge of the issue of running away and the lack of expertise, an appointed person to set procedures and protocols and guide practice would improve the service they could deliver to children and young people who run away as it would provide:

'something clear and tangible that we could reach out to, train us and guide us, so that we can respond appropriately.'

Shifting from responsive to preventative measures

Many practitioners felt that because of the need to respond to crisis, there tends to be an emphasis upon responsive measures. In general there was universal recognition that more resources need to be directed towards preventative measures and that intervention should begin after the first incident of running away, rather than allowing it to develop as an established pattern.

The importance of preventative work with families to prevent the need for young people to run away was acknowledged. The need to have a number of approaches to offer families in relation to parenting was identified as important with an emphasis upon preventative work which can stop families reaching crisis point.

Early intervention

A significant majority of professionals highlighted the importance of placing intervention after the first incident of running away, rather than allowing it to develop as an established pattern. By responding to the first incidence of running away, professionals felt that it would be possible to prevent further incidents by establishing and addressing the reasons for running away. This will obviously reduce the possibilities for a young person being at risk, as well as having an impact upon resources, as responding to a young person who runs away repetitively will be more resource-intensive. In addition, a young person who is embedded in an established pattern of running away may have more issues to address and need longer term support than a young person who has run away on only one occasion.

Providing walk-in emergency accommodation

Walk-in emergency accommodation should be provided for young people under the age of 16 in South Yorkshire. This was identified by the majority of professionals as a priority when addressing running away amongst young people aged under 16. Different professionals prioritised certain characteristics of a refuge that they would like to see:

'A warm place to stay and some food so that you can have some space and thinking time. Where you can just walk through the door without having to call social services or fill in forms straight away. Where the young person can be settled, get warm and have some food, before having to provide information because of child protection issues.'

'I would like there to be a place for young people to go to that isn't 16 and up.'

'There is a need for walk-in emergency provision for young people or a contactable provision specifically aimed at young people with access to emergency accommodation.'

Working with a younger age group

A number of professionals commented upon the change in what it means to be a young person in contemporary society and the nature of being 'young'. Some argued that this shift should influence and be represented in service development. There should be an emphasis upon ensuring that service providers examine the consequences in this shift and ensure that service provision meets the needs of a population of young people who, at an early age, are running away, being out on the streets, engaging in sexual activity, drug taking and participating in crime. This calls for a lowering in the age of mainstream provision. As one professional asked:

'What is it about this magic age of 16?'

There is a call from many professionals for work targeting 10- to 13-year-olds:

'There is a strong need for structural provision for particularly 10- to 13-year-olds as the age range is lowering in term of young people out on the streets.'

As well as providing specialised support in relation to running away, services and support for this age group should be provided to address other issues and to offer a holistic approach. Whilst the infrastructure exists to provide this work in terms of buildings and facilities, training would need to be provided for professionals, as conducting work with 10- to 13-year-olds that is traditionally undertaken with older young people would necessitate different skills and approaches.

Improving practice with young people from diverse backgrounds

Many professionals in South Yorkshire felt that mainstream services were particularly poor at working with minority groups including children and young people from ethnic backgrounds, from the traveller community, and lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. Many professionals recognised that there is a need to increase and improve work with children and young people who belong to these groups. In order to do this in a more effective manner, there was recognition of the need for cultural awareness training for carers and practitioners.

A number of recommendations were made by professionals working with Asian young people centring on the following:

- providing an advocacy role between the young person and the community
- one-to-one support for the young person
- provision of education and other skills
- making young people feel part of a community and fostering a sense of belonging when they are away from their family
- providing agencies with more information about the issue of forced marriage.

Providing support for young people involved in sexual exploitation

In relation to working with young people who have run away and are at risk of sexual exploitation or involved in sexual exploitation, professionals stress the importance of targeting the houses of individual men who are inviting young people into their homes in a manner that removes the emphasis from the young person onto the adult.

For young women involved in sexual exploitation, professionals identified the need for specialised provision which could offer them somewhere to go which provided a safe refuge from pimps or any other persons involved in the sexual exploitation.

Providing support for young people involved in drugs

For young people involved in the drug scene, specifically those working as runners for dealers in residential units, there need to be placements available with a rehabilitation element to address the young person's drug use and to provide safety from dealers.

