



Missing from Care in Staffordshire

**A report prepared by Barnardo's
for Staffordshire Children
and Lifelong Learning Directorate**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have contributed to this study. A special thanks is due to Vonni Gordon for commissioning the work, providing a wealth of background material, advising during the progress of the study and conducting the case audit. Special thanks also to those working in Staffordshire who gave their valuable time and expertise as interviewees for this study and to the organisations who provided information and examples of promising practice. We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Barnardo's research staff, Julie Harris, Barbara Healy and Gillian Holden who provided important material for this report.

1. INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND METHODS

1.1 Overall purpose

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of a study carried out by Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit to explore policy and practice in relation to children and young people going missing from care in Staffordshire. It is intended to inform recommendations for improved guidelines and inter-agency working. The research also informed the basis of three multi-professional training workshops held in September 2006 and this report includes a summary of ideas for future development arising from these events.

1.2 Aim of the study

Barnardo's were commissioned to carry out this study after Staffordshire Children's Services had identified a problem relating to a small number of young people repeatedly going missing from their children's units (one unit recorded 105 absences involving five young people in one three month period in 2005). Whilst the county has a Missing Children Protocol, written in line with the national guidance, which has been in place for over 12 months, there is still concern that it is not enabling staff to meet the needs of children who repeatedly go missing or are absent without permission.

The focus of the study was on three Local Authority children's units:

- The Alders - Tamworth
- Westmorland Avenue - Kidsgrove
- The Birches - Newcastle

During the course of the study, there was also a major review of children's services taking place in Staffordshire, including residential provision. This has undoubtedly influenced some of the findings with staff being interviewed for this study during a period of considerable uncertainty. However, we hope that this report will make a positive contribution to the planned changes.

1.3 Research questions

The key questions the study sought to address were:

- Why do young people go missing from care?
- What factors are likely to reduce incidents of unauthorised absence?
- How can levels of risk be assessed in relation to unauthorised absence and missing episodes?

- What are likely to be the most helpful (immediate and long-term) responses under different circumstances?
- What has been most effective in decreasing incidents?
- How does this problem relate to other difficulties in supporting young people in residential care?
- How can residential practice be improved to address the problem?
- What role can the police most helpfully play?
- What contribution can be made by education and health services?
- How can policy provide an effective framework for good inter-disciplinary practice?

1.4 Methods

This aims to be a change-orientated study, engaging key stakeholders in semi-structured interviews, and using the approach of ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Liebling, Price and Elliot, 1999). The aim has been to explore the key questions from the perspectives of those directly engaged with the problem, and therefore, best able to effect change in protecting young people at risk. Interviews have been conducted with:

- managers of the three children’s units and staff in two of the units
- representatives from the police, health, education and the Youth Offending Team
- managers responsible for residential services in Staffordshire
- the Children and Young People’s Voice project
- a representative from Sustain

A total of seventeen individuals were interviewed, the majority by phone, with site visits to the Alders and Westmorland Avenue to include face to face interviews with four members of staff.

In addition, a documentary analysis was carried out examining the current policy and procedures manual for residential children’s homes and recent inspection reports for the three children’s units.

We also conducted a review of successful or promising initiatives from other parts of the UK to extract potentially transferable lessons. This is summarised in appendix 1.

Finally, we reviewed a case study analysis, carried out by Vonni Gordon, of seven young people who have had repeated missing episodes.

2. RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE CONTEXT

2.1 Defining terms

This report considers the needs of children and young people who are at risk through being absent or missing from their care placement. Young people in such situations may be referred to as missing, as having runaway, or having unauthorised absence. Being clear about definition is important as there is a world of difference between a young person being absent but staff knowing where they are or likely to be, and actually missing with staff not knowing where they are.

An absent young person may still be at risk; staff may know that he or she is somewhere or with someone unsafe. In such circumstances, they may still be reported as missing as a protective measure and to ensure their return to the placement. However, the range of circumstances in which young people are reported missing can make the statistics on incidence misleading. A young person may have dozens of 'misper' reports, yet staff be fully aware of their whereabouts. Another young person may go missing only once, but if they disappear without staff having any idea where they are, then this may be the more risky situation.

This study is primarily concerned with those young people at risk. We therefore focused our questions on young people who go missing but we also asked about patterns of unauthorised absence, particularly where this was persistent.

2.2 Who goes missing?

Young people staying away from home without parental or carer permission is a relatively common occurrence. Estimates based on a national survey of nearly 13,000 young people conclude that approximately 11%, or one in nine young people across the UK run away overnight on at least one occasion before the age of 16¹

The majority of these young people do not present any significant cause for concern. Recent research estimates that the majority of young people running away every year are 13 to 15 year olds² and, in general, it can be understood within a continuum of normal adolescent behaviour as young people test boundaries in the endeavour to negotiate and assert an independent identity.

¹ Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*. The Children's Society

² Ibid.

However, some running away behaviour is a cause for serious concern and requires a professional response. This may be where a young person is especially vulnerable because they are very young, have additional support needs, where they are running away from an abusive or harmful environment and/or placing themselves in unsafe situations or locations. In addition, persistent or prolonged episodes of running away may threaten positive outcomes for a young person in the longer term, increasing the risk of 'detachment' and social exclusion into adulthood.

Research on young people who go missing or 'run away' suggests strong links between the quality of relationships and running away or staying away.³ Conflict with parents or carers is reported as the most common cause of young people absenting themselves from home or care. There is also a relationship between running away and family form: young people are more likely to run away from step families than from one parent families, and much less likely to run away from two parent families. Causes may lie in issues of conflict and separation with regard to the original family, as well as in the formation of a reconstituted family.⁴ Some young people run away because they are experiencing neglect or abuse, others because of domestic violence in the home or parental drug and alcohol misuse. Younger children who run away for the first time under the age of 11 are more likely to develop patterns of running away behaviour.⁵

Looked after young people are significantly more likely to run away than those who live at home, and over 50% of young people in care have run away at some time from care or home.⁶ This is not to say that the care system necessarily *causes* young people to run away. In many cases, persistent running away behaviour may have been established at an early age and may well have constituted a factor in the young person's admission to care. However, research suggests that the culture and environment in care and in *some* residential units, in particular, may reinforce running away behaviour or that it may be instigated through peer pressure or bullying behaviour.

Young people who go missing from care are also potentially at greater risk than other young people. Their life histories, levels of vulnerability, lack of attachment to safe, supportive adults make it more likely that looked after young people will gravitate towards risky adults and/or unsafe locations than other young people. Successive research studies on looked after young people have highlighted their increased vulnerability to substance misuse, exploitative relationships including sexual exploitation and involvement in crime. All of these risks increase where a young person goes missing from care. At the same time, each of these issues can be a contributory factor to young people going missing: the draw of drink, drugs and risky adults can be difficult to counter.

³ Ibid

⁴ Rees, G and Rutherford, C. (2001) *Home Run: Families and Young Runaways*. The Children's Society.

⁵ Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*. The Children's Society

⁶ Bichal, N and Wade, J (2002) *Children Who Go Missing: Research, Policy and Practice*. University of York.

The fact that young people go missing for a variety of reasons and are exposed to different risks suggests that there are differential needs for support. A national evaluation of 19 support projects for young people running away⁷ analysed in some detail the profile of young people referred to services, the initial and ongoing contact rates, and the degree to which projects were able to effect change. The findings from this, together with other messages from research, provide some general lessons about young people who go missing which can equally be applied to those who are looked after:

- Some young people are less likely to be reported as missing than others and these include the older age group, young people living at home who have developed patterns of repeat running, young people who have been forced to leave, or young people who are involved in or witness to abusive situations.
- For 'looked after' young people the most likely referral route is through residential staff and carers reporting young people as missing to the police. The tendency to over-report (i.e. to 'misper' young people who have not run away but have failed to come in by the agreed time) can have the effect of obscuring the support needs of young people who genuinely run away. There is a tendency to label young people as 'runaways' or absconders' and this can also act as a barrier to the identification of risk.
- Young people who are detached will not be referred to services by traditional routes and alternative access needs to be developed. This may be through youth homeless projects and drop in centres or through active outreach or street work⁸.
- Different methods of engagement are required to meet the full range of needs and address different types of risk. Interventions should therefore be based upon thorough needs assessment.

