Provision for young rural runaways: Report and recommendations based on rural interviews carried out between 1999 and 2003
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This report debates the possible shape of provision for young people who run away in rural areas. It is a supplement to research carried out by The Children’s Society the findings of which were published under the title *Still Running* (1999). Data from the *Still Running* research in the form of interviews with rural young people as well as professionals who work with them in rural areas of England, Scotland and Wales have been utilised. Supplementary data collection for this report was carried out in the spring and summer of 2000. This included telephone interviews with professionals from sixteen agencies that work in rural areas in England and Wales. These included five Children’s Society project leaders’ and seven others involved in rural provision for young people and four workers operating different kinds of mobile services for young people in rural areas. One of these mobile provisions was operated by a Children’s Society project worker. Additionally, because the issue of high visibility emerged as a core problem for young people who wish to access support or assistance in rural areas, a rural women’s refuge was also contacted as a means of ascertaining their special concerns regarding lack of anonymity in a rural environment. This was in order to facilitate thinking concerning the pros and cons of the notion of a rural refuge.

Since these interviews took place pressures on rural people have been exacerbated by the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis, which swept the country and deeply affected not only farming families but, entire rural communities. In order to draw attention to the altered circumstances of rural youth in the fallout post this crisis two further interviews with professionals from the Rural Stress Information Network, who offer support to rural families, have been carried out. It is probable there is a need for further research into the largely hidden issue of the material and psychological effects of the FMD crisis on the lives of children and how it may affect their future wellbeing.

The fact that the schools survey for *Still Running* research evidenced the numbers of young people who run away from rural areas to be proportionately no less than those who run away in urban areas points to the fact that rural living is, for young people at least, no more ideal than urban living. Interestingly it transpired that the concerns of rural interviewees for this supplementary study were somewhat different from those expected by the interviewer. All along this dissonance between interviewer expectations concerning rural issues and the answers has been to some degree the case. This demonstrates how rural issues are not always apparent to the city dweller and this must surely be taken into account in terms of staffing a rural project. We still live in the aftermath of Victorian romanticism and idealisation of the countryside.

**What do we mean by rural?**

Christine Couchman (1994) interrogates the concepts of ‘countryside’ and ‘rural’. She suggests that for the urban middle classes ‘countryside’ is “not just a
geographical description” but as mentioned above a concept tinged with nostalgia – a place to de-stress from an urban life-style. Many well resourced individuals who move to the countryside as a lifestyle choice are able to maintain that lifestyle in rural surroundings and are able to protect themselves from rural stress (Couchman 1994:8). Such residents can claim the best of both rural and urban worlds.

Categories of ‘extreme rural’ through ‘intermediate rural’ to ‘intermediate non-rural’ and ‘extreme non-rural’ have been used to describe varying degrees of rurality (Cloke and Edwards 1981) and it may be that rural indicators vary according to the purpose of trying to define what rural is. But ultimately, for a rural interviewee in the West Country, it boils down to “if you take the population figures and there are more sheep than people its normally rural”. In some cases, however, there are small urban pockets surrounded on all sides by rural areas and in the case of post-industrial areas, these may be areas of deprivation surrounded by the vastness of rural spaces. Because of changes in the economy, in agriculture and fishing, in the manufacturing base and population movement in the last couple of decades the map of rural and urban areas and distribution of degrees of rurality has changed. For instance a worker pointed out that the Isle of Wight used to be classed as rural. She related how as a youth worker a few years ago she attempted to obtain some rural funding and discovered they had been re-classed as urban. She described this as “really silly as a lot of people who come into Ryde live in isolated areas which are impossible to get to after 6 o’clock at night”.

Although there is evidence of rural poverty and the effect it has on children (Davis & Ridge:1994) Couchman makes the point that ‘rural’ does not always equate with deprivation. She gives the example of how “it is possible to be less deprived in the middle of Cumbria with all the advantages money can buy, than on the outskirts of Exeter on Income Support and off the bus-route” (Couchman:9). Rurality does not necessarily lead to deprivation but as our informants suggest, for young people to be disadvantaged in a rural area is to be locked into a specific kind of exclusion which expresses itself in a number of significant ways which are discussed below.

Rural social exclusion issues:

Drawn from the interviews and literature the big issues for rural young people appear to be:

- No transport and poor communications
- The rural economy, low wages, unemployment as well as lack of employment opportunities. This situation has been exacerbated by the FMD crisis.
- Difficulty in gaining access to confidential services, lack of anonymity, high visibility and stigmatisation
- Romantic expectations associated with rurality (on the part of others) may mean low tolerance of young people’s needs or behaviour
• Even more than in urban areas, young people have no voice
• Limited resources

No transport and poor communications

The problem of lack of rural transport has been emphasised in the literature as an overwhelming cause of social exclusion and isolation (Password Challenge 1999) (Couchman 1994) (Leach 1996) (NCVO 1999) (Streich 1999). This lack of mobility limits young peoples' potential to engage in after-school activities, to make friends and to enjoy leisure activities. When they reach school leaving age it can exclude them from training or from obtaining jobs. It limits the number of adults children and young people are able to talk to about issues that bother them. It prevents access to the information they need without going through the filter of school or parents. This last can be improved by Internet access and some projects are attempting to offer young people greater computer access. For instance cyber cafes have been started in some country towns (Craven YMCA) or computer provision on an Isle of Wight youth service bus (Mobile Youth Initiatives, Mobile Youth Centre, Isle of Wight). From interviews with rural workers in Wales the impression gained is that these kinds of initiatives are often ephemeral being lottery funded (not necessarily the ones mentioned above) and have a short life span if they are dependent upon volunteers and if no continuation funding is found.

