



# Stability Index 2019

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Overview report

AUGUST 2019

# Contents

Foreword from the Children’s Commissioner for England .....	1
Executive summary .....	3
About the 2019 Stability Index .....	3
Key findings from the 2019 Stability Index.....	3
Our methods .....	6
Our findings .....	7
Additional findings: placement instability.....	9
Additional findings: school instability .....	10
Additional findings: social worker instability .....	11
Limitations of our work .....	11
Children’s experiences of instability .....	13
Moving home.....	13
Moving school .....	14
Changing social worker.....	16
Recommendations .....	20
Next steps.....	21

## Foreword from the Children's Commissioner for England



Every week we speak with children who are growing up in the care of the state. Separated from their parents and already with a tough start in life, their number one ask from us is the same as it has always been: that the people who are tasked with looking after them provide them with the support and stability they need to be able to begin to recover, build positive relationships and start to build their future.

That is why in 2017 we created our Stability Index, an annual measure of changes in home, school and social worker for children in care. We want to identify where there are problems and encourage local authorities and Government to tackle them to improve stability in the system.

Happily, for many children in care, that stability exists. They live permanently with a loving foster family, stay at the same good school and have a social worker with whom they form and keep an important relationship. Many others though are growing up with too many changes, moving from home to home, chopping and changing schools, seeing different social workers drift in and out of their lives – many moving on before they have got to know them or even in some cases before they have met face to face.

This instability hampers their chances in life. If we moved our own children from home to home, school to school, year after year, we would not be surprised if they struggled with their education or found it difficult to settle. Instability also makes children in care more vulnerable – without the safety nets of trusted adults and security needed to guide and protect them. In the worst cases, this can lead to exploitation. There are always those who are good at spotting and manipulating the most vulnerable children, and when children don't have strong and trusted relationships with foster carers, social workers or teachers, who can they turn to when they are most at risk?

This year's findings repeat much of what we saw in 2017 and 2018: around one in ten children are still 'pinballing' around the care system. Despite important positive measures like the Department for Education's National Stability Forum and improvements by some councils, there seems to be a persistent problem affecting the stability of around ten per cent of the kids in care.

We know too that they are more likely to be older children. Over the last five years, the overall profile of children in care has changed dramatically, driven by a growing share of older children and teenage care entrants, who have more complex needs. The number of teenagers aged 13 or over growing up in care rose by 21% between 2012/13 and 2017/18, while the number of 0-5 year olds fell by 15%. As a result, nearly 1 in 4 children in care – 23% – are aged 16 or over, while a further 2 in 5 are aged 10-15.

The vulnerability of these children is stark. Compared to younger children, teenagers in care are significantly more likely to have experienced child sexual exploitation (6 times more likely), gone missing from home (7 times more likely), be involved in gangs (5 times more likely), trafficking (12 times more likely) and be misusing drugs (4 times more likely).

They also experience much higher levels of instability: they are around 80% more likely (compared to the national average) to have two or more changes of home within a year. Inevitably many local authorities are buckling under the rising cost of the specialist care needed for this growing group of children. In one local authority alone, we found that 20% of the entire children's services budget is being spent on just ten children.

As a result, we have a care system struggling to cope with children with different needs and which in turn is not providing stability for highly vulnerable children.

We should be alarmed that just over half of children in care moved home at least once in three years, while one in ten did so four or more times. Every week we hear from children in care contacting our Help at Hand advice line because they are being moved again – often without even being asked first. I hope this year's Stability Index will again encourage councils and Governments to think creatively and to invest appropriately so that those numbers come down in the future. All of us tasked with looking out for children growing up in care have a duty to make it happen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Longfield." Below the signature is a short horizontal line.

**Anne Longfield, OBE**  
Children's Commissioner for England

### **About the Children's Commissioner for England**

Anne Longfield, OBE, is the Children's Commissioner for England. The role was established under the Children Act 2004 which gave the Commissioner responsibility for promoting awareness of the views and interests of children. Her remit includes understanding what children think about things that affect them and encouraging decision makers to take their best interests into account. She has unique data gathering powers and powers of entry to talk with children to gain evidence to support improvement for them. The Children and Families Act 2014 further strengthened the remit, powers and independence of the Commissioner.

The Children's Commissioner helps to bring about long-term change and improvements for children, in particular the most vulnerable children including those who are in care. She is the 'eyes and ears' of children in the system and is expected to carry out her duties 'without fear or favour' of Government, children's agencies, nor the voluntary or private sector.

## Executive summary

### About the 2019 Stability Index

The Stability Index is an annual measure of the stability of the lives of children in care. It was first launched by the Children's Commissioner in 2017 to shine a light on the issue of stability, provide data that allows stability to be monitored over time, and ultimately drive improvements in stability for children in care.

This report provides the national overview of the latest data analysis (relating to 2017/18) and findings. An accompanying [technical report](#), available on our website, provides the full detail and methodology.

For this year's report, we have continued to improve our data on social worker stability, which now covers nearly all local authorities in England. This year we are also publishing the [underlying data](#) for each local authority on our website.

We have also spoken to children in care (or who have been in care in the past) about their experiences of instability while in care, to understand what effect it had on their lives and what might have made it easier to deal with. The full findings of that work are available in a separate ['Children's Voices' report](#).

