

# COMMENTARY

## 1. Numbers of children looked after in England

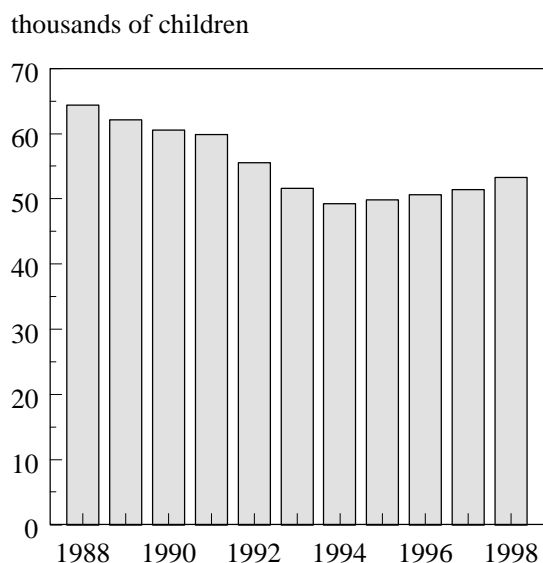
(Tables A, B, 1 – 5, 11 and 13)

### Looked after at 31 March

The latest figures show that the **snapshot** total of children looked after in England at 31 March 1998 was 53,300, excluding those accommodated for an agreed series of short term placements. This was 3.7% higher than the revised estimate for 1997 (51,400). 47 out of every 10,000 children were looked after at the end of 1997/98.

As can be seen in Table A and Figure 1.1 the long-term decline in the number of looked after children came to an end in 1994, when 49,300 were looked after at 31 March. Since then there has been an 8% rise in the number of children looked after, and a 5% rise in the rate per 10,000 children.

**Figure 1.1 Number of children looked after at 31 March, 1988 and 1998**



### All children looked after in year

The number of children looked after in England **at any time** during the 1997/8 year is estimated at 87,500, slightly lower than during the previous year, and representing 77 out of every 10,000 children under 18 years (see Table 1). This figure includes 11,000 children who were looked after at some time during the year under a series of short term placements (Table 2).

### Started to be looked after

The total number of children who **started** to be looked after during the 1997/8 year was 29,700, excluding children starting an agreed series of short term placements (compared with 29,900 a year earlier).

### Ceased to be looked after

The total number of children who **ceased** to be looked after during the 1997/8 year was 29,300, compared with 30,300 a year earlier (Table 4).

### The flow of children in and out of care

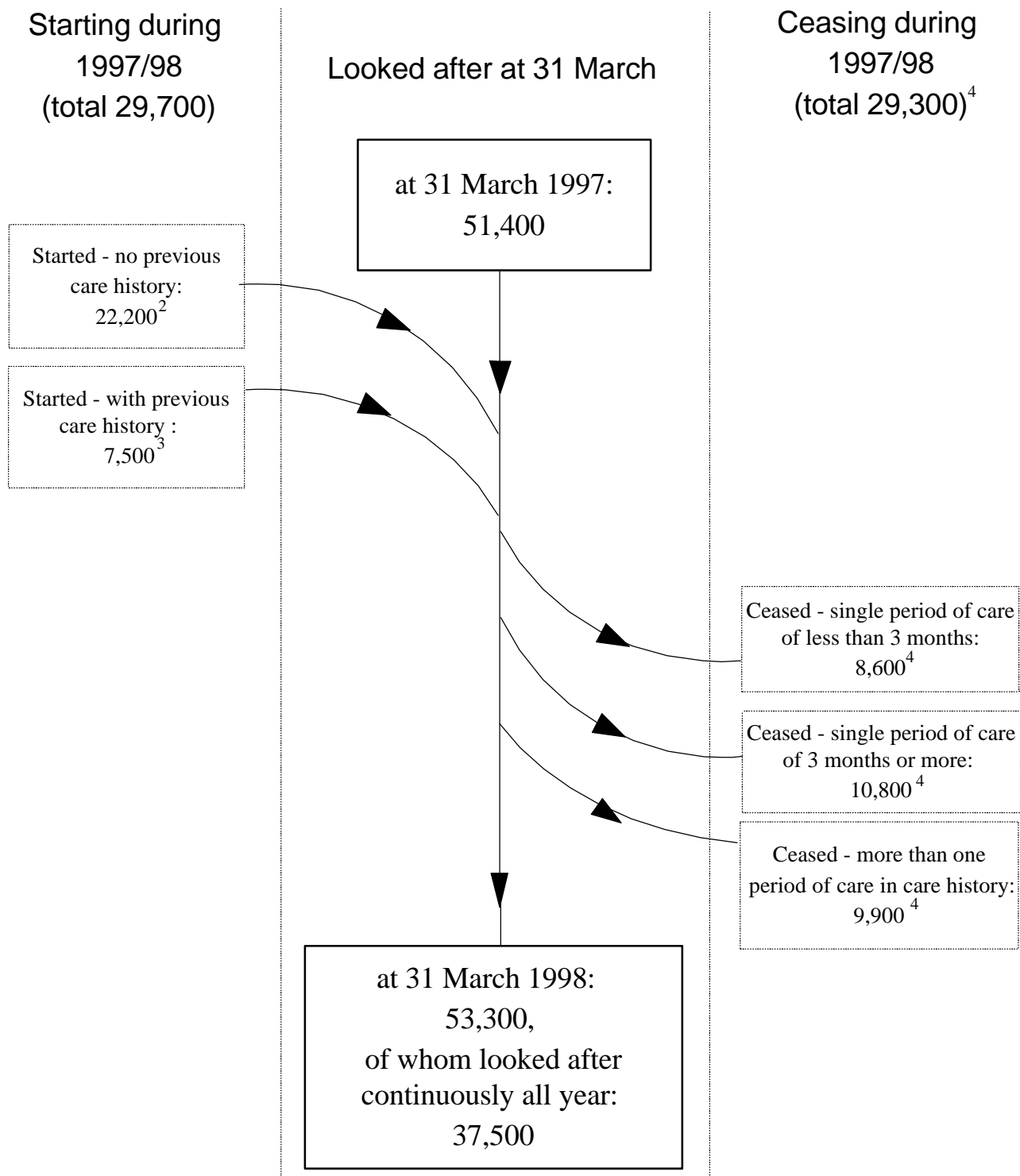
Figure 1.2 illustrates the relationship between the numbers of children who started and ceased to be looked after during 1997/98 and those who were looked after at the start and the end of the period. It covers the experience of the 78,200 children who were looked after at some during the period (but excludes children who were looked after during the year only under agreed series of short term placements).

Of those children starting to be looked after during the year 22,200 (75%) had no previous care history with their local authority. Most of the remainder had been looked after during a previous year; some were looked after at the start of this period, ceased and started again.

