

# **RUNNING – OTHER CHOICES REFUGE EVALUATION**

## **University of Stirling Evaluation for the Aberlour Child Care Trust**

### Summary

#### **The Project and its aims**

The Running - Other Choices Refuge opened in July 2004. The ROC Refuge was established as a national pilot project, intended to provide residential refuge for children and young people who had run away or were temporarily unable to remain at home, under the terms of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. This legislation enables local authorities to provide short-term refuge in designated or approved establishments and households for children or young people who appear to be at risk of harm and who request refuge. Under the legislation, refuge can be provided for up to seven days, or in exceptional and limited circumstances for a maximum of 14 days. The ROC Refuge was developed to accommodate a maximum of three young people at any one time and to serve the local authority of Glasgow, and its surrounding areas.

The refuge was established in line with the ROC Outreach Project, which was initially set up as a result of research which estimated that approximately 9000 children run away from home in Scotland each year, with one in six reporting being physically or sexually assaulted while away from home<sup>1</sup>. Family conflict, abuse and problems at home were cited as the main reasons why children and young people run away.

The stated aims of the ROC Refuge are to:

- Provide safe and confidential accommodation to young runaways therefore minimising/eliminating risk of harm from (i) the location they ran from or (ii) the place they would have run to.
- Link young runaways into a support service which can help them to address the reasons for their running away.

Young people can access refuge accommodation at any time through the operation of an on-call system. A 24 hour helpline ensures that young people can make contact with the refuge whenever support is required.

#### **Evaluation aims and methods**

The evaluation of the ROC Refuge was part of a larger evaluation of four Aberlour projects in receipt of Youth Crime Prevention funding and was conducted over a three year period. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from a range of sources. Documentary information included: Policy guidelines, procedures and protocols; other relevant research studies; minutes of the ROC Steering Group and Refuge Working Group. A comprehensive database was devised and an SPSS programme established to record and analyse the data. Information was collected from young people's files and completed evaluation forms. Between August 2004 and October 2005, data was recorded for 82 stays in the refuge relating to 51 young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Wade, J. (2001) *Missing Out: Young Runaways in Scotland*, Stirling: Aberlour Child Care Trust.

Interviews and questionnaires elicited information from ROC managers and workers, social workers and social work managers, representatives from relevant voluntary agencies, police, teaching staff, young people and parents.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Implementation***

Developing a residential service of this kind has been a complex process. There are few models of refuge upon which to draw and the service needs to be responsive to geographical needs and local requirements. A great deal of time and effort has been spent by ROC managers and staff in informing other agencies about the service and developing a flexible system of staffing and resourcing the refuge. The service is intended to meet the needs of young people by providing safe and supportive accommodation for a specified period of time. Developing inter-agency protocols for the operation of the refuge and informing other agencies about the service had required ongoing support and co-operation from other agencies who work with young people who run away.

### ***Referral and admissions***

Young people admitted to the refuge meet the criteria set out. Girls accounted for 66% of refuge admissions and a number of young people were admitted on more than one occasion. Most young people stayed for seven days or less (72%) and most young people admitted to the refuge came from Glasgow. The majority of young people were referred by social work services or West of Scotland Standby Service (54%) although 32% had made a self-referral to the service. Referrals from other voluntary agencies were low.

Most young people given refuge had run from the family home although a number of these young people had been looked after and accommodated at some time in the past. The young people had run away on many occasions in the past and were seen as having significant difficulties at the point of referral. Ongoing assessment while in the refuge identified more extensive problems that young people were experiencing (such as substance misuse, self-harm, eating disorders, physical and/or emotional abuse), which may not have been known to other agencies.

Respondents from other agencies were satisfied with the admission criteria and referral process although social workers often appeared to refer young people when other appropriate accommodation was difficult to obtain. This sometimes meant that referrals did not result in a young person being admitted to the refuge. During the evaluation period, 44% of referrals which did not result in an admission to the refuge were made by social workers. In 11% of cases there was no bed space available at the point of referral. However, in these situations, ROC staff would ensure that the young person's needs were being addressed and would negotiate with young people, their families or other agencies, as appropriate. Clear admission criteria and procedures had been set out to ensure that refuge spaces were used appropriately.

