

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

Executive summary

Introduction

London Councils commissioned the University of Bedfordshire and Channon Consulting to undertake a research study to examine the use of and approaches to commissioning out-of-area placements for children in care in London. The study was undertaken between November 2013 and March 2014.

The research took place in a policy and practice context where there is ongoing concern regarding how best to meet the complex needs of children in care, and the extent to which out of area placements are helpful. The study aims to provide a detailed picture of the current use of out-of-area placements in London boroughs; the challenges and opportunities associated with this and how policy and practice might be improved in respect to the use of out-of-area placements in London.

Placing looked after children (LAC) outside their home local authority is an issue which has been recognised as being a challenging one for local authorities for some time. 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. Therefore, throughout this report we have looked at both placements outside of borough and beyond 20 miles.

Current use of out of area placements in London

There is an upward trend in terms of the levels of LAC placed within 20 miles of home across almost all regions of England, including London. Since 2007, London has placed disproportionately more children out of borough than in other regions. However, London local authorities are smaller geographical units than most other local authorities, therefore it is more likely LAC will have to be placed outside of these boundaries. London's proportion of LAC placed out of borough is not markedly different from other small or urban authorities. When viewed in terms of the proportion of looked after children placed within 20 miles of home, London is generally in line with other regions in England.

Since 2007 there has been a modest fall in overall numbers of looked after children in London, which is contrary to the picture for the rest of England. However, there is no clear correlation between change in the size of the LAC cohort and the number of children being placed within area.

There is marked variation in the proportions of LAC being placed out of area both between boroughs (true for both Inner and Outer London) and over time. Therefore it is difficult to identify any significant pan-London patterns.

Characteristics of LAC placed out of area

There are a number of characteristics among LAC that are shared across London which often make it harder to find appropriate placements for them in-borough. The proportion of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) looked after is higher for London as a whole, and especially in outer London. London boroughs, in comparison with the England average, have a noticeably older age profile for children who start to be looked after either over the age of 10 and over the age of 16. Rates of reported LAC with special educational needs and recorded school exclusions were slightly higher for London than for England. 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.

Reasons for out of area placement

There was broad agreement amongst participants on the reasons for the use of out of area placements in their boroughs. Appropriate placements were not always available in-borough to meet the needs of specific groups of children and young people. It is essential that LAC with complex needs have access to tailored provision, which is often not available in-borough due to economies of scale. LAC who require this specialist support include: those with disabilities; those with specific cultural needs; sibling groups; with experience or are at risk of gang involvement, offending or sexual exploitation; and those who were abusive to others. An out of area placement could be a means to prevent problems escalating, or it could indicate the seriousness of a child's problems. It could also be the result of a series of placement breakdowns, which has led to the identification of a more specialist placement further afield. The reasons for use of out-of-area placements relate to both the nature of individual need as well as the amount and type of provision available locally.

Challenges and opportunities

The research examined interviews and online questionnaire responses from a small group of senior managers and others involved in the commissioning of placements for looked after children and young people. Four main themes emerged in terms of challenges and opportunities from this element of the research:

1. the market place
2. the importance of assessment and placement decision making
3. monitoring and the quality of placements
4. longer term outcomes

1. Market place

Both inner and outer London boroughs place a smaller proportion of LAC in placements provided by the local authority and make greater use of independent provision than authorities in other regions. The London boroughs place slightly more LAC in residential care. This trend can be attributed to the fact that a number of small local residential units have had to close in recent years, due to financial pressures, as identified in the research interviews. Interviewees regretted the loss of diversity, innovation and specialist approaches available in such provision. The growing presence of very large providers, however, had the advantages of greater flexibility and the ability to withstand financial pressures.

However, participants reported a varied picture in terms of capacity. While some clearly had reasonable access to in-house and within borough provision others did not and identified very real barriers to bringing about any significant change in this. For example, a number of interviewees found the recruitment of foster carers generally, and those with appropriate expertise specifically, to be a real challenge. In addition, estate costs in London often make it prohibitive to attract more residential providers into boroughs.

Participants welcomed the mixed economy of provision and some discussed the importance of sectors working together. 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.

2. Importance of assessment and placement decision-making

Social workers identified the key factors in placement decision making to be finding a placement that met the child's needs and provided a high quality of care. Social workers tended to think that the needs of children and young people placed out-of-borough 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.

The point was made that an essential component of effective commissioning is not only adequate social work assessment of children's needs but also the identification of the qualities and services required from a placement in order to meet those needs.

Despite a generally positive view of the assessment and decision-making process, participants in the research raised a number of concerns. The policy of placing a looked after child in foster care first was felt to constrain social workers in their assessment of need. Similarly, there was concern that the views of children and young people did not systematically inform assessment of placement effectiveness.

3. Monitoring and the quality of placements

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, particularly in terms of their long term financial viability. There was also a concern that the need to retain good or better ratings might deter providers from offering placements to some of the most challenging young people.

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. However, they also 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.

Participants in the research reported that it was travel time, rather than distance, that impacted on their work with young people, especially in relation to informal contact opportunities. Monitoring the quality of placements a long way from the home authority was problematic as social workers could not just drop in and also were less likely to have a detailed knowledge of the area for example whether the police considered it to be safe.

4. Longer term outcomes

Despite general consensus about the reasons for placing a LAC out of area, there was little agreement among participants about the effectiveness of out of area placements for specific groups. In particular, concerns were raised about the longer term outcomes for those who had been involved in crime or gangs, and those at risk of sexual exploitation, particularly if they are moved back in borough within a short period of time.

Participants shared a general concern about what happened to LAC once the placement ended. There was recognition that these children may wish to stay in the area where they had been placed, but that this was often very difficult to manage, particularly in terms of finding suitable housing.

Access to universal health services was generally described as good in out of area placements, but obtaining support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was problematic. Given that many LAC have mental health-related issues, this can be a significant challenge in terms of transforming outcomes.

Conclusions and implications for practice

There is a need to avoid demonising out of area placements as invariably representing poor practice. Evidence gathered through this report suggests that LAC are placed out of area primarily to access more specialist provision that is better able to meet their needs. The assessment of placements should be, and is, driven by consideration of a range of factors, of which distance is one.

Data from all sources indicated the variability of use of out of area placements. It is clear that there is no one picture for London as a whole. The effective use of data in scoping and analysing the local picture within individual boroughs and neighbouring boroughs is therefore an important element in ensuring greater clarity about how effectively these placements are being used.

There are a number of trends affecting the availability of residential provision. While commissioners are committed to using high quality provision, there are concerns that Ofsted ratings are not always helpful in supporting smaller providers. It was generally agreed that a mixed economy of provision, with a range of local providers as well as more specialist settings, was the preferred option for commissioners to meet the varied needs of their LAC cohorts. Good assessment and the ability to translate this into clear requirements for providers was viewed as essential to improving the matching of individual needs to placements.

While there was evidence of some good practice, the findings from the study emphasise the need for greater consistency in ensuring that children and young people placed out of area have access to good health and education services to improve longer term outcomes. Specific difficulties were associated with access to CAMHS services and housing for care leavers. These findings indicate the need for reconsideration of how responsibility for children and young people in care can be shared across authorities, regardless of their home local authority.