INTER-AGENCY WORKING

Working together in partnership with other agencies has, in recent years, received increasing emphasis as an essential aspect of good practice in the social welfare field. In view of this, some of the issues which projects face in working in partnership are no different from those being grappled with on a wider level within organisations working in many different fields. However, as will have become clear in the previous chapter, there are specific dynamics involved in the process of working with young people who run away which may make inter-agency working particularly difficult. This chapter pulls together contributors' comments about these issues, together with some of the solutions that projects have developed in order to maintain workable relationships.

Tensions in inter-agency working

Given the nature of the work and the approaches taken by the projects described in this report, a certain amount of tension with other agencies is seemingly inevitable. For some, the act of setting up a project in a specific locality can be interpreted as a 'thinly-veiled criticism' of existing provision (particularly by statutory services) in the area. Certainly this seems to have been an issue both for Leeds Safe House and the Porth Project in their early years, although there may be lessons to be learned here about the way such projects are set up:

'When I look back in terms of refuge, it seemed to be that The Children's Society, for whatever reason, took a decision in isolation to situate its refuge in Leeds and while there was initial discussions to say that "this is what we are doing"... Maybe you couldn't really do more at the time because there was a need for The Children's Society not only to develop a service delivery, a practice model, but it was also in the situation of highlighting an issue and a need which may not have been easily acknowledged or welcomed.'

Beyond this developmental issue, there are various aspects to the approaches taken by projects which can potentially create problems in working with other agencies. The young-person-centred approach taken by projects can create a rift with statutory agencies in particular, and the stance on confidentiality can be seen as maverick or irresponsible:

'There is a tension there, in that the statutory services can sometimes look at the voluntary sector or look at somebody that works with a higher threshold (of confidentiality) and see that as very unprofessional, because the professional standards are often perceived to belong to the statutory services, and having a
policy that means you step out a bit and are able to work with young people a bit longer also means that it's going to bring [you] into conflict... So the challenge for any project working to a higher threshold is, "Can your own organisation live with it?"; "Can the workers live with it?" - because that may be a choice about whether they work here or not."

Moreover, the use of advocacy as a standard practice tool is prone to create adversarial and antagonistic relationships with other professionals:

'By doing advocacy with young people you find that you're viewed as antagonistic by others, whether that be agencies or parents or carers... It puts you into conflict, being seen as do-gooders, maverick people.'

This is especially true when the purposes of advocacy and the roles of workers are not clearly understood:

'I think it can work but you've got to be able to distinguish very clearly what the advocate's role is. Quite often the approach of other professionals would be appealing as an adult or as a professional, but you're there in an advocacy role and essentially you're an extension of the young person and their opinion. You're not putting across a professional opinion there and I'm not sure that that was always clear, either from the person from the other side of that [the social services], or even for the person providing it.'

A further tension for refuge-based projects stems from their legal exemptions. This means that they can allow a young person to stay for 14 days without the consent of parents or carers, including the local authority, where relevant. This creates a power imbalance in discussions with social services staff which may not be conducive to positive joint working.

The voluntary sector also sees its role as being to advocate and campaign for children and young people collectively, as well as individually. Again, if not carefully handled, this kind of activity runs the risk of alienating professionals who may feel directly or indirectly criticised.

All these factors militate against the creation and maintenance of positive working relationships between projects and the statutory sector. Certainly, the early histories of the first wave of projects working with missing young people reflected these issues. There were often major rifts and tensions between these projects and the local Social Services Department (SSD) in particular, stemming from all the above factors, but especially from the over-enthusiastic use of advocacy, as discussed in Chapter 8.

Yet, more recently, these older projects have succeeded in establishing far better relationships with statutory services. In addition, the newer projects that have been set up seem, by and large, to have avoided these problems and to have had good working relationships with local networks of agencies from the outset. This may be partly due to a gradual shift in professional culture towards a greater acceptance of young people's participation, as discussed in the introductory chapter:

'The methodologies require services to be accessible to these very detached young people and therefore the key issue for them is confidentiality, because it's about power and control, and power is the problem with all these types of services. The cultural shift is such that having young people's wishes and feelings at the centre of planning of services and of initiatives is now enshrined in the way in
which government documentation and legislation is formulated. So maybe we need to be fighting a different battle now.'

However, there are a number of other explanatory factors evident in the accounts of contributors, which are discussed in the second half of this chapter.

Despite these positive developments, significant tensions are likely to remain between projects working with young people who run away and other agencies, particularly SSDs. These stem from difficulties the projects often experience in assisting young people in gaining access to services and resources. This was an issue which prompted substantial comment from contributors.

Ironically, despite concerns about the level of confidentiality with which the projects operate, and the impact this might have on child protection decisions, many contributors commented on the difficulty of taking a child protection route with the young people with whom they worked. There seems to be widespread reluctance on the part of social services to accept child protection concerns in relation to older young people who run away. One contributor recounted the case of a 13-year-old girl living at home who was taking heroin and who was not seen as being at enough risk to be accommodated by the local authority. The issue of lack of access to statutory resources creates huge frustration for staff within projects, although it is recognised that social services have limited resources and that, in terms of child protection work, younger children tend to be prioritised over teenagers:

‘When you engage with a young person, a whole range of issues emerge for that young person apart from the running away. And one of the difficulties is, how do you begin to address those issues? If you are reliant, for instance, on statutory agencies, then you may not be able to address those issues quickly – because we find that we don’t get a particularly quick response, for instance, around child protection issues for teenagers, and on the one hand you can understand that. If you’re needing to deal with babies with broken legs or teenagers, then people do prioritise – that may not be right but it’s a reality of the situation at present.’

However, there was also a recognition that child protection procedures may not always be a helpful or appropriate way of working with young people who run away:

‘Sometimes, what you would think automatically would be a child protection issue doesn’t always have a child protection response from social services; but that in itself isn’t a bad thing because a child protection response might not be the best way forward for these young people. Child protection procedures can be quite traumatic – it might not be what they need.’

Before moving on to look at the factors facilitating good inter-agency relationships, one further comment on inter-agency working relates to the failure on the part of a number of projects to create adequate networks with other local agencies. This seems to have been a particular problem for refuge projects, as discussed in Chapter 3, but there have also been concerns about insularity within other projects at certain points in their development. There is a risk that this insularity will, in the long run, be detrimental both to the project and, more importantly, to young people.
Factors facilitating relationships with other agencies

Informing and consulting other agencies in the early developmental stages of a project

Projects working with young people who run away can be seen by other agencies as quite threatening. As pointed out earlier, the very act of setting up a service can be interpreted as an implied criticism of existing services for young people. In order to counteract negative consequences of this, it is vital to involve local agencies from the very early developmental stages. When Leeds Safe House was set up, this did not happen:

'Social services weren't that happy at not being consulted about refuge being plonked in Leeds in the first place. In starting out with any piece of work, one of the initial things that you should always do is to identify who the key stakeholders are before engaging in developing it any further, that purely in principle they are supportive for this piece of work, or even if they are not supportive it has got a mandate from somebody that it has to be provided, whether that be from central government or individual local authorities or whatever.'