### ***Service provision***

Given the needs of the young people admitted to the refuge, service provision needs to be flexible and responsive. Refuge staff continued to informally assess young people during their stay in the refuge, supported them, advocated on their behalf and mediated with family members and/or other agencies. It was viewed as important that

the young people were supported to identify and voice their own needs and concerns. Identifying ongoing issues for young people in this way, enabled refuge workers to refer young people on to other agencies who could support them, or to obtain more appropriate services for young people who had not felt heard in the past. The intensive nature of the support available to young people in the refuge and the child-centred ethos which underpinned interventions was appreciated by young people and generally recognised as important by respondents from other agencies.

### ***Inter-agency work***

Despite potential difficulties with inter-agency work, considerable emphasis has been given to joint work aimed at meeting the needs of vulnerable young people. Although the ethos of agencies may differ, throughout the development and operation of the refuge, there has been willingness and commitment from key agencies to develop protocols and procedures to ensure the refuge is used appropriately. ROC workers were viewed as having been very proactive in meeting with social work teams to publicise the refuge and there appeared to be very positive links between individual workers in different agencies.

The refuge provides an important opportunity to offer young people an alternative to being on the streets and to reduce the risks they face when running away. The support available also provides an opportunity for the young people to develop resilience. This is likely to reduce the risks for young people, and offset any potential involvement in offending behaviour. Young people themselves viewed the refuge very positively and most of the young people interviewed stated that being in the refuge had made things better for them, at least in the short-term but often in the longer. While measuring outcomes and changes in a young person's situation requires longer-term follow-up, most respondents viewed success in terms of the provision of a place of safety, the opportunity to access other services, and the potential for ongoing support. It was viewed as important that the refuge could provide this service outwith the statutory sector.

### ***Outcomes***

The refuge appears to have been successful in achieving the following objectives:

- Keeping young people safe
- Engaging effectively with young people
- Providing more detailed assessment of young people and their situations e.g. eating disorder, child protection concerns
- Developing positive relationships with young people
- Supporting young people to make decisions
- Providing young people with information about other options available to them

The evidence to date illustrates the importance of this innovative service for young people who run away, or are forced to leave home. While offending behaviour was not the key issue for most of the young people accessing this service, it would appear that while running, young people may engage in 'survival crime'. The provision of a safe place and support will prevent young people having to engage in such activities.

Inter-agency support and co-operation has played a key role in the development of the refuge and will continue to do so. Despite minor tensions in this area, agencies have

worked together, notably in relation to statutory requirements and procedures, information sharing and the development of protocols. ROC and other agencies have displayed a commitment to provide an effective service for young people, and to work together to do this.

### ***Implications for policy and practice***

ROC managers have consistently set out to design and deliver a high quality, effective refuge service while, at the same time, keeping costs to a minimum. The innovative system of staffing the refuge has kept costs comparatively low and includes post-refuge outreach work for up to three months with young people who use this resource. This compares favourably with other UK refuges but may be difficult to sustain in the current economic climate. Although the refuge is used by local authorities (notably Glasgow), it was funded by the Scottish Executive and set up by Aberlour Child Care Trust rather than commissioned by a local authority. There was a view among respondents that the Scottish Executive should continue to fund it and ensure it was adequately funded. Given the difficulties of predicting the demands on the service it may have been under-funded from the outset.

To meaningfully support vulnerable young people requires appropriate funding, even if the numbers using the service are comparatively small. Providing somewhere safe for a young person, and helping them to access appropriate resources, is not something which can be easily quantified.

The importance given by the Scottish Executive to meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people, particularly young runaways and other young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation have been set out in a guidance pack<sup>2</sup> (Scottish Executive, 2003c). However, the Scottish Executive has noted “*concern that the needs of children and young people for refuge are not being adequately met*” and indicated that “*an assessment of how local agencies are meeting the needs of young people for refuge in their area and levels of demand should be conducted as a matter of priority*”<sup>3</sup>

A Scottish Coalition for Young Runaways has been set up by ROC managers in recognition of the need for a national support framework for young people who run away or are at risk of running away in Scotland. The aims of the Coalition include the development of policies, structures and funding streams which can support this framework. Membership includes statutory and voluntary organisations in Scotland who are working together to raise awareness and develop practice and policy for these young people.

The ROC Refuge provides an innovative model of how refuge can operate in Scotland and has been a crucial resource for the young people who have used it, offering a safe place and ongoing support. Young people face many risks when running away, this evaluation illustrates that the ROC Refuge is an important resource for vulnerable young people.

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<sup>2</sup> Scottish Executive (2003) *Vulnerable Children and Young People: Guidance Pack*, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Executive (2003:6) *Vulnerable Children and Young People: Young Runaways*, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.