

BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Still Too Far

Children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them

August 2024

About Become

Become is the national charity for care-experienced children and young people. We put young people at the heart of everything we do, supporting them to get the help they need now and empowering them to bring about change in their own lives, the care system and society

Executive Summary

There are nearly 84,000 children in care in England today.¹ Despite obligations on local authorities to provide homes for children in care in the local area, each year more and more children are being moved miles away from their home and friends, school, and family.

At Become, the care-experienced children and young people we work with have told us that they are being moved miles away from their home area and often with no say in the decision. Being moved far away can disrupt children's education, lives, and relationships. It can create feelings of loneliness, isolation, and stigma; it can exacerbate adversity or trauma that children may have experienced before entering the care system; and it can put them at greater risk of exploitation.

Our new research and analysis shows:

- There are almost 18,000 children in care in England living more than 20 miles from home, representing 1 in 5 children in care
- The number has increased by more than 3,000 since 2018, rising every year
- Children in care are now living further away, on average, than they were a year ago
- Children in private children's homes are 2.5 times more likely to be living far away
- 4 out of 5 children in secure settings are living more than 20 miles from home
- Children living more than 20 miles from home are more likely to have significantly lower wellbeing than those who are placed closer to home
- Children who experience multiple moves are more likely to be placed more than 20 miles from home

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 closer to family

¹ Department for Education (2023), [Children looked after in England including adoptions](#). Accessed 08/07/2024. [Unless otherwise stated, all online sources used in this report were accessed on this date.]

connections or existing support networks, but the reality is that all too often children are being moved far away simply because of a lack of appropriate options closer.

Following on from our first [Gone Too Far campaign report in April 2023](#), this new research highlights how things are moving in the wrong direction, with children continuing to be let down by a care system in crisis.

These findings are a call to action. The new Government must act now to develop a national strategy to ensure that children in care are not being placed miles away from the people and places that matter to them simply due to a lack of carers or housing. With urgent and decisive action, we can ensure that all children get the love, care and stability they need.

In this report, 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.
- 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.

Introduction

“Having a stable home built on love and no moves allowed me to not only dream, but to achieve great things. I’ve been able to get an undergraduate degree, pursue and MA in Social Work and follow my dream of travelling the globe.

As corporate parents, the new Government needs to make sure all young people have somewhere loving they can call home, so they too can thrive.”

Kevin

(Gone Too Far young campaigner)

Care-experienced children and young people have consistently told Become that they are being moved miles away from their home area, often with no say in the decision, which leaves them feeling isolated and lonely. This isolation can also leave them at greater risk of exploitation.

All children need and deserve the same things to thrive: a loving home, a stable support network, and access to the community that helps them feel like they belong. But children in care rarely get this when they are moved far away from the people and places that matter to them.

There are almost 18,000 children living more than 20 miles away from their home area, with some children moved more than 500 miles away, and the number of children experiencing these far away moves is rising year on year.

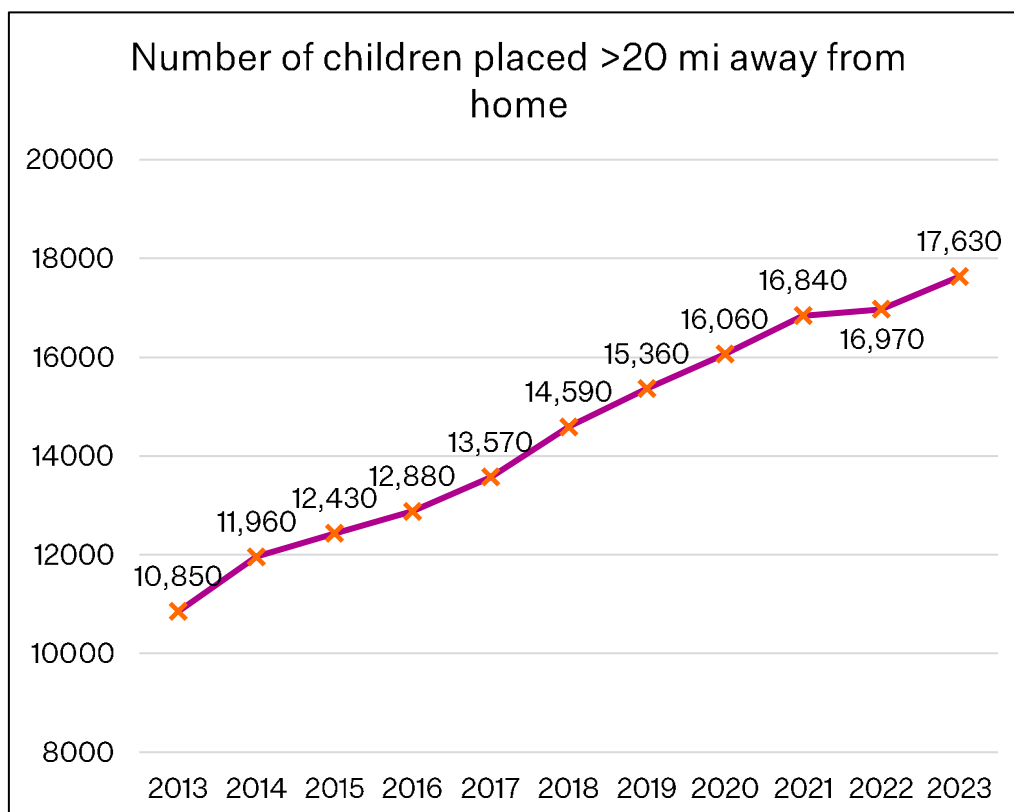
This report outlines:

