



# Children looked after statistics: report on user need for a comparable data subset or common set of indicators across the United Kingdom

## Background

The UK Statistics Authority assessed the statistics on looked after children produced by each of the UK administrations in 2013. A requirement of continuing designation as National Statistics was that the Department for Education (DfE), the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) should investigate user needs for a comparable data subset or a common set of indicators, and – should a user need exist – explore how such needs might be met. The full assessment report (number 265) can be found on the [UK Statistics Authority website](#).

This note describes the findings from the informal consultation of user needs undertaken by each administration and the conclusions.

## Consultation of users

Across the UK, approximately 505 users of the data were consulted. This included researchers, academics, local authorities, central government, charity organisations, non-departmental public bodies and others who had, at some point, registered an interest in children looked after statistics. Of these, 36 responses were received, representing a 7% response rate. The DfE, Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland DHSSPS undertook the consultation via e-mail, and the consultation was open for a period of 2.5 to 4 weeks (varying by administration). The Welsh Government carried out the consultation of users by discussing the topic at a health and social services user consultation event.

## Findings

14 respondents were in favour of either a comparable dataset or a common set of UK-wide indicators, and 22 did not feel it would be useful to them. From those respondents who supported a comparable dataset or common set of indicators, there were a wide range of views:

- a common set of measures for the UK would be beneficial to enable international comparisons to be made
- consistent definitions across the 4 nations would be required
- comparisons which could be interpreted in the context of local legislation and policies would be most beneficial
- difficulties in compiling a UK-wide subset of indicators, given that each country currently publishes their data separately, at different times of year and not all for the same time period, were recognised

- concerns over a comparable dataset due to the diversity in operational practices in children's services across the different countries, which might not be understood/recognised by all users

A range of different measures were suggested, including number of looked after children at a census point, number of children and reason for entry into care, and placement.

More detailed information on the consultation responses and a consideration of how the needs can be met, is provided at annex A.

In the user consultation by the Welsh Government, there was little interest expressed by the attendees from health and social care organisations in detailed intra-UK data and there was more interest in small area geographical comparisons.

## Conclusions

Some information is already available on children looked after across the UK. A review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom is published at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2014/140523-review-comparability-statistics-children-looked-after-local-authorities-en.pdf>.

This describes the comparability of the statistics collected and published by each administration. A table showing statistics from each country, including numbers looked after at 31 March by placement type and numbers starting and ceasing to be looked after in the latest year, is also attached as Annex B of the document. The presentation of the data within the document ensures the user is able to view the statistics in the context of the legislative and methodological differences that exist across the administrations.

Additionally, in the "Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland" and the "Children's Social Services Statistics, Northern Ireland" publications, broad cross-UK comparisons on rates of looked after children are presented. Similarly, broad comparative population rates for the numbers of looked after children and some outcome measures are available for Wales and England and these are used as general contextual information.

Amongst those in favour of UK statistics in the consultation, there was little agreement on what additional measures would be helpful, or where there was some level of agreement, the information is not always available for all the UK nations (e.g. category of need), and would require significant additional burden to produce it. Details of individual responses collected by correspondence are shown at Annex A. One or two participants in the Welsh Government's health and social services user consultation event expressed the view that overall comparisons might be interesting if available, but this was not regarded as a priority area.

Therefore, without a specific and widespread user interest in extending these comparisons to all UK countries and greater levels of detail it was judged that there was no justification for devoting further resources to this aspect of the statistics on looked after children in comparison to other areas of development. Whilst there are no current plans to progress work in this area, the statistical teams of the 4 nations meet quarterly and also support a cross-cutting health and social care statistics theme group, so will review this topic if there is a sustained level of expressions of user interest or requests for data in the future.

Users who are interested in UK-wide comparisons more generally may find the UK statistics data catalogue useful. This is published by the Office for National Statistics and is a compendium of UK indicators, of which 'Children in the Care System' is one. It notes the data is "Partially Comparable. The number of looked after children is not directly comparable across the four countries of the UK. Whilst information is gathered and published by each country this is done to slightly different definitions of what constitutes 'looked after' by the Local Authority, and the point in the calendar when the data collection takes place." Further information, including a range of other UK indicators is available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/compendiums/compendium-of-uk-statistics/social-indicators/data-catalogue/index.html>.