### Key findings from the 2019 Stability Index

- > **At a national level, most rates of instability have not fallen since 2016/17.**
  - > We still find that in 2017/18, 1 in 10 children in care experienced two or more home moves during the year, and just over 1 in 4 experienced two or more changes of social worker. These rates are broadly the same as in 2016/17.
  - > The exception is school stability: there has been a slight reduction in the proportion of children in care who experience a change of school during the academic year, from 13% in 2016/17 to 11% in 2017/18.
- > **Most children in care continue to experience some kind of instability, in one form or another.**
  - > Less than 3 in 10 children in care experienced no change of home, school move or social worker through the year. Only 1 in 6 experienced none of these changes over two years.
- > **Some children experience instability at home, at school *and* in their social worker.**
  - > Around 3,200 children in care – roughly 1 in 20 – experienced a home move, a school move *and* a change in social worker within the same year (2017/18). A further 1 in 5 (13,840 children) experienced two of these changes.
  - > Over two years from 2016/17 to 2017/18, 7,100 children experienced all of these changes; this works out to roughly 1 in 7 of those in care in both years. A further 1 in 3 (nearly 15,500 children) experienced two of these changes.
  - > Nearly 500 children experienced multiple home moves, a mid-year school move *and* multiple social worker changes all within the same year (2017/18). A further 4,470 children experienced two of these changes.
- > **Some children also experience repeated instability over two years.**
  - > More than 1,420 children (2.7% of those in care in both 2016/17 and 2017/18) who experienced multiple placement moves in both years consecutively. This is a similar rate to that which we found last year – it has not fallen.

- > Among children in care who were enrolled at school, around 2,000 (4%) experienced a school move two years in a row. This is very similar to the rate we found last year.
  - > Around 6,000 children in care (roughly 1 in 12 of those in care in both 2016/17 and 2017/18) experienced multiple social worker changes in both years consecutively.
- > **Over the longer term, most children in care experience a home move.**
- > Over a three-year period, more than half (52%) of children in care experience at least one home move; 3 in 10 experience multiple (two or more) moves and 1 in 10 experiences four or more moves.
  - > Over a four-year period, nearly 3 in 5 children in care (58%) experiences at least one home move. More than a third (35%) experience two or more moves; while around 1 in 11 children (9%) experiences five or more moves.
- > **Changes of social worker occur much more frequently than placement or school changes.**
- > More than 45,000 children in care – 3 in 5 – experienced at least one change of social worker in 2017/18, while more than 20,000 children in care – just over 1 in 4 – experienced two or more changes.
  - > Over a two-year period (2016/17 to 2017/18), more than half of children in care (55%) experience two or more changes of social worker, while 1 in 3 (32%) experience three or more changes.
- > **The overall profile and needs of children in care is changing, driven by a growing share of older children and teenage care entrants – who tend to have more complex needs on average.**
- > The number of teenagers (aged 13 or over) in care rose by 21% between 2012/13 and 2017/18, while the number of 0-5 year olds fell by 15%.
  - > Teenagers in care are more likely to have vulnerabilities that require specialist or intensive support. They are 50% more likely (compared to children in care aged under 13) to have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and 10 times more likely to have been attending a pupil referral unit (PRU).
  - > Teenagers also tend to come into care for different reasons. Compared to under-13s, teenagers in care are significantly more likely to have the following issues flagged up by social workers: child sexual exploitation (6 times more likely), going missing from home (7 times more likely), gangs (5 times more likely), trafficking (12 times more likely) and child drug misuse (4 times more likely).
  - > Older children and teenagers who enter care also experience much higher levels of instability: they are around 80% more likely (compared to the national average) to experience two or more changes of home within a year.
- > **As a result of this, teenagers in care also tend to need more complex or specialist support.**
- > They are six times more likely (compared to children under 13) to be living in residential or secure children's homes.
- > **There remains wide variation in rates of instability across the country.**
- > The proportion of children in care experiencing multiple home moves in 2017/18 ranged from 4% to 20% across local authorities, while the proportion of children experiencing a mid-year school move ranged from 4% to 22%.
  - > For social worker stability the variation is even wider: the proportion of children experiencing multiple changes of social worker in 2017/18 varied from 0% to 51%.

- > **More analysis, and better data, is required in order to be able to explain this local variation.**
  - > There are some factors recorded in national datasets which can contribute to these differences. For example, rates of home and school instability tend to be slightly higher in areas with more children in care with complex needs, teenage care entrants, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, or children whose legal status is not a full care order.
  - > However, these factors can only account for a small proportion of the variation of across local authorities. Many local authorities who appear to be similar in terms of these factors can still have different rates of instability.
  
- > **Statistically there is a relationship between school Ofsted ratings and rates of school stability, but not between local authority Ofsted ratings and rates of home stability.**
  - > Only 8% of children in care attending schools judged 'Outstanding' moved school during the academic year, compared to 1 in 5 children in care attending schools judged 'Inadequate'.
  - > There appears to be no correlation between a local authority's Ofsted rating for Looked After Children and the proportion of children in care in that area who experience two or more home changes in a year.
  
- > **Social work workforce challenges affect the stability that children in care experience.**
  - > In local authorities with higher rates of agency staff, higher rates of social worker turnover and higher social worker vacancy rates, children in care are more likely to experience multiple changes of social worker in a year.
  
- > **This year we are publishing stability figures for every local authority.**
  - > The underlying data is available on [our website](#) to help local authorities compare themselves to each other, and understand where more progress can be made to improve stability.

## Our methods

- > The Stability Index considers three domains of stability that we know matter for the wellbeing and welfare of children in care:
  - > Stability at home
  - > Stability at school
  - > Stability in professional support
  
- > To measure these, we use datasets that contain information on:
  - > How often a child experiences a placement change
  - > How often a child moves school
  - > How often a child's allocated social worker changes
  
- > For each child in care, we measure the number of times that any of these changes happened during the 2017/18. For placement moves, our headline findings focus on whether children experienced multiple – two or more – placement moves within a year. This is equivalent to having three or more placements. Similarly, for social worker changes, our headline findings focus on whether a child in care experienced multiple changes of social worker within a year, equivalent to having three or more social workers. For school moves, our headline findings focus on whether a child experienced a mid-year school move, i.e. a move during the academic year, although we also look at school moves in general.
  
