



Department  
for Education

# **Children looked after in England (including adoption) year ending 31 March 2017**

**Methodology and quality document**

**September 2017 (Version 1.0)**

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# 1. Introduction

This document provides methodology and quality information on published statistics on the [Children looked after in England \(including adoption\) in the year ending 31 March 2017](#) statistical first release (SFR).

## Expiry or review date

This document is due to be revised in December 2017 when the additional statistics on looked after children are expected to be published.

## Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for:

Users of published statistics including:

- Department for Education
- Stakeholders within the children's services sector
- Local authorities
- Researchers.

## Version History

1.0	September 2017	First website version
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## 2. Summary

This document provides some background information on the statistics published on children who are looked after by local authorities during the year ending 31 March 2017, those adopted from care and, for those who have recently left care, information about their activity and whereabouts on their 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays. Where available, updated figures for the previous 4 years are also provided.

The statistical release includes information on:

- Children looked after at 31 March in each year, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children
- Children looked after at any time during the year ending 31 March
- Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March
- Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March
- Children looked after who were adopted during the year ending 31 March
- Care leavers now aged 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 years' old
- Children who went missing during the year ending 31 March

Information is included on the reasons why a child is looked after, their legal status and placement type. Information is also included on the average time taken for each stage of the adoption process.

All figures are based on data from the SSDA903 return collected each spring from all local authorities. This publication is the main information source on the numbers of looked after children in England; it is used to inform policy decisions to improve the outcomes for this vulnerable group of children. It is also used extensively by other organisations interested in this subject.

This document provides information on the methodology involved in the production of this data – from collection through to publication – and information relating to the quality of the statistics.

### 3. Data collection

The statistics are based on information on looked after children collected in the SSDA903 return which is completed annually by local authorities in England. The return is submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) and is required for two groups of children:

1. every child who is looked after by the local authority at any time during the year ending 31 March 2017
2. children who have been looked after for at least 13 weeks which began after they reached the age of 14 and ended after they reached the age of 16 who are now aged 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 (care leavers)

The figures presented for the year ending 31 March 2017 are based on data reported by all 152 local authorities in England.

The SSDA903 collection began in 1992 and prior to 1998 it covered all looked after children. Between 1998 and 2003 the SSDA903 return covered only a one third sample of children: those with a date of birth divisible by three. There was then an aggregate return, the CLA 100 return, which was used to provide 'fast track' data and to gross the sample data. In 2000, the OC1 (educational qualifications of care leavers) return was introduced, followed by the AD1 (children adopted) returns in 2001 and the OC3 return (19th birthday) in 2002. From 2004, the CLA100 return was discontinued and the SSDA903 reverted to covering all looked after children. Becoming a web based data collection for the first time, the SSDA903 return also incorporated the AD1, OC1 and OC3 returns.

Note that additional information on offending, health promotion checks, immunisations, dental checks, health assessments and substance misuse problem identification and intervention is also collected through the SSDA903. This is collected for the cohort of children who have been looked after continuously for at least 12 months at 31 March. This information is released as part of a series of additional tables, subsequent to the initial release in September. The information was previously collected via the Outcome Indicators (OC2) return which contained aggregated data collected at a local authority level. However, the information was added to the SSDA903 in 2008-09 and is now collected at child level.

The database used to collect this information is longitudinal with one record for every episode of care. Local authorities are asked to update the database every year, including making amendments to previous years' records where there have been changes (see footnotes on historical changes in the relevant tables). The information collected contains details about the child (for example gender, date of birth, unique pupil number) and details about the child's episodes in care. When a change in legal status or placement (or both) occurs, a new episode of care is started and the date and reason for the change are recorded.

The following table shows how data for 2016 has changed between this publication and last year's publication due to historical revisions:

<b>Count of children</b>	<b>Reported in 2016 SFR</b>	<b>Reported in 2017 SFR</b>	<b>Percentage change</b>
Children looked after at 31 March 2016	70,440	70,450	0.0%
Children starting to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2016	32,050	32,160	+0.3%
Children ceasing to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2016	31,710	31,830	+0.4%

Some revisions to previously published data occur as a result of amendments and corrections made by local authorities to their historical data. Records for the years since 2004 can be amended directly by local authorities. Common amendments include correcting episode information and including missing records. Changes can also be made to dates of birth, gender or ethnicity.

