Final draft

Research on differences in the looked after children population

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Leading Social Services
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Executive summary

Remit

This research was commissioned by the All Wales Heads of Children's Services, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Association of Directors of Social Services. It seeks to provide insight into the following research question:

Why do local authorities with similar levels of need, have different looked after children populations?

Methodology

The diagram below shows the overall framework for this project. A 'whole system' perspective was taken, recognising that a wide range of factors may affect the total number of looked after children (LAC) within a local area, i.e. factors that affect the flow of children into looked after services, factors affecting the return of children to families, and factors affecting the exit of looked after children through other permanent solutions, e.g. adoption.

Figure 1: Summary of the range of functions considered by the research
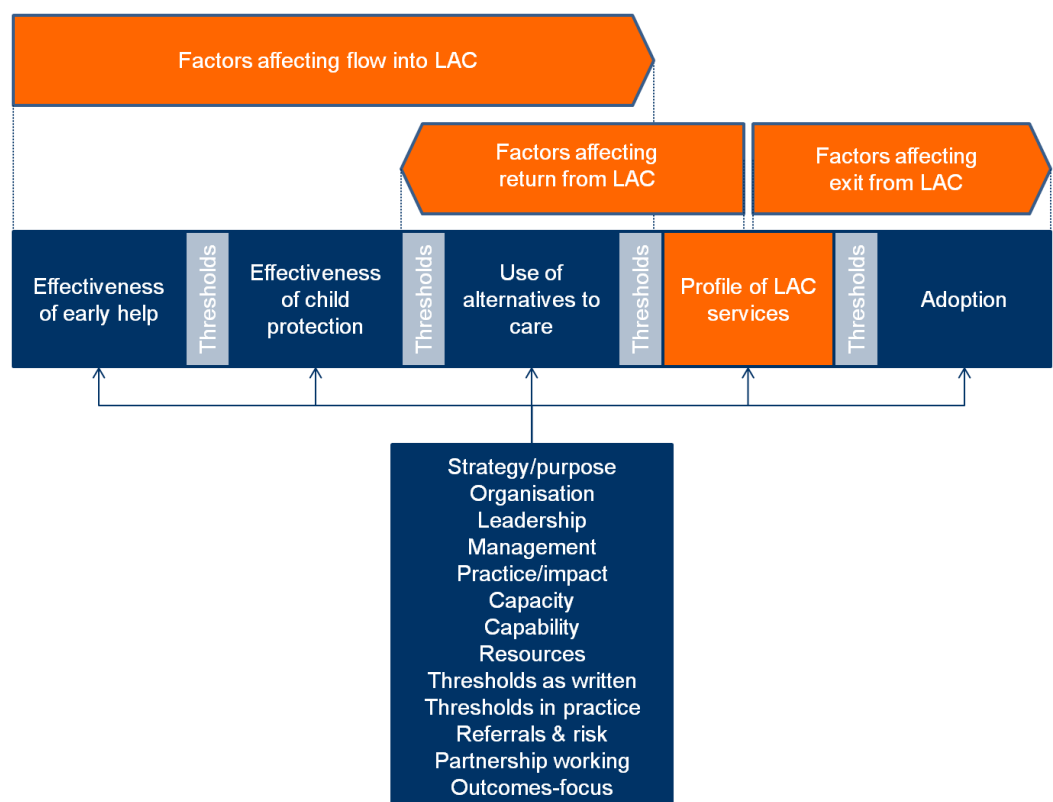
The research took a case study approach. The following areas were identified, and agreed, to participate in the research: Bridgend, Denbighshire, Newport, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Torfaen. Our approach to fieldwork and analysis broadly followed the framework of a Nested Analysis, i.e. a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data which enables comparisons to be made. The range of evidence included:

- Analysis of statistical data relating to the numbers, rates and characteristics of looked after children. This was undertaken for all 22 local authorities in Wales, but concentrated on the five case study areas.

- Review of inspection reports and annual performance letters from the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales and Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales for the five case study areas.

- Analysis of 154 policies, procedures, protocols and other documentation provided by each of the five local authorities.

- Review of other research and literature that has been completed in connection with the research question.

- In-depth interviews and focus groups with 229 practitioners, managers and senior leaders across the five case study areas including representatives from the local authority, local health board, police, voluntary and community sector and other agencies/services working with children and young people.

Trends

- In 2012, the number of looked after children in Wales ranged from 80 (in Ceredigion) to 595 (in RCT). Within our case study areas, Denbighshire has the lowest number of looked after children (160), followed by Newport (275), Torfaen (300), Bridgend (345) and RCT (595).

- In 2012, the average number of looked after children per 10,000 in Wales was 90. However, rates between local authorities range from 53 (in Flintshire) to 166 (in Neath Port Talbot). Within our case study areas, two local authorities (Denbighshire and Newport) had rates below the Wales average, whilst three (RCT, Bridgend and Torfaen) had rates above the average.

- Between 2005 and 2011, the Wales average rate of looked after children increased by +17.3 per 10,000 children and young people. Across local authorities this trend varied from a reduction in the looked after children rate of -34.8 (Blaenau Gwent) to an increase of +61.6 (Torfaen). Within our case study areas, the rate of change has varied from -2.5 (Newport) to + 61.6 (Torfaen).

Findings

Some variation in the numbers and rates of looked after children across local authorities can be explained by differences in the demographic and socio-economic profile of each local authority. This is especially the case in relation to population size, deprivation and the proportion of households that are lone parent families. These demographic and socio-economic factors, however, only go part of the way to explain differences between local authorities.

Other aspects affecting the numbers and rates of looked after children relate to factors more within the control of the local authority and their partners – especially the way that local areas lead, organise and deploy their services for vulnerable children and families. Our research highlighted five main areas that can help to reduce the numbers of looked after children. These are:

- **Strategy and leadership:** the key characteristics relate to whether there is a strategy in place to reduce the numbers of looked after children and, if there is, the extent of buy-in from the full range of roles and partners working with children and their families. To be successful, such a strategy needs to genuinely prioritise the improved outcomes that can be achieved by: (a) preventing need from escalating; (b) responding appropriately to disadvantage and to safeguarding concerns; and (c) maintaining a focus on discharging children from being looked after.

- **Prevention and early intervention:** prevention and early intervention can be used to reduce the number of looked after children where the full range of stakeholders are bought in to the objective and to the ability to reduce need from escalating and to support children and families out of statutory services (step down). As a result, prevention and early intervention needs to be appropriately resourced and part of a coherent continuum of support and intervention for children and families. Such initiatives have greater success at reducing the numbers of looked after children when they are long-standing and embedded and where there are clear, robust mechanisms in place to measure outcomes for children and families. Finally, to be successful and have maximum buy-in from stakeholders, senior managers need to recognise that the management of risk is more dispersed and that practitioners need to be equipped with appropriate skills and experience to reflect this and have access to appropriate leadership and management support.

- **Approach to practice:** local authorities who have relatively low numbers of looked after children have a clearly defined approach to social work practice and give practitioners and managers sufficient time to implement this approach with children and families. This is complemented by robust and effective quality assurance mechanisms in place with a clear organisation-wide process in place for learning from quality assurance findings. This results in a system that is focused on improving outcomes for children and families. As part of this, there is an effective mechanism in place to allocate appropriate resources and support to children based on need, rather than on status or designation.

- **Partnership working:** effective partnership working is important in achieving a relatively low rate of looked after children. The partners that have particular influence are the courts, CAFCASS and the council legal team. Where local authorities have relatively low rates partnership working is characterised by effective collaborative working focused on improving outcomes for children; a culture of mutual support and challenge; and a high degree of trust in local authority assessments and practice in its work with vulnerable children and families.

- **Information and intelligence about performance:** local areas with relatively low rates of looked after children collect high quality information and intelligence that gives them insight into how effective the system as a whole is at protecting and supporting vulnerable children. A second important element is that this information is regularly used throughout the organisation to change and improve practice.

Conclusions

Our research suggests that there is no 'magic number' for the rate of looked after children that would help a local area calculate whether numbers are 'too high' or 'too low'. This is because the number of looked after children in a local area is a result of a complex interaction of demographic and socio-economic trends as well as factors connected to the way the local area leads, organises and deploys its services for vulnerable children and families.

Nevertheless, there are a range of reasons why local areas may wish to implement actions that could help to reduce the number of looked after children. For instance, a number of reasons are connected with the early help agenda, i.e. the benefits and moral obligation to intervene early before issues arise and become complex. There is also a possible benefit in terms of costs and there is an emerging policy focus on reducing numbers. For those local areas that wish to reduce the number of looked after children, our research has identified 23 characteristics that should be in place in order to increase the likelihood of success. These factors are explored in detail in the main report and summarised in Figure 2 below.

These characteristics could be developed into a tool that local areas could use to self-evaluate their progress in reaching their objective of a system that has a relatively low – yet still safe – number of looked after children. We recommend that the All Wales Heads of Children's Services consider taking such a tool forward. Finally, during our research we encountered a high degree of interest in exploring in more detail how rates in Wales compared to other nations, in particular England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We believe that this could be a valuable line of enquiry and recommend that the All Wales Heads of Children's Services consider undertaking or commissioning such a research project.

Figure 2: Conclusions drawn from the research

Factors that can help reduce the number of looked after children in a local area
A. Strategy and leadership
A1. An explicit strategy is in place to reduce the number of looked after children
A2. The strategy is effectively and continuously communicated by all members of the senior leadership team
A3. There is Corporate and Elected Member buy-in to the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children
A4. There is buy-in from partners from outside the local authority and especially from the courts
A5. The key reason for reducing the number of looked after children is to improve outcomes for all children (including those who may become looked after) and only secondarily about tackling financial pressures
A6. The strategy and any actions designed to implement the strategy focus equally on between reducing the number of children who enter the system and on increasing the number of looked after children exiting the system
A7. Practitioners, managers and leaders from within the local authority and from other partners have opportunities to regularly review in an open and constructive way the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children and this feedback is responded to in a timely manner
B. Prevention and early intervention
B1. All relevant stakeholders – but especially social workers and their managers – believe that targeted prevention and early intervention can stop needs from escalating
B2. There is a willingness and capacity to invest in evidence-based prevention and early intervention and to allocate an appropriate level of resources
B3. Prevention and early intervention initiatives are embedded and long-standing
B4. Prevention and early intervention forms part of clearly communicated, effective and coherent continuum of support and intervention for families and this is enabling effective step-up and step-down of support to meet need
B5. Prevention and early intervention services have clear objectives and robustly measure their impact
B6. All relevant stakeholders are bought into the strategy to, and implications of, locating more risk further down the system

Factors that can help reduce the number of looked after children in a local area
C. Approach to practice
C1. There are robust and effective quality assurance (including Independent Reviewing Officer) functions in place
C2. There is a clearly defined approach to social work practice in place that is understood and (where relevant) implemented by all relevant stakeholders
C3. Staff working with children and families – and especially social workers – have sufficient time allocated to provide appropriate support and interventions to children and families, and in particular, to looked after children
C4. There is a clear outcomes-focus to casework
C5. Resources that are allocated to a child reflect need, rather than the specific designation of that child, e.g. that they are looked after or are subject to a child protection plan
D. Partnership working
D1. There is strong collaborative working in place between all agencies working with children and families
D2. There is a culture of mutual support and challenge
D3. Courts, CAFCASS and the council's legal team agree with the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children and/or trust local authority assessments and practice in relation to vulnerable children
E. Information and intelligence about performance
E1. Stakeholders collect high quality information and intelligence that gives insight into how effective the system as a whole is working to protect and support children
E2. This information is regularly interrogated and used to improve service provision and support

1 Remit & context

1.1 Remit of this research project

This research was commissioned by the All Wales Heads of Children's Services, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Association of Directors of Social Services.

It seeks to provide insight into the following research question:

Why do local authorities with similar levels of need, have different looked after children populations?

By 'similar levels of need', we mean similarities in terms of:

- Population size and density.

- Deprivation and socio-economic profile.

- Family composition and household size.

By 'different looked after children populations', we principally mean different numbers of looked after children (LAC) in relation to the total population of children and young people (i.e. rate per 10,000 children and young people).

The research is focused on local authorities in Wales and took place over the period October 2012 to April 2013.

1.2 Context

1.2.1 Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action

The growth in numbers of looked after children – and other children in need – is highlighted as one of the key societal changes that forms the context for *Sustainable Social Services: A Framework for Action* (2011), which is the Welsh Government's strategy for social services. This strategy also highlights the financial pressures faced by central and local government and its partners in delivering social services and that radical solutions are required to ensure that services and support remain sustainable, as government cannot "buy a way forward"[1].

In relation to families with complex needs the strategy highlights four key priorities:

- Supporting families to care for their children.

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[1] Page 6.

- Where children need to be looked after, to have greater stability in their placements, friendships, school lives and those who provide support.

- To ensure that children living in Wales who need to be looked after are accommodated and rehabilitated in Wales, close to their home or neighbouring community, unless there is a good reason not to do so.

- To act sooner to find permanency or replacement families for those children for whom a return is not in their best interest. As part of this the strategy notes that: *"Two-thirds of children return home within the first six months, but this reduces to only a fifth after a year in care. Success of early return is contingent on "early" influence factors, including the quality of attachment between the child and family, and the parents' attitude – their motivation, participation and their willingness to accept planned social work intervention. Evidence suggests that as time in care passes, there is less will on the part of families, children and practitioners for re-unification."[2]*

1.2.2 Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Bill

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Bill – which was introduced to the National Assembly for Wales on 28 January 2013 for consideration and scrutiny – seeks to address these priorities. For instance, it seeks to establish a National Adoption Service in order to prevent unnecessary delay and duplication that can impact negatively on looked after children. It will also help to build skill, capacity, efficiency and equality of delivery in relation to adoptions and bring greater focus to authorities' placement strategies and increase the importance of adoption in creating permanence for looked after children. The Bill also proposes improvements to assessment, planning and review and the establishment of a National Eligibility Framework in order to ensure greater equity in access and continuity of care and to make more effective use of resources.

1.2.3 Sustainable Social Services for Wales: Local Government Implementation Plan

The Local Government Implementation Plan responds to *Sustainable Social Services for Wales.* It proposes a number of initiatives, programmes and actions designed to address the key issues within the strategy. Of particular relevance to the strategy's concerns about rising numbers of looked after children are actions in the Implementation Plan designed to:

- Improve commissioning, local intelligence and the way need is assessed for current and future services. These actions are designed to support key stakeholders to work with each other to develop and implement service models that will meet that need within available resources.

- Strengthen safeguarding. Of particular relevance for children are: clarifying the resource implications and responsibilities for safeguarding across all agencies (ensuring that there is stronger and shared accountability), ensuring a fit-for-

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[2] Page 19.

purpose approach to delivering safeguarding, and a sustained focus on safeguarding outcomes.

- Strengthening and improving integrated services.

1.2.4 Local Government Expenditure in Wales: recent trends and future pressures

This report, produced by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, does not highlight any specific financial pressures related to the numbers of looked after children. It does, however, highlight that social services account for 23% of net service spending in Wales in 2012-13. It also highlights that the spending per person on social services varies from £410 in the Vale of Glamorgan to £636 in Neath Port Talbot. It notes too that the average spending per head on social services is £487 in Wales compared to £397 in England.

The report also notes that since 2009-10 the overall spending power of Welsh local authorities has fallen by 6.5% (or 7.9% per person). There is, however, significant variation between local authorities with reductions ranging from 12.9% (13.5% per person) in the Isle of Anglesey to 1.0% (or 5.1% per person) in Cardiff. These reductions have not been applied evenly to all services. For instance, spending on social services has been relatively protected, falling on average by 3.8% per person. It further notes that this is likely to be connected by expectations of the Welsh Government that spending on social services should be protected[3]. The extent to which social services has experienced a reduction in funding varies between local authorities, for instance: between 2009-10 and 20012-13 spending on social services fell by 13.8% in Newport, whereas it rose by 5.5% in Carmarthenshire.

1.2.5 CSSIW Chief Inspector's Annual Report

The 2011-12 report of the Chief Inspector of the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales also highlights the impact of growing numbers of looked after children. For instance:

> *There are four local authorities in Wales each with more than 400 looked after children – Cardiff, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea. There are three local authorities with a rate of looked after children in excess of fifteen per thousand population, Neath Port Talbot (16.7), Merthyr Tydfil (15.5) and Torfaen (15.1). Local authorities need to consider the rate of looked after children that they think is appropriate for their population, alongside outcomes for children in need and looked after children. They need to ensure that their services are focussed on promoting and safeguarding the welfare of children as currently children in need have poorer outcomes than looked after children.*

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[3] Page 31.

It notes some of the challenges faced by local authorities with high numbers, e.g. securing sufficient foster carers, avoiding the inappropriate use of residential care or out-of-area care, and maintaining a focus on outcomes and plans for permanence.

The report also highlights the variability in rates between Wales and England, and between local authorities in Wales. It notes that:

> *It is, however, important that we get as full an understanding of [these differences] as possible, because this has significant implications in terms of practice, resources and capacity to meet this ever increasing demand, particularly in the current financial climate.*

Finally, the Chief Inspector's report notes that policy and strategy in Wales has an emphasis towards trying to keep children with their families where possible. However, it also notes that evidence suggests that children who are looked after have better educational achievement than children in need. This raises the question of how to improve outcomes for those children if local authorities are being asked to commit to keep them with families where safe to do so.

With this context in mind, this research project has been commissioned in order to understand why variation in the numbers of looked after children exists. This, in turn, will help local authorities and their partners draw conclusions about effective practice, impact, equity and cost effectiveness.

2   Methodology

2.1   Governance

A steering group was established to guide the research project. The group consisted of:

- Amanda Lewis, Head of Children's Services at Powys County Council;

- Mike Nicholson, Head of Children's Services at Newport City Council;

- Leighton Rees, Head of Children and Family Services at Denbighshire County Council;

- Tony Young, Service Director Children's Services at Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council; and

- Emily Warren, Policy Officer, Children's Health and Social Services at the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

This group provided input into various aspects of the research including: choice of case study areas, framework for the review, lines of enquiry, consultation frameworks, and draft reports. Further information is provided below.

2.2   Research framework

A framework to guide the research project was agreed in collaboration with the steering group. This was designed drawing on previous research and literature on looked after children's services (see section 5). In addition, it reflected the practice, management and leadership experience of members of the steering group.

The framework is summarised in Figure 3. It takes a 'whole systems' perspective and reflects the fact that there may be a range of different factors that could affect the number of looked after children (LAC) within a local area. Some factors may be about the flow of children into looked after children's services. Other factors may relate to the exit of children out of looked after children's services, e.g. rehabilitation back home or seeking alternative permanent arrangements, e.g. adoption. Finally, the framework reflects that both 'flows' of children may be affected by the way services are led, organised, managed and run.

Figure 3: Summary of the range of functions considered by the research
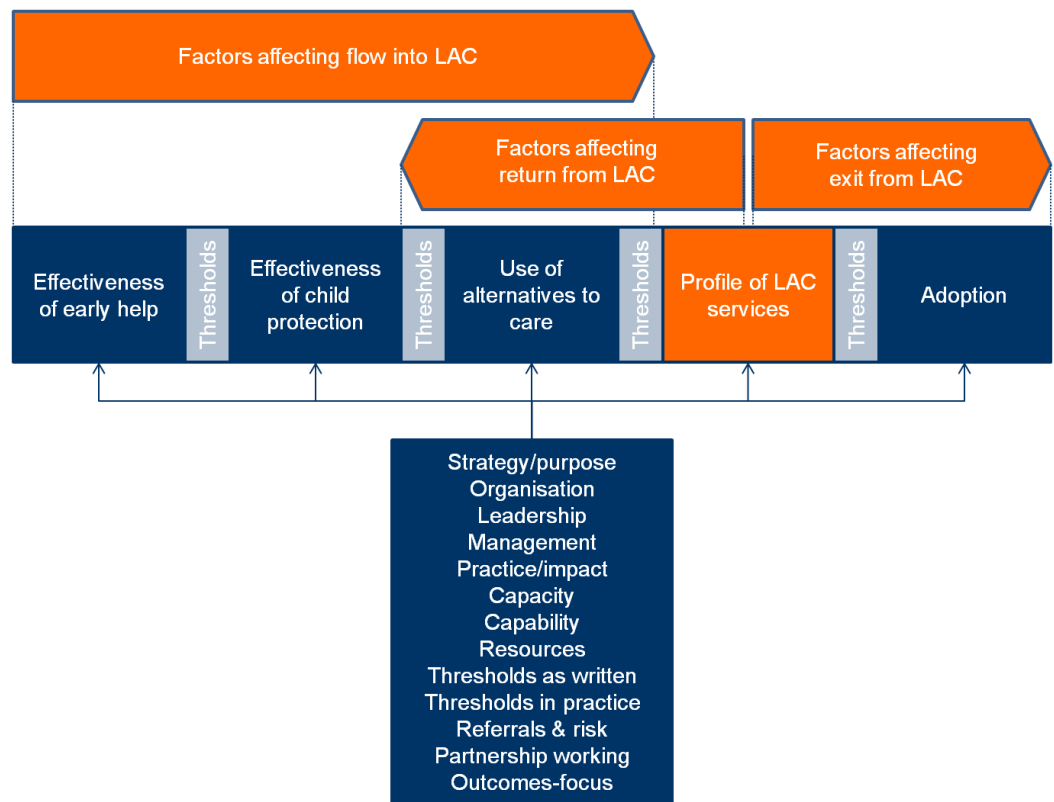
The framework affected the research as follows:

- It influenced the decision to take a case study approach. For instance, it highlighted the need to understand how the system as a whole functions and how different aspects connect and inter-relate. It highlighted that some of this understanding would need to be at a broad strategic level but also might involve understand the system on the ground and in minutiae. It also emphasised the need for comparability and for understanding how local areas differ and how they are alike. The number of case study areas chosen would need to enable us to generalise across Wales.

- It guided the design of the consultation framework. Specifically, it ensured that stakeholders were asked to comment, where appropriate, on all aspects of support for children who may become looked after.

- It helped the steering group to agree that fieldwork should involve a range of stakeholders from within the local authority but that it should also encompass other stakeholders who work with looked after children or who somehow influence the way the system as a whole operates.

2.3 Case study areas

Five areas were invited – and agreed – to be case studies as part of this research. These were:

- Bridgend

- Denbighshire

- Newport

- Rhondda Cynon Taf

- Torfaen

These areas were selected using demographic data, socio-economic information, data on the numbers and rates of looked after children (see section 3 for further information), and insight from members of the steering group. They were chosen to reflect as far as possible the main premise within the research question, i.e. local authorities that share similar profiles of need but have different looked after children populations.

2.4 The evidence base

Our evidence base broadly follows the requirements of Nested Analysis, i.e. a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, which enables comparisons to be made[4]. It involved:

- An analysis of statistical data relating to the numbers, rates and characteristics of looked after children and the services that support them[5]. These are explored more fully in section 3. It includes information about all 22 local authorities in Wales as well as more detailed information about the five case study areas.

