

Vulnerable children and social care in England: A review of the evidence

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April 2018

EDUCATION
POLICY
INSTITUTE

Research Area:
Vulnerable Learners
and Social Mobility



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Summary

Trends in prevalence and overview of provision

- According to the latest official statistics there are 389,430 children in need (CIN) in England. These are children deemed unlikely to achieve reasonable health and development without the provision of services, including those with a disability.
- Since 2010 at least, there has been a rise in the numbers of children in need issued with Child Protection Plans and council care orders. This has been partially attributed to a deliberate response by social care authorities to high-profile serious case reviews into child deaths resulting from abuse. Other factors, including cuts to early intervention (EI) services and deprivation, may also be contributing to a rise in acute need.
- The increase in these more acute forms of monitoring and intervention is occurring in spite of staff-reported increases in thresholds for access to services.
- Over half of LAs in all regions except London were rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate by Ofsted, according to the latest data.

Funding and staffing issues

- In order to maintain statutory services, local authorities have balanced a fall in local spending power since 2010 with cuts to early support services combined with the use of budget reserves.
- Social care staffing is showing signs of strain, and different parts of the country have adapted differently to the challenging context. In London, caseloads are slightly lower than average, but are managed with heavy reliance on agency workers to fill high rates of vacancies. In the Midlands and parts of the North, caseloads are higher than average, but vacancies and agency worker rates are lower. Burn-out appears to be a significant problem, with 63 per cent of leavers in 2017 having worked less than five years.
- Social worker change has been linked to a loss of trust among children in need.
- More positively, the number of starters was substantially higher in 2017 compared to previous years. In some cases, this may be the result of local recruitment and retention schemes.
- Regions with higher caseloads have a higher proportion of local authorities with poor Ofsted ratings.

Educational and long-term outcomes for children in contact with social services

- The effects of the adverse childhood experiences that lead to social care intervention stretch well into adulthood, and include mental health difficulties and crime.
- Despite efforts to prioritise looked after children in schools, through virtual school heads and the LAC pupil premium, their experiences are still characterised by instability and poor outcomes.
- Within this concerning picture, there is hope that longer-term stable care placements can result in better outcomes, including a lower chance of permanent exclusion from school.

Outlook

- With child poverty projected to increase, the strains on the system are unlikely to decrease without significant additional spending.
- Research suggests that the most affected parts of the country are those that have already borne the brunt of cuts to preventive services. If the risk of further deteriorating child outcomes is to be averted, services will need to be sufficiently resourced to tackle the underlying connections between poverty and child protection risk.

Prevalence and overview of provision

How many vulnerable children and young people are there in England? In 2017, the Children's Commissioner's office released a report attempting to answer this question for the first time.¹ While highlighting that their estimates are likely imprecise due to data gaps, overlap between groups and competing definitions of 'vulnerability,' the authors identified 32 groups at risk of poorer outcomes - these included children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), children in low-income families, undocumented children and those who are excluded from school. The authors estimate that 670,000 English children live in 'high-risk' situations, including with parents addicted to alcohol or drugs or in temporary accommodation, at least 800,000 have mental health disorders and 580,000 are in need of direct intervention.

This latter group is largely made up of 'children in need' (CIN) – those who are deemed unlikely to achieve or maintain reasonable health or development without the provision of services. **According to the latest published data, there are 389,430 children in need in England.**² Within this classification, more serious cases – those assessed to be likely to suffer or currently suffering significant harm - are issued with a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and account for around 13 per cent of all CIN, children looked after by their local authority (LAC) make up around 19 per cent and those with a disability account for 13 per cent. **Approximately 6 per cent of the total population of children and young people in England qualify as 'in need' at some point throughout the year.**³

There has been a rise over time in the most acute forms of monitoring and intervention. Official statistics show that, between 2010 and 2016, the rate of all CIN per 100,000 decreased by 1 per cent, yet the rate of children issued with Child Protection Plans increased by 24 per cent (from 34.8 to 43.4) and the rate of looked after children increased by 9 per cent (from 57.0 to 62.0) (Figure 1).⁴

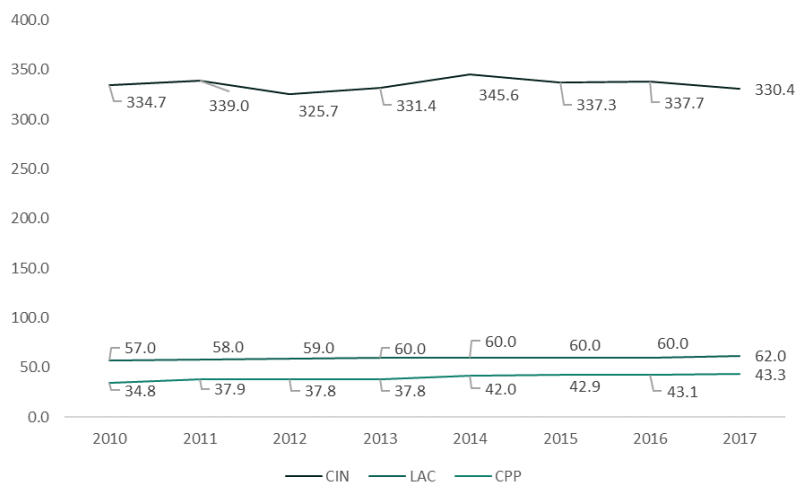
¹ Children's Commissioner, 2017, 'On measuring the number of vulnerable children in England', <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CCO-On-vulnerability-Overveiw.pdf>

