

Trends in Care:
**Exploring reasons for the increase in children
looked after by local authorities**

**A study commissioned by the Department of Health for
the Children's Budget Pressures Group**

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This independent study was commissioned by the Children's Budget Pressures Group, consisting of representatives of the Department of Health, the Association of Directors of Social Services and the Local Government Association to provide further information on reasons for the increase in the numbers of children being looked after by local authorities. Between 1986 and 1994, numbers of looked after children were consistently falling, but since 1995 there has been an increase each year, and an even bigger increase in the number of days care provided annually to such children. The cost to local authorities of looking after children is considerable. According to figures from the Children in Need Census undertaken in February 2000, the average spend on a looked after child was £435 per week, compared to £90 for each child supported at home or independently (Department of Health 2000a). An increase in the number of children in the looked after system is therefore likely to be a significant factor contributing to pressures on children's services budgets.

Analyses conducted by the Department of Health on statistics provided annually by local authorities (Cornish 2001) show that the increased volume of care provided since the mid-1990s (measured in number of days) reflects a combination of trends:

- fewer children entering care
- children staying longer in care
- an increase in children placed under care orders rather than voluntary agreements
- more younger children entering care

Although the statistical picture is fairly clear, there is little information about why this is happening. Hypotheses which could explain the figures include:

- a) Children are staying in care longer, and coming in younger, perhaps because of increasing problems with parental drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence and parents' mental health problems.
- b) Staffing issues (vacancies, heavy workloads, insufficient training) may mean that children are not being discharged from care when they could be. There may be insufficient staff resources for effective planning and review, or for rehabilitative work to restore children to their families.
- c) Assessment procedures could have become more efficient, so that families are being offered support services where it will work, hence fewer children are coming into care. Those children who do enter care would then be those where there is no alternative, hence they stay longer.
- d) Local authorities could be increasingly taking a 'low threshold' line and offering care because of pressure from other agencies in child protection conferences, even though social services would prefer to support the child at home.

e) Local factors in some authorities, such as rising numbers of unaccompanied child asylum seekers, could be contributing to the increased volume of care (Ayotte and Williams, 2001).

The study described in this report aimed to systematically explore possible reasons for the increase since 1995/6 in the volume of care provided to children looked after, through secondary analysis of national statistics followed by fieldwork in a sample of twelve local authorities. Because it was not feasible within the timescale of the work to undertake any detailed analysis of case records or make first-hand observations of procedures and practice, the study also draws on findings from other sources including a number of major studies commissioned by the Department of Health under the Children Act research programme, which were carried out at various points during the early and mid-1990s (Department of Health, 2001). Other sources of information included children's services inspection reports; information from the Children in Need Census carried out in February 2000 (Department of Health, 2000a); and analyses carried out by statisticians within the Department of Health. The studies provide information on issues such as the reasons children are in need of support from social services departments, local authority policies and procedures in relation to such services, and the operation of the courts in childcare proceedings. This literature is reviewed briefly below, before describing the objectives and methods of the current study.

1.2 Reasons for children being in need

One possible reason for the increased volume of care provided by local authorities could be an increase in the prevalence of problems and circumstances that require local authorities to intervene. It is known that socio-economic factors play a part in determining children's likelihood of entering care. Research by Bebbington and Miles (1989) demonstrated that children were much more likely to be looked after if they came from a one-parent household, a poor household, lived in overcrowded accommodation or were of mixed heritage. An increase in poverty and levels of deprivation could in principle therefore contribute to an increase in the number of children looked after, although it would only be part of the story. Differing levels of need and deprivation have been shown to only account for part of the variation between authorities in the number of children looked after (Department of Health 2000b).

Another possibility is increased incidence of issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, which are affecting parents' ability to meet their children's needs. It is difficult to obtain accurate information on this, since statistics have not been routinely collected. A study by Ward and Skuse found there was wide variation in the extent to which drug misuse was identified as the main presenting problem in an analysis of the reasons children were looked after in six local authorities. These children had started their current care episode in 1997 or 1998. Overall, nearly a quarter of birth mothers were known to have drug or alcohol problems, but in one authority this accounted for forty per cent of cases and in another for none at all. The authors suggest that this is more likely to reflect differences in interpretation of need rather than real differences in the incidence of such problems (Ward and Skuse, 2000). The study also found that children in substance abusing families experienced their first episode of care or accommodation at an earlier age than the rest of the sample, suggesting that an increase in the prevalence of such problems will result in a particular increase in the numbers of young children entering care.

Assessing whether these figures represent an increase on earlier years is hampered by lack of information on a comparable sample. Two of the studies in the Department of Health's Children Act research programme did collect information on the prevalence of substance misuse. In a study of emotional abuse and neglect, one third of families (not all of whose children were looked after) had problems with the misuse of drugs or alcohol (Thoburn et al., 2000). In the second study, on making care orders work, similar problems were reported for about two fifths of the parents. (Harwin et al., forthcoming). Data for the first study related to 1995, and for the second to 1997.

The Children in Need Census in February 2000, and an earlier exercise attempting to produce a classification of children in need (Sinclair and Carr-Hill, 1997), both included substance abuse in a wider category of children needing to be accommodated because of their parent or carer's disability or illness, including addictions. This makes it difficult to disentangle the different sources of need. However, as part of the Census, one authority carried out a Social Factors Survey in respect of all cases (over 3,000) open to children's services in a typical week. This survey did ask specifically about substance abuse, and found that the information was not always known. Where information was available, alcohol abuse was reported as a factor in 21% of cases and drug abuse in 14%. A significant proportion of cases featured both drug and alcohol abuse within the same household (Cheshire County Council, 2001).

There is evidence from the statistics supplied annually to the Department of Health by local authorities of an increase in the proportion of children starting to be looked after for reasons of 'abuse and neglect', up from 20% in 1996 to 31% in 2000 (Department of Health, 2001a). Substance abuse may lie behind some of this increase, since there is also increased recognition of the extent to which drug and alcohol problems may prevent parents from meeting their children's needs (Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate 1999).

1.3 Differences in local authority policy and practice

Local policy may lead to different interpretations of the threshold of 'in need' and 'at risk of significant harm' laid down in the 1989 Children Act. For example Packman and Hall's study of two contrasting local authorities found that one operated a much higher threshold for accommodating children, backed up by clear central policies and procedures, and so had a lower rate of children looked after despite experiencing greater economic disadvantage than the other area (Packman and Hall, 1998).

Similarly a small scale study of reasons for variation between local authorities on a range of children's services indicators (Oliver et al., forthcoming) suggested that high numbers of children looked after appeared to be linked to a number of factors in the way that authorities planned and delivered their services. These included an interventionist and legal approach to working with families; a cautious organisational ethos, in which fear of scandal among members and senior officers was described as influencing decision-making in favour of accommodating children; and under-developed preventive family support services. A lack of strategic control and direction, and of effective monitoring of cases, was also cited as a contributory factor to high statistical returns on these indicators.

Although there is evidence of variation in the thresholds at which authorities are prepared to accommodate children, this does not necessarily imply that children are being looked after in some authorities when they should not be. A recent inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate of children's services in 31 councils (a one in five sample), between August

1999 and July 2000, could find ‘no evidence to suggest children were inappropriately coming into the looked after system’ (Adams, 2001 p6).

1.4 Availability of services to support children and families

The decision to look after children may be influenced by the availability of services to support children within their families and communities. It could be expected that authorities that have invested heavily in a wide range of family support services may be more able to support children within their communities and have less need to look after children away from home. Hard evidence on this subject is difficult to come by, although this was identified as a possible factor contributing to variations between authorities in numbers of children looked after (Oliver et al., forthcoming). A study carried out in the late eighties compared outcomes for families referred to social services in two local areas, and found more improvements in family problems after four months in the area with more developed family support services, as well as a lower rate of children in local authority care – although it was not clear if these were causally related (Gibbons et al., 1990).

The amount local authorities spend on services to support children in their communities is one indicator of the extent of preventive work. Using data from the 2000 Children in Need Census, statisticians at the Department of Health found little evidence of an association between the amount local authorities reported spending on delivering services to children supported in their families or independently, and the rate at which children were looked after by the local authority (DH, 2001d). However, more information on policies and resource allocation in high- and low-spending authorities would be needed to show whether or not authorities that concentrate resources on preventive work with children are likely to have a lower rate of children entering the care system.

1.5 Use of the courts

Any substantial increase in the use of court proceedings to safeguard and promote children’s welfare is likely to have an impact on the number of days care which local authorities need to provide. Whilst the number of children accommodated under Care Orders dropped in the first few years after the implementation of the Children Act, the figure rose each year from some 28,900 in 1995 to 36,400 in 2000 (Department of Health, 2001a). Not surprisingly, the volume of care provided under Care Orders has also increased, by 25% between 1996 and 2000, compared to a 2% decrease under voluntary agreements (Department of Health, 2001c). In a recent commentary in the *British Journal of Social Work*, it has been suggested that this ‘care proceedings explosion’ represents a ‘dramatic change in practice...in the way that social workers and their managers choose to respond to concerns about parenting...or a change on the part of their legal advisers’ (Beckett 2001a, p498).

As well as an increase in the proportion of children looked after under Care Orders, any increase in the length of care proceedings will add to the number of days care local authorities are required to provide. Despite the intentions of the Children Act, research suggests that the problems of delay have worsened rather than improved, partly because cases are more complex and require more evidence to be produced (Brophy et al., 1999, Hunt et al., 1999). An analysis of data collected by the Children Act Advisory Committee (Beckett, 2001b) showed that the average length of care proceedings in the Family Proceedings Court rose by 43 per cent between 1993 and the end of 1996, from 21 to 29 weeks; while the average length of proceedings in the County Court and the High Court rose by 67 per cent

and 88 per cent respectively over this period (more recent data is not available). One of the major causes of delay appears to be a lack of time in the higher courts (Hunt et al., 1999).

1.6 Use of kinship care

One way of potentially avoiding the need to accommodate children would be for the local authority to support relatives and friends to care for children who are unable to remain with their parents. Practice in this area appears very variable, including whether or not children placed with such carers are counted as looked after and the level of financial and other support provided. Extended families may be prepared to take responsibility for children provided they are supported financially to do so; others may want continuing involvement of social services while the child lives with them, in order to ensure support in dealing with the child's birth family. Ongoing research for the Department of Health at the University of Bristol (Farmer and Moyers 2001) is exploring this variability, and should provide a clearer picture.

1.7 Objectives of the study

Against the backcloth of the issues described above, the study had the following objectives:

- To assess how far the underlying trends in services provided to children looked after are typical of local authorities in England
- Using published statistics for children looked after in the year to 31 March 2000 and other sources of published data, to identify factors associated with providing a high volume of care
- To identify a sample of twelve local authorities to visit: eight with a particularly large rate of increase in the amount of care provided between 1996 and 2000, and four who had experienced a change in the opposite direction (see 2.2, 'selection of authorities to visit')
- Through fieldwork in each of these 12 authorities, to explore reasons for changes in the volume of care provided.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

The study had two main components: secondary analysis of national statistics on changes in the number of days care provided by each local authority in England between 1996 and 2000, followed by fieldwork in a sample of twelve local authorities to explore possible reasons for these changes in more depth.

2.1 Secondary analysis

Each year, the Department of Health collects statistics from local authorities in England on children looked after. The form CLA 100 collects summary data on all children looked after by the authority for the calendar year ending 31 March. The form SSSA 903 records the complete care history of a sample of children who are looked after by the local authority: by selecting those looked-after children whose day of birth is divisible by 3, approximately one third of the total population of looked-after children is selected. This form also covers activity up to the 31 March. Both forms, and guidance in their completion, are available from the Department of Health web site: <http://www.doh.gov.uk/stats/forms.htm>

Results from these two forms are published annually in the volume *Children Looked After by Local Authorities*. Most data are given at local authority level, although some figures are given only as national totals. Additionally, some figures are available in the Department of Health *Key Indicators Graphical System*, a CD-ROM database made available to local authorities. This database also includes a large number of other data, including demographic statistics and performance indicators.

A new data collection is the *Children in Need Census*. This annual survey was first conducted in February 2000. It records the activity and expenditure reported by Social Services in respect of provision for all children in need during a “typical” week in February. The survey is undertaken under the Quality Protects initiative. It is the first comprehensive national survey covering all children in need: that is, children who are known to their Local Authority Social Services as requiring the provision of services. Results from the first survey are available from the Department of Health web site: <http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/cinresults.htm> and <http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/cinlatables.htm>

Tables from the CLA 100 forms were the main source of data analysed here, although the other sources were also used. In addition, the Department of Health provided special tables from unpublished data, for which we are grateful.

The main aim of the secondary analysis was to account statistically for the variations between local authorities in one particular measure: the change in the volume of care (expressed as the total number of looked after days in a year) between 1996 and 2000. As has already been noted, this has been increasing over the period. However, local authorities have not been increasing uniformly - and some have even had decreases. The statistical analysis related changes in the number of days to aspects of the local authority practice in 2000 to see if differences in behaviour between authorities was related to different rates of change in the volume of care. More details of the methodology are given in chapter 3.

2.2 Selection of authorities to visit

For purposes of selection, local authorities were grouped in four types (metropolitan, county, unitary, London) and ranked within each group according to the rate of increase in the volume of care provided between 1996 and 2000. Three authorities were selected from each group in consultation with members of ADSS and the LGA, one in each of the following categories:

- Large increase 1996-2000 in rate of children looked after; high starting point
- Large increase 1996-2000 in rate of children looked after; low starting point
- Decrease (or much smaller increase) 1996-2000 in rate of children looked after

All of the authorities approached to participate in the study agreed, and were co-operative in arranging and facilitating interviews, and supplying relevant documentation.

2.3 Fieldwork in selected local authorities

The secondary analysis provided the basis for the second stage of the study involving a 1-2 day visit to each of twelve local authorities, selected as above, to investigate possible reasons for the changing rate of children looked after. Information was collected from a variety of sources.

Interviews with key officers

An initial approach to the Director of Social Services identified a key contact in each selected authority who facilitated the visit and arranged interviews with relevant officers. These included Assistant Directors of the Children and Families Service, senior managers with responsibility for children looked after and family support services, research/information or performance review officers, plus others identified in the initial contact as appropriate. Between one and five people were interviewed in each authority.