The National Chairman for Young Farmers and South West Project Officer for the Rural Stress Network pointed out that during the FMD crisis Young Farmers age 10-26 were unable to hold any meetings for six months. A government sponsored scheme to teach computer skills and offering access to the Internet proved useful to these young people in their isolation. This points to the importance of young people having computer training and access to computers not only at centres but on isolated farms.

A small number of project workers from the Still Running interviews specifically mentioned lack of transport in rural areas as exacerbating the problems of young people who eventually run away. The majority of supplementary interviews reinforced this perception where interviewees were specifically asked what a rural project should be like. In more extreme cases “children and families do live up the end of farms tracks and they are heavily reliant on school transport for any kind of social activity”. But it is not only these young people who run the risk of social isolation but also dwellers in small villages where young people sometimes feel they don’t have any choice regarding friends (Password Challenge 1999).

Some projects are finding ways of addressing this need for mobility independent of the goodwill or ability of parents to ferry them around. For instance in Hereford and Worcester there is a moped scheme which leases mopeds to young people (The Rural Development Commission 1998). This is largely as a means to enable young people to attend training courses or to start work. But this does not
help the under 16s except in terms of showing them there may be ways of finding employment after school.

Some projects, like the mobile foyer run by Craven YMCA, are trying to address this problem by offering mobile services themselves. In this case transport goes out to villages, collects young people and brings them to the drop-in (cyber cafe) and/or if necessary and appropriate accesses them to the foyer.

**Rural economy, unemployment, low employment, poor pay**

The problem in rural areas is not only the lack of resources through sheer lack of numbers of residents but also the fact that employment is scarce and pay levels are poor. According to Couchman (1994) the economic and social deprivation experienced by rural people is not unlike that experienced by urban dwellers but it has obvious added dimensions in terms of spatial and environmental differences which make life without a car or the wherewithal to purchase a car extremely limiting in terms of choice, access to medical attention, or training and work opportunities. Couchman sites also the findings of Scott et al (1991:14 in Couchman: 12) in a Peak National Park study where they found the aspirations of established local people and the actions of local planning organisations were often in conflict. As interviewees pointed out, in many rural areas (e.g. Cornwall, Powys or the Isle of Wight, young people have to leave if they want higher education). The work that is available is generally poorly paid. Sue Leach wrote in 1996 that “unemployed young people living in remote rural areas often fall into a vicious circle of no job, no money, no transport, no job…Local employment is scarce, often casual and seasonal and pay rates are low, as little as £1-50 per hour” (Leach 1996:4). Since then a minimum wage has been introduced but a youth worker for SHELTER in rural North Wales interviewed for the *Still Running* research suggested, with regard to the seasonal tea room and hotel trade, that it was unlikely that all employers in rural areas would pay or be able to pay the minimum wage. She thought it was a ‘take it or leave it’ situation.

The interviewee from the Isle of Wight referred to what she termed as “island apathy”:

> There’s not a lot of career opportunities for children down here. Its almost like ‘we’re going to go to school but there’s not a lot for us’ and at the end of it, unless they’re reasonably bright and want to get off the island there’s nothing for them. For those who actually want to stay on the island it’s almost doom and gloom really.

A senior YMCA worker related how:

> I’m working quite closely with Young Farmers here and one of the things that I was absolutely astounded by was that there are members of Young Farmers clubs who are fifty years of age and who are not allowed to have
cheque books by their fathers and mothers who run the farm but they work on the farm for pocket money.

The interviewee claims this is not an extreme example of the way in which lack of rural opportunities can foster dependence.

Lack of access to confidential services, high visibility and stigmatisation

In terms of imagining what kind of service might be most appropriate to young people who run away, who get thrown out, or who are at risk of running away in rural areas we started out by thinking that a rural service might be a mobile one. This was in terms of travelling from village to village to offer a service to young people. But the indication from people who actually work and live in rural areas, as well as from some rural young people interviews for Still Running, is of a serious lack of anonymity. This high level of visibility precludes accessing any service, which is labelled as one for young people experiencing difficulties and which does not work under the cover of being a generic service. This, beside lack of transport appeared to be one of the most important issues.

Two young people in Moray, interviewees for the Still Running research described themselves as leaving home because they “needed space”. Because many city dwellers associate rurality with wide-open spaces and the opportunity to breathe fresh air this might, at first, seem incongruous. Yet a number of workers and group interviews pointed to the fact that rural claustrophobia is an issue and this throws new light on the matter. This is because there is no anonymity in a small village and young people especially are subjected to constant surveillance. This leads to an internalisation of difficulties, an attempt to make them invisible. For children of hundreds of farming families the rural claustrophobia was amplified by confinement to farms for two or three months during the FMD crisis.