- Review of inspection reports and annual performance letters for the five case study areas' local authority social services functions produced by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (CSSIW). In addition, we examined inspection reports of local authority education functions as undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn).

- Interrogation of a range of policies, procedures, protocols and other documentation provided by each local authority case study area. The volume of material analysed is summarised in Figure 4 below.

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[4] Liberman, E.S. (2005) Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research in *American Political Science Review*, Vol 99, No 3.

[5] See www.statswales.gov.uk for further information.

Figure 4: Summary of documentation reviewed

Case study	Number of documents reviewed
Bridgend	43
Denbighshire	26
Newport	21
RCT	21
Torfaen	43
Total	**154**

- Analysis of other research and literature that has been completed in connection with the research question. These documents are summarised in section 5.

- In-depth qualitative research with the full range of stakeholders involved in working with children who may become looked after. Research consisted of a mixture of face-to-face interviews and focus groups and leadership, management and practice roles were included. Interviews were completed by a senior member of the team. Focus groups were facilitated by a senior team member, with an additional researcher involved to take notes. A total of 229 stakeholders were consulted. A semi-structured consultation template was used to guide discussions in each case and which reflected the 'whole systems' approached highlighted above. A copy is available in appendix 2. Figure 5 below summarises the stakeholders involved in the research with more detailed information provided in appendix 1.

We would like take this opportunity to record our thanks to all those people who participated in the fieldwork. We really appreciate the time they were able to spend with us to explore the range of issues involved. Their honest, constructive feedback was extremely helpful in supporting the development of findings and conclusions.

Figure 5: Number of stakeholders consulted in each case study area

Case study area → Stakeholder ↓	Bridgend	Denbighshire	Newport	RCT	Torfaen
Face-to-face interviews with…					
Local authority children's services senior managers, e.g. Director of Social Services, Head of Children's Services, Service Manager for Looked After Children, Service Manager for Child Protection, and Service Manager for Early Intervention.	11	7	8	6	4
Other stakeholders, including Elected Members and representatives from CAFCASS/GSSLBT, the council's legal team, the voluntary and community sector, the courts, police, schools, the local health board, Public Health Wales, and the local authority corporate team.	9	6	10	6	10
Focus groups with…					
Independent Reviewing Officers and other quality assurance roles.	7	2	8	7	3
Early intervention (from the local authority and other relevant agencies)	6	6	6	6	3
Child protection and children in need services (from the local authority and other relevant agencies)	13	7	13	17	17
Looked after children's services (from the local authority and other relevant agencies)		5	11	7	9
Total number of stakeholders consulted	**46**	**33**	**56**	**49**	**45**

2.5 Analysis

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative research detailed above were recorded in a matrix. This required each finding to be allocated to one or more of the functions or dimensions which are highlighted in Figure 6. This helped to ensure the 'whole systems' perspective was maintained throughout the analysis stage. The matrix was then interrogated by individual team members and conclusions then scrutinised as a team. Further quality assurance and robustness checks were completed by another team member who had not been involved in the qualitative research.

The draft report was reviewed by the steering group and amendments were made to reflect comments received.

Figure 6: Headings for the analysis matrix

Functions	Dimensions
• Preventing need from escalating • Protecting children quickly • Keeping children with their families where appropriate • Removing children from their families where appropriate in a timely fashion • Returning children to their (birth) families where appropriate and in a timely fashion • Using 'relative fostering' or Residence Orders and Special Guardianship Orders in an appropriate and timely fashion • Using adoption where appropriate and in a timely fashion	• Strategy/purpose • Organisation • Leadership • Management • Practice/impact • Capacity • Capability • Resources • Thresholds as written • Thresholds in practice • Referrals & risk • Partnership working • Outcomes-focus

2.6 Structure of this report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 3 presents information about the trends in the numbers and rates of looked after children across Wales and, in particular, for the five case study areas.

- Section 4 presents the main findings from our research, taking into account our document review, data analysis and fieldwork.

- Section 5 highlights the extent to which other research in this field supports our findings.

- Section 6 puts forward conclusions.

3 Trends

3.1 Introduction

This section explores some of the main trends in relation to the number and rate of looked after children in Wales. We have used the following key throughout:

*Figure 7: Key for charts used throughout this report*

1	Blaenau Gwent	13	Pembrokeshire
2	Caerphilly	14	Powys
3	Cardiff	15	Swansea
4	Carmarthenshire	16	Vale of Glamorgan
5	Ceredigion	17	Wrexham
6	Conwy	B	Bridgend
7	Flintshire	D	Denbighshire
8	Gwynedd	N	Newport
9	Isle of Anglesey	R	Rhondda Cynon Taf
10	Merthyr Tydfil	T	Torfaen
11	Monmouthshire	W	Wales average
12	Neath Port Talbot		

3.2 Numbers, rates & changes over time

3.2.1 Number of looked after children

Figure 8 shows that in 2012, the number of looked after children in Wales ranged from 80 (in Ceredigion) to 595 (in RCT). Within our case study areas, Denbighshire has the lowest number of looked after children (160), followed by Newport (275), Torfaen (300), Bridgend (345) and RCT (595).

Figure 8: Number of looked after children (2012)
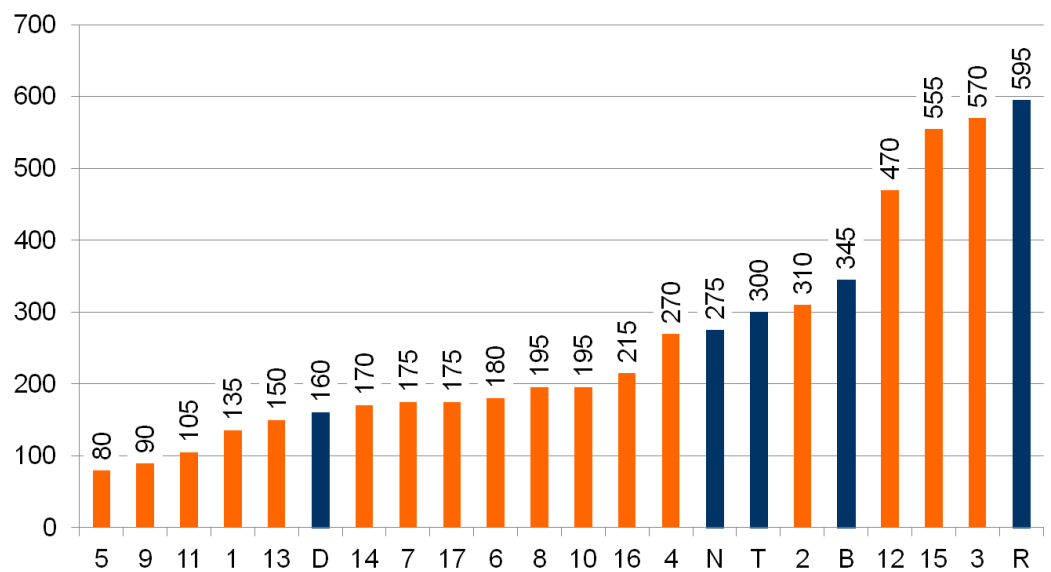
3.2.2 Number of looked after children per 10,000 children & young people

Figure 9 shows the number of looked after children as a proportion of the total population of children and young people. In 2012, the average number of looked after children per 10,000 in Wales was 90. There was marked variation, however, in the rates across local authorities, ranging from 53 (in Flintshire) to 166 (in Neath Port Talbot). Within our case study areas, two local authorities (Denbighshire and Newport) had rates below the Wales average, whilst three (RCT, Bridgend and Torfaen) had rates above the average[6].

Figure 9: Rate of looked after children (2012)

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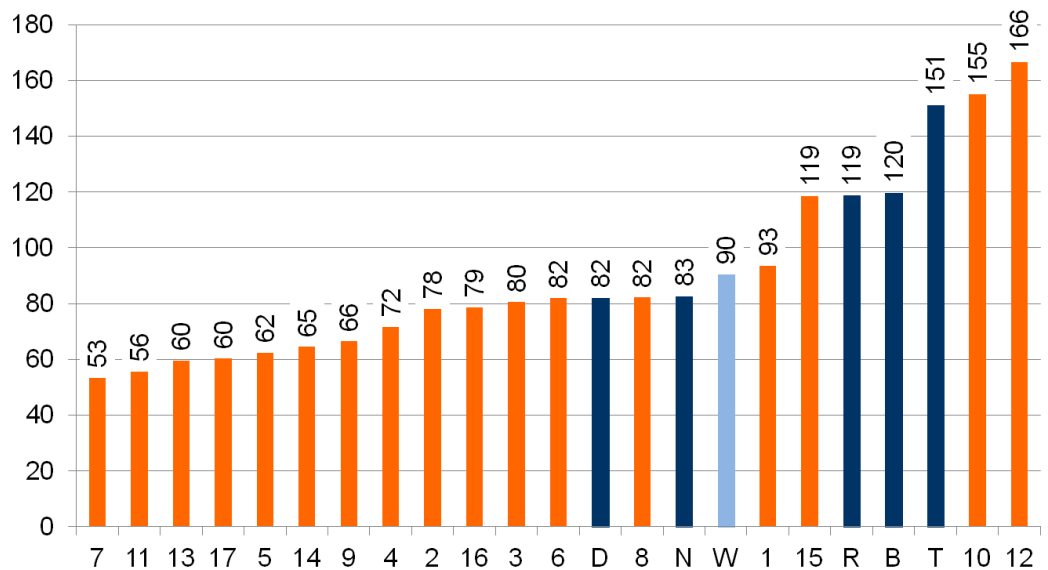
[6] Appendix 3 compares LAC rates in local authorities in Wales with local authorities in England. This shows that on average the rates of looked after children are higher in Wales than in England. The focus of this research project is on why local authorities within Wales have different LAC populations. However, we believe that further research could usefully be undertaken to help understand why local authorities in Wales with similar levels of need as local authorities in England have different LAC rates. Further insight may be gathered by making this a four nations study, incorporating Scotland and Northern Ireland.

3.2.3 Trends over time

Figure 10 shows that local authorities in Wales have experienced different changes in the rate of looked after children over time. For instance, between 2005 and 2011 the Wales average rate of looked after children increased by +17.3 per 10,000 children and young people. Across local authorities this trend has varied from a reduction in the looked after children rate of -34.8 (Blaenau Gwent) to an increase of +61.6 (Torfaen). Within our case study areas, the rate of change has varied from -2.5 (Newport) to + 61.6 (Torfaen).

Figure 10: Change in the Looked after children rate (2005-11)
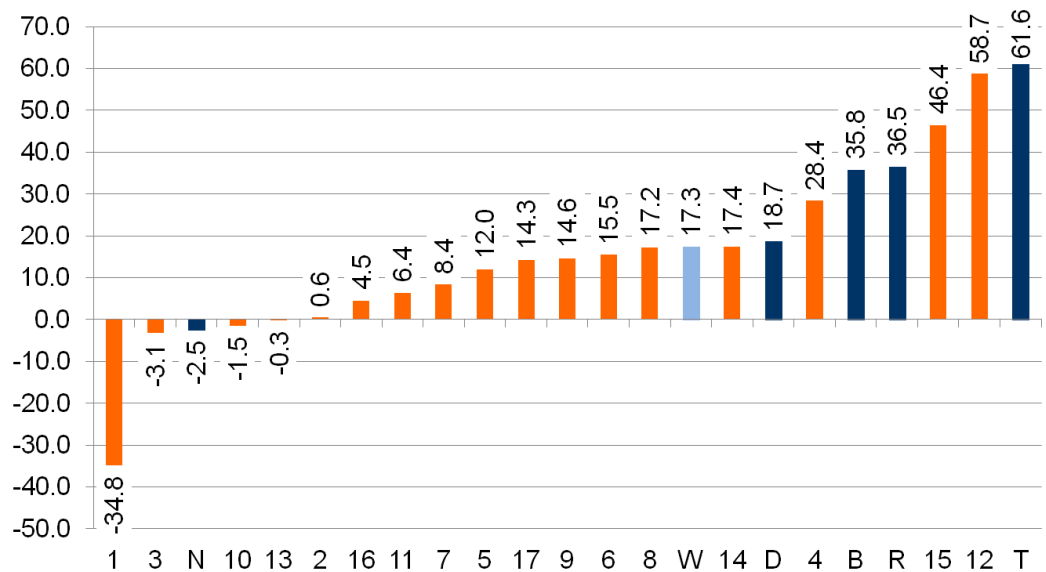
More detailed information about trends for the five case study areas is provided in Figure 11. It shows that over the period, Bridgend and RCT have experienced relatively similar trends. This was also the case for Newport until about 2010, after which the rate of looked after children started to decline. Since 2010, Torfaen's numbers have increased much quicker than the other local authorities. Denbighshire experienced a different overall trend from the others until 2009, when they too experienced increases. From 2011 they have experienced a reduction.

Figure 11: Changes in rates over time for the five case study areas
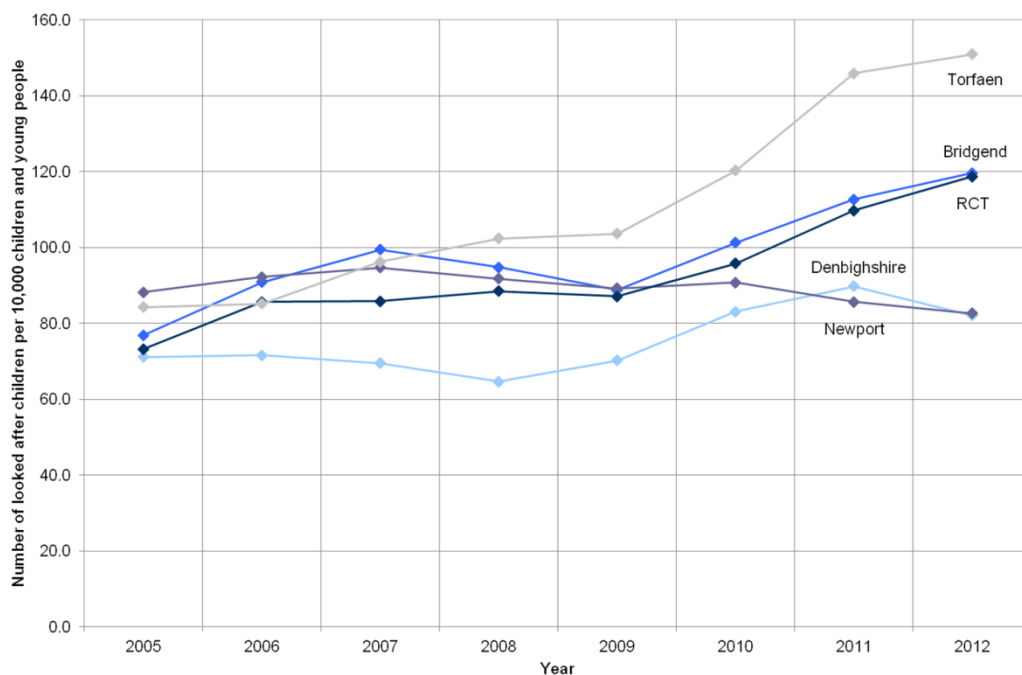
3.2.4 Rate of Children in Need

Figure 12 shows that the although the focus on our research is on why local authorities have different rates of looked after children, the same question could be posed for all Children in Need. The chart suggests that local authorities with similar levels of need have different Children in Need populations. It also shows that those with high rates of Children in Need (excluding looked after children) are also more likely to have high rates of looked after children.

Figure 12: Rate of Children in Need (minus children who are looked after) compared to the rate of looked after children (2011)
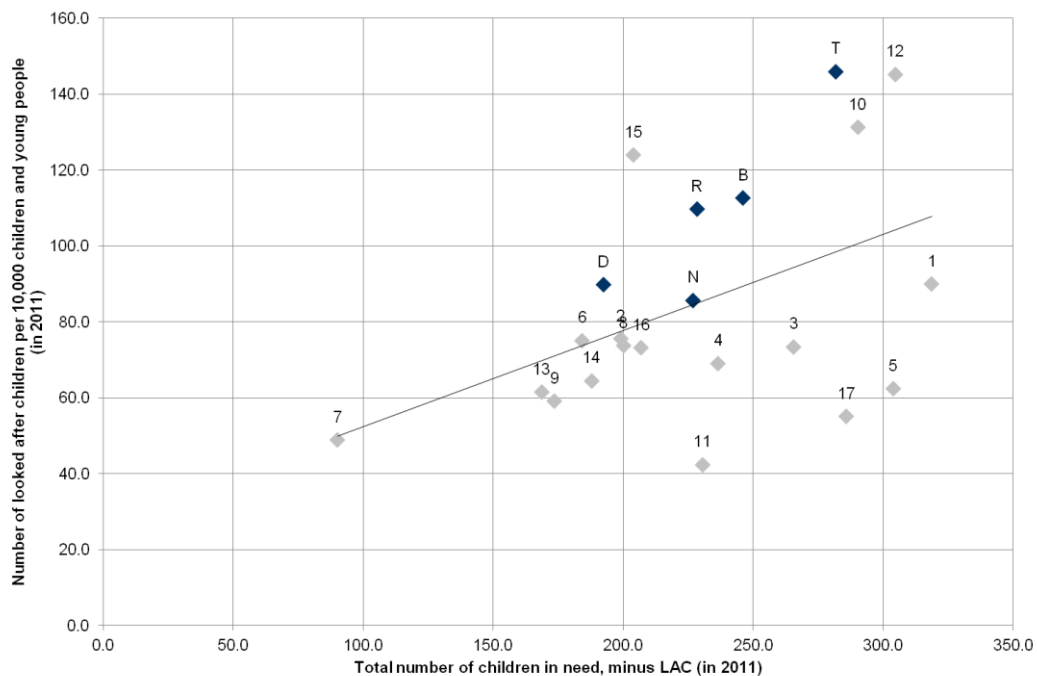
3.3 Impact of demographic and socio-economic factors

As part of our research, we tested the assumption built into the research question, i.e. do local authorities with similar levels of need, have different looked after children populations? Our analysis[7] showed that:

- Local authorities with similar profile of ages of children and young people have different LAC rates.

- Local authorities with similar average household sizes have different LAC rates.

- Local authorities with similar population densities have different LAC rates.

- Local authorities with similar proportions of their population from Black and minority ethnic groups have different LAC rates[8].

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[7] See appendix 3 for data.

[8] This is in contrast to other research, see Janzon, K & Sinclair R: Needs, Numbers, Resources: Informed planning for looked after children in *Research Policy and Planning* (2002) Vol 20 No 2

- Local authorities with similar levels of housing overcrowding have different LAC rates[9].

Our analysis also suggested that three key factors helped to explain some of the differences in LAC rates between local authorities. These are:

- Population size;

- Deprivation; and

- Lone parent households.

That said, these factors did not go all the way to explain the differences in LAC rates. Further information is provided below.

3.3.1   Differences by population size

Comparing the number of looked after children with the total population of children and young people is an effective way of comparing differences between areas of different sizes. However, these rates do not take into account the fact that the numbers of looked after children do not fall evenly across any population. For instance, if the average rate of looked after children is 90 per 10,000 it does not necessarily mean that in each group of 10,000 children you will find 90 that are looked after. As an example, in an area of 20,000 children, on one occasion, you may require a cohort of 15,000 children to reach a total of 90 looked after children, and on the next occasion only 5,000 children to reach a total of 90 children. Taking each cohort individually there appears to be a difference in rates, i.e. 60 per 10,000 and 180 per 10,000. But when the cohorts are combined the average still comes to 90 per 10,000. The main conclusion from this is that the larger the base population the more likely this variation evens-out. The smaller the base population the more likely the area is to being subject to this statistical variation[10].

Figure 13 takes this into account by calculating the Poisson distribution which helps to understand the degree of statistical variation that may occur in the rate of looked after children due to differences in the overall size of each local area. The Poisson distribution is the 'funnel' in the chart below and shows the upper and lower limits of statistical variation due to the size of the population. The middle line shows the mean average rate of LAC across all 22 local authorities. Figure 13 shows that those local areas within the funnel share similar rates, whilst those outside the funnel have rates that are very likely to be below or above the average.

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[9] This is in contrast to other research, see Janzon, K & Sinclair R: Needs, Numbers, Resources: Informed planning for looked after children in *Research Policy and Planning* (2002) Vol 20 No 2

[10] For a more detailed, yet still layperson's, explanation please see: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/28/bad-science-diy-data-analysis

This suggests that the size of the population goes some way to explain why local authorities with similar populations have different LAC rates. Nevertheless, once population is taken into account, some differences remain. For instance, Denbighshire and Torfaen have similar sized children and young people populations, but different LAC rates. This is similarly the case for Newport and Bridgend[11].

Figure 13: Rate of Looked after children (expressed per 1,000 children and young people) compared to the children and young people population (2012)


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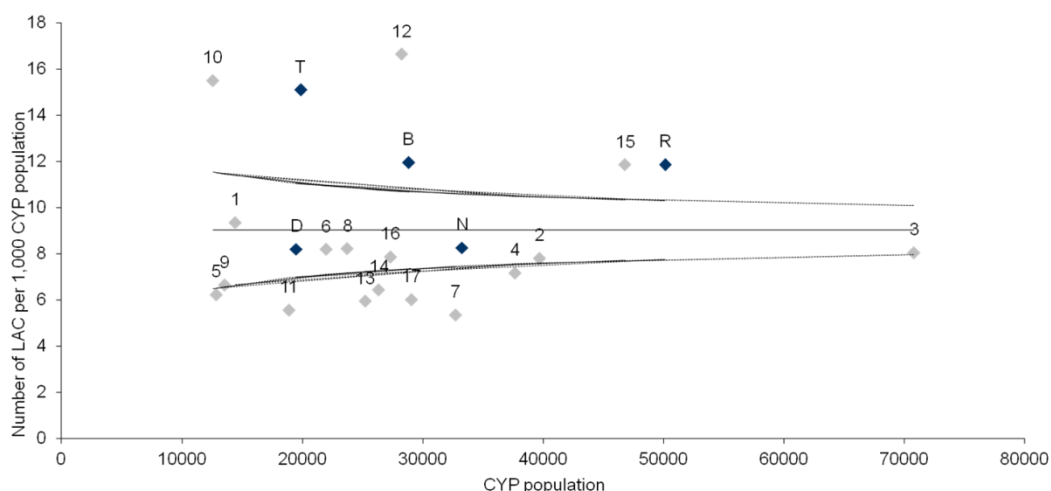
[11] When rates in local authorities in England are taken into account a different picture emerges. This suggests that a smaller number of local authorities in Wales have 'average rates' of LAC given their population size. These are Ceredigion, Flintshire, Isle of Anglesey, Monmouthshire, Pembrokeshire and Powys. No local authority in Wales has a LAC rate below the combined Wales and England average. All other local authorities in Wales have a LAC rate above the combined England and Wales average. Further information is included in appendix 4 and gives further weight to our suggestion that a comparative study between Wales and England, Scotland and Northern Ireland could be valuable.