Two thirds of those ceasing to be looked after during the year did so having had only a single period of being looked after; many of these had had less than 3 months in care (see also Tables S and T). Some of the children ceasing started again later in the year, whilst others will be looked after again at a later date.

Of those looked after at 31 March 1998 37,500 (70%) had been looked after continuously all year.

**Figure 1.2 Children starting, ceasing and continuing to be looked after during 1997/98<sup>1</sup>**



Total number of children looked after at any time during the year = 78,200

<sup>1</sup> Excludes children only looked after under agreed series of short term placements

<sup>2</sup> With current local authority

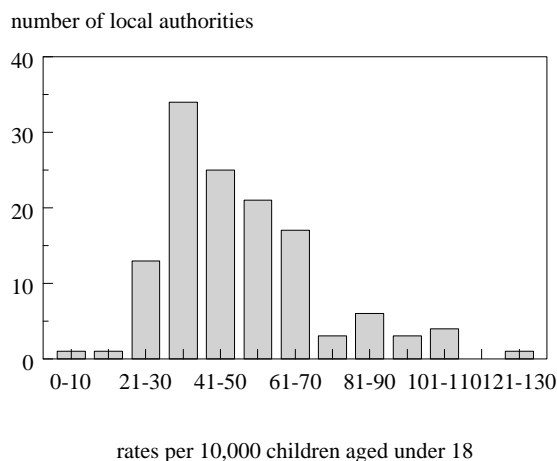
<sup>3</sup> Including 1,800 children who were looked after at 31 March 1997 and who ceased and started again

<sup>4</sup> Including 3,300 children who started again later in 1997/98 and were looked after at 31 March 1998

## Differences between authorities

The aggregate figures for England conceal considerable variation between local authorities as can be seen in Tables 1 to 5, 11 and 13. This variation reflects differences in the needs of the populations which the local authorities serve, as well differences in the responses of the individual social service departments in meeting the needs of the children in their area.

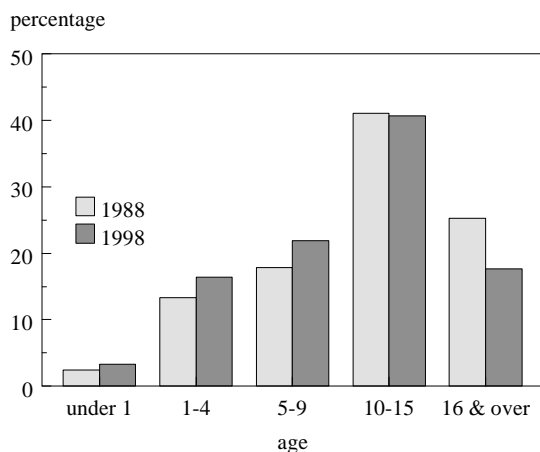
**Figure 1.3 Children looked after at 31 March 1998 in each local authority**



For example, Table 3 provides **snapshot** rates for 31 March 1998, expressed as the number of children looked after per 10,000 children in the local population. Although the average rate for England is 47 the figures for individual authorities range from 8 (Rutland) and 16 in Leicestershire to 124 (Kingston upon Hull). The distribution is illustrated in Figure 1.3.

## Age and sex

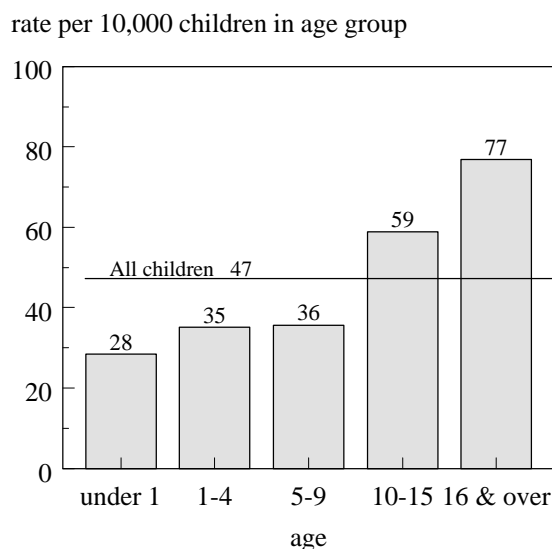
**Figure 1.4 Children looked after by age at 31 March 1988 and 1998**



The average age of children looked after has been steadily falling for a number of years; their average age at 31 March 1998 was 10 years 6 months compared with 11 years 2 month in 1994. At 31 March 1998, there were 22,200 children looked after aged under 10 (42% of all children). In contrast the proportion in this age group ten years ago was 34% (Figure 1.4). The percentage aged 16 and over was 18% at 31 March 1998, compared with 25% in 1988.

A far greater proportion of older children in the population are looked after than younger children (Figure 1.5). When expressed as a rate per 10,000 children in the relevant age group the proportion of children looked after at 31 March rises from 28 for children aged under 1 to 77 for those aged 16 and over. The average rate for all children is 47.

**Figure 1.5 Children looked after at 31 March 1998**



The **snapshot** at 31 March 1998 shows that there were more boys looked after (55%) than girls. The proportion of boys has been rising slowly since 1993 (Table B). It is the highest amongst the 10 and 15 years olds. In the 1997 mid-year estimates of population, boys accounted for 51% of the population aged under 18.

## 2. Children who receive short-term breaks

(Tables I and 2)

As explained in the Introduction, where children are accommodated under an agreed series of short term placements (often called 'family link placements' or 'short breaks') local authorities can record either the period covered by an agreement, or the individual placements themselves. For this reason it is not possible to include the data for these agreements in most of the tables in this publication. Instead, data for children who are looked after under these arrangements are presented separately at a national level in Table I and by local authorities in Table 2.

A total of 11,000 children received series of short term placements at some time during 1997/98. Of these 9,300 were looked after exclusively under short term placements, the remainder having also been looked after during the year in placements that did not form part of an agreed series.

As can be seen in Table I, the number of children looked after in this way has risen since 1993/94. This rise may, at least in part, reflect incomplete reporting of these children in earlier years. In 1997/8 60% of these children were boys, a higher proportion than for other looked after children. Also unlike other looked after children their average age has risen since 1993/4, to 11 years 1 month in 1997/8. 55% were accommodated in foster placements and 38% in children's homes.

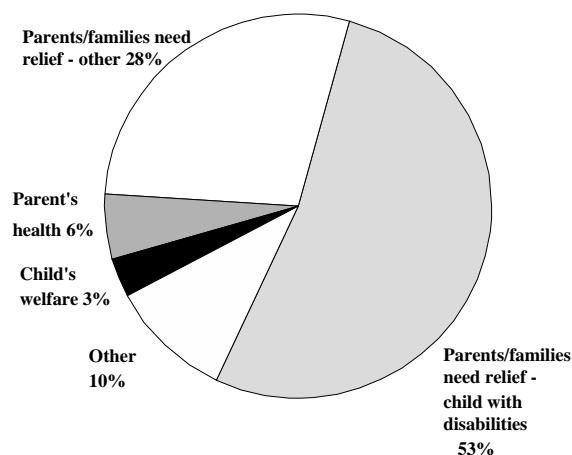
Series of short term placements are generally used to provide relief to parents and families. Although sometimes thought of as a means of supporting families caring for disabled children it can be seen from Figure 2.1 and Table I that slightly less than half the children are recorded as being looked after for reasons other than disability.

