MISSING PERSONS SCHEMES

Introduction

This chapter focuses on a number of schemes which receive all or a large proportion of their referrals as a result of young people being reported as missing to the police. This is a relatively new area of service provision for young people who run away.

Police receive reports of people of all ages who are missing from home, usually from relatives or carers of the missing person. It is standard working practice for the police to follow up on these reports and to visit the person if they return home. However, in relation to young people, it became clear from early research studies into running away (e.g., Rees, 1993) that the police may not be the best-placed agency to offer such a service. Young people often view the police with mistrust and are unwilling to engage with them. It was also clear from research that many young people return home without anyone having explored the reasons why they ran away. Consequently, it has been the recommendation of several research reports that non-statutory agencies attempt to talk to young people reported missing when they return home, with a view to offering a listening ear, providing advice and information, and potentially engaging with them, where appropriate, to seek solutions to the issues that led to them running away.

The first scheme of this kind was probably a pilot project carried out by Leeds Safe House in 1996. This chapter draws on the work of five current schemes which can be categorised as being wholly or partly missing persons schemes, two run by Barnardo's in Bradford and Kirklees in West Yorkshire, two run by The Children's Society in Leeds and Birmingham, and one run by the ASTRA Project in Gloucester. There are also schemes currently in operation in the Midlands run by Barnardo's, and in Manchester and London run by The Children's Society. Moreover, there are several other schemes in the pipeline, including in Cardiff, Torquay and Glasgow. Missing persons schemes have therefore become a key model of intervention with young people who run away.

Apart from having the same source of referrals, all the projects considered in this chapter have something in common in terms of their means of initially engaging with young people. In contrast to the refuge and centre-based projects, they actively go into the community in order to make contact with young people who have run away or may be at risk of running away, visiting them in their homes and at other locations, such as schools. This method of contact has certain strengths but also raises a number of issues, which will be discussed later in the chapter.
Case studies

CASE STUDY 1

ASTRA  Independent

The ASTRA (Alternative Solutions to Running Away) Project was set up by a consortium of local statutory and voluntary agencies in Gloucester in 1998. The scheme originated in concerns noted by the police about missing young people, which were emphasised by the Fred and Rosemary West case.

ASTRA works with young people under 18 in the Gloucester area (including young people in substitute care). The project takes referrals from a range of sources (including agencies, parents and young people themselves), and so is not exclusively a missing persons scheme. However, the most common source of referrals to the project stems from police missing persons reports, and a key intended outcome of the project’s work is to reduce the repeat incidence of young people being reported as missing to the police. The project receives details of young people who have run away, and makes direct contact with them when they return home.

CASE STUDY 2

Bradford Young Missing Persons Scheme  Barnardo’s

This project developed from within Barnardo’s Streets and Lanes Project in Bradford, which focuses on girls and young women at risk of being, or who are being, abused through prostitution. The early learning from this latter project had been that there was a connection between young women being sexually exploited and their running away. In many cases, the ‘grooming’ process through which sexual exploitation took place was started while young women were missing from home. Consequently, the multi-agency steering group supported the creating of a pilot project aimed at young women reported as missing. The idea was that contact would be made with young women in order to assess their risk of becoming involved in sexual exploitation, and to work with them or refer them on to the main scheme where appropriate.

The pilot was run in one area of Bradford and was perceived to have been a success. As a result, Barnardo’s made a successful application to the Department of Health for joint funding of an ongoing scheme. The resulting project expanded its activities to cover all areas of Bradford.

More recently, the project has obtained Quality Protects funding to provide independent interviews for young people who run away from substitute care. This development will be accompanied by a local protocol on dealing with running away from care, which the project has been instrumental in drawing up, together with the police and social services.
Description of work

Target groups
The projects work with slightly different target groups of young people. The ASTRA Project works with young people who have been reported missing to the police more than twice plus any referrals they receive from other sources. The two Barnardo’s projects currently work with all young women reported as missing. The Leeds project works with all young people reported missing (with the exception, currently, of young people from residential care). 8

Methods of contact
The main method of contact with young people for all the projects is information passed to them by the police regarding reported missing person incidents, but again there are significant differences in approach. The two Barnardo’s projects receive notification from the police when a young person is reported missing, at which point they write a letter to the parents or carers introducing the project. They then receive a further notification when the young person returns home, at which point they write both to the young person and to the parent or carer. These letters are followed by a visit to the home.

At Leeds the project receives information from the police when a young person who has been reported missing returns home. The project writes both to the young person and to the parents or carers, introducing the project and proposing a date for the visit, which is then followed through unless it is cancelled by the parent or young person.

The Children’s Society scheme run by Youth Link in Birmingham has piloted a variety of ways of making contact incorporating all the above methods, as discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

The ASTRA Project adopts a more direct approach, it does not send out letters to either the young person or the family, but attempts to get in touch with the young person directly, either at home, at school or by telephone.

Models of service delivery
All the projects see the initial contact with the young person as providing an opportunity for the young person to talk about any issues, and to gain information about what the project can offer them. For the two Barnardo’s projects there is additionally an element of assessment in the initial contact, aimed at identifying young women who may be at risk of sexual exploitation.

Where ongoing work is provided by the projects, this is intended primarily to be short term. For example, ASTRA sees its role as being one of crisis intervention and it aims to work with young people for six to twelve weeks. Contributors stressed the need to be flexible in their response to the differing needs and circumstances of young people. A range of interventions are employed, with a focus on the issues that

8 Discussions are currently under way between Leeds City Council, The Children’s Society and Save the Children (which runs the local Children’s Rights Service) about the most appropriate way to provide services to this target group.
led to the young person running away, and attempts are made to resolve them in order to prevent further incidents of their going missing:

"Our service will try and pick up a young person for an appointment or not, or meet them in the café with their mate — that would be quite normal to us, whereas some services would say, "We only visit at home" or "We only visit in school." I think that flexibility needs to be built into any role or job description that anyone creates."

Discussion

As the description of services has indicated, there is considerable diversity among the missing persons schemes so far set up, and there are a number of unresolved issues about the best ways to operate such schemes. These issues can be divided into two broad areas: methods of contact, and approaches to working with young people and families. There is a fair degree of inter-relationship between these two issues, and there is a need for a coherent and consistent approach to making decisions about them. There are also issues around the extent to which this kind of service is suitable for the needs of the diverse range of young people who run away. Finally, there are some common messages emanating from the projects under discussion.

Methods of contact

It is still not clear what is the most helpful method of making contact with young people (and their parents or carers) in missing persons schemes. Much may depend on the philosophy of the project and the planned nature and extent of ongoing work with young people and their carers.

An early missing persons scheme, run as a pilot by Leeds Safe House in the 1990s, used the approach of police officers circulating cards that publicised the scheme. It was hoped that young people would then make telephone contact with the project. In reality this approach did not succeed in engaging with young people. There seem to be several reasons for this. First, in practical terms, it is quite difficult for the police to ensure that cards are available for all officers and so there may well be a significant proportion of young people who do not receive any information about the scheme. A second problem is that the scheme may become associated with the police in young people's minds, and this is unlikely to facilitate their contacting the project as an independent service. In addition, it seems that young people are unlikely to make contact with such a scheme, at least in the aftermath of a running away incident, and that more active and direct approaches are needed to increase the likelihood of engaging with them.

The experience of the Birmingham scheme run by Youth Link is interesting in this respect because the project has successively piloted a number of different techniques with increasing success. The initial approach was the same as above, resulting again in very low levels of contact from young people. A second approach involved writing letters to young people inviting them to contact the service and simultaneously sending a leaflet to parents. This approach resulted in a small increase in the number of contacts. A third approach piloted was a leaflet sent to young people (including information in Widgit (a symbolic, pictorial language) aimed at young people who are not able to read) which included a postcard (postage pre-paid)
that young people could return to the project requesting information, a phone call or a visit. Again there was some limited improvement in contact rates. The current approach is for the project to write to young people and parents with a proposed date for a visit, asking the young person to contact the project if they do not want the visit.

The two principal methods – the one involving letters to the young person and their parents as operated in Leeds, Birmingham, Bradford and Kirklees, and the other involving a direct attempt to contact the young person as operated in Gloucester – seem to have competing advantages. The former approach seems well received by parents, as already discussed, but the latter approach seems to more often result in an initial interview with the young person. It may also be that the initial impression created by each approach is taken as an indication of what the service can offer. The projects’ strategies for making initial contact reflect different philosophies of working with young people and families, as discussed below.

The nature and goals of work

The ASTRAA Project is probably the most ‘young-person-centred’ of the four projects under discussion in this chapter, both in terms of its method of initially contacting young people and the nature of its ongoing work with them. The project focuses strongly on the young person and carries out much of its work with them on an individual basis, although it will carry out joint work involving other members of the young person’s family if this is something that the young person chooses. In the eyes of contributors, the advantage of this strong focus on young people is the ability to establish a relationship of trust with them:

‘Young people in that situation [running away] feel they have no control, and I know that this is something that is borne out in the Still Running research and Running the Risk before that. When you feel that you have no control and the only thing you can control is where you go – what you do with your feet – the last thing you want is someone to come and try and control you again. You’re not going to respond to that, so our approach, whether it’s conscious or subconscious, has always started from the point of putting that young person back in control of the situation, at least trying to make them feel that that is the case.’

