Out-of-Borough Placements for London's Looked After Children: A Research Study

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

This report examines the findings from research into out-of-area placements for children in care in London. It was commissioned in November 2013 and completed in March 2014.

This research aims to develop understanding of practice across London in placing looked after children (LAC) outside their home local authority. This is an issue which has been recognised as being a challenging one for local authorities for some time. In considering questions about out-of-area placement there are concerns about both the distance from home for the child and the 'distance' from the responsible authority – in terms of both geography and oversight and responsibility. In the case of London local authorities, the majority of which occupy a small geographical area, a child placed beyond a borough's administrative boundary might not, in reality, be very far from home or very far from their social worker's base. Indeed, it is possible that his or her carer works for the local authority responsible for the child – despite living outside that borough, or it could be that children are living with kin who reside in another borough.

Just as there have been concerns about children being placed far away, there has also been disquiet about the extent to which local authorities have prioritised their responsibilities in ensuring adequate and appropriate placement provision is available within their area. There have been calls for planners and commissioners to ensure that provision is available which aligns with the needs of the children and young people who are looked after.

Currently, there is a mixed economy of placement provision, but many types of placement – especially those designed to support troubled young people - are predominantly provided by the independent, and often the private, sector. Therefore, closely related to the issue of placement 'in or out of area' are questions about the type of placement and the type of placement provider. This is allied to what is known about the profile of children and young people in care, namely that the majority entering the care system have troubled individual and family histories, and a high proportion will have experienced different kinds of abuse, mental health and educational difficulties. The extent and complexity of these needs, and the corresponding importance of 'intensive, highly skilled support' should not be underestimated (Sempik, Ward and Darker, 2008, p222).

This research tries to explore these issues further. The research had two aims:

1. To provide a detailed picture of the current use of out-of-area placements in London boroughs, and the challenges and opportunities associated with this.
2. To identify ways in which policy and practice might be improved in respect to the use of out-of-area placements, and the opportunities and barriers associated with this.

The specific research objectives were:

- To provide a detailed analysis of patterns of out of area placement use in London boroughs, in respect to both foster and residential care
- To identify the key challenges in relation to supply and demand and how these are currently being met
- To explore the rationale for the pattern of placements, and specifically out-of-area placements, in a sample of London boroughs
- To identify how the quality of placements is measured and managed
- To examine accountability in relation to the monitoring and management of placements
- To examine the profile of children living in different types of out-of-area placement.

The report is organised as follows. It opens with a description of the policy background and methodology for the study. It then examines the findings in accordance with the key research questions: patterns and trends in London's use of out of area placements; processes of placement commissioning; and frontline experiences of practice in out of area placement. For ease of reading, the findings from the literature review are reported for each of these chapters. The report concludes with some key issues for consideration.

Policy background

The Children Act 1989 placed considerable value on placing children, where possible, in their home authority. Section 22G of the 1989 Act outlines the 'sufficiency principle', that local authorities are required to take reasonable steps to secure sufficient accommodation within the authority to meet the needs of the authority's children, if remaining within the authority is consistent with their welfare. This will require partnership with other services such as education and health to ensure the child's needs are met and the placement supported.

Arrangements for placing a child out of area are informed by Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, relating to the functions of local authorities and their staff under Part 3 of the Children Act 1989. The guidance recognises that out of area placements may sometimes be appropriate in the light of the child's needs. A number of factors must

be taken into account when decisions are made to place the child out of the area of the responsible authority, but still within England and Wales. Crucially, the responsible authority must ensure the placement is the most appropriate placement available, will meet the child's needs as identified in the care plan, and takes account of the child's wishes and feelings, according to age and understanding. It is anticipated that, when an out of area placement is identified as appropriate, the child and his/her parents will accompany the child's social worker on a visit to the placement.

The introduction of the Children Act 1989 coincided with other major changes – some reflecting the principles enshrined in the Act - in the supply and demand for placements for children in care. These included an overall decline in numbers of children in care and a preference for foster care over residential facilities. Bebbington and Miles (1990) research into the supply of foster families for children in care, concluded that for many inner-city areas, most notably in London, there was a significant mismatch between supply of and demand for foster care places. It was suggested that recruitment of foster carers outside the local authority boundaries might be one way of addressing this, and that this was already happening much more often in London than in other parts of the country. It was recognised that there could be sensitivities in respect to such placements e.g. the perception of 'poaching' from other authorities, but that 'on efficiency grounds' there was a good case to seek placements further afield.

Arrangements for providing placements for children in care changed rapidly in the late 80s and 90s. In 1993-94 local authorities provided 63 per cent of residential care for children; by 1996-97 this had reduced to 53 per cent (Kirkpatrick et al, 2002). Cliffe with Berridge (1991) undertook a case study of Warwickshire which, for a variety of reasons, ceased to provide in-house residential care but continued to use out of area residential placements. This study highlighted the ongoing role for the residential sector and indicated that placements were often considered effective, though distance from home was considered a problem by social workers. Later research highlighted problems in accessing education and in meeting the cultural needs of black and minority ethnic children placed in residential units which were far from their communities (Berridge and Brodie, 1998; Brodie, 2001; Berridge et al, 2008). Research into foster care during the 2000s emphasised the complexity of the foster care task, and the need to ensure carers were equipped with the training and

support they required to maintain placements. At the same time there was a rapid growth in the number of independent foster care agencies, which reported greater success in the recruitment and retention of foster carers (Sellick, 2006).

Over recent years, a key juncture in thinking about out of area placements, specifically in residential care, occurred with the publication of findings from a series of high profile cases of child sexual exploitation that included young people who were in out of area placements (see House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013).   This resulted in a high level of media attention and two influential reports from the All Party Parliamentary Group and the Office of the Children's Commissioner. The APPG report on Missing and Runaway Children (2012) argued that the high levels of children missing from and running away from care was clearly related to 'poor quality and unsuitable' care placements, which were too often far away from home. The report identified a number of specific concerns relating to out of area placements, including the extent to which receiving local authorities were notified consistently of the placement of children from other areas, and the efficiency of arrangements for sharing information between the home authority, the residential children's home and other services, notably the police (APPG, 2012; see also Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2012).   These reports have some value in drawing attention to the experiences of children and young people in care, but there is a danger that some issues become confused – for example, the extent to which residential placements can provide high quality care and whether it is appropriate to use out of authority placements (Munro et al 2014). Although the reports provide evidence of cases where young people placed out of area have experienced very serious problems, this does not mean that this is the case for all young people living in such placements.

These reports have also further focused the debate on residential care, rather than considering residential placements within the wider context of care provision. This is also related to the different trajectories of research into residential and foster care, with foster care receiving less attention until the 2000s (Sellick, 2006). Most recently, the House of Commons Education Committee (2014) has considered the role of residential care. This report has emphasised that while out of area placements may be required to meet the needs of individual children, local authorities – or their neighbours – should have sufficient placements to ensure children are placed as close to their home as possible. It also

recommends that the Government commissions a study of the impact of a rule prohibiting local authorities from placing a child more than 20 miles from home, unless there is a proven need to do so.

The issues are, therefore, complex and have not necessarily been explored through research. This study seeks to contribute to understanding of the issues of out of area placement as they are experienced in London.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was implemented in order to achieve the research aims and objectives. This included four distinct strands of work:

- A review of literature
- An analysis of published statistics concerning placements for looked after children[1]
- Interviews with placement commissioners in 7 London boroughs
- Interviews with social workers working with 30 children and young people placed out of area.

A fifth strand - an online questionnaire to commissioners in all London boroughs was added in response to a request from the Association of London Directors.

Methods

Literature review

- In terms of methodology, this has involved a rapid review of the literature using the following inclusion criteria. Searches were restricted to the UK and post-2000 on a range of search engines. Searches for grey literature were also carried out using the websites of relevant organisations, including government and voluntary organisations. Finally, fingertip searches were undertaken of key journals and some items were identified through the prior knowledge of the research team. A total of 45 items were identified through initial

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[1] An initial plan to examine child level data to address the question of placement patterns did not prove feasible within the timeframe of the study, thus analysis is restricted to published statistics in this report.

searches. Abstract screening reduced this to 15 items that discussed out of area placements as a key issue. Broadly, these can be categorised as follows:

- Background literature that places out of area placement in historical context.
- Policy literature that identifies key changes in policy in this area.
- Empirical studies, including investigation of children's views.

Analysis of Department for Education statistics

This analysis was based on the published statistics produced annually by the Department for Education from SSDA903 returns (Department for Education, 2013)). The analysis had two aims: first, to examine the proportions of LAC who are placed outside of borough boundaries, at a distance from home, with independent providers and in residential accommodation; and, second, to identify indicators of variation in relation to the profiles of LAC, both within London and between London and England.

Central to placement decisions for children are considerations about the needs of each individual child that must be met by the placement. It is not possible to address the detail of individual cases without access to child-level data but it is possible to get a sense of the proportions of LAC who are placed outside of borough boundaries, at a distance from home, with independent providers and in residential accommodation. It is also possible to identify indicators of variation in potentially important factors in terms of the profiles of children looked after, both within London and between London and England generally.

The analysis was undertaken in two stages: (1) comparison of the average figures for London with those of England as a whole (and in some cases against comparator authorities) and (2) comparison across London boroughs.

Interviews with commissioners

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with senior managers with responsibility for commissioning in seven London boroughs. The boroughs involved varied according to geography, representing a mix of Inner and Outer London boroughs, and their profiles in respect to out of area placements.   These interviews aimed to examine in greater depth the factors that inform policy relating to out-of-area placements; the processes through which

decision-making takes place; and the checks and balances that exist to ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people who are placed out of area. These interviews were augmented with views from a representative of London Councils and another from the independent provider sector.

On-line survey with commissioning managers

In addition to the interviews with commissioners, an on-line survey covering the same areas was sent to all assistant directors of children's services in London. This was an addition to the original methodology, but had a limited response (n=10). However, the information provided is useful and has been analysed alongside the interview findings.

Interviews with social workers

This aspect of the project aimed to explore social workers' experiences of working with children and young people who had been placed out of borough. Interviews were undertaken with social workers in six London boroughs, concerning a total of 30 children and young people. Further details of the characteristics of these children and young people are provided in the findings section, but the interviews helped bridge the gap between policy and practice and highlighted key issues relating to social work planning. It is important to emphasise the numbers concerned are small and that this sample is not intended to be representative. Rather it serves to illustrate the range of issues and experience for front line practitioners. Analysis of the data focused on identifying the key themes and issues emerging from practitioners' accounts.

Research ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institute of Applied Social Research Ethics Committee and the University of Bedfordshire Research Ethics Committee. The research has followed the requirements for ethical approval as outlined by *The Economic and Social Research Council* (ESRC) and *The British Sociological Association Ethical Guidelines*. Participating boroughs were also asked if there were any additional ethical governance procedures for their area. Participation in the project was voluntary. All those taking part via interviews and the completion of questionnaires, were asked to provide written consent. The information provided was confidential and it was agreed that, in the event of poor practice being identified which could place individual children at risk of harm, this would be reported to the appropriate authorities.

An initial meeting with Assistant Directors of Children's Services provided an opportunity for questions relating to the research to be discussed. A notable feature of this research has been the enthusiasm amongst London boroughs for the study and their wish to be involved.

Summary

- The methodology for the study has involved five elements: a review of literature; an analysis of published statistics concerning placements for looked after children; interviews with placement commissioners in seven London borough; interviews with social workers working with 30 children and young people placed out of area; and an online questionnaire to commissioners in all London boroughs.

- Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Bedfordshire's Institute of Applied Social Research and the University Research Ethics Committee.

2. Patterns of out of area placements in London according to published statistics

This section of the report examines the proportions of looked after children recorded as being placed within local authority boundaries and the proportions placed within 20 miles of home, as these data are presented in statistics published by the Department for Education. These data listings are compiled from the annual SSDA903 returns submitted by all local authorities in England and aggregate data are made available at the local authority level.

The approach taken to analysis of these data has been first to examine the average figures provided for London boroughs against those presented for England as a whole and subsequently to compare across London boroughs in an attempt to identify whether different patterns exist for different groups of local authorities. Some consideration of comparator local authorities is also included. It is important to note at this point that the City of London has been excluded from these analyses because of its very distinct characteristics and the very small number of children in its care.

The primary variables to be examined are the proportions of looked after children placed within the boundary of their home borough and the proportions placed within 20 miles of home. However, because of the small geographical size of boroughs it seems important to add a little more context – as far as can be achieved using aggregate data.

The additional factors explored include:

- The numbers and rates of looked after children in each borough.
- Patterns of use of different placement types.
- Variation in the profile of children looked after by London boroughs.
- Relationships between these measures and borough profiles in terms of deprivation or affluence, geographical area and population density, rates of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and children who first become looked after at an older age.

It is important to note throughout that placements made with adoptive parents are routinely excluded from published figures relating to whether placements are in or out of area but, on aggregate, the proportion of adoptive placements made across London is not

dissimilar to that for England as a whole. In similar vein, the figures concerning distance from home capture neither adoptive placements nor placements of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). This latter point about UASC in relation to distance from home is particularly pertinent for London, especially in relation to certain boroughs as will be discussed below.

Findings

In (and out of) borough placement

The analysis identified that London authorities differed markedly from the England averages on a number of indicators or rates. The first and most striking observation was that for England as a whole in 2013 some 59% of children were placed within the boundary of the local authority responsible for them while the comparable figures for London were just 44% and 28% for Outer and Inner London respectively. This was not a one-off, the disparity within and between London and other parts of England has been evident for at least the last seven years. Figure 2.1 is included to illustrate just how stable that disparity has been.

