

# 'Relocating Adolescents': The Costs of Out-of-Area Placements as a Response to Extra-Familial Risk/Harm

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## Abstract

In the UK, there has been increased awareness of the harm adolescents face beyond their families. There is no national strategy for safeguarding adolescents. One intervention that comes with particularly high costs is relocation placements by children's social care that move adolescents some distance from their communities. This research aims to contribute to the evidence about the relocation of adolescents exposed to, or at risk of extra-familial risk/harm. The research reported here sought to explore the costs associated with relocation placements. Data were gathered about the time taken to carry out the social work processes associated with relocation placements and about the costs associated with the placements. Two interviews and six focus groups were conducted with twenty-four participants. The findings highlight that each adolescent had a unique context, which was influenced by the type of extra-familial risk/harm. The service response therefore needed to be tailored, and unit costs are presented as a range from £22,000 to £170,000 for six months. There is substantial variability in the use and costs of relocation placements. The findings offer evidence for earlier intervention to avoid extra-familial risk/harm. The financial costs of relocation placements need to be considered within the context of the well-being of adolescents.

**Keywords:** child welfare, extra-familial harm, out-of-home care, relocation, unit costs

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## Background

### Extra-familial risk/harm and out-of-area placements

In the UK, over the past two decades, there has been a shift in the child welfare system with an increased awareness of the types of harm adolescents (young people aged ten to twenty-five years) can face in contexts beyond their families. These harms, commonly known as ‘extra-familial risks/harms’, include sexual and criminal exploitation and peer-on-peer violence and abuse (HM Government, 2018). Multiple high-profile cases of ‘extra-familial risk/harm’, highlighted the inadequacies of social care, police and criminal justice responses to such incidents (see Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014; Firmin, 2017) demanding a conversation about who has a responsibility to safeguard adolescents when they encounter significant harm beyond their families.

The legislation laid out in the Children Act 1989 has previously been interpreted as a duty to safeguard children and young people up to the age of eighteen years from abuse within their families. However, as awareness grew about the significant harm some adolescents experience, primarily outside of their families, this came to be understood as a matter for child welfare agencies (see Ofsted, 2021). This is the context in England, the location of the specific study discussed here.

A child welfare response to significant harm beyond the family includes the prioritising of adolescents’ best interests over criminal justice or punitive concerns, adolescents’ needs being addressed beyond the risk they pose to themselves or others, and resourcing of caring services and support that strengthen adolescents’ safe relationships (Lloyd et al., 2023).

Research by Firmin (2019) identified that when child welfare agencies have not been able to build safety in these extra-familial spaces and relationships, adolescents have been moved away to protect their safety. Discussing child removal in cases of intra and extra-familial harm Firmin notes:

in cases of familial abuse social workers may use many other interventions before this point to try and create safety while preserving the family unit and thereby create physical safety and relational safety and safeguard psychological welfare. There are comparably few interventions used for extra-familial risk and social workers are not trained/equipped to identify opportunities for intervening in peer, school or neighbourhood contexts as part of child protection practice. In the absence of contextual interventions, relocation is one tool that can disrupt

relationships between ‘risky’ public spaces and a young person’s welfare. (Firmin, 2019, p. 534)

As a result, Firmin (2019) suggested that further research was required to establish the rate and cost of relocations, noting that in resource-deficient local authorities oversight of spending on relocations could facilitate debate and guidance on targeting public space risks with public space interventions (minimising the need to move young people away from their communities).

In parallel within the UK, there have been increasing concerns about the impact of austerity on child welfare services and the shift in spending to late intervention services (Franklin *et al.*, 2023). Rising needs and costs in children’s services have been cited as one of the biggest drivers of financial instability experienced by local authorities in recent years (Stride and Woods, 2024). Furthermore, recent research to explore the cost pressures faced by local authority children’s services departments highlighted the difficulties associated with predicting demand for services, in particular for adolescent cohorts who require placements (Holmes, 2021).