The other three projects, which all make initial contacts with both the young person and their carers, put more emphasis on a multi-perspective approach. They are still committed to the key principles of working with young people that are to a great extent a common feature of all the projects contributing to this report, as discussed in Chapter 8. However, they also place emphasis on gaining the acceptance of parents for their interventions:

‘I always aim to help the young person share what they can with their parent, rather than speaking to the young person and leaving. I don’t think that would help to ease tensions between parents and young people; it’s not going to help them stay there next time when they have a problem.’

Without a rigorous evaluation it is impossible to draw conclusions about the pros and cons of these two different philosophies of missing persons work, but it is possible to draw on knowledge of the phenomenon of running away in order to
speculate on their relative merits. The research indicates that young people who run away are often mistrustful of, or have lost their faith in, professionals and other adults. To this extent the ASTRA approach is well founded, in that it gives priority to forming a relationship with the young person. On the other hand, research also indicates that most of the reasons why young people run away are to do with problems in the home environment. Viewed from this standpoint it makes sense for projects to attempt to establish positive relationships both with young people and with key members of their family. This is clearly a matter for ongoing debate and, hopefully, evaluation, but the issue keys into broader debates about approaches to working with young people which will be picked up again in Chapter 8.

Limitations of missing persons schemes

A missing persons scheme working in isolation from a range of other services for runaways may find it difficult to engage with some young people. A particular issue is whether the project offers any emergency accommodation. Several contributors commented that the lack of an accommodation option could be a barrier to establishing an initial relationship with some young people:

'When they find out that I can't offer them somewhere else to be, often they lose interest in accessing other bits of the service.'

'Emergency accommodation is an immediate concern for [some of] the young people we work with... It's kind of half a project without that option.'

As with other models of working, a missing persons scheme may best be operated as part of a wider package of services, a point which is echoed in other parts of this report and returned to in Chapter 13.

Working with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds

There are some tentative indications that missing persons schemes may have variable success in working with the issues facing young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, although there is not yet enough practice experience to draw firm conclusions on this issue.

There are some question marks about the extent to which Asian young people are reported as missing by their families. As discussed in Chapter 10, running away may be a particularly sensitive issue for the families of young people from certain cultural backgrounds, and there is the possibility of the family being viewed negatively as a consequence. A contributor from one scheme had become aware of the potential repercussions of police arriving at a house, in uniform and in a marked car, to respond to a missing person report. The fear of drawing attention to the house may be a factor in deterring some families from reporting a missing incident to the police until it becomes absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, the ethnic origin of young people reported missing is not collected routinely by the police in missing persons reports, so it is difficult to ascertain whether there is evidence of under-reporting and there is currently insufficient data from missing persons projects to make reliable comparisons with the research findings based on self-reporting of running away by young people.

The potential of missing persons schemes to engage with young people from ethnic minority groups who are reported missing has been demonstrated, for
example, by successful pieces of work at ASTRA. However, a number of contributors felt that the projects could do more to develop services in a way that is credible to families and young people in minority ethnic groups, and culturally sensitive to the contexts in which young people live.

**Working with young people running away from substitute care**

Some of the schemes currently do not work with young people running away from the substitute care system while others do. There is a question about the appropriateness of missing persons schemes for this group of young people, for at least two reasons. First, the reporting procedures for young people in residential care that are in operation in many local authorities mean that a large proportion of missing persons reports relate to unauthorised absences, essentially involving young people coming in later than expected. Second, many young people run away from substitute care repeatedly within relatively short periods of time, thus triggering multiple missing persons reports.

These factors suggest that there may need to be some modification to reporting and/or contacting procedures for missing persons schemes working with this target group. There is a potential role for independent professional interventions for young people running away from care, and missing persons schemes could provide a valuable safety net. They can be a means of fulfilling the recommendations of the Children’s Safeguards Review that the reasons for young people going missing should be ascertained (Utting, 1997). Clearly, therefore, missing persons schemes can play an important part in a range of services for young people who run away from residential care. They might be more effective when developed in conjunction with agreed protocols regarding the reporting of young people missing from care. Such protocols are currently being put into place in many areas.

Nevertheless, they may not be the most efficient way of engaging with young people in the care system on the issue of running away. The initial attraction of missing persons schemes was the ability to make contact at an early stage with young people in the community who may not otherwise receive any professional intervention relating to the factors which led to them running away. However, in the case of young people in substitute care, bearing in mind the relatively high prevalence of running away, there is more potential for generic interventions. The Bradford Young Missing Persons Scheme has developed specific ways of working with young people in the care system (see Chapter 7).

One contributor from a missing persons scheme commented that it was particularly difficult to engage effectively with young people in substitute care who had gone missing and returned. These young people will often have had contact with a significant number of professionals throughout their lives and may perceive a visit by a worker from a missing persons scheme as an unwanted intervention. This makes it especially important to ensure that the intervention is seen by young people as being concerned with their wishes and feelings.
Relationships with parents and carers

Despite initial concerns, all the schemes report surprisingly positive reactions from parents when they make contact with them and/or young people initially as a result of a reported missing person incident:

'They do welcome you with open arms, which is something I've been surprised about... But we're saying that we're prepared to listen, which is something people don't [usually] get.'

Parents have often expressed relief that someone is offering some help to their child, and there has been only a small amount of gate-keeping by parents.

'Nearly all the parents have actually said, "I can see why my daughter needs someone to talk to who's not family, and I think it's good that it's a young person's service." A few, and a very very few, parents say, "She's getting everything, everyone comes to talk to her, no one is listening to what we want, she thinks she can get away with murder and you're helping her to do that." It's very, very rare. I think that parents see that young people do need an adult and they put quite a lot of trust in what you are going to say in response. Having a social work background, I would have thought that parents thought that having another professional turning up on their door, they're going to be asking loads of questions about "have I abused them" - that type of conversation - but it hasn't been like that. Parents have willingly gone out of the room and sat in the kitchen for an hour while we've had a chat.'

The success of the projects in this respect is encouraging. However, it must be borne in mind that many incidents of running away are not reported to the police. It seems likely that, on the whole, the projects are coming into contact with those parents who are most concerned about their child's welfare and, therefore, are most likely to welcome intervention.

One of the difficulties that projects have encountered in ongoing work relates to parents' own need for support. In many cases, the parents are struggling with issues of their own, and it is clear that they are not receiving support from other agencies. The projects have had to clarify with parents that their role is to focus on the young person. However, workers have often experienced frustration that the needs of the family are not being met, and have ended up feeling that if these issues could be resolved then the young person's problems would be diminished.

Independence

One of the areas of consensus among the projects contributing to the study is about the need for missing persons schemes to be seen as independent from statutory services in order to engage effectively with young people and parents. Young people who run away may have already had contact with statutory services (although research suggests that this is not the case for the majority of first-time missing incidents) or they may have preconceptions or fears about the intervention of the police or social services in their lives:

'Young people see the word "police", or an association with the police, and they switch off. But if you have that face-to-face contact... they're usually prepared to hear you out.'
These fears may also be felt by parents and carers, who again may also have had previous involvement with these services:

'They think that it's good that we're not social services, it's very good that we are a charity and it's good that we've had an immediate response, and they appear to be very willing to want help and want someone to listen to what they've got to say.'

There is a paradox here, in that, among the projects contributing to this publication, it is the ones running missing persons schemes which have the closest links with both statutory and voluntary agencies in their area, as discussed below. Indeed, the ASTRA project is technically a statutory service, as it receives core funding from statutory sources (social services, education and the police).

So, it is the perceived independence of projects which is important. This independence needs to be balanced with the need to have good links with other agencies in order to be able to facilitate young people's access to the range of services that can meet their diverse needs.

**Speed of response**

A second area of consensus concerns the value of a speedy response to running away. One of the reasons that the projects seem to have been particularly welcomed by young people and adults alike is that they are often able to make a visit within a day or two of the young person's return home. Again, this is sometimes experienced as a contrast to previous involvement with voluntary and statutory services:

'A lot of young people and parents have commented that we've turned up very quickly because a lot of the responses from other professionals have been lengthy waiting lists and lengthy response, and at the end of the wait they've been told that there's going to be no services.'

It seems that this may be a particularly important aspect that should be consciously built in to a missing persons scheme in terms of resourcing, in order that the scheme can take advantage of the goodwill it engenders.

**Multi-agency involvement in the schemes**

The issue of partnership with other agencies is covered in detail in Chapter 9. However, the value of multi-agency involvement at an advisory or managerial level has been particularly emphasised by contributors from the missing persons schemes, and this seems worthy of brief mention in this chapter, particularly as the viability of these schemes is almost completely dependent on the co-operation of the police.