2.3 Young people's views

Research undertaken with young people to explore their views and experiences of running away reinforces these differential needs for support. Noticeable differences emerge between those running away from home and from care, and those young people who have become detached from their families and from services altogether.

Young people living in care feel that they are more likely to run away because, in addition to the problems that led to them being in care, they have to cope with the difficulties of

⁷ Rees, G., Franks, M., Raws, P. and Medforth, R (2005) *Responding to Young Runaways: An evaluation of 19 projects 2003 -2004*. London: DfES

⁸ Stein M, Rees G & Frost N (1994) *Running the risk: young people on the streets of Britain today*. London: The Children's Society
SEU (2002) *Young Runaways Report*

living in the 'care' environment. These could include feeling bullied by other residents, feeling controlled by too many rules and restrictions on their activities, feeling ignored or unfairly treated. Young people also identify difficulties in being separated from family and friends or lack of choice of placement leading to 'not wanting to be there' or 'wanting to be somewhere else.'⁹

A common theme to arise among young people living in residential care is the practice of reporting young people missing who have stayed out without permission, which they can see as unfair and discriminatory. Some young people say that this can also be counter-productive because being 'wanted' by the police makes them feel more like running, either because it provides an adrenalin kick or because they feel guilty and find it hard to return to the placement.¹⁰

There are some noticeable differences in the types of support that young people say they need depending on their situation. Young people living at home identify help lines such as Child-line as a good source of support because they are easy to access, confidential and the young person can exercise control over when to access and when to cease contact with the service. Young people living in care however would prefer face to face contact, possibly because they are used to this form of support and often have to meet with professionals and service providers. For these young people help-lines can seem impersonal and they would rather talk to someone known to them.¹¹

Young people who are detached may view home as being as risky an environment or riskier than being on the streets. These young people may identify the need for mediation and the help of professionals in intervening between themselves and their parents and more help for their parents to deal with their own issues and difficulties.¹²

However, there are also some common themes across all groups of young people:

- The risks of running away are perceived similarly and include those of being attacked or raped, being drawn into sexual exploitation or involvement in criminal activity as survival strategies or becoming homeless.

⁹ Morgan R (2006) *Running Away: A children's views report*. Children's Rights Director for England. CSCI

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Turner, C and Jagusz J (2002) Feedback from young people on the SEU recommendations for young runaways. Barnardo's 2002

¹² Smeaton, E (2005) *Living on the Edge: the experiences of detached young runaways*. Children's Society.

- However, many young people do not think about the risks when they run away and it is not usually planned.
- A safe place to sleep is considered a priority and detached young people identify the need for hostel type accommodation specifically for under 16's where they can have their own space and further support if requested.
- Running away can be experienced as a positive activity and provide young people with some thinking time and space or just some fun away from the control or disapproval of adults.
- Regardless of the individual situation, young people emphasise the need for a listening, non-judgemental, trustworthy adult to tell their problems to in confidence.

2.4 National Guidance

In 1997 a review of the safeguards for children living away from home¹³ highlighted concerns about young people who run away and, in response, the Government commissioned further research, eventually resulting in the Social Exclusion Report *Young Runaways*, accompanied by good practice guidance: *Children missing from care and home, 2002*. The SEU report proposes a *Vision for Runaway's Services* in which:

- young people at risk of running are identified and given access to the right services
- young people who run away have someone to talk to and a safe place to go
- young people and their families get access to follow-up help and support after running away.

To this end, it makes recommendations in six key areas:

- putting someone in charge;
- preventing running away;
- ensuring the immediate safety of runaways who return home;
- improving the transition to independence for 17-17 year-olds who cannot go home; and
- making change happen. (p70)

The specific action points are detailed in Sections 6 and 7 of the document.

The *Young Runaways* report also announced that government funding would be given in order to develop and test services and approaches to more effective support. Since 2002, two government funding programmes have developed a range of pilot interventions across the UK.

¹³ Utting (1997) *People like Us - Review of the safeguards of children living away from home*,

The *Missing from Care and Home* Guidance places a strong emphasis on inter-agency working and makes recommendations for each agency. Hence, the police are encouraged to implement:

A clear local police lead to be responsible for young missing persons...to better link police into local services for runaways, develop specialist skills and knowledge about running away and to give a more consistent and efficient response to runaways.

Local Authorities are recommended to appoint:

... a senior designated manager with responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of its missing from care protocols and procedures, reporting information about patterns of absence amongst looked after children to the Director of Social Services and to councillors responsible for “corporate parenting”. This report should be an action plan with targets for minimising missing from care incidents.¹⁴

Also,

...a named manager within social service departments whose responsibility would be to monitor policies and performance relating to children missing from home. Depending on the structure of the local authority this function may be carried out by the same manager responsible for the authority’s missing from care strategy.¹⁵

The guidance requires that children and young people’s services should record missing incidents from care in order to monitor patterns of running away:

- *Service managers must monitor patterns of absence from individual children’s homes and foster carers*
- *Reports about patterns of absence must be made available to senior managers and to the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) Inspectorate.¹⁶*

LAC 17 (2002) states the necessity for all local authorities and police forces to:

- *Audit the need for, and availability of, services for children and young people in their area who are at risk of going missing from home and care.*
- *To collect and share information relating to all incidents of young people going missing from home and local authority care in order to develop a co-ordinated response between partner agencies.*

¹⁴ Department of Health (2002) *Children Missing from Care and from Home: a guide to good practice*. p12

¹⁵ Ibid. p28

¹⁶ Department of Health (2002) *Children Missing from Care and from Home: a guide to good practice*.p7

The Guidance identifies young people missing from care are identified as an 'at risk' group because:

- They are more likely to run away than young people living at home
- A culture of running away in residential units can contribute to patterns of repeated running away
- Young people in care are more vulnerable to targeting by 'risky' adults and to sexual exploitation

However, there are difficulties in identifying the extent of the risk faced by young people. This is partly because many children's homes have a practice of reporting young people as 'missing' when they do not return to their placement on time or when they stay away without permission (unauthorised absence). Very often staff will know where a young person is and the young person will not be at any particular risk. This practice raises concerns for the following reasons:

- It can obscure risk or make it more difficult to differentiate young people who are at risk from those who are not
- It overloads the police with missing reports that are time intensive and divert resources unnecessarily
- It provides misleading data in terms of monitoring patterns of running away from care and this data cannot therefore be used to inform future service planning.

This issue is addressed in the *Missing from Care and from Home* guidance which distinguishes between 'missing' and 'absent without permission' incidents and recommends that:

- A risk assessment should be undertaken when a young person is placed to identify the likelihood that they might go missing
- A second risk assessment should be undertaken in the event of a young person going missing
- Categories of unauthorised absence should define whether a young person is at risk and subsequently reported as missing to the police.
- Where unauthorised absence exceeds a particular time an incident should be re-classified as 'missing' and reported to the police.

The guidance recommends that categories of risk be agreed between agencies in order to *clarify "the roles of social services, the police and voluntary agencies in responding to missing person's incidents."*¹⁷

2.5 Staffordshire's procedures

¹⁷ Ibid. p14

Staffordshire's policy and procedures were introduced in March 2005 and reflect the above guidance. They encompass children missing from care and home but have a specific section relating to children and young people who go absent from residential care. These set out the general duty of the local authority and highlight the considerations to be taken into account when a young person is absent without permission. The procedures differentiate between children of 13 or under and those over 14, recognising the greater risk faced by younger children. Crucially, they clarify the system for notifying the police and making a request for police action and set out the matters to be taken into consideration when requesting police action. These centre on the potential risks faced by the young person based on their maturity, their perceived vulnerability and the likelihood of harm.