A list of the topics to be covered in the interviews was sent in advance of the visit (appendix 1), and also a page of information extracted from the secondary analysis which showed the authority's position on a range of indicators relevant to numbers of children looked after (an example is given in appendix 2). Interviews focused on the officers' understanding of reasons for change, backed up wherever possible by 'hard' evidence from internal monitoring and management systems. The interviews covered the following broad areas:

- Changes in level and type of needs
- Changes in assessment procedures
- Changes in legal proceedings
- Service restructuring
- Young offenders
- Placement policy and practice
- Adoption
- Use of independent sector provision
- Reunification policy
- Availability of family support
- Changes in recording practices
- Interagency relationships
- Workforce/skills issues

Analysis of documentation

Information relevant to the above topics was also extracted from a range of documentation collected from the local authorities visited, including policy documents, discussion papers, assessment procedures, and any local analyses of trends in children looked after statistics which the authority had recently undertaken.

Social worker questionnaire

A short (one page) self-completion form was drawn up, to elicit the views of social workers on possible reasons for the increase/decrease in volume of children looked after, and any evidence they could put forward to support this view. This was provided to the key contact officer in the majority of the twelve authorities, requesting that it be circulated to all social workers in relevant teams. Replies were returned, either directly by social workers (by post or email), or pre-collated by a co-ordinating officer. The authorities that did not circulate the questionnaire had either conducted a similar enquiry themselves in the previous year and were able to supply information from this, had particular reasons for not wanting to add to social workers' workload at the time our study was conducted, or were uncertain about the accuracy of their statistics. A total of 27 responses were received from 7 authorities, some completed by individual social workers and some at team meetings (and hence representing a collective view). In a further authority, social workers had already been consulted on this topic in recent independent research, and these views have been included in our analysis. Chapter 4 outlines how social worker views were analysed and incorporated in our findings.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS FROM THE SECONDARY ANALYSIS

National trends

It has already been noted that the total number of looked after days rose between 1996 and 2000. This is shown in Table 3.1. The total number of days children were looked after in England rose from 18,200 in 1996 to in 20,800 in 2000, an increase of 14 percent. Within the total days looked after, a majority are days in children's homes or in foster care. These are also the most expensive type of accommodation, and the placements we focus on in this report. The number of days in these two forms of care rose slightly less than in all types of placement, from 14,250 to 15,860, which represents a rise of 11 percent.

Table 3.1 also shows the change in the numbers of children being looked after on 31 March, when the statistics are collected. This rose over the period from 50,600 to 58,100, a rise of 15 percent. The number of children starting to be looked after fell from 32,300 to 27,600, a decrease of 15 percent. It seems paradoxical that the number of children being looked after was rising when the number starting to be looked after was falling. However, this is easily explained by looking at the numbers of children who ceased to be looked after during the year: this fell from 32,600 to 25,600, a fall of 21 percent. So, the number of children leaving care or accommodation was slowing down over the period at a faster rate than the number starting to be looked after, with the consequence that the number being looked after showed an increase.

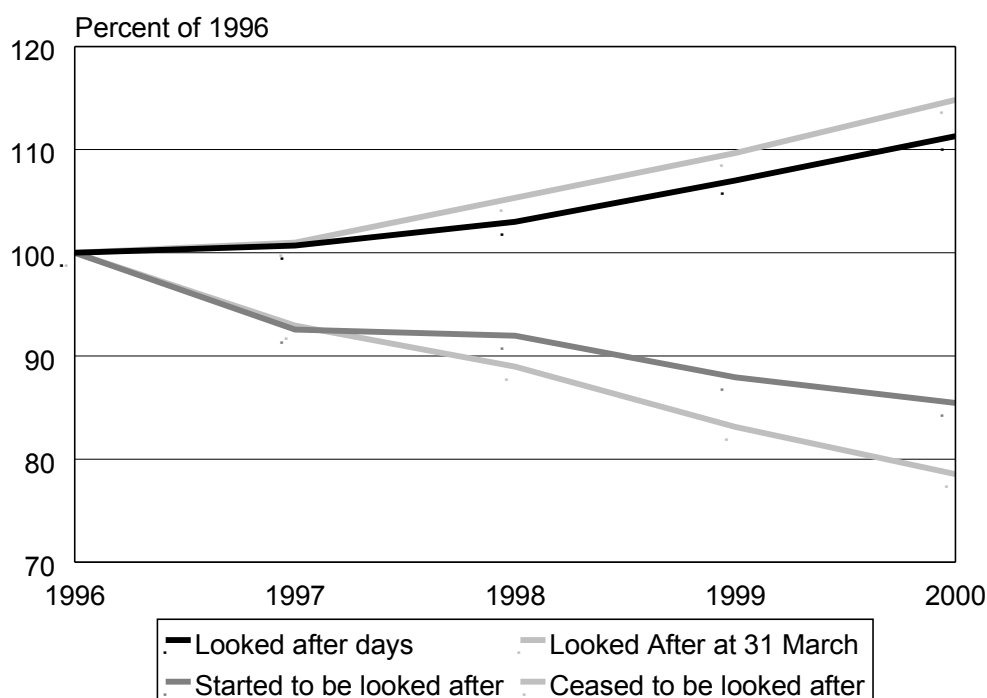
Table 3.1 Children Looked After trends for year ending 31 March

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Days Children Looked After during year	18,200	18,400	19,000	19,800	20,800
Days CLA in Children's Homes and Foster Care	14,250	14,350	14,680	15,250	15,860
All children looked after at 31st March	50,600	51,100	53,300	55,500	58,100
Children who started to be looked after	32,300	29,900	29,700	28,400	27,600
Children who ceased to be looked after	32,600	30,300	29,000	27,100	25,600
Days per child (excl short term)	207	210	214	218	225
Care Orders (full and interim)	29,000	30,100	32,100	34,400	36,400
Voluntary orders (Section 20)	19,900	19,200	19,100	18,800	19,300

Source: Children Looked After Statistics, 1996-2000.

These trends are shown in Figure 3.1. Taking 1996 as a baseline of 100 percent for each measure, the differences in the rates since 1996 are very clear.

Figure 3.1 Changes from 1996



Not only did the number of children looked after increase, the average number of days within the year that children were looked after also increased (excluding children looked after on a series of agreed short term placements), from 207 days to 225 days, an increase of 9 percent. So, on average, children were spending more of the year being looked after: an average of over seven months. However, this figure does not represent the length of time children are being looked after, as this measure of days is just the days within the current year. A better measure is the total length of time children have been looked after when they cease to be looked after. This increased from an average of 532 days in 1996 to 617 days in 2000, an increase of 16 percent. However, the total length of time children are looked after depends very strongly on their legal status: children on full care orders stay looked after for much longer than children looked after under a voluntary agreement (under Section 20 of the Children Act) or under other arrangements. This is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Duration looked after by legal status at ceasing to be looked after (days)

	1996		2000	
	Duration (days)	Number of children ceasing to be looked after	Duration (days)	Number of children ceasing to be looked after
Full care order	2,350	4,350	2,211	3,973
Interim care order	276	1,451	321	1,823
Voluntary agreement	242	23,868	307	16,804
Other	319	2,932	419	3,011
All children	532	32,601	617	25,611

Source: special table from Department of Health

Clearly, the duration of being looked after for children on a full care order when they cease to be looked after is far greater than for other legal statuses: in 2000 it was 2,211 days, which is just over six years. That constitutes a reduction from 2,350 days in 1996, a drop of six percent. The relative numbers of children looked after under care orders and under other legal statuses is bound to affect the number of days looked after. The legal status of children looked after on 31 March was shown earlier in Table 3.1. (Interim and full care orders have been combined.) Whilst the number of children on care orders has risen from 29,000 in 1996 to 36,400 in 2000, an increase of 26 percent, the number of children looked after under voluntary agreements has fallen slightly, from 19,900 to 19,300, a decrease of three percent.

Variations between local authorities

Having given the national context, the aim of the secondary analysis was to account statistically for the variations between local authorities in changes in the volume of care between 1996 and 2000. Volume of care was the key focus. It was defined as the number of days that children are looked after in total per year (ending 31 March). Not all days were included: only looked after days in children's homes or in foster care were included, and children on a series of agreed short term placements were excluded. Our measure accounts for the majority of children looked after and a large majority of looked after days.

Within the published *Children Looked After (CLA)* statistics, only a national figure is given for the number of days looked after per year. Therefore, a special table at the Local Authority level was obtained from the Department of Health¹.

In order to compare local authorities, it was necessary to take into account the number of children in the area: other things being equal, a large authority would be expected to have more days of children looked after than a small authority. The size of the authority was taken into account by expressing the number of days as a rate per 10,000 children (aged under 18) in the area. The mean number of looked after days, expressed as a rate per 10,000 children under 18 in the local population, are shown in Table 3.3. The mean increased from 137 in 1996 to 151 in 2000, an increase of 10 percent. To give some idea of the variation between authorities, the table also shows the lower and upper quartiles for this rate. Both increased over the period, but the ratio between them (1.8) stayed the same over the period, showing that the relative difference between the upper and lower quartiles remained the same.

Table 3.3 Looked after days in year ending 31 March per 10,000 children in population

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Mean	137	138	141	146	151
Standard deviation	61	60	63	63	66
Lower quartile	94	94	94	98	102
Upper quartile	169	174	179	184	181

Source: special table from Department of Health

As this study was trying to account for *change*, the difference in the rate of days between 1996 and 2000 was calculated: a positive change represents an increase and a negative

¹ All analyses for local authorities have excluded the City of London, the Isles of Scilly and Rutland, as these are very small authorities that would be likely to give unreliable estimates.

change represents a decrease in the number of looked after days per 10,000 children in the area. One third of authorities (32 percent) showed a reduction, and 10 percent reduced the rate by more than 10 days per 10,000 children. The other two-thirds (68 percent) showed an increase: more than half (56 percent) by more than 10 days per 10,000 and an eighth (12 percent) by more than 50. The mean and the quartiles for this change are shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Change in rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000

Mean	Standard Deviation	Lower quartile	Upper quartile
15	30	-7	33

Source: special table from Department of Health

To make more concrete what these changes represent, two examples are given in table 3.5, one at approximately the lower quartile of change and one at the upper quartile of change.

Table 3.5 Two examples of change in the rate of looked after days (between 1996 and 2000)

Authority	1996		2000		Change
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	
Lower quartile	63,500	100	58,900	93	7% decrease
Upper quartile	41,300	61	63,200	94	54% increase

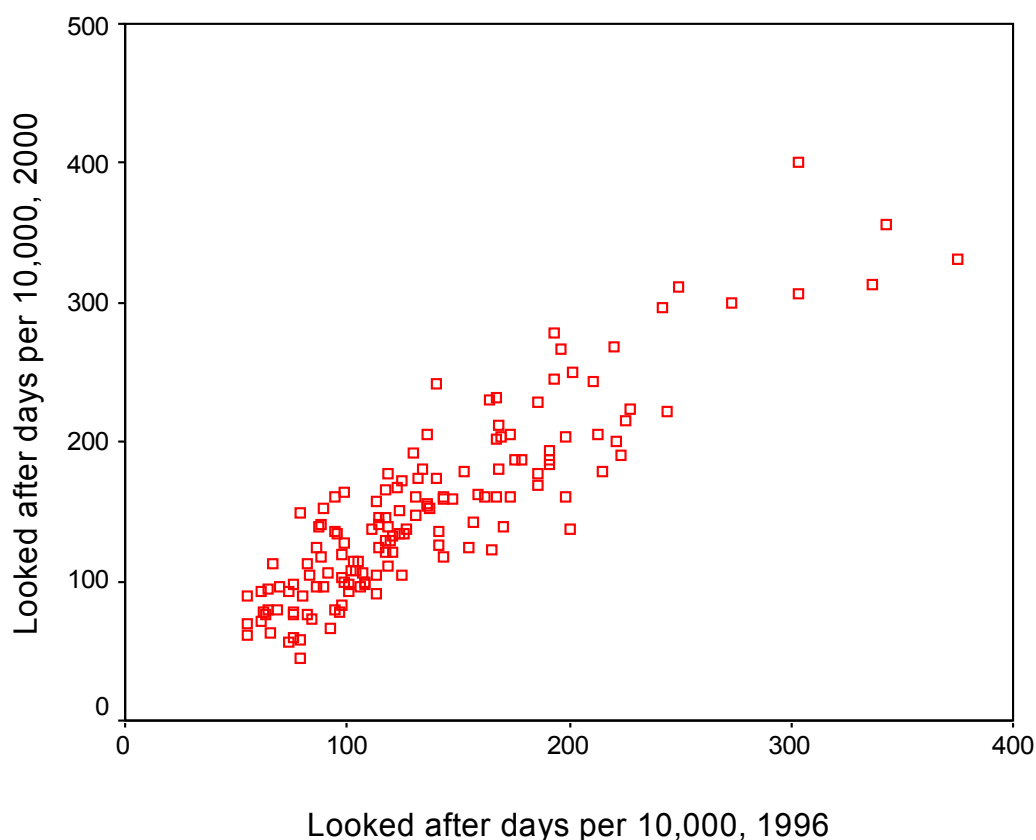
An authority at the lower quartile changed from a total of 63,500 looked after days in 1996, a rate of approximately 100 days per 10,000 children in the population, to 58,900 days in 2000, a rate of 93. This represents a decrease of about 7 percent in the rate of looked after days. Another authority, at the upper quartile, changed from a total of 41,300 looked after days, a rate of 61 days per 10,000 children, to 63,200, a rate of 94. This represents an increase of about 54 percent.

3.3 Change in volume of care (Days per 10,000, 1996-2000)

The change in the volume of care is being represented in the analysis that follows as the change in the rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000.

Change in the volume of care between local authorities has not been uniform. Some authorities started in 1996 with high numbers of days looked after and have increased their days even further, some authorities started in 1996 with low numbers of days and have seen a moderate increase in days, and yet other authorities have seen a decrease in days looked after between 1996 and 2000. This is shown graphically below in figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 Looked after days in 1996 and 2000



The scatterplot in figure 3.2 shows each local authority as a square point within the box. The horizontal axis (which ranges from 0 to 400 days) represents the number of looked after days in 1996. This is expressed as a rate per 10,000 children aged under 18 years. The vertical axis (which ranges from 0 to 500 days) represents the same data for 2000.

