Review of South Coast Runaways Initiative’s Experience of Establishing a Flexible Refuge in Torquay

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Introduction

This report describes a review of the experiences of South Coast Runaways Initiative (SCRI) of establishing a flexible refuge in Torquay. In order to provide background and context to the flexible refuge in Torquay, this introductory section begins with an outline of running away and the national context and then moves on to address the concept of refuge, including the different forms of refuge, and provide a brief history of refuge provision. A description of the flexible refuge in Torquay then follows. The introduction ends with the aims of the review and an outline of the methods used to carry out the review of SCRI’s experience of establishing a flexible refuge in Torquay.

Running away and the national context

The term ‘running away’ in the UK is used to describe situations where children and young people under the age of sixteen have chosen to leave home, are staying away from home without parental permission or have been forced to leave home by parents or carers.

The issue of children and young people under the age of sixteen running away began to be recognised by agencies in London in the 1980s. This led to The Children’s Society establishing the first refuge for runaways in the UK and then, subsequently, Section 51 of the Children Act 1989 which made legal provisions for such refuges. Throughout the early 1990s, several further refuges were established in England and Wales alongside the development of other practice responses to the needs of children and young people on the streets. The 1990s also saw a number of research reports issues relating to running away amongst under-16s. 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 sixteen and that there are 129,000 overnight running away incidents each year in the UK.

As a consequence of the interest generated by the above developments, the Social Exclusion Unit highlighted running away as one of its priority areas. An initial report based upon findings from existing research (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) was followed by a major consultation exercise which, in turn, lead to a second publication recommending policy and practice frameworks to develop national and local strategies to address the needs of young runaways (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Following the publication of this report, the Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU) announced funding to provide short-term opportunities to pilot a range of
innovative responses to running away which resulted in twenty projects working closely with young people and a further seven initiatives which did not involve direct practice.

At the end of 2003, the CYPU ceased to exist and responsibility for programmes relating to running away transferred to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Funding from the Choice Protects grant for each of the years 2004/05 and 2005/06 was made available to support a pilot programme to establish community-based refuges. The aim of these community-based refuges was to provide immediate safety and other services for young people who run away from home or care by providing accessible overnight accommodation alongside direct support for young runaways and their families that meets needs and prevents further episodes of running away. The South Coast Runaways Initiative was one of five applicants who were successful with their bid and received acceptance of their tender.

**Refuge**

In its broadest sense, refuge describes any place that offers shelter or protection from danger or trouble and refuge can be an identifiable building or a location where an individual knows they will be safe. In relation to young runaways, refuge is for children and young people under the age of sixteen who have run away, been thrown out or on the streets for any other reasons and are vulnerable or at risk of harm either because of their own actions or those of others.

Refuges were made legal, and operate under, Section 51 of The Children Act 1989 which protects refuge projects from prosecution of “harbouring” a young runaway and applies to - a service that is established to operate solely as a refuge; registered children’s homes operating as a refuge; and to foster carers providing refuge. This section of The Children Act overrides the requirement for the person who has parental responsibility for a child to give consent when a child stays away overnight. Section 51 of The Children Act 1989 maintains provision of young people who are in need of a safe place to stay for up to fourteen days when a child is deemed at risk of significant harm. It is also necessary for a refuge to meet National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes (Department of Health, 2002).

An important feature of refuge is that children and young people can directly access refuge. Whilst this access is commonly mediated by the young person who may self-refer through a freephone telephone number or with the assistance of another agency, a child or young person is also able to access refuge without assistance from other agencies.

Refuge is not the only option for children in need of safe emergency accommodation. Where a parent can be contacted and gives consent, a local authority can accommodate a runaway under Section 20 of The Children Act 1989. Under Section 21 of this Act, all local authorities have a duty to make accommodation available for children who are placed under police protection (Section 46 of The Children Act 1989) which can last for up to 72 hours. Under Section 44 of the same Act, local authorities also have the power to apply for emergency accommodation orders if they need to look after a child at short notice, or following a period of police protection, where there is evidence that a child may be at risk.

To highlight the fundamental differences between refuge and emergency accommodation:

- there is provision for refuge to accommodate a child or young person without parental consent for up to fourteen days
• a child or young person can self refer and obtain direct access to refuge without involvement from other agencies

**Distinguishing between different forms of refuge**

The term ‘refuge’ is used to describe both fixed and flexible refuges.