² Department for Education, 2017, 'Characteristics of Children in Need: 2016-2017 England', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656395/SFR61-2017_Main_text.pdf

³ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children in Need of Help and Protection', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690999/Children_in_Need_of_help_and_protection_Data_and_analysis.pdf

⁴ Department for Education, 2017, 'Characteristics of Children in Need: 2016-2017 England', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656395/SFR61-2017_Main_text.pdf

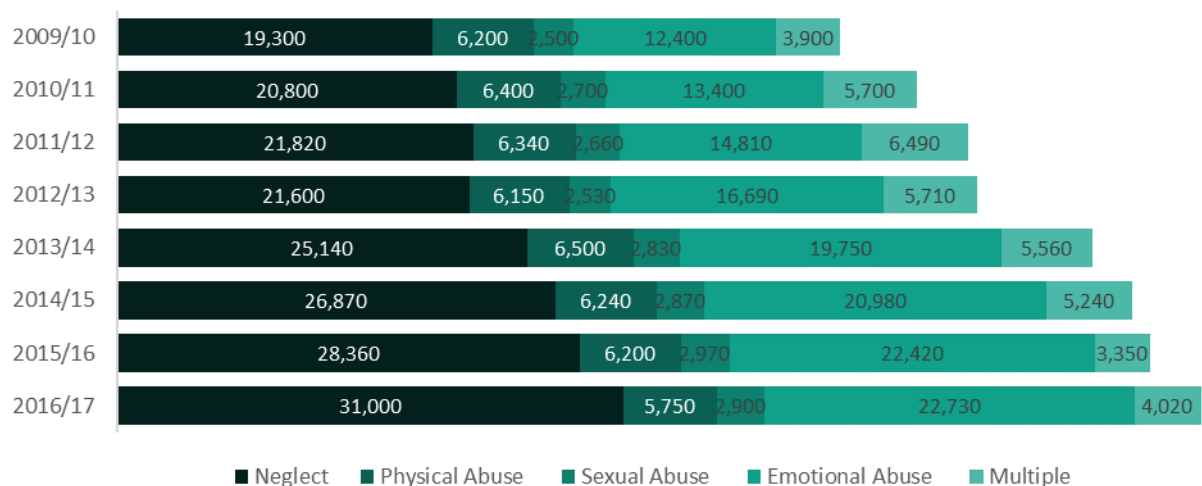
Figure 1: Rates of CIN by 100,000 children under 18 years, 2010-2017



Source: Department for Education, 2017

The broad categories of abuse underlying the increase in CPPs since 2010 are emotional abuse and neglect, with fewer children identified as being at risk of physical abuse and only slightly more at risk of sexual abuse (Figure 2).⁵

Figure 2: Number of CPP children by category of abuse, 2009/10 to 2016/17



Source: Department for Education, 2017

According to the latest data release, factors of need for all CIN most commonly identified in assessment are domestic violence (49.9 per cent) and family mental health problems (39.7 per cent),

⁵ Department for Education, 2017, 'Characteristics of Children in Need: 2016 to 2017 England', <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need-2016-to-2017>

with close to a fifth affected by family substance misuse, emotional abuse and/or neglect.⁶ The proportion of children in need identified as living with family mental health problems has risen from 32.5 per cent in 2014/15 (the earliest year with consistent data reporting), while the proportions with the other most prevalent factors of need have remained broadly constant since 2014/15.⁷

There are likely to be multiple factors driving the increase in numbers of children subject to acute interventions.

First, a deliberate orientation of LAs toward more protective interventions following high-profile serious case reviews into child deaths as a result of abuse may be a contributing factor. The year following the public announcement of Baby P's death in 2008 saw a 21 per cent rise in council care orders - local authorities cite other changes around the same time, including the introduction of the Public Law Outline and improved identification of cases, as additional explanations.⁸ Official statistics show the number of LAC has risen more steeply since 2007/08.⁹

Second, some evidence suggests that drivers of demand for children's social services are on the rise.

There is a strong association between deprivation and contact with social services. The latest official statistics show that 30 per cent of school-age children in mainstream provision on child in need plans and 37 per cent of those on child protection plans live in areas of high deprivation (based on IDACI bands), compared to 18 per cent of other children and 17 per cent of looked after children.¹⁰ Researchers with the Child Welfare Inequalities Project at Coventry University found a graded relationship between deprivation and contact with services, with children in the UK's most disadvantaged tenth of areas at least 10 times more likely to be in contact with children's services than those in the richest tenth, either through CPPs or council care orders.¹¹ The Department for Work & Pensions reports that the proportion of children living in relatively low-income households (measured by household equivalised income below 60 per cent of median income in 2016/17) before and after housing costs has not changed significantly between 2010/11 to 2016/17.¹² Yet, taking into account expected economic trends, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that after-

⁶ Department for Education, 2017, 'Characteristics of Children in Need: 2016 to 2017 England', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656395/SFR61-2017_Main_text.pdf

⁷ Department for Education, 'Statistics: children in need and child protection', <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-children-in-need>

⁸ Macleod, S., Hart, R., Jeffes, J. and Wilkin, A., 2010, 'The Impact of the Baby Peter Case on Applications for Care Orders (LGA Research Report)', National Foundation for Educational Research.

