Freedom of Information Request
Findings on Looked After Children and International Placements

This report investigates the latest data surrounding children placed with family abroad. This focuses on rates of international placements for Looked After Children, how frequently international placements are explored, and what types of placements are used when placing Looked After Children overseas.
Contents

Executive Summary 3

Introduction 5

Findings and Analysis 6
• Response Rates 6
• Case Study 8
• Exploring Family Members Abroad as Potential Carers 9
• Looked After Children placed with family members abroad 11
• Placement Order used in International Placements 14
• London Data 15

Conclusion 16
Executive Summary

In August 2021, CFAB sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 211 UK local authorities to better understand the care provided for Looked After Children (LAC) with family members abroad, between January 2018 and December 2020 inclusive. Results were then compared with CFAB’s FOI research (2018), which covered the period January 2015 – December 2017 inclusive.

Despite a 94% response rate in the latest data collection, 60% of local authorities could not respond to all three FOI requests and 41% could not specify which orders were used in international placements. This highlights CFAB’s concern that children are being denied their right to family as, without the data, it is unclear whether families abroad are adequately incorporated into decision-making or whether support for overseas kinship placements is on par with what a child would experience in the UK. CFAB’s Safe, Secure and Thriving campaign calls for the improvement in the quality of the data gathered and its regular publication and analysis, so the true number of children placed abroad is known and their outcomes are evaluated.

In 2019 there were over 104,000 LAC in the UK1, with 42 of these children being placed in international placements, representing only 0.04%. This number is surprisingly low given that almost 13% of the UK population is foreign-born and a third of children born in England and Wales have one or more parents who were born outside the country. This suggests that families abroad are not sufficiently considered as potential carers for LAC, and as such many children may have been denied the possibility of remaining with family.

CFAB believes that international kinship placements can be hugely positive, helping children to avoid unnecessary, unrelated foster care and achieve better life outcomes. While it is disappointing that the number of LAC placed abroad has dropped since our 2018 FOI research, this lower number may be more of a reflection of the impact of Covid-19 as the number of LAC who had international placements explored has increased. The decision to place a child abroad should only be made if it is in the best interest of the child, and if the right support systems can be put in place – to prevent a placement breakdown.

Key findings
The first area of enquiry regarded the total number of LAC who had family members outside the UK explored.

¹2,763 LAC in Northern Ireland Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2019 to 2020
80,080 LAC in England Children looked after in England including adoption: 2019 to 2020
14,458 LAC in Scotland Children’s social work statistics: 2019 to 2020
7,172 LAC in Wales Children looked after by local authorities:2019 to 2020
Consistent with the findings from CFAB’s FOI covering 2015 - 2017, over half of local authorities (52%) could not provide CFAB with a response.

39% of local authorities that responded stated they explored family members abroad as possible carers of LAC in 2018-2020. This has dropped from 49% in 2015-2017.

Of those local authorities that did respond, an estimated 233 LAC had family abroad explored as potential carers in 2018-2020, a rise from 202 in the previous FOI request. Although fewer local authorities reported exploring family abroad, it is encouraging that these local authorities have found successful placements for children in their care.

The second area of enquiry concerned the number of LAC that were placed outside the UK.

- 17% of local authorities could not provide a response, with the most common reason given that the information was not centrally collated or available in an extractable format. This is despite that this information is required in the SSDA903 statistical returns to the Department for Education.
- Of those that responded, only 24% of local authorities placed a LAC abroad in the three-year period, a similar figure to the 2015-2017 data of 23%.
- An estimated 112 LAC were placed with family members abroad in 2018-2020, which is 9 fewer than in 2015-2017. A decrease was expected as, in 2020, the pandemic resulted in many border closures.

The final area of enquiry was regarding the number and type of placement orders used when placing LAC overseas.

