

Children looked after placement data

Methodology and Quality Report

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30 June 2015

Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to Ofsted's annual release of children looked after data. These data are collected from Local Authorities (LAs) on a voluntary basis. 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 'Children looked after placements'.

The annual release of data reflects all placements of looked after children in England, as at the 31 March.

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

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (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 registered social care provisions under the Care Standards Act 2000.¹ Ofsted inspects LA children's services, under section 136 (2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.²

Ofsted has two distinct uses for the children looked after placement data. The data are collected for the purpose of informing inspections of LA services for children who need help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. Inspections of LA children's services are conducted under the single inspection

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

² Education and Inspections Act 2006: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/contents

framework (SIF).³ Inspection reports can be found on the [Ofsted website](#) and statistics about the outcomes of inspections can be found on the [Gov.Uk website](#).

A further use of the data, is that Ofsted analyses the data to enhance insight into this sector. The analysis of the data informs policy discussions and decisions, for instance, contributing the reviews of inspection frameworks, evidence and reports.

The data are published annually as official statistics. The aggregation of data for official statistics allows us to communicate to users the key data and messages about children looked after, for example, at different geographical levels and within sub-types of provider. The official statistics draw out the key messages and communicate these in an understandable way, appropriate for a wide range of different users.

Ofsted will be also publishing supporting data in autumn. The data may, therefore, be used by stakeholder groups, academics and other interested parties across the sector. Local authorities may also use the data themselves, for local and regional use, to inform on areas of practice and to improve processes and standards. The published data contributes to national debate on placing of, and commissioning for, children looked after.

Meeting user needs

The data collection is reviewed annually to ensure that, going forward, the collection meets the needs of policy makers in Ofsted by providing them with a comprehensive, high quality dataset. For example, the 2013 review of the collection saw date of birth information added, instead of age information, in order to improve accuracy of the data and reduce burden to data suppliers; age requires calculation whereas date of birth is an existing field within the Department for Education's (DfE) 903 data collection.⁴

Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team, who are responsible for the data collection and who produce the social care Official Statistics, are represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs. These regional meetings are organised by the Association for Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). Feedback on the proposed changes to the collection is obtained from these groups, before changes are made and the template is tested. Final sign-off of changes is dependent on successful testing of the template, then the collection is launched.

The collection is a voluntary survey. It is requested of all LAs in England, however there is no legal obligation for LAs to submit these data to Ofsted. The majority of the data are also collected by the DfE on a statutory basis; further information can be found under the coherence and comparability section. The template, including

³ SIF framework and guidance: www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-inspections-of-local-authority-childrens-services

⁴ DfE guide to 903 data collection: www.gov.uk/children-looked-after-return

guidance on its completion, are sent directly to data suppliers (LAs) and are not published due to the sensitive nature of the data being collected.

Data suppliers are also encouraged to contact the Social Care Data & Analysis Team, if they have any queries that are not answered by the automated guidance messages which have been built into the form. The team can be contacted by phone or email: 0300 013 0020 and socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk

Coherence and comparability

Ofsted first collected children looked after placement data in England at 31 March 2011; however, this is not comparable to later years as the information requested was more limited. Work was undertaken in 2012 to ensure the collection was robust and comprehensive, and an enhanced collection was launched annually since 2013. Over time, the data collection has been developed and improved.

DfE have a statutory collection of data from LAs about looked after children. The emphasis of Ofsted's collection, which is distinct from the DfE collection, is data about the registered social care provision in which children are placed. Ofsted's data provides a snapshot picture of looked after children on the 31 March, including the specific placement provider. The DfE data captures all looked after children, at any point during the year, however it cannot be attributed to specific providers; provider type is the lowest detail collected. There are minimal differences in the data published from the two collections. These differences are usually attributed to slightly different timing for the submission of data and different quality assurance (QA) processes. The data published by the DfE are available [here](#). A document reviewing the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom was published on 30 May 2014.⁵

Ofsted's response rates have been consistently high for all collections. It is believed that this stems from the similarities between the Ofsted and DfE collections, meaning that data can be reused and there is minimal additional work to be undertaken by LAs.

No time series are available from this data collection. This is due to the data being a snapshot point in time, of a particular cohort of looked after children, on a set date: the 31 March. It is possible, though, to make some comparisons between the two snapshots to illustrate some changes over time.

⁵ www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-265---statistics-on-looked-after-children.pdf

Accuracy and reliability

All local authorities are asked to complete this return on a voluntary basis. There was a 100% response rate for 2013 and for 2014; 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 LAs in England, and so there is no risk of potential bias through sample selection. This data is sourced from the LA's administrative systems, and therefore the data returned by each LA reflects all looked after children that they are responsible for on 31 March. Ofsted recognises, however, that the data is collected from 152 LAs, and that detailed information on their internal quality assurance (QA) processes is not available.

