

# BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE  
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

## Gone Too Far

Preventing children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them.

April 2023

### About Become

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. Our vision is that care-experienced 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 to 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.

[www.becomecharity.org.uk/gone-too-far](http://www.becomecharity.org.uk/gone-too-far)



# Executive Summary

There are over 82,000 children in care in England today.<sup>1</sup> Despite obligations on local authorities to provide homes for children in care in the local area, each year more and more children in care are being moved miles away from their home and friends, school, and family. At Become, the care-experienced children and young people that we work with have told us that this means being disconnected from friends, family and the people that matter to them most. Being moved far away can disrupt children's education, lives, and relationships. It can create feelings of loneliness, isolation, and stigma; and it can exacerbate adversity or trauma that children may have experienced before entering the care system.

## **Our new research and analysis show:**

- Children in care in England were placed, on average, more than 18 miles from home in 2022 – this is equivalent to the distance between Birmingham and Coventry
- Both the number and proportion of children in the care system placed more than 20 miles away from home increased each year between 2012 and 2021
- Some children are moved more than 500 miles from home
- Over 800 children under the care of local authorities in England were moved to Scotland or Wales in 2022
- Children who experience multiple care placements are more likely to be placed more than 20 miles from home
- Children who are moved more than 20 miles from home are more likely to have lower wellbeing and to experience emotional difficulties than children who are placed closer to home
- Some local authorities spend more than double on average on out-of-area care placements than they do on in-area placements.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (2022), [Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions](#) [all online sources last accessed 13 April 2023 unless otherwise specified]

There can be legitimate reasons why children in care are placed miles from their home area, such as to safeguard them from exploitation or harm, or to move in with or closer to wider family connections or existing support networks. However, too often, the reality is that children are moved far from home as there are simply not enough appropriate options closer. Children are being let down by a broken care system and this needs to change.

Despite recent proposals to reform the care system, there remains a lack of accountability that is impacting on children's lives and life chances now. There needs to be a renewed commitment that children should only be moved miles from home when this is in their best interests. National Government and local authorities need to develop and publish strategies for ensuring that children in care are not placed miles away from the people and places that matter to them simply due to a lack of appropriate carers or housing.

**In this report, we are calling for:**

1. A national commitment to stop children being placed miles from home when it is not in their best interests
2. The development and publication of national and local strategies to increase the provision of care placements close to home, so that children don't have to be moved miles from their support networks
3. New data collection and reporting on the numbers of children who are inappropriately moved miles from home
4. Increased accountability for national Government and local authorities.

# **Gone Too Far**

## **Introduction**

Care-experienced children and young people have consistently told Become that they are being moved miles away from their home area and with no say in the decision, which leaves them feeling isolated and lonely. At Become, we want to see an end to this. In this report, we outline:

- The situation of children being placed miles from home
- The impact this has on children and young people
- The reasons why this is happening
- What can be done to change it.

## **Methodology**

To support this work, we have carried out new research and analysis, through Freedom of Information requests submitted to the Department for Education and 151 local authorities in England between October 2022 and February 2023.

Through these Freedom of Information requests we have obtained national data about:

- The numbers of children in care<sup>2</sup> in England who were placed:
  - inside their local authority boundary
  - outside their local authority boundary
  - more than 20 miles away from home
  - less than 20 miles away from home
- Whether children from different age groups, or ethnicity groups, or children who had experienced multiple care placements, were more at risk of being placed out-of-area or miles from home

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<sup>2</sup> Legislation and official data sources use the terms “looked after children” or “children looked after”. However, throughout this report, we have used the term ‘children in care’ as this is non-stigmatising and more representative of the language that care-experienced children and young people have told us they prefer.

- The number of children under the care of local authorities in England who were moved outside of England between 2018 and 2022
- The comparative emotional wellbeing of children in care in England who were placed inside and outside of their local authority boundary, and more or less than 20 miles away from home.

We have also obtained local authority data about:

- The numbers of children placed inside and outside of the local authority boundary in different care settings over the last three years
- The total financial cost of children's social care placements, in different care settings, inside and outside of the local authority boundary over the last three years.

A detailed methodology and the findings of our research can be found in an appendix document, [‘Gone Too Far: data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England’](#).

We have also run four workshops between March and April 2023 with a group of diverse care-experienced children and young people (aged 16-24) to hear about the implications and impact of being moved miles from home.

