

Pass the parcel

Children posted around the care system

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Summary

“I feel like a parcel getting moved around all the time, getting opened up and sent back and moved on to somewhere else.” - Teenage girl, in care over 100 miles from home

There are over 30,000 looked after children living ‘out of area’¹ in England. This is 41% of all children in care² and has risen by 13% since 2014. Over 11,000 of these children are more than 20 miles from what they would call home, with over 2,000 further than a hundred miles away.

This happens for a number of reasons. It may be that children need to be kept safe from criminal gangs or sexual predators who pose a serious threat to them. Often, however, it is simply because there is nowhere suitable for them to live locally. Numbers of older children going into care have risen year on year³ leaving cash-strapped local authorities without enough places for them to live. Many children therefore end up going to live in children’s homes run by private companies, often operating in cheaper and less ‘desirable’ parts of the country.

Children living far away are likely to have more complicated and fragmented histories. They are more likely to be older children, more likely to be living in children’s homes than children placed in their local areas, and more likely to have experienced multiple moves while in care. Being so far away from their hometowns can be another trauma for children who have already had difficult upbringings. More than half of children (52%) living out of their local area have special educational needs and a quarter (24%) have social, emotional and mental health identified as their primary need. These are therefore often children who struggle to process change and need routine and consistency to stay calm and content. They may take a long time to build trust with adults and feel settled, and yet this group are at risk of chronic instability at the hands of the care system.

Children living far away are also known to be at much higher risk of going missing⁴, which may well be because of this trauma. Their vulnerability also means that they are easy targets for exploitation by criminal gangs, who are expanding drugs markets through ‘county lines’ activity into semi-rural areas. As a result of this exploitation and the fact that many go missing, we hear a lot about the challenges these children pose to services: the difficulties for the police, health and education services of having a constant flux of very vulnerable children concentrated in one area. What is missing from this narrative is the experiences of those that go through this journey. We need to shine a light on the experiences of these children as victims of a system that is letting them down, not as ‘problems’ for the system.

We wanted to ask what it is like to be uprooted and placed hundreds of miles away; what does it mean for friendships and relationships with family, and how does it affect a child’s sense of belonging. These absolutely fundamental questions are not asked often enough so their answers are absent from much

¹ An out of area placement refers to any placement outside of the home local authority. This is not always a problem; out of area placements can include local placements which are in bordering local authorities. Information on how many miles children are placed away from their family homes is most helpful in understanding the nature and scale of the issue. Distinctions have also been made between out of area placements and placements ‘at a distance’, which are those in boroughs which do not share borders with the home local authority.

² Figures relate to children in care at 31st March 2018. Source for all figures is CCO analysis of 2017/18 Looked after Children Census. While detailed underlying data for March 2019 is not yet available, indications from published statistics are that there has remained a large (and increasing) number of children placed over 20 miles from home. At the 31st March 2019, 11,990 children were placed out of their local area and more than 20 miles away from their home postcode (41% of all children placed out of their area).

³ Numbers jumped by 4% between the years of 2017 to 2018 alone to 75,420. Department for Education (2018) *Statistics: Looked after children*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children>

⁴ The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2019) *No Place At Home: APPG inquiry into children missing from out of area placements*: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/appg-inquiry-into-children-missing-from-out-of-area-placements>

of the national discussion about children's care. To listen to children's experiences, we visited fifteen children's homes across England, wherever children were being placed - the small towns, the rural areas, the coastal towns – to ask them about their lives. While some children were thriving in their new homes, many were discontented and felt a sense of injustice about how they had been treated.

These are the 10 things children wanted us to know:

1. They are moving home far too often. We heard teens casually talking about having to move home 10, 11 or even 15 times (numbers which we know can go much higher). We found that over half of children placed out of area have 2 or more moves within 2 years.
2. They want to feel like 'normal' children, but they often do not. Sometimes this is because they are living in a children's home, something that is more common for out of area children (13%) than those placed locally (5%). At other times it is because they are put in different schools from 'normal' children.

"You lose everything being in care. You don't get the same things you get as a normal kid."

- 14 year old girl

3. They feel isolated and often do not see loved ones enough. Some children find the distance between where they live and their loved ones extremely isolating and saddening. Friendships are often side-lined as contact with families has to take priority. When we visited some were in the dark about whether they would get to see their families at Christmas.

"I feel isolated, I don't even know where I am. We're not even trusted to go to the shops. You feel like you have no one." - 14 year old girl

4. They feel they have no voice, no choice and no freedom. A sense of powerlessness came through in our conversations, from children who had no choice over where they were placed, no choice over the type of placement, and no say about how long they stayed for. Many feel stifled by the curbs on their freedom which they perceive as excessive in comparison to other children their age.

"No one listens to us because we're just kids." - 15 year old boy

5. Some children believe that being placed in these children's homes far from an area or place they know is a form of punishment for past misdemeanours. Like children in youth custody, they are often counting down the time they are forced to spend in these homes, often to find assurances about returning home are not lived up to.
6. They don't feel social workers are there for them. They told us that they find social workers largely unreliable and unresponsive to their wishes and feelings. Almost all have experienced a change in social worker, which is more likely to occur when a child is placed out of their area. There is also confusion about the role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and advocates and how they can help.