The policy has been overseen by Vonni Gordon who also has responsibility for monitoring via SW140 returns. Her review report of March 2006 notes a good level of compliance with both the policy and the data monitoring by residential units. This view is supported by our interviews with unit staff and managers who all evidenced a good level of awareness of the procedures. Reports of unauthorised absence from foster care appear rather low which may suggest that the procedures have yet to filter through to all foster carers.

3. WHO GOES MISSING? FINDINGS FROM A CASE AUDIT

As part of this study a case audit was carried out on the case files of seven young people who have been recorded as going repeatedly missing. The characteristics of these young people reflect wider research findings on the risk factors for going missing reported in the 2002 SEU report:

- rejection: children who have been cared for by extended family and or friends prior to becoming looked after
- family conflict
- history of family violence
- parental reports of behavioural difficulties in children
- family change, including lone and step-parent families
- truancy
- many changes of address
- misper episodes prior to becoming looked after
- children with insecure attachment patterns.

Whilst the case audit indeed revealed that most young people with repeat missing episodes did have many of the above factors in their history, it does not necessarily follow that these are an entirely reliable predictor of risk. In addition to the more detailed case audit, we also considered a 'snapshot' profile of all young people placed in the three residential units on a particular day in July 2006. The purpose of this was to compare the profiles of young people known to be persistent 'mispers' with the general population of looked after young people in the units. We used anonymised data collected from the

authority's Client Information Screens (CISS) to compare factors such as age, gender, reasons for referral and number of placement moves. Although this comparison was imperfect (we would have needed full access to case files to make a full comparison and this was beyond the remit of this study) it did seem to highlight two lessons. Firstly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the above 'risk' factors are present in the lives of the majority of young people. As we have already noted, by the time young people enter residential care, they have frequently experienced family disruption, several moves, abuse and behavioural problems. However, the comparison of CISS profiles with the more detailed case file audit on the seven frequent 'mispers' *did* seem to show that the young people who go missing regularly have a longer and more persistent history of moves (both in care and out) and of behavioural challenges, frequently starting at an early age. Of the seven young people identified as frequent 'mispers', only one did not fit this profile, this being a young woman who only came to the attention of Social Services at 13.

This suggests that whilst no risk assessment can be wholly predictive, it is worth ensuring that information on the above factors is collected and recorded consistently from the point at which a young person gets involved with children's services.

4. VIEWS OF PROFESSIONALS IN STAFFORDSHIRE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this section, we report on our findings from interviews with seventeen staff from across Staffordshire. These included managers and staff of the residential units and representatives from education, police, health, the YOT, Sustain and the Children and Young People's Voice project.

4.1 Why young people go missing from care

Respondents' views on the reasons why young people go missing fall into three interacting categories: the characteristics of young people themselves; the 'pull' of external attractions (activities and/or people outside the residential units); 'push' factors relating to the care experience.

4.1.1. Characteristics of young people

Most people made the comment that all young people who end up being looked after in residential units have major difficulties. Their experiences vary, but without exception their young lives will have been blighted by negative relationships with adults and, more often than not, they will have experienced disrupted family lives, abuse and or neglect and multiple moves of care placement. A consequence of this is that by the time many young people enter a residential unit they already have an established pattern of behaviour which increases the likelihood of them going missing. As one respondent put it:

Looked after children are very difficult and damaged. Their early life experiences mean they are often 'programmed' with a fight or flight response as a survival strategy.

Some young people will have had little previous experience of parental or carer control. One residential worker described a young man who had looked after himself from an early age and had always come and gone as he pleased. As a teenager in care he was reluctant to respond to an adult carer asking him to account for his whereabouts.

Several respondents also commented that apart from the additional factors associated with being looked after, the young people in the residential units are also teenagers and some of their behaviour can be viewed as normal adolescent challenging of boundaries. A number of people observed that young people in care want to do ordinary things like go to parties, sleep over at friends and stay out with their mates. Confronted with the restrictions placed on them by being in care, some young people will stay out anyway. Such examples of 'unauthorised absence' are not the same as going missing though may still pose a risk if staff aren't aware of where the young people are. One residential manager commented that there can be a pattern to such behaviour, for example, the warm weather and light nights tempt young people to stay out. Sometimes young people will pair up and encourage each other to stay out and the unit experiences a run of such behaviour. Some young people become frustrated by the rules or attracted by the attention they get when they run off. As one person put it:

Sometimes they do it cos they know it pisses off the staff. Or they get a buzz from knowing the staff or the police will come after them.

Such behaviour can be labelled 'attention-seeking'. However, given the relatively little individual adult attention many of these young people will have received in their lives, it may be more usefully interpreted as a manifestation of their need for attention.

Young people can also be subject to peer pressure and patterns of absence can change in a unit according to the mix of young people in residence. Bored young people are fairly easily tempted at the prospect of something more exciting if it is suggested by peers. Young people may also be co-erced or bullied into going missing. A recent example was given of a 12 year old who was being encouraged to stay out by an older sibling who was placed in a different unit. The older girl was thought to be involved in sexually exploitative relationships – *'going with blokes for cigs'* so there were concerns about the safety of the younger one. However, it was clear in this instance that the pull of her sister was stronger than that of her link worker.

The mix of young people in a unit is an important factor. Staff and unit managers told us that they did have a say in whether a young person was admitted and could consider the impact of the young person on the rest of the unit as part of the decision. However, there were clearly some limits to their powers given the need to place a young person and the

shortage of places available. It was evident that staff felt there were sometimes young people in their unit who really shouldn't be there.

There was also the view expressed that some young people who end up in the units should not be in care at all. There was a strong feeling that insufficient energy and resources went into preventing admission, that care planning was inconsistent and, that once in a residential unit, the focus of attention went elsewhere. As one member of staff put it:

Young people here feel as if they've been dumped.

4.1.2 External attractions or 'pull' factors

Some young people go missing because they want to be somewhere else. In some instances, this may be a desire to go home to family or local community. It was pointed out that given the size of Staffordshire, even with efforts made to place young people close to their own locality, it is not uncommon for young people to be a very long way from their family and friends. This may encourage young people to stay away.

On the other hand, a number of people highlighted the downside of a young person being placed close to their own community. An example was given of a young man who had such a well established network of contacts near to his residential unit that he could easily disappear into any number of flats or houses without staff knowing precisely where he was. This problem was compounded by the young man starting to take other young people with him. In this instance, the appeal of staying away from the unit was associated with access to drink and drugs. Several people commented on the role played by alcohol and drugs in missing episodes.

Another draw for young people may be friends or a particular person, perhaps a family member that they don't wish to be separated from or a girlfriend or boyfriend. In these instances it can be difficult to assess just how risky the going missing episodes are. An example is young people spending time with former residents who have left care. Care leavers with flats can be a major draw for young people, and the risk to themselves of losing their tenancies if they end up with gangs of looked after young people staying with them can be difficult to convey to them. A party in someone's flat is generally going to be more appealing to a 15 year old than an evening with a video back at the unit. Likewise, despite sterling efforts to convey the importance of sexual health to young people, the appeal of spending the night with one's girl friend or boyfriend is likely to be stronger than pizza and a computer game with one's link worker.

The challenge of such incidents lies in assessing the risk. An example was given of a young woman who has been going repeatedly missing to stay with another young woman a few years older whom she describes as her girlfriend. On the one hand, there are clearly concerns that this older girl may be exploiting her and the fact that she lives in London makes it harder to check out and potentially more risky. On the other hand, a young woman exploring her sexuality with someone she has contacted via the internet is part of normal growing up for a gay or lesbian teenager with limited access to alternative social opportunities.

Clearly the possibility of sexual exploitation is a significant concern. Awareness has been heightened by the experience of looking after two young women at the Alders who became seriously involved with groups of sexually exploitative men, initially in the Tamworth and

Burton areas and subsequently in Birmingham. Although respondents in this study all felt the situation had settled with the moving on of the young women concerned, it is clear that the whole experience had been traumatic for both young people and staff. The ability of the men concerned to target the young women and to draw them into exploitation has left serious concerns that without due vigilance, it could happen again. It was pointed out that the men concerned are often very appealing to vulnerable young women who crave attention and 'love' and the cleverness and persistence of these abusive adults should not be under-estimated.