Training

Professionals who work with children and young people in a variety of settings should receive training. Foster carers and residential staff were highlighted specifically as being in particular need of training. This training should be centred around: procedures and protocols to follow when a young person is reported as missing or self-reports as having running away; which agencies are available to provide support to a young person who has run away; procedures to follow when a young person returns from going missing; and insight into the triggers for running away and the inherent risks involved. Training should also be available to professionals related to running away and child protection issues and when it is appropriate to refer to Social Services.

Ensuring services are child/young person centred

There was general agreement that services should be child and young person centred. Many professionals believed that there is too much bureaucracy involved when a young person approaches a service and this was not young person centred as:

'too much red tape is just not on most young people's agenda.'

It was suggested that services would be more likely to be approached by young people, if there was less exposure to bureaucratic and administrative procedures.

Learning from good practice

Professionals felt that it would be helpful to identify and learn from examples of good practice from the practice base that already exists in relation to work with young runaways and to incorporate this learning where appropriate. Whilst there is a lot of good practice evident in South Yorkshire in relation to work carried out by agencies, professionals felt that they could improve their own practice and develop responses to running away by learning about work already undertaken with young runaways.

Improved practice becoming embedded in working culture

Any developments in relation to running away should lead to practice becoming embedded in working culture rather than being an ad hoc response as is presently the case. This may require a shift in priorities and resources but professionals believe that it is necessary to do so in order to provide the response to running away that meets the needs of children and young people under the age of 16 who run away, are forced to leave or are on the streets for any other reason.

5 Summary and conclusions

In this final chapter of the report we briefly summarise the key findings presented in the previous chapters and then, to conclude, move on to consider the key themes and recommendations stemming from these findings.

Survey of young people

- There are at least 3200 runaway incidents each year in South Yorkshire
- At least 1600 children and young people under the age of 16 run away for the first time each year in South Yorkshire.
- At least 1250 young people run away overnight each year in the 14- to 15-year-old age group.
- Around a quarter of these young people will sleep rough whilst away from home.
- 18% of overnight runaways are forced to leave home
- Around 1/5 of overnight runaways first run away before the age of 11
- Young runaways in South Yorkshire tend to stay close to home and are much more likely to seek help from friends or family whilst away than to approach professional agencies (less than one in eight overnight runaways approached professional agencies for help).
- Most young runaways said that they were not reported missing to the police when they ran away from home.
- There is no evidence of different running away rates in the four areas of South Yorkshire and no evidence that the running away rate in South Yorkshire is different to elsewhere in the UK.

Consultation with young people

- In discussing models of emergency accommodation young people were concerned with five key issues – availability, accessibility, confidential location, safety within the accommodation and the nature of care being offered.
- In general, young people expressed a clear preference for a ‘fixed refuge’ model of accommodation provision, with a ‘foster care’ option also being available for some young people. A ‘crash pad’ model was not popular.
- Young people were also concerned about the lack of more general provision for young people in need and felt that improved preventative and responsive services needed to be put in place to tackle the issue of running away.
- Young people also gave strong messages about the importance of all professionals and agencies being competent to work with diversity.

Consultation with professionals

- Many professionals expressed concern about the hidden and unrecognised extent of the issue of running away amongst young people.
- Professionals emphasised the strong links between being away from home and an involvement in sexual exploitation and drug use.
- Professionals also expressed concerns about the ability of local services to work effectively with young people from minority groups.
- Professionals believed there should be more emphasis upon preventative measures and early intervention to prevent running away from becoming an established pattern.
- Professionals highlighted the need for walk-in emergency accommodation for under 16s who run away in South Yorkshire.
- Professionals would like to see a service provision for young runaways in South Yorkshire based upon examples of good practice from existing practice base, led by an appointed person in each area to ensure procedures and protocols are followed, so that good practice becomes embedded in working culture.

Discussion and recommendations

The research has provided a picture of the extent and nature of the issue of running away amongst young people in South Yorkshire and has provided an analysis of the current service framework in the region. In this final section we draw out some of the key themes from the research and offer suggestions for ways forward in developing a more comprehensive response to the needs of young runaways in the region. We look first at potential targeted initiatives and then move on to consider some of the issues for general service provision for young people. The discussion makes use of the framework provided by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002).

Preventing running away

Preventing running away is one of the six key areas of recommendations in the action plan proposed by the Social Exclusion Unit. Recommended actions include: local planning to prevent running away; more effective early identification; more and better family support services; and improved information for young people, parents, schools and communities.