Fixed refuge refers to a model of refuge where the refuge is in a fixed confidential location in a building that operates solely as a refuge 24 hours a day and where all work with a child or young person takes place. Fixed refuge is usually located in an urban area where there is likely to be a large population base and thus significant demand for refuge.

The term ‘flexible refuge’ is used to describe the two other forms of refuge that are not open twenty-four hours a day but respond to demand by providing refuge when a child or young person is identified as being in need of refuge. Foster care and crash pad models are therefore examples of flexible refuge.

The foster care model is where accommodation is provided for young runaways in the home of adults who have received training to enable them to provide high quality support to runaways. Foster carers may be those in the employment of Social Services or may operate in a system outside of that provided by Social Services. Whilst the foster carer provides a caring role to meet the child or young person’s physical and practical needs, focused problem-solving type work is carried outside of the foster placement by, for example, project workers or social workers.

The term ‘crash pad’ is often used to describe a model where the refuge is linked to a project and/or office base that provides general support for young runaways.

**A brief history of refuge provision in the UK**


From 2004 to 2006 the DfES funded six pilot community-based refuge schemes for young runaways. Two of these, the flexible refuge in Torquay and the London Refuge, are registered refuges and four are projects focused on building capacity within local authority accommodation in County Durham, Bradford, Liverpool and Leicestershire. DfES funding for these projects came to an end in March 2006.

At present there are three refuges in the UK – the London refuge which has six beds; a three bed refuge in Glasgow provided by Aberlour; and the one bed flexible refuge in Torquay provided by The Children’s Society. Safe at Last in South Yorkshire are also presently in the process of developing a two bed flexible refuge.
The flexible refuge in Torquay

The refuge in Torquay is a flexible refuge. There is provision for one child or young person to stay at a time for a maximum of four nights. The flexible refuge is staffed by a part-time Registered Manager and by sessional workers when a child or young person is in refuge. Whilst a child or young person is in refuge, they are provided with access to advice and support to address the circumstances and the reasons why they ran away. A Key Worker is allocated to each young person in refuge who co-ordinates and takes a lead role in the child or young person’s planning and provides other support such as advocacy and making referrals. Personal Action Plans are completed with children and young people whilst in refuge to meet their needs to work towards identified outcomes. Case work is undertaken that will often include mediation with parents or carers to reconcile the child or young person with parents or carers and explore the possibility of a safe return home. If this is not possible or appropriate, work is undertaken to divert the child or young person to other suitable services or accommodation. When this is the case, refuge staff support the child or young person to live elsewhere and maintain a positive relationship with their family. Internal referrals are also made to Checkpoint to address other issues in a child or young person’s life and this involvement may well continue after the child or young person has left refuge.

The review

In 2005 The Children’s Society’s Research Unit was approached by SCRI with a view to undertaking a review of the process of establishing a flexible refuge in Torquay.

The purpose of the review was to explore the processes and outcomes of the above work in order to identify learning which:

- can be used by SCRI to improve its own practice
- can be of wider use in promoting the development of community based emergency accommodation for young runaways

Aims of the review

The aims of the review were to:

- capture the process of establishing a flexible refuge, identifying any issues that arose throughout this process;
- consider the distinctive use of flexible refuge and the potential for change it can offer;
- assess the strengths and weaknesses of running a flexible refuge;
- consider the role of Registered Manager;
- assess potential outcomes for young people using the refuge;
- assess how the flexible refuge meets local need and fits with existing service provision.

Methods

There were four main elements to the methodology for the review:
1. In-depth telephone interviews with key project staff and external professionals

2. Questionnaire surveys for SCRI project staff

3. Questionnaire surveys for sessional staff employed to work at the refuge

4. Review of relevant literature

**In-depth interviews with key project staff and external professionals**

Three in-depth telephone interviews were carried out with project staff who have been closely involved with the establishment of the flexible refuge and with three external professionals who worked closely with SCRI to develop the flexible refuge in Torquay.

These interviews covered issues such as views upon strengths and weaknesses of refuge, partnership working, fit with local services, potential outcomes for young runaways, the role of Registered Manager and other operational issues.

**Questionnaire survey**

Questionnaire surveys were sent out both to SCRI project staff and to sessional workers employed to work in the refuge.

The questionnaire survey for project staff focused on such issues as the impact of developing the refuge upon other work, the role of the registered manager, the potential for refuge to provide change for young runaways in Torbay, strengths and weaknesses of running a refuge and the fit of refuge into overall service provision for young runaways.

