

# Good practice: guide

## Safe and well?

Looked-after young people who run away



# Shelter



# Foreword



*Safe and well?* offers carers practical advice on responding to the challenges of supporting young people in care. Entrusted with the responsibility for providing young people with good quality, day-to-day care, foster carers and children's homes staff are on the front line in meeting young people's needs.

This guide emphasises the need for positive, purposeful care to keep young people safe and help them reach their potential. It stresses the importance of seeing beyond challenging behaviour, by recognising and respecting each young person's value. A warm, constructive approach is essential when supporting young people. It reduces the risk they will run from care thinking that no one understands or is prepared to listen.

Examples in the guide show good practice by local authorities and the voluntary sector in encouraging young people to participate to influence the quality of their care. This guide demonstrates how support can make young people feel empowered and safe, enabling them to achieve their goals.

In June, the Government issued *Care matters: time for change*, our White Paper setting out a programme to transform the prospects for young people in care. It included a commitment to revise guidance for local authorities on preventing, and responding to, young people running away. *Safe and well?* includes important ideas that should improve future policy, so young people feel valued and better safeguarded.

I appreciate the work of Shelter and their partners in producing this guide, as it provides a voice for young people from care to inform and make recommendations for good practice. I am pleased to endorse *Safe and well?* and I'm sure all service providers for children in care will find the guide valuable.

Anne Weinstock  
Director, Supporting Children and Young People Group.  
Department for Children, Schools and Families.

# Good practice: guide Safe and well?

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# Introduction

*Safe and well?* is a new resource from Shelter highlighting good practice in working with looked-after young people who run away. The guide has been produced with the support of The Children's Society, which is at the forefront of campaigning, research and service provision for young runaways. As an organisation, it has a wealth of experience and practice both in working with young runaways and in supporting professionals that work with them.

*Safe and well?* aims to build on skills and practice within the sector by identifying innovative and empowering models of working with young people to reduce the number of incidences of running away. Shelter carried out substantial consultations with looked-after young people and those who care for them, and their suggestions inform the structure and content of this guide.

The guide identifies the legislation and some of the messages from research that inform and shape practice in this field. It looks at the roles of different professionals and ways that multi-agency working can improve outcomes for children at risk of running away. By examining the chronology of events leading to a young person repeatedly running away, the guide looks at how carers can support young people and provide a service that equips them with the skills and knowledge they need to make positive choices in their lives.

The guide is divided into four areas. The first section identifies the facts, reasons, legislation and policy, and risks behind young people running away. The second chapter looks at creating a supportive placement to ensure that carers are able to meet the complex needs of young people in their care. The third section looks at direct service provision and the staying safe agenda. Finally, the guide examines services for young people when they return from running away. Each section of the guide includes the key findings from consultations with young people and professionals.

## Methodology

Four stages of research were undertaken to develop and inform the structure of the guide.

**Stage 1** – Identifying research, policy and legislation that shape current practice.

**Stage 2** – Consultation with young people who are looked after or who have had experiences of the care system. Peer-consultation methods were used. The consultation took place in six different locations in England and 30 young people were consulted in total.

**Stage 3** – Consultation with professionals currently engaged in service delivery. The consultations covered three different locations and involved a range of organisations to ensure that voluntary, private and statutory sectors all had an input.

**Stage 4** – Using the recommendations from the consultation to identify good practice examples.

A detailed explanation of the consultation methods can be found in Appendix 1 on page 29.

## Definitions

Throughout the guide the term 'runaway' refers to an individual who has defined her/himself as someone who has run away, who ran away before the age of 16 and who has run away for at least one night.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'young person' or 'child' are used interchangeably and refer to anyone aged under 16 years. The term 'carer' is used to define both residential workers and foster carers.

## Recommendations

The key recommendations in this guide came out of consultations with professionals and young people. The six different locations covered in the consultations included urban and rural communities in the north and south of England. Shelter tried to make sure that the young people involved were representative of looked-after young people nationally by working with a variety of organisations – a private care provider, a local authority, and a number of runaways projects run by The Children's Society and Barnardo's. Appendix 1 contains a list of the organisations that participated in the consultation. Shelter has not used the names or locations of individuals featured in this guide, so that the young people can remain anonymous.

The experiences reflected in this guide belong to the professionals and young people consulted during the research process.

<sup>1</sup> Rees, G, and Lee, J, *Still running 2: findings from the second national survey of young runaways*, The Children's Society, 2005.

# Running away – the facts

## Background

Running away is a national phenomenon, occurring in both urban and rural areas, although generally a much higher proportion of runaways come from disadvantaged areas.<sup>2</sup> Research by The Children's Society estimates that one in nine young people run away for at least one night before the age of 16<sup>3</sup>, and that young people living in residential and foster care are three times more likely to have run away at some point in their lives than those living with their families.<sup>4</sup> The average age at which people first go missing from family homes or local authority care is 13 years.<sup>5</sup> However, a substantial minority go missing at a younger age, with a quarter of all runaways going missing before the age of 11.

In terms of ethnicity and running away, research from The Children's Society found that rates of running away overnight were highest among young people of white and mixed ethnic origin<sup>6</sup>, and lowest among young people of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. The profile is the same for young people who go missing from care. Research indicates that there is no difference in patterns of young black and young white people who go missing. However, the difference highlighted by some professionals was that some young black people were more likely to return to support networks in their home areas than go to city centre streets where they would be more visible and more likely to experience racist abuse.<sup>7</sup> There are indicators of higher rates of running away among young lesbian and gay people.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, in relation to placements for looked-after young people, research has identified that placements with a similar intake of young people can have very different rates of running away. Thus, differences in regimes, management and culture of individual homes appear to have an impact on whether young people go missing.

## Reasons

Wade and Biehal<sup>9</sup> identified three key categories for classifying the reasons for running away. These are placement centred, family centred or young person centred. Where the young person has already established running away as a coping strategy, this can be another reason. Research has revealed that almost half the number of children who run away from their care placements are likely to have gone missing from their family home before coming into care.<sup>10</sup>

During the consultations, young people identified reasons for running away that fitted within four key themes. The family- and placement-centred issues that were raised included:

- the desire to be with family and friends: through choice but also through concern for what was happening at home
- negative peer relationships within the placement: eg, bullying, peer pressure to run away, or not getting on with other young people they live with
- poor relationships with carers: feeling isolated, having no one to talk to, or disliking carers
- placement rules and boundaries: disagreeing with or finding them difficult to adhere to.

What is clear from the consultation is that reasons for running away are often multi-layered and changeable. Immediate triggers to an incident may be linked to underlying issues.

Figure 1, overleaf, illustrates the link between the factors that need to be identified when assessing why a young person might run away.

2 Abrahams and Mungall, *Young runaways: exploding the myths*, NCH Action for Children, 1992.

3 *Still running 2: findings from the second national survey of young runaways*, op cit, pages 7 and 24.

4 Ibid.

5 Wade, J, and Biehal, N, with Claydon, J, and Stein, M, *Going missing: young people absent from care*, John Wiley and Sons, 1998.

6 *Still running 2: findings from the second national survey of young runaways*, op cit.

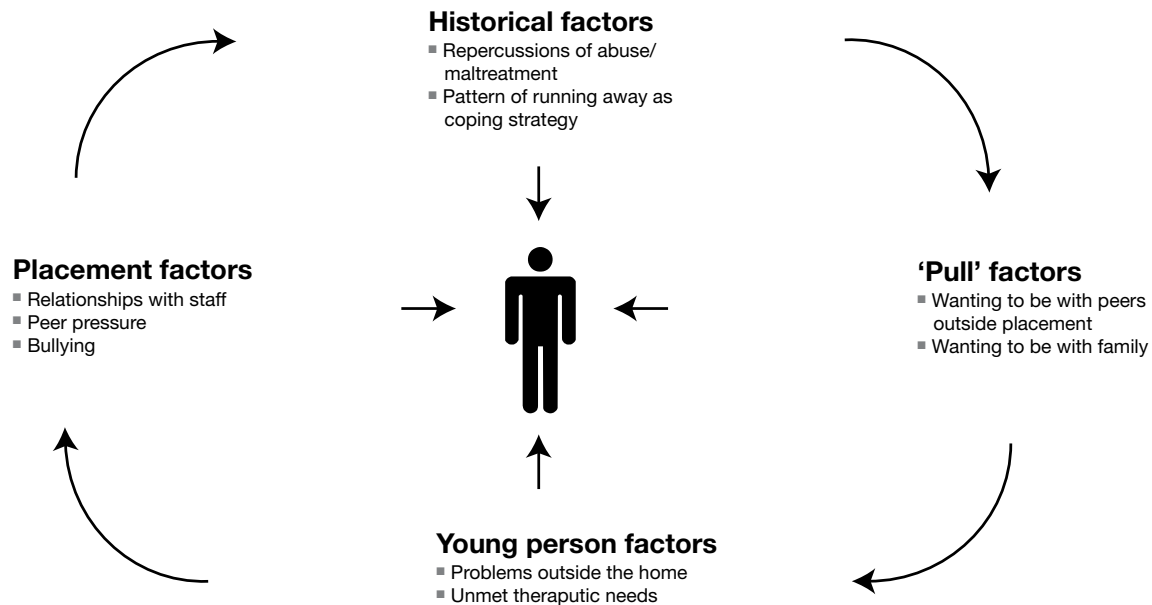
7 *Going missing: young people absent from care*, op cit.