The findings presented here are part of a wider research project that explored the rate, cost and impact of out-of-area placements as a response to extra-familial forms of risk/harm (Firmin *et al.*, 2022; Wroe *et al.*, 2023). The research into the rate and impact of relocations identified that approximately one in ten young people known to children’s services teams in England and Wales due to risk beyond their families were relocated (Firmin *et al.*, 2022) and that there is substantial variability in their use across England and Wales and little local or national oversight of their use. The research suggested multiple drivers for this variation, including: the local authority’s strategic position on relocations (specifically their decision not to relocate) and investment in alternative services; the availability of placements; and pressure from partner organisations (primarily the police). Qualitative research with professionals, young people and families also identified that relocations, whilst increasing perceived physical safety, significantly impacted young people’s relationships and emotional well-being and posed some physical safety risks including risks associated with going ‘missing’ from placements and self-harm:

The qualitative reports provided by participants indicate that relocation is a common and a substantial intervention with significant consequences for young people and their families. Despite this, the participant accounts indicate that there are not sufficient planning frameworks or thresholds to determine when relocating a young person would be an adequate response to [extra-familial harm]. Significantly, in the absence of this planning, young people can be relocated to manage physical risk, whilst being exposed to a range of relational and emotional harms, as well as other forms of physical risk, through increased missing episodes

and limited professional relationships and oversight. (Wroe et al., 2023, p. 2974).

Importantly, for many professionals and families, relocations were used as a ‘last resort’ or when there were no alternative means of keeping young people safe. This raised questions about the efficacy of ‘relocations’ for meeting the safety needs of adolescents who are harmed beyond their families and about the resource available to professionals to build safety for young people in the relationships and contexts where they are being harmed.

In addition to the practical limitations of relocations when it comes to building safety around adolescents at risk of harm beyond their families, there are legal and ethical concerns. Over the past years, there has been a gradual decline in adolescents in youth custodial alongside an increase in adolescents secured in residential settings on welfare grounds (Bateman, 2017; Williams et al., 2020; Roe and Ryan, 2022). There has also been a significant increase in adolescents entering the care system for the first time, with this being linked to their experiences of extra-familial risk/harm (ADCS, 2018; Children’s Commissioner, 2019).

Whilst the increased visibility of adolescents in child welfare systems, including in out-of-home care, distance and secure placements, might indicate a promising move away from criminalising adolescents for the harm they have experienced in their communities (as early criticisms highlighted, see Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014), it also indicates that risks in the community are not being addressed. Rather adolescents are being moved away from harmful contexts with significant consequences for their holistic safety needs. Many have cautioned the ways in which child welfare involvement in families has shifted to monitoring, assessment and disruptive interventions at the expense of preventative or restorative support that can alleviate the complex drivers of familial and extra-familial harm and help keep families together (Featherstone et al., 2018).

## Cost of relocations

As outlined above, there is no consistent evidence about the rate or effectiveness of relocation placements in response to extra-familial risk/harm. There are also substantial gaps in the evidence base about the costs associated with these placements or whether they offer value for money. Ward et al. (2008) highlighted some of the complexities and additional costs associated with relocation placements, but their research had a broader focus—all children over the age of ten in out-of-home care, rather than specifically in response to extra-familial risk/harm. They also identified that adolescents with the most complex needs who entered care during adolescence tended to have the worst outcomes and the costliest care pathways. Adolescent entrants into out-of-home care

are also more likely to be placed in high-cost placements, yet there remains a substantial gap in the evidence about the effectiveness of these (Holmes, 2021).

## Aims and objectives

The research outlined in this article aims to contribute to the national picture of the relocation of adolescents exposed to, or at risk of, extra-familial harm in England. It is part of a broader research project that investigated the scale of relocation in different localities in England, Wales and Scotland explored the costs and examined the impact of relocation on the safety of adolescents, their parents/carers and the professionals involved.

The objectives of the broader research project were to:

1. investigate the rate and cost of relocation placements;
2. investigate the experiences of adolescents and their families affected by relocation (due to extra-familial risk/harm) to establish how relocation impacts feelings and experiences of safety;
3. utilise this information to inform national statutory policy and associated guidance on relocation placements; and
4. utilise this information to produce resources for adolescents, families and practitioners.

