Children who go missing from care

Briefing for joint inquiry by APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, and APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, May 2012

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Summary

Barnardo’s has a number of dedicated services to identify and support young people who go missing from home or from care. In addition, Barnardo’s also provides thirteen services which provide support both to sexually exploited children and young people and children who go missing. This briefing describes the work of these services and summarises the insights they have gathered into each stage of the process of working with children who go missing; from prevention and early intervention to identification and the subsequent response. Alongside highlighting a number of elements of best practice, including a practice model which has been developed by Barnardo’s and which has been commended by the Home Office, this briefing also identifies areas for development in the provision of services and support for children and young people who go missing from care.

Barnardo’s Services

Barnardo’s has a number of dedicated services to identify and support young people who go missing from home or from care. These services respond to reports of missing young people, contacting the young people when they return to offer help in addressing why they went missing and raising awareness of the risks and how to keep safe. Most of Barnardo’s sexual exploitation services also work with young people who go missing and will either provide specialist support directly or refer the young person to a Barnardo’s missing project. For example, the SCARPA project is a service provided by Barnardo’s and the Children’s Society in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to young people who have run away from home, or are at risk of being sexually exploited or trafficked. The dedicated missing services will also refer the young person to a Barnardo’s sexual exploitation service if they are thought to be at risk of that form of abuse. Barnardo’s services include:

- **Young Women’s Project, MissU, London** works to raise awareness about the risks for children who go missing from home or care. The service provides direct support to young people and families affected by missing episodes, return home interviews, and prevention group work. As well as reducing the rate of repeat missing episodes, of particular significance is the early identification of children at risk of sexual exploitation.
- **Barnardo’s Against Sexual Exploitation (BASE), Bristol** works with young people who are at risk of sexual exploitation or who are being sexually exploited. Bristol BASE also provides advice and information to young people
who run away from home. A rapid response, early intervention model is effective in reducing the incidence of repeat running away, enabling young people to address problems with family support rather than running away from them.

- **Turnaround Service, Bradford**, works together with young people aged 5-18 (21 if they have special needs) to increase their self-esteem, skills, resilience and knowledge around reducing the risks of sexual exploitation and going missing from home or care. The Service works closely with Police, Social Care, Connexions and other agencies and is funded by Bradford Council Transformation Fund.

- **Safe Choices, Northern Ireland** works with children and young people who go missing from care. An evaluation of the service was carried out in 2011 by Queen's University and this found the service to be effective in supporting young people and children who go missing from care and in its training programmes for professionals. It receives funding from Northern Ireland’s Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and works with approximately seventeen young people at any time.

- **Missing from Home Service, Middlesbrough**, works with children, young people and families to reduce missing from home and care. The service offers risk assessment and support to young people who have run away or are missing from home. It works with families to reduce conflict through mediation, prevent placement breakdown and youth homelessness thus reducing the risk of children and young people becoming subject to sexual exploitation and crime related issues.

- **R U Safe?, Buckinghamshire**, works with young women who are involved in sexual exploitation. The service also works closely with Thames Valley Police to provide a service to young people, aged between 11 to 18, who have returned after being reported missing. The R U Safe? Team also provides training and awareness raising sessions for multi-agency working with young people throughout Buckinghamshire. The service aims to promote professional awareness in identifying key risk indicators in young people, as well as planning appropriate and realistic support packages.

**Barnardo’s Practice Model**

Barnardo’s services are tailored to local contexts and circumstances, however all Barnardo’s services for children missing from home or care broadly mirror the best practice established by Barnardo’s Missing from Home Service in Middlesbrough. The Missing from Home Service in partnership with Cleveland Police and Middlesbrough Social Care Department developed a practice model to closely monitor and respond to children and young people who go missing from home or care. Originally it was intended to ensure that data for the National Indicator 71 was captured in a multi agency framework. Although NI 71 has now been abolished, this practice continues. Middlesbrough’s missing from home procedure and joint agency working practices have been recognised and commended by the Home Office. Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Crime and Security, James Brokenshire, visited Middlesbrough SECOS project in 2011 and described the missing from home work as “unique, groundbreaking and innovative.” It has the following features:

- The Service works in partnership with statutory and third sector agencies, referral pathways are embedded and are working efficiently, and a protocol

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1. Barnardo’s SECOS Project, Cleveland Police and partnership working with the Local Authority are referred to within the Home Office report: Missing Children and Adults, A Cross Government Strategy.
has been established whereby the Police refer direct to Barnardo’s Missing from Home Service.