8 *Still running 2: findings from the second national survey of young runaways*, op cit.

9 *Going missing: young people absent from care*, op cit.

10 Ibid.

**Figure 1** The range of factors contributing to going missing from residential care.<sup>11</sup>



Another way of identifying reasons why young people run away is to use the 'push' and 'pull' headings. 'Push' factors relate to areas such as placement issues, relationships with carers, bullying, unhappiness at school, and unmet support needs. 'Pull' factors relate to areas such as wanting to be with family/friends, drug/alcohol use, engagement with street cultures, and links with sexual exploitation.

## Risks

The Social Exclusion Unit, in its *Young runaways* report (2002), identified that there are some groups of runaways that appear to be at greater risk:

'Young people running from care are more likely to be involved in crime before they run, more likely to run away repeatedly, and more likely to sleep in unsafe places and resort to risky behaviour whilst they are away.'

The risks are both immediate and long term. Children who run away are vulnerable to physical and sexual assault, and sexual exploitation. They may also resort to risky survival strategies (such as begging, stealing and substance use). Research<sup>12</sup> has identified links between running away as a child and problems in later life, such as homelessness, substance use and crime.

## Legislative and policy context

Current policy and legislation provides a framework for procedures and practice in relation to looked-after children who run away from local authority care or other accommodation. Some key pieces of policy and legislation that should shape practice for carers are identified below; other relevant guidance will be referred to in subsequent sections.

### ***Working together to safeguard children (2006)***<sup>13</sup>

This guide from the Government sets out the roles, duties and responsibilities of different people and organisations; identifies the role and function of local safeguarding children's boards; and looks at training and development needs. It has a specific section that looks at safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children who might be more vulnerable, including looked-after children and those who go missing.

### ***Children missing from care and from home: good practice guidance (2002)***<sup>14</sup>

This guidance, published by the Department of Health, is for those involved in the development, planning and delivery of services to children and young people who may be at risk of going missing.

11 Rees, G, Smeaton, E, and Wade, J, *Children and young people going missing from children's homes in Leeds*, The Children's Society and University of York, 2002.

12 Rees, G, *Working with young runaways: learning from practice*, The Children's Society, 2001; Lofts, C, *What is homelessness?*, Centrepoint, 2006; Goulden, C, and Sondhi, A, *Home Office Findings 152: Drug use by vulnerable young people: results from the 1998/99 youth lifestyles survey*, Home Office, 2001.

13 HM Government, *Working together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, 2006.

14 Department of Health, *Local Authority Circular (LAC) (2002) 17: Children missing from care and from home: good practice guidance*, issued as guidance under s.7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970.

It identifies action that local authorities and police forces should take. It includes: action points relating to multi-agency protocols; audits of service provision and consideration of service development to meet need; and highlights that each local authority should have a system for monitoring patterns and trends concerning children who go missing from care. The guidance aims to ensure that carers understand locally-agreed procedures that need to be followed when children go missing from foster placements or residential care.

### ***Guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons (2005)***<sup>15</sup>

This guidance, written by the Association of Chief Police Officers, is specifically for police forces and relates to how they manage all incidences of missing persons. It advises the police to adopt a problem-solving approach to young people running away, with the aim of reducing numbers of runaways and enabling the police to concentrate on high-risk investigations.

Guidelines are included for conducting the return interview and putting in place appropriate support and interventions. The importance of multi-agency working is clearly set out, and a specimen protocol for joint working with social services is included in the appendices.

The guidance requires police forces, when responding to missing person cases, to consider potential criminal links, such as abduction, child abuse, sexual exploitation, domestic violence and human trafficking.

### ***Every Child Matters: change for children (2004)***<sup>16</sup>

This document, published by the Government, sets out a clear framework that carers can use when working with young people at risk of running away.<sup>17</sup> It sets out guidance on working with children, focusing on responding to the needs of young people in an appropriate way and anticipating whether services are necessary to divert young people from risk. Every Child Matters establishes five outcomes necessary for promoting children's needs: staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of care planning, the key tools that have been introduced are Contact Point, the Common

Assessment Framework (CAF) and the Integrated Children's System (ICS). Contact Point is a quick way of finding out who else is working with a child, while the CAF enables practitioners to gather and record information in a consistent way so that it can be shared with other agencies. ICS provides a conceptual framework, a method of practice, and information management process to support practitioners and managers in undertaking the key tasks of assessment, planning, intervention and review, in order to meet the needs of looked-after children. Access to Contact Point is available to authorised users who need it as part of their work; CAF can be used by any suitably trained practitioner; and ICS will be used by social workers, with limited access given to other practitioners. The focus on integrating services and supporting professionals to work across boundaries has improved the ability of social care workers to meet the range of needs identified by looked-after young people who run away.

### ***Children's homes: National Minimum Standards and Children's Homes Regulations (2002)***<sup>19</sup>

These regulations set out the legal requirements that must be met by every children's home, including requirements about how homes should be managed and the arrangements they must make to promote the welfare of children in their care. The national minimum standards include information about standards that homes must meet in order to demonstrate compliance with the regulations. Standard 19 covers young people in care who are 'absent without authority' and the action that should be taken in these situations.

### ***Fostering services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations (2002)***<sup>20</sup>

The regulations set out the national minimum standards for fostering service providers and carers. Part 3 of the regulations sets out the requirements for the conduct of fostering services, including the requirement that foster carers are provided with the training, support and information necessary to meet the needs of the children placed with them. Standard 9 sets out how foster carers are expected to protect children from abuse and neglect, this includes specifying that every foster carer must have a clear written procedure on what to do if a young person goes missing from their home.

15 Association of Chief Police Officers, *Guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons*, 2005.

16 HM Government, *Every Child Matters: change for children*, 2004.

17 Every Child Matters stems from s.10 of the Children Act 2004.

18 Every Child Matters Green Paper 2003, Cm 5860, Executive summary, pages 11–12.

19 Department of Health, *Children's homes: National Minimum Standards and Children's Homes Regulations*, 2002.

20 Department of Health, *Fostering services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations*, 2002.

# Reducing the risk of running away

There are many strategies that can be employed to help reduce the likelihood of someone running away from care. These relate to the culture of the placement, the physical environment, and effective joint working and information-sharing between local authority services and other agencies.

## Multi-agency working

Strong partnership working at all levels is important to achieve the level of support and service provision required to make a positive impact on outcomes for young people. Throughout the consultation with professionals, collaborative working was highlighted as vital in meeting the needs of young people and providing a joined-up service.

The following recommendations came out of the consultations.

- Protocols should be developed for multi-agency working on a local level. For these to be effective, there needs to be a commitment to the protocol at all levels of each organisation and training for staff on its implementation. There should also be regular monitoring and evaluation of procedures to ensure they remain relevant and effective.
- Regular multi-agency partnership action groups can improve communication between agencies, aid understanding of the roles and remit of other organisations, and promote the building of working relationships outside of crisis situations. Co-ordination of this could be carried out by local

safeguarding children's boards, as part of their scope is to pro-actively target particular groups that are potentially more vulnerable than the general population, including children living away from home and children who have run away.<sup>21</sup>

- Information-sharing should be encouraged to monitor patterns of running away, and to identify risk and patterns of concern.

Recommendations to implement joint-working procedures can be found in a number of sources, including the 2002 Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report, *Young runaways*, and the Department of Health statutory guidance that was issued in tandem with the SEU report. Both of these sources recommend that local authorities should establish protocols to co-ordinate joint-working across all agencies – including police, social services and health – for children who go missing.

Partnership and joint working is also key to delivering the Every Child Matters agenda. The Children and Young People's Plan<sup>22</sup> has promoted improved partnerships between local agencies, while the Common Assessment Framework, Integrated Children's System and the role of the lead professional provide ways of ensuring services work together to fulfil service needs for young people. The Children's Act 2004 and the Childcare Act 2006 place duties on local authorities to plan and deliver integrated services, and for directors of children's services and lead members to provide strategic leadership.

<sup>21</sup> HM Government, *Working together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, 2006, page 77.

<sup>22</sup> As implemented under the Children and Young People's Plan (England) Regulations 2005 (SI 2005/2149), as amended by the Children and Young People's Plan (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2007 (SI 2007/0057).

### **Good practice example: Lancashire County Council**

In Lancashire half of the 6,200 missing persons investigated annually by the police are children who go missing frequently or are missing from care. Some young people go missing up to 70 times a year and some care homes report up to 200 cases of runaways per year. Each case costs the police approximately £1,000 to investigate.