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. For example, the template includes the lists of placement codes as supplied in Annex 2 of this report. The validation checks built into the template provide support to LAs around resolving errors; for example, inconsistencies between unique reference numbers (URNs)⁶ and provider types.

The templates are sent directly to LAs, rather than being published on the gov.uk web page due to inclusion of underlying data for validation purposes. An example of this would be provider information, which enables LAs to validate their data prior to returning their forms. Children looked after placement data are submitted in Excel workbooks and no databases are used for the production of these statistics.⁷

Each individual form is checked by Ofsted for completeness, accuracy and consistency. Where discrepancies are identified through Ofsted checks, such as comparisons against the DfE published data or inconsistent combinations of placement codes and provision details, these are followed up with the data suppliers to check and confirm accuracy.

Once all datasets have been QA'd at an individual provider level, Ofsted has QA processes at national level. 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.

⁶ URN: the unique reference number assigned to each social care provider on successful registration.

⁷ Ofsted's arrangements for data collection and storage of data can be found in the Statement of administrative sources here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>

Strengths of the data are:

1. Robust LA data sources: LA systems should be quite robust, in terms of recording, storing and reporting on children looked after, as a result of systems being designed to meet the requirements of the long standing statutory DfE data collection.^{8, 9} Ofsted is in regular contact with the DfE about its data collections and definitions and seeks to work in partnership to improve the data that LAs supply to the DfE, and with LAs about the data that they supply, and to improve the knowledge of all involved.

2. Robust QA of the data by Ofsted: The data received by Ofsted from LAs will have already passed the DfE's validation checks as part of the statutory return. Ofsted also completes further QA, with particular reference to the data unique to the Ofsted collection, such as URNs. The QA tools, processes and outcomes are described in the introduction to the main report, and elsewhere in this quality report.

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 100%.

2. Recording of URNs is not yet well established: Ofsted takes several actions to mitigate this, including providing resources via secure website to assist data suppliers to identify the correct unique reference number. 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 or verifying provider details.

The badging of the experimental statistics has been removed because the QA processes were able to validate 100% of records that were submitted. The main report includes some details of how this was done and the impact of changes on the data.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis, which reflects the annual collection of data. The frequency of the release has not changed, however, where possible, supplementary data are also published to improve the accessibility to, and usefulness of, the data.

Data are published on the date pre-announced in the publication schedule [here](#). 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

⁸ Additional information about the arrangements the DfE has in place to collect and store these data can be found in the Statement of administrative sources and accompanying annex. DfE statement of administrative sources:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-official-statistics-published-by-the-department-for-education

⁹ Further information about the DfE collection and validation rules can be found in the DfE statutory 903 collection guidance: www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2015-to-2016-guide

necessary to properly quality assure the data to ensure its robustness. Publications are announced on the Ofsted's Twitter page and social media channels.

The average timescale for production of the children looked after placement data release is approximately seven months. This includes approximately four months for the collection and QA of the data. 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](#).

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.

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 children looked after placements and for re-use by analysts and researchers (as may be required).

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 template. For instance, the data worksheet is designed to closely mirror the data fields as collected by the DfE. Also the enclosed guidance and validation in the Ofsted template are written in order to be easy to follow and complete.

Ofsted is committed to partnership working and sharing data that can be used for multiple purposes. A substantial development has been agreed with the DfE to introduce Ofsted URNs into the statutory 903 data collection from LAs.¹⁰ This means that it is unlikely that a separate Ofsted collection of children looked after placement data will be required from 2016 onwards; subject to a review of the robustness of the 903 submissions to meet Ofsted's data requirements. The potential to cease collection would result in further reduction of burden to LAs, the data suppliers.

¹⁰ DfE statutory 903 collection guidance: www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2015-to-2016-guide

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](#). All staff using sensitive data have been trained in confidentiality and disclosure awareness.

For the children looked after placement data, no child level data or individual provider level data are published by Ofsted. The Statistical First Release reports on data at national, regional and provider type levels.

Children looked after data are held in Excel, stored securely in system folders. The collated dataset is also Excel format. Access to the restricted system folders is only available to members of the Social Care Data & Analysis Team who are directly involved in the data collection or production of Official Statistics.

Local authorities are responsible for submitting data in accordance with their own data protection policies. Ofsted offers secure options for these data to be submitted, including password protection of workbooks and secure email systems.