⁹ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children looked after in England (including adoption)', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf

¹⁰ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children looked after in England (including adoption)', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf

¹¹ Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Sparks, T., & Bos, E., 2016, 'Child welfare inequalities: New evidence, further questions', *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(3).

¹² Department for Work & Pensions, 2018, 'Households Below Average Income: An analysis of the UK income distribution: 1994/95-2016/17', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/691917/households-below-average-income-1994-1995-2016-2017.pdf

housing-cost relative child poverty is projected to rise to 36.6 per cent by 2021/22.¹³ Using a broader indicator that considers household type and the price of a 'moral minimum' basket of goods, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports a rise of approximately 6 percentage points from 2008/09 to 2014/15, with 45.0 percent of children living below a minimum acceptable living standard in 2014/15.¹⁴

Additionally, analysis of local expenditure on children's services since 2010 suggests that a modest overall increase has not kept pace with the number of children in contact with services. In order to maintain statutory services, cuts have been focused on early support services - and some local authorities argue this may be driving demand for more acute interventions later on.¹⁵

According to the National Audit Office (NAO), local children's services have seen a 3.2 per cent real terms increase in expenditure from 2010 to 2017 - despite a 28.6 per cent drop in local spending power in the same period.¹⁶ However, researchers at the Universities of Sheffield and Huddersfield found a real terms 11.3 per cent fall in median spend per child from 2010/11 to 2014/15.¹⁷

Looking at a breakdown by service type, both analyses show that cuts have been focused outside of so-called 'late intervention' spending (including looked after children). These areas have seen a sharp reduction: Webb and Bywaters report a 38.3 per cent real terms fall in non-LAC, non-safeguarding median spend per child - including early years, preventive family support, youth justice and 'other' services for young people - from 2010/11 to 2014/15. The Sutton Trust analysed available national data on children's centres and found that a third of registered Sure Start centres (up to 1,000) have closed since 2009.¹⁸ While these findings show that the proportion of children's centres in deprived areas remained unchanged during this period, Webb and Bywaters found that cuts to overall non-LAC and non-safeguarding expenditures were more pronounced in the most deprived third of LAs, with a reduction of 45.6 per cent between 2010/11 and 2014/15 compared with a 28.3 per cent fall in the least deprived third.¹⁹

The modest rise in 'late intervention' spending reported by the NAO may also be related to an increase in more costly placements. Last year saw the largest national increase in the number of

¹³ Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018, 'Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2017-18 to 2021-22', <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/comms/R136.pdf>

¹⁴ Padley, M., Hirsch, D., & Valadez, Laura, 2017, 'Households Below a Minimum Income Standard: 2008/09-2014/15.' Joseph Rowntree Foundation', <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/households-below-minimum-income-standard-200809-201415>

¹⁵ Local Government Association, August 2017, 'Children's social care at breaking point, council leaders warn', <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/childrens-social-care-breaking-point-council-leaders-warn>

¹⁶ National Audit Office, 2018, 'Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities', <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018.pdf>

¹⁷ Webb, C. J., & Bywaters, P, 2018, Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015. Local Government Studies.

¹⁸ Smith, G., Sylva, K., Smith, T., Sammons, P., & Omonigho, A., 2018, 'Stop Start: Survival, decline or closure? Children's Centres in England', The Sutton Trust, <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/StopStart-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁹ Webb, C. J., & Bywaters, P, 2018, 'Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015', Local Government Studies.

children's homes in the last five years.²⁰ In London, the number of looked after children fell slightly from 2013/14 to 2016/17, yet the number requiring a residential placement increased by 13 per cent between 2014/15 and 2016/17 and expenditure on these placements increased by 23 per cent in the same period.²¹

Funding pressures for CYP services on the whole may be reaching a particularly acute stage. The NAO reports a steady increase in the number of authorities overspending on social care since 2011/12, with a total of 80 per cent in 2016/17, and 66 per cent drawing down their reserves in the same year.²² The Local Government Information Unit's State of Local Government Finance Survey released last month found that a third of councils rated children's services as their top immediate pressure - above adult social care for the first time in at least three years – up from 7 per cent of councils in 2017.²³ Responses to a 2017 survey by London Councils found that social care overspend for children has become more significant than that for adults in many London boroughs in the last year.²⁴ According to the NAO, one in ten local authorities with social care responsibilities have the equivalent of less than three years' worth of reserves to rely on if current overspend trends continue.²⁵