By taking a partnership approach, Lancashire has achieved a significant reduction in the numbers of young people running away. The main partners are the police, the local authority and key voluntary sector agencies. They work together to target the 'push' and 'pull' factors of running away, and focus on repeat runaways and those who are most vulnerable because of their engagement in risky survival strategies. The county has introduced a system for multi-agency performance management and has improved information-sharing. Regular multi-agency performance management meetings are held every three months and all residential unit managers attend. The figures of young people who run away from each unit are discussed, and good practice and information are shared.

A local protocol clarifies the roles and responsibilities of statutory and voluntary sector agencies working with children and young people who go missing. The protocol states that when a young person returns the return interview needs to be conducted within 48

hours and has to be carried out by an independent person, usually an independent social worker or a voluntary agency. In addition, each residential unit has a procedure that states what carers need to do when a resident runs away. Police and community support officers regularly visit one of the units in the area and mix informally with carers and residents.

The following improvements highlight the impact of Lancashire's approach.

- Guidance for staff on dealing with running-away incidents has led to a clear and consistent approach within the staff team.
- Improved relations between police and young people can aid prevention of running away because young people feel able to talk to the police about issues and concerns.
- Having a relationship with young people outside of crisis situations has enabled the police to diffuse volatile situations through their presence, instead of inflaming them.
- Better communication with young people has led to improved police intelligence in terms of potential 'pull' factors in the local community. Police have also taken a pro-active stance in community policing to ensure the safety of young people within the community.
- Improved police intelligence on locating runaways means they are able to support staff in ensuring a safe return.

## **Training and support for carers**

### **Assessing and meeting training needs**

Carers, both in foster homes and residential settings, need sufficient training and support in order to minimise the risks of young people running away, and also to respond when someone does. Effective management, regular supervision and access to training can enable carers to understand the developmental needs of young people and offer a sensitive child-centred service. Adequate and targeted training enables them to deal better with issues as they arise, and prevent problems from happening in the first place. In turn, improving training and support leads to better understanding of procedures, more confidence in using them, and a consistent approach in all aspects of care work.<sup>23</sup>

During the consultation exercise, practitioners stated that meeting the learning and development needs of carers is essential because:

- carers who are able to identify support needs can provide appropriate interventions
- having sufficient knowledge of external agencies means carers can make appropriate referrals
- it improves their ability to deal with complex issues presented by young people in their care.

### **Foster carers**

Bradford Metropolitan District Council's crisis care scheme (see case study overleaf) highlights the way that training and support needs of emergency placement foster carers can be met. It is essential to ensure that foster carers, used as part of a crisis care

<sup>23</sup> Department of Health, *Children's homes: National Minimum Standards and Children's Homes Regulations*, 2002, Standard 31 (relating to the outcome for children are looked after by staff who are trained and competent to meet their needs); Department of Health, *Fostering services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations*, 2002, Standard 16 (regarding meeting the training needs of foster carers); Children's Workforce Development Council, *Ordinary people doing extraordinary things: the training, support and development standards for foster care*, 2007.

### Good practice example: Bradford Metropolitan District Council – crisis care scheme

The crisis care scheme works towards improving outcomes for vulnerable young people to be safe and healthy. The service provides a 24-hour resource for both overnight and day care provision for young people who may have been missing from home or care, and a local rapid response to young people aged 11 to 16 in crisis. Individuals who have run away are immediately placed in a family home setting with an approved short-break crisis carer. Seven crisis carers provide a rota of cover for the whole of the Bradford District. In partnership with Childminding Network, the service provides emergency day placements with trained childminders.

Most carers are recruited through the local paper. Assessment of potential carers follows the full-time foster care approval process, ie informal preliminary discussions, an application form, individual and home assessments, statutory checks, and preparation groups run specifically by crisis care workers. A portfolio and assessment report is then submitted to Bradford MDC's fostering panel for approval.

All crisis carers have a supervising crisis care social worker who undertakes individual supervisory

visits. Group support meetings take place, usually on a quarterly basis, and crisis carers are reviewed annually and evaluated under the core competencies, which are:

- caring for children
- providing a safe and caring environment
- working as a team
- own development.

Young people and workers complete evaluations after each placement. Carers have to complete five training sessions per year, through the training programme provided by the unit, the fostering unit or children's services. The day-care element of the scheme has been developed to meet the needs of children who are excluded or not at school. Crisis care workers run training sessions for child minders on topics such as child protection, safe caring and diversity.

The crisis care service provides young people with a short-term community-based placement in a home setting, to enable social workers to support a return to their home or placement as soon as possible. The project is a well-used resource by social workers across the authority and its success is shown by 64 per cent of young people who have been referred to the scheme returning to their home or placement.

team, are equipped to support young runaways, as this can be an important element in the prevention of repeat incidents of running away. The national minimum standards for fostering services identify the range of support and training that foster carers should access – self-help groups, ongoing training and development opportunities, regular supervision and support, as well as out of hours support services.

### Involving young people

During the consultation process, we asked young people to identify the skills and qualities that they felt it was important for carers to have.

- **Positive communication skills.** Carers should listen and respond. It is important that they are able to diffuse situations and communicate with groups as well as with individuals.

- **Like young people.** Carers should enjoy working with young people and be friendly, 'bubbly' and caring.
- **Empathise and understand.** Carers should be able to understand young people's experiences.
- **Take a holistic approach.** Carers should focus on the positive aspects of a young person's life, not just the negatives.

When asked what would enhance these skills, young people identified training in areas such as communication skills, confidentiality, raising awareness on running away, substance use, cultural awareness and counselling skills. Another key area they highlighted was the need for training that includes a young person's perspective on life in care and for young people to be involved in the recruitment of foster carers and residential staff and managers.

## Good practice example: Hampshire Children's Services – involving young people in recruitment

Hampshire Children's Services use a range of different models to engage young people in the recruitment process. Different models of participation used within the local authority are highlighted below.

### Youth panel recruiting for Deputy Director of Children's Services and care-leaving teams

Invitations went out to young people, through looked-after teams and children leaving-care teams, asking them to apply to be a member of a youth panel for the interviews for this post. The Director of Children's Services identified what he wanted from the candidate and the panel worked with human resources to create a range of questions for the interviewees. The young people developed their own scoring system and their scoring counted for 20 per cent of the vote. The youth panel interviewed candidates separately from the main panel. The positive elements of this method were that the young people felt empowered, found the experience rewarding, and received useful training. Staff highlighted the importance of being clear with the young people about how the final scoring system worked and that their choice of candidate might not be the overall successful applicant. Young people are also involved in the appointment of all staff in leaving-care teams. Each interview panel includes a young person who has been looked after and they participate in the interview as a full panel member.

### Recruitment of residential workers

All candidates applying to work in children's homes in Hampshire are asked, as part of their application

form, to produce information for children and young people. Candidates are told what age range the information is for and asked to address a range of questions about their experience, such as why they want the job, what their experience is and what they would offer to children in the homes. Children and young people contribute to the short-listing process based on what the candidates have written. Residential carers support children and young people to think of questions that they want to ask short-listed candidates for their pre-interview visit to the home. Their feedback, along with the staff feedback, is written into a report that is then used as the basis for some of the interview questions.

'The residents have given serious consideration to the questions that they want to ask the candidates for the residential posts and their feedback has been interesting and insightful. They are not looking for people who would appear to be the "soft option". They want to feel that they will be kept safe and their behaviours managed.'

### Registered Manager, Hampshire

The final decision to appoint for those posts lies with the managers, but the input from children and young people has been important in informing decisions that are taken. This process is being developed and refined each time.

## The placement

### Pre-placement planning

A recent Ofsted report identified a lack of appropriate placements for looked-after children as one of the barriers to meeting the staying-safe outcome.<sup>24</sup> Placement commissioning and developing spare capacity to increase placement choice are key to having a range of placements to meet the diverse needs of looked-after young people. This includes placements to meet specific support needs for those who are known by the local authority to have a history of running away. Ensuring that the views of young people are sought, listened to and acted upon is important at the pre-placement stage. Engaging young people presents an important opportunity to

look at their previous behaviour related to running away, the 'push' and 'pull' factors influencing this, and their current circumstances. This is essential when considering the placement and assessing its suitability for that person.

During the consultation sessions, both professionals and young people identified the importance of the pre-placement process in identifying appropriate placements. The main recommendations from the professionals were:

- informed matching to ensure that a placement is best placed to meet the needs of the individual
- addressing issues related to running away at the outset and identifying ways of meeting support needs in the foster placement agreement or care plan.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ofsted, *Narrowing the gap: the inspection of children's services*, 2007, Executive summary, page 5.

<sup>25</sup> s.31A Children's Act 1989: the care planning process should take into account the feelings of the young people.