**The proportions of LAC placed within LA boundaries
(Inner London, Outer London and England)**

Legend:
- Inner London (All)
- Outer London (All)
- England (All)
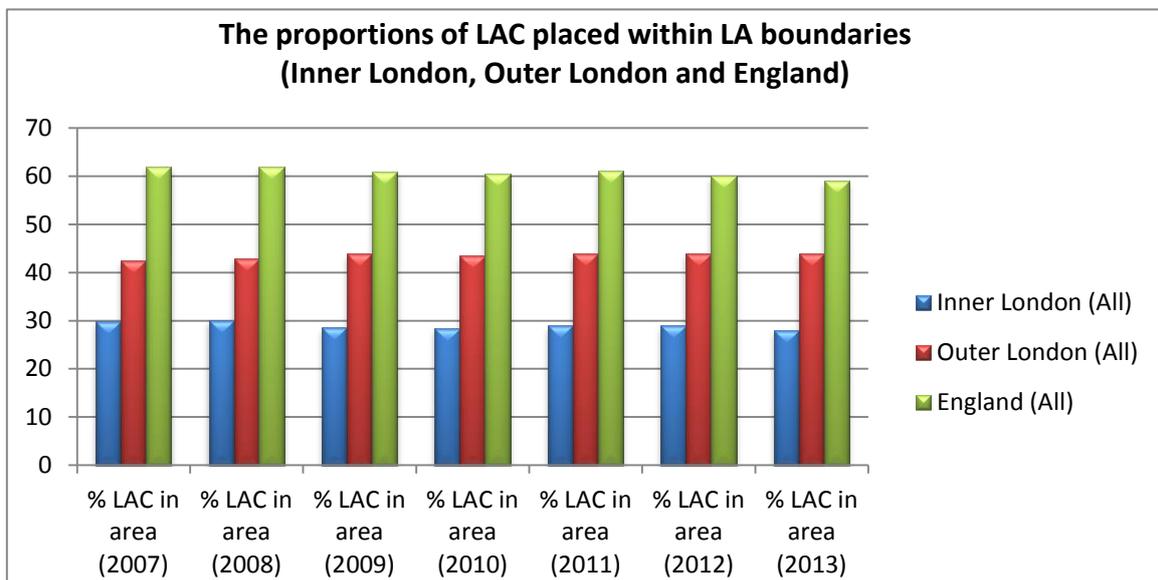
Figure 2.1

However, local authority administrations across England include large county areas (with a mix of rural and urban settings), metropolitan boroughs and unitary authorities. Cities such as Birmingham or Manchester or the small city centre unitary authorities are therefore more meaningful comparators for London and London boroughs than England as a whole.

Figure 2.2 sets out the proportions of children placed within area in 2013 for a selection of conurbations and city authorities (this is list is not comprehensive). This comparison reveals that London's performance on the whole is not markedly out of line with other small or urban authorities, although Birmingham and Luton both managed to achieve in area placements for over half of their looked after children: performance which substantially exceeds that of London.
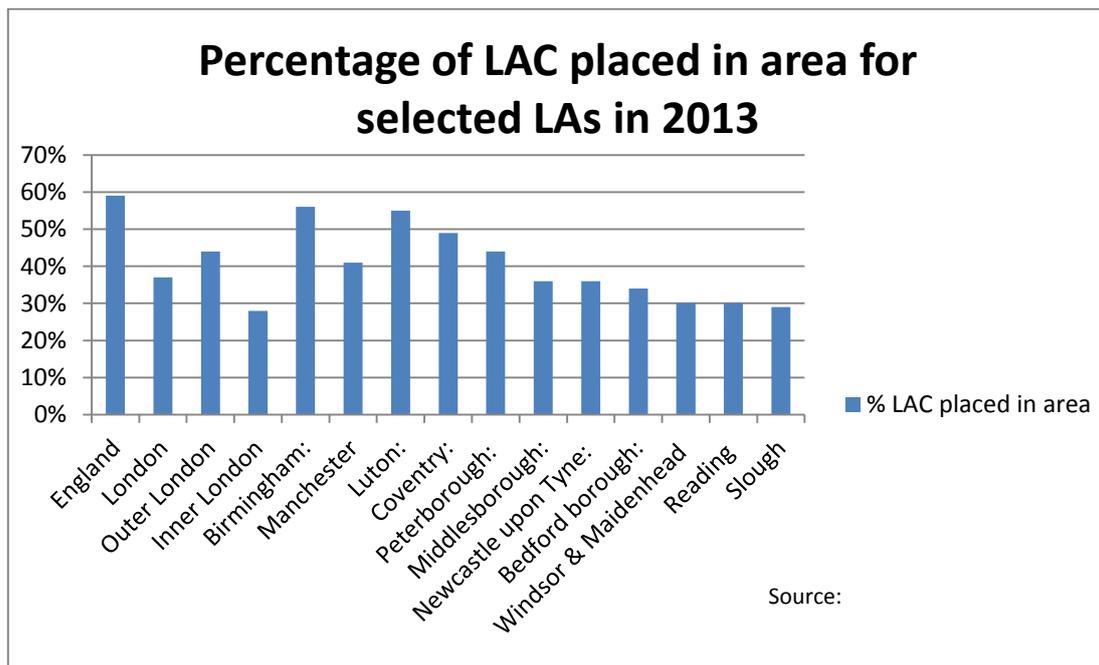
Figure 2.2

Inspection of the figures for individual local authorities within London reveals marked variation both between boroughs (true for both Inner and Outer London) and over time. The percentage of children placed within borough between 2007 and in 2013 is illustrated for individual Inner London boroughs in figure 2.3 and in figure 2.4 for Outer London.

The proportion of LAC placed within LA boundary 2007 to 2013 (Inner London boroughs)
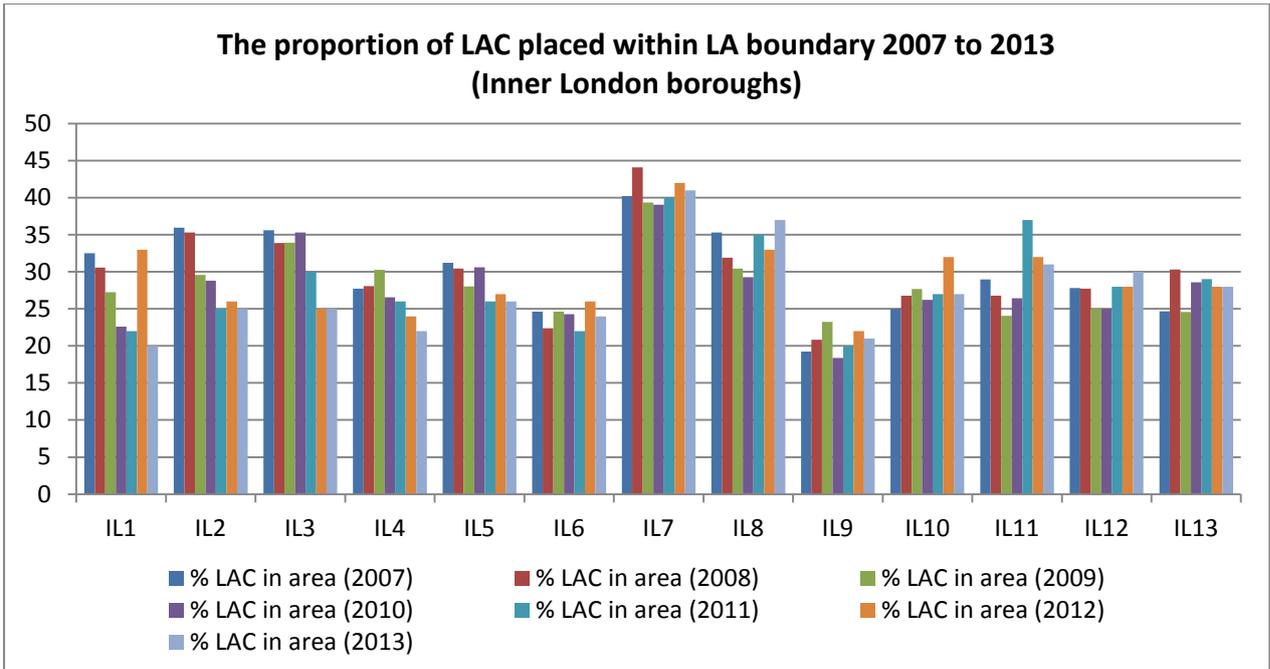
Figure 2.3

Figure 2.3 demonstrates that over the six year period rates of within area placement had fallen, to a greater or lesser extent, for five Inner London boroughs; had been fairly stable for four and there were slight rises for a further four (although rises were not as marked as some of the falls). The chart also illustrates that there was moderate variation between boroughs in terms of the proportion of children placed within area.

The proportion of LAC placed within LA boundary 2007 to 2013 (Outer London boroughs)
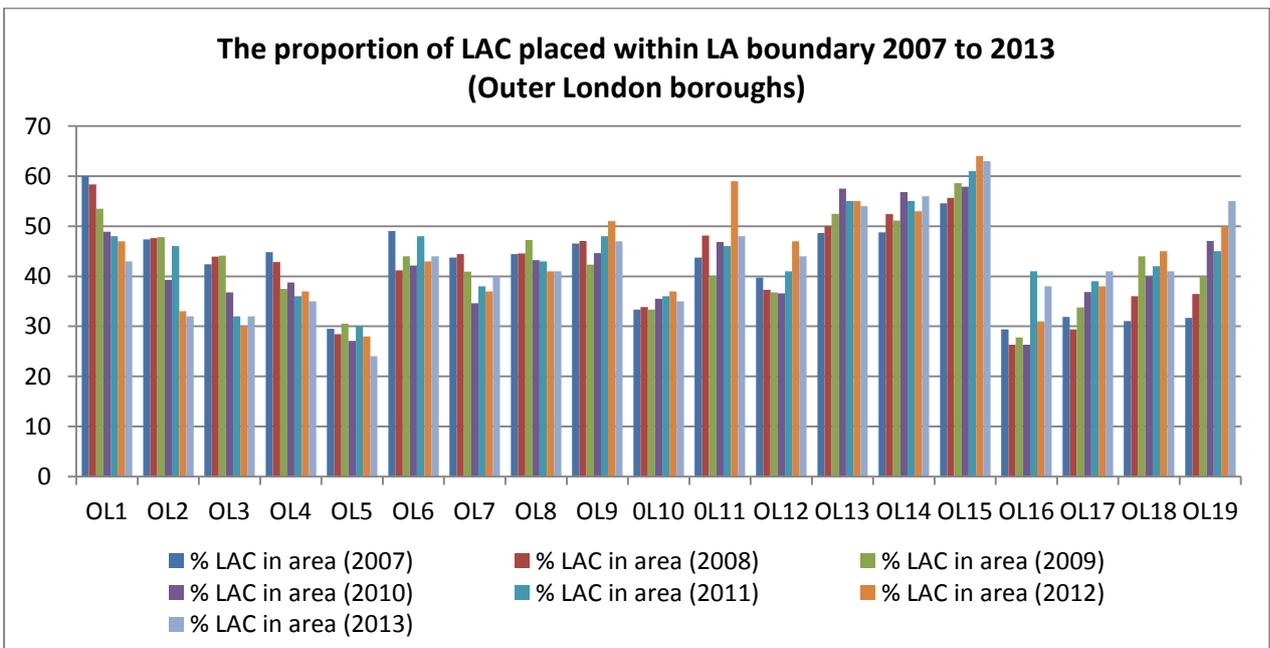
Figure 2.4

The same charting of data for Outer London boroughs (figure 2.4) reveals a similarly mixed picture although the pattern of rises and falls is more distinctive. Thus five boroughs experienced a very clear fall in the rate of within area placement: the most marked of these being borough OL1 which had been placing 60% of children within their area in 2007 but only 43% by 2013. As with Inner London, the data for a further five boroughs shows a fairly steady pattern. Finally there were nine boroughs which showed a fairly steady increase in within area placement although it remains the case that the starting points varied markedly with one borough, OL16, increasing the rate of in area placement by nine percent – but from a starting point of only 29%! In contrast another borough, OL15, made similar gains but had managed to place 54% of children within area in 2007 and by 2013 a total of 63% of children were placed in area: a rate that exceeded the England average.

By viewing the data for all seven years it is possible to see that for most boroughs, individually, there has been some consistency in the direction of travel but not all are moving in the same direction. However, it remains important to be cognisant of particular circumstances which might prevail in London generally, or in specific boroughs, which have the potential to present additional challenges or indeed to distort the picture. For this reason, later in this chapter, we take the opportunity to explore some of the wider contextual factors which might impact on a borough's ability to place children within area.

Placements within and beyond 20 miles of home

The distances involved between home and placement for looked after children is the other important element that needs to be considered. Currently, the published statistics provide aggregate data by local authority identifying the proportions of looked after children placed less than or more than 20 miles from home. It is likely that there is some overlap between this measure and out of area placement but, while we explore this to some extent below, it is not possible to examine the detail when using aggregated data.