## Contacts

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 and is available here: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2014/140523-review-comparability-statistics-children-looked-after-local-authorities-en.pdf>.

If you have any further queries relating to the statistics published on children looked after, or wish to discuss what is currently available and the different sources of data, please contact one of the following:

- Department for Education (for England) CLA data team: [cla.stats@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:cla.stats@education.gsi.gov.uk)
- The Scottish Government's Children & Families Statistics team: [Childrens.statistics@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Childrens.statistics@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)
- The Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services: [stats.pss@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:stats.pss@wales.gsi.gov.uk)
- The Northern Ireland Executive's Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: [cib@dhsspsni.gov.uk](mailto:cib@dhsspsni.gov.uk)

## Summary table of consultation responses received via correspondence

The table below provides details of the positive responses received i.e. those where the user felt that UK statistics on children looked after would be useful, and where the respondent provided information on why the information would be useful to them and suggestions for what would be the most useful. Some other respondents provided more general responses noting that they could see some benefit in either a comparable data and/or UK-wide data but with little information on the exact usage that would be made of such data, or the specific statistics that would be of most use.

**Respondent 1 summary:** Respondent listed a range of comparable national and UK statistics that would be helpful.

**Detailed feedback:** “A range of UK-wide data would be helpful as well as comparable data for the 4 nations”. The respondent expressed an interest in “statistics on looked after children and adoption in the separate statistics for each of the 4 countries, which can be interpreted in the context of local legislation and policies, and also in comparing and compiling the statistics from the 4 countries. This helps to inform our policy and campaign work, and helps us to provide accurate information to the media and in response to the many enquiries we receive each day, which are often in relation to the UK-wide picture” The information they would be particularly interested in is:

- Number of Children Looked After
- Placements of Children Looked After
- Numbers of Children Entering Care
- Numbers of Children Leaving Care
- Reasons for Entering Care
- Length of Time in Care
- Adoptions from Care
- Ages and average age of Children Adopted From Care
- Foster Carer Adoptions
- Waiting Times for Adoption
- Legal Status and Gender of Adopters
- Number of Approved Adopters and Foster Families/Places

**Conclusion:** The first 4 on this list are already available in the document “A review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom”. In relation to the other areas, some can be generated from the separate statistical publications, (although users will need to be mindful of the differences in definitions and timing). Others, such as reasons for entering care, are not collected by all administrations and given there is little agreement amongst users for which measures would be the most useful, it is not judged a good use of resource for these to form the basis of changes to data collection, or for comparable measures to be produced centrally.

**Respondent 2 summary:** comparable data would be helpful, including for example, on length and type of placement, and outcomes.

**Detailed feedback:** “...given the concerns about the outcomes of children looked after across all Nations in the UK, we agree that comparative statistics would be extremely valuable. It would

facilitate not only a national picture of looking after children, but would also allow comparisons to be made between the different approaches, systems and practices. It may be possible to develop an understanding of best practice from different nations, which may be used to inform future planning and commissioning across the UK”...”we anticipate that it should be possible to undertake a comparative analysis of a child’s journey through the care system (including placement patterns and placement stability) without substantive additional work being required. We know that the key differences between the data sets are the data collected on outcomes. If these data were made comparable, further learning could be gained.”

Conclusion: Statistics on numbers of children looked after at 31 March by placement type for each of the 4 nations has been presented in “A review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom”. Consistent data is not currently published by each of the 4 nations on the duration of period of care but, depending on specific requirements, further information could be made available on request from the individual administrations.

Respondent 3 Summary: The respondent suggested a number of specific data items that would be helpful.

Detailed feedback: I would be very keen to see data presented for all UK countries. I would like to see:

- a) number (and rate/child population) of first entries in each calendar year
- b) prevalence of children in care at census point each year
- c) total child days in care during the previous 12 months (mean and se) for children in care at census date
- d) ‘ideally’ age specific cumulative incidence of first entry into care by calendar year of birth ( I realise none of providers produce these figures yet)

All above should be given

- For age groups
  - <1 y
  - 1-4
  - 5-9
  - 10-13
  - 14-17
  - 18+
- All above analyses (a-d) and age groups should be given:
- By reason (respite care, child protection, other)
- By reason x type (foster, residential , accommodated, other)
- By above age groups - for children in care at census (in previous year) outcome should be given (stratified by respite , child protection and other at previous year census) based on status at subsequent annual census of :
  - Adopted
  - Reunified
  - Re-entered care after reunified
  - independent living

