

# Looked-after Children: The Silent Crisis

2019 Update

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**SMF**

Social Market  
Foundation

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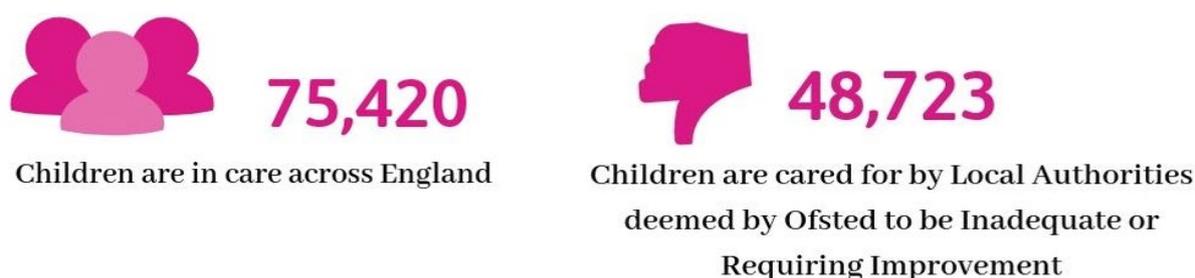
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## SUMMARY

This Social Market Foundation (SMF) update assesses the current standard of care provision for looked-after children in England. It shows that the number of looked-after children continues to rise and that the quality of provision many of these children receive remains inadequate - 48,723 children (65% of all looked-after children in England) were looked after in Local Authorities classed as either “inadequate” or “requiring improvement”. It is remarkable that this is not headline news. This would not be the case were it to be found in our school system, where 73% (secondary) and 87% (primary) are judged to be either good or outstanding.<sup>i</sup>

**Figure 1: Performance of care for looked-after children in England**



*Source: Department for Education children looked after in England 2018 and SMF analysis of Department for Education children looked after in England 2018 and ADCS SIF Outcomes Summary 2018*

Children with experience of the care system are significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers, on average suffering from lower education outcomes, being over-represented in the youth justice system, and being more likely to be unemployed in the future. In future, our ambition should be nothing less than a system which helps looked-after children catch up with their peers and achieve the same outcomes as any other children. Anything less is setting our sights too low. More can, and must, be done to help the most vulnerable in our society.

To ensure this happens, we are calling on the Government to set out a "Charter for Looked-After Children", committing to raising the standards of care we expect and closing the gap in outcomes between children with experience of care and their peers. We hope that this update, alongside our publicly available data dashboard, will contribute to making this a reality.

## LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN: THE SILENT CRISIS UPDATE

Children in care are some of the most vulnerable members of our society. They have often suffered traumatic events which have led to them being placed in care and lack the family support networks that others might take for granted. The term “looked-after children” (LAC) refers to all children who are “in care” and who are currently in foster care, adoption, secure institutions, and special placements.

On 31st March 2018, there were 75,420 children in care across England, the equivalent to 64 out of 10,000 under 18’s in England<sup>ii</sup>. Out of these children, 48,723 children (65%) were looked after in Local Authorities that were deemed to be either “inadequate” or “require improvement”<sup>iii</sup>.

In August 2018, The Social Market Foundation published the report “Looked-after Children: The Silent Crisis” which evaluated the standards of the provision of care for looked-after children in each Local Authority in England, and how this can affect a child and their outcomes in the future, both socially and economically.

Alongside this report, we also created an interactive data dashboard for each Local Authority in England. This public tool combines data from the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, and others to give an easily accessible picture of how Local Authorities are performing in terms of their standards of care provision to looked-after children. We have since updated this dashboard with the most recent Ofsted data.

