Characteristics of children in need in England: 2018 to 2019

Methodology document

October 2019

Contents

1. Collection summary

The children in need census collects information on:

- any child referred to children's social care services within the year, and
- any cases open at the beginning of the year for whom local authorities were providing a service.

The collection of the data from each local authority allows the local and national level calculation of information on the numbers of referrals and assessments carried out by children's social care services, along with the identification of the number of children assessed to be in need and the numbers who were the subject of a child protection plan.

2. Background

The children in need census is a child level data collection which records individual assessment information and child characteristics for each child who has been referred to children's social care services.

The 2018 to 2019 children in need census captured child level information on children referred to and assessed by children's social care services within the 12 month period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. The census includes any child referred to children's social care services within the year and also any cases open at 1 April 2018 for whom local authorities were providing a service, for example:

- active case work
- making regular payments
- where funding or on-going services such as respite care has been agreed
- maintaining a child with care and accommodation
- a commitment to review the case at a predetermined date
- maintaining a child's name on a register that ensures the child and family receives targeted information or other special consideration

The 2018 to 2019 census was the ninth full year of the new children in need census. A collection covering a reduced 6 month period was carried out in 2008 to 2009 to collect information from the 1 October 2008 to 31 March 2009; however, following this a full year collection was introduced from 2009 to 2010.

A number of local authorities struggled to provide a complete, clean children in need return in the first full census in 2009 to 2010. On completion of the collection, a Departmental review of the children in need census was carried out alongside the Munro review which resulted in some data items being removed from the 2010 to 2011 collection onward. Local authorities were no longer asked to return information on:

- duration and types of services provided to children in need
- information on the status of cases open at the end of the year
- a flag to identify looked after children who had been adopted
- a flag to identify asylum seeking children and the date they ceased to be asylum seeking
- reasons for missing unique pupil numbers (UPN)

For 2008 to 2009 and earlier, information on referrals, assessments and child protection plans was collected through the aggregate 'Child Protection and Referrals' (CPR3) return. The introduction of the children in need census meant there was no longer a need to collect CPR3 and so it was discontinued after the 2008 to 2009 collection. The 2008 to 2009 period was a year where both collections were dual run. As mentioned, the children in need census was for 6 months of the year only, so CPR3 was the definitive data source for 2008 to 2009.

Although the information collected between the two returns is similar, the move from the emphasis being on local authorities to calculate indicators and return aggregate level information, to a child level national return where indicators are calculated by the Department for Education, mean that the figures are not directly comparable between the two returns. An example of this issue is that the aggregate returns were subject to a limited degree of local interpretation of definitions, for example, one key indicator looked at whether reviews were within the required timescales of three and six months. On moving to a centrally calculated indicator we identified that three and six months had been interpreted differently in different local authorities.

Further information on the comparability of figures between the children in need census and the CPR3 collection can be found in section 3 of the accompanying data quality document.

The data items collected in the children in need census include child identifiers and characteristics along with the dates of any referrals, assessments, section 47 enquiries and child protection plans and reviews.

3. Data cleaning

The data is collected through the DfE COLLECT (collections online for learning, education, children and teachers) system. Local authorities upload their data extract into COLLECT where a series of validation rules run against each upload upon loading into the system to identify any errors and queries with the data. Local authorities then have a period of time in which to resolve these errors and clean the data in their return before submitting a final return by the end of July. Guidance notes advising on the content of the return and a full list of validation rules are available on the [children in need census collection website.](#)

Once data has been submitted by the local authority, DfE carry out further quality assurance of the data so that we can make an assessment of the confidence we have in the data returned and highlight any issues with quality. Further details can be found in the accompanying data quality document.

4. Data processing

Defining counts of children in need

The number of children in need is a key indicator, however there is no flag on the dataset to identify these children. Instead, it must be derived using a combination of other data items provided in the data return. Key data items for calculating the numbers of children in need are:

- referral date
- referral NFA (flag identifying whether the referral resulted in no further action)
- reason for closure code

The methodology used to calculate the children in need numbers (table B1) of the publication is in the table below.