The findings reported in this article focus on the first of these objectives (cost of relocations) and include an examination of the costs associated with initiating, sustaining and ending out-of-area placements as a response to community risk. The findings from the research project concerning the rate at which relocations are used in England, Wales and Scotland are reported in Firmin *et al.* (2022). Findings related to the impact of relocations on experiences of safety are reported in Wroe *et al.* (2023).

## Methods

This article draws on data captured in focus groups and interviews along with expenditure and budget information provided by the three participating local authorities. A ‘bottom-up’ unit costing approach was utilised (Beecham, 2000). This approach starts with a focus on the smallest components of an activity or service (i.e. Placement finding) and adds them up to provide a total cost. The main advantage of this approach is that it facilitates an exploration of variations in activities and costs, and as such is well suited for the complex and nuanced child welfare system,

particularly for adolescents exposed to extra-familial risk/harm (Firmin *et al.*, 2022; Wroe *et al.*, 2023). To estimate unit costs, data were gathered about the time taken (on average) to carry out the social work processes associated with the decision-making for relocation placements. Data were also collected about the costs associated with relocation placements, comprising placement fees and allowances, as well as the salaries of all involved social care personnel. The data collection methods are detailed below.

## Recruitment of participants

The fieldwork was conducted online, due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, across three areas (local authorities) in England, between April and August 2021. These areas were selected from a larger sample of thirteen areas involved in the broader research project. Purposive sampling was used to select three in relation to the number of adolescents exposed to extra-familial risk/harm. One area had a low rate (0–5 per cent), one medium (5–10 per cent) and one with high use (10–24 per cent) (Wroe *et al.*, 2023).

After the identification of the three local authorities and their agreement to participate in this part of the research project, initial meetings were held in each local authority to identify professionals involved in the procurement of relocation placements, who could contribute to the focus groups and interviews.

## Focus groups procedures and participants

The focus groups aimed to ascertain the time spent on key tasks and activities related to relocation placements. The appropriateness of this method to capture time-use activity data within child welfare services has been discussed elsewhere (Holmes and McDermid, 2012). The first three focus groups were conducted by the researcher leading this cost study and supported by a second researcher, and the subsequent three focus groups were conducted by the latter. Both researchers have several years of experience, and the lead researcher is an expert in child welfare time use and unit cost research projects.

Six focus groups were conducted with a total of twenty-one participants. The decision to use this technique to collect data was based on the understanding that decisions on the processes and support of adolescents who are relocated are taken in the context of specific teams (Acocella, 2012). Therefore, professionals from two key teams (i.e. heads of services and team managers), who were involved in the decision-making process to provide externally commissioned placements, and

(case-holding) social workers who supported adolescents relocated due to extra-familial risk/harm, were invited to share their knowledge and practices. In each local authority, one focus group was conducted with decision-making professionals ( $n=11$ ) and one with social workers ( $n=10$ ) with samples per focus group ranging between two and five participants.

The templates for the time-use focus groups with commissioning professionals and social workers were adapted from previous research using this same method (Ward *et al.*, 2008). In the focus groups with those who were involved in the decision-making process the discussions focused on: activities related to the decision to relocate, specifically focused on placement panels; and activities related to multi-agency decision-making for relocation placements. In the focus groups with social workers, questions under the following themes were explored: organisation of the teams supporting adolescents exposed to extra-familial risk/harm and relocations; activities related to the decision to relocate; activities related to supporting the adolescent in their relocation placement; and the placement review process. In both sets of focus groups, participants were asked to estimate the time taken for the different activities associated with the relocation placements, and, when relevant, to share examples from previous cases they had supported.

## Interview procedures and participants

In two local authorities, interviews were conducted with finance leads ( $n=3$ : in one of the local authorities, two participants joined the interview). These were conducted by the researcher leading this cost study and supported by a second researcher. In the third local authority, the finance lead was not available to meet with the researchers; however, they completed a template and sent relevant finance information by email which was included in the data analysis.