The majority of authorities can be seen to have between 50 and 200 looked after days, with fewer authorities having over 200 days.

The scatterplot shows a strong, positive correlation. Authorities with low rates of looked after days in 1996 still tended to have low rates in 2000, whilst those with high rates in 1996 still tended to have high rates in 2000. This is not surprising as we have only looked at the trend over a few years, which is a relatively short amount of time to see much change, especially given the long periods that some looked after children spend in care.

3.4 Accounting for local variation

This secondary analysis part of the study has tried to account for the increase in the volume of care since 1996 by examining eight key topics. These are:

- Volume (the number of children looked after in 2000)
- Flows of children looked after into and out of the care system
- Legal Status (of children entering, leaving and in care)
- Age (of children entering, leaving and in care)
- Type of placement
- Duration
- Reasons for entering care
- Staffing levels

The approach taken was to relate the change in the rate of looked after days per 10,000 children in the population (between 1996 and 2000) to aspects of the current activity (i.e. in 2000) of local authorities and other factors about the area. The aim was to see if any aspects of what was happening in and around the authorities *now* could account for variations in the key variable - the change in the rate of looked after days. This has been done through calculating correlations and drawing scatterplots.

For the scatterplots, each point represents a single authority. The vertical axis always represents the change in the total looked after days (1996-2000), expressed as a rate per 10,000 children aged under 18 years within the authority. The horizontal axis represents the single measure of current activity (the eight factors listed above) that is being related to this change in days.

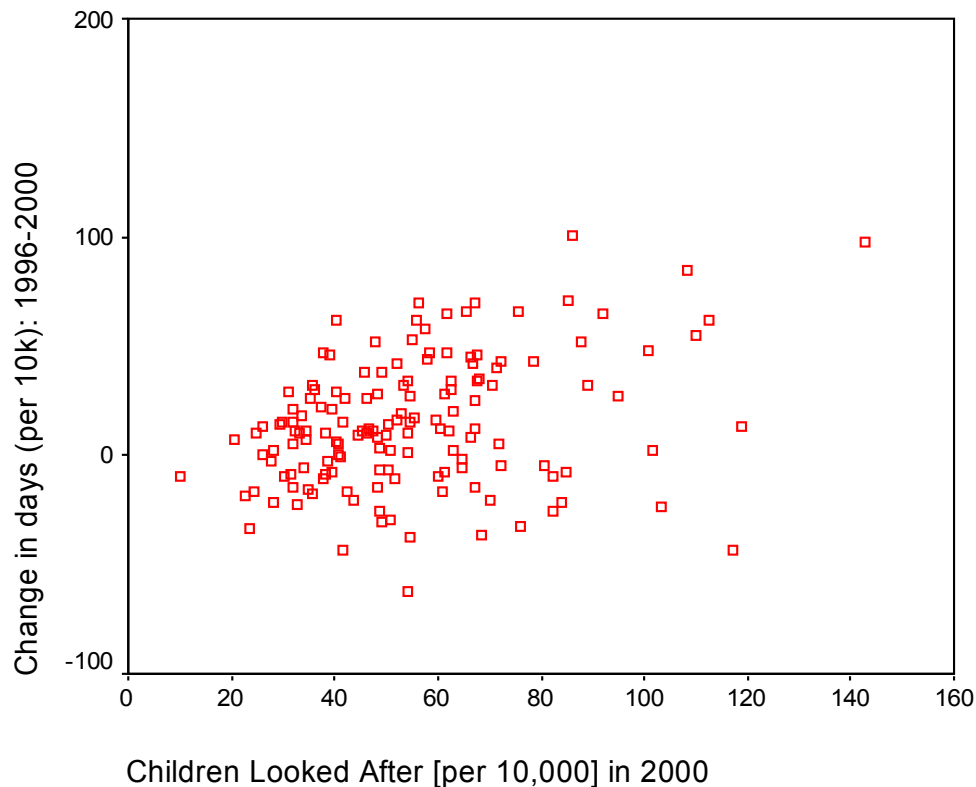
This section of the report is structured around these eight factors. For each, a research question or hypothesis is posed, such as 'does the increase in days reflect more children entering care or fewer children leaving care?'. The analysis then takes the reader through each hypothesis, and explores how far it is supported by the statistical analysis. The section ends with a consideration of other factors which might explain some of the variation between authorities in the volume of care provided, although we were unable to explore these areas statistically because of lack of suitable data.

3.4.1 Volume

Question: Are the authorities with high volumes of children looked after, also authorities that have the largest increases in days?

Volume is represented here by the number of children looked after at 31st March 2000 per 10,000 children in the area.

Figure 3.3 Change in days by volume of care



The scatterplot in figure 3.3 shows that the relationship between the change in looked after days per 10,000 and the rate of children looked after in 2000 (again per 10,000 children), is fairly weak – especially compared to the previous scatterplot. The correlation between the two measures is 0.32.

Authorities with lower rates of children looked after in 2000 tended to have either a decrease in the rate of looked after days (i.e. a value less than zero) or a small increase. However, authorities with a large volume of children looked after were more varied: some had large increases in the rate of looked after days and others had decreases.

There is a slight tendency for authorities with higher volumes of children looked after to show a slight increase in the rate of looked after days (1996-2000), but the relationship is not strong and there are many exceptions.

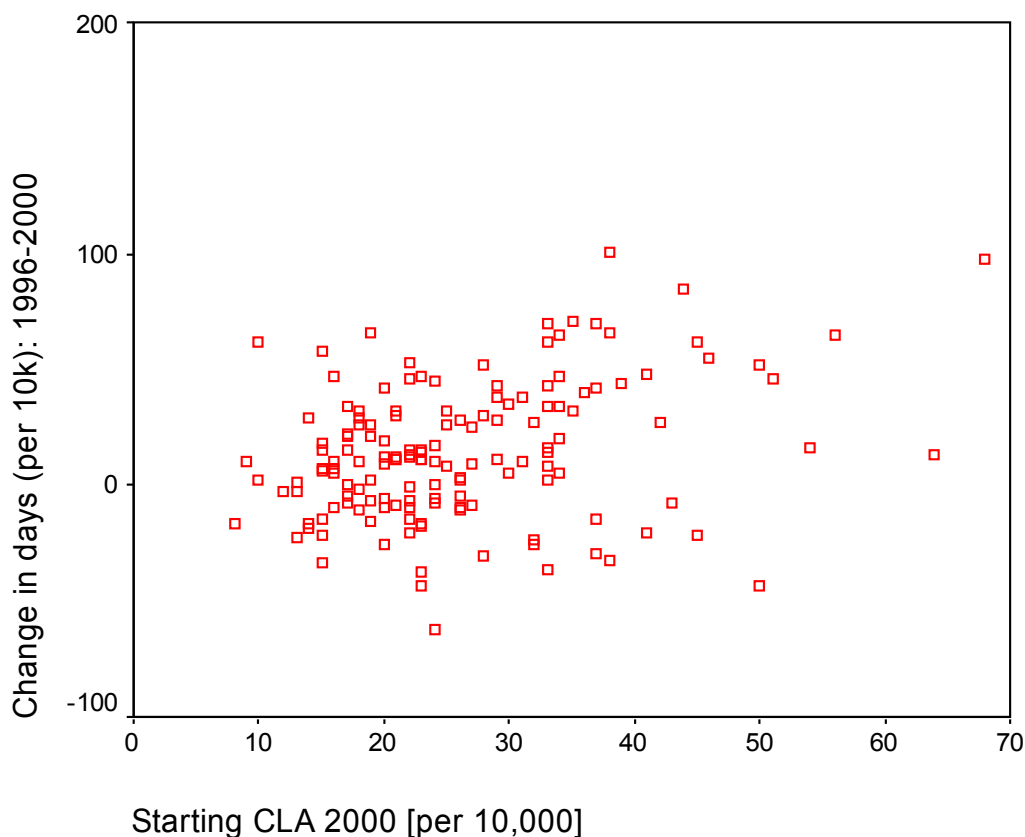
3.4.2 Flow

Question: Does the increase in days reflect more children entering care or fewer leaving care?

The numbers of children starting to be looked after per 10,000 children in the area in 2000, and the numbers of children ceasing to be looked after in 2000 (both per 10,000), contribute to the change in the rate of looked after days.

The numbers of children *starting* to be looked after per 10,000 is presented first.

Figure 3.4 Change in days by numbers starting to be looked after

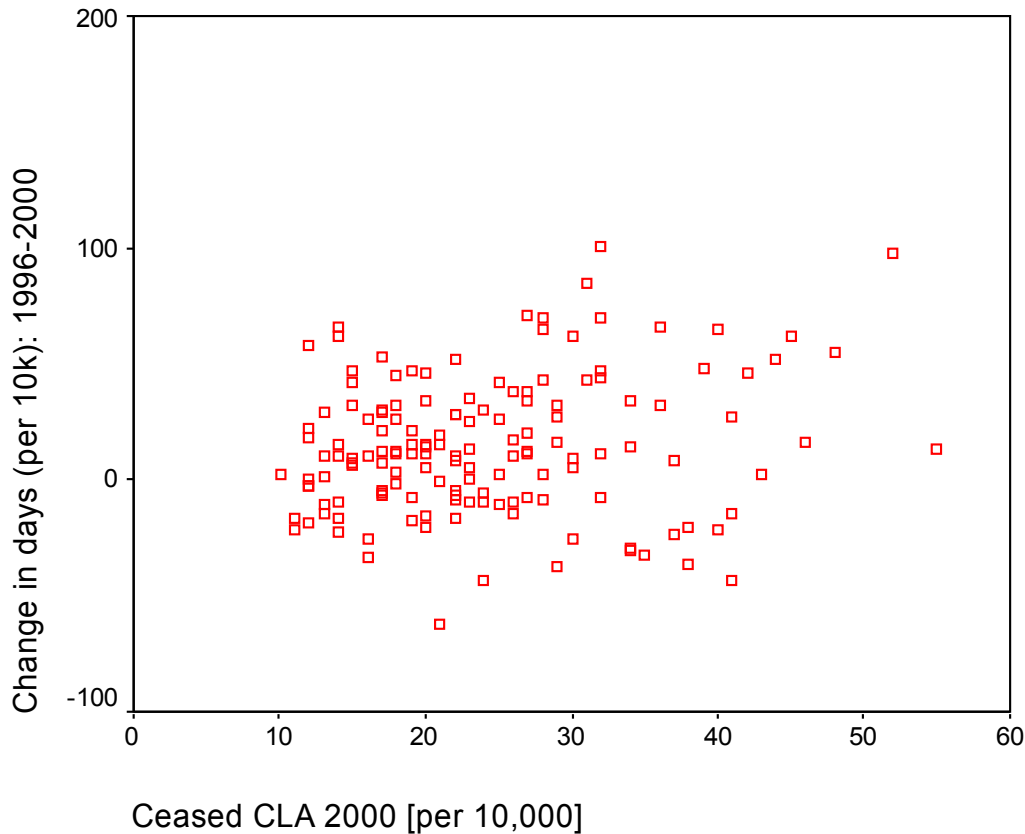


The scatterplot in figure 3.4 shows the rate of children starting to be looked after in 2000 against the change in the rate of looked after days. This is a similar relationship to the last scatterplot. The correlation between the two measures is 0.33.

The scatterplot illustrates a weak relationship between the change in the rate of looked after days and the numbers of children starting to be looked after per 10,000 in 2000. Authorities with more children starting to be looked after have a slight tendency to have larger increases in the rate of looked after days, but the relationship is not strong.

Next, the number of children *leaving* care per 10,000 children in the area was examined in relation to the change in looked after days.

Figure 3.5 Change in days by numbers ceasing to be looked after



The scatterplot in figure 3.5 shows that the rate of children ceasing to be looked after (per 10,000) in 2000, causes little, if any, change to the rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000. The correlation between the two measures was 0.19.

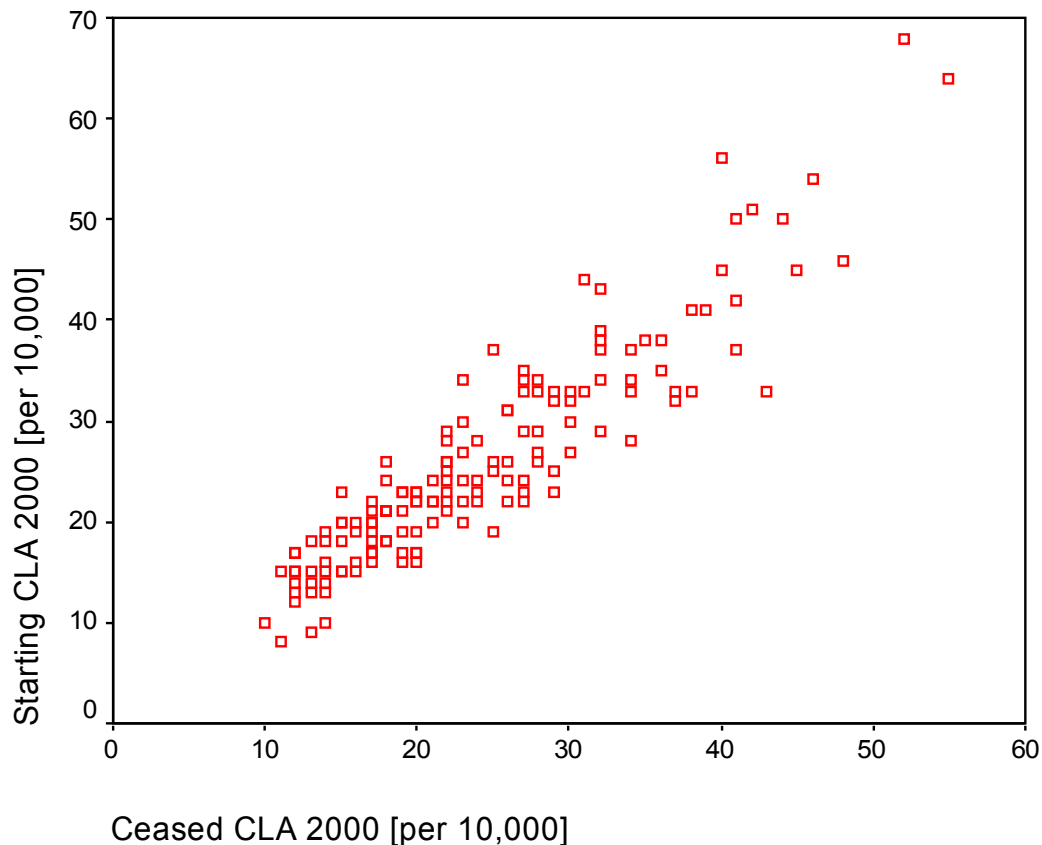
Authorities with more children ceasing to be looked after were no more likely than authorities with fewer children ceasing to be looked after to have seen a decrease in the rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000. However, as we show later, authorities *were* more likely to show a decrease if they had a high proportion of children leaving care who had been looked after for a long time.