As a consequence of this it was always difficult for the project to work effectively in partnership and there was a sense of lost opportunity:

'I think it was one of the brilliant things about being a voluntary and independent organisation that we had freedoms to work with young people in quite fresh, innovative ways. And one of the great losses, because we didn't set ourselves up in partnership with other agencies from the beginning, was that we weren't able to realise the potential that we had as an organisation that young people actually trusted.'

On the other hand, the Bournemouth refuge had better relationships with local agencies from the outset, and this continued throughout the history of the project:

'I have a view that how things start does affect how they develop. It's very difficult if you've had a slightly difficult start to put things right down the line. There were some very sympathetic people in the police and social services to start with. We had good protocols. We had some horrendous cases, but it was OK, I didn't get the feeling ever that there was any antipathy.'

More recently the development of the flexible refuge by the South Coast Runaways Initiative, as discussed in Chapter 6, has been undertaken with the close involvement of police and social services:

'The idea came about and then we decided to meet with social services to put it to them — you know, "This is an idea we've had, what do you think? What we want to do is to negotiate a protocol with you around this." And they said, "That's fine, this is who you need to contact", and it went very well. You've got to have a relationship with statutory partners. It doesn't mean we're not in a position to challenge them. We challenge social services every day... But we can still have a dialogue at another level with managers and improve the way the whole system here works with young people.'
Developing services on the basis of locally identified need

Historically, there has been a fair amount of resistance to accepting the widespread and serious nature of young people running away. Early research studies spent a considerable amount of energy in producing evidence of the level of need, often in the face of denial from other professionals.

One of the reasons for the success of the ASTRA Project in Gloucester (described in Chapter 5) seems to have been an awareness and acceptance among local agencies in the city of the importance of the issue of young people running away, and a shared desire to tackle this issue. The same is true for the two missing persons schemes set up by Barnardo's in West Yorkshire (also described in Chapter 5).

Thus, where it is possible, projects should aim to build on locally-held concerns about young people running away. Where this is not possible, it may be necessary to undertake research or audit activities in partnership with local agencies in order to produce locally-based evidence which is accepted as credible and relevant. This is an approach which Safe in the City has utilised in Manchester. The project played a key role in commissioning a research study which emphasised a participatory form of enquiry. This study was successful in creating a receptive culture for debate about the needs of young people on the streets in the city. More recently, the project has been undertaking a study of the needs of black young people with the aim of developing locally-based responses to their needs (see Chapter 10 for more details).

Involving agencies in a steering group

The second way in which projects have been successful in building bridges with other local agencies is through the creation of a steering group with representatives of local agencies. This provides a forum for discussing issues arising out of the project's work, and also means that the representatives can become 'champions' of the project within their own agency, thus promoting a more positive image. It is interesting that the Bradford Young Missing Persons Scheme emerged from the steering group set up in relation to another project.

Putting resources into clarifying the project's policies and approach

For the longer-established projects, some of the initial problems with other agencies seemed to have been created by a misunderstanding of what the project did or what it aimed to achieve. The approach to confidentiality and child protection was often a particular area for confusion, and it was only through a concerted effort to explain the approach that projects succeeded in improving relationships. Again, with newer projects, these lessons seem to have been absorbed, with contributors emphasising the value of making visits to relevant agencies from the outset of the project's development in order to share information:

'When I first started, one of the first things that I did was go around and actually speak to all the relevant local agencies and with as many as possible I went around and did it face to face, rather than send a leaflet around saying "this is now in existence". And I asked if I could go to team meetings and talk to workers and explain what I do. I go in and explain our confidentiality policy so that you don't get caught into the myth of [of] "Don't talk to [the project] because they won't talk to anybody, they've got such a tight confidentiality policy."'
Along with this there is a need to be clear about the roles of the different professionals within multi-agency forums:

"The critical thing is an understanding of role, which I think was an issue for a lot of the projects in their early days – that that wasn’t clear. So if you’re taking on the role as advocate for a young person there’s got to be a clear definition of advocacy, there’s got to be an understanding of your [advocacy] role in that, and very clear distinction between that and the [social work] capacity. Because that’s where I think there have been difficulties and I think what has been very hard to swallow as a result of all that is the negative effects that has had on young people."

A realistic approach

The fifth factor promoting more positive relationships with other agencies has been a gradual refinement of approaches to advocacy in particular, which are discussed further in Chapter 8. This has entailed developing a recognition of the constraints with which other organisations are faced, and adopting a more subtle and realistic approach to attempting to assist young people in achieving their desired outcomes.

Sharing knowledge and expertise with other projects

A number of contributing projects have developed initiatives to share knowledge and expertise with other local agencies. One of the forms this has taken has been to assist other projects in developing their practice with under-16s. There is often an element of fear in working with this target group, particularly from smaller voluntary agencies that work mainly with young people in an older age group. This fear is often born out of a lack of knowledge about the legalities of working with young people under 16, including issues of parental consent, and about the child protection system. Several projects (including the Breaking Free Project and Safe in the City) have therefore provided information to other local agencies with which they have developed links, and supported them in developing their practice with this age group:

'We’ve worked quite hard with them... We’ve helped them write an under-16s policy so that they now feel really confident that if someone who is under 16 comes in that they would know how to deal with it, what to do, who to contact. They feel clearer about their responsibilities under the Children Act, they’ve got a really sound policy now.'

Several projects have also been involved in developing local protocols around working with young people who run away, in partnership with social services and the police. One of these is the Kirklees SOS Scheme, which also undertakes partnership working on individual cases with social workers, where appropriate:

'We have got quite a few referrals from social services as well, and what we also offer to social services is more a consultative role... if the social worker or family support team have got a very good working relationship with a young person, it’s not always helpful that we also work with that young person, but we have resources we can offer them, ideas about young people going missing. We offer that service as well, which has had quite a high take-up and has been quite successful with work carried out with young people.'
Through the above means, projects working with young people who run away have been able to forge positive relationships with statutory agencies within their local areas. It is important to note that this has been achieved without a substantial change in approaches to working with young people on the part of the projects.

Key points

- Projects working with young people who run away face an inherently difficult task in establishing and maintaining positive and constructive relationships with other agencies. These difficulties stem from several factors:
  - The establishment of a project for runaways can be perceived by statutory services as a criticism of service provision
  - The young-person-centred and advocacy approaches often adopted by projects are, in the view of many contributors, an inevitable source of conflict
  - The approach to confidentiality can be perceived as maverick or irresponsible
  - For refuges, the legal exemptions granted to projects can be a source of frustration and resentment within social services
  - The resource shortage faced by statutory services can often lead to conflict with projects attempting to get access to services for young people.