- > We also consider stability over the longer term, as we know that this important for children. For home stability, we examine whether children experience multiple placement moves two years in a row, as well as the number of placement moves over three or four years. For school stability we examine whether children move school two years in a row, and for social worker stability we examine how many changes of social worker children experience over two years.
  
- > Our analysis of home stability is based on the Department for Education's (DfE's) Children Looked After Census; we link this to the DfE National Pupil Database for our analysis of school stability. Our analysis of social worker changes is based on data we gathered from 140 local authorities on the social worker histories for each of their children in care. Further details on the data, samples and methods are available in the accompanying [technical report](#).
  
- > In addition to our annual data analysis, this year we have also carried out interviews with 22 children in England who are in care or care leavers. The interviewees were aged between 9 and 21. These interviews explored two themes: the impact that instability had on these children, in their own words; and their perspectives on the factors that make instability harder or easier to deal with. The full findings of that work are available in a separate '[Children's Voices](#)' report.



## Our findings

- > **At a national level, most rates of instability were broadly the same in 2017/18 as those we found last year for 2016/17.** We find that 10.4% of children in care on 31 March 2018 – 7,880 children – experienced two or more home (placement) changes in 2017/18. This very similar to the 2016/17 rate of 10.6% of children in care (7,680 children). Among those who were also enrolled at school, just over 1 in 10 (11%, 6,230 children) experienced a mid-year school in move in 2017/18. This is slightly lower than the corresponding rate for 2016/17 of 13% (6,640 children). Experiencing social worker changes remains significantly more common than experiencing placement or school changes: more than 20,000 children in care experienced multiple social worker changes in 2017/18. This works out to 27% of the children in care on 31 March 2018 – similar to the rate we found for 2016/17 (26%).
- > **Most children in care continue to experience some kind of instability, in one form or another.** Less than 3 in 10 children in care experienced no home (placement) move, no school move and no change of social worker change through the year. Only 1 in 6 experienced none of these changes over two years.
- > **Furthermore, significant numbers of children in care experience instability on multiple fronts within the same year.** Around 3,200 children in care – roughly 1 in 20 – experienced a home (placement) move, a school move *and* a change in social worker within the same year (2017/18). A further 1 in 5 (13,840 children) experienced two of these changes. Over two years from 2016/17 to 2017/18, 7,100 children experienced all of these changes; this works out to roughly 1 in 7 of those in care in both years. A further 1 in 3 (nearly 15,500 children) experienced two of these changes. Nearly 500 children experienced multiple home (placement) moves, a mid-year school move *and* multiple social worker changes all within the same year (2017/18). A further 4,470 children experienced two of these changes.
- > **Since one-year measures do not provide a full picture of the stability that children in care experience, our analysis also considers the numbers of changes they experience over two years.** Around half of children in care in 2016/17 and 2017/18 saw no placement moves over two years; while 1 in 5 (around 12,000 children) experienced two or more placement moves over this period. These rates are the same as those we found last year. Around 3,400 children (6.3% of children in care in both years) experienced four or more placement moves over two years. These rates are all broadly the same as those we found last year (over 2015/16 and 2016/17). Around 1,400 children (2.7%) experienced multiple placement moves two years in a row; this is also a very similar rate to last year. Around 2,000 children (4% of those enrolled in school) experienced any type of school move – mid-year or otherwise – two years in a row. This is slightly higher than the rate last year (3%). More than 6,000 children (8% of those in care in both years) experienced multiple social worker changes two years in a row.
- > **Over the longer term, most children in care experience some degree of placement instability.** Among the children in care in both 2015/16 and 2017/18, less than half (48%) experienced no placement changes over that three-year period. A further 3 in 10 experienced two or more changes, including 1 in 10 (4,100 children) experienced four or more changes. Over 2,500 children (6%) experienced five or more changes over three years. Among children in care in both care in both 2013/14 and 2016/17, only 42% experienced no placement changes over that four-year period, while more than 1 in 3 experienced two or more changes and around 1 in 7 (4,300 children) experienced four or more changes. Nearly 2,800 children (around 1 in 11 of this group) experienced

five or more placement changes.

- > **The overall profile and needs of children in care is changing, driven by a growing share of older children and teenagers.** The number of teenagers (aged 13 or over) in care has risen by 21% between 2012/13 and 2017/18, alongside a 26% rise in the number of 8-12 year olds – but 15% fall in the number of 0-5 year olds. As a result, nearly 1 in 4 children in care (23%) is now aged 16 or over, while a further 2 in 5 (39%) are aged 10-15 (as of 31 March 2018).
- > **Teenagers in care are more likely to have certain needs or vulnerabilities that may require specialist or intensive support.** For example, they are 50% more likely (compared to children in care aged under 13) to have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and 10 times more likely to have been attending a pupil referral unit (PRU).
- > **Teenagers in care tend to have had different risks and vulnerabilities identified by social workers when they first came into contact with children’s social care.** Compared to under-13s, teenagers in care (with social work assessment information) are significantly more likely to have the following issues flagged up at assessment: child sexual exploitation (6 times more likely), going missing from home (7 times more likely), gangs (5 times more likely), trafficking (12 times more likely) and child drug misuse (4 times more likely). Around 1 in 5 teenagers in care who have social worker assessment information has been flagged as an unaccompanied asylum seeking child, compared to only 0.2% of under-13s in care. Conversely, teenagers in care are less likely to have had the following issues flagged up at assessment: parental drug and alcohol misuse, parental mental health issues, domestic violence, and abuse and neglect. Older children and teenagers (specifically, those aged 12-15) who enter care also experience much higher levels of instability: they are around 80% more likely (compared to the national average) to experience two or more changes of home within a year.
- > **As a result of this, teenagers in care also tend to need more complex or specialist support.** They are six times more likely (compared to children under 13) to be living in residential or secure children’s homes. Nearly half (46%) are living in privately-run accommodation – twice the rate of under-13s. Around 1 in 7 lives in independent or semi-independent accommodation, including 1 in 9 in private independent or semi-independent accommodation. Since 2012/13 there has been an 83% increase in the number of teenagers in care living in this sort of accommodation.
- > **There is wide variation between local authorities in the proportions of their children in care experiencing instability.** The proportion of children in care experiencing multiple placement moves in 2017/18 ranged from 4% to 20% across local authorities (LAs). The proportion of children experiencing a mid-year school move in 2017/18 ranged from 4% to 22% across LAs. For social worker stability the variation is even wider: the proportion of children experiencing multiple changes of social worker in 2017/18 varies from 0% to 51% across the 140 LAs who shared their social worker data with us.
- > **However, it is generally not the case that the same local areas have persistently high or low rates of instability over time.** At the LA level, there is only a moderate relationship between rates of placement instability from one year to the next: an LA’s rate in 2016/17 explains 43% of its rate in 2017/18. There are 7 LAs whose rate of placement instability was in the top 10% nationally in both years. For school stability – defined as rates of mid-year school moves – the relationship is even weaker: an LA’s rate in 2016/17 only explains 8% of its rate in 2017/18. This means most LAs have higher rates followed by lower rates, and vice versa.