The template for the interviews with finance leads was adapted from previous research focused on the costs of placing children in out-of-home care (Ward *et al.*, 2008). These were semi-structured and focused on placement fees and allowances payments made for relocation placements, staff salaries and organisational overheads.

## Data analysis

As detailed earlier in this article, a 'bottom-up' unit costing approach was utilised. This approach is recognised as an appropriate methodology to capture variations in cost according to differences in the needs and circumstances of children and adolescents and diversity of practice

(Beecham, 2000). The approach has been used previously to examine the costs and outcomes associated with placements in out-of-home care (Ward et al., 2008). This previous research included the development of a conceptual framework which sets out a series of eight social work processes to support children in out-of-home care, from the initial decision to place a child or adolescent, through to them ceasing to be in care (Ward et al., 2008). An integral component of this approach is a time-use study to include the costs of social work time as well as placement fees and allowances (Ward et al., 2008). Data are captured systematically about the different personnel who are involved and whether input is provided by partner agencies.

The findings reported in this article focus on the social work activities associated with relocation placements, categorised into three overarching processes utilising the aforementioned conceptual framework (Ward et al., 2008):

1. decision to relocate adolescents (including moving them to the placement);
2. support provided to the relocation placement; and
3. review of the relocation placement.

The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the data were thematically analysed by the second researcher with the guidance of the lead researcher utilising the conceptual framework developed by Ward et al. (2008). The researchers captured information about the nature and availability of financial data and interviewees sent financial information following the interviews. Summaries were then prepared for each local authority and data from the two focus groups, interviews and any additional documents shared by the participants (e.g. remit of panels) were triangulated to estimate unit costs.

Where participants from the focus groups provided information about their involvement in activities but were unable to provide time estimates these were supplemented from relevant time-use data extracted from existing, published research (Ward et al., 2008; Holmes and McDermid 2012). These supplementary data were recently verified and validated with a sample of nineteen local authorities in England (Bowyer et al., 2018). When finance leads were unable to provide detailed cost information, data were drawn from Section 251 (Department for Education, 2019): an annual return of local authorities planned and actual expenditure on education and child welfare, as part of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The categorisation of organisational overheads was also based on previous research (Selwyn et al., 2009).

The time-use estimates and the associated unit costs for each of relocation processes are set out in the following section. Time-use estimates and unit costs are reported as a range, based on average figures across



the three participating local authorities. Times have been rounded to the closest fifteen minutes.

## Ethics

The ethics committee at the University of Bedfordshire granted ethical approval for this part of the research project. Research participants gave verbal consent to participate in the focus groups/interviews.

## Limitations

The fieldwork was initially planned to be conducted in person; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was shifted online. This change resulted in some minor limitations, particularly regarding sound quality and potential constraints on the group dynamics.

Moreover, the findings presented in this article are from a small-scale exploratory study and are not intended to be representative of all situations where relocation placements are utilised for adolescents deemed at risk of extra-familial risk/harm nor to ensure generalisation. Consequently, there are some limitations with gaps in the data because of small numbers of relocations and a reliance on self-report data for the time-use study. Nevertheless, this article sets out vital contextual information and provides an indicative approach to understanding the costs associated with relocation placements, which has the potential to be replicated, on a larger scale, in the future.

## Findings

As aforementioned, the focus groups facilitated the collection of qualitative data to provide information about the local context of each of the three local authorities. An understanding of the broader issues and context in which child welfare services operate is pivotal to meaningfully analyse time-use data and estimate the costs associated with decision-making and the provision of different types of services ([Holmes and McDermid, 2012](#)).

