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## TOO FAR TO GO? PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES PLACED OUT-OF-AREA

*a research report commissioned by  
Kent County Council by*

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### BACKGROUND

The need for housing with support for people with learning disabilities is growing and there is a shortage of places, particularly in some areas. If suitable services are not available locally, people with learning disabilities may end up in residential homes outside their own local area, sometimes a long way away. Out-of-area placements may cause difficulties in communication and co-ordination and concern has been expressed about the quality of care they provide. Moving away from their own community is also likely to make it more difficult for people to keep in touch with family and friends. There are no statistics on the number of people with learning disabilities placed in residential care out of their local area and no evaluative data on the quality of these placements.

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### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The study had three objectives:

- To clarify the policy framework for health and social services concerning out-of-area placements
- To estimate the number of people placed from other areas in Kent
- To find out what were the reasons for and effects of out-of-area placement on individuals, their families, the homes and the professionals serving them

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### METHOD

Following a detailed review of the policy guidance, a survey of care homes in Kent was carried out, together with analysis of social services records, to identify people placed in Kent by other authorities. Thirty people selected from the population identified in the survey were then followed up with interviews with them, their family, their care manager and the manager of the residential home in which they lived. Focus groups were also held with community learning disability teams.

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### OUTCOMES

- Official guidance is complex and there are several 'grey' areas where responsibility is unclear and there are distinct perverse incentives for placing authorities.
- At a minimum, between 1000 and 1400 people are placed by other authorities in Kent, and this number may be as large as 2000 people. Half the placements are in the eastern of the three administrative areas of Kent, with relatively large concentrations in the coastal towns.
- Residents placed out-of-area are on average less socially impaired, have more language ability and are more challenging; there are also more people from black and ethnic minority groups (which may reflect the number of people placed by London authorities).
- A key reason for out-of-area placement is insufficient local services, either because they are not of acceptable quality, or because they are unable to support people with greater needs (for example, because of challenging behaviour). Some people have been placed because locality was perhaps not thought to be important, eg people who were in long-stay institutions who may have lost contact with their

family. There appear to be financial or quality incentives for services to accept referrals from authorities other than Kent.

- The effects of out-of-area placement vary across individuals. Generally the most disabled people experience the worst outcomes. Some individuals experience very poor outcomes and some homes are achieving well below acceptable standards of care. If the third of placements in this category found in the interview study is representative of the whole population then between 300 and 700 people might be in this situation.
- Families could be interviewed for half the sample. A third said they felt they had no say in the choice of placement. Some families felt they had to fight hard to find and fund the right placement. Distance and transport problems caused some problems. Although almost all said that they thought their relative was happy in the placement, some families identified concerns about basic levels of care and some were very anxious about criticising their relatives' care.
- Almost half the home managers reported problems contacting care managers from placing authorities. All 'placing' care managers identified distance as a disadvantage in terms of providing care management and monitoring. Nearly half said they would not normally inform Kent of the placement being made. Members of community learning disability teams said that they were not usually informed in advance of people placed in their area and referrals to them for help were typically made when people were in crisis.
- Most managers report positive changes for residents after moving to the home; negative effects were focused on the home not being able to meet the person's needs. All care managers from placing authorities saw advantages, especially that the placement met specialised individual needs better. Care managers identified distance as a disadvantage for the resident (mostly in terms of being further from family and friends).
- Members of community learning disability teams felt that the quality of out-of-area placements was generally poor, with poorer monitoring than with local care managers. They reported that the effects on them were increased workload, less resource for local people, more difficulties in coordination and liaison with care managers and lack of information about people moved in to their area.
- Social services and health authorities should develop services locally that can support the full range of individual needs, so that people are not driven to seek out-of-area placements. Only if local services develop the competence to support people near their homes, families and communities, can people exercise real choice about where to live.

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**RESEARCH  
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The full report of this study (Beadle-Brown J, Mansell J, Whelton R, Hutchinson A and Skidmore C (2005) *Too far to go? People with learning disabilities placed out-of-area*. Canterbury: Tizard Centre) is available on the Centre's website.

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