Children's COMMISSIONER

Stability Index

Overview and Initial Findings

APRIL 2017

The Importance of Stability for Children in Care

Despite recent improvement, the instability of placements, a high turnover of social workers and a requirement to move schools remain the experience for many children in care. Children in care tell me that being stable and being able to build consistent relationships with carers, friends and teachers is what makes the biggest difference to their lives. That's why we have developed a Stability Index this year which will become an annual measurement of stability for children in the care of each local authority.

Anne Longfield

Children's Commissioner for England

About The Children's Commissioner for England

Anne Longfield OBE is the Children's Commissioner for England. The role was established under the Children Act 2004 which gave the Commissioner responsibility for promoting awareness of the views and interests of children. Her remit includes understanding what children think about things that affect them and encouraging decision makers to take their best interests into account. She has unique data gathering powers and powers of entry to talk with children to gain evidence to support improvement for them. The Children and Families Act 2014 further strengthened the remit, powers and independence of the Commissioner.

The Children's Commissioner helps to bring about long-term change and improvements for children, in particular the most vulnerable children including those who are in care. She is the 'eyes and ears' of children in the system and is expected to carry out her duties 'without fear or favour' of Government, children's agencies, nor the voluntary or private sector.

An overview of the Stability Index and its initial findings

> The Stability Index is a new initiative by the Children's Commissioner to measure the stability of the lives of children looked after by local authorities. The purpose is to shine a light on the issue of stability, to monitor trends, and, working with local authorities and others, to support improvements to stability.

> In this iteration, the Stability Index measures three aspects of children's experiences of care - placement moves, school moves, and changes in social worker. To measure placement moves and school moves, we analysed data from the Children Looked After Census and School Census on children who were looked after on 31 March 2016. To measure social worker changes, we carried out a pilot data collection involving 22 Local Authorities across nine regions.

> The current findings are exploratory, intended as a first step in the long-term development of the Stability Index. We will now work with a handful of authorities, virtual school heads, fostering agencies and children to test the underlying drivers of instability, and to determine how the Index should develop over time. Our ambition is to develop the Index so that it provides data not just on what is easy to measure, but also gets closer to assessing the lived experiences of looked after children.

> We do not wish to add undue burdens upon local authorities and other agencies, but rather to make the most of data that is already collected. However, it is apparent that much of what we know matters to children in care is not recorded systematically and centrally, so approaches based on linking and analysing existing data will only take us so far. We will therefore work with others to improve what is recorded and how it is used, but we will also seek to ensure that the results of that minimise or reduce burdens while manifestly adding value.

> While our findings are preliminary, our analysis provides important new data and insights on the experiences of stability for children in care. The full findings and analyses are described in the technical report. This paper provides a summary.

The importance of stability

> Children in care must have the best possible opportunity to thrive and fulfil their aspirations. Stable relationships are the platform on which children in care can build their lives and achieve their potential. Children themselves say that stability is the most important aspect of their experience of care. Consistent, high-quality relationships are important – they enhance feelings of security, support their ability to form relationships as they grow into adults, and enable the development of a sense of belonging and identity.

> Instability in experiences of care reduces the opportunity for children to form and maintain secure relationships. When children in care have to change their placement, it can lead to relationships with trusted adults being broken. When children in care have to move schools, they can lose ties with friendship groups. Staff turnover in residential units and changes of allocated social worker can further unsettle children and young people.

> Children in care regularly raise the issue of stability and the ways in which it affects them[1]. In 2016 and 2017, we ran four workshops with children with care experience[2]. They talked about experiences of instability in different aspects of their lives – such as when their home, school or the professional that worked with them changed – and the ways in which it affects their relationships with adults and peers, making it difficult to trust others and build connections. They also told us that placement changes negatively affect their education, and many of them said that experiencing frequent change was typical for children in care. These children also told us that stability facilitates relationships and helps them feel safe. It reinforces the feeling that someone is there for you, and you know what is going to happen.

"If you move places constantly you will never feel safe in a secure home. If you move about a lot, you can lose trust in people."

"You get used to your foster carer's kids, and then you miss them."

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[1] There is a wide literature on this. See for example "Children's Commissioner for England (2015) State of the Nation Report 1: Children in Care and Care Leavers."