### Differences between authorities

Table 2 shows the numbers of children under series of short term placements in each local authority. (The figures for 1997/98 are based on the analysis of the one third sample of looked after children and are therefore subject to sampling error.) There is considerable variation between authorities in the number of children looked after in this way when compared with all looked after children (Figure 2.2). Some authorities appear to have provided this service to relatively few children, whilst other apparently similar authorities accommodated a quarter or more of their looked after population in this way.

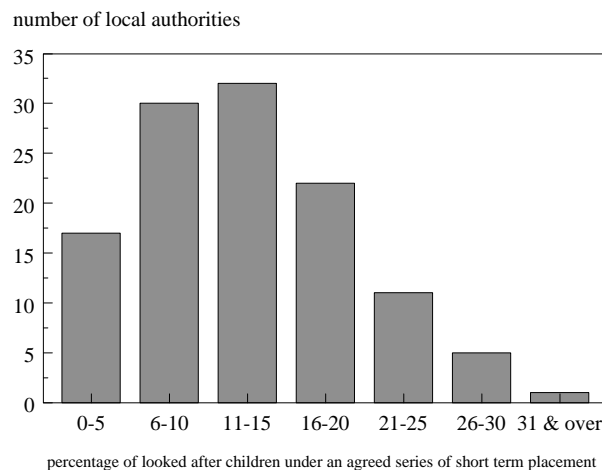
In considering these findings it is however necessary to bear in mind that authorities may differ in the way they record these children; the distinction between these children and others looked after under Section 20 is known to cause difficulties when recording data for the SSDA903 return. In addition, some authorities may fail to record these children, incorrectly treating them as not looked after. Others may have accidentally left these children out of their one-third sample return for 1997/98.

**Figure 2.1 Children looked after during the year ending 31 March 1998 under at least one series of short term placements by reason for being looked after<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup>Relates to child's latest episode of care

**Figure 2.2 Percentage of children looked after at any time during the year ending 31 March 1998 under an agreed series of short term placement**



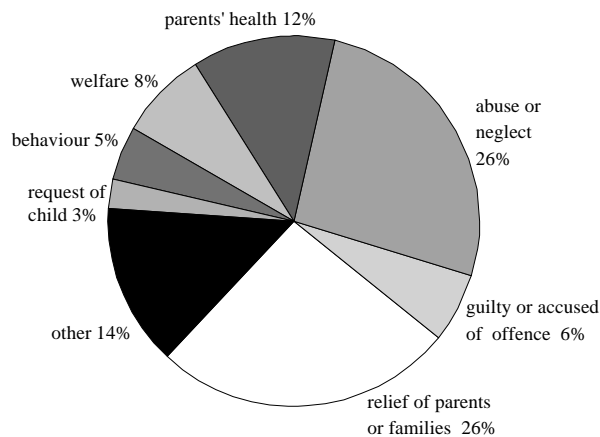
### 3. Reason for starting to be looked after

(Tables E and N)

#### Children who started in 1997/98

As can be seen in Figure 3.1, the most common reasons given for starting to look after a child during the 1997/8 year were to give relief to the parents or families (26%) and abuse or neglect (26%). The other commonly cited reasons were parent's health (12%) and concern for the child's welfare (8%). Table E shows trends over the last 5 years whilst Table N gives more detail for the latest year.

**Figure 3.1 Children who started to be looked after during year ending 31 March 1998, by reason for being looked after.**



#### Trends over time

The most striking trend in Table E is the steady rise in the number and proportion of children starting to be looked after because of risk of or actual abuse or neglect. 5,500 children (18%) were classified under this reason during the 1993/4 year; by 1997/8 this had risen to 7,800 children or 26%. Data collected separately by the Department of Health about children on child protection registers show that a quarter of children on the register are also looked after – at 31 March 1998 8,000 children were both on the register and looked after.

'Concern for the child's welfare' is now given less often as a reason than in 1993/4, as is 'parent's health'. However it should be borne in mind that these trends may, at least in part, reflect changes in social workers' preference for certain categories rather than changes in the population of looked after children.

#### Looked after children with disabilities

As explained in the Introduction, children who are looked after under agreed series of short-term placements are excluded from most tables in this publication, including Table E. Most of these children are looked after in order to give parents or families relief (Table I). As described in Section 2 of this chapter, slightly more than half of them (5,800) were recorded as being looked after during 1997/98 for reasons relating to the child's disability. In contrast, of those children who started to be looked after in placements that did not form part of an agreed series (Table E), only 360 were looked after for this reason.

Considering the 87,500 children looked after at any time during the year, 7,000 or 8% were recorded as looked after because they were disabled, although it is interesting to note that some authorities do not use this category for any of their looked after children

In addition to these 7,000, other looked after children will have had disabilities but will have been recorded as being looked after for other reasons, and therefore cannot be identified as disabled from the data collected.

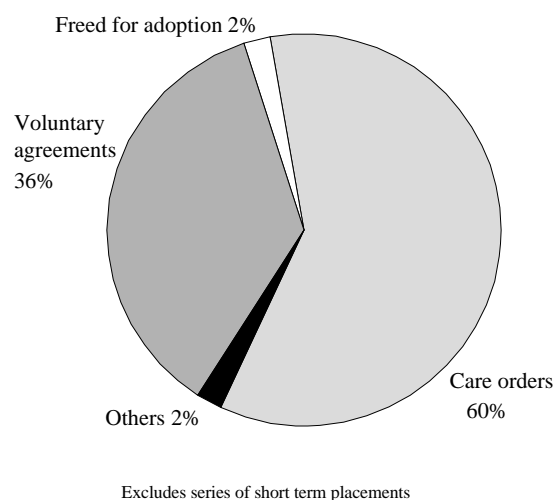
## 4. Legal basis for being looked after

(Tables C, F, K, O, Q, 6 and 12)

### Voluntary agreements - single placements

The intention of the Children Act 1989 was to promote the use of accommodation as a family support service and, when a child has to live away from home, to make voluntary arrangements with parents wherever possible. Table C shows that at 31 March 1998 there were 19,200 children looked after by voluntary arrangement under Section 20 of the Act, (*i.e.* excluding children under agreed series of short term placements), representing 36% of all children looked after (Figure 4.1). This compares with a peak of 19,900 (39%) at 31 March 1996.

