

Fostering data in England

Methodology and Quality Report

Last updated:

9 December 2015

Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) annual release of fostering data, covering all fostering provision in England. This methodology and quality report should be read in conjunction with the background notes contained within the statistical first release, as those notes will include helpful information that is not in this report.

This release can be found at the following webpage:

www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics under the heading 'Fostering in England 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015'.

The statistical first release (SFR) contains data which are sourced from Local Authorities (LAs) and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). The release includes data about fostering providers, foster carers, and children in foster placements.

The data includes:

- LA fostering agencies
- IFAs, including IFAs performing the function of LA fostering agencies.

In terms of the period covered by the release, the annual release of fostering data in England covers the period between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2015.

The statistical release is published as a full version annually and contains final data.

Ofsted publish a number of official statistics covering children's social care, including fostering, adoption and children looked after placements. These releases can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>.

Ofsted welcomes feedback about our statistical releases. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions, please contact the Social Care Data & Analysis Team on: socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk.

Relevance

Ofsted regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. Ofsted official statistics are released to promote reform and improvement across government through increasing transparency and citizen participation.

Ofsted regulates and inspects IFAs under the Care Standards Act 2000.¹ The Care Standards Act 2000, including regulations² made under section 22, sets out the legal basis for regulating fostering agencies. For more information on how Ofsted regulates and inspects independent fostering agencies, please go to the gov.uk website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-to-independent-fostering-agencies and www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-inspections-of-independent-fostering-agencies

Ofsted inspects LA children's services functions, including fostering, under section 136 (2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Ofsted has two distinct uses for the fostering data. Primarily, the data are collected from providers to support inspections of IFAs and LA children's services. The data are analysed at an agency level, and using comparator data, to prompt lines of enquiry that will be followed at inspection. The data are also used to evaluate the effectiveness of fostering agencies, including ongoing monitoring of performance and improvement work.

A secondary use of the data, is that Ofsted analyses the data to further enhance insight into this sector as well as for planning and providing public services, for example, by informing about the capacity of social care provisions nationally and by area. The analysis of the data informs policy discussions and decisions, for instance, contributing the reviews of inspection frameworks, evidence and reports. The data are also used to respond to ad hoc requests and to give context to emerging issues or the impact of changes in the sector.

The data are published annually as official statistics. The aggregation of data for official statistics allows Ofsted to communicate to users the key data and messages, for example, at different geographical levels and by provider type. The official statistics draw out the key messages and communicate these in an understandable way, appropriate for a wide range of different users. Users are able to interpret and manipulate the data published for their own purposes, as the release includes underlying data.

¹ The Care Standards Act 2000; <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/14/contents>.

²The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011; The Care Standards Act (Registration)(England) Regulations 2010; The Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) (Children's Homes etc.) Regulations 2007; The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: fostering services.

The data may, therefore, be used by stakeholder groups, academics and other interested parties across the sector. Fostering agencies may also use the data themselves, for local and regional use, to inform on areas of practice and to improve processes and standards.

Some of the data about fostering in England is unique to Ofsted; alternative sources are not available. For instance, data about the capacity of fostering services and recruitment activity in England, as well as some other indicators, is only collected by Ofsted. These data are widely viewed as a valuable source for information about recruitment and capacity, for identifying vacancies, and for providing an in depth overall picture of fostering in England.

Some data is also published by other sources, such as the Department for Education (DfE).³

Meeting user needs

The presentation of underlying data for this release has recently been reviewed and amended by Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team, who produce the social care Official Statistics, in agreement with the Social Care Policy Team. This was done in order to allow greater usability of the data, as well as enabling better comparability of similar data within the same dataset. The major changes are to the grouping of data: all data at England and sector level, including trends over the past three years, are now presented in a single table. This is replicated at provider level for local authorities. Similar data has now been grouped together; for example, number of children of compulsory school age is now presented alongside data about educational outcomes.

