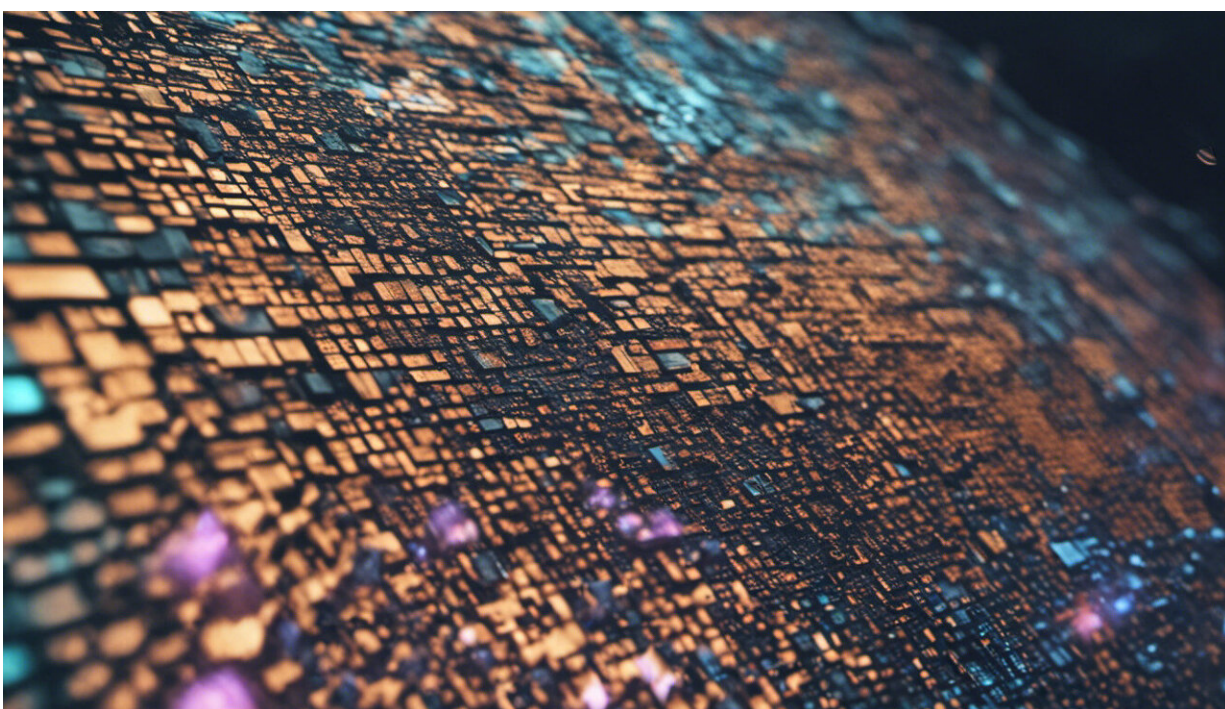


2 in 5 children in care are placed outside their local authority—here's why that's a problem

June 27 2023, by Anders Bach-Mortensen, Benjamin Goodair and Jane Barlow



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Since June 2022, a series of BBC investigations [have made](#) shocking revelations about terrible abuse and malpractice in a number of children's homes run by the Hesley Group in Doncaster, South Yorkshire. Among other things, the reports describe instances of

physical assaults and psychological abuse on vulnerable children [by staff](#).

These revelations prompted the government to commission an [expert panel](#) in October 2022 to conduct a safeguarding review. The homes have since been closed.

Public [outrage](#) has been [extensive](#). These homes had been [rated "good" by Ofsted](#). And the revelations of abuse had only come to light after several reports from whistleblowers.

Less concern has been expressed, though, about the fact that most of the children in these homes were [living outside](#) their local authority. The [expert panel](#) found that on average, the 108 children living in Hesley Group facilities were living [95 miles](#) from their homes.

Our [latest research](#) documents how more children in care are placed out of their area every year, and that this trend may be driven by local councils outsourcing care placements to the for-profit sector.

For-profit care homes

Every year more children in care are placed outside their local authority, even though councils are obliged to [prioritise placing them locally](#). The charity [Become](#) found that, in 2022, the average [placement](#) distance of children in care was 18 miles.

This had been pointed out previously, in 2021, in a [House of Commons](#) briefing and, before that, in 2019, by the [All-Party Parliamentary Group](#) for runaway and missing children and adults. This inquiry had been convened to investigate those children who go missing from out-of-area placements.

The final review underlined that the numbers of such placements had

soared, "despite a government pledge to clamp down on them".

[Experts](#) agree that this development is [unacceptable](#). The question, then, is why it is such common practice.

Following up on [our recent study](#) on Ofsted ratings between for-profit and council children's homes, we wanted to investigate how placement outcomes are connected to services being outsourced over time.

Using data spanning 12 years to 2022, that covers more than 600,000 children in care placements in England, we analysed how for-profit outsourcing is connected to placement stability and distance for children in care.

Over the last decade, fewer children have been placed within their area. Of all children currently in care, 43% are placed outside their local authority, which represents an increase of 4 percentage points since 2011.

During this time, there has also been a significant increase in the outsourcing of these services. Local authorities currently outsource 38% of children's placements to the for-profit sector. This represents a 9 percentage point increase since 2011.

Our analysis shows that these outcomes are connected. Increases in for-profit provision is strongly associated with more children being placed out of area.

Local authorities with the highest number of outsourced placements are also the ones with the highest average rates of out-of-area placements. We estimate that the increases in for-profit provision since 2011 correspond to an additional 17,000+ out-of-area placements over the last decade.

Negative impacts

For some children, being placed out of area is in their best interests. Sometimes there are concerns over their safety if they remain in their local area.

For many, though, being placed at a distance, they risk losing touch with their home community and with the local authority responsible for their care and safeguarding. [Research from the Become charity](#) has found that, too often, this has a negative effect on their wellbeing and is a source of instability and insecurity.

The national regulator Ofsted [recognises this challenge](#). It recently acknowledged that local authorities often have to compromise between placing a child locally and prioritising the child's needs.

The scarcity of placements in the sector means that many local authorities cannot offer children both.

The future role of for-profit provision in children's social care remains a topic of debate. The 2022 [children's social care market study](#) by the Competition and Markets Authority attributes the sufficiency crisis to poor commissioning and market oversight by local authorities.

Essentially, this study concludes that the problem is not with the market, but with how local authorities fail to adequately engage with and shape private provision.

In response, the Department for Education has taken steps to enhance commissioning at the regional level by establishing [regional care cooperatives](#). These commissioning units aim to combine resources and expertise at the regional level to improve the knowledge, leverage and negotiating power of children's social care commissioners.

However, it remains uncertain whether shifting from local authority to regional commissioning will make cared-for children's lives better. More than a decade of consistent growth in for-profit provision has not helped [local authorities](#) to supply better care for their wards.

On the contrary, because for-profit provision has increasingly become synonymous with out-of-area placements, the care these [children](#) receive is compromised. Children in care deserve to have both their needs met and to live close to their homes.

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