The Gloucester and Kirklees projects both originated in statutory services initiatives, and the Bradford project emanated from the multi-agency steering group of an existing Barnardo's project. In the case of ASTRA, one contributor saw the multi-agency involvement in the scheme, right from its inception, as the key factor in its success:

'The major strength of the project is the steering group... they've been involved from the beginning, they conceived the idea collectively and have been supportive of it since. It's an amalgamation of voluntary and statutory sector organisations, all of whom have found a common interest in supporting this initiative and have stuck with it when they could have lost interest or found other initiatives that
were more kind of flavour of the month, really. That's the key strength and I fundamentally believe that we wouldn't have reached the point we've reached so far without that kind of inter-agency support and co-operation. And it's something that we've become aware is quite unique. Across the rest of the country, there are other projects doing similar work and they are largely voluntary sector projects, and they often have difficulty getting senior level support from statutory services."

It is notable also that in all three of these areas, there was a recognition of the need for such a scheme because of the emergence of issues at a local level (the West case in Gloucester, and evidence of links between running away and the sexual exploitation of young people in the other two projects).

It seems particularly advisable, therefore, to place emphasis on gaining the support and commitment of local agencies, in particular police and social services, from the inception of these schemes. If possible, this should include building the scheme on the foundations of locally identified concerns or locally initiated research.

**Key points**

- Appropriate methods of contact are key to the success of missing persons schemes. Passive models which rely on young people taking the initiative have proved unsuccessful, and there is a need to be more active, through letters and through visiting young people and/or their families.

- Parents and carers have generally responded positively to the interventions of missing persons schemes, viewing them as a service which can help the young person. There has been surprisingly little hostility towards workers.

- However, since not all young runaways are reported as missing to the police, projects relying solely on police referrals will, by definition, only reach a proportion of all young runaways, and therefore do not constitute a universal intervention.

- In developing a missing persons scheme, a fairly fundamental decision needs to be made about the extent to which the scheme focuses on the young person, or on the whole family. This will have implications both for the initial reception of the scheme's intervention and also for its ability to carry out ongoing work to prevent further running away incidents.

- Missing persons schemes may need to develop a slightly different model of working with young people in residential care, given the high volume of reported missing incidents, many of which are essentially 'unauthorised absences' rather than incidents of 'running away'. Nevertheless, they can play an important role as a safety net.

- The perceived independence of missing persons schemes from social services and the police is believed by contributors to be an important ingredient in their ability to engage with young people and families.

- Initiating a rapid response when the young person returns home is also regarded as important.
- Missing persons schemes may not be as effective at engaging with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, as it seems that these young people may well be less likely to be reported as missing when they run away.

- Good inter-agency working seems particularly important for an effective missing persons scheme, and evidently the support of the police is an essential requirement.
6

CENTRE-BASED SERVICES

Introduction

This chapter looks at two projects which work with young people who run away as part of a wider range of services offered to young people focused around a drop-in/advice centre: the Home & Away Project in Lambeth run by the Catholic Children's Society, and Checkpoint in Torquay run by The Children's Society. These projects both aim to undertake short-term work with young people and their families, with a principal aim of re-establishing young people within their family or community where possible. Both projects also aim to provide very short-term emergency accommodation for young people in certain circumstances.

Case studies

CASE STUDY 1

Home & Away Project, London Catholic Children's Society

The idea for the Home & Away Project originated in a piece of research undertaken by the Catholic church in central London. It found that many young homeless people sleeping on the streets of the central city area came from Lambeth in south London. The project was therefore set up to cater for the needs of these young people within their local area. It is managed by the Catholic Children's Society and currently receives much of its funding from Lambeth Social Services.

The project works with young people aged 13 to 20. Its main aims are to prevent young people becoming homeless and to prevent young people being accommodated by the local authority. So a focus of its work is to try to resolve the family situations that threaten to make young people homeless.

One aspect of the project's work is a crisis team which works with young people under the age of 18. This team uses a solution-focused brief therapy approach to work with young people and their families. It is also able to provide emergency accommodation to some of the young people with whom it works, including some emergency foster care provision, which is accessible to young people under the age of 16, with parental consent.
Description of work

Target groups

Both projects aim to work with young people who run away and with those at imminent risk of running away or being forced to leave home. The minimum age for both projects is set at 13 years. The emphasis of both projects appears to be on young people who are still relatively attached to their families.

Methods of contact with young people

For both projects the primary source of work with young people who run away is through a drop-in centre. Home & Away also receives initial contacts from young people over the telephone, but this is usually followed up by a meeting at the centre. Word-of-mouth recommendation is an important source of referrals for both projects, although in both cases some outreach work into schools has also been undertaken.

Models of service delivery

The Home & Away Project has an explicit theoretical framework for engaging with young people and their families: solution-focused brief therapy. As its name implies, this approach is concerned not with problems but with solutions:

'Solution-focused brief therapy isn’t concerned with problems, it’s about solutions and how to help people to draw on their own strengths and what already works. Because in most crises people can identify something that has worked before or something positive... People can come up with their own solutions and we can support them through that... It sounds really mad but it works – I was really cynical about it when I started.'

One of the potential advantages of this approach is that young people and parents will sometimes already have had experience of other agencies which focused on the
problems they were facing, and will have found these to be unhelpful. The project can therefore bring a fresh, positive approach to the issues; this often provides a positive experience for families and distinguishes the project’s work from that of statutory agencies. Solution-focused therapy is intended to last only a short time and the project rarely works with young people and families for more than 12 weeks. If there are issues that are more engrained, the project will refer the case on to other agencies.

The Home & Away Project has two emergency foster carers who can accommodate young people for up to 72 hours. The carers are approved by the Catholic Children’s Society and by Lambeth Social Services. They are paid a retainer, plus a nightly fee when they provide accommodation. This service is mainly intended as a respite for young people and their families while the project is working with them on solutions to the situation. Mostly it is used for young people who are at risk of leaving home. Accommodation for under-16s is always provided with parental consent, although this has rarely been an issue. In certain circumstances young people who have already had to leave home can be accommodated with the emergency foster carers, again with parental consent.

The SCRI uses a young-person-centred approach which recognises the diversity of situations of young people who run away. Thus it can provide a range of services:

‘The service young people get very much depends on what they want. Some people just want information and advice. Some people want to break the ice with their parents, so they want crisis mediation work. Some people want more in-depth work.’

There is an initial assessment interview in which the worker explores with the young person the reasons for their situation and what they would like to do about it. The model is broadly a crisis intervention framework:

‘My initial assessment will be exploring with them why they are in the situation they’re in and what they want to do about that, and looking at where we take it from there. It’s crisis intervention, so on average I guess I’m in their lives about four days... The most I’ve engaged with someone has been six weeks, and that was because other services weren’t kicking into place.’

The worker is able to refer young people to other parts of the Checkpoint service for specialist counselling and other assistance.

The project has also been developing a model of flexible refuge provision. The idea of this is to provide temporary supported accommodation for young people on an occasional basis for no more than four nights, at selected bed-and-breakfast establishments. The establishments will have been prepared for the possibility of this kind of work. The project aims to employ sessional workers to support the young people during these periods, two workers working at once. In the daytime the young person will then use the Checkpoint facilities and the SCRI specialist worker to attempt to find a longer-term solution to their situation. This project has been endorsed by the local police and has the support of the local Social Services Department. However, some legal issues have arisen in relation to Section 51 of the Children Act, and the current plan is to provide this accommodation only where parental consent can be gained.
Discussion

Self-referral
A key aspect of both centre-based services is that the onus of accessing the service lies primarily with the young person. This is in contrast to the missing persons schemes discussed in the previous chapter, which actively seek out young people who have run away and returned home.

This aspect can be viewed as both a strength and a weakness of these services. On the downside, research has shown that many young people who run away are not aware of the helping services that are available in their area. A centre-based service relying on self-referral is therefore likely to meet only a portion of the total need in the local area, unless it has a very well-developed profile among young people under the age of 16. Even where awareness is high, there is the potential barrier of young people having to take the plunge and enter the centre, rather than be met initially on their own territory.

On the other hand, the young people who do access these services are likely to be motivated to find solutions to their problems. Both projects report high levels of success, either in terms of being able to negotiate a return home with a resolution to the some of the problems that caused young people to run away or contemplate running away, or in terms of finding young people other places to stay within the community. Of 48 young people worked with by the SCRI in its first year of operation, 19 returned home, 14 moved to other accommodation in the community (extended family, friends, etc.) and, of the remainder, only three chose to remain on the streets. These were young people who had already been away from home for several months when they made contact with the project.

Reaching young people not in contact with other services
Both projects aim to work with young people who are not in contact with other services and have been successful in achieving this aim. The SCRI was set up with the aim of targeting a specific group of young people:

'One of the aims when we set this up was to capture young people who weren't accessing help from any other service, and that's what we've done. The majority of young people we work with, at the time they engage with us, are receiving no other help from anywhere else. That's where we saw the gap.'

The Home & Away Project will not do substantial pieces of work with young people who have a social worker or who are involved with the youth offending team, although it will undertake short-term telephone advocacy with these young people to ensure that other agencies are meeting their needs.

In reality, then, despite the concerns mentioned above about publicity and awareness-raising, the experience of the two projects illustrates the potential for a centre-based model to engage with young people who are not already receiving support in connection with the problems they are experiencing.