Young people identified the following considerations that need to be part of the placement-matching stage:

- ensuring young people are supported to get their wishes and views heard in any decision about future placements
- taking into account the mix of young people living at the placement – individuals can feel isolated because of their gender, race, ethnicity or age
- monitoring placements to ensure they provide safe and supportive environments for young people to live in
- paying attention to the positive influences in young people's lives by ensuring proximity to family, friends and their local community
- recognising the importance of continuity at school, as this is key to them coping with the transition
- ensuring that young people are aware of the boundaries and expectations of a placement.

'When I first moved into this home I'd only run away once or twice, but there were these two girls that were older than me and literally the first night I got there they were like "We're off to [place name removed] for some parties", and I thought "great fun, I'm off". I didn't come back for three days, that was how I got into it... I ended up becoming this miniature criminal whilst I was in there.'

### **Informed matching**

The national minimum standards for fostering services<sup>26</sup> address the importance of information-sharing between professionals, and involving the young person and their family in the decision-making process about placement settings.<sup>27</sup> The standards also highlight the importance of making an assessment that considers the child's racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic needs, and matching these as closely as possible with those of the foster family.

### **Care planning**

Good care planning is key to meeting the needs of looked-after young people. Local authorities, through their social worker, must assess the needs and draw up a care plan for every child they look after. Care plans should be drawn up before the child becomes looked after or, in the case of emergency entry to care, within 14 days of becoming looked after.

The care plan can help anticipate problems that might link in with running-away behaviour and identify individual needs. The care-planning process provides an opportunity for assessing how running-away behaviour can be managed to avert potential risk. This assessment necessarily involves taking into account the young person's understanding of the issues that lead them to run away.

Care planning is a process that adapts and changes as the young person develops and passes through different transitional stages of their life. Good care planning is flexible and must respond to the full range of young people's developmental needs. It is important that carers are able to contribute to the planning process because they play an important role in reporting on the young person's progress.

When a placement has been identified, and there is a possibility that a young person may go missing, a risk assessment should be carried out and a support plan put in place to reduce the likelihood of this happening. This is also an opportunity to develop good support packages for carers and for the lead professional to co-ordinate input from other agencies so that support needs that cannot be met within the placement are addressed elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

### **The physical environment**

Young people identified a number of areas where they felt that the physical environment they lived in impacted on their running away behaviour. Some of the areas highlighted below may seem obvious or unimportant when taken in isolation, but are often not addressed when dealing with the larger issues relating to running away. However, it was clear from the consultations that these factors, when combined with other underlying problems faced by young people, could act as a trigger to individuals going missing.

The following sections stemmed from a selection of responses linked to the physical environment and suggestions by young people for creating a supportive home environment, which meets their physical needs and makes them feel safer.

#### **Surroundings**

Helping new arrivals get their bearings on their first day in a placement was identified as important in helping young people settle. One young person stated that carers should: 'Take you around, especially in out of area placements like some obscure village, cos you're there and you're bored and you don't know where you are.'

<sup>26</sup> *Fostering services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations*, op cit.

<sup>27</sup> For more information go to [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/integratedworking](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/integratedworking)

<sup>28</sup> *Fostering services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations*, op cit, Standard 8.

Involvement in decorating the home was important for some young people to help them create a place that felt like theirs. Bedrooms were particularly important, because some young people identified them as a place of refuge. Making a placement feel less institutional was also important. For young people, with a range of different placement experiences, having areas in their homes from which they were excluded represented both a lack of trust and a feeling that they were living in an institution.

‘Not having doors locked all the time, ‘cos in a normal house doors aren’t locked all the time. The kitchen is locked, the freezer is locked, it’s all locked.’

There are times or reasons when some areas of the home need to be locked. Where this is the case, young people should be involved in the setting of ground rules and asked for their opinions on access to areas. It is important that they are given an explanation for why some areas are locked (for example, for storage of confidential files) and that attention is not drawn unduly to locked areas, for example, by staff wearing bunches of keys.

### Activities

Placements should offer access to constructive activities and leisure opportunities, so that young people can pursue their own interests and develop a sense of confidence and well-being.<sup>29</sup> Activities away from the placement are important for young people in terms of reducing boredom, building self-esteem, and developing relationships with carers and other peers, both inside and outside the placement. Activities need to be young-person centred: ‘I was often dragged on trips but they really weren’t my cup of tea.’ They also need to be managed sensitively to ensure that young people do not feel stigmatised by travelling in marked social services vehicles or by getting free tickets because of their looked-after status.<sup>30</sup>

### Food

Food plays an important role in many cultures and, for some of the young people consulted, food had more significance than merely being what was on the plate in front of them. As mentioned above, locked kitchens make a home seem more institutionalised and children feel that they are not trusted. Young

people said that they prefer to be involved in preparing their own food, because this makes them feel more independent.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, if specific dietary needs are not taken into account, or if no one notices if they are not there for a meal, they feel that this shows that the staff do not care.<sup>32</sup>

The young people consulted made the following recommendations:

- placements must meet their dietary needs and promote healthy food choices<sup>33</sup>
- they should be able to have food outside of allocated mealtimes
- they should be encouraged to help with the cooking, so they can learn to cook for themselves
- carers should make sure everyone is there at mealtimes, to make them feel more cared for.

### Privacy

The consultation highlighted the need for young people to have somewhere to ‘chill out’ and time on their own. For some this meant space from carers, for others a chance to get away from a noisy and chaotic environment, while for others it was time away from the young people who they live with.<sup>34</sup>

‘It’s only my bedroom that makes me feel like it’s home.’

Those consulted stated it is important for carers to respect their right to privacy. They gave examples of how they would like to be treated, eg staff knocking on the door, waiting for a reply before entering bedrooms and, if they are busy, they would like carers to respect this and come back later. There will be obvious exceptions to this need to protect privacy and it is important that young people are made aware of these.

### A safe space

‘It’s not so much where you live, it’s who you live with that creates a safe space.’

Some of the young people consulted revealed that they would never think of the placement as their home, because home is where their family is. However, they felt that it could (and should) still be a safe place for them to live.

29 *Children’s homes: National Minimum Standards and Children’s Homes Regulations*, op cit, Standard 15; also see details of the National Children’s Bureau Healthy Care Programme at [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

30 *Ibid*, page 21.

31 Children should be involved in food preparation, see *ibid*.

32 *Ibid*, Standard 10.

33 *Ibid*, Regulation 13.

34 *Ibid*, Standard 9 and Regulation 13.

They outlined the following as ways to make them feel more secure:

- ensuring that young people know which members of staff are on duty
- introducing them to new staff: this was specifically highlighted where there is a high staff turnover and when agency staff are used for shift cover
- having designated areas for visitors<sup>35</sup> and making sure that visitors do not have access to all areas in a placement (this was identified as being important in offering some protection to young people where there is a risk of exposure to sexual exploitation)<sup>36</sup>

- supporting young people to make and maintain positive links with staff, and being clear about boundaries for this.

‘If you move to a foster placement, you need to know if they are fine about inviting your friends round for a meal or if your friends want to come and watch a video. Or, if you’re still in contact with your family, can your mum or aunty or whoever pop round for a cup of tea.’<sup>37</sup>

### **Good practice example: Hampshire Children’s Services – CAT Mark scheme**

The Care Action Team (CAT), established in 1999, is a group of young people who are, or have been, in care. They work with members and officers of Hampshire County Council to improve services offered to children and young people in, and leaving, care. The project is led by young people and supported by participation workers who are funded by the Council.

CAT’s aim was to develop a way of measuring the performance of services in terms of issues that young people feel are important. The vision behind the CAT Mark is to identify organisations that provide an excellent service to young people. All inspectors are young people and they aim to conduct the evaluation from their point of view. CAT worked with Connexions and the Youth Council to train up a group of young people to be inspectors, some who were looked after, or had past experiences of being looked after, and some who had not.

The criteria developed by the young people is based on six categories: (i) consulting young people, (ii) safety, security and well-being, (iii) equal opportunities, (iv) links to other services, (v) environment and resources, and (vi) availability of support. After the assessment a short report is written by the young people giving feedback and recommendations. The report goes through each category identifying good practice and areas for improvement, and concludes with a summary and recommendations for the unit. The following quote is taken from the summary of an inspection taken on a residential unit that initially failed to get a CAT Mark but was awarded one a year later.

‘The overall atmosphere of the home has changed from negative and uninviting

to upbeat, warm and friendly... Great recognition has to go to the staff... changes seem to have made them stronger for the young people... giving a better environment on the whole.’

CAT and the CAT Mark have added to good practice in Hampshire in the following ways:

- young people from the CAT team are involved in training new residential workers and foster carers
- looked-after young people are more willing to talk with CAT inspectors, sharing concerns and suggestions
- residential staff are more aware about important issues for young people as a result of being assessed through the CAT Mark scheme
- residential meetings in units are more effective, because young people feel empowered to participate and set an agenda that reflects issues that matter to them
- they have created an opportunity for looked-after young people to influence service delivery and development
- involvement from young people who have not been in care gives them a better understanding of the issues looked-after children face and has been beneficial in promoting positive images of looked-after young people and aiding social inclusion.