**Figure 4.1 Children looked after at 31 March 1998 by legal status**



It is estimated that just over two thirds (68% or 20,200) of children starting to be looked after during 1997/8 were accommodated under a voluntary arrangement for a single placement. This proportion has been falling steadily since 1993/4, when it was 79% (Table F).

### Care Orders

Whilst voluntary agreements have declined in number the use of care orders has increased. Figures for the **snapshot** at 31 March 1998 show that the majority (31,900 or 60%) of children who were looked after on that date were under care orders, 1,800 more than a year earlier (Table C). *Table i)* below shows that more than half of this increase can be accounted for by the continuing rise in the use of interim care orders. Table F shows that there have also been recent increases in the use of both full and interim care orders for children starting to be looked after.

**Table i) Numbers of children subject to different kinds of care orders at 31 March**

	1996	1997	1998
Interim	4,400	5,300	6,400
Full	24,600	24,800	25,500
Total	29,000	30,100	31,900

This recent increase in the use of care orders and the decline in the use of voluntary agreements reflects a gradual change in the needs of the population of children looked after by local authorities. It is consistent with the increase in the numbers looked after as a result of abuse or neglect (see section 2 above and Table E).

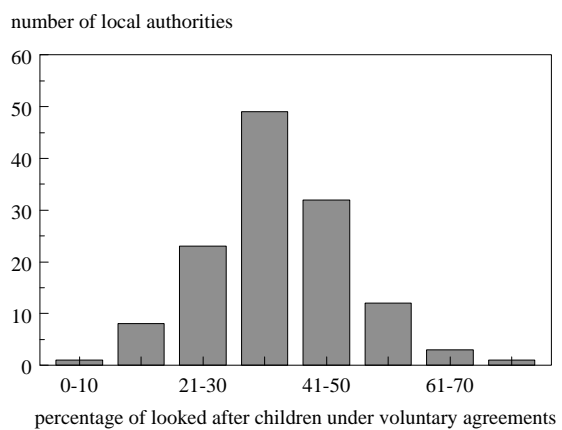
### Children accommodated compulsorily

Of the children who **started** to be looked after during the 1997/8 year, 4,600 or 15% were accommodated compulsorily, compared with 4,000 in 1993/4 (Table F). Roughly a third of these children were on remand, committed for trial or detained and the remainder were either under police protection or under emergency protection orders.

### Differences between authorities

The figures in Table 6 reveal the variation in the legal statuses of children looked after by different local authorities. For example, local authorities can be seen to vary in the use they make of single voluntary agreements under Section 20 of the Children Act (Figure 4.2). In England 36% of the children looked after at 31 March 1998 were covered by a single voluntary agreement. At the local authority level this percentage ranges from 7% in Hartlepool to over 60% in 4 outer London boroughs (and 71% in Rutland).

**Figure 4.2 Percentage of children looked after under single voluntary agreements at 31 March 1998**



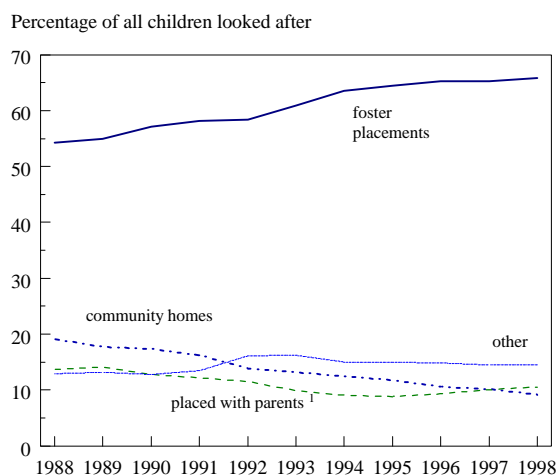
## 5. Placements

(Tables D, L, P, R, 7 and 8)

### Types of placement

Provisional figures for the **snapshot** at 31 March 1998 show that the majority of children looked after were in foster placements (35,100 or 66% of the total). As can be seen from Table D, the number of children in foster placements fell from 35,000 in 1988 to 31,300 in 1994; since then the number has risen and by March 1998 exceeded the 1988 level. Over this period the proportion of looked after children placed in foster placements has risen steadily from 54% in 1988 to 66% in 1998 (Figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1 Children in care/looked after at 31 March 1988 to 1998 by placement**



1. Under charge and control of parent or guardian before 1992

In contrast, over the ten years since 1988 there has been a substantial decrease in the number and proportion of children in local authority community homes. The number fell from 12,300 at 31 March 1988 to 4,900 at 31 March 1998. The 1998 figure represents less than 10% of children looked after, compared with just under 20% of those in care in 1988. The number of children looked after in voluntary homes and hostels was 550 at 31 March 1998 compared with 1,032 ten years earlier. Private registered children's homes were first identified separately in the statistics collected after implementation of the Children Act. At 31 March 1998 there were 770 children looked after in these homes (Table L), compared with 780 a year earlier.

At 31 March 1998, there were 5,600 children looked after who were placed with parents, representing over 10% of all children looked after. This compares with 5,200 in 1997. The use of this kind of placement has been increasing since 1994.

Prior to the Children Act, the number under legislation comparable to the Placement with Parents Regulations 1991 had been falling steadily. In 1988 there were 8,810 children under the charge and control of a parent or guardian, representing 14% of all children in care.

### Children placed outside their authority

Of the 35,100 children in foster placements at 31 March 1998 6,400 or 18% were in placements outside the boundary of their authority. As can be seen from *Table ii*, this percentage has increased slightly in recent years. Part of this increase has resulted from local government reorganisation: the increase in authorities unaffected by the boundary changes has been very small.

**Table ii) Percentage of children in foster placements at 31 March who were placed outside their local authority**

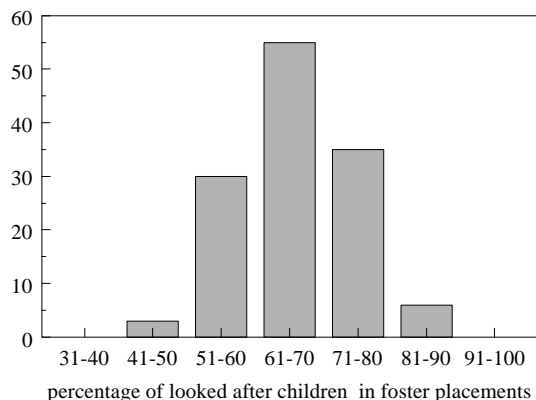
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
All authorities	17.4	16.6	16.6	17.1	18.3
Authorities unaffected by boundary changes	20.3	19.4	19.4	19.6	20.2

There is considerable regional variation in the use of out of authority foster placements. Authorities in London place, on average, a far greater proportion (44% at 31 March 1998) of their children in foster care outside their boundaries than other authorities. However, English local authorities vary considerably in their geographical size and the implications of an out of authority placement in, say, a small London borough may be quite different from a placement outside a large shire county.