Integration of services for young people
One of the strengths of both projects is that the services they offer young people who run away are part of a wider integrated network of services that they provide. This has several advantages. First, the service may be seen by young people to be less
stigmatising than a service known to work exclusively with young people who run away. This certainly seems to be the case at Checkpoint where young people with specific problems can remain fairly anonymous among the thousands of young people contacting the centre for a variety of reasons:

'What it means for young people is that you're not immediately identified as somebody who has a drug and alcohol problem or somebody who has run away, because you're just turning up with lots of other young people... So young people are relatively anonymous and are not singled out or stigmatised.'

Second, there is the possibility of young people gaining access to an integrated range of services. At Home & Away this includes the possibility of young people under 18 being supported beyond their 18th birthday in independent housing accessed through the project. In the case of Checkpoint there is the possibility of access to other specialist services focusing on relevant issues, such as sexual health, within the same project.

At project level, a further advantage of an integrated centre-based model is the economies of scale it offers. At Checkpoint, the SCRI consists primarily of one specialist project worker. However, this initiative enjoys the benefits of being part of a larger concern in terms of front-line drop-in centre access, telephone support, and so on.

The need for emergency accommodation

It is interesting that both projects include an emergency accommodation element. As noted in Chapter 3, one of the concerns about a model which has refuge provision as its central component is that young people may feel that they have no option but to move into a refuge in order to access the project's other services, such as advocacy, counselling or mediation. It seems that the centre-based models are able to work with the majority of young people without providing accommodation. Often, where young people have run away, it is possible to find a place to stay for a few nights with extended family or friends. However, in a minority of cases this is not possible, and it is in these cases that emergency accommodation is or would be provided:

'The criteria for the refuge is that they are going to be at serious significant risk if they don't access the refuge. One example of that is a young woman aged 15, returned to a squat where [there were] six older men involved with various different drug uses and offending. She would have fitted the criteria [but most young people] generally have support elsewhere, either with extended family or with friends.'

The case of the SCRI is particularly interesting in this respect because, for the first year of its existence, the project has not been able to offer an accommodation option. This has provided the unexpected opportunity for an assessment of what the need for accommodation might be. The SCRI specialist worker undertook a review of the 48 cases worked with in the first 12 months of the service, and estimated that 13 or 14 of these young people would have fitted the envisaged criteria for flexible refuge, i.e., that they would be at serious risk if they did not get access to refuge. An example of this was the young woman in the above quote who was staying at a squat with older men involved with drugs and offending, and who had no other emergency
accommodation options. So the project estimates that around one-quarter of the young people it works with might need flexible refuge when it becomes available. This is much the same as the proportion of young people who report sleeping rough when they run away (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Similarly, the Home & Away Project provides emergency foster care accommodation, mostly on a respite basis, for an estimated 20 young people per year.

These projects provide evidence, then, of a need among a significant minority of young people who run away for some emergency accommodation. However, there is a suggestion that access to this service should be controlled. As one contributor noted, most of the young people running away who approach the centre present themselves as having accommodation needs, even though they have somewhere temporary to stay:

‘They probably come in saying... Presenting it as an accommodation need, actually, and that’s because often, as you know, what happens is that young people don’t make a planned move to run away. It’ll often be a culmination of events, as something will happen – which might appear quite minor to other people – that will trigger it and they will think, “That’s it.” So it’s un-thought-out and therefore there’s no plan as to what they’re going to do. So when they come in to see me often what I’m trying to do is to slow the process down for them and actually give them the opportunity to think about what are they going to do now. So whereas they’ll often come in here and say, “I’m 15 and I’m not going back home, I’ve got nowhere to live”, so they present it as they’ve got nowhere to live. When you actually break it down for them and explore what the different things are, then they’re able to come up with, “Actually, I could stay with Gran” or “I could stay with a friend for a couple of days”, or whatever it takes, really, while you sort things out. But there are some that you just know, if you had the refuge, that things would just work so much better.’

Relationships with parents

The centre-based projects work in a way that often entails involvement with the families of the young people who run away. As with the missing persons schemes, the general experience of contributors was that their intervention was welcomed by parents and carers:

‘When I started this work, that’s where I thought the problem would be... very angry parents. And that’s been the biggest shock, in that none have expressed any kind of negative feelings about the work that’s being done. In the main, what they’ve said is, “Thank God that there’s somewhere for my son or daughter to go”, and I think it’s about how you present it... What I’ll always try to do is to explain what my role is – to find a solution to the problem and also to encourage young people to reestablish themselves in the community somewhere, somewhere that’s safe. And I think once you explain that to parents, they’re OK.’

Both projects reported that parents were often glad that someone was trying to help, and also that many of the families with whom they have contact have already sought help from other agencies with limited success:

‘By the time a young person presents to me, things are quite dire, and the chances are, in the main, that parents have been trying to get help, or young people have
been trying to get help from different quarters over a period of months, sometimes years, and feeling that they’ve been passed around.’

There also do not appear to be any major difficulties in gaining parental consent for young people to be accommodated temporarily elsewhere. The Home & Away Project has had hardly any difficulties over this, although it mainly uses its emergency foster carers for respite:

‘We try to keep that resource available for the young people where we are working together with the family anyway, so we would be talking to the families about it and offering it as an option.’

At Checkpoint, despite concerns before the project started working with young people, the specialist worker does not now foresee any major problems with seeking parental consent for flexible refuge.

The need for long-term referral options

While a short-term intervention can be effective in resolving immediate issues for many young people who run away, research indicates that there are often longer-term underlying contextual factors contributing to the pattern of running away. In some cases these factors will require a much more substantial intervention, and contributors at both projects mentioned the need to refer some young people and families on to specialist, longer-term family services:

‘Particularly working with runaways under the age of 16, getting a response from social services, that’s a major issue. There’s always the problem of young people engaging with us and we can take things so far but after that, where do we go? We have one worker, we can’t provide that longer-term support. We can do the patching things up, looking for opportunities, helping young people take them, and working with families initially, but only for a very short time – then where do we go? And that may be a problem for other projects in other local authority areas where they don’t have good family support services.’

A project offering short-term centre-based intervention therefore will need to develop good links with other specialist services in the locality. However, this can be difficult for young people:

‘My work is very crisis-led. I’m not in their lives for very long and one of the young people did actually say that that for her was a difficulty because it was the first time that somebody had actually listened to her, and that what I would have to do is pass her on to other parts of the service. So I think the advantage is that everything is on site here. The disadvantage is that specialist workers do their specific piece of work and then it goes over to somebody else, and if you can forge a relationship with somebody, for that young person that’s quite difficult.’

Where such services are not available, there is a danger that the model of working described in this chapter will face the same problem of repetitive usage by some young people that was the drawback of the short-term crisis intervention model operated in refuges, as discussed in Chapter 3.
Key points

- Centre-based services, being partly reliant on self-referral by young people, need to pay particular attention to publicity and awareness-raising, as there is evidence that young people who run away are not always aware of services available to them in their locality.

- However, both projects considered in this chapter have been successful in engaging with young people who are not already in contact with other helping agencies.

- Situating services for runaways within a centre providing a range of services for young people offers the possibility of an integrated approach to work which can meet a diverse range of needs both in the short and the longer term.

- There is a need, among a significant minority of young people using centre-based projects, for short-term emergency accommodation, and it may be that such projects are best located as one component within a network of services for young people who run away.

- In common with the missing persons schemes discussed in Chapter 5, the projects in this chapter have undertaken a considerable amount of work with families and report a positive reception to their work from parents and carers.

- The short-term interventions of the centre-based projects can be effective in resolving immediate issues, but some young people and their families will require a more substantial longer-term intervention and, therefore, projects adopting this model will need either to cater for these needs or to establish good links with other specialist services in the locality, such as family therapy services.
Other practice models

The models explored in the previous four chapters have been the main methods utilised to date in the UK for working with young people who run away. However, some other methods have been employed, although most of these are currently at an early stage of development. This chapter looks briefly at these alternative models and summarises some of the early learning from practice.

Schools-based preventive work

Schools are a common location for preventive strategies aimed at social issues affecting young people. Schools-based interventions were a key suggestion made by young runaways who were asked what kind of help might have prevented them having to run away (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

**CASE STUDY 1**

**Peer Counselling Scheme, Leeds**  
*The Children's Society*

Safe on the Streets – Leeds has developed a model of peer counselling in schools in an attempt to provide early interventions for young people who may be at risk of running away. Project staff deliver a training programme to young people who are interested in becoming peer counsellors (usually in the 15- to 17-year-old age group), covering basic counselling skills. These young people then become available as a resource within the school for young people who are having problems either at home, at school or in their personal lives. This kind of model is quite common in North America as a way of tackling a range of issues, including running away.

The above scheme has been implemented in five secondary schools in Leeds over the past three years. The training programme has been successful in recruiting and preparing pupils to be peer counsellors, and young people's enthusiasm for, and commitment to, this work has been high.

The take-up of the counselling service has varied significantly across schools and at different times. From the experience so far, it appears that the culture of the school and the commitment of its staff are important factors affecting the scheme's success in a given school. The scheme has worked best when there has been a dedicated member of staff who liaises with the project worker and supports young people:

'What we have found is that you need some strong allies in the school... You need to get not just one teacher on board, but a number of committed individuals.
to include at least one person who will drive it in the school. Particularly as an outside agency going in, it's quite hard. I think one way we might change or develop it in the future is to establish a stronger base in the school.’

