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Return Home Welfare Interviews for Young Runaways – A role for the police?

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Drawing on exiting literature and RHWI pilot evaluation to consider key messages re the delivery of RHWIs by the police



What's the issue?

- 1 in 9 run away overnight
- Indicates a need for concern
 - Symptomatic of wider problems
 - Carries immediate risks for children
 - Associated with longer term risks of poorer outcomes

(e.g. Safe on the streets research team, 1999; Biehal and Wade, 2000; Wade, 2000; Rees and Smeaton, 2001; Stein and Rees, 2002; Rees and Lee, 2005; Rees et al, 2009; Smeaton, 2009)

In recent years, we have learned a considerable amount about the issue of running away.

We know that an estimated 1 in 9 children will runaway overnight before the age of 16.

We know that it is indicative of a need for concern

Children and young people runaway because of problems in their lives. For those from home, it is most commonly due to problems within the family home. For those from care, it is related to 'push' factors linked to their placements and 'pull' factors linked to their wider familial and social networks often disrupted as a result of being in care.

We know that running away carries immediate risks for children and young people – it can be a risk and frightening experience, between a quarter and a third sleep rough while away, and a research suggests 1 in 7 may be sexually or physically assaulted while away.

It has been associated with longer term risks of poorer outcomes – such as homelessness, prostitution and offending.

[peak ages 13-15, but significant minority run before age of 11; girls more likely to run the boys; And the research suggests that higher numbers of children run from home, but higher likelihood of children running from care but this latter finding may actually reflect prior histories of running as well as an increased likelihood of being reported missing (Safe on the streets research team, 1999; Wade, 2000; Stein and Rees, 2002; Rees and Lee, 2005; Rees et al, 2009)



How should we respond?

- Prevention of running away
- Identification of young runaways
- Appropriate immediate responses while away
- Appropriate ongoing responses after return

(e.g. Rees, 2001; Rees et al, 2005; Macaskill, 2006; Malloch and Burgess, 2006; Evans et al, 2007; Smeaton, 2008; Rees et al 2009; Franks and Goswami, 2010; Malloch and Burgess, 2011)

We have also learned a considerable amount about how to prevent or reduce running away and how to address the immediate and longer term needs of young runaways.

Tackling running away and the needs of young runaways is likely to require strategies that work to prevent running away, to identify young runaways (both those who are reported missing and those who are not), to meet the immediate needs of young people while they are away (e.g. to access help and emergency accommodation) and to meet their longer term needs by addressing the issues or reasons that led to them running away.

The evaluative research literature has illustrated that the young runaways are diverse population with diverse needs and that services will need to take into account issues and differences that exist for different age groups, for those running from home and those running from care placements, for those from different minority groups (including ethnicity, sexuality and disability), for those exhibiting different patterns of running (e.g. single incidence compared with repeat incidence), and for those who are at risk of sexual exploitation.



Return home interviews

“non-statutory agencies [should] attempt to talk to young people reported missing when they return home, with a view to offering a listening ear, providing advice and information, and potentially engaging with them, where appropriate, to seek solutions to the issues that led to them running away” (Rees, 2001; 36).

As part of assessing what would be an appropriate response to young runaways at the point they return, a number of early research studies have recommended that **“non-statutory agencies attempt to talk to young people reported missing when they return home, with a view to offering a listening ear, providing advice and information, and potentially engaging with them, where appropriate, to seek solutions to the issues that led to them running away”** (Rees, 2001; 36).

They recommended that non-statutory agencies conduct interviews as the research had found that young people often viewed the police with mistrust and were unwilling to engage with them.



‘Missing person schemes’

- Unresolved issues regarding:
 - Methods of contact
 - Approaches to working with young people and families
 - The extent to which schemes are suitable for the needs of the diverse range of young people who run away

However, we have limited evidence on the operation and effectiveness of what Rees describes as ‘missing person schemes’ involved in conducting ‘return home interviews’.

Based on an appraisal of practitioners and managers perspectives, working within five such schemes operated within the voluntary sector, Rees (2001) comments that ‘unresolved issues remain about the best ways to operate such schemes in relation to

Method of contact – active and direct ways of making contact with young people appeared to be more successful, and initiating a rapid response was considered important; perceived independence from SSD and police was considered as a contributory factor in engaging with young people

Approaches to working with young people and families – a fundamental question has to be asked about the extent to which a scheme focused on a young person or family as a whole?

