

# Seeking Refuge: Findings from an Evaluation of the 'Running – Other Choices' Refuge

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## Introduction

Each year, a significant number of children and young people run away from, or are forced to leave, home. Research conducted by Wade (2001) estimated that approximately 9000 children run away from home in Scotland each year, with family conflict, abuse and problems at home cited as the main reasons. Rees and Lee (2005) indicated that one in six young runaways sleep rough, and one in 12 young runaways are hurt or harmed while running away. Alarming, Wade (2001) estimated that one in six young runaways in Scotland have been physically or sexually assaulted whilst away from home.

Other studies have highlighted the risks facing these young people on the streets (Crawley, Roberts and Shepherd, 2004; Dillane, Hill and Munro, 2005; Harper and Scott, 2005). Young people may adopt 'survival strategies' which involve shoplifting, theft, sexual exploitation and/or coping mechanisms which may involve the use of drugs and alcohol (Wade, 2001; Biehal and Wade, 2002; Owen and Graham, 2004; Rees and Lee, 2005; Smeaton, 2005). This can often result in long-term difficulties for young runaways such as addiction and adult homelessness. Indeed, the Prison Reform Trust (2005, p.16) notes the high number of prisoners who ran away from home as a child. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 enables local authorities in Scotland 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. Available support for young runaways is often non-existent or seriously inadequate; however, recent attention has focussed on the plight of young people on the streets, leading to the publication of policy frameworks and guidelines (Scottish Executive 2003a and 2003b).

The first dedicated refuge for young people in Scotland was opened in July 2004 as a national pilot project. This refuge was funded by the Scottish Executive and set up by Aberlour Child Care Trust, building on the foundations and experience of the already existing 'Running - Other Choices' (ROC) Outreach Project. The ROC refuge provides sanctuary for young people aged 11-15 years, although young people aged 16 and over, who are deemed vulnerable and who have run away, may be assessed as suitable. The service is available to young people who have run away from local authority accommodation or foster care as well as those who have left their family home. The young person is admitted voluntarily to the

refuge and can leave if they choose to do so. On leaving the refuge, young people will be offered ongoing support from the ROC refuge and outreach teams. This paper outlines the findings of an evaluation of the ROC refuge.

## Background

The evaluation began while the refuge was in its early stage of development. This presented an opportunity to examine how the refuge was set up and to identify the complexities of this process. The refuge can accommodate three young people at any one time and serves Glasgow and the surrounding areas. It takes the form of a newly refurbished house located in a quiet urban area, blending into the local neighbourhood. The interior is warm and comfortable. Young people can access refuge accommodation at any time through the operation of a 24 hour helpline supported by an on-call system.

Considerable emphasis has been given to ensuring that the criteria for admission and referral processes are clear and concise, yet allow flexibility to address the needs of individual young people. It was recognised from the outset that there may be occasions when a young person should be referred to social work services for support, advice or longer-term accommodation, or if there were child protection concerns regarding their welfare or that of other young people. Similarly, there was an understanding that the refuge should not be used for young people who required to be looked after and accommodated, where local authorities had a duty of care but no other placement was available.

To alleviate potential problems in using the refuge, detailed inter-agency protocols were developed and considerable time was expended in informing other agencies about the service. Agreeing standard procedures which meet with the ethos and operational objectives of ROC, social work services and the police was challenging, and extensive discussions took place to develop workable protocols. Some of the complex issues which required early clarification included the development of procedures for reporting a missing person (before a young person accesses refuge and if they leave the refuge on an unplanned basis), informing parents/carers of a young person's whereabouts, police access to refuge, referral procedures, and reporting offences and/or responding to outstanding warrants/bail issues. While many of these issues could be resolved by negotiation, the legal basis of the protocols and importance of effective procedures required that any issues were resolved with clarity. This process highlighted the importance of inter-agency co-operation and commitment to implementing procedures that worked effectively for agencies and, more importantly, for young people.