The content of the survey and accompanying guidance are reviewed annually, by the Social Care Data and Social Care Policy teams, to develop the collection, and senior managers then sign off any changes that are required. This review process ensures that the survey will meet the data requirements for inspections and takes into account any policy changes or emerging issues.

In May 2015, Ofsted carried out a consultation with data suppliers and stakeholders regarding a proposed change to the survey template for data collection covering the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016. A draft template and guidance were circulated for comment, and amended by the social care data team in light of responses from LA and IFAs. A final draft of the template and guidance was circulated in late 2015, in preparation for the 2015-16 collection, to be launched in April 2016.

Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team are represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs. These regional meeting are organised by the ADCS. Ofsted has presented relevant information and publications to all of the existing

³ For example, "Children Looked After in England" includes data about fostered children, who make up the majority of children looked after (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>)

regional groups, and sought feedback about whether its publications meet user needs. Ofsted's participation in these groups helps inform about user views on Ofsted's social care official statistics, and suggested improvements are taken on board. Additional workshops have been attended to assist data suppliers and stakeholders to understand the data that is being asked for and how it can be used. Ofsted inspectors attend annual conferences which include sessions on the data that are collected and how this can inform inspection preparation.

Social care outputs are also shared with users in other organisations, such as the DfE, LAs, and representatives from the private and voluntary sectors at Ofsted-led stakeholder meetings. These organisations use the data for a range of purposes including informing their own social care outputs (DfE) and benchmarking performance (LAs).

The data form includes definitions, to help clarify what is being requested, and calculation methods. The data calculations built into the form as validation checks provide a method of quality assurance for the agencies helping them to accurately complete the form. Additional guidance has also been circulated in the form of frequently asked questions. The Social Care Data and Analysis team also offers help and guidance to agencies via email and the telephone as well.

The contact details for the Social Care Data and Analysis team are included in the releases and users are encouraged to feedback about any unmet needs, ask questions that are not covered in the glossary definitions and supporting guidance, or feedback improvements that can be made.

There was an Ofsted-wide user consultation survey in January 2012 on all Ofsted official statistics releases. A report from this consultation can be found here: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/report-responses-2012-consultation-of-ofsted-official-statistics

More information about Ofsted's Engagement policy and Confidentiality & Access policy, as well as Ofsted's Statement of Administrative Sources can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>. Ofsted also operates under more detailed internal engagement guidance.

Coherence and comparability

Ofsted has reported on fostering data in England since 1 April 2008. Over time, the data collection has been developed and improved. As the survey is reviewed and questions are amended or added, some areas are not comparable over time.

Reasons for these changes include:

- Changes in legislation or policy; for example, a question about Raising the Participation Age was added when this was introduced

- In response to data supplier feedback; for example, the questions on unplanned endings were changed when data suppliers fed back that the 2013-14 structure was difficult to complete accurately
- To provide more nuance in the resulting analysis; for example, additional questions were added around allegations.

Where it is not directly possible to compare data over time, notes are given in the release to alert users.

The response rates have varied over the course of the survey; however, they have been consistently high at around 99% for the last three collections (2012-13, 2013-14, and 2014-15). An exercise was conducted to review the impact of the changing response rates, specifically around the impact of any missing data. The exercise considered the potential for grossing up or using imputation when agencies did not return data, and found minimal impact from any missing data. Therefore, it was not deemed necessary to use any estimation or imputation. Data comparisons are therefore made generally for these three years.

Where appropriate, comparable data collected by the DfE or the Office for National Statistics are referenced.⁴ For example, the numbers of children in foster care of different ethnicity groups, and with disabilities, are compared against the DfE's annual report on looked after children, and the ONS census statistics.

Data are presented at England level and then sub-divided by sector (LA/IFA). Although there is a small amount of comparable data collected for other countries in the UK^{5,6}, this is minimal and so has not been included. Comparable data for other countries, including via the EuroStat database, are not available. Where applicable, regional comparisons have been made; however, these are limited.