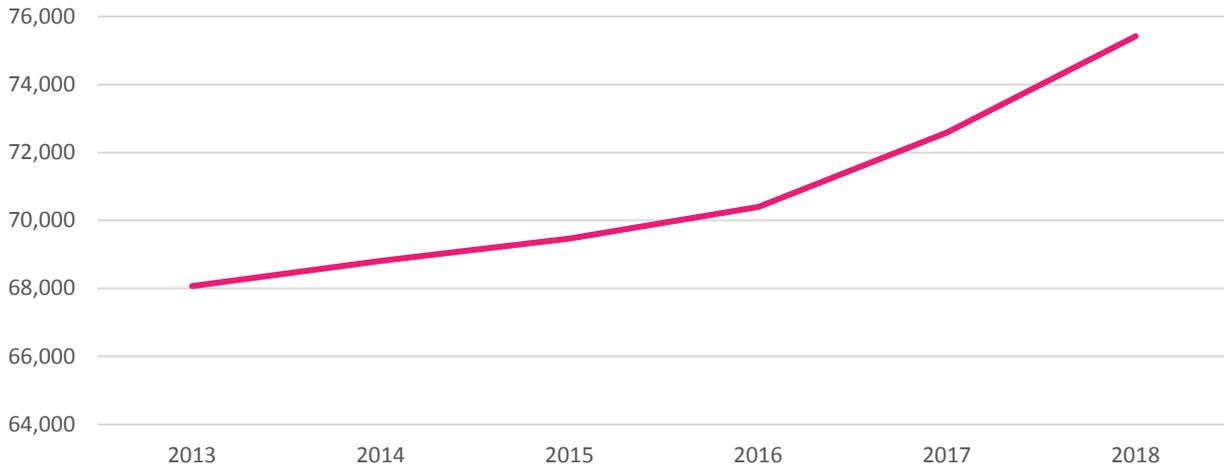
This report gives an overview of the latest data, which is drawn from the data dashboard: <http://www.smf.co.uk/looked-after-children/>

## THE SILENT CRISIS: A YEAR ON

### Number of looked-after children

A growing number of children are being looked after. In the last year alone, the number of looked-after children (LAC) in care rose by 3.8% to reach 75,420 children in 2018<sup>iv</sup>.

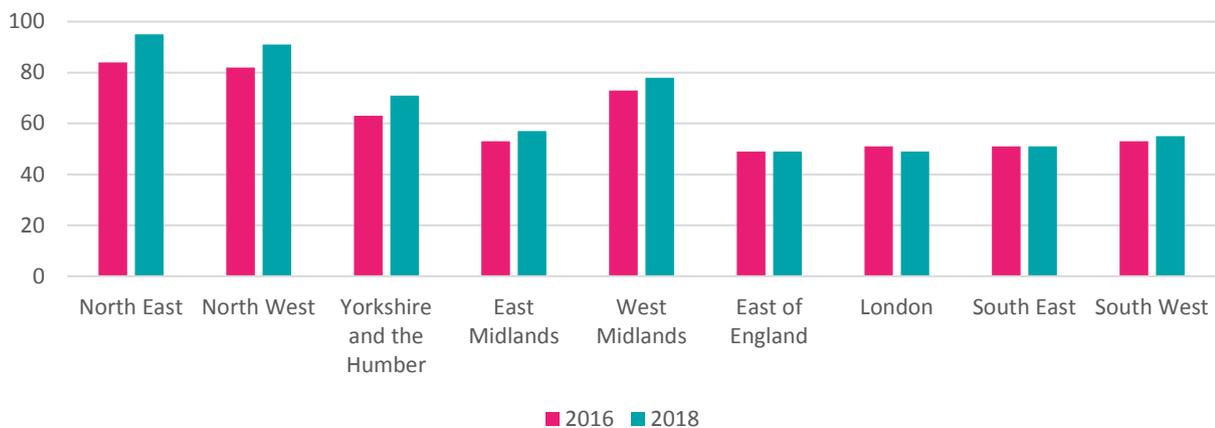
**Figure 2: Number of looked-after children at 31st March**



Source: Department for Education, *Children looked after in England 2017, 2018*

More recently, the share of children who are looked after has also started to increase, with the number of looked-after children per 10,000 in England rising from 60 in 2016 to 64 children in 2018.<sup>v</sup> Some regions across England saw larger increases than others. In particular, the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions. These regions also had relatively higher shares of looked-after children to begin with.