Figure 2.4 provides an overview of the proportions of looked after children placed within 20 miles of home for the main geographic regions of England.
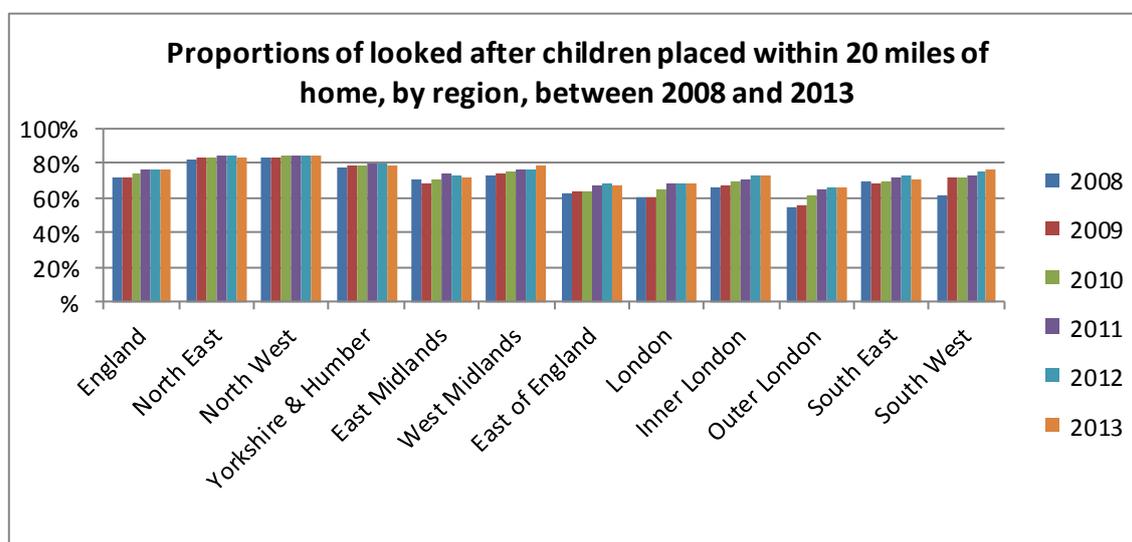
Figure 2.4

As is clear there is a very definite upward trend in terms of the proportions of children being placed within 20 miles of home across almost all regions of England, including London. Outer London boroughs, in comparison to Inner London, can be seen to be placing a slightly smaller proportion of their looked after children within 20 miles of home than were other local authorities. However, on the whole, the performance of London in this regard is not markedly out of kilter with England generally: and is in fact fairly typical of southern regions. In considering these data it is important to remember that the data presented in figures 2.4 and 2.5 are drawn directly from the published figures and compare proportions looked after children *known* to be placed within 20 miles and that there are groups of children (those

placed for adoption, those missing from their placements and UASC) who are listed as 'not known' or 'not recorded'.

Figures 2.5 and 2.6 illustrate how distance from home and 'in area' versus 'out of area' placements overlap. Figure 2.5 shows the proportions of looked after children placed within 20 miles of home and identifies whether these placements fall within or without the authorities' boundary. This illustration makes it very clear that a substantial proportion of London borough placements are within 20 miles despite being outside the borough boundary.
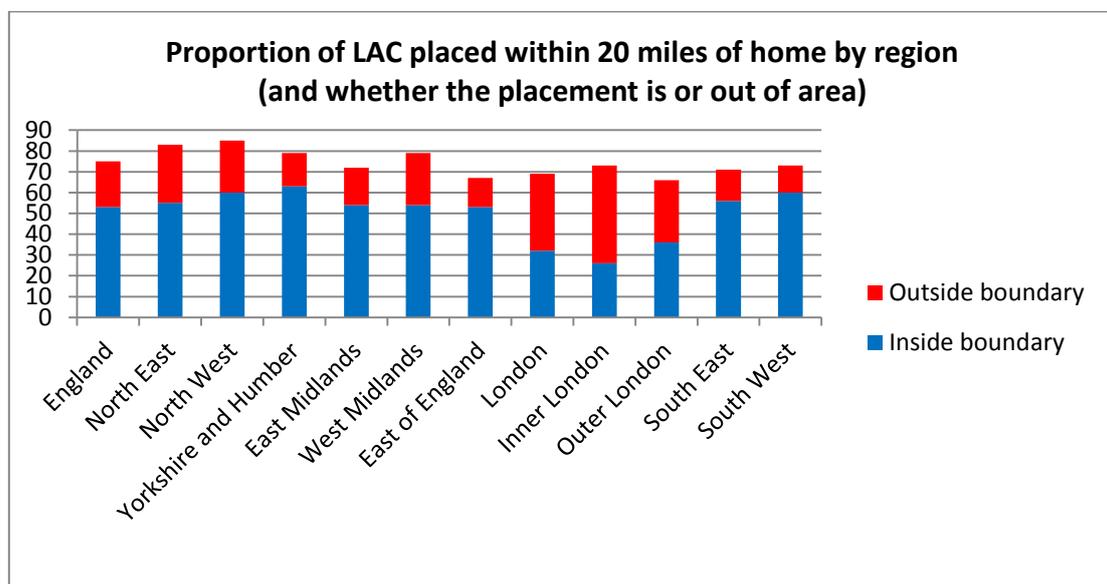
Figure 2.5

Figure 2.6 provides the detail in terms of the proportions of placements that were 20 miles away, or more. Here it is clear that, unlike other regions, placements that are 20 or more miles away from London boroughs were always 'out of area'.
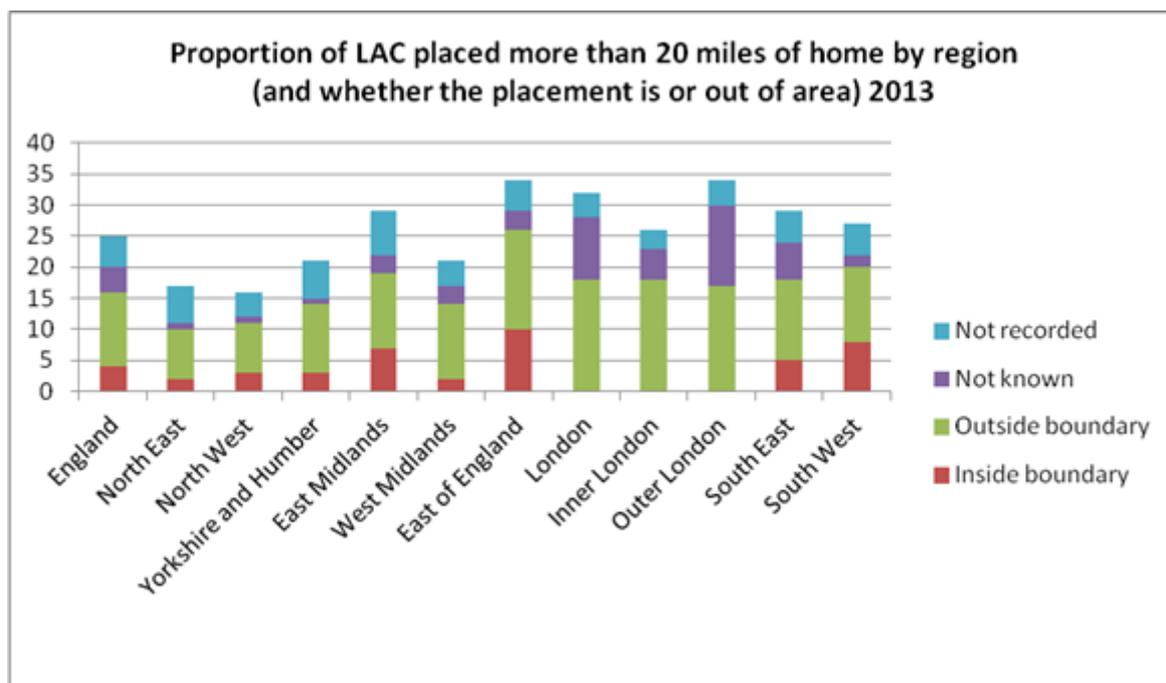
Figure 2.6

Figure 2.6 also includes an indication of the proportion of placements for which this measure cannot be calculated (the turquoise and purple sections of the bars). It can be seen that London boroughs had a much greater proportion of placements in the 'not known' category. As previously mentioned, the notes that accompany the statistical tables explain that this may occur for placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children – or children who are missing from their main placement (table LAA6, SFR36_2013_LATables). The turquoise sections of the bars denote placements not recorded and the data source indicates that this relates to the proportions of children placed for adoption. As can be clearly seen, the proportion of children for whom distance was recorded as 'not known' was substantial for London and particularly Outer London in comparison with other regions.

The size of the populations of children looked after

The work undertaken for London Councils by Ward and Chamberlain (2012) identified that the numbers of looked after children in London had been falling between 2007 and 2012 – in contrast to the general picture for England as a whole. Examination of figures to include data for 2013 confirms that when London is considered as a whole this picture continues. Figure 2.7 illustrates that while Inner London continues to have a higher rate of looked after

children (as a proportion of all children under 18 in each local authority area) than the average for all England authorities or the average across all Outer London authorities, the pattern of reduction for London has continued.
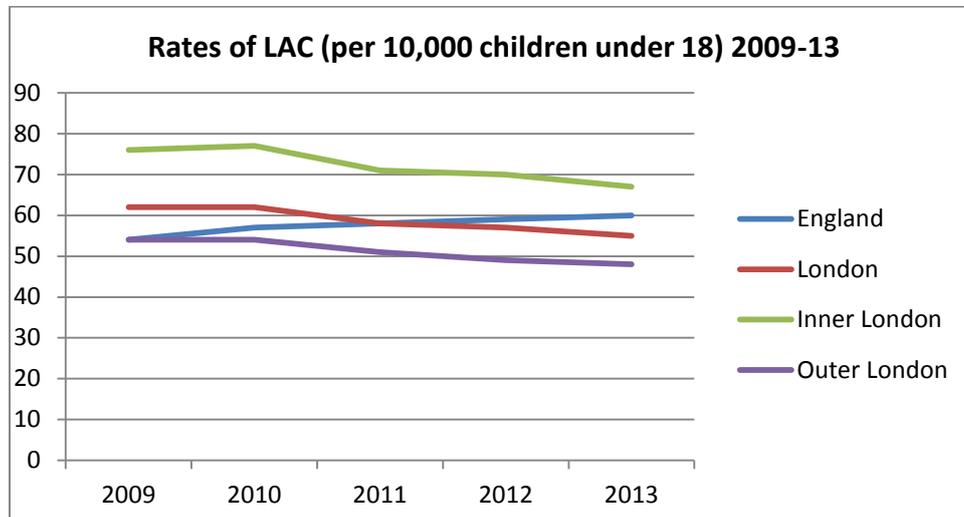
Figure 2.7

However, it is important to note that when looking at individual boroughs, the reductions seen in both inner and outer London are modest for the most part, and indeed rates actually increased in some boroughs. The overall reduction seems to be largely accounted for by some dramatic reductions in a just a few boroughs. Rates reduced by between 15 and 25 per 10,000 in four inner London boroughs and one outer London borough recorded a reduction of 17 and another logged a massive reduction of 44 per 10,000 children under 18.

Figures 2.8 and 2.9 present the actual numbers of looked after children, year on year, for inner and outer London boroughs respectively. As is clear there is substantial variation between boroughs in both the absolute numbers of looked after children and the degree and direction of change in the sizes of the cohorts over time.
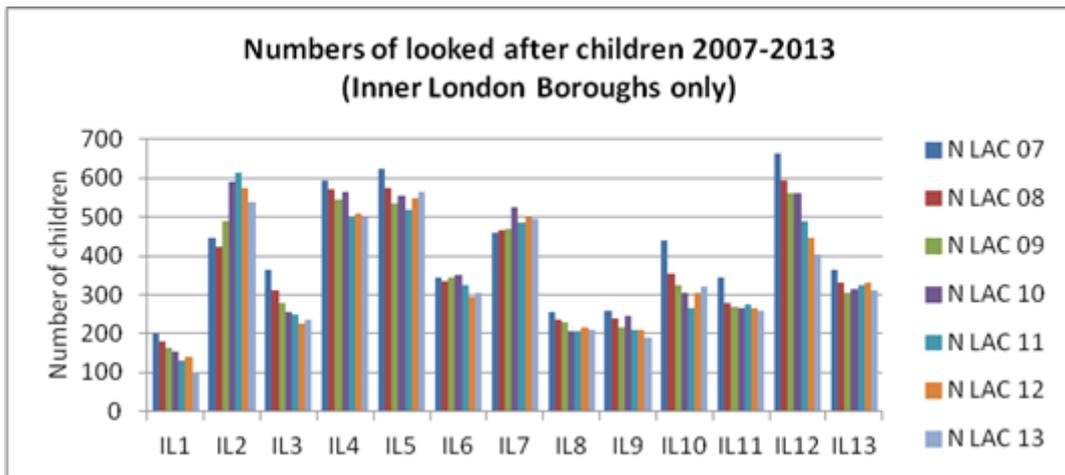
Figure 2.6
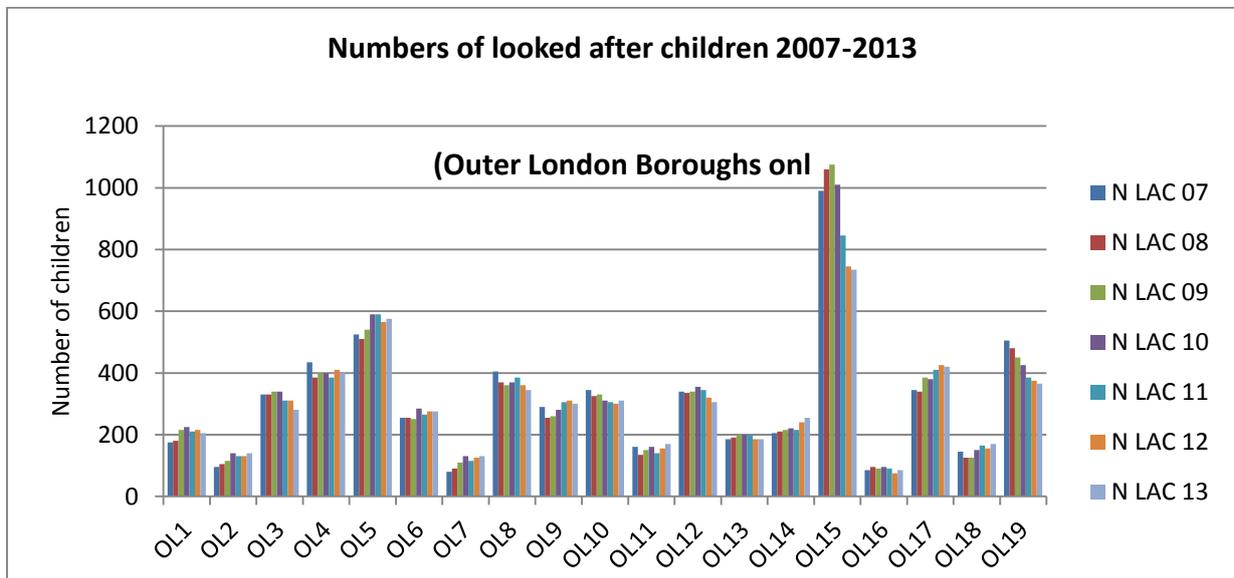
Figure 2.7

What is also clear however, is that while one might expect changes in the size of the looked after cohorts to translate into a lesser or greater proportion of children being placed within area, such a pattern was only rarely evident in these data.