The CAT Mark assessment provides an opportunity to address issues within a home and put preventive measures in place to create a warm, supportive young person-friendly environment. The scheme is supported by all agencies across the children’s services strategic partnership and a diverse range of young people are involved in the assessments.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, Standard 27.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, Standard 17; *Fostering services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations*, op cit, Standards 9 and 12.

<sup>37</sup> This should be discussed as part of the process of developing the placement information record, which is included as part of the Integrated Children’s System.

# Meeting support needs

‘You don’t talk to people if you don’t know them, do you? It’s about communication.’

Placements with a similar intake of young people can have very different rates of running away, so it is clear that the placement environment impacts on running away behaviour. Creating a placement that supports the emotional needs of young people and builds resilience is important in countering some of the ‘push’ factors linked to running away. ‘Push’ factors identified by young people include: poor relationships with carers, bullying, and difficulties coping with rules and boundaries in a placement.

Key points raised by young people:

- they want support from carers – either from a foster carer, key worker or a member of staff with whom they have a good relationship
- they want to negotiate boundaries in their placement and have some flexibility
- they want their carers to talk with them about running away – the facts, the risks, and ways of staying safer
- they want access to support from independent organisations. This arose because of concerns around confidentiality within a placement or wanting to talk with someone who is independent from their placement or who can provide specialist support.

Key findings from professionals:

- building relationships within the placement setting is crucial so that young people feel able to talk with carers about issues that lead to running away
- realistic boundaries need to be set, but the potential for flexibility must also be built into placement rules
- professionals should take a multi-agency approach to prevention work with young people related to running away – engaging with schools and voluntary sector organisations, as well as undertaking work in the placement setting.

## The role of the carer

The consultation highlighted examples of good practice throughout England. There are many carers who have a clear understanding of the variety of approaches to, and the importance of, supporting young people in their placements. A professional approach that identifies the importance of putting the child at the centre of all practice and provision was identified throughout the consultation.<sup>38</sup> The following points highlight some of the good practice found in different settings and explain, from a young person’s perspective, why this can help them in relation to running away.

### Building relationships

This is essential if young people are to talk about their problems. Young people talked about the importance of knowing that there was someone who they could talk with and who cared about them. They wanted residential carers to be more accessible and not be ‘somebody who clung to other staff like it’s a social event’. Good relationships with carers are important so that young people feel able to trust them with sensitive information about their lives.

‘I just want someone to show that they care about us, even if they don’t.’

### Confidentiality

Clear guidelines around confidentiality are a priority for young people if they are to feel able to trust carers with sensitive information. One young person said that they would not talk with a member of staff because the information would be passed around the staff team at handover sessions. These concerns were repeated in other consultations where young people felt that they did not know what would happen to information they shared with foster carers and residential staff. This led to a reluctance to talk with carers about sensitive issues that were concerning them, particularly when their issues related to other staff, the foster family, or other people in the placement, as sometimes there were concerns about reprisals.

<sup>38</sup> Children’s Workforce Development Council, *Ordinary people doing extraordinary things: the training, support and development standards for foster care*, 2007, page 4, Principles and values.

## Negotiation and flexibility

These are important in meeting young people's needs. In the consultation the issue of boundaries was raised: clear rules and boundaries were identified as being important in supporting 'normal' lifestyles, such as bedtimes, waking times and attending school. It was also important to young people that acceptable behaviour in a placement was defined.

Young people identified negotiation and compromise as an important way of reducing incidents of running away. They highlighted situations where a lack of flexibility had led to them running away. Examples ranged from negotiation about bedtimes to wanting to go to gigs with friends and stay over the night.<sup>39</sup>

Young people like spontaneity and it is important to create systems that are flexible enough to cope with this. Any flexible system that meets the needs of individual young people also needs to be underpinned by a robust structure of risk assessment. This ensures that the system presents an opportunity to engage with young people to identify and address possible risks. Risk assessment, as part of an ongoing process with the individual, enables the carer to be in a better position, in turn, to respond flexibly.

## Information about running away

Young people involved in the consultation were clear that they want to know more about running away.

'Definitely, otherwise they all just think it's cool, cos I know that when I just started I was pretty young running away from home, I thought it was gonna be good and then I realised it was rubbish.'

The consultation highlighted the importance of carers talking with young people about a range of the following factors connected to running away:

- basic facts about running away
- risk awareness, including specific risks about the local area
- safe places to go to, for example children's rights services, local advocacy projects, drop-in centres
- national helplines and local support projects (this would have to be part of an induction procedure agreed with the child's social worker)
- procedures in the placement covering action taken when young people run away and when they return.

Discussing running away with carers may be what

some young people need to help them address their behaviour, while for others it might help them look at ways of staying safer. It is also important in ensuring that young people are aware of what support is available to them from external organisations.

## The role of staff and the foster care team

The consultation asked young people to identify what support they need from their carers, and also what support they wanted from the staff team if it was different. They highlighted the following areas where staff teams could make a difference in meeting their support needs.

### Consistency

Carers within a placement need to be consistent with people in their care. Young people find it a 'wind up' when carers fail to communicate decisions to them, or other carers, and circumstances are changed without any explanation. In relation to running away, this added to feelings of dissatisfaction within a placement and could be a trigger to them leaving. Young people's examples of lack of consistency included: one carer telling someone they could have their dinner early so they could go out and then another member of staff telling them they could not; pocket money being given out at different times, depending on the staff member on shift; or other general incidents where carers interpreted policies and procedures differently. Young people felt that they were powerless in these situations and that when things were changed, or were out of their control, it could be hard for them to cope.

Consistency is key for foster care teams to ensure that legislation and agency policies and procedures are interpreted in the same way and a consistent approach is taken with young people in foster care.

The consultation identified the following ways of addressing the issue of consistency:

- better channels of communication within the staff and foster care teams, and subsequently with young people, to ensure that decisions made are communicated to other carers
- training for all carers on the implementation of policies and procedures so that they interpret them in the same way and practice is consistent.<sup>40</sup>

Staff should communicate effectively and spend time with young people. Young people said that if staff spent more time with people in their care, it would help them get a better understanding of issues that

<sup>39</sup> For guidance see Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills, *Local Authority Circular LAC (2004) 4: guidance on the delegation of decisions on 'overnight stays' for looked-after children*, 2004, issued under s.7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970.

<sup>40</sup> See Department of Health, *Children's homes: National Minimum Standards and Children's Homes Regulations*, 2002, Standard 31; and *Ordinary people doing extraordinary things: the training, support and development standards for foster care*, op cit, Standard 2, page 6.

might result in someone going missing, such as bullying. It is important that systems are put in place for supporting children if a key worker is on holiday or off sick, so they are clear about who else they can talk to.

The consultations with young people for this guide, and other research<sup>41</sup>, shows that children are more likely to go missing from badly managed, chaotic homes. In units where there is little structure and staff support, children feel they can come and go. In homes where there is strong leadership and well-supported staff there tend to be lower rates of running away.

### Developing links with other agencies

Both professionals and young people identified the importance of engaging with other agencies as key to keeping young people safer.

For young people, the advantages of accessing external support are around confidentiality and increased levels of privacy outside the placement setting. The consultations showed that external

organisations use a range of interesting ways of getting information across to young people. Some highlighted peer education as a powerful tool, as discussing running away with other young people who had gone missing in the past had a strong impact on young people in placements.

For professionals, the advantages of multi-agency working are around accessing skills and experience in other projects, and ensuring that a clear message around staying safe is conveyed to young people from a range of different sources. The Looked After Missing Persons (LAMP) Project (see good practice example, below) highlights the advantages to young people of accessing support from an external agency that has specific skills and expertise in working with those who have been assessed as likely to go missing from their care placement. It also demonstrates the benefit of a programme of work that has been developed to give young people the knowledge and skills to keep themselves safer.

#### **Good practice example: The Children's Society – Looked After Missing Persons (LAMP) Project, Birmingham**

The LAMP project in Birmingham offers young people working with the project support on ways of staying safer. Areas explored are dependent on the young person's individual needs and circumstances.

Initially, project staff will work with a young person, discussing what they each consider 'safe' and 'risky' and explore the differences in their views. Topics often covered by the project include: healthy relationships, attitudes towards sex, self-esteem, and drugs and alcohol. Once young people have identified some of the areas where their safety is more vulnerable, project staff can work with them to think about how those risks can be reduced when they are missing, and plan strategies for keeping safe. The project aims to help the individual build up their own skills and awareness around keeping safe, and provide them with accurate, factual information on a range of issues. Work with young people is usually done on a one-to-one basis and adapted to their age and ability. Although simple worksheets are often used as a prompt to exploring issues, young people also draw, converse, and write poems, raps or rhymes with project staff.

