

BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Home for Christmas

Become's briefing on "placement" moves for children in care over the Christmas period

December 2022

About Become – Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. Our vision is that care-experienced young people have the same chances as everyone else to live happy, fulfilled lives. Our mission is to help children in care and young care leavers believe in themselves and to heal, grow and unleash their potential. We work alongside them to make the care system the best it can be.

Executive Summary

We know through our work with care-experienced children and young people that Christmas can be a particularly isolating and lonely time so our new research set out to explore how many children and young people in care are moved over the Christmas period, as such instability is likely to compound the loneliness and isolation many already feel.

Our research found that in England between 18 December 2021 and 3 January 2022 –

- **At least 1257 children in care moved homes**
- **On average, 79 children a day were moved**
- **One local authority saw 54 children moved during the Christmas period**
- **Data provided by some local authorities shows that some children in their area were moved more than once during this period**

Instability is of course an issue all year round. During 2021-2022 there were a total of 54,620 “placement changes” in England but we know that such moves over the Christmas period can be particularly difficult and increase feelings of anxiety and isolation in care experienced children.

While families across the country will be enjoying time together, young people in care are being uprooted and moved, and facing increasing uncertainty. One young person Become supports told us “Christmas (...) often reminds me that I don’t have a ‘normal’ family (..) I am reminded of how different my experience of the world is from them”

These moves can be abrupt, and not the child’s choice, which only exacerbates feelings of being unsettled and uprooted. It can also lead to children being unable to maintain relationships, to feel safe and secure, and to remain connected to the people around them. It increases their feelings that they have little agency over their lives and their futures.

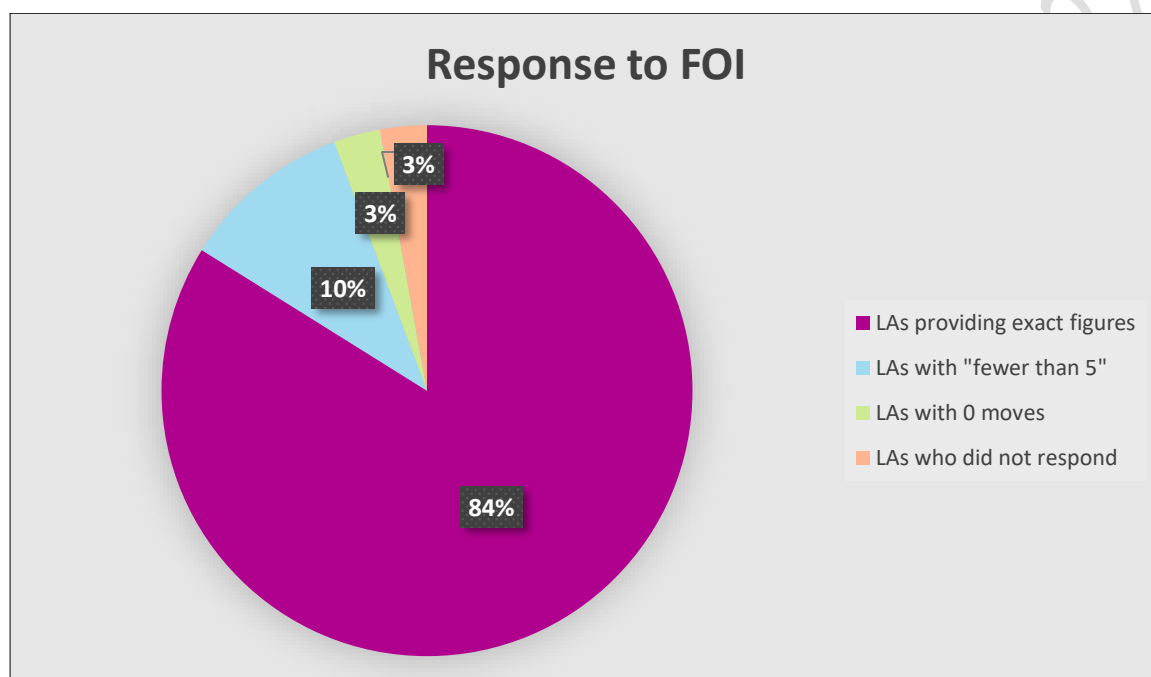
This report should be a wakeup call for Government to address the instability children in the care system are facing as a matter of urgency. As a first step, government must make a commitment to reduce the number of moves children in the care system experience and provide the necessary additional funding to boost the number of children’s homes in areas that need them, and to invest in recruiting more foster carers, particularly for those children who are currently not well served by the system.