Historic issues with the classification of certain cases in relation to some of these measures have been identified and fixed within the current publication. Please see the dedicated section in the data quality and uses document, entitled 'Children in need population figure time series changes', which covers these changes in details. The definition of what is counted as a child in need remains unchanged.

Children in need episodes	We have defined these as referrals excluding cases where: a. The referral is flagged as being a referral resulting in no further action in 2018 to 2019; or b. The only activity recorded against the referral was an assessment (there was no s47 enquiry or child protection plan) and the reason for the closure of the case being that the case was closed after assessment with no further action (using closure code RC8).
Episodes of Need starting and children starting these episodes	These are episodes of Need starting and children starting these episodes as defined above, where the referral is within the 2018 to 2019 year. The number of children starting an episode of need in the year, as defined above.
Episodes of Need ending and children ending these episodes	These are episodes of Need ending and children ending these episodes as defined above, where the referral is within the 2018 to 2019 year. The number of children ending an episode of need in the year, as defined above.

Episodes of need at any point during the year and the number of children with these episodes	These are episodes of need at any point during the year and the number of children with these episodes as defined above, with an episode of need open at some point within the 2018 to 2019 year. The number of children with an episode of need at any point in the year, as defined above. Note: These are **NOT** children who have been in need for the whole of the year.
Children in need at 31 March	These are children in need (defined above) where the referral date is on or before 31 March 2019 and there is no closure date.

Counting number of referrals and assessments completed

Number of referrals

Figures are a count of referrals within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019).

Number of children with referrals

Figures are a count of children referred within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019).

Number of assessments completed

Figures are a count of assessments completed with an assessment authorisation date recorded within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019).

Duration of assessments

The durations of completed assessments published this year are consistent with recent years but differ from those pre 2012 to 2013. Since 2012 to 2013 the actual assessment start date has been collected. But for 2011 to 2012 and earlier, we collected the date the statutory timescale began. So, whereas in past publications the durations represented the timeliness of completing the assessment in relation to the trigger event, from 2012 to 2013 the durations shown are the actual number of working days between the assessment being started and being authorised.

Calculating referrals within 12 months of a previous referral

Figures are calculated by using the 2017 to 2018 data and the 2018 to 2019 data. Figures are a count of the number of referrals within 12 months of a previous referral, calculated as follows:

Select the referrals that occurred between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019 in the 2018 to 2019 data.

Select the referrals that occurred between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018 in the 2017 to 2018 data, but remove any duplicated children, keeping the latest referral for the child.

The two datasets are merged together and the difference in days between consecutive pairs of referral dates is counted by comparing referral 1 to referral 2, referral 2 to referral 3, etc. The referral is added to the count of re-referrals if the difference between the pair of dates is 365 days or less.

Calculating referrals resulting in no further action

For referrals within 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019, if the 'ReferralNFA' flag is equal to '1' or 'true' then count the referral as one which resulted in no further action and exclude the case from any other populations.

Calculating children assessed not to be in need at assessment

If the referral is within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019) and is not counted as a referral resulting in no further action, we consider whether any other activity has been recorded against the referral (for example assessments, child protection plans). If the referral has only an assessment, and the referral has a closure reason of "RC8 – case closed after assessment, no further action", then count as a child assessed not to be in need at assessment.

Factors identified at the end of assessment

For factors identified at the end of assessment we first select all those assessments authorised within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019). The file is then condensed down to one row per CIN details record and we aggregate factors identified across all assessments on the CIN details record, removing duplicate factors from the count.

Section 47 enquiries and initial child protection conferences

Number of section 47 enquiries

Figures are a count of cases where the section 47 actual start date is present and within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019). Section 47 numbers have changed in the historical time series as the derivation no longer removes duplicate section 47s starting on the same day. This is valid in specific circumstances and only affects a small proportion of records.

Number of children with a section 47 enquiry

Figures are a count of children with a section 47 enquiry as defined above.

Number of initial child protection conferences taking place

Figures are summed from two parts of the return:

1. From the section 47 module (where conferences should be recorded when they are the result of section 47 enquiries). Using data in the section 47 module of the return, cases are selected where the date of initial child protection conference is present and within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019). Any duplicates (based on date of initial child protection conference) are removed.