M, aged 13, lived in a residential unit and had a history of running away before coming into care.

There were many issues around M having contact with his family, and the frequency of running away started to increase once M was in care. M was referred to The Children's Society who worked with him on staying safe. At first, M did not identify risks he faced while away and felt he was in control of the situation. Project staff worked through case studies and scenarios with him, and it was only through identifying dangers other young people faced that M eventually recognised that he faced similar situations.

M realised that some people he had been hanging around with were potentially dangerous and that he was putting himself at great risk by being with people who no one knew and in places where no one knew where to find him. As well as working with M on alternative coping mechanisms to running away, the project staff worked with M on how he could reduce some of the risks to himself if he ran away.

When M recognised some of the dangers he faced, his running away reduced significantly. Although he did still run away sometimes, usually when there had been a really traumatic experience with his family, M was more aware of possible dangers he might face and would usually keep in contact with staff at the residential unit.

41 Social Exclusion Unit, *Young runaways: report by the Social Exclusion Unit*, 2002, page 14.

# Working with young people who run away

'We don't love running away, no one does. It's something you got to do if you need to.'

## Guidance

There is clear policy and guidance on what to do if a looked-after young person runs away. This is highlighted in guidance from the Department of Health (DoH), *Children missing from care and from home* (2002), and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), *Guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons* (2005). When assessing risk, attention should be given to DoH guidance, *Safeguarding children and young people involved in prostitution: practice guidance* (2000) and *Working together to safeguard children* (2006).

Local protocols are in place in each local authority that clarify the local procedures to be followed, for example the respective roles and responsibilities of the police, local authorities and care staff. In addition to this, each residential unit and fostering services facility should ensure that they have their own missing from care procedures and understand how these relate to the wider local protocols. *Local Authority Circular (LAC) (2002) 17*<sup>42</sup> states that local authorities and police forces should ensure that carers understand the locally-agreed procedures that are to be followed when children go missing from foster care or residential care. It also identifies the need for local authority protocols to be in place on what action should be taken to respond to young people who go missing from their care placement.

## Looking for young people who run away

As a corporate parent, the local authority has a duty of care to all looked-after children and young people. Good practice indicates that carers should actively participate in looking for a young person when they go missing. This duty of care is not fully discharged by merely reporting them missing to the police.

Young people consulted felt that if carers actively looked for them when they ran away, it would give the message that they care. The professionals also

stressed that carers should take some responsibility for finding missing young people.

## Police interviews

Police are the lead agency for the investigation of missing children. They will conduct an investigation into all reports of missing children. The role of the police is laid down in the ACPO guidelines and these clarify that the investigation is not concluded until the missing person has been finally interviewed. The guidelines set out the purpose and remit of the interview that the police conduct with young people once they are located and returned from running away – in many areas known as the 'safe and well check'. The guidelines highlight the positive impact that the interviews can have in reducing the frequency of running away incidents.

Through consultation with young people, the following factors were identified as important in improving outcomes when being interviewed by the police on their return. Interviews are more likely to achieve a successful outcome if:

- the police officer conducting the interview has already established a positive relationship with the young person
- there is a consistency in the officers conducting the interviews
- the officer has a positive attitude to looked-after young people.

## Return interviews

DoH guidance, *Children missing from care and from home* (2002), states that when children or young people run away from their placements, arrangements must be made to talk to an independent professional prior to their return. The majority of young people involved in the consultation said that it did help to talk to someone about running away, because it gave them an opportunity to talk about what happened when they ran away and look at ways of providing support to deal with their reasons for running. They also stressed that they

<sup>42</sup> Department of Health, *Local Authority Circular (LAC) (2002) 17: Children missing from care and from home: good practice guidance.*

need looking after on their return, rather than a telling off. In particular, they highlighted that:

- young people need time to deal with the practicalities – food, shower, sleep and time to relax – when they come back from running away
- carers should make young people feel welcome when they return.

‘You don’t run away to annoy people, although staff sometimes think that you are running away to make their life difficult, that’s not the case at all. The only way to resolve people running away is to find out why they’re running away and try and help them with it.’

The professional consultation also highlighted the importance of young people having someone to talk to on their return and specifically identified the importance of having return interviews conducted by someone independent from the placement. Nationally, there are variations in how return interviews are conducted, which are dependent on local agreements and service provision. However, the basic principles remain the same. These are that:

- the interview should be conducted by a non-statutory or independent agency
- it should be conducted when the young person is ready to talk, at their own pace, and in a comfortable and neutral environment
- there is explanation and agreed understanding with the young person beforehand on confidentiality policy and information sharing arrangements

### **Good practice example: The Children’s Society – Lancashire Young Runaways Project**

Since 2003, the Lancashire Young Runaways Project has worked with young people reported as missing from care across the Lancashire area. The project helps young people in identifying the issues that led to them running away and supports them in addressing these issues. Return interviews are part of the project’s service for runaways. The aim is to provide a listening ear, advice and information. If engagement with the young person is successful they then try to seek solutions to the issues that led to them running away.

Although any agency can refer young people to the project, the majority of the referrals come directly from the police. The project will receive basic personal information about the individual, a history of their patterns of running away (ie number of times missing, length of missing episodes), information on other agency involvement and details about contact with the family.

The project workers contact the young person directly to organise a meeting, explaining who they are, what they do, the purpose of the visit and to arrange a time that is convenient for the young person. Staff also check they have the young person’s consent to visit them and hold a return interview. Following the meeting, and if the young person agrees to work with the project, staff will then agree further times for the two of them to meet to explore any issues raised.

The project has successfully engaged with young people ‘written off’ by other services – those that

other agencies have refused to work with or have described as ‘dangerous’ or ‘difficult’. The project’s independence from statutory agencies and the approach used by project staff encourages young people to engage with workers.

In Lancashire, as in many other areas, there is an agreed multi-agency protocol for safeguarding young people who repeatedly go missing. A ‘missing from home meeting’ will be called, usually by the social worker, after a young person has gone missing three times. Those invited to attend the meeting will be: the young person, their project worker, their social worker, residential unit staff, the police, and any other agency involved with the young person. Further meetings are held after five missing episodes and again after 10. The young person and project worker are invited to all the meetings, the other agencies send a progressively more senior representative to each one. After 10 missing episodes the police MISPER (Missing Persons) co-ordinator and team leader from social services must attend, sometimes the independent reviewing officer will also be there. If child protection concerns are raised at any of these meetings, the usual child protection procedure is followed. However, this will be done separately to the debriefing regarding the missing behaviour.

In some areas in England the local runaways project is responsible for calling these meetings, also known as ‘strategy group meetings’ or ‘multi-agency support meetings’. The Children’s Society project staff also act as the lead professional for the young person in some areas, and many undertake CAF assessments on referral.

- there is a commitment to follow up issues raised by the young person
- the immediate focus should be the young person's safety and well-being, not information gathering.

The Lancashire Young Runaways Project (see page 21) is a good example of how an independent return interview can play a key role in identifying the support needs and service requirements for young runaways.

## Keeping young people safer

As outlined above, young runaways often use a range of high-risk survival strategies. Having no legitimate income may result in them begging and stealing; there may be involvement in crime, both as the victim and the perpetrator; and they may be open to abuse through sexual exploitation.<sup>43</sup> For young people who run away repeatedly, the chances of significant harm are increased with each exposure to risk. Where a young person goes missing repeatedly a multi-agency risk management meeting should be convened to look at ways of managing these situations.

### Good practice example: Barnardo's – Birmingham Space

Birmingham Space works with children and young people who are abused, or vulnerable to abuse, through sexual exploitation. The project aims to help young people develop strategies that will enable them to move towards a safer and more settled lifestyle. The project is also involved in various multi-agency forums, including Birmingham Missing Children's Forum, to promote the protection of children who are abused through sexual exploitation. In the year 2005–2006, 43 per cent of the project's service users were known to be looked after.

The project takes a child-centred approach, tailoring the service to each case. Birmingham Space provides a range of activities and opportunities for children and young people to address their diverse and complex needs. Project workers use non-judgmental listening and counselling skills to build trust and create an environment where service users feel valued and comfortable to share personal information or experiences. The project encourages service users to explore relevant issues such as building self-esteem and confidence, life-story work, personal safety, sexual health, identity issues, drug use, relationships, budgeting, and education and training. Practical support, such as providing food, clothing, laundry and shower facilities, and access to advice and information, is also available.

The consultation with professionals highlighted the following as important in supporting young people at risk:

- being able to access specialist support when needed, for example substance use and sexual health services
- allowing time for regular, meaningful communication, including negotiation, listening, and encouraging young people to make decisions.