The questionnaire survey for sessional workers focused upon the recruitment process, training, levels of understanding of running away, the role of the registered manager, the potential impact of the refuge, strengths and weaknesses of refuge and factors that have impacted upon the fit of refuge into overall service provision.

**Review of literature**

This element of the review focused upon research and policy documents.

**Structure of the report**

The remainder of the report focuses upon findings from the review, focusing upon – the strengths and weaknesses of refuge; the role of Registered Manager; identifying those factors that facilitated and hindered development of the flexible refuge; and how the flexible refuge meets local need and fits with existing services. The report ends with concluding comments and a summary of the main findings of the review.
Findings of the review

Contributors to the review were very positive about the establishment of a flexible refuge in Torquay. There was, however, acknowledgement that the flexible refuge model has both strengths and weaknesses and that it was important to address those areas of weakness through learning from practice and evaluation.

A number of the strengths and weaknesses of flexible refuge are also common to fixed refuge. In order to contextualise the strengths and weakness of the flexible refuge in Torquay, it is useful to consider the merits and drawbacks of the concept of refuge and make some comparisons with non-refuge emergency accommodation. The discussion will then move on to address the strengths and weaknesses of flexible refuge in comparison to fixed refuge, and, lastly, discuss these in relation to the flexible refuge in Torquay.

Strengths of refuge

The concept of refuge was developed to both protect and meet the needs of children and young people who run away. Evidence from both practice and research has revealed how refuge can:

“offer instantly accessible and tangible services to young people which can prevent their exposure to the difficulties and risks of spending time ‘on the streets’, while helping them to try to resolve the issues that led to them running away in the first place.” (Rees, 2001; 20.)

A recognised and important strength of refuge is its ability to provide a safety net for young runaways. As one contributor to the review explained, refuge:

“saves young runaways from getting into very dangerous situations. For the small number of young runaways who are at significant risk, refuge provides the space and time to think through their options and make an informed decision, maybe a more positive one than might have been made had they not been offered refuge.”

Alongside the tangible strengths of refuge highlighted above, contributors to the review also highlighted the importance of refuge as a place that enables a young person to calm down. This strength of refuge was highlighted by young people who were consulted with and described what they would like most to receive from refuge:
“They [young people] didn’t want to be overwhelmed with support but just wanted somewhere quiet to think through what they were going to do …… If you are on the streets or hanging round with your friends without any adult role models who are talking about your choices in an objective way, you can’t think straight; particularly if you are hungry and you don’t know where your next meal or roof is coming from. You’re upset; you don’t know what your parents think because your credit has run out on your mobile and you haven’t spoken to them; you can’t think straight. Hopefully [being in refuge] allows that process to start happening.”

Refuge also provides a gap in services for young people who are unable to remain at home and offers a more appropriate option than would otherwise exist:

“As Council and Social Service departments clamp down on the number of young people in B&Bs, it will give runaways the opportunity to get a safe place to stay with the support they need to go home – rather than being isolated in a hotel or sofa surfing at friends’ with no real resolution to their problem.”

“It is wonderful that we now have the option of placing a young person in a safe environment where work supporting their needs can take place within a given timescale.”

Refuge can provide a structured approach to working with a child or young person which, in turn, both addresses the needs of children and young people and may enable positive outcomes. For example, the flexible refuge in Torquay, as was the practice in previous refuges undertakes Personal Action Plans with young runaways whilst they are in the refuge. As described earlier in the report, Personal Action Plans are completed with a child or young person in refuge and enable a structured approach to be taken to meet their needs. This tool directs the child or young person themselves, refuge staff, project staff and external agencies to focus upon desired outcomes, working on a number of levels alongside reinforcing the responsibilities of involved agencies to respond speedily to the needs of the child or young person and work towards identified outcomes.

The strengths of refuge ensure that it can act as the platform for both short-term interventions to address the issues that lead to a child or young person running away and as a means of facilitating a safe and speedy return from where they ran (Rees, 2001; 27).

**Weaknesses of refuge**

As the concept of refuge presently stands, there are a number of weaknesses of the model which are discussed below. There have also been concerns raised about the cost of providing refuge as it has been identified as resource-intensive in terms both of development and operation. This issue is also addressed in the later section comparing flexible and fixed refuge.

Past experience has revealed that staffing a refuge can be difficult; this has been the case for both fixed and flexible refuge. This is also discussed further in the section comparing fixed and flexible refuge.
Refuge is recognised as taking a significant amount of time to develop. Experience from practice (Rees, 2001; 27) has shown that it can take up to two years to develop and register a refuge and this was confirmed by the experience in Torquay.

