

Protecting and supporting young runaways and victims of child sexual exploitation



Running away is a cry for help

Every year around 100,000 children run away in the UK. Running away is a sign that something is wrong in a child's life and that they may be at risk of harm. It is also a recognised indicator of child sexual exploitation (CSE). This exploitation may be the reason the child runs away, or it may start while they are on the streets.

The Children's Society delivers high quality services to children who have run away or gone missing, and who may be at risk, or are victims of sexual exploitation.

Tackling running away can save money

It is estimated that each missing person's investigation costs the police between £1325 and £2415. Even at the lower estimate, dealing with 190,000 episodes of missing children under the age of 18 in England and Wales would amount to around £250 million every year.

This is just the police cost. There are also significant costs to public services because of the long-term effects of running away. Associated expenditure can include tackling drug use, poor health, missing school and criminal activity.

If children who run away receive early help, cost savings can be made and harm avoided.

How we can help

The Children's Society provides a range of targeted and specialist services for runaways and victims of child sexual exploitation.

These include intensive one-to-one support and advice, drop-in services and family mediation. We provide a safe haven where children can go for independent and confidential help.



We run group work, training and consultancy for both young people and professionals – in schools, care homes and local authorities – to help raise awareness of the risks and indicators of running away and sexual exploitation, and of how to respond. We also deliver return interviews which are a vital service for supporting young people who run away.

'I felt so lonely, I had no one to talk to and that's how I ended up with bad people and bad things happened to me.' (Young runaway)

Why return interviews are important in identifying and preventing exploitation

A return interview is an in-depth conversation led by an independent trained professional whom the young person can trust. They can help identify the reasons for running away such as abuse or neglect, and highlight any exploitation that may have occurred while the child was away. They also allow professionals to take immediate action to prevent further risks.

Effective return interviews can reduce the number of times or stop children going missing altogether.

The Children's Society in Newcastle

Around 60% of young people who receive targeted return interview support show a reduction or cessation in going missing and risky behaviours.

The statutory guidance on running away states that all children who run away from home or care should receive an independent return interview. At The Children's Society, we specialise in delivering return interviews and achieving effective results.

The importance of return interviews

Fiona received a return interview and a follow-up programme of activities, and the extent of her risk taking became apparent. She was drinking alcohol and partying with a number of older males when missing, aged between 16 and 63, including a known drug dealer. She also made an allegation of rape against an extended family member, and of sexual assault against a local shop keeper.

As a result of our involvement, the rape and sexual assault cases are going to court. We have discussed with Fiona the risks of taking drugs and alcohol, grooming and sexual exploitation, and how to have healthy and appropriate relationships. **Fiona's missing episodes have greatly decreased. She is attending school and no longer using drugs or alcohol.**

'I find it difficult to ask for help - I don't like to ask for help, it's difficult to say we need help. But knowing they're there, this made it easier to ask.' (Young runaway)

The Runaways' Charter

We have produced a Runaways' Charter, co-written with young runaways. It is a commitment by the local authority and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services that they will take steps to make young runaways safe in their local area.

Sign up here: <http://makerunawayssafe.org.uk/>

Download our planning guide for professionals 'Developing Local Safeguarding Responses to Young Runaways' at www.childrenssociety.org.uk/resources



'The Runaways Charter has ensured support services to vulnerable young people are focused upon this group and all that can be done to minimise harm is put in place. We have found in the past 12 months that instances of children going missing have reduced and there is a heightened awareness amongst staff of the importance of this issue.'

North Tyneside Lead Cabinet Member for Children, Councillor Ian Grayson

Commission The Children's Society

Contact us today to find out how we can help you achieve better outcomes for children who run away and/or are at risk of sexual exploitation in your area.

Call **0845 612 9402**, email bdu@childrenssociety.org.uk or visit www.childrenssociety.org.uk to find out more.