## **Note on data**

Local authorities collect and record data about children's social care placements by locality (whether children in care are placed within or outside of the local authority area), or by distance from home (which records whether children are placed more than 20 miles from home, or 20 miles or less from home). We use both measures throughout this report and refer to these as “out of area” or “miles from home”.

Where possible, we have used the measurement of “miles from home”, as this is more meaningful and representative of what is important for care-experienced children and young people. However, there are occasions where we have only been able to obtain or analyse data about children being placed ‘out-of-area’.

**1) More children in care are being placed miles away from their home area each year, despite obligations on local authorities to place children locally.**

Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities have duties to provide appropriate accommodation for children in their care, which must be within the local authority's area and must allow the child to live near to their home, unless this is not "reasonably practicable".<sup>3</sup> Children in care "should be placed as close to their existing family networks and support systems as is possible and appropriate".<sup>4</sup>

Local authorities also have a strategic duty to take steps to secure sufficient accommodation within the local authority's area which meets the needs of the children under the care of that local authority, so far as 'reasonably practicable'. This is known as the sufficiency duty.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the legal obligations on local authorities and safeguards for children, more and more children are being placed out of area or in care settings miles away from home each year. In 2022, more than a fifth of all children in the care system in England were placed over 20 miles away from home.<sup>6</sup> **Both the number and percentage of children in the care system placed more than 20 miles away from home increased each year between 2012 and 2021.**<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [Section 22C, the Children Act, 1989](#)

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education (2010), [Statutory guidance: Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Section 22G, the Children Act, 1989](#)

<sup>6</sup> On 31 March 2022, 16,970 children were placed more than 20 miles from home, representing 20.7% of all children in care in England. Department for Education (2022), [Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions](#)

<sup>7</sup> On 31 March 2012, 10,540 children in care were placed more than 20 miles from home, representing 15.7% of all children in care in England. By 31 March 2021, the number of children in care placed more than 20 miles from home had risen to 16,840 or 20.8% of all children in care in England. See: Department for Education, [Children looked after in England, including adoption series \(multiple years\)](#)

## 2) New data and analysis from Become highlights the extent of children in care being placed miles from their home area, and which children are most affected.

Our new data and analysis have shown that in 2022<sup>8</sup>:

- Children in care in England were placed on average 18.2 miles from home.<sup>9</sup> This is equivalent to the distance between Birmingham and Coventry.
- Some children in care have been placed more than 500 miles from home.<sup>10</sup>
- 840 children under the care of English local authorities were placed outside of the country, including 540 in Wales and 270 in Scotland.<sup>11</sup>

Some groups of children in care are more likely to be placed miles from home:

Children who experience multiple placements moves in care are more likely to be placed out of area and miles from home. **Children who have just had one placement are placed on average 15.8 miles away from home, whilst children who have had three or more placements are placed on average 22.4 miles away from home.** Similarly, in 2022, just over a fifth of children in their first placement (20.6%) were placed more than 20 miles from home, compared to almost a third of children (29.9%) in their third or subsequent placement.<sup>12</sup>

Children in care living in secure units, children's homes and semi-independent living settings are more likely be placed more than 20 miles from home than children in other care settings. In 2022, 33% of children living in secure units,

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<sup>8</sup> See Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

<sup>9</sup> This is the mean average. See table 1 in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

<sup>10</sup> See table 1 in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

<sup>11</sup> See table 7 in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

<sup>12</sup> In 2022, 20.6% of children living in their first or only placement in care were placed more than 20 miles from home (15, 710 out of 76, 340 children); and 29.9% of children living in their third or subsequent placement in care were placed more than 20 miles from home (3, 950 out of 13, 210 children). See table 2 in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)



children's homes or semi-independent settings were placed more than 20 miles from home, compared to 18% of children living in foster placements.<sup>13</sup>

**Children in care who are placed in private provision** are more likely to be placed out of area. In 2022, 64.7% of all children placed in private provision were placed outside of their local authority area, compared to 29.9% of children not in private provision.<sup>14</sup> In 2022, almost all (92%) of children living in private secure units, children's homes or semi-independent settings were placed out of area.<sup>15</sup>

The Competition and Market's Authority reported that 78% of all children's home places in England were provided by the private sector in 2021 – and this proportion has been on the increase in recent years.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the number of children's homes are not proportionately spread over the country – with 23% of all children's home places in the North West and just 6% in London. This is partly caused by financial factors and profit – with children's homes being built more frequently where it costs less to build them. This limits the options for local authorities when they are trying to find appropriate local homes for children in their care with a lack of supply in some areas, and areas with more homes, such as the North West, having an 'oversupply' with children from other areas being moved there.