4.1.3 The care experience or 'push factors'

The majority of respondents pointed out that, by and large, residential units are not places where young people want to be. Given the factors discussed above, firstly, that the young people concerned have difficulties which make it hard for them to attach to caring adults and, secondly, that there are a plethora of attractions outside the units, then for the residential units to hold these young people effectively, they would really need to be very special places. Most people seem agreed that as they stand, none of the residential units are equipped to meet this challenge.

There were several factors highlighted. Firstly, most respondents commented on the out-dated and inappropriate size and design of the buildings. Although the number of young people the units take has been reduced to five at any one time, the buildings themselves lack any real sense of homeliness. There can be no doubt that managers and staff have done their best to make them as welcoming as possible. However, they look like institutions and they feel like institutions.

Secondly, from the interviews we carried out for this study, it became evident that staff do not always feel as well skilled, as well trained and as well supported as they need to be to work with young people with such substantial difficulties. Several people, including staff themselves, talked about a negative ethos in the units, not necessarily all the time, but enough to have a detrimental impact. One interviewee commented:

I look at the rota to see who I'm on with and I just know what sort of night I'll have. With some staff it'll be calm and no problems. With others, it'll be pick, pick, pick at the young people until eventually one of them will go off on one and then it all starts... and you think all that could have been avoided if only they (the staff) knew how to leave it alone.

Other observers talked about occasions when they visited the units and witnessed staff getting into confrontations with young people, including staff shouting. As one person put it:

There seems to be a lack of respect both ways. Some staff have the attitude of 'you do what I say' which just doesn't work. Young people fundamentally want to feel a sense of belonging and genuine caring which isn't there.

This point is linked to another comment several people made about residential units being 'rule bound'. It was not always clear where people thought these rules came from. Unit managers who had worked in the residential sector for many years observed that the number of national abuse inquiries over the past 20 years had resulted in a much more regulated approach to residential care. Whilst these regulations are in place to safeguard young people, a less positive consequence has been a reluctance of staff to do anything that's not 'by the book'. It has certainly impacted on the ability and willingness of staff to develop close relationships with young people and it was clear from our interviews that staff struggle to engage with young people and frequently feel frustrated and helpless in the face of their difficulties.

That is not to say there are not many extremely skilled and highly committed staff working in the residential units. It was evident from our interviews, and from the observations of other professionals, that Staffordshire has managed to retain some very committed residential staff. As one person external to the units commented:

Despite all difficulties I'm often struck by how thoughtful the unit staff are about the young people. They demonstrate a lot of insight.

However, the staff we talked to were unanimous in their view that they did not have enough training to help them acquire the skills needed to work with young people's difficulties. As one put it:

I've been forced to go on IT training and other stuff that has nothing to do with young people but anything relevant to my work I've had to fight for and find for myself.

A third factor, which many people raised, was the number and mix of young people in the units. Despite the reduction to five places per unit, most people felt this was still too many given the difficulties they each have. The group dynamics in residential units are very powerful and the introduction of a new young person can easily shift the tenor of the unit from calm to disruptive. However carefully the assessment process is carried out prior to admission, this shift can be hard to predict or control, and the group dynamics of five disturbed teenagers in a unit can be so difficult to manage that staff feel that they are more in the business of crowd control than care.

A couple of people commented that some young people may run away from units because they don't feel safe. Young people with a history of abuse may find it hard to feel safe with adults and may be threatened by peers, particularly in a mixed gender setting. As one person said:

I'm not sure the units feel safe for all young people. I'm not sure if I would feel safe alongside some of the young people they look after.

4.2 What helps to prevent young people from going missing

4.2.1 Education

All the respondents made the point that young people are more likely to go missing or stay out without permission at night if they are not sufficiently occupied during the day. Everyone highlighted the key role of education in the lives of young people. However, whilst everyone agreed that education was of critical importance to looked after young people, views varied as to how successful Staffordshire is in providing it.

Respondents were complimentary about the support offered by the LAC teachers and were, on the whole, positive about the efforts made by schools to provide flexible and tailored education for looked after young people. It is clear that considerable thought and effort has gone into adapting educational activities to fit young people's needs and during the course of this study we were shown examples of individual programmes aimed at engaging young people in education and maintaining their interest.

By the time young people enter residential care, they are likely to be already experiencing educational difficulties and some will be seriously disengaged. Although it is important to give every looked after young person the opportunity and encouragement to achieve qualifications, most people were agreed that for many looked after young people it is more important to engage them in something that will interest and motivate them. Hence there were examples given of young people being encouraged to get involved in Duke of Edinburgh and ASDAN award schemes as well as traditional schooling.

In many respects, therefore, the educational needs of young people looked after in Staffordshire are well catered for. For example, arrangements are in place to ensure that as soon as a young person is admitted to a residential unit, an educational place is there for them so there should be no need for any young person to be out of education for more than a very few days.

However, our observations from this study are that the actual daily experience of young people varies considerably. For example, as part of one of our interviews we were shown the individual educational programme for a 15 year old girl at Westmorland Ave. Great care had obviously gone into tailoring this plan and we were told that in her previous placement she had been doing well at school. However, on the school day we visited Westmorland Avenue the young woman concerned was still in bed at midday and was refusing to go to school, having been out until 1am that morning. When we visited the Alders, we were told that three young people placed there were unoccupied during the

day. Whilst educational placements were arranged, a combination of waiting to take up college places and young people absenting themselves from school was resulting in these young people spending considerable periods of time hanging around the unit during the day.

Even when young people are attending an educational placement, things do not necessarily go smoothly. Some young people have educational plans which amount to only six hours a week. Understandably, they get out of the habit of attending and sometimes conclude it isn't worth bothering with at all. Other forms of education can be experienced as stigmatising. For example, the E4U programme with Westmorland Ave seems to be an excellent, responsive arrangement with the local school, which ensures that no young person needs to be out of education. However, this individualised response does not go down well with every young person. As one member of staff commented:

He doesn't want to go because it makes him feel out of it. He says he feels like a 'spaz' going there.

These observations about the educational arrangements in Staffordshire may be perceived as unfairly critical. After all, it is clear huge efforts have been made, and there is universal agreement among our interviewees that matters have improved in recent years. It is also the case that we are trying to engage young people who, more often than not, do not want to be involved in education for all kinds of reasons. However, constructive day-time educational activity is key to preventing young people from going missing. It is also a key contributor to better outcomes for young people across the board.

4.2.2 Support to meet young people's emotional and mental health needs

Respondents were generally complimentary about the support from health staff and examples were given of sexual health support and 'clinic in a box' visiting units to ensure young people have access to health advice.

A major concern, however, was around the lack of support for young people's emotional and mental health needs. We were repeatedly told that CAMHS services are inadequate because of very long waiting times after referral (a couple of respondents told us that it could take over a year for a young person to be seen by CAMHS), and a lack of understanding of the particular needs of looked after children. In particular, interviewees were frustrated by what they saw as CAMHS' requirement that young people were willing to 'co-operate' with the service straightaway. Whilst it is clearly impossible to address someone's mental health issues without their co-operation, respondents felt that CAMHS failed to take into account the importance of engaging gradually with looked after young people. As one person succinctly put it:

They turn up and the young person tells them to fuck off. So they do.

When CAMHS do work with young people, some residential staff were critical about the lack of communication with them as the primary carers. As one commented:

I know confidentiality is important and I don't want to know the details but a young person comes back and they're in a right state and we have no way of knowing how we should respond.

Several interviewees told us that they get better support for young people's mental health (and substance misuse) issues via the Youth Offending team. However, quite reasonably, the YOT's resources have to be targeted at those young people who offend or are at risk of offending. This led some respondents to observe that it is sad that it is only when they start offending that young people get the service they need.