Comparisons may be adversely affected by different reporting practices across data suppliers; for example, one agency only records the ethnicity of the primary carer in a household, while most record the ethnicity of both carers where applicable.

The annual collections give data at consistent intervals. It includes snapshot data as at the 31 March and periodical data for 12 months between 1 April and 31 March. The reporting period used is made clear in the release. An exception to the defined reporting periods may occur in certain circumstances; for example, a new piece of legislation came into effect mid-way through the financial year.

⁴ For example, the DfE's annual collection on Children Looked After in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>), and the ONS' publication of data from the 2011 census (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/index.html>).

⁵ For example, the number of approved LA foster carers and places in Wales is available here: <https://stats.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Fostering-Services/fostering-services-by-local-authority-measure>

⁶ For example, data on children looked after in Scotland in 2013-14 is available here: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/03/4375/2>

Accuracy and reliability

All LAs and IFAs are asked to complete this return on a voluntary basis. There was a 100% response rate from both sectors to all questions in 2014-15; therefore, this release does not currently use any imputation or other statistical techniques, and data are not used to make any estimates about the population or other geographical areas. If the response rate changed at the 2015 collection, the impact of this on the data collected would be assessed, and would be made clear to users in the release.

The survey is conducted across all LA fostering agencies and IFAs in England, and so there is no risk of potential bias through sample selection. This data is sourced from the agency's administrative systems, and therefore the data returned by each agency reflects all fostered children and fostering households during the year 2014-15, and as at 31 March 2015. Ofsted recognises, however, that the data is collected from 445 agencies, and that detailed information on their internal quality assurance (QA) processes is not available. Three agencies returned data with discrepancies which could not be resolved with the agency before the deadline for publication.

The data are subject to a rigorous QA process, by both data suppliers and Ofsted. Validation rules within the template, and the enclosed guidance, assist data suppliers with checking the data prior to submission; these are developed with reference to the high quality data that Ofsted, as regulators of social care provision, holds on all registered providers. Ofsted also engages with data suppliers in conversation via email and telephone to clarify any queries or errors in the data and resolve these to the most accurate data the agency can supply; for some agencies with a larger number of issues, or who are new to completing the return, these conversations can be detailed and lengthy. The validation checks built into the template provide support to agencies around resolving errors; for example, not accounting for all reasons a child goes missing. An example of this is given below, checking number of approved places against implied capacity, and number of households against each other.

A1	Information about foster places at 31 March 2015	All foster places, excluding short breaks
A1.1	How many approved foster places (not carers) in total did your fostering service have as at 31 March 2015?	12
A4.4	Family and friends foster care	Y 2
C1	Information about fostering households as at 31 March 2015	Number
C1.1	How many fostering households did you have? (Please exclude family and friends households and short breaks)	10
C1.2	How many family and friends households did you have? (This does not include those family and friends who had children placed with them under Regulation 24 of The Care Planning Regulations 2010)	
C1.3	How many 'connected person' households did you have? (Family and friends who had children placed with them under Regulation 24 of The Care Planning Regulations 2010)	
C1.4	How many fostering households did you have that were exclusively approved for short breaks?	
Total number of fostering households (C1.1 to C1.4):		10
Of the approved fostering households in C1.1, as at 31 March 2015, how many households were:		
C1.5	Approved for one child/young person?	4
C1.6	Approved for two children/young people?	2
C1.7	Approved for three children/young people?	1
C1.8	Approved for more than three children/young people?	0
<p>!! The total of these figures imply a capacity of 11 which is inconsistent with the number of foster places reported for your service in A1.1 (excluding short breaks and family and friends places A4.4) !!</p> <p>!! The total number of fostering households (C1.5-C1.8) should equal the number of fostering households in your agency (C1.1) !!</p>		

The data are submitted in Excel workbooks and stored securely in system folders which are only accessible to members of the Ofsted Social Care Data and Analysis team. No person-level data is collected.