- > **Existing data on the characteristics of LAs and their children in care can only explain part of this local variation.** There are some factors recorded in national datasets which can contribute to these differences. For example, rates of placement and school instability tend to be slightly higher in areas with more children in care with complex needs, teenage care entrants, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, or children whose legal status is not a full care order. However, these factors can only account for a small proportion of the variation of across local authorities. Many local authorities who appear to be similar in term of these factors have different rates of instability, and vice versa.
- > **Statistically there is a relationship between school Ofsted ratings and school stability, but not between local authority Ofsted ratings and placement stability.** Only 8% of children in care attending schools judged 'Outstanding' had a mid-year school move in 2017/18, compared to 1 in 5 children in care attending schools judged 'Inadequate'. However there appears to be no statistical relationship between an LA's Ofsted rating for Looked After Children and the proportion of children in care in that area who experienced two or more placement changes in 2017/18. In fact, the rates were the same (on average) for LAs judged to be 'Outstanding' and for those judged to be 'Inadequate'.
- > **This year we are publishing stability figures for every local authority.** The [data is available](#) to help local authorities benchmark themselves, and understand where more progress can be made to improve stability.

### Additional findings: placement instability

- > **There are some factors that are associated with higher or lower placement instability; these are mostly indicators of children having additional or more complex needs. However these factors can only explain a small proportion of the variation.** We find, for example, that the two-year average rate of placement instability (over 2016/17 and 2017/18) is around 3 percentage points higher in LAs where the proportion of children in care who were teenage care entrants is 10 percentage points higher. There is a similar relationship with the proportion of children in care whose placement is under a criminal justice legal status. Rates of placement instability are also higher in LAs with higher proportions of unaccompanied asylum seeking children or Section 20 orders, and lower in LAs with higher proportions of full or interim care orders. But all factors together are only able to explain 15% of the variation across LAs in rates of placement instability. We also find that LAs which see a reduction in the supply of available foster placements are more likely to see an increase, on average, in rates of placement instability – but this correlation is very small and the factors we consider can only explain 2% of the variation.
- > **We did not find statistically significant links between many local authority factors and the risk of experiencing placement instability.** The correlations with Ofsted ratings, deprivation levels, rates of looked after children, rates of children in secure/residential care, or social worker turnover and vacancy rates, budget per looked after child and high needs funding per child were all very small and statistically insignificant.
- > **As with last year, we find that certain groups of children in care – namely those with more complex needs – are significantly more likely to experience multiple placement moves within a year.** Nearly 1 in 5 teenage care entrants experiences this, as does 1 in 5 children with a criminal justice legal status, 1 in 4 children in secure or residential care, and 1 in 4 children attending a pupil

referral unit. These rates also vary significantly across the country: for example, in some LAs, at least half of children in secure or residential care experiences multiple placement moves in a year. There are also LAs where at least 1 in 3 teenage care entrants, or 1 in 5 children with an identified need around social, emotional and mental health, experiences multiple placement moves.

- > **In many cases this instability leads to children with more complex needs ending up in high-cost, privately run provision.** Nearly 7 in 10 of these children starts off in foster care when they enter care. But 18 months later, during which they have experienced nearly three placement moves on average, only 4 in 10 remain in foster care. By contrast, over the same period, the proportion in residential or secure care increases from 1 in 4 to 4 in 10. The proportion in private provision also increases, from 1 in 4 to over half. Other research we published last month found that high-cost residential care in some LAs costs in the region of £260,000 per child per year, on average.