- Projects working with young runaways therefore will need to put considerable energy into inter-agency relationships. The experience of contributing projects suggests that if there is a commitment to this, then it is possible to have positive, or at least workable relationships with other agencies. The key elements which contributors identified as being helpful in this respect are:
  - Informing and consulting agencies in the early developmental stages of a project
  - Developing services on the basis of locally-held concerns or local evidence of need
  - Involving agencies in a steering group
  - Clarifying project philosophy and policies
  - Developing a pragmatic approach with realistic expectations of other agencies
  - Sharing knowledge and expertise with others.
There has been a gradual development of awareness within projects working with young runaways that their services are not reaching out equally to all sections of the target group, and are not always successful in adequately meeting the diverse needs of the young people with whom they have contact. This chapter looks at the approaches which projects have developed to tackle these issues. It also examines some of the ways in which anti-discriminatory practice with this target group might be undertaken in the future.

The development of interventions with young people who have run away over the past two decades was spurred initially by perceived needs in the West End of London, and this was followed by a gradual diversification geographically, and in terms of working methods, as outlined in Chapter 1. A drawback of this approach is that responses based on visible need will not adequately address the needs of all members of the target group. More recently, research has highlighted some of the specific issues facing young people from certain sub-groups within the overall population of young people who run away, but the picture painted by this evidence is still incomplete.

Before embarking on a discussion of the issues in terms of minority groups, it is worth noting that, in terms of gender mix, the various practice models have generally been fairly evenly used. Research suggests that females are slightly more likely to run away than males (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) and this pattern has often been apparent in project usage.

This chapter looks first at the issue of working with young people from black and minority ethnic groups. This is the area of anti-discriminatory practice where there is most research evidence and practice experience. Later in the chapter, the comments of contributors on other aspects of anti-discriminatory practice – including working with lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, and disabled young people – are presented.

Working with black young people

In the context of the discussion below, the term ‘black’ is used to include young people of African, Caribbean and Asian origin. However, there are some significant differences between sub-groups of black young people and a distinction is made where appropriate between young people of African-Caribbean origin and those of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin. This distinction is itself an over-simplification as there is considerable diversity within these sub-groups, but is helpful in defining some of the broad issues.
Before discussing practice issues, it is relevant briefly to review existing knowledge on patterns of running away among young people from different cultural backgrounds.

**Evidence from research**

As shown in Chapter 2, there is evidence of differing rates of running away among young people from different ethnic groups, with black young people being somewhat less likely to run away than white young people (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). However, the estimated rates of running away (7.5 per cent for young people of African-Caribbean origin and 5.5 per cent for young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin, compared with over 10 per cent for white young people) still represent a significant incidence of running away under the age of 16.

There are surprisingly few ethnic differences in patterns of running away. There are no significant differences between young people from the three main ethnic groups (white, African-Caribbean, and Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi) in terms of the age at which they first ran away, the number of times they had run away, the proportion who classified themselves as having been forced to leave rather than having run away, the likelihood of sleeping rough, or in how far they travelled while they were away. The only significant difference in running away patterns is the finding that black young people are likely to stay away longer than white young people when they do run away.

Broadly speaking, reasons for running away appear to be the same for young people in all ethnic groups including high levels of conflict, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. However, for young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin, there are additional cultural factors. It is vital that professionals understand if services are to be culturally sensitive.

Although it is dangerous to make generalisations, many young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin grow up in relatively traditional, close-knit communities with a very specific set of cultural norms. There will often be considerable pressure on families and young people within these communities to conform. The incidence of a young person, particularly a young woman, running away can be seen as a failure on the part of her or his family, and this can have dramatic repercussions in terms of stigmatisation of the young person and the family. For a young person living in this cultural context, the decision to run away can therefore be a much more serious and far-reaching one than for other young people, and the use of services can exacerbate the situation:

"One of the dangers of refuge is that, having brought young people into refuge, the fragile ties they might have had which might have been the road home, could be irrevocably broken, particularly within some cultures, like the quite understandable distress expressed by the Asian community about [young people] living in a mixed refuge where proper attention wasn't given to their cultural needs – and I think that that was a well-founded criticism."

The implications of this fact for the development of services aimed at meeting these young people's needs is discussed later in this chapter.

Finally, in this brief overview, qualitative research indicates that there may be some other significant differences in the experiences of young people after running away. Black young people are unlikely to be visibly on the streets when they run away.
because of fear of racism or harassment. They may also find that agencies they approach are not always sensitive to or geared to catering for their needs (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). They are therefore more likely be invisible and to rely on support networks within their own communities. Again, this has implications for developing services designed to meet these needs.

**Access to existing services**

As discussed in earlier chapters, each model of work developed with young people who run away has been primarily successful at engaging with a particular sub-group of the target population. There have been concerns in projects operating each practice model about the extent to which they have been accessible to a range of young people.

The evidence on this issue varies according to the practice model. There does seem to have been a tendency for city-centre-based street-work projects to work primarily with white young people. As discussed above, black young people who run away are unlikely to find the city centre a safe environment, so a city-centre-based model is, by definition, unlikely to engage effectively with young people from minority ethnic groups. However, there are young people from these groups sleeping rough outside city centres.

Turning to other practice models, monitoring statistics of project usage gathered over a nine-year period at Leeds Safe House do not suggest that the project was under-used by young people from minority ethnic groups, based on estimates of running away rates from research. Thus there is no evidence of a lack of access in this case, but there are other issues in relation to service delivery and anti-discriminatory practice, which are discussed later in the chapter.

In missing persons schemes there has been some concern about the effectiveness of this model of working in relation to young people from ethnic minorities. The projects attempt to make contact with all young people reported missing. However, there are some suggestions that young people from particular cultural backgrounds may be less likely to be reported as missing by parents or carers. Contributors also mentioned experience some gate-keeping by parents when attempting to make contact with young people of Asian origin, although to date the numbers of such referrals have been small, so the evidence on this matter is not conclusive.

**Developing more inclusive practice models**

The issue of uneven access to existing services can be tackled in two ways: through measures that promote more equal access, and through the development of different services that might better meet the needs of specific target groups.

In terms of increasing access to existing services, projects have attempted a number of strategies, including developing better links with organisations working with minority ethnic groups and with communities, and improving publicity in order to be more culturally inclusive. For projects relying on face-to-face initial contact with young people, the composition of the staff team can also influence access rates. Youth Link has noticed an increase in the numbers of black young people on the streets in the city centre, particularly during the day. Monitoring figures have suggested that when the street work pair includes a black worker, the level of contact with these black young people is higher. Consequently the project has
created a specific post within the street-work team to attempt to increase its contact with these young people.

Although such measures are vital in ensuring equality of access to existing services, they cannot alter the extent to which models of working may not be suited to the needs of particular groups of young people. A wider range of services should therefore be developed to meet the diversity of need.