An audit of records relating to the 2016 to 2017 year which were changed by local authorities shows that around 1,090 child records were deleted and a further 380 were added to the system. There were 2,080 master changes made, these are changes to a child's date of birth, gender or ethnic group. In addition, changes have also been made to the characteristics of a child's care.

It should be noted that a legal status or date change in any episode of care may mean that the child will no longer be included in a particular set of figures. For example, changing a date episode ceased in a child's care history may mean that the child is no longer included in ceased figures for 2016 but in 2017, this will also mean that the child is then considered to be looked after at 31 March 2016.

Further information on the data items collected in the SSDA903 return can be found in the collection guide. This and other documents useful for the completion of the SSDA903 return can be found on the DfE children looked after [collection website](#).

## 4. Data cleaning

To ensure data accuracy, its consistency and the integrity of each child's history over time, a number of validation checks are carried out on the records at the point of data entry, to identify and remove:

- Invalid codes
- Unlikely or impossible combinations of legal status
- Unlikely or impossible sequences of dates
- Information which contradicts that already held about the child, in particular details submitted for the beginning of the current year which do not match those at the end of the previous year
- Information in the supplementary milestone fields that contradicts details recorded in the episode date for the same child.

Any record which fails the validation checks is shown as being in error and must be corrected. An explanation of each validation check and guidance on how corrections can be made are documented in the list of [validation checks](#).

## 5. Data processing

### 5.1 Production of snapshot tables

Local authorities supply information to the DfE annually, and these records are then linked (by a unique identifier for each child) to any supplied by the same local authority in preceding years (from 1992 onwards).

In early July each year, at the end of the data collection and cleaning process, a 'snapshot' or 'freeze' of the database is taken. As well as containing data for the latest year, this snapshot includes all the historic data for each child, as signed off by the local authority at the end of June of the latest year.

A series of checks are undertaken on these snapshot tables to ensure they have been produced correctly from the database, including year-on-year comparisons, sample checks against the live database (e.g. the number of children adopted in a particular LA) before the data are further processed to produce the tables for this SFR. Cross checking between different snapshot tables is also carried out.

### 5.2 Production of SFR tables

#### Quality assurance

From this snapshot, a series of data tables are produced. These snapshot tables are used to produce the SFR tables which are quality assured in accordance with [DfE statistical quality principles and procedures](#). This involves independent dual running of each of the tables.

#### Counts and definitions

The snapshot tables used for the production of the main SFR tables are listed in the table below. Note that additional tables are also created and released later in the year.

Snapshot table	Count of children	Definition	SFR tables
March table	Children looked after at 31 March	Children whose period of care was open at 31 March (i.e. started on or before 31 March with no end date). Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	A1, A2, A3 LAA1, LAA4
Episodes table	Children looked after during the year ending 31 March	Children who had an episode of care at any point between 1 April and 31 March. Children looked after solely under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	B1, LAB1



<b>Snapshot table</b>	<b>Count of children</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>SFR tables</b>
Starts tables	Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March	Children whose period of care started on or after 1 April. If a child started to be looked after more than once in the year, only their first period of care is counted. Children who started to be looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	C1, LAC1
Ceased table	Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March	Children whose period of care ceased on or after 1 April. If a child ceased to be looked after more than once in the year, only their last period of care is counted. Children who ceased to be looked after while under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	D1, LAD1
AD1 table	Children who were adopted during the year ending 31 March	Children who ceased to be looked after on or after 1 April using reason episode ceased of either 'Adopted – application for adoption order unopposed' or 'Adopted – consent dispensed with by court'.	E1, E2, LAE1
OC3 table	Care leavers aged 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21	Children whose 17 <sup>th</sup> , 18 <sup>th</sup> , 19 <sup>th</sup> , 20 <sup>th</sup> or 21 <sup>st</sup> birthday falls between 1 April and 31 March who were previously looked after for at least 13 weeks after their 14 <sup>th</sup> birthday, including some time after their 16 <sup>th</sup> birthday.	F1, F2, F3, F4, LAF2a, LAF2b, LAF4a, LAF4b
Missing table	Children who went missing or were away from placement without authorisation during the year ending 31 March	Children who went missing or away from their placement without authorisation (excluding those looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4)).	G1, LAG1

### **Rounding conventions**

Rounding and suppression is applied to the data. The National Statistics Code of Practice requires that reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that all published or

disseminated statistics produced by the DfE protect confidentiality. This SFR follows the [DfE policy statement on confidentiality](#).