3.3.2   Differences by deprivation

Figure 14 shows the LAC rate for each local authority in Wales compared to the percentage of Lower Layer Super Output Areas in the 30% most deprived in Wales, according to the income deprivation affecting children index. A trendline has been added which shows the 'line of best fit' given the data on each of the 22 local authorities.

The chart suggests that deprivation may go some way in explaining differences in LAC rates between local authorities, i.e. the higher the level of deprivation, the higher the number of children per 10,000 who are looked after[12][13]. However, differences still remain. For instance, Bridgend and Torfaen share relatively similar levels of deprivation but have different LAC rates. This is also the case for Newport and RCT. Connected to this, the chart suggests a 'funnelling out' of the rate of looked after children as deprivation increases, i.e. rates of looked after children vary more widely as deprivation increases. This implies that the way that local areas and local services respond to deprivation may go some way to explain differences in the rates of looked after children. This is explored further in section 0.

Figure 14: LAC rates compared to deprivation affecting children
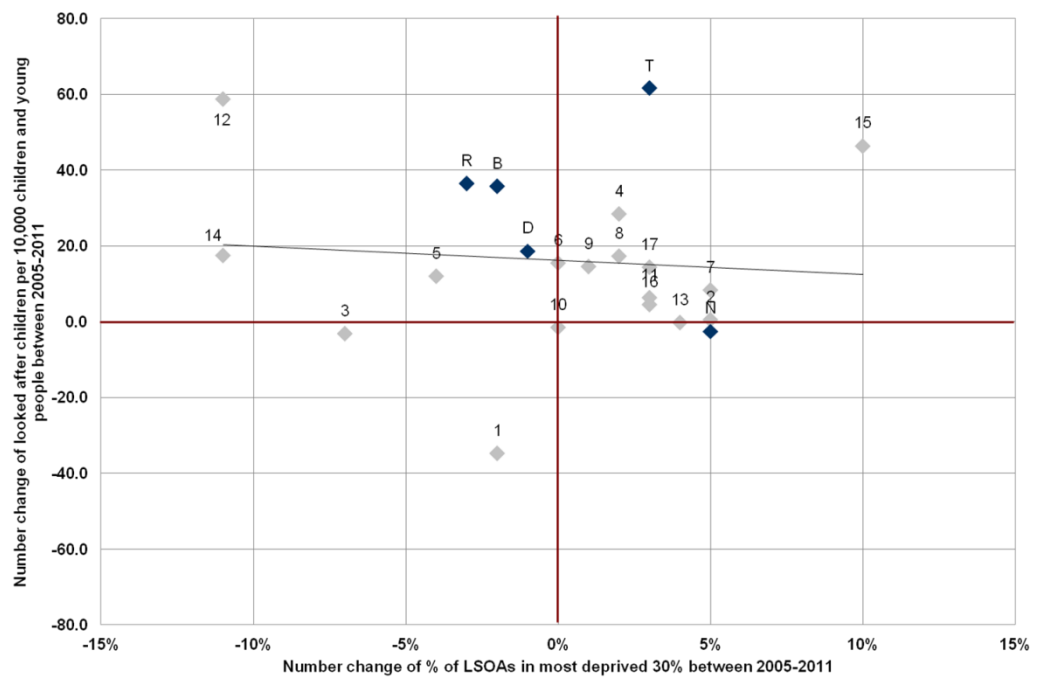

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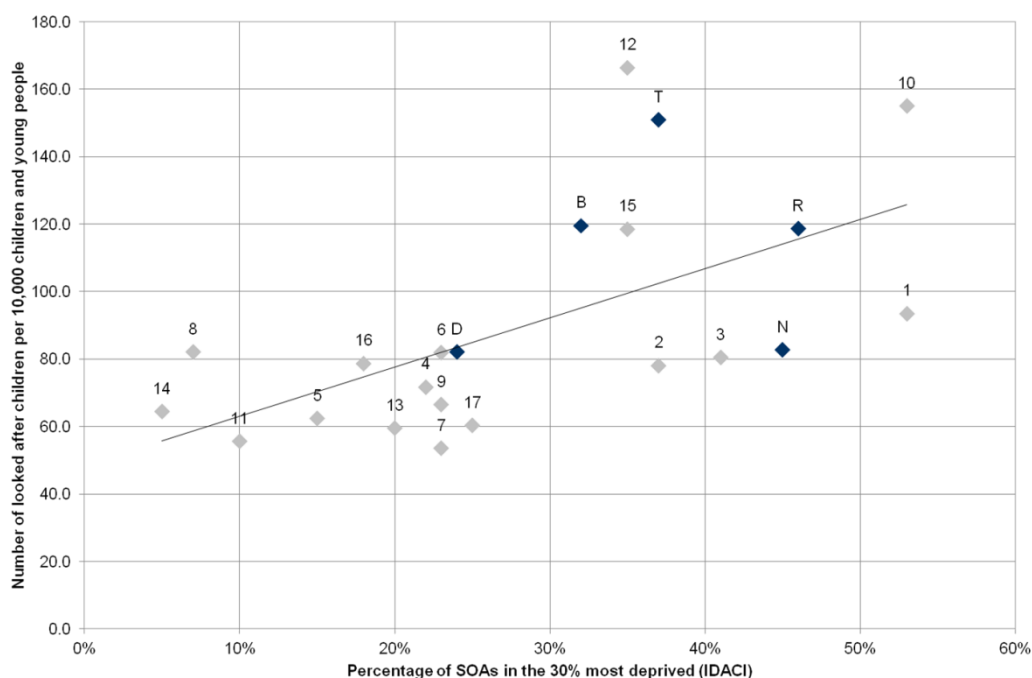
[12] This is consistent with other research, see Janzon, K & Sinclair R: <u>Needs, Numbers, Resources: Informed planning for looked after children</u> in *Research Policy and Planning* (2002) Vol 20 No 2

[13] This is also the case when data on local authorities in England is included. Unfortunately, data on the Index of Multiple Deprivation is presented in different ways in Wales and England. As a result, data on economic activity is used instead. See appendix 4 for further information.

Interestingly, Figure 15 suggests that there is not a strong connection between changes in deprivation and changes in LAC rates. For instance, an increase in deprivation over time does not appear to result in higher LAC rates. Also, local authorities with similar changes in deprivation have experienced different changes in LAC rates, e.g. Denbighshire, RCT and Bridgend experienced similar improvements in deprivation over time, but experienced different changes in LAC rates. Similarly, Torfaen and Newport experienced similar increases in deprivation over time, but experienced different changes in their LAC rates.

Figure 15: Changes in the LAC rate compared to change in deprivation (2005-11)

3.3.3   Differences by lone parent households

Our data analysis also suggests a connection between LAC rates and the percentage of lone parent households in a local authority. Figure 16 suggests that the higher the proportion of lone parent households, the higher the rate of LAC[14]. Nevertheless, there are divergences. For instance, Bridgend, Torfaen and RCT have similar proportions of lone parent households, but different LAC rates.

Figure 16: LAC rates compared to percentage of households that are lone parent families

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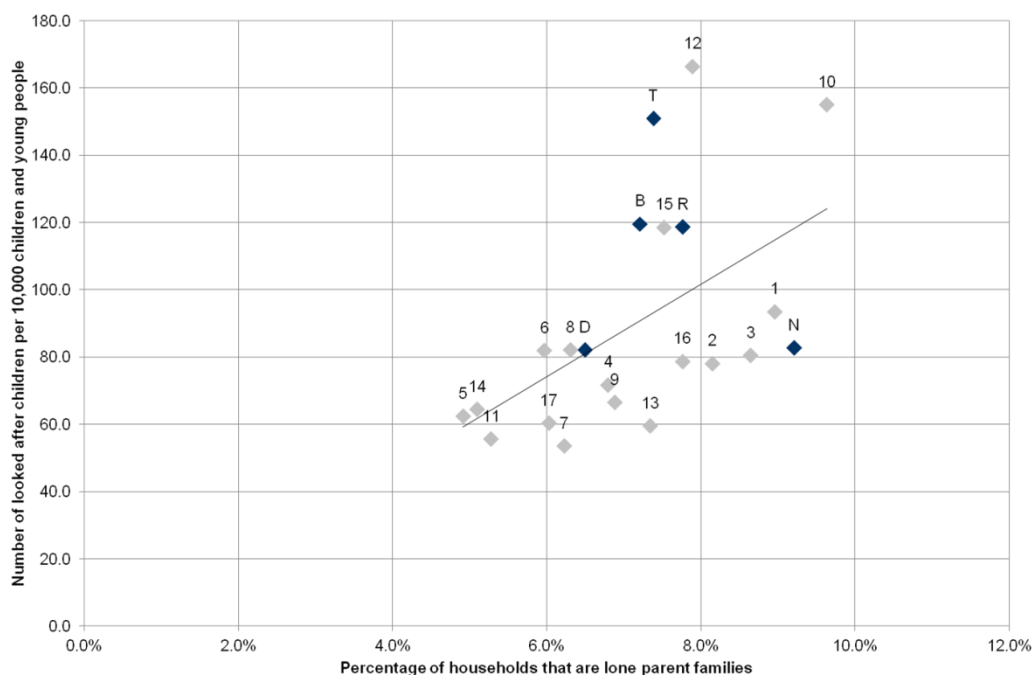
[14] This is consistent with other research, see Janzon, K & Sinclair R: <u>Needs, Numbers, Resources: Informed planning for looked after children</u> in *Research Policy and Planning* (2002) Vol 20 No 2

4   Findings

4.1   There is no 'magic number'

During our fieldwork, a large number and wide range of stakeholders emphasised that they felt there is no 'magic number' for the rate of looked after children in a local area that would determine whether numbers are 'too high' or 'too low'. We agree with this overall conclusion. For instance, stakeholders across all the case study areas are relatively confident that there are probably only a very small number of children who are not looked after but who could be made safer by being so. Stakeholders agreed that this is principally about individual cases and does not represent a 'systemic failure' to protect children, although everyone needed to continue to be vigilant. This view was consistent across all case studies regardless of the relative rate of looked after children. Equally, stakeholders across all case study areas tended to agree that there were only a very small number of children who are looked after who shouldn't be. Stakeholders were more likely to agree that there are some children within the system who should be discharged from LAC but due to operational pressures remain LAC.

That said, our research highlighted a number of factors that – if put in place – could reduce the number of children who become looked after and/or increase the number of children who are no longer looked after. These factors relate to:

- Strategy and leadership.

- Prevention and early intervention.

- Approach to practice.

- Partnership working.

- Information and intelligence on performance.

We have organised our findings by these themes in the sections below.

4.2   Strategy & leadership

4.2.1   Existence of a strategy to reduce the numbers of looked after children

The LAC rate tends to be lower in those local authorities which have an explicit strategy to reduce the numbers of looked after children. Such a strategy exists in three out of the five case study areas and these areas tended to have the lower rates (taking into account demographic and socio-economic factors). What this strategy looks like varies between these three local authorities. In one, it is expressed as one of the key drivers for local authority children's services performance. In another, the reduction in numbers is a by-product of an overarching strategy to improve outcomes for children and young people. And in

the third, it is one of a number of initiatives/programmes designed to help improve outcomes and also tackle financial constraints.

Our fieldwork suggests that these strategies are particularly successful where there is:

- **Strong articulation of the strategy:** Leadership teams articulate the strategy to every part of their organisation, as well as other partners and stakeholders, and they do this on a regular, ongoing basis. This latter point is particularly important in ensuring that there continues to be a momentum towards the objectives. We found that in two out of the three local authorities with strategies in place, practitioners and some managers are either unclear about the strategy or unsure of the priority or overall level of organisational commitment attached to the strategy. This is impacting on the extent to which practitioners and managers are implementing the strategy in their day-to-day work, which in turn is affecting the success at reducing numbers. The importance of strategy reinforcement also arose in our document review: those local authorities with lower LAC rates tended to have objectives around LAC numbers embedded in a wide range of different strategies, policies and protocols.

- **Corporate and Elected Member – as well as directorate – buy-in to the strategy:** This is particularly important in helping to ensure that some of the practical elements are in place that will deliver the strategy, e.g. prevention and early intervention and approach to practice (see sections 4.3 and 0 for further information). We noted during our research that where this is in place the length of time that the corporate centre has been involved varied and this too is impacting on progress in reducing the LAC rates.

- **Involvement of partners:** Partners – especially the courts – agree with the strategy and understand how they can contribute to the objectives. For further information, see section 4.5 below on partnership working.

4.2.2 Characteristics of effective implementation of a strategy

Our research suggests that a strategy is more likely to have an impact on the numbers of looked after children when:

- The primary driver for the strategy is about improving the outcomes for children and young people, rather than simply tackling financial pressures. In the former case, we found a higher degree of buy-in and commitment to the objectives. Our research suggests three main ways in which such buy-in can be maximised:

  ○ Ensuring that the bulk of any strategy – as written and as articulated by senior members of staff – is principally about "improving the outcomes for children and young people" or "making the right decisions". During our fieldwork, stakeholders highlighted that this has more resonance with them as practitioners and managers working with children and families than "we need to live within our means" or "we must tackle a financial deficit".

- ○ Ensuring that practitioners, managers and other stakeholders <u>believe</u> that the strategy is primarily about outcomes, rather than finances. This is mainly about the way that the senior leadership team is viewed, i.e. are they truly committed to improving outcomes for children and young people or are they seeking to manage an organisation away from spending too much money. Key characteristics of leaders that the fieldwork suggested are particularly impactful in achieving buy-in are: 'in control', 'leading by example', 'visible' and 'engaged with the frontline'.

- ○ Finally, stakeholders highlighted that the way the strategy is implemented is important to achieving buy-in. Consultations in case study areas suggested that implementation focused too heavily on process is more likely to be interpreted as being "really" about reducing expenditure, whilst those focused on changing culture and outlook – of individuals and organisations – is more likely to be interpreted as being about improving outcomes.

- There is a focus both on reducing the number of children who become looked after, <u>and</u> on increasing the number of children who exit the system. This is explored more fully in section 4.2.3 which shows that local areas vary in the rate of entry and exit into LAC. We found that focusing on one side of the coin only is more likely to be interpreted as about tackling financial pressures, than about improving outcomes for children and families. Our research also highlighted that some local authorities have specific initiatives in place to increase the use of Special Guardianship Orders as a way of achieving permanence for looked after children. In other case study areas, stakeholders highlighted that SGOs are "rarely suggested by social workers", that they "don't tend to think of SGOs as an option" and "when they do they focus on the financial impact on carers". In terms of initiatives in place to boost the number of SGOs, one local authority had a dedicated officer who was tasked with promoting and leading on SGOs and that this included identifying children who are currently looked after who may be eligible for an SGO. A range of stakeholders in local authorities with such initiatives in place felt confident that these are helping them to reduce the number of children who are no longer looked after. Interestingly, this view is not supported by the data on numbers of SGOs. Figure 17 shows that the numbers of SGOs in 2012 do not vary significantly across the 22 local authorities or across the five case study areas[1516].

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[15] Members of the steering group guiding this research suggested that the data submitted to the Welsh Government on Special Guardianship Orders via SSDA903 returns may not be the fullest picture of SGO usage across local areas. As a result, the data presented in Figure 17 may need to be treated with caution.

[16] The appendix provides further information about whether there is a link between LAC rates and differences in the use of permanency arrangements. The data suggests that there is no connection.

Figure 17: Number of special guardianship orders (2012) (numbers rounded to the nearest 5. * shows numbers less than 5)

Local authority	SGO with former foster carers	SGO with carers
Blaenau Gwent	5	*
Bridgend	5	10
Caerphilly	10	*
Cardiff	*	*
Carmarthenshire	*	*
Ceredigion	*	*
Conwy	*	*
Denbighshire	*	*
Flintshire	*	*
Gwynedd	*	*
Isle of Anglesey	*	*
Merthyr Tydfil	*	*
Monmouthshire	*	*
Neath Port Talbot	5	*
Newport	5	10
Pembrokeshire	10	*
Powys	*	*
Rhondda Cynon Taf	*	5
Swansea	20	5
Torfaen	10	5
The Vale of Glamorgan	*	*
Wrexham	*	*
Wales (total)	**90**	**50**

- Leadership teams are seen to be critically reviewing the implementation of the strategy and are open to challenge and learning about the objectives and implementation. Examples we encountered during the fieldwork included: senior officers regularly 'walking the floor' and actively seeking feedback from staff; efforts designed to respond to concerns about caseloads; initiatives to improve pay and conditions; projects to address identified service gaps; and revisiting performance data to ensure that it provides the intelligence required to make robust decisions. Such an approach helps to re-emphasise that the priority of any efforts to reduce numbers of looked after children is about ensuring that children are safe and that their outcomes are improved.

- Corporate Parenting Forums/Boards (which are a statutory requirement) are closely linked with front-line practice. Each of the five authorities had Corporate Parenting Forums/Boards in place supported by a strategy, policy statement or terms of reference. These varied in their quality and linkages to the other key strategic forums including Local Safeguarding Children Boards. In addition, the effectiveness of Corporate Parenting Forums/Boards varies, with stakeholders in two case study areas highlighting key areas for improvement. In one local area, this was about the Elected Members effectively discharging their responsibilities. In another, this was principally about the effectiveness of partnership working within the board. In contrast, during our fieldwork, we noted that in at least one of the authorities, members of the corporate parenting forum had visited not only LAC resources but also field social work teams to explore their role and contextualise information relating to the demand for front-line child protection assessments. In another local area the Corporate Parenting Strategy had been developed with the full engagement and contribution of partner agencies. It was felt that this underpins the commitment of partner agencies to understanding the needs of looked after children and their contribution to discharging the functions of being Corporate Parents.

4.2.3   Evidence from statistical data

Data on the numbers of looked after children provides some support to the conclusions above that those local authorities with a strategy to reduce the number of looked after children have:

1. A higher rate of exit out of looked after children status. For instance, Figure 18 shows that across the 22 local authorities there appears to be a connection between the proportion of looked after children who finish a care episode and the overall rate of LAC, i.e. the higher the proportion that end an episode the lower the LAC rate.

2. A lower rate of entry into looked after children's services. Figure 19 shows that this may be the case for the five local authorities who participated in the study, i.e. local areas with a lower proportion of looked after children who had their first placement in the year tend to have a lower LAC rate. However, the data suggests that for all 22 local authorities, the opposite is the case, i.e. the higher the proportion of first placements the lower the LAC rate. A similar picture emerges in terms of trends over time (see Figure 20),

i.e. within the five case study areas there seems to be a connection between reducing the proportion of first placements and reducing the overall LAC rate. However, across all 22 local authorities in Wales there does not appear to be a connection.

Figure 18: LAC rates compared to number of episodes finishing LAC (excluding those who re-started within 24 hours) expressed as a percentage of number of Looked after children
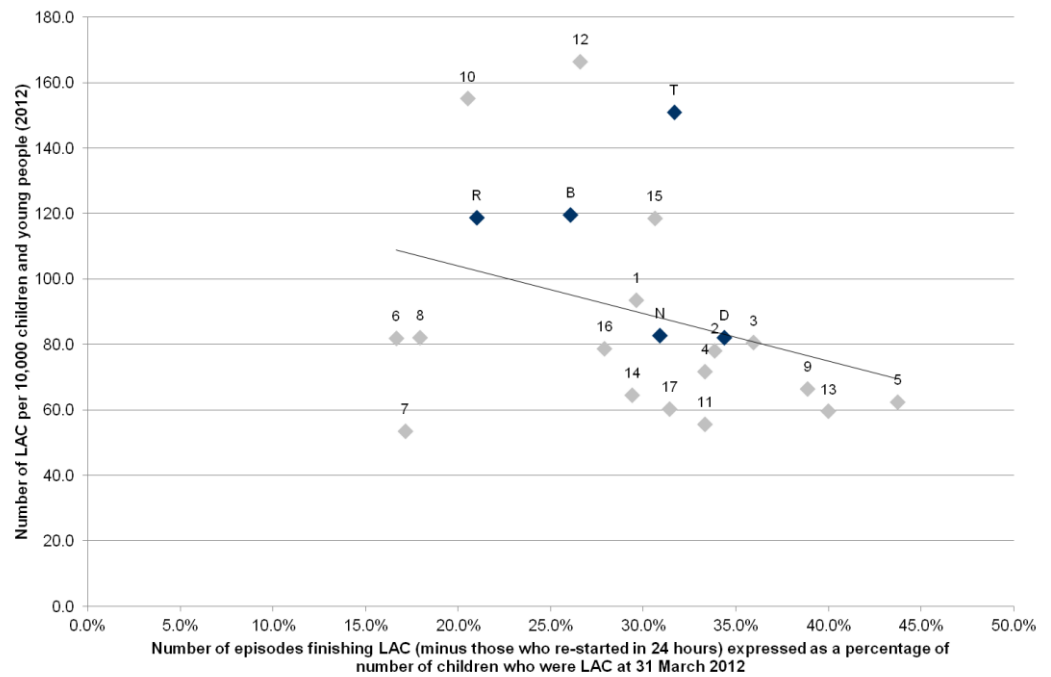
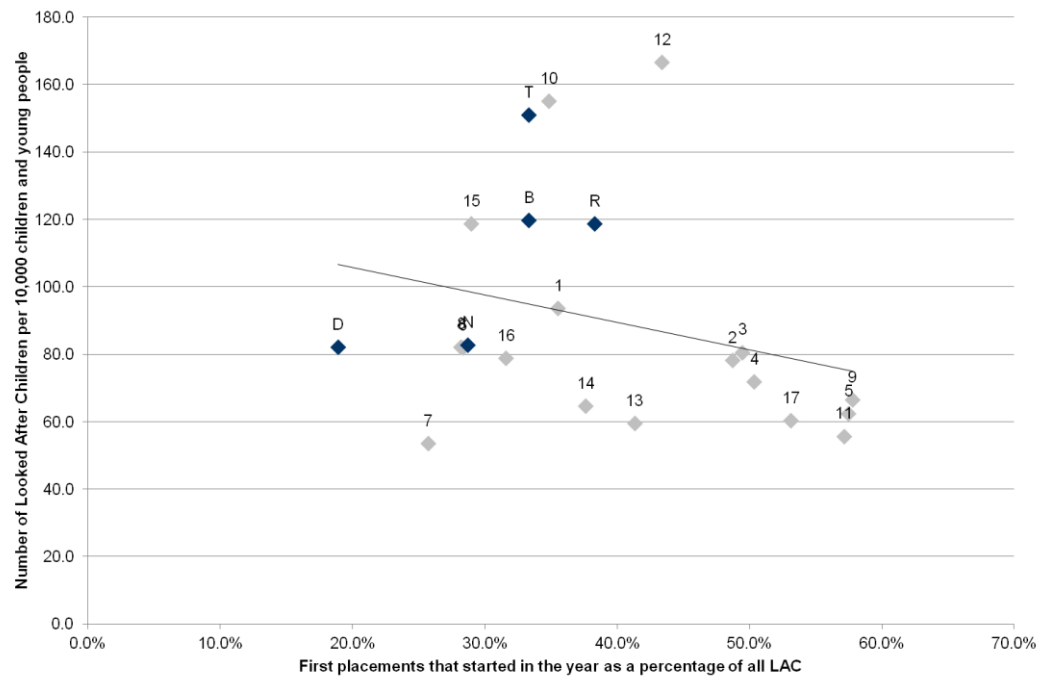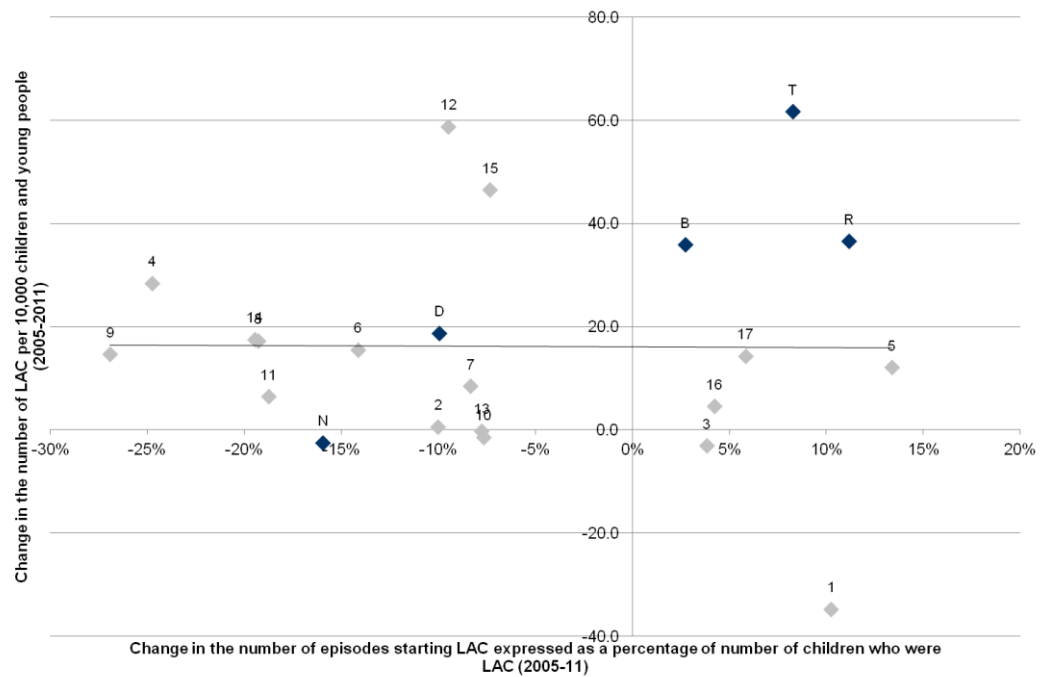*Figure 19: LAC rates compared to percentage of looked after children who were first placements*