An example of this approach is provided by Safe in the City. In response to the low usage of its Manchester city-centre services by black young people running away, the project created a specific team to work with this target group. The team's work is still at a developmental stage. Research has been carried out into the local issues for black young people running away, primarily focusing on young people of African-Caribbean origin. This supports the above research findings in relation to issues of harassment and racism directed at black young people on the streets and the consequent reliance on local community networks. The team has spent a lot of time networking with agencies working with black young people throughout the city, and aims to develop a community-based model of work which attaches services to existing agencies and projects that are already engaged with this target group.

A similar approach is likely to be needed in order to devise culturally sensitive services for young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin. Safe on the Streets – Leeds is currently undertaking research in West Yorkshire into the needs of these young people in relation to running away. Given the discussion above about specific cultural issues for this group, it is evident that many existing practice models are not appropriate to their needs. In the view of one contributor there is a particular need for preventive community-based work with young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin. This is necessary because the consequences of running away can be so far-reaching.

There is also a need to develop approaches to working with young people and families that are more rooted in the specific cultural context. The advocacy approach practised at Leeds Safe House, for example, together with the provision of accommodation without parental consent, often ran the risk of making things worse for young people. Mediation approaches would seem to be a more appropriate strategy for resolving the issues faced by young people. It may also be possible to provide respite accommodation with parental consent, using the model developed by the Home & Away Project (see Chapter 6).

'It think if there was a project that was developed in relation to providing specific family mediation work with young people and a retreat, I think that would work, if it's done in conjunction with families [i.e., a respite facility that the family could agree to].'

It may also be possible to provide respite accommodation with parental consent, using the model developed by the Home & Away Project (see Chapter 6).

Service delivery issues

The issue of language has been a significant issue for a number of the projects. Although young people are usually able to speak English, their parents and other family members may not. Several projects which make initial contact with families by written means have developed information in relevant languages. However, people
may not always be literate in languages they speak, and verbal approaches may be a more effective means of communication.

Young people who run away often have essential practical needs such as food and hygiene products. Catering for these needs can be a prerequisite to engaging with young people on the streets or in accommodation-based projects. It is vital that projects ensure that the practical help they provide is sensitive to the different cultural needs young people may have. This might include carrying a range of skin-care products while working on the streets, offering a range of food for young people in refuge, and so on. This is a very basic area which contributors felt had not always been attended to fully in projects in the past.

There are also issues around developing cultural competence in order to provide culturally-sensitive and appropriate services to young people whatever their background:

"I think [when] working with Asian young people we got very uncertain and worried and perhaps didn't take enough steps to learn about the community the young person had come from, and the best ways to negotiate and mediate with people in that young person's community."

This points to the need for effective training and staff development opportunities, as discussed later.

Working with young people from other minority groups

The picture in terms of usage of projects by minority groups other than black young people is less clear. In terms of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, recent UK research has not found a clear link between issues of sexuality and young people running away. However, there have been methodological difficulties in terms of this issue. Safe on the Streets – Leeds is currently undertaking research specifically into the issue of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people running away which will hopefully throw further light on this issue.

There have been a number of specific initiatives within projects in relation to working with lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. In its early years a substantial amount of Youth Link's work was with gay young men in Birmingham city centre. This was partly related to characteristics of the local situation, but the project also had a sexual health worker, seconded from a health authority, and this may have promoted issues of sexuality within the work. Leeds Safe House employed a specialist worker to focus on lesbian, gay and bisexual issues but there were barriers preventing this worker from spending sufficient time focusing on these issues (see discussion later in the chapter). Safe in the City ran a group for gay young men on the streets in Manchester city centre, in partnership with two other street agencies (a mental health project and a youth homelessness/empowerment project). The aim of this initiative was to facilitate mutual support between the young people. Finally, the Breaking Free Project has worked with a number of young women who have had issues in relation to sexuality. The project has produced leaflets, based on ones developed in Canada, giving straightforward information about sexuality and offering suggestions about where to go for support and further information.

However, as one contributor commented, grappling with the issue of sexuality is quite difficult because people's identities are not necessarily visible. There was
therefore a feeling amongst contributors that whilst some positive steps had been taken, there was a need for further development of understanding and expertise in relation to issues of sexuality:

'I think that young people whose sexuality was in question sometimes we were very affirming of that but also sometimes we got a bit confused because so many young people who came in had been damaged, their sexuality had been damaged by the different kinds of abuse, whether it was sexual abuse or damage to their self-esteem through other kinds of abuse... I think we got muddled sometimes and didn't know how to treat a young person who is damaged sexually and how to differentiate between that and a young person struggling to find their sexuality.'

Turning to the issue of disability, the barriers presented by specific service models were highlighted in Stein, Rees and Frost (1994). The emphasis on telephone access to refuges, and the focus on city-centre street work both reduce the likelihood of working with young people with disabilities. So far, there has been relatively little specific development in relation to the issues of disabled young people who run away, in terms of either research or practice. Exceptions to this are two practice developments at Youth Link. The project has made efforts to ensure that it produces information which is accessible to young people who have difficulties with reading, and has purchased a software package to incorporate Widget (a symbolic language) into publicity and other materials. Youth Link's Internet service (described in Chapter 7) is also seen as a means of offering a service which may be accessible to young people who are not able to contact the project via the telephone.

General anti-discriminatory issues

Contributors also commented on the need for a focus on anti-discriminatory practice within the wider organisation and management of projects. Many of the points made here have a wider relevance than just in relation to working with young people who run away.

Project development

Given the discussion above about the inappropriateness of certain practice models for engaging with particular sub-groups of young people, it is clear that thinking about anti-discriminatory practice should be built into the planning and early development of projects. As one contributor pointed out, if this is not done at this stage, practice can become inflexible and it can be very difficult to bring about changes later.

As discussed earlier, this planning should include information-gathering and the building of links with a range of local organisations working with minority groups.

Staffing

There are a number of recruitment and staffing issues which need to be considered in terms of working with young people who run away. The issue of qualifications and recruitment is discussed in Chapter 11.

A key issue discussed by several contributors related to the advantages and disadvantages of employing specialist staff. A number of projects have employed staff specifically to focus on issues of ethnicity or sexuality, and Safe in the City has
developed a black young people's team. This can be a useful strategy for ensuring that anti-discriminatory issues are adequately addressed within projects. However, there can also be a danger of seeing these staff as the experts on certain issues and, therefore, not take a more general responsibility for anti-discriminatory practice. In addition, where specialist workers are employed partly to do face-to-face work with young people, it can be difficult for them to find the time to develop other aspects of their work appropriately, given the crisis-driven nature of much work with young people who run away.