With regard to this ‘rural claustrophobia’ in the interviews prior to the FMD crisis one worker pointed out that, if for instance, the only place in a village for young people to congregate is the village green someone will watch them and even report them to the police. A young person feels forced to bottle their problems up because they cannot be sure they can access a confidential service. Young people are fearful of visiting their GP because they are afraid their parents will be informed. They cannot, for instance, buy condoms from the local pharmacy or the Spar because someone will tell their mother. In a village, everyone knows everyone else. One interviewee who runs a mobile service in Powys had carried out her own investigation, phoning “six places” and finding that there was nowhere where young people could access condoms in her area.

Young people in group interviews in Gwynedd carried out for the Still Running research had actual experiences of confiding in teachers who then went straight to their parents to discuss the matter. As a professional in Denbighshire
commented, children with difficulties in rural areas, “stick out like a sore thumb”. According to a project leader in Cornwall, and others in Wales, young people did not like to access services that were seen to be those for young people with problems. This marks them out and they are easily stigmatised. As one senior worker commented a project for young people in a rural area needs to be seen to be “all things to all people”.

The mobile services in Powys suffer from stigmatisation; one as the “sex bus” and the other, formerly the mental health mobile information vehicle, was called the “loony van”. After a makeover it has more recently been branded the “condom van”.

There are few options available. The more rural an area is the more highly visible an issue becomes because anonymity is one of the things it is impossible to establish. A rural project worker described how:

You are not anonymous and so therefore if you identify yourself as having a dilemma or a problem then every one knows about it…. You don’t want everyone to know about it you just want someone to know about it. So it’s quite difficult for young people… if they’re facing a crisis at home to find a way to resolve that crisis without it becoming the talk of the village. And it probably is already the talk of the village if they’re not careful. So things become internalised quite quickly.

A group of young people interviewed at a school in Snowdonia who were already alienated from the school system and some of whom had already run away said they needed a hostel in the area but they were fearful that its whereabouts being known locally would endanger the young people who used it. Nevertheless they felt that some form of respite would be helpful and they felt the need for a drop-in centre where they could talk to workers.

Projects or individuals who work with marginalised young people or adults may also become resented and marginalised themselves. A North Wales worker commented on how foster carers could be stigmatised. They have to be careful whom they place with potential foster carers because it “does get around” and some young people are reluctant to go to foster carers or to stay in supported lodgings for that reason. Lack of anonymity in this rural area could result in a situation where “the carer got nasty things through his letter box from neighbours”. The problem is that in a rural area the young people “stick out like sore thumbs”. A young person interviewed (for Still Running) in Devon commented that what they needed was:

More people to help you and stuff. There was no one really to talk to who wasn’t a social worker; and if you say something to a social worker it’s broadcasted in the leaving care magazine.
According to a project leader in the West Country:

The paradox of not having anonymity is that you are also extremely visible and visibility is a key issue for young people in that they become identified quite quickly and if you haven’t got the income levels to go ten miles away to where there is a leisure centre or a cinema or just to go to meet friends elsewhere then what you end up doing is just kind of staying in that community and hanging around by the memorial or kind of hanging around outside the post box or whatever there is. So you become identified quite quickly and quite soon (as a problem) and very visible… In rural communities the toleration level is very, very low. So what is considered to be antisocial behaviour within a rural community is considered to be a normal Friday night in an urban setting.

Other workers alluded to the, at times, deeply conservative views of people who live in rural areas. A project worker who grew up in a rural area said he knows what village life is like for young people. He described it as:

Overwhelmingly boring. You make your own entertainment. Half the village are related to each other. You can't move without somebody knowing somebody. There can be a parochial small minded attitude which is very restricting.

This statement perhaps better explains to the city dweller the young rural interviewees' desire for “space”.

Romantic expectations associated with rurality
As suggested by Couchman (1994), a number of interviewees also mentioned the issue of how people move to rural areas with a ‘rural idyll’ idea in their minds. This romantic view of country living can lead to a low level of tolerance of young people’s behaviour. What might be ignored in an urban area may be perceived as outrageous in rural areas. There are, as mentioned above, often conservative views among villagers and councillors. As a project leader put it:

Its probably because of adults expectations about what life in the country should be like and when you go into areas where people have moved in with an expectation about country life which is that its quiet, its peaceful and you don’t see the issues you see in an urban setting. Well in that kind of environment kids sitting around a car playing music are a nuisance. And so what you find is that young people are censured so quickly.

This represents the other side of the coin from the imaginings of how fine it is to live in the country – a myth it is important to explode for the sake of young (and older) people who find their difficulties made ironically invisible to the larger society by urban representations of the reality of their lives.
Five workers mentioned ‘the rural idyll’ issue in another dimension, in this case how people imagined rural areas to be wealthier than they are. A project leader in rural Wales related a story from the local press which told how a large bank had mistakenly decided to open up a branch in Llandrindod Wells, a county town with five-thousand inhabitants. The bank’s choice was based on statistical evidence that showed the people in the locality as being amongst the highest second car owners in Britain. It was assumed they had lots of money whereas in such a large rural area a car is, as seen above, an essential.