Methodology

We sent a freedom of information request on the 29 September 2022 to all 151¹ local authorities in England, which asked:

“how many children in care, for which you are the corporate parent, moved placements between 18 December 2021 and 3 January 2022”

In total, we received responses from 145 local authorities (a response rate of 96%)



22 local authorities gave a figure of ‘fewer than five’ (as they said that disclosing the number could lead to identification of individuals). For each of those local authorities we have counted that as one young person, although the actual number may be higher.

The full data breakdown across local authorities is on pages 8 - 12

Key findings

More than 1,257 children and young people were moved over the 16-day Christmas period from 18 December 2021 to 3 January 2022.

Some local authorities reported a higher number of moves than children, meaning some children had been moved more than once in that 16 day period.

The instability faced at Christmas is a reflection of the annual picture. In 2021/22, 10% of all children in the care system were moved three or more times (8, 030 children in total), with almost a third of all children in care (31%) moved two or more times. ⁱⁱ

There were a total of 54,620 “placement” changes in England, an average of 150/day, but we know that such moves over the Christmas period can be particularly difficult and increase feelings of anxiety and isolation in care experienced children.

“In some ways I am looking forward to being free from home and feeling safe, but by the time Christmas arrives I will have moved into my fourth home within the space of eight months...I’m scared that the host family I will have moved to won’t want to spend their day with me because they might not class me as ‘family’” ⁱⁱⁱ

There is some variation between local authorities in terms of the absolute number of children moved during the Christmas period, but to some degree this reflects differences in the total number of children in care in a local area. It is harder to make a clear comparison about the proportion of children being moved in an area, due to data limitations. However, the data available suggests that there is also some variance between local authorities in the proportion of children being moved at Christmas.

We have included the full data breakdown by local authority on pages 8 - 12

Over the Christmas period in 2021 -2022, on average **79** children in England were moved per day

31% of children in care in England were moved two or more times in 2021/22

The impact of moving for children

Whilst there can be valid reasons for children being moved and this can be done in a child's best interests, too often moves can be due to a lack of suitable places being available, poor planning or unsuitable matching or places. Moving can create huge instability and insecurity for children in the care system.^{iv} It can make them feel as though they have no agency over their lives, and that their lives, relationships and connections can be uprooted at any time.

It means being forced to create new relationships, routines and adapt to a new home, community and potentially a new school and can lead to children being separated or disconnected from the people, places and things that are most important to them – this could include friends, family, professionals, community, schools, hobbies or interests.

In many cases, moves can be abrupt and lead to children feeling uprooted and unsettled. Quite often, the move is not primarily the choice of the child, which can lead children to feel like they shouldn't get too settled or form relationships as they may be moved and uprooted again.

Importantly, moving home – and particularly regular moves or moves far away from their home area - can make it difficult for children to develop and maintain the trusting and loving relationships that they need. It can impact negatively on their mental health and wellbeing; and can exacerbate trauma or adversity that they experienced before entering the care

Sometimes a move will be positive, moving a child to a more suitable or longer term home and in the run up to Christmas, social workers may be going the extra mile to get a child into a good home in time for Christmas.

But moving home at Christmas can also be particularly difficult for children in care, compared to other times of the year. This is partly due to the symbolism that Christmas represents family time; and the comparison that brings with the upheaval and instability that they are facing, and potentially the separation from their family or the people that matter most to them.