There have been issues around the provision of confidential space for counselling to take place within the school, and this also seems to have a significant bearing on levels of usage. It has sometimes been difficult to identify a suitable location in which counselling can take place which is both private and accessible. A variety of techniques have been tried to facilitate young people’s access to the scheme: for example, offering a drop-in lunchtime facility, or having a postbox through which young people can make contact with the peer counsellors. There is a need to tailor the methods of contact to the contexts in individual schools.

Given the nature of the peer counselling work, it is important to have a clear awareness of child protection issues, to include these in the training of peer counsellors, and to have agreements with the schools about how to handle any issues which do arise. Although child protection issues have not been a common feature of the work in practice, some issues of emotional and physical abuse have emerged through the counselling and these have been referred on to a designated specialist teacher in the school.

A key issue has been that of focusing the scheme on the intended target audience. This is a problem common to all preventive projects. It is not easy to identify young people at risk of running away, and so there is a risk of the scheme becoming a generic counselling scheme. To an extent this appears to have happened at times, with school bullying being a common issue brought to counselling. The project is considering accompanying the scheme with awareness-raising in the school about the issue of running away in order to focus use of the service more effectively.

However, this issue can be perceived by schools as a sensitive or a minority issue, and this has necessitated the project taking a broad approach to the scheme’s goals in order for it to be regarded as acceptable and relevant by schools:

‘Even if it’s recognised as something that is worthwhile in itself, they don’t see it as something with a broad appeal or substantial base of need within their environment. So we’ve adopted a broad approach to get over people’s barriers about how many young people it would be appropriate for.’

The project is currently considering whether it is possible to develop a model of peer support which can work in primary schools, bearing in mind the research findings about the early onset of running away among young people who run away repeatedly, as reviewed in Chapter 2.

Internet work

Youth Link in Birmingham has recently developed a website and e-mail service around the issue of young people running away. One of the initial motivations for this was to offer a service to disabled young people:

'It started as a way of offering something to young people with disabilities. Physically disabled young people can’t literally run away but they can run away in their heads.'
However, it was also seen as having a potentially wider value as one of a range of preventive strategies to assist young people at risk of running away:

'It's another way for young people to get in touch with us, to find someone who can help them, before they run away.'

The website provides information about issues including running away, safe sex and drugs. It also informs young people about their rights, and about potential other sources of help for young people (including a links page).

Young people can write to the project via e-mail to seek support or further information, and will receive a response from a project worker within 24 working hours. The project has some concerns about becoming involved in an ongoing personal e-mail relationship with young people. In order to minimise the chance of this developing, workers respond to e-mails on a rota basis and young people who e-mail are encouraged to telephone or visit the project or to seek help from other suggested resources.

The service is still in the early stages of development, but there have already been a number of e-mail contacts from young people who are facing difficulties that might lead to them running away. So far there have been very few problems relating to inappropriate use of the e-mail service. This development therefore provides some indication of the potential for this kind of initiative to be part of a preventive approach to the issue of running away.

Family-based work

Given the strong link between family issues and running away, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to developing services specifically to work with families in order to resolve the issues that lead to young people running away.

A small pilot project was recently set up by NCH and attached to the London refuge. The aim was to work with families of young people using the refuge in order to prevent repeat incidence of running away. This pilot has now finished and the project has moved on to other areas of work. Unfortunately, it was not possible to gain views from the project to contribute to this report.

Some of the projects described earlier in the report have focused on family work, the prime example being the solution-focused therapy undertaken by the Home & Away Project (Chapter 6). It is interesting to note that this approach has also been used by The Children's Society's SANDS Project - a family intervention project which developed out of the closure of the Southside Refuge in Bournemouth.

Safe on the Streets – Leeds intends to develop a new scheme working with families of young people who run away, using the family group conferencing model. The whole area of family work in relation to young people running away is a potentially fertile one for development, both in a general sense and also in order to meet effectively the needs of young people and families from some minority ethnic groups, as discussed in Chapter 10.
Work with young people in care

Given the high rates of running away among young people in substitute care, this is an obvious sub-group on which to target specific interventions. Several contributing projects have developed or are in the process of developing specific work with young people in substitute care, particularly those in children's homes.

Safe in the City has developed a model of preventive group work with young people in residential units in Manchester. This idea stemmed from an awareness of the high proportion of young people on the streets in the city centre who were running away from care settings. It was felt that these young people might best be worked with when they were not in this situation but in a period of relative stability. The project therefore approached the local Social Services Department (SSD) with a proposal to run group-work sessions for young people in residential units to discuss the issue of running away and, possibly, to play a preventive role in terms of repeat incidence. This proposal was taken up by the SSD and the terms of engagement with young people were negotiated.

Significantly, it was agreed that the project workers could adhere to the project's confidentiality policy when working with young people in the units. It was found that in addition to having a tight confidentiality policy, it was also particularly important in residential settings to be seen to be adhering to the policy:

'It's difficult in units because they are public places. I think making people feel safe is about how you enact confidentiality and how you behave, really. An example would be that we would make sure we didn't talk to [residential] staff after the group, even just to say, "Hi, how are you?" We would be really cautious not to be seen to have contact with staff because young people might suspect that we were sharing information even though we said we wouldn't...You've got to be sensitive to the dynamics.'

The work consisted of a six- to eight-week course of group-work sessions. The aims of the work were to provide advice, information and education for young people when they were in a more stable setting and also to build up good relationships with residential staff. The scheme was positively received by young people. As a result of the work, the project received telephone calls from young people, which offered the opportunity to prevent further running away incidents:

'One of the outcomes was that young people made contact with the project for advice and information when there was something troubling them. They felt better able to do that, having been part of that group work process. So we got calls from young people and there was a lot of ability to interact with somebody before anything became problematic for them.'

Another outcome of the work was that discussion from group sessions spilled over into dialogue between young people and key workers in units. Although initially some staff in the units had concerns about the scheme, they ultimately viewed it positively. There was good feedback from the SSD and the project was subsequently asked to do similar work in other residential units.

The Bradford Young Missing Persons Scheme has also established a good working relationship with residential units and has developed tailor-made approaches for working with young people in the care system with a focus on preventing running
away and sexual exploitation. This has included a mobile library of books, videos and other resources which are made available to young people in the unit to raise awareness of the risks they would be facing.

Other developments with young people in care are in the pipeline. Checkpoint in Torquay and the two Barnardo’s missing persons projects in West Yorkshire have all been involved in the development of local protocols with statutory services in relation to young people running away from residential care. The Bradford and Torquay projects are about to start providing independent interviews to young people who run away from residential care on their return to the unit.

**Work with young people at risk of sexual exploitation**

Research suggests a strong link between young people running away and young people being sexually exploited. The Streets and Lanes Project in Bradford run by Barnardo’s was set up to work specifically with young women being sexually exploited. It developed an understanding of the ‘grooming’ process though which young women were recruited into prostitution, and it was evident that this process often took place while a young woman had run away from her usual address (family or substitute care). Thus the primary motivation for the missing persons scheme described in Chapter 5 which emerged from that project was to attempt to identify young women at risk of sexual exploitation and to undertake preventive work. A similar principle underpinned the development of the Kirklees missing persons scheme, also discussed in Chapter 5.

The NSPCC has developed a specific project aimed at the issue of young women being sexually exploited in London: the Breaking Free Project.

### CASE STUDY 2

**Breaking Free Project, London NSPCC**

The Breaking Free Project was set up in 1999 as a result of growing awareness of young people being sexually exploited and of the lack of services to meet their needs. Much of this awareness came out of the (then) Centrepoint/NSPCC Refuge in London. Workers at the project found it difficult to undertake work with these young people because of their complex, long-term needs.

The project has developed two aspects to its direct work with young people. First, it provides a weekly drop-in session at an established centre for young people who are homeless in central London. Second, it accepts referrals from local authorities in London and other agencies to undertake individual work with young women who are being, or are thought to be at risk of being, sexually exploited. The project also offers training and consultancy with professionals in other agencies.

One of the ideas behind the project was to attempt to prevent young people becoming entrenched in a street lifestyle involving survival sex:

‘The police... were regularly making contact with vulnerable young people and were concerned at the lack of appropriate services. In their experience, if a child or young person was new to the West End they were likely to be much easier to
engaged and worked with. If, however, they continued to spend time in the area, they became entrenched in a street lifestyle, and working with them became very difficult... After a period of six weeks on the streets a positive outcome for a young person was far less likely.' (Breaking Free Project – Initial Project Report, NSPCC, 2000)

Looking firstly at the work of the project outside the West End, some of the young women being referred to the project fitted the Barnardo's 'grooming' model. They were generally young women who had already become detached from their families, and usually would also have had some involvement with social services, including periods of living in the substitute care system. Many of these young women were highly mobile, and one of the strengths of the project was its ability to remain in contact with the young people while they moved from one local authority area to another, providing some continuity of support in what were often fairly chaotic lives.