"My social worker just dumped me here and drove off." - 14 year old girl

7. They are often waiting weeks and months for school after moving homes, leaving them bored and frustrated. Mid-year school moves are more common for those living out of their area, disrupting friendships and teacher relationships. Some have home tuition but this is not

comparable to a full school day.

“It’s boring being inside all the time.” - 14 year old girl

8. Some children in desperate need of therapy are not getting it or are not having it regularly enough. Some areas have long CAMHS waiting lists which children lost their place on when they were moved, sending them to the back of another long queue. In certain cases, this delays children transitioning back to their families or home areas.

“I’ve been waiting for therapy for a year now. It destroys you inside.” – 15 year old girl

9. These complaints are not universal. Some young people recognise the advantages of being placed away from home. These children told us they did not necessarily like the decisions made about them but they could see that the distance had helped them.

“I thought it would be boring but everything has gone really well, better than I expected.”

- 14 year old boy

10. Some children are getting the right help although this appears more common among younger children. On our visits, these children shared positive stories about their lives in care and their relationships with the staff members supporting them, as well as other residents. Homes appeared homely and children spoke enthusiastically about new activities and hobbies they had taken up.

What needs to be done

The Children's Commissioner believes that too many children in care are sent far away from loved ones to unfamiliar places around the country and moved too frequently. The state is the parent to these children. It can and must do better. The Children's Commissioner is recommending:

1. That the Government makes children in care outside of their local areas a specific subject in its upcoming review of the care system, which was outlined in its election manifesto. The review should look at how greater weight can be given to these children's long-term emotional needs, in addition to their immediate safety, and how children can meaningfully contribute to decisions made about them.
2. The Department for Education should:
 - a. Urgently review the current proficiency of the residential care market for children in conjunction with a cross-departmental working group which the Children's Commissioner is convening to address the state of children's residential care.
 - b. Provide a capital injection for future commissioning arrangements and consider financial incentives for local authorities which place children locally.
 - c. Ensure that children can easily relay their views and wishes about their care arrangements by: reviewing and strengthening guidance relating to terminating care placements; placing greater requirements on Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to visit and make contact with children when they are placed out of their local areas and ahead of moving between homes; placing greater requirements on advocacy services so that children are allocated a named 'reserve advocate' as soon as they are placed away from their home areas; better incorporating the voices of children's home staff who know children well into decisions about moving.
 - d. Update guidance for the training and development of staff in children's homes – particularly in relation to children's mental health – so that a focus on children's immediate safety does not compromise their emotional wellbeing.⁵
 - e. Ensure that its review of the role of virtual school heads looks at education processes in response to out of area placements. This review, which is already in progress, should consider: how virtual school heads can have a greater role in placement decisions; giving local authorities powers to direct academy schools to admit children placed away from their home areas; how delays in school transfers can be minimised for these children, especially unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and children with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, including how admissions processes can be simplified; how children can be kept in mainstream schools as far as possible.
 - f. Ensure that children placed out of their local areas are eligible for leaving care support from their home local authorities when they leave care, regardless of how long they were placed outside of the area for. This support should include council tax exemption and facilitated access to local housing, in either their home local authority or the local

⁵ Current requirements are that staff have a Level 3 Diploma or equivalent: *The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015*, Part 4, Regulation 32: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/541/regulation/32/made> Recent research however suggests that more training is needed: Department for Education (2018) *Children's homes research: phase 3*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/689446/Children_s_Homes_Phase_3_Research.pdf

authority they were placed in.

- g. Together with the NHS publish a protocol focusing on the mental health of children in care. This should include plans for a targeted programme of CAMHS support for children in care and plans to ensure that automatic transfer of children on CAMHS and other health-related waiting lists is implemented so that moving to a new home does not affect access to support.
- 3. Ofsted should ensure that its inspections of local authority children's services effectively capture the experiences of children living away from their hometowns.

Introduction

Children entering the care system today are having to live further away from their hometowns and loved ones than ever before. We found that:

- > 41% of all children in care at 31st March 2017/18 in England are living 'out of area'.
- > Of this group, 40% (11,352 children) are living more than 20 miles from their home postcode.
- > 2,075 of these children are over 100 miles away and 963 are over 150 miles away. This is up 20% on 2014 and accounts for around 3% of all children in care.
- > The number of children living out of their area has risen by 13% since 2014, meaning that the most vulnerable children in our society are increasingly disconnected from their support networks, often without advance warning and preparation.
- > Particular areas take on disproportionate numbers of children from other areas. For example, for every one child Kent and Lincolnshire placed out of their area in 2017/18 they have 4.1 and 4.6 children placed in their area by other local authorities.
- > The three local authorities that place most children out of their areas per child placed in their areas from other local authorities are Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham and Tower Hamlets – all London boroughs.

These children are more likely to:

- > Be older than those cared for locally. 50% of those living out of their local areas are aged 13+ compared to 42% of other children in care.
- > Live in a children's home (13%) than children living within their local authority (5%).
- > Be unaccompanied asylum-seeking children – 7% of children placed outside of their local areas are UASC.