Clearly therefore, assuming that the size of the pool of local authority placements remains reasonably stable, the number of children being looked after, in relation to the pool of available carers, does not seem to explain very much in terms of the use of out of area placements.

Patterns of placements for London
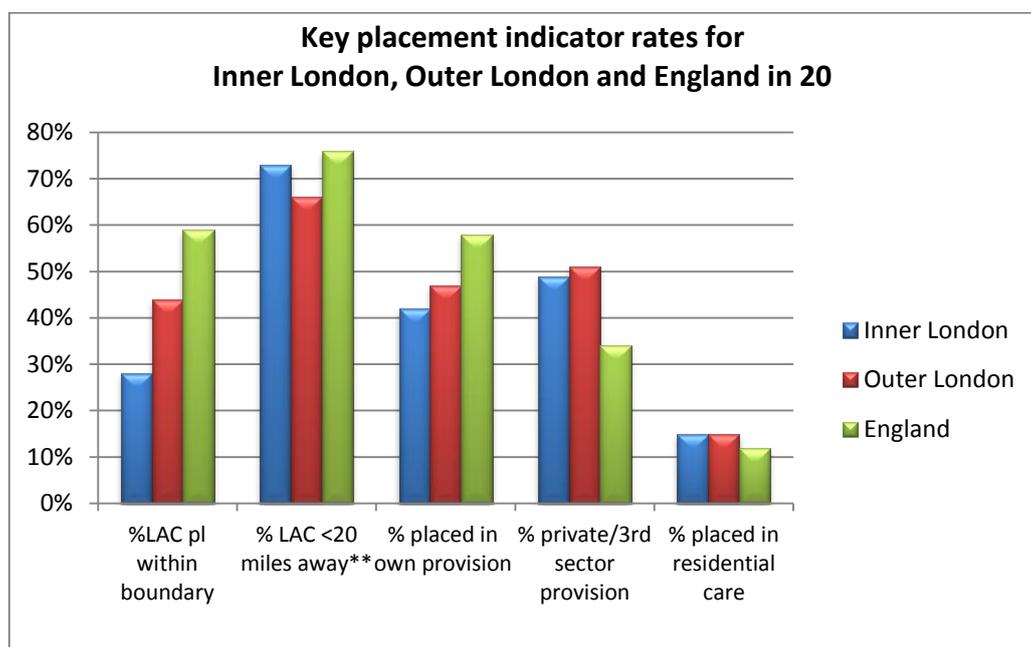
Figure 2.8

Figure 2.8 shows summary data for Inner and Outer London against aggregate data for England as a whole in relation to five key placement indicators. The disparity between London boroughs and England as a whole in terms of the proportion of children placed within the authority boundary and London's profile in relation to the proportion of placements made within or beyond 20 miles have both been discussed in depth previously. Here however, summary data is presented which confirms that while London places a slightly smaller proportion of their looked after children within 20 miles of home the rates are not markedly different. In fact, it is possible that the disparity which appears to exist here is accounted for by significant amounts of missing data for boroughs which have a high proportion of UASC. If analysis is restricted to only cases where distance data are available then 80% of placements made by London boroughs in 2013 were within the 20 mile criteria while the average rate for England as a whole was 83%. Furthermore there was relatively little variation between boroughs: boroughs placed between 69% and 89% of the children for whom data were available within 20 miles of home with the majority of boroughs (26 of 32) placing between 75% and 85%.

The chart also presents data regarding the type of placement provider, columns three and four of this chart reveal that both Inner and Outer London boroughs, on average, place smaller proportions of their looked after children in placements which the authority provides and at the same time make far more use of independent provision than is true for England as a whole. It is also the case that London boroughs place slightly more often in residential provision, although again the differences when looking at these average rates are not huge.

Variations in the profile of children looked after by London boroughs

The final area it is possible to examine to some extent from the annual aggregate SSDA903 data concerns measures of certain child characteristics. The ones extracted for presentation here are, again, taken from the published tables for 2013 (see figure 2.9).
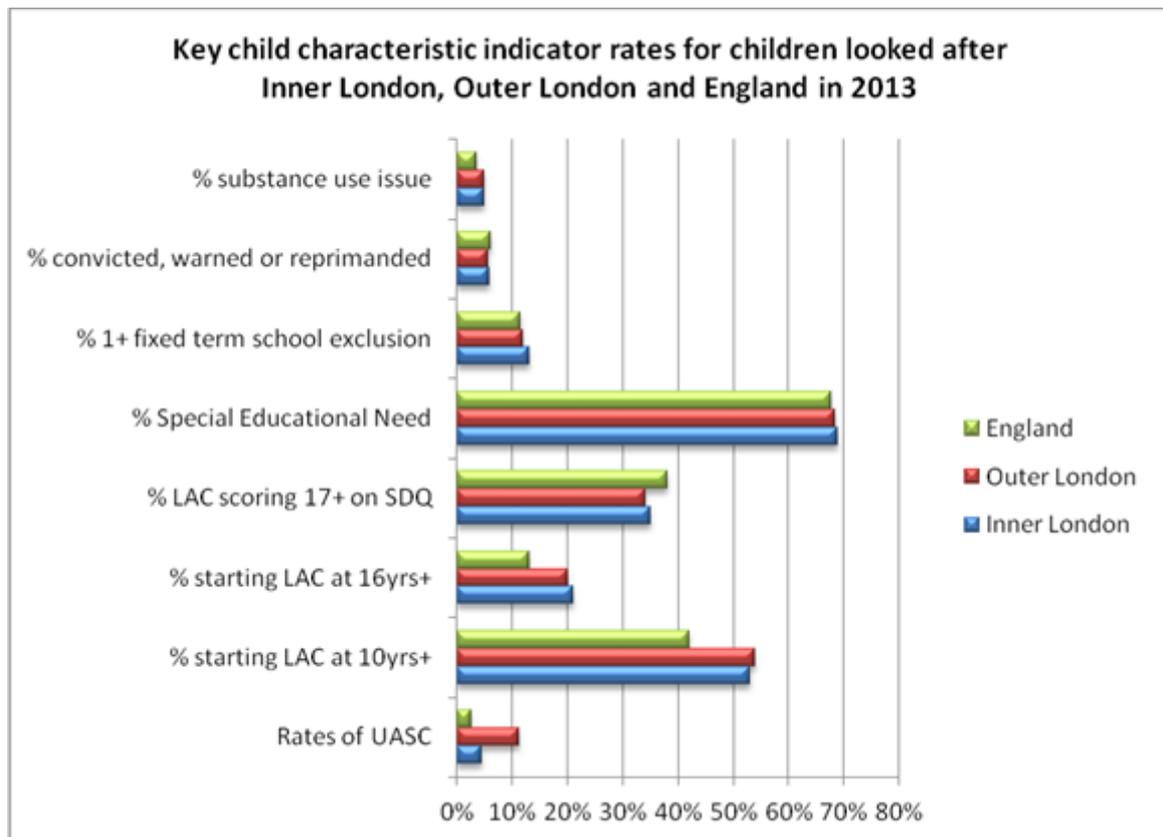
Figure 2.9

Notes to figure 2.9: The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a widely used 25 item checklist concerning children's behaviour. It produces scores which indicate levels of difficulty in relation to conduct, emotional and over-activity problems along with a 'pro-social behaviour score. There are published norms and 'cut-off points' indicating borderline and abnormal scores.

Working from the bottom of the chart to the top, it is clear that there is a substantial difference between London and England as a whole in the proportions of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) looked after and that this is particularly marked for outer London. In fact, because this is averaged over all Outer London boroughs, this particular measure masks very significant proportions of UASC in a handful of boroughs (as high as 42%) in one area and has particular implications for those boroughs. Importantly, it also has implications for our interpretation of the data related to the distance between placement and home (examined in the previous section) since, as mentioned previously, these data are not made available for UASC and so information about whether these young people are placed within reach of the responsible authority is not available.

The next set of bars (two and three of figure 2.9) illustrate the proportion of children starting to be looked after during the year 2012-13 who were either over 10 or over 16 years old at starting. Again London boroughs generally stand out as having an older age profile for their looked after children than has been true for England as a whole.

The top four bars of figure 2.9 examine indicators of 'outcome' for looked after children. Considering first children's scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)[2], London boroughs were shown to be pretty good at returning SDQ scores for children who had been looked after for more than 12 months, with higher rates of return than the England average. Interestingly, although the differences were not particularly marked, smaller proportions of London's children were identified as scoring in the 'concern' band. It might be that this is related to the higher proportion of older children (or young people) since average scores on the SDQ are very slightly lower for 11-15 year olds than is true for the younger age group (Parent version 8.2 v 8.6[3]). Nevertheless the proportions of children for whom overall scoring is in the range which is a cause for concern (33-35%) is highly elevated above general population norms where about 10% would be expected to score in this range.

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[2] The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a widely used 25 item checklist concerning children's behaviour. It produces scores which indicate levels of difficulty in relation to conduct, emotional and over-activity problems along with a 'pro-social behaviour score. There are published norms and 'cut-off points' indicating borderline and abnormal scores.
[3] http://www.sdqinfo.com/UKSchoolNorm.html

The rates of reported special educational need and recorded school exclusions among looked after children were slightly higher for London authorities than was true for England. It is also the case that higher proportions of London's children were identified as having a problem with substance use, although rates of conviction or caution for looked after children were actually lower in London boroughs than was the case across England.

Factors associated with in borough and close to home placements

Further analysis of the factors that might be associated with higher or lower proportions of in-borough and close to home placements included consideration of three borough characteristics and two aspects of the profile of looked after children in each borough. The borough characteristics selected were the level of affluence or deprivation, the geographical size of boroughs and population density. The LAC profile characteristics examined were proportions of UASC and proportions of children who began to be looked after over the age of 10.

Characteristics of boroughs and the relationship with in borough and close to home placements

The first borough characteristic which seemed potentially relevant here was economic constraints. Since London hosts some of the most affluent and some of the most deprived areas in England, it would seem entirely reasonable that community characteristics might be associated with a borough's ability to accommodate children within their own resources.

The LSOA indices of multiple deprivation 2010[4] were used as a proxy indicator for borough affluence. There was a moderate positive correlation between the average indices score for London boroughs (the lower the score the less the deprivation) and the number and the rate of children in local authority care when all boroughs were included in the analysis[5].

However, the relationship between the deprivation index score and proportions of children placed within borough was fairly moderate (r= -.512, see table 2.2) suggesting a tendency for higher levels of deprivation to be related to lower proportions of children being placed within borough.

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[4] http://data.london.gov.uk/datastore/package/indices-deprivation-2010
[5] Pearson bi-variate correlation, values for r ranged from 0.60 to 0.63 between 2009 and 2013 when all boroughs were included.

Table 2.2 Borough profile factors and correlations with the proportions of children placed in-borough

Correlations with proportions of children placed in-borough								
Factor	Inner London			Outer London			All London		
	r=	*p=*	n=	*r=*	*p=*	n=	*r=*	*p=*	n=
Affluence/deprivation LSOA scores	-			-			-.512	.003	32
Geographic size (hectares)	.630	.021	13	.488	.034	19	.709	.000	32
Population density	-.534	.060	13	-.535	.018	19	-.772	.000	32

Notes to table 2.2: Values of '*r*' can range from -1 to +1. A value of zero indicates no relationship between the variable being examined. Values of 1 (or -1) would indicate perfect correlation: thus, the larger the value for '*r*', the stronger the correspondence between the variables. A negative value for '*r*' indicates that the correlation is negative: ie the greater the value of one variable the less the value of the other.

Further analysis related to borough characteristics included consideration of the geographical size of boroughs and population density for each[6]. These measures showed a moderately strong correlation with the percentage of children placed within borough boundaries and placed close to home (Pearson correlation co-efficients were .709 and -.772 respectively). Plots for both of these measures, set against the proportions of children placed within borough boundaries are presented in figures 2.10 and 2.11. Figure 2.10 reveals that there is a tendency for larger boroughs to place a greater proportion of their looked after children within their area boundaries. While figure 2.11 illustrates how as population density rises the proportions of children placed in area reduce. The degree of correspondence between the size of boroughs and the density of population is presented graphically in figure 2.12.