Sustain has also done work in the residential units with both some individual young people and staff groups. Sustain's underlying principle is that therapeutic input with young people can only be successful in the context of a secure and caring placement, hence the key is to enable carers to provide the emotional support for young people to regain some of the attachment they have failed to experience in earlier life. As we have already observed, residential staff do not in general feel able to engage in the sustained, consistent relationships with young people to enable this attachment to occur.

Where staff feel helpless and unskilled they can start to feel wary and even afraid of engaging with young people so that interaction becomes limited. Several people commented that where practice was best, it was when the units had staff who talked to young people and didn't withdraw from them:

You do see a difference between units. In one place you visit and you're immediately ushered into the office with the door closed as if there's a lot of caged animals out there. In another, staff are out of the office talking with young people and playing games. The atmosphere is different.

The lack of confidence felt by some staff in engaging with young people may be compounded by a lack of training and support, as we have already observed. Another factor may be the number of changes which have occurred in residential services and which are still taking place:

The units seem to have been under a cloud of uncertainty for as long as I've worked here. In a way, the staff are in the same state of insecurity as the young people. If they don't feel secure, how can they offer security to the young people?

4.3 The response to young people going missing

4.3.1 How the residential units respond

Managers and staff in the units were all aware of Staffordshire's procedures on young people who go missing and all talked about the importance of a process of risk assessment which starts as soon as a young person is admitted. Unit managers were consistent in their description of an assessment which included consideration of a young person's past history, the likelihood of them going missing or absenting themselves and an assessment of risk which informs decisions about how to respond including when to report them as missing to the police.

Of course, all these processes require individual judgement and, inevitably, there are some differences in how the assessments are completed and implemented both between units and between different staff on duty within units. One person's assessment of the risk presented by a young person's absence may differ from another person's and one may lead to a misper report and one not.

It was also unclear as to how thoroughly and consistently assessments are carried out and who is involved. Staff did not necessarily feel that their role as link worker meant they were fully involved in meetings about young people. There were also comments about the role of young people's area based social workers which made it clear that the level and quality of information available to the units is variable, particularly at the crucial time when a young person is first admitted.

When a young person fails to return to the unit, staff on duty make a further judgement about risk. This will be informed by the initial risk assessment and by other factors such as whether the young person's whereabouts is known, what their general pattern of return has been and what the particular circumstance surrounding the incident:

If they've stormed off in a huff or something you might decide to give them a bit of space. If you know they're upset you might follow them to try to talk. If you know where they are you might give them a bit of time and then go after them.

Staff often referred to going out to look for young people, though sometimes this is difficult because young people are adept at disappearing and because staffing levels, particularly at night when this is most likely to occur, makes it difficult to be away from the unit for too long:

When you just have two night staff and a sleep in you can't always go looking because that leaves just one person looking after all the rest in the unit.

However, despite the practical difficulties, most staff and other interviewees thought that going out to look for the young people was important. It is, after all, what any 'normal' parent would do and it shows the young people that they are cared about and that what happens to them matters to the people who are looking after them. It was evident that staff often went to some lengths to get this across to young people.

Staff at the Alders, for example, described a lengthy period of going out to look for the two young women involved in sexual exploitation. Whilst they didn't feel it was appropriate to forcibly remove the young women from the situation, they did keep watch and get them to come with them for a bag of chips and a chat to try to persuade them to come home. Even when this was unsuccessful, staff clearly felt it was important to build up the trust of the young women and make them feel cared for. Staff expressed some frustration that it hadn't always been possible to do this because of staffing levels.

4.3.2 The role of the police

Where staff feel the young person is at risk because they don't know their whereabouts, or they know they are somewhere potentially risky, they will report them missing to the police. It is widely agreed that the procedures implemented around a year ago have reduced the number of 'misper' reports to the police and have brought about an improvement in relationships between the units and the police.

Unit managers and staff talked about the importance of maintaining positive relationships with the police. They commented that whilst they were generally good, there was some variability depending on the outlook and attitude of individual officers, with some being more understanding of the problems of looked after young people than others.

Similarly, whilst the police appreciated the reduction in misper reports, frustration at the police being called 'unnecessarily' hasn't been entirely eradicated. Likewise, there was some frustration at apparent police inaction on occasions when they are called, with examples given of police passing a young person on the street late at night and not picking them up, or the police response being too slow.

To some extent, this mutual frustration is the product of both agencies feeling powerless in the situation. Unit staff call the police when they don't know what else to do and hope the police will 'do something'. The police may be reluctant to use the powers they have because criminalising a young person is unlikely to be helpful. In such a scenario everyone goes away feeling slightly grumpy with everyone else.

Staff at the Alders felt that they developed good relationships with the police when they were dealing with young women going missing and being sexually exploited. However, they expressed frustration at the inconsistency of police response citing instances of witnessing the young women with abusive men and feeling that had the police been able to respond immediately they would have been able to intervene more effectively. In these

circumstances, staff would have liked to be able to call on a dedicated police unit which could respond swiftly.

Some interviewees expressed the view that the police are still involved too often. The point was made that even when the police avoid using their formal powers, the fact that they get involved and get to know the young people means that looked after young people become labelled as 'trouble'. There was, therefore, some difference in views about the extent of information it is appropriate to share with the police. Some people felt that the more information shared across the two agencies, the better as it leads to a more informed and, hopefully, sensitive and effective response to the individual young person. Others felt that just because a young person is looked after shouldn't mean that they have any fewer rights of privacy than anyone else.

This difference of view was also evident when it came to a discussion of the 'return interview'. There appeared to be some lack of clarity both about the purpose of the return interview and who should carry it out.

When a young person is reported missing and returns to the unit, the police have to satisfy themselves that the young person has returned safe and well. This is an essential part of police procedure, as their missing report cannot be officially closed until a police officer has confirmed that the young person has returned and is safe. At present, therefore, the police are required to carry out a return interview, usually carried out by the community officer linked to the unit concerned.

However, the other purpose of a return interview is to obtain an independent assessment of the reasons for the young person going missing, and to consider whether there is any support needed to prevent recurrence. Independence is important because, although the return interview should not replace normal good residential care practice of talking to the young person about the missing episode, a young person should also be given the opportunity to talk to someone about anything that might be occurring in their care setting e.g. something related to their treatment in the unit.

All seem to be agreed that an independent return interview is a good thing. What is less clear is who should carry it out. The police have to satisfy themselves that the young person has returned and there is no need for further police action. Some police officers will also do an excellent job of talking to the young person about other matters relating to the missing episode; others won't nor would they necessarily see it as their role unless the concerns raised were a police matter (e.g. criminal activity committed by or towards the young person while they were missing). However, a police officer is unlikely to be best placed to talk to a young person about something that was worrying them or the underlying reasons for going missing. For this purpose, another resource may need to be found, and it would be helpful to make a clearer distinction between what the police have to do to satisfy their procedures and a return interview which looks more comprehensively at a young person's circumstances and needs.

5. WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE? RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Improved risk assessment

Although risk assessment is carried out as part of Staffordshire's procedures, there may be scope for greater consistency of both process and recording. This will entail the monitoring of those factors which increase the likelihood of a young person going missing. The case audit carried out by Vonni Gordon offers some important lessons. It highlights the fact that almost all the young people identified as regularly going missing share common characteristics of early behavioural problems, multiple placement moves and detachment from family networks. Although these factors are present in the histories of many children in the looked after system, they do seem more persistent in those who go missing, which is similarly reflected in the wider research literature. However, the clarity and consistency of recording of these factors varies, which impedes the use of children's records as a risk assessment tool. More attention needs to be given to known risk factors which would enable residential units to put more effective support measures in place.

5.2 Improved prevention and care planning

We are aware that a recent review of children's services, including residential care, is recommending a greater emphasis on prevention to reduce the admissions of children into the looked after system and to facilitate their early return home wherever possible. We have not been provided with the detail of these proposals, but it is clear from our study, that a concerted attempt to improve preventive measures is a positive step. Many young people go missing from placement because they do not want to be there. This means that reducing missing episodes has to entail greater resources into avoiding placement at all, if possible, and better care planning to ensure that the placement is as appropriate as possible.