### Local authorities and extra-familial risk/harm contexts

Participants stressed that each adolescent had a unique context influenced by the type of extra-familial risk/harm, risk level, familial environment and personal characteristics. Building trusting relationships with these adolescents was identified as crucial and participants indicated that

they had structures and specialised teams to provide additional support to this group. However, they identified differences in the way support was provided and how professionals worked. In the local authority with a low rate of relocation, there had been investment in a new service focused on supporting adolescents on the edge of care. In the local authority with a high rate of relocation, participants reported a high turnover of social workers, which was described as compromising relationships with adolescents. Moreover, there were some differences in the groups of adolescents supported by these local authorities: In those with a high and medium rate of relocation professionals talked mostly about adolescents with ‘gang’ affiliation or/and in a context that had put their life at risk.

### Time-use study

As aforementioned, the conceptual framework developed by [Ward et al. \(2008\)](#) to understand how child welfare practitioners use their time was utilised for this study. The approach is based on the time spent for an individual case with a focus on the needs and circumstances of an individual adolescent, and variations in practice, rather than accounting for all time use, usually akin to workload studies. A comparison of the two differing approaches to capturing time use in social work and the relative merits is set out elsewhere ([Holmes et al., 2014](#)). For this study, the conceptual framework was utilised to focus on the professional practice and time spent around the decision to place an adolescent in a relocation placement, support their relocation and review the placement.

The variability of the needs and circumstances of the adolescents was reflected in the time use data, with participants highlighting the vast range of time spent on specific activities to respond to the differing needs and circumstances of the adolescents. Furthermore, even in the local authority deemed to have high rates of relocation placements, the relative occurrences were small, and as such plans to support the adolescents were predominantly individualised, and there were few prior experiences to draw on to inform decisions. The unique circumstances and needs make it more difficult to determine average times for activities, and consequently a range of times and costs are reported in this article—the fieldwork in the three local authorities identified that there is no definitive amount of time for relocation placements where there is potential risk of extra-familial risk/harm. This reflects the findings of [Ward et al. \(2008\)](#) who identified a small group of adolescents who require bespoke out-of-home care, and that often needs cannot be met locally.

The data set out below encompass the time taken from when a decision to relocate is made. Participants indicated that activities were

carried out prior to this decision, often working with families to avoid placement in out-of-home care, with support provided by children's services, partner agencies or a package of support provided by multiple agencies.

Participants in all three local authorities indicated that in most cases it was difficult to find placements that met adolescents' needs (e.g. health, educational and emotional needs), that were safe (e.g. no other rival adolescents were in that placement), whilst also being a place where they could build new relationships. For these reasons, professionals first tried to relocate the entire family, avoiding a placement in out-of-home care, or alternatively using an out-of-area foster care placement, even if that involved paying extra allowances and providing additional resources. When those options failed, professionals would then opt to place adolescents in residential care homes.

### *Decision to relocate*

In all three areas, decisions to relocate adolescents were made as part of 'panel' meetings with groups of senior managers discussing service responses. Data were captured about the activities leading up to the panel meeting, during the meeting and any resulting actions. As shown in [Table 1](#), activities were broken down for the different personnel involved in the panel meeting. The time use estimates reported are per adolescent, not for the entire panel meeting. Participants reported that the number of relocation cases discussed at panel varied substantially—some weeks it was none and in the local authority with high rate of relocation some weeks several cases were discussed.

Participants in the local authority with a high rate of relocation reported that social workers indicated on the panel paperwork that '*the young person cannot stay in the area*' and described the panel as a place to reflect on what is best for each adolescent and the costs associated with different options. Panel was expressed as frequently exploring alternative options to relocations, and to some extent was perceived as challenging the assessment of social workers. On the other hand, participants in the local authorities with medium and low rates of relocation considered that panel was a place where value for money was discussed and where the recommendations of social workers and their managers were accounted for and mostly supported. This aligned with the culture of avoiding relocation and trust in social workers' and managers' recommendations.