Practitioners have highlighted how providing refuge to a child or young person can sometimes slow down the responses of other agencies and that when refuge is not available, a speedier response from agencies has been witnessed (Ibid, 24.). Particular issues have been identified when a child or young person is accommodated by the local authority or when admission into substitute care is an appropriate response (Ibid.).

There are some groups of children and young people for which refuge, as it presently stands, may not appropriate for a number of reasons. For example, detached runaways – those away from home for longer periods of time who do not access formal systems of support – may find it difficult to adhere to the structured approach of refuge and conventional approaches of interventions (Smeaton, 2005; 23) and may feel restricted by all forms of refuge as they presently exist.

The suitability of refuge for BME children and young people has also been questioned but experience has revealed that BME children and young people do access refuge and that measures can be adopted to assure BME children and young people that refuge is a safe form of emergency accommodation. To avoid discrimination and bullying or any other form of abuse, refuge should be promoted as being for all children and young people reinforced by a safe environment in refuge where it is made explicitly that any form of prejudice, including racism and homophobia, will not be tolerated.

As a concept, refuge therefore holds a number of strengths and weaknesses. However it is important to acknowledge the important contribution refuge can make to a network of emergency accommodation for young runaways. Whilst local authority emergency accommodation is a vital part of building a safe network of safe emergency accommodation for children and young people, it is recognised that some children and young people are suspicious or frightened, for whatever reason, of services provided by the local authority. Refuge provided by voluntary-sector organisations offers a more attractive option for some children and young people. Refuge is also able to offer high degrees of anonymity and confidentiality which is important to those children and young people in highly dangerous situations who have a genuine fear that they may be tracked down by people intent upon harming them. The self-referring aspect of refuge that does not require the involvement of other agencies is also highly attractive to many children and young people. Learning from practice and research has shown that where children and young people can self-refer, interventions are likely to be more successful (Rees et al, 2005; 61).

**Strengths and weaknesses of flexible refuge in comparison with fixed refuge**

In the past, flexible models of refuge were viewed as being more cost effective than fixed refuge, though practice has revealed less differences in cost than may be assumed (Rees, 2001; 27). It is also important to consider, alongside costs, the counterbalancing strengths and weaknesses of, for example, benefits to children and young people and operational issues (Ibid.). Future evaluation of refuges currently in operation, such as the Glasgow refuge and the
flexible refuge in Torquay, will generate useful learning about managing costs and ensuring an effective service is maintained to children and young people.

Maintaining a twenty-four hour emergency resource is problematic for both fixed and flexible refuge. In a fixed refuge, managing staff rotas is a time-consuming and difficult task for management (Ibid, 21). When sessional workers are used, or foster carers provide refuge in a flexible model, there are a number of issues relating to recruiting, training and maintaining a body of staff. Past experiences has revealed that, in flexible refuge, there are times when there is an insufficient body of staff to provide refuge for a child or young person.

A fixed refuge is easier to operate than a flexible refuge, largely because all of the support needs of the child or young person are met in one location and by project workers who are able to support and work with a child on site.

However, there are drawbacks of groups of children and young people living together in one location. Evidence from practice has revealed that issues can arise from having groups of children and young people that can have a significant impact upon staff resources to deal with group dynamics (Ibid, 22). A further drawback is the possibility that the diversity of children and young people using refuge may result in children and young people being introduced to new and risky activities by other children and young people (Smeaton and Rees, 2004; 17).

As noted by Rees, these risks may be counterbalanced by:

‘the potential for mutually supportive relationships between young people with common experiences.’ (Rees, 2001; 22.)

A dispersed model of flexible refuge such as accommodation provided by foster carers avoids some of the potential drawbacks of communal living as only one child or a young person at a time would be placed in a foster placement. It is acknowledged that whilst some children and young people would benefit from a foster placement, for example, younger children or LGB young people who may not approach a refuge for fear of intimidation and would feel safer in a family home than in a refuge, there are some children and young people for whom a placement in a family home would not be appropriate. This point highlights how different forms of refuge may more appropriate for some sub-groups of children and young people than for others.

Strengths and weaknesses of the flexible refuge in Torquay

Strengths of the flexible refuge in Torquay

1. Providing safe accommodation for young runaways in the area

The flexible refuge in Torquay fulfils the fundamental function of refuge by providing somewhere safe and confidential for young runaways to stay, thereby minimising or preventing risk of harm from both the place the child or young person ran away from and/or the place they would otherwise have run to.
2. The avoidance of children and young people being introduced to new risky behaviours

Whilst it may be argued that the flexible refuge in Torquay is limited as it is only able to accommodate one child or young person at a time, there are a number of strengths that arise from this potential limitation, namely the avoidance of children and young people being introduced to new and risky behaviours and of potentially being intimidated by other children and young people in refuge.

