



National Audit Office

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# Children and young people in care and leaving care



# Who are we?



National Audit Office

We are the  
**National Audit Office**



We tell people how well the government spends its money and if it keeps its promises.

We are not part of the government and we tell everyone what we find.

# Introduction



A child who is being looked after by their local authority is known as a child in care.



Local authorities look after children in care and help them when they leave care too.



There are about **69,000** children in care in England.



Most children in care live with foster parents but some live in children's homes.



Local authorities care for children because a court says they need to be looked after. Sometimes parents agree to someone else caring for their children.



Local authorities often take children into care to protect them from harm. About **6 out of 10** children are in care because they have been abused or neglected.



Every year about **10,000** young people aged 16 or over leave care.



Young people usually have to leave care when they are **18 years old** but sometimes if they are in foster care they can stay where they are until they are 21.



When a young person leaves care, their local authority must help them until they are **21**. Local authorities have to make sure that care leavers have a plan for leaving care and a person called a personal adviser to give them advice and other help.



If young people leaving care are at school or college or on a training course the local authority must help them until they are **25**.

# What this report is about



We looked at how many young people were in care and leaving care.



We also looked at:

- the support children in care and young people leaving care got from government;
- what the government was doing to make things better; and
- whether the government was doing a good job.



We talked to people who work for government and local authorities about what they do.



We spoke to young people who had been in care. They told us how things had worked out for them.

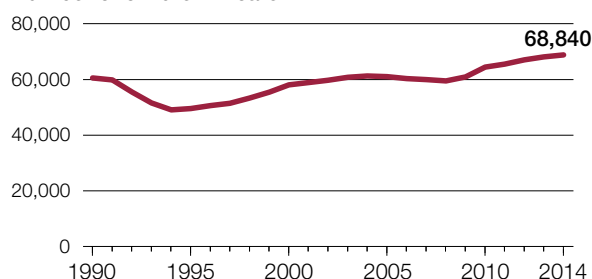


We also asked charities that work with children and young people how things were too.

# What we found

## The number of children in and leaving care

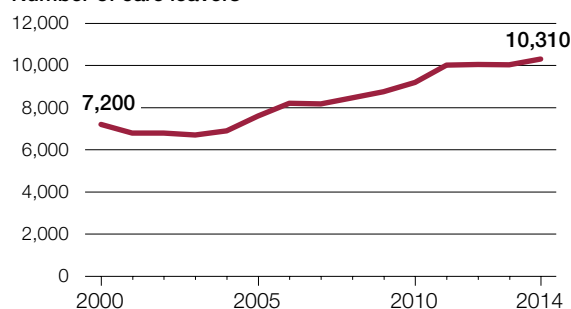
Number of children in care



In March 2014, there were **68,840** children in care. Most children, about **three-quarters**, were in foster care, but some children lived in children's homes.

Every year the number of children in care has been going up. In March 2014, the number was the **highest** it had been for 20 years.

Number of care leavers



Between April 2013 and March 2014 over **10,000 young people left care**. Every year this number has been going up, as the number of children in care has been going up. The number of young people leaving care every year is now **twice** as much as it was ten years ago.

April 2013 to April 2014



Local authorities told us they were finding it harder to work out how many children might need their help and what help children needed. It is important that local authorities work out what is best to help each child.



If local authorities do not work out what young people need and give them the right help then young people can find life hard when they leave care.

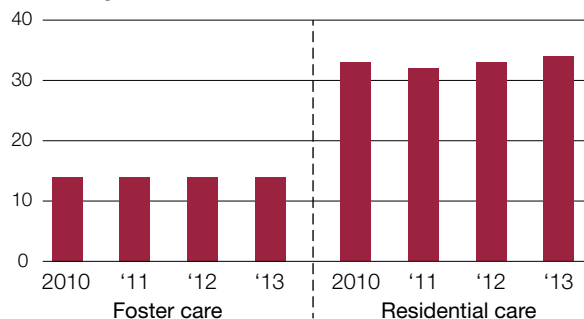
For example, when young people leave care they do not find it as easy as other young people to carry on with their education or training, or to get a job.

## Where children in care live



The law says local authorities should try to make sure there are enough places for children in care to live near their home.

Percentage

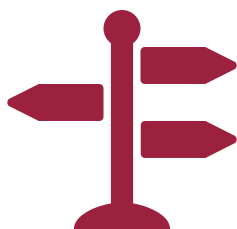


**20**  
MILES

But in March 2013:

- **14%** of foster children lived more than 20 miles from home; and
- **34%** of children in residential care lived more than 20 miles from home.

These numbers have not got any better since 2010.



Sometimes a local authority has a good reason for moving a child far away from their home. However, the government wants fewer children living a long way from their homes.



The government wants to make sure children in foster or residential care do not have to move homes too many times.

Number of changes to where they live

1 time



3 times+



But on 31 March 2013:

- just over **3 in 10** children in care had to change where they lived at least once; and
- **1 in 10** children had to move three times or more.