The most time-intensive part of the process was post-panel, which included finding an appropriate placement for the adolescent. Participants reported substantial variability determined by the availability of provision and the needs and circumstances of the adolescent. Participants were not able to provide specific time estimates but offered examples of

**Table 1.** Processes, activities and time spent (range) on the decision to relocate.

Process	Main activities	Time spent (range) in hours and minutes
Pre-panel	Social workers with the support of managers, prepare papers for panel Administrators share papers with panel members Panel members read papers before panel	3 h 30 min to 12 h 45 min
Panel	Social workers, managers or head services present papers at panel Panel members discuss the possible relocation Administrators or another member of panel take minutes of the discussion and update case file	1 h 45 min to 3 h
Post-panel	Social workers with the support of managers, find a placement that meets the needs of the adolescent	38 h 15 min <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Time spent for these activities is taken from previous research (Ward et al., 2008; Bowyer et al., 2018) in lieu of specific time use figures being provided by participants. These figures reflect the reported complexities associated with placement finding activities for adolescents with complex needs.

substantial amounts of time being spent over several days, by multiple professionals trying to find a placement.

### *Support provided to the relocation placement*

Once adolescents are moved to relocation placements they need ongoing support. The central focus of this process was on the time spent by the adolescents' allocated social worker. Participants in the three participating local authorities highlighted the need for work to be carried out immediately after the adolescent had moved to help settle them into their new placement and to arrange access to necessary support services. Participants highlighted a variety of challenges. They focused mainly on the distance, the reduction of in-person meetings, and the consequent implications for the relationship between adolescents and social workers. They also indicated that often adolescents would need to join long waiting lists for services such as mental health services, and that even if the adolescent had been on a waiting list for a specific service in their own area, new referrals were necessary, which led to delays in accessing these services.

Social workers reported that they would usually visit once every four weeks, each visit lasting approximately one hour. The frequency of in-person meetings varied according to the needs and circumstances of the adolescent and whether safeguarding concerns remained despite the relocation. The travel time for each visit was disproportionate to the length of visit, with travel in some cases taking up to four hours each way. Social workers also reported ongoing telephone contact with adolescents in between the in-person visits. Furthermore, social workers

**Table 2.** Process, activity and time spent (range) on monthly support provided to the relocation placement.

Process	Main activities	Time spent (range) in hours and minutes (per month)
Support placement	Setting up additional services Conduct visits Stay in contact with adolescent	33 h 45 min to 42 h 15 min

indicated that referrals to services, ensuring physical and mental health support, and making education arrangements (where applicable) added to the time spent to support the relocation placement. When discussing time to support relocation placements on an ongoing basis, social workers indicated disproportionate levels of activity in comparison with other adolescents that they were supporting. In [Table 2](#), we provide time estimates per month based on the number of visits and meetings estimated with the social workers and supplemented with time use data from previous research with a similar population ([Ward et al., 2008](#); [Bowyer et al., 2018](#)).

### *Review of the relocation placement*

In England, all placements for children in out-of-home care are subject to review at statutory timeframes. Participants in the focus groups indicated that the main aim of the review was understanding if the placement met the needs of each adolescent, whilst also reflecting on when would be the best time to move the adolescent back to the area (i.e. when risks had been mitigated). Within this process, we identified less variability in the time taken for reviews. In two of the local authorities if the placement was deemed to be ‘high cost’ it was also reviewed at a separate panel. In one of these additional meetings also happened monthly to ensure the monitoring of the placement.

The figures presented in [Table 3](#) include activities prior to the review or panel meeting, during the meeting and any actions resulting from the discussions.

### **Legal interventions**

In England, approximately three-quarters of children in out-of-home care have a legal order whereby the decision to place them in out-of-home care has been made as part of (family) court proceedings ([Department for Education, 2020](#)). The findings from this study indicated that relocation placements also encompassed legal orders, such as Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) or Mental Health Sectioning as well as

**Table 3.** Processes, activities and time spent (range) on review of the relocation placement.

Process	Main activities	Time spent (range) in hours and minutes
Standard review panel	Prepare and read papers Discuss papers Update case file	13 h <sup>a</sup>
Specialised review panel	Prepare and read papers Discuss papers Update case file	5 h 45 min
Additional meeting	Meeting	45 min

<sup>a</sup>Time spent for these activities is taken from previous research (Ward et al., 2008; Bowyer et al., 2018) in lieu of specific time use figures being provided by participants.