Despite statutory services having been maintained during this period, the picture of service quality is bleak. At the end of 2017, Ofsted published outcomes data for all 152 local authorities: 64 per cent were rated Requires improvement or Inadequate on overall effectiveness, with 34 per cent judged to be Good and 2 per cent rated Outstanding (Figure 3).²⁶ **Over half of LAs in all regions except London received a rating of Requires Improvement or Inadequate.** The highest proportion of worst-rated LAs were in the South West, the West Midlands and the North West, with 81 per cent, 79 per cent, and 74 per cent respectively rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate. The report findings also echoed independent analysis showing that the deprivation level of local authorities is associated with their overall effectiveness rating, with the least deprived authorities more likely to be rated positively.²⁷

²⁰ Ofsted, 2017, 'Local authority and children's homes in England inspections and outcomes', <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-and-childrens-homes-in-england-inspections-and-outcomes>

²¹ London Councils, 2017, 'Children's Services Financial Pressures', <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/node/32693>

²² National Audit Office, 2018, 'Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities', <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018.pdf>

²³ Local Government Information Unit, 2018, 'State of Local Government Finance Survey', <https://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LGIU-MJ-State-of-Local-Government-Finance-Survey-2018-Full-Report.pdf>

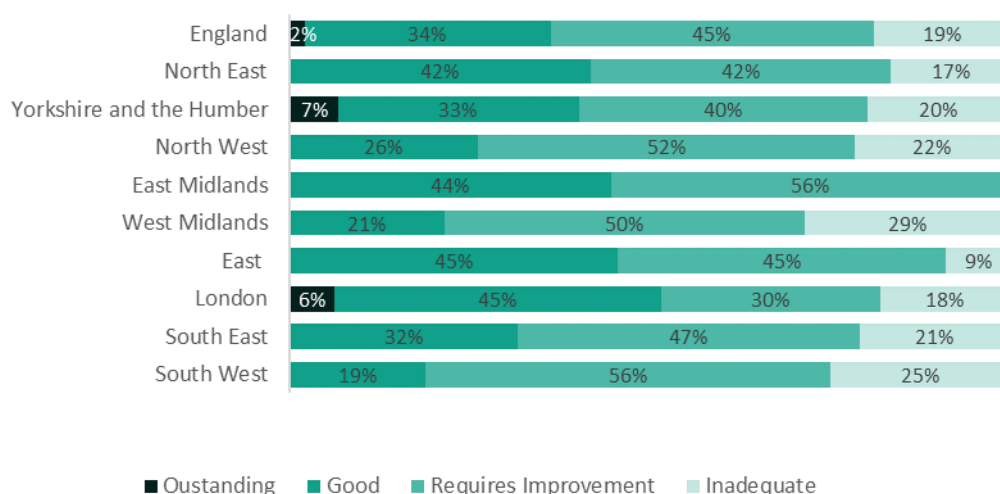
²⁴ London Councils, 2017, 'Children's Services Financial Pressures', <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/node/32693>

²⁵ National Audit Office, 2018, 'Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities', <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018.pdf>

²⁶ Ofsted, 2017, 'Local Authority children's homes in England inspections and outcomes', <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-and-childrens-homes-in-england-inspections-and-outcomes>

²⁷ Bywaters, P., Webb, C., & Sparks, T., January 2017, 'Ofsted ratings do reflect local authority deprivation and spending', Community Care, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2017/01/18/ofsted-ratings-reflect-local-authority-deprivation-spending/>

Figure 3: Ofsted inspection outcomes for 152 LA children's social services by region as at October 2017



Source: Ofsted, 2017

The children's social care workforce

According to the latest official figures, there are a total of 30,670 - or 28,500 full-time equivalent (FTE) – local authority employed social workers including 5,690 agency workers in England.²⁸ Approximately two thirds of agency workers are employed to cover vacancies.

Child and family social workers hold an average of 17.8 cases (Figure 4). DfE's methodology for calculating caseload has changed successively over the last two years making it difficult to compare figures over time – in 2016 the number of cases per case holder was 16.1. Social workers in London have a slightly lower than average caseload, managed by a heavy reliance on agency workers to fill vacancies compared with other regions (the FTE agency worker rate is 26.5 compared to 15.8 in England overall). London's workforce is also characterised by a comparatively high turnover rate. Meanwhile in the Midlands and parts of the North, caseloads are higher than average, but vacancy rates are lower as is the proportion of agency workers.

The regions with the highest average caseloads (the North West at 19.4 and the West Midlands at 18.7) also have among the highest proportion of local children's services with Ofsted ratings of Requires Improvement or Inadequate (74 and 79 per cent respectively). Meanwhile, London has among the best rated children's services (51 per cent Good or Outstanding), and a comparatively low average caseload (16.1), despite a high vacancy (25.7) and turnover rate (17.8).