Irrespective of the decisions a project makes about creating specialist posts, there is also a need to develop the cultural competence of the whole staff team, including training, secondment opportunities, and the provision of a range of literature which staff can access in order to develop their understanding and practice. The role of supervision is also vital in ensuring that anti-discriminatory issues are kept on the agenda.

Policy and practice

There are specific areas of project policy that require careful thinking in terms of anti-discriminatory practice. A particular area of focus should be policies on child protection. There is a risk of decisions on child protection issues being made on the basis of a set of dominant cultural assumptions which do not apply to all young people. While this is an issue that can apply to any agency working with children and young people, the high profile of child protection issues within work with young people who run away makes it a particularly important issue in the context of this report. Again, then, there is a need to develop the cultural competence of staff teams, but also there is a need to build checks and balances into the decision-making process, and also to review decisions at a later date in order to learn from practice.

On a more general note, one contributor summed up the development of good-quality anti-discriminatory practice with young people who run away as incorporating two principles: transparency and choice. Projects need to give out clear, accessible information to all young people about what they can offer and about their policies and practice. This needs to happen in terms of both publicity and awareness-raising, and once the young person has made initial contact with the project. Young people should also be given choice about how to engage with the project. This should include as many different avenues as possible to access services, and choices about who they work with at the project. Consideration should always be given to offering a range of workers (e.g., mixed street-work pairs) but it should not be assumed that a person from a particular background or group will necessarily want to engage with a worker from that group.

Key points

- Research suggests that while there are many similarities in reasons for running away among young people from different ethnic groups, there are also some key differences in terms of the cultural context, particularly for young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin.
- Research also indicates that young people from black and ethnic minority groups are less likely to be visible when they run away.
The above factors mean that services need to be sensitive to cultural differences, and that more inclusive practice models should be developed in order to meet the needs of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Approaches that are effective in working with white young people who run away are often not easily transferrable to different cultural contexts.

The development of practice in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual young people who run away has been limited to date, and more attention should be paid to this issue in future.

A similar remark applies to working with disabled young people, where issues such as access to services have not been extensively addressed to date.

There is also a need carefully to consider anti-discriminatory issues in terms of the general development and management of projects working with young people who run away. This includes the need to keep issues of diversity and cultural competence at the forefront in terms of the recruitment and training of staff, and the need to consider the anti-discriminatory implication of policies and practice in relation to areas such as child protection and general service delivery.
This chapter looks at the issues involved for managers and staff working in projects with young people who run away. The focus here is on issues that are specific to working in this field, rather than on general learning about good practice in management and staffing. However, the messages contained in this chapter are still likely to be of relevance to other fields of work which involve engaging with disadvantaged and/or detached target groups.

Recruitment of staff

The recruitment of staff to work with young people who run away presents some difficult dilemmas for organisations and managers. Judging by the comments of many of the contributors, there is an ongoing debate between the need for qualified staff (and in particular staff with social work qualifications) and the need for staff who can engage with young people in innovative ways and in unusual settings:

'We appoint and recruit people who do not easily adapt well to managerial structures and managerial oversight... it's striking that balance, really, to have good enough management to be confident that your quality of work, your standard of work is there, but sufficient leeway to allow people room to manoeuvre and operate - because you're sending two staff out on a night-time at eight o'clock, and they're on their own and they've got to be enabled and empowered to behave and operate effectively on their own. make decisions there and then.'

Most, but by no means all, practice staff in the projects contributing to this report held a qualification in either youth and community work or social work. There is also a debate about the relative merits of employing workers from youth work and social work backgrounds for this kind of work.

These debates stem from the approaches to working that have been developed with this target group of young people, discussed in depth in Chapter 8. In summary, there is an emphasis on working in a young-person-centred way in order to engage successfully with the young people but, given their background and situations, also a need regularly to handle issues of confidentiality and child protection.

However, it is interesting to note that one contributor from a statutory background found it necessary to go through a process of adjustment to the approach to confidentiality and child protection in operation at one of the projects.

There is no simple answer to the above debates, and no consensus between contributors about what is the best approach. It seems important that managers,
and others responsible for developing projects, should be aware of the need for careful consideration of a balance of skills and competencies within the team. It may be, for example, that a lack of statutory background at practitioner level can be balanced by substantial experience at senior practitioner/managerial level. There is also likely to be a need for good training and preparation of all new staff, whatever their background, in handling child protection issues with this particular target group.

The above debate also has a relevance in terms of anti-discriminatory practice. Several projects reported difficulties in recruiting qualified staff. There is a general skills shortage, but this seems to be more marked in relation to the shortage of qualified staff from minority ethnic backgrounds. A consequence of requiring qualifications may be a failure to recruit a staff team who are diverse in terms of cultural background, and this will have a knock-on effect on other issues, as discussed in Chapter 10.

**Composition of teams**

One aspect of the composition of teams – the profile of qualifications – has already been discussed above. Other comments made by contributors relate to the extent of specialisation that might be necessary or helpful in order to deliver services to young people who run away. This is likely to be most relevant for projects working with a diverse user group and wanting to offer a range of approaches to meet differing needs – for example, advocacy, family mediation, counselling, and so on. Some contributors felt that it would not be possible for each member of staff to be competent in and comfortable with all the different approaches that might be necessary:

> 'I think it's worth considering now, because of the changing roles and because of the number of demands, whether what we had in the past - a generic job description is what's needed in the future, or whether you should be looking to have wider multi-disciplinary teams, where you have people who are particularly experienced and qualified in family work as opposed to advocacy or social work, health professionals - all sorts of different experiences.'

There were plans at Leeds Safe House, before its closure, to develop a more multi-disciplinary team. This may be necessary for any project which aims to work flexibly and responsively.

**Safety of staff**

To some extent, it is an inevitable feature of working with young people who run away that staff will sometimes find themselves in risky situations. However, it is clearly essential to attempt to minimise these risks, and projects have developed a range of good-practice principles in order to achieve this goal.

Before considering some of these principles it is worth exploring the nature of the risks faced by staff, partly in an effort to challenge some natural preconceptions. Perhaps the most obvious risk that springs to mind is for detached workers on the streets of a city centre. Yet, in fact, serious assaults on staff in these situations have been extremely rare at Youth Link and Safe in the City. This may have been partly
due to the precautions taken by the projects, but there are also aspects of these situations which might make them less risky than would first appear:

'There clearly are risks but it would be easy to sensationalise these, because it is easy to perceive it as a dangerous activity. Some of the risks are no more or less than you would face as an individual or a couple in the middle of Manchester on a Friday night when people are coming out of the clubs and pubs. You are facing the same risk of violence, street robbery and aggression.'

The following list provides some of the key aspects of maximising worker safety while on the streets, based on the practice of Safe in the City and Youth Link:

- workers always work in pairs, never split up, maintain easy eye contact at all times
- workers always have access to a mobile phone
- workers always have access to a manager via telephone (including a designated manager on duty outside office hours)
- there is an agreement that if one worker is uncomfortable with doing something, it's not done, and that there is no discussion about this at the time
- workers agree a code with which to communicate in difficult situations
- the project provides clear information about areas where staff should be extra-vigilant and areas which they should not visit
- time is allotted at the start of the session for discussion between the pair of workers about strengths and weaknesses
- staff work in mixed-gender pairs when practical.