- 18% of local authorities could not provide a response, and the most common response was that the order used to place a LAC was unspecified (41%)
- 18 (29%) of the responses were ‘Care Orders’ i.e. a Full Care Order, Interim Care Order, Adoptive Placement Order or Child Arrangement Order.
- Similarly, to the 2015-2017 findings, among those specified, the most common order used to place LAC abroad was a Special Guardianship Order (33% in 2018-2020, 45% in 2015-2017) followed by Full Care Orders (30% in 2018-2020, 24% in 2015-2017). This raises questions about the ability of the sending local authority to exercise rights over the child once the child is outside their jurisdiction.
Introduction

In August 2021, CFAB sent FOI requests to 211 UK local authorities (LAs) regarding the number of LAC who had family members abroad explored as potential carers, the number of LAC placed with family members abroad, and the number and type of care orders used in international placements. This research is a follow up to the FOI requests that CFAB sent to 213 UK LAs in 2019 – when the same three questions were asked for the period 2015 to 2017.

Freedom of Information request questions:

1. The total number of LAC under your local authority care, where family members outside the United Kingdom were explored between January 2018 and December 2020 inclusive.
2. The number of LAC under your local authority care that were subsequently placed outside the United Kingdom between January 2018 and December 2020 inclusive.
3. The number and type of placement orders used for placing LAC from your local authority care with family members abroad between January 2018 and December 2020 inclusive.

CFAB requested access to this information because we do not know the total number of children being placed overseas, which countries they are being placed in, what orders are being used or how many are successful or eventually breakdown. There is not a body responsible for publishing the data of LAC placed abroad and the outcomes for overseas kinship placements are not analysed. CFAB’s own research has found that there are discrepancies in post-placement practices of UK local authorities for children in international kinship placements.

The data gathered in this research will be used to further inform CFAB’s advocacy work with relevant stakeholders, such as the Department for Education, Ministers and MPs, and CFAB’s Safe, Secure and Thriving campaign. This campaign calls for the Department for Education to publish data on the number of children placed overseas from England and to include outcomes for overseas kinship placements.
Response rates

211 LAs were sent CFAB’s three-part FOI request, and while it had a 94% response rate, only 40% of LAs were able to provide answers to all three questions. This is a higher percentage than in 2015-2017, when only 30% of LAs were able to respond to all three questions. In 2021, a much higher proportion of LAs (39%) were also able to give a partially successful response compared to the 2015-2017 findings (24%). While it is disappointing that most respondents were unable to answer all three of the requests, the increase in responses suggests that improvements have been made in data collection processes.

Findings and Analysis

Consistent with the findings of CFAB’s 2015-2017 research, over half of LAs (52%) that responded either could not provide or reported to not holding a response to the question of the number of children who had family abroad explored as potential carers. 17% of LAs could not provide or reported to not holding information of the number of children that had subsequently been placed abroad. 18% of LAs could not provide a response to question 3, and the most common response was that the order used to place a LAC was unspecified (41%), meaning it was unclear which type of placement order had been used to place an LAC.

Six LAs have high² estimated numbers of foreign-born children in care. Two out of six of these LAs, Birmingham Children’s Trust and Leicester City Council, reported that they were unable to provide a response to all parts of the FOI because their data was not available.

²High is defined here as in the top 50 LAs for both number of children in care and total number of foreign born residents.
in a readily accessible format. The other four LAs, Manchester City Council, London borough of Croydon, Nottingham City Council and Sandwell Metropolitan borough Council, were only able to provide partially successful responses, and could not answer how many LAC had placements explored with family abroad.

The most common response for LAs not being unable to provide the data was that the information was not available in an easily retrievable format, making the process of collating the information difficult and lengthy. Although LAs keep this information within individual case files, many do not have processes for storing this information centrally; meaning that each individual record would have to be manually trawled through to provide a response.