## The use of foster care by local Authorities

**Figure 5.2 Percentage of looked after children who were in foster placements at 31 March 1998**

number of local authorities

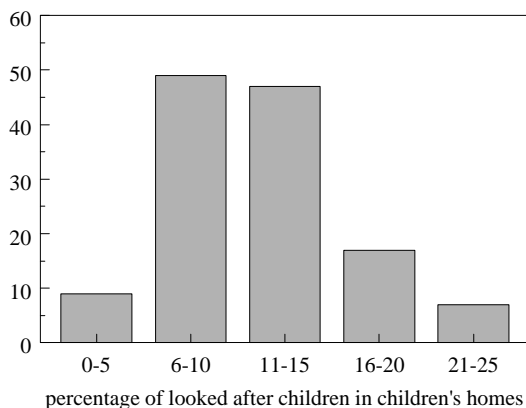


Local authorities vary considerably in the use they make of different types of placement of the children they look after (Table 7). At 31 March 1998 66% of children looked after in England were in foster placements. This percentage has remained reasonably constant for the last three years. The variation in the use of foster placements by local authorities can be seen in Figure 5.2. At one extreme Kirklees had only 47% of its children in foster homes, whilst at the other extreme authorities such as Bath and N. E. Somerset exceeded 80%.

## The use of children's homes by local authorities

**Figure 5.3 Percentage of children looked after who were in children's homes at 31 March 1998**

number of local authorities



Similar percentage data for children's homes also reveal variation between authorities (Figure 5.3). At 31 March 1998 12% of children looked after in England were placed in children's homes. At local authority level this proportion ranges from 2% (North Somerset and Hartlepool), to 25% (Gateshead). The figures for children's homes cover community homes, voluntary homes and hostels, and private registered homes.

## The ages of children in different types of placement

The continuing decline in the use of children's homes reflects the feeling that most children are better off in a family setting than in residential care. This is particularly true for younger children who are therefore more likely to be placed with foster carers, placed for adoption or placed with their own parents than older children. This can be seen in Table L, and is also examined in Table 8 at local authority level for children under 10 years of age. At a national level, only 3% of children under 10 were placed in children's homes at 31 March 1998. However in some authorities this percentage was over 10%

The relationship between placement and age is explored in more detail in the charts in Figure 5.4. In each chart the bars represent percentages by age of the total number of children in that type of placement at 31 March 1998.

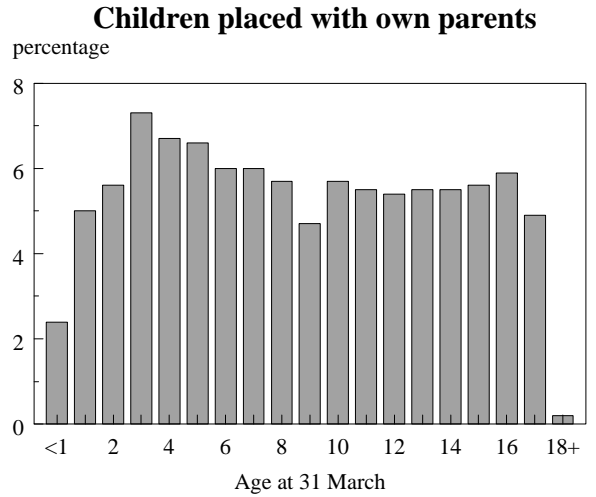
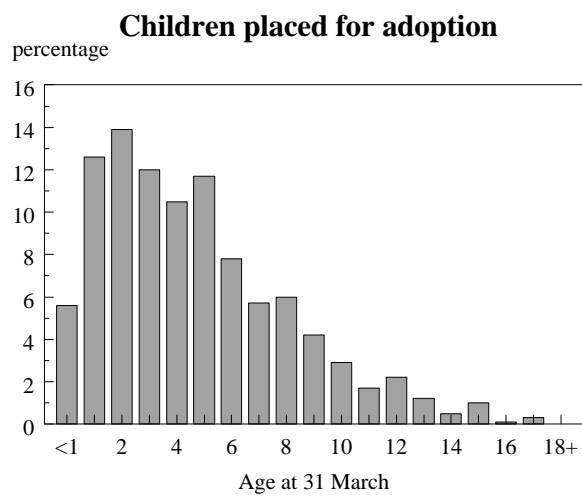
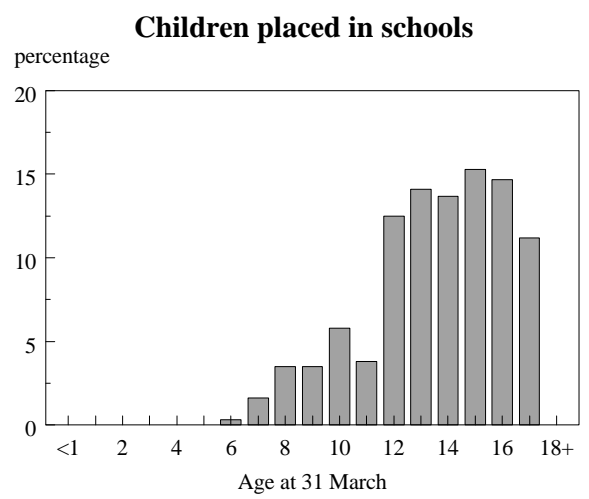
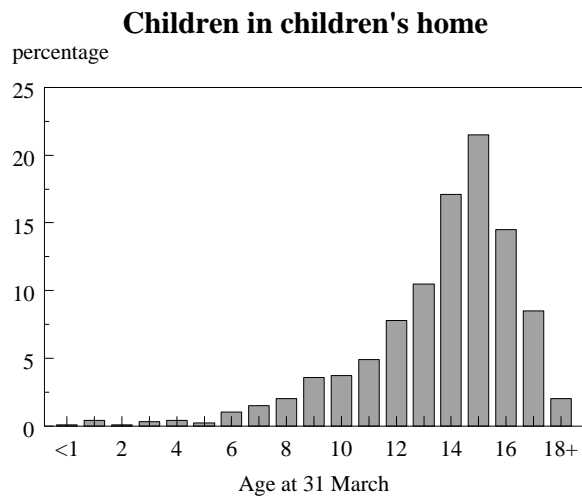
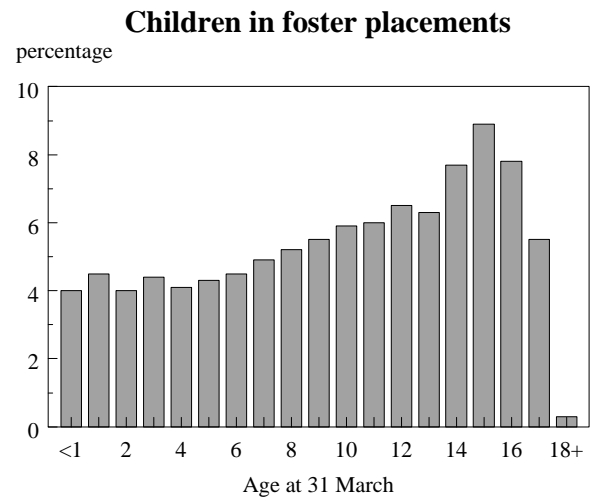
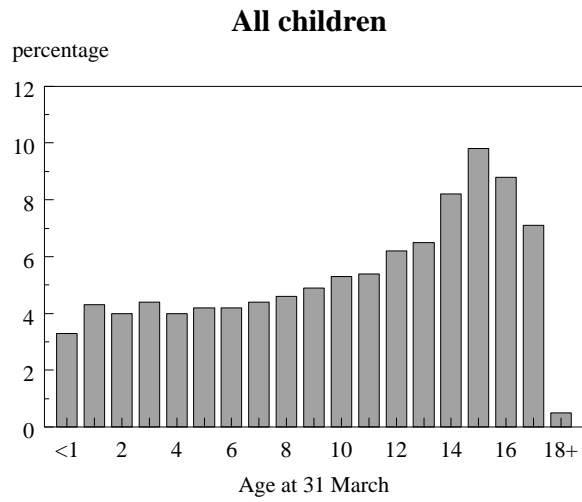
Two thirds of children were placed in foster placements. The age distribution of children in foster placements therefore follows a similar pattern to the overall distribution for all placements, with a peak at age 15.