In terms of the work with young people in the West End, there was much less evidence of entry into sexual exploitation through the 'grooming' model, and more likelihood of the need for survival being a key element in young people's involvement. The issues faced by the project in their city-centre work are very similar to those described in Chapter 4 on street-work services. Many of the young people are extremely detached from mainstream society and mistrustful of adults:

'I think for the young people in the West End the issues are very different, they are at a chaotic stage and the work you do with them is very different. You might spend an awful lot of time engaging with them and establishing a relationship.'

Therefore the project has twin goals of harm minimisation together with the long-term possibility of sometimes being able to facilitate young people moving off the streets:

'Harm minimisation is, I think, where you have to start with young people, especially when they've got to where they've got to – they're not wanting to be rescued, they are often very "anti" all services. They often just want to be left alone and so you need to start from where they're at. They're at the stage where they are on the streets using drugs and selling sex, and so you say, "OK, then what can we do to make that life safer for you?"'

The process of engaging with young people in these contexts can be very protracted and the project has become aware of the need to set realistic goals on an individual basis:

'There's one young woman... for two years we've been out and she's been around, and it's been almost impossible to make contact with her. Success now is that when we do do outreach work and she sees us, she doesn't run off – I can offer to buy her a drink or something and say "Hi!" and she'll know we're not the police. Now that's a breakthrough and it's taken almost two years.'

In other cases the project has been successful in engaging at an early stage to prevent young people becoming entrenched, as envisaged in the conception of the project.

The project has a specific child protection orientation (both the current workers
have statutory social work experience) and this has been recognised by other agencies
as one of the strengths of the service:

'It's often how you present the concern, semantics even sometimes, and the
street-work agencies I work with, very youth-work-oriented, and they are often
really exasperated with the responses they get and end up in a real head-to-head.
It's been pointed out to me by some of those agencies that they've noticed the
difference – if I'm in a meeting I'll try to elicit collaboration and working
together in a different way.'

One of the difficulties of using a drop-in-based model with this target group is that
young people may not be wish or be able to attend at pre-arranged times. The project
therefore has undertaken some outreach work and has also developed strong links
with other agencies providing outreach in the West End. In general, the contributors
from the project emphasised the need for good multi-agency working with this target
group, a point which is discussed in more depth in Chapter 9.

Key points

- Preventive strategies in relation to running away have really only just begun to be
developed in the UK. Schemes have been piloted in schools and via the Internet.
At this stage it is too early to say how effective these strategies might be, and there
is a need for evaluation of these initiatives and for more consideration to be given
to the development of other preventive models.

- There has been relatively little family-focused work done specifically with young
runaways in the UK. This is surprising, given the central importance of family
relationships as a factor influencing running away (see Chapter 2). This is a key
area for development in this field.

- There are very high rates of running away from residential care and there is scope
for targeted initiatives aimed at this group of young people. One example is
presented in this chapter which shows the potential for engaging with young
people and staff in residential units to prevent repeat running away and to ensure
that young people who do run away have access to services.

- There is also a strong link between sexual exploitation and running away, and
several initiatives have been developed to work specifically with young people who
are being, or who are at risk of being, sexually exploited on the streets. These
projects can have positive outcomes in terms of harm minimisation, preventing
entrenchment on the streets, providing a continuity of contact with young people
with chaotic and mobile lifestyles, and facilitating co-ordination with other
services to meet their needs.
This chapter looks at the approaches projects take in engaging with young people and carrying out work with them. There is, of course, some diversity in approaches between projects. However, there is also a large amount of common ground. To a great extent all the projects that contributed to this report share a common philosophy in terms of the way they view young people and work with them. This philosophy is often referred to as a ‘young-person-centred’ approach. The first part of this chapter is spent exploring the key elements of this approach and some of its implications. The remainder of the chapter covers some of the more concrete elements of practice, including ways of engaging initially with young people, advocacy work, confidentiality and child protection issues, as well as some different approaches used by specific contributing projects.

Young-person-centred approach

'We try and take an approach with young people that it's their choice to be in touch with us, so that everything has to stem from that. Everything we do has to stem from it being their choice, so you can talk through all the options and then they have to choose whichever option they want — with support, obviously — and whilst we may feel that the option they have chosen was completely and utterly wrong, unless it was an unsafe choice we let them run with that, on the clear understanding that if or when it all goes horribly wrong, they can come back to us.'

The young-person-centred approach used by the projects is characterised by a number of key elements. These include:

• an emphasis on listening to young people
• taking seriously what young people say, and using their views and concerns as a starting point for planning the work
• providing them with information about their options and then supporting them to make informed choices
• not telling young people what to do
• working at the young person's pace
• keeping young people involved and/or informed about progress
• being non-judgemental
• not seeking parental consent
• giving young people as much control as possible over the information held about them. (See discussion about confidentiality later in this chapter.)
The list on page 62 is compiled from comments by various contributors. It was sometimes difficult to get contributors to explain this approach fully, and the reason for this seems to have been that it was almost taken for granted as the right way of working with this group of young people – one contributor described it as 'bog standard' youth work practice. It is clearly not an approach unique to working with young people who run away. However, using it with this target group of young people raises a number of issues which will be explored in the course of this chapter. Several contributors described the approach as 'treating young people like adults' and it seems that to a great extent this is what the projects aim to do. But there are clearly a number of complexities inherent in working with young people who run away that belie this simple way of describing the work, as will become clear.

Before going on to discuss some of the specific issues raised by the approach, it is important to note that some contributors expressed concern about the way the notion of a young-person-centred approach could be interpreted in practice.

One issue raised was that the approach could lead to a tendency to inertia in some cases. Adhering to the approach could leave workers feeling that they could not take any initiative, and that everything had to be instigated by young people:

"Young-person-centred sometimes meant for individual workers that we weren't getting off our backsides and doing things sometimes which were necessary for that young person to move their circumstances on and give them some new opportunities. We felt that too often young-person-centred might mean, "Well, I have to wait for it to come from the young person before I can act", and that became a reactive process."

On the other hand there is a risk when working with this target group of placing too much pressure on young people, which can set them up to fail:

"I'm very aware that young people can feel that they've let workers down, or their family down. Their low self-esteem often means that they feel they're no good, so we try very hard to encourage them to make different choices... But also to say if they aren't able to, then we'll still be here."

A second related concern was the distinction between being young-person-focused and young-person-led:

"[There was a confusion over] being young-person-centred and when that became young-person-led, and that we always had to take what the young person was saying at face value and not to question that... that has not always been the case, but it is one of the things that I think we have grappled with."

Third, as voiced in the quote above, there are some concerns about the concept of always believing what young people say:

"If a young person or child came expressing certain allegations, views, his or her story, what the project did was, prima facie it would accept that view up to the time when substantial evidence to the contrary came into the picture. That meant that one was required to believe what children and young people said to you, until such time as something concrete came in from the outside to contradict it... Whether that's good or bad I'm not commenting on, but how some workers
dealt with that was to line themselves up uncritically behind young people, and that’s as dangerous as lining yourself up uncritically with anyone else. There was an idea that there was a moral purity about young people, and the reverse for the rest of the system—that young people were inherently good.’

In reality, however, the approach that has developed in most projects is rather more subtle and flexible than the earlier checklist would suggest. There was a feeling in some of the projects that the initial approach had been too ‘evangelical’ and that it had not recognised some of the complexities inherent in working with young people:

‘I think, probably, very early on the practice was very ideological in terms of pursuing children’s rights—that there was no social justice, that nobody listened to children and young people. So there was a real sense of crusade about the project in advocating for young people. It seemed to be a case that everybody out there is bad and we are trying to promote young people’s rights and have their voices heard, so we’re very righteous.’

Through a process of refinement, these projects have now developed a model of practice that retains young people at the centre of the work, but is also realistic in terms of expectations of others, and of what can be achieved in practice. It is this learning that will be the focus for most of the remainder of the present chapter.

Making contact with young people

The initial contact that projects make with young people is seen as crucial by many of the contributors. Young people who run away have often had bad experiences of adults, including professionals, as illustrated by several research studies (e.g., Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994). Or they may have had no involvement with agencies but have preconceptions about what they might have to offer. The feelings of suspicion, mistrust and disillusionment about adults, which are common among this group of young people, mean that the task of attempting to engage with them requires a considerable amount of skill and tact on the part of project workers. Whether the initial contact was made on the streets, over the telephone, in a drop-in centre, or through a visit to the young person’s home, contributors felt that they had very little time to make the right impression with the young person.

The learning from efforts to engage with these young people can be summarised under three broad headings. First, it is seen as being vital to establish the independence of the project from other services, particularly statutory agencies. Second, it is necessary to say something concise and clear to young people about the way the project handles issues of confidentiality. Third, there is a need to emphasise that it is entirely a matter of choice for the young person whether and to what extent they choose to engage with the project:

‘You need to be able to tell them who you are, what you are doing, and whether it’s optional or not, so they can tell you to get lost. So the things that I make sure I know is our confidentiality policy in bite-size chunks: “We won’t tell anyone unless you’re in real danger and by that we mean this and this.” You don’t want to go into your whole confidentiality policy, because what you find is that young people don’t often know what confidentiality means. You need to be able to say what you offer.’

64
It was also seen as important by some contributors doing street work to leave the young person with something tangible – such as some information about the project or something of practical value – in order to create a lasting impression.