The large gaps in this data point to the difficulties of establishing the number of LAC in the UK who are placed abroad and in understanding the quality of care that they receive once they are living in their placements. Having more detailed and easily accessible data would mean we know the true number of children placed abroad and their outcomes could be evaluated. Without this data, we do not know if overseas kinship placements are on par with what a child would experience in the UK. If for the children placed abroad, their quality of care is poor or their placement breaks down, they may be put at further risk of neglect, abuse, exploitation, or forced to take dangerous journeys back to the UK.
Case study: Amelia’s Story

By the age of six, Amelia’s home life had significantly deteriorated. Her father, suffering from poor mental health and drinking too much alcohol, had become violent. Authorities removed Amelia from her home and placed her with unknown foster carers. Sadly, it did not seem possible for the father’s health to improve enough for him to care for Amelia. With such a traumatic disruption in her life, Amelia’s social worker was keen to find other family members to care for her.

With the help of CFAB, Amelia’s mother was located over 10,000 miles away in New Zealand. Given the distance, the mother had little contact with Amelia and had started a new family. After a thorough investigation of the mother, her mother’s mental and physical health, the disposition of her new family to accepting Amelia, their overall financial situation and more, CFAB recommended Amelia join her mother, new stepfather and new half-brother. We also recommended the UK social worker regularly follow up with young Amelia, given her distressing history and her new environment. Such follow-up can identify early signs of strain and help prevent family breakdown.

While we hope and believe that Amelia is living safely and happily with her new family, we are greatly concerned that the UK social worker did not follow through with their planned follow-up visits to ensure Amelia’s well-being.
Exploring family members abroad as potential carers

An estimated 233 LAC had family abroad explored in 2018-2020 (includes the median of <5 responses³). In the period of 2015-2017, an estimated 202 LAC had family members abroad explored as potential carers.

- 61 LAC where family abroad were explored in 2018.
- 91 LAC where family abroad were explored in 2019.
- 81 LAC where family abroad were explored in 2020.

Among the LAs that responded to question one, over half (61%) of LAs did not explore any family members abroad as possible carers of LAC in 2018-2020. This has risen from 51% in 2015-2017, meaning an even greater number of LAs did not explore family members abroad in the period 2018-2020. Although 2019, represents the year when the most LACs had family explored, it is important to note that these children represent just .087% of the Looked After population.

Although the total number of LAC that had family explored has increased since the 2015-2017 FOI research, the number of LAs that explored overseas placements has decreased. This suggests that the LAs that do consider this type of care arrangement are doing so more regularly, but that many LAs continue not to sufficiently consider family members abroad as potential carers for LAC. This may not necessarily be an indication of failure from the LAs and could instead be reflective of the diverse ethnic make-ups of the communities living in these LAs. The FOI questions does not distinguish between children who had family members abroad who could be explored and children who did not. This rise in the proportion of LAC that have family members abroad explored as carers could mean LAs are exploring placements with family overseas more regularly, and therefore are seeing these kinds of placements as a viable option for LAC.

³For responses reported as ‘less than 5’ in one year, the median (2) has been calculated by taking the median of 4. For responses reported as ‘less than 5’ in total across the 3-year period, the median (.66) has been calculated by dividing 2 into 3, to account for the split across the 3 years.
Table 1: Top 10 local authorities that explored placing LAC with family abroad across the three-year period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local authority</th>
<th>Question 1: Number of LACs where family members abroad were explored as potential carers, 2018-2020</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Islington</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Ealing</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverhampton</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Tower Hamlets</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blackburn with Darwen</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calderdale</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Camden</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Redbridge</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Waltham Forest</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torfaen</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Six out of ten of the top LAs are London boroughs, which reflects the fact that two-thirds of children in London have at least one foreign-born parent. Data from the 2011 census shows the diverse communities living in these boroughs. Redbridge has the second largest Asian population of all LAs. Ealing has the sixth largest Asian population of all LAs, and a huge Indian population of 48,240 people. Tower Hamlets has the fourth largest Asian population and the largest Bangladeshi population in the UK. Both Redbridge and Waltham Forest have large Lithuanian and Pakistani communities. Having said this, five out of the six London LAs that appear here are not within the top hundred LAs for either the number of children in care or the total number of foreign-born residents, meaning that the most diverse boroughs do not have the highest number of children in care.