- What’s changed over the last year
- Which children are most impacted
- What still needs to be done to change it

Still Too Far

1) Things are going in the wrong direction with more children in care living further away

Following a year-on-year increase, more than a fifth of all children in care in England are now living more than 20 miles from home, a rise of 62% since 2013.²



Our research shows that on average children in care are now living further away than they were a year ago. In 2023, children in care in England were on average living 18.5 miles from home, up from 18.2 miles in 2022.³

There can be legitimate reasons why children in care are moved miles from their home area, such as to safeguard them from criminal or sexual exploitation or abuse, to be closer

² Ibid. In 2013, 10,850 children in care were living more than 20 miles from home, out of 68,110 children who were in care at the time. That means the percentage of children in care living more than 20 miles from home has also risen by 5.1 percentage points, from 15.9% in 2013 to 21.0% in 2023. Also see Table 1, [Appendix A](#).

³ See Table 2, [Appendix A](#).

to wider family or support networks, or where a child or young person has expressed their wish to live somewhere far away from their home area. However, the main reason children in care are so often living far away is simply due to there being a lack of sufficient appropriate places that meet children's needs, within their local area.

Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a sufficiency duty, which 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.⁴ As highlighted in our original [Gone Too Far research report](#), 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.

Although we know how many children in care are living far away, there is no data collected about why that is the case. This is contributing to a lack of accountability and is a real barrier to effective policymaking to reduce the numbers of children being placed far away.

2) Children in private children's homes are 2.5 times more likely to be living far away

Children living in children's homes run by private providers are 2.5 times more likely to be living more than 20 miles from home than children living in homes run by the voluntary sector, the local authority, or other public organisations and agencies.

Private providers operate over 83% of all children's homes, providing 77% of all available places.⁵ The number of homes operated by private providers has increased significantly in recent years, and we have seen a 70% increase since 2019.⁶

⁴ [Children Act 1989](#) (Section 22G)

⁵ Ofsted (2024), [HYPERLINK "https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-care-in-england-2024/main-findings-childrens-social-care-in-england-2024"](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-care-in-england-2024/main-findings-childrens-social-care-in-england-2024) \I "supported-accommodation", [Children's Social Care in England 2024](#)

⁶ Ibid

Research has already shown that private children’s homes tend to be more concentrated in certain areas of the country, often where property is cheaper, not where children need homes the most.⁷

Our findings are also in line with previous academic research showing that the increase in for-profit provision is associated with an increase in placement instability and out-of-area placements.⁸

The changing trend of how homes are provided—with an increasing proportion being delivered by private providers and less being delivered by local authorities—has contributed to the challenges that local authorities face in being able to provide sufficient appropriate local homes to meet the needs of children in their area.^{9 10}

This has meant that too often local authorities are left with little choice but to send children miles away from everything they know—their school, their friends and sadly, often, brothers and sisters.¹¹ This is affecting growing numbers of children, with a huge impact on their mental health and wellbeing, leaving many isolated and vulnerable.

⁷ Savage, García & Duncan (2023) [‘Revealed: children’s care homes flood into cheapest areas of England, not where most needed’](#), *The Guardian*, 9th July.

