

**ASTRA Project
Evaluation of Out-of-Hours Service
April to December 2003**

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1: Introduction

Project origins

In the Autumn of 2002, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Children and Young People's Unit announced a short-term development fund for work with young runaways. Projects were invited to bid for funding to provide innovative services to support young people who had run away, been thrown out of home or were at risk of being in one of these situations.

Alternative Solutions to Running Away (ASTRA) made a successful application and was provided funding to establish an out-of-hours service for young people who are in crisis and their parents. A service was set up from January 2003 to offer additional evening support. This was an extension to the current service provided by ASTRA to young people who have run away or been thrown out of home or care in the county of Gloucestershire.

As part of the funding of the project, there was a requirement that the development project would be evaluated. The Children's Society's Research Unit were approached to conduct this evaluation based on their extensive past experience of research into running away. The Unit is a partnership between The Children's Society and The University of York.

Description of the ASTRA project

The ASTRA project was set up in 1997 to reduce the incidence of persistent running away among young people under the age of 18 in the city of Gloucester. The service was later expanded to cover the whole county, including Cheltenham, Stroud, Tewksbury, the Forest of Dean and the Cotswolds.

The objectives of the service are as follows:

- To provide a safety net for young runaways
- To offer information, advice and support on a one-to-one basis to young people who have run away or have been thinking about running away
- To work in partnership with other organisations to support the needs of young people who run away or are at risk of running away

Description of the ASTRA out-of-hours initiative

The staff at ASTRA were concerned that despite their availability, services provided by the Police and Social Services Emergency Duty Team may not always be young person friendly. They had piloted a similar service a few years previously, which ran for six to twelve months but there had not been enough resources to continue the service and the initiative had not been formally evaluated. They felt that it would be useful to pilot this kind of out-of-hours support again. The service was set up to provide support seven days per week between 5pm and 10pm. The support was to be provided by staff on a weekly rotational basis offering support by telephone and call out visits where necessary.

The aims of this initiative were:

- To respond to 'emergencies' to prevent more serious problems arising for the young person (by filling the gap in local provision)
- To assess the level of need for emergency support from ASTRA
- To identify local alternatives to meeting the need for emergency support

Description of the evaluation

The 'out-of-hours' service was seen by the project as a pilot which could test out the extent and nature of the need for such a service in Gloucestershire and elsewhere. Hence, the central aim of the evaluation was to capture the learning from this pilot and to answer a number of key questions identified in the proposal submitted to the DfES for the scheme:

1. Is there a need for the service? If so, can patterns be detected where need is greater in terms of timing (e.g. particular times of day, weekends, holiday periods etc.)?
2. Can particular patterns be detected within the level of need (e.g. in terms of area of the county, urban versus rural need, gender issues, disability or ethnicity)? If so, what implications do these patterns have for the services both ASTRA and other agencies provide?
3. How effective is the service in terms of outcome of contact (i.e. is the young person in safe, secure accommodation for the night)?
4. How effective is the service in terms of signposting to other appropriate agencies and in follow-up of contact?
5. How effective are other services in terms of their ability to respond to the needs of young people in crisis?
6. Is it possible to identify gaps in the services that are offered to young people in crisis, either in terms of inability to provide for particular groups or for particular issues? If so, what implications does this have for service providers?

In order to achieve the above, and given the limited resources available, it was decided that the main component of the evaluation would be a monitoring system to quantify the volume and pattern of need, incorporating staff's perspectives on the outcomes of each piece of work. The evaluation uses a realist approach,¹ which emphasises not simply the outcomes achieved by the work but also the mechanisms at play that may have influenced these outcomes, such as the context and factors that have helped and hindered access and referral.

Monitoring access to the out-of-hours service and the level of activity generated

A monitoring form was developed for project staff to record details of the out-of-hours calls received. This form included the following categories of information:

- *Details of contact* – date, time and identity of caller
- *Details of young person* – whether young person already known to project, age, sex, and geographical location
- *Young person's situation* – where young person usually lives, current situation
- *Details of incident* – reasons for most recent running away or at risk incident, whether the incident was reported to the police, and length of time away from home
- *Details of work done* – reason for contact, emergency criteria, whether caller had approached another agency and if support could have been provided elsewhere, other agencies involved, work carried out, outcomes of the work and any further action as a result of the call.

In addition, the research team were also involved in a more general monitoring exercise about the project's work as part of a national evaluation of young runaways projects. This meant that some additional contextual data on young people using the out-of-hours service was available.