²⁸ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children's social work workforce 2017', <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-work-workforce-2017>

Figure 4: Children’s social care workforce statistics by region, 2017 (FTE equivalent)

	Starters	Leavers	Average caseload	Vacancy rate	Agency worker rate	Turnover rate
England	5,570	3,880	17.8	17.0	15.8	13.6
North East	390	230	18.3	11.5	12.6	13.2
North West	770	520	19.4	13.4	12.2	12.5
Yorkshire and the Humber	600	400	18.1	7.8	7.8	11.7
East Midlands	460	270	18.3	21.3	17.7	13.3
West Midlands	570	430	18.7	19.2	16.7	14.1
East	400	310	16.1	16.7	11.9	11.3
Inner London	450	350	16.0	23.7	27.7	15.9
Outer London	670	500	16.2	27.3	25.4	19.4
South East	820	510	18.2	15.2	14.8	12.5
South West	440	370	17.5	15.8	13.3	14.5

Source: Department for Education, 2018

Looking at LA-employed social workers, the total number of starters in 2017 exceeded leavers by 25 per cent (6,020 versus 4,500, equivalent to FTE 5,570 versus 3,880) – this represents a rise in the number of starters against leavers compared to the last four years (Figure 5). In some cases, this may be due to local incentive schemes, including ‘golden hello’ payments for new starters and ‘golden handcuff’ payments for those who stay in the role for a defined period.^{29,30,31}

Based on responses to FOI requests sent out by Community Care in 2015, recruitment and/or retention payments are most common in London (70 per cent of councils), the South East (77 per cent) and the South West (70 per cent).³² The latter two regions had comparatively low vacancy rates in 2017, at 15.2 and 15.8 respectively, yet London had the highest in the country at 25.7. Based on the latest workforce data, recently introduced local schemes may have had an impact in some areas: for example, Buckinghamshire, which introduced a recruitment bonus payment in 2016, and Derby, which offers new starters £10,000 toward a mortgage since 2016, doubled their numbers of FTE starters between 2016 and 2017 (from 44 to 83, and 18 to 50 respectively), while in West Berkshire, a scheme introduced in 2015 to pay starters £15,000 after three years did not appear to affect recruitment numbers between 2015 and 2017, although the agency worker rate dropped from 26.0 to 19.0.³³ Additionally, the introduction of an agency worker pay cap and tax reforms in 2016 may have made permanent employment more appealing to social workers – although official figures show the agency worker rate has remained broadly constant.³⁴

²⁹ Children and Young People Now, February 2015, ‘Buckinghamshire offers social workers £5,000 ‘golden hello’, <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1149663/buckinghamshire-offers-social-workers-gbp5-000-golden-hello>

³⁰ LocalGov, April 2016, ‘Local authority offers £10,000 incentive to social workers’, <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Local-authority-offers-%C2%A310000-incentive-to-social-workers/40775>

³¹ Community Care, November 2015, ‘Council offers record £15,000 bonus to children’s social workers’, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/11/11/council-offers-record-15k-bonus-childrens-social-workers/>

³² Community Care, June 2016, ‘Social work’s great employment challenge’, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/06/28/social-works-great-employment-challenge/>

³³ Department for Education, ‘Statistics: children’s social work workforce’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childrens-social-care-workforce>

³⁴ Community Care, 2018, ‘Revealed: social worker pay differences for agency, permanent and adults’ and children’s staff’, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/28/revealed-social-worker-pay-differences-agency-permanent-adults-childrens-staff/>

Figure 5: Children’s social care workforce statistics by year, 2013/2017 (FTE equivalent)³⁵

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Starters	3280	4420	4400	4720	5570
Leavers	3360	4060	4200	4190	3880
Vacancy rate	14.0	15.0	17.0	16.7	17.0
Turnover rate	15.0	17.0	16.0	15.1	13.6
Agency worker rate	12.0	15.0	16.0	16.1	15.8

Source: Department for Education, 2014-2018

While recruitment appears to have seen a boost in 2017 compared to previous years, staff retention remains a problem. The full-time equivalent turnover rate – or number of leavers divided by the total number of social workers - was 13.6 per cent. This compares unfavourably with retention in schools, where the FTE teacher turnover rate was 9.3 per cent in 2016 (the latest year for which figures have been released).³⁶ Among FTE children’s social care workforce leavers in 2017, 63 per cent had worked for the council for less than five years (33 per cent for less than two years), and 47 per cent were younger than 40 – up from 2016, when 60 per cent of leavers had worked less than five years (32 per cent less than two) and 43 per cent were younger than 40.³⁷ As DfE has only published these breakdowns for the last two years, it is unclear if this is part of a trend.

There are concerning implications of funding and workforce pressures for the well-being of vulnerable children. Findings from a 2017 survey of 1,600 children’s social workers suggest that many children who would have previously met criteria for intervention no longer qualify: 70 per cent of respondents reported thresholds for qualifying as ‘in need’ have risen over the previous three years, 50 per cent that thresholds for Child Protection Plans had risen, and 54 per cent that thresholds for care order applications had risen.³⁸

The workforce figures suggest that ‘burn-out’ is a significant problem for children’s social workers. The heavy reliance of some councils on agency workers could be problematic given the necessity of a stable permanent workforce for building relationships with vulnerable children and families. Social worker change has been linked to a loss of trust among children in need.³⁹ In local authorities with more than 10 CIN per social worker, the probability of children being re-referred has been shown to

³⁵ DfE emphasises that changes from year to year may simply indicate improvements in data quality.