- The Count, Think, React, Prevent model enables staff to monitor and collate information of the number of children and young people going missing from home or care specifically focusing on the top ten.
- A multi agency meeting has been established to focus on strategic issues, models of good practice and also ways in which to enhance the service delivery.
- All staff currently working for Barnardo’s Missing from Home service are trained in and have experience of using pre CAF and CAF. The team work closely with the CAF team in Middlesbrough and attend the CAF strategic Managers meeting.
- Barnardo’s has developed monitoring systems to ensure evaluation of the service is continuously carried out. Barnardo’s ensures that children young people and families are involved in the ongoing monitoring process.
- Barnardo’s has developed and utilises a clear Outcome Monitoring Framework (OMF) that is able to identify whether or not interventions achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and their families. The OMF are used by both professionals and service users to complete risk assessments and identify areas for change at the start of work. These are monitored and updated throughout the duration of the intervention whilst levels of risk continue to be assessed. The following areas are evaluated:
  - Assessing levels of risk (Safety and Health)
  - Improved School attendance
  - Reduction in repeat Missing from Education
  - Reduction in repeat Missing from Home incidents
  - Reduction in Criminal Behaviour
  - Reduction in Victimisation
  - Reduction in alcohol and/or drug consumption

- The evaluations are shared with schools, police and Social Care and other referrers to the project; the outcomes are distributed through the Annual report.

**Insights from each stage of the process**

Our services have accumulated a wealth of insight into children who go missing from care and how they are most effectively supported. A summary of these insights from each stage of the process are included below:

**Prevention and Early Intervention**

Whilst children and young people may run away in search of excitement, many run because of problems at home, personal problems and problems at school. Support to address underlying problems is required to prevent the child or young person from running away again. It is important therefore that the needs of young runaways are not seen in isolation.
In most respects, the needs of young people who run away are no different to those of other young people with complex personal and family difficulties. The most effective approach is to ensure that services are targeted at these vulnerable children and young people as early as possible.

In terms of preventative education, the young people most at risk of running away are those with multiple problems and are unlikely to be deterred from running away by a workshop in school. Some of the most vulnerable will not be accessed via school at all. However, services report that school education programmes which provide information and advice about what to do if young people are considering running away and where to go if they do run away, could be effective in reducing the risk of harm. Work in schools also has the benefit of raising the awareness of teachers and alerting them to those young people who may be at risk of running away.

**Identification**

Services report that there is an issue with effectively identifying risk among children in care because incidents of missing from care are over-reported. Often children who are pushing boundaries, staying out late, or overnight at a friends’ home without permission are categorised as ‘missing persons’. This is because social workers are concerned that they would be responsible if risk was underestimated. The high numbers of children reported as ‘missing persons’ means that finite resources are not targeted at those young people who are most at risk.

“Many of the missing reports we get from residential units are not real missing people, more absent without authority. The young people don’t come back on time but even know the unit may know where they are still report them as missing.”

“Children in care go missing because they feel a lack of freedom and that this is their way of taking back some control. They don’t go far, either go to their families or spend time with friends. They don’t want to feel left out of what is going on in their peer group.”

R U Safe? Buckinghamshire, Staff Member (2012).

During a pilot study of a Barnardo’s Young Runaways Project in Aberdeen, a protocol was developed for when a young person went missing from local authority accommodation. It used a traffic light basis (green, amber and red) and did not automatically require workers to alert the police in the first instance. The protocol was generally deemed a success in the beginning and the number of missing person reports decreased significantly. This allowed finite resources to be targeted at those young people who were most at risk. Over time, respondents indicated that it lost some of its impact as residential social workers tended to increasingly go for the ‘red light’ due to concerns that they would be responsible if risk was underestimated. To address this, the Young Runaways Service, in partnership with the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, conducted training days to make new staff aware of operational practice.

There needs to be improved use of the information on the prevalence and patterns of running away. Barnardo’s is aware that where effective data management occurs, children are more effectively identified and monitored using the Common Assessment Framework or other local risk assessment and referral systems.
Response

As the majority of referrals to specialist services are made by the police and social services, it is important that these agencies have a good understanding of the role of those specialist projects that do exist so that responses and referrals are as swift and effective as possible.

Services that respond rapidly and effectively to early incidents of running away can play an important role in preventing the escalation of underlying problems, disengagement from school, and other problematic behaviour such as offending. Where specialist projects exist, they have developed effective inter-agency arrangements, good information exchanges and effective links into ‘safeguarding’ and early identification of sexual exploitation issues.

However, some challenges have also been identified including:

- Difficulty engaging with the child. Young people who go missing often have chaotic lives and are therefore difficult to engage. They often feel they don’t need another person to talk to or do not see themselves as missing.
- Not enough independent return home interviews take place. There are advantages for a young person of having an independent professional with whom to discuss their reasons for running away, the risks of this occurring again and what could be done to reduce the risk. Each young person has their own reasons for running away so a detailed assessment is required to try to work with them. In evaluations of Barnardo’s joint sexual exploitation and missing services, young people and statutory services observe that young people are more likely to be open and forthcoming with independent professionals, rather than those who are with the police or even with social services.