3. Targeting resources upon the needs of individual children and young people

An additional benefit to the flexible refuge accommodating only one child or young person at a time is that refuge resources can be targeted upon meeting the sole needs of that child or young person.

4. Benefits of the location of the flexible refuge as part of SCRI and located in the same building as Checkpoint

In addition to the flexible refuge providing a positive resource for both young people and the community and a framework for addressing young people’s issues, there are also benefits stemming from the flexible refuge being part of SCRI and located in the same building as Checkpoint:

- A runaway can initially access the drop-in service, which may be less overwhelming for young people, before accessing refuge;
- The refuge is supported by a diverse staff team who are skilled and experienced at working with young runaways and are able to respond quickly and effectively to their needs;
- Because of the range of services and support offered by SCRI, continuity of support can be provided to the young person and there is ease of access to external services.

Weaknesses of the flexible refuge

1. Tensions of registering as a children’s home and operating as a refuge

A number of commentators to the review highlighted the lack of legislation relating to running a refuge as a weakness. A refuge has to be registered as a children’s home and fulfil requirements as outlined in the National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes and a number of tensions exist due to this when, by its very definition, a refuge operates in a distinct manner. A fundamental difference, for example, between refuge and a children’s home is that a child or young person is free to leave refuge at any time. There are also a number of policies outlined in the National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes that are suitable for a children’s home but not for refuge. One example is the medical policy which states as a requirement that if medication is necessary, parental consent is required. Clearly, in a refuge, this is not always possible. Other policies relevant for children’s homes but not refuges are policies relating to outdoor activities and procedures for a child or young person wishing to leave.
2. Staffing issues

Having learnt from past experiences and because of the recognition that there is likely to be a relatively low level of need for refuge in Torbay, a staffing system has been designed to ensure that costs remain as low as possible. However, staff at SCRI acknowledged that staffing a flexible refuge has been difficult. Whilst SCRI has been very fortunate in recruiting and retaining sessional staff, it has been very difficult to provide sessional staff with regular work whilst the refuge has been in operation. There is the potential that this will lead to some some sessional staff being lost. As a large amount of time was spent recruiting and training staff, and ensuring that the appropriate structures were set in place to support sessional staff who brought skills and expertise to the refuge, losing sessional staff would a distinct drawback. Because of the short notice available to sessional staff when a child or young person requires refuge, there is also a concern that it will not always be possible to organise workers to staff the refuge and meet the needs of children and young people. However, experience will reveal whether this concern has materialised or not.

3. Confidentiality and security

There are issues relating to confidentiality and security that may be problematic for any form of refuge. Children and young people have highlighted the importance of any refuge provision being in a secret location to ensure that runaways who seek refuge feel safe (Smeaton and Rees, 2004; 16). However past experience has revealed that it is often difficult to maintain the confidential location of refuge because word-of-mouth often plays a part in spreading the location of a refuge. This issue is particularly pertinent for a flexible refuge that exists as part of a project for young runaways. Whilst children and young people have identified a number of benefits of a refuge being part of a project that offers ease of accessibility, they have identified concerns that locating a refuge as part of a project causes concerns about safety and this may hinder young people’s willingness to access refuge (Ibid.). However, past learning has revealed that the majority of young runaways do not need the high level of confidentiality and security that refuge offers and that this would be an issue for the minority of runaways.

Concerns were also raised in relation to confidentiality and security when a young person was in the refuge as there are potential risks to both these issues stemming from the flexible refuge being located in the same building as Checkpoint which offers drop-in and other services to children and young people. The project team at SCRI are aware of the importance of providing a confidential and secure space for children and young people, for both those in refuge and those accessing other services provided by SCRI. A number of measures have been implemented to minimise any threats to confidentiality and security by, for example, installing a security card entry system in the refuge and ensuring that the refuge is completely self-contained when a child or young person is in refuge.

The role of Registered Manager

The role of Registered Manager is currently part of a dual role, the other part of this dual role being a Senior Practitioner for Checkpoint. The demands upon the Registered Manager of the flexible refuge have resulted in a disproportionate amount of time spent on one aspect of the overall service provided by Checkpoint. During the period of developing the refuge and its first
few months of operation, it was estimated that 80% of the time of the person with the role of registered manager was spent upon this element of her dual role, resulting in the other part of the role being neglected. Whilst it is recognised that some of this imbalance between the two functions of the dual role was because of the time needed to develop the flexible refuge which detracted from other work, there is recognition of the need for a separate registered manager whose sole role is to focus upon the refuge.