The extent to which such schemes are suitable for all young runaways – for example, as not all young runaways are reported missing then reliance upon police missing person reports will miss a significant proportion; a different response might be required in working with young people in residential care given the high proportion of reports involving ‘unauthorised absences’ rather than runaway incidences



Grampian Return Home Welfare Interview pilot and evaluation

- Developed in response to findings of scoping study
- Introduced two models and a control
- Built upon existing police response to missing person reports
- Underpinning principles of welfare of child; views of the child; multi-agency response to needs of the child

In response to recommendations made following Scottish scoping survey (Malloch and Burgess, 2006) on responses to young runaways, SG made a decision to fund a pilot project with evaluation.

The principles underpinning the RHWIs were set out in the Interim Guidance Document for the pilot which indicates that “the paramount consideration is the welfare of the child or young person” and emphasised:

Collaboration and information-sharing between agencies and professionals;

Shared accountability between agencies for decisions made and actions taken;

The views of children and young people will be sought and taken into consideration;

The need to ensure community wellbeing through the reduction of antisocial behaviour”.



Evaluation of Grampian Police Return Home Welfare Interview Pilot

- TOR – delivery, experience and effectiveness in identifying young people in need and informing appropriate responses by other agency
- Mixed methodology and multiple data sources (monitoring data, semi-structured interviews, written documentation)

Draw on a study, completed in 2010, that evaluated a pilot return home welfare interview project operated by Grampian police – collaborative team of researchers from university of stirling and Ipsos MORI Scotland

The evaluation has to meet SG terms of reference – which broadly focused on questions of delivery, experience and effectiveness in identifying young people in need and providing information to inform appropriate responses by other agencies.

To address the research objectives effectively both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. More specifically, the evaluation included collection and analysis of:

- Written documentation
- Monitoring data on incidences of young people running away and aspects of the RHWI
- Semi-structured interviews with the RHWI teams and other officers within Grampian police; key stakeholders; and young people who ran away during the pilot period.

More detail in the report



Three models operating:

- Fraserburgh - acting as control for evaluation
- Elgin – 4 community beat officers, complete OPS 12/1 to FPU (supported by RHWI coordinator in Aberdeen)
- Aberdeen city – dedicated team conduct RHWIs, complete OPS 12/1 to FPU and refer on

So as I said there were three models operating.

In Fraserburgh, it was business as usual with the conduct of safe and well checks and completion of cancellation forms

In Moray, Elgin was selected as the pilot site with four Community Beat Officers (CBOs) performing RHWIs alongside other operational responsibilities. They were supported by the RHWI Co-ordinator, based in Aberdeen, who provides background information collated from police databases. A nominated CBO will be allocated the task of conducting the RHW, who would then contact the young person and arrange for a RHWI to take place at the young person's home, school or other appropriate premises. On completion of the RHWI, the CBO will complete an OPS 12/1 based on the information disclosed during the interview. CBOs do not generally make direct referrals, but will instead identify any needs during the interview and will ensure they are flagged up when the OPS 12/1 is completed. The completed OPS 12/1s will be forwarded to the FPU who will then share the information with health, education and voluntary organisations at a pre-screening group (Local Integrated Assessment Planning Meeting); an initiative which was already in place in Elgin prior to the introduction of the pilot.

In Aberdeen, a dedicated team was established. Based in the main police station in the city (and located alongside the Young Runaways Service), the team consisted of two civilian employees (a co-ordinator and interviewer) and one seconded police officer. For each case, the co-ordinator collated existing data from police information systems (and other agencies as appropriate) prior to the interview. The interviewers made contact to arrange an interview with the young person at a place deemed appropriate by both the young person and the interviewer. Following the interview Aberdeen RHWI team may make direct referrals to appropriate agencies after speaking with the young person, in addition to completing an OPS 12/1 which was forwarded to the FPU and in turn, to social work services and/or SCRA. If the young person is currently allocated a social worker, the RHWI Co-ordinator will attempt to notify them of any changes in the young persons' circumstances and may also contact other



Overall numbers of cases analysed

Sample area	Sample		
	Incidences	Young people	Interviews
Aberdeen	376	135	235
Elgin	38	23	26
Fraserburgh	45	18	-
Sample total	459	176	261

- During the nine pilot period, there were a total of 459 missing incidents during the pilot period (26th March – 26th December 2009),
- These involved 176 young people (85 boys and 91 girls).
- More missing incidents involved girls than boys, with girls accounting for 63% of the total 459. This pattern held across the three areas.
- A majority of missing incidents involved young people in their teens; 5% involved children under the age of 11.
- Overall, the INCIDENCES were almost evenly split between young people missing from home and young people missing from care (RC, FC or kinship).
- But from the analysis of the patterns involving young people, it was clear that more YOUNG PEOPLE were reported missing while living at home and that young people who were looked after and accommodated from home were reported missing repeatedly.
- A pattern that it is important to bear in mind as we know that there are differential responses to young people who run away from home compared with those who run away from care – with protocols and strategies often overlooking those running from home.