A project manager from the West Country commented that people who think that rural wellbeing is the case “are not fifteen and living in Mullion on a low income”. He made the point that through their own action research they had concluded that rural areas are attractive to young children but they lose their charm for young people beyond the age of puberty. The difficulty for rural teenagers transplanted from towns by parents who are eager to live in rural areas was highlighted by a senior social worker in rural North Wales who was interviewed for Still Running. He suggested that his department sometimes had young people who had been moved from towns such as Telford referred to them. Parents who wanted to live in rural Wales had moved these young people who later ran back to their former communities and familiar networks. He said “With the older children, 12, 13, 14 and the younger people 15, 16, 17 you can imagine…wholesale change the whole kind of foundation of their previous lives and sometimes without preparation at all”. Young Farmers National Chairperson and Rural Stress Project Officer for the South West – suggested that if any good has come out of the Foot and Mouth Disease Crisis it is that “it bridged the gap between urban and rural areas” because urban people became aware of the rural issues and donated money to help the farming families.

Young people have no voice
The rural economy causes an exodus of young people and a high level of immigration of early retired and later retired people in some rural areas. This is especially the case in rural Wales and Cornwall. The imbalance of the population means that young people are less likely to be heard and local public money (which is likely to be stretched anyway in a sparsely populated area) will be spent on the needs of older people. This demography is not the case of the whole of rural Wales, one of the Children’s Society workers pointed out that there are certain communities in Powys where the youth population is actually growing and she is working in one of these at the moment. Even without taking an ageing population into account, the young people under 18 are, anyway, not democratically represented but in the rural context they are separated geographically from each other in small villages or by the spaces between farms and isolated houses. As already suggested in the section on lack of transport. It is difficult for them to get together except in the context of school. This separation denies the possibility of a common voice.

On occasion young people have been offered a forum to express their views and
articulate their needs but adults may not have liked what they have heard. If this is the case in a rural area there may not be recourse to any other adults who might be more receptive. A project leader quoted above related how there had been a consultation process with young people in his rural area.

There was a group of adults in the village who were worked up about needing to do something for young people. ...And what the consultation provided was that one group of young people wanted a BMX, not necessarily a track but somewhere they could ride their BMXs. Half the adult committee resigned on that basis saying, 'There is no way there is ever going to be a BMX track in this village'. What you then get is that those adults who are a dominant force within the village are set up against anything that is developed for young people in that village because they consider it to be inappropriate.

So, in this case, the young people have been offered a voice but the adults don't want to hear what they have to say because the thing they desire does not fit in with visions of the rural idyll. In this situation the young people have no recourse to anyone. In cities they might have a wider forum of some kind but here they do not. It takes a degree of progressive thinking to offer young people a voice and especially to be able to listen to what they have to say.

Another worker on the Isle of Wight suggested that there was “island apathy” because there were no career opportunities for young people. This lack of career opportunities is, as stated above, magnified in the rural setting. In this respect young people are silenced by their resignation to the lack of opportunity, which means they fail to speak out.

**Lack of resources**

According to *Rural Briefing* (1999) the delivery of youth work in sparsely populated areas is less than in urban areas and young people have less spent on them than their urban counterparts. “For example, in 1996/97 the average amount of money spent by the youth service per young person (11-19 year olds) in shire counties was £56. In Inner-London the figure was £150, in Outer London the figure was £62 and in Metropolitan Districts £69. The all England average was £64.” (Youth Services in Rural England, RDC, 1998 quoted in National Forum for the Development of Rural Youth Work 1999: Rural Briefing: 3). This picture is backed up by agency interviews with professionals for *Still Running*. In some areas there are literally no services available to young people outside school. For instance, in Gwynedd in North Wales, the youth service operates for only six months of the year. Two supplementary interviewees also referred to lack of spending on youth work in rural areas as a problem and how sources of funding tend to be temporary in terms of EU Social Exclusion money and Lottery money. These interviewees felt that core funding that would lend stability to services was a necessity. The infrastructure in rural areas does not exist to the same degree as it does in the city. An interviewee from North Wales talked about
lack of access to an emergency dental service even in towns. A worker at a women’s refuge in Powys pointed out how in a small town it can take a year for a young person to get an appointment with a child psychiatric nurse. There is a sense of factions competing over scarce resources and if the project attracts people from outside into the area, as is the case of the Women’s Refuge then local peoples’ resentment rises and pressure on local resources becomes problematic. The refuge worker commented, “You know you are creating a problem. We’re part of the community as well”. Related problems regarding resources for young people were mentioned by a senior worker of the YMCA in Wales in relation to a house they converted for young people in Rhaedr using lottery money.

So we’re talking ‘rural-rural’ and what we did find …was that the social services with whom we had liaison tended to put into there the ones they couldn’t cope with anywhere else. But it was more difficult there because support services that you would find in a city…were not existent in this town. So things like people to read to people, to help them with housing and living and that sort of thing were not available and we found that our caretaker of the hostel, who was just a caretaker was doing more of a care job and doing her own job at the same time.