The collated dataset is also Excel format. No databases are used for the production of these statistics.

The deadline for all agencies to submit a return is 30 June. Each individual form is checked by Ofsted for completeness, accuracy and consistency. Where discrepancies are identified through Ofsted checks, these are followed up with the data suppliers via telephone and email to check and confirm accuracy, until the final deadline for revisions (6 October).⁷

Quality assurance checks are also carried out on the combined dataset, the analysis and the key findings, along with any supplementary statistics that are going to be published. Where applicable, data is considered against the DfE data on Children Looked After as a "sense check"; however, the time periods in the two returns do not always match up, and so there is limited utility to this.

Strengths of the data are:

⁷ In some cases (less than 1% of returns), this cannot be done because the agency has de-registered between 31 March and the QA date. Where this occurs, the data supplied by the agency prior to QA is used.

1. High response rates with all data provided: response rates for the last three years have been around 99%, and in 2014-15 were 100%.
2. Robust QA of the data by Ofsted: Ofsted completes detailed QA of all returns, which means a high level of confidence in the data presented. The QA tools, processes and outcomes are described in the introduction to the main report, and elsewhere in this quality report.
3. Data benchmarking: Where applicable, data returned to Ofsted is benchmarked against data submitted to the DfE, and generally found to be in line with DfE data. Where there are differences, this is likely due to additional quality assurance work done with individual agencies, particularly independent fostering agencies, to ensure quality of data; as the DfE collects data from local authorities only, this level of QA work is not always possible for them.
4. Comprehensive picture of fostering: due to high response rates, and the volume of data collected, as well as the mix of in-year and end-of-year figures, the data provide a comprehensive picture of fostering in England over the last three years.

Limitations of the data are:

1. The voluntary nature of the collection: as a result, response rates may fluctuate, though response rates to date have been close to 100%, and 100% in 2014-15, with all respondents providing all requested data. As the collection is voluntary, there is no legislation compelling agencies, including local authorities, to supply data, or to provide information on their own data quality. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has also not made use of his powers to compel reporting of these data.

2. Different reporting practices: different agencies will have different reporting practices; there is no standard across all fostering agencies. This may impact the burden of completing the return on some agencies. There is also some anecdotal evidence of different recording practices in different agencies, such as around children going missing for short periods (less than 24 hours).

3. Minimal knowledge of data quality at provider level: although all data returns are extensively quality assured by Ofsted, information is not generally available about how the agency ensures that accuracy of their own data. Steps are taken to mitigate the impact of this, including QA, and the provision of guidance on completion of the form. A helpline number is also operated such that data suppliers are able to speak to a member of the Social Care Data & Analysis team for queries.

4. There is some known variance in recording: this is particularly likely around areas new to the collection such as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) where robust reporting systems may not yet be in place. In this example, three local authorities reported that they were unable to provide information on the number of children at risk of or subject to CSE. An additional 14 LAs reported no children at risk of CSE, often citing difficulties in assessing these numbers from their current recording systems. This also impacted in reporting of children subject to CSE. Where issues such as this occur, this has been noted in the key findings; this information is also passed on to senior HMIs to support them in conversations with local authorities.

Potential sources of error and bias:

1. Quality of agencies' data: Ofsted has no direct knowledge the agencies' data storage systems, or the checks and quality assurances they carry out on this, and currently is unable to explore this in any depth due to the time and resource needed. However, we perform extensive QA of data to minimise the impact of this; additionally, the data collected is broadly similar year-on-year, so it is likely that agencies would have systems in place to collect and report on the required data. There has also been evidence of improvement over the years as a result of this data collection.

2. Best fit requirements: there will always be situations which do not fit easily into the categories supplied, and in these cases, personal interpretation may mean that

different data suppliers code similar situations in different ways. Ofsted aims to minimise this through use of guidance and support.