⁸ Bach-Mortensen, Goodair & Barlow (2023) [‘For-profit outsourcing and its effects on placement stability and locality for children in care in England, 2011–2022: A longitudinal ecological analysis’](#), *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 144, October, 106245.

⁹ Ofsted (2022), [How local authorities plan for sufficiency of accommodation that meets the needs of children in care and care leavers](#)

¹⁰ Competition and Markets Authority (2022), [Children’s Social Care Market Study](#)

¹¹ Jayanetti (2024) [‘Places in council-run children’s homes in England fall by third as private firms take over’](#), *The Observer*, 16th June.

“I grew up in multiple private children’s homes in predominantly white areas. They were at least 100 miles away from home.

As a black Caribbean child, I experienced racism. When you are a child, you are unaware that the reason for being treated differently is because of your race. As it was not always overt, I struggled to figure out why I was treated differently. I saw myself as a child... who was no different to the other children.

As I grew older, I became aware of the reason and I am still angry about it. My local authority did not consider the critical cultural consequences of being placed far from home. I saw myself and other children from ethnic minorities being criminalised, while the white children were labelled as, "mentally ill" rather than "aggressive" or "intimidating" for the same behaviours we exhibited or worse. This affected my sense of self; I spent years trying to discover myself. I believe if I had been placed closer to home or in a diverse area, this would have prevented the racial trauma I sustained while in the care system.

Notwithstanding, one of my children’s homes taught me I am black before I am a woman. They taught me how to cook Caribbean food and how to be unapologetically myself. This home picked up where the local authority failed.

However, children’s homes do not always have the resources or the knowledge to implement this. The local authority’s job as a corporate parent is to reflect on all the consequences of placing a looked after child far away from home. But unfortunately, due to a lack of children’s homes, the consequences are not a priority... finding a placement is.

Being placed far from home, no matter the ethnicity a child identifies as, has grave consequences if their local authority does not reflect on what the area gives or takes from a child’s life.

This campaign is to raise awareness of this heartbreaking issue. By raising awareness, we are highlighting not what only needs to be done to prevent the moves but also the issues the moves bring to prevent the effects when they transpire.”

Bre

(Gone Too Far young campaigner)

3) The children most affected are those who need support and stability most: children with lower wellbeing, those in secure settings, and those with recent experiences of multiple moves are most likely to be living far away

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 thrive. At Become, we hear consistently from young people about the damaging and lasting impact that being moved miles away from their home area can have.

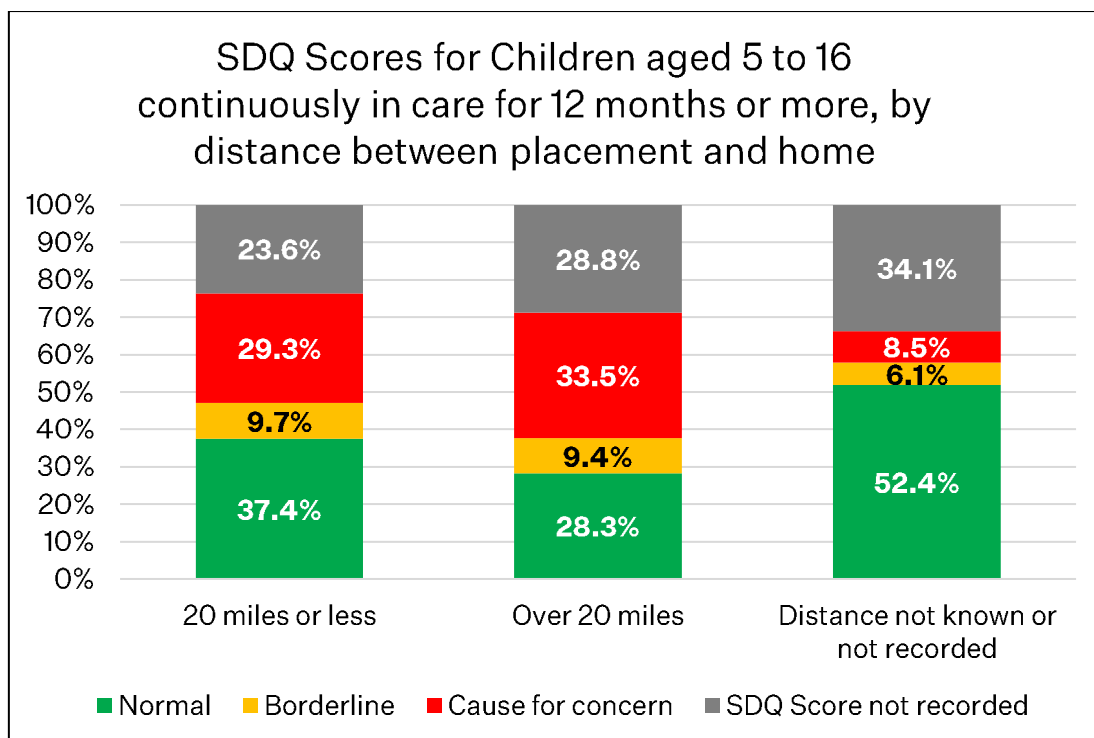
Worryingly, children with lower wellbeing, those in secure settings, and those with recent experiences of multiple moves are most likely to be living far away from the people and places that matter to them.