The obvious concern is that distance creates obstacles in meeting a child's needs, both practically and emotionally. This report deconstructs the ways children can be affected. Perhaps less glaring, but equally important, is the fact that distance is inherently destabilising for children. Children who spend any time out of area have notably higher rates of placement instability, with over half (52%) having 2 or more changes within 2 years, compared with a quarter (23%) of those who stayed in their local area⁶. This suggests a pattern or cycle that some children get sucked into, characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty. This is unsurprising given moving home involves change and loss on many levels, and requires children to draw on resilience which has often been depleted by moving.

The Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities to secure suitable accommodation within their area (22G) and as far as possible allow children to live near to home (22C). Guidance also makes allowances for circumstances when this might not be possible⁷, such as children with complex needs that cannot be met by local services, and for times when out of area placements might be necessary from a safeguarding perspective (for example to protect a child from exploitation). These grounds often inform placement planning decisions, however decision-making is now beholden to even stronger forces. In many areas, local placements are scant; a consequence of local authorities being squeezed by drastic funding cuts, affecting their ability to commission critical care services. They cannot match the level of need and are unable to cope with the rising numbers of older children going into care. Local authorities have become reliant on private care providers which operate in cheaper regions and rarely

⁶ This relates to the cohort of 6,457 children that had a care entry in the period between April and September 2016 and are still in care at the 31st March 2018, where both placement and social worker histories were recorded. This cohort approach is used so that the children analysed have been in care for the same amount of time.

⁷ Department for Education, *Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 2: care planning, placement and case review* (2015): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-care-planning-placement-and-case-review>

prioritise local children. This means that children – and particularly older children - are pushed away from home not because it is best for them, but because there is nowhere else for them to go.

These institutional challenges are familiar to those working in and around children's care, yet in grappling with this systemic crisis there is a risk that the impact on children's lives is being overlooked. To know what it feels like for a child living out of area, the Children's Commissioner's Office conducted visits to fifteen children's homes across England under the Commissioner's statutory powers (Section 2E, Children Act 2004). We visited children's homes in four different regions of the country to see how the experiences of young people varied. In these settings, we collected the views of children and young people, to learn the intricacies of their reality and what matters most to them.

In having these conversations, we remained mindful that we were only hearing one side of the story. We recognise the complexities involved in care and that decisions along this road are not made lightly. We also accept that acting in a child's best interests sometimes involves making challenging decisions which may be unpopular. However, we do not see these as reasons to dilute the voices of the children and young people affected. Children feel the way they do even if the decision to move them away was done with the best intentions to keep them safe, and they need to know that these feelings are valid.

Just wanting to feel normal

“I miss the normality of my old life” ... “Care was made out to be a fairyland” ... “You lose everything being in care. You don’t get the same things you get as a normal kid, you have to arrange to do everything.” - Teenage girl

Children in care outside of their local areas are more likely to be in a children’s home or residential care⁸, and therefore living in a place which lacks the family composition of a foster home. While children’s homes we visited were, on the whole, deeply invested in creating a homely atmosphere for their young people, some children remained acutely aware of their institutional surroundings. One young person requested that her friends only had contact with a handful of staff-members, to project a traditional family image to his peer group. She scolded staff for talking about the ‘office’ when her friends were in earshot.

In our conversations with children, the word ‘normal’ cropped up again and again. Children told us they were desperate to feel normal and not be marked out as a looked after child. While this sentiment holds true for many children in care, being moved out of their local area sometimes exacerbated feelings of abnormality due to the practicalities of where they were. One clear example is the emergence of schools which are owned by private children’s home providers. These are schools which have been set up to meet the education needs of the influx of children coming into certain areas, often with complex needs. Some children cannot transfer schools easily when they move and may therefore be expected to attend a school run by the children’s home rather than spend time out of school. Typically, these schools have a small number of students, which means children may end up in classes all by themselves or have lessons alongside other children of different ages and abilities. This was an unwelcome environment for a few young people who were used to big, busy schools with lots of opportunities to make friends. Children told us they also felt exposed by attending a school with the same name as their care provider, and embarrassed to tell others where they went to school. As one young person simply put it, “I don’t want everyone knowing I’m in care”.

“What school mixes 11 year olds with 16 year olds?” ... “It doesn’t feel like a normal school, it doesn’t look like a normal school. All the doors have locks on them, they lock people in.”

- Teenage girl

These schools can be the right fit for some pupils and can also prevent delays in these children accessing education. The extension of children’s homes into this domain however leaves some children without a healthy distinction between home life and school life. Children could find this setup oppressive, in contrast to their previous lives where school was a haven from home, and a place where they could build a new narrative for themselves.

“Personally I don’t feel normal when I’m in school. We’re treated like there’s something wrong with us because we’re in care. I’ve never been treated like that before in my whole life, even by my parents.” - Teenage girl

⁸ Residential care homes, health providers and residential schools.