The appearance of Torfaen, a Welsh authority, in the top ten LAs that explored placing LAC with family overseas, may point to an increase in Wales improving its ability to uphold the rights of LAC by exploring family relations overseas. It should be noted that CFAB has a central authority agreement with Welsh government, and five out of the top ten LAs that explored family members abroad as potential carers have regular engagement with CFAB’s services, with an average of more than one call to the Advice Line per quarter and more than one referral to CFAB each year.
Looked After Children placed with family members abroad

An estimated 112 LAC were placed with family members abroad in 2018-2020 (includes the median of < 5 responses). In 2015-2017, an estimated 121 LAC were placed with family members abroad.

- An estimated 51 children were placed in 2018.
- An estimated 42 children were placed in 2019.
- An estimated 20 children were placed in 2020.

Among the LAs that responded to question two, only 24% of LAs placed a Looked After Child/ren abroad in the three-year period, which is consistent with 2015-2017 data (23%). The highest number of children placed abroad by a LA in a one-year period was three children, and only 6% of all LAs placed more than two children abroad in the three-year period. In the three-year period, 47 local authorities sent children to live abroad.

The impact of Covid-19 must be considered when interpreting these results, as there was a large fall in the number of children placed abroad in 2020; the number of LAC being placed abroad decreased by more than half of the year before. This is likely to be due to travel restrictions, the reduction of services in many countries and delays in communication between services.

Government statistics from the financial year 2019/2020 stated that there were over 104,000 LAC in the UK. Even before the impact of the pandemic, the figures for placing LAC abroad are considerably low at .04% of LAC. This number is surprisingly low given that 13% of the UK population is foreign-born and a third of children born in England and Wales have one or more parents who were born outside the country. This suggests that families abroad are not sufficiently considered as potential carers for LAC, and as such their right to family is being denied, despite research conducted by CFAB which shows international kinship placements are a feasible option⁴.

We know that LAs often do not explore placing children with family abroad because the process is understood to be complicated and drawn out, and there is confusion about how to navigate multiple child protection systems and communicate with agencies overseas. This emphasises the importance of the expertise that CFAB can provide. CFAB estimate that there are at least 18,500 children in care with family members abroad in

⁴Cross-border child safeguarding: Challenges, effective social work practice and outcomes for children 604e08763657bb4c2811ef8_Cross Border Child Safeguarding - Research.pdf (website-files.com)
England and Wales. If this is the best option for them, using a conservative placement rate of 30%, there are 5,500 children that are currently in care that could be with their families.

However, it must be noted that the number of LAC being placed abroad in the 2021 findings are remarkably similar to the numbers in 2015-2017, despite the significant impact of the pandemic resulting in low numbers of LAs conducting international placements in 2020 (9% of all LAs). This indicates that the numbers of LAC being placed abroad may in fact be rising, an encouraging finding which suggests that international kinship placements are being considered more regularly as a viable option for LAC.

Table 2: The top 10 Local Authorities that placed Looked After Children with family members abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local authority</th>
<th>Question 2: Number of LACs placed with family members abroad, 2018-2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halton</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Enfield</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belfast Trust</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calderdale</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London Borough of Croydon</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxfordshire</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hertfordshire</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverhampton</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridgeshire</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in table 2, only two of the top ten LAs placing children abroad are based in London, despite Table 1 showing that London boroughs represent six of the top ten LAs that explored placing LAC abroad. This may be reflective of the large, established migrant communities in London that have lived in these areas for multiple generations and therefore have large family networks based in them. It is possible that family in these communities were assessed as prospective carers at the same time as family overseas, with the final decision being made to place the LAC with family members in the UK. Additionally, London boroughs may be highly represented in the number of LAs exploring family members abroad because the children living in these areas are more likely to have

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5Based on CFAB’s 2018 research, which showed 30 – 50% of foreign assessments resulted with children being placed abroad with their families.
overseas family connections than children in other parts of the country, meaning that there is more opportunity for LAs to explore family placements abroad.