The SEU report made a link between its recommendations and the broader thinking within Government on preventative strategies, which has since been developed in *Every Child Matters*:

'Running away will be made less likely by incorporating potential runaways' needs in the planning and improvement of generic preventative services. The actions in this report therefore link directly to the wider work being undertaken across government to bolster preventative support for children and young people and their families, in particular through the Green Paper on Children at Risk.' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 72)

The potential importance of preventative work is confirmed by the survey findings for South Yorkshire which show that more than a fifth of young runaways start running away before the age of 11. These findings reinforce the concerns of professionals highlighted earlier in the report about young people in South Yorkshire running away at a young age. Previous UK research (Rees & Smeaton, 2001) has found that young people who first run away before the age of 11 are more likely to run repeatedly and that repetitive running away places young people at serious risk and is linked to a range of other problems at school, and with drugs, alcohol and offending. There are also links between running away at an early age and social exclusion and homelessness as an adult.

Clearly, then, there is a need to engage with this group of young people in order to prevent the escalation of the problems they face – thus both limiting the risks faced by the young person and reducing the resources needed to address future problems. The recommendations made by the Social Exclusion Unit could form the basis of a comprehensive preventative action plan.

Ensuring the immediate safety of runaways

'Ensuring the immediate safety of runaways' is another of the six key themes of the Social Exclusion Unit's recommendations. The provision of emergency accommodation was prioritised both by professionals and young people as an important means of responding to the issue of under 16s who run away. The survey findings support this prioritisation, estimating that more than 300 14- and 15-year-old runaways sleep rough in South Yorkshire each year. These findings would suggest that there is a substantial unmet need for emergency accommodation in the region. There remains a question about what form this accommodation should take. The Social Exclusion Unit report called for an exploration of different models of service provision including the use of foster carers and other forms of community-based flexible accommodation. The DfES has announced plans to fund a small number of pilot projects to test out these forms of provision over the next two years. However, the young people with whom we consulted overwhelmingly chose the 'fixed refuge' option as their first choice for emergency accommodation, potentially running alongside some foster care provision.

Responding to incidents of running away and the importance of early intervention

The Social Exclusion Unit also emphasised the importance of responding quickly and effectively to young people when they return from running away:

'Runaways, particularly the most vulnerable, should be provided with timely and sensitive interviews after running away, to identify any longer-term needs.' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 77)

Since the publication of the SEU report, a number of practice-based initiatives have been developed throughout England (many provided with short-term funding by the DfES) to work with young runaways. However, at the time when the research was carried out, there was no specific dedicated service provision for young people who run away in South Yorkshire, and professionals and young people consistently expressed concerns about this.

Over the past five years a number of schemes have been developed throughout England to provide immediate support to young people reported as missing to the police when they return home. This is a positive development, potentially providing short-term crisis intervention to young people and enabling them to link up with longer-term support from relevant local agencies. However the current research suggests that many (if not most) young people who run away are not reported as missing to the police. Therefore alternative referral routes to access these kinds of services need to be made available including accepting referrals from parents, friends and relatives as well as from young people themselves.

Putting someone in charge

The idea of putting 'someone in charge' is also identified by the Social Exclusion Unit and is one of the key targets of the Government's action plan for runaways. At a local level the report recommends that:

There will be named local authority managers and police leads responsible for planning and working with other agencies. Local agreements should also be put in place to ensure that responsibilities are set out clearly and no young person ends up slipping through the net. (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 72)

At the time that the initial data collection for the current research was carried out, this recommendation had not yet been implemented throughout South Yorkshire. However, at time of writing, nominated managers had been established in all four areas. Establishing clear local accountabilities is a vital first step in developing a strategic and co-ordinated response to the needs of young runaways.

Multi-agency working

Building on the previous point, the needs of young runaways are often complex and multi-faceted and can not be met by agencies working in isolation. The report has highlighted examples of good practice in inter-agency working in South Yorkshire. However, the professionals who took part in the research felt that more could be done at a formal and structured level to promote and facilitate multi-agency working with young runaways. Improved multi-agency working could, to some extent, alleviate resource problems. Social services, acknowledged universally as over-burdened, could develop an improved response to running away alongside joint working with agencies such as schools, Connexions and the police.