Incidences per RHWI

No of incidences per interview	Aberdeen	Elgin	Total interviews
1	190	22	212
2	29	4	33
3	7	0	7
4	5	0	5
6	3	0	3
7	1	0	1
Total interviews	235	26	261

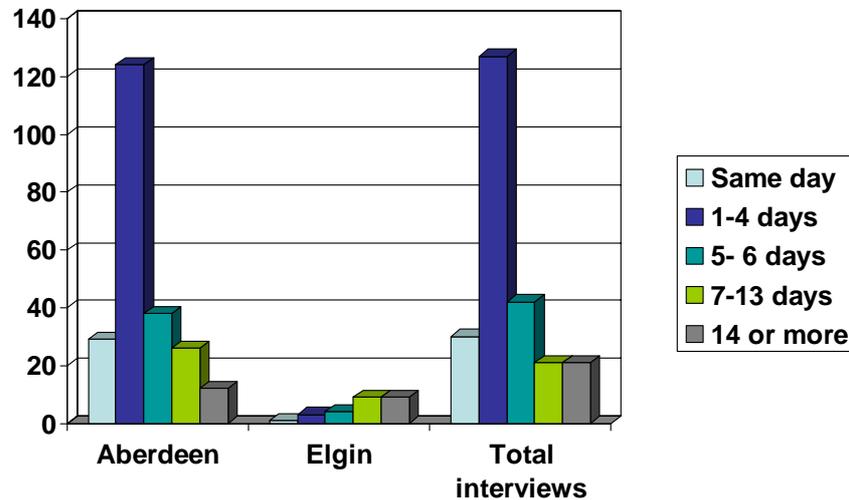
•If we turn to look at the pilot areas, there were a total of 414 missing incidences, relating to 158 young people in Aberdeen and Elgin during the pilot period.

•In keeping with the operational protocol, RHWIs were not necessarily completed for every missing incident (i.e. if a young person had run away more than once in a short period the interview could cover more than one incident). A total of 261 RHWIs were conducted during the sample period – 235 in Aberdeen and 26 in Elgin.

•Sixty six of the 414 incidences (involving 33 young people) did not result in a RHWI. However, 20 of these 33 young people did attend a RHWI relating to a missing incident either at a much earlier or later point during the pilot period. A total of 14 young people did not attend a RHWI at any point. The reasons differed – incl. moving outside the boundaries, deciding not to as it may compromise a criminal investigation, and in others it appears young people did not want to as avoided all contact.



Timing of RHWIs



- The guidance for the RHWIs stipulated that they should be undertaken within 5 days of the young person being located following a missing person report.
- As you can see, overall, the majority of RHWIs were undertaken within 7 days of the young person being identified following a missing person report. Just over 12% took place between 7 and 14 days after the young person was first identified, and 8% took place 14 days or later.
- The Aberdeen team were generally able to respond more quickly following a report than Elgin – this is likely to be linked to the resources made available by a dedicated team without additional duties, and the shift patterns in operation in Elgin. There was an expectation that the RHWI should be conducted when the young person was available and with least disruption to their routine.
- On occasion, it appeared to be difficult to complete the interviews within the suggested 5 days, but this tended to be due to problems accessing young people (e.g. they may run away again before the interview takes place), and the general logistics of contacting and setting up an interview with the time frame. However, attempts were made to conduct the interview as soon as possible after the young person had returned.
- Different groups of respondents agreed that the RHWIs should be conducted up to a few days after the young person had returned – as it gives young people time to calm down but the episode is still fresh in their mind.



Location of RHWIs

- Various locations used
- No strong preferences for particular locations emerged
- Many young people considered it relatively unimportant, but dependent on individual circumstances

•RHWIs were conducted at family homes, foster care placements, residential placements, schools and other relatives homes. [The place at which the RHWI was conducted did not appear to be influenced by where young people lived at the point they went missing – both young people who lived at home and those who lived in care were interviewed at their place of residence, schools and other places].

•No strong preferences for particular locations emerged. In many cases location was considered relatively unimportant by the young person and others, only that the circumstances of the young person were taken into account to ensure they were comfortable and felt able to talk.

•RHWI respondents noted that if the young person was experiencing problems at home, the RHWI may be usefully held elsewhere (i.e. at school) to ensure the young person was able to talk openly. However, if workers suspected that all was not well at home of the young person, it was suggested that they may consider it beneficial to visit the young person there to obtain a perspective on their home circumstances.