- remained in care no change of placement
- remained in care 1 change of placement
- remained in care 2 or more changes in placement
- other

Conclusion: Numbers of children looked after at a census point, and numbers of entries into care are published in the 'Review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom'. Rates of entry to care, and days in care in the previous year are not published by all the administrations but could be made available on request where it is available. However, some of the remaining suggestions are more detailed analyses, some of which is not published by any of the individual countries at present, and not requested by other users. Where available, it could be provided by the individual UK countries but it was felt that there was no justification for devoting further resources to producing UK wide estimates for these specific requests.

Respondent 4 summary: Expressed concerns about the presentation of data from the different nations given the different policies and practices in each, and suggested that any analysis should include a range of contextual data about the children starting to be looked after and their needs, rather than just looking at the end user placement.

Detailed feedback: "The use of residential options for young people and the operation of children's services is so diverse among the 4 nations that you would be comparing 4 different approaches"...."There is every danger that this nuance will be lost especially by the media if comparable data is published."..."If this is to be done then there needs to be a radical review of the data collected. It could assist if it looked at data such as age of entry, length of stay, numbers of previous placements, SDQ and DAWBA scores on entry and on leaving. In such a way the analysis is then system wide rather than a focus on 'end user placements' which show the correlation of system wide failure but cannot be extrapolated. It is needs led data that is required to be collated in one format to reveal accurate evidence and to provide for scrutiny to policy and practice"

Conclusion: This raises a useful point about the risks of presenting any 'output' or 'performance' measures for each nation (e.g. outcome measures for looked after children) without presenting full contextual information around the practices and policies in the different administrations, and the methodological differences in producing the statistics.

Respondent 5 summary: Requested a wide-range of comparable statistics for England, Wales and Scotland for children looked after, presented by various equality groups.

Detailed feedback: "The three specific areas for which data are required are:

- statistics on children in need and looked after children placed in care due to abuse or neglect in England and Wales or due to a Child protection Measure in Scotland,
- statistics on health and dental checks and immunisations, substance misuse and SDQ scores for looked after children
- statistics on educational level or qualifications of looked after children.

In each of these areas we are looking for comparable data for England, Scotland and Wales and, for the comparison of equality groups, breakdowns by age, gender and/or other equality characteristics such as ethnic group and disability."

Conclusion:

Whilst some of this information is available for some nations, it is not currently published for all of the individual administrations at the level of detail required. Where available, it would require further analysis to provide the specific breakdowns requested - this might be possible on request. However, data on the disability of children looked after is not currently collected in England and Wales.

Respondent 8 summary: Identifies a number of specific areas where comparable data would be helpful.

Detailed feedback: We are.. “interested in the comparability of this and we have been grappling with some of the nuances and difficulties of comparing disparate sources.

Key Gaps:

- Category of need: England and Wales currently make data available on this.....yet this data is not available for Northern Ireland or Scotland
- Disability status: none of the nations in the UK publishes formal data on how many looked after children are disabled
- Ethnic group: Northern Ireland is the only nation in the UK that does not publish a category of ethnicity amongst the LAC population
- Short term placements: Northern Ireland is the only nation to include LAC in short term placements in the population statistics.
- Children starting and ceasing to be looked after: England and Wales only captures the first time a child is taken into or leaving care, whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland include all episodes. In addition Northern Ireland does not record destination on discharge or reason for discharge.”

Conclusion: Information on category of need of children looked after is not currently collected in Northern Ireland or Scotland. Disability information is not collected in England or Wales. Therefore to produce this information would require a significant investment of resource. The ethnicity of looked after children is collected and published for Northern Ireland and more detailed information is available on request. In relation to the fourth bullet, looked after children figures in Northern Ireland includes all children looked after by the HSC Trusts for 24 hours or longer, however excludes those looked after solely by virtue of respite arrangements. In relation to the final bullet, it may be possible to produce information on request in relation to all children starting and ceasing to be looked after in the year in England and Wales. The final request has been addressed- in 2014 Northern Ireland published figures on the destination of those leaving care.