### Additional findings: school instability

- > **As we found last year, school moves can be extremely disruptive for children in care.** In 330 cases, children in care missed an entire term of school because of a mid-year move. We also find that when children have a mid-year move their next school is, on average, 26 miles away from their previous one.
- > **There are some factors that are associated with higher or lower school instability; these are mostly indicators of children having additional or more complex needs. However these factors can only explain a small proportion of the variation.** We find, for example, that the two-year average rate of school instability (over 2016/17 and 2017/18) is around 4 percentage points higher in LAs where the proportion of children in care who were teenage care entrants is 10 percentage points higher. Rates of school instability are also higher in LAs with higher proportions of unaccompanied asylum seeking children, Section 20 orders and children attending pupil referral units (PRUs), and lower in LAs with higher proportions of full interim care orders. But all factors together are only able to explain 26% of the variation across LAs in rates of school instability.
- > **As we found last year, many children in care are not attending schools judged by Ofsted to be 'Good' or 'Outstanding' – despite statutory guidance.** Of the children in care attending school, 1 in 5 (nearly 11,000) are in schools judged to be 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement'. This includes 2,830 children – around 1 in 20 of those enrolled in school – who are in schools judged to be 'Inadequate'. These rates are similar to those we found last year.
- > **The proportion of children in care attending schools judged to be 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' varies significantly across the country.** In some LAs fewer than 1 in 10 children are in such schools, but there are other LAs where the proportion is more than 1 in 3. It can even be as high as 40%.
- > **Part of this variation across LAs can be accounted for by the local supply of, and demand for, places in good schools for children in care.** We find that the proportion of children in an 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' school is partly determined by an area's overall rate of children in care in an LA, and by its number of vacant 'Good' or 'Outstanding' school places. These two factors explain around a third of the variation across LAs. But other factors also play a role: we find that children in care are more likely to attend schools judged 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' in LAs which have a lower budget per looked after child, a lower rate of full care orders, a higher rate of teenage care entrants, and a higher rate of children on Section 20 orders.

- > **Children in care are more likely to experience school instability if their school has a lower Ofsted rating.** While 1 in 5 children in schools rated as “Inadequate” experienced a mid-year school move in 2017/18, only 1 in 12 children in schools rated ‘Outstanding’ experienced this. The relationship between school instability and school quality is stronger than that which we found last year: rates of school instability have increased slightly among children in schools judged ‘Inadequate’, but have decreased slightly among children in schools judged ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’.
- > **As we found last year, children with additional or complex needs are significantly more likely to experience school instability.** Nearly half of children in care attending PRUs experienced a mid-year move in 2017/18, along with 1 in 5 teenage care entrants, 1 in 5 children who had a criminal justice legal status, 17% of children with an identified special educational need (SEN) around social, emotional and mental health, and 15% of children with autism or learning disability as their identified SEN. However, these rates are all slightly lower than the corresponding figures for the previous year (2016/17).
- > **These rates also vary significantly across the country.** For example, in some LAs, more than two-thirds of children attending PRUs experienced a mid-year move. There are also LAs where more than 1 in 3 teenage care entrants or children with a criminal justice legal status experienced this. Even among children with SEN statements or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) – whose overall rate of mid-year moves is the same as the national average (1 in 10) – there are some LAs where this rate is above 1 in 5.

### Additional findings: social worker instability

- > **The risk of experiencing social worker instability has less of a relationship with child and placement factors, compared to school and placement instability, and more to do with local workforce issues.** The proportion of children who experience multiple social worker changes is higher in LAs with higher rates of agency social workers, social worker vacancies and social worker turnover. There are no statistically correlations across LAs between their rates of social worker instability and the characteristics of their children in care.
- > **There remains a large amount of variation in levels of social worker instability which cannot be explained by the above factors.** Together these factors only explain 11% of the variation across LAs in rates of social worker instability.
- > **Rates of social worker instability are generally higher in local areas with lower Ofsted ratings.** In LAs judged ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted in relation to Looked After Children, 1 in 4 children in care experienced multiple changes of social worker – but in LAs judged ‘Inadequate’, the proportion was 1 in 3.

### Limitations of our work

- > **This report features a number of developments over our first report.** In response to children’s views that stability matters over the longer term, we now report all measures over two years; for placement moves, we can also report on changes over three or four years. We also have a much richer picture of the patterns of social worker changes, having collected social worker data from nearly all local authorities in England – enabling a national and regional picture of social worker stability.

- > **The key limitation is how close we can get to measuring what really matters – the quality and security of their relationships and environment.** We recognise that some change can be inevitable or even a positive step, especially when a child’s needs change or when better placement or school options become available. Our analysis counts the number of changes but the data we have does not allow us to say whether these changes are good or bad, or whether they are well managed or badly managed. This remains a challenge for future work.
  
- > **We are also limited by the quality of national data on factors that might lead to instability.** While this report identifies many factors recorded in national data that we know increase the risk of experiencing instability, their total explanatory power is limited. There may be other important drivers of stability not captured in our data, such as – for example – a child’s background of traumatic experiences, the quality of the relationship between a child and their family, the quality and quantity of support around a child and their family, and how much contact a child has with friends and siblings.



## Children's experiences of instability

- > This year we have carried out qualitative work to speak with children and young people that are in care or have experience of being in care, to understand what stability – or the lack of it – means for them. We also wanted to understand what they say about how changes can best be managed, to minimise any harm or upheaval, and ensure that they can still try to lead a normal life. This builds upon the important work carried out Coram Voice through its ['Bright Spots' programme](#).
- > This section contains highlights interviews carried out by Children's Commissioner's Office with 22 children and young people in England who are in care or care leavers. The interviewees were aged between 9 and 21. These interviews explored two themes: the impact that instability had on these children, and the factors that made instability harder or easier to deal with. [Read the full report](#).