Interviews with project staff

The above data was supplemented by two visits to the project and some telephone interviewing. The initial visit was made to the project in Spring 2003 to learn about the new initiative and its aims and objectives. The second visit, after the end of the scheme's operation focused on the following areas:

- Access and referral – i.e. whether the service reached the target group
- Service delivery and factors that helped and hindered delivery
- Perceived outcomes
- Key recommendations from practice learning

Key members of staff who weren't available for these visits were interviewed separately via telephone.

¹ Pawson, R. Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation* London: Sage.

2: The monitoring data

The monitoring data covered a 12-month period (January to December 2003). However the project was closed temporarily from mid-December, so in effect the figures relate to slightly less than a full year.

A total of 145 calls were logged on monitoring forms. This is an average of around three calls per week over the whole period.

In this section we look at:

- The timing of calls to the service
- The characteristics of people who called the service
- The characteristics of the young people to whom the calls related
- The reasons for calls
- The nature of young people's needs
- The work done by the project
- The outcomes of the work

Timing of calls

Days of the week

Table 1 shows the number of calls received on each day of the week. There is some evidence of a tendency for a greater number of calls to be made on Mondays to Thursdays compared to Friday and the weekend.

Table 1: Number of calls per weekday

Month	No. of calls
Monday	26
Tuesday	32
Wednesday	29
Thursday	20
Friday	14
Saturday	11
Sunday	13
Total	145

Calls per month

Similarly Table 2 breaks down the calls by calendar month. There was a reduction in the level of demand for the service during the last few months of operation, but it is not clear whether this shows a seasonal variation or is due to service-related factors.

Table 2: Calls per quarter during the operation of the service

Month	No. of calls
January to March	21
April to June	50
July to September	50
October to December	24
Total	145

Time of calls

As shown in Table 3, the majority of calls were received within the first two hours of the time slot during which the service operated

Table 3: Timing of calls

Time period	No. of calls	%
5:00 to 5:59	47	32.4%
6:00 to 6:59	27	18.6%
7:00 to 7:59	32	22.1%
8:00 to 8:59	21	14.5%
9:00 to 10:00	15	10.3%
Unrecorded	3	2.1%
Total	145	

Duration of calls

Finally, Table 4 shows the length of involvement with each call. Almost half (46%) of the calls were ten minutes or less in duration. The median length of involvement was 12 minutes, and there were 27 calls which took up 30 minutes or more of worker time, often involving a set of telephone calls.

Table 4: Length of calls

Length	No. of calls	%
More than 2 hours	4	2.9%
91 to 120 minutes	2	1.5%
61 to 90 minutes	7	5.1%
31 to 60 minutes	14	10.2%
11 to 30 minutes	46	33.6%
5 to 10 minutes	35	25.5%
Less than 5 minutes	29	21.2%
Total	137	

Notes: Data was not recorded for 8 cases.

Who called the service?

The service was open to young people themselves and other people (e.g. parents, carers and external professionals) who were connected with them.

Over two-fifths of the calls received were from young people themselves, with the remainder divided equally between parents/carers and other people. The 'other people' category included: police, friends, housing agencies, relatives, and Social Services staff.

Table 5: Category of caller

Category of caller	Number of calls	%
Young person	57	42.2%
Parent or carer	39	28.9%
Other person	39	28.9%
Total	135	

Notes: Data was not recorded or was unclear for 10 cases

In the large majority of cases the young people to whom the calls related were already known to the project:

Table 6: Whether young person was already known to the project

Already known to project	Number of calls	%
Yes, current case	107	82.3%
Yes, but case closed	7	5.4%
No	16	12.3%
Total	130	

Notes: Data was not recorded for 15 cases

Characteristics of the young people

It was possible to identify, using reference numbers, 64 of the young people making calls to the project. These young people accounted for 125 of the 145 calls. The remaining calls were not allocated reference numbers and are likely in most cases to relate to young people not previously known to the project. In this section looking at young people's characteristics we only look at the above 64 young people to ensure that double counting is avoided. Table 7 shows the number of calls per young person for these 64 young people. It can be seen that some young people contacted the out-of-hours service repeatedly. Based on the figures in the table it can be calculated that, in total, 50 calls (over a third of all calls received) related to ten young people.