Other members of the staff team commented upon the complex nature of the role of Registered Manager:

“This seems like a complex and complicated job – like running a children’s home without the ongoing routine.”

It was also felt that there was some potential for tension around boundaries arising from achieving a balance between overseeing the work against direct involvement with young people that the role of Senior Practitioner involves.

Factors that facilitated the development of the flexible refuge in Torquay

Contributors to the review outlined the following factors that facilitated the development process and establishing the flexible refuge in Torquay:

1. Checkpoint as an established provider of services for young runaways
The first point relates to Checkpoint itself as the provider of refuge. Checkpoint has provided a service of young runaways in Torbay for fifteen years and is an established service for young runaways in the area which has amassed both skills and expertise in working with this group of children and young people and is regarded with credibility by both external agencies and children and young people. The commitment and expertise of project staff has been identified by external professionals as an important factor that facilitated the development of the flexible refuge.

2. A history of working towards developing a refuge in Torquay
The concept of flexible refuge is not a new one in Torquay. There has been a long history of discussions at a strategic level to establish a flexible refuge in Torquay. Prior to the bid being submitted to the DfES that led to the development of the flexible refuge, external agencies had worked together for some years to develop the concept of flexible refuge for Torquay and had also worked towards developing a protocol and polices addressing, for example, referral criteria and length of stay. This history meant that a good understanding of flexible refuge existed prior to a bid being put together for the DfES.

3. Consistency of key individuals at a strategic level
Linked to the previous point, there was also consistency relating to key individuals at a strategic level who were involved in discussions around establishing a refuge from the onset. These individuals remained committed to the concept of a flexible refuge and built a wealth of
knowledge around issues of importance when developing a flexible refuge. This consistency ensured that positive partnership working was sustained.

4. The willingness of Social Service to act as a joint partner
The willingness of Social Services to act as a joint partner in a bid to the DfES has clearly been an important factor that enabled the establishment of the flexible refuge in Torquay.

5. Prior existence of a missing person’s protocol
The prior existence of a missing person’s protocol between the Police, Social Services and the SCRI has also been identified as a facilitating factor. The development of the missing person’s protocol provided a good basis for further partnership working when it came to inter-agency working to develop the flexible refuge. The protocol itself has provided the tool to carry out further inter-agency communication. The implementation of the missing person’s protocol has yielded positive results as both the Police and Social Services have witnessed the lowering of numbers of children and young people going missing from care. As one of a number of consequences of this, there has been a reduction in the costs incurred of looking for a young person when they are missing.

6. Understanding of a child-centred approach
There have been other indirect benefits that have derived from developing and implementing the missing person’s protocol and its enactment has been borne out in very practical ways. For example, a child-centred approach is outlined in the protocol reinforced by a mutual understanding of where partner agencies stand in relation to a child-centred approach. External agencies are supportive of SCRI’s child-centred approach as there are provisos within the protocol for when, for example, a young person accesses refuge when there is a warrant for their arrest. On the few occasions when the Police have needed to speak to a young person at Checkpoint, the Police have contacted the project first to inform them of this need and have agreed to attend out of uniform.

7. Working in partnership
Positive partnership working has been a common thread throughout these points and has clearly played a very important part in facilitating the process of establishing the flexible refuge in Torquay. There are a number of examples of how positive partnership working has facilitated developing the flexible refuge. For example, positive partnership working has furthered understanding of the concept of flexible refuge and contributed to the willingness from external agencies to participate in a joint bid to the DfES. Good links with specific agencies have also resulted in positive outcomes. For example, the Police are aware that the service provided by Checkpoint makes their job easier in relation to young runaways. The Police are also aware of the impact of the work carried out at Checkpoint on reducing crime and, as mentioned in the above point, how the costs incurred when looking for a missing child or young person can be minimised when they know a child or young person is in refuge.
Factors hindering the process of establishing a flexible refuge in Torquay

Factors that hindered the process of establishing the flexible refuge in Torquay were also identified in the review:

1. **Timing of establishing the refuge in Torquay**
   In the past there have been some difficulties around timing. During the past five years there have been a number of points where SCRI thought that a refuge was able to be established and began to recruit staff etc only to have the process halted. There were, at times, reservations and some reluctance from SCRI staff about setting the wheels in motion to establish the refuge and to begin detailed discussions with partner agencies about policies and service agreements until there was absolute certainty that a refuge was going to be established.