Methodology

The data in the children looked after placement data release are taken from returns made to Ofsted by LAs in England. The data relates to a snapshot picture of placements as at the 31 March.

The collection is a voluntary survey, which receives a very high response rate. The deadline for submissions is usually 31 July. Following a period for amendments, and any agreed extensions, a cut-off date is set. Following the cut-off date, the data are taken as they stand; with no imputation or estimation for the purposes of the statistical release.

The compiling of the data involves the use of VBA programming to combine the individual returns into a complete dataset in Excel. All data submitted by LAs is incorporated into the complete dataset. In rare instances, particular records may be deemed unusable and excluded from the analysis. The impact of excluding any records is negligible, because, as detailed in accuracy and reliability above, the QA processes pick up any errors, investigate and resolve these, prior to the cut-off and compiling of the complete dataset. If a small number of records were excluded, this would be noted in the relevant Statistical First Release.

Data processing involves aggregating numbers of children and placements up to highest level categories, such as national, regional or placement type level. The data processing includes some calculations in preparation for the analysis. Calculations include: the use of averages for age variables and subtraction of date variables (for instance, to derive duration).

Definitions are provided in the Statistical First Release, for instance the glossary includes a list of the provision types and describes what each provision type offers.

Data is not rounded or suppressed in the commentary, but it will be rounded and suppressed in underlying data.

Attached to this quality report are annexes providing further information:

- Annex 1 is list of data items collected by Ofsted
- Annex 2 is a key to placement codes as used in the DfE 903 data
- Annex 3 details how Ofsted has combined some DfE codes to provider aggregated data for the purposes of this release.

Annex 1

The following two tables set out all data items which are collected by Ofsted, from all local authorities in England.

Ofsted inspected providers

Child ID
Gender
Date of birth
Ethnicity
Placement Code
Placement Provider Code
Ofsted URN (where available)
Establishment name, where applicable
Establishment address
Establishment postcode
Placement postcode
Placement start date
LA Notes/Comments (if required)

Ofsted inspected providers

Child ID
Gender
Date of birth
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LA Notes/Comments (if required)

Annex 2

Placement codes

The children looked after placement data collection requested data on children's placements that, for the most part, had already been validated as part of the process to submit the 903 returns to the DfE. This DfE return requires local authorities to submit details of the placements where their children are, using placement codes.

The full list of DfE placement codes and their meanings is as follows:

Placement codes:	
A3	Placed for adoption with parental/guardian consent with current foster carer
A4	Placed for adoption with parental/guardian consent not with current foster carer
A5	Placed for adoption with placement order with current foster carer
A6	Placed for adoption with placement order not with current foster carer
H5	Residential accommodation not subject to Children's Homes Regulations
K1	Secure Unit
K2	Children's Homes
M1	In Refuge (Section 51 of Children Act)
M2	Whereabouts known (not in Refuge)
M3	Whereabouts unknown
P1	Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility
P2	Independent living
P3	Residential employment
Q1	Foster placement with relative or friend
Q2	Placement with other foster carer
R1	Residential Care Home
R2	NHS/Health Trust or other establishment providing medical or nursing care
R3	Family Centre or Mother and Baby Unit
R5	Young Offender Institution or prison
S1	All Residential schools, except where dual-registered as a school and Children's Home.
T0	All types of temporary move
T1	Temporary periods in hospital
T2	Temporary absences of the child on holiday
T3	Temporary accommodation whilst normal foster carer is on holiday
T4	Temporary accommodation of seven days or less, for any reason, not covered by codes T1 to T3
Z1	Other placements

Placement provider codes	
PR0	Parents or other person with parental responsibility
PR1	Own provision (by the Local Authority)
PR2	Other Local Authority provision
PR3	Other public provision (e.g. by a PCT etc.)
PR4	Private provision
PR5	Voluntary/third sector provision

Placement location codes	
IN	Inside local authority boundary
OUT	Outside local authority boundary

Annex 3

Aggregated placement codes

For the purposes of this release, Ofsted have aggregated some of the codes so that they are grouped with similar placements, for example all the adoption placement codes are grouped together. This helps increase the number of children in a particular type of placement and therefore the robustness of the data. The following aggregations of placement types have been used:

Ofsted description used in the SFR	Aggregated placement codes
Foster placement	Q1 - Q2
Children's Home	K2
Placed for adoption	A3 - A6
Placed with parents	P1
Independent living and residential accommodation	P2 and H5
Secure unit, Young offender institution or prison	R5 and K1
Residential schools not registered as children's homes	S1
Other placements	M1 - M3, P3, R1 - R3, Z1