3. Agencies' perceptions: agencies may perceive that the data will be used to form a judgement on their service, which could bias their return. Ofsted includes guidance on the purpose of the collection in an aim to reduce this concern.

4. Other considerations: all agencies are asked to, and do, submit data; therefore, there is no risk of sample or response bias in the data.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis.

Data are published on the date pre-announced in the publication schedule here: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/statistics. Information on any delay in publication can also be found on the publication schedule. Reasons why a delay may occur include, for example, where more time is necessary to properly quality assure the data to ensure its robustness. Publications are announced on Ofsted's Twitter page and social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for production of the fostering data release is approximately seven months. This includes approximately three months for the collection of the data, and approximately the same period for QA of the data and follow-up with agencies. A further six weeks of the production involves: the analysis, drafting the findings, creating the statistical release, QA of all outputs and publication on the gov.uk website.

Pre-release is given in accordance with the pre-release access to Official Statistics Order (2008), as detailed in Ofsted's pre-release policy here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>.

Accessibility and clarity

Ofsted releases are published in an accessible format on the gov.uk website. The information is publicly available and there are no restrictions on access to the published data.

Data covering children's social care are held on a collections page on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>

The primary function of the data is to meet Ofsted's data requirements for inspections. However, the data are shared for public use with the intention of informing about the fostering sector and for re-use by analysts and researchers as may be required. The underlying data presentation was amended to better support public use and re-use from 2014-15.

Performance, cost and respondent burden

Through direct consultation and the use of feedback and queries, Ofsted attempts to minimise the respondent burden by improving the clarity of questions and definitions. Some work was done in 2011, for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) single data list, to establish the annual respondent burden in terms of resource hours.

More recently a short questionnaire was introduced, with the 2014-15, collection to enable Ofsted to estimate the amount of resource used to complete the dataset. The questionnaire was returned by 95 of the 445 agencies who completed the data forms (21%). These 94 respondents reported that they spent a total of 3,540 hours on the return, ranging from one to 280 hours.⁸ This equates to an average of 38 hours per agency; or around one working week. The majority of respondents (89%) reported that they found the guidance notes helpful. Ofsted will continue to monitor these figures to ensure that the respondent burden is appropriate.

In order to reduce the burden on local authorities around producing this data, Ofsted and the DfE have reached an agreement to introduce Ofsted URNs into the statutory SSDA903 data collection from local authorities.

Confidentiality, transparency and security

Where sensitive or personal data are held by Ofsted, the disclosure control processes we have in place ensure that this data is not published. All data releases follow Ofsted's confidentiality and revisions policies which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>. All staff using sensitive data have been trained in confidentiality and disclosure awareness.

Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating data to England and sector level. This processing is done using SQL and Excel, and is reviewed and quality assured before the data is used. No data has been removed.

For data protection and disclosure purposes, totals in the key findings and the underlying data have been rounded to the nearest five; this has also been applied to figures from previous years used in the release. The purpose of the rounding is to ensure non-disclosure of sensitive data while maintaining its usefulness. Totals have been rounded to the nearest five to allow maximum use of provider level data with the minimum risk of disclosure. This means, however, that some total figures do not match exactly with data aggregated at provider type, England or regional levels.

⁸ One agency reported 744 hours, which equates to three months, assuming an eight hour working day; this has been excluded from calculations as it is extremely likely to be an error.

Figures of three or less are suppressed and secondary level suppression is used where required.

IFA agency level data is not published, as IFAs are subject to different legislation and frameworks than LA fostering agencies, as described above. IFAs are also often smaller, meaning that the risk of disclosure is higher if data is shared at agency level for this group. IFAs also include private organisations, for whom this data is commercially sensitive, and therefore not applicable to being shared widely. Definitions are provided in the Statistical First Release; for instance, the glossary includes placement types and what these mean, as well as references to relevant legislation where applicable.