There clearly are also risks attached to doing other forms of work with young people who run away. In terms of refuge work, there are risks to staff within the accommodation provision, and also in travelling to meet young people at unknown destinations in the middle of the night. Contributors from Leeds Safe House and the Porth Project commented on their concern, in retrospect, about the way in which the project met young people. At Leeds, one worker went out alone in the project car, with a mobile phone, and stayed in regular contact with the refuge. However, at night, when there were only two workers on duty and one senior member of staff on call, this could leave both workers in a vulnerable position. At Porth, two workers went out to meet young people. However, due to the size of the staff team, for several years there was no additional on-call safety net out of office hours. This is an issue which needs to be seriously considered in any future provision of confidential refuge as there are huge resource implications in ensuring pair working at all times.

There are also risks for workers at missing persons schemes visiting young people and families, which have also been addressed by the provision of mobile phones and a system of reporting back to the project base (or an out-of-hours contact) when the visit is completed.

**Stresses on staff**

Apart from safety issues, there are a range of emotional and physical stresses on staff working in projects with young people who run away. Perhaps the most significant of these stresses is the emotional impact of hearing young people's stories, and often a feeling of powerless to change things for individual young people. The young-person-centred approach and tight confidentiality policy both exacerbate these
stresses. It is not uncommon for workers to have to end contact with a young person knowing that they are going to return to a potentially harmful situation:

'What you see and hear can be quite traumatic. And you do sort of think, "God, I wish I could put a stop to this", but I think that as workers you go in with your eyes open and say, "This is what's happening and I'm not here to rescue these young people. I can't measure success on a young person coming out of what's happening now, I have to measure success on where I'm at with each individual young person."

On top of this, there is the frustration and anger that workers feel when they have done substantial work with a young person which has ultimately failed to achieve any sort of satisfactory outcome:

'Some situations have left us furious, angry and fed up, and on the edge of burnout about certain situations where we haven't been able to get the desired outcome. For a lot of workers that is their own burn-out because you often don't know the outcomes of your work, you don't have something you can measure at the end of the year.'

There are also more practical stresses involved in many of the projects, including working anti-social hours on disruptive rota patterns, or spending time out on the streets in winter.

**Supervision and support**

Given the range of stresses that workers face and the complexity of some of the work being undertaken by the projects, good structures for supervision and support are vital to the successful maintenance of a staff team, and of good-quality practice. The projects have approached these support needs in differing ways, partly to fit particular models of working. There is emphasis on, and commitment to, regular line-management supervision for workers, but it is clear that there are a range of needs requiring a range of different types of support.

In street-work projects there is always an opportunity for staff to debrief after the session, with someone who did not participate in the street-work session. If the session ended outside office hours, this role is filled by an on-call manager over the telephone. Both street-work projects place a high priority on debriefing, including regular opportunities for the staff team to do this as a group:

'We ask workers often to go home who've walked away from situations because they've made an assessment that, at that moment in time, that young person out on the streets is safer than where we might want them to be - and that's incredibly stressful, so you build in things like supervision, practice meetings, to enable that dialogue. An unsafe place would be where people don't feel able to say, "I'm really struggling with this, I stayed awake last night."'

One of the missing persons projects has a contract with a mental health team to provide regular confidential individual consultancy to workers, which gives them an opportunity to talk through the feelings raised by the work outside the staff team. Other projects were aiming to develop similar support systems, and this was seen as
an important part of maintaining a high standard of professional practice in this field of work:

'Some information you get can bring up a lot of other things for you. I want to feel very clear in my responses to young people. I don't want them to feel rejected, I want to be open, I want to feel like I've done the best job I can, and often in ordinary supervision there isn't time to look at the detailed interactions, but I think that is very important.'

Aside from the concrete aspects of support structures, some contributors emphasised the need for the right environment within the staff team to enable people to ask for and be provided with support. There is a need to create a culture which tolerates mistakes, accepts vulnerability and values honesty. One contributor argued that there was a need to counteract a macho approach to working with this target group:

'Strict work and detached work often comes with a very macho image of being tough, being out on the streets at the cutting edge, and you have to keep balancing that with [the fact that] if you're not willing to feel vulnerable at times within this environment, you may make decisions that have implications for young people or yourself really.'

The induction of new staff can also be a particularly important area in projects working with young people who run away:

'The work with young people on the streets can make demands on staff that far exceed what they may have experienced before... The adjustment to working in that kind of way can be quite difficult for staff that haven't come from a street-work background, so we have a very considered induction.'

Management issues

So far this chapter has focused on the issues relating to practice staff in projects. Given the above discussion, it is also clear that there are a range of challenges facing managers of staff in projects working with young people who run away.

The unpredictability of the work was one key issue identified:

'You walked through the door and you could never go in with an agenda that 'I'm going to do this, this and this' because two or three things would hit you immediately when you walked in which you hadn't planned for.'

Senior practitioners and project managers are expected to offer on-call telephone support out of hours, usually on a rota basis, at most of the projects discussed in this report. Usually this support facility is used regularly or intermittently by project workers, either to 'offload' about the impact of the work, or to discuss difficult decisions, such as those relating to breaches of confidentiality and child protection issues. This has a particularly marked effect on managers in 24-hour accommodation projects, with a feeling of the work always being present, and difficulty in shutting off from it:

'You don't switch off at all; even when you're not on call it's still a 24-hour machine that goes on when you're not there... I found that extremely demanding, extremely draining.'
There is a very high degree of responsibility placed on managers in terms of making decisions about sensitive issues in situations which often require a rapid response.

It seems also to be common for managers to face a high level of challenge from project staff in many of the projects. One contributor felt that this was intrinsic to the work, given the emphasis on recruiting staff with strong advocacy skills and the willingness to work independently in difficult situations:

'I think, because of the nature of the job, the people that get attracted to it are usually very clear in their expectations and I think that managing a team of that nature can be more demanding than managing a youth club setting... It's probably to do with the fact that we spend a lot of our time advocating for young people and therefore we're quite happy to advocate on behalf of ourselves... As a manager you have to be prepared to listen to people and hear their views and accept that sometimes you have to make adjustments [because of] what people are feeling. There needs to be flexibility in the management to do that.'

However, at times, the level of challenge seems to have become a heavy burden for managers at some projects:

'Managers would apparently be responsible for everything and have all those pressures on them, and the workers would expect management in that sense to take ultimate responsibility, but at the same time felt totally free to undermine and abuse all management activity.'