As the Women’s Aid refuge worker put it, “If you haven’t got support systems you’re setting people up to fail”.

Three professionals talked about problems associated with working with a volunteer force. This was not a criticism of volunteers but of the problems associated with expecting people to work consistently for free in difficult circumstances and to give up social engagements. So in this respect volunteers might not always be there when needed and a service which relies on them in order to operate cannot be reliable.

People just don’t want to do it. I think there’s a lot of reasons. I think these days that they train us obviously about child protection and about health and safety and people just think ‘I don’t want all this. I could be accused of anything when all I’m actually trying to do is offer something to young people’. There’s all these regulations. You can’t serve food to people. You have to have first aid certificates etc. etc. You can’t just say I’ll go out and do some work with young people as a volunteer.

A rural refuge: what form might it take?
Two possible forms of rural refuge for young people are a mobile refuge or a dispersed (or invisible) refuge. A third form is a refuge in a town which serves a large rural area and which provides transport. As the project leader of the mobile foyer in Skipton said, for young people from the Dales Villages, coming to Skipton a market town to live “feels like moving to London”. Some of the young people interviewed for Still Running say they run away from rural areas to find
“space”. For some young people moving to a town where there is a higher level of anonymity as well as amenities for young people may be a good solution.

The problem with the notion of a literally mobile refuge is its obvious lack of anonymity. Where would they park? No one would want such a provision in close proximity to their village. But the model used for the mobile foyer in Skipton is that young people are collected from the villages and taken to the foyer in the town. So the foyer itself is not mobile but young people are able to access it.

The problem with dispersed refuge is that it could not operate unless it involved long-term foster parents who were willing to keep a place open on the basis of an unpredictable probability of uptake by a young person. How could this be made to work? Should they be paid a retainer? While some children who run away may wish to go to families, others might not. They may have had enough of family life. The project at Torbay is experimenting with a dispersed refuge idea, using B&B:

...because a town like Torbay or similar size cannot support the costs of running a refuge. It is crisis intervention, offering a young person a window of opportunity to examine the issues that have caused them to run away. The staff themselves become the refuge and stay with the young person.

But this is not the 24-hour care job that might be imagined. There are two members of staff overnight with the young person and who is then be taken back to the project in the morning "by their members of staff and you put the action plan together at the project base". They use family run B&Bs where they have carried out an assessment from a number of visits. They are people who have some kind of commitment to the project and where they have put in some work. "They're going to be paid the going rate but it's not going to make a huge difference to their business. They have to have an interest to help out. Some sort of sense of public spirit really".

A Children's Society project leader in the West Country was critical of the idea of a dispersed rural refuge that depended on foster parents:

Its logistics. Two things. It would be very difficult to establish a refuge in a rural community in a conventional sense where you're talking about a building with a lot of people managing that. Partly because you would never keep it quiet. You would become known...so you can't protect it in that regard.

Interestingly, in the case of the interview with a project worker from the rural women's refuge, men turning up on the door was not a big issue but this was because they have a nation-wide network of refuges and are able to move
women from one to another. This would not really be the case with a children's refuge. Further other interviewees, both in terms of the young people at Ysgol y Gader and the worker in North Wales who mentioned unpleasant things being put through letterboxes, have also highlighted local knowledge of the specific location as a potential problem.

The model of a refuge in a big enough town to offer some anonymity as well as resources beyond the scope of the refuge itself is appealing. This is like the YMCA Craven mobile foyer model. It would not draw the resources into one difficult to access rural area and nor would it be seen as drawing ‘problem people’ into the area. The size of a refuge in a rural area can be problematic. The Women’s Refuge worker from a small town in Wales commented, “The size of a refuge in a rural area is a problem, just in terms of impact. If our refuge had been smaller the kind of issues we’re talking about wouldn’t have arisen. A smaller one would have taken only local women.” At the moment they can take six families and this means they can have families sent to them from all over Britain. These tend to be families with multiple needs. The worker suggested that four families would have been better but they started the refuge in partnership with a housing association and to make a smaller one, according to the regulations of the time, would not have worked out financially. The interviewee suggested that the rules have now changed and that they would have been able to create a smaller refuge, which would have minimised the impact on the community.

The systemic approach
Project leaders tended to talk about the systemic approach to the problem of inadequate services to young people who run away in a rural area. As there are just not numerically enough young people running away in any given rural area to warrant the running expenses of a refuge as a staffed building 52 weeks a years, there is just not the density of young people running away in any given area. A Children’s society project leader described the systemic approach as one of the alternative ways of improving the response to young people running away in rural areas:

What you can do is build on those other issues like the way in which the police will respond, the way in which social services will respond. The way in which other agencies can and should respond to young people who present as having that kind of crisis and I think that the intervention in the first instance is not necessarily to generate a new service but to improve the services that exist. To actually increase their awareness, their capacity and ability to respond appropriately and that is a real challenge because if you talk to police in Leeds or Manchester or the Metropolitan police and you talk about runaways then okay they’ve got work to do but you know they’ve got a volume of work and they’ve got a volume of experience that can be drawn on and its possible to engage with them on a kind of a dialogue on how that can be improved. You talk to Devon and Cornwall police or even the
Somerset police and the yes the issue is there but not to the same degree. …maybe strategically they will have a concept but when you get down to districts you get down to individual police officers and you know, officers responsible and the awareness will become much lower and I think there’s room for improvement. Similarly for SSDs you talk to SSDs in Cornwall and Somerset and they say its not an issue. … I think that’s where the intervention needs to lie.