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[6] Data on geographical area size and population density by borough were taken from London Datastore Opinion Research and Statistics team (June 2014). Available at: http://data.london.gov.uk/datastore/package/london-borough-profiles. Last accessed 4th July 2014.
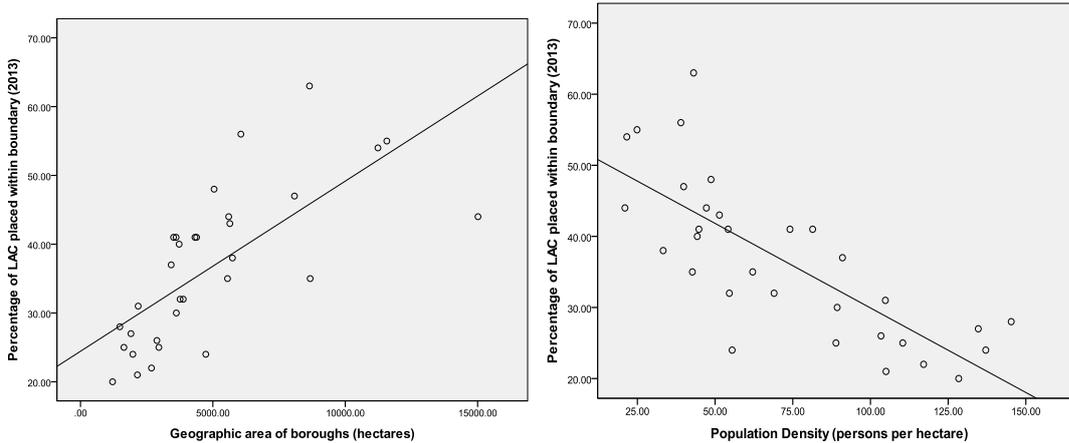
Figures 2.10 and 2.11
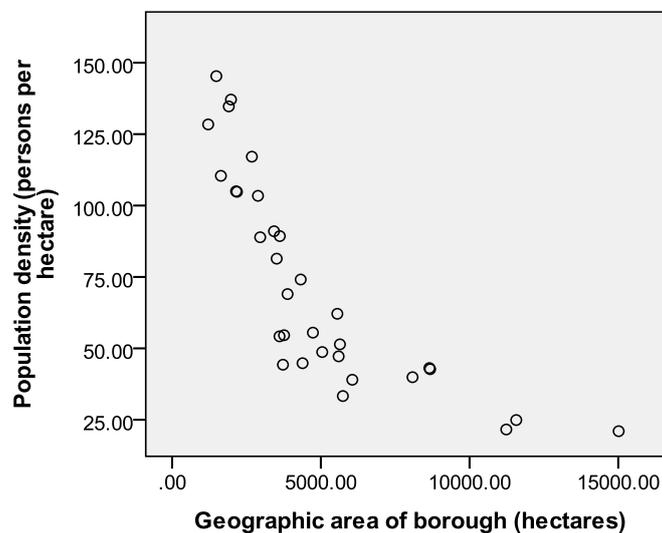
Figure 2.12

It is important, however, to recognise here that levels of deprivation, population density and borough size were all inter-related. There was a negative correlation between borough size and deprivation (*r*=-.505), meaning that smaller boroughs (which are mostly Inner London) tend to experience higher levels of deprivation. Inner London boroughs are also significantly more densely populated than Outer London boroughs, the average for Inner London being 110 people per hectare, compared to 46 for Outer London (*F*= 108.7, *df*=1,30, *p*<.001)

While these indicators seem to explain a good deal about in or out of borough placement, there was little correlation with the proportion of children placed within 20 miles, regardless of whether missing data was included or excluded from the analyses. When the original data were used (which took account of missing data) there was a weak correlation with borough deprivation scores (r=.342) across London as a whole and a moderate correlation (r=.467) between the proportion of children placed close to home and borough size for Inner London suggesting that while many Inner London boroughs may not have been able to place children within their boundary, they were making placements that were not too far away. However, this correlation was not evident when the analysis excluded the missing data.

Rates of UASC and older entrants to care

The final area to be examined here concerns the two child characteristics that seem to be over-represented in the profile of looked after children in some London boroughs. These are the proportions of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and rates of children and young people who start to be looked after when they are over 10 years of age.

Closer examination of the data reveal that at least some of the over-representation of both of these characteristics is the result of very high rates of one or both characteristics in the profiles of a small number of boroughs. According to the 2013 statistics, there are eight boroughs where between 24% and 41% of children who started to be looked after during the year were aged 16 or older at the point they became looked after. It is probable that there is some overlap here with rates of UASC, since for five of these eight boroughs between 10% and 42% of their looked after children were unaccompanied minors. The correlation between rates of UASC and rates of young people becoming looked after at 10 or more years of age in 2013 was moderately strong (r=.529). This does not appear to be the whole story, however, since there were a number of boroughs which had relatively high proportions of children starting to be looked after at 16 or over but had modest or low rates of UASC.

Summary

This section has outlined the position for London boroughs in relation to the extent and nature of out of area placement. It has also considered potentially relevant factors in terms of variation in the profile of children looked after in each of the boroughs.

1. Since 2007 there has been a fall in overall numbers of looked after children in London, which is contrary to the picture for the rest of England. However, this reduction is fairly modest in most boroughs.

2. No direct relationship was identified between change in the size of the LAC cohort and the number of children being placed within area.

3. Since 2007, there has been a sustained disparity in the levels of within-authority placement between London boroughs and England as a whole. However, there is also marked variation both between boroughs (true for both Inner and Outer London) and over time.

4. Although low in comparison to England as a whole, in-area placement rates for London were found to be fairly similar to other small city centre unitary authorities.

5. Population density, the size of boroughs and levels of affluence each showed some relationship with the proportions of children placed in-borough. Correlation analyses suggest that the strongest of these was population density.

6. While rates of out of borough placement are high, the data suggest that many of these are nevertheless within 20 miles of home.

7. Analyses suggest that while London boroughs appear to place fewer children within 20 miles of home, much of this might be accounted for by high rates of UASC for whom distance from home is recorded as 'not known'.

8. Proportions of unaccompanied asylum seeking children looked after are higher for London as a whole, and especially in Outer London). Data concerning distance from home (or home authority) are not currently available for UASC which limits the ability to examine placement distance.

9. London boroughs, in comparison with England as a whole, have a noticeably higher proportion of children who start to be looked after either over the age of 10 and over the age of 16. It seems likely that rates of UASC might explain some of this pattern but this cannot be examined in detail using aggregate data.

10. Rates of reported special educational need and recorded school exclusions for looked after children were slightly higher for London than for England.

11. London also had higher proportions of LAC who were identified as having a problem with substance use. However, rates of caution or conviction for LAC were lower than for the rest of England.

3. Commissioning and monitoring placements for London's looked after children

Introduction

Seven in-depth interviews were carried out with senior managers from participating boroughs and representatives of associated organisations. As noted earlier, there was a general interest from London boroughs in being engaged in the research, and these senior managers had expressed interest in being interviewed. Though there are clearly methodological difficulties with self selection, it is important to note that the managers came from a range of boroughs that varied according to geographical location in London, the size of authority, and reflected the different trends identified in Chapter 2 in relation to their out of area placements. To this extent they are not unrepresentative. Interviews were semi-structured and recorded. Transcription was partial and not all quotes are verbatim.

Interview data has been supplemented with information from the online survey distributed to all senior managers. As noted in the methodology section, responses to this were few in number and not amenable to separate analysis, so have been incorporated into the discussion of the findings below.

Background

Government policy has emphasised the need for local authorities to drive the process of commissioning to ensure sufficient supply and choice in the type of placements available (Department for Education, 2014; Sellick, 2011). This policy drive has been evident for some time, but the development of commissioning frameworks has proved problematic, in part owing to national and local histories of residential and foster care.   Consequently, there continues to be considerable variability in the commissioning arrangements that have developed.

Research that has included commissioners (Sellick; 2006; Sellick, 2013; DfE, 2013) has found that most emphasise the need to ensure that the provision identified was not only appropriate to the child's needs, but also conformed to other measures of quality, such as OFSTED ratings past experience of the home, access to health and education services and the needs of other children in the home: cost was a factor but not the primary

consideration. Providers, on the other hand, report that pressures on local authorities to use in-house placement, and drastic cuts to local authority budgets, have had an impact on the use of independent fostering agencies (Sellick, 2013). Many local authorities are part of joint or regional consortia, which research indicates are viewed positively on the grounds that these help drive up standards and secure best value.   The most common commissioning arrangement is the use of framework agreements with providers rated good or excellent, and who were assessed to offer value for money (DfE, 2013). However, such arrangements can wax and wane in their effectiveness, and external commissioning will often be a last resort in an attempt to keep budgets down. Critically – and unsurprisingly – a good quality of relationships between commissioners and providers is essential to making such arrangements work (OPM, 2013).

Findings

The care placement market

Interviewees described different trends in the market, which had a bearing on the number and location of placements available. The degree to which it was felt that a sufficiency of placements was available, in accordance with the 'sufficiency principle' seemed to vary. With the growth of large providers, and the concentration of placements in the hands of a small number of providers, 'an oligopoly' was identified (see also Department for Education, 2014). Several interviewees noted the closure of local residential units, usually attributed to financial pressures, and the impact of this on the choice of placements. While there were advantages to what was available from large providers, interviewees expressed concern that the squeezing out of small providers limited flexibility and was not always helpful when seeking highly specialised placements.

There was agreement that the numbers of out of area placements had declined, and where they existed, they were the object of much greater scrutiny than hitherto. External policy had influenced this.

'We are more confident now that we have the right children in residential and in the right residential placements for the right length of time. We are not totally satisfied, but we are much better now.'

In a small number of cases this was attributed to better practice in relation to foster care, including success in the recruitment of foster carers, more effective placements in foster care, and the tightening up of planning and reviewing procedures. More often, participants found the recruitment of foster carers generally, and those with appropriate expertise specifically, to be problematic. Some participants took the view that residential care was still sometimes required, but that the residential sector was unstable and difficult to manage. The inspection regime was viewed as making this more problematic: when a home was rated 'inadequate' this could place commissioners in something of a quandary – while they aimed to place in good or outstanding provision, their experience had suggested that some of the issues leading to an 'inadequate' rating could quickly be resolved. Poor OFSTED ratings could also, of course, force the closure of homes and thus further diminish the market. Large providers were more able to withstand these pressures.

Commissioning was not, therefore, an issue of in borough or out of borough. There were advantages to small local providers:

'We have a different relationship with our local providers. We help them, we have an investment in them being good.'

'If we know a small provider, with only two or three units, we can know if they have consistent quality and we know the managers by name it just helps.'

Equally, the very large providers could be useful 'for coming up with an emergency bed when we need it' but were less likely to be able to offer bespoke qualities. Having in-house residential provision could be useful, and some managers regretted the loss of this – but others pointed out that the history of in house provision in their boroughs was problematic, that it was not always appropriate for the young people seeking placements, and that it was not necessarily more cost-effective.

One way of addressing these issues is, potentially, through inviting more providers into the borough. Where interviewees discussed this issue, there was agreement that this could be an attractive option, but was not necessarily easy to achieve – particularly with estate costs in some parts of London. In respect to foster care, there was a general recognition that more work could be done to demonstrate the value of in-house packages, and some

boroughs felt they were making progress in this area. Overall, there was a sense that relationships with IFAs were more stable and positive than relationships with the residential sector – as one manager commented 'partnership is the only way to do it'. Some felt that they still had too many children placed in independent fostering placements, but at the same time noted this did not necessarily mean they were placed more than 20 miles away from the home borough. Involvement in some commissioning consortia had also been helpful. In some cases managers felt that the social demographics of their local area had a negative effect on their ability to recruit foster carers.

Boroughs were, of course, also in receipt of children and young people who were placed there from other boroughs. Notification from other boroughs was received, but there were frequent delays and they often had 'to be chased several times'.

There was a high level of agreement in terms of the *reasons* for use of out of area placements. Interviewees emphasised that appropriate placements were not always available in-house, and that in order to meet the needs of specific groups of children and young people– described as children with disabilities; children and young people with specific cultural needs; complex needs; sibling groups; those who had experienced or were at risk of gang involvement, offending or sexual exploitation; those who were abusive to others. The increase in the number of young people aged 16+, resulting from the Southwark Judgement, was also noted.

 An out of area placement could be a means to prevent problems escalating, or it could indicate the seriousness of the problems, or it could indicate a series of placement breakdowns. The fact that the placement was out of area related both to the nature of the individual need and the spectrum of provision available locally. In line with the analysis of DfE data reported above, there was also variation between boroughs regarding gaps in their in-house provision – some had more local options for residential care, one noted that in-house mother and baby placements were available, and so on. These issues were in part historical and not easily corrected.

Arrangements for commissioning

As outlined in other research, strategic arrangements for commissioning varied. There were panel arrangements in most boroughs, but the remit of these varied. Interviewees tended to express confidence in panel arrangements, though in some cases there was a need for more streamlining of the relationships between different panels.

Most of the boroughs involved in this study had some relationship with a commissioning consortium. There were considerable differences in levels of involvement with these, and in how far they were considered effective. This effectiveness was not simply related to views about the quality of the consortium, but more about the extent to which interests cohered. Thus, while there were advantages in having a set range of providers, who were quality assured 'trying to get 12 authorities to go in the same direction is a bit tricky'. This corresponds with the findings from other research, namely that negotiating consortia agreements is not straightforward, and that 'one size doesn't fit all' (Sellick, 2011, p456).