Figure 20: Change in the percentage of Looked after children starting a care episode, compared to the LAC rate (2005-11)

### 4.2.4 Impact of inspection and serious case reviews

As part of this research, the steering group asked us to explicitly consider whether inspection judgements, occurrences of serious incidents involving children, or publication of serious case reviews could explain why local authorities with similar levels of need have different looked after children populations. Our research does not reveal any strong connection to any of these factors. For instance:

- **Serious case reviews:** Figure 21 shows the number of serious case reviews (SCRs) that have been published in each case study area between 2009 and 2013 (year to date). There appears to be no connection between the number of SCRs and the rate of looked after children or the extent of change in the LAC rate over time. Figure 22 to Figure 26 maps the publication of SCRs against the LAC trend for each case study area. Again, this shows no connection between publication and any change in the LAC rate.

- **Inspection judgements:** as well as showing publication dates for SCRs, Figure 22 to Figure 26 also show the results of inspection reports from Estyn and CSSIW. Like SCRs, the charts do not suggest any direct connection between LAC rates or LAC trends and the timing or nature of the inspection judgement.

- **Consultation with stakeholders:** during fieldwork, a large number of stakeholders highlighted that they felt that the number of children subject to a child protection plan and the number of children looked after had been affected by the Baby P case. In particular, they felt that this had increased everyone's awareness of safeguarding issues and had increased the likelihood of agencies referring concerns to social services. A number of stakeholders across all five case study areas referred to people being more 'risk adverse' and more 'cautious' in their practice and decision-making. That said, stakeholders also recognised that the Baby P events and subsequent responses affected all stakeholders across all parts of Wales. As a result, the Baby P events could explain a general upward pressure for child protection and looked after children cases, but could not explain why local authorities with similar levels of need have different looked after children populations. As part of the follow-up to this, the research explored whether stakeholders perceived that trends in the numbers of looked after children were affected by serious case reviews or the outcomes of Estyn or CSSIW inspections. In the main, the bulk of stakeholders did not highlight or perceive a connection or a dynamic.

Figure 21: Number of serious case reviews published between 2009 and 2013[17]

Case study area	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 (to date)
Bridgend	0	9	0	1	1
Denbighshire	2	0	0	0	1
Newport	0	0	0	1	0
RCT	0	1	1	0	0
Torfaen	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 22: Key events for Bridgend

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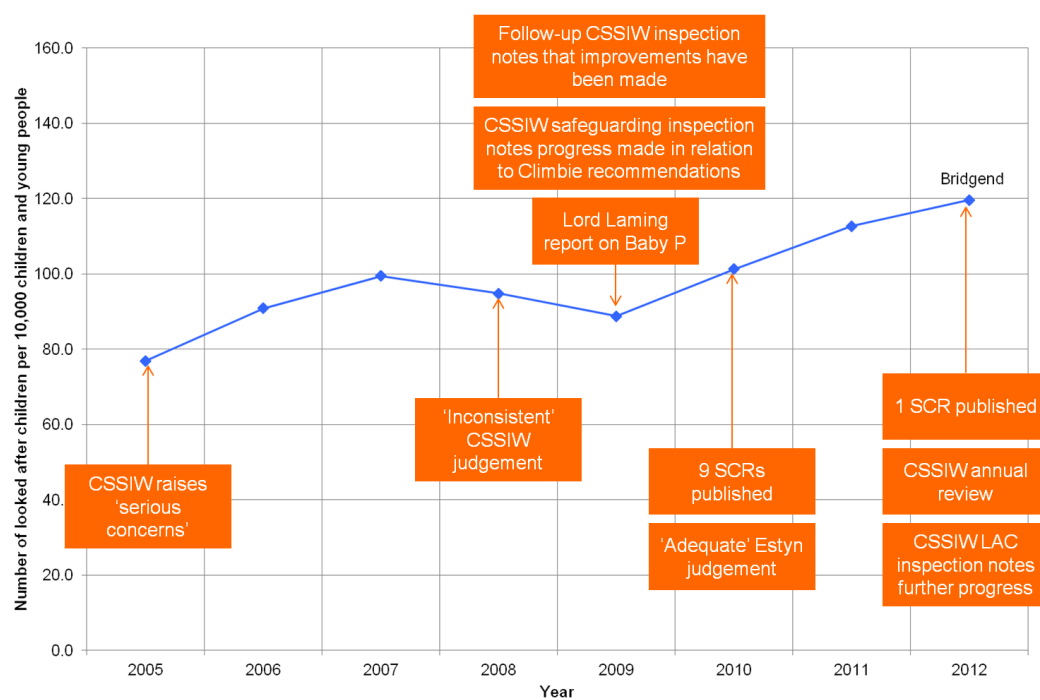
[17] From: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/reading_lists/serious_case_reviews_2009_wda62916.html
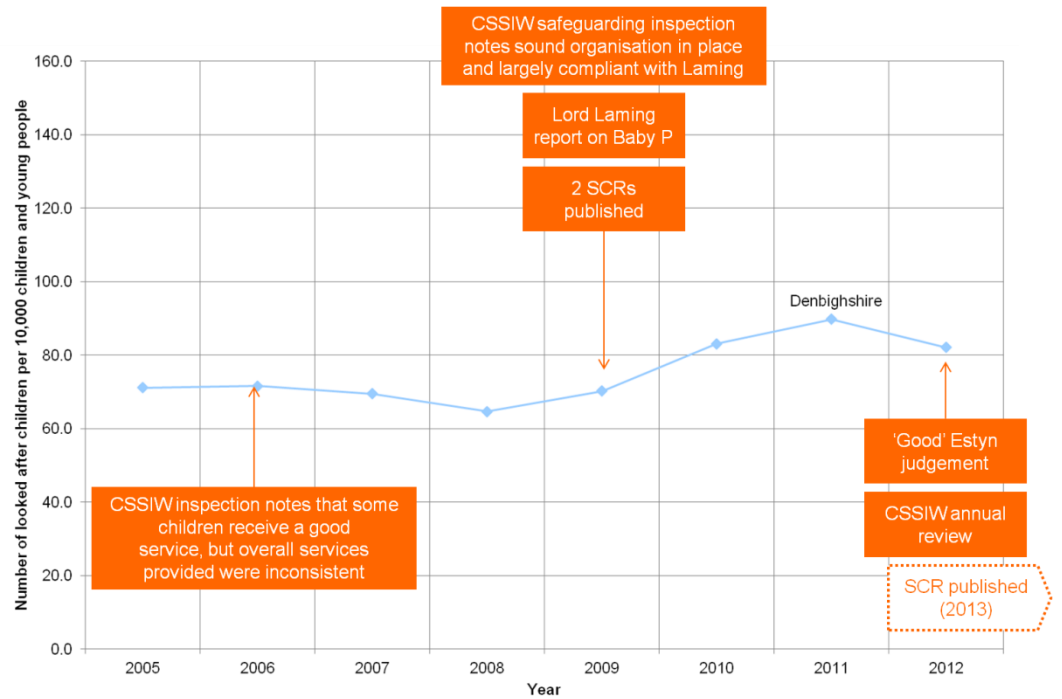
Figure 23: Key events for Denbighshire

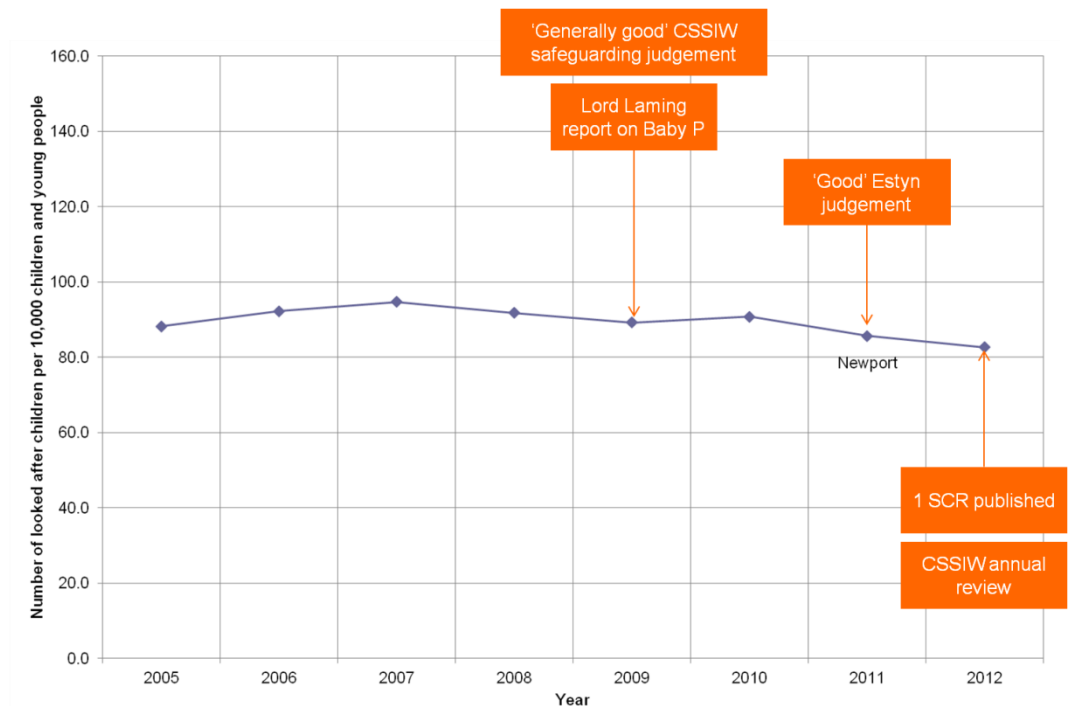*Figure 24: Key events for Newport*
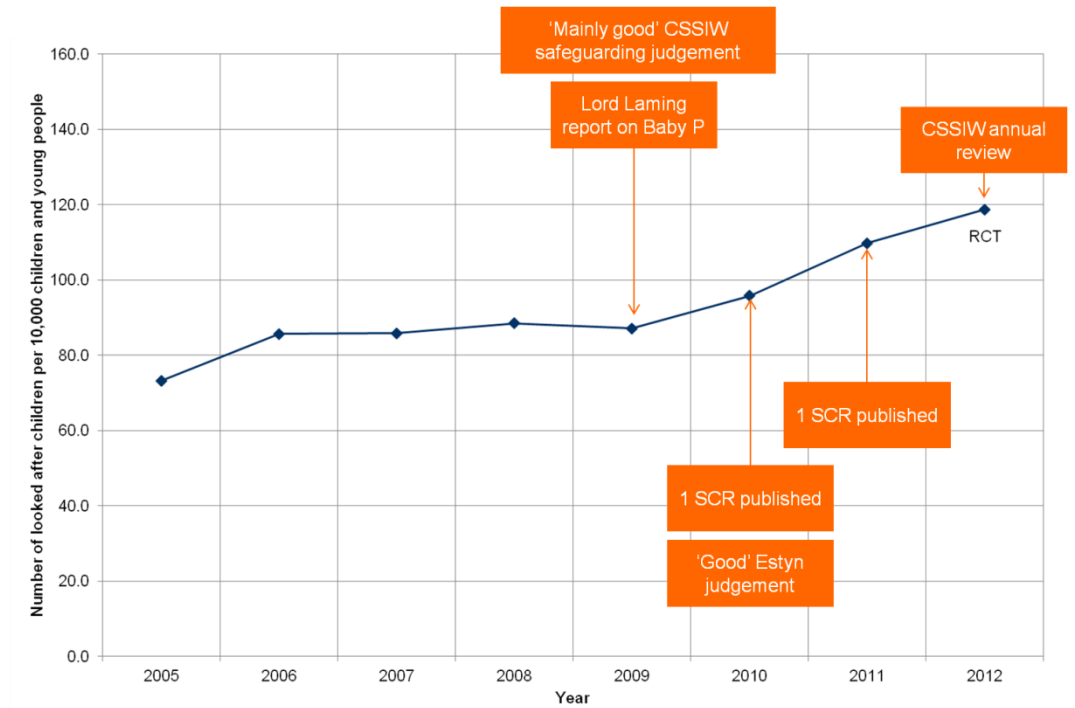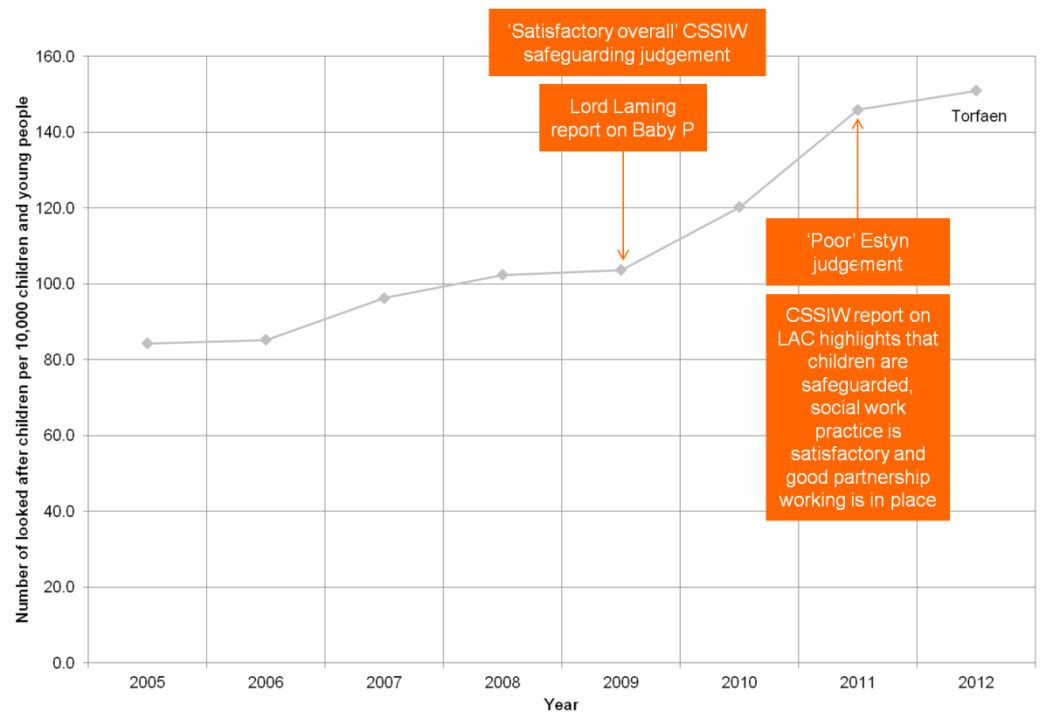
Figure 25: Key events for RCT

Figure 26: Key events for Torfaen

4.3   Prevention & early intervention

4.3.1   Prevention & early intervention can impact on numbers of looked after children

Our fieldwork suggests a positive connection between prevention and early intervention[18] and the ability to reduce the number of children who are looked after. Where it is impacting on the number of looked after children, there is a high degree of 'belief' that prevention and early intervention works and can prevent the needs of children and young people from escalating. For instance, stakeholders commented:

> *"Family support are now involved earlier and with the throughput of the work. EIPs (part of the family support team) have a good change process. They are not just making them feel OK, they are following a plan."*

> *"Services are now better able to keep children and young people out of LAC and more safely at home with either parents or family members."*

> *"The early intervention and prevention teams' input is part of a long-term plan that prevented children being looked after."*

We found that the overall level of buy-in varies from local area to local area[19]. In those local areas with less developed prevention and early intervention we found that stakeholders are generally more pessimistic and fatalistic about the ability of services to prevent children coming into care. For instance:

> *"[There is] no respect, no community investment, lots of cheap booze and drugs and "different types of behaviour" and that impacts on vulnerable kids, on looked after children, there's just no motivation for anything better…"*

> *"With some families, it doesn't matter what you do, they're never going to change…"*

> *"We're not good at insisting that parents make an effort."*

> *"Not a lack of aspiration, a lack of understanding of how to achieve the aspiration. But it depends on where you are, in an area I used to work, their aspirations are very, very low. There is a different tolerance level depending on what community you're in. When I was in [area deleted to ensure confidentiality], there were bands of young*

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[18] We use 'prevention and early intervention' in its broadest sense, i.e. services and support that are designed to stop needs escalating. As a result, it includes initiatives such as Flying Start and Families First as well as Integrated Family Support Teams and services such as Rapid Response Teams, which are designed to prevent breakdown of families and foster placements (for instance).

[19] This could also vary within organisations and between stakeholders.

roving kids that were normal, whereas in [area deleted to ensure confidentiality], you'd get social services called."

"We don't turn kids away, if they need to be looked after we will worry about the money afterwards – a major factor here is high unemployment and deprivation indices. This approach has an impact on our numbers as we don't have any Early Intervention Services"

"Schools don't make referrals as we have nothing to offer"

"If Early Intervention is to reduce LAC numbers, I can't see it as numbers are rising"

In these areas, there is, in some ways, a sense of inevitability that these children would enter the care system and that this is the safest place for them. During fieldwork, stakeholders in these areas are more likely to highlight the impact that can be achieved for the child when they are taken into care. This is partly connected to the fact that practitioners are able to access additional resources and support that they would not be able to access if the child was not looked after (see approach to resources in section 0 for further information). These stakeholders also highlight that looked after children tend to statistically have better outcomes than other Children in Need[20].

Connected to this, our research highlighted a high degree of variability in the willingness of stakeholders – and, in particular, within the local authority – to invest in prevention and early intervention. Where prevention and early intervention is embedded, there is a willingness from within the children's services directorate – and, importantly from the corporate centre – to fund (at an appropriate level) additional activities aimed at preventing need from escalating, whilst also funding statutory functions. This involves allowing the children's services directorate to retain any under-spend, or re-investing under-spends from other parts of the council, or tapping into reserves to fund prevention and early intervention initiatives. This finding is mirrored in one of the case study's recent CSSIW Annual Review and Evaluation of Social Services which notes in connection to high LAC rates in the local area:

"Social services have not been able to secure greater investment in commissioning early intervention and preventative services for children and families although was identified as an area for development. Where investment has already been made and valued services have been established, there is the risk that they will not be sustained."

We recognise the very real challenges that local authorities face in making invest-to-save a reality. For instance, Figure 27 shows that those local authorities with higher rates of LAC are spending a higher proportion of their total council budget on services for looked after children. As a result, local authorities with high rates

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[20] See commentary on CSSIW Chief Inspector's report for further information.

of looked after children are being asked to invest in prevention and early intervention on top of a very high spend on LAC services (in real terms and proportionally).