Work which aims to change attitudes to young people who run away are important but they do not replace the importance of face-to-face encounters with people who clearly understand the issues and have a special brief to work with young people who find themselves in difficulties. This ‘consciousness raising’ is part of the holistic approach to the problem and significant in rural areas where services are sparse.

**Mobile Services: Pros and Cons**

Workers who work directly with mobile services: a small van in Powys which runs an information service, a ‘mobile foyer’ in North Yorkshire and a youth bus with coffee facilities and seating for 15 young people in Shropshire were interviewed. A Children’s Society worker who runs a drug information van was also consulted. Some other interviewees had connections with other mobile services. For instance, one in the Isle of Wight with computers on board and which has been refitted by boat builders in order to make everything fit. This seems like an imaginative and appropriate use of local skills. But there were also workers who were critical of mobile services in terms of their high visibility in small villages. For instance a senior worker in the South of Powys referred to how a mobile service:

> Used to go round and park in lay-bys in little villages in Wales and had on the side ‘Powys Mental Health bus’ and they couldn’t work out why nobody got on it. We’ve now called it ‘Radical’ and its got everything on it including youth provisions, computers, cups of coffee and its getting used a little bit more…not very much but a bit more.

Mobile services tend to get labelled and this labelling can take a friendly or hostile form. Of the two mobile services now operating in Powys, the other, an information service which travels mostly to schools these days based in the north is described as ‘the sex bus’ or more recently, as mentioned elsewhere, ‘the condom van’. The Children’s Society worker who runs a mobile drug information service said that young people say to him “you’re the ‘drug man’ aren’t you?”

Lack of anonymity can also be a problem for mobile services. Two of the projects who didn’t find this the case were the Children’s Society worker who operates a drug information mobile service and the mobile foyer in Skipton. In the first case this may be because the Children’s Society mobile targets groups of young people who collect informally and does not necessarily return to the same place again. A random service, partly because it depends upon the help of volunteers
and partly because the van could break down and let young people down if it was expected. It does not make regular visits to any specific location. In the second case, the mobile foyer in Skipton found that people were not averse to them in the villages. This was largely to do with groundwork they had carried out with the churches with whom they have a good relationship. “We’ve got it in all the church magazines so people know who we are and they’re not afraid of us”. This background work with local communities would seem to be essential.

The worker from the North of Powys described how the van they used was very small and this meant that it was impossible to get a confidential conversation. Young people’s inability to find someone they can talk to without fear of the conversation being relayed to their parents or becoming common knowledge is problematic. But ‘the drug man’ said: “We try to avoid confidential conversations. In a way all conversations are confidential”. This is because they don’t ask young people for their names.

Lack of access to confidential services means that young people in rural areas tend to internalise their difficulties - an issue mentioned by more than one rural worker. This internalisation of problems and its potential as a cause for running away in the future was also identified as serious issues post the Foot and Mouth Crisis. In the case of the mobile foyer this is combated by actually taking the young people to a drop-in centre associated with the foyer in Skipton and returning them later to their village by bus. Another way is to have a big enough vehicle which incorporates both seating for travel and meeting space. This happens in the South West Rural Project Shropshire where they have an old removal van for one project and a converted bus, with seats in the front and coffee area to the rear for another. The youth leader who runs the bus said that the pros were: “You can move it around. As soon as young people got used to it they were happy to go to Chester and were open to moving around the country”. They operate this service five nights a week. But the cons were: “It’s quite small. Fifteen packs it out. It takes quite a lot of running – tax, MOTs, generator, electric system, gas system. Damage could have the vehicle off the road for two or three months. You can’t have pool tables or table tennis. It’s a sit and chat kind of thing”. Disruptive young people tend not to access the bus… “It isn’t easy to have a confidential conversation on the bus but if a young person says they want to talk to you, you can step outside and have a chat. Its not a good idea to have a specific confidential area anyway as it marks people out.”

This was not the only mobile worker who mentioned the difficulty of the van being off the road for repairs. This can leave young people without a service for some length of time. The Children’s Society worker added to this the fact that they depend upon volunteers and this is one of the reasons why they do not make a commitment to be in a regular place at a regular time. He said that one of the cons of a mobile service was that “you do less work on foot” and “unless the group is clearly visible you could be missing people in winter. You get a bit reliant on the bus itself. One idea is to go into an area and have mountain bikes
in the back of the van. There are lots of times when kids don’t hang around in car parks. They might go down by the river”. This is especially the case where village life, as has been implied earlier means being under constant surveillance.