As discussed above, children's homes are generally not felt to be appropriate for younger children so the majority of children placed in them were teenagers. Similarly most looked after children placed in residential schools were aged 12 or over, although a few were as young as 6.

For children placed for adoption the picture is reversed, with most of them under 10 years of age.

Children placed with their parents are relatively evenly distributed across all ages, with a slight peak in the 3 - 5 age range.

**Figure 5.4 Children looked after at 31 March 1998 by age and placement**



## 6. Stability in care

(Tables T, U, 9 and 10)

### Number of placements during the year

The Department of Health is concerned about the frequent changes in placement that some looked after children experience. To tackle this the Department has established a national target for social services under the National Priorities Guidance (NPG) as follows:

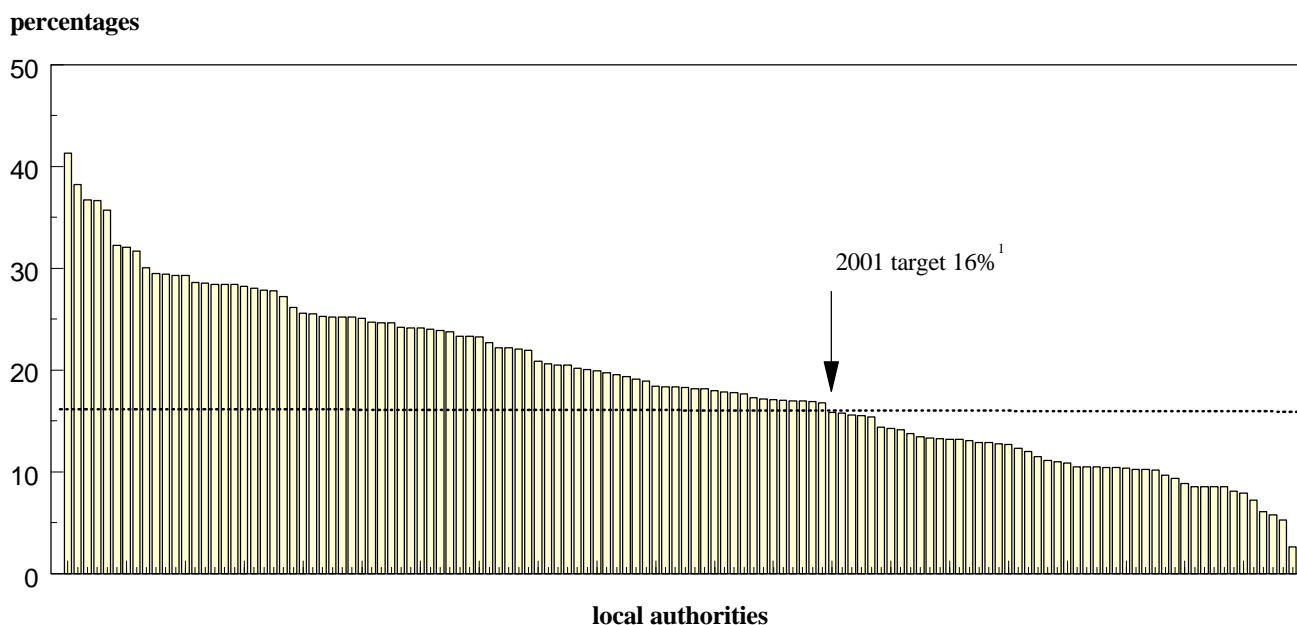
*Reduce to no more than 16% in all authorities, by 2001, the number of children looked after who have three or more placements in one year.*

A count of the number of different placements a child has had over a given period of time provides a rough measure of the stability of care that that child has experienced. The proportion of children looked after at 31 March who have had 3 or more placements during the year is therefore under consideration as a Social Services Performance Indicator and was also included as an indicator in the Quality Protects Programme launched by the Department in September 1998.

Table 9 shows figures for the **snapshot** of children looked after at 31 March who have had **3 or more placements** during the year, as recorded on the SSDA903. (Agreed series of short term placements under Section 20 of the Children Act are excluded.) These figures include **all** recorded placements during the year, not just those in the child's latest period of care; they also include any placements recorded on the SSDA903 form as 'temporary'. In interpreting these figures it should be borne in mind that they will be distorted by any inconsistencies between authorities in the reporting of placements.

The basis of these figures is however simpler than that of the related indicator collected by the Audit Commission (L9c) which counts the number of **moves** (as opposed to placements) during the **latest period of care only**, and allows authorities to exclude moves which they consider short term.

**Figure 6.1 Children looked after at 31 March 1998 with three or more placements during the year. Expressed as a percentage of all children looked after at 31 March 1998, by local authority**



<sup>1</sup> National Priorities Guidance target for each authority for the year ending 31 March 2001

At 31 March 1998, 19.3% of children looked after had experienced 3 or more placements during the year (compared with 20.0% in 1997 and 20.8% in 1996). Within this total, the figures for individual local authorities vary from 0% to 38% (Solihull), with the figures reported for London, and particularly inner London, being lower than for the rest of the country. Figure 6.1 shows that 43 authorities had levels below the NPG target at 31 March 1998. These figures, however, are based on the one third sample of looked after children introduced from 1 April 1997; this is likely to lead to a slight overestimate of the number of authorities achieving the target.

### **‘Long-term’ placements**

By analysing the full care histories of looked after children as recorded on the SSDA903 it is possible to focus on children who have been looked after continuously for several years. It is informative to then examine what proportion of these have been provided with a stable, ‘long-term’ placement by their local authority.