Feeling isolated and not seeing loved ones

For many children, being placed away from their hometowns made it much harder for them to keep in touch with family and friends, with those furthest away having the least contact. “You lose everything being in care”, according to a young person placed 8 hours from home, who had not seen her mum for 3 months. In this case, the distance was a clear obstacle for the children’s home and social care teams, which have to coordinate contact arrangements. Children also told us that long distances could be a disincentive for family members who might otherwise want to visit. Uncertainty meant that children were already worrying about Christmas when we visited in early October, as they had no guarantees when they would see their loved ones.

“I’ve asked multiple times to see my mum but it hasn’t happened.” - Teenage girl, in care over 250 miles from home

Most children and young people we spoke to were seeing family on a fairly regular basis, but for some this meant travelling excessive distances via public transport – 6 hours every weekend, for example, often all in one day. This is not how they wanted to be spending their free time. These distances were especially distressing for children who travelled all the way back, only for family members to cancel or not turn up. It was usually the case that children did the travelling back and forth, not parents or relatives.

Seeing friends also appeared to fall by the wayside, when time available for contact was limited, and contact with family took priority. The vast majority of children and young people we spoke to said that they are not in contact with their friends anymore, and this made them sad. While some young people were allowed mobile phones to keep in touch with friends, many were not, for their own safety. This often meant that young people could only talk to loved ones in a supervised setting, with phone conversations on loudspeaker for staff to monitor. Young people hated this intrusion and feel this stopped them from being able to express themselves.

“I feel isolated, I don’t even know where I am. We’re not even trusted to go to the shops. You feel like you have no one.” - Teenage girl

The Children Act 1989 identifies contact as a child’s right and places a duty on Local Authorities to promote contact. This legislation stems from a recognition of relationships and their fundamental importance in relation to identity and happiness. From a therapeutic perspective, positive contact can enable children to process abuse or neglect they experienced and move forwards with their lives. For children and young people, it was first and foremost about missing the people they love. This void was amplified by being in an unfamiliar place which was alien to them in many ways. Young people said they felt isolated and alone, and unsettled by the otherness of where they were – it was “too quiet”, there were “lots of old people here”, and “only seagulls”, “fields” or “sheep”.

“I don’t even know where I am on the map.” - Teenage girl

“I’d never heard of this area.” - Teenage boy

It was not uncommon for children to view their situation as a punishment, or to perceive contact as a reward for being ‘good’. These comments suggested that some children were rationalising their circumstances in worrying ways, by blaming themselves and internalising responsibility. These comments give us a glimpse into the complex emotional processing going on for children trying to make sense of their lives; processing which might often be left unspoken.

No voice, choice or freedom

Young people overwhelmingly felt they had little or no say in decisions made about them, especially where they ended up living. Most had no idea how they came to be where they were. Counterintuitively, older children appeared to receive less information and have less choice over where they lived than younger children. Social workers often have the difficult task of taking children and young people to placements where they may not want to go, without the safety net of alternative placement options should the young person refuse to go. This can put social workers in difficult situations when it comes to honest information sharing. Young people consequently spoke about being lied to and misled by social workers – such as being told they were going to foster care when they were actually going to a children's home.

“No one listens to us because we’re just kids.” - Teenage boy

“My social worker told me I was going into foster care in my hometown then she drove me here and it’s a children’s home and it’s hours away. I said I didn’t want to be in a home.” - Teenage girl

“They don’t tell you nothing. They tell you something totally different from what’s actually happening.” - Teenage girl

In addition to not having their voices meaningfully heard, most of the children were frustrated by the physical limitations imposed by children's homes, which are typically in rural or suburban areas. Many had grown up in inner city areas where they took public transport by themselves and had enjoyed a level of independence. They have therefore struggled to adapt to life in remote settings, where they often have to rely on staff to drive them places. Being bored and having nothing to do were common complaints. Remote settings are often chosen to safeguard young people from risks such as going missing or being exposed to CSE and CCE risks. Some children were vocal about not feeling safer despite these protections, with one explicitly saying she felt “more vulnerable to dangerous behaviours”.

Children often connected mental health difficulties with having no freedom and feeling ‘not trusted’ by adults. One child described a vicious circle, whereby being honest about her mental health led to more restrictions on her liberty. This young person pretended she felt better so that she could she gain her independence, making her true thoughts and feelings taboo (“I can’t be who I am”).

“The first time I touched drugs or anything when I was in care. So many of my friends have turned to drugs.” - Teenage girl

“I have to hide my emotions to have the freedom I want” ... “I can’t be who I am, everything is restricted.” - Teenage girl

Gaining the wishes and feelings of children is a central part of the job description for social workers and IROs. While there is clearly dialogue between children and their social workers, young people sometimes feel that responses given to them are vague or meaningless. With regard to moving closer to home, for example, one young person was told he is “not ready yet” but given no more advice on when this time might be. Almost all children were hoping to move closer to home in future, and it was common to hear their plans expressed as a term of internment – “if I’m good it will only be for a few months” and “I need to work on myself”. This ambiguity translated into false hopes for the young person who said “they told me this was temporary, that was three years ago”. Others were apathetic and resigned to a fate determined by others.

Social workers not being there

Almost all the children we spoke with had experienced a change of social worker, sometimes explicitly because travel from their home local authority was too complicated and time-consuming. Most young people felt at best let down and at worst abandoned by their social workers. This was because they rarely visited, were hard to get hold of via phone, and made promises that were not kept. We heard about important visits being made by unknown duty social workers rather than the allocated social worker, which added to children's feelings of being "dumped" and forgotten about.