There is a comparative lack of data about the distance that **children from some ethnic minorities, or older teenagers**, are moved from home.

- In 2022, the distance from home of 'placements' was not known or recorded for 35% of Asian or Asian British children, 23% of Black, African, Caribbean,

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<sup>13</sup> Data relates to children in care in England on 31 March 2022. See Department for Education (2022), *Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions*: table '[CLA on 31 March by placement type, distance, and locality of placement](#)'.

<sup>14</sup> Data relates to children in care in England on 31 March 2022. Placements where the provider has not been reported have not been included. See: Department for Education (2022), *Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions*: table 'National CLA on 31 March by placement provider and locality'

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Competition and Markets Authority (2022), *Children's Social Care Market Study: Final Report*

or Black British children and 72% of children from other ethnic groups, compared to less than 1% of White children.<sup>17</sup>

- In 2022, the distance from home of ‘placements’ was not known or recorded for 24.3% of children in care aged 16 or over, compared to less than 2% of children aged 15 and under.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Data relates to children in care in England on 31 March 2022. See table 5 in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

<sup>18</sup> Data relates to children in care in England on 31 March 2022. See table 4 in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

### **3) Being placed miles from your home area can have a significant and long-term negative impact on children's wellbeing, development, and relationships.**

Children in care have often experienced adversity, complexity, or trauma before entering the care system and need stability and positive loving relationships to help them heal and thrive. However, being moved to care settings miles away from their home area can have a damaging impact and create huge instability and insecurity for children.

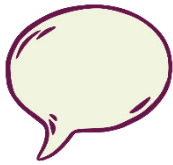
For some care-experienced children and young people this means being moved miles away from everything that they have ever known, or the people, and things that matter to them the most. Young people have told us that this has meant being separated or disconnected from family, friends, or other important people, like teachers, mentors, or Independent Visitors, and this can have a long-term impact on the continuity of important and loving relationships. Similarly, being moved so far from home can break care-experienced children and young people's connections to communities, groups, hobbies, interests, their religious or cultural heritage, or even pets that previously had a positive impact on their wellbeing or had acted as protective factors.



“Moved away from siblings to somewhere so far away lose contact with them” – quote from care-experienced young person.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Between March and April 2023, we held four sessions with a group of diverse care-experienced children and young people, aged 16-24, to explore the impact of being placed miles from home for children in care, and to inform the development of our wider ‘Gone Too Far’ campaign. All the quotations in this document from young people are taken from these sessions.



“My twin sister was moved from London to Ipswich that really affected her as she went from living in a city to countryside with lack of diversity” – quote from care leaver aged 21 years

We have heard from care-experienced young people who have had to spend hours navigating public transport to visit the people that matter the most to them, whilst others haven't been able to do this due to public transport routes that are too long, complex, or expensive.



“13 miles from school meant an hour in the taxi every day. I wasn't consulted on for that.” - quote from care-experienced young person.

For many children, being moved miles from their home area, will often lead to a change in school, disrupting their education, including during important periods, such as in the lead up to, or during their GCSEs. For others, moving miles away can also disrupt important support they may be receiving for physical or mental health needs, or special educational needs or disabilities, and they may be forced to build relationships with new professionals. This disruption comes at a time when children are being forced to create new relationships, routines and adapt to a new home and community.



“I was moved from an area that was of a different religion to that of my birth family. Meaning I could never really embrace myself in the community” – quote from care leaver, aged 22 years old.

We have heard from care-experienced children and young people who have felt that they have had little or no choice in where they live, when moved miles from

their home area, which 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. This can impact on children's self-esteem and can lead children to feel like they shouldn't get too settled or form relationships as they may be moved and uprooted again. Importantly, being moved 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's so scary having to navigate a new town miles away"  
– quote from care-experienced young person.

All of this can contribute to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and stigma. It can impact negatively on their mental health and wellbeing; and can exacerbate trauma or adversity that they experienced before entering the care system. New research carried out by Become shows that children in care who are placed in homes more than 20 miles from home are more likely to have lower wellbeing and experience emotional difficulties than children who are placed closer to their home area (see figure 1 below).



