

Fostering data

Methodology and Quality Report

Last updated: 12 May 2015

Introduction

This paper contains quality information relevant to Ofsted's annual release of fostering data collected from Local Authorities (LAs) and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), covering all fostering provision in England.

This release can be found at the following webpage:
www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics under the heading 'Fostering'.

The annual release of fostering data in England covers the period between 1 April and 31 March. It includes data relating to foster carers and fostered children.

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 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.

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

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

² The 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.

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. 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 statistics are published as an annual dataset. 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 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 valuable.

Assessment of user needs and perceptions

The content of the survey and accompanying guidance are reviewed annually, by the data and policy teams, to develop the collection and 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 February 2014, Ofsted carried out a review of the survey in conjunction with a selection of data suppliers and stakeholders. A proposed draft of the survey template was circulated and the feedback informed some required amendments that were made for the 2013-14 collection.

A further consultation is planned with data suppliers and stakeholders. The consultation will take place in May 2015, with the outcomes feeding into the 2015-16 collection; due to be launched in June 2015.

Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team are represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs, organised by the ADCS, and at stakeholder group meetings where relevant. 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.

The data form includes definitions, to help clarify what is being requested, and calculation methods. The definitions in the form can be found in two places: there is a

separate worksheet, called 'glossary', listing all definitions; alternatively, within the data collection worksheet, any questions that have supporting definitions are indicated by a help icon (◆). Additional guidance has also been circulated in the form of frequently asked questions.

Data suppliers are also encouraged to contact the Social Care Data & Analysis Team, if they have any queries that are not covered in the glossary definitions and supporting guidance. The team can be contacted by phone or email: 0300 013 0020 and socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk

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

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, some areas are not comparable over time. 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 for the last three collections (2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14). An exercise was conducted to review the impact of the changing response rates and it found minimal impact, therefore it was not deemed necessary to use any estimation or imputation.

Data are presented at England level and then sub-divided by sector (LA/ IFA). Comparisons may be adversely affected by different reporting practices across data suppliers.

The annual collections give data at consistent intervals. It includes snapshot data as at the 31 March or periodical data for 12 months between 1 April and 31 March. A rare exception would be if a new piece of legislation came into effect mid-way through the financial year.

Accuracy and reliability

The release does not use, currently, any imputation or other statistical techniques and data are not used to make any estimates about the population or other geographical areas.

The data are subject to a rigorous quality assurance (QA) process, both by data suppliers and also by Ofsted. Validation rules within the template, and the accompanying guidance, assists data suppliers with checking the data prior to submission. Each individual form is checked by Ofsted for completeness, accuracy and consistency. The QA process also involves further checks at national and provider level. England and sector totals are reviewed for any unexplained changes in trends. Provider level data, for a sample of indicators, is checked for spread and variation to check for skews and outliers.

The data are sourced from a survey of over 500 providers. Data are therefore subject to the effectiveness of the systems holding the data and the knowledge/skills of the people supplying the data. Where discrepancies or outliers are identified through Ofsted checks, these are followed up with the data suppliers to check and confirm accuracy.

The data are submitted in Excel workbooks and stored securely in system folders. The collated dataset is also Excel format. No databases are used for the production of these statistics.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis; in line with the period covered by the 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: 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.

The average timescale for production of the fostering 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.

Publications are announced on Ofsted's website, Twitter page and social media channels.

Pre-release is given in accordance with the pre-release access to Official Statistics Order (2008).

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 the fostering sector 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 clarity of questions and definitions. Some work was done in 2011, for the 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.

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 local authorities. A review of the data requirements, and new available sources, may derive considerable benefits for the fostering data collection, including reduction in burden to respondents.

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. Further information is provided in the methodology section below.

All data releases follow Ofsted's confidentiality and revisions policies which can be found in these locations: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics and www.gov.uk/government/publications/handling-and-retention-of-ofsted-inspection-evidence

Methodology

The data in the fostering data release are taken from returns made to Ofsted by LA and IFAs. Most of the data relate to an annual period between 1 April and 31 March.

For data protection and disclosure purposes, figures in the fostering release have been rounded up to multiples of five (i.e. there are no figures which have been rounded down to the nearest five). The purpose of the rounding is to ensure non-disclosure of sensitive data while maintaining its usefulness. Totals have been rounded up to 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. Figures less than five are suppressed and secondary level suppression is used where required.

For more information on how Ofsted regulates and inspects independent fostering services, 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