2. From the children in need details module (where conferences should be recorded when children who are the subject of a child protection plan transfer into the local authority). Using data in the children in need details module of the return, cases are selected where the date of initial child protection conference is present and within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019). These cases are merged with the cases identified in part 1 so that where the recorded date of initial child protection conference is the same; we remove these duplicates from the count.

Number of children with initial child protection conferences taking place

Figures are a count of children with an initial child protection conference as defined above.

Child protection plans and children who were the subject of a child protection plan

The methodology used to calculate the number of child protection plans and the children who were the subject of a child protection plan is given in the table below.
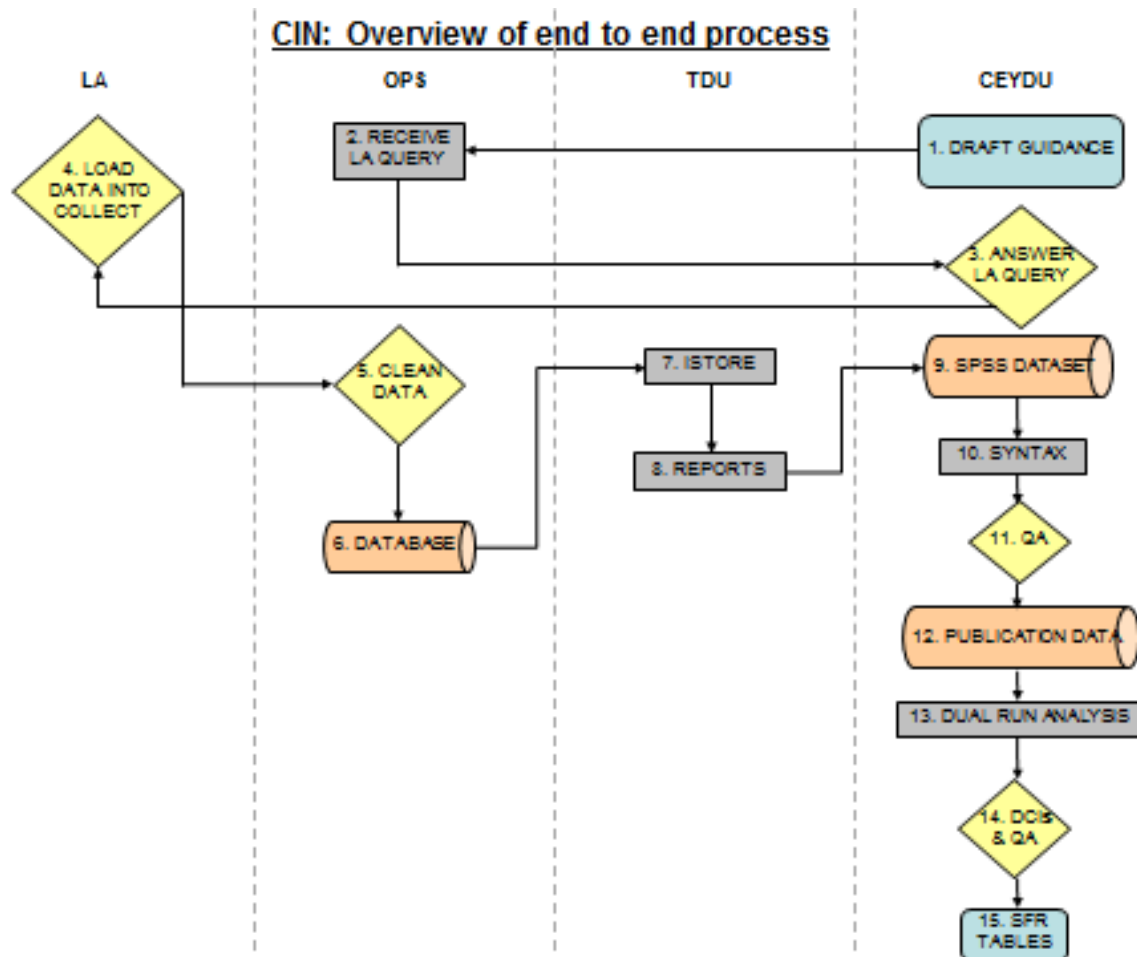
Child protection plans starting in the year and the number of children starting a plan	A count of the child protection plan start dates where the date lies within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019). The number of children with plans starting in the year as defined above.
Child protection plans at any point in the year and the number of children with a plan at any point	A count of the child protection plans where the start dates are before 31 March 2019 and the end date is on or after 1 April 2018 (or is missing). The number of children with a child protection plan at any point during the year as defined above.
Child protection plans that ended during the year and the number of children who ended a plan	A count of the child protection plan end dates where the child protection plan end date lies within the collection year (1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019). The number of children with a child protection plan that ended during the year as defined above.
Number of child protection plans open at 31st March	A count of child protection plans where the child protection plan start date is on or before 31 March 2019 and there is no closure date.