"Being moved away can affect your safety and sense of wellbeing" – quote from care leaver, aged 21 years old

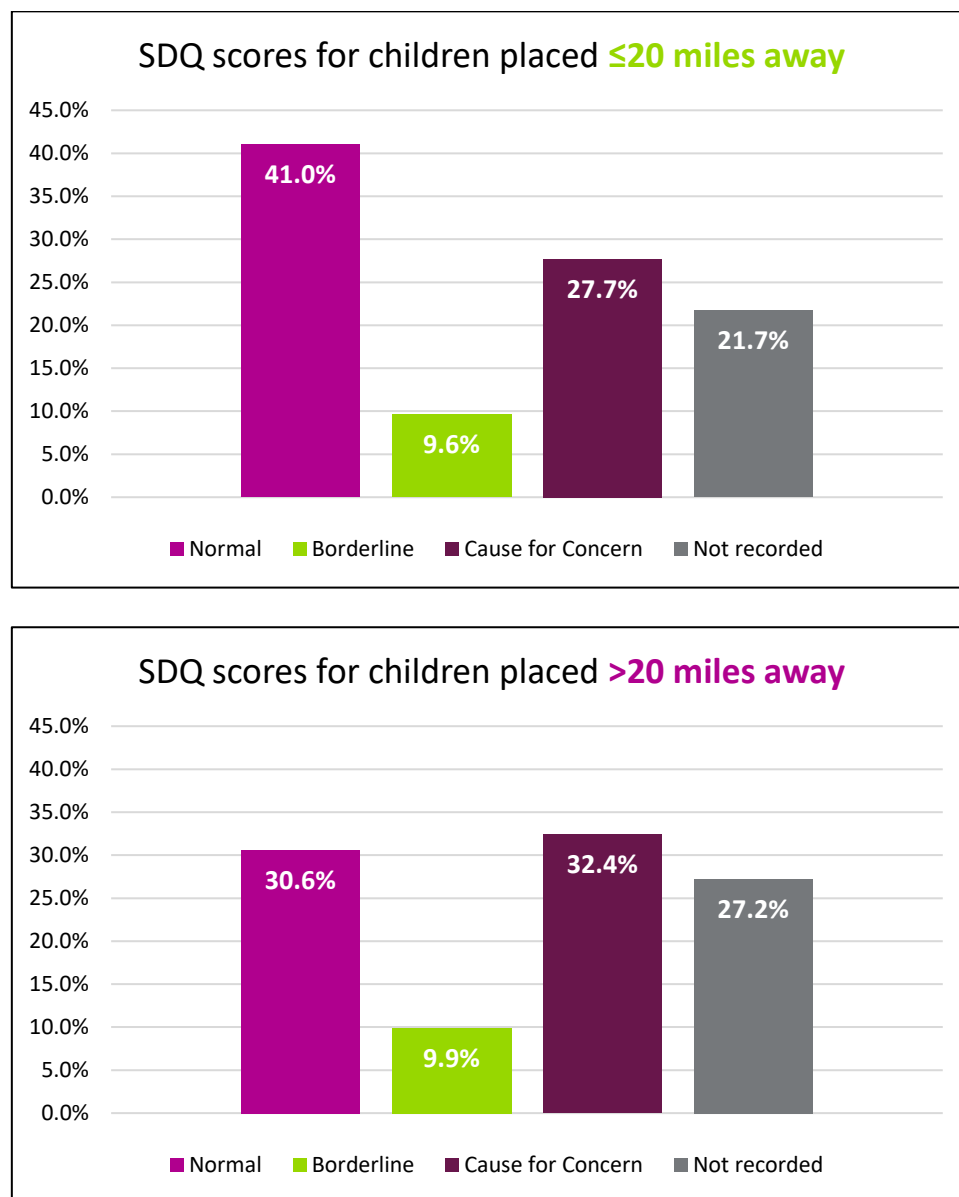
Research suggests that children in care who are placed out of area are disproportionately likely to go missing from their care placements<sup>20</sup>, and then at increased risk of sexual and criminal exploitation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2019) [\*No Place at Home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements\*](#). See also: All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2016) *'Inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children: 'It is good when someone cares'*

<sup>21</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2019) [\*No Place at Home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements\*](#).