Figure 27: Percentage of the total council budget spent on looked after children services (2012)
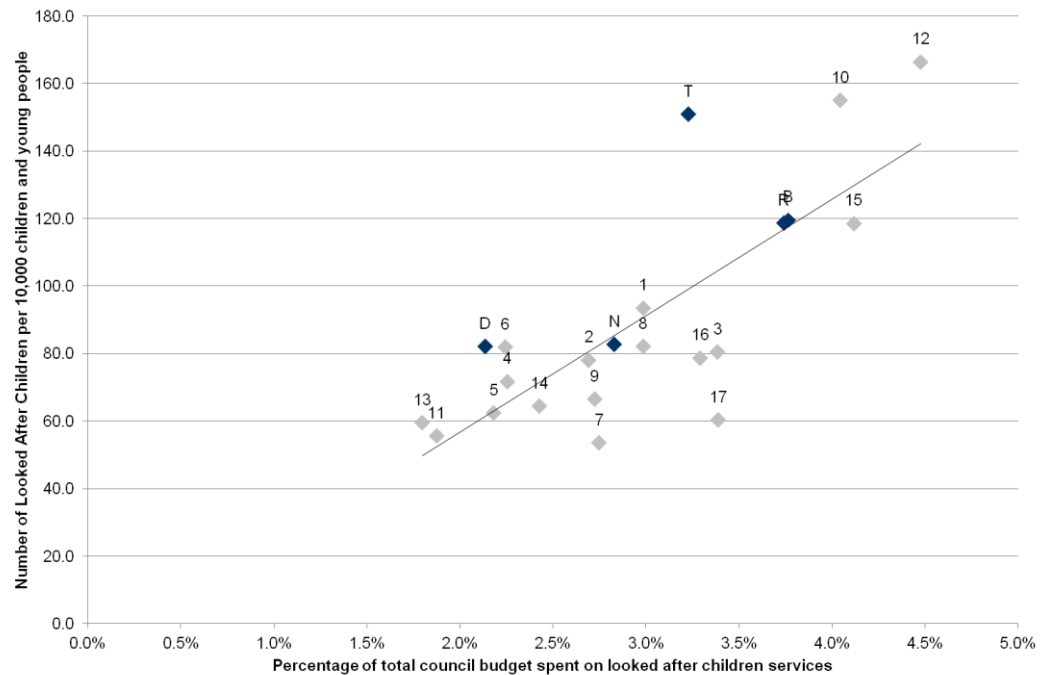
4.3.2   Other dimensions of prevention & early intervention that can impact

Having a commitment to prevention and early intervention and having this commitment translated into appropriate resourcing are the two main elements that contribute to ensuring that prevention and early intervention is impacting on the number of children being looked after. Other factors include:

- **Length of time in place:** stakeholders tended to agree that the longer the initiatives have been in place the more likely they are to help to reduce the numbers of looked after children. Our fieldwork observations in each local area confirmed this. In addition, a number of stakeholders reported that when prevention and early intervention initiatives were first implemented they tended to result in an increase in the numbers of children who are looked after as they often highlight need that may not have been identified earlier. As prevention and early intervention initiatives embed, and assuming they are effective, then they start to impact on the number of children entering the system[21].

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[21] We agree with this observation and believe that it is important for local authorities including corporate and Elected Members to understand that implementation of prevention and early intervention services may initially

- **Part of a continuum of support and intervention:** stakeholders in those local areas with a lower LAC rate tended to feel that prevention and early intervention programmes are more joined-up with other functions within children's services. For instance, they form part of a spectrum of support designed to improve outcomes for children and young people, e.g. preventing problems from escalating and acting as a step-down from more complex support. Those local areas where prevention is felt to be fragmented or 'bolted-on' or 'just another initiative' tended to have higher LAC rates. In these cases:

  ○ Prevention and early intervention is deemed to be less successful when it is seen principally as operating as a 'buffer' before entering statutory services at tier 3 (e.g. children in need or child protection). In these circumstances, stakeholders often reported feeling that prevention and early intervention is mainly about acting as a 'holding zone', deferring entry to statutory services because staff do not have the skills and experience to address need.

  ○ Prevention and early intervention is not able to act as a 'step-down' from statutory services and, as a result, is potentially impacting on the ability and/or willingness of social workers to remove children from being looked after. For example: a lack of services available to families is affecting social workers' willingness to place back with the family because of concerns that the situation at home may deteriorate without appropriate support.

- **Clear objectives with measurable impact:** those local areas with higher rates of LAC tended to have:

  ○ Less clarity about the objectives of prevention and early intervention, i.e. which groups prevention and early intervention are aimed at, what services are seeking to achieve, and what difference could be made to looked after children (as well as other vulnerable children).

  ○ Less consistency between stakeholders, i.e. teams and partners lack a common perspective on the role of prevention and early intervention.

  ○ Fewer mechanisms in place to measure and monitor the impact of prevention and early intervention – for individual children, for cohorts of families and, specifically, for children at risk of becoming looked after[22].

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lead to higher numbers of children being identified for services and that this may need to be reflected in resource allocations.

[22] In fact, we believe that this is an area for improvement for all five case study areas. See later sections for further information.

- ○ Less evidence that data and other intelligence about 'what works' in intervening early is being used to mould service delivery.

- **Willingness to locate more risk further down the system:** local authorities with lower rates of LAC (relative to their demographic and socio-economic profile) tend to be more willing to locate decision-making about vulnerable children in other teams outside of statutory services, i.e. co-locating knowledge about the family and risk. This is connected to initiatives to implement prevention and early intervention services and efforts to 'disconnect' resources from the status of the child (see section 0 for further information). Our fieldwork suggests that to have an impact on the number of looked after children five further factors needed to be in place:

  - ○ Sufficient resources, skill, capacity and confidence need to be located in these 'lower tiers' to cater for families with varying levels of need. Where services are multi-agency there needs to be a shared coherent view of the aims, objectives and working methods across all of the responsible agencies.

  - ○ Practitioners and managers have a full understanding of what it means to manage risk outside of statutory services, remain vigilant (given the risks that are being managed) and are active thinkers in terms of meeting the needs of children and their families.

  - ○ Services are fully able to validate their contribution towards achieving better outcomes for children and their families by demonstrating outcome changes in both qualitative and quantitative ways.

  - ○ Senior leaders and managers appropriately delegate decision-making and risk assessment to prevention and early intervention services. Practitioners and middle managers have confidence that the organisation will support them and back them up if things go wrong, despite defensible decisions being made.

  - ○ An appropriately robust quality assurance system is in place that is scrutinising the decisions being made by prevention and early intervention services[23].

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[23] During our fieldwork we felt that this was an area for improvement across all five local authorities.

4.4 Approach to practice

Our research suggests that there are various approaches to practice that can influence the numbers of looked after children within a local area. These are:

- Quality assurance and IRO functions.

- Defined approach to social work.

- Sufficient time to work with children and families.

- Outcomes for looked after children.

- Approach to resources.

Each of these issues are explored more fully below.

4.4.1 Quality assurance and IRO functions:

Across the five case study areas, our research showed that the strength of quality assurance and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) functions varies and that the strength of these functions tended to be connected to rates of LAC, i.e. those with less robust quality assurance functions tended to have higher LAC rates[24]. For instance:

- In a case study area with relatively high rates, during focus group discussions IROs tended to agree that their scrutiny of cases was affected by the high caseloads that they knew social workers were juggling. As a result, they felt that they may not be pushing cases hard enough or escalating cases because they don't want to place additional burden on social workers. This was often resulting in children remaining looked after when alternative arrangements might be found.

- In another case study area with relatively high rates, a range of stakeholders (and IROs themselves) highlighted during interviews and focus groups that IROs struggled to scrutinise all of the cases that were subject to statutory services due to high workloads and a high number of cases. This resulted in them having to prioritise 'higher risk' cases for scrutiny but meant that there were some cases that might be safe but drifting.

- In a third area with relatively low rates, the IROs and social workers highlighted an approach to quality assurance, which balanced the scrutiny of due process with ensuring high quality practice and outcomes for children.

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[24] Variability in IRO practice was also highlighted in the Family Justice Review report in November 2011. For instance: *"The role of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is important to local authorities and they would very likely recreate it were it removed from them. The priority should be to improve the quality of the function and ensure its effectiveness and visibility. We recommend that local authorities should review the operation of their IRO service to ensure that it is effective. In particular they should ensure that they are adhering to guidance regarding case loads."* Paragraph 82.

These stakeholders felt that there was an effective combination of performance measures that reported against cohorts of looked after children as well as individual children.

- Finally, in another case study area with relatively high LAC rates a recent CSSIW report highlights that the quality assurance framework is under-developed and appears to be seen as an additional task rather than being embedded in an overall performance management framework.

4.4.2 Defined approach to social work:

Local areas with a lower LAC rate tended to be more able to articulate which 'model' of, or approach to, social work is being used within the local authority. Typically, there is also a higher level of awareness of this amongst social work staff, but also across partners and other stakeholders. We found a number of different approaches in place, e.g. Signs of Safety, Reclaiming Social Work Hackney-model units (rather than teams), and intelligence-led approaches (see Figure 28 for further information).

During fieldwork, consistency of social work practice was more evident where a model of practice had been established (as in two of the five case study sites) and that this consistency is connected to lower LAC numbers. In these cases, practitioners and managers during focus groups and interviews highlighted greater level of confidence that they were focused on the needs of the child or young person and were more focused on outcomes. These stakeholders, in turn, felt that they were making decisions to take children into care on a timely basis and were also continuously thinking about what a permanent solution for a looked after children should be.

In case study areas with higher rates of looked after children, a range of stakeholders highlighted during interviews and focus groups that decisions about, and outcomes for, a child often vary depending on the social worker allocated. This resulted in a system that depended on individuals – rather than the organisation as a whole – being responsible for maintaining momentum on a particular case.

Figure 28: Further information about social work models deployed in case study areas

Signs of Safety

The Signs of Safety Framework accepts that child protection practice and culture tends toward paternalism. This occurs whenever professionals adopt the position of knowing what is wrong in the lives of children and their families and what solutions are to the perceived problems – this is viewed as a default position. The Signs of Safety Model seeks to create a constructive culture around child protection practice and organisations. It is based upon professionals and family members engaging in a partnership to address situations of child abuse and maltreatment and is based upon three principles:

- Developing working relationships through critical examination of what constructive child protection relationship look like;

- Thinking critically and fostering a stance of enquiry as the core professional stance of child protection practice; and

- Moving away from a command and control approach in order to develop more rigorous, skilful and greater depth of thinking.

Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework: Government of Western Australia Department for Child Protection: September 2011

Hackney Model

The Hackney Model or 'Reclaiming Social Work' is based upon developing a culture of reflective learning, skill development openness and support and the re-establishment of a family focus within statutory social work.

Research on the model has shown evidence of improved decision making, improved working relationships with families and professionals, improved consistency and continuity of care; reduced constraints on practice and reduced administration. Further positive outcomes have shown a reduction in overall costs, a significant number in the reduction of children drawn into the care system and a significant reduction in staff absence and use of agency staff.

Social Work Reclaimed: Innovative Frameworks for child and family social work practice: Trowler and Goddard: 2012

Intelligence-led Approach

One case study site is developing an intelligence-led approach which is using a range of data to help understand the factors that are more likely to result in families requiring statutory services and complex support. This intelligence is used to inform the design of prevention and early intervention services. It is also impacting on social work practice: helping teams identify the types, format and content of support that has the desired impact on families. The local authority anticipates that such an approach:

- Ensures that services and support are relevant to children and families.

- Provides a better understanding of the challenges or concerns that services are seeking to address.

- Enables activities to be more focused and targeted.

- Minimises process waste caused by duplication and redundant activity.

4.4.3 Sufficient time to work with children and families:

Interviews and focus groups highlighted that local areas vary in the extent to which social workers feel that they have sufficient time to work with children and families. Those local areas with lower rates of looked after children tended to have stakeholders who tended to agree that they had (a) sufficient time to intervene with families with a child in need or with a child subject to a child protection plan to prevent need from escalating; and (b) sufficient dedicated time to work with children once they become looked after to find a suitable permanent arrangement. Our research suggests that the extent to which social workers felt that they had enough time to support children and families is connected to two factors, i.e. size of caseloads and existence of dedicated LAC teams. These are explored more fully below:

- **Caseloads:** during focus groups, social workers across all five case studies highlighted that they feel caseloads are too high and that they are stretched. They highlighted that they often feel that they are unable to dedicate sufficient time to reflective practice and to completing meaningful interventions with families. Although this was flagged up in all five case study areas, we found that these pressures are felt more acutely in those local authorities with higher rates of LAC. This is supported, in some respects, by data which shows that the higher the number of looked after children per social work staff, the higher the LAC rate (see Figure 29 below). Please note that social work staff do not only work with looked after children. To give a more accurate picture of potential caseloads we have also included Figure 30 which shows the total number of children in need per social work staff compared to the overall LAC rate. This is also supported by the CSSIW report on looked after children in Torfaen[25] which also highlights concerns about high caseloads, e.g.:

> *"The inspectors have significant concerns about the capacity of the workforce with social workers carrying case loads of up to 25 (sometimes this is exceeded to cover sickness) a number of which by their very nature are extremely complex. This significantly contrasts with the recommendations following the Lord Laming inquiry around optimum sizes of caseloads… the inspectorates view is that this level of workload/caseload size poses risks and is unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term."[26]*

A similar trend was highlighted in the CSSIW inspection of looked after children's services in Bridgend. This highlighted:

> *"There are pressures for staff in prioritising work for 'looked after' children. Social workers struggle to have capacity to add value to the care children are receiving. This could result in the more vulnerable*

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[25] Inspection of Children's Services in Torfaen Social Services relating to the quality and timeliness of assessments and decision making regarding Looked After Children (July 2011) CSSIW

[26] Page 6.

and challenging children not always receiving the support they need."[27]

And:

"The volume and complexity of the safeguarding case work was stretching the capacity of workers to undertaken pro-active direct work with looked after children and young people…"[28]

- **Dedicated LAC teams:** across the five case study areas, social work teams are organised in a number of different ways. There is some evidence to suggest that those local authorities with lower LAC rates tended to have dedicated teams for looked after children. In these local authorities, social workers reported being able to focus on the needs of these children and feel they have more capacity to plan for next steps for the child. That said, stakeholders in these local authorities also highlighted that this way of organising teams comes with its own disadvantages, and in particular, issues with moving children from team-to-team and worker-to-worker. This can affect the quality of the relationship with the child and can affect the momentum attached to individual cases. Social workers in local authorities without dedicated teams tended to report that it is often very difficult to prioritise the work with looked after children when caseloads also included urgent child protection cases. These social workers often highlighted that at least looked after children are 'safe', whereas other children on their caseload are at higher levels of risk. Examples from fieldwork included:

"Once children are placed, they can get forgotten – that the immediate concerns of the day take over and the child is left to drift, because they're 'safe' now."

"Social worker caseloads are far too high, fire-fighting most intense cases and letting others drift, because they just don't have time."

In answer to the question: are high social worker caseloads part of problem a respondent answered: "Absolutely. And sometimes there are complaints from parents, and when you look into things it's not a rogue social worker, it's that they're just inundated all the time. I have the greatest sympathy for them. They're fire-fighting all the time, and then the slow burner cases get missed. The SWs are dealing with the non-accidental injury, screaming violent domestic abuse, and parents that are off their faces all the time, and the ones just bobbing on with neglect are forgotten. And those that are LAC. You let it drift, pragmatically, it's not the one you get a chance to look at this week."
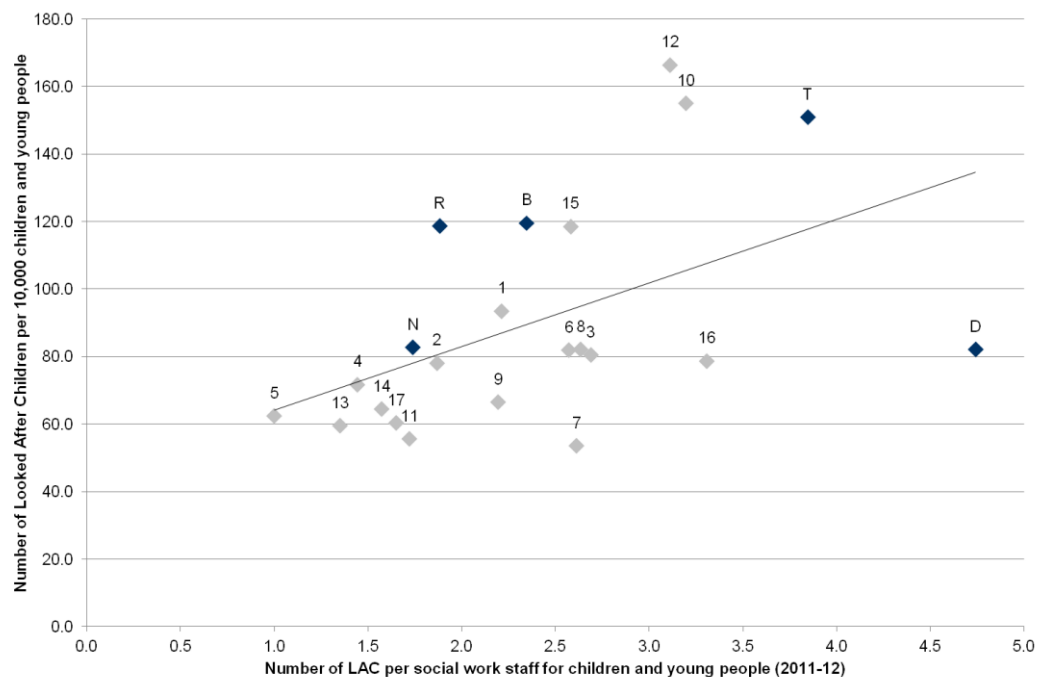
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[27] Page 4 of *Inspection Report on the Arrangements for Looked after Children and Young People in Bridgend County Borough Council* (July 2012) CSSIW
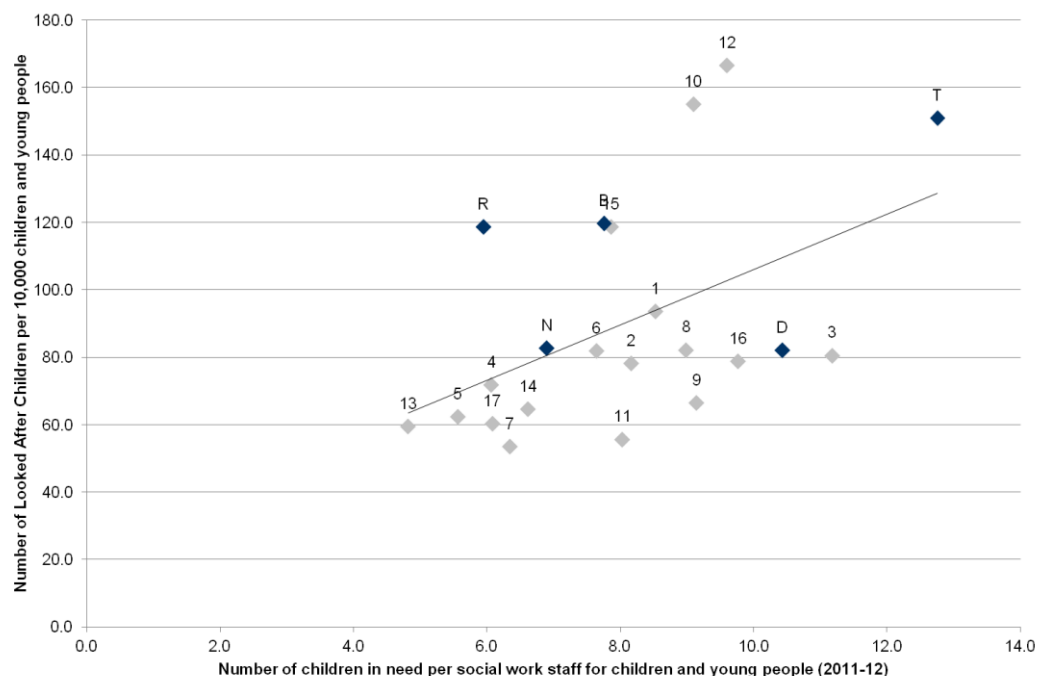
[28] Page 8.

As a result, they are naturally and in some respects understandably drawn into these cases.

Figure 29: Number of looked after children per social work staff for children and young people compared to the LAC rate[29]

Figure 30: Total number of children in need per social work staff for children and young people compared to the LAC rate[30]

4.4.4 Outcomes for looked after children:

In all case study areas, stakeholders were able to clearly articulate the outcomes that they hope to achieve for looked after children. Most commonly, the outcomes are focused on 'keeping children safe', 'achieving stable placements', 'improving educational achievement' and 'completing statutory health assessments'. Local authorities with lower rates of LAC tended to diverge from the other case study areas with a greater and more consistent recognition that in addition to this, achieving permanence – ideally outside of being Looked After – is a priority (see Figure 18 above). This translated into a more consistent focus on taking children out of LAC where possible and safe to do so.

4.4.5 Approach to resources:

Our research suggests that further downward pressure on the numbers of looked after children can be achieved if local authorities are willing and able to disconnect resources available to a child from the 'status' of that child. For instance, a number of social workers and other local authority staff in local areas with relatively high LAC rates reported that they are only able to access specific

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[30] Please note the 'social work staff' includes a wide range of different roles, practitioners, managers and support staff.

services or additional resources once a child has been made subject to a Care Order, e.g.:

> *"One factor is that a lot of families that can't get support until it's up to a threshold that's quite severe, which may be a problem."*

> *"If the resources were available, I think it would be money well spent. But since there isn't, money is spent on out-of-county, residential placements etc. and we need a pot to start prevention services, to get that going. And if they're coming out of one-on-one residential care that costs the LA so much, and then they're coming back and I ask if we can have one-on-one support for a little while, and then they say no – but I'm saving you tonnes of money, and this is how to keep the kid here. And so often it seems like fire-fighting and not having a strategic, long term vision of what needs to happen."*

Specific examples of support that could only be accessed when a child became looked after included mental health support, targeted education support for looked after children, and psychology services. This is creating a momentum towards making a child looked after. This trend is, we feel, connected to the financial health of the children's services directorates and to the number and range of prevention and early intervention initiatives available within a local area (see section 0).

4.5 Partnership working

We found a strong connection between effective partnership working and the rate of LAC in a local area. The connection is principally about how partnership working functions rather than the strength of relationships. In connection to the latter, we found that – on the whole – all case study areas felt that relationships are strong and constructive. In relation to functions, we found that LAC rates tended to be lower when there is a common aim around looked after children (and vulnerable children more generally) which is shared by all relevant partners/stakeholders and that this translated into common planning and shared action. This was reflected in our document analysis as well as the fieldwork. Examples highlighted during our research included:

- Strong collaborative working between education and social services teams within the local authority.

- Schools providing space and resources for Intensive Family Support Team members.

- New services developed in collaboration with, and including investment from, the voluntary and community sector.

- Establishment of multi-agency panels designed to scrutinise decisions affecting looked after children and take back learning to improve practice to each partner agency.

Where LAC rates are relatively high, local authority stakeholders are more likely to report that partners are focused on their own 'core business', are less able (and/or less willing) to 'share the burden' of supporting vulnerable families, and are less open to funding or being involved in initiatives that might prevent need from escalating. In these areas, stakeholders felt that children's needs are often left to escalate, as initiatives to tackle need earlier do not have the buy-in or involvement from other partners or teams or because these teams feel unable or unwilling to manage risks/problems. As a result, stakeholders reported that social work teams are often left to "pick up the pieces". However, by the time these teams are involved, problems are entrenched and need has escalated to the point that there is no choice but to take children into care. During fieldwork, respondents referred to "compensating for others' lack of contribution", "it's down to us – no one else is going to help", and "other agencies don't take responsibility". Finally, these stakeholders felt like once statutory services are involved, other stakeholders withdraw and they are left "holding all the risk".

Our research suggests a complex interaction between partners' views on the approach to practice and rates of LAC. Where partners are aligned with the approach to practice within social work teams then this is likely to result in it reinforcing the LAC trend within the local area. This is particularly the case for courts, CAFCASS and the council's legal team. For instance:

- Where partners feel that social work teams have the right approach to practice, then they tend to agree with the approach to court (and other legal processes) proposed by the local authority. This, in turn, is likely to reinforce the direction of travel of the LAC rate (e.g. upwards or downwards).