Table 7: Number of calls per person

No. of calls	Number of people	%
One	37	57.8%
Two	14	21.9%
Three	3	4.7%
Four	5	7.8%
Five	2	3.1%
Six	2	3.1%
Eight	1	1.6%
Total	64	

The age distribution for the 64 young people is shown in the table below, which also shows the age profile of ASTRA's overall user group. Unfortunately due to the amount of missing data regarding the ages of young people involved in the out-of-hours work it is not possible to undertake a statistical comparison with the overall user group, but a visual inspection suggests that the age profile amongst the out-of-hours callers is slightly older than amongst the project's total user group.

Table 8: Age of young person to whom call related

No. of calls	Number of people	%	% in user group
Under 11	2	4.5%	3.0%
11 years old	0		1.7%
12 years old	2	4.5%	10.0%
13 years old	2	4.5%	12.6%
14 years old	11	25.0%	21.2%
15 years old	17	38.6%	34.2%
16 years old	6	13.6%	11.7%
17 years old	4	9.1%	3.5%
Total	44		

Notes: The age was not known for 20 of the 64 young people

The sex of young people to whom the out-of-hours calls related is shown below:

Table 9: Sex of young person to whom call related

No. of calls	Number of people	%	% in user group
Female	38	70.4%	59%
Male	16	29.6%	41%
Total	54		

Notes: The sex was not known for 10 of the 64 young people

Where known, 73% of the young people to whom the out-of-hours calls related were female. This is higher than the proportion of females in the overall user group of the project (59%).

Looking at the ten young people mentioned earlier about whom calls were made most frequently, seven of these were female, and there was no notable age pattern.

There was substantial variation in levels of usage across the six geographical areas covered by ASTRA as shown in Table 10, but there is no clear pattern to this variation in terms of types of areas. Project staff felt that this variation was due to a number of factors related to variations in delivery of the service and the particular characteristics of young people in different areas during this period, rather than due to any systematic geographical variation.

Table 10: Geographical areas of calls

Area	Number of calls	Number of people	Number of people in total user group	Out-of-hours contact rate
Stroud	7	5	40	12.5%
Cheltenham	3	3	55	5.4%
Gloucester	54	27	79	34.2%
Forest of Dean	25	13	20	65.0%
Tewkesbury	24	10	12	83.3%
Cotswolds	12	6	19	31.6%
Total	125	64	225	

Notes: Data was not recorded for 3 calls relating to one young person. Figures in the fourth column relate to the number of new people who the project did substantial work with during the period. Some of the out-of-hours calls were from young people who had had previous contact and thus the figures in column 3 can be higher than the figures in column 4.

Reasons for calls

There were some significant differences in the reasons for out-of-hours calls for the three different groups of callers discussed earlier.

Where young people themselves made the call, the reasons for their calls fell into three main categories:

1. Young people who were currently in some kind of risk or crisis situation (16 calls), including currently being away from home, at imminent risk of running away or being forced to leave, or at some other kind of risk:

‘Young person ran away from care unit - unhappy with staff and impending move to another area as current unit is closing. Young person very high on drugs at time of contact.’

‘Young person called as things had ‘kicked off’ at home (mum was throwing things around and getting very aggressive) so she planned to leave.’

‘Young person sent text message saying that she had self harmed and felt really low.’

2. Young people who were not at any immediate risk but who wanted some support or advice (19 calls):

‘Young person wanted to talk about her visit to the psychologist and how parents had been treating her since. She felt like running away.’

3. Young people who were ringing to pass on messages to project workers, to discuss existing arrangements for meeting project staff, or to re-engage with the project (18 calls)

Where the call came from a parent or carer, the main categories were:

1. Parents who were concerned about their children, who in most cases were currently away from home (12 calls)

'Dad says young person spending time at addresses well known to police and social services.'

2. Parents who were seeking support or advice (10 calls):

'Parent called re: her son [who was being] abusive and threatening. Advised mum to call the police. Mum said she had and was waiting for them to attend.'

3. Parents calling about issues related to the project's work, for example making arrangements for a meeting (eight calls)
4. Parents informing the project that a young person had returned home (three calls)
5. Relatives who were feeling that a young person they were caring for would have to leave (three calls)

Calls from other people were primarily of two kinds:

1. Agencies ringing about ongoing work, to make a referral, for support or advice (22 calls):

'Young person returned home to find her father had thrown her belongings out onto the doorstep. When she entered the house he physically assaulted her. She left the house and went to a friend's, who took her to the [Referring organisation].'