**Figure 1. Charts representing percentage of children in care with high and low wellbeing scores, by ‘placement’ distance from home.<sup>22</sup>**



1. A Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a brief emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for children and young people that can be used to assess for emotional wellbeing and mental health problems. All children in care aged 4-16 should have an annual SDQ assessment. A higher score indicates more emotional difficulties. 0-13 is considered normal. 14-16 is borderline cause for concern, and over 17 is cause for concern.

<sup>22</sup> This data is taken from the response to a Freedom of Information request by the Department for Education. The full data and explanatory notes can be found in table 6 in Become (2023), [Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England](#)

#### 4) There can be legitimate reasons why children are moved far from their home area, but too often these moves are the symptom of a broken care system.

There are legitimate reasons why children in care could be placed miles from their home area, such as:

- To safeguard them from criminal or sexual exploitation or abuse
- To move to live with or near to wider family networks
- Where care-experienced young people may have expressed a wish to be moved far away from their home area – for example, if they feel unsafe, want to be away from family, or for cultural reasons – and these wishes and preferences should always be taken into account when decisions are made.

However, too often, **the main reason children in care are so regularly placed miles from their home area is simply due to there being a lack of sufficient appropriate ‘placements’, of the right type to meet a child’s needs, within their local area.**<sup>23</sup> Local authorities are often forced to place children miles from their home area due to a lack of appropriate alternatives closer.

#### Challenges in providing sufficient homes

Local authorities face a range of well-documented challenges in planning for and securing sufficient appropriate accommodation for the children in their care.<sup>24</sup>

These include:

- Rising numbers of children in care, including more older teenagers entering care, and children with complex needs, including mental health needs, that may require more specialist support provision;<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Competition and Markets Authority (2022), [Children’s Social Care Market Study: Final Report](#)

<sup>24</sup> Competition and Markets Authority (2022), [Children’s Social Care Market Study: Final Report](#); Ofsted (2022), [How Local Authorities Plan for Sufficiency of Accommodation that Meets the Needs of Children in Care and Care Leavers: What can we learn from Sufficiency Strategies? - What Works for Children’s Social Care \(whatworks-csc.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>25</sup> A significant challenge for local authorities is planning for and providing, or commissioning, specialist homes or provision for children with complex emotional, mental health or behavioural needs. This is due to the high cost of providing this specialist provision, and the low incidence, with

- Workforce challenges – including the recruitment and retention of foster carers, residential care workers and managers, and other professionals working in children’s social care
- A lack of the right quantity and mix of appropriate care ‘placements’ locally; and challenges in being able to accurately forecast or plan for future need
- Rising care costs, particularly in children’s homes<sup>26</sup>
- Problems linked to the private market, including a lack of choice of care ‘placements’, and a power imbalance between private providers and local authority commissioners.<sup>27</sup>

### **The sufficiency duty**

The sufficiency duty requires each local authority to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that it can offer sufficient suitable accommodation in its area to meet the needs of children in care.<sup>28</sup>

Local authorities should document and publish their plans for meeting the sufficiency duty, within their commissioning strategies. Yet, the What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care reported in 2022 that 44% of local authorities had not published a sufficiency strategy<sup>29</sup> or demonstrated publicly how they planned to provide sufficient suitable accommodation to meet the needs of children under their care.

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sometimes only a small number of children requiring a certain type of specialist provision across the country. See ADCS (2022), [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8](#) and Ofsted (2022), [How Local Authorities Plan for Sufficiency of Accommodation that Meets the Needs of Children in Care and Care Leavers](#)

<sup>26</sup> Competition and Markets Authority (2022), [Children’s Social Care Market Study: Final Report](#)

<sup>27</sup> Ofsted (2022), [How Local Authorities Plan for Sufficiency of Accommodation that Meets the Needs of Children in Care and Care Leavers](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Section 22G, the Children Act, 1989](#)

<sup>29</sup> What Works for Children’s Social Care (2022), [What Can We Learn from Sufficiency Strategies?](#)



Any out of area or distance placement needs to be approved by a local authority's Director of Children's Services or a nominated officer.<sup>30</sup> However, if the decision to place a child out of area, or miles from home, is challenged – for example by the child, a family member, advocate or professional – then the local authority should be in a position to demonstrate how it has done all that is reasonably practicable to secure sufficient accommodation for children in care more broadly at a strategic level.<sup>31</sup>

Despite requirements on local authorities to develop and publish plans showing how they will meet the sufficiency duty, there is limited accountability about whether sufficient appropriate accommodation is being provided at either a local or national level. For example, the evaluation criteria for Ofsted's inspections of local authority children's services does not include an explicit assessment of how well local authorities are performing in meeting the sufficiency duty.<sup>32</sup>

### **Lack of transparency – nobody knows how many children and young people are moved miles from their home area when it is not in their best interest**

Data is recorded and collected locally and nationally about the number of children in care who are placed out of area, or more than 20 miles from home.<sup>33</sup> However, this data does not differentiate between those children who are placed miles from home:

- For a specific purpose or reason – such as to meet their education, health, or care needs, to safeguard them from risk of harm, or to fulfil their wishes or preferences; or
- Due to a lack of appropriate homes closer to their home area.