Taking the information in figure 3.4 (the numbers of children starting to be looked after per 10,000) and the information in figure 3.5 (the numbers of children ceasing to be looked after per 10,000) together shows that there is a stronger link with the number of children starting to be looked after than with the number ceasing to be looked after. However, these two measures are strongly related to each other.

The scatterplot below (Fig 3.6) plots the numbers of children starting to be looked after (on the vertical axis), plotted against the numbers of children ceasing to be looked after (on the

horizontal axis). It demonstrates a very strong, positive relationship between the two measures ($r=0.92$). Authorities with high proportions of children starting to be looked after are also authorities with high proportions of children ceasing to be looked after. The implication of this is that some authorities have a higher level of activity concerning looked after children, with higher rates of children both starting to be looked after and ceasing to be looked after.

Figure 3.6 Numbers starting to be looked after by numbers ceasing to be looked after



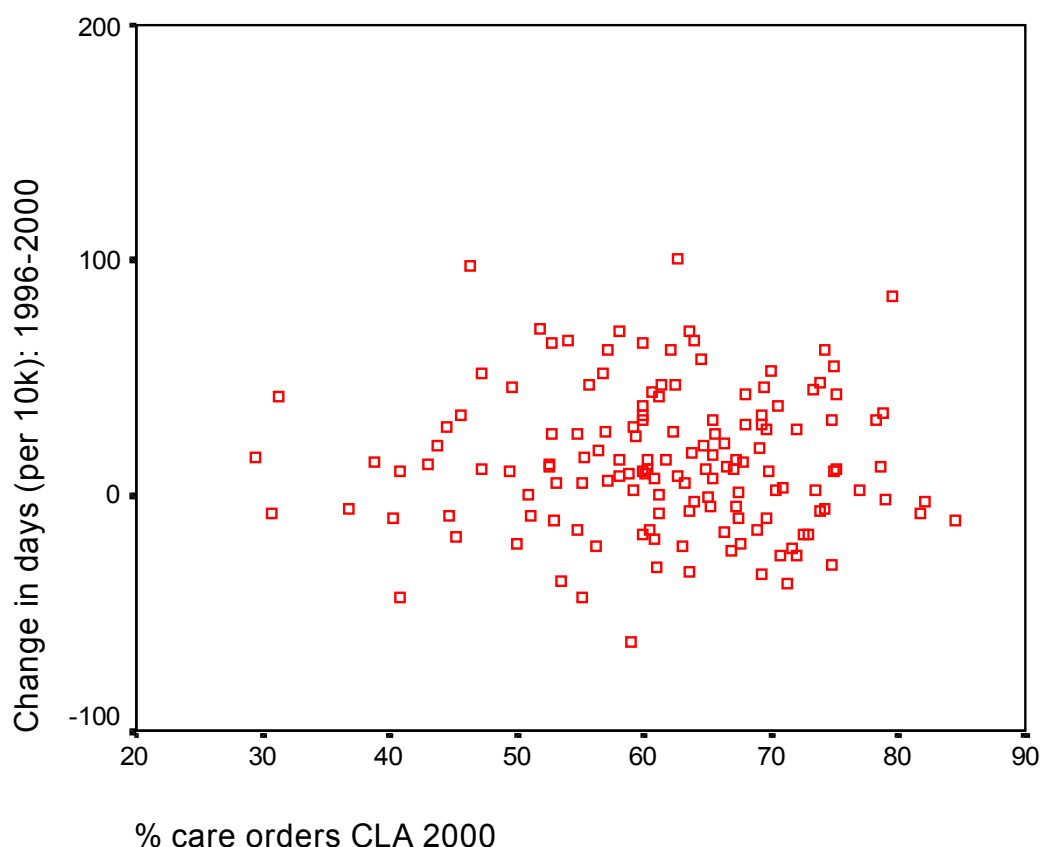
It is still the case, that when each of the measures is individually related to the change in the rate of looked after days (between 1996 and 2000), each measure bears little relationship to the change in the rate of looked after days. However, the rate of children starting to be looked after has a slightly stronger relationship with the change in the rate of looked after days than the rate of children ceasing to be looked after.

3.4.3 Legal Status

Question: Are authorities with large increases in days also authorities that have high proportions of children looked after on care orders?

Children on care orders can be the most expensive children looked after to accommodate and can spend the longest durations in care, but what is the impact of this on the change in the rate of looked after days?

Figure 3.7 Change in days by percentage of children looked after on care orders



The scatterplot in figure 3.7 shows the change in the rate of looked after days (per 10,000) on the vertical axis against the percentage of looked after children on care orders (in 2000) in each local authority, on the horizontal axis. The scatterplot shows that there is no relationship between the two measures. The correlation between the change in the rate of looked after days and the percentage of looked after children on care orders is -0.02 .

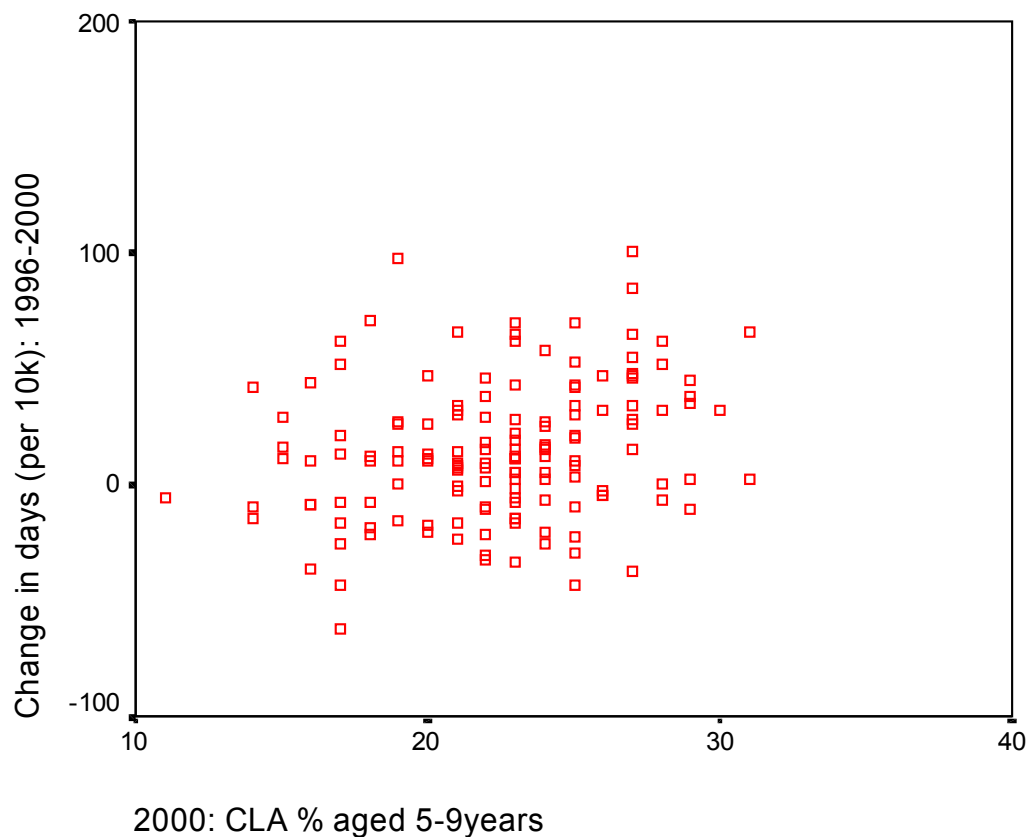
Authorities with large percentages of looked after children on care orders are no more likely than authorities with small percentages of looked after children on care orders to have experienced an increase in the rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000.

3.4.4 Age

Question: Do authorities with large increases in days have a different age structure to the other authorities?

If some age groups of looked after children were more difficult to permanently place, then the age structure of the looked after population might account for some of the variation between authorities. To assess this, the proportions of children looked after in different age groups were compared with the change in rate of looked after days per 10,000 between 1996 and 2000. This revealed two important correlations. The first is between the percentage of looked after children aged 5-9 years and the change in the rate of looked after days, and the second correlation is between the percentage of looked after children aged 16 years and over and the change in the rate of looked after days.

Figure 3.8 Change in days by percentage children looked after aged 5-9 years

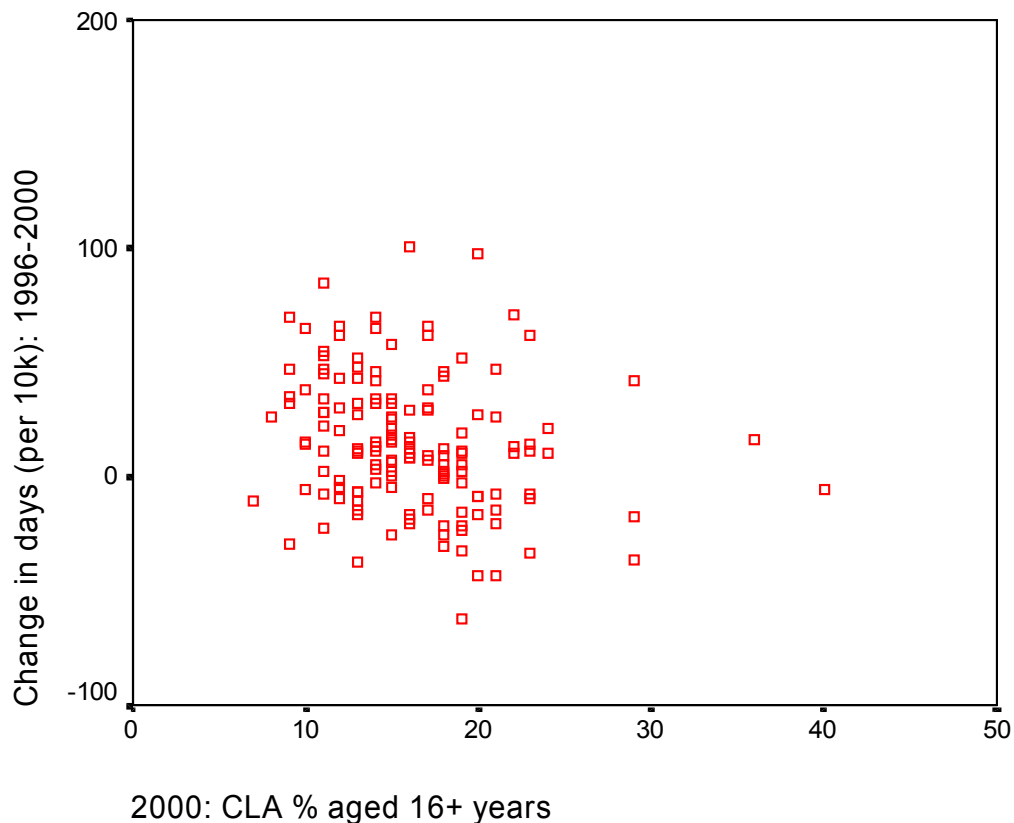


The scatterplot in figure 3.8 shows the first correlation – the percentage of looked after children age 5-9 years on the horizontal axis, plotted against the change in the rate of looked after days on the vertical axis. These two measures are related to one another ($r=0.25$), but as the scatterplot above shows, the correlation is weak.

Authorities with small percentages of looked after children aged 5-9 years tended to have experienced either a decrease or only a small increase in the rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000. The authorities with *large* percentages of looked after children aged 5-9 years, on the other hand, were more likely to have seen an increase.

The second correlation, between the percentage of looked after children aged 16 years or over and the change in the rate of looked after days, is presented next in figure 3.9.

Figure 3.9 Change in days by percentage children looked after aged 16 years and over



The scatterplot above shows that the majority of authorities have between 10% and 25% of looked after children that are aged 16 years or over. The relationship between the percentage in this age group and the change in the rate of looked after days between 1996 and 2000 is again very weak. This time, however, the correlation is slightly negative at -0.21 . Authorities with higher than average percentages (over 25%) of their looked after children in the 16 plus age group had a slight tendency to show a reduction or only a small increase in the volume of care provided over this period.

The age structure of the population of looked after children is thus related to a limited extent to the change in the rate of looked after days. Large percentages of looked after children aged 5-9 years are associated with an increase in looked after days, and large percentages of looked after children aged 16 or over are associated with a decrease in looked after days (or a smaller increase).

3.4.5 Type of Placement

Question: Do local authorities with high increases in days make above average use of foster care, or placed with parents or kinship care?