“Christmas (...) often reminds me that I don't have a 'normal' family (..) I am reminded of how different my experience of the world is from them”

We also know from our work with young people that moving over Christmas can present particular practical challenges. Whilst all local authorities will have staff that are supporting children in care over the Christmas and bank holidays, including on Christmas day itself, regular services are less likely to be available. With schools closed, children won't have the same distractions, and contact with their existing network of friends through school may be more limited. If they are feeling low it can be harder to access professional support.

Reasons children are moved

Children can be moved for a range of reasons, sometimes complex, however moves are often the result of “placements” breaking down or no longer being able to meet the needs of the child. This is particularly an issue for older children and it is estimated that around half of teenage “placements” break down before the young person reaches 18^v

The Christmas period can be a time of additional pressure for many families and we know from the young people we work with that it can bring anxiety and stress and have a particular emotional impact on them. The added stress brought about by this period may be a factor in relationships, and so “placements” breaking down.

Sometimes an emergency move might be necessary for example to protect a child from sexual exploitation or gang involvement.^{vi} Other factors for moves can include concerns about the standard of care, child protection concerns, or the closure of care settings, such as children’s homes, although this is not common and represents about 4% of moves in total.^{vii} In a small proportion of cases (3.7% in 2022), the move was because the child had requested that the “placement” ended.^{viii}

Older children, those in secure/specialist residential, and children’s homes and those with social emotional and mental health needs are more likely to experience multiple moves than other children.^{ix}

Generally, it is better for children to be moved if the home is unable to meet their needs. However, this highlights a major issue in the system – a lack of suitable places for children to live means that too often children are being placed in homes that are not a good match for them. This might be because the home is unable to meet all their needs or it is not in their local area. In 2022, in at least 21% of “placements” children were placed more than 20 miles away from home.^x

Recommendations

We need ambitious, urgent and sustainable change to the care system to ensure that all children in care experience the stability they need to heal and thrive. This means ending the experiences of children being moved from home to home, or from school to school, being placed away from siblings or miles away from home – unless it is in the child’s best interests.

It is crucial that the Government’s response to the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Report includes commitments to:

- Ensure that more children are moved to homes that are suitable for them to begin with, in an appropriate location and which meet all of their needs by:
 - Recruiting more foster carers, (including those that are able to care for children not currently well served by the system - older teenagers, unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), children from ethnic minority backgrounds, siblings, and those with social emotional and mental health needs) and improving the foster care matching system;
 - Providing additional investment to boost the number of children’s homes that are run by local authorities or the voluntary sector, in the areas that need more homes.
- Setting a national commitment or target to reduce the number of “placement moves” children in the care system experience, and to monitor and report on this; and
- Increasing accountability for local authorities where children experience multiple “placement moves” due to poor planning or inadequate local sufficiency, by strengthening duties for them to publish a sufficiency plan.

Data Breakdown

Data sources:

Number of children moved at Christmas – Become’s FOI, sent September 2022.

Number of ‘Looked After Children’ as of 31/3/2022 - [Create your own tables, Table Tool – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions#subjectTabs-createTable)

Number of placement moves in 21/22 - <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions#subjectTabs-createTable>

* There are challenges in accurately comparing the number of children moved during Christmas in each local authority with the total number of children under the care of that local authority. We do not have data on how many ‘Looked After Children’ there were for the period 18 December 2021 to 3 Jan 2022, so we have included the most recently available data on the numbers of children in care to provide a comparator

Eastern				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of ‘Looked After Children’ as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Bedford Borough	6	272	2%	219
Cambridgeshire	8	597	1.3%	426
Central Bedfordshire	Fewer than 5	327	-	156
Essex	8	1118	0.7%	886
Hertfordshire	16	1024	1.5%	617
Luton	4	381	1%	250
Norfolk	11	1089	1%	674
Peterborough	7	354	1.9%	206
Southend-on-Sea	Fewer than 5	327	-	181
Suffolk	18	921	1.9%	539
Thurrock	6	294	2%	195
11 Local Authorities/ Total	86	6704	-	4349
East Midlands				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of ‘Looked After Children’ as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Derby	8	627	1.2%	447
Derbyshire	11	909	1.2%	937
Lincolnshire	7	736	0.9%	493
Leicester	10	619	1.6%	338