- Where partners have concerns about the approach to practice taken by social work teams, then they tend to be more likely to challenge or disagree with the approach to court (and other legal processes) proposed by the social work team. As a result, these partners tend to be more involved in case management decisions and tend to be more likely to propose next steps that minimise risk. An example of this is a range of stakeholders in two local authorities reporting that it often felt like legal teams are instructing social workers rather than *vice versa*. Our fieldwork suggests that this is likely to create an upward pressure on the numbers of looked after children within a local authority. Another example encountered during our research was in the willingness of courts to endorse a Special Guardianship Order or Supervision Order. In local areas with higher rates of LAC, we found that once a child became looked after through a court process, the court would often or always impose an Order or statutory status on a child, i.e. a Care Order and/or a Kinship Placement under Placement with Parents or Family Regulation 38 rather than an SGO or Supervision Order. As a result, there was less momentum towards moving children out of looked after status.

Constructive relationships with the family court system were seen as of variable quality amongst those interviewed. In one authority senior leaders had used the strategic meetings with the family justice system to gain the understanding of the issues within the authority and how they were reshaping services to ultimately improve services to children and their families. Having a dialogue with the family

justice arrangements on some of the apparent blocks within the system was seen as essential to avoiding situations where scepticism from individual judges led to overly specified judgements or delay. The recent reforms to the family justice system should provide a platform for authorities to open this dialogue further.

Similar dynamics were highlighted by the recent Family Justice Review report. Further information is provided in Figure 30 below.

Figure 31: Messages from the Family Justice Review

Comments from the Family Justice Review about the relationship between courts and local authorities

The final report of the Family Justice Review was published in November 2011[31]. It highlighted a number of stresses and difficulties within the current family justice system, including: cases take too long, the cost to the taxpayer and to individuals is too high, children and adults are often confused about what is happening to them, organisational structures are complicated and overlapping, there is a lack of trust between individuals and organisations, there are no shared objectives, morale is often low, and information and IT systems do not support effective management and processes[32].

Some of these stresses and difficulties are connected to the way that local authorities and the courts work together. This in turn sheds further light on some of the dynamics highlighted in our fieldwork with case studies. For instance:

- *"…courts and local authorities should work together to tackle their at times dysfunctional relationship. There should be a dialogue both nationally and locally between the judiciary and local authorities. The Family Justice Service should facilitate this. Designated Family Judges and Directors of Children's Services / Directors for Social Services should meet regularly to discuss common issues."[33]*

- *"Local authorities and the judiciary need to debate the variability of local authority practice in relation to threshold decisions and when they trigger care applications. This again requires discussion at national and local level."[34]*

- *"The judiciary should be more consistent in their approach to case management. Different courts take different approaches to case management in public law. These need corralling, researching and*

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[31] Source: http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/publications/moj/2011/family-justice-review-final-report.pdf

[32] Paragraph 5.

[33] Paragraph 65.

[34] Paragraph 66.

> promulgating by the judiciary to share best practice and ensure consistency."[35]
>
> - "One of the first priorities for local authorities and the judiciary is to address the reluctance of courts to rely on local authority assessments. Assessments and reports need to be appropriately detailed, evidence based and clear in their arguments. We propose that the judiciary led by the President's office and local authorities via their representative bodies should urgently consider what standards should be set, and should circulate examples of best practice."[36]

4.6   Information & intelligence on performance

Our review of local authority documentation and our consultations with stakeholders highlighted that a range of data and information is collected and used – by the local authority and its partners – to monitor the performance of work with children and families generally and looked after children in particular. We found a number of examples of effective practice (both emerging and embedded) which is providing teams with robust information about the impact of their practice. Our research suggests two main connections between performance information and rates of LAC, i.e.:

- Local authorities are using performance information as a means of monitoring their success at implementing an explicit strategy to reduce the number of looked after children. Where performance data and strategy reinforce each other, this is helping to reduce the number of looked after children.

- Local authorities are using performance information to monitor the impact of interventions and to develop a body of evidence of 'what works, when'. Where performance information and practice reinforce each other, this is helping to ensure a focus on improved outcomes for children, is helping to ensure that children get appropriate support at the appropriate time and is helping to maintain a focus on permanence or return for looked after children. This, in turn, is helping to reduce the number of looked after children.

Some of the issues around performance information are explored more fully below.

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[35] Paragraph 69.

[36] Paragraph 80.

4.6.1 Information & intelligence about demography & the socio-economic context

Case study areas vary in the extent to which they use demographic and socio-economic data to develop a better – and common – understanding of their local communities and the challenges they face. In local areas with higher rates of looked after children we tended to find a disjointedness between what data and statistics highlighted as the level and nature of need, and how stakeholders perceived that level of need. In these circumstances, stakeholders tended to feel that deprivation and disadvantage was more pervasive and more severe than data implied. In local areas with lower rates of looked after children, we found a more consistent picture of deprivation and need between statistics and stakeholder perceptions.

Another, connected aspect relates to the amount of agreement between stakeholders about the level of need. In local authorities with higher rates of looked after children we tended to find a greater degree of variation in the extent to which different stakeholders thought that particular issues were of concern within the local area (e.g. domestic violence, substance misuse). In local authorities with lower rates of LAC, there was again more consistency in viewpoint.

Finally, we noted that only one of the five case study areas regularly uses demographic and socio-economic data about other local areas to help officers understand how need differed and how service provision may need to vary to meet that need. In this area, LAC rates were relatively low compared to the other case study areas.

4.6.2 Information & intelligence about outcomes

All case study areas highlighted their efforts to ensure an appropriate balance between collecting, analysing and responding to data relating to <u>process</u> (e.g. timescales for completion of assessments, seeing children on their own) and data relating to <u>outcomes</u> for children (e.g. safety, stability, permanence). Stakeholders in local areas with relatively high rates of LAC tended to report that performance information was still too focused on processes. In one case study area, we found examples of where outcomes data was missing, e.g. an Intensive Family Support Team was unable to say how effective their interventions are in preventing children coming into care as "it was too soon"[37]. In another local authority data does not appear to be routinely collected on 'Placement of Children with Parents'[38] and there appears to be gaps in targeting these placements for rehabilitation (revocation of Care Order). In two local authorities the high volume of these placements and lack of compliance with LAC visiting and compliance regulations may result in higher risk to those children.

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[37] This is despite the fact that the team had been in place for a significant period of time.

[38] Placement of Children with Parents etc. Regulations 1991

Finally, stakeholders in all case study areas highlighted that outcomes data that is monitored by the Local Safeguarding Children Board could be improved and that such improvements could impact on the number of looked after children. Specifically, stakeholders highlighted that there was a lack of data and discussion that would shed light on the effectiveness of multi-agency working and how the system as a whole worked to prevent children coming into care, ensure the right children were looked after at the right time, and ensuring that looked after children were quickly discharged or rehabilitated (see 4.6.4).

4.6.3   Information & intelligence about quality of practice

Section 0 highlights variability in quality assurance and Independent Reviewing Officer functions. Stemming from this, our document review and consultations with stakeholders highlighted that there is variability in the extent to which data and intelligence from quality assurance functions are regularly included in the suite of indicators that are used to monitor performance. Connected to this, we found variability in the extent to which practitioners and managers could articulate how evidence from IROs and other quality assurance checks are used across teams and the directorate to improve practice. Similar issues were highlighted in a recent CSSIW report for one of the five case study areas. The report states:

> *"There was evidence on files reviewed by inspectors that file audits were being carried out. Issues highlighted were similar to those identified by inspectors but it was difficult to see where the learning from the audits had led to improvements. It was not clear how staff were informed about the outcomes of the audits and how their development to address the shortcoming identified was supported."*

And:

> *"The performance of the independent reviewing service was delivering positive outcomes. However there is no system in place to give an early warning to managers that 'looked after children' are not making progress. This results in the inability to act quickly to address issues as they develop. It is also difficult for the senior management team to have an overview of the permanency plans for looked after children and young people population as a whole."*

Where rates of looked after children are relatively low we found greater degree of awareness of key messages from quality assurance functions and an understanding of how stakeholders were responding to these messages.

4.6.4   Information & intelligence about how the system as a whole functions

Our analysis of documentation and consultation with stakeholders highlighted that those local areas with relatively low rates of LAC tended to have a more holistic information and intelligence about how the system as a whole is working to protect and support children appropriately. We feel that, overall, this is an area for improvement across all five case study areas. Some examples of gaps in the majority of case study areas involved in the research included:

- **Flow of children:** 'conversion' rates from children in need, to being subject to a child protection plan to becoming a looked after child are in the majority of areas not consistently tracked. This results in a lack of robust performance information about the extent to which services are successful at preventing need from escalating or at responding proportionately and appropriately to safeguarding or wellbeing issues faced by the child or young person. Where data is collected, we found occasions where is was unclear how local areas were responding to this data, e.g. in two local authorities links between high re-referral rates did not appear to be tracked or linked to actions in order to improve pathways.

- **Effectiveness of prevention and early intervention:** in the majority of cases, local areas are only just starting to develop mechanisms to measure the impact of prevention and early intervention initiatives. However, in one local authority performance data is collected that shows the outcomes that have been achieved through prevention and early intervention, the risk that has been reduced and the extent to which entry into statutory services has been avoided (in an appropriate and safe way).

- **Timings and windows:** we found variability across case study areas in the extent to which information was used to identify key timings and windows for improving outcomes for looked after children. In particular, this relates to the timings and windows in which professionals can (a) successfully divert looked after children back home; and (b) successfully use other solutions that would achieve permanence for a child.

- **Resources:** business planning processes and regular monthly management information rarely incorporate information on demand, cost effectiveness; unit costs, occupancy; avoided costs; cashable savings; and lifetime cost calculations. As a result, this is often inhibiting business cases for particular permanence or rehabilitation arrangements for looked after children.

5 Learning from other research

A number of our findings are supported by other research that has been completed in this field[39].

The importance of having a well-resourced, stable and confident children's social care department in order to reduce the numbers of looked after children is highlighted in the recent report from London Councils on *Looked After Children in London*[40]. It draws a direct connection between a reduction in social work capacity and a higher risk of rising numbers of LAC. This report also highlights the importance of strategy, senior leadership commitment to reducing numbers and the need for strong performance information. It reports:

> *…we cannot underestimate the strength of our finding that those senior managers who have paid attention to understand the detail of their looked after children populations and then acted on that detail, have been able to reduce the numbers of looked after children. We saw evidence of the effectiveness of a proactive approach to knowing and controlling which children become looked after, how long they stay, minimising drift and ensuring that children move on to stable and permanent placements.*
>
> Page 16

This conclusion is also put forward by a 2002 study by the National Children's Bureau[41]. This highlights that changes in leadership, the promotion of a more interventionist approach and service re-organisation (e.g. changing the mode of operation and changing the remit children's planning and review) can impact on the numbers of looked after children. This report also highlights a connection between changes in policies and changes in the LAC population.

Studies draw mixed conclusions about whether there is a connection between prevention and early intervention and numbers of looked after children. A recent report by the Association of Directors of Children's Services in England on safeguarding pressures[42] highlights that in some local authorities prevention and early intervention is resulting in more children being identified and quicker decisions being made to start care proceedings. For other local authorities, it is helping to reduce the numbers who enter the system (especially by tackling the prevalence of domestic violence). A report by the House of Commons Education

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[39] See appendix 4 for information on the sources included in this analysis.

[40] *Looked After Children in London: an analysis of changes in the numbers of Looked After Children in London*: London Councils (2013)

[41] *Needs, numbers, resources: informed planning for LAC*: NCB (2002)

[42] *Safeguarding pressures project: phase 3* ADCS (October 2012)

Committee[43] supports this latter point and concludes that effective early intervention services are crucial to help reduce the numbers of children protection cases and looked after children. The report by London Councils supports our conclusion that the stage of development of early help services may affect the level of impact they have on child protection and looked after children numbers.

Finally, a number of studies support our finding that approaches to practice may impact on the numbers of looked after children. The 2008 SSIA report on safeguarding and child protection in Wales[44] highlights that the quality of work with children is inconsistent within and between local authorities and that this is mirrored in the provision and performance of services. The report highlights that this covers all aspects of work, e.g. completing checks, spending time with children, collecting all information needed, quality of assessment, quality of plans, balance between immediate protection and long-term protection, and the ability to focus on outcomes. This is echoed in the ADCS report which suggests that local authorities have varied in their ability to introduce better systems and processes to improve practice, e.g. development of multi-agency safeguarding hubs, integrated teams and service re-design.

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[43] *Children first: the child protection system in England: fourth report of session 2012-13 (volume 1):* House of Commons Education Committee (2012)

[44] *Safeguarding and child protection in Wales: the review of local authority social services and Local Safeguarding Children Boards:* SSIA (2008)

6   Conclusion

Our research suggests that some variation in the numbers and rates of looked after children across local authorities can be explained by differences in the demographic and socio-economic profile of each local authority. This is especially the case in relation to population size, deprivation and the proportion of households that are lone parent families. These demographic and socio-economic factors, however, only go part of the way to explain differences between local authorities.

Other aspects affecting the numbers and rates of looked after children relate to factors more within the control of the local authority and their partners – especially the way that local areas lead, organise and deploy their services for vulnerable children and families. Our research highlighted five main areas that can help to reduce the numbers of looked after children. These are:

- **Strategy and leadership:** the key characteristics relate to whether there is a strategy in place to reduce the numbers of looked after children and, if there is, the extent of buy-in from the full range of roles and partners working with children and their families. To be successful, such a strategy needs to genuinely prioritise the improved outcomes that can be achieved by: (a) preventing need from escalating; (b) responding appropriately to disadvantage and to safeguarding concerns; and (c) maintaining a focus on discharging children from being looked after.

- **Prevention and early intervention:** prevention and early intervention can be used to reduce the number of looked after children where the full range of stakeholders are bought in to the objective and the ability to reduce need from escalating and to support children and families out of statutory services (step down). As a result, prevention and early intervention needs to be appropriately resourced and part of a coherent continuum of support and intervention for children and families. Such initiatives have greater success at reducing the numbers of looked after children when they are long-standing and embedded and where there are clear, robust mechanisms in place to measure outcomes for children and families. Finally, to be successful and have maximum buy-in from stakeholders, senior managers need to recognise that the management of risk is more dispersed and that practitioners need to be equipped with appropriate skills and experience to reflect this and have access to appropriate leadership and management support.

- **Approach to practice:** local authorities who have relatively low numbers of looked after children have a clearly defined approach to social work proactive and give practitioners and managers sufficient time to implement this approach with children and families. This is complemented by robust and effective quality assurance mechanisms in place with a clear organisation-wide process in place for learning from quality assurance findings. This results in a system that is focused on improving outcomes for children and families. As part of this, there is an effective mechanism in place to allocate appropriate

resources and support to children based on need, rather than on status or designation.

- **Partnership working:** effective partnership working is important in achieving a relatively low rate of looked after children. The partners that have particular influence are the courts, CAFCASS and the council legal team. Where local authorities have relatively low rates partnership working is characterised by effective collaborative working focused on improving outcomes for children; a culture of mutual support and challenge; and a high degree of trust in local authority assessments and practice in its work with vulnerable children and families.

- **Information and intelligence about performance:** local areas with relatively low rates of looked after children collect high quality information and intelligence that gives them insight into how effective the system as a whole is at protecting and supporting vulnerable children. A second important element is that this information is regularly used throughout the organisation to change and improve practice.

These characteristics are summarised in Figure 32. These combination of factors are also highlighted by a local authority's recent CSSIW Annual Report and Evaluation which notes:

> *"The strong emphasis on building family resilience, providing support at the right time through close multiagency working, appropriate gate-keeping and robust decision making has meant that the number of looked after children has reduced."*

We believe that these could be used to help local areas evaluate how successful they may be if they wish to reduce the number of looked after children. There are a range of reasons why local areas may wish to implement actions that could help to reduce the number of looked after children. For instance, a number of reasons are connected with the early help agenda, i.e. the benefits and moral obligation to intervene early before issues arise and become complex. There is also a possible benefit in terms of costs and there is an emerging policy focus on reducing numbers.

That said, we should re-emphasise at this point our conclusion at the beginning of section 4 which is that we – and the full range of stakeholders that we talked to as part of this research – believe that there is no 'magic number' for the rate of looked after children in a local area that would determine whether numbers are 'too high' or 'too low'. As a result, we believe that the elements highlighted in Figure 32, if implemented, could be used to reduce the number of looked after children, but should not be used to strive towards a specific number or specific target.

Figure 32: Conclusions drawn from the research

Factors that can help reduce the number of looked after children in a local area
A. Strategy and leadership
A1. An explicit strategy is in place to reduce the number of looked after children
A2. The strategy is effectively and continuously communicated by all members of the senior leadership team
A3. There is Corporate and Elected Member buy-in to the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children
A4. There is buy-in from partners from outside the local authority and especially from the courts
A5. The key reason for reducing the number of looked after children is to improve outcomes for all children (including those who may become looked after) and only secondarily about tackling financial pressures
A6. The strategy and any actions designed to implement the strategy focus equally on between reducing the number of children who enter the system and on increasing the number of looked after children exiting the system
A7. Practitioners, managers and leaders from within the local authority and from other partners have opportunities to regularly review in an open and constructive way the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children and this feedback is responded to in a timely manner
B. Prevention and early intervention
B1. All relevant stakeholders – but especially social workers and their managers – believe that targeted prevention and early intervention can stop needs from escalating
B2. There is a willingness and capacity to invest in evidence-based prevention and early intervention and to allocate an appropriate level of resources
B3. Prevention and early intervention initiatives are embedded and long-standing
B4. Prevention and early intervention forms part of clearly communicated, effective and coherent continuum of support and intervention for families and this is enabling effective step-up and step-down of support to meet need
B5. Prevention and early intervention services have clear objectives and robustly measure their impact
B6. All relevant stakeholders are bought into the strategy to, and implications of, locating more risk further down the system

Factors that can help reduce the number of looked after children in a local area
C. Approach to practice
C1. There are robust and effective quality assurance (including Independent Reviewing Officer) functions in place
C2. There is a clearly defined approach to social work practice in place that is understood and (where relevant) implemented by all relevant stakeholders
C3. Staff working with children and families – and especially social workers – have sufficient time allocated to provide appropriate support and interventions to children and families, and in particular, to looked after children
C4. There is a clear outcomes-focus to casework
C5. Resources that are allocated to a child reflect need, rather than the specific designation of that child, e.g. that they are looked after or are subject to a child protection plan
D. Partnership working
D1. There is strong collaborative working in place between all agencies working with children and families
D2. There is a culture of mutual support and challenge
D3. Courts, CAFCASS and the council's legal team agree with the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children and/or trust local authority assessments and practice in relation to vulnerable children
E. Information and intelligence about performance
E1. Stakeholders collect high quality information and intelligence that gives insight into how effective the system as a whole is working to protect and support children
E2. This information is regularly interrogated and used to improve service provision and support

Glossary

Abbreviation	In full…
ADCS	Association of Directors of Children's Services
CAFCASS	Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service
CSSIW	Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales
Estyn	Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
IRO	Independent Reviewing Officer
IT	Information Technology
LAC	Looked After Children
RCT	Rhondda Cynon Taf
SCR	Serious Case Review
SGO	Special Guardianship Order
SOA	Super Output Area
SSIA	Social Services Improvement Agency
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association

Appendix 1 – List of participants

Bridgend

- Interviews with:

  - Cabinet Member for Children
  - Commissioning and Placements Officer
  - Director of Children's Services
  - Family Support Manager
  - Group Manager for Assessment and Transition
  - Group Manager for Fostering Services
  - Group Manager for Integrated Working and Family Support
  - Group Manager for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance
  - Group Manager for Service Provision
  - Head of Safeguarding
  - Looked After Children Education Coordinator
  - Looked After Children Health Nurse
  - Manager for Adoption and Permanency Team
  - Regional Director for CAFCASS
  - Senior Health Commissioner for Looked After Children
  - Senior Lawyer
  - Two members of the Police Child Abuse Investigation Team
  - Two primary school headteachers

- Focus groups with:

  - Six members of the Family Support Team
  - Five members of the Integrated Working Team
  - Seven Independent Reviewing Officers
  - Seven members of the Safeguarding and Family Support Teams

Denbighshire

- Interviews with:

  - Child Health Manager for Besti Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB)
  - Corporate Director for Social Services and Housing
  - County Solicitor
  - Head of Children and Family Services
  - Headteacher for Rhyl High School
  - Headteacher for Ysgol Carrog School
  - Operations Manager
  - Partnerships and Communities Manager
  - Practice Leader for Therapeutic Prevention Project
  - Practice Manager for CAFCASS

- ○ Service Manager for Intervention, Strategy and Support
- ○ Service Manager for Looked After Children
- ○ Service Manager for Safeguarding and Practice Quality

- Focus group with practitioners and managers within early intervention services, covering: Welfare Rights Service Manager, Barnardo's Substance Misuse Service Worker, Action for Children Parenting Team Leader, Flying Start Worker, Team Around the Family Senior Coordinator, Service Manager for BCUHB

- Focus group with quality assurance officers, covering Business Development Officer and Commissioning Officer

- Focus group with practitioners and managers within services for Looked After Children, covering Practice Manager, NWAS (North Wales Adoption Service) Practitioner, Leaving Care Team Practitioner, Barnardo's Strategic Manager, and Barnardo's Personal Advisor

- Focus group with practitioners and managers within child protection and children in need teams, covering Intake and Assessment Practice Leader, Intake and Assessment Practice Leader, two Intake and Assessment Social Workers, Intensive Family Support Worker, Intensive Family Support Practice Leader, and FFPS Practitioner.

Newport

- Interviews with:

  - ○ Assistant Head of Education (Inclusion)
  - ○ Director of Social Services
  - ○ Head of Finance (Treasurer)
  - ○ Head of the ABHB LAC Nurse Team
  - ○ Head of Children's Services
  - ○ Inspector in Child Protection and Vulnerable Adult Unit, Gwent Police
  - ○ Manager from Barnardo's
  - ○ Manager in Public Health Wales
  - ○ Operations Manager for CAFCASS
  - ○ Partnership Manager
  - ○ Senior Solicitor
  - ○ Service Manager for Duty and Assessment and Child Protection
  - ○ Service Manager for Integrated Family Support
  - ○ Service Manager for LAC
  - ○ Solicitor
  - ○ Two representatives from the voluntary and community sector
  - ○ Youth Offending Service Manager

- Focus group with prevention and early intervention stakeholders covering: Deputy Headteacher of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), two Early Intervention

Team members, two Prevention Team members, member from the Gwent Education Multi-ethnic Service (GEMS).