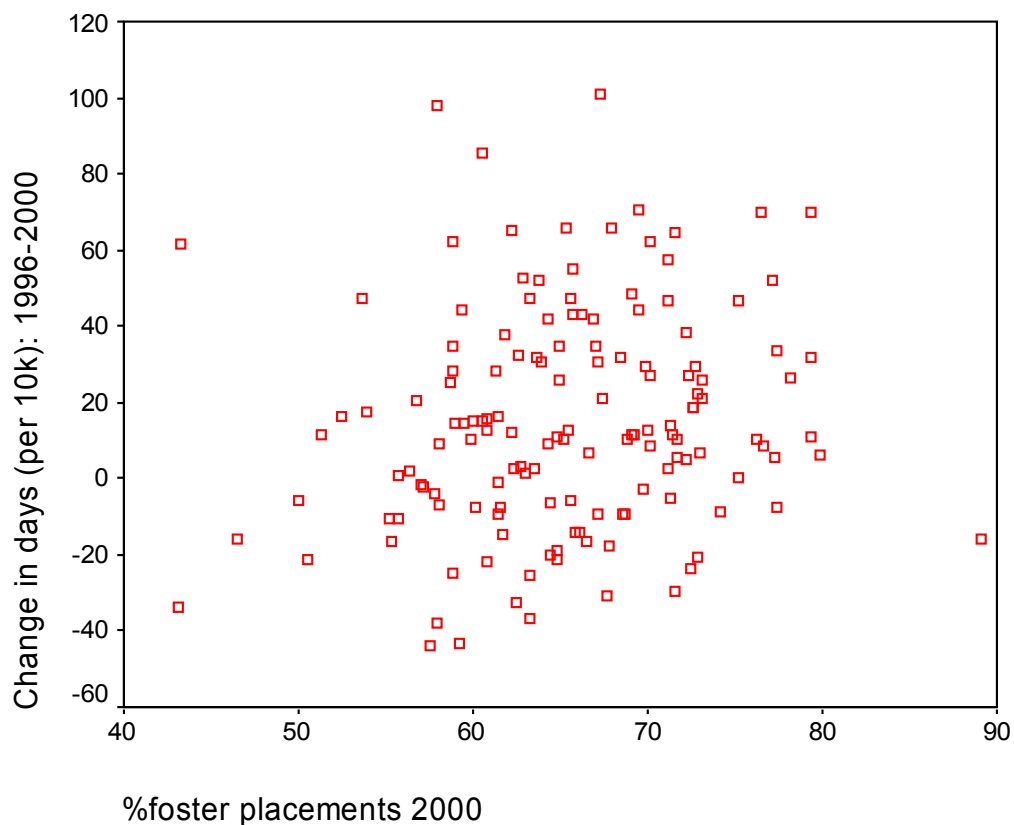
There are 5 types of placements covered within the CLA statistics. These are:

- Foster placements
- Children's homes

- Placed with parents
- Placed for adoption
- Other placements

None of the variations between authorities in their use of different placement options (2000 data) could be clearly related to the change in the rate of looked after days. Foster care was the only factor to have some kind of relationship with the change in the rate of looked after days and is shown in the scatterplot below.

Figure 3.10 Change in days by percentage children looked after in foster placements



In the scatterplot in figure 3.10, the percentage of looked after children on foster placements (horizontal axis), is plotted against the change in the rate of looked after days (vertical axis). Figure 3.10 shows a lot of variation between authorities, with the majority having between 55 and 75% of looked after children in foster placements. Authorities with fewer children (i.e. below 55%) in foster care either had very small increases (with the notable exception of one authority which had an increase of 60 days between 1996 and 2000) or large decreases in looked after days between 1996 and 2000. Authorities with more children on foster placements (i.e. above 75%) were more varied, with some authorities having large increases and others, small decreases.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about this relationship as the overall correlation between the percentages of looked after children on foster placements and the change in the rate of looked after days is very weak.

3.4.6 Duration

Question: Do authorities with high proportions of children in care for long durations have the largest increases in days?

Duration is measured by the length of time of the last episode a child spends in care before ceasing to be looked after.

We looked at a number of different periods of duration using the children looked after statistics. These periods/durations (based on the latest episode of care before ceasing to be looked after) were:

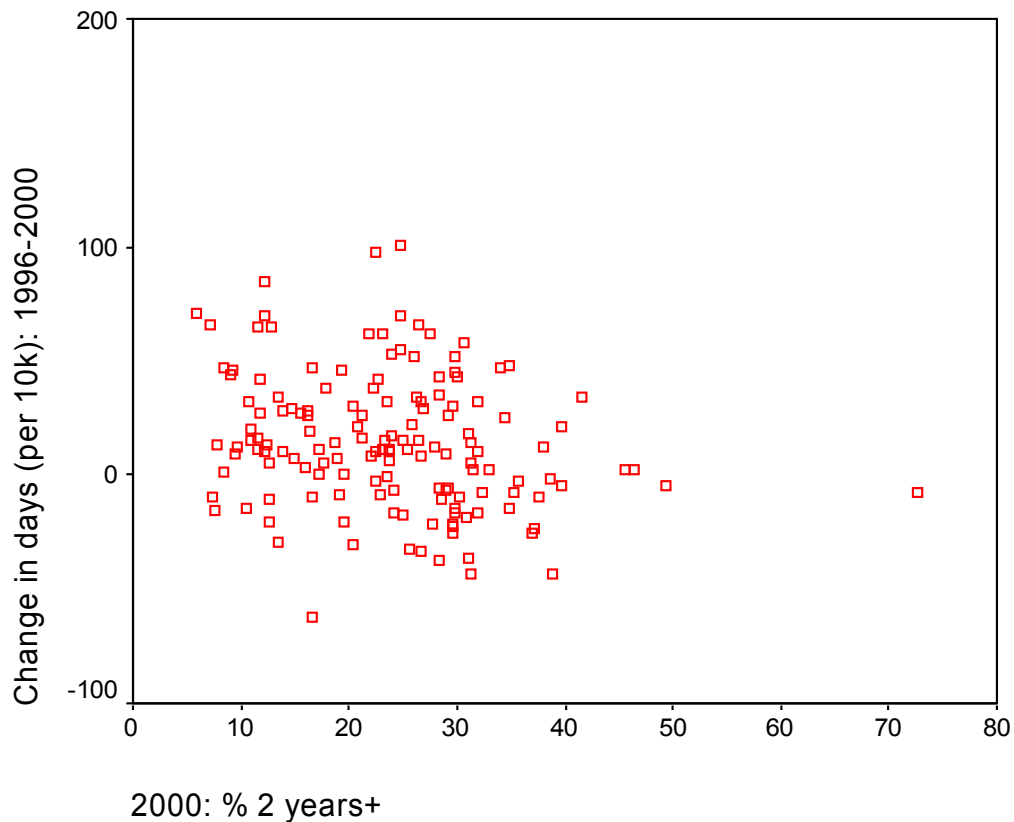
- Under 8 weeks
- Under 6 months
- Under 1 year
- Under 2 years
- Under 5 years
- 6 months and over
- 1 year and over
- 2 years and over
- 5 years and over

This produced a number of correlations between the change in days and durations of latest period of care. From the list of durations above, the change in the rate of (1996-2000) was only significantly correlated with the following:

- % CLA less than 2 years ($r=0.23$)
- % CLA less than 5 years ($r=0.23$)
- % CLA more than 2 years ($r=.23$)
- % CLA more than 5 years ($r=-.27$).

The third correlation from the above list is illustrated in the scatterplot in figure 3.11.

Figure 3.11 Change in days by percentage of children looked after for 2 years or more before leaving



The scatterplot shows the correlation between the proportion of children who have been looked after for more than two years for each authority (horizontal axis), plotted against the change in the rate of looked after days (vertical axis). This scatterplot illustrates that there is a relationship between the two measures – a slightly negative correlation of -0.23 – but that the relationship is weak.

The majority of authorities have between 10% and 40% of looked after children who have been in care for over 2 years at the time they leave, although one authority stands out as having an exceptionally high percentage of its looked after children in care for over two years – over 70 percent.

Figure 3.11 is indicating that authorities with high percentages (over 40%) of children spending more than 2 years in care before ceasing are not the ones showing an increase in looked after days. However, just considering children who cease to be looked after at some point during the year does not give the full picture. We need to look at these children in combination with those who are still looked after on a particular date (31 March) to investigate how short and long term placements interact to affect the number of days care that authorities provide. For example, short durations of care might not be contributing to a positive change in days (short durations are made up of high numbers entering and exiting children looked after placements, so account for relatively few days), while children in longer periods of care could be a more significant factor in an increase in days.

The tables below add together two sources of information on numbers of children looked after from the published statistics for 1996 and 2000: the numbers of children looked after at 31st March by duration (the first column), and the numbers of children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31st March by duration (the second column). The total column on the right provides a better representation of the number of children who have been accommodated at some point during the year.

Table 3.5 Looked after days by duration, 1996

Period of Care	Children looked after at 31st March 1996, by duration of being looked after (Table H)	Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending March 31st 1996, by duration of being looked after (Table 16)	Total of first and second column
Under 8 weeks	3,700	14,500	18,200
8 wks-6 months	5,800	5,200	11,000
6 months-1 year	6,800	3,100	9,900
1 year-2 years	9,200	2,800	12,000
2 years-5 years	13,900	3,500	17,400
5 or more years	11,800	2,430	14,230

Table 3.6 Looked after days by duration, 2000

Period of Care	Children looked after at 31st March 2000, by latest period of care (Table M)	Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending March 31st 2000, by duration of latest period of care (Table 14)	Total of first and second column
Under 8 weeks	3,260	9,400	12,660
8 wks-6 months	5,900	4,100	10,000
6 months-1 year	7,600	3,100	10,700
1 year-2 years	11,100	3,000	14,100
2 years-5 years	17,700	3,800	21,500
5 or more years	12,500	2,200	14,700

These figures show that there has been a decrease in the number of children who have been looked after for short periods of under 8 weeks (from 18,200 in 1996 to 12,660 in 2000), and an increase in children who have been in care for between 2 and 5 years (from 17,400 in 1996 to 21,500 in 2000). This suggests that children in longer periods of care and, in particular, those up to 5 years, do indeed seem to be contributing to a positive change in days.

Together, tables 3.5 and 3.6 suggest a bottleneck of children looked after at the 2-5 year duration mark. The figures show that whilst there is a relatively fast turn around of children that have been in care up to 8 weeks (with more ceasing than starting), fewer of the children that have been in care for 2-5 years (or indeed, more than 5 years) cease being looked after. In other words, the likelihood of ceasing is greater for children who have been looked after for relatively short periods of time. Durations are getting longer over time for children who do not leave care within the first 8 weeks.

3.4.7 Reasons why children enter care

Question: Do authorities with large increases in days have children entering care for different reasons?

There are 14 reasons that can be entered on the SSDA 903 form for why children start to be looked after. These are:

1. No Parents
2. Abandoned or lost
3. Family or child homeless
4. Parent(s) in prison
5. Breakdown of adoptive family
6. Preliminary to adoption
7. Parent's health
8. Parents/families need relief dues to either a child's disability or for some other reason
9. Abuse or neglect
10. Concern for child's welfare
11. Own behaviour
12. Accused or guilty of an offence
13. At request of child
14. Other

Tables of the numbers of children under each heading and for each local authority were supplied by the Department of Health from the SSDA 903 database for the years 1996 to 2000. Unfortunately, the data could not be used to explore variations in the change in days between local authorities. Upon close examination of the table, it was apparent that the data had a skewed distribution with two of the reasons having the majority of the cases for all authorities. These two reasons were: Parental /family needing relief and abuse/neglect. The remaining reasons on the list above contained very few cases in comparison with relief and abuse/neglect. In addition, category 14 'other' contained a large number of cases for some authorities and zero for others. It was difficult to see why this might be as we were unable to find any information about why a child would be coded within this category. This led us to conclude that this information on reasons for children being looked after was not being recorded in a consistent fashion by local authorities and therefore might not be as reliable as the other CLA information we had obtained.

3.4.8 Staffing levels

Question: Do local authorities with large, positive changes in days have low staffing levels?

Staffing information is not an area covered by the CLA statistics, so other sources of data were analysed.

The SSD001 staffing return is the main source of data on staffing within social services departments. This is collected annually and is published on the DH website and within the Key Information Graphical System (KIGS). However, this only provides information on the number of permanent staff, and excludes the increasing number of agency staff. We know from the Employers Organisation who publishes information about local authority staff

turnover and vacancy rates that this is particularly high among London authorities, which could bias the results. We therefore decided not to use the information from the DH staffing return in our analysis.

The Children in Need Census gives information on the number of hours provided to each looked after child by staff within local authorities, and does take account of vacancy staff as well as permanent staff. However, this source provides information about the volume of work rather than the number of staff. Even though this data did not satisfy what we had originally intended to look at, we still related the number of hours per looked after child to the change in days. However, there was no relationship to comment on.

3.4.9 Other Factors

As stated in chapter 1, we had intended to explore whether factors such as the extra responsibility for unaccompanied children seeking asylum or an increase in the use of drugs by parents could explain some of the variation between local authorities in changes in the volume of care provided. However, it has not been possible to explore these areas statistically, for reasons that are outlined below, although they were addressed in the fieldwork in selected local authorities.

Child asylum seekers

One of the possible reasons as to why some authorities might have large numbers of children looked after is that they might be receiving and having to accommodate large numbers of unaccompanied children seeking asylum. Therefore, one of the aims of this study had been to explore this issue of child asylum in relation to days looked after.

We set about trying to find any current published data on child asylum seekers at local authority level and quickly found that although it was possible to obtain published statistics on adult asylum seekers, the same could not be said about child asylum seekers. We did, however, find a response to a Parliamentary Question, which was published within Hansard. The response was in the form of two data tables. The first (Hansard volume 359, no 6, 13 December 2000, column 187-191W) was a table showing the amount of grant claimed by and awarded to each local authority in England for the cost of supporting unaccompanied children. The second (Hansard volume 360, no 10, 19 Dec 2000, columns 138-140W) was a table showing the numbers of children that were seeking asylum and were being looked after within each local authority in 1999, together with the estimated number of asylum seeking children within each local authority for 2000. However, as with the reasons for children entering care, the data for both of these entries in Hansard was skewed - with some authorities looking after large numbers of unaccompanied children and other authorities looking after fewer than five unaccompanied children or recorded as looking after no unaccompanied children at all. This made it difficult to compare authorities and get any meaningful information from these data.

Drug misuse

Another possible reason as to why the numbers of children looked after are increasing over time could be a growing incidence of socio-economic problems and, in particular, of problems associated with drugs misuse, either by parents or children themselves. Therefore, one of the aims of this study had been to explore drugs misuse in relation to days looked after.