A key aspect of multi-agency working, emphasised by the Social Exclusion Unit report and Department of Health guidance, 2002, is the development of protocols between services to clarify roles and responsibilities for young people who run away. Such protocols are also a recommendation of various policy documents, including the Bridge report which was set up in response to the West case in Gloucester. Protocols have already been developed in a number of local authority areas. Protocols of this kind need to be framed carefully and would need to allow for discretion and flexibility on the part of staff and managers involved with individual young people. The protocol could also form part of a strategy to improve communication and information exchange in relation to young people going missing. At the time of the research, there were protocols between South Yorkshire Police and Social Service Departments. The Running Away Partnership had drafted a general protocol in relation to running away which, at the time of writing, was being considered by partner organisations.

Learning from good practice

As outlined earlier in the report, there are examples of good practice in South Yorkshire but practice and service development for young runaways could be improved by learning from practice that already exists. Rees (2001) summarises the learning from practice to that date in working with young

runaways in the UK. Many of the issues identified echo themes which were raised by professionals through the consultation process. These include: improving responses to child protection issues faced by this target group; training and awareness-raising of staff; and the development of models of working which balance a 'young person centred' approach with the need to engage constructively with other professionals and with parents and carers.

Improving responses to young people going missing from care placements

The subject of young people going missing from care placements came up regularly during discussions with professionals and for this reason merits some individual comment. However, it is important to maintain a perspective on this issue. A small minority (less than 5%) of young runaways are in the 'looked after' system (Stein & Rees, 2002); young people reported as missing from care are not necessarily 'running away' – in many areas young people are routinely reported missing if they are late returning to children's homes.

Nevertheless young people in the care system are at much higher than average risk of running away, and of doing so repeatedly. This sub-group of young runaways is a key concern for police, social services and the Government. The Social Exclusion Unit report recommended improvements in local systems:

'Each local authority [is] to collect information on whether there are patterns of young people going missing from particular care placements (foster homes of children's homes) which will help target support on young people who persistently run away from their placements. (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 75)

The Department of Health (2002) issued detailed guidance on going missing, including a specific focus on the 'looked after' system.

There is a risk of responses to this issue being reactive and piecemeal. In a study of going missing from children's homes in Leeds, Rees, Smeaton and Wade (2002) highlighted the risks of responding cyclically to individual incidents. This report recommended the development of more strategic responses, including routine risk assessments when young people come into care; joint strategy meetings to tackle repetitive incidents of going missing; and more negotiated approaches to older young people in residential care staying away over night. The report also recommended a review of the system for reporting incidents to the police, with the aim of reducing the burden of reporting both for children's home staff and the police.

Ensuring that young people are aware of helping services in their area

Children and young people also need to know what is out there to help them. As mentioned earlier, the consultation with young people confirmed previous research (Safe on the Streets Research, 1999) that young people often do not know where to go locally to access help if they run away. Evidence from practice reveals that attempts to publicise projects for young runaways have met with mixed success and that the main source of publicity is through young people making word-of-mouth recommendations (Rees, 2001: 101). This does not mean that other attempts at publicity should not be made but that there needs to be some creative thinking involved, perhaps with the participation of young people.

Monitoring

As mentioned earlier in the report, at the time of consultation, no agency apart from the police held monitoring information about running away. The monitoring information held by the police refers to the number of missing reports made and the majority of running away incidents are not reported. Therefore the extent of running away amongst under-16-year-olds in South Yorkshire remains unmonitored. It is very important that projects and agencies working with children and young people begin collecting data on running away so that the extent of the problem can be effectively monitored; children and young people who are at risk or experiencing real difficulties in their lives can be picked up; and resource allocation can be facilitated by this process.

Working with diversity

Finally, spanning all the issues discussed above, the theme of diversity cropped up frequently throughout the research. The term 'running away' encapsulates a huge diversity of situations and experiences, from one-off events to a semi-permanent way of life. It is vital that professionals are aware of the different meanings that running away may have in different cultural contexts in order to be able to respond in a culturally sensitive manner. The group of young people who run away are also highly diverse, both in terms of characteristics and the issues they are facing in their lives. Services which aim to respond to the needs of young people who run away must be able to work with diversity and must be responsive to individual, community and local contexts and to a wide range of needs. The comments from professionals and young people have highlighted the need for training in cultural awareness and for the development of policies and practice which ensure that service provision is inclusive for all.

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