Given the short time span of many initial contacts, the above is no easy task, but there was a shared feeling among contributors that this kind of one-to-one contact was essential not only to engage with specific young people but also to promote the work of the project more widely. For most of the projects, word of mouth recommendations were the primary source of publicity.

**Advocacy**

An advocacy approach to working on the issues raised by young people was seen as a fundamental part of most of the projects’ work. In fact, some projects had at times seen their role as being essentially about advocacy. It is important to reflect on the history of the development of work in this area to understand some of the reasons for this, and to appreciate the changes that have occurred over time.

Projects such as Youth Link, Safe in the City and Leeds Safe House were set up more than ten years ago at a time when the concepts of children’s rights and young people’s participation were not as well established as they are today. The Children Act 1989, which has contributed to the development of more participatory ways of working with young people, did not come into force until October 1991 and the key principles of the Act took some time to be absorbed and incorporated into day-to-day work. There has, in fact, been a shift in professional culture in working with young people over the past decade in both the statutory and voluntary sectors, which needs to be borne in mind in reviewing the early advocacy work undertaken by some of the projects.

Many of the contributors who were involved in this early work now accept, with the wisdom of hindsight, that some of the advocacy work was undertaken with a rather misplaced zeal. There was a tendency to be very adversarial and to push every case as far as possible, without acknowledging the constraints and stresses under which other professionals were working:

> 'Advocacy is not of itself a bad thing, but it depends on how you conduct the advocacy, and if you line up with your basic premise that young people can do no wrong, and say no wrong, then you’ve got a problem. Then you add to that the moral high ground and the fatally-flawed assumptions that go with that and you take it out and you rather contemptuously parade that in front of everyone with whom you are advocating on behalf of young people then you’re probably going to do more harm than good.’

This approach achieved short-term gains for some individual young people, but it also damaged relationships between the projects and other services, and sometimes had an impact on the key relationships in the young person’s life.

It may not be useful to dwell on these problems for too long, since the current styles of advocacy undertaken by contributing projects are considerably more subtle. However, there is some important learning from this early experience:

> 'Anybody that’s trying to get involved in this kind of work needs to recognise that it’s too easy to fall into saying “we’re right and you’re wrong” – that doesn’t get
that young person any further... Although sometimes you have to shout, it's necessary, but it shouldn't be the first port of call, or you will lose goodwill, and this doesn't benefit the young people you work with.'

Lessons from early practice have been absorbed into the current practice of projects. There is still an emphasis on strongly supporting young people in advocating for their desired outcomes. However, this has become tempered by a sensitivity to the restraints with which other professionals are working, and by a recognition of some of the realities of what is achievable in a given situation:

'Having an advocacy model is not that same as just blindly agreeing with everything the young person says, and just saying it again and again more loudly and more angrily to the authority that you're advocating with. There is a balance in terms of how you get across a young person's point of view and how you work with a young person to develop their own point of view that is more sophisticated... If you are advocating with SSD, you have a need for something from them, you need them to put more resources towards that young person – you're asking them to take on board that young person's point of view, and therefore you're in no position to shout the odds... There is an overriding need to stay calm and measured and polite and understand where they're coming from and explain that to the young person, and I think that this can sometimes become lost in the rush to say 'this is what this young person wants'.'

A second important area for consideration in terms of advocacy work is the extent to which it is an appropriate and useful method of working with all young people who run away. It has already been seen in Chapter 4 that the initial idea of advocacy as a key component of street work at Safe in the City was abandoned as the realities of the situations of young people on the streets became apparent. Advocacy was retained as one component of the project's practice which could be applied in given situations, rather than as an overarching methodology.

This more flexible concept of the place of advocacy in working with young people who run away is also relevant to other models of working. Before its closure, Leeds Safe House was beginning to move away from the idea of advocacy as a core element of service, towards a more flexible approach in which advocacy was one tool available to workers along with others, such as negotiation and mediation, and the Porth Project began to move in that direction before its closure also. A desire for a more flexible range of tools for working with young people was voiced by a number of contributors:

'I think that advocacy can be really useful as part of the toolkit, but I worried about hanging on to that over and above what might help the situation, like negotiation, mediation, compromise – those sorts of things – family support, family therapy, whatever it might be. I don't think you're necessarily disempowering the young person as long as you keep checking out that it's OK with them... [advocacy is] just one role of many that's needed within this sort of crisis, and you've got to step further than that, otherwise it's just too rigid.'

This may seem a rather obvious idea, but it has taken a considerable amount of practice working with young people who run away for projects to develop an understanding of the range of methods needed, and to refine the role of advocacy.
Confidentiality and the handling of information

The issue of confidentiality is absolutely fundamental to discussing approaches to working with young people who run away. Many contributors believe a well-defined and appropriately-framed confidentiality policy is the most important element of good practice in successfully working with young people in this target group:

'For me it has always been historically one of the key policy positions that has enabled us to work with detached young people effectively, get alongside them and work with them. But it means that you have to be so rigorous and thorough about that, in your communication of that policy to young people, your partner agencies and the other agencies you are in contact with, in your internal decision-making processes about how and when you do it [breach confidentiality] and how you enact that decision.'

By and large, the projects' thresholds of confidentiality were considerably higher than those in use by many agencies working with young people. Although there was inevitably some variation, there was generally an emphasis on serious and immediate risk as the threshold which needed to be crossed before a breach of confidentiality was considered.

An example of the kind of approach in operation was provided by one contributor:

'A good example of that was a 15-year-old female that had alleged physical abuse by her stepdad but didn't want us to do anything with it and at that point was not willing to return home. My feeling was that if we breached confidentiality we stood the risk of losing that young person and of engaging with her... Based on the fact that she was not returning home, we were able not to do anything about it. We had to take everything into account – the nature of the abuse, who else was in the house. As the work progressed and she was planning to return home she understood that at that point we had to breach confidentiality and discuss it with social services. But that was a good example of where the policy worked because we were able to do some really good work with her and I think, had we have gone against her wishes, she wouldn't have engaged again.'

This flexible approach to handling confidentiality when working with specific groups of young people has begun to be accepted as good, and is alluded to in 'Working Together', in relation to working with young people involved in prostitution:

'Children involved in prostitution may be difficult to reach, and under very strong pressure to remain in prostitution. They may be fearful of being involved with the police or social services, and may respond best initially to informal contact from health or voluntary sector outreach workers. Gaining the child's trust and confidence is vital if he or she is to be helped to be safe and well, and diverted from prostitution.' (Department of Health, 1999)

The projects contributing to this publication have been at the forefront of the development of this shift in thinking about confidentiality in relation to older children and young people. There is a consensus among contributors that they could not be successful in engaging with the young people with whom they work without a guarantee of a high degree of confidentiality.
Although there is a very strong link between confidentiality and child protection work, several contributors commented on the importance of viewing confidentiality decisions in wider terms than just child protection considerations:

'I have become more aware of the need to take a holistic perspective on the risk assessment process; that what we were not just doing was only attending to child protection concerns, which you could interpret in a narrow frame... Is there physical harm, is there sexual abuse or whatever going on here?... The risk there is that you don't factor in the other risks that young people are facing - their mental health, their harmful exposure to drug use...'

Having a confidentiality policy that is different from the norm places an extra onus on projects to be clear about their policies. Contributors emphasised the need to explain the policy clearly to young people at the outset of the work, to check young people's understanding of the policy, and to provide reminders about it as work progressed. There is a risk that the policy will be interpreted by young people as meaning 100 per cent confidentiality.

One area that perhaps has been paid only limited attention is the notion of young people's competence. The whole basis of the young-person-centred approach and the approach to confidentiality is the notion of young people making their own decisions. However, there are situations where young people may not be able to act in this way. This might be due to extreme pressures exerted upon them by others, or to the state of their mind at that point in time, or due to their maturity of thought. This seems to have been an issue that has been underplayed in projects (although it is included in some projects' procedures), perhaps primarily because it implies some form of assessment of competence which does not sit comfortably with the idea of empowering young people and treating them like adults. However, it may be more of an issue for any project that works with a slightly younger age group or with young people who have difficulties with learning.

There is also a need to put effort into explaining the policy to other agencies, as well as developing agreements and protocols. Projects reported having difficulty at times with other agencies, which could find the approach to confidentiality obstructive or even maverick. Sometimes with agencies, too, there was the misconception that projects would never share information. Contributors had found that it was important to put effort into engaging in a dialogue with other professionals about the policy, so that it was better understood.

For the long-standing projects this was something that happened only after several years of practice:

'We have a difficult confidentiality policy for other agencies to comprehend, and my learning from my experience about how you present that is, if you can present it in a way that is not threatening and not questioning other people's professionalism, it is received a lot better... because I've never compromised on the confidentiality of this project, but how it's now received is very different.

'It was explained to other agencies in quite an abrasive manner in the past which, before you even started, made life difficult, because other agencies would receive it in the way that it was given, which was kind of stroppy - "we're not passing on any information about this young person"', etc., whereas now we still have the same stance, but we have conversations with other agencies about it.
rather than say “this is what we do, good bye”. That’s made quite a big difference as to how we’re received by other agencies.

‘I think once they realised that we weren’t trying to be particularly precious about everything, but that we were just trying to maintain a service to young people so they at least could talk to us about things, then it was accepted, but that’s taken a long time.’