Police conduct of RHWIs

- Broad consensus that police most appropriate agency
- But, interviewer's ability to relate to young person was viewed as critical – *"It doesn't matter where they come from as long as you can talk to them"*
- Young people felt that uniform should not be worn

- When considering these findings it is important to recognise that this evaluation did not take into account the conduct of RHWIs by different agencies – it focused solely on models operating within one police force.
- There was overall consensus among respondents that the police were the most appropriate agency to conduct RHWIs.
- The young people interviewed as part of the evaluation were positive about their experiences of the RHWIs – they were able to relate well to the interviewers and felt that it was appropriate for police to conduct the interview. There was, however, a minority view that social workers are easier to speak to and so would be more suited to conducting the interviews. In line with professionals views, there was a feeling that their ability to relate to young person was the most important factor.
- Other reasons cited were that police involvement could highlight the seriousness of running away, that the police lead in RHWI could facilitate access to information from within police information systems that other agencies may not have access to, the police were relevant as likely to have had an initial contact with young runaways and that the police may be able to respond quicker than other agencies (e.g. such as social work) in contacting and arranging to meet a young person.
- In general, young people felt that the police uniform should not be worn.



Techniques for delivering RHWIs

- RHWI more effective at enabling young people to share information
- Young people in the control area do not divulge as much information

- The RHWIs differed significantly from the cancellation process used in Fraserburgh and elsewhere in Aberdeenshire in a number of ways.

- While the cancellation process was obligatory and highly structured, the RHWI was voluntary (following on from a required safe and well check) and the interview teams attempted to make it as unstructured as possible. Notes were taken as appropriate and given to the young person at the end of the interview to ensure accuracy and to let the young person see what had been written.

- From the perspective of the young people interviewed, the revised technique for conducting interviews in Aberdeen and Elgin was more effective in enabling them to share information than the current approach in the control and wider force area.



Usefulness of interview

- Young people indicated they felt better after the interview
- Some young people felt that they would be less likely to run away
- Others didn't feel they'd be less likely to run away but may be less likely to be unsafe while away

- Young people indicated that they tended to feel better after the interview.
- They found it useful to get things off their chest, particularly with someone who they didn't know previously and was therefore not involved in other aspects of their lives.
- However, views were mixed as to whether the interview had made them less likely to run again.
- Some said they were less likely to run and suggested this was due to being given advice about talking to someone and alternative ways of coping if they have problems; being able to call the interviewer to talk if they did think about running away again; fear of getting in to trouble; having the risks of running away explained to them; realising how much people worry when they run away.
- One young person said they would not be less likely to run but would be less likely to be unsafe while away while a small group said that they would not be less likely to run and had run again since the interview had taken place.



Information gathered and shared

- Key benefits - opportunity to obtain information
- Key difference between pilot and control areas was quality and depth of info gathered
- Appeared less valued where young people already involved with services, but a safety net
- Valuable in identifying young people who were not accessing support

•So, one the key benefits across the 2 areas of the RHWI is that it provides an opportunity to obtain information about the young person that may not otherwise be available with a key difference between the pilot and control areas being the quality and depth of information gathered and shared.

•The information obtained at the RHWI was seen by those conducting the interview as having two main purposes: identifying welfare issues (which would involve sharing of information on young person's background and the issues identified in the RHWI with the referral agency); and intelligence gathering.

•Police involvement as the lead agency facilitated access to information which was available only to the police and not to other agencies, which could be shared where appropriate in line with the Getting It Right For Every Child Framework.

•The RHWI appeared to be less valued in cases where the young person was already involved with services. Where a young person was already involved with social work services, some social work respondents were dubious that the RHWI could provide additional information or support. However, it would appear that the young person may not be in continual contact with their social worker or be engaging with services and the RHWI could be useful in these circumstances.