- Focus group with quality assurance stakeholders, covering: Performance and Information Management Manager for Adult and Children's Social Care, Business Manager for Newport Safeguarding Children Board, Service Manager for Safeguarding, Principal Officer for Quality Assurance- non face to face social work, two Independent Reviewing Officers, member of the Quality Assurance Team, and Chair for Integrated Family Support Conferences.

- Focus group with stakeholders from services for Looked after children, covering: two Team Managers for Looked After Children, Looked After Children Education Coordinator, member of the Placement Support Team, 16+ Team member, member of the Police Child Exploitation Unit (Artemis), Looked after children Social Worker, Senior Practitioner for LAC, Adoption Social Worker, LAC Health Specialist, LAC Team Manager.

- Focus group with stakeholders from Children in Need team, Disabilities team and Child Protection team, covering: Senior Practitioner, Social Worker for Child Protection and Family Support, IFST member, Child Protection Officer for Education, Team Manager for the Disabilities Team, Social Worker in Disability Team, Family Support Worker, Senior Family Support Worker, two Team Managers for Child Protection and Family Support, Senior Practitioner in Child Protection Team, two Duty and Assessment Team Social Workers.

RCT

- Interviews with:

  - Corporate Manager for Human Resources
  - Corporate Service Director of Finance
  - Director of Children's Services
  - Director of Social Services
  - Head of Intervention Services
  - Head of Safeguarding and Standards
  - Head of Safeguarding for Cwm Taf Health Board
  - Principal Solicitor
  - Regional Head of Operations for CAFCASS
  - Senior Psychologist
  - Service Manager for Adoption and Fostering
  - Service Manager for Disabled Children

- Focus group with Independent Reviewing Officers and stakeholders from Early Intervention Teams, covering: Management Information Manager, Children's Complaints and Access to Information Officer (replaced Complaints Manager), Team Manager for LAC IROs, three LAC IROs, and Chair of Child Protection Conferences.

- Focus group with practitioners and managers within early intervention teams, covering: Consultant Social Worker within IFST, Senior Health Worker, TAF

and Canopy Partnership Co-ordinator for Rhondda, IFST Team Manager and RCT Families First project Manager, and South Wales Disabled Children's Team Worker.

- Focus group with practitioners and managers in Child Protection and Children in Need teams covering: eight Social Workers, three Team Managers, a Practitioner, two Senior Practitioners, two Project Workers, and Senior Manager for TAF.

- Focus group with practitioners and managers within LAC managers, covering: Service Manager for Residential Services, Lead LAC Nurse Specialist, Team Manager for Fostering, Team Manager for Adoption, Social Worker in Fostering Team, Social Worker for Special Guardianship Orders, Social Worker within the Adoption Team.

Torfaen

- Interviews with:

  - Borough Solicitor
  - Chief Officer for Social Care and Housing
  - Clerk to Designated Family Judge for Gwent
  - Deputy Chief Officer for Social Care and Housing
  - Two Group Managers for Children and Families Division
  - Head of Children's Services
  - Inspector, Gwent Police, Child Sexual Exploitation Team in Public Protection Unit
  - LAC Inclusion Officer
  - LAC Nurse
  - Lead Nurse for Safeguarding
  - Lead Financial Officer for Social Care and Housing
  - Practice Manager at CAFCASS
  - Representative from NYAS

- Focus group with Managers for Children and Family Teams, 16+ Team, Child Protection Coordinator, and Family Placement Team Manager

- Focus group with two Independent Reviewing Officers and the LAC Coordinator

- Focus group with MIST Team Manager, Families First Manager, and Assistant Team Manager for Family Focus

Appendix 2 – Consultation framework

Introduction

Cordis Bright has been asked by the All Wales Heads of Children's Services and the WLGA to undertake research to understand why local authorities with similar profiles of need have different looked after children populations. These questions are designed to explore some of these issues. Your responses are confidential and your comments will not be attributed in any report.

Purpose

1. Within your local authority (or other agency) what does success for looked after children look like?

2. Within your organisation, where and how is this articulated?

3. What impact does this have on: (a) the numbers of LAC; and (b) how long children are looked after?

Your contribution

4. What is your role in helping to achieve this 'success'?

5. What impact does this have on: (a) the numbers of LAC; and (b) how long children are looked after?

6. In your view, what helps you do this effectively? What gets in the way?

7. How could barriers be overcome?

Other teams within the local authority

8. How well do other teams within the local authority help to achieve 'success' for looked after children?

9. What impact does this have on: (a) the numbers of LAC; and (b) how long children are looked after?

10. What works? What doesn't work?

11. How could impact be improved? How could barriers be overcome?

Other agencies within your local area

12. How well do other agencies within your local area help to achieve 'success' for looked after children?

13. What impact does this have on: (a) the numbers of LAC; and (b) how long children are looked after?

14. What works? What doesn't work?

15. How could impact be improved? How could barriers to overcome?

Numbers

16. Does the local authority or other agencies have specific objectives around the number of looked after children?

17. What impact does this have on: (a) the numbers of LAC; and (b) how long children are looked after?

18. How does this impact on achieving 'success' for looked after children?

Appendix 3 – Additional data

Local authorities with similar profile of ages of children and young people had different LAC rates

Figure 33: LAC rates compared to the percentage of all children and young people aged under 1

FINAL DRAFT
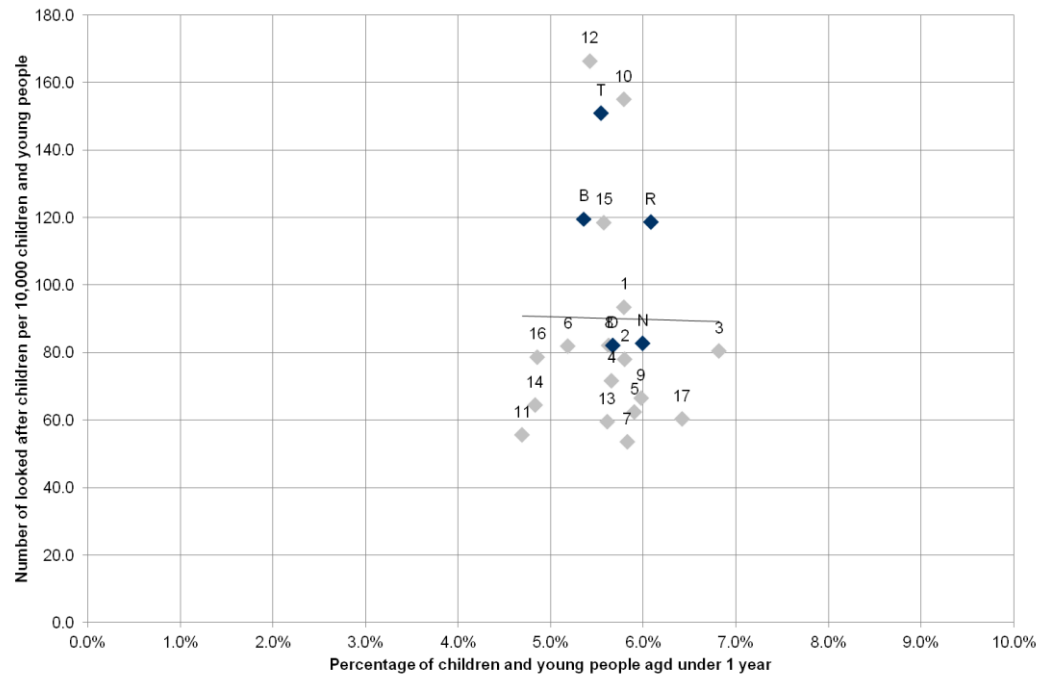
Figure 34: LAC rates compared to the percentage of all children and young people aged 1-4 years
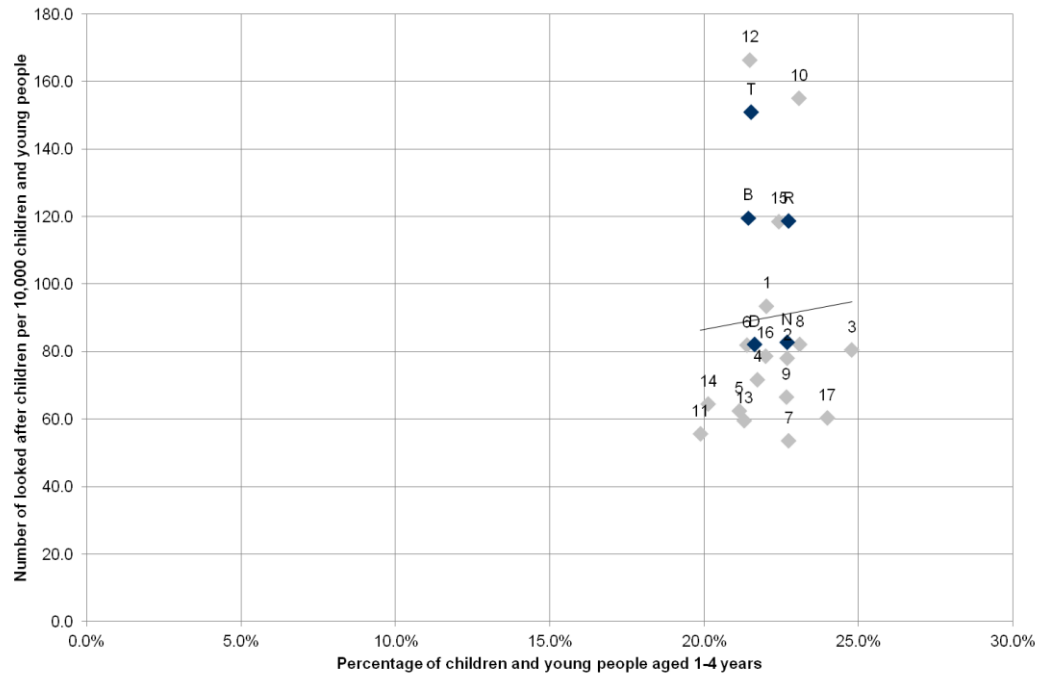
Figure 35: LAC rates compared to the percentage of all children and young people aged 5-9 years
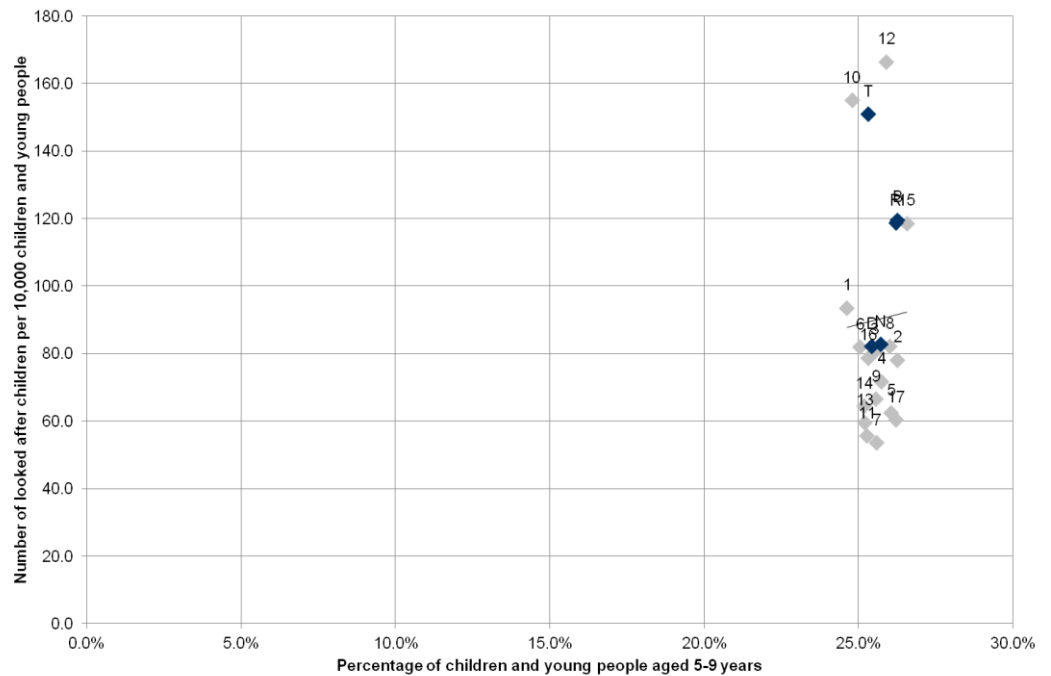
Figure 36: LAC rates compared to the percentage of all children and young people aged 10-15 years
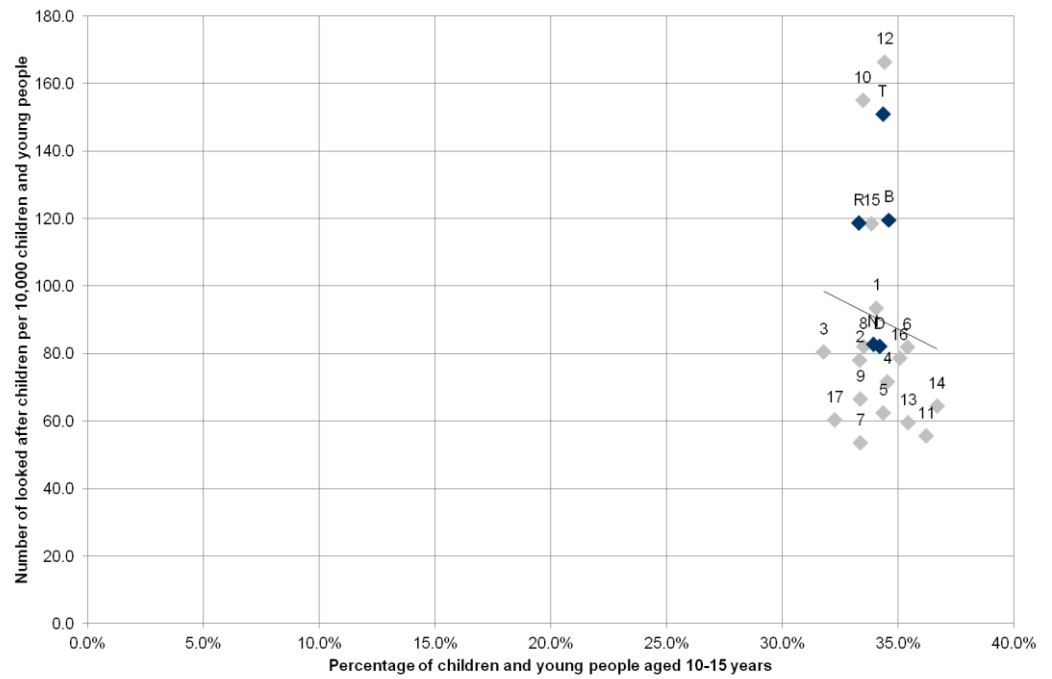
Figure 37: LAC rates compared to the percentage of all children and young people aged 16-17 years
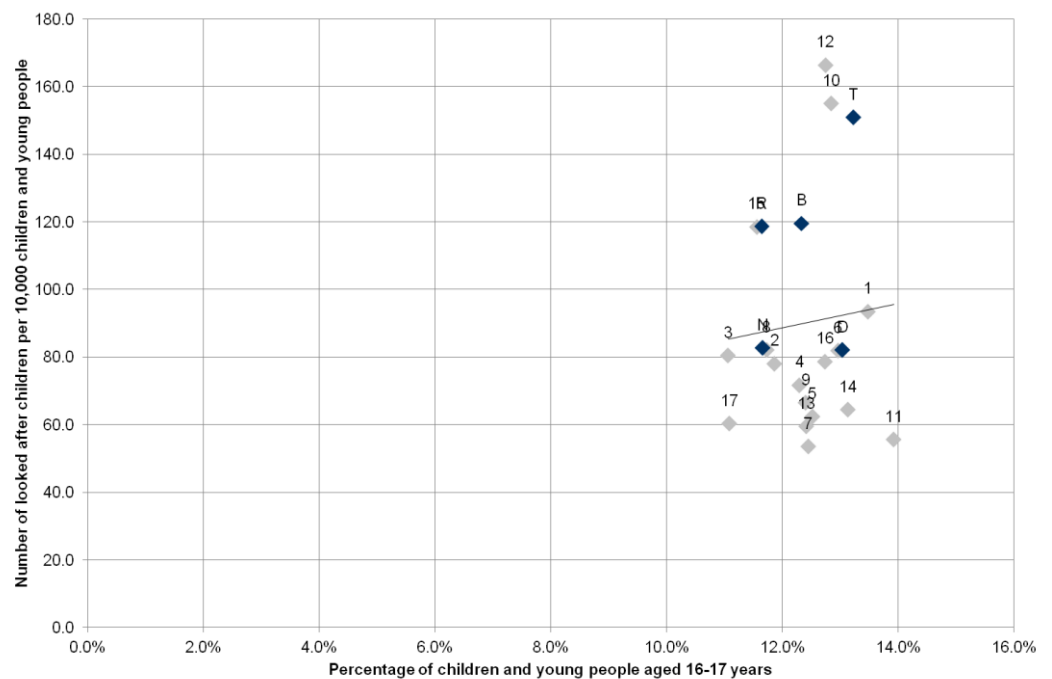
Local authorities with similar average household sizes had different LAC rates

Figure 38: Average household size compared to LAC rates
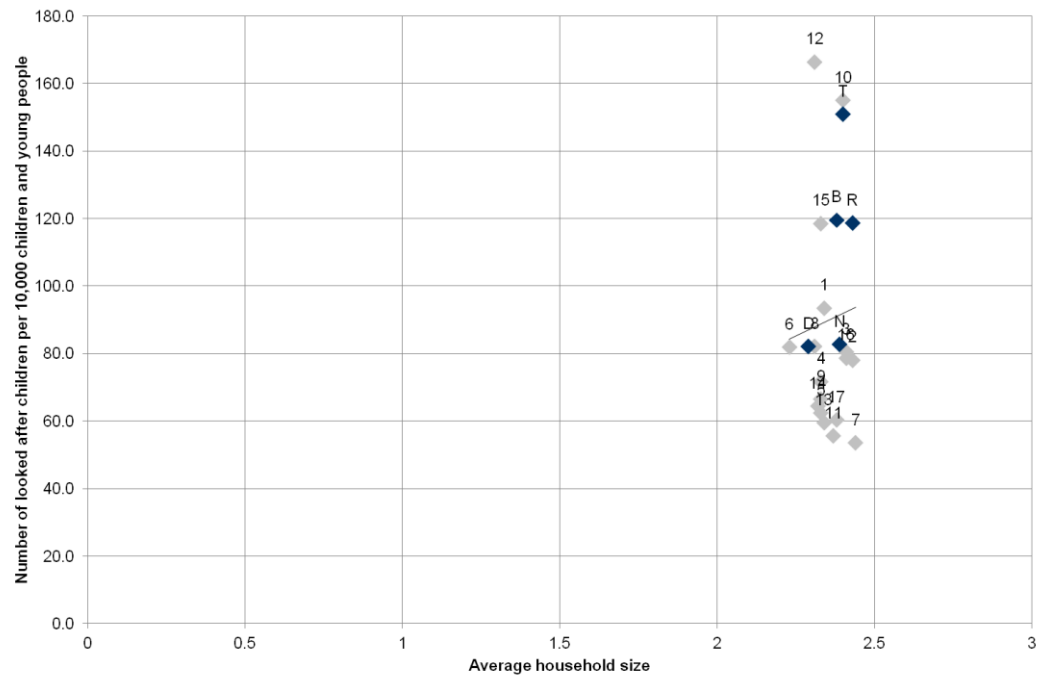
Local authorities with similar population densities had different LAC rates

Figure 39: LAC rates compared to total number of people per square kilometre
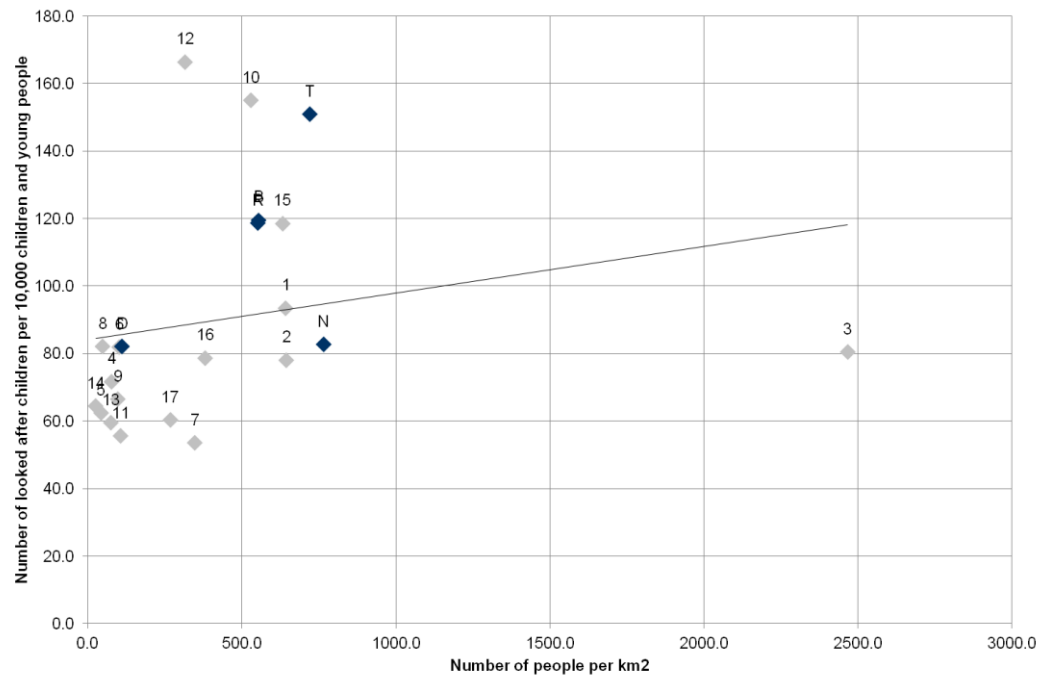
Local authorities with similar proportions of their population from Black and minority ethnic groups had different LAC rates