"My social worker just dumped me here and drove off." - Teenage girl

"I have the most shockingest social worker ever. She's supposed to call me every week but don't. She said she's trying to find somewhere closer [to home] but it's taking forever." - Teenage boy

Our data supports these complaints. Social worker changes are more likely to occur when a child is placed out of area, with three quarters (72%) of children placed out of area (for any length of time) experiencing multiple changes of social worker over the 2-year period we analysed compared to 69% of those staying in their home LA⁹. Social worker changes are also more likely to happen (65%) during the time that they were out of area, illustrating the problems with maintaining this relationship across a distance. Social workers of course have demanding caseloads and extensive paperwork, especially at moments when children transition into care. It is, however, important to acknowledge that children are experiencing these actions (or lack of) on a very personal level; the competing demands on a social worker's time are irrelevant to them.

"Social workers change, they never hand stuff over." - Teenage boy

"Social workers just leave; leave and never see me again." - Teenage girl

Our work also highlighted how difficult it is for many children to get help from IROs and advocates¹⁰ who have responsibilities to uphold children's views about their care plans and intervene on their behalf. Children and young people usually expressed confusion about these professionals and their role. One felt that it was too little, too late: an advocate "might have helped 2 years ago but not now". Another had not had a Looked After Child review¹¹ despite being there for almost 3 months. Our findings reflect what children tell us via our Help at Hand advice line about hardly ever being visited by their allocated social workers, and often having never met their IROs ("Who is that?" is a regular remark). This was also noted in Ofsted research conducted in 2014 which found that IROs rarely engaged with children between reviews or acted to challenge drift or delay.¹²

⁹ Our analysis relates to the cohort of 6,457 children that had a care entry in the period between April and September 2016 and are still in care at the 31st March 2018, where both placement and social worker histories were recorded. This cohort approach is used so that the children analysed have been in care for the same amount of time.

¹⁰ It is the responsibility of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to oversee children's care plans and act on behalf of children in challenging the Local Authority, if the plan is not being properly implemented. Advocates are additional independent professionals who can intervene to promote children's rights.

¹¹ A LAC review is a meeting involving everyone concerned with the child and their care plan. It is a legal requirement for any child in care and is chaired by an IRO.

¹² Ofsted (2014) *From a distance: looked after children living away from their home area*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/looked-after-children-living-away-from-their-home-area-from-a-distance>

Distance can also present problems with coordinating professional networks (from social care, education, health, and police for example) which are spread across the country. One child who had suffered serious abuse was denied counselling until the culmination of a police investigation, despite desperately wanting and needing this support. She knew that therapy had been put on hold, without clarity on who decided this or how, leaving her in limbo for an indefinite period, waiting for the investigation to end.¹³

¹³ Guidance on pre-trial therapy is out of date and the publication of new guidance is delayed.

Waiting for school, waiting for therapy

“I love school, it gets me out of here [the children’s home].” - Teenage girl

We spoke to children during September and October and many of them had no school place for the beginning of the school year. This was a common occurrence for older children, a number of whom were stuck waiting for decisions from professionals. This waiting game could last weeks or months, despite statutory duties to prioritise education, and in the case of emergency placements to secure suitable education within 20 school days.¹⁴ Virtual School professionals responsible for managing education plans for looked after children informed us that when children are placed outside of their local area it can contribute to delays because different areas have different application procedures to be understood and navigated. We were advised that children with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans¹⁵ usually suffer further setbacks because their applications must go via Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) teams and because schools take time to assess whether they can meet children’s needs.

“I want my education but I don’t feel I’m getting what I need.” - Teenage girl

“It’s boring being inside all the time.” - Teenage girl

Some young people had home tuition as an interim solution, but this usually amounted to just a few hours, so was not equivalent to a full school day. While some students welcomed the one-to-one support, others felt stifled by learning and living under the same roof. They longed for the social life that school brings and were scared of falling behind, but felt they had no control over the situation.

Unsurprisingly, the data confirms that mid-year school moves are notably more common amongst those spending any time in an out of area placement. 43% of those who had any time in an out of area placement during the two year period we looked at had a mid-year school move, compared to 31% of those who stayed locally. 5% (140 children) of this out of area group missed a term of school or more, compared to 2% of those staying in their home local authority.

Children’s access to therapeutic support was hit and miss, and dependent on support offered by the children’s home, as well as the local provision. We heard about children losing their places on CAMHS waiting lists when they were moved into new areas, which if correct would mean that some of the most vulnerable children are repeatedly slipping through the net. This was not just an issue for children once they were in children’s homes away from home. We repeatedly heard from children who were on CAMHS waiting lists when they were taken into residential care (either from foster care or living with relatives). Though it is not possible to know whether this is actually the case, many of these children felt they would have been able to stay where they were in their local communities if they had been able to get the mental health support they needed.

“I’ve been waiting for therapy for a year now. It destroys you inside.” - Teenage girl

¹⁴ Department for Education (2018) *Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>

¹⁵ An EHC plan or ‘EHCP’ is a legal document that describes a child or young person’s special educational, health and social care needs.