## Moving home

- > The children we spoke often mentioned feeling sad, angry, disappointed, lonely and stressed as a result of placement changes. Others described feeling exhausted or weary.
  - > *"I probably cried myself to sleep each night, the first week." (Male, 17)*
  - > *"But the more you move to different places and then the more you just get used to it ... It's just [breathes out], it's just tiring ... I don't know how to explain it, you do literally feel tired, you hear it and it's just like [breathes out] go back to bed." (Female, 15)*
  - > *"I think it [moving placements] just had an impact on ... how I act, how I controlled my emotions. If I felt angry now, I'd just hold it in but then I would just lash out." (Female, 16)*
- > Some children spoke about losing touch with friends and no longer feeling close to siblings or other family members.
  - > *"It was difficult, because all my friends lived in [town], they still do there, they still live there. All my friends are from where I'm from, so it was hard, I didn't get to see them as much." (Female, 17)*
- > Some children spoke positively about placement moves that occurred with their siblings, or in order to be with their sibling(s). Others spoke about being separated from a sibling and how it had a hugely damaging effect on their wellbeing, as well on the relationships.
  - > *"[What helped during the placement change?] That I was with my brother and sister, so I knew that I wasn't alone and that." (Female, 16)*
  - > *"Well they just said that he's getting adopted to North England. That's all I'm now allowed to know. ... When she told me that he was gone, I just broke down... It was hard, I would cry every single day at school." (Female, 18)*
- > Many children said that counselling was one of the most important ways of supporting a child through difficult changes, including placement changes.
  - > *"A lot of counselling, like, not just the school counsellor, like, actual counselling, behavioural CBT, whatever. I feel that's really important. We weren't offered anything like that, and I just don't think there's enough done for young children when they experience placement moves... They don't do enough to guarantee the emotional wellbeing of that child, and the psychological*

*wellbeing, it can have a big impact on kids because there's all that stability gone. ... It can have a lot of psychological damage on a kid, and you get the kids acting out, you get kids being rebellious, going off and doing drugs, and they turn down paths, and get involved with the wrong people, and I feel like, a lot of the time, that can be prevented.” (Female, Care leaver)*

- > *“My behaviour got a bit uncontrollable [when moved placement to another town]. It's because I still wasn't given the help I want, I needed... Like I needed therapeutic help and I didn't get it. And then when I moved to [new town following another placement move], I finally got it ... It [therapy] made me get rid of all my anger ... I haven't kicked off as often as I used to.” (Female, 13)*
- > Some of the children we spoke with said they would have appreciated more one-to-one support in order to make them feel less alone.
- > *“Just someone talk to, or someone just to say yeah I'm here for you. Because I didn't really get that back then.” (Female, 18)*
- > Having at least one teacher to turn to for support at school was seen as important during placement moves, especially if they knew about these changes in advance and could be more understanding and accommodating.
- > *“Was it helpful that they [the teachers] knew? Yeah. Because if I needed to talk to them they'd be there and I could talk to them. They helped me, I don't think they give me any homework. Just so I could settle in. That helped because I was a bit stressed every night and I couldn't sleep sometimes.” (Female, 12)*
- > Some children found it comforting to have a cat or a dog while going through a placement change.
- > *Because I think that pets, straight away, they're happy to see you, as soon as you walk through the door and they just, I think they know what's happening and how you feel and they can sense it. So they know when to come up to you and give you hugs.” (Male, 12)*

## Moving school

- > Children said that the process of changing schools can make them feel scared and lonely, can cause anxiety and depression, and can magnify and exacerbate other feelings that they already having – such as insecurity and uncertainty. Having to meet new people, being asked many questions, and having to explain their situation can also be incredibly stressful.
- > *“And I just, I felt very lost. ... I was very anxious a lot of the time just whether people would like me and things. And like making new friends and trying to find somewhere to fit in. I was quite stressed I think trying to make sure that I was doing everything right with the school. And just very nervous to be honest.” (Female, 15)*
- > Making friends can be hard for children in care when they first arrive at a new school. Some children said they had to lie when making new friends, so that their friends would not realise that they were in care. This can prevent children from getting close to new friends or being able to turn to them when things are difficult.
- > *“So everyone wants to know about the new kid, where they're from, why they moved and so, it was a case of having to make up elaborate stories like, oh my parents got a new job this end and so I had to move schools. And so it is hard because if you don't choose to tell people why*



*you're in care it's a lot of lying and having to keep up with your lies and it's like you're living a fake life, you can never really be who you are and you can never let your guard down or be vulnerable, and you can't just say, 'oh yeah, sorry, I can't hang out with you after school because I've got to go out for a family meal', when the social worker's really coming around ... it's like living a double life. It's not easy... I reckon I was really depressed." (Female, care leaver)*

- > Changing schools can have an impact on schoolwork – particularly at the beginning.
  - > *"I think that changing school did have an impact on me, because I was already so behind when I went to my first secondary school, when I got to my second one it was, I was still really, I was even more behind ... So I had a lot of catching up to do, I, if I remember rightly it was about five years' catch up." (Female, 17)*
- > Children also mentioned not being able to continue with subjects that they enjoyed, because the new school did not offer it or because that subject was oversubscribed at the new school.
  - > *"The geography room was apparently full and the photography they didn't do. They didn't do a specific photography class, so I had to go to an art class, which isn't what I'd liked. So, I ended up having to drop that." (Male, 16)*
- > Children emphasised that school changes, if they occur, should be smooth transition as possible – without missing much school.
  - > *"I was out of school for three weeks rather than two, because the woman we was given to help me find a new school didn't really do her job properly... I understand that she's busy with loads of other people, but she left me and my mum on a voice message for a whole week, then a second week." (Male, 16)*
  - > *"I would have rather got to know all the children that was going to be in my class [before their first day at new school]. Who they are and what they like doing and all of that." (Male, 12)*
- > Children also valued having a designated support teacher from the very start – someone that they could speak to for help.
  - > *"I have one [an assigned member of staff as a mentor] now so it's like, it's a lot easier now and obviously I'm very used to this school but I mean I think it would have helped to begin with." (Female, 15)*
  - > *"I was given a day after school that I could go to a teacher to catch up ... That had a great impact because it allowed me to catch up on work I'd never done before." (Male, 16)*
- > Some children also felt it was helpful to be able to ask for support at school without having to speak to someone in person first (which could feel intimidating). Online systems for asking for help were mentioned as an alternative.
  - > *"My school has like an online system where you can like make appointments with people ... I didn't have to speak to anybody like upfront and ask for it, it was just a thing I could do that took less than a minute and once it was done it was out of the way and I knew that eventually I get to talk to somebody." (Female, 15)*
- > Sometimes changing school could be beneficial, for example if the new school was more appropriate for the child (e.g. a special school or alternative provision), or if the move led to better

support for the child's educational needs.