Figure 40: LAC rates compared to the proportion of the population that is non-White
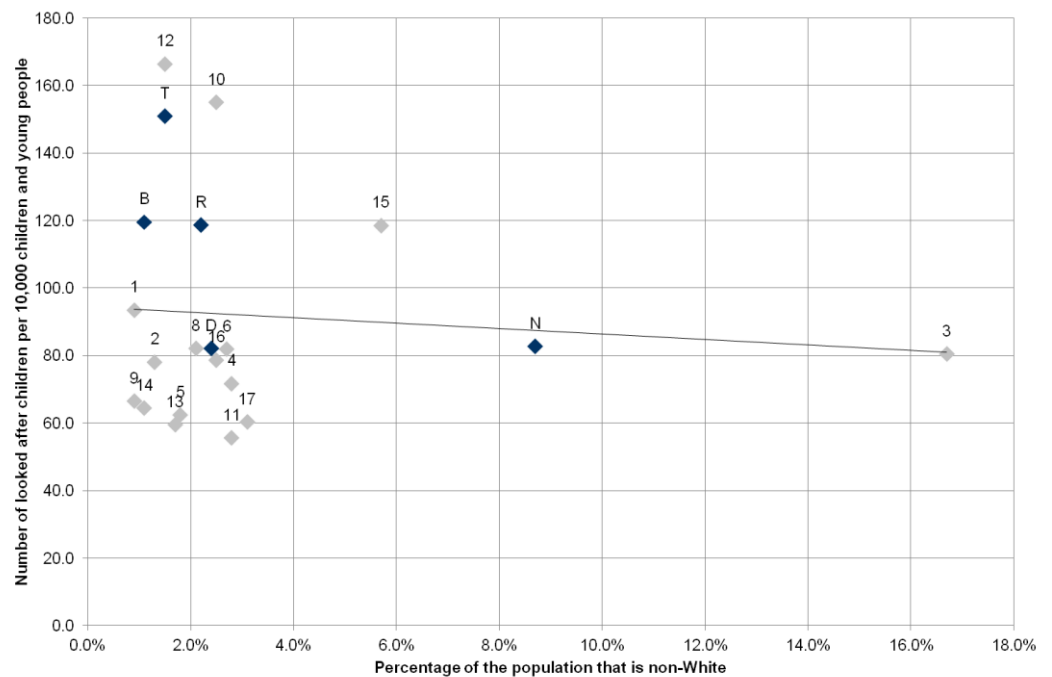
Local authorities with similar levels of housing overcrowding have different LAC rates

Figure 41: LAC rate compared to housing overcrowding measure
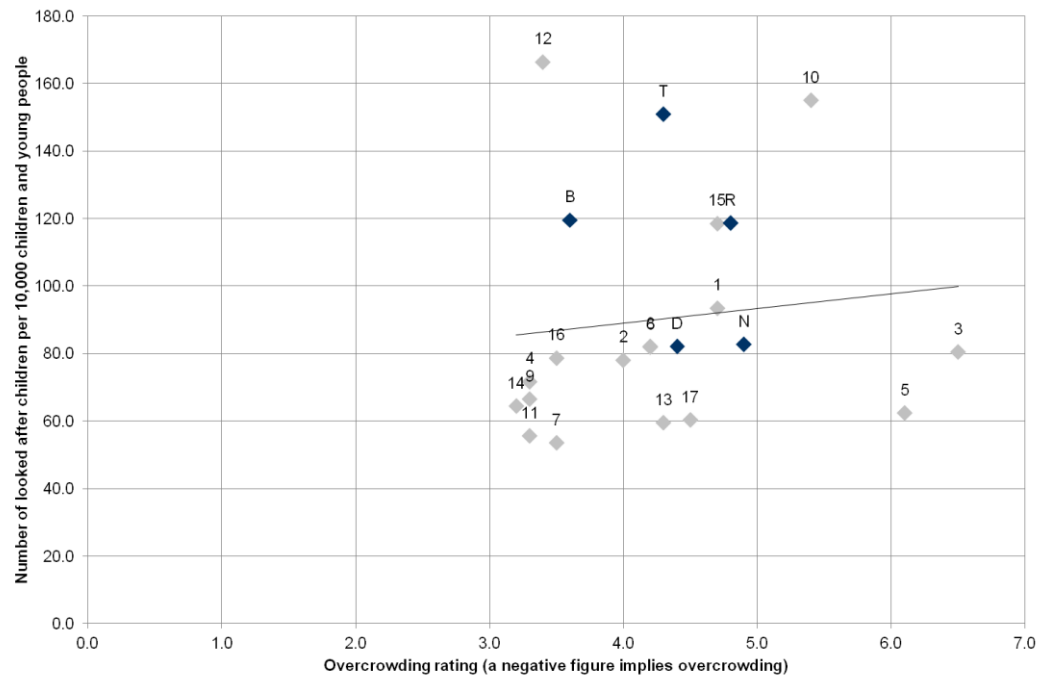
Differences in the use of permanency

The figures below suggest that there is no connection between LAC rates and use of different permanency arrangements.

Figure 42: Percentage of looked after children placed for adoption
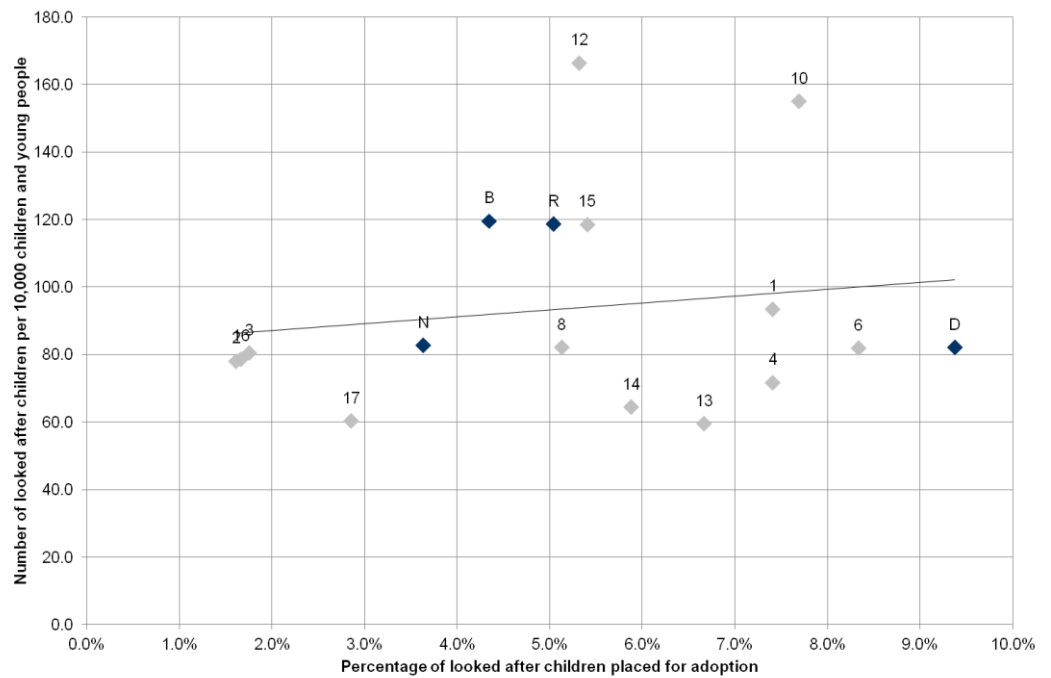
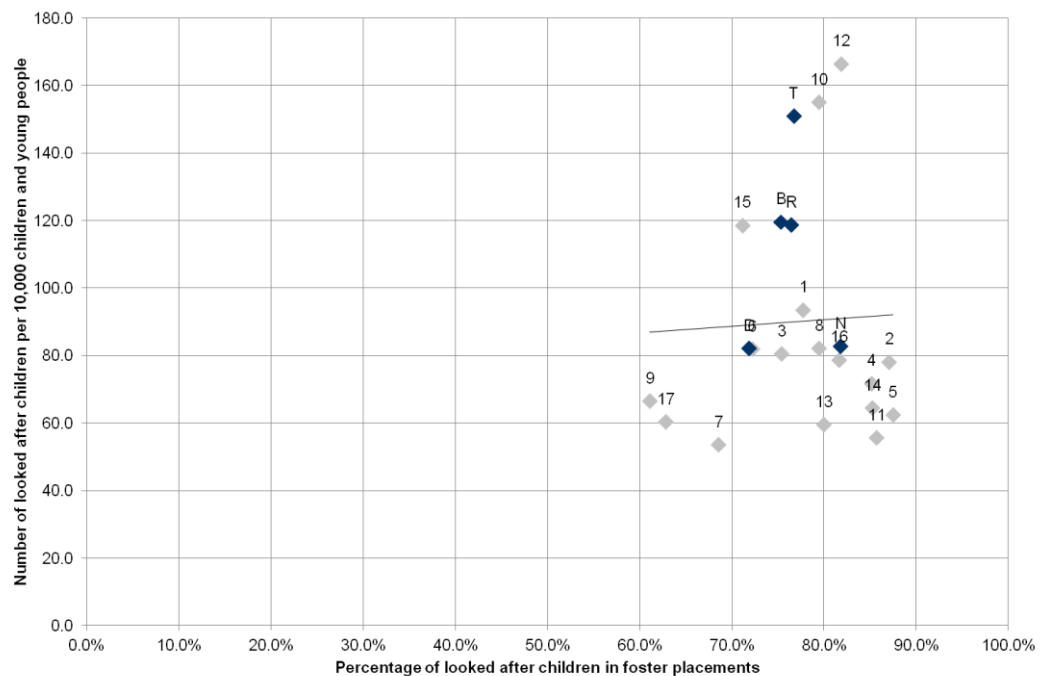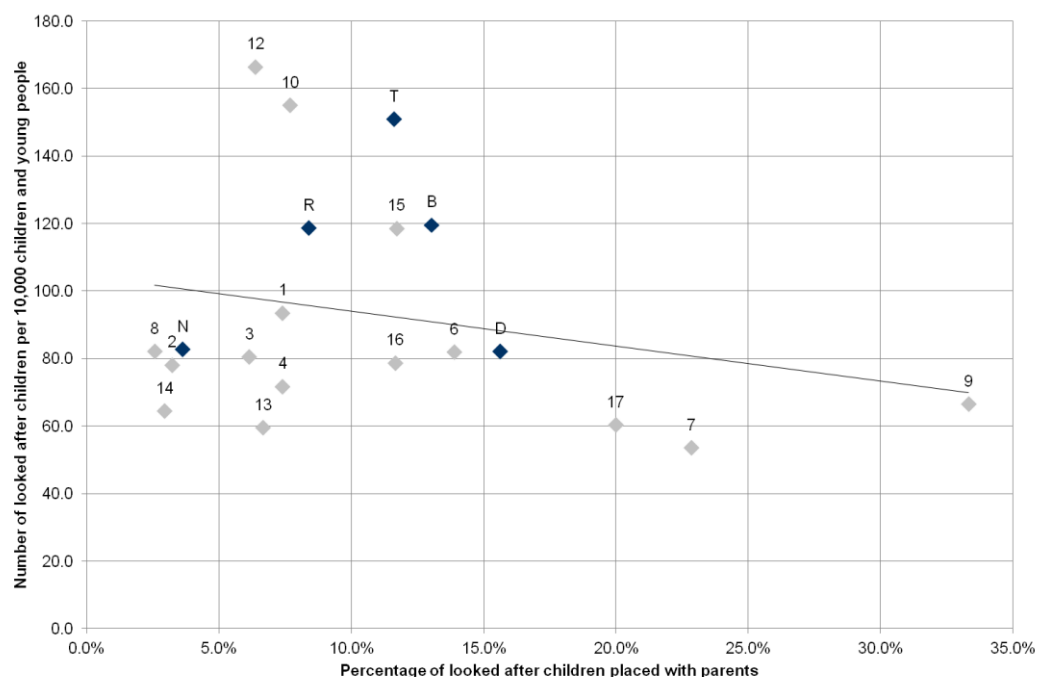*Figure 43: Percentage of looked after children in foster placements*

Figure 44: Percentage of looked after children placed with parents

Adding local authorities in England to the analysis

Figure 45 provides further contextual information by presenting the rates of looked after children for local authorities in Wales and England[45]. Local authorities in Wales are shown in dark blue, those in England are shown in orange. The Wales average is shown in light blue and the England average (59 per 10,000) is shown in purple. It shows that two Welsh local authorities have rates below the England average (i.e. Flintshire and Monmouthshire). Welsh local authorities with rates between the England and Wales averages are: Pembrokeshire, Wrexham, Ceredigion, Powys, Isle of Anglesey, Carmarthenshire, Caerphilly, Vale of Glamorgan, Cardiff, Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd, and Newport. Local authorities above the Welsh average are: Blaenau Gwent, Swansea, RCT, Bridgend, Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil, and Neath Port Talbot.

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[45] Please note that this data is drawn from two different data collection exercises.

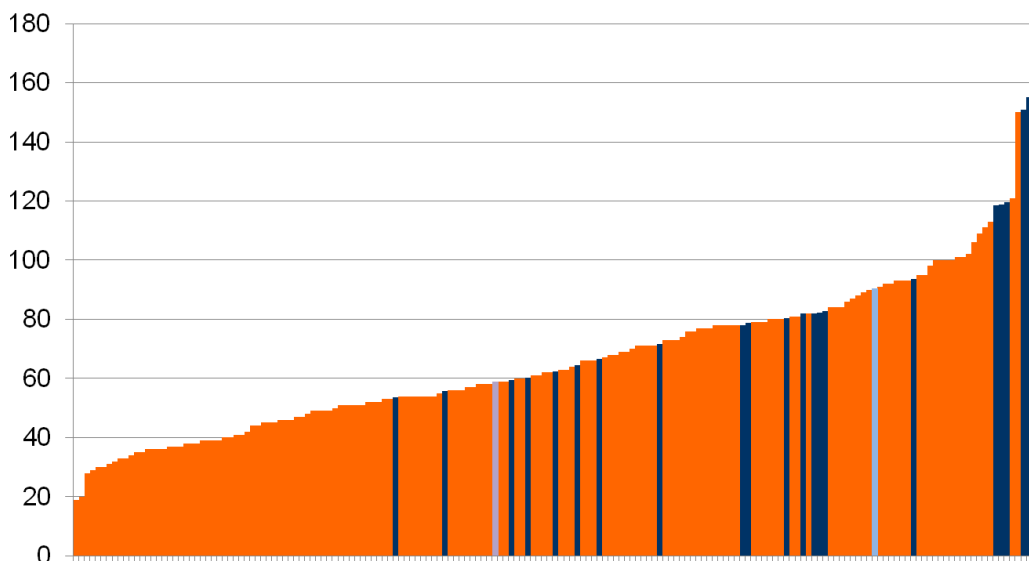*Figure 45: Rate of Looked after children across Wales and England (2012)*

Figure 46 lists the local authorities with ten highest rates of LAC across Wales and England. It shows that six out of ten local authorities are Welsh.

Figure 46: Lowest and highest rates of LAC across Wales and England (2012)

Local authorities with the highest rates
Neath Port Talbot (166) Merthyr Tydfil (155) Torfaen (151) Blackpool (150) Manchester (121) Bridgend (120) RCT (119) Swansea (119) Hull (113) Middlesbrough (111)

Figure 47: Rate of Looked after children (expressed per 1,000 children and young people) in Wales and England local authorities compared to the total children and young people population (2012)
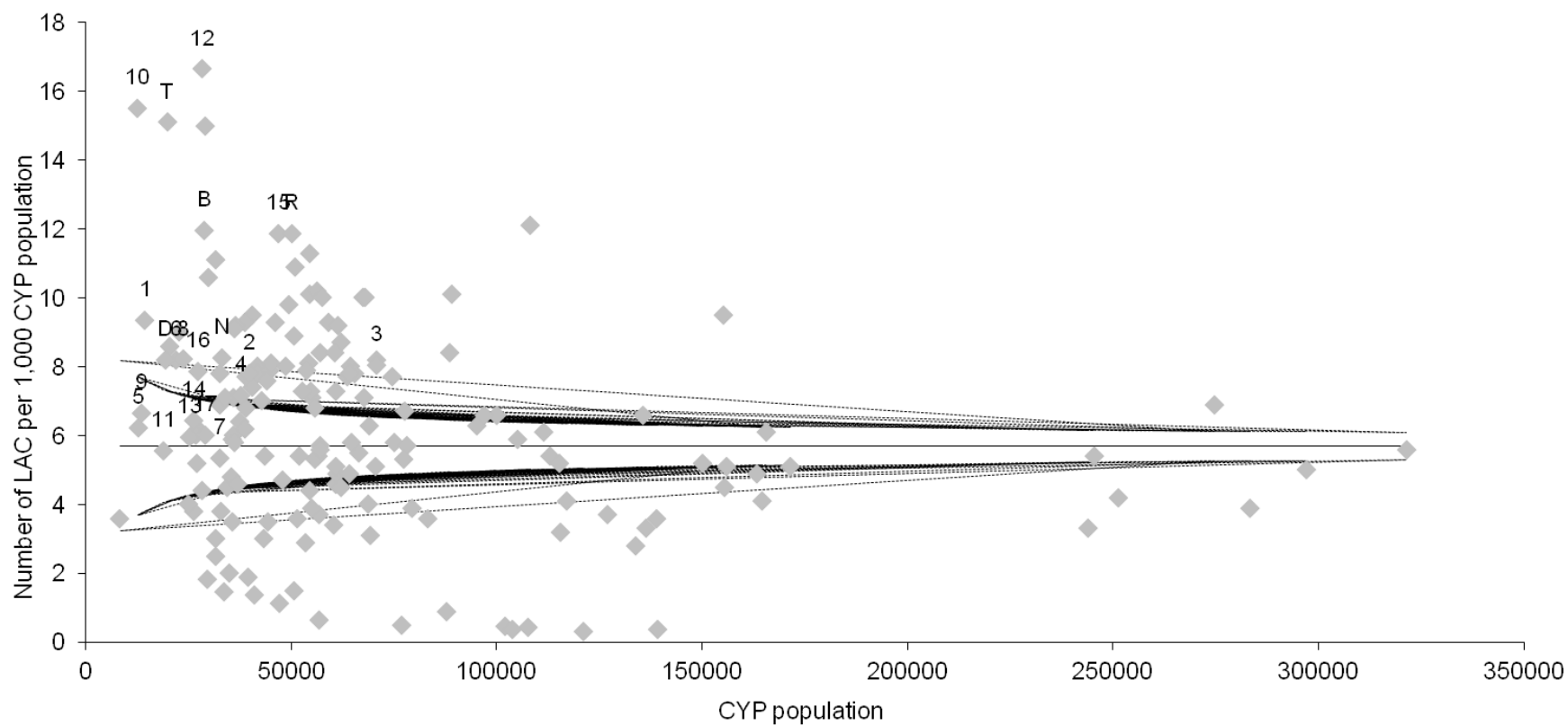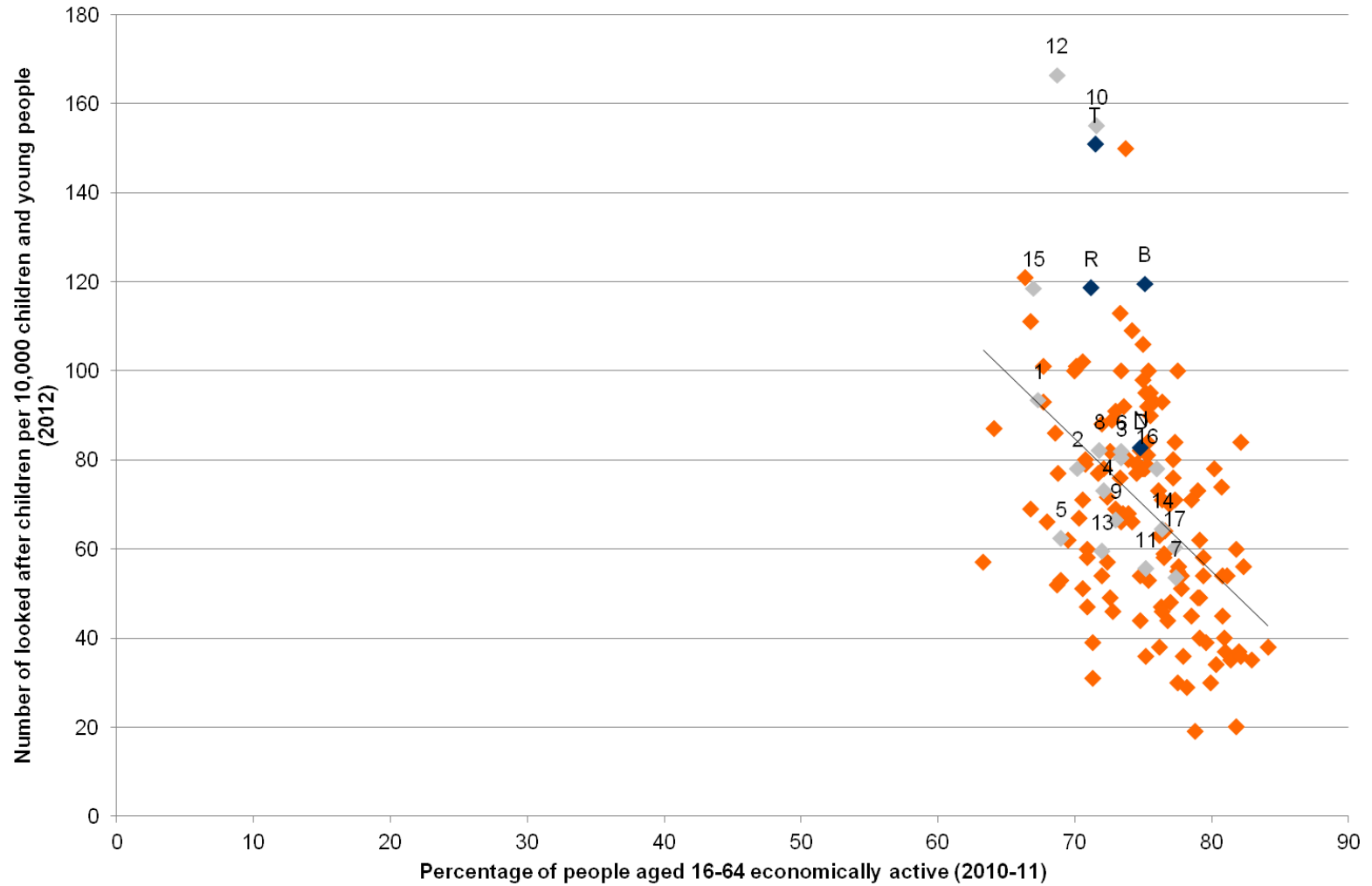
Figure 48: LAC rate compared to percentage of the population that is economically active for local authorities in Wales and England

Appendix 4 – Literature included in the review

1. Reunification of looked after children with their parents: patterns, interventions and outcomes: DCSF-RBX-14-08 (October 2008)

2. Needs, numbers, resources: informed planning for LAC: NCB (2002)

3. What works in promoting good outcomes for looked after children and young people?: SSIA (2007)

4. Safeguarding and child protection in Wales: the review of local authority social services and Local Safeguarding Children Boards: SSIA (2008)

5. Sustainable Social Services for Wales: a framework for action: WAG10-11086 (2011)

6. Safeguarding pressures project: results of data collection ADCS (April 2010)

7. Safeguarding pressures project: phase 2: exploring reasons and effect ADCS (September 2010)

8. Safeguarding pressures project: phase 3 ADCS (October 2012)

9. Children first: the child protection system in England: fourth report of session 2012-13 (volume 1): House of Commons Education Committee (2012)

10. Looked After Children in London: an analysis of changes in the numbers of Looked After Children in London: London Councils (2013)

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