5.3 Planned programmes of direct work with young people

Once a young person is admitted to residential care, it should be seen as an opportunity to address their needs in a planned way. At present, all too often young people feel dumped and staff do not feel enabled to work with them constructively. As several people noted, we have the most damaged and difficult young people being looked after by the least well trained and supported staff. The re-organisation of residential services offers a unique opportunity to reverse this trend but it will require some investment both in recruiting and retaining staff who are able to meet the challenge, and in training and supporting staff. In particular, staff need to be given the skills and confidence to establish strong, supportive relationships with young people. This is the key to meeting the needs of all looked after

young people and particularly those who are establishing a pattern of going missing and are in serious danger of becoming detached from any form of adult support.

5.4 A review of the support services to meet young people's emotional and mental health needs

It is clear that whatever the strengths of CAMHS services for young people generally in Staffordshire, they are not working for young people in the looked after system. Given that these young people are among those in greatest need of mental health support, this issue should be urgently addressed. Resources do exist in the shape of Sustain and the YOT provision, as well as CAMHS, and we recommend that the key parties be brought together at the earliest opportunity to consider how the available resources can be better deployed. Some authorities have a specialist team within CAMHS to work with looked after children and this may be an option for Staffordshire to consider.

5.5 A continued emphasis on education

As has been repeatedly noted, education for looked after young people is crucial. Major improvements have been reported but, in our view, there needs to be a continued drive to ensure that the theory of educational programmes as set out on paper is matched in the real day to day experience of young people. All looked after young people need to have constructive day time and where young people are out of school, there needs to be greater attention given to the provision of alternative constructive day-time activities. Whilst there are some excellent initiatives in this regard, it did not appear to us that units were resourced to provide the one to one support to which most young people respond best. Where possible, there needs to be greater flexibility of staffing levels to take account of those periods where units have young people out of school.

5.6 A confirmation of the existing protocol

The protocol that has been introduced for young people who go missing or absent in Staffordshire seems sound and to be working. With the proviso that risk assessments should be conducted in a more consistent and systematic way, there appears to be no argument for adding further layers of procedure on what already exists. There does need to be continued dialogue with the police to ensure that there is mutual understanding of risk and agreement on when to misper. Regular opportunities for joint training to include residential staff and community police officers would be helpful in this regard.

5.7 Clarity of role of the area social workers

Residential staff were quite unflattering about young people's social workers. Whilst they reported some to be good, other comments made it clear that some social workers visit infrequently, do not attend review meetings and fail to respond to requests for support. As one residential worker put it;

You have to make a nuisance of yourself before they'll take any notice.

In fairness, it seemed to us that some expectations of field social workers are unreasonable. Fortnightly review meetings, for example, when a social worker may be based 40 miles away and have a caseload demanding immediate attention, may not be wholly realistic. On the other hand, reports of social workers visiting once in three months are not reasonable either. We recommend that the expectations of social workers are reviewed and clarified and monitoring processes put in place to ensure compliance.

5.8 Appoint an independent body to conduct return interviews

Whilst the police do need to satisfy themselves that a young person has returned safely following a misper, we do not believe they are the best agency to conduct a return interview. This interview should offer an opportunity for a young person to discuss why they went missing, what could be done to prevent it in future and to explore in a safe environment anything that is worrying or upsetting them. An agency such as the Voice project may be best placed to provide this service, though there would need to be appropriate resourcing and protocols on when and how often the same young person was seen.

APPENDIX 1

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICE

In this section, we examine examples of promising practice by a number of organisations working with young people who go missing from care. These examples are looked at under a number of headings, including work with young people, limitations, outcomes and links to research and policy recommendations.

1. Barnardo's sexual exploitation services and missing young people

Background

Research carried out by Barnardo's Policy and Research unit has highlighted the close relationship between going missing and sexual exploitation, with rates of going missing in local boroughs found to be highly predictive of the number of young people experiencing sexual exploitation (Harper and Scott, 2005). A recent Barnardo's report "*Reducing the Risk*", showed that approximately half of the young people that Barnardo's sexual exploitation services work with have at some point been in the looked after system (Skidmore and Scott, 2006). The report also highlighted that ways of working with young people often take a similar approach to that of missing services, with attention given to advocacy and alternative ways of working with young people who are "*frequently alienated from most forms of professional support*".

Examples of good practice in relation to...

Barnardo's sexual exploitation services aim to reduce the risk for young people experiencing or at risk of sexual exploitation, by concentrating on a number of risk factors for exploitation including going missing. Services focus on reducing the rate of young people going missing through engaging with hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, and achieving positive change for young people who run away repeatedly.

Work with young people

Barnardo's services undertake direct one-to-one work with young people, and centre on the needs of the young person. The Barnardo's model of practice used focuses on a number of key points, including:

- **Access:** Services are made accessible to young people by providing drop in facilities and outreach work. There are also formal lines of referral through police, social services, education and voluntary organisations. The service environments are accessible to young people, with facilities including kitchens, washing machines and showers made available.
- **Attention:** Each young person has a dedicated key worker. Initially the key worker will focus on developing trust with a young people and building a flexible, supportive and protective relationship. There are also opportunities for young people to access counselling, group work support and drop-in activities. It is important for services that young people feel listened to as 'adults', as young people often feel a sense of powerlessness and that they are not listened to.
- **Assertive outreach:** Compared to published research on missing services, 'assertive outreach' is a greater component of work with young people at risk of sexual exploitation than young people who go missing. Young people are followed up by mobile phone calls, text messages and visiting young people who have not remained in contact. Assertive outreach recognises the chaotic nature of young people's lives - if young people do not

choose to access services at a certain time, workers remain in contact with them so they are aware they can still access the service.

- **Advocacy:** Barnardo's services accompany young people to appointments and work with other professionals to increase their understanding of the pressures on young people's lives. Services also work with external agencies to ensure young people get the services that they should.

Outcomes

A two-year national evaluation of Barnardo's sexual exploitation services was completed in 2006. During this time, Barnardo's practitioners completed assessment forms detailing cases with young people throughout their contact with the service. Analysis of data from these forms found that when young people were first accessing services, 63% were going missing (not including staying out late). A third of young people accessing services were going missing for frequent and prolonged missing episodes. When young people were at the end of contact with a service, a dramatic change was found with 70% of service users not going missing. The majority of these young people had been frequently missing prior to the service intervention from Barnardo's.

Limitations

Barnardo's sexual exploitation work provides an example of promising practice not specifically aimed at young people who go missing. However, it provides an example of how longer term working can have an effect on rates of long-term missing.

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Understanding of confidentiality
- Creative ways of working
- Bringing about change with young people who persistently go missing

Examples of Barnardo's promising practice with young people missing from care:

Barnardo's run a number of services which work with young people who go missing from care and home. These include Missing in Yorkshire, Aberdeen Young Runaways service (which deals exclusively with young people running from care) and London's Miss-U service, which is based at Barnardo's Young Women's Project (described below).

Miss-U service, based in Barnardo's Young Women's Project, London

Background

Barnardo's Missing Person 'Miss-U' service is attached to the Young Women's Project, which aims to prevent young women being drawn into sexual exploitation and reduce the risks they face. The Miss-U service works with young women aged 12 – 16 who have run away from home or care. A significant percentage of the repeat runners the service comes into contact with are running from care. The service is built upon a central relationship with the Police who notify the service of all young women who have returned from a missing incident. They also collect the data for missing incidents for young men but do not provide a service to them.

The service provides an independent and confidential space for young women who have gone missing, aiming to reduce risks through short-term and focussed programmes.

Examples of good practice in relation to...

The service provides an important role in identifying early indicators of sexual exploitation and many of the referrals for the sex exploitation service run from the Young Women's Project come from Miss-U.