“Two times a month [CAMHS appointments] is not enough.” - Teenage girl

Ofsted found that deficits in existing local provision, poor liaison between local authorities and CCGs, and funding disputes all contributed to children not getting the support they need.¹⁶ There is also the strain on mental health services in areas which have high numbers of looked after children, especially in pockets where private providers have invested in a cluster of homes. Delays in mental health provision were not only leaving young people to suffer alone but leaving them to develop their own coping strategies. One child said she saw no point in unpacking when she was moved somewhere new; a response to uncertainty and decisions being made beyond her control. Delays also damage children’s prospects of being rehabilitated back into the care of family members, as therapeutic intervention is often a measuring stick for progress. Thinking back to those children who are waiting to return home or to their local areas, these setbacks are needless months that children waste in places they do not want to be (and at great financial cost to the state).

“I never unpack cos I know I’ll be passed on somewhere else in a few weeks” ... “I feel like a statue. I can’t speak, I can’t do anything.” - Teenage girl

When services for children are unavailable or insufficient, it falls to children’s home staff to make up this deficit. We saw numerous examples of good practice and strong bonds between staff and children, which no doubt are having transformative effects on children’s lives and development. We met dedicated managers who supported children beyond the confines of their working day and who took special efforts to support children post-18, because the after-care package was not good enough. Given the vital role that managers have, especially in the current climate, there was appetite for further support at this level to ensure high quality training, professional development and access to specialist support. This could also guard against high staff turnover, which was flagged as an issue in some areas, and reduce the number of people that children have to get to know and trust.

Happy homes

We heard many positive stories and experiences on our visits. There were children who liked their surroundings and were keen to tell us about all the new hobbies they had taken up. There were children in schools they loved, receiving regular therapy and in the final stages of being rehabilitated back to their hometowns.

“It’s been good to learn new stuff.” - 11 year old boy

We observed homely environments with child-led interior design and pictures of children on the walls. We saw staff and children eating together and heard about joint-cooking ventures and holidays. Often, children and young people identified staff members and other residents as the best aspects of their placement, which showed that careful thought was going into the matching process.

For younger children, it was usually the case that they visited the setting in advance of moving to live there, and some older children were also afforded this opportunity. One young person explained that he was taken by his social worker to visit two places in different areas, which he was then able to choose between.

“I thought it would be boring but everything has gone really well, better than I expected.” - Teenage boy

¹⁶ Ofsted (2014) *From a distance: looked after children living away from their home area*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/looked-after-children-living-away-from-their-home-area-from-a-distance>

We even heard positive accounts from young people who disagreed with being placed out of area, but were able to see some of the benefits it brought. One spoke about it helping him “clear his head” and noticed that his “life has calmed down” because there was “drama” back home.

The instability problem

Children talked about placements in many different parts of the country, which in some cases were hundreds of miles from the previous one and hundreds of miles from home. When children placed outside of their areas moved, 62% of the time they moved to another home outside of their area during the two year period we looked at. This gives us a glimpse of the sharp end of the problem – a group of children who are caught in a spiral of placement breakdowns and unable to get a foothold at all.

“I feel like a parcel getting moved around all the time, getting opened up and sent back and moved on to somewhere else.” - Teenage girl

It is difficult to know whether children living outside of their local area suffer more transitions to their care because they have more complex needs to begin with, or because of the difficulties these care arrangements bring. Certainly, instability is also tied to bigger cracks within the system, one of which is funding. Children’s home staff told us that they sometimes had to fight to keep children in their homes, against pressure from local authorities to move children to cheaper settings. For younger children this could be foster care, and for older children this was more likely to be an unregulated placement. This risks disrupting children’s progress and undermining all the investment put into them, if they are moved away once they begin to stabilise.

It is also important to recognise that the challenges associated with being placed outside their home areas do not stop when a child turns 18. Through our own Help at Hand helpline service for children living away from home, we have been contacted by care leavers who have been denied support and housing they are entitled to from their home local authorities because they were placed out of area as a child and consequently lost their local connection. Others wanted to stay in the area they were placed in, but were only eligible for priority housing in the area they grew up in, so were effectively forced to return.¹⁷ These children are victims of a system which sends them out of area, abdicates responsibility on the grounds of distance, and then actively penalises children placed out of area, even when children had no choice over their placement location.

¹⁷ The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 extended provision for care leavers who had been placed out of their local areas, but only if they had lived in another area for 2 years, including some time before they turned 16: Gov.uk (2018) *Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities*: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/overview-of-the-homelessness-legislation>

Conclusion

This year marks 30 years since the Children Act 1989, legislation that promoted a “sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging” for children in care.¹⁸ This is far from the current reality for many. In placing children outside of their local areas, efforts to ensure the immediate safety of children can mean that other fundamental rights are neglected – rights to education, health care, and a stable home for example. We have to question whether this care is effectively preparing children for adulthood, and ultimately whether it is a successful safeguarding solution for children, when many go missing or plan to return home as soon as they can.