## Methodology

The ROC refuge was evaluated as part of a larger study of four Aberlour Child Care Trust projects (Burgess, Malloch, Walker and Brown, 2006). Information for the refuge evaluation was collected from a range of sources including policy guidelines, procedures and protocols, other relevant research studies and the ROC

### Steering and Working Group minutes.

Interviews and questionnaires were used to obtain information from ROC managers and workers, social workers and social work managers, representatives from relevant voluntary agencies, police, teaching staff and parents. Key respondents were interviewed twice, at the beginning of the evaluation and a year after the refuge had been in operation. In total 10 questionnaires and 42 interviews were conducted with these groups of respondents.

Interviews were also conducted with 10 young people (seven girls, three boys). At the time they were interviewed, between one and five months had lapsed since their stay in the refuge, although one young person was interviewed 10 months after leaving. The purpose of the interviews with young people was to explore their perspectives on the experience of being in the refuge and the impact this had on their current situation. The interviews were semi-structured, covering aspects of particular interest to the research but also allowing scope for young people to raise issues that mattered to them (Gorin, 2004).

Between August 2004 and October 2005, data were recorded for 82 stays in the refuge, relating to 51 young people. Refuge staff detailed information on referrals, service planning and provision, young people's background and circumstances, risks and protective factors. Anonymous data were passed to the research team for analysis. Information was also collected on 123 referrals that did not result in admission to the refuge during the evaluation period.

### Referral

Although time had been set aside to inform other agencies and to publicise the refuge, referrals were initially slow and it has taken time for some agencies to use the refuge. The need for dedicated time to let other agencies know about a new initiative and to make appropriate referrals is not a problem unique to the refuge. This has been a major issue for other innovative projects (Rees, 2001). Girls accounted for 54 out of the 82 admissions and the majority of young people were aged 15. Previous studies have identified the greater likelihood that girls will run away, while boys tend to do so at an earlier age (Wade, 2001; Rees and Lee, 2005).

*Table 1: Refuge admissions*

Age	Boys	Girls	Total
12	0	1	1
13	5	11	16
14	10	17	27
15	13	22	35
16	0	3	3
Total	28	54	82

Young people can stay in the refuge for seven days. If no other safe accommodation is available at the end of this time, the relevant local authority can make an application to extend the stay for up to a further seven days. Fifty-nine young people stayed in the refuge for seven days or less.

Eleven young people were admitted to the refuge on two occasions (eight girls and three boys), six young people on three occasions (five girls and one boy), and one young person on both four and five occasions (both boys). It is not unusual for young people to have multiple admissions to refuge. Figures from the London Refuge indicate that 17 percent of young people who accessed the London Refuge used it on two occasions, while 9 percent used the refuge on three or more occasions (London Refuge, 2002).

Forty-seven young people were not reported missing at the time they were admitted to the refuge. This accounts for 12 out of 28 boys, and 35 out of 54 girls.

The majority of young people admitted to the refuge came from Glasgow although four young people came from outside the catchment area: one young person from West Dunbartonshire; one young person from the Channel Islands and two young people who had run away from addresses in England. Both of the English young people were from minority ethnic groups.

*Table 2: Source of referrals*

Referred by	Number	Percentage
Self	26	32
Social worker	25	31
Standby SW	19	23
Police	6	7
Friend/relative	4	5
Other agency	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>

As Table 2 illustrates, there was a significant number of self-referrals; however 44 referrals came from social workers with almost half of these originating with the West of Scotland Social Work Standby Service. While the number of referrals from other agencies is low, it is possible that a number of the young people who self-referred obtained information on the ROC refuge from leaflets or contact details given out by other organisations such as ChildLine or Barnardo's Street Team.

### **Characteristics of young people**

Thirty-five young people who were admitted to the refuge were usually staying in the family home with one or more parent/s, while six young people stayed with

a family relative or friend. Thirteen of the young people had not stayed at their current address (the address from which they were admitted to the refuge) for more than six months. Nine of the young people were looked after and accommodated at the time they were admitted to the refuge. Of the young people who were accommodated at the time of admission to the refuge, three had been staying with foster carers, while six had been accommodated in a residential home or children's unit. Of the 51 young people admitted to the refuge, 13 had been accommodated at some time in the past. Nine of the young people who stayed in the refuge were currently on some form of statutory supervision. The principal reasons why young people were given refuge were because they had, or were planning to, run away; however a number of other reasons was also provided at the point of referral. Up to 3 reasons for referral could be noted for each young person.