Although it was possible to locate information about adult drug misuse and the number of convictions that arose because of it, it was more difficult to obtain any data that related this information to the number of children being taken into care. It was also possible to obtain information about the number of child cases of drugs misuse but these data were not collected or published at local authority level. Originating from the Probation Service, the information is presented by police authority areas. These are not the same as local authority areas: they are often larger and the boundaries are not always coterminous. This meant it could not be directly compared to the children looked after statistics that are collected and published at local authority level.

Deprivation

Although it has not been possible to explore the issues of child asylum seekers and drugs misuse, we were able to explore the role of external factors in explaining the variations between authorities using the York Index, a measure of social deprivation which is based on five census indicators of the social demographic characteristics of local authority areas (Carr-Hill et al., 1997). The York Index was significantly related to the number of children looked after per 10,000 children in the area in 2000 ($r=0.77$), the number of children starting to be looked after per 10,000 children in the area in 2000 ($r=0.69$) and the number of children ceased to be looked after per 10,000 children in the area in 2000 ($r=0.67$). However, the York Index was not related to the change in the rate of days looked after.

Availability of family support services

As described earlier (section 1.4), an analysis by DH statisticians showed no significant relationship between net expenditure by each local authority on 'Family Centres/Family Support and Under 8 provision' and numbers of children looked after (both expressed as a rate per 10,000 children in the area). We repeated this exercise correlating the expenditure figure with our key variable, the change in the rate of days looked after between 1996 and 2000, but again the correlation was very low (0.03). This indicates that there was no correlation between rates of expenditure on family support services and change in the rate of day looked after.

3.5 Summary

Out of the complex picture that can be built up from the statistics, it has been possible to 'unpack' a few important points about the pattern of variation between local authorities. The key points to emerge are:

- Authorities that have had a *decrease* in looked after days also had high proportions of children looked after for long durations before ceasing
- Authorities that have had a reduction in looked after days are also authorities that have ceased to look after many of their children aged 16 years or over
- Authorities that have had a large *increase* in looked after days also had high numbers of children aged 5-9 years among their looked after population
- Type of placement was not related to the change in days
- Apart from at the national level, legal status was not related to the change in days.

From the evidence in the statistics, the authorities that appear to have been more successful at reducing the total number of days care provided per year between 1996 and 2000 are those that have been reducing the numbers of children in long-term care.

CHAPTER 4: INDICATIONS FROM FIELDWORK

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores possible reasons for the changing rate of children looked after, based on fieldwork conducted in twelve local authorities, as outlined in chapter 2. Authorities welcomed the study and supported its objectives and, as noted, were very co-operative in facilitating the visits and providing data requested. Overall, authorities were very concerned about the high numbers of children looked after, and were taking various management actions in an attempt to address this. Whilst interviewees were quite open about challenges they were facing, they were also keen to show us how their services had improved. In addition to internal scrutiny, some authorities had commissioned their own research to look into the issues and identify actions to be taken. Where available, this data has been drawn upon as valuable contextual material to complement interview data, and to provide insights on specific issues.

The interviews have provided rich data around the area of this study. However, in many cases interviewees could only talk with confidence about what the current situation was in their authorities in relation to factors being discussed, rather than whether there has been a definite increase around a particular factor, due to a lack of detailed statistical information covering the entire period. Where possible, statistical information has been used to back up interview data.

In analysing the fieldwork data, authorities were grouped according to whether they had increased from a high 1996 baseline, a low 1996 baseline, or showed a decrease over the period. Interviewees' responses to the questions outlined in chapter 2 were then compared, to look for similarities and differences, and to identify emerging patterns. Social worker questionnaire returns were similarly grouped, and their responses were compared with overall collated data from managers' interviews, to look for similarities and differences. The resulting picture was complex, but we have been able to draw out broad underlying trends. These are discussed below as factors of little significance to numbers of children looked after; factors of mainly local significance; factors of significance for all or for many authorities; factors of particular significance in authorities showing a decrease in children looked after; and significant changes reported since the March 2000 returns. It must, however, be pointed out that since the sample used is small, findings must be read as indicative only.

4.2 Findings

4.2.1 Factors of little significance to LAC numbers

a. *Changes in inter-agency relationships leading to the adoption of lower thresholds for accommodating children*

There is no evidence to suggest that social services departments have taken children into care too early by lowering their thresholds for accommodating children under pressure from other agencies. This is not to say that there have been no pressures to lower thresholds. Indeed, managers in many authorities talked about tensions in inter-agency relationships. This was particularly so with education and health, where it was said that agencies tend to adopt a *'more cautious approach'*, as one manager described it, preferring to take a child into care at an earlier stage to be on the safe

side. A manager in one authority suggested that for education '*a care order was the solution*'. A manager from another noted an under-involvement of health and education in cases where they should be; and a manager from yet another suggested that there was some '*cost-shunting*' by education and health to social services. By contrast, a manager from one authority felt that they had had an improvement in relations with these agencies.

4.2.2 Factors of mainly local significance

These are factors that had led to some rise in numbers of children looked after for a few authorities only, some due to socio-demographic, and others for structural reasons.

a. Asylum seekers

Whilst a number of authorities reported having had to look after a very small number of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, this was noted as a significant factor for two inner London authorities only, by both managers and social workers. One of these authorities reported a year on year increase in unaccompanied minors looked after. The other pointed to peaks in numbers at different points in the 1990s, associated with different cohorts of asylum seekers, but with a fairly substantial and steady increase in numbers since 1998. Managers in the latter authority also noted a small number of accompanied children from asylum seeker families being looked after in the period 1996-00. A third authority also had a large number of asylum seekers in their population, but they were generally supported as children in need in lodgings or with a host family, rather than through foster placements. through the looked after system, because they were said to be in supported accommodation more often than in family placements.

b. Young offenders

Three authorities, two with an increase in LAC numbers from a high baseline and one reverse trend (decreasing) authority, reported an increase in numbers of children remanded to local authority care. A manager from the reverse trend authority felt the increase in young people placed in custody to be the biggest change it was experiencing. Managers from two of the three authorities perceived the increase in children remanded to their care to be related to some local magistrates being more punitive than in other areas. All three authorities were working with their Youth Offending Teams to seek to address this problem.

c. Large sibling groups

One London authority, with an increase from a low 1996 baseline, reported a large number of sibling groups of 4, 5, or 6 children per family among its looked after population, though this was not a new category. The authority tries to keep sibling groups together, and managers felt that this was putting pressure on the system and helped keep figures up. A northern metropolitan authority similarly commented on difficulties it was facing in placing large sibling groups.

d. *Thresholds*

Whilst most authorities seemed satisfied that their assessment procedures were thorough and the thresholds they were applying were right, managers of one county expressed concern about whether the thresholds they were applying were too high. Their thinking was that if they were taking children in later than they should, reunification might be difficult, resulting in children remaining within the care system. They were particularly concerned because although they had had structured assessments for some time, their numbers of looked after children were increasing. An SSI inspection report in 2000 had found their assessment procedures to be satisfactory. However managers were aware that another county in their area with not dissimilar socio-economic characteristics had lower numbers of children looked after, and suggested that one reason might be that their own authority was '*better at assessing, so uncover need*'. The authority was investigating this issue at the time of the study.

e. *Restructuring*

The three unitary authorities visited all reported changes following LGR, in particular a scrutiny of categorisation and a tightening of recording practices, that accounts for some of the increase in their numbers of children looked after. Such increases, therefore, do not represent a real increase in numbers looked after. Internal restructurings reported by other authorities have, more often than not, led to increases in efficiency. These are seen in better assessments, which result in more children coming in to the system; and also a better throughput, so more children than before leaving the system.

4.2.3 Factors of significance for all or many authorities

These factors were perceived to be of significance by managers in at least half of all the study authorities. They encompass social, legal, structural and historical reasons, and could be seen to account for the bulk of children looked after.

a. *Substance misuse, domestic violence, and parental mental health problems*

All authorities reported significant and increased numbers of children being looked after for one, if not all, of the above reasons. Few were able to provide 'hard' evidence in the form of comparable statistics for 1996 and 2000, since there had been little recording of such information in 1996, but as one manager noted, this view was based on well-informed perception among people who had worked in the authority for many years. A number of authorities had undertaken internal audit exercises or commissioned external research which confirmed an increase in the category of abuse and neglect as reasons for children becoming looked after, and this was thought to reflect a growing awareness of the impact of problems such as parental substance abuse and domestic violence on children's well-being (see below).

b. *Improved assessment*

Managers were quick to point out that the increased prevalence of issues such as substance misuse and parental mental health problems in the backgrounds of children

who become looked after, may not reflect a rise in actual numbers of substance abusing parents but rather a heightened awareness within social services of their effects on children. In the words of one manager:

There has been a greater recognition of wider family problems in the last ten years or so, which has grown more significant in recent years... issues to do with neglect, previously seen as a value judgement. Also drugs and alcohol misuse, which ten years ago hardly featured in child protection figures... Also domestic violence, and a growing body of research that influences practice.

A similar point was made in another authority, and the link with improved assessment explicitly made:

We have become more aware of general problems related to drug and alcohol misuse (mainly by adults) and what can happen if these are not addressed. So our assessment of families has got clearer.

In a third authority, a greater awareness of the potentially damaging impact of neglect on children's welfare had led them to act more decisively to protect children in such situations, once it became clear that supporting the child within their family was not going to have the desired effect:

We're more concerned about not leaving children in situations of neglect. We will provide support and work with them for so long, then if they are not improving there is now more willingness to have a cut-off point and say the situation is not tolerable.

Statistics on child protection registration rates provided by this authority backed up this position. Whereas only 36% of neglect conferences resulted in CP registration in 1994, this had risen to 87% by 2000. Only 16% of additions to the register in 1994 were due to neglect: in 2000 this accounted for 45% of additions to the CP register.

c. *Problems with teenagers and young adolescents*

Interviewees from half of the study authorities expressed concern over the rise in teenagers and young adolescents coming into care in recent years, seen as a new category of need. One Midlands authority talked about '*disaffected teenagers*' rejected by their families; another noted parents in the context of reconstituted families referring teenagers to the courts, presenting them as '*out of control*', as well as children caught up in marital contests. The latter authority also pointed to a rise in anti-social behaviour among teenagers and young adolescents, evidenced in a rise in Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOS). An inner London borough manager similarly expressed concern about the rise in needs of teenagers and young adolescents, though there discussed as '*mental health needs*'. The interviewee pointed to reports such as *Children in Mind*, that suggest that mental health needs of teenagers and younger adults are rising, that young people are now more difficult to look after, and are more likely to come into care by that route.

A southern county and a neighbouring outer London borough also noted trends in teenagers and adolescents becoming looked after in their areas in recent months. (This

data would not have been available for 2000 returns.) Whilst in many areas it was boys and young men who were of particular concern, in one home county the problem was said to be specifically in relation to young women '*with more severe difficulties in relation to substance abuse and sexual abuse*', with young girls being targeted into prostitution by a group of adult males. As evidence, the interviewee pointed out that 50% of young people in their residential accommodation are female, which represents a real change from the past.

d. *Care orders*

Eight of the twelve study authorities (covering all three analysis categories²) noted an increase in care orders, relating to complex cases with multi-faceted problems, an increase in requests for expert witnesses, more parties to proceedings, and consequent delays. A manager in a Midlands county with an increase in LAC numbers from a high baseline, felt that their authority takes care proceedings more readily than other local authorities, and was in negotiations with their legal department on this. However, a manager from a home county reverse trend authority also noted a large increase in care proceedings. This manager indicated that in the year 2000/1 there had been twice the number of appeals for care proceedings as for the previous year, mirrored by twice the number of expert witnesses called. He felt that there has been an '*over-reliance*' on Guardians ad Litem over the past year or so, and the authority was taking steps '*to get conduct of proceedings reviewed and ensure that roles are correct*'. Other authorities too noted the influence of Guardians ad Litem in protracted court proceedings. The manager of the home county mentioned above also suggested that with the advent of the Human Rights Act, court proceedings have become more complex, and legal advice more cautious.

Related to the increase in care orders, is the issue of care orders not being discharged, mentioned by many authorities. This is one factor in keeping children within the looked after system longer than they need to be. A Midlands county with an increase from a high baseline reported around 40 cases currently awaiting discharge. A northern reverse trend authority similarly reported a large number of care orders not being discharged, many relating to the high proportion of children on care orders that were living with their parents (22% of all LAC and 40% of all children on care orders currently live with their parents in that authority). The manager noted that many of these cases were based on previous poor initial assessments, where, in his view, children should never have come into care.

A lot of the log-jam of such cases experienced by authorities was felt to be related to staffing resource difficulties (see below) and heavy workloads, which made discharging care orders, in the words of a southern county manager, '*lower priority for social workers*'.

e. *Placements and permanency*

There was no discernible pattern of placement policy common to all study authorities. Broadly speaking, most authorities sought to keep children within the local community, in family placements as far as possible, with placing with relatives and friends as the preferred option. This was discussed as '*kinship care*' by many, also

² Increase from high 1996 baseline, increase from low 1996 baseline, decrease 1996-2000

raising the issue of financial and other supports for such carers. One authority pointed out that the government does not categorise kin as foster carers; but recognising the financial burden placed on kin in such circumstances, many authorities would assess them as special foster carers, and pay them as such. Authorities also stated that often kin would agree to the placement only if the local authority took responsibility for the arrangements, to protect them from disturbed or chaotic natural parents. Children placed with relatives and friends in this way would thus be counted as looked after. That type of arrangement would account for some of the rise in numbers of children looked after, as a consequence of authorities better supporting kin carers.

Increases in numbers of children in foster care were reported by nine authorities. Some of this increase included children 'fostered' with relatives and friends, as discussed above. Additionally, two other authorities reported '*huge numbers*', and their '*bulk of care*' being foster care.

The increase in foster care noted above goes hand in hand with an increased use of independent sector foster care, reported by 11 authorities, and related to difficulties in recruiting and retaining their own foster carers. This impacts on budgets, rather than directly on numbers of children looked after, although managers in one or two authorities suggested ways in which an increased use of independent agency placements could be contributing to an increase in the number of days care. For example, by tying up more of staff time in arranging and monitoring such placements, or by making it harder to reunite children with their families if the placement was out of county.