**Figure 3: Number of Looked-After Children per 10,000 per region**

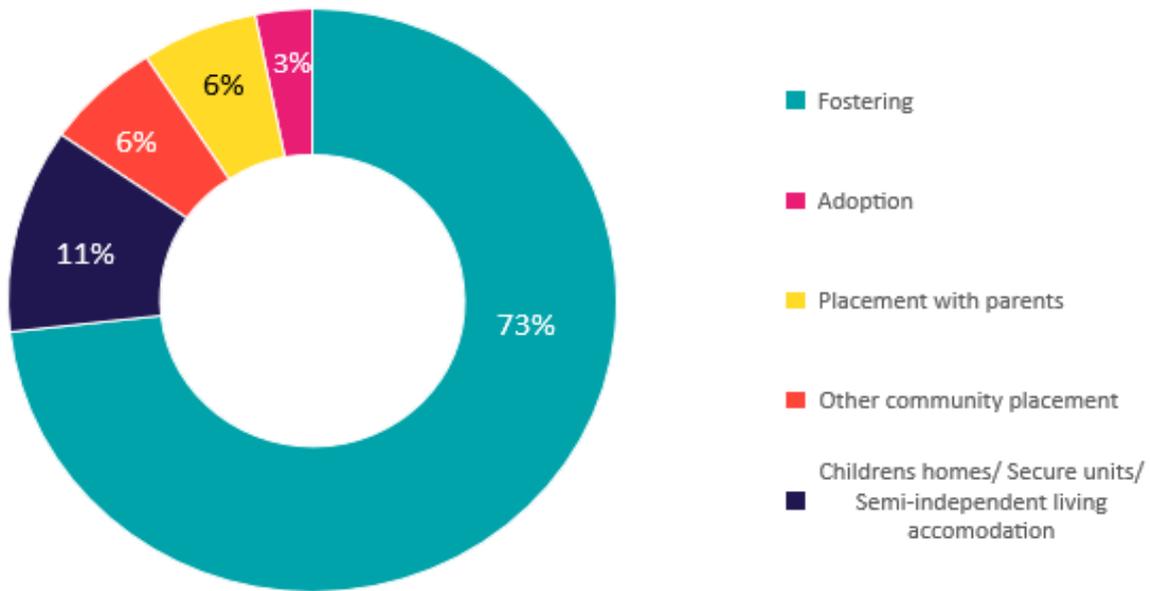


Source: Department for Education, *Children looked after in England 2018*

### The mixed provision of care

As shown in the chart below, there are a variety of different placements for LAC, depending on their needs and circumstances. The vast majority of children in care are looked after in foster placements, which account for nearly three-quarters of all placements. This is compared to the second most likely placement type, children’s homes/ secure units/ semi-independent living accommodation at just over 10%.<sup>vi</sup>

**Figure 4: Distribution of care placement types**



Source: Department for Education, Children looked after in England 2018

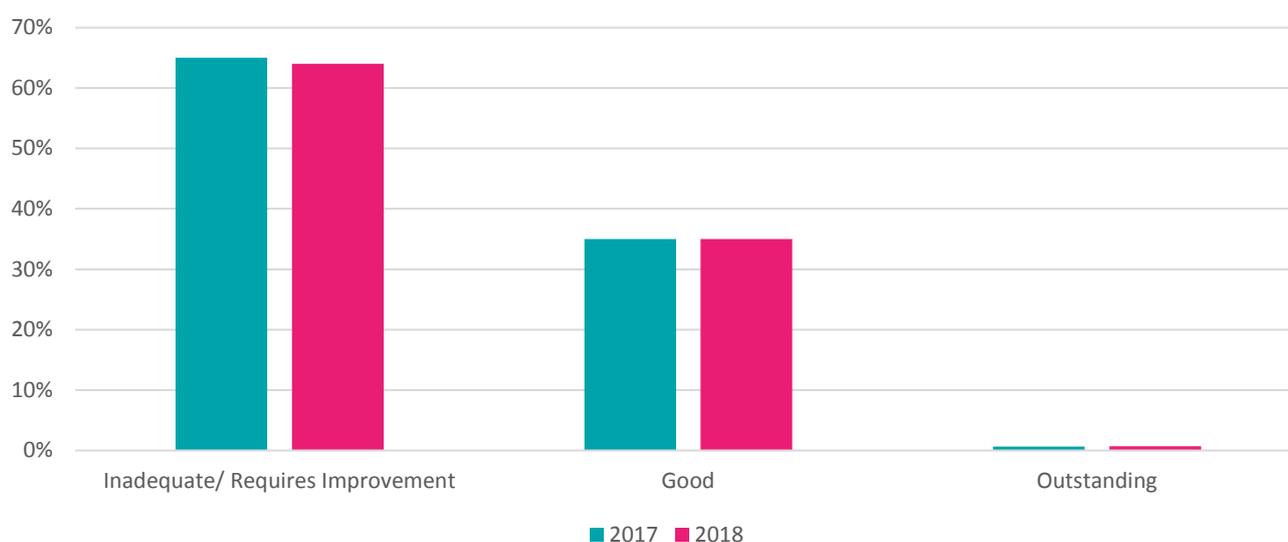
Fostering is by far the biggest service within all looked-after children services, with only 3% of children placed for adoption. However, despite the large number of children in foster placements, this is an area that has often been overlooked by policy makers and in policy and public debate. The SMF will therefore shortly be publishing a report focused on the provision of fostering services to help shine a light on this important part of the system. The report will consider the role of foster carers and their experiences within the fostering system in England and set out a clear vision for improvement.