Similarly, to the findings for question one, there is a link between engagement with CFAB and a higher amount of LAC placing children with family abroad. Three out of the top ten LAs that placed LAC with family abroad have a CFAB membership, and all LAs have used CFAB’s services, whether that be through the advice line or casework.

In addition to the FOI request sent out to all UK LAs, CFAB sent a separate FOI to the Department for Education which asked how many LAC’s placement postcodes had been reported by LAs as outside of the UK in the year 2019. It was reported that an estimated 45 LAC were placed outside of the UK, which is very close to the LA responses to our own FOI which found an estimated 42 LAC. This suggests that LAs are accurately reporting their data on LAC to the Department for Education.

It should be noted that LAs will not include Special Guardianship Order (SGO) placements in the statistical data that they report to the Department for Education; this is because the child will cease to be categorised as ‘looked after’ once this order is made. This means that some LAs will have also omitted the statistics on LAC being placed using SGOs in their response to our FOI and may point to the overrepresentation of ‘Care Orders’ in our findings.
Placement Orders used in international placements

Among the LAs that responded to question 3\(^6\), 27% reported that placement orders had been used to place children previously under their care abroad. Only 3% reported more than four placements orders in the three-year period 2018-2020.

LAs most commonly reported using unspecified/‘other’ orders to place LAC, meaning that it was not clear which type of order they used to place LAC; this category accounted for 41% of all responses. 29% of LAs responses referred to using general ‘Care Orders’; this could either be referring to a Full Care Order (FCO), Interim Care Order (ICO), Adoptive Placement Order or Child Arrangement Order.

In the 2015-2017 FOI research, FCOs accounted for 24% of the total placement orders used, whereas in 2021 they accounted for 30% of placement orders. Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) represented 45% of the orders used in the 2015-2017 findings. In 2021, they represented 33% of the orders used. 16% of all orders used to place LAC were Interim Care Orders (ICOs), consistent with the previous FOI data (15% of all orders used)\(^7\).

\(^6\)Responses from Scotland and Northern Ireland are not included in these findings due to the different legal systems, and types of orders, used to place LAC in these countries (data includes the median of <5 responses).

\(^7\)To compare the 2021 findings to the 2018 findings, the unspecified/‘other’ category was removed from the total figure for placement orders used.
This is not practical in an international placement. The use of SGOs is also problematic as they are unique to the English and Welsh care system, so their use will not translate easily to international care systems. As discussed above, children are technically no longer ‘looked after’ once they are placed under an SGO, meaning that many LAs may not have included these types of placements in their responses and that the actual figure for the use of this order may be higher.

The rise in the use of FCO is potentially concerning, as this type of order allows the LA to maintain parental responsibility over the child, and often has a higher level of parental responsibility than other involved parties. As the child is no longer in the LA’s jurisdiction once they are living overseas, this may create difficulties for the LAs in being able to exercise their statutory duties towards the child. LAs have an obligation to make arrangements for these placements to be supervised, but this is difficult if they cannot see the child regularly or in person. These factors raise questions about whether LACs in this type of placement are being appropriately monitored and demonstrates the practical complications of using FCOs for LAC being placed with family overseas. Robust contingency plans and cooperation with the child’s carer is essential, and CFAB offers full guidance on this through the International Kinship Care Guide.

It is more concerning to see a consistent trend in the number of ICOs used, as these orders are intended to be temporary in nature. It raises questions about how LAs are taking responsibility for these children if they are no longer in their jurisdiction. It also could create difficulties and disruption in the child’s move abroad if the terms of this order contradict those of the final hearing.