The importance of assessment of children's needs

The interviews with senior managers tended to emphasise the importance of assessment and finding the appropriate placement, and to suggest that systems were in place to make this possible. There was overall agreement that the ways in which matching between needs and placement was undertaken could be improved, though interviewees had different diagnoses of where problems existed in the system, and the best means for addressing these. Concerns were expressed at cycles of breakdown, and that social workers lacked a clear sense of why a specialist placement might be required. It was suggested this could explain why residential care became a 'last resort' in a series of placements, whereas it might have been more appropriate to find a specialist residential unit first time round. This issue is a feature of some of the case study data

presented in chapter four.

Some saw the inadequacy of assessment as a structural issue – in terms of what kinds of teams should be in place or the return of observation and assessment units. Others located the issue in the work undertaken by social workers, one describing this as 'woeful' and

another arguing that the assessments made did not necessarily translate into a language of requirements for the provider. There is an interesting mismatch here, in that some social workers complained of pressures from senior management to use in-house resources first. Linked to this, one management interviewee suggested that social work expertise amongst commissioners might be an issue:

I appreciate the difficulties commissioners might have, but we go through serial placement failures in fostering and residential, with commissioners [of placements] repeatedly having the same child coming through with escalating behaviours. Over the past five years the level of social work expertise in commissioners has gone down as the administrative and financial constraints have increased. So we now have 'procuring' not 'commissioning' because they don't know the needs of the child.

However, it is important to examine how these are reflected in the experiences of frontline professionals (see Chapter 4 below). Other research has suggested that the reality for social workers is one of 'few options' for placements, depending on the availability of foster care and residential provision (Wigley et al, 2011). One interviewee expressed frustration at this, locating the problem in the emphasis on finding a placement, which was usually foster care, without adequate assessment of need:

The pressure that social works are under to choose foster care first means that they are not able to think clearly about needs and interventions to meet those needs. So what they end up doing is asking for foster care, but saying 'I don't know if it's going to work in foster care...' But our analysis shows children going through multiple breakdowns in foster care, and we are still going to foster care. After the 8th placement breakdown, the 2nd or 3rd, no-one is saying wait a minute. Everyone is just saying 'we need another placement'. But the child is missing and foster care has reached the end.'

However, the different explanations sought by commissioners could also be located in their different approaches to data collection and analysis of this – different individuals had carried out various exercises to track children and to try to understand better why assessment and the matching or placements had not worked out.

One manager also argued strongly for the importance of clarity on the interventions being provided, and that providers needed to provide evidence – as part of the plan for the child – regarding the effectiveness of the work being carried out. It was suggested that data concerning the nature and quality of placements themselves needed more rigorous analysis, in order to assist decision making at the level of the individual case.

Monitoring and the quality of placements

Most of those interviewed agreed they would only use IFA and independent provision that Ofsted had rating 'outstanding' or 'good'. Those who used 'adequate' rated provision explained this in terms of individual children who were doing well in the setting, or because the authority had a good relationship with the provider. OFSTED ratings could also have a negative impact as homes could not admit other children while working to improve their ratings, described by one interviewee as 'financially impossible' for these providers. Others felt that concern for ratings could make it less likely that homes would admit the most troublesome children, that they were in the business of 'the mainstream' and tended to avoid specialising. Concern was also voiced that some experienced providers had simply given up as a result of the pressure from inspections.

There was a sense of sympathy for providers, and a wish to work with them to improve where this was possible – one said 'you are in it together'. There was a common interest in ensuring a diversity of provision and in maintaining placements for individual young people. It was also recognised that independent providers faced a challenging task in working with so many different local authorities and therefore systems. At the same time, as noted above, some interviewees also highlighted the need for greater rigour in questioning the nature of care on offer.

The monitoring of the quality of placements was identified as a problem in some interviews – the fact that a social worker could not simply 'pop in' and that there was a sense of detachment from local authority processes. Not knowing the environment of the placement could also be problematic, and one interviewee noted that they had ceased to make placements in an area which was considered 'unsafe' by police. This could also be problematic where a provider had set up in an area considered 'safe' that later became 'unsafe'.

'You still hear the view that placing children far away makes them safer. I don't agree with that, they'll be less safe and they receive fewer services – you can pretty much measure it. Social workers aren't going to be able to pop in when there's a crisis, they'll keep to their statutory visits but it's harder.'

As with the research literature, there was little evidence from interviewees that systematic attempts were made to gather the views of children and young people in care regarding placement out of borough. One commented that 'Their voices are very quiet' and another 'We don't listen to them enough'. In one borough where questionnaires were sent out, it was noted that returns were good and that young people were keen to comply. Other methods noted included Children in Care Councils, a participation worker, and views gathered via the Independent Reviewing Officer and the LAC review process.

'So recently we did a residential survey to help with the needs analysis, all our residential placements, 20 miles or more away. We asked them a set of questions which were not dissimilar to the national survey for children in residential care which talks about their experience and what it was like. The children said they didn't like being placed far away from family, that was an issue for them. A couple just wanted to go home, didn't want to be in care at all, but what came out was that they were unhappy in the placement, didn't want to be in that placement. Those kids really helped me to think about how much of the child's voice do we hear in our LAC reviews.'

'Our [service aimed at talking to children and young people and collating their views] go out and visit the children within 3 weeks of them being placed, in residential or foster care. Where you have peer on peer (who has also been looked after) talking about their experience. We present the collated responses to our Corporate Parenting Board and our In Care Council sit on that Board as well and present reports about what they are doing. Councillors also attend. So their voice is real in our borough, it's fluid and consistent and it's through the whole process of delivery and it's never missed. I think that is a really positive thing.'

This is linked to the issue of how far children and young people placed out of area are able to access other services. One interviewee argued that given the constraints on local health and education services, it was increasingly important for residential providers to be able to

offer a comprehensive in house package which did not involve dependence on these other services.

Certainly, and in accordance with other research, views were mixed regarding health and education. On balance educational support appeared more positive than health - '*Education is much more on board because it's local authority and in the mix*'. The role of the virtual head was valued, as was that of the LAC nurse. One borough had a joint education and health resource team.

Mental health emerged as a key issue for all stakeholders (DfE, 2013) and interviewees in this study were very clear on the high levels of mental health problems within their looked after populations. There were difficulties at all levels, from the negotiation of tripartite funding agreements between Health, Education and Social Care authorities), accessing CAMHS services in other authorities, and, equally, problems associated with planning or managing young people's moves back to their home borough.

CAMHS will say, 'we'll come to a meeting' or 'we'll come to this' about the child, but it is very piecemeal and it's not consistent. They can't offer something that is consistent and that's the problem.

Commissioners also expressed varying levels of confidence in the alternative 'therapeutic' and 'mental health support' put in place by individual providers to address these problems.

Though there was little sense that any of the boroughs were about to end the use of out of area placements, the interviewees had different views about their value and about the significance of distance, specifically in terms of access to services. Ensuring access to therapeutic support within placement was therefore an important element in identifying placements. In terms of foster placements, IFA carers were often seen as being in a better position than the local authority's own carers to provide this additional support, including education (though there was little discussion of how this was monitored).

Longer term outcomes

While there was agreement on the reasons for the use of out of area placements for specific groups, there was less agreement about the *effectiveness* of these placements. Concerns

were expressed about the longer term issues for those who had been involved in crime or gangs, and those who had been identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation.

'The disruption is short lived and they'll sooner or later be back in borough participating again.'

'moving them out of borough could be effective for a short period of time but some of them just link up with gangs in the area where they are placed. A lot of them don't but then they've got to come back into borough and we've come full circle.'

On the other hand, one interviewee felt that the strategy had been successful, in that young people in these cases had a commitment to change and were more likely to work with staff to make this happen.

These concerns about specific needs and groups were linked to a more general concern about what happened when out of area placements ended, especially in regard to care leavers. There was a recognition that practice in this area needed to be improved, both as a result of the Staying Put guidance and in view of the complex needs of young people, which meant they were unlikely to be able to cope with a mainstream college placement, for example, without adequate support. Managers expressed concern that young people in these placements had, understandably, formed attachments to the communities where they were living and often wanted to remain there, but finding housing was virtually impossible. At the same time, some questioned whether such placements should have lasted so long, and suggested that more active care planning would have facilitated a better transition to the young person's home borough.

Summary

1. This chapter has examined the responses of a small group of senior managers and others involved in the commissioning of placements for looked after children and young people.
2. The chapter has focused particularly on the four main themes that emerged from the interviews and has set these alongside what is known from the existing literature. The themes examined were 'the market place', 'the importance of assessment', 'monitoring and the quality of placements' and 'longer term outcomes'. The key messages from the analysis are as follows.

3. In relation to the market place, the experience of interviewees was found to be varied in many ways. While some clearly had reasonable access to in-house and within borough resources others did not and identified very real barriers to bringing about any significant change in this.

4. Participants appeared to welcome the mixed economy of provision and some discussed the importance of sectors working together although there were signs that partnership working with the independent fostering sector was further advanced than was true for residential providers. There was scope for more to be done on this.

5. Quality monitoring of placements was seen to rely heavily on OFSTED ratings. Concerns were raised about the way that these ratings were made and about the impact on individual settings of earning a rating of less than good as well as a fear that the need to retain 'good' or better ratings might deter providers from offering placements to some of the most challenging young people. Additionally there were concerns about these factors leading to reduction in diversity, innovation and specialist approaches through the loss of small providers.

6. There was also concern that while consortia approaches could be helpful the move toward 'preferred provider' lists risked restricting choice when particular services were needed.

7. Participants described the characteristics and needs of children and young people who were most commonly placed out of borough as being (often) highly complex, with challenging family and social networks. There were worries about children and young people who had experienced serial disruptions of placements.

8. Most boroughs had commissioning panel arrangements but more integration of these with other decision making systems within the organisation was needed in some cases.

9. The point was made that an essential component of effective commissioning is not only adequate social work assessment of children's needs but also identification of the qualities and services required from a placement in order to meet those needs. The policy of placing in foster care first was felt to constrain social workers in their assessment of need.

10. Some participants felt that placement away (often in specialist provision) was appropriate for some children. However, others challenged this and there were particular concerns about longer term outcomes, including the impact of return to the home borough. There was disquiet also that the views of children and young people did not systematically inform assessment of placement effectiveness.

11. There was a consensus that provision of health and education services could pose difficulties but these appeared to be much more obdurate in the case of CAMHS.

12. Participants felt that greater clarity and transparency was needed in relation to what constitutes therapeutic 'input' or a 'therapeutic community' and indeed what an education package actually means.

4. Case study data analysis.

The interviews with senior managers provide one picture of the use of out of area placements in London boroughs. However, it is important to look further into how these policies and procedures are translated into practice and service user experience. This section of the report examines primarily the data from interviews with social workers regarding 30 children and young people placed out of area.

Very little information was obtained from the literature search regarding the experiences of social workers, carers, birth families and children and young people. Although there is an extensive literature on the issue of contact arrangements generally for children in care, there is an absence of literature that examines specific issues associated with out of area placements. Research into residential schools – where some children in care will also be placed – highlights difficulties in terms of the cost of making visits, and the lack of longer term planning in respect to the young person's return to their home authority (Mcgill, Tennyson and Cooper, 2006)

The literature relating to professional perspectives is similarly limited. Worrall-Davies et al (2004) undertook research into the views of practitioners working with young people with 'challenging and complex problems' in Yorkshire. This highlighted the issues faced by professionals in finding both accommodation and additional support in a timely way that would prevent problems escalating. This study also showed that the use of emergency placements as stop-gaps in cases where needs were very complex and where it proved difficult to find appropriate provision. There was also concern at the 'seeming distance of managers from grassroots practice' (p185).

Morgan (2012) carried out a consultation with twelve children and young people who had experienced out of area placement. Beck (2006) received questionnaire returns from 109 (from a possible 529) looked after children and young people in Lambeth regarding mental health needs and use of mental health services. Unusually, this study distinguished the views of those living out of borough. Research consultancy OPM (2013) undertook a piece of action research for the Local Government Association, which included a national survey of children and young people with experience of residential care, which received 93 responses. Although the evidence is limited, there are recurrent themes. As with other

research into care placements, out of area care is not considered universally good or bad, but depends on the quality of the care environment. That is not to say distance is not an issue – missing family and friends and having contact with social workers are identified as problems. Children and young people are not asked consistently how they feel about their placement and about living away from their home communities.

As outlined in chapter one, the current study included 1-1 interviews with 30 social workers, based in one of six participating London boroughs. The great majority of these interviews were conducted face to face (28) with just two being completed by telephone.

As has been indicated elsewhere in this report, current understanding of which groups of children are placed away, and the reasons for those decisions, is underdeveloped and based largely on either anecdotal evidence or rather patchy research. Our interest was thus to explore with practitioners the sorts of circumstances that lead to out of area placement, their experiences of decision making processes and quality control, their observations about any challenges these placements might bring in terms of executing effectively the responsibilities of allocated social worker and 'corporate parent'.

Interviews focused on the circumstances related to one particular child for whom the interviewee was the allocated social worker and who was placed out of borough at the time of the interview. That said, inevitably there were times when professionals drew on and discussed wider experience of this type of placement.

The cases included in this stage of the study were identified by local authority staff and we have no way of knowing what criteria might have been applied within local authorities in making decisions about which cases to select. Therefore, in reporting these data there is no suggestion that the sample of cases is in any way representative of all children placed out of area

4.1   Sample characteristics

Between three and six social workers in each of six participating boroughs contributed to this stage of the study. They discussed with us, anonymously, their work with 30 children and young people (16 male and 14 female) whose ages ranged between 4 and 17 years. The detail of the characteristics of the children and young people is provided in table 4.1. As can

be seen, over half of the cases involved white children, mostly white British, all spoke English and the majority were described as not adhering to a religion.