[2] Our first series of consultations were held at the East of England Children in Care Council meeting in November 2016, involving around 40 children in care and care leavers across three workshops. Their age ranged across primary years, secondary years and school leavers, and our workshop focused on their experiences of stability at school, at home and in terms of professional support. Our second workshop in February 2017 involved around 10 young people in care from 4 Local Authorities across England. This focused on our preliminary findings on placement moves, school moves and social worker changes.

"It affects your learning when you move school, because of different topics and different subjects."

"In the middle of my GCSE [exams], my carers text me that I was going to change school. I said no and refused."

"I'm not willing to build up relationships again when they are going to leave again in a few months."

"If [social workers] keep leaving you can't trust them very well."

"I've lost count of the amount of social workers I've had."

> Placement moves may be an inevitable process in some cases, as a child's case progresses through the system. Placement moves may also sometimes be in the child's best interests, and children may themselves desire a move when a placement is not working out or as needs change. When managed appropriately, a change of placement may be a positive step for the child. Nonetheless, the improvement of stability in the care system is an important objective for all local authorities.

Our methods

> Our analysis of placement changes is based on the 2015/16 Children Looked After Census. This contained 70,438 children looked after (on 31st March 2016).

> Our analysis of school changes is based on the subset of these children who also appeared in the 2015/16 Autumn and Summer School Censuses (40,068 children).

> Finally, we conducted a pilot data collection on social worker changes. We worked with 22 local authorities who provided data on 12,508 children in care.

Headline findings

> We estimate that around 50,000 children in care on the 31st March 2016 (71% of all children in care in England) experienced a change in their placement, school, or their social worker over a 12 month period.

> Information on all three stability measures – placements, schools and social workers – was available for 7,269 children attending school across the 22 pilot areas[3]. Of these children, 2 in 3 children (69%) experienced a change in at least one measure. 1 in 20 (5%) experienced a change in all three. Nationally, this would be equivalent to around 2,000 children in care attending school experiencing a change in their placement, school and social worker all within the same year.

Prevalence of in-year instability among children in care (pilot sample, attending school)

No Change	31%
Any Change	69%
Change in 1 Measure	45%
Change in 2 Measures	19%
Change in 3 Measures	5%
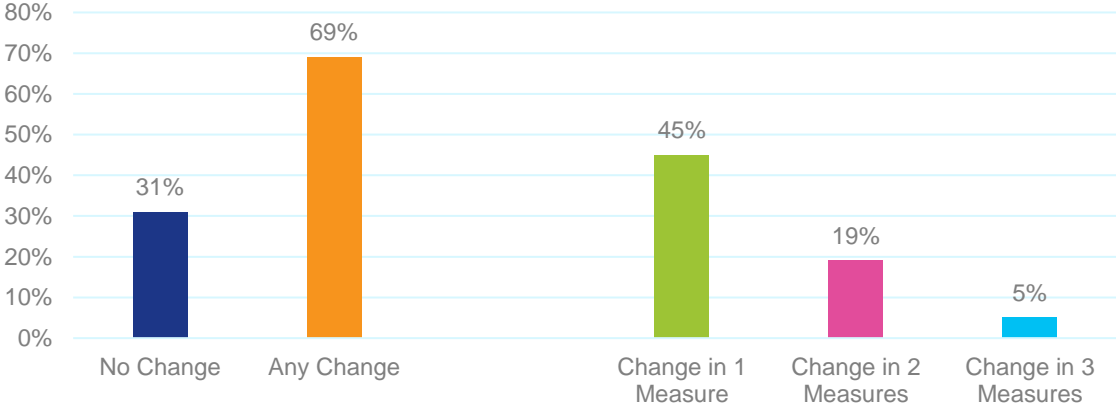
> In order to focus on the degree of instability experienced by children in care in 2015/16 we have identified a group of children with high levels of instability. We have defined **high instability** as the experience of *multiple* placement moves in a year, or a *mid-year* school move, or *multiple* social worker changes in a year. In our analysis, 1 in 3 children in care attending school (35%) had experienced at least one type of high instability over a 12 month period. This includes 1 in 16 children (6%) who experienced high instability across multiple measures. Finally, we estimate that across England as a whole around 220 children experienced high instability across all three measures in the same 12-month period. That means they experienced multiple placement moves *and* a mid-year school move *and* multiple social worker changes, all within in the same 12-month period.