National and regional figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 and local authority figures have been rounded to the nearest 5. For confidentiality purposes, numbers from one to five inclusive have been replaced in the published tables by a cross (x). To ensure the suppressed number cannot be identified by simple arithmetic secondary suppression may be required. In these cases, another number may be suppressed. Where any number is shown as zero (0), the original figure submitted was zero (0). The following convention has been used:

“.” means not applicable

“..” means not available

“-” means negligible – used to represent a percentage that would appear as 0 when rounded but is not zero

Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers but where the numerator was five or fewer or the denominator was 10 or fewer, they have been suppressed and replaced by a cross (x). Note that percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. The average durations in table E2 have been rounded to the nearest month. The average number of missing or away without authorisation incidents in table G1 has been rounded to one decimal place.

### **Grossing**

Prior to 2013, grossing factors were applied to the data in order to compensate for records with errors in their episodes. These were calculated by comparing the number of valid looked after children records reported in the return with the number of invalid records in the system. In 2013, because of the rigorous validation checks applied to data submitted, such discrepancies were very low and the calculated grossing factors to be applied were close to 1 and after a review of grossing factors, it was decided to discontinue grossing the data from 2013 onwards.

## 6. Data quality and uses

Local authorities collect data on all looked after children as given in Section 3 above. Validation and consistency checks are in place to ensure the information provided is of high quality. However, the following should be taken into account when reviewing the statistics on looked after children.

### 6.1 Effect of collecting provider unique reference numbers on placement type

For the collection year 2015 to 2016, there was a new requirement for local authorities to provide the unique reference number (URN) where the setting is subject to Ofsted inspections. For children's homes, for example, this would be the URN of the individual home, and for foster or adoptive placements, for example, this would be the URN of the relevant service or agency providing the placement. For larger providers with multiple settings or branches this meant the precise URN for the particular setting or branch. This data, which covers around 90% of placements, was required for any placement that was ongoing on 1 April 2015, or for any new placement after 1 April 2015.

As a result of this, and the in-built system validation to ensure the placement type submitted by local authorities corresponds with the placement type for the given URN, there were some corrections of placement types by local authorities in 2016 and 2017. In particular, there were a number of cases where children previously recorded as being in residential schools in 2015, were recorded as being in children's homes in 2016 and 2017; in many cases the provider may have been dual-registered.

Whilst we usually see small annual revisions to previous year figures, these changes will largely be a result of improvements in the accuracy of reporting placement types.

URNs were only collected for new placements or placements ongoing at 1 April 2015, this means that a placement 'incorrectly' coded, which ended in 2015 will not have needed a URN reporting this year and so will not have been corrected. As such, as we move further back in the time series it's likely more placements are misreported and so any decrease, or increase in placements over time should be interpreted cautiously.

### 6.2 Children missing from care

Information was collected for the first time in 2015 on children who were missing or away from their placement without authorisation in the year ending 31 March, for any length of time. Previously, information had only been collected on children who were missing or absent for at least 24 hours.

The definitions of missing and away from placement without authorisation are as follows:

*Missing from care – a looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g. school) and their whereabouts is not known;*

*Away from placement without authorisation – a looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.*

These reflect the definitions in the [statutory guidance](#) on children who run away or go missing from home or care.

Information is collected on the start and end date of the missing incident. If a child goes missing or away from placement without authorisation more than once in the same day, each separate episode is counted. It is possible that children who were missing were also away from placement without authorisation during the year, and vice versa, so the figures should not be summed to give a total number who were missing or away from placement without authorisation during the year. Additionally, users should exercise caution when summing the number of missing periods and away from placement without authorisation periods together, this is because an away from placement without authorisation period could become a missing period if the child's whereabouts becomes unknown. These will appear as separate incidents in the data, but could be one continuous period where the child is not at his/her placement.

This information was published in 2015 as 'experimental statistics' given it was the first year in which the data had been collected and, therefore, local authority data collection systems and recording practices were still bedding in. They have continued to be classed as 'experimental statistics' in 2016 and 2017. Feedback from local authorities in 2016 and 2017 suggested the figures were more robust than in 2015. Some local authorities have continued to report some significant improvements in recording.

In 2017, some local authorities informed the department that they do not record incidents as 'away without authorisation' but instead report all incidents as 'missing' to maintain consistency with local police reporting. We estimate this could mean that at a national level there is an overestimate of missing incidents of up to 3% and an undercount of away without authorisation incidents of up to 6%. There is some variation across the country in the way these incidents are reported and so robust comparisons between regions is not possible. Some of these local authorities submitted 'away without authorisation' information and this has been included in the tables.