2. Friends or relatives of young people who were concerned about their welfare and were ringing for support or advice, or were wishing to get in touch with them (eight calls):

'Staying with a friend. Has concerns about abuse from father.'

The nature of young people's needs

Based on the information in the previous section, it is evident that in a significant minority of cases (around 40) the calls related to situations where the young person was or may have been at risk. These included 16 calls from young people at risk or in crisis, and 12 calls from parents who were concerned about a young person (who in most cases was away from home), three calls indicating the young person was going to be forced to leave home, and seven calls from friends and agencies who were concerned about a young person's immediate situation.

The concept of 'emergency' or 'crisis' provision is interesting. When asked about this during an interview in the early stages of delivering the service, staff focused on the idea of providing a safety net for young people away from home or at risk of being away and the associated vulnerability to harm. The out-of-hours service was seen as an extension to the crisis intervention work that ASTRA undertook to prevent young people from running away or to keeping them safe whilst away or in a risky home environment. Emergency situations were seen as scenarios where a young person might have run away or be planning to do so and may be potentially at a lot of risk. They also referred to situations where young people were very distressed, or had been subject to abuse. The key criteria for 'emergency' appeared to be high risk of harm.

As part of the evaluation monitoring forms, staff were asked to indicate whether or not they thought particular calls to the out-of-hours service fitted what they considered to be emergency criteria. At least 30 of these calls were classified by project staff as meeting these criteria. A closer examination of these has reinforced initial comments from staff.

The majority of the 'emergency calls' involved the young person being away or at risk of being away from home and vulnerable to environmental risks (those risks associated with being on the streets and having nowhere safe to stay). This was often compounded by risks due to their own personal vulnerability, for example:

'Young person ran away from care unit– unhappy with staff and impending move. Young person very high on drugs at time of contact.... Gave lengthy telephone support – listening, advising, rationalising thoughts and feelings she was having (possibly drugs induced). Young person stayed at unit until my last call at 10pm, hopefully avoiding putting herself at risk of serious harm.'

In addition to this, 'emergency' cases involved situations where the young person was at risk in their own home and there were associated child protection concerns. One young person had been physically assaulted by her grandmother and ASTRA worked to keep the young person safe and make a child protection referral. ASTRA also supported a young person who alleged she was at risk from her brother. Although mum reassured ASTRA that there was no risk, ASTRA were able to advise the young person that they could call the police if necessary and ongoing support would be available the next day.

There is clear evidence that for these young people, the out-of-hours service was able to intervene and alleviate risk of serious harm. Although this was not the case for all of the calls, they do represent a significant minority of very vulnerable young people who could have come to harm without such a service being available.

Work done by the project

Evidently the work done by the project staff in response to out-of-hours calls was closely related to the reason for the call.

The table below shows the extent of the work done in response to each call:

Table 11: Immediate action taken as a result of the call

Immediate response	Number of calls	%
Telephone work only	61	58.7%
Telephone work plus call out	3	2.9%
Telephone work plus follow-up next day	40	38.5%
Total	104	

Notes: This data was not recorded for 41 calls mostly of very short duration

In the majority of cases the extent of the work was restricted to telephone interventions although as seen earlier these were sometimes quite lengthy. In over 38% of the cases, the call led to follow-up work the next day. Case Study 1 is an example of a piece of work that involved an hour and a half of telephone support:

In three cases, the call led to immediate action involving the worker going out to meet the young person. An example of this is shown in Case Study 2.

CASE STUDY 1**Lisa**

Lisa was 12 years old when she contacted the out-of-hours service for the first time. She had never used the ASTRA service before. She called one evening because she was thinking about running away. She was having difficulties with her parents at home and when she called they were arguing downstairs. The out-of-hours worker was able to give her support and advice and following this the young person decided not to run away. However, a little later the project worker received a call from the young person's mother informing her that her daughter had run away.

The project worker established contact with the young person who had run to her friend's house and was then able to update her mother on her whereabouts and let her know that she was safe. Her mother was consequently able to find her and talk things through, and, as a result, the mother agreed to let Lisa stay with her friend for the night.

In this instance the project worker had provided advice and support to the young person, her mother and the mother of the young person's friend. She stayed the night in a place of safety and the mother could be reassured of this. The project worker also made plans to follow up this work with the young person the next day as part of the general service offered by ASTRA for young people who run away or are at risk of doing so.