2. **Length of time to develop a refuge**
   Contributors to the review also identified the length of time it took to develop and establish the refuge as a hindering factor. Although SCRI and a number of other agency professionals had been working towards developing a flexible refuge in Torquay for some time, other agencies, such as the Commission for Social Care and Inspection (CSCI), that played a part in the development process were not so familiar with the concept of flexible refuge. Whilst refuge differs from children’s homes in many respects as there are, as touched upon earlier in the report, distinct operational issues alongside different functions and objectives, refuge still needs to meet the statutory requirements outlined in the National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes. Whilst it is important to recognise that CSCI provides an inspection process of a system of checks and balances that ensures probity and transparency, alongside assessing whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them, CSCI’s expertise is in inspecting children’s homes and inspecting a flexible refuge was a novel concept for the representatives from CSCI to work with. Broadly speaking, it took time to develop the concept of flexible refuge within existing structures and support and this impacted upon the timescale that it took to develop the flexible refuge so that it could become operational.

3. **Tensions of meeting standards set for a children’s home and operating as a refuge**
   Developing further the point made in the above paragraph, the tensions of registering as a children’s home and operating as a refuge described earlier in the report as a weakness of flexible refuge were also described as a hindering factor in the process of establishing the refuge.

4. **The impact upon staff and services at Checkpoint**
   Because of the resources engaged in establishing the flexible refuge, there was an impact upon both staff and services at Checkpoint. For example, key project staff involved in developing the refuge were not able to allocate as much time to supporting other staff and being involved in the provision of other services provided by the project. There was also a sense that adhering to the necessary legal requirements overshadowed the rest of the project’s work. In addition to these issues, staff members of SCRI also identified a number of other factors that impinged negatively
on other services provided at Checkpoint. For example, project staff described how the building work carried out to adapt the building to include the flexible refuge had negative impacts:

"[It was] messy and noisy having the work done to the premises. [This] sometimes impacted on the ease of hearing young people or concentrating."

"Disruption by builders and loss of space."

Members of staff also commented how the refuge has taken space in the premises and this has reduced the spaces available for other parts of the project’s work such as rooms for counselling sessions.

5. Lack of understanding of the concept of flexible refuge
There was also some lack of understanding of the concept of flexible refuge, as a distinct form of refuge, and of what flexible refuge can achieve. Responding to this lack of understanding was both necessary and time-consuming, and resulted in a number of delays.

6. Changes of personnel in roles in partner agencies
The degree of changes in posts and roles within one partner agency has hindered sustaining partnership working. The degree of change meant that there was a need to keep building new relationships with representatives from partner agencies.

7. A lack of opportunity to work with social work practitioners to further understanding of the flexible refuge
Whilst managers from Social Services have been involved at a strategic level from the onset of the process of developing a refuge in Torquay, work was not carried out with social work practitioners in the development stages. Whilst social workers operating on the ground were aware that the refuge was being developed, no response was made from teams to offers for SCRI staff to go into teams and pass on information in relation to referral criteria and the general workings of the refuge. With hindsight, project staff have identified that it would have been greatly beneficial if they had been able to carry out work with social work practitioners in the development phase. It is, however, acknowledged that work will be carried out with social workers on an individual basis when a young person accommodated in the refuge is referred to social services or is already involved with social services.

8. Diverse approaches to child-centred working and its potential to a be a source of tension
At a strategic level, managers in external organisations are supportive of the child-centred approaches that SCRI adopts in its work with young people. However, this approach can, at times, cause tensions in day-to-day working with partner agencies. This tension was touched upon at points throughout the process of establishing the flexible refuge and is identified as continuing to be a source of difference throughout operation of the flexible refuge. There is also recognition between partners at a strategic level that there may well be occasions when SCRI are advocating that there should be interventions put in place with a young person from the local authority and that there may be disagreements about assessments and needs. It is also recognised that these issues can be translated into different discussions at ground level in
relation to an individual young person. Whilst there is an acceptance that Social Services view SCRI as providers of a useful service, there are sometimes different perceptions of what risks are involved and what appropriate action should be taken stemming from, in the opinion of SCRI project staff, being led by a child-centred perspective and the local authority being resources-led.