## Quality of placements for looked-after children

The DfE maintains oversight of the quality of provision for looked-after children in Local Authorities through Ofsted inspections, which result in a Local Authority provision rating of either “outstanding”, “good”, “requires improvement” or “inadequate”.

In 2018, almost 50,000 (65%) of vulnerable children are being cared for in Local Authorities that are not deemed adequate (i.e. rated “inadequate” or that “require improvement”). Of these 50,000 children, 24% are receiving care services judged as “inadequate” which is the worst possible rating.

**Figure 5: Local Authority performance, Ofsted ratings**



Source: SMF analysis of Department for Education children looked after in England 2018 and ADCS SIF Outcomes Summary 2018

Latest data shows the quality of provision is largely static. Between 2017 and 2018, the number of Local Authorities rated “inadequate” fell from 23 to 19. However, there was an almost equal rise in the number of Local Authorities rated as “require improvement” (71 to 74) over the year. The number of Local Authorities that were “good” or “outstanding” remained the same (54 were rated “good” and three were rated “outstanding”).<sup>vii</sup>

## OUTCOMES FOR LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN

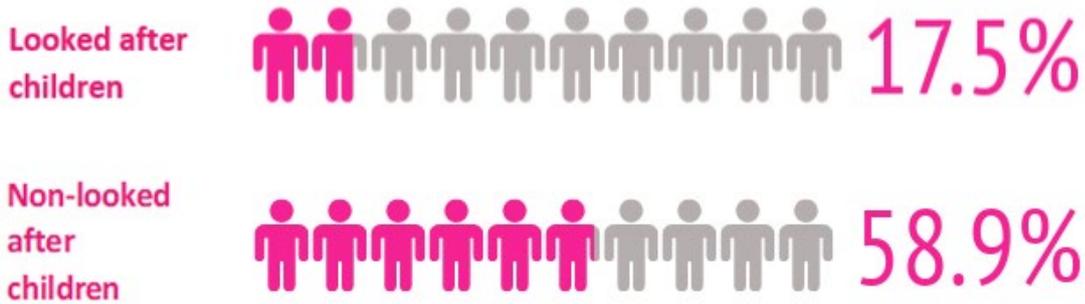
### Education and employment outcomes

Evidence shows that looked-after children are significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers. On average, they suffer from lower education outcomes, are over-represented in the youth justice system. These outcomes feed through to later life chances once children leave care. For example, nearly 40% of care leavers in England aged 19-21 are not in education, employment or training (NEET)<sup>viii</sup>. This remains much higher than the NEET rate amongst all 16-24-year olds in England, which is just 11.1%.<sup>ix</sup>

Our analysis of the latest data shows there has been limited improvement in many of these outcomes over the past year.

For example, only 17.5% of pupils who were looked-after children achieved A\*-C in both English and Mathematics GCSE.<sup>x</sup> This is compared to almost 60% of non-looked after children. Looked-after children are also five times more likely to be excluded from school than their peers.<sup>xi</sup>