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[3] 7,269 children in care from 22 local authorities aged 5 to 18, who were found in both the 2015/16 Children Looked After Census, 2015/16 Autumn School Census and 2015/16 Summer School Census.

Prevalence of high in-year instability among children in care (pilot sample, attending school)
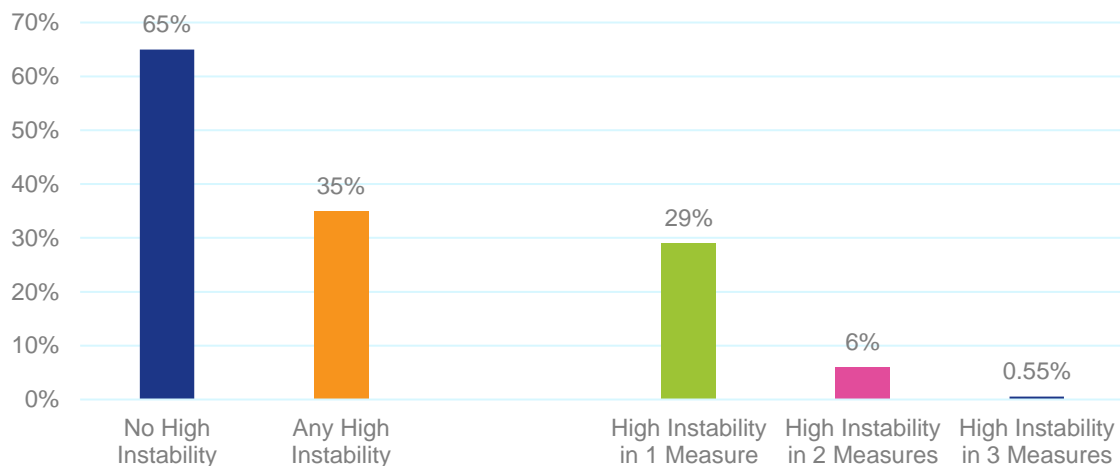
Placement stability

> Information on placement moves in 2015/16 was available for 70,438 children looked after on the 31st March 2016. Nationally, around 3 in 10 children (27%) experienced at least one placement move in the 12 months preceding 31st March 2016. A further 1 in 10 children (10%) experienced multiple placement moves (high placement instability) over this period.

> While there are regional differences in the proportion of children who experienced multiple placement moves, these are not statistically significant once we take the characteristics of children into account. This suggests that regional differences in the rates of multiple placement changes are more likely to reflect regional differences in the profile of children looked after, rather than regional differences in policy and practice.

> At a local authority level, the majority of areas are broadly in line with the national average in terms of the rate of multiple placement moves, once we take the characteristics of children into account. In the few cases where statistically significant differences remain, we are currently unable to judge whether they are due to variations in practice, data quality, data reporting, other characteristics of the local authority or other child factors that we have not taken into account.
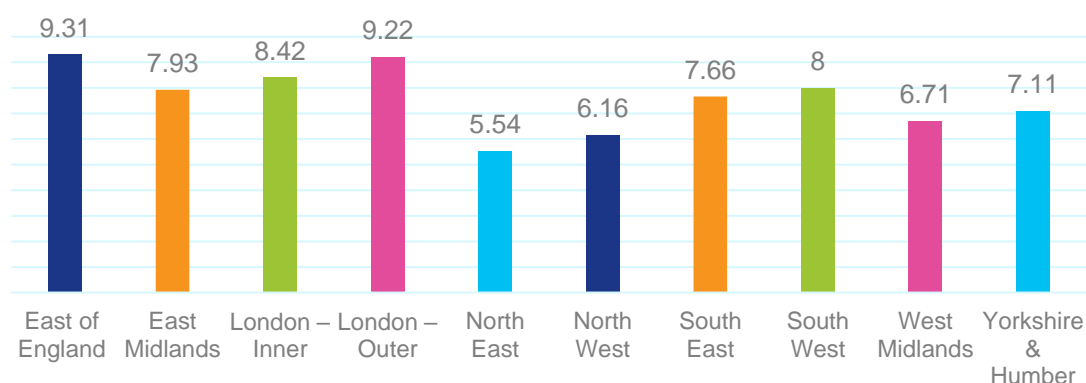
School stability

> We had information on school moves in the 2015/16 academic year for 40,068 children in care attending school in England. We found that 1 in 7 of these children in care (14%) moved schools over the summer (at or by the beginning of the 2015/16 academic year). This is similar to the proportion for all schoolchildren: 1 in 8 (12%).