Wellbeing

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

Our research shows that children in care who are living more than 20 miles from home were significantly more likely to have a 'cause for concern' SDQ score and less likely to have a 'normal' score.¹² They were also less likely to have even received an SDQ assessment.

¹² See Table 4, [Appendix A](#).



We know that children are more likely to go missing when they don't feel safe or secure, in an unfamiliar area, and without people they trust nearby. Worryingly children in care who are placed out of area are disproportionately likely to go missing from their care placements and are at increased risk of sexual and criminal exploitation—for example gangs recruiting young people into county lines.^{13 14}

Children in secure settings

Almost all children in secure settings are living far from home, with 83% of children living in secure children's homes living more than 20 miles from home.¹⁵

Children living in secure children's homes are amongst some of the most vulnerable children in our society. It is of the utmost importance that they receive the support and stability they need and deserve.

¹³ 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](#)

¹⁴ 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](#).

¹⁵ See Table 5, [Appendix A](#).

The number of children in care living in secure settings is relatively small, only 120 children in England in 2023, and it's reasonable to expect these settings to be further from home on average than more common care settings, such as foster homes and children's homes.

But right now, when professionals decide that it is necessary for a child to live in a secure setting, it can be extremely difficult for local authorities to find suitable provision at all because there aren't enough secure children's home places to meet the needs of increasing numbers of children.

This has led to a sharp rise in the number of children subject to deprivation of liberty (DoL) orders—a legal last resort now being routinely used instead of secure placements, due to the total insufficiency of appropriate secure provision.^{16 17} In the second half of 2022, children subject to DoL orders were living more than 55 miles from home on average.¹⁸

When a place in a secure children's home can be found for a child, our data shows that, much like with DoL placements, these settings are almost always far away. This can be difficult and disorienting for children at an already challenging time and crucially can make it much harder for children to maintain meaningful connections with important people in their lives.¹⁹

Children who have experienced recent instability

On average, children who have experienced recent multiple moves are living further away. The average distance for children who had stayed in one place in 2023 was 16 miles compared to over 22 miles for children who had moved twice or more that year.²⁰

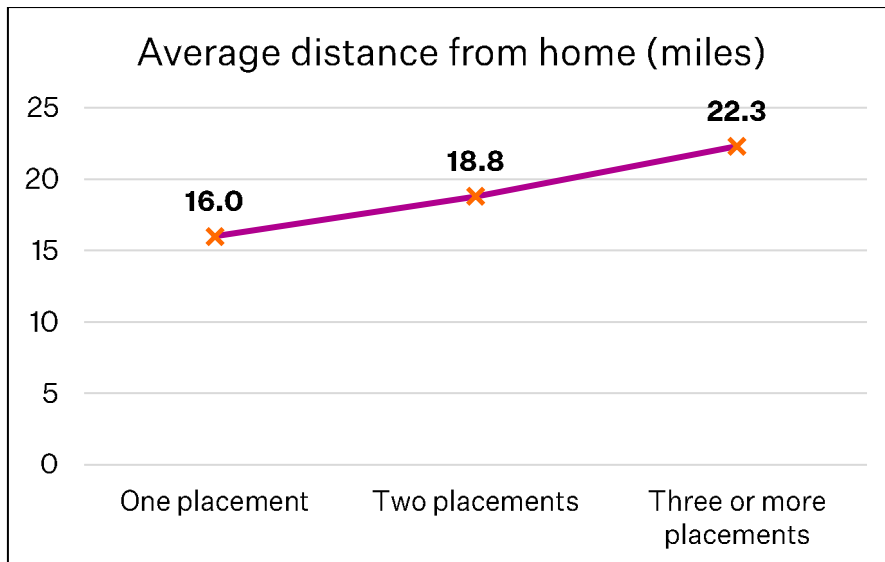
¹⁶ Roe (2023) [Children subject to deprivation of liberty orders](#).