*Table 3: Initial reason for referral*

Reason for referral	Number	Percentage
Running away	61	74
Relationship difficulties	54	66
At risk at home	17	21
At risk outwith home	16	20
Health/self-harm	11	13
Problems at school	9	11
Offending/behaviour	8	10
Substance misuse	4	5

The full assessment carried out while young people were staying in the refuge revealed more complex difficulties. Identified problems at the point of referral significantly underestimated the extent of the issues affecting the young people seeking refuge. Often, underlying problems were only identified during the ongoing assessment which took place when the young person was in the refuge, particularly regarding eating disorders and self-harm. These difficulties often came to light while young people were living in the refuge spending time in close contact with staff.

While in the refuge, ongoing assessment revealed that of the 51 young people admitted, 22 were considered to be at risk of physical abuse. Twenty-one young people had substance misuse issues. Eleven young people were considered to be at risk sexually and self-harm was an issue for 10 of the residents. Other identified problems included eating disorders, offending, bereavement/loss, mental health issues. The close engagement of young people with refuge staff was crucial in identifying previously unacknowledged difficulties for a number of young people. As one social worker commented:

*This stay highlighted what was going on in the young person's life. In actual fact it uncovered much deeper issues. Assessment highlighted emotional abuse –*

*turned things around – we realised it wasn't safe for the young person to go home, something we wouldn't have noticed previously.*

The young people admitted to the refuge had run away on a number of occasions in the past, as illustrated in Table 4:

*Table 4: Previous running away*

Number of previous episodes of running	Number	Percentage
1-3	16	31
4-9	17	33
More than 10	10	20
Not known	8	16
Total	51	100

Eight of the young people who were interviewed said that when they had run away previously, they had stayed with a friend, 'walked about' or 'hung about' the town, or slept in closes (common stairwells).

### Referrals not admitted to the refuge

During the period of evaluation, referrals which did not result in admission to the refuge were made for 123 young people. Of these 123 young people, referrals were made for 15 young people (13 of them were girls) on two or more occasions. The majority of referrals were for girls (70 percent) and the highest age group for referrals was 15 years (28 percent). Most referrals which did not result in admission to the refuge were made by social work services (44 percent), although 26 percent were self-referrals. For most of these young people, the referral was not considered appropriate as the young person was not deemed to be a runaway, or they were not seeking refuge; however, 11 percent of referrals were not admitted because there was no bed space available in the refuge at the point of referral.

If refuge accommodation was not considered appropriate, the young person was referred back to social work or an attempt was made to find alternative accommodation. Refuge workers often spent a great deal of time responding to referrals and would negotiate with other agencies to ensure the needs of young people were acknowledged. Similarly, when young people and/or their families spoke with refuge staff it often meant that their situation could be addressed, with the result that the young person was able to return home. It was considered important not to allow the refuge to be used to provide respite care, or as a backdrop to local authority accommodation if places were not otherwise available; although young people who had run away from residential care could make use of the refuge where appropriate.

## Service provision

The objective of establishing the refuge as a 'safe' place for young people was viewed as paramount and seemed to be successfully achieved. The young people interviewed believed that the refuge had made a difference to them, providing them with somewhere to stay that was safe and comfortable. All the young people interviewed felt that the refuge had exceeded their expectations when they arrived and they expressed feelings of relief at getting to the refuge. They said that it was good to have someone to talk to, they settled in quickly with the help of the staff, and importantly, all said they felt safe in the refuge.