Newer projects had clearly absorbed this learning and spent time explaining their policies to other agencies from the very outset. Provided this was done, contributors felt it was possible to have good working relationships with other agencies applying lower thresholds of confidentiality. Many of the projects had had their approach to confidentiality incorporated into a protocol with statutory agencies, and some (e.g., Safe in the City) had also had the approach endorsed by the local ACPC.

Given the crucial importance of the confidentiality policies for forming good relationships with young people, it is not surprising that many of the contributors commented on the dilemmas involved in making a decision to breach confidentiality against a young person’s wishes. These were decisions that projects generally took very seriously, and some had developed specific tools (e.g., checklists or risk assessment forms) or decision-making processes or forums.

Child protection work

The discussion around confidentiality naturally leads to a consideration of child protection work, as many of the confidentiality decisions made by the projects related to child protection issues. Primarily, the projects work with teenagers, and dealing with child protection issues with this age group can be particularly problematic.

Because of their success in engaging with young people and developing a relationship of trust, the projects regularly receive fresh disclosures of abuse and neglect which they feel need to be passed on to statutory agencies. Thus the projects have found it necessary to ensure that their policies and procedures promote a high standard of practice in this area. All projects have in mind clear ‘exceptional circumstances’ in which they will breach confidentiality because of child protection concerns. These policies have usually been built into service-level agreements and protocols with other agencies.

There are also well-developed procedures for making child protection decisions within projects, with an emphasis on shared decision-making between practitioners and managers. At Safe in the City the decision-making process involves as many members of the team as possible, in order to ensure that different perspectives are included, but it is clearly understood that managers are ultimately responsible and accountable for the decisions made. At projects working outside office hours (e.g., refuges) there are clear procedures for contacting an on-call manager in relation to any child protection concerns that arise. Projects have also developed good procedures for recording child protection decision-making, which include situations where ultimately the decision was taken not to breach confidentiality.

Although there is undoubtedly a high level of expertise and exemplary practice within contributing projects, some concerns were raised by contributors in respect of the approach to child protection. One issue was the level of risk that projects were
willing to take in this respect. For example, one contributor felt that Leeds Safe House had gradually lowered its thresholds for passing on child protection concerns, that making child protection referrals had become too routine at the project, and that there was a danger of falling into the trap of making a referral as a means of advocating for the provision of services.

A second concern related to the following-up of child protection referrals. Most of the projects have a short-term focus and work at the young person's initiative. If they lose contact with the young person there is a danger of the child protection issues being allowed to drop. Some contributors felt that, notwithstanding the young-person-centred approach, there should be more follow-up of child protection referrals:

'It did feel sometimes as if the child protection referral was a stone that dropped in a pond and sank, after the first few ripples – just sank without trace. It was hard to keep the energy and momentum going to follow it through, particularly because our way of working was very temporary with young people... it felt like a very sporadic responsive service that didn't address things in a very planned way.'

Finally, the substantial amount of child protection work which has been common in projects working with young runaways has considerable implications for the staffing and management of projects, and these are discussed in Chapter 11.

Interactions with families

The approaches to working with families vary quite considerably between contributing projects. Some projects, in particular the street-work projects, have relatively little contact with families because of the nature of the young people with whom they work. Among the projects which commonly work with young people still attached to families, some make a conscious decision to focus work primarily on the young person, whereas others actively seek to engage families in the work that they do. There are strengths and weaknesses to these approaches which need to be thought through carefully in terms of intended outcomes of the work.

The approach of focusing work primarily or exclusively on the young person has tended to be associated with a strong emphasis on advocacy. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there were strong arguments for diversifying approaches to working with families, including the development of more conciliatory approaches, such as mediation:

'We would have a family meeting where the young person wanted that, but what happened with workers – which is almost inevitable, I think – is that they were partial, supporting the young person into that situation, and helping the young person express themselves, which is already valid. But you need to engage the whole family properly. So the family work we were doing wasn't that effective.'

The need for the development of a more flexible approach when working with young people is supported by the suggestions of young people consulted for the 'Still Running' research (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999), many of whom identified family support mediation as a service which they felt would have helped their situation:
'Some sort of counselling – maybe where families can go and sort stuff out and stop arguing.' (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999)

This idea is also reflected in the direct experience of projects working with these young people:

'One young person said she wanted us to mediate. We said, ‘We advocate.’ But she said, ‘No, I don’t want you to advocate, I want you to mediate, because I’m wrong as well.’"'

This is a particularly important area for future development of practice. There are strengths inherent in the advocacy approach (particularly when working with young people in care or in the child protection arena) which have enabled projects to engage successfully with young people. There may also be some cases where this approach is helpful when working with families. However, in the field of family work there is a need to pilot and evaluate alternative approaches to resolving the issues which young people bring to projects and for some flexibility to be built into models of working to cater for the diversity of needs of young people who run away.

Issues of long-term engagement versus crisis intervention

As has already been discussed in the preceding chapters on models of working, most of the projects saw their role as including an element of crisis intervention. For most projects the concept of a crisis was applied to an individual incident of running away, and this was seen as an opportunity to engage with young people (and sometimes their families) on problematic issues which underpinned running away. For the street-work projects, the concept of crisis could also be applied to events which disrupted young people’s established survival strategies on the streets, and perhaps offered an opportunity to promote alternative solutions, including moving off the streets.

One of the problems of the projects’ successes in working with young people is that young people do not always share this desire to limit their involvement to a short-term crisis intervention. In the experience of contributors, some young people feel they have been listened to and taken seriously for the first time, and are reluctant to lose the relationship they have built up with the project, or with individual workers:

'I think it was confusing. Refuge was seen as a short-term intervention and yet the young people’s need was for longer-term, particularly emotional, support. There was always a tension in the work between those two things.'

This reluctance is compounded by the difficulties which the projects often experienced in trying to refer young people on to longer-term support services (see also Chapter 6).

There is therefore a tension between the concept of short-term crisis intervention on the one hand, and the desires of young people and realities of disengaging with them on the other hand. For example, in refuge projects, the limitations on follow-up work with young people often led to young people coming back into refuge for repeat stays in order to get access to the services they felt they needed.

The reality is that most of the established projects contributing to this study have
become engaged with some young people either sporadically or continuously for several years. This was an issue which was raised in a study of four projects in the mid-1990s (Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994) but which has still not been fully resolved. For example, while Leeds Safe House ended up working with some young people regularly for two or three years, the practice model remained short-term focused. There was a tendency to focus on immediate issues on each occasion that the young person came into refuge, and there was little sense of a long-term plan to the work. In some cases the project appears to have been adhering to an idea of how to conduct its work that was not in tune with the realities of young people’s lives and their need for some form of continuous independent support.

An example of this was the way the project dealt with child protection issues, as discussed earlier in the chapter, but is also was reflected in other kinds of work:

’We responded to need, or we tried to, and that was great but there wasn’t the follow-through and I don’t think other people were clear about what we were doing and where it began and ended. So we might go into a school with a young person and talk about problems that they were having there and make a lot of agreements, and then the young person might leave refuge and we’d never see them again or talk to those people in that school again.’

There is an important debate to be had about the extent to which the potential for long-term involvement should be taken into account when planning services, and this issue needs careful consideration when setting up projects working with young people who run away. While many young people’s situations are suited to a short-term crisis intervention model, there are some circumstances where this will have little or no value. Should the project take on long-term work with these young people? Are there other services in the area which could fulfil this function? What implications do the answers to these questions have for the allocation of resources within the project?

Key points

- A young-person-centred approach has proved effective in engaging with young people who run away. However, it needs to be realistic rather than ‘evangelical’ in order to effectively move work forward and it needs to work in partnership with other agencies.
- Techniques for making contact with young people who run away require an emphasis on clarity, directness and the independence of the service, in order to establish some trust with young people who have often felt let down by adults.
- An advocacy approach can in certain circumstances be a vital element of working with young people who run away – for example, where there are child protection issues or issues relating to the quality of statutory service provision. However, projects need to guard against the indiscriminate use of advocacy combined with an over-zealous advocacy style which created problems for the early projects working with young runaways.
- The issue of confidentiality is vital to the development of work with young people who run away. Traditionally, projects in this field have worked to a high threshold of confidentiality and this approach has recently been endorsed in official
guidance. Effort needs to be put into ensuring that young people and other professionals are clear about the approach to confidentiality.

- Projects working with young runaways will regularly have to deal with child protection concerns. Existing projects have developed a high level of expertise in this area and it is vital that any new projects that are developed give this issue priority consideration. This should include the development of understandings and agreements with statutory agencies concerning the approach to handling child protection issues.

- A more flexible range of models of intervention needs to be developed to work with young people and their families. Existing models have primarily focused on individual work with young people, yet most of the reasons for running away relate to problems within the family.

- Many young people who run away have long-standing problems in one or more areas of their lives. The short-term crisis intervention undertaken by most existing projects can be effective in resolving immediate issues, but there is also a need to attend to the longer-term support needs of young people and families, either through the provision of ongoing support or through effective referral to other agencies. If this is not achieved there is a danger of projects becoming caught up in a cyclical crisis-driven pattern of working with some young people.