Immediate action needs to be taken to protect the rights of children who have been disadvantaged by being sent long distances from home, but above all, a fundamental review is required to look at repairing a broken system. It has to be recognised that serious investment and reform of local commissioning models is needed, rather than a piecemeal approach which genuinely risks children’s welfare and leads children to distrust the very professionals there to help them.

Our recommendations

1. That the Government makes children in care outside of their local areas a specific subject in its upcoming review of the care system, which was outlined in its election manifesto. The review should look at how greater weight can be given to these children’s long-term emotional needs, in addition to their immediate safety, and how children can meaningfully contribute to decisions made about them.
2. The Department for Education should:
 - a. Urgently review the current proficiency of the residential care market for children in conjunction with a cross-departmental working group which the Children’s Commissioner is convening to address the state of children’s residential care.
 - b. Provide a capital injection for future commissioning arrangements and consider financial incentives for local authorities which place children locally.
 - c. Ensure that children can easily relay their views and wishes about their care arrangements by: reviewing and strengthening guidance relating to terminating care placements; placing greater requirements on Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to visit and make contact with children when they are placed out of their local areas and ahead of moving between homes; placing greater requirements on advocacy services so that children are allocated a named ‘reserve advocate’ as soon as they are placed away from their home areas; better incorporating the voices of children’s home staff who know children well into decisions about moving.
 - d. Update guidance for the training and development of staff in children’s homes – particularly in relation to children’s mental health – so that a focus on children’s immediate safety does not compromise their emotional wellbeing.
 - e. Ensure that its review of the role of virtual school heads looks at education processes in response to out of area placements. This review, which is already in progress, should consider: how virtual school heads can have a greater role in placement decisions; giving local authorities powers to direct academy schools to admit children placed away from their home areas; how delays in school transfers can be minimised for these

¹⁸ The Department for Education (2015) *Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 2: care planning, placement and case review*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-care-planning-placement-and-case-review>

children, especially unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and children with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, including how admissions processes can be simplified; how children can be kept in mainstream schools as far as possible.

- f. Ensure that children placed out of their local areas are eligible for leaving care support from their home local authorities when they leave care, regardless of how long they were placed outside of the area for. This support should include council tax exemption and facilitated access to local housing, in either their home local authority or the local authority they were placed in.
 - g. Together with the NHS publish a protocol focusing on the mental health of children in care. This should include plans for a targeted programme of CAMHS support for children in care and plans to ensure that automatic transfer of children on CAMHS and other health-related waiting lists is implemented so that moving to a new home does not affect access to support.
3. Ofsted should ensure that its inspections of local authority children's services effectively capture the experiences of children living away from their hometowns.

Appendices

CLA = Children looked after

LA = Local authority

Distance from their home postcode for children placed out of their area

Distance from home postcode for children placed out of area	Number of CLA at 31st March 2014	Number of CLA at 31st March 2015	Number of CLA at 31st March 2016	Number of CLA at 31st March 2017	Number of CLA at 31st March 2018	% change 2014-2018
<= 20 miles	16096	15995	15740	15924	16697	4
21 - 50 miles	4979	5202	5430	5532	5971	20
51 - 100 miles	2837	2979	3003	3153	3306	17
101 - 150 miles	953	985	1008	1034	1112	17
>150 miles	782	791	792	882	963	23
Missing data	1576	1799	2451	2613	2691	71

Location of children placed outside of their home local authority: Neighbouring local authority vs. non-neighbouring local authority

Location of placement local authority for children placed out of area	Number of CLA at 31st March 2014	Number of CLA at 31st March 2015	Number of CLA at 31st March 2016	Number of CLA at 31st March 2017	Number of CLA at 31st March 2018	% change 2014-2018
Neighbouring LA	14898	15258	15471	15803	16436	10
Non-neighbouring LA	11284	11539	12078	12439	13298	18

Note: this excludes children placed outside of England and those where the placement local authority is missing/redacted

Regional breakdowns for children placed out their home local authority

Local authority	Number of CLA placed out of area at 31 st March 2018	Number of CLA from other LAs placed in LA at 31 st March 2018	Ratio of children placed in LA by other LAs to those placed out of area by LA
Kent	248	1147	4.6
Lincolnshire	116	475	4.1
North Yorkshire	72	281	3.9
East Riding of Yorkshire	93	289	3.1
Essex	216	609	2.8
East Sussex	99	272	2.7
Redbridge	129	354	2.7
Leicestershire	184	462	2.5
Stockport	113	282	2.5