In order to address the difficulties in recruiting foster carers, some authorities were seeking to increase their allowances and supports in order to better attract and retain their own foster carers, and some had considered a special category of salaried foster carer, for more challenging children. Of the eleven authorities reporting an increase in use of independent sector foster care, four (2 increasing from a low baseline and 2 reverse trend) also reported a corresponding increase in use of independent sector residential care, again with budgetary implications. As against the latter trend, one county reported a decreased use of independent sector care, and one metropolitan borough reported a static level in their use. A metropolitan authority noted a decrease in use of independent sector residential provision only, and two other authorities (1 inner London, and 1 county) reported a static level in use of independent sector residential accommodation.

A final point under this sub-section concerns the length of time children remain in care. Many authorities noted that due to historical reasons which resulted in children coming into care on low thresholds, a large number of children in the middle years are among their looked after population. Three authorities made particular mention of a glut of 8-12 years olds in the system, pointing out that reunification is less easy if a child has been in care for a long time. These children would now usually be found in long-term, stable placements, and can be expected to remain there till they leave care. A further factor in this is the impact of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, where looked after children are expected to be supported until they are 18 years old. Whilst this has been considered good practice, and was reported to have been standard practice in at least one of the study authorities for some time, a consequence of the Act is likely to be some increase in the length of time children remain looked after.

f. Reunification

All authorities reported a policy of returning children home, if it was seen to be in the child's best interests. However, in practice, managers suggested that there was some drift, related to:

- (i) availability of support services in the community – see *Human Resources*, below
- (ii) length of care proceedings - see above
- (iii) young people coming in as teenagers.

In relation to young people coming in as teenagers, there was no clear message from study authorities. In particular, two authorities (one outer London and one metropolitan) indicated that it was hard to return young people in these circumstances, one authority specifying that it was because parents did not want them back. Two inner London authorities, on the other hand, felt there was a better chance of reunification with young people coming in as teenagers rather with than those who had been in the system for some time. A manager of one of those authorities suggested that the process was '*complex, dependent on the willingness of both parents and young people to engage, and skills available within the local authority and other agencies to support them..*'. The interviewee felt that in the long term many young people do re-establish some form of relationship with their birth families.

In terms of working towards reunification, whilst most managers felt that monitoring arrangements would usually prevent social workers working too long with families before considering an alternative permanent placement, managers from three authorities (one increasing from a high baseline, two increasing from a low baseline) felt that they might be attempting to work too long. One of them suggested the reason for this was that the courts want them to work longer, another that this was due to the influence of Guardians ad Litem.

g. Human resources

Most authorities noted difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced staff in the context of a reduction in numbers of skilled workers nationally. Some authorities were affected more than others, with one authority reporting having to leave 30 children unallocated to a social worker. There was widespread recognition of the impact this was already having, or potentially would be having on increasing the numbers of LAC. This included being dependent on agency staff who did not have long-term association with cases, the ability to provide support services, discharge care orders efficiently, and so on. There was thus an urgent need to find ways around the problem. In this, authorities were variously looking at promotion opportunities for social workers, use of newly qualified staff where appropriate, and recruitment of workers with other than social work qualifications as family support workers, to ease the situation.

h. Data recording

In addition to the new unitary authorities who reported that figures for 1996 and 2000 were not comparable, three other authorities (all showing an increase from a high baseline) also reported that their figures over the study period were not comparable. The apparent increase was therefore said to be not as great as it seemed. Other authorities, in general, indicated that present data were more detailed than in the past, but that overall figures were accurate. All authorities were now fairly confident about their current data systems.

4.2.4 Views of social workers

The information provided by social workers working directly with children and families reinforced the picture obtained from interviews with managers and other key officers. Substance misuse, domestic violence, parental mental health problems, problems with teenagers/young adolescents, difficulties with placements and permanency arrangements, issues related to reunification, and staffing resource shortages were key issues noted by social workers as reasons for the increase in children looked after. Among other social problems noted by some, were increased school exclusions, leading to offending behaviour and additional pressures on families. On other issues, a few social workers also suggested that it would be pertinent to look at re-referrals and re-registrations, implying that these could relate to cases being closed too early. In relation to placements and permanency, some social workers noted difficulties with matching children from ethnic minorities, and more particularly children of dual heritage, with foster or adoptive families.

4.2.5 Factors of possible significance in authorities showing a decrease in LAC

The analysis below does not include data from the new unitary authority in this category, because of lack of confidence in figures, noted above. Once that authority was taken out of the equation, the single most notable factor differentiating authorities showing a decrease in LAC from others seemed to be the level of preventive services available, as discussed below.

a. Family support services

The three reverse trend authorities were prominent in the level of preventive services they provide. These variously included an increased emphasis and new structures for family support, early interventions to prevent children coming into care, and parenting supports for children who behave badly in school. However, two of these authorities expressed concern at now having to restrict spending on preventive services because of budget pressures. Additionally, a manager of one of these authorities noted that while they were well resourced to work with younger children, his authority provided *'less rich services for older children, sometimes because we are not sure of the most effective preventive service'*. He felt that the priority now was to develop adolescent support to prevent young people coming into care, commenting that, *'we are not offering a good enough alternative to being looked after'*.

The value of preventive services was certainly recognised by all other study authorities. However, with high numbers of children looked after, cuts in funding, and staffing difficulties, they have had to prioritise their obligations to looked after children and children on the child protection register, and seemed unable to re-direct

resources into preventive work. Some of these authorities were using Quality Protects moneys to develop family support services.

b. Gatekeeping and monitoring systems

The reverse trend authorities were also characterised by their well-defined gatekeeping and monitoring structures and processes. These included consistent assessments through centralised controls such as placement monitoring panels, permanency and adoption panels, and so on. However, these authorities were not alone in having such structures. Indeed, we found many examples of good practice in this area even among authorities with an increase in numbers of children looked after. But it would seem that having both good preventive services as well as good gatekeeping and monitoring systems provides a better service, and together go a good way towards reducing numbers of children looked after.

In relation to the above, social workers across all three analysis categories overwhelmingly pointed to lack of or decrease in preventive and family support services as a reason for a rise in numbers of children looked after. In relation to stringent gatekeeping however, one social worker suggested that funding shortages were crucial in decisions on which children were to be accommodated.

4.2.6. Notable developments since March 2000 returns: three case studies

As previously noted, in the interviews managers were anxious to talk about what actions their respective authorities were taking to attempt to reduce numbers of children looked after. In this subsection we draw on that data, to further explore changes in numbers of children looked after and to illustrate some of the points made above.

Case Study A

Authority A is an inner London borough which has shown an increase in its children looked after from a high 1996 baseline, and with a very large increase in the year 1999/2000. The authority counts a large number of unaccompanied asylum seeker children among its looked after population, and perceives a rise in mental health needs of its teenagers and young adolescents. A large number of younger children of drug misusing parents are reported to be currently looked after on care orders by the authority.

Concerned with the steep rise in numbers of looked after children, the authority commissioned independent research to look at the issues and explore reasons for this rise. This research pointed out, among other things, that the borough was not taking in more children than comparable authorities, but that they were staying in the system for longer than in the other authorities. The authority initiated a number of management actions on the basis of the research findings, which included more management scrutiny, setting up of planning groups, and it also commissioned more research, to design a practice tool to monitor children's successful return to their families.

Since taking the above actions, the authority has seen a decrease in its numbers of children looked after. Whilst it is not possible to say with any certainty that the decrease is a direct result of management actions taken, it is likely that they have played some part in the reduction in numbers.

Case Study B

Authority B is a Midlands county, which also demonstrated an increase in numbers of children looked after from a high 1996 baseline. The authority reported that it takes care proceedings more readily than other authorities, and makes below-average use of voluntary arrangements. Historically, children had been brought into care on low thresholds, and these children have stayed in the system. The authority also has a very high rate of children placed with parents, but there has been some drift, and orders have not been revoked. Historically also, its family support services are said to have been under-funded and under-resourced.

The authority has made efforts to be more effective, which it feels it has, with the creation of new teams, and new family support services. But, paradoxically, there has been an increased demand on its services. Additionally, the authority is said to have a very successful Teenage Placement Scheme and a Middle Years Fostering Scheme, which, whilst good practice, is felt to work against achieving throughput.

The situation is causing concern to the authority, with some managers questioning whether the authority's thresholds are in fact now too high. One manager commented that the authority does not have research capacity of its own, nor does it have spare funding, but that research is urgently needed to identify the cause of increases in its looked after population.

Case Study C

Authority C is a northern reverse trend metropolitan authority. The main pressure on its looked after system comes from children of substance misusing parents. It has a large number of children in the system who had become looked after because of paternalistic policies in the past, where children were placed under care orders '*just in case*'. A high proportion of its children on care orders live with their parents. The authority is actively pursuing the discharge of care orders, and though facing some resistance from Guardians ad Litem, it has seen a decrease in full and interim care orders for 2000-1. It reports that in the past 12-18 months it has seen:

- a reduction in numbers of children placed with parents
- an increase in the percentage of children placed for adoption
- a very short time lag between coming into care and being adopted (with an average time of 2 years).

To manage the service, the authority has a Resources Panel which gatekeeps requests for accommodation; a Placed with Parents Group, which monitors such placements; an Adoption Team; and an effective permanency policy. The

authority also has a very high level of preventive services, which includes a Family Support Team to prevent children coming into care, and if they do to get them back home as quickly as possible.

However, in recent months the authority reports seeing an increase in numbers of children coming into care. This seems to coincide with a change in membership of the Resources Panel from Senior Managers to Team Managers, and has raised questions of whether the present membership of the Panel is sufficiently experienced to manage risk safely and effectively.

The three case studies above illustrate some of the issues outlined in this chapter, and their complexities. Key points to be noted include:

- having high numbers of looked after children could sometimes indicate good practice, such as with the service to older children and teenagers through Authority B's Middle Years Fostering and Teenage Placement schemes
- there is a need to seek to identify possible causes of a rise in numbers of children looked after before seeking a solution. Introducing good practice alone may not have the effect of reducing numbers
- as demonstrated by Authority C, good preventive services need to be complemented by good gatekeeping and monitoring systems to be effective. Gatekeeping has thus to be located at the right level of management and decision-making.

4.3 Discussion

In this chapter, we have tried to identify some key factors in the rise in numbers of children looked after by local authorities. We have attempted to do this through delineating main areas of concern in the majority of study authorities, and by pointing to factors that seem to be of significance in authorities showing a decrease in numbers of children looked after. This analysis has suggested that factors that account for the majority of children being looked after, barring local factors, can be grouped together as:

- social factors
- historical factors
- legal factors
- structural and administrative factors.

Social factors: In this category would fall children becoming looked after through abuse and neglect, related to parental drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and domestic violence. Accommodations for these reasons would be associated with a new and heightened perception within social services of their ill-effects on children, reported by all authorities. These factors would often account for a rise in numbers of younger children, and also for whole sibling groups coming into care, and present sound reasons for children becoming looked after. For this group, generally, there seemed to be good throughput of cases, based on better assessments and clearer planning.

Within this category would also be older children - teenagers and young adolescents - coming into care, and in which there was a reported rise in half of study authorities in recent years. These young people would be accommodated for reasons of disaffection, evidenced by anti-social behaviour; for parents rejecting them because of adjustment and related difficulties within reconstituted families; and for increased mental health needs. This area was felt to be a new category of need by interviewees, and there was some evidence that social services departments needed to develop more effective responses to this need, such as better support services for teenagers and adolescents. Placements or reunification for this group was seen as more difficult than for young children.

Historical factors: Here we would include effects of previous policies, which account for a large number of children in the middle years who are in care. These children could have been accommodated on lower thresholds, or, for example, under Children Act guidance, local authorities may have worked in partnership with parents for so long that when children eventually did become accommodated there was little hope of return. These children would now generally be found in stable, long-term placements, and could be expected to remain there till old enough to leave the care system.

Legal factors: These include protracted court proceedings with large numbers of complex and costly cases, that involve increased use of expert witnesses, more parties to proceedings, and so on, that prolongs the process. These factors have largely resulted in a slow throughput of cases, with children staying longer in the care system.

Structural and administrative factors: The key factor here is staff shortages and a less stable workforce in social services departments, with high vacancy rates and high staff turnover rates, affecting all authorities to some extent. This has led to a growth in reliance on agency and less experienced staff within social services. Staffing difficulties have affected the rate at which social services departments are able to discharge care orders, and to pursue permanency arrangements, for example, as well as their ability to provide family support services. Problems with staffing are thus an important factor in accounting for the rise in numbers of children looked after.

It will be noted that all the above factors reportedly affect not just the authorities showing an increase in children looked after, but also the reverse trend authorities, which seems to make a somewhat confusing picture. Moreover, authorities in both groups also demonstrate examples of good assessment and monitoring procedures, which further complicates the picture. But a key difference in the two groups of authorities that we noted, seems to be the level of preventive and support services available in the reverse trend authorities. In other words, these authorities could be better at preventing children becoming looked after because of the level of family support services offered. If preventive services are coupled with well-defined gatekeeping and monitoring processes, as seem to be the case in the reverse trend authorities in the sample, this would further strengthen the system and support that trend. It would seem, however, that better staffing levels, for preventive work, and for better throughput, are required to achieve a decrease in the numbers of children within the looked after system.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Overview

This study has aimed to explain why there has been an overall increase in the number of children looked after, and an even bigger increase in the number of days care provided by local authorities, between 1996 and 2000. Two main sources of data were used: secondary analysis of national statistics relating the rate of increase in days since 1996 to aspects of local authorities' current activity (in 2000); and interviews with staff in twelve selected authorities across England.

The study revealed a complex and, to some extent, contradictory picture, with different factors interacting to produce in some cases increases in the amount of care provided and in other cases decreases, depending on particular local circumstances. As with previous studies (e.g. Oliver et al. forthcoming) the fieldwork indicated the need for caution in relying on statistical indicators as accurate reflections of practice, without understanding the local circumstances that might affect their interpretation. In a few cases there was evidence from the fieldwork of figures being incorrect or not directly comparable between 1996 and 2000, especially in authorities which had restructured. This would obviously affect calculations of the rate of change in days care provided over this five year period, which was the key variable to which we related other factors. In most of the authorities that were visited, managers and social workers described similar pressures that would tend to lead to increases in care, and it was these factors that they were most keen to explore and discuss, even if their statistics indicated that they had reduced the number of days care provided between 1996 and 2000.