Being moved around too much can make it harder for children to get to know people.



Sometimes local authorities choose a placement for a child because they think it is cheapest rather than because it best meets the child's needs.

## How much is spent to look after children

**£2.5 billion**

between 2012 and 2013



Local authorities spent about **£2.5 billion** on children in care between April 2012 and March 2013.

Foster

Residential



**£30,000**



**£130,000**



We worked out how much local authorities spent on every child in foster care or in a children's home.

For one year local authorities spent about:

- £30,000 on a foster place; and
- £130,000 on a residential place.



But different local authorities paid different amounts for the same care.



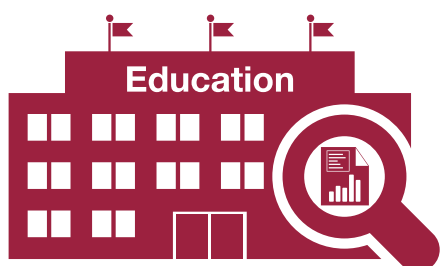


Nobody knows if foster care or children's homes that cost more money are better.



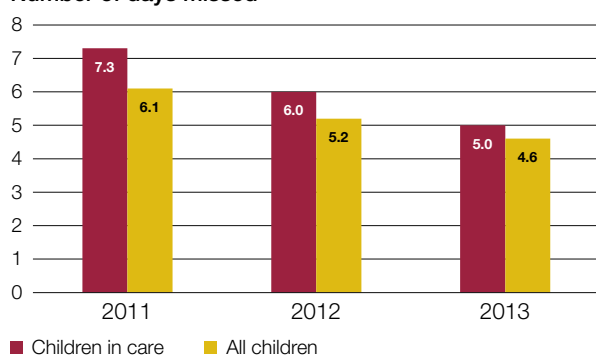
Inspectors go to local authorities, children's homes and foster services to make sure they are looking after children and young people safely.

## How children in care do in school



The government wants children in care to do better in school. It asks schools how well they do.

Number of days missed



But children in care do not do as well as other children in school.

They miss more days at school but this is getting a bit better.

In 2011 on average, children in care missed about **seven days** a year from school. In 2013 the number of days missed was **five**.

Reading



Writing



Mathematics



When children are about 11 years old, they take tests in reading, writing and maths. The results for children in care are getting better. But other children still do better.

#### Children in care



**15**  
out of  
**100**

**16**  
yrs old

When children are about 16 most sit GCSE exams. Children in care do not do as well as other children in these exams. In 2012/13:

- **15 out of 100** children in care **passed five GCSEs** including maths and English.
- **58 out of 100** children not in care got this many passes.

But the gap between the two groups is getting a little bit smaller.

#### Children not in care



**58**  
out of  
**100**

### When young people leave care



**18**  
yrs old

Young people usually have to leave care when they are **18 years old**.



**1 in 3**  
leave care  
before 18

**16**  
yrs old

**One in three** young people aged 16 or over leave care before their 18th birthday.



**half**

**Half** of other young people who have not been in care are still living at home when they are 22 years old.

Care leavers

Other young people



Care leavers have to look after themselves when lots of other young people still get help from their parents.

## Why care leavers need help

Care leavers often find life on their own hard. For example:



**1 in 4**

- They are more likely to be homeless than other young people. **One in four** homeless people have been in care at some point.



**half**

- They are more likely to get into trouble with the law. **Nearly half** of young men in trouble with the law had been in care at some time.



**4/5 times**

- They often have mental health problems. Care leavers are **four or five times** more likely to harm themselves than other young people.



**1 in 5**

- **One in five** female care leavers have a baby when they are a teenager.

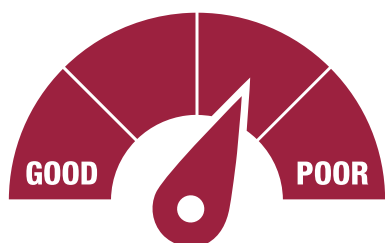
## What the government has done to help care leavers



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The government wants local authorities to give young people leaving care the same help that young people living with their parents get.



The government knows that help for care leavers has not always been good enough. It has tried to make things better.



In 2013, it wrote a plan to give more help to care leavers. It said it would track what happened to care leavers.



In 2014 the government made another new law called Staying Put so young people could stay with their foster carers until they were 21, if their foster carers agreed.



Young people in children's homes cannot stay there after they turn 18.

## What the government knows about care leavers

### Employment



### Education

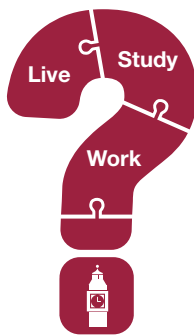


### Training



When young people leave care, the government usually knows whether they are:

- working, in education or training; and
- living in a safe and secure place that the young person can afford.