Elements of best practice

Elements of practice which are considered particularly successful are:

- **Individual support packages and child-centred responses** – every child who runs away is different and is in need of different services of support, the best projects tailor packages of support to each individual and in conjunction with them. The importance of direct work with young people which is genuinely young person-centred is critical. The most effective projects give some time to listen to the young person’s own assessment of their situation and discuss with them the range of issues in their life. This gives services a better understanding of the circumstances leading to the young person running away and enables them to work with the young person in devising a realistic, applicable solution. Young people need to have choices about who is best to advise and support them; if they have run away from their care home, for example, social workers are often seen as ‘the enemy’. Mentoring, befriending and peer support are sometimes more likely to be effective.
- **Strong relationships between workers and runaways** – A recent evaluation of Barnardo’s Safe Choices, Northern Ireland Service found that the young people benefited from strong relationships with the workers at the service. Staff from the Safe Choices. Northern Ireland service were able to use a range of advanced and interpersonal counselling skills to develop empathy for the young people. This constituted the first building block in developing trust and formed the basis of successful interventions.
Multi-agency working – some projects have found the support and advice given to the project from Local Authorities and the willingness to answer questions about young people referred to the service has been immensely valuable and has fostered excellent multi-agency work.

LA/LSCB committed to prioritising this issue – identification of LSCB and Local Authority staff lead for the issue, along with the allocation of appropriate resource based upon assessment of need at a local level.

Partnership working with other runaway's agencies – some local projects have teamed up with national voluntary sector services which has meant, for example, that a national helpline can refer through to a local service and know that someone will be able to go out to the young person who has run away. Working with other runaway services has also encouraged best practice sharing locally.

Training for social workers – a recent evaluation of Barnardo's Safe Choice NI Service found that even the most experienced of social workers who work with children who go missing are still looking to develop the knowledge and skills that will allow them to intervene appropriately. In the evaluation of the Safe Choice Training programme, senior staff working in residential units commented favorably on the difference the training had made to staff practices within their units. As a consequence, some young people had been dissuaded from running away, whilst for others there was a reduction in both the rate of running and the risks they exposed themselves to when they ran away.

Ongoing support for social workers – just as valuable to social workers as initial training is ongoing support that specialist services can provide. Managers, senior residential staff and social workers commented positively on the support, guidance and advice given by staff at runaway services through formal meetings and phone calls. In some cases members of staff are given reassurance that they are doing the right thing, in others they are guided to take more appropriate action.

Areas for Development

Out of Hours Service – As a large proportion of young people run away at night and at weekends, response falls to the police and social services’ Emergency Duty Team (EDT) whose ability to respond varies as does the nature of the response. Specialist services have an important role to play in ensuring a consistent approach within their area, however, these specialist services are not always available.

Self Referrals – Levels of self referrals from young people to specialist services are generally low. It is unclear from the evidence available to what extent greater publicity and direct promotion would increase self-referrals. Helplines are one means of enabling direct access by young people, however, dedicated local helplines are unlikely to be cost-effective. Some projects have reported good links with the National Runaways Helpline, however, the effectiveness of these links is dependent upon local provision and working practices, particularly by EDTs.

Long-term responses – Most specialist runaway services offer immediate/crisis help and support the child returning home. However it was found that a number of cases required more than two visits in order to explore the issues that were uncovered and then further work was needed to involve other professionals in delivering a service to the runaway.

Next Steps
Barnardo’s would be delighted to host a visit from the APPG Inquiry to any one of our specialist services for children who run away.
Barnardo’s practitioners would also be happy to meet members of the Inquiry to give oral evidence.
For more information, please contact Eve Byrne, Parliamentary Officer, eve.byrne@barnardos.org.uk or 020 8498 7737.

Further Reading – Barnardo’s Research

- Missing in London: Meeting the needs of young people who run away, (2006) Julie Harris and Sara Scott
- Missing from Care in Staffordshire, (2006) Di McNeish and Sara Scott, a review of policy and practice in a local authority
- Meeting the needs of young people who go missing in West Yorkshire. A report for Connexions West Yorkshire, (2005) Helen Mills

All of the above are available at: www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/policy_research_unit/research_and_publications.htm
Summary

Since 2009, Barnardo’s has been piloting three projects which deliver direct support to trafficked children. These services provide us with an understanding of the challenges facing organisations on the ground and trafficked children themselves. Our experience has shown us that there is a shocking lack of awareness of child trafficking in the UK and consequently a national gap in appropriate specialist service provision and protection for trafficked children.

Going missing from care is a significant indicator of trafficking. Increasingly, the evidence shows us that specialist, protective accommodation is the only solution to helping trafficked children break contact with their traffickers and prevent re-victimisation. However, our services tell us that there is still insufficient specialist support and protective accommodation in place for victims of child trafficking across the UK.