CASE STUDY 2**Karen**

Karen was already being supported by ASTRA when she felt the urgent need for help at 8pm one evening. The situation at home had become very difficult. Her mum had become aggressive and started throwing things around and all her family were being verbally abusive to her.

She planned to leave so the project worker arranged to meet her at the end of her street. The out-of-hours worker was able to call another project worker who lived locally so that she could get to the young person as quickly as possible and she could provide back up.

They met up with the young person and discussed options with her, but she was adamant that she did not want to return home. As a result they arranged for an alternative safe place for the young person to stay for the night. ASTRA contacted the police who checked that the address was safe.

In addition to this, the support could be continued the next day as part of the ASTRA service.

The table below shows the ongoing action taken as a result of the call:

Table 12: Ongoing action taken as a result of the call

Ongoing action	Number of calls	%
Ongoing contact arranged	63	62.4%
Ongoing work already being undertaken	21	20.8%
Young person to contact if needed	10	9.9%
Referred to other agency	1	1.0%
No further contact needed	6	5.9%
Total	101	

Notes: This data was not recorded for 44 calls mostly of very short duration

As might be expected due to the large number of referrals from ongoing cases, a large proportion (almost two-thirds) of the calls led to ongoing contact being arranged and over 20% had ongoing work already being undertaken. It is clear that the out-of-hours service generated further work for staff as part of their usual day care provision and it seems that this model of working allows for continuity of support for young people following a crisis situation.

Outcomes of the out-of-hours work

There were a variety of outcomes identified by the project workers delivering out-of-hours support. Some examples of the type of outcomes identified by project workers are summarised below:

ASTRA Project and other agencies

- ASTRA and other agencies updated or given background information about young person situation or case
- Other agencies given information on local services to support young people and parents

Parents and carers

- Parents or carers updated on young person's situation
- Parents and carers calmed down and feeling supported
- Parents and carers reassured about young person's whereabouts (where possible) or safety
- Parents and carers given advice on other service options
- Parents and carers given advice on how to register a young person as a missing person
- Parents and carers reviewing young person's boundaries at home to minimise conflict

Young people

- Young person calmed down and reassured
- Young person prevented from running away
- Young person supported to find an alternative safe place to stay
- Young person made aware of alternative housing options
- Young person back in contact with parents/carers
- Young person given options for keeping safe
- Young person in a position where they know who to contact if situation at home becomes difficult
- Young person ending contact with boyfriend who was potentially putting her at risk
- Young person's message conveyed to case worker
- Young person's place of residence police checked
- Young person registered as missing
- Child protection referral made for young person
- Involvement of police and emergency duty team where appropriate

Could the support have been provided by other existing local services?

A key question for the evaluation was whether the services provided by the project in cases which met the emergency criteria could or should have been provided by other agencies. In terms of the 30 cases which workers identified as meeting the criteria, staff's assessment was that in 12 cases other agencies could have met the immediate need, in 11 cases they could not, and in the remaining seven cases it was unclear.

In a sense, given the criteria set out by the project, it could be argued that the local Social Services Emergency Duty Team should have met the immediate needs of all young people who met the criteria. However, in practice there were barriers to this. First, it has been a consistent theme of research into running away that young people have to an extent lost faith in mainstream agencies that have tried to help them. This was evident in some of the case notes associated with the out-of-hours calls:

'Involved with SSD but has lost confidence in their services.'

One of the strengths of services such as ASTRA which are young-person-focused and are perceived by young people as independent is that they may be able to establish a good working relationship with young people in this category, as in the above case. Once trust has been established with young people it is natural that they would prefer to turn to the service when in crisis.

There were also, inevitably, resource issues. Several callers rang after not being able to contact Social Services or having not had a speedy response to their concerns.

More importantly, it is evident that after more than six years of practice, ASTRA has now become embedded in the local service framework and was sometimes relied upon by Social Services and police as a component of the local capacity to respond to young people in crisis. Thus some of the calls which met the emergency criteria were actually received from statutory services who were asking for support or advice.

Thus, whilst in theory the support provided by ASTRA during the out-of-hours work could always have been provided by other local services, in practice there are question marks over whether young people would be willing to access support from elsewhere and also whether other local agencies always have the capacity and resources to meet the immediate needs of young runaways in crisis.

3: Staff perceptions

As described in the introduction, the discussion with staff in February 2004, after the out-of-hours service had ceased operation focused on their views of general learning points under three broad headings – access, delivery and outcomes. Staff's views are summarised in this section.