Care Orders (as part of family court proceedings). The trend of an increase in the use of DoLs in England has recently been highlighted by Roe and Ryan (2022) and is counter to efforts to progress anti-oppressive practice in children's social care.

Furthermore, the costs associated with obtaining these different legal orders can be extensive and participants reported that where restrictive legal orders had been obtained their time spent was increased exponentially. The costs associated with Care Orders have been reported by Ward et al. (2008) who highlight substantial variability in the estimated costs, reporting an average cost of £4,864. Research by Shah et al. (2011) indicated that the estimated average cost of a single DoL assessment was £1,277. The costs associated with mental health tend to focus on those associated with in-patient stays rather than the application for the legal order; consequently, there is not a comparable unit cost of sectioning an individual as a result of Mental Health (McCrone et al., 2008).

### Unit costs

As a precursor to providing financial data, the participating local authorities were asked whether they could distinguish the costs associated with relocation placements resulting from extra-familial risk/harm, from other placements. All local authorities reported a disconnect between their financial recording systems and child-level information (needs and reason for placements), although some manual work had been carried out in one of them to link data and examine the fees and allowances being paid to placements out-of-area of the authority in accordance with the needs and circumstances of the adolescents. The disconnect between finance and child-level data reflects findings from previous research (see Holmes and McDermid, 2012). Furthermore, the inability to link financial and child-level data negates the potential to assess the value for money of placements (Suh and Holmes, 2022).

**Table 4.** Unit costs of relocation processes.

Process	Unit costs (range)
Pre-panel	£165–791
Panel	£166–176
Post-panel	£1,678–1,821
Placement support (monthly)	£1,402–1,659
Standard review panel	£606–665
Specialised review panel	£258–433

Participants from all three local authorities indicated that the placement fees and allowances for relocation placements constituted some of the highest for children in out-of-home care. Often the placements were provided by the private and independent sector and/or were deemed to be specialist provisions to meet specific needs. Furthermore, participants indicated that in most instances the placement fees and allowances were paid by children's services and that arrangements for joint funding with partner agencies (such as education and health) were in the minority. Only one of the local authorities was able to provide data about placement fees—these ranged from £690 to £6,300 per week. Relocation placements were cited as being the most expensive of these. For comparison, nationally applicable placement unit costs for out-of-authority placements in England average £3,682 per week (Curtis and Burns, 2020).

Following the identification of the range of times for the processes outlined above, the activity data were linked to salary and overhead information to calculate unit costs. The unit costs per hour for each of the personnel were multiplied by the times reported in Tables 1–3 and the unit costs for each of the processes, reported as a range, are detailed in Table 4.

As demonstrated throughout the preceding sections of this article, the findings indicate substantial variation in the activities and consequently unit costs associated with relocation placements. Taking all the processes together along with the cost of placement fees and allowances it is possible to present low and high estimates of unit costs of relocation placements. Utilising the lowest unit costs for each of the processes, and lowest reported placement fees and allowances, the low estimate for a placement lasting six months is in the region of £22,000. In contrast, using the highest unit costs for each of the processes, highest reported placement fees and allowances, plus the cost of a DoL assessment, the upper-end estimated unit cost is in the region of £170,000. The qualitative and contextual data gathered as part of the focus groups and discussions with finance leads suggest that the unit costs are likely to be weighted towards the top end of this range. These cost estimations highlight the variability in the needs and circumstances of the adolescents

who experience relocation placements, along with differences in the service response, and decision-making processes between local authorities in England. Furthermore, although this is a small-scale feasibility study, the findings indicate that where relocation placements are provided, these are some of the costliest for local authorities.