Finally, the stresses on workers discussed earlier can spill over into a high demand for support from managers:

'Because your client group is extremely needy and vulnerable, I think those patterns are replicated in the worker groups, so the teams are needy as well - they're dealing with needy people and they become very needy and depleted themselves, and so they turn to a limited number of managers for all kinds of support, overt and covert.'

All in all, management posts in projects working with young people who run away are likely to be highly demanding and stressful, and an awareness of this should be built into recruitment procedures and into the support and supervision structures that are put in place for these posts.

**Key points**

- In recruiting practitioners and managers for projects working with young people who run away, a balance needs to be struck within the team between skills in engaging with detached young people and the skills needed to work on issues such as child protection in conjunction with other agencies.
- If projects are to provide a range of services to meet young people's diverse needs, there may be a case for the creation of multi-disciplinary teams with specialist posts for different styles of work such as advocacy and family mediation.
- Careful thought needs to be given to policies, practices and procedures that can maximise staff safety, particularly for refuge and street-work projects.
Work with young people who run away is often emotionally draining for staff. High-quality supervision is vital and there is also a need for the creation of a mutually supportive environment where staff can talk openly about their feelings regarding the work. There is also a case for external individual consultancy to be made available to staff.

The management of projects for young runaways is a difficult and challenging task. The work is extremely unpredictable and a high degree of responsibility is placed on senior practitioners and managers in terms of decision-making, often including being instantly available out-of-office hours. The impact of the work on practitioners may also have knock-on effects on line managers who may face a high degree of challenge from the staff team.
DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

This final chapter on contributors' views picks up on comments which have not been covered so far, and which can be broadly termed 'developmental issues'. These include ways of publicising services, resource issues, issues relating to developing services within a wider organisational context, young people's participation, and learning related to the conduct of research and evaluation with young people who run away.

Publicity

Research has revealed that many young people who run away have had no previous contact with helping agencies and are unaware of services in their area that might be of assistance to them. Clearly, then, the effective publicising of services is a major priority and challenge for projects working with this target group.

It seems that traditional forms of publicity, such as posters and leaflets, are not particularly effective. Several contributors emphasised the need for face-to-face contact with young people, in order to give an impression of what the project was like. A number of projects have done a series of presentations at local schools, and at Checkpoint and the Porth Project this has been followed by a significant upturn in referrals from young people under 16. This therefore seems a useful strategy, but it is resource-intensive and needs to be repeated annually.

Indirect approaches also seem to have had some success. Youth Link and the Porth Project noticed increases in referrals following efforts to publicise their service through other local agencies. However, this is obviously only going to reach young people who already use other services.

Ultimately, for most projects, the major source of publicity has been word-of-mouth recommendation by other young people. Initial contacts with young people, even relatively minor ones such as one minute spent with a young person on the streets, can therefore be important in promoting a service. Clearly, this form of publicity will take a long time to build up.

Resource issues

A number of contributors commented on the resource-intensive nature of work with young people who run away, and the need to be realistic about what can be achieved with a finite amount of resources. Some details of costs of refuge projects were provided in Chapter 3. Leeds Safe House cost around £500,000 a year. Porth Project had a budget of £350,000 but often struggled to maintain a service and was, in the view of staff there, significantly under-resourced. In both these projects the large majority of resources went into staff costs.
Street-work projects also are fairly labour-intensive. For example, the annual budget of Youth Link's street work/drop-in service is around £180,000. This includes around eight street-work sessions a week, plus the maintenance of the drop-in centre on weekdays. If a street-work model is chosen, a certain minimum amount of work must be done each week, otherwise the familiarity and credibility of the project on the streets will be difficult to establish:

'Like any level of service, you have to be doing enough of it [so] that people know it exists and can make contact with it – doing one session a fortnight is pointless. You cannot build up the relationships with the street agencies and the street community and get linked into that intelligence grapevine and have a physical presence there. You really need to do, I think, four to five sessions a week over a spread of times and days, otherwise you might as well not bother; you're better off using other methods, and those other methods are less expensive to resource.'

Missing persons schemes and centre-based projects appear to be the cheapest options, particularly if they are integrated into a wider service network as in Checkpoint. The South Coast Runaways Initiative runs on just one full-time post plus some sessional staffing, together with a contribution to the costs of running the centre.

Whichever model of work is chosen (with the possible exception of a daytime centre-based model), consideration must be given to out-of-hours and on-call payments. This has been a difficult issue at some projects, particularly where staff are expected to be available via telephone for lengthy periods outside office hours on the basis of a small lump-sum payment. At times it seems that some projects have been able to maintain an out-of-hours service only thanks to high levels of commitment and goodwill of staff, but these conditions may not be easily replicable on a wider basis.

The benefits of integrating services in terms of efficient use of resources were noted by several contributors. For example, Youth Link is able to provide a responsive service to young people through a range of referral routes, due to the size of the staff team. The demand for services via the missing persons scheme has been sporadic, but it has been possible to absorb this demand within a daily pool of resources also catering for drop-in and street work. If such a scheme had been set up independently, the variation in demand might have meant a significant amount of wasted resources.

**Organisational issues**

With the exception of the ASTRA Project, all the projects contributing to this study are part of a larger organisation. At times this has created difficulties for projects in relation to organisational policies and also to young people's views.

A particular area for tension is that of confidentiality and child protection policies. Large organisations will tend to have standard policies on these issues which are applicable to a range of projects working in different ways with a diverse range of children, young people and families. The relatively unusual approach taken by projects working with young people who run away will often conflict with these policies. There is therefore a need for some flexibility in organisational policy, without which projects are unlikely to be successful in engaging effectively with young people in the target group. Organisations involved in this area of work need to
be aware of this issue and of the inherent risk-taking approach that is necessary. It has usually proved possible for projects to develop appropriate policies within the context of a large organisation, but this does require a high degree of commitment and support for the approach on the part of senior managers:

'We have a lot of projects coming along asking whether they can use our confidentiality policy "off the shelf". We say, "Great! However, if you end up in court or another environment where you have to explain it, do you own it, do you understand where you fit in to the law, do you know what that means for you as an individual?"'

The inherently risky nature of work with young people who run away can also have other kinds of implications for organisations. The Children's Society has successfully managed to maintain a programme of work in this field for over two decades, and this has necessitated making changes within the organisation (for example, a review of foster-caring policy) and on campaigning for changes in the external environment. The organisation has at times taken significant risks, such as setting up refuges when there was no legal framework. It has also campaigned on some difficult areas, such as changes in the way young people who are involved in the sex industry are treated in law. There can be a tension between tackling social injustices and the need for voluntary organisations to maintain a particular image and bring in funding. These tensions seem to be particularly likely to emerge in this field and an organisation needs to be prepared for this if it embarks on work with young people who run away.

**Young people's participation**

There is growing recognition within the field of social welfare work of the importance of involving service users in the development and running of services. This is quite a challenge for any project, but there are particular issues in working with young people who run away which make this task more difficult. The young people with whom the projects work often have particularly chaotic lives and efforts to involve them in project development have sometimes foundered because of this.