Work with young people and professionals

The service has a focus on early intervention to minimise the risk of exploitation. It works directly with young women through intensive one-to-one work and a range of group activities. Miss-U has been able to help young people recognise the dangers of going missing and their own vulnerabilities. Miss-U also delivers 'Keep Safe' programmes to girls and boys in residential units and schools.

Limitations

There is no local service available for young men who go missing. Although girls of this age group are more likely to run away, the lack of services for their male peers remains an issue.

Outcomes

The service has seen a reduction among service users in associating with risky adults and a reduction in being out of school, education and training.

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Links to sexual exploitation service
- Close relationships with local agencies, particularly the Police
- Early intervention to prevent escalation of issues

2. Safe in the City, Manchester

Background

Safe in the City is a Children's Society project, which works with young people under the age of 18 in Manchester and Salford who have run away or are at risk of running away. The project focuses on social inclusion, relationships and safety issues and working with young people with diverse needs.

Examples of good practice in relation to...

The Safe in the City initiative focuses on the development of preventative group work and engaging with at-risk young people. The service aims to engage and inform young people in residential care settings about running away in order to prevent further instances.

Work with young people and residential workers

Safe in the City staff have developed a bottom-up approach to working with young people who go missing from care. While the majority of missing services have worked with young people via Police referrals, this service also receives referrals from residential workers and self referrals from young people.

The service carries out preventative work in groups, which helps young people understand the dangers they face when they go missing. Following group work, service users have an increased awareness of Safe in the City and can contact staff when facing problems. This allows the service to engage with young people before they run away and problems escalate further. Safe in the City's work in residential units has also raised awareness of the project among residential staff, who have developed relations with project staff. This in turn has resulted in better working practices with young people and increased residential staffs' understanding of missing issues.

Outcomes

By working directly in residential units, the service can ensure that it is meeting the young people that are most in need. The project was found to be successful in ensuring change for young people in the national evaluation of missing services (Rees et al, 2005).

Limitations

The review of missing services (2005) did not report on follow up missing person rates. So although we know that positive change was achieved for young people coming into contact with services, there is no evidence to indicate the long-term effectiveness of the programme.

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Better trained and more support to staff
- Preventative work

3. ASTRA Project (Alternative Solutions to Running Away), Gloucestershire

Background

The ASTRA project was developed in response to the findings of the West Case, where some of the young victims were found to have gone missing from home or care. ASTRA is a small voluntary led organisation, and was promoted as a model of best practice in the 2002 Social Exclusion Unit report on young runaways.

Examples of good practice in relation to...

ASTRA works to reduce the rate of young people going missing, through young person-centered and innovative ways.

Work with young people

ASTRA is a dedicated Missing Person service, serving all young people who run away from home in Gloucestershire. The scheme places an emphasis on working with young people who repeatedly go missing. In addition to the support work provided to young people, a missing helpline is available to young people who are thinking about running away. The project is jointly funded by the police, Education and Social Care, along with contributions from local borough councils and was developed in line with local protocols.

ASTRA has managed to successfully engage with young people by approaching the young person directly after a missing incident. This is not always the case, with some missing person projects accessing the young person's family or carers first (Rees et al, 2005, Rees, 1999). The project focuses on developing a positive relationship with young people.

Taking a short term solution focused approach; an individual worker will identify with the young person what is causing them to runaway and set out an action plan to identify appropriate solutions to the problem. In common with other projects the service has developed good links with other organisations in the area, and can signpost young people to other services.

Outcomes

The ASTRA project has received a positive (independent) evaluation from the Children's Society which has shown that the project is effective in working with young people. The project report a 32% reduction in the number of young people going missing from care (Astra, 2006), and Gloucestershire Police estimate that the number of young people going missing repeatedly has reduced by two thirds (SEU, 2002).

Limitations

Specialist missing person schemes in evaluations have raised concerns about the low level of referrals, and can feel isolated from other service providers (Rees et al, 2005).

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Dedicated service to respond to young people who go missing.

4. Mountains into Molehills, Lancashire

Background

The Mountains into Molehills project was developed in 2003, after receiving funding from the SEU when poor outcomes for children for children going missing were identified. Initial mapping of children who went missing in Lancashire found that 300 children in the county go missing at least 3 times a year. These children accounted for more than 3200 investigations, and one young person was subject to 78 investigations. The majority of children involved were looked after. A further sub sample of high risk children was identified with 6 children accounting for: 201 missing person investigations, 78 arrests, 60 offences, being victims of violent crime on nine occasions and involvement in drugs, sexual exploitation and firearms.

In response to these findings a hierarchical and multi agency response was developed – in the shape of Mountains into Molehills. At the centre of the project is the most advanced computerized missing person case management system in the UK ('Sleuth'), which allows for effective actions to be taken when a young person goes missing and meaningful analysis of missing cases.

Examples of good practice in relation to...

The response to children going missing in Lancashire was the most co-ordinated and

comprehensive approach identified in the research literature. The programme won second prize in the Tilley Award for Problem Orientated Policing in 2005 and a toolkit has been developed for use by practitioners.

Work with young people

The 'Sleuth' computer records sensitive information on missing children and young people, including data on the initial incident and the return interview. If a young person goes missing 3 times in the space of 90 days, a referral is automatically triggered. In addition, the information recorded on 'Sleuth' means that local patterns can be identified through a Performance Management Framework structure involving health, social care and education leads, which is held on a quarterly basis.

In a number of cases, voluntary partnerships across Lancashire carry out return interviews with young people and will attempt to engage them in short-term focused work, to reduce the risk of repeat running. Their work involves supporting young people with a history of running, advocating on their behalf and raising awareness among residential workers. Cases of young people reported missing are also colour-coded according to their individual needs and vulnerabilities, linking the local missing person policy closely into the scheme.

Outcomes

32% reduction in missing episodes in first year of operation, year on year reductions in rates of missing. Regular meetings to assess cases where young people have gone missing multiple times, ensures that young people do not 'slip through the net'. Computer monitoring means that local patterns can be identified and responded to.

Limitations

Focus of project is on recorded missing cases only – and would not pick up missing incidences that have not been reported to the Police.

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Development of centralized computer system recording information on missing children and young people.
- Inter-agency co-operation
- Independent return interviews carried out by local voluntary organisations

5. Looked After Missing Persons (LAMP), Birmingham

Background

A Children's Society service, LAMP works with looked-after children and young people aged 10 - 17 years, who go missing for an overnight period or on five separate occasions in a month. The project works in partnership with Birmingham City Council and aims to support young people who go missing and to reduce the number of looked-after missing persons.

Examples of good practice in relation to...

LAMP provides an independent visit to young people who have run from care, to ensure that they have the opportunity to discuss the circumstances that led them to run away - *"The importance of an independent visitor is crucial to the way LAMP works"* (LAMP 2006).

Work with young people

Following each missing incident, a LAMP worker will offer an independent visit to the young person. The aim of this one-to-one work is to engage with the young person, providing information and support and ensuring they feel listened to. The project will also refer the young person on to appropriate services if necessary. Through this interaction, young people have an opportunity to discuss why they ran away and their experiences of running. LAMP also helps young people recognise the dangers associated with running away and how they can protect themselves to minimise risks if they experience if they run away again.

The project works to help young people improve their care plans in residential homes in order to lessen the risk of the young person running away again and will attend strategy meetings to advocate on a young person's behalf.

Outcomes

Reduction in cases of young people going missing from care following the project's intervention.

Limitations

Limitations of the project's work are basically linked to resource issues. Under the current arrangements, LAMP can provide one visit per person referred. However, research by The Children's Society and evidence from practice highlights that eight visits are needed to ensure that young people find alternative strategies to running and reduce the instances of running. Additional funding could allow for more follow-up visits to take place.