Leicestershire	5	694	0.7%	291
North Northamptonshire	No response*	524	-	600
Nottingham City	9	718	1.2%	422
Nottinghamshire	15	962	1.5%	628
Rutland	0	25	0%	10
West Northamptonshire	No response*	659	-	715
10 Local Authorities/ Total	65	6473	-	4881

*The FOI was sent in error to Northamptonshire local authority which no longer exists, and has been replaced by North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire local authorities hence not receiving a response

Greater London

Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Barking and Dagenham	Fewer than 5	413	-	286
Barnet	14	333	4.2%	267
Bexley	Fewer than 5	234	-	160
Brent	23	341	6.7%	264
Bromley	Fewer than 5	328	-	180
Camden	2	191	1%	120
City of London	1	10	10%	-
Croydon	5	550	0.9%	224
Ealing	7	328	2.1%	218
Enfield	1	386	0.2%	204
Greenwich	6	459	1.3%	263
Hackney	12	405	2.9%	267
Hammersmith & Fulham	Fewer than 5	216	-	157
Haringey	13	387	3.3%	234
Harrow	8	188	4.2%	156
Havering	Fewer than 5	264	-	153
Hillingdon	7	408	1.7%	188
Hounslow	6	296	2%	204
Islington	5	385	1.2%	223
Kensington & Chelsea	Fewer than 5	101	-	50
Kingston-Upon-Thames	0	133	0%	86
Lambeth	0	402	0%	245
Lewisham	3	465	0.6%	246
Merton	2	122	1.6%	83
Newham	7	431	1.6%	305
Redbridge	6	287	2%	145
Richmond-Upon-Thames	0	129	0%	53
Southwark	18	457	3.9%	279
Sutton	Fewer than 5	236	-	175
Tower Hamlets	No response	332	-	223
Waltham Forest	Fewer than 5	329	-	180
Wandsworth	Fewer than 5	243	-	185
Westminster	3	170	1.7%	54
33 Local Authorities/ Total	158	9959		6077

North East				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Darlington	5	273	1.8%	247
Durham	14	985	1.4%	754
Gateshead	7	483	1.4%	234
Hartlepool	Fewer than 5	308	-	126
Middlesbrough	13	502	2.5%	400
Newcastle-Upon-Tyne	6	670	0.8%	274
Northumberland	5	425	1.1%	261
North Tyneside	6	354	1.6%	248
Redcar and Cleveland	5	341	1.4%	269
South Tyneside	2	284	0.7%	179
Stockton	12	574	2%	360
Sunderland	18	554	3.2%	467
12 Local Authorities/ Total	94	5753		3819
North West				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Blackburn with Darwen	13	387	3.3%	266
Blackpool	11	609	1.8%	458
Bolton	4	548	0.7%	313
Bury	11	359	3%	228
Cheshire East	5	522	0.9%	406
Cheshire West and Chester	9	538	1.6%	239
Cumbria	8	734	1%	424
Halton	No response	370	-	182
Knowsley	No response	298	-	125
Lancashire	21	1941	1%	1178
Liverpool	19	1596	1.1%	837
Manchester	27	1385	1.9%	781
Oldham	25	536	4.6%	340
Rochdale	4	554	0.7%	261
Salford	10	559	1.7%	376
Sefton	No response	598	-	330
St Helens	7	470	1.4%	298
Stockport	5	447	1.1%	295
Tameside	0	666	0%	360
Trafford	Fewer than 5	359	-	147
Warrington	1	331	0.3%	222
Wigan	12	614	1.9%	398
Wirral	10	789	1.2%	438