Given the nature of many of the young people's lives, it is important also to view participation as a matter of choice on their part. Young people in crisis will often have more pressing priorities than participating in project development, and neither may they wish to be contacted once the work is over:

'Primarily the young people in these sorts of situations are wanting to sort out their crisis rather than comment on service delivery! They want to know how to comment on it if it's bad practice, but that's not their first and foremost thought.'

Leeds Safe House attempted on several occasions to have consultation days with young people who had used the project but, despite considerable efforts, attendance was very low. There have been some successes in this respect. Safe in the City recently involved young people in the recruitment process for staff, which required a consistent level of commitment, including preparation days. However, it was noted by one contributor that this was achieved through working with young people who had had contact with the project but had returned to a semi-stable situation. The Children's Society has also, on several occasions, involved young people in the
dissemination of research findings, including doing interviews with the media. A point of learning from both the above initiatives has been the importance of keeping issues of support and confidentiality at the forefront at all times. Any engagement with young people who run away can raise unanticipated issues, and clarity over the boundaries of confidentiality, and a commitment to provide the ongoing support to young people after the concrete task has been completed are vital elements of good practice.

A point made by several contributors was the need to devise modes of participation that are relevant to the way young people live their lives, rather than expecting young people to fit into adult professional ways of working, such as steering groups. In general, more immediate spontaneous forms of feedback and gathering views have proved to be more effective than highly-structured ones. Leeds Safe House devised a questionnaire, which was used for several years and proved to be a valuable way of gathering immediate feedback from a wide range of young people using the service. Questionnaires can be very popular with young people if well designed. Safe in the City has a computer for young people with tailor-made software designed to gather feedback in a fairly unstructured way.

Finally, it was noted by several contributors that a commitment to participation will have to be matched by a significant commitment of resources. It is easy to lose sight of long-term goals when the issues raised by day-to-day work are so pressing:

*The lessons learned... are, if you don't plan for it it won't happen, if you don't put resources into it it won't happen, and even if you do plan for it and put resources in, it can still be difficult.*

It may therefore be necessary to allot dedicated staff resources in order to pursue a consistent development of young people's participation within a project, particularly when the nature of the practice work is unpredictable and crisis-oriented.

**Research and evaluation**

Research findings have made a significant contribution to the development of models of practice in this field of work. There is now a body of knowledge at a general level which can be of use in planning work with this target group. (A summary of research-based knowledge can be found in Chapter 2.) Nevertheless, it has been suggested elsewhere in the report that there may often be a need for small-scale research projects as a prelude to project development, in order to learn about local needs or the issues affecting particular target groups. In view of this, a brief overview of learning points from previous research with young people who run away is provided in this section.

In terms of methodology, three particular difficulties have been encountered in attempting to do research into this target group.

First, it is no easy task to draw up clear definitions of the phenomenon being studied. Some of the early research studies focused on reported incidence of running away to the police, but it has become apparent that this has a fairly weak association with actual rates of running away, and it seems inadvisable to conduct a research study on the basis of this definition. General surveys of young people have tended to rely on self-definition of ‘running away’ or ‘being forced to leave’ and this has proved to be a relatively successful strategy, provided sufficient information is gathered about
the incident to be able to root out any misunderstandings. In terms of interviewing young people, definitions can be explored with young people face-to-face but it can be difficult to identify appropriate young people in the first place. Studies which rely on professionals to identify relevant young people need to build in some checks because professionals often confuse the issue of running away with that of youth homelessness.

Second, it has not been easy to obtain for research purposes good samples of young people who run away. Studies have been most successful when they have been spontaneous in making contact with young people, but even so, there have been difficulties. The ‘Running – the Risk’ study (Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994) had resources equivalent to the cost of a full-time researcher plus management and other expenses for a two-year period. It has also had the commitment of an organisation and direct links into four projects working with young people who run away. Yet interviews were obtained with only 28 young people. More recently, the ‘Still Running’ research (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) was successful in interviewing over 200 young people, most of whom had experience of running away under the age of 16, but this project had a substantial investment of resources. Even in large samples it is difficult to ensure that specific sub-groups are well represented, and particular thought needs to be given to strategies which will adequately reach young people from minority groups (including on the basis of ethnicity, sexuality and disability).

A third methodological issue is the difficulty of carrying out follow-up studies. Several attempts to do this (e.g., Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994) have met with only limited success. The nature of the lives of young people who run away, in terms of mobility and disruption, make follow-up studies particularly problematic. They are likely to require a large investment of resources for a relatively small return.

Apart from these methodological issues, prospective researchers in this field should be aware of the need for particularly well-developed research policies and practice standards, due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. Research experience has shown that participants can often make fresh disclosures of abuse and other events during interviews, so there is as much need for clarity regarding confidentiality and child protection policies in research as when undertaking practice-based work. Essentially, researchers should ensure that there is a full explanation of these policies before the interview begins, and adequate time given for debriefing at the end of the interview. There has also been a significant level of disclosure through self-completed questionnaires, so it is vital to decide whether these are to be anonymous and, if not, how issues of concern are to be followed up and dealt with.

In face-to-face research contact with young people who run away it is also vital to be clear about roles and boundaries. If the interview is a strictly one-off encounter, then young people should be aware of this and researchers should be prepared with local information about relevant services so that if young people raise issues that may need to be followed up, they can be referred to these services as appropriate.

Finally, as with practice-based work with this target group, the emotional impact on researchers should not be under-estimated. It has proved necessary to provide significant levels of support and debriefing to interviewers and office-based researchers analysing data, and the resources and structures for this should be built into the design of the project.
All in all, research into this area raises up a range of difficult issues and organisations undertaking such research need to be well prepared and appropriately skilled in dealing with these issues.

Key points

- Efforts to publicise projects for young runaways amongst young people have met with mixed success, and it seems that the main source of publicity is word-of-mouth recommendation by other young people.

- There are large differences in costs of the different models so far utilised in the UK. Refuge projects have been the most expensive, but street-work projects also require a substantial investment. Missing persons' schemes and initiatives integrated into centre-based services are less expensive options.

- Where a runaway project is run by a large organisation, the tailor-made policies and practice needed to work effectively with young runaways will require a high degree of flexibility and a certain amount of risk-taking on the part of the organisation, if the initiatives are to be successful.

- Projects attempting to involve young people actively in their development have often encountered difficulties in view of the nature of young runaways' lives and the issues they face. The successful achievement of participation of young people in this target group is likely to require dedicated resources and an ongoing commitment on the part of projects.

- People considering embarking on research with young runaways should be aware of the range of methodological difficulties which have been encountered in this field, and the need to prepare thorough approaches to ethical issues such as confidentiality and the handling of disclosures of information by young people.