London data

Out of the thirty-three London boroughs, thirty-one responded to our FOI request, five of which (15%) were unable to provide any of the information requested; this is the same percentage as responses across all UK LAs. Twelve London boroughs (36%) were able to provide a numerical response to all three questions, again in line with responses across UK LAs (40%).

Out of the sixteen London boroughs that provided a numerical response to question one, ten explored placing LAC with family member(s) abroad. Nine London boroughs explored placing five or more LAC abroad. Out of the twenty-two London boroughs that provided a numerical response to question two, only four placed LAC with family members abroad. Access to this information will support CFAB’s further research into the outcomes of international kinship placements and CFAB’s campaign for clear guidance on the appropriate steps to take when placing children with families abroad.
Conclusion

When researching international placements for LAC, gaps in the data available has continued to be a problem, and this research is no exception. Over half (60%) of LAs were not able to respond to all three questions in the FOI request. While we are pleased that this is a lower than the previous FOI request, without all the data, we do not know if support for overseas kinship placements is on par with what a child would experience in the UK, meaning children who are already vulnerable can be put at further risk of harm. As such, CFAB’s Safe, Secure and Thriving campaign calls for the improvement in the quality of the data gathered and its regular publication and analysis, so the true number of children placed abroad is known and their outcomes evaluated.

It is promising that the total number of LAC that had family explored has increased since the 2015-2017 FOI research. Yet, the number of LAs that explored overseas placements has decreased. This suggests that the LAs that do consider this type of care arrangement are doing so more regularly – potentially evidence that once it becomes a kinship option, these social workers look to explore it more regularly. Despite this, it is clear from the evidence that few LAs sufficiently consider family members abroad as potential carers for LAC.

The number of LAC placed abroad has dropped since the 2015-2017 FOI data, and while it remains disappointingly low, a drop was expected given the impact of Covid-19. More positively, the number of LAC being placed abroad in the 2021 findings are very similar to the numbers in 2018. This indicates that as the impacts of Covid-19 continue to lessen, the numbers of LAC being placed abroad may continue to rise - an encouraging finding which suggests that international kinship placements are being considered more regularly as a viable option for LAC.

CFAB estimate that there are at least 18,500 children in care with family members abroad in England and Wales who could and should be considered for long-term care options. If this is the best option for them, using a conservative placement rate of 30%, there are 5,500 children that are currently in care that could be with their families. As such, many LAC are being denied their right to family, a right which is enshrined in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 2014.

CFAB argue that families abroad are not sufficiently considered as potential carers for LAC, likely because the process is understood to be complicated and challenging to navigate at an international level. Given that there is a link between engagement with CFAB and a higher amount of LA’s exploring family members abroad as potential carers and placing children with family abroad; this is further evidence of the importance of the
expertise that CFAB can provide in helping local authorities deal with international child protection systems and agencies.

International placements represent an opportunity for more successful outcomes for children, helping them to retain a sense of identity and family belonging. Consequently, one would expect to see more than 39% of LAs exploring international placements for LAC. However, the right systems must be in place both to support LAs in international assessments as well as to prevent a placement breakdown that can leave a child even more vulnerable. CFAB want to ensure that no child is put at risk, either here in the UK or overseas.

The data collected in these FOI requests will support CFAB’s further research into the outcomes of international kinship placements and support CFAB’s Safe, Secure and Thriving campaign. The campaign calls for the Department for Education to record and publish the number of LAC placed overseas and their outcomes analysed; ensure support for overseas kinship placements is on par with what a child would experience in England; and a high-quality contingency plan, including provision in the case of a placement breakdown, is written for all children before they are placed overseas. CFAB hope the findings in this report will bring to light the inadequate levels of support for overseas placements, and the need for recorded data to better inform policy and practice to ensure every child can be in a safe, caring and, where possible, family home.