## Discussion

### Variations in costs

In all three local authorities, participants consistently indicated the individualised nature of making decisions to relocate adolescents deemed to be at risk of extra-familial harm. Reflecting this, we reported a range of unit costs, setting out the different types of decision making, levels of activity and variations in the fees paid for placements. Despite the variability, presenting a range of unit costs moves us closer to explore the complexity of decision making and the nuanced approach required to support adolescents and their families. Variability in the costs of child welfare is not a new issue, and concerns were first raised in the late 1990s about the delivery of effective child welfare and an appropriate cost (Knapp and Lowin, 1998). Since then, few studies have attempted to offer explanations by setting out potential sources of cost variations in children's social care (Beecham, 2006). Through this small-scale feasibility study, we hope to increase awareness of the relevance of exploring variations in unit costs, and offer a methodological approach that incorporates qualitative methods into economic evaluation of child welfare services. The time-use study also offers a way to explore the complexity associated with social work decision making and commissioning of relocation placements.

### Defining and attributing outcomes

A fundamental issue highlighted early in this article is the gap in evidence about the outcomes associated with or attributed to relocation placements. The disconnect between finance and child-level data systems reported in this article exacerbates the difficulties of attributing outcomes, and it is evident that within the three participating local authorities, analysis was not being carried out to examine the outcomes being achieved by the relocation placements. Furthermore, Firmin et al. (2022) highlighted that relocation placements were often considered to be a step towards a specific outcome rather than an outcome per se.

Within the field of child welfare, difficulties attributing outcomes are commonplace (Sebba et al., 2017; La Valle et al., 2019; FitzSimons and McCracken, 2020). Furthermore, Parr and Churchill (2020) argued that



the needs, services and outcomes of families need to be viewed holistically, and that there is a myriad of socio-economic factors that are outside of the control of local authority children's services departments. This is also central when considering the service response to extra-familial risk/harm, and how adolescents can be diverted, or moved from immediate safeguarding concerns within their community.

## Early intervention

Relocation placements in response to extra-familial risk/harm are not commonplace, and even in the local authority categorised as having a high rate of relocations, the numbers constitute a small proportion of adolescents who are placed by children's services. Avoidance of relocation placements, particularly relocation as part of a legal order rather than a voluntary arrangement, was considered a 'last resort'. Alongside this perspective, there is a growing recognition and a developing evidence base of the need to support adolescents at risk of extra-familial harm through holistic interventions that create safety in young people's communities and subsequently avoid placements in care (see e.g. [Firmin and Lloyd C, 2020](#)). In recent years, the largest growing cohort of children entering care are those in the adolescent population, thought to be a result of extra-familial harm ([Children's Commissioner, 2019](#); [Bennett \*et al.\*, 2020](#); [Holmes, 2021](#)).

## Costs to the public purse

For the most part, the costs associated with relocation placements are met by child welfare. More broadly, there has been a growing recognition that costs should be studied from a holistic multi-agency viewpoint instead of looking at children's services in isolation ([Hannon \*et al.\*, 2010](#); [La Valle \*et al.\*, 2019](#); [Holmes, 2021](#)). This becomes particularly pertinent in analyses of costs that progress to assessing costs within the context of longer-term outcomes, and subsequently value for money. Incorporating the long-term perspective is an intrinsic difficulty for child welfare, whereby often benefits, financial or social, are not realised for some time ([Ward \*et al.\*, 2008](#); [Feinstein \*et al.\*, 2017](#); [Bowyer \*et al.\*, 2018](#)).

## Conclusion

Supporting adolescents and their families where there is extra-familial risk/harm is a developing component of child welfare services in England. This article sets out preliminary work to understand the financial costs associated with service responses to extra-familial risk/harm

where it is deemed that adolescents cannot be safeguarded in their locality. The study did not seek to assess the cost–effectiveness of relocation placements in response to extra-familial risk/harm—that will be a necessary future endeavour. However, the position of the findings reported here, alongside the qualitative research (Wroe et al., 2023), highlights the need to consider financial costs within the context of collective moral and societal responsibilities to provide the right services, at the right time, to achieve the best possible outcomes and safeguard adolescents. Relocation placements are not an outcome per se, but a step in a pathway that needs to be carefully considered within the context of the impact of the relocation on the mental health and well-being of the adolescents, and the unintended negative consequences of disrupting supportive and positive relationships with families, peers and schools (Wroe et al., 2023).

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