**Meeting local need and fit with existing services**

There was consensus amongst contributors to the review that the flexible refuge meets local need and fits with existing services in a number of ways:

1. There has been long standing agreement that there is no merit in having a fixed refuge in the Torquay as the number of young runaways does not warrant the expense. However, due to the existence of significant numbers of children and young people at risk in the area, a flexible refuge was identified as meeting local need.

2. The flexible refuge also fits and complements services provided by other agencies in the area as well as providing what was previously a gap in services.

3. The flexible refuge also fits with the services provided by Checkpoint who are now able to provide a comprehensive service for young runaways in Torquay. Prior to the existence of the flexible refuge, Checkpoint had been providing preventative work undertaken in schools, the direct work whilst a child or young person is missing and follow-up work when a child or young person returns home. A runaway who accesses the flexible refuge is now able to benefit from the holistic service that Checkpoint is able to offer.

4. The flexible refuge is able to meet a number of needs of young runaways. On a very basic but fundamental level, the flexible refuge provides a safe place where a child or young person is able to get a good meal, a good night’s sleep and the opportunity for the pace to calm down. In turn, this enables the child or young person to:
   - move from feeling scared to safe
   - establish order where there has been chaos
   - make more informed decisions leading to more positive outcomes
Concluding comments

The review of SCRI’s experience of establishing a flexible refuge in Torquay has offered an opportunity to consider the strengths and weaknesses of refuge in general and of flexible refuge in particular. Whilst both strengths and weaknesses have been identified, the flexible refuge in Torquay is able to meet the needs of young runaways in a holistic manner, reduce risk and achieve benefits for the whole community as witnessed by Social Services and the Police. It is important to maintain sight of this when considering other factors such as, for example, the costs involved and difficult operational issues.

A past history of partnership working between agencies to both discuss and establish a flexible refuge in Torquay meant that a high level of understanding existed between partner agencies when bidding to the DfES. However, this understanding of the concept of flexible refuge did not always extend to other individuals and agencies and there were examples of time being taken to work with others to further their understanding. This barrier specifically impacted upon time delays and working with CSCI to achieve registration of the refuge. The process of registering the flexible refuge as a children’s homes in accordance with National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes also revealed tensions between registering as a children’s home and operating as a refuge. There is therefore the need for The Children’s Society to work further with other organisations to improve understanding of the concept of flexible refuge, to clearly outline how a refuge for children and young people differs from a children’s home and that, subsequently, there are some different aims and operational issues.

The extent of partnership working played a very positive role in the process of developing the flexible refuge in Torquay. This was facilitated by a consistency of key individuals at a strategic level and by prior partnership working to develop a missing person’s protocol. As a result of this process, partner agencies had experienced the benefits of targeting resources to work collaboratively to address running away. However it has been recognised that changes in key personnel within partner agencies can have a negative impact upon the process of developing a refuge and that it is important to work with operational staff, as well as with managers at a strategic level, whilst developing a refuge.

Developing a refuge as part of an existing service can impact in significant ways on staff and other parts of the service. Therefore plans to develop a refuge should consider this issue and implement strategies to minimise the toll taken upon project staff and services.

There are a number of issues relating to staffing of the flexible refuge in Torquay. The first relates to the role of Registered Manager which is currently part of a dual role, the other part of the dual role being a Senior Practitioner for Checkpoint. The demands upon the registered
manager of the flexible refuge have resulted in a disproportionate amount of time spent on one aspect of the overall service provided by Checkpoint. Whilst some of this is because of the time needed to develop the flexible refuge, which detracted from other work, there is recognition of the need for a separate registered manager whose sole role is to focus on the refuge. The second issue relates to the reliance upon sessional staff when a child or young person is in refuge and the potential for the needs of a child or young person not to be met because of an inability to staff the refuge. To address this issue, there may be lessons from the forthcoming evaluation of the Glasgow refuge that has a flexible staffing system without a reliance upon sessional staff. There may also be other avenues for exploration such as, for example, combining a role for refuge staff that includes working with children and young people in refuge alongside outreach work.

Whilst it is indisputable that SCRI and Checkpoint, have a well-established reputation with children and young people in Torbay, the flexible refuge is a relatively new service and requires time to develop its reputation. Refuge projects have found that word-of-mouth recommendations amongst young people provide an important source of self-referral in the longer-term to raise awareness and credibility amongst young people. It is therefore important to, firstly, ensure that resources are allocated to the flexible refuge in Torquay to ensure that enough time is given for it to develop this credibility and that, secondly, there are opportunities to capture learning, evaluate and develop practice accordingly.
References