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<sup>30</sup> Sections 9 and 11 of [The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations 2010](#). See also Department for Education (2021), [The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review](#)

<sup>31</sup> Department for Education (2010), [Statutory guidance: Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children](#)

<sup>32</sup> Ofsted (2023), [Inspecting local authority children's services: guidance](#)

<sup>33</sup> See: Department for Education (2022), [Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions](#)

Consequently, there is no accurate information at a local or national level about how many children are being placed miles from their home area due to a lack of appropriate ‘placements’ in the right locations. This creates a real barrier for effective policy-making or evaluating the efficacy of strategies to reduce the numbers of children being placed far away.

This lack of accountability has contributed to a situation where more and more children are being placed miles from their home area, negatively impacting on their lives and life chances, due to a broken system.

### **Financial cost of out of area ‘placements’**

New research that we have carried out, based on responses to Freedom of Information requests from local authorities in England, has shown that out of area ‘placements’, can not only have a significant human cost for the children placed out of area, but also has a disproportionate financial cost.<sup>34</sup>

From the local authorities that were able to provide full comparative data<sup>35</sup>:

- The average cost of a children’s social care ‘placement’ outside of the local authority boundary in 2022 was £44,396 (see figure 2 below). That’s almost double the average cost for ‘placements’ inside the local authority boundary
- In 2022, average ‘placement’ costs were higher for children moved out of the local authority boundary for all ‘placement’ types compared to the costs for children placed within the local authority area (see figure 2)

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<sup>34</sup> Between October 2022 and February 2023, we submitted Freedom of Information requests to 151 local authorities in England to request information about the number of children placed inside and outside of the local authority boundary in different care settings over the last three years; and the total financial cost of children’s social care placements, in different care settings, inside and outside of the local authority boundary over the last three years. A detailed methodology and the findings of our research can be found in an appendix document, in Become (2023), [\*Gone Too Far – Appendix: Data from Freedom of Information requests to the Department for Education and local authorities in England\*](#)

<sup>35</sup> This only included local authorities who were able to provide data for both the number of children placed inside and outside of the local authority boundary and corresponding data about the total cost of placements inside and outside of the local authority boundary for the specified placement type and year. Where local authorities recorded less than five placements in a particular placement type within a year this information hasn’t been included in the analysis for consistency, as several local authorities didn’t provide data where there were less than five placements to protect confidentiality.

- In 2022, a majority of the local authorities able to provide comparative data had higher average ‘placements’ costs for out-of-area ‘placements’ than in-area ‘placements’ across all ‘placement’ types (see figure 3 on next page).

**Figure 2 - Comparison between average ‘placement’ costs in 2021/22 by location**

Placement Type	No. of local authorities with comparative data	Number of local authorities with...		
		Avg. placement costs higher for out-of-area placements than in- area placements	Avg. placement costs the same for out-of-area and in-area placements	Avg. placement costs lower for out-of-area placements than in-area placements
All children’s social care placements	21	18 (86%)	1 (5%)	2 (10%)
All foster care placements	24	14 (58%)	3 (13%)	7 (29%)
All children’s home placements	17	10 (59%)	3 (18%)	4 (24%)
All semi-supported placements	17	11 (65%)	3 (18%)	3 (28%)

**Figure 3 – Comparison between average ‘placement’ costs for in-area and out-of-area ‘placements’ in 2021/22**

Placement Type	No. of local authorities with comparative data	Average placement cost in 2021-22		
		In area placements	Out of area placements	Difference
All children’s social care placements	21	£22,488	£44,396	£21,908
All foster care placements	24	£21,014	£24,624	£3,610
All children’s home placements	17	£140,619	£169,176	£28,557
All semi-supported placements	17	£33,890	£69,929	£36,039

## **5) We need greater accountability, alongside a strategy to stop children being placed miles from their home area due to a lack of appropriate local homes.**

As this report has highlighted, being placed miles from their home can have a harmful impact on the lives and life chances of children in care and can compound the adversity or trauma that they have faced before entering care. Yet, more and more children in care are being placed miles from their home area each year due to a broken care system. This cannot continue. Care-experienced children and young people deserve much better.