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Dedicated service to respond to young people who go missing from care

6. ReUnite2, Coventry and Warwickshire Connexions

Background

ReUnite2 was set up by Coventry and Warwickshire Connexions and the West Midlands Police in response to the high number of young people running away in two particular areas. Police and social services found it difficult to engage with young people who went missing and tackle the issue, as the majority of young people were unwilling to talk about their experiences in return interviews with the Police for a number of reasons, including fear of arrest and prosecution and feeling intimidated in the presence of uniformed police

officers (SEU, 2002). The lack of information on the circumstances leading young people to run away meant developing a response to the problem was difficult.

ReUnite2 was established when the Coventry and Warwickshire Connexions service and the Police developed a system where young people who went missing were referred by the Police to a Connexions personal adviser. The aim of the project is to reduce the rates of young people going missing through exploring the circumstances and reasons that led them to run away.

Work with young people

Through the ReUnite2 project, Coventry and Warwickshire Connexions Personal Advisers engage with young people aged 13 – 19 years who go missing. ReUnite2 provides a system of return interviews with young people who have gone missing from home and care, providing the young person with a key worker they can trust and develop a positive relationship with. The key worker works with the young person to listen to their experiences, identify the reasons why they went missing and reduce the risk of repeat running through offering support measures such as counselling and mentoring. In addition, the Police have appointed a dedicated Missing Person's Officer for missing young people. The aim of this position is to develop a more positive and informal relationship with young people who go missing and to devote more time to their cases than was previously the situation (SEU, 2002).

Examples of good practice in relation to...

The appointment of a Police Missing Person's Officer dedicated to working with young people who go missing has been a key element of the Coventry service's success.

Outcomes

The Social Exclusion Unit's report (2002) recommended extending this scheme across all Connexions services. According to a Police representative quoted in the report: *"There is no doubt that the system has reduced the number of repeat runaways by dealing effectively with each missing young person in a bid to prevent similar incidences."* Coventry found that their missing persons scheme works particularly well if the young people are referred quickly after a running away incident.

Limitations

According to the SEU (2002), while ReUnite2 was successful with most repeat runners, it was less effective working with young people involved in the Criminal Justice system *"who need more intensive support"*.

Links to research and policy recommendations

- Inter-agency collaboration: close relationship with the Police is key to ReUnite2's effectiveness.

References:

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APPENDIX 2:**SUMMARY OF IDEAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT ARISING FROM THREE MULTI-AGENCY WORKSHOPS HELD IN SEPTEMBER 2006**

Three workshops were held in September 2006 to communicate the findings of the research and to develop further ideas for future inter-agency working and practice.

The workshops focused on the needs of young people who go missing from care and how Staffordshire can better meet these needs.

There was considerable agreement across all three workshops about the needs of young people. These emotional, social and practical needs can be summarised as follows:

- An ability to cope with the legacy of the past, to have a positive sense of identity, and to have the support to deal with difficult past experiences and relationships.
- To feel valued and have a sense of belonging in the present. To feel secure with, and attached to, at least one trusted adult and to maintain links with family, friends and community.
- To have meaningful things to do, and to develop a sense of achievement and hope for a positive future.

Workshops considered ideas for practice improvement on a range of topics. The main points raised are summarised below:

1. *What more can be done to engage young people in education/constructive day time activity?*

- There is a need for a lead person to take responsibility for each young person to ensure their needs are met.
- Programmes of activities are needed which tap into mainstream resources e.g. involvement in local youth groups, interest groups etc which are part of the community
- Programmes should build on young people's existing talents and interests
- Education should be broadly defined to include training and development and activities which provide creative learning opportunities
- Education needs to be built in to the whole planning process and involve joint assessment
- At the placement/pre planning meeting, education provision should be discussed as a priority and involve the young person
- Education should be in place at the point of admission
- There needs to be good links with the previous education provider and better communication between all parties
- Getting young people to school should be a key objective and practical issues such as transport should be arranged as a priority

- Staff in units need to provide support and motivation via help with homework, attendance at parents evenings and showing an active interest in the school day.
- Staff need to be provided with training to enable them to support young people's education including basic skills on how to get young people up in the morning, establishing routines and providing constructive activities

2. What more could be done to support young people's emotional and mental health needs?

Course participants expressed considerable concern over the inadequate provision to meet young people's very evident mental health needs and to support their emotional well-being. However, they were equally convinced that considerable capacity for undertaking direct work with young people existed already in the residential sector, but was currently under-utilised and poorly supported.

Staff recognized a need for training in areas such as attachment, trauma and child development, and for specialist supervision to be provided where residential staff were undertaking direct work with young people. There was considerable support for the suggestion that with adequate training and supervision residential staff could deliver packages/interventions in relation to issues such as anger management, self-esteem and keeping safe, and could undertake life story work.

One group of staff suggested that a specialist mental health worker should be employed to work across the units in Staffordshire and spend at least one day a week in each unit supporting staff and interacting with the young people. (They suggested that this would ensure their suggestions and advice would be 'more grounded'). Other staff suggested that a designated CAMHS professional should provide consultancy, and possibly supervision to the residential units, either on a case by case basis or by providing a monthly 'surgery'.

One group suggested there should be an 'on call' psychologist attached to the LAC teams in order to encourage a more rapid response and to facilitate dialogue between social services and CAMHS. They pointed out that the development of the new LAC teams was a real opportunity for 'skill-ing up' frontline workers in mental health, and were keen that family support workers were included in training in this area.

Staff were extremely keen to learn from each other and suggested mentoring and residential staff conferences as means to facilitate this.

3. What more could be done to build on positive relationships with the police? How should return interviews be conducted?

Staff were able to differentiate clearly between the legally required police 'return interview' which was simply to check on the young person's safe return and to ensure no crime had been committed during their absence, and the need for a 'pastoral' interview in order to

ascertain the young person's reasons for going missing and the identification of any unaddressed needs and vulnerabilities.

However, one group considering this issue suggested that it might be useful to check whether guidance on the police return interview advocated they ask the young person: 'Is there any reason you don't feel safe to go back?', and if this was not the case to consider piloting the inclusion of such a question.

While most staff were supportive of the idea of return interviews being conducted by an independent person in some instances, they did not think this was feasible after every missing episode for every young person. It was variously suggested that a first missing episode after a young person came into the unit, or when a young person hit a 'certain threshold of risk' an independent interview would be appropriate. One team suggested a VOICE worker should be available to visit a young person within 48 hours of their return.

It was pointed out that the issue of return interviews was of very little significance unless such interviewed triggered some effective form of help being provided, problems being solved and better relationships built. One worker spoke of the challenge of persuading young people to invest a little of themselves in relationships with staff and life in the unit.

One group was extremely positive about developing closer working relationships with community police officers; having allocated link officers; sharing information and involving officers in activities with young people in order to build more trust.

4. How can staff promote a positive culture in the units and discourage negative perceptions of young people?

The culture of residential units was agreed to be extremely important and intimately related to staff morale and confidence. Staff described a 'positive culture' as being lead by staff committed to reflecting on their own practice: this was variously named a 'learning culture', a 'non-blame culture', an 'open culture' and a 'reflective culture'. They were clear that such a culture would be one in which staff could constructively challenge each others practice and behavior – and this was not currently the case.

One group of staff considered that the 16 hour shift pattern was a major barrier to improving unit culture: staff were often exhausted and unable to maintain the calm, thoughtful approach necessary at the end of a shift. The shift pattern was also considered to mitigate against 'modelling' ordinary, regular home and work/school routines that staff were trying to encourage in young people.

Accessible and approachable leadership and support for staff were considered vital in maintaining staff resilience in the face of 'many small failures and few big successes'.

Suggestions of practice change included emphasizing that the allocated key worker's primary responsibility was to 'hold onto what was best in this child', to act as their advocate in the unit, as well as outside, and to focus other staff's attention on their positive behaviors. Negative handovers were considered to be a major problem and that the handover must not be used as an opportunity for 'off-loading'. It was suggested that de-briefing and handover information should be separated and that this needed further exploration. Finally, the importance of young people's records was emphasized and it was

suggested that staff needed training in how to record information in a neutral (non-judgemental) or positive way.