Table 4.1. Demographic characteristics of the case study sample

Characteristic	Group	N=	%
Gender:	Male	16	*53%*
	Female	14	*47%*
Age group:	4-10 years	5	*17%*
	11-15 years	16	*53%*
	16-17 years	9	*30%*
Ethnicity:	White British	13	*43%*
	White other	5	*17%*
	Black	9	*30%*
	Asian	2	*7%*
	Dual heritage	1	*3%*
Language:	English	28	*93%*
	English + others	2	*7%*
Religion:	None	17	*57%*
	Roman Catholic	4	*13%*
	Other Christian	4	*13%*
	Muslim	4	*13%*
	Other	1	*3%*

Beyond sample description, the data analysis focused primarily on the qualitative content of the interviews. The detail of interviews was summarised rather than fully transcribed and these summary comments were then grouped in terms of substantive themes in order to identify the main messages and permit comparison of experience across groups of cases. The remainder of this chapter presents descriptive data on seven aspects of out of borough placements including care histories, placement types, reasons for placing out of borough, the decision making process (from the social worker's perspective), effectiveness of placements, experience of engaging needed services and patterns of - and challenges for - social workers in working with children and young people placed out of borough.

4.2 Care histories and current placements

In the majority of cases young people were being looked after under Section 31 Care Orders. Just four young people were cared for under Section 20 voluntary care arrangements and two who were the subject of Placement Orders. Although we did not collect full detail on

young people's histories the information gathered indicated that many young people had long been known to social care services before the current placement and in several cases before entering care. The average length of time children had been known to services was just over six and a half years but this ranged from one to 15 years.

Table 1.2 Care and placement data for cases

Characteristic	Categories	N	%
Legal status:	Section 20	4	*13%*
	Section 31	18	*60%*
	Placement Order	2	*7%*
	Full Care Order	6	*20%*
Time known to social care	Mean: 6.6 years (range: 1-15yrs, n=25)		
Number of previous care placements (N=29)	0-1	11	*38%*
	2-4	10	*34%*
	5-8	8	*28%*
Number of disrupted placements (N=29)	None	10	*35%*
	1-2	10	*35%*
	3-7	9	*30%*
Type of placement	Foster care (I/H)	8	*28%*
	Foster care (external)	8	*28%*
	Residential Care -no education (External)	5	*16%*
	Residential Care with education (External)	9	*30%*
Cost of external placements (where known)	Range £700- £4624 per week. (Mean 2,186, n=13)		

The current placement was the first care placement for just four of 29 young people and only 10 of 29 had not experienced a placement disruption (data were not available for one case).

Children and young people across the age range were placed in foster care, both in-house and externally provided. Residential care with education placements were also seen to provide accommodation for young people from 11-16 years. Residential care without education was only in evidence for young people who were 15 years or over. The average cost of external placements (including both residential care and fostering) was £2,186 per week.

4.3   Reasons for out of borough placement

The reasons for placing children and young people in their current placements were varied. Overall the analysis of cases indicates that, the decision to place out of borough was primarily governed by the need to identify placements that could provide for young people's emotional, therapeutic, educational, developmental or identity needs and provide a safe, stable and nurturing environment.

As a part of the interview social workers were asked: 'Do you think that the needs and risks for this child were greater or more challenging than those of children placed more locally?' Social workers indicated that the needs of the child or young person were indeed greater than the majority of children placed within borough boundaries in 18 of the 30 cases surveyed.

For example in the case of one young woman, the social worker felt that it would have been better had her borough been able to provide a suitable foster carer, noting that '*It is probably less value for money than some of the in house ones but the child would have needed an experienced carer and there was no-one available.*' Other cases included children who had experienced serious abuse, young people who had been involved in offending in the local community, and children who social workers felt would be further traumatised by placement close to family and community.

Interestingly with one or two exceptions[7], children whose needs were not thought to require particularly specialised care, while still being placed out of borough, were placed fairly close by. The average distance of the placement from the social work office for most of these cases was just 17 miles compared to an average 83 miles for children and young people whose needs suggested specialist care was necessary. Greater distances were involved in order to provide specialist educational or therapeutic services or to offer environments which removed children and young people from risks associated with either dangerous family members or risks of gang association and/or sexual exploitation.

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[7] In one of these cases the local authority had originally been looking for adopters when the child was placed. In another case the placement had been made several years ago.

Within this small sample there were six children and young people who were displaying sexualised behaviour or had experienced sexual abuse and in a further three cases there were worries about actual or potential sexual exploitation. Two young women had been involved with gangs while in London and there were worries about the risk of this for a third young person.

> *If we brought her back to London we would be bringing her back to the risks*
> *we removed her from. The risk in London has become so big that the only*
> *choice is to move them out of London.*

4.4 Placement decision making

Other sections of this report focus on the arrangements for making decisions about children's placements. In discussing the case studies the intention was to understand the social worker's involvement with the placement selection and decision making processes. Many practitioners felt that they had a good deal of input into the process of choosing placements for the young people they were working with. Not all of the social workers spoken to had been involved with the case at the time of placement but they were usually able to reflect on their experience with other cases.

Overall, experience seemed to be mixed – even within the same borough. Some workers appeared to talk quite confidently about their ability to influence decisions while others were more circumspect, explicitly referring to costs and the fact that ultimately managers make the decisions.

> *Not much, but I did with this one. They push [our in-house] carers first and*
> *they don't always meet the child's needs. Sometimes it is hard to make a case.*

One social worker suggested '*the higher the need, the less the choice*' another stated that within his/her borough there was a recognition that the borough could not provide for everything.

In almost all cases, except those where there was an immediate need to remove children and young people from danger - or the nature of need required very specialised care, in-house and local options had been explored before the decision was taken to place out of borough.

There is a lot of talk about placing children away. These children have specialist needs. It is not as if the decision to take them away from everything they know is made lightly. The somewhere else is actually safer. A lot is said by people who do not understand what is involved. It takes a lot of meetings and people to move outside boroughs. The top managers make you so answerable. The decision is made by more than 6 workers.

The majority of social workers reported that at the time the decision was made about the placement all involved professionals were in agreement with this, there were cases where the child or the birth family were not happy with the plans – although this was often overcome by visiting the placement and meeting carers or staff.

Importantly, 13 of 25 people who were able to answer a question about the timing of the placement felt that the decision should have been made much earlier. In some cases this referred to a decision to take the child into care, but mostly it referred to the decision to place a child into specialist provision. Seven out of 10 workers who were discussing the case of a child placed in residential care thought that the placement had been made too late and the very high number of placement breakdowns evidenced in some of these cases endorses this.

He was taken into care far too late and from the range of his behaviour it should have been obvious that only a very specialist placement would work for him.
(This young man had experienced five placement disruptions)

However, there was also recognition that young people who have experienced disruption might be better able to recognise and work with another care placement. For example one social worker talked about how s/he thought it had been important for the young person to experience her choice of local placements not working, in order to accept the current arrangement.

4.5   Effectiveness/outcomes of Out of Borough placements

Social work expectations of the placement ranged from '*providing a home*' through to '*contain him, help with his education and allow him to develop in a safe environment*'. As might be expected, there was lots of mention of stability, security and safety – reflecting the young people's needs as outlined above.

In 22 of the 30 cases the social workers felt that the placement was providing the care that had been hoped for and was meeting the needs of the young person. Social workers' descriptions of the nature of this care corresponds with wider evidence about effective care: the development of warm and continuous relationships, with access to specialist services as appropriate. In six cases needs were being met in some ways – or to some extent – but aspects of care were less than optimal. In just two cases were social workers of the opinion that the placement was ineffective in this regard.

In similar vein, while concerns remained, social workers' narratives revealed improvements in young people's behaviour and emotional states which appeared to be related to the influence of the placement in 24 of 30 cases. These changes were reflected in better relationships/interactions with peers and carers, reductions in absconding or other risky behaviours, reductions in self-harming and increased engagement with education for example.   One young woman, with a history of sexual exploitation and going missing, was considered to be safe in her placement and was doing several GCSEs. Another child had ceased to self-harm and had increased self-esteem.

We asked social workers what they understood to be the young person's view of the placement. The great majority described young people who appeared to be happy where they were (one or two were said to 'hate' the placement and those placements were under review). While a few young people returned to their home borough on a regular and planned basis for contact (indeed one repeatedly absconded back to the home borough) several were said to not miss London or their borough and were anxious that they should not be moved.

Contact and links with friends and family appeared to be in place where this was deemed appropriate and wanted by the child or young person. There were examples of good practice in strengthening family relationships – for example, a case where carers had

arranged a family birthday party which had served to improve contact. In some cases of longer term placements the social workers explained that friendships and social networks tended to be focused in the area of residence rather than the home borough.

In thinking about young people's experience when placed away from home, there were relatively few who had an independent visitor in place (indeed it seemed as though some social workers might not have understood that role) and very few participated in events for looked after children within their home boroughs. In contrast, an example of good practice in this area involved a young man who was due to return to his home borough, was aware of this and returned regularly for meetings with his social worker. An independent visitor had also been appointed and had a good relationship with the young person.

4.6   Practitioner views on engaging services and support for out of borough placements

The services that were focused on during interviews with practitioners were those provided by health and education. A question about Youth Offending Teams was also included although only one young person had any such involvement. Issues related to two further service areas became apparent during interviews and these were housing and careers advice services.

With regard to health, social workers reported that for those young people placed in residential settings all health issues were managed by the setting. There was evidence of boroughs' own LAC health teams being involved in making sure that annual health assessments were done for all cases. Access to universal health services did not appear to be a problem at all. What was a problem in some cases was access to CAMH services. There were references to these services being over-stretched but people also spoke about disputes over which authority was responsible for paying, and there were sometimes issues about threshold criteria.

For most of the young people whose cases were discussed arrangements for education were in place. In many cases school places had been organised by carers or was part of the package in the case of some residential placements. There were difficulties encountered in a few cases where additional support was needed and on occasion the receiving authority was perceived as being obstructive.

Experience was mixed with regard to the involvement of virtual heads/schools within the boroughs and the LAC designated teacher in the schools in terms of their contributions to reviews (LAC reviews or PEP meetings) or indeed in planning for meeting the educational needs of the young person. In some cases – and this was very evident in one particular borough – the virtual school seemed to be very involved so much so that one social worker stated "It feels like we are one", other workers described less close involvement with attendance at meetings 'sometimes' – or occasionally 'not at all'.

In relation to both virtual schools and LAC health teams there were comments made about the helpfulness of having these teams based in close proximity to the social work offices.

While most social workers felt that the young people they were working with were settled and progressing in their current placements there was disquiet about arrangements for leaving care. In particular there were concerns about rights to housing which forced a choice between two equally unsatisfactory options: either leaving a young person in a familiar environment out of area but risking that young person potentially facing homelessness on leaving care or bringing a young person back to borough to secure housing support but possibly disrupting social networks (in the case of a long term placement) and/or returning them to an area in which they had been considered 'at risk'. There is a clear tension here between the professional assessment of the young person's interests and welfare and the availability of services. In an example of what was considered good practice, one borough had extended a placement for a young person to 19, to provide time to undertake a specific programme of work to help prepare him for living away from care.

Issues concerning careers advice were identified in only two case studies but this is potentially an important area to consider in terms of planning for young people placed away from their home borough. The context in which this was said suggests that the difficulties are not so much with the young person being looked after out of borough but that the quality of careers advice services varies in different areas.

4.7   How 'out of borough' are out of borough placements?

As can be seen in table 4.2, while all of the cases examined were of children placed out of borough, over a quarter of placements were within the greater London boundary and a

further 43% were located in the south east and home counties region of England. Just under one third (30%) of the placements were further afield.

Table 4.2. The location of out of borough placements

Broad region of placement	Greater London	8	27%
	South East/Home counties	13	43%
	East England	3	10%
	Midlands	1	3%
	North West	5	17%

One of the major issues about out of area placements has been concern about the distance between the home area and the placement. A major part of this is clearly that children and young people are apart from family, friends and environments with which they are familiar.

A further issue relates to the implications of distance for social workers' ability to visit as often and for as long as they might wish. As illustrated in figure 4.1, for the 30 cases examined in this stage of the study, distances between the social work office and the placement location ranged from 3 to 214 miles (mean average = 67 miles) with a quarter (27%) of placements being within 20 miles of the social work office.
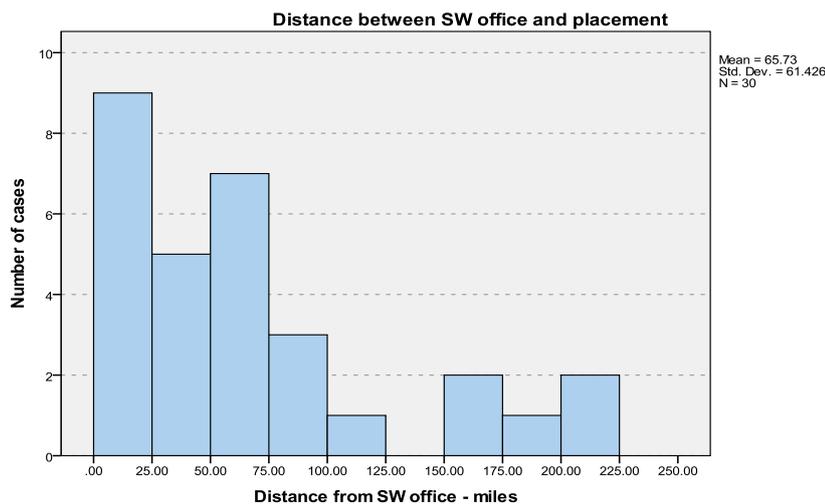

Figure 4.1

The time taken for social workers to travel to visit children and young people varied accordingly, ranging from 30 minutes to five hours (see figure 4.2). While the correlation between distance and time taken was substantial (Pearson correlation r=.736), it was not perfect and it was clear from the interview data that it was the directness of the journey and connections, that is the time taken to travel (particularly in relation to public transport) that was key.