5. Accounting for missing data

All 152 local authorities provided a return for the 2018 to 2019 collection. As in previous years we did not accept any aggregate data from local authorities for 2018 to 2019.

6. Process map

The process map that is shown in the figure below covers the end to end process of the children in need census, from data collection through to publication of the statistical release.

Definitions:

CIN: Children in need

LA: Local authority

OPS: DfE Operational Helpdesk

TDU: DfE Technical Development Unit

CEYDU: DfE Children and Early Years Data Unit

QA: Quality assurance

7. Definitions

The full guidance notes relating to the children in need census can be viewed on [children in need census collection website](#).

The definitions of the key aspects of the referral, assessment and registration process are shown below.

Referrals

A referral is defined for the purposes of the children in need census as 'a request for services to be provided by children's social care services'. This is in respect of a case where the child is not previously known to the council, or where the case was previously open but is now closed. A referral should not be recorded if there is a case for the child already open. A referral can be made by a professional from one of many different agencies (typically in the health and education sectors) but the term as used here is a broad one which encompasses referrals from any source, including self-referrals.

Referrals leading to no further action

On receipt of a referral the local authority has one working day to decide what further work needs to be done. If more investigation is needed, then an assessment will be carried out. However, it may be that the referral can be resolved by providing some information, or referring to another agency or in some cases, no further action at all is needed. Thresholds, for deciding if further action is required, can vary from one local authority to another.

Assessment

Assessment of any child who has been referred to children's social care services with a request that services be provided. Statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' was revised in 2013 giving local authorities more flexibility when assessing children. Previously, local authorities carried out an initial assessment within 10 working days and (where needed) a more in-depth core assessment within 35 working days. All local authorities now carry out a single continuous assessment within 45 working days.

Child in need

A child in need is a child who has been assessed to be in need of social care services.

Initial child protection conferences and child protection plans

Where concerns about a child's welfare are substantiated and the agencies most involved judge that a child may continue to suffer, or be at risk of suffering significant harm, the social care services department should convene an initial child protection conference. The purpose of the conference is to draw together the information that has been obtained and to make judgements on whether the child is at continuing risk of significant harm and whether he or she therefore requires a child protection plan to be put in place. It is set out in the inter-agency guidance "Working Together to Safeguard Children" that an initial child protection conference should take place within 15 working days of the strategy discussion which decided whether section 47 enquiries should be initiated. The conference will result in a decision on whether the child will become the subject of a plan or not.

Child protection plan reviews

Once a child becomes the subject of a child protection plan, their plan should be reviewed within the first 3 months and then at intervals of not more than 6 months.

Children who cease to be the subject of a plan

A child will cease to be the subject of a plan if:

1.   it is judged that the child is no longer at continuing risk of significant harm requiring safeguarding by means of a child protection plan (for example the risk of harm has been reduced by action taken through the child protection plan; the child and family's circumstances have changed; or re-assessment of the child and family indicates that a child protection plan is not necessary). Under these circumstances, only a child protection review conference can decide that the child being the subject of a plan is no longer necessary;

2.   the child and family have moved permanently to another local authority area. In such cases, the receiving local authority should convene a child protection conference within 15 working days of being notified of the move, only after which event may a child cease to be the subject of a plan in respect of the original local authority's plan;

3.   the child has reached 18 years of age, has died or has permanently left the UK.

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