¹⁷ Munby (2024) [Judges are sick of locking up children who just need help. Why has nothing been done?](#), *The Observer*, 8th June.

¹⁸ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2023) [Legal outcomes of cases at the national deprivation of liberty court](#).

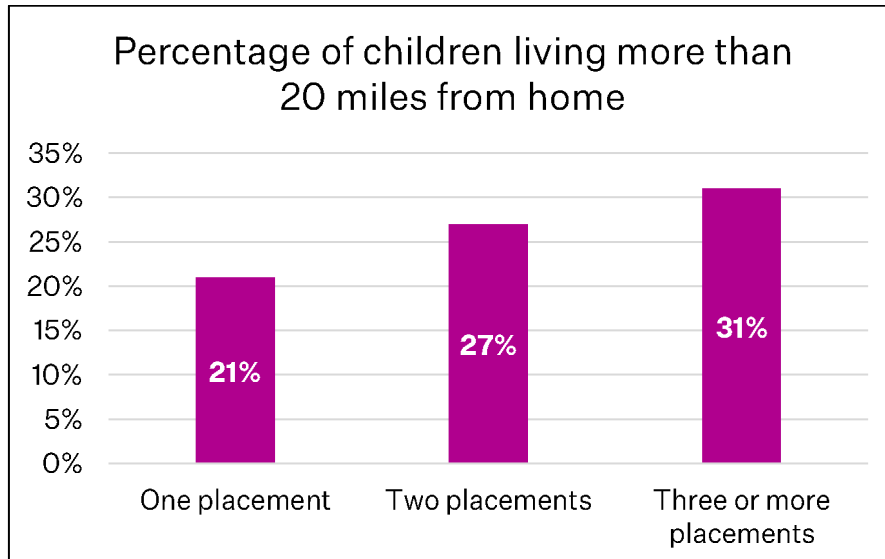
¹⁹ Baptiste & Convery (2024) [Children detained under little-known orders are speaking out after turning 18](#), *BBC News*, 22nd May.

²⁰ See Table 6, [Appendix A](#).



The more times a child has moved within a year, the more likely they are to be living more than 20 miles from home.

In 2023, a fifth of children (21%) who had not experienced any moves during the year were living more than 20 miles from home.²¹ By contrast, almost a third (31%) of children who had moved twice or more were living more than 20 miles from home.



²¹See Table 7, [Appendix A](#).

We know that instability in and of itself can be extremely difficult for children in care. When that instability is accompanied by being moved further from home, things can be even harder.

For many children, this will often lead to a change in school, disrupting their education, including during critical periods such as in the lead up to exams. For others, it can disrupt important support they may be receiving for physical or mental health needs, and they then need to build relationships with new professionals. It also means having to navigate new relationships at home and build new relationships in other aspects of their lives, as it becomes difficult to stay connected to the friends, relatives or other supportive adults who are now many miles away.

We have heard from care-experienced young people who have had to spend hours navigating public transport to visit the people that matter to them, whilst others haven't been able to because it's too complex or expensive.

We have heard from care-experienced young people who have been moved to a predominantly white area when they've come from a diverse community, making them feel even more isolated and alone.

We've heard from care-experienced young people who have had little or no choice in where they live, leaving them feeling they have no agency over their lives and that they can be uprooted at any time.

We need action now so that all children in care can get the love and stability they deserve.

What needs to change

We urgently need:

- 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:
 - a. **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
 - 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
 - b. **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
 - 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
 - c. **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

Ofsted reports found that the number of foster care applicants are decreasing year on year, which has a big impact in how the care system functions.

The number of applications in 2022-23 was 18% lower than that of 2018-19. Moreover, the number of deregistrations are on the rise. In 2022 out of 8010 applications to foster, 42% withdrew.

The implications of this creates an imbalance between the number of children in care and the amount of foster homes available, as the children who are in need of a safe homes increases, but the possibility decreases. Social services are forced to resort to long-distance placements where the child is moved to an area they are unaware of and isolated.

The Gone Too Far campaign wants to see better support to recruit and retain foster carers.

Lamar
(Gone Too Far young campaigner)

Appendix A. Further Information

Methodology

The data in this report includes both publicly available government statistics and data obtained from the Department for Education by Become through requests made under the Freedom of Information Act (2000).