Travel time SW office to placement
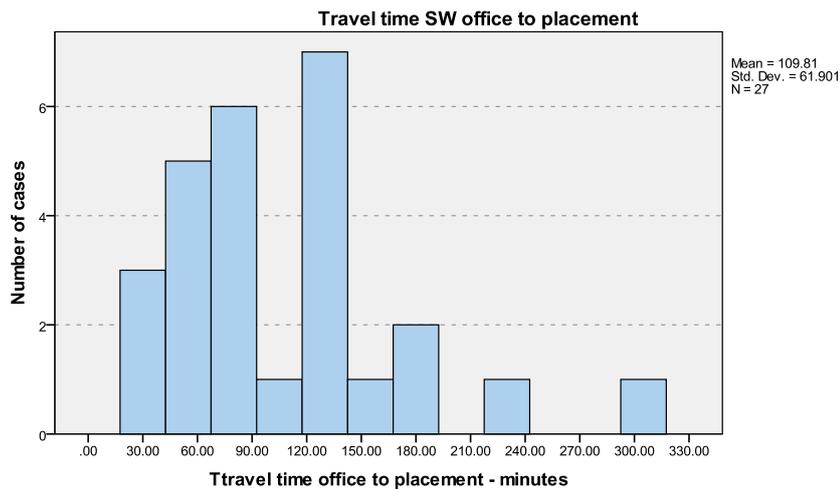
Figure 4.2

Notes to Figure 2. Three social workers did not provide an estimate of time. Some provided both driving and public transport times, in these cases the shortest duration has been included in the figure above.

Social workers were visiting placements on a regular basis in line with, and sometimes more frequently, than required by statutory guidance. However, practitioners did report that it was not possible for many young people placed out of borough to just 'drop in' to the social work office. Neither was it easy for social workers to arrange to visit young people in their placement at short notice should the need arise. The reduced ability for informal and impromptu contact did lead to less opportunity to build rapport.

> *[Its] very difficult to spend more time because he is a long way away. It is a whole day so that kind of affects the relationship that I have with him. I would spend much more time if he were local. There would be much more interaction with him……. He is open but it doesn't go a step up to a deep relationship.*

Summary

- Interviews were undertaken with social workers in six London boroughs who talked about their work with 30 children and young people. Cases were selected by the boroughs and should not be viewed as representative of all children placed out of area.

- The majority of young people had experienced more than one placement and in most cases the disruption of a number of care placements.

- Placements varied considerably in the extent to which they were out of area, with over a quarter within the greater London boundary and 43% in the south east or home counties regions of England.

- The decision to place out of borough was usually attributed to finding a placement that would meet the young person's needs and provide a safe and supportive environment.

- Social workers tended to think that the needs of this group were greater than those of children placed within borough boundaries. There appeared to be an association between the degree of specialisation required and the distance of the placement.

- Social workers felt that they had a fair amount of input into the process of choosing placements, and that professionals tended to be in agreement about the placement.

- Social workers emphasised the complexity of the needs of this group and in some cases suggested the decision to find more specialised provision should have been taken earlier.

- In just over two thirds of cases social workers felt the objectives of the placement were being met and the child or young person's needs were being met.

- Access to universal health services was generally described as good, but obtaining support from CAMHS was problematic. Social workers highlighted issues around housing and careers support for young people close to leaving care.

- Social workers reported that it was travel time, rather than distance, that impacted on their work with young people – especially in relation to informal contact opportunities.

5. Summary and conclusions

This report has considered findings from a small scale study of out of borough placements in London. The research has been limited in a number of respects: it has taken place in a short time frame and lacks a longitudinal dimension; it has not included directly the views of children, young people, providers and other professional groups; and the samples examined are not fully representative. Nevertheless, it provides an important snapshot of the issues facing commissioners in London in the context of existing statistical data and research evidence regarding out of area placements. It tries to link these commissioning issues to the experiences of social workers and a sample of cases of children and young people placed out of area. The research is also timely, taking place at a point where there is ongoing policy interest in the question of sufficiency and the way in which out of area placements are being used (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014).

This final chapter discusses the key implications of the findings from the study. There are three major themes.

Defining the debate

The policy and research literature identifies fairly consistent trends in the direction of travel in respect to the market in placements for looked after children. The growth in independent fostering agencies and private children's homes has been accompanied by concerns about the costs and quality of external placements, and how this relates to in house provision. These concerns can be linked to a wider body of evidence relating to the complex nature of the needs of the care population, and the difficulties in providing care in environments that are safe and address the physical, emotional, behavioural and other health needs of children and young people.

One of the challenges associated with undertaking research in this area is that there are multiple threads to the discussion, which are not always acknowledged, far less differentiated. Residential care – for reasons of history, cost and media profile – tends to dominate a great deal of debate. The question of whether a placement is provided by an independent or private agency is often conflated with whether a placement is out of area or not. Additionally, these issues will be intertwined with assumptions about the acceptability or desirability of different types of placement, types of provider, and placement location.

Such conflation and overlapping emerged in the research data, and highlighted the lack of consensus on exactly what we are talking about when referring to 'out of area' placements. Thus, for example, interviewees talked about foster placements that were 'in-house' but 'out of area'. Commissioners talked mainly about high end cases where challenging behaviours were often the issue; the cases described by social workers highlighted the range of placement types and individuals for whom an out of area placement might be deemed appropriate.

There is a need, therefore, to avoid demonising of 'out of area' placements as invariably representing poor practice; to define precisely the nature of the problem or issue being discussed under the banner of 'out of area' placements, and to treat critically artificial definitions of what constitutes 'out of area' – most obviously in the form of the 20 mile limit. The assessment of placements should be, and is, driven by consideration of a range of factors, of which distance is one. Understanding how these are prioritised at strategic, agency and practice levels is essential to judgements about the effectiveness of an agency's management of its looked after children population.

Good outcomes for children depend on the complementarity of placement commissioning and case management. Arguably, the development of such policy and practice is not helped by the nature of the evidence base. Hayden (2007) notes that overall, the issue of out of area placements has been under-researched and 'subsumed under the broader literature'. Certainly, much research into children in care does not routinely identify children and young people looked after in out of area placements as a distinct subgroup. There is also an absence of longitudinal research into the impact of different types of residential and foster care provision on different sub-groups of children and young people, including those who are disabled and young people from black and minority ethnic communities. The views of the different providers and professionals working directly with children and young people in out of area placements is also largely absent.

A variable experience

The different data gathered in this research has indicated the high level of variability in patterns of placement in and out of borough in London. This is reflected in the Department for Education's published data, which indicates there is no one picture for London as a

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whole, and that there are a range of factors affecting the ways in which out of area placements are being used. Boroughs vary in their demographics, their relationship to other boroughs, their history of placement provision and resources. Consequently, it is unsurprising that there are differences in the profile of the care populations of individual boroughs and their ability to provide appropriate in-house [and in area] placement solutions. These needs also fluctuate e.g. influx of new communities, changes to housing policy. As our understanding of certain issues develops – for example, the emergence of new evidence regarding child sexual exploitation, improved understanding of the nature of gang association and involvement, the impact of mental health problems on adolescent behaviours – then this will also have an impact on analysis of the needs of the care population and the adequacy of placement options.

These differences indicate the importance of scoping and analysing the issue of out of area placements within boroughs/groups of boroughs. There was evidence in the research findings that managers with responsibility for commissioning were keen to use data, and some had undertaken work individually or as part of consortia to obtain a better picture of children's needs and their relationship to services. Scrutiny of decision making is taking place at panel level, but there may be a multiplicity of panels and it was not always clear how information was being shared and integrated. However, although some individuals were enthusiastic about certain models, there appeared to be a need for more sharing of good practice in the use of data, and potentially more consistency across boroughs in how this was done.

Commissioners were aware of the need for agility in responding to changing local conditions. At the same time, the need for sound knowledge of local provision and good relationships with providers seemed an essential condition of good decision making. A key benefit from good consortia arrangements was reported to be the profiling of the member boroughs' potential need, sharing this with providers enables them to better position themselves to meet need. This is an area of apparent good practice which would benefit from further exploration.

Having a good relationship with local providers also enables commissioners to better manage the impact of the OFSTED ratings system on residential provision. With personal

knowledge of a provider commissioners can make informed decisions about moving a child who is doing well and/or working with a provider to regain a good rating. Whilst the inspections regime has brought undoubted benefits, experienced small specialist residential providers are closing due to the pressure and commissioners are concerned about the reduction in placement choice.

Assessment

Assessment of need emerges as a strong theme in the research findings. Even while strong arguments were made regarding the care with which placement decisions were made, there were still concerns that the right placement was, in too many cases, only identified at the end of a series of placements which had ended badly. Commissioners also argued that social work assessment, while identifying the nature of need, did not always translate into helpful descriptions of what was required in terms of provision. Thus placement discussions centred on children's behaviours rather than the reasons for the behaviour, such as disrupted attachment or trauma and importantly did not always identify what placements needed to be able to provide in order to meet children's needs.

There is a sense that the *language* associated with commissioning and providing is serving to obscure both the needs of the child or young person, and the nature of the input from providers. Terms such as 'therapeutic' and 'education on site' can mean many different things, and managers expressed – implicitly or explicitly – the need to dig underneath this, but were not necessarily clear on how this might happen. In some cases the development of commissioning frameworks had helped in pinning down exactly what was on offer from providers, but at the same time commissioners were aware of the need for flexibility, and that sometimes spot purchasing would be required. In this context, it is important that the social workers putting together the case for a placement, and those examining this case at panel, are able to ask the correct questions.

Such questioning should be ongoing as part of the monitoring of placements, and there were some examples of good practice in this respect – for example, a case where the local authority had challenged the placement regarding their ambitions for the child. Another interviewee highlighted the need to tease out the nature of psychiatric services on offer. At the same time, it was not always clear how far questions had been asked about the nature

and quality of services that might be available as part of the placement – for example, in terms of educational provision.

Links to services

Even if we take the view that, all things being equal, a placement that is out of area may be appropriate for a child or young person, the practice raises important issues about how far children and young people in these placements receive an equitable service in being able to access universal and specialist health and education services. While 'everyday' services may be sufficient, the weight of the evidence suggests that additional services are likely to be involved in a disproportionate number of cases. The evidence from this study suggests that this is indeed the case, and that children and young people placed out of area may be disadvantaged in this respect. There is some evidence that roles that have been established over recent years – the Virtual Head and the LAC nurse – can play a valuable role in ensuring that the needs of children and young people are not overlooked, and that some boroughs are using these to good effect. However, this is patchy and the boroughs' responses to the children they receive from other areas is similarly variable.

The question of access to CAMHS was raised throughout the study. This is clearly serious but is not unique to London – and there are questions about how well children placed in-house and in borough are provided for in terms of mental health and therapeutic services. However, there are additional organisational barriers when seeking these services out of area, which may have further impact on the well-being of individual young people. Given the evidence that has accrued regarding levels of mental health problems in the care population, this raises questions about how far access to these services is being considered when developing commissioning strategies, and in decision making at panel level.   There is scope for closer partnerships between local authorities and clinical commissioning groups to ensure that the latter commissions CAMHS with a specific remit and resources to support looked after children in foster or residential care.

Both case study data and interviews with managers highlighted the issue of the longer-term experiences of care leavers who had settled in the areas where they had placed. This is an interesting finding – cases which could be considered 'good' outcomes and where young people had actively expressed a wish to stay in another area became problems owing to the

difficulty of finding housing and ensuring appropriate support for young people's transition to independence. Interviewees recognised the tension between having to return young people in-house, and the thrust of the Staying Put initiative and other evidence regarding care leavers.

If the weight of the argument indicates a continued need for some out of area placements, including some that are outside London altogether, then logic demands that shared responsibility is exercised in respect to ensuring all children and young people in care who are living in a local authority have access to relevant services. This is not easy in a context where resources are limited and specialist services are under pressure. If local authorities do not think that such services will be available, then this raises questions about the validity of the placement decision.

Next steps

Interviewees themselves had views about how the commissioning process could work more effectively, and about the gaps that existed in planning and integrating services for children and young people looked after out of area. Specific suggestions included:

- Sufficiently well resourced placements team to know the providers

- Better training and specialist e.g. therapeutic support for in house foster carers

- Better assessments, again potentially with mental health expertise, to identify children's needs and place them 'right first time'

- Good LAC population profiling to enable providers to better meet need

- Support for small, specialist residential providers

- Good integrated working between case management & reviewing and commissioning placements management

- Integration of health and social care expertise throughout the placement commissioning process to ensure that the child's needs are properly assessed, the therapeutic offer is appropriate and the child makes the expected progress in placement

These suggestions chime with many of the findings highlighted in this study. There is clearly scope for knowledge exchange in respect to, for example, the analysis of data; good practice in assessment and planning; and models of integrated working with health and education

services, including CAMHS. It is also important that, within London and nationally, further research helps establish more clearly the outcomes from different out of area placements and helps define both the nature of the problems, and the potential for good practice, more clearly.

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