This approach is illustrated in Table 10. The figures show, for each local authority, the number children who at 31 March 1998 had been looked after continuously for at least 4 years. They also show the proportion of these who were in a ‘long-term’ arrangement at 31 March, *i.e.* those who had been in their foster placement for at least 2 years or who were placed for adoption. The figures for 1997/98 are based on the analysis of the one third sample of looked after children and are therefore subject to sampling error.

Although nationally 51% of such children were found to be in such a ‘long-term’ placement, the figures for some authorities can be seen to be over 70% whilst others’ are below 30%.

### **Numbers of placements in full care history**

An alternative approach to examining long-term stability is to consider the total number of placements that looked after children experience during their full care history. As can be seen in Table U, just under 40% of children who ceased to be looked after during 1997/98 had only a single placement in their care history and over two thirds had had 3 or fewer. At the other extreme 1,700 children had had 10 or more placements. It is important to bear in mind that a proportion of these children will be re-admitted and looked after again at a later date (see also Figure 1.2).

### **Multiple periods of care**

Table T provides a similar analysis in terms of the numbers of separate periods of care experienced by these children. Two thirds of children ceasing in 1997/98 had only had a single period of care (*i.e.* a continuous period of being looked after) but 9% had had more than 3 separate periods. This table excludes children in receipt of agreed series of short term placements, whose planned care by definition consists of many separate periods of care. A relatively high proportion of those ceasing on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday had had only one period of care; many of these young people had a stable, long-term care history under a care order.

# 7. Duration of care

(Tables M, S, V and 14)

## Length of time being looked after

By "length of time being looked after" we refer to the total length of time that a child has been **continuously** looked after by a local authority; this is also referred to in this publication as a "period of care".

Since the implementation of the Children Act in 1991 there has been a gradual reduction in the length of time children are looked after. Those children who **ceased** to be looked after during the year to 31 March 1994, had been looked after in their latest period of care on average for 586 days. By 1997/8 this had fallen to 563 days.

This reduction is largely a consequence of the decline in the proportion of children with longer durations of care. Of the children ceasing to be looked after during the 1997/8 year, 18% had been looked after for more than 2 years (Table S). The comparable figure for the 1993/4 year was 24%. This can be seen in Figure 7.1.

**Figure 7.1 Duration of being looked after of children who ceased to be looked after during the years ending 31 March 1994 and 1998**

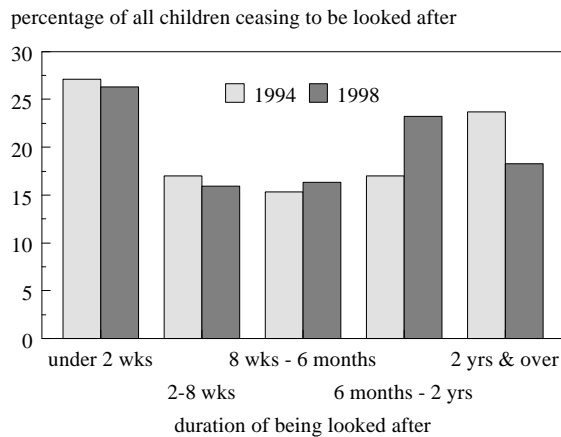


Figure 7.1 also illustrates the large proportion of children who are looked after for relatively short periods. In the year ending 31 March 1998 42% of children ceasing to be looked after had been looked after for less than 8 weeks, with 26% having been looked after for less than 2 weeks (see also Table S).

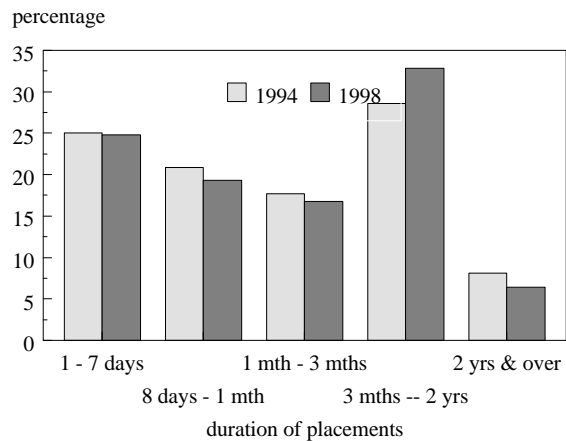
The **snapshot** of children looked after at 31 March provides a different view (Table M). This is because children being looked after for shorter periods are less likely to be captured by this snapshot than those with longer durations of care. At 31 March 1998

7% of children looked after had been looked after for less than 8 weeks. At the other extreme 52% of these children had been looked after for more than 2 years, and 23% for more than 5 years.

## Duration of individual placements

The average length of time children spend in any given placement has gradually decreased since 1992/3, the first full year after the implementation of the Children Act. The average length of placements which ended during the 1997/8 year (excluding agreed series of short term placements) was 210 days (Table V). The average during 1993/94 was 266 days.

**Figure 7.2 Duration of placements ceasing in the years ending 31 March 1994 and 1998**



The effect of the reducing placement duration can be seen in Figure 7.2. Of those placements ending during the 1997/8 year, only 6% lasted for two years or more; the comparable figure for 1993/4 was 8%. Figure 7.2 also shows that over half of all placements lasted under 3 months.

Placement duration is examined in more detail in Table V. This table gives figures for placements ceasing during 1997/98. It can be seen that 48% of foster placements lasted less than 1 month but only 6% lasted more than 2 years. The equivalent figures for placements in children's homes were 40% and 4%.

## 8. Care Leavers

(Tables G and 15)

Local authorities have a duty to 'advise, assist and befriend' young people who have ceased to be looked after at the age of 16 or over (Children Act 1989, Section 24). Increasing the support offered to care leavers, including steps to prevent the inappropriate discharge of young people at the age of 16 and 17 is one of the priority areas under the Department of Health's Quality Protects Programme. In addition two National Priorities Guidance targets have been established to improve the level of employment, training and education of care leavers.

Table G provides national figures for young people aged 16 and over who have **ceased** to be looked after in recent years. It is estimated that 7,800 young people left care in this age range during the 1997/8 year; this figure has fallen steadily since 1993/4. 46% of these young people were aged 16, a proportion which has increased since 1993/4, whilst the number and proportion of young people leaving care on their 18th birthday has fallen over the last 5 years. Figures for children who cease to be looked after include those children who return to live at home.