> We found that 1 in 10 children in care (10%) moved school in the middle of the academic year (high school instability). This is significantly higher than the proportion

for all schoolchildren, which is 1 in 35 (3%).

> Children who experienced a mid-year school move were also more likely to have experienced a placement move, and vice versa. However, more than half (56%) of those who moved school during the academic year had not experienced a placement move – suggesting that other factors (such as exclusions) play a role as well.

> We found some statistically significant regional differences in the proportion of children in care who experienced a mid-year school move, even after controlling for children's characteristics. Overall, it was highest in the East of England and outer London, and lowest in the North East and North West[4]. It is not clear why these differences exist: they could be due to variations in practice, data quality, data reporting, other characteristics of the local authority or other child factors that we have not taken into account.

Percentage of mid-year school moves by region, controlling for differences in children's characteristics between areas

East of England	East Midlands	London – Inner	London – Outer	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Midlands	Yorkshire & Humber
9.31	7.93	8.42	9.22	5.54	6.16	7.66	8	6.71	7.11

Social worker stability

> Of the 12,508 children in our pilot data collection, just over 2 in 5 (43%) did not experience any change in social worker in 2015/16. We found that just over 3 in 10 children in care (31.5%) experienced one change in their social worker over this period.

> A further 1 in 4 children in care (25%) experienced 2 or more changes (high social worker instability). This includes 1 in 10 children (10%) who experienced 3 or more changes in their social worker over this period.

> We found considerable variation across the country in social worker stability. In one local authority 77% of children in care were reported to experience no change in social worker in 2015/16, whereas in another area the figure was only 6%. It is unclear at this stage why such large variation exists, but

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[4] Results are estimated percentage (marginal predicted probabilities) of mid-year school moves by end of May 2016 by region based on a multilevel logistic regression model, controlling for children's age, ethnicity, duration of care, needs status, SEN status and placement moves.

feedback suggests that local differences in data quality and reporting methods could be a factor.

Limitations

> In our workshops, children in care told us that a single year does not fully capture stability. A better understanding of stability for children in care would involve looking at longer term periods of stability and instability.

> Local authorities have told us that some changes in placement and social worker may be inevitable as a child progresses through their care pathway, and that the process of becoming looked after is inherently unstable for a child. Hence the "acceptable" level of instability may vary depending on the context.

> We also recognise that the changes we measure could be positive or negative. Placement moves may be a positive step if they involve the child being placed into a well-matched long-term home. A placement move due to a breakdown after a longer period in care may be a more negative experience. Planned and unplanned moves may have very different consequences for the child. As such, we are not able to show that fewer changes of placement, of school and of social worker change are necessarily desirable outcomes.

> While we have attempted to take important child characteristics into account when exploring regional and local differences, there may be other local factors and trends which impact our measures of stability and confound these comparisons. There may also be local differences in data quality and reporting.

Next steps

> As we show in the technical report that underpins this summary, this data is available for every local authority area and for each region. We are now working with a small number of areas to test the findings with children and local agencies. We will also engage in more depth in these areas to understand their data, the reasons behind placement and other changes in their area, how school and placement moves interact, how to account for planned and unplanned moves, and what features of local service delivery might help explain the results.

> In 2018, we will strengthen the Index with additional data over a longer time period, further analysis of specific groups of children, more refined stability measures, and another pilot data collection. This will put us in a stronger position to comment on differences across local authorities in the degree of stability, and to help authorities use our data to improve provision and outcomes for children in care.

> Through related work on the mental health and wellbeing of looked after children, we intend also to introduce elements of personal experience and identity into the Index so that it captures children's own sense of belonging and relationships as well as administrative measures of their care experience.

> We will bring together national government, local agencies and other organisations to share cutting-edge data analysis that drives improved service provision and child outcomes, working collaboratively to share learning and best practice.

> These are long-term goals. In the meantime, we hope that local authorities, virtual school heads and children will use the Index to shine a light on the issue of stability, and work with us to maximise the value and impact of the Index.