³⁶ Department for Education, 2017, ‘School workforce in England: November 2016’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2016>

³⁷ Department for Education, 2018, ‘Children’s social work workforce 2017’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-work-workforce-2017>

³⁸ National Children’s Bureau, September 2017, ‘Children must fall deeper into crisis before getting help, suggests survey of social workers’, <https://www.ncb.org.uk/news-opinion/news-highlights/failure-invest-childrens-social-care-services-ignores-rising-demand-0>

³⁹ Selwyn, J., Magnus, L & Stuitzand, B., 2018, ‘Our lives, our care: Looked after children’s views on their well-being’, University of Bristol and Coram Voice, <http://www.coramvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/1053-CV-Our-Lives-Our-Care-report5.pdf>

rise sharply.⁴⁰ Over half of children referred to children's social care in 2010/11 had been re-referred by 2015/16.⁴¹

There are also implications for looked after children's experiences of care. A fifth of all LAC, and half of those placed in children's homes, secure units or other semi-independent living accommodation (up from 40 per cent in 2015/16), were placed more than 20 miles from their home in 2017.⁴² Out-of-borough placements have been linked to an increased risk of harm and going missing from care.⁴³ Last year, the Children's Commissioner released their first 'stability index' report examining instability in the lives of children in care: the authors report that 71 per cent of all LAC in 2016 experienced a change in their placement, social worker or school over a 12-month period, and a third of LAC in school had experienced 'high instability' in the last year – defined as multiple placement moves, multiple social worker changes and/or a mid-year school move.⁴⁴

Despite this, many looked after children report positive experiences in care: 81 percent responding to a 2015 Children's Commissioner survey felt they were living in the right place for them.⁴⁵ However, only 46 per cent often felt positive about the future, just over half did not understand why they had come into care - which translates to more than 35,000 children in the care system - and a tenth felt that their placement was not right for them, citing lack of support and positive relationships with carers as key reasons. **Overall, children who have experienced care emphasise the importance of a supportive and trusting relationship with an adult and stability for their wellbeing – and the pressures outlined above are likely to undermine these protective factors.**

Educational and long-term outcomes for children in contact with social services

Educational outcomes for children in need are substantially poorer than for other pupils, albeit with variation between children with different social care classifications. Research shows that looked after children, particularly those who are in care for longer periods, fare better than non-looked-after CIN on some indicators. An examination of the CIN attainment gap over time would require more complex statistical analysis and is beyond the scope of this evidence review, but is an important question for future research.

⁴⁰Troncoso, Patricia, 2017, 'Analysing repeated referrals to children's services in England', Department for Education, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/630811/Analysis_of_repeated_referrals_to_childrens_services_in_England.pdf

⁴¹Department for Education, 2018, 'Children in Need of Help and Protection', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690999/Children_in_Need_of_help_and_protection_Data_and_analysis.pdf

⁴² Department for Education, 'Statistics: Looked after Children', <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children>

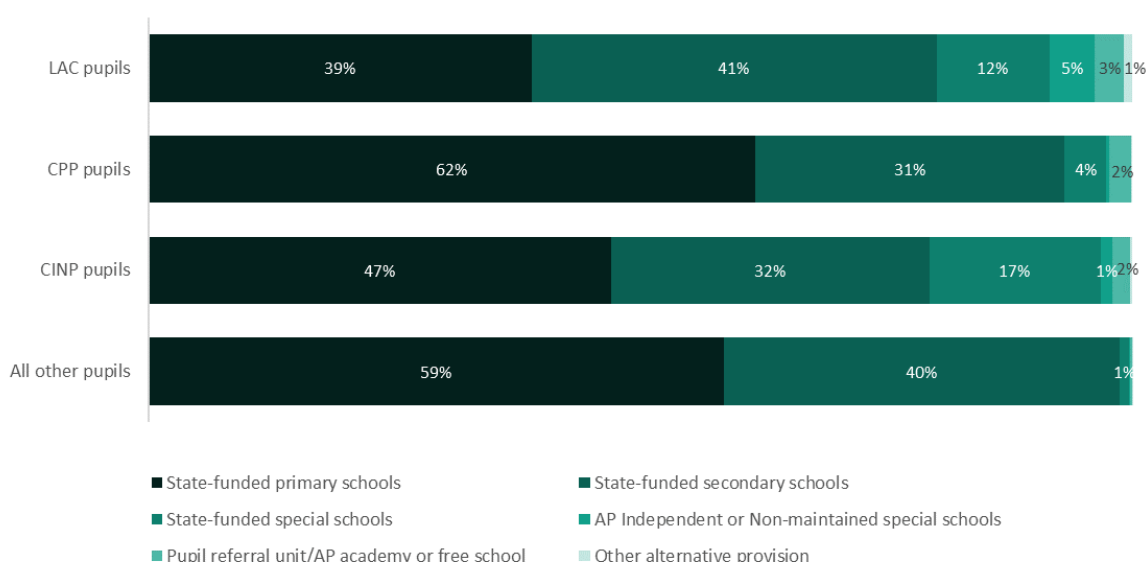
⁴³ Children's Society, 2012, 'Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care', https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint_appg_inquiry_-_report...pdf

⁴⁴ Children's Commissioner, 2017, 'Stability Index: Overview and initial findings', <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Childrens-Commissioners-Stability-Index-2017-Overview-Document-1.3.pdf>