- > *"So there's four children in the class and two teachers. ... I loved it, I thrived." (Male, 17)*
- > *"At first I was quite nervous but I got adjusted to it [moving into alternative provision] quite quickly because I knew all the kids were all in the same situation I was in, most of them anyway. ... Knowing that fact that I'm not, I'm not the only one in, they're all in the same boat as me makes me think, OK I'm not the only one who's struggling, there are kids out there probably in worse situations than me." (Male, 14)*
- > *"So I got no support with any education in my first school. Whereas in my second school my mum and I really pushed for more support. And the Special Educational Needs Coordinator that I had at the time, that I was under, I had loads of support... one to one sessions, and after school, and I had in class support, and extra one to one lessons in the subjects that I was struggling with, I felt like I could catch up and I did catch up." (Female, 17)*

## Changing social worker

- > Many children said that having one social worker as a constant over many years was very important.
  - > *"It makes such a huge difference, because you've got to know each other, you're happy with each other, you're confident around each other, and you've got that relationship, you've got that trust between you, and it just makes your care experience so much more enjoyable." (Female, 17)*
- > When children have had many different social workers, it often reduces their ability and/or willingness to make the effort to get to know the next social worker. It can feel frustrating, boring, repetitive and exhausting to build that same relationship over and over. In some cases it led to apathy or indifference towards changes of social worker.
  - > *"So many things get lost and you have to keep repeating yourself ... And it's just boring, it's horrible, I hate it... you've got to try and trust them that they're not just going to up and leave whenever they feel like it. Because all the others just left after three or four visits or a couple of months, and you're just like, I've just got to accept that, as soon as it gets to three months I'm, I'll be waiting for the next one." (Female, 17)*
  - > *"I don't know it just feels like it's always on me to repeat like, OK I'll build a new relationship with you and then six months later you'll be gone so what is the point?" (Female, 16)*
  - > *"Well I wasn't too happy that we were changing again because it's hard to make relationships if they're literally going to be there for two months and then have someone else... I think I was a bit distant with some [new social workers] because I was like, oh they're just going to leave, what's the point of opening up to them? ... I just thought there was no point if they were just going to leave in a matter of months." (Female, 16)*
- > If children have established a good relationship with the social worker, it can be very painful when that social worker has to move on. Several children spoke about feeling really upset or distraught because of what that social worker had meant to them.
  - > *"It was summer and it was in my back garden and I remember as soon as they [old and new social worker] both left, I just sat in my room for hours crying. Mainly because I was going to*

*miss her, because she was so lovely. She always texts me, like if I had a hard day at school she would text me saying you're my lovely star, you're my golden star, keep your chin up. And I don't really get texts like that anymore. ... And I find it really hard to get close to people, and me and her got really close. I don't like losing people." (Female, 18)*

- > Having many social worker changes can impact on a child's self-esteem – it was common to talk about feelings of rejection.
  - > *"I didn't meet my new social worker for quite a while, and then I met her a couple of times, and then I got another one. And it's just like, well I only saw you three times and you're already leaving, am I that bad? And it just makes you feel like you're worthless, you're not valued, and you've done something wrong all the time. It also makes you feel like you're not important to them, and they don't want to be with you, they don't want to work with you, they're just doing it because they have to." (Female, 17)*
- > Children also reported that changing social workers can make life feel more unstable and chaotic.
  - > *"It [changing social workers] makes your life quite unstable because everything's like changing all the time and it's like there's not a consistency with the person that you should be able to trust." (Female, 15)*
- > Sometimes changes of social worker can cause a child to relive past traumatic events, because they may have to talk about their past again. This can prevent them trying to achieve normality in their life.
  - > *"For me, ideally, the best way that things can be is that although I may be a looked after child, my life carries on as normal as it possibly could be, and situations like that where you've got a social worker change brings everything back in to the forefront, and you then have to think about more than you'd perhaps like to. It can affect your everyday life in ways that you would rather they didn't." (Male, 17)*
- > The children we spoke with understood that many changes of social worker changes were simply a result of how services worked, for example if their case is transferred from team to another, or when they turn 18, or because the social worker leaves the job for various reasons. However they still had ideas for how these changes could be managed more effectively. They wanted the transition to be gradual, so that they have time to adjust. They wanted their current social worker to discuss the upcoming change in a meaningful way – like being told in advance why the change was required, and who the new social worker would be – and to feel involved in decisions.
  - > *"With my [old] social worker, I knew that he was going to leave ... he gave me some notice. About a month and a half, so quite a lot. So I could ease into it and know what's happening." (Male, 12)*
  - > *"I think it [changing social workers] should be gradual, well as gradual as it can be. Like you tell them, then you give them that time to process it, and then say goodbye, and then meet the person, rather than all in one bang." (Female, 18)*
  - > *"Try and involve the child in the change before doing it. Talk to the person, tell them about the person that you're going to change them over to." (Female, 17)*
  - > *"And if you're leaving then actually tell the young person ... I'm really sorry but there's circumstances that I have to leave. It's not because of you, it's just personal reasons, and*

*something's happened that I've got to make a career change, or I've got to leave, or give a little bit of an explanation why they're leaving, so it doesn't leave the young person like, oh, so again, I'm in the wrong, or that kind of thing. ... A little sentence or something about why they can't stay would just be enough to put that child's mind at ease." (Female, 17)*