Most of the mobile services targeted schools on occasion. One mobile in mid-Wales was having problems negotiating with the school head for access. This was because there was concern about the information younger children might be getting from it about sex.

The idea of the workers being the resource themselves was highlighted by a project leader from the Isle of Wight who had visited Finland and had seen the work of some street work projects there. She suggests that because they have a problem with young people on the streets:

They have a bus and all the youth workers wear like padded jackets so people like recognise them. And the buses go out into little areas in the town and they do like a…they walk in a specific area and then they’ll meet back at the centre.

This idea of identifiability exacerbates the problem of lack of anonymity in a rural area. But at the same time, where the workers are acting as the resource itself, identifiable clothing offers a degree of safety. This recognisability would be especially valuable where a young person is being picked up by a worker in a rural area at night.

The importance of working in partnership
A number of participants in the supplementary interviews mentioned the importance of working in partnership in a rural area. For instance a senior YMCA worker suggested he had found, in the case of working in rural mid Wales, working in partnership with the Children’s Society and others was extremely beneficial

Working together we seemed to achieve a hell of a lot more than we did working against each other... because of the smallness of the population etc I work in very close partnership with all sorts of people. It’s a different way of working than in South Wales where you can actually set something up and its yours.

A Children’s Society Project leader in Mid-Wales saw her project as working in partnership to build amenities in the current funding situation. The team works in partnership and they apply in the name of the group for funding and go for lottery money, trust funds and other kinds of financial support. They worked together with the YMCA and others on a youth centre and cyber café in Llandrindod Wells. Another Children’s Society project leader said that to respond to the issue of young people who run away in rural areas
…which happens sporadically in ones and twos and in different communities…to respond to this kind of issue…it would have to have a broader geographical focus with the capacity to pick up on work that other people are generating. So it would be much more in the partnership model than we would normally have.

Another Children’s Society project with a preventative focus works in a rural area in partnership with various housing associations. They “get them into schools to go through the whole issue of leaving home and what it’s like to leave home and the problems and the difficulties and challenges and ‘think before you jump’ kind of thing”.

**Recommendations:**

**Challenging the Rural Myth**

Literature and participants suggest that urban romantic expectations of rurality contribute to the social exclusion of young people in rural areas by influencing policy decisions and funding to rural projects. How far should the rural myth be challenged head-on? Should young people be removed from rural situations – or should their difficulties be addressed within the rural situation? It does not appear that there is one specific way of dealing with this. The challenge cannot be instigated through one-to-one work with vulnerable young people. There are other ways of challenging the rural myth and various kinds of projects are required both rural and urban, which address the different kinds of needs experienced by young people from rural areas.

A number of approaches are possible which should take the situation and context of the young person into account. Confrontation, education and raising awareness of those involved in local and national policy and provision takes place through systemic advocacy and the kinds of work in which Children’s Society projects engage in rural areas and the insights of Children’s Society rural workers deserve to be given a higher profile. There needs to be a conspicuous campaign to inform policy makers of the issues. Within rural areas community relations exercises such as the groundwork in which the YMCA engages with the Yorkshire Dales churches help to smooth the way for interventions in the villages where some residents might otherwise feel threatened by schemes that aim to assist young people.

**The systemic approach only goes so far**

The systemic approach, although important in rural areas, has its limitations. It is clearly a necessary part of building an improved service for young people who are at risk of running away or who are forced to leave home. It is also an important part of the groundwork necessary to working in partnership as well as contributing to a holistic approach. Nevertheless, on its own it can still leave young people without the face-to-face services they really need and devoid of access to the confidential services with which they can feel confident. This
leaves them in the situation of bottling up their difficulties. They need access to an ‘outsider’ whom they can trust. Because the appropriate workers are otherwise engaged (working with professionals rather than with young people) it can deny young people contact with the very workers who have the particular skills which make them most able to work with young people who find themselves on the margins.

**Core Funding and stability**
Core funding of work with young people who run away or who are at risk of running away in rural areas is essential if these young people are not to be left without assistance. Where replacement funding is not found lottery funding can lead to services which are short-lived. The work of volunteers is important to projects but a reliance on the altruism of volunteers who have other commitments can lead to services being unreliable and intermittent.

**Preventative measures**
Preventative measures such as those organised by Craven Foyer, picking young people up in villages and taking them to places where they can access computers, advice and each other combats isolation. The provision of evening transport gives these young people the opportunity to socialise with their peers from outside their direct vicinity. This offers choice in relationships and the chance for confidential conversation away from the village setting. Internet access offers alternative ways of gaining access to information and other people. A mobile with a youth computer service is an interesting idea in this respect. But it would of course have the problems associated with vehicle maintenance, parking etc. Computer access proved to be something a lifesaver during the FMD crisis for some Young Farmers who had acquired computer skills and who had computer access. The development of Internet access schemes for isolated young people is an important way forward.

**Continuing to work in partnership**
Project workers emphasised the importance of working in partnership in rural areas. This is of even greater importance in a rural environment because of the lack of resources and the kinds of funding that are drawn upon. But partnership is clearly not without its problems as illustrated by the comments of the Women’s Refuge worker, where the criteria for funding meant that the refuge they ended up with was not as appropriate to local needs as it might have been and ultimately caused some community resentment.