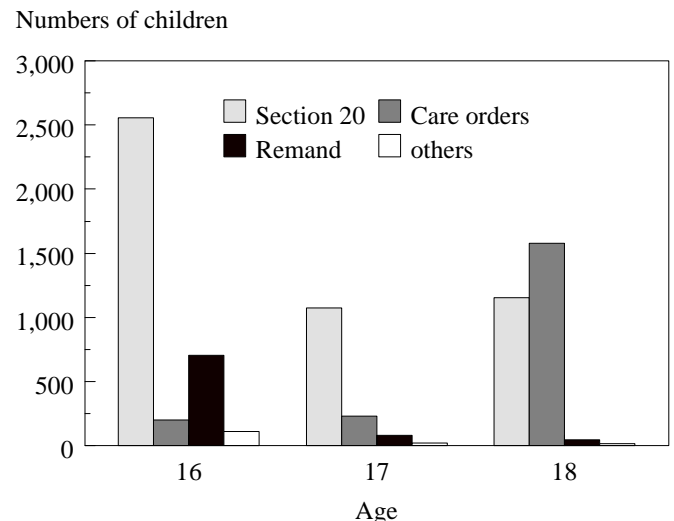
This decline in the proportion of 18 year old care leavers is a result of the decline in the numbers leaving care following care orders. Figure 8.1 shows that most of those leaving having been looked after under a care order do so at the age of 18. Figure 8.2 shows that there has been a steady decline in the numbers of this kind of care leaver over the last 5 years, whilst those leaving having been accommodated voluntarily has fluctuated around the 5,000 level. As a result there were fewer 18 year old care leavers during 1997/98 than during 1994/95 but a similar number of 16 and 17 year olds (Table G).

47% of young people leaving care aged 16 or over had been living in foster placements up until ceasing, and a further 23% in children's homes. Half of these care leavers had been looked after continuously for more than 2 years, although a quarter had been looked after for less than six months during their final period of care.

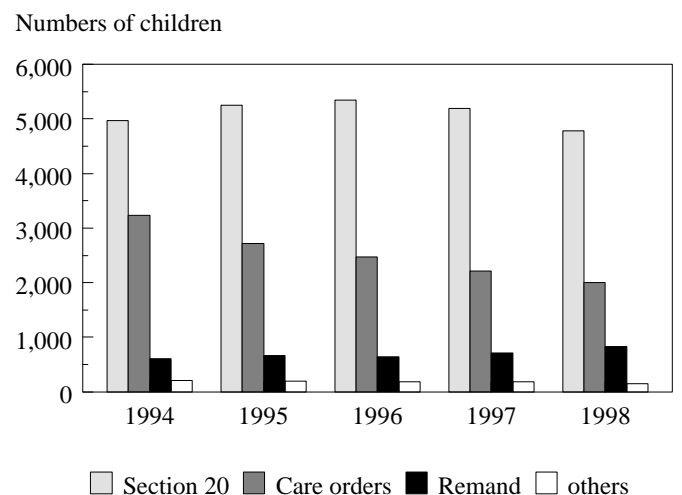
Table 15 gives some information about care leavers aged 16 and over who left the care of each local authority during 1997/98. Authorities vary considerably both in terms of the number of care leavers they are responsible for, and in terms of the age of their care leavers, their final placement and their length of time in care, factors which may affect the level of post-care support they need. The figures in Table 15 are based on the analysis of the

one third sample of looked after children and are therefore subject to sampling error.

**Figure 8.1 Children aged 16 and over who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 1998 by legal status and age**



**Figure 8.2 Children aged 16 and over who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 1994 to 1998 by legal status**

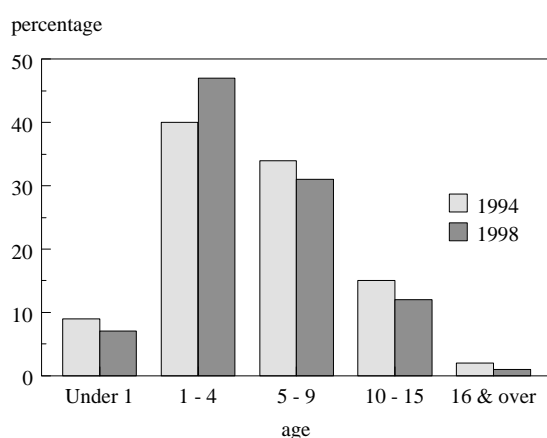


## 9. Adoptions

(Tables H, 7 and 8)

Roughly a third of all children adopted in England have been looked after prior to adoption, most of the remaining two thirds being adopted by step-parents or relatives. Table H shows details of the children who **ceased** to be looked after because they went on to be adopted during the years from 1993/4 to 1997/8. The total number of such children who were adopted has fallen from 2,300 in 1993/4 to an estimated 2,000 in 1997/8.

**Figure 9.1 Looked after children who were adopted, during years ended 31 March 1994 and 1998, by age**



More than half of these children were under 5 years old at adoption; the proportion 5 years old or older has been falling gradually since 1993/4 (Figure 9.1). In 1997/8, 42% had been looked after for 3 years or more before adoption.

All looked after children who are subsequently adopted are placed for adoption with the prospective adopters before adoption. However, this final placement is often not recorded on the SSDA903 form. In 1997/8, over two thirds of these looked after children were recorded as having been placed for adoption before their adoption. Most of the remaining one third were recorded in foster placements up to adoption. It is likely that some of these were adopted by their foster carers; the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering estimated from a survey conducted during 1998 that 16% of looked after children were adopted by their foster carers.

Not all placements for adoption result in an adoption. Of those placements for adoption that ceased during 1997/98 86% ended in adoption, 10% were followed by another placement, and 4% ended with the child ceasing to be looked after but

not recorded as having been adopted.

The figures returned to the Department suggest that the use of freeing orders prior to adoption has been increasing over the last five years and is now used in approaching a third of cases (Table H). As can be seen from *Table iii*, children freed for adoption spend on average about 3 years being looked after before adoption compared with over 4 years for children under care orders. The children who are adopted most quickly are generally those looked after under voluntary agreement with the parents.

**Table iii) The average time looked after before adoption by legal status on adoption, years ending 31 March**

Legal status		Average time looked after before adoption	
		years	month
All children	1996	3	6
	1997	3	4
	1998	3	3
Care orders	1996	4	1
	1997	4	0
	1998	3	11
Section 20 CA 1989	1996	2	1
	1997	1	11
	1998	1	9
Freed for Adoption	1996	3	3
	1997	3	0
	1998	3	0

The number of looked after children adopted each year is relatively small in many authorities. Because of this, the one third sample of records collected by the Department of Health does not provide a sufficiently reliable estimate of the numbers adopted in many authorities. Figures for the numbers adopted in individual authorities are therefore not presented in this publication, although the percentages of children placed for adoption at 31 March are given in Tables 7 and 8.

## **10. Staffing**

### **Staff of maintained community homes**

(Table J)

At 30 September 1998, (the mid-point of the financial year 1997/98, to which the latest figures of children looked after relate) there were 10,600 staff of social services departments employed in maintained and controlled community homes (expressed as whole-time equivalents). The corresponding figure at 30 September 1997 was 10,900.