It is also important to note that a reduction in care was not necessarily an indicator of good practice. For example in one authority where the statistics recorded a reduction in the number of days care provided between 1996 and 2000 (although there were some doubts about the accuracy of the earlier figure), the interviews revealed that the children and family service was experiencing serious difficulties and was lacking clear strategies and policies. By contrast, the increase in care in another authority could be partly explained by the introduction of clear procedures for working with families to protect children followed by intervening decisively if this was not being achieved rather than allowing the situation to continue.

Although the picture was complex, we have tried below to draw out some key findings from the study, looking firstly at possible explanations for the increase in care at a national level and then at what can be learnt from variation between authorities in their changing volume of care between 1996 and 2000.

5.2 Increase in Care Orders

At a national level, an important factor contributing to the increase in number of days is the increase in the proportion of children who are accommodated under care orders. As we showed in chapter 3, there is a strong relationship between the total length of time children are looked after and their legal status. Children looked after under full care orders remain looked after for on average just over 6 years (although this has reduced slightly since 1996), compared to under a year on average for children looked after under voluntary agreements. So the fact that the number of children on full or interim care orders has risen by 26%

between 1996 and 2000 must be contributing to the number of days care local authorities are providing.

At a local level, the picture is less clear. For example, secondary analysis looking at variations between local authorities was unable to demonstrate any significant relationship between increases or decreases in the number of days care provided between 1996 and 2000, and the proportion of children looked after under a care order. Some authorities with a high proportion of children looked after under care orders in 2000 had experienced an increase since 1996 in the number of days care, some appeared to have experienced a decrease, and some showed little change. The most likely explanation, supported by findings from the fieldwork, is that, at local authority level, there are a number of different factors interacting to affect the amount of care provided, such as the behaviour of courts. For example if there are serious delays in the court system locally, especially in discharging care orders, then number of days care will rise even in an authority which has seen a reduction in the proportion of children accommodated under care orders since 1996. Other factors of local significance uncovered in the fieldwork part of the study included the presence of unaccompanied asylum seeking children, changing policies on the treatment of young offenders, and an increase in the number of large sibling groups. Local factors such as these will mask the impact of general trends, and this complexity makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions from the secondary analysis.

5.3 Variation between authorities

There were some indications from the secondary analysis and the fieldwork about the characteristics of authorities that had reduced the number of days care provided between 1996 and 2000, compared to those that had seen an increase.

Duration of care

The secondary analysis found that authorities showing a decrease in days care had experienced the highest rate of children leaving care after being in the system for a considerable time – five years or more. They also had higher rates of children leaving care when they were aged 16 or over. Whilst short durations of care were not contributing to the increase in days, these longer periods were. This suggests that in order to reduce the volume of care, authorities need to be able to move on those children who have been looked after the longest. What this does not tell us is whether such a strategy would be in the children's best interests. It could represent a concerted effort to discharge care orders for children who no longer need to remain looked after but whose cases are low priority for social workers engaged in crisis work. Or it could reflect a situation where older children are supported in stable long-term foster placements, and moving them on would not be desirable. Analysis of individual case records, which was not possible within the constraints of this study, would be needed to explore such issues.

Age of children

Authorities showing a decrease in days were less likely to have a high proportion of looked-after children in the 5-9 age group. The secondary analysis showed that overall it was the authorities with a high proportion of looked-after children aged 5 to 9 years in 2000 who had experienced the largest increases in days. The fieldwork also found that one of the explanatory factors put forward by authorities that had experienced an increase

in days was a rising number of children in their ‘middle years’ needing to be accommodated. It was sometimes suggested that this was because in the past they had attempted to work for too long with children’s families and were now accepting that accommodation was the best option; in other cases that this was due to local demographics. Once in care, children in this age group are less likely than younger children to move on and would thus contribute to an increase in the amount of care.

From the fieldwork, the following factors appeared to be important in distinguishing authorities that had reduced the volume of care:

- **Availability of family support services**

There was evidence from the fieldwork that authorities which had seen a reduction in the volume of care had a higher level of preventive support services than the authorities experiencing an increase, especially services to support families with younger children. However, secondary analysis was unable to demonstrate a relationship between local authority spending on family support services and either the number of days care provided or the rate of increase between 1996 and 2000.

- **Effective gatekeeping and monitoring systems**

There are no data available at a national level, but fieldwork indicated that the ‘reverse trend’ authorities were characterised by a combination of good preventive services and clear, consistent procedures for monitoring placement decisions. This reinforces the findings of an earlier study of variance in local authority performance, which also found a lack of strategic direction and control, and of effective monitoring of cases, in authorities with high numbers of children looked after (Oliver et al., forthcoming).

5.4. Hypotheses revisited

At the beginning of this report, we set out a number of possible hypotheses to explain the increase in number of days care provided. We review below the evidence for these from this study.

a) Children are staying in care longer, and coming in younger, perhaps because of increasing problems with parental drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence and parents’ mental health problems.

There was evidence of increased numbers of children coming into care because of emotional abuse and neglect in most authorities, and there was a widely held perception, on the part of both social workers and managers, that issues such as parental substance abuse and mental health problems were contributing to this. Because such issues particularly affected young children and because they often resulted in whole families rather than individual children needing to be accommodated, this is likely to be a major factor underpinning the increase in the number of young children entering care. Whether such children are staying in care longer and thus fuelling the increase in the number of days care, is less clear. On the one hand, younger children are easier to place successfully for adoption, and authorities appeared to be getting better at reducing the time taken to make such arrangements once it is decided that reunification is not in the child’s best interests. On the other hand, the nature of the circumstances in which many of these young children are accommodated means that a high

proportion will be accommodated under care orders, tending to lead to longer stays in the care system.

b) Staffing issues (vacancies, heavy workloads, insufficient training) may mean that children are not being discharged from care when they could be. There may be insufficient staff resources for effective planning and review, or for rehabilitative work to restore children to their families.

Problems with staffing were an important factor in accounting for the rise in numbers of children looked after. Difficulties were reported by authorities that had decreased as well as increased the number of days care provided since 1996, but where numbers were high or increasing, a vicious circle appeared to operate. Work on getting children out of the looked after system suffered as staff time was prioritised to deal with the increasing numbers entering care, often under care orders which involve a great deal of work. This created a situation where it was difficult to move forward as the effects of the crisis in numbers of looked-after children consumed so much time and energy.

c) Assessment procedures could have become more efficient, so that families are being offered support services where it will work, hence fewer children are coming into care. Those children who do enter care would then be those where there is no alternative, hence they stay longer.

Again, there was some supporting evidence for at least part of this hypothesis. Most authorities described how their assessment procedures had improved and become more consistent (the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need should reinforce this trend, although in many cases it was too early for it to have had a noticeable effect). Authorities were generally confident that their thresholds for accommodating children were now about right, and that children were only taken into care when it was not possible for them to remain safely at home. This perception has on the whole been backed up by SSI inspection reports. However, the finding that authorities with decreasing rates of care tended to have a greater range and level of family support services suggests that although the thresholds may be right, some children could perhaps have been prevented from reaching that threshold if more support services had been provided.

Once in the care system, the high proportion of children entering for reasons of serious neglect means that increasing numbers are unlikely to be safely returned home. Because families have generally received whatever support the authority is able to provide in an attempt to prevent the need for accommodation, it can then be difficult to return children home since, in the words of one manager, 'there is nothing left to try'. There was also some evidence that longer durations in care could reflect a positive decision to pursue foster care as a long-term option for some children, especially where they had strong ties with their birth families and did not wish to be adopted.

d) Local authorities could be increasingly taking a 'low threshold' line and offering care because of pressure from other agencies in child protection conferences, even though social services would prefer to support the child at home.

There was no evidence that this was the case.

e) Variations in other factors within the local authority area, such as an increase in the number of unaccompanied child asylum seekers.

A high number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children was contributing to an increase in the number of children looked after in those authorities that had experienced this situation, but was not a significant factor in the majority. Various other local factors were identified as contributing to the increase in other authorities, reinforcing the need for local authorities to have good monitoring and reviewing systems so that they understand why children are looked after for different lengths of time, rather than simply attempting to reduce the number of days care they provide.

5.5 Looking forward

Overall, there appears to be a mixture of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors operating that may serve both to increase and to decrease the amount of care local authorities may need to provide in the future. On the one hand, more children are being accommodated at a younger age, when the chances of their being adopted (and hence removed from the numbers of looked-after children) are higher. The reduction in the average time between a child becoming looked after and being adopted (Department of Health 2001) suggests this is already having an impact. On the other hand, new needs are being uncovered through better assessment and through a greater awareness of the impact on children’s well-being of situations such as parental drug misuse and domestic violence. This improved assessment and intervention is likely to strengthen the trend for children to become looked after at earlier ages. It may also explain the increased use of care orders, with local authorities being more proactive in protecting children where there are issues of emotional abuse and neglect. But because court proceedings are taking longer, this is contributing to the increased number of days.

There are a number of measures which this study suggest authorities could take to reduce the number of days care they provide, although they would not necessarily reduce expenditure. Resources would need to be re-directed to improve family support services, to provide better access to child and adolescent mental health services, to develop support services for young people whose families are finding it difficult to keep them at home, and to improve staffing levels. Some changes, such as reducing the delays children still experience in the court system, are to a large extent beyond the control of social services departments, but need to be addressed. A key factor, based on the evidence from the authorities visited in the fieldwork part of the study, is likely to be recruiting and retaining sufficient well-trained and motivated social work staff, and possibly looking to employ staff with other than social work qualifications for less specialised work, such as in some family support services. This could impact on the volume of care at a number of levels: through improving support to families to prevent the need for children to become looked after; through speeding up the process of moving children through the court system (although this would also depend on changes in court behaviour); and through increasing the rate of children ceasing to be looked after.

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APPENDIX 1

Study on reasons for the increase in numbers of children looked after

Interview topics

The starting point for the interviews with key officers in the selected authorities will be a discussion of information from TCRU's secondary analysis on local trends in their children looked after service, focusing on the officers' perceptions of reasons for significant changes in any of the indicators between 1996 and 2000 (a summary of the statistics will be sent in advance). Topics we would then like to discuss include:

1. Changes in level and type of needs

- Has there been an increase in particular family problems that result in children needing to be accommodated e.g. substance abuse, mental health problems, domestic violence?
- Is there any 'hard' evidence for this?
- Are there new categories of need e.g. asylum-seeking children who need to be accommodated?

2. Changes in assessment procedures

- Has the authority changed its procedures for assessing children?
- Is the Assessment Framework making a difference to the numbers of children looked after and if so how?

3. Changes in legal proceedings

- If there has been an increase in care orders, do you know if this reflects more 'harder' cases, or changes in court behaviour?

4. Restructuring

- Has the children's service been restructured since 1996? New teams created? Could this have had an impact on numbers of children entering and leaving care and if so how?

5. Young offenders

- Has there been any change in the way young offenders are dealt with that could help account for changes in the amount of care provided?

6. Changes in policy and practice on placements

- Is the authority making more/less use of particular kinds of placement e.g. foster care, placements with parents, kinship care?
- Is there a support care/ short-break fostering scheme? Introduced when? Are such children counted as looked after?

7. Adoption

- Have there been recent changes in adoption policy and practice? Could this have affected the number of children looked after or the length of care provided?
- When children are placed for adoption, are they still counted as looked after?

8. Changes in the use of independent sector provision
 - Is the authority making more/less use of independent family placement services and independent residential provision?
9. Reunification policy
 - Have there been any changes in policy on returning children home? Is this option actively pursued?
 - Does the time children spend in care and the time they are initially expected to stay for differ significantly? Is this particularly so for certain kinds of cases?
 - Are social workers working longer with families even when there is little hope of reunification?
10. Availability of family support services
 - Is priority given to spending on services for children looked after or services to other children in need? Have there been significant cuts or increases or shifts in funding over the last 5 years?
 - Have new services been developed, or existing services closed, which helped to keep children at home with their families – including services for adults e.g. substance abusers?
 - Are there sufficient resources to support children at home wherever possible?
11. Changes in recording practices
 - Are the statistics on children looked after comparable for 1996 and 2000?
 - Has the authority made changes to the way in which placements are recorded, or improved the accuracy and consistency of its figures compared to 1996?
12. Changes in inter-agency relationships
 - Are there pressures from other agencies, or from external events, which are leading the authority to adopt a lower threshold for providing care or to be more cautious about returning children home?
13. Changes in human resources
 - Are there workforce/skills issues which are affecting the length of time children are looked after?

Are there any other factors you can think of that could account for the change in the number of children being looked after by your authority and the amount of care provided?

APPENDIX 2

THOMAS CORAM RESEARCH UNIT Children Looked After Statistics

Name of authority:

	Your Value	England		Unitary authorities	
		Average Value	You were	Average Value	You were
Change in number of days care provided 1996-2000, rate per 10,000	+70	15	High	18	High
Related Indicators: On this measure, in March 2000:					
Children looked after on 31 March 2000, rate per 10,000 (from Table 3 ³)	56	55	Average	55	Average
Children starting to be looked after, rate per 10,000 (from Table 4)	37	26	High	25	High
Children ceasing to be looked after, rate per 10,000 (from Table 4)	32	24	Above average	24	Above average
Percentage ceasing to be looked after, latest period 2 years or more (Table 14)	12	24	Low	26	Low
Percentage of LAC aged 0-4 (Table 5)	25	20	High	21	Above average
Percentage of LAC accommodated under care orders (Table 6)	58	61	Below average	62	Below average
Percentage of LAC in foster placements (Table 7)	76	66	High	65	High
Percentage of LAC placed with parents (Table 7)	9	11	Below average	11	Average
Percentage of LAC with 3 or more placements (Table 9)	38	18	High	18	High
Percentage of LAC adopted during the year (Table 16)	4	5	Below average	5	Below average
York Index of deprivation	153	134	Above average	119	High

³ Tables refer to Department of Health (2000) *Children Looked After by Local Authorities. Year Ending 31 March 1999. England.*