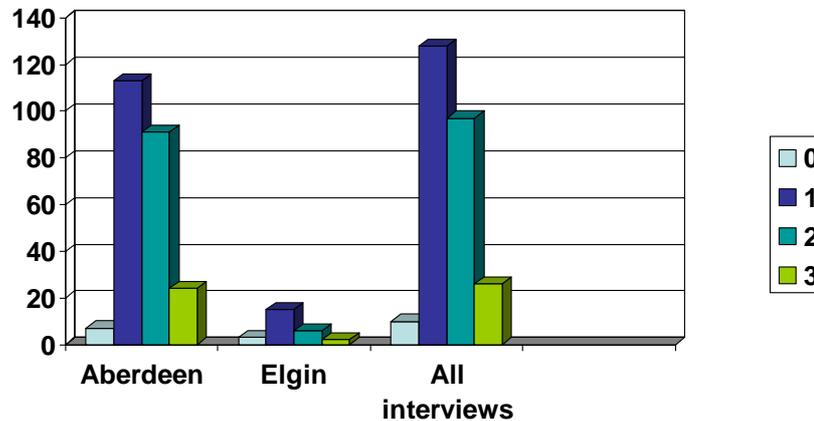
•Professional respondents indicated that the information from RHWIs could provide them with a different perspective on the young person's circumstances and often contained background information about young person's home situation, their families and friends which was not otherwise known.

•Information about where young people run to and who they spend their time with was understood to be useful in the potential protection of other young people.

•For young people without statutory support, the RHWI was often the first opportunity they had to discuss problems they were experiencing and allowed onward referral to social work and/or another relevant service.



Referrals made per interview



The information obtained in the RHWI was important in determining further action (if any) required.

Referrals made to other agencies during the pilot were recorded for each interview. This was categorised by the RHWI team into four possible referral routes: (1) Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA); (2) The child or young person's social worker, where they had one (3) A new contact with social work services and (4) Other specific agencies or projects.

As you can see here, very few interviews resulted in no referrals – only 10 interviews did not result in a referral. Overall, just less than 50% of the interviews undertaken resulted in a referral to one agency, around 40% resulted in a referral to two agencies and 10% resulted in referrals to three agencies

And for me, this slide perhaps demonstrates most clearly the value of RHWIs – in their potential to connect young people with services that can respond to their needs.

During the interviews, non-statutory agency respondents indicated that RHWI referrals were often 'new' referrals; indicating that young people were accessing a service they may not have had without the RHWI; where social work referrals were also made to non-statutory services (for the same young person), respondents commented that RHWI referrals were also made at an earlier stage (more timely and with more detailed information than social workers were often able to provide) which enabled interventions before they hit crisis point.



Overarching conclusion

- Appropriate intervention that does help identify young people who require further support
- Of most benefit to those not already involved with services, but also some benefits for those already involved
- RHWIs in 2 sites more effective than current practice in control site
- No clear evidence that either model more effective than the other

The principal conclusion of the evaluation was that the Return Home Welfare Interviews are an appropriate intervention that do help identify young people who require further support and referring them to an appropriate agency. Even without an onward referral, they can improve outcomes by helping young people appreciate the value of talking about their problems rather than running away.

RHWIs were of most benefit to young people not already involved with services (just under a third of those who received a RHWI were not already involved with social services) and some social workers were dubious about their value when young people were already involved with services. However, there can still be some benefits, such as additional information being revealed and additional opportunities to engage.

The RHWIs in both Aberdeen and Elgin were more effective than the practice in Fraserburgh in terms of the quality and depth of information collected and, therefore, the likelihood of identifying support needs and making an appropriate referral.

Aberdeen and Elgin are quite different environments in terms of size, numbers of young runaways, resources and multi-agency working processes. It is therefore difficult to compare the different RHWI models in terms of overall effectiveness and outcomes. Both models generally worked well and each had their own practical issues to contend with. There is no clear evidence that one model is better than the other and so areas should make decisions based on what is likely to work best in their particular local circumstances - taking into account current working



Implications for development

- Existing infrastructure in pilot areas was important for the implementation and operation of the RHWI initiative
- The training provided was key for civilian and police workers
- Implementing the initiative required good interagency communication and consultation to secure buy-in from key stakeholders. Time consuming but crucial for effectiveness

Given that the pilot was intended to inform decision making by forces on the potential roll out of RHWIs across Scotland, we highlighted that it was important to consider a number of issues if the service were to be implemented elsewhere.

The existing infrastructure of resources in Elgin and Aberdeen was important for the introduction of the RHWI – information on the scale and nature of running away by young people had been considered and responses already developed

The training provided was key in informing civilian workers about police processes and supporting police workers to identify and address welfare issues in conjunction with intelligence gathering

Implementing the initiative required good interagency communication and consultation to secure buy in from key stakeholders. This can be a time consuming and ongoing process but is crucial in securing effective referral processes to support young people.



RHWIs as part of a service continuum

- Effectiveness dependent on the follow through response to any needs identified...
- ... a question that the Grampian pilot evaluation did not extend far enough to answer

Effectiveness is dependent on the follow through response to any needs identified... Unanswered questions as to whether or not referrals resulted in appropriate response to young people's needs



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