- > *"[Knowing the reason why you have to change social workers is important] because then I don't have to wonder like, why they left and was it me or was it the workplace, like what was it?" (Female, 16)*
- > Children said it is important to have a proper goodbye with their current social worker. This could involve writing a letter, having a goodbye conversation over the phone, or meeting up one to one.
- > *"I'd known her for nearly six years. That's such a long time and then I didn't even get to say like a proper goodbye." (Female, 13)*
- > *"She [old social worker] came to see me, and I wrote her a card and she started crying when I gave her my card, and I was like oh it's intense. Yeah, it was nice." (Female, 18)*
- > *"I think saying goodbye is the main thing for me, just saying, I'm leaving and then why they're leaving." (Female, 16)*
- > In general, the children we spoke with preferred not to meet their new social worker at school; they found it more comfortable at home or in another safe space.
- > *"If it's [meeting a new social worker] in school it's really awkward, it's really not very nice. Because you get pulled out of class and all your peers are like, oh why are leaving school again? ... Whereas if it's at home it's just much more personal, they're at their home, they're settled and they're a lot more comfortable and more likely to open up and talk because they're in their home." (Female, 17)*
- > Children also said that having the old social worker keep in touch for a while can help with the transition. This made them feel more reassured, and in some cases helped them build up a relationship with new social worker.
- > *"Me and [old social worker] kept in contact even when [new social worker] became my social worker, she would, I'd still talk to [old social worker] about stuff, and she'd advise me to talk to [new social worker] about more things than I talked to her about. So, she helped me talk to her [new social worker] as well." (Female, 17)*
- > Children and young people emphasised the importance of their new social workers having done their homework, like reading their files properly and having an in-depth handover meeting with the previous social worker.
- > *"It's frustrating when perhaps there's a, well, everyone knows there's a file on them somewhere which has all details of their case story and things like that... I get that people are human and they get, make mistakes, but it's, when you know your old social worker knew this one thing about you and it was kind of important, and then the next one doesn't." (Male, 17)*
- > Having another professional in their lives who is a constant made it easier to go through a change of social worker. For example, children spoke about a particular teacher, an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) that they could turn to, or a counsellor, which made it easier to cope with a 'revolving door' of social workers.

- > *“She’s [IRO] always been really, really supportive and anything that I wanted to change or have altered she’d always back me up if it was within reason. And I just felt like I could always speak to her more than I could my social workers because they were always changing but I’ve always had my IRO.” (Female, 16).*

## Recommendations

- > **Availability and choice of homes is a key issue and a prerequisite for stability.** At present there are not always enough of the right kinds of homes for children, including adoption, fostering and children's homes, in the right areas. This can lead to children being placed far away or in homes that may not be the best fit for their needs. In some cases specialist residential care may be the right option given a child's needs, in which case it is better to place them there sooner – rather than after potentially several placements in foster care. More coordination is needed from the National Stability Forum to oversee local sufficiency plans and strengthen national sufficiency guidance. Regional hubs should also be encouraged to help coordination and market oversight, including oversight of out of area placements. Finally, there should also funded national strategies to drive up the recruitment and availability of foster families and social workers.
- > **Local authorities should consistently identify the best provision and help for a child based on proper assessment of what the child needs – not on costs or legal status.**
- > **Better access to mental health support, therapeutic help or even just a person to talk to, is crucial.** Many of the children we spoke to mentioned that this helped them cope with changes of school or placement, and then it also helped them deal with their issues – potentially contributing to improved stability in future. There is also a need for more support for children and families to help them cope – including mental health or therapeutic help, or practical day-to-day support. All of these options can help families stay intact.
- > **Schools and school leaders should be held to account for the extent to which they give children in care priority access for school places.** This would help to ensure that as many children in care as possible attend schools judged 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. Local authorities should also have the power to direct academies and free schools to admit a child who is looked after.
- > **In some cases moves or changes may be inevitable. Where changes must happen, better planning and communication with children is essential – along with protecting other sources of stability.** Children told us about the importance of being told in advance about changes, along with a clear explanation of why, and the opportunity to be involved. Transitions should also be smoother, with children given a chance to see and get to know about their new home, school social worker before the change actually happens. Social workers should find other sources of stability in a child's life, like a sibling, teacher or another person, and support that relationship to stay intact through any changes in the child's life.
- > **The DfE and National Stability Forum should take ownership of the national use of data on the care system and how well it functions.** This includes data on stability, the needs of children in care, and the drivers of supply and demand in the care market. They should also support the collection of better and more consistent information on the actual experiences of children in care.

## Next steps

- > We have data on placement and school stability for every local authority in England, and on social worker stability for nearly every local authority. We will be writing to every Director of Children's Services and every Lead Member for Children's Services to notify them of their local area's rates of instability, and will ask them to use the data we have published for their local area to identifying areas of concern.
- > We will also use our powers under Section 2C of the Children Act 2004 to follow up with the DfE and with local authorities to find out how they will respond to the recommendations in this report.
- > We want to see children in care placed in good or outstanding schools only. We will be writing to local authorities where significantly low proportion of children in care are in these schools, seeking both an explanation and a commitment from the local authority to secure better school places for its children in care.
- > We want to see the Stability Index informing Ofsted's inspections of local authority children's services. We will be sharing our data with Ofsted to support its inspections and conversations.
- > We have written to the DfE asking it to take over the collection and production of Stability Index data, and will be following up to ensure that the Stability Index continues to inform local and national policy on children in care. The data will continue to inform the National Stability Forum set up by the DfE.
- > Finally, we will continue to push for better and more meaningful data to be collected nationally on the lives, experiences, wellbeing and outcomes of looked after children, so that we can better shed light on these issues and hold services to account.

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