Access to and awareness of the out-of-hours service

In terms of meeting the target group of young people who were in an 'emergency' situation ASTRA felt that the service had been mainly used by young people as a means of passing messages to their project worker or other professional rather than dealing with a crisis situation where they were in any immediate risk of harm. They felt that this was true to an extent with professionals also, particularly Social Services staff who called around 5:30pm to 6:00pm as an extension to their working hours:

'SSD phoned up quite a lot asking for information when they could quite easily have phoned up in the daytime.'

They noted that it was difficult to get the message across to young people and professionals that the out-of-hours service was not a general information service and it was intended to be an emergency service, though this was occurring less towards the end of the year.

Other staff seemed to understand the purpose of the service and ASTRA commented that calls from youth groups and information shops requesting information on local services were a more appropriate use of the service.

ASTRA felt that there were two groups of young people who did not tend to access the service:

- Young people in the care system who often went missing but did not contact the out-of-hours service as they did not feel the need (often out partying or with friends) or see themselves at risk.
- Those who had run away for the first time and were perhaps unaware that the service at ASTRA existed.

Initially ASTRA put in a bid to the CYPU to fund an information officer post to maintain awareness raising about the various elements of the ASTRA service. The bid was unsuccessful and at an early stage of operation, the staff highlighted the difficulties for a small (two whole time equivalents and a Project Manager) and busy team in undertaking regular publicity and awareness-raising initiatives about the service over such a large geographical area (Gloucestershire county). However, when the staff were interviewed at the end of the funding period, they reported that a substantial amount had been undertaken. Schools had been sent information packs (posters and leaflets). They could not be sure, however, that information passed on had been effectively displayed to young people.

Staff in Social Services had been sent information packs about the service and in general, ASTRA felt that there was a high level of awareness amongst other agency staff:

'All the major services, Connexions, SSD, EWO, all the rest of it, there are key people who know who we are because of the multi-agency steering group. I think there will be very few people in this county who were getting involved in running away, or families that don't know about us. Information is even getting into infant schools now.'

The service had also been advertised to staff and young people on the ASTRA website. One project worker remarked that there was little else that they could have done:

'How else do you do it? Maybe take out an advert directly before Eastenders?'

They did, however, identify one gap in that they had not had the resources to target youth clubs, but it was acknowledged that they needed to be realistic about what was possible for their small team:

'We could have done a visit to every youth club and visit every school assembly in the county but you have to balance how realistic this is. We need to balance that with the fact we have only got one worker on call... You've got to be realistic about the resource that you've got.'

Staff believed that in reality, most young people heard about the service through friends and other professionals:

'It was literally word-of-mouth in the end. Young people phoned up and said my friend was talking about it so I phoned up.'

It was acknowledged that in Gloucestershire it was quite difficult to assess the level of awareness amongst young people. Due to the countywide missing person's scheme in operation between ASTRA and the police, any young person who has been reported as missing more than once will be contacted by the project and will automatically be informed about the out-of-hours service. However many young people who run away are not reported missing to the police so the overall level of need is difficult to assess:

'It's difficult to know how many young people were out there with a genuine emergency who didn't access us so it's difficult to say. We don't know if groups exist out there who didn't access the service and why.'

Delivering the out-of-hours service

The out-of-hours service had been set up so that project workers took it in turns to be on call for the full week. However, the Project Manager was required to assess risk and authorise call out visits to young people so in effect she was on call practically every evening for that year. The impact on the staff team took its toll:

'I think the biggest difficulty with delivering the service to be honest was as there were only four of us doing it, one week a month we were working 9am to 10pm which was exhausting and then at the weekend it was 5pm until 10pm at night so it was pretty stressful for that worker. The other difficulty was that [the Project Manager] was permanently on call for a year, as she had to be back up. That was part of the problem in delivering the service as a small team.'

In reality the staff could only recall one incident where a call out visit was necessary. In crisis situations the out-of-hours worker had often mediated between the young person, parents and places of safety via the telephone. Telephone advice and support was also provided to professionals in other agencies dealing with emergency situations.

ASTRA felt that the simple system they had set up for other agencies to divert calls to the ASTRA out-of-hours service helped it to run smoothly:

'I think we kept it simple in terms of how to access it. It was just everyone just diverts their phone to the worker so there were not the difficulties that you sometimes get in trying to access out-of-hours services. It was very simple from the service user's point of view. They rang the number – they got through to the worker.'