All data refers to children in the care of local authorities in England, who have 'Child Looked After' (CLA) status in law.

If not otherwise stated, the data in this report pertains to the 12-month period ending 31st March 2023.

Full data tables

Table 1. Numbers and percentages of children in care living more than 20 miles from home as at 31st March 2023.

Year	Number of children placed >20 mi away from home	Number of children in care	Percentage of children placed >20 mi away from home
2013	10,850	68,110	15.9%
2014	11,960	68,840	17.4%
2015	12,430	69,540	17.9%
2016	12,880	70,440	18.3%
2017	13,570	72,670	18.7%
2018	14,590	75,420	19.3%
2019	15,360	78,150	19.7%
2020	16,060	80,000	20.1%
2021	16,840	80,850	20.8%
2022	16,970	82,170	20.7%
2023	17,630	83,840	21.0%

Source: Department for Education, [Children looked after in England including adoptions](#), various releases from 2013 to 2023.

Table 2. Average distance of placements from home as at 31st March 2023.

Year	Mean average distance of placement from home (miles)
2022	18.2
2023	18.5

Source: Freedom of Information requests submitted to the Department for Education by Become.

Table 3. Numbers and percentages of children living more than 20 miles from home as at 31st March 2023, according to provider type.

Year	Placement Provider Type								
	All children's homes			Private children's homes			LA, voluntary and other public children's homes*		
	No. over 20 miles from home	Total children	% over 20 miles from home	No. over 20 miles from home	Total children	% over 20 miles from home	No. over 20 miles from home	Total children	% over 20 miles from home
2019	3,430	6,720	51%	3,030	5,030	60%	400	1,690	24%
2020	3,600	6,960	52%	3,210	5,300	61%	390	1,660	23%
2021	3,750	7,290	51%	3,400	5,730	59%	350	1,560	22%
2022	3,720	7,440	50%	3,390	5,910	57%	330	1,530	22%
2023	3,870	7,780	50%	3,550	6,300	56%	320	1,480	22%

* Includes all places provided by the local authority, the voluntary/third sector, other local authority provision and other public provision (e.g. by PCT).

Source: Freedom of Information request submitted to the Department for Education by Become.

Table 4. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores of children according to distance of placement from home.

SDQ Score Banding	Distance between placement and home		
	20 miles or less	Over 20 miles	Distance not known or recorded
Normal	11,960	3,000	430
Borderline	3,090	1,000	50
Cause for concern	9,370	3,550	70
SDQ score not recorded	7,540	3,050	280
All children (see note)	31,970	10,600	820

Guidance:

- Figures include children aged 5 to 16 who have been continuously in care for at least 12 months as at 31st March 2023
- All children in care aged 4-16 should have a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) assessment each year
- A higher score indicates more emotional difficulties. 0-13 is considered normal, 14-16 is borderline cause for concern and 17-40 is cause for concern

Source: Freedom of Information request submitted to the Department for Education by Become.

Table 5. Numbers and percentages of children in secure children’s homes living more than 20 miles from home as at 31st March 2023, compared to the rates for all children’s homes.

Year	Secure children’s homes			All other (non-secure) children’s homes		
	No. over 20 miles from home	Total children	% over 20 miles from home	No. over 20 miles from home	Total children	% over 20 miles from home
2019	110	140	79%	3,320	6,580	50%
2020	110	130	85%	3,490	6,830	51%
2021	100	130	77%	3,650	7,160	51%
2022	110	130	85%	3,610	7,310	49%
2023	100	120	83%	3,770	7,660	49%

Source: Freedom of Information request submitted to the Department for Education by Become.

Table 6. Average distance of placements from home according to the number of placements as at 31st March 2023.

Number of placements in the year	Mean average distance of placement from home (miles)
One placement	16.0
Two placements	18.8
Three or more placements	22.3

Source: Freedom of Information request submitted to the Department for Education by Become.

Table 7. Numbers and percentages of children living more than 20 miles from home as at 31st March 2023, according to the number of placements within the year ending 31st March 2023.

Distance of placement from home	Number of placements within the year		
	One placement	Two placements	Three or more placements
Number of children placed more than 20 miles from home	16,050	6,450	4,680
% of children placed more than 20 miles from home	21%	27%	31%
Number of children placed 20 miles or less from home	60,130	17,190	10,470
% of children placed 20 miles or less from home	79%	73%	69%

Source: Freedom of Information request submitted to the Department for Education by Become.