⁴⁵ Children's Commissioner, 2015, 'State of the Nation: Children in care', <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/state-of-the-nation-children-in-care/>

Official statistics show a disproportionately higher number of children in need being educated in the least regulated settings (Figure 6).⁴⁶ Researchers at Oxford and Bristol Universities found that close to 40 per cent of looked after children attend non-mainstream schools at Key Stage 4 – and holding other factors constant their attainment is significantly lower than the 60 per cent in mainstream provision.⁴⁷

Figure 6: Type of provision by social care classification of pupils, 2015/16



Source: Department for Education, 2018

Children in need in mainstream provision are less likely to attend schools rated Outstanding and more likely to attend those rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate.⁴⁸ However, it is unclear whether this correlation is entirely due to the oversubscription of schools judged to be Good or Outstanding, resulting in CIN missing out on places in popular schools; it is possible that the causality runs in both directions, and that schools with higher proportions of CIN face an uphill struggle to be rated Good. Such an effect has been documented for schools with high deprivation levels, which may in turn be related to higher incidence of child protection concerns.⁴⁹

Almost half (48 per cent) of school-age children in need are identified as having SEND, compared to 14 per cent of other pupils.⁵⁰ At every stage of assessment, all groups of CIN perform poorly

⁴⁶ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children in Need of Help and Protection', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690999/Children_in_Need_of_help_and_protection_Data_and_analysis.pdf

⁴⁷ Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. & O'Higgins, A., 2015, 'The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data,' Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

⁴⁸ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children in Need of Help and Protection', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690999/Children_in_Need_of_help_and_protection_Data_and_analysis.pdf

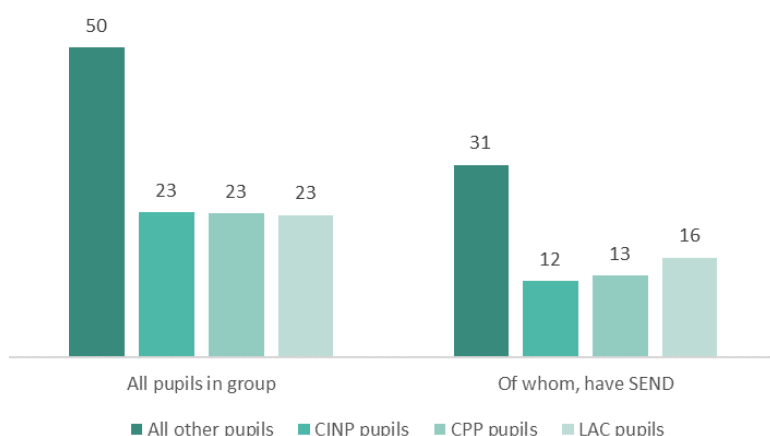
⁴⁹ Hutchinson, Jo, 2016, 'School inspection in England: is there room to improve?', Education Policy Institute, <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/school-inspection-in-england-web.pdf>

⁵⁰ Department for Education, 2018, 'Children in Need of Help and Protection', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690999/Children_in_Need_of_help_and_protection_Data_and_analysis.pdf

compared to other pupils - and these gaps widen over time.⁵¹ In the early years foundation stage, 42 per cent of children in need reach a good level of development compared to 70 per cent of other pupils. CIN with SEND are around half as likely as other pupils with SEND to reach a good level of development. At Key Stage 4 (KS4), the average Attainment 8 score of CIN is 23 compared to 50 for all other pupils. Among children in need with SEND, looked after children scored an average of 16 compared to around 12 for other CIN, and 31 for non-CIN pupils with SEND (Figure 7).

Analysis that further breaks down differences between children in need shows that at KS4, longer-stay looked after children do better than both children in need who are not in care and shorter-term looked after children (who perform the worst); time of entry into care also has an impact on attainment, with those being admitted earlier achieving consistently better outcomes compared to those entering later.⁵² These findings, along with an international body of evidence, support the explanation that care provides an environment more conducive to education than that inhabited by many other children in need – and it is plausibly the underlying exposure to risk during childhood, and not the care itself, that drives poor outcomes.⁵³

Figure 7: Average Attainment 8 Score for pupils with and without SEND at KS4, 2015/16



Source: Department for Education, 2018

Children in need experience more educational instability, including more moves between schools and a much higher rate of fixed-period and permanent exclusions (Figures 8 and 9), than other pupils – exclusion rates have remained steadily high for CIN since 2013, following a decrease from 2010 to

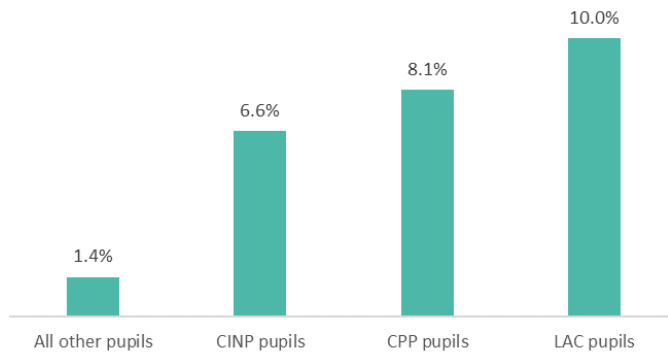
⁵¹ Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. & O’Higgins, A., 2015, ‘The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data’, Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