The staff also felt that the fact that they are a close, supportive and flexible team, willing to swap shifts around to ensure cover, helped with the delivery of the service. Other agencies were helpful too. The Youth Service administrative staff would ensure that calls were diverted to the duty worker if there was no one available at the project base. Some workers had close connections with Social Services Emergency Duty Teams.

Although the ASTRA service was reported to be well known by staff in the county, delivering the service was sometimes hindered by the fact that there was a high turnover of staff, particularly in the police. Where there was a new staff member in the county, the ASTRA team had to spend time explaining who they were and the nature of the service before any action could be taken (e.g. where address checks were required, this could often be held up). In addition to this the night shelter in Gloucester closed for a period of six months during 2003, so this meant even more restricted options for the young people. There is only one emergency bed available in the Crisis Intervention Unit in the county so young people had to spend nights in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation.

One of the most challenging aspects was delivering the service as an extension of work for a small busy team. The staff found it exhausting and were relieved when the initiative came to an end

Outcomes

Staff felt that one of the key outcomes of providing out-of-hours support was the imparting of information on options, so that young people, parents and professionals knew where to go and what to do in a crisis situation. In addition to this, they felt they had been able to give young people and parents strategies to cope with their immediate situation:

'Just by talking things through with them you calm them down a bit. They take a little step back, take the heat out of the situation.'

Positive outcomes were achieved through maintaining continuity, allocating young people to workers they had already met and reacting quickly to referrals.

'Building on relationships that young people had developed with workers, not passing clients on. If the young person spent the night away, you have to go and do mediation otherwise you leave it hanging in the air until it next kicks off.'

Team work was also important. When a worker received a call to the service, they would ensure that the worker allocated to the case had the necessary background to the young person's situation so they could make an appropriate response and put the young person at ease.

Positive outcomes also relied on workers having knowledge about the way other local agencies worked and also having particular contacts within each agency. Workers were also experienced in dealing with runaways so they had the ability to do a risk assessment over the phone.

'As we've been working for a long time we are pretty good at working out whether we actually need to go out, that's why there was only ever one call out as we did it over the phone and knew what could be put in place for the night.'

The outcome had been less positive where a young person had unrealistic expectations, such as being re-housed immediately.

Conclusions about running the service

Overall the staff did not feel that providing the out-of-hours service in this way would be worthwhile in the long term. The Project Manager did not feel that the project was cost effective or value for money, particularly when taking into account the impact on the staff in terms of mental health and well-being.

If they were planning the out-of-hours service now they would set it up as a separate team with more staff resources or with a dedicated worker:

'For the calls and amount of stress it was just not worth it, but there was definitely a need for it, for young people to access something out-of-hours... For us as a project it was just not effective in terms of time or our mental health.'

However they also referred to an example of an out-of-hours referral made by a youth worker concerning a young person with mental health issues who had been living in a residential unit. There was a child protection issue and the young person could have run away and put herself at risk in an unknown area had the youth worker not been able to access the service. The staff reflected that:

'For that one person it was definitely a resource that was worthwhile.'

The team did feel that it was worthwhile running the service to assess the level of need, although it had been an exhausting experience for staff:

'Good that we did it.....It was something that had to be set up just to see what need there was for it out there. I'm glad we've done it but personally if someone asked us 'would you do it again?' I personally wouldn't because I know my own boundaries.'

ASTRA suggested that it would be better to run an out-of-hours service nationally. They see a function for the National Runaways Helpline to screen calls and refer them to a more local out-of-hours service housed within the police or EDT. The Project Manager is currently talking to the Message Home Service about this. One of the staff commented:

'That number (National Runaways Helpline) should be plastered everywhere. That's who people should go through to. Those people can do the same risk assessment and have the same conversations we did and there ought to be a local resource if needed that can respond in person or whatever.'

Running the out-of-hours service has led the project workers at ASTRA to recognise the need for the provision of information to young people and professionals in crisis situations. Some agencies, particularly Connexions, whose workers are relatively inexperienced in dealing with runaways, have really benefited from the advice ASTRA has given them and the service has prevented crisis situations from escalating.

'If information stops a crisis developing then, it's useful to have.'

In summary, the Project Manager highlighted the conclusions that the staff team and the Steering Group had come to in relation to running the out-of-hours service as follows:

'The majority of calls received during the development period were not an emergency and indeed almost invariably non urgent issues raised by existing young people in contact with projects'.