Brighton and Hove local authority were unable to provide child level data for 2017. No attempt has been made to estimate their data.

We will continue to assess in future years whether the figures are considered robust enough to be classed as national statistics, rather than experimental. Given the changes in the way this data has been reported, comparisons over time should not be made.

Information on children missing from care is collected separately by police forces. Details of all missing or absent incidents are provided to the National Crime Agency quarterly. The NCA publish annual information – the [latest available](#) was published in May 2016 relating to the 2014/15 year. This information is not directly comparable with the latest DfE statistics due to the different collection methods and definitions.

Table G1 includes figures for the average duration of being missing. Around 90% of both missing and away from placement without authorisation incidents are for 2 days or less. In each case, there are a small number of particularly long durations of being missing reported by local authorities in the data which affect the value of the mean duration. Both the mean and median have been presented in the table in order to show a better descriptor of the true average value.

Measure	Average number of days per missing incident	Average number of days per away from placement without authorisation incident
25th percentile	0 days	0 days
Median	1 day	1 day
75th percentile	1 day	1 day
Mean	3 days	2 days

Note, the exact times a child went missing or away without authorisation or returned are not recorded, only the date, so the duration of missing incidents are calculated to the nearest whole day.

### 6.3 Care leavers

In the national table, figures exclude those who were looked after under an agreed series of short term placements, those who have died since leaving care, those who have returned home to parents or someone with parental responsibility for a continuous period of at least 6 months and those whose care was transferred to another local authority. The numbers of young people recorded as having returned home for at least 6 months, or having died after ceasing to be looked after in each year, are as follows:

Care leavers <sup>1</sup>	2015			2016					2017				
	19	20	21	17	18	19	20	21	17	18	19	20	21
Died	10	20	30	0	x	20	30	40	0	x	10	20	30
Returned home for at least 6 months	140	140	120	100	180	190	170	160	100	170	200	200	190

There has been a recent improvement in recording of activity and accommodation for care leavers. The percentage of known information about activity and accommodation has increased to 90%. As a result, year-on-year changes cannot be immediately assessed. Tables F1a and F1b present the percentage of care leavers in each activity or accommodation category as a percentage of all young people; the table below shows

<sup>1</sup> A young person may be recorded in more than one year

care leaver activity and accommodation for those care leavers aged 19 to 21 **where the information is known:**

<b>Activity of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
In higher education i.e. studies beyond A level	7%	8%	7%
In education other than higher education	21%	20%	21%
In training or employment	26%	27%	27%
Not in education, training or employment owing to illness or disability	9%	11%	12%
Not in education, training or employment owing to pregnancy or parenting	7%	8%	8%
Not in education, training or employment owing to other reasons	29%	26%	25%

<b>Accommodation of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
With parents or relatives	13%	13%	13%
Community home	4%	5%	5%
Semi-independent, transitional accommodation	11%	12%	13%
Supported lodgings	6%	6%	5%
Gone abroad	<0.5%	<0.5%	<0.5%
Deported	<0.5%	<0.5%	<0.5%
Ordinary lodgings	2%	2%	2%
Residence not known	1%	1%	2%
No fixed abode/homeless	1%	1%	1%
Foyers	2%	2%	3%
Independent living	45%	42%	39%
Emergency accommodation	<0.5%	<0.5%	<0.5%
Bed and breakfast	<0.5%	<0.5%	<0.5%
In custody	4%	4%	4%
With former foster carers	5%	7%	8%
Other accommodation	5%	5%	4%

It is not possible for local authorities to determine the suitability of the accommodation where the young person was deported, had gone abroad, or their residence was not known. Therefore, in this SFR these accommodation types have been removed from the suitability calculations.

## **17 and 18-year-old care leavers**

The cohort for former care leavers was extended in 2016 to include care leavers aged 17 and 18, in addition to those aged 19, 20 and 21, who were looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday. These figures are released as 'experimental statistics' in 2016 and 2017 as it is the first

two years this information has been collected for these age groups. Additionally, analysis suggests there has been some under reporting by some local authorities for 17 and 18-year-olds who left care on their birthday. We believe under reporting is very small for 17-year-olds but for 18-year-olds we believe we could have been missing data for around 1,000; 11% of young people in 2016. However, whilst we expect under reporting to remain a risk, the same level of under-reporting was not experienced in 2017 and we do not expect this to be an issue going forwards.