⁵² Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. & O’Higgins, A., 2015, ‘The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data’, Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

⁵³ O’Higgins, A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N., 2015, ‘What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review’, Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

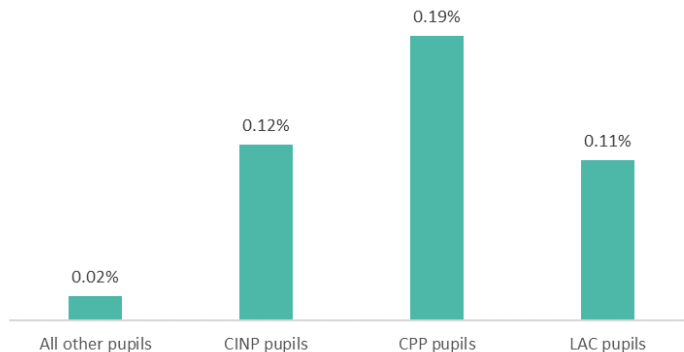
2013.⁵⁴ Looked after children experience fewer permanent exclusions than other CIN, while there is evidence of a stronger association between school moves and worse GCSE results for CIN not looked after and LAC in short-term care, compared with LAC in long-term care.⁵⁵

Figure 8: Pupils with at least one fixed term exclusion, 2014/15



Source: Department for Education, 2018

Figure 9: Pupils with a permanent exclusion, 2014/15



Source: Department for Education, 2018

Beyond educational outcomes, evidence shows that children in contact with social services experience worse outcomes through life. Longitudinal findings from the UK birth cohort studies show that being looked after in childhood is associated with poorer economic outcomes in

⁵⁴Department for Education, 2017, 'Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31 March 2016', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602087/SFR12_2017_Text.pdf

⁵⁵ Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. & O'Higgins, A., 2015, 'The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data', Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

adulthood, as well as smoking, depressive symptoms, low social support, anxiety in women, and addiction and criminal convictions in men.^{56,57} There are a dearth of studies that follow up non-LAC children in need, yet we know that they have, by definition, lived through adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as physical or emotional abuse, family mental illness or domestic violence. ACEs are strongly associated with poorer health, social and economic outcomes over the life course.⁵⁸ Most children in need experience a range of adversities – and there is good evidence of the cumulative effect of exposure to multiple ACEs on short- and long-term wellbeing.⁵⁹

Conclusions and outlook

Existing evidence paints a picture of instability for the provision of support to vulnerable children. Late intervention services have weathered funding cuts so far yet early intervention services have not, despite a solid evidence base for the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention in terms of improved outcomes and cost benefit.^{60,61} The outlook for quality of provision – which is currently very poor - is concerning given the cumulative impact of years of local overspend and insecurity in the workforce. Inequalities in short- and long-term outcomes for children in contact with social services are stark – this is especially worrisome given that the number of children at the highest risk of harm appears to be on the rise, and we simply do not have data on vulnerable children not in contact with services and therefore at the highest risk of poor outcomes.

There is a strong relationship between deprivation and contact with social services, as well as with the areas of need identified in CIN assessments, including family mental illness – and the IFS predicts child poverty is on the rise.⁶² Additionally, research shows that the most deprived areas have faced the greatest fall in early intervention funding since 2010/11 and area deprivation is linked to Ofsted effectiveness rating.

If vulnerability among children in England is to be tackled, and if those in need are to be effectively supported, better data is needed – on children who fall under the radar, on outcomes and experiences of identified children in need and on causal drivers of the increase in acute interventions – along with greater recognition of and response to both the social inequities linked to contact with social services and structural weaknesses in provision.

⁵⁶ Knapp, M., King, D., Healey, A., & Thomas, C., 2011, 'Economic outcomes in adulthood and their associations with antisocial conduct, attention deficit and anxiety problems in childhood,' *Journal of Mental Health Policy and Economics*, 14(3).

⁵⁷ Teyhan, A., Wijedasa, D., & Macleod, J., 2018, 'Adult psychosocial outcomes of men and women who were looked-after or adopted as children: prospective observational study', *BMJ open*, 8(2).

⁵⁸ Institute of Health Equity, 2015, 'The impact of adverse childhood experiences in the home on children and young people', <http://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/the-impact-of-adverse-experiences-in-the-home-on-children-and-young-people/impact-of-adverse-experiences-in-the-home.pdf>

⁵⁹ Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., Jones, L. & Dunne, M. P., 2017, 'The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis,' *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8).

⁶⁰ Messenger, C. & Molloy, D., 2014, 'Getting it right for families: A review of integrated systems and promising practice in the early years', Early Intervention Foundation, <http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/GETTING-IT-RIGHT-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

⁶¹ Chowdry, H., & Fitzsimons, P., 2016, 'The cost of late intervention: EIF analysis.' Early Intervention Foundation, <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/the-cost-of-late-intervention-eif-analysis-2016/>

⁶² Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018, 'Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2017-18 to 2021-22', <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/comms/R136.pdf>