As a result of the above the staff were increasingly frustrated that their time away from work was disrupted by non-urgent calls or the possibility of non-urgent calls.

Staff were unanimous that the disruption and potential disruption that this system caused, led to them feeling that the system was counterproductive compared to the high energy, enthusiasm and commitment given during normal working hours. It was for this reason that the Steering Group supported the staff view that the out-of-hours service was an unnecessary burden on staff members and given the needs of the service, would best be accommodated by diverting to a centralized system such as the Runaway Helpline.'

4: Summary and conclusions

Summary of key findings

- The out-of-hours service received 145 calls over a ten-month period – an average of around three calls per week.
- Two fifths of the calls came directly from young people but a substantial amount also came from parents or carers and other professionals.
- The large majority of calls related to young people already known to the project, and most of these were cases where ongoing work was being undertaken with the young person.
- The out-of-hours calls were more likely to relate to females than males and the age profile of the young people was slightly older than for the project's total user group.
- There was evidence of higher usage of the service in some areas than others but there was no clear difference between rural and urban areas.
- Calls were made to the service for a variety of reasons. Between a quarter and a third of all calls received could be defined as emergency or crisis situations.
- The majority of the support was carried out over the telephone and 'call out' visits were rare. However in over a third of cases the out-of-hours call led to further work the following day.
- Outcomes of the work were wide ranging and appeared to be an extension of the day service that ASTRA currently provide via ongoing case work with young people – prevention of running away, supporting young people to find safe alternative accommodation, helping young people to re-engage with parents and carers, and the provision of advice and support to young people, parents and professionals.
- Staff felt that providing the service was worthwhile in that it enabled them to assess the level of need and respond to a small but significant number of young people who were genuinely in need of emergency support. It took users of the service a long time to recognise the true purpose of the service and there were a large number of calls that did not represent a crisis situation.
- Delivering the service as an extension of existing daytime services had a big impact on the team. Staff concluded that this was not the best way to provide an out-of-hours service. Two options for future delivery were a separate local team, or access through a national telephone helplines service.

Discussion and conclusions

The piloting of this 'out-of-hours' service has, as anticipated, generated valuable learning regarding the potential advantages and pitfalls of providing stand-alone emergency telephone services to young runaways.

After careful reflection ASTRA's project management and staff have decided not to continue the service after the end of the initial funded pilot period. The chief reasons for this are the resources required to run the service, and the substantial additional demands that this placed on the staff team. Given this decision based on experience, it is questionable whether it would be feasible for other projects of a similar size to run similar out-of-hours as an add-on to an existing daytime service.

On the other hand, the pilot has provided evidence of an unmet need for out-of-hours support for young runaways in crisis. The monitoring data gathered throughout the operation of the scheme indicated that out of an average of around 13 calls received per month, around three calls per month fitted the original criteria (i.e. young people in emergency or crisis situations). As anticipated in the initial conception of the scheme, in these situations an intervention was urgently needed and the project was able to undertake significant work which ensured the young person's immediate safety.

Given these two contrasting conclusions, the key question remains as to how this kind of emergency service might best be provided to young people and families. Alternatives include local statutory services, a stand-alone out-of-hours local crisis service for young people, or a national telephone

helpline. The evaluation cannot provide a definitive answer to this question but has something to say about the relative merits of each option.

The first option, local statutory services (EDT and police), has the advantage of local knowledge and in many cases prior involvement with specific young people. However, the evaluation, and previous research, has raised questions about the capacity of such services to meet the needs of older young people in crisis and also about whether young people will always be willing to turn to these services for help.

The second option – a local stand-alone crisis service for young people – could meet the needs of a wider target group than young runaways and would again have the advantage of local knowledge, but would potentially require a high level of resources.

The third option – creating a link to a national telephone helpline – is one which the project turned to after the end of the out-of-hours pilot. The advantages of this are independence and accessibility, but there will be limitations in terms of relationships of trust with young people and local knowledge and links.

In conclusion, the pilot project described in this report is an important step in exploring the emergency needs of young runaways. It has produced valuable evidence regarding the level and nature of these needs, and has highlighted some of the challenges inherent in providing a service to young people in these situations. This evidence offers a foundation for further piloting of alternative forms of provision in order to develop best practice in providing emergency out-of-hours support to young runaways.