The consultation with young people highlighted the following needs:

- access to specialist support, 'I was twelve years old and quite street wise but I didn't realise half the dangers of the drugs that I was on'
- a safe place to go, 'Somewhere to go where you don't have to explain anything to anyone, somewhere it's safe to stay the night – like a children's refuge. It's so much better having something like that than having some older man that might take them in'

K was unable to remain in her family home due to her mother's inability to cope with her behaviour, which included running away, using drugs and alcohol, truancy and risky sexual behaviour. K was initially placed in foster care, but continued to abscond from this placement and from four subsequent placements in children's homes. Birmingham Space started working with K when she first came into the care system 18 months ago, and continued to do so despite her frequent moves. Workers from the project helped K to gain insight about the risks associated with absconding, and raised her awareness of exploitation. K was able to explore problems through creative writing and art activities, and examined her behaviour and feelings by using a personal reflection journal. K often came to Birmingham Space when she was missing from her placement.

In the last eight months, K has achieved some stability in her latest placement. She runs away less frequently and is able to identify and assess risk. She has taken up an educational placement, and is now preparing to move into the independence unit attached to the children's home to learn independent living skills to enable her to move into her own accommodation when she is 16. K's progress shows achievement of the headline outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda.

<sup>43</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, *Young runaways: report by the Social Exclusion Unit*, 2002, page 17.

- input from carers, such as advice, information, attention, and use of reward schemes is important. Young people also need individual time with carers to look more closely at support needs.

## Advocacy

*Working together to safeguard children (2006)*<sup>44</sup> highlights the importance of looked-after young people having access to a trusted adult outside of their placement. The guidance specifically identifies the importance of making young people aware of the help that they can receive from independent advocacy services. The guidance also highlights the importance of young people in a foster care placement having a voice outside the family. Social workers are expected to see children in foster care on their own and evidence of this should be recorded.

Much of the legislation and guidance in this area highlights the importance of young people being able to make a positive contribution in decision-making processes. Throughout the consultation, the difficulties highlighted by young people around communication, negotiation and access to an independent service emphasised the important role that advocacy can have in supporting those at risk of running away.

### Good practice example: Voice – Advocacy support and impact on running away

Voice is a national children's advocacy charity committed to empowering children and young people in public care, and campaigning for change to improve their lives. Voice runs a national helpline that often receives calls from young people running away from care.

Recently, one of Voice's advocates worked with R, a young woman who had runaway from her children's home. R told Voice that she had run away because she was unhappy in her placement. R told Voice that she did not like the placement's rules and that bullying was happening in the house and not being properly addressed. R also told Voice that the placement was obstructive when arranging contact with her family.

R had absconded and had been reported missing to the police. This meant that if she presented herself to any place other than the children's home the police would be called. Therefore, R could not go

For those in care, independent advocacy services can provide a level of independence and neutrality that services linked to social services departments do not guarantee (at least in the eyes of the young people). A National Voice, a campaigning organisation, highlighted the importance of young people in foster care being encouraged to use, and having easy access to, advocacy services, particularly in their statutory review process.<sup>45</sup> Young people with complex needs directly linked to their running away behaviour can find an advocate invaluable in acting as a link between them and the many professionals, adults and organisations that are involved in making decisions that affect their life.

## Empowerment

The consultation highlighted that there are many examples of good practice within services that are working to reduce the numbers of looked-after young people who run away and to improve their outcomes. The theme of empowerment is one that links all areas of good practice in this guide. Generally, looked-after young people are seen as being disempowered. For some young people, running away is their way of dealing with this disempowerment, as an alternative is not always obvious to them.

to school or visit a friend or a member of her family. Although R regularly contacted her children's home, she was unwilling to tell any professionals where she was staying.

After calling Voice's national helpline, R was allocated an advocate, who started to work with R over the phone. As part of the advocacy service, Voice's advocate liaised with the service manager of the relevant social services department. The service manager agreed to meet R at a café chosen by R to discuss her concerns. The service manager made sure that nobody would inform the police of R's whereabouts at the time of the meeting. R, her advocate and the service manager were therefore able to discuss R's issues and possible solutions. R had the opportunity to discuss her concerns with a senior manager in a place she considered safe. Together they achieved a solution agreeable to them all. R was moved into a new placement and, due to the concerns she raised, the local authority no longer uses that particular provider to accommodate their young people.

44 HM Government, *Working together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, 2006, page 193.

45 A National Voice, foster care campaign, [www.anationalvoice.org](http://www.anationalvoice.org)

Empowering work models can redress the power imbalance by:

- giving young people the information and skills they need to make informed and safer choices
- recognising the skills and experience of young people and harnessing them to improve service provision
- offering a range of services and agencies that are able to meet complex and diverse support needs
- enabling young people to take part in decisions that are important in their lives.

Empowerment models also enable carers to perform their role. This can be achieved by:

- local authorities putting in place adequate support structures, access to training packages and clear lines of accountability for carers
- having local protocols that set out clear procedures for multi-agency working when a young person runs away, clear guidelines on information-sharing and an understanding of how other agencies operate
- demonstrating a commitment at all levels to improving outcomes for looked after-young people by addressing running away behaviour.

### **Good practice example: Children's Rights Officers and Advocates (CROA) – Total Respect training course**

In 1999, CROA set up the Total Respect training course which was developed in partnership with looked-after young people, with funding from the Department of Health. It is used by many of The Children's Society's projects with local partners and statutory agencies to promote the participation of young people in training. The course was developed to ensure that children and young people's right to participate in all decisions affecting them is fully respected by foster carers, social workers, residential care staff, managers and elected members.

The training programme aims to cover most aspects of young people's lives in care, but specifically focuses on:

- children's participation in individual care planning
- making sure children are taken seriously when they make complaints of abuse or poor practice
- children's participation in local authority policy and service development.

The course is facilitated by trained young people, supported by project staff and is usually delivered over one or two days. The five units of the course include examples of good practice, a series of activities, a quiz to test understanding of each unit, and a summary of key points. There is an accompanying course handbook containing additional information and further reading.

As highlighted in this consultation, many young people cite problems with their placement as a key factor in their decision to run away. Many feel that they are not listened to and do not have their views taken into account. Total Respect aims to ensure

that all young people in care have their views heard. In areas where staff have undertaken Total Respect training, young people report feeling that they are listened to more and have their views taken into account. This empowers them to make positive decisions about their situation and the issues that effect them, thereby reducing the need for them to resort to reactionary running away behaviour.

Evaluations are conducted with participants and young people to assess the impact of the training course and gather opinions to inform learning. The following supporting statements were taken from course evaluations delivered by young people and staff from The Children's Society's West Sussex PAR Project.

'Fantastic to have input, instruction and feedback from the young people. It was good to be challenged directly by them and have to justify my practice and the way I think and feel.'

'I felt that this was one of the best training sessions I have been to. The young people were very impressive and all staff who work with young people should do this to enable them to have a better understanding of the young people they work with. Thank you.'

'The course should be mandatory for workers who need to listen to, hear and communicate with children and young people.'

# Conclusion

Our consultation with young people highlighted that there are many reasons why they run away, and there are several methods of working that will stop them wanting to run away. What young people were clear about is the key role that carers play in meeting their support needs so that they are properly safeguarded and able to reach their potential.

Carers are the adults that young people in care spend most of their time with, and the attitude, expectations and support offered by carers is crucial in improving outcomes for young people and influencing running away behaviour. For carers in all placements, the importance of having support, supervision and clear lines of accountability that meet statutory requirements cannot be underestimated: all three have a significant impact on their ability to provide sensitive, personalised, and child-centred services.

The good practice highlighted throughout this guide was identified through consultation with young people and professionals. Where appropriate, links have been made to current legislation, policy and procedures that inform the good practice identified.

While a range of legislation, policy and standards covering the operation of the care system exist, it was clear from the consultation that these are not always correctly interpreted or fully implemented. Therefore, some of the recommendations made in this guide can be found in statutory guidance or national minimum standards.

# Findings and recommendations

## Local authorities

- Clear guidelines around multi-agency working are needed to achieve a reduction in the numbers of young runaways. Local protocols about running away from care and home should include resources for training, a commitment to the protocol at all levels of each organisation, and regular monitoring and evaluating of the protocol in practice.<sup>46</sup>
- Regular multi-agency partnership action groups can improve communication between agencies and aid understanding of roles and remit between organisations.
- Return interviews need to be conducted by someone from outside of the home, and preferably independent of social services.
- Local authorities should look at developing creative ways of working in partnership with young people, both individually and collectively, in service planning and design.
- Pre-placement planning is pivotal in ensuring that young people are placed in settings appropriate to their needs and that they are engaged in the decision-making process.<sup>47</sup>
- The continuity of positive links in young people's lives, such as friendships, contact with birth family and education, should be promoted and supported while they are in care.
- Local authorities should actively work to promote a positive image of looked-after young people by rewarding their special skills and talents.
- Information on running away should be included in all training for foster carers and social care staff.

## Residential unit and foster care teams

- Identifying and meeting training needs ensures a confident and consistent staff and foster care team.