This is a national challenge: one that is facing local authorities across the country, and it requires joined-up action at both a national and local level. In February 2022, the Government published its proposed reform strategy for children's social care, "Stable Homes, Built on Love", which recognises that too often "children are living far from where they would call home (without a clear reason for this), separating them from loving relationships from ... the people that matter to them most".<sup>36</sup> Despite, the Government's proposed reforms, there remains no national commitment or strategy to reduce the number of children in care who are placed far from their home area simply due to the lack of appropriate homes closer. This needs to change.

Local authorities are already supposed to develop sufficiency plans, setting out how they will provide sufficient appropriate accommodation in their local area for children in care. However, going forward, these plans need to be published and updated annually, to increase transparency, and to demonstrate what action the local authorities plan to take to ensure that more children are able to live in their home area. The UK Government should also develop and publish a strategy setting out how it will support local authorities to boost sufficiency so that fewer

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<sup>36</sup> Department for Education (2023), [\*Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children's Social Care Reform 2023\*](#)

children are moved miles from their home area when it is not in their best interests to do so.

Building on the example of the adult mental health sector - where there is a commitment to end the number of 'inappropriate out of area placements' -<sup>37</sup> data should be collected and published about how many children are placed miles from their home area due to a lack of appropriate care options closer to home. This will provide information to help understand the true scale of the problem, and to better enable evidence-based policy-making at both a local and national level. It would allow for more effective evaluation of strategies designed at reducing children being placed miles from their home area and create an accountability mechanism for national and local Government.

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<sup>37</sup> In 2016, the Government set a "national ambition to eliminate inappropriate out of area (OAP) placements in mental health services for adults in acute inpatient care" and started collecting and recording data on the number of inappropriate out of area placements. See Department of Health and Social Care (2016), [\*Guidance: Out of area placements in mental health services for adults in acute inpatient care.\*](#)

## What needs to change:

We are calling for:

**1) A national commitment to stop children being placed miles from their home area when it is not in their best interests.**

**2) The development and publication of national and local strategies to increase the provision of care placements closer to home, so that children don't have to be moved miles from their support networks. To achieve this:**

- i. Government should publish a national strategy to work towards ending the number of children in care in inappropriate distance placements, which sets out how the Government will support local authorities to achieve this. The strategy should include:
  - Investment to increase the numbers of foster carers across the country, through retention and recruitment measures
  - Investment to support local authorities to commission and / or provide more residential care settings that are not for profit, and have sufficient well-trained staff<sup>58</sup>
  - Measures to help local authorities to forecast more effectively for the numbers and types of care settings that will be required locally in the short- to medium-term to fulfil their sufficiency duty.
- ii. Government should legislate to require local authorities to publish sufficiency plans and update these annually. Sufficiency plans should include:
  - How many children in care are in inappropriate distance placements each year

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<sup>58</sup> New residential care provision should be not-for-profit to rebalance the power imbalance in the care market between local authority commissioners and private providers, and to redistribute public funding away from profit and into provision for children in care.

- What strategies the local authority is putting in place to reduce inappropriate distance ‘placements’
  - An evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies
  - How children’s wishes are involved in decision-making before they are placed more than 20 miles from home.
- iii. Local government should begin to publish such sufficiency plans now and update these annually.

**3) New data collection and reporting on the numbers of children who are inappropriately moved miles from home: To achieve this the Department for Education should develop definitions to record and collect data on:**

- **Appropriate distance placements** – where children in care are placed more than 20 miles from home, but this is based on a purposeful decision to meet the child’s needs, best interests or wishes
- **Inappropriate distance placements** – where children in care are placed more than 20 miles from home and this is based on there being a lack of appropriate care ‘placement’ options close to home.

**4) Increased accountability for national Government and local authorities. The Department for Education should develop and publish an annual report on inappropriate distance placements, which sets out:**

- How many children in care have had inappropriate distance placements in England each year, disaggregated by protected characteristic
- What support the Government is providing to local authorities to reduce inappropriate distance placements
- An assessment of the efficacy of Government support to local authorities.