23 Local Authorities/ Total	203	15210		8902
South East				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Brighton & Hove	6	389	1.5%	284
Bracknell Forest	Fewer than 5	137	-	106
Buckinghamshire	5	502	0.9%	474
East Sussex	5	628	0.7%	401
Hampshire	46	1724	2.6%	1569
Isle of Wight	7	275	2.5%	181
Kent	54	1777	3%	1764
Medway	Fewer than 5	443	-	300
Milton Keynes	5	361	1.3%	332
Oxfordshire	11	854	1.2%	604
Portsmouth	8	386	2%	252
Reading	7	234	2.9%	131
Slough	12	234	5.1%	112
Southampton	19	561	3.3%	487
Surrey	17	1048	1.6%	657
West Berkshire	1	166	0.6%	106
West Sussex	14	860	1.6%	659
Windsor & Maidenhead	5	128	3.9%	111
Wokingham	4	136	2.9%	86
19 Local Authorities/ Total	228	10843		8616
South West				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Bath and North East Somerset	Fewer than 5	196	-	93
Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	7	486	1.4%	217
Bristol	7	691	1%	326
Cornwall	18	501	3.5%	472
Devon	17	819	2%	601
Dorset	5	448	1.1%	324
Gloucestershire	19	840	2.2%	798
North Somerset	Fewer than 5	199	-	135
Plymouth	7	491	1.4%	354
Somerset	11	551	1.9%	434
South Gloucestershire	Fewer than 5	255	-	102
Swindon	Fewer than 5	332	-	261
Torbay	7	299	2.3%	286
Wiltshire	7	426	1.6%	252

14 Local Authorities*/ Total	109	6534		4655
*We did not include Isles of Scilly in the FOI				
West Midlands				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Birmingham	19	2094	0.9%	1153
Coventry	9	723	1.2%	521
Dudley	12	585	2%	365
Herefordshire	0	378	0%	139
Sandwell	9	837	1%	478
Shropshire	9	609	1.4%	346
Solihull	8	528	1.5%	328
Staffordshire	9	1303	0.6%	773
Stoke-on-Trent	31	1022	3%	727
Telford and Wrekin	7	423	1.6%	307
Walsall	Fewer than 5	661	-	307
Warwickshire	12	822	1.4%	765
Wolverhampton	6	521	1.1%	227
Worcestershire	9	890	1%	583
14 Local Authorities/ Total	141	11396		7019
Yorkshire & the Humber				
Local Authority	Number of children moved at Christmas	Number of 'Looked After Children' as of 31/3/2022	% of Christmas moves compared to number looked after as of 31/3/2022*	Number of placement changes in 2021/22
Barnsley	Fewer than 5	348	-	358
Bradford	25	1447	1.7%	834
Calderdale	2	337	0.5%	159
Doncaster	6	589	1%	223
East Riding	3	325	0.9%	276
Hull	28	886	3.1%	632
Kirklees	9	604	1.4%	382
Leeds	30	1373	2.1%	1030
North East Lincolnshire	21	615	3.4%	360
North Lincolnshire	Fewer than 5	192	-	110
North Yorkshire	4	429	0.9%	263
Rotherham	10	557	1.7%	391
Sheffield	11	666	1.6%	537
Wakefield	14	650	2.1%	597
York	8	277	2.8%	150
15 Local Authorities/ Total	173	9295		6302
Total across England	1257	82,167		54620

ⁱ The 151 Local Authorities are those in England who are responsible for ensuring and overseeing the effective delivery of social care services for children, not including Isles of Scilly

ⁱⁱ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2021 to 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2021-to-2022)

ⁱⁱⁱ All quotes are from young people we have worked with at Become

^{iv} [Childrens-Commissioners-2018-Stability-Index-Overview.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Childrens-Commissioners-2018-Stability-Index-Overview.pdf)

^v Sinclair, I., Baker, C., Wilson, K., and Gibbs, I. (2003) *What happens to foster children? Report Three*, York: University of York.

^{vi} [The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414812/the-children-act-1989-guidance-and-regulations.pdf)

^{vii} <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/bba7bc5f-fd01-43c9-35a4-08daa20fa891>.

^{viii} <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/bba7bc5f-fd01-43c9-35a4-08daa20fa891>.

^{ix} [cco-stability-index-2020.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/cco-stability-index-2020.pdf)

^x <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2021-to-2022>

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