**Figure 6: Proportion of LAC achieving A\*-C grades in GCSE Mathematics and English**

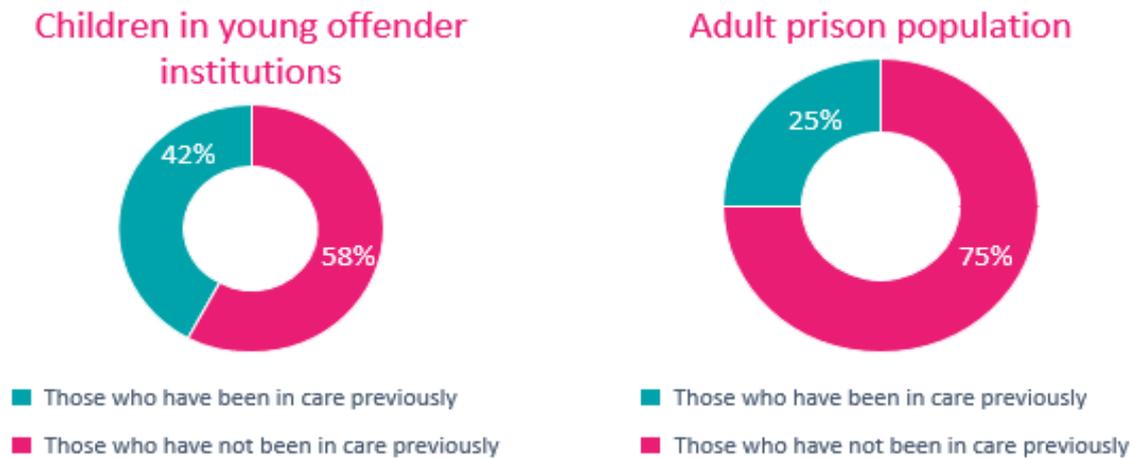


Source: Department for Education, Outcomes for children looked after by LAs 2018

## Social outcomes

Children who are looked after are also overrepresented in the youth justice system. Furthermore, almost 25% of the adult prison population has previously been in care,<sup>xii</sup> and children who have been in care reoffend at roughly twice the rate of children who have never been looked after.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Figure 7: Outcomes for looked-after children in the justice system**

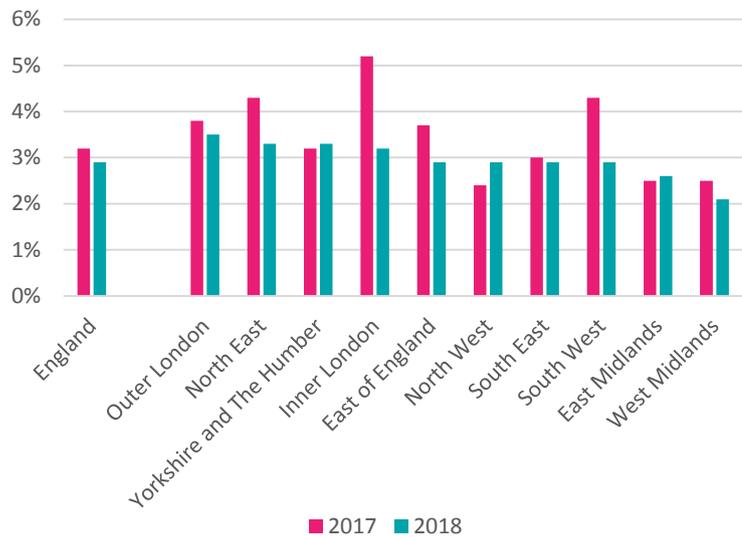


Source: HM Inspectorate of Prisons<sup>xiv</sup>

In 2018, the percentage of children in care who were convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand in England was 2.9%<sup>xv</sup>. Although this has fallen slightly since 2017, when it was 3.2%, it is still shocking that this implies children in care are approximately three times more likely to be involved with the justice system than the total population of all children<sup>xvi</sup>.

Again, this masks variation across the regions, with the North East, South West and Inner London seeing the largest falls. Meanwhile, some regions, notably the North West, saw slight increases in the percentage of convictions, final warnings or reprimands.

**Figure 8: Percentage of LAC convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand during the year**



Source: Department for Education, Children looked after in England 2018, underlying data

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Children in care are some of the most vulnerable members of society. As highlighted in the Silent Crisis report and this update, the number of children in care continues to rise and those leaving care face a variety of lower outcomes compared to their peers, which can continue into adult life.

To some extent, these poor outcomes can be expected; children in care are there because they are in a position of need and / or face a real risk of harm. It is also the case that, for many children, the experience of being in care is a positive one, leading to improved outcomes compared to the alternative of not being taken into care. On the other hand, for some children, experiences within care can serve to exacerbate their issues or cause new ones. As this update highlights, many Local Authorities are failing to provide even adequate services for the children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and the picture is not improving.