**Staff who are informed on rural perspectives**
It is evident that in order to combat social exclusion a rural project needs to be staffed by workers who are well-versed in rural issues because differences between countryside and city living are not always apparent to urban dwellers. As mentioned above, young people from rural areas can be excluded from resources by urban beliefs about rurality.
**Add-on services**

One possible way of developing services for young people who run away in rural areas is as add-on services to already established projects such as the mobile drug information services. There is (as is suggested by findings for *Still Running*) overlap between young people who use drugs, who absent themselves or are excluded from school and who run away. The project worker who runs the mobile drug information service suggested, “The idea of runaways we’ll be targeting more and more. It is quite easy for us to have a provision”. This may well be true as these projects have established connections with young people and a mobile outreach service already in existence. But he could also see the difficulties: “You need to be careful if your obligations are that you have to find a place of safety.” To avoid this situation of being perceived as having some kind of policing role or as a kind of ‘child catcher’ the add-on would have to be part of a larger network of provision which might involve alternative ways of doing refuge work.

**Refuge ideas**

A rural refuge in terms of a highly resourced building and staff team would not be cost effective in terms of the numbers of young people who would need it in any given rural area. Such a provision would absorb resources into one specific rural area and would be at risk through lack of anonymity. A mobile refuge – literally on wheels – on the other hand, would be too unreliable, too small, too visible and basically, no one would want it parked near their front door. Two alternatives are the ‘mobile’ refuge in a town or the dispersed refuge in rural areas.

**‘Mobile’ refuge in a town**

Where at the outset we had thought a mobile service most appropriate it maybe that a refuge in a town in the Midlands (for instance) which could serve a number of rural areas would be more useful in terms of serving more young people. Where we had initially thought that young people should remain in the rural areas in which they have lived, the interviews suggest that the respite of anonymity might be helpful. The refuge could be mobile in the same sense as the Craven YMCA project in that project workers could transport the young person to the refuge. This obviously needs staff who are sympathetic to the young person’s plight and able to deal effectively with the situation and these could perhaps be sessional workers attached to already existent schemes. This would be a way of offering cover to a number of rural areas. One possibility would be to carry out a pilot with North Yorkshire or some other rural area in association with the Safe House in Leeds. As suggested by two supplementary interviewees, lack of resources in rural areas may mean that it is necessary to place young people with complex needs in a more highly populated area where there are support services and where they are not being set up to fail.

**The dispersed/invisible refuge**

To remove young people from their rural area will not always be appropriate. The idea of the Children Society project workers (sessional workers as in the
Torbay model) being the refuge *themselves* is appealing. This is like an invisible refuge. There is no particular reason why the workers involved would have to use a B&B as they do in Torbay. They could utilise whatever situation is most appropriate to the particular needs of the young person. This might be to foster parents who are willing to act as refuge, to a B&B where groundwork has been done or to a crash pad back at the project. This gives flexibility in responding to young people’s particular needs. Some young people might prefer to be away from a family situation for instance. The workers would be sessional and brought in to stay with the young person for the night but the intensive work would take place back at the centre, as is the case in the Torbay plan.

*The Foot and Mouth Epidemic*

This report needs to be read with recognition of the devastation caused to many rural people’s lives through the FMD crisis. Contributors from the Rural Stress Information Network described how during the spring and summer of 2001 hundreds of farming families were marooned in their farms for periods of two to three months. No one could enter and no one could leave. As a consequence school attendance plummeted in rural areas. Families lived on food parcels and some had to send their children away as they were not able to afford to support them. The dynamics of many traditional farming families changed with women becoming the main breadwinners and this sometimes resulted in family strife. The Director of the RSIN described how children saw the pyres, the palls of smoke and witnessed their parent’s despair. Another interviewee described the situation of the children who “saw the vets and the inspection. They saw the anxiety of their parents, saw tempers frayed, some saw the stock being slaughtered. Many farms and parents sent children away but imagine Monday 9 a.m. there are 300 sheep and 100 cattle - by 3 p.m. they are all in the yard dead.” The informant described how his own cattle were slaughtered and left for 3 weeks. The animal corpses were “Outside someone’s bedroom window rotting. This could well be a form of emotional torture for these children.”

The project worker suggested that children have subsequently been bullied on their return to school. He described the comparative poverty of the farm children compared to “other children whose father is a computer programmer”. Also there was strife between farming children at school—other children saying “it’s because of your father that our animals died.” The greatest concern of these Rural Stress workers was the future and how it will affect these children as they grow. The Director pointed out that many children might be blaming themselves—thinking that if they hadn’t brought something onto the farm their animals may not have been infected. They internalise these fears and sense of guilt and have no one to talk to about them. The Director of RSIN suggested that when they reach 15 or 16 some of the children who were subjected to the effects of this epidemic may well run away.
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1 Since these interviews The Children’s Society has announced its withdrawal from its work in Wales by July 2002.

2 Since this suggestion was written the Safe House in Leeds closed in September 2000.