## 6.4 Long term fostering placements

From 2016, all children in an ongoing long term foster placement on 1 April 2015, or those who change to a long term foster placement after this date, should have been recorded as such. The definition of a long-term foster placement came into effect from 1 April 2015 in [The Care Planning and Fostering \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) \(England\) Regulations 2015](#) and is defined as:

A “long term foster placement” means an arrangement made by the responsible authority for the child to be placed with a foster carer where:

- a) the child’s plan for permanence is foster care,
- b) the foster carer has agreed to act as child’s foster parent until the child ceases to be looked after, and
- c) the responsible authority has confirmed the nature of the arrangement to the foster carer, parents and the child.

Nationally, 21,390 foster placements (40%) were recorded as long term fostering placements in the 2017 data collection. However, local authority level analysis of the data highlighted large differences in the proportion of foster placements reported as being long term foster placements in both the 2016 and 2017 data collections. Quality assurance checks carried out with local authorities with very high or very low proportions of children in long term foster care identified a degree of misreporting at a level that has affected our confidence in the figures and so figures for long term fostering have not been included in the 2016 or 2017 releases. Children reported under the long term fostering category were included in the categories ‘With other foster carer not FFA/concurrent planning’ or ‘With relative or friend, not FFA/Concurrent planning’ as appropriate, in the 2016 and 2017 statistical release data tables.

## 6.5 Reason episode ceased ‘other’

The ‘reason episode ceased’ codes collected in the SSDA903 record the circumstances when a child ceases to be looked after. If a child ceases to be looked after because he/she has turned 18, this can already be deduced from his/her date of birth. Therefore, the appropriate code is used to capture the destination of the young person. In 2014, 5,000 episodes (16%) were reported as ceasing with the code ‘Period of being looked after ceased for any other reason’. After discussion with local authority data contacts three new categories were introduced in 2015 to try to capture the reasons for these



children leaving care. These categories were 'Accommodation on remand ended', 'Age assessment determined child aged 18 or over' and 'Child moved abroad'. However, despite the introduction of these three new categories, in 2017, 5,470 children ceasing to be looked after (17%) are still categorised as 'Care ceased for any other reason'. 3,500 (64%) of these were aged 18 years or over so it's likely they ceased to be looked after as they reached 18 years of age and the more detailed code has not been provided.

## **6.6 Reason for placement change**

For episodes that cease due to a change in placement, from 1 April 2015 the SSDA903 collection records the reason for the placement change. A full list of valid codes can be found in the [guide](#). This information was published as experimental statistics in 2016 as it was the first year the data has been collected and published. Nationally 34% of placements were recorded in the 'Other' category in 2016. Quality assurance checks on local authority level figures suggested some local authorities were still implementing local procedures to report this information which affected our confidence in the 2016 data.

## **6.7 31 March, starts and ceased comparability**

The number of looked after children at 31 March 2017 (Table A1) does not always equate to the number at 31 March 2016 plus the number who started (Table C1) minus the number who ceased to be looked after in the year (Table D1). The reason for this is that a child is only ever counted once as starting to be looked after during the year, and once as ceasing to be looked after during the year, but in some circumstances a child may enter care and/or leave care more than once during the year. There are also a small number of children who move in and out of respite care during the year for whom the same will apply.

## **6.8 Children freed for adoption**

The 2017 data shows that there are still a very small number of children subject to freeing orders even though applications for freeing orders could not be made on or after 30 December 2005 as they were replaced by placement orders. Further guidance on the use of freeing orders has been included in the [guide](#).

## **6.9 Revisions**

This publication is produced using a final version of the 2017 dataset and we do not plan to make any revisions to this publication. If we later discover that a revision is necessary, this will be made in accordance with the [DfE statistical policy statement on revisions](#).



## 7. Further releases of data based on the SSDA903 collection

The data underlying this release will be published in December along with further information on looked after children, including detailed local authority level analysis. A full schedule showing which tables are included under each theme and a publication date is published on the website for this publication. The SSDA903 data is also used to produce the [Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England](#) statistical first release – the next version of this publication is expected to be published in March 2018.

## 8. Consultation process

Feedback on the methodology is welcome. If you have any comments on the information collected, the timing or format of our outputs or whether these statistics are meeting users' requirements, please contact us via [email](#). If you would like to register as part of our looked after children data user group, please also let us know.



Department  
for Education

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