As recommended in the Silent Crisis report, this issue clearly needs to receive more attention from politicians and policymakers to ensure the system helps looked-after children catch up with their peers and achieve similar outcomes and to have access to the same opportunities as any other children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Achieving this ambition is a difficult task given the complexity and multifaceted challenges people in the system face. The vast majority of people working within and involved with the care system for children are determined to improve the lives of the people that they are caring for and there are areas of good performance. This means that improving the lives of looked-after children is not a case of simply trying to completely overhaul the system. Instead, what is needed is a more considered approach; first ensuring that the reasons for failure are properly understood and then taking action to ensure improvement.

### Raise the profile of the issue

The profile of the issue needs to be raised and a clear vision of improvement set out in a **“Charter for Looked-After Children”** which would commit to raising the standards of care that we expect for looked-after children, and to close the gap in outcomes between those in (and close to) the care system and their peers who do not experience the care system.

### Better data and understanding

More needs to be done to improve available data, and to make it easier to navigate and ensure that it is effectively joined up and shared between departments and Local Authorities. The SMF’s interactive dashboard represents one way this could be achieved; in the future, we hope to include other items including performance on stability (the stability index), and wider education and employment metrics. We aim for this to be a first step to boosting transparency and understanding in this sector, and hope others will join us in making this information more accessible and comprehensive.

### Monitoring performance and accountability

There needs to be a better way of monitoring the performance of Local Authority service providers and for holding local and central government accountable in delivering it, however currently, there is virtually no accountability that stems from this available information or data. For this reason, we believe that as part of the new Charter, a public monitoring framework across the data held by all government departments, Local Authorities and wider service providers should be developed. It should identify key metrics against which all Local Authorities can be judged publicly in terms of both the quality of their service delivery and the outcomes that they are supporting for looked-after children.

### Focusing on problem areas

The Silent Crisis report showed that the performance of the system and the needs of children vary substantially. It is clear that the right reforms in the right places could make a world of difference to the most vulnerable children in our society. However, the route forward is not always clear, and in many cases a strong local understanding will be needed to identify how opportunities can be improved for looked-after children. Nonetheless, a set of tools to identify both where there is good practice that should be replicated, and also where Local Authorities are lagging would be of enormous use. We hope that leaders at the local and national level, be they MPs, councilors, civil servants, or members of the community, will be able to use the SMF dashboard tool, and future versions, to identify where action might need to be taken in their areas.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ofsted-inspection-of-schools.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Department for Education, Children looked after in England, National tables

<sup>iii</sup> SMF analysis using Ofsted inspection results <https://adcs.org.uk/inspection/article/sif-outcomes-summary> and Department for Education, Children looked after in England 2018, Local Authority tables

<sup>iv</sup> The number of children in England in care rose by 3830. This was 3.8% of the 2017 number of children (72,670). The Department for Education, Children looked after in England, National Tables 2018

<sup>v</sup> Department for Education, Children looked after in England, National tables

<sup>vi</sup> Department for Education, Children looked after in England, National tables

<sup>vii</sup> SMF analysis comparing 2017 and 2018 Ofsted inspection results, <https://adcs.org.uk/inspection/article/sif-outcomes-summary>

<sup>viii</sup> Department for Education, Children looked after in England, National tables

<sup>ix</sup> [researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06705/SN06705.pdf](https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06705/SN06705.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-las-31-march-2017> national tables, table 3a

<sup>xi</sup> Department for Education, Outcomes for children looked after by LAs 2018, National tables

<sup>xii</sup> Berman. G, & Dar. A, 'Prison Population – Statistics', UK Parliament, 2013.

<sup>xiii</sup> Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 'Reducing reoffending: furthering our understanding', 2015.

<sup>xiv</sup> *The Inspectorate of Prisons: 'Children in Custody – 2015-2016 – An analysis of 12-18-year olds' perceptions of their experiences in secure training centres and young offenders institutions', 2016 and Prison Population – Statistics', UK Parliament 2013*

<sup>xv</sup> Department for Education, Children looked after in England 2018 Underlying data

<sup>xvi</sup> SMF analysis of rates for total under 18 population calculated from Ministry of justice, 'Youth Justice Statistics 2015/16, England and Wales' 'Prison: the facts – Bromley Briefing Summer 2017', 2017.