**22**  
yrs old

However, the government stops asking these questions after a care leaver is 21. It does not know where they live, study or work from when they are 22. The government does not ask care leavers about the rest of their lives, including whether they have any health problems. This means it is hard to know if they are getting the help they need.

## When young people leave care

### Care leavers



**19**  
yrs old

In 2013-14:

- **40 out of 100** care leavers who were 19 did not have a job, did not go to school or college and were not doing any training.

### Other young people



**19**  
yrs old

- Only **15 out of 100** other young people who were 19 were in the same position

#### Care leavers



**6**  
out of  
**100**



- **33 out of 100** young people who were 19 were at university, but only **6 out of 100** care leavers were there too.

#### Other young people



**33**  
out of  
**100**

### Where care leavers live



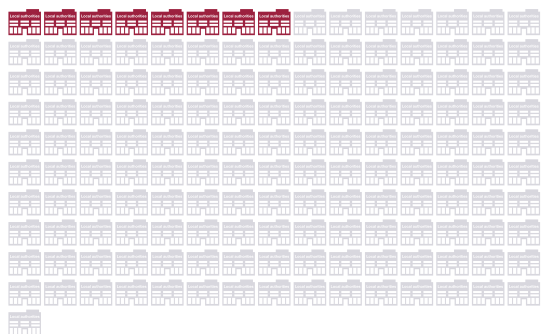
**93%**

**93%** of care leavers were living in safe places they could afford. But care leavers told us that sometimes they do not feel safe in their new homes.



**Local authorities**

Not all local authorities stay in touch with all their care leavers. This is worrying because care leavers need extra help that other young people get from their parents.



There are 151 local authorities in England that help care leavers. But only **8 of the 151** local authorities know where all their care leavers are and what they are doing.

## How the government knows care leavers get support



The government sends inspectors to check if the services local authorities give to care leavers are good enough.



The inspectors found that local authorities did not always help care leavers make good care leaving plans. Personal advisers sometimes did not give care leavers the advice they needed.



■ Outstanding ■ Good ■ Requires improvements ■ Inadequate



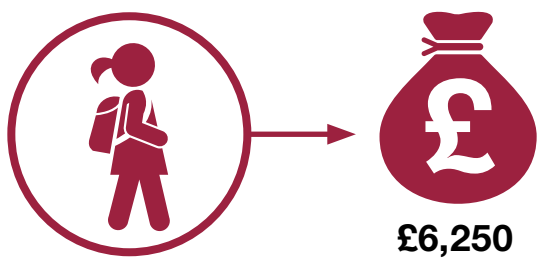
In 2015 the inspectors told the government that of **59** local authorities **two out of three** it had visited were not good enough in how they help care leavers.

## How much care leaver services cost

**£265 million**  
spent in  
2013-14



Local authorities spent **£265 million** on services for care leavers in 2013-14.



We worked out how much it cost local authorities to help each care leaver.

In 2013-14, there were about **42,000** care leavers entitled to help and support. Local authorities spent an average **£6,250** on each one of them.



We found some local authorities spent much more than others, but local authorities that spent more did not always have better services. The government does not know if these local authorities are wasting money.

## What works well



Some local authorities get together to find out how other people help children in care and care leavers, and what works best. But not all local authorities do this. Those local authorities that do, get better scores than others.



In 2014, the government said it wanted to get people to try new ways of supporting children and young people and find out what works best. The government is spending **£100 million** to do this.



# What next

What we found in this report shows that the government needs to do some things better. The government needs to:



- Work with local authorities to find out what is the best sort of help for children in care and care leavers.



- Use the information it collects from local authorities, and other research to make local services better.



- Think about how it can get people to find new ways to work together and help children and young people.



- Get better information about how much it costs to help children in care and young people leaving care.



- Look again at its plans for helping care leavers.

The government has already started to make some changes.  
It has said that:



- It will make services for children in care and leaving care better by 2020.



- It will set up a team to find out about what works best and will share what it finds out with local authorities so they can make services better.



- If local authorities do not give good support to children in care and care leavers it will take the job away from them and get someone else to provide the services.



- It will think again about how different parts of government can work together to give care leavers better support and help.

The government also plans to have a new law so that:



- Care leavers will be able to have a personal adviser to help them get the support they need until they are 25.



- Local authorities will need to tell care leavers what support they should be getting.

## What will we do?

We will:



Check that the government has kept its promises.



Look to see if things have improved for children in care and care leavers.



## Where to go for help

If you are worried about yourself, another child or someone you know, you can contact one of these organisations:

### **ChildLine: 0800 1111**

Open 24 hours a day. You can contact ChildLine about anything, anytime. No problem is too big or too small.

### **Who Cares? Trust: 020 7017 8901**

For children in care and care leavers. You can call between 10.30am and 3.00pm, Monday to Friday, or email on [advice@thewhocaretrust.org.uk](mailto:advice@thewhocaretrust.org.uk).

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