Barnardo’s Services

- Barnardo’s has three trafficking services which were established in 2009 in London, Hampshire and Manchester.
- The pilot projects were established with a small grant (£50k between them) from the then Department for Children, Schools and Families. Since then they have been funded from voluntary funds.
- As well as direct work with children, they also provide awareness raising and training regarding child trafficking to local agencies including social care, health, police and immigration authorities, education, accommodation providers etc.
- In April 2011 Barnardo’s was successful in a bid for Department for Education funding (£1.4m over two years after which time the service must be self-sustaining) to establish a safe accommodation project for sexually exploited and trafficked children offering specialist, therapeutic foster care. By recruiting carers in areas where we have existing specialist services we are able to move children away from areas that put them at risk and break ties with traffickers / perpetrators, whilst also providing
them with key worker support. The project is being formally evaluated by University of Bedfordshire.

- Barnardo’s is pleased to have been invited, along with the NSPCC, to become a First Responder for referrals into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) which is enabling us to develop a more active role in the identification of trafficked children.

**Under identification of victims of child trafficking**

There is a significant under-identification of victims of child trafficking across the UK.\(^2\) Child trafficking is a hidden problem enhanced by the culture of disbelief and lack of awareness amongst members of the public and practitioners. As a consequence, children are put at risk in unsuitable accommodation rather than being given the specialist protection they need. Our services report that:

- Not enough enquiries under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 are taking place when required to develop a plan for the child’s immediate protection; including the supervision and monitoring of arrangements and agreement about what information can be given about the child to any enquirers.
- Social Workers are not sufficiently aware of how to identify & support trafficked young people.
- Social Workers frequently do not identify trafficking risk indicators and fail to refer to appropriate specialist support agencies.
- Barnardo’s experience is that all too often the effort appears concentrated on establishing a child’s age rather than ensuring their safety.
- Social work staff are unfamiliar with the requirements of immigration laws and give poor / no support to young people in their care.
- Social Work staff are unfamiliar with the NRM assessment and frequently submit forms with inadequate information.

As a consequence of this lack of awareness and under-identification of trafficked children, our services report that:

- Victims are placed in accommodation that does not offer them sufficient appropriate protection from their traffickers, for example into hotels or bed and breakfasts;
- even if victims are placed into care, they do not receive the specialist support they need to escape their exploiters and;
- often, trafficked children who come to the attention of the authorities, for example if they are arrested for criminal behaviour, are not identified as trafficked children but instead are put into the criminal justice system where they will continue to be at risk.

**Recommendations**

\(^2\)This was recognised in CEOP’s most recent assessment where the 202 children to have been identified as trafficked into and within the UK over the period 1 January 2011 to 15 September 2011 are clearly acknowledged as an under-estimate.
Social Work teams and professionals who come into contact with trafficked children should be trained to understand and confidently and effectively respond to their needs.

Safeguarding must be placed above all other considerations including age and immigration status by the authorities and frontline practitioners.

More must be done to ensure that young people at risk from trafficking are treated as vulnerable, that they are accommodated appropriately (accommodation that provides the level of supervision proportionate to the need to protect them), and that realistic safety plans are put in place.

Social Workers should be trained in the completion of trafficking assessments, trafficking matrix, age assessments and completion of NRMs.

In addition to the need for protection, the complexity of children's circumstances sets them apart as a distinct group in requiring a range of social and health services (specialist foster carers offering placements to trafficked children, support to overcome trauma, mental health services, treatment for physical and sexual maltreatment etc.), and legal representation.

For this reason Barnardo’s supports calls for a system of guardians to ensure that children receive the right support and guidance in securing their best interests.

Barnardo’s advocate that scoping is undertaken to ascertain the nature of the issue on a local level and gauge what the appropriate Local Authority and Local Safeguarding Children Board response should be so that the necessary resource can be allocated (because child trafficking is under-acknowledged, currently local authorities are unlikely to prioritise spending on specialist support).

More research is required to improve understanding of the issue – child traffickers constantly change their tactics to evade detection. Regular assessments of child trafficking data must therefore be undertaken in order to identify the emergence of new modes of entry in the UK, patterns of exploitation and victims’ experiences.

**Next Steps**

- Barnardo’s and Paradigm Research have been successful in a bid to Comic Relief for a one-year research project looking at the relationship between child sexual exploitation and going missing. The project will start on 1 May. We would be happy to update the APPG Inquiry as the research progresses.
- Barnardo’s would be delighted to host a visit from the APPG Inquiry to one of our specialist services for victims of child trafficking.
- Barnardo’s practitioners would also be happy to meet members of the Inquiry to give oral evidence.
- For more information, please contact Eve Byrne, Parliamentary Officer, eve.byrne@barnardos.org.uk or 020 8498 7737.