Local authority	Number of CLA placed out of area at 31 st March 2018	Number of CLA from other LAs placed in LA at 31 st March 2018	Ratio of children placed in LA by other LAs to those placed out of area by LA
Shropshire	125	307	2.5
South Gloucestershire	73	177	2.4
West Sussex	161	361	2.2
Nottinghamshire	277	608	2.2
Staffordshire	367	804	2.2
Wigan	114	247	2.2
Durham	204	442	2.2
Lancashire	418	884	2.1
Medway	204	421	2.1
Worcestershire	205	396	1.9
North Tyneside	87	161	1.9
North Lincolnshire	49	88	1.8
Northumberland	99	177	1.8
Barnsley	97	173	1.8
Derbyshire	247	438	1.8
Devon	173	302	1.7
Isle Of Wight	45	76	1.7
Croydon	371	610	1.6
Enfield	140	226	1.6
Havering	132	206	1.6
Bexley	123	191	1.6
Rochdale	186	274	1.5
Gloucestershire	119	175	1.5
Darlington	91	131	1.4
Merton	100	143	1.4
West Berkshire	70	100	1.4
Suffolk	185	257	1.4
Cornwall	88	121	1.4
Bury	134	184	1.4
Sefton	189	259	1.4
Bedford	101	138	1.4
Bolton	155	210	1.4
Dorset	153	205	1.3
Harrow	91	120	1.3
Waltham Forest	189	248	1.3
Hampshire	510	643	1.3
Somerset	161	200	1.2
Hounslow	137	170	1.2
Hillingdon	126	156	1.2
Wokingham	59	73	1.2
Bradford	218	268	1.2
Milton Keynes	146	176	1.2
Knowsley	151	181	1.2
Warwickshire	291	342	1.2
Bracknell Forest	69	81	1.2

Local authority	Number of CLA placed out of area at 31 st March 2018	Number of CLA from other LAs placed in LA at 31 st March 2018	Ratio of children placed in LA by other LAs to those placed out of area by LA
Trafford	150	176	1.2
Halton	113	131	1.2
Calderdale	118	135	1.1
Stockton-On-Tees	163	185	1.1
Herefordshire	75	85	1.1
Brent	183	202	1.1
Northamptonshire	262	289	1.1
Walsall	287	310	1.1
Bromley	181	183	1
Telford and Wrekin	143	144	1
Poole	94	94	1
Doncaster	213	210	1
Wiltshire	166	163	1
Tameside	242	237	1
Sunderland	191	186	1
Lewisham	300	278	0.9
Birmingham	709	649	0.9
Central Bedfordshire	184	167	0.9
Wirral	198	178	0.9
Wakefield	204	181	0.9
Norfolk	261	229	0.9
Hertfordshire	301	260	0.9
Bournemouth	116	100	0.9
Ealing	201	173	0.9
Warrington	160	136	0.9
Oldham	231	193	0.8
Hartlepool	95	78	0.8
Luton	201	165	0.8
St. Helens	214	175	0.8
Leeds	363	288	0.8
Dudley	301	238	0.8
Cheshire West and Chester	204	161	0.8
Kensington and Chelsea	65	50	0.8
Cumbria	206	157	0.8
Buckinghamshire	259	192	0.7
Blackburn with Darwen	164	120	0.7
Newham	264	191	0.7
Lambeth	296	210	0.7
Sutton	153	108	0.7
Cheshire East	209	147	0.7
Gateshead	167	116	0.7
Sandwell	414	287	0.7
North Somerset	102	69	0.7
Sheffield	229	153	0.7
Cambridgeshire	347	230	0.7

Local authority	Number of CLA placed out of area at 31 st March 2018	Number of CLA from other LAs placed in LA at 31 st March 2018	Ratio of children placed in LA by other LAs to those placed out of area by LA
Wolverhampton	364	219	0.6
Surrey	463	276	0.6
Barking and Dagenham	253	150	0.6
Peterborough	216	122	0.6
North East Lincolnshire	93	52	0.6
Southend-on-Sea	147	80	0.5
Rutland	24	13	0.5
Redcar and Cleveland	141	76	0.5
Salford	242	130	0.5
Solihull	267	140	0.5
Swindon	129	65	0.5
Camden	116	58	0.5
Blackpool	247	120	0.5
Liverpool	525	253	0.5
Slough	133	64	0.5
Middlesbrough	231	110	0.5
Thurrock	183	86	0.5
Kirklees	310	144	0.5
Coventry	307	142	0.5
Kingston Upon Thames	91	42	0.5
Bath and North East Somerset	114	52	0.5
Plymouth	153	68	0.4
Windsor and Maidenhead	73	32	0.4
Torbay	153	67	0.4
Oxfordshire	240	104	0.4
South Tyneside	132	57	0.4
Barnet	212	91	0.4
Nottingham	391	167	0.4
Manchester	701	291	0.4
Bristol, City of	275	111	0.4
Stoke-On-Trent	339	136	0.4
Leicester	340	131	0.4
Rotherham	330	125	0.4
Greenwich	362	137	0.4
Portsmouth	253	94	0.4
Newcastle Upon Tyne	318	115	0.4
Haringey	322	115	0.4
Southampton	279	99	0.4
Hackney	295	100	0.3
York	80	26	0.3
Richmond Upon Thames	79	24	0.3
Wandsworth	212	61	0.3
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	248	70	0.3
Islington	230	60	0.3

Local authority	Number of CLA placed out of area at 31 st March 2018	Number of CLA from other LAs placed in LA at 31 st March 2018	Ratio of children placed in LA by other LAs to those placed out of area by LA
Derby	318	76	0.2
Reading	199	45	0.2
Brighton and Hove	250	55	0.2
Southwark	375	74	0.2
Tower Hamlets	237	35	0.1
Hammersmith and Fulham	173	25	0.1
Westminster	166	18	0.1
City of London	10	N/A	N/A



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