- Residential and foster care teams need to identify ways of increasing engagement with young people.
- Empowerment-based practice should be the norm. Teams should build in ways of engaging young people in the running of the unit.
- Clear guidance should be given to carers about methods that could be employed when young people run away, and the impact of such methods on referrals to other agencies.
- All placements should provide a safe and positive environment for children to live in. A consistent approach needs to be adopted when tackling issues such as bullying. Policies must be in place that are understood and followed by all carers.<sup>48</sup>

## Individual carers

- Building relationships with young people is key to developing trust and open communication.
- Engaging young people in what they eat, cooking a meal and eating together are important in meeting the physical and emotional needs of young people.
- Carers should plan and set aside time for regular communication with young people.
- Young people should be involved in discussions about their needs and decisions about their future.
- Boundaries should be clear, but open to negotiation on an individual assessment of each young person.
- Young people should contribute to care plans and reviews, to ensure that their views are considered.
- Young people should be provided with information and facts about running away and external support services, in an accessible way that enables them to make informed choices around staying safe.
- Carers should find out about local support services, including advocacy services, in the area and what the referral procedures are.

<sup>46</sup> Examples of protocols – Joint Protocol for responding to Young Missing People in East London and Greater Merseyside Protocol for children and young people who go missing or run away from home or care.

<sup>47</sup> The Integrated Children's System should support this process.

<sup>48</sup> See Department of Health, *Children's homes: National Minimum Standards and Children's Homes Regulations*, 2002, Standard 18: countering bullying; and Children's Workforce Development Council, *Ordinary people doing extraordinary things: the training, support and development standards for foster care*, 2007, page 11, Standard 6: safeguard children and young people (keep them safe from harm).

# Useful organisations

## **Barnardo's**

A national organisation working with vulnerable young people and children. Barnardo's has specific projects on running away, sexual exploitation and services for care leavers.

Tel: 020 8498 7556 (Barnardo's Information Officer)

Web: [www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)

## **Childline**

It has a specific helpline for young people living away from home called 'The line' and it operates:

Monday to Friday, 3.30–9.30pm, and

Saturday and Sunday, 2–8pm.

Tel: 0800 884 444

Web: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

## **The Children's Society**

A national charity for children and young people whose work includes extensive research on young people and running away, direct service provision, and training and consultancy for organisations and local authorities around running away.

Tel: 020 7841 4400

Helpline: 0845 300 1128

Web: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

## **Missing People**

Missing People (formerly National Missing Persons Helpline) offers a specialist service to help social workers whenever they lose contact with one of their looked-after children. Local authorities fund this service.

Tel: 020 8392 4527

Web: [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

## **A National Voice**

A voluntary organisation run by, and for, young people in care. It provides a national platform to hear the voices of young people and creates campaigns, events and lobbies Government for positive change.

Tel: 0161 237 5577

Web: [www.anationalvoice.org](http://www.anationalvoice.org)

Email: [info@anationalvoice.org](mailto:info@anationalvoice.org)

## **Runaway Helpline**

A dedicated service offering help and advice to young people who have run away from home or care, or who have been forced to leave home.

Helpline: 0808 800 7070

Web: [www.runawayhelpline.org.uk](http://www.runawayhelpline.org.uk)

Email: [runawayhelpline@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:runawayhelpline@missingpeople.org.uk)

## **Shelter**

A national housing and homelessness charity offering advice and information on a number of housing problems.

Tel: 020 7505 2000 (head office)

Helpline: 0808 800 4444

Web: [www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)

## **Voice**

A national charity specialising in providing advocacy to children in care and in need, and campaigning for lasting improvements in their lives.

Freephone for young people: 0808 800 5792

Tel: 020 7833 5792

Email: [help@voiceyp.org](mailto:help@voiceyp.org)

# Further reading

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# Appendix 1: the consultation process

## Consultation with young people

The consultation with looked-after young people was planned by Shelter and Shelter's youth panel – the 'Expert Posse'. As a group of young people with a range of life experiences, including both being looked after and running away, they acted as an advisory panel on the format, content and language used in the consultation. A small group of the Expert Posse were trained as peer consultants and they helped run over half of the interviews with young people, with the rest being conducted by Shelter staff.

At the beginning of each interview the position on confidentiality and child protection was explained to the young person. Follow-up support for the young people engaged in the interviews had been arranged in advance and it was made clear to each participant at the start that this was available. Quotes have been used throughout the guide to illustrate points made by the young people consulted and their names and locations have been omitted or changed to protect their identities.

The interviews were conducted in groups or individually, depending on what the young people felt most comfortable with. No carers were present at the interviews, to enable young people to express themselves freely. Thirty young people were interviewed in six different locations. These represented a mix of rural and urban settings in both the north and south of England. This enabled Shelter to ensure that the young people interviewed represented a cross-section of life experiences, ages and backgrounds. Young people were identified through various means, including through voluntary organisations such as The Children's Society and Barnardos; by a local authority in the Midlands; and through a private care provider in the north.

Thanks are due to the following for their support with the young people's consultation: The Children's Society projects (Devon Children's Rights, LAMP (Looked After Missing Persons) Project, Youth at Risk and Lancashire Children's Rights); Barnardo's Missing in Yorkshire; Jean Parks, Derbyshire County Council; and Grace Webber, Nationwide Childcare.

## Consultation with professionals

A series of focus groups – expert panels – were held in three locations in England and an e-mail consultation was sent out to organisations that were unable to attend. The professional focus groups used a consensus decision-making process to facilitate identification of good practice. Groups were asked to focus on the following question: 'What is good practice for residential staff and foster carers who are supporting looked-after young people that run or who are at risk of running away?'

Using a consensus approach enabled Shelter to create a picture of good practice that incorporated the differences in approach of the organisations involved and was agreed on by all the participants.

The following organisations participated in the professional focus groups: Talk Don't Walk, Warrington; Warrington Safeguarding Board; Nationwide Childcare; Safe in the city, The Children's Society; Liverpool Runaways Project, NCH; Runaways Helpline; Missing from Care Helpline; West Yorkshire Police; the Metropolitan Police; St Christopher's Refuge; Voice; Shaftsbury Homes and Arethusa; Wakefield Metropolitan District Council; Greater Manchester local authorities; Children's Residential Services, Kirklees; Barnardo's Space Project; the care action team at Hampshire Children's Services; Lancashire Children's Rights, The Children's Society; and Lancashire County Council.

# Appendix 2: questionnaire used in the consultation process

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Where you live – the placement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What problems do young people have where they live that might make them run away?</li><li>2. What support do young people need if they have problems where they live?</li></ol>
Making it like a home	<p><i>Research has shown that the culture within a home has an effect on the numbers of young people running away – by culture we mean things like the rules of the house, the ways that staff and young people talk to each other, arrangements for eating and cooking, and how young people get on with the other people that they live with.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. In your experience how have staff/carers made a placement feel like home and feel safe?</li><li>2. What can staff/carers do to help a young person settle into their placement when they arrive?</li><li>3. What can other young people do to make the placement feel like home?</li><li>4. Some homes have high numbers of young people running away. Why do you think this is?</li><li>5. What do you think that staff should do about this?</li></ol>
Working with young people who have run away	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What can individual staff members/foster carers do to help young people that are at risk of or who have run away?</li><li>2. What can staff do as a team to help young people?</li><li>3. If you were the manager of this unit what skills would you look for if you were choosing staff?</li><li>4. Is there any training that you think staff should have to enable them to work with young people who run away?</li></ol>
Personal issues	<p><i>Some young people have run away before they become looked after as a way of dealing with the pressures in their lives.</i></p> <p>How can staff/carers help and support young people dealing with the pressures that they are facing?</p>
Prevention	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Do you think that young people should be told about running away – the facts, risks, ways of staying safer?</li><li>2. Do you think that being in school prevents young people from running away?</li></ol>

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Returning from running away	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think should happen to a young person when they come back from running away? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Straight away</li> <li>– Later on</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Does it help to talk with someone about running away? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Straight away</li> <li>– Later on</li> <li>– Why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Who would you like that to be?</li> <li>4. What can staff/carers do to help you settle back into your placement?</li> </ol>
Young people who run away more than once.	<p><i>Some young people run away regularly.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What help do you think these young people might need from their carers?</li> <li>2. Is there anyone else who could help?</li> </ol>
Care and control	Should staff/carers use physical restraint with young people who are at risk of running away? Why do you say this?
Sexual exploitation	<p><i>Some young people who run away become involved in prostitution and are exploited for sex.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What should staff do to support these young people?</li> <li>2. Is there any other support that they need?</li> <li>3. What information do these young people need to keep themselves safer?</li> </ol>
Offending	<p><i>Some young people who run away commit crimes and get in trouble with the police.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think that carers could do to support these young people?</li> <li>2. Is there any other support that they might need?</li> </ol>
Other agencies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do young people in care have enough information about organisations that can help young runaways? Why do you say this?</li> <li>2. Are there any organisations that you know about which you think other young people should know about too?</li> <li>3. What would be a good way to get information about support available to young people?</li> </ol>









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