While young people were in the refuge, available support was directed towards: identifying the reasons for running away; support to rebuild family relationships (if appropriate) and to return home safely; individual support (in areas such as mental health; self-awareness and personal welfare; addressing situations of risk/risk-taking behaviour); access to other services; help for young people to put their views across; and support to find alternative accommodation if required. Refuge workers assisted young people to access other services, or helped them get a better service once their needs had been identified. Although most young people interviewed had contact with other agencies, they emphasised that they did not always feel listened to or heard.

Leisure activities were also seen as important opportunities to help young people develop relationships with workers and other young people, while also enhancing their confidence and self-esteem. 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. As one social worker commented:

*It kind of pains you to admit it but the one thing that young people (...) respond to is time, it's time and that opportunity to build all the trust and relationship up with someone, it's one of the things the area teams struggle to provide. That seems to be what she actually responded to in there (the refuge).*

All of the young people interviewed said that they felt they were listened to in the refuge, that they were able to say what they wanted to, and that their views were taken into account.

## Outcomes

Given the potentially short-term and crisis-based nature of the ROC refuge's intervention with most young people, it is difficult to identify what specific factors and/or services had a particular impact on a young person. Measuring changes in behaviour and well-being is fraught with difficulties. Similarly, attempts to measure long-term outcomes are problematic. However, the evaluation did illustrate that the refuge provided young people with a place of safety, the opportunity to access

other services, and the potential for ongoing support.

The ROC 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 ongoing availability of outreach support, from refuge workers in the short-term and outreach workers in the longer-term is significant for helping young people to develop resilience (Allen, 2003). 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 term also.

When asked about their current situation, eight young people felt that their situations had improved and seven specifically stated that being in the refuge had made things better for them. Examples of the views of young people were

*A lot is different, I have done better in school and improved physically*

*My current placement is more stable and more comfortable. Hope to stay here for a bit.*

*A lot better in the house, we're getting on brilliant, I'm not staying out too late.*

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, for example eating disorders or 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.

## Conclusion

The refuge is primarily successful in keeping young people safe while they are in the refuge. It is a practical resource, which provides safe accommodation and gives the young person an alternative to being on the streets or at risk in other households. Given the high levels of risk that young people may encounter when running away, it is not surprising that this was prioritised as the key success of the refuge by respondents.

The services provided by refuge workers were considered to be important in achieving positive outcomes for young people and refuge staff were praised for being caring, flexible and responsive. The proactive engagement with young people



and families to provide an extra level of support was viewed as a factor which makes the refuge particularly distinctive from other services. The problems facing young people who run away can be entrenched and repetitive, relating to parental difficulties, poverty, and substance misuse, to name but a few. Addressing these issues requires longer-term solutions; however, by linking young people into other, appropriate services from the pivotal platform of the refuge, it is likely that this will help them obtain the support they need and assist them in the development of resilience. The importance of positive working relationships between refuge staff, social work services and the police was highlighted throughout the evaluation.

The innovative system of staffing the refuge has kept costs relatively low and includes post-refuge outreach work for up to three months with young people who use this resource. Although the refuge is used by young people from a range of local authorities (notably Glasgow), it was originally 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.

To support vulnerable young people meaningfully 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. One respondent commented:

Looking at this as a volume issue will never win the argument of the need for the service. If we can offer a child a place to feel safe, and people who they feel safe talking to about what is wrong, that in itself can be worth its weight in gold – and could be an intervention that does change someone's life. But this requires a political commitment. If we are serious about supporting young runaways in Scotland, this is going to cost us money and we will have to invest in it, let it run for a while and see what works with it.

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, has been set out in a guidance pack (Scottish Executive, 2003c). 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 (Scottish Executive, 2003b, p.6).

This has not yet been carried out.

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 Coalition has commissioned a scoping study which will map services for young runaways across Scotland. This study aims to investigate the nature and extent of the problem of young runaways in Scotland; and the action taken to provide services to young runaways by local authorities and Area Child Protection Committees. The study, which is funded by the Scottish Executive, will be carried out by researchers at the University of Stirling.

The ROC Refuge provides an innovative model of how a 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. This evaluation demonstrates its value and adds weight to the argument that such services should be more widely available.

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