

Children looked after data in England

Methodology and Quality Report

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Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) annual release of children looked after data. 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:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>.

The statistical first release (SFR) contains data which are sourced from Local Authorities (LAs) in England. The release includes data about placement providers, and children looked after.

The data includes:

- Local authority (LA) placement providers
- Private and voluntary placement providers
- Children looked after as at 31 March 2015

In terms of the period covered by the release, the annual release of children looked after data in England provides a snapshot of the data as at 31 March 2015.

The statistical release is published as a full version annually and contains final data.

Ofsted publish a number of official statistics covering children's social care, including fostering, adoption and children looked after placements. These releases can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>.

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

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

For more information on how Ofsted regulates and inspects children's social care providers, please go to the gov.uk website: <https://www.gov.uk/topic/schools-colleges-childrens-services/inspections>

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 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 uses it 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 Ofsted 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. Users are able to interpret and manipulate the data published for their own purposes, as the release includes underlying data.

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 the placing of, and the commissioning for places for, children looked after.

Some of the data about children looked after in England is unique to Ofsted; alternative sources are not available. For instance, data about the capacity of services in England, as well as some other indicators, are only collected by Ofsted. These data are widely viewed as a valuable source for information about capacity, and for providing an in depth overall picture of children looked after in England.

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

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

Some data are also published by other sources, such as the Department for Education (DfE).⁴

Meeting user needs

The presentation of underlying data for this release has recently been reviewed and expanded by Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team, who produce the social care Official Statistics, in agreement with the Social Care Policy Team. This was done in order to allow greater usability of the data, as well as enabling better comparability of similar data within the same dataset. The major changes are the release of more data than in previous years, including trend data, and to the grouping of data: all data at England and sector level, including trends over the past three years, are now presented in a single table. Data are also provided for the current year at local authority level.

The content of the collection and accompanying guidance are reviewed annually, by the Social Care Data and Social Care Policy teams, to develop the collection, and senior managers then sign off any changes that are required. This review process ensures that the collection will meet the data requirements for inspections and takes into account any policy changes or emerging issues.

Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team is represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs. These regional meetings are organised by the ADCS. Ofsted has presented relevant information and publications to all of the existing regional groups, and sought feedback about whether its publications meet user needs. Ofsted's participation in these groups helps inform about user views on Ofsted's social care official statistics, and suggested improvements are taken on board. Additional workshops have been attended to assist data suppliers and stakeholders to understand the data that are being asked for and how they can be used. Ofsted inspectors attend annual conferences which include sessions on the data that are collected and how the collection can inform inspection preparation.

Social care outputs are also shared with users in other organisations, such as the DfE, LAs, and representatives from the private and voluntary sectors at Ofsted-led stakeholder meetings. These organisations use the data for a range of purposes including informing their own social care outputs (DfE) and benchmarking performance (LAs).

The collection template includes definitions, to help clarify what is being requested, and calculation methods. 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 guidance on its completion, are sent directly to data suppliers (LAs) and are not published due to the sensitive nature of

⁴ For example, "Children Looked After in England" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>)

the data being collected. However, a copy of the guidance notes is available for reference here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-placements-as-at-31-march-2015>. The Social Care Data and Analysis team also offers help and guidance to agencies via email and the telephone as well.

The contact details for the Social Care Data and Analysis team are included in the releases and users are encouraged to feedback about any unmet needs, ask questions that are not covered in the glossary definitions and supporting guidance, or feedback improvements that can be made.

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: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141124154759/http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/report-responses-2012-consultation-of-ofsted-official-statistics> (now archived)

More information about Ofsted's Engagement policy and Confidentiality & Access policy, as well as Ofsted's Statement of Administrative Sources can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>. Ofsted also operates under more detailed internal engagement guidance.

Coherence and comparability

Ofsted has reported on children's social care data in England since 31 March 2011. Over time, the data collection has been developed and improved, and in 2012, work was undertaken to ensure the collection was robust and comprehensive; as a result of this work, it was concluded that data collected prior to 2013 was not comparable to data collected from 2013 onwards and so has not been included in the analysis. An enhanced collection was launched annually since 2013; however, as the survey is reviewed and questions are amended or added, some areas are not comparable over time.

Reasons for these changes include:

- In response to data supplier feedback; for example, questions relating to age were replaced with requests for date of birth, as this is also collected in the DfE SSDA903 collection, and does not require calculation.
- Data on gender and ethnicity were collected for the first time in 2014.

The data supplied by local authorities are augmented with data items sourced from the Office for National Statistics and matched to the placement postcode, including deprivation, level of crime, and rural/urban status. Over time, small amendments have also been made to this, including:

- To reflect changes; for example, the Department for Communities and Local Government recalculated the indices of deprivation from 2014 to 2015.

- To improve comparability; for example, deprivation and crime were given in quartiles from 2014 onwards, to allow comparability with other similar data sets.

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 three snapshots to illustrate some changes over time. Where it is not directly possible to compare data over time, notes are given in the release to alert users.

From 2012-13 onwards, the response rate for this collection has been 100%, with all 152 local authorities submitting a return. 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. Therefore, it was not deemed necessary to use any estimation or imputation. Data comparisons are therefore made for these three years.

Where appropriate, comparable data collected by the DfE or the Office for National Statistics are referenced.⁵ For example, the numbers of children of different ethnicity groups are compared against the DfE's annual report on looked after children, and the ONS census statistics.

Data are presented at England level and then sub-divided by sector (LA/non-LA). Although other regions in the UK do collect and publish data on children looked after, there is limited comparability between this and the data included in this release, and so it has not been included in the report. The table below gives a breakdown of what comparable data are available.^{6,7,8} Comparable data for other countries, including via the EuroStat database, are not available.

⁵ For example, the DfE's annual collection on Children Looked After in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>), and the ONS' publication of data from the 2011 census (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/index.html>).

⁶ Data on children looked after in Scotland: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/PubChildrenSocialWork>

⁷ Data on children looked after in Wales: <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After>

⁸ Data on children looked after in Northern Ireland: <https://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/articles/children-need>

	Percentage of CLA			
	England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland*
Age:				
Under 5	20	23	24	32
5-15 years	58	60	57	53
16+ years	22	17	18	15
Gender:				
Male	55	54	52	53
Female	45	46	48	47
Placement type:				
Foster placement	75	76	76	62
Children's home	9	4	7	4
Placed with parents	5	10	12	27
Placed for adoption	5	5	~	1
Ethnicity:				
White	77	91	~	~
Minority ethnicity	22	6	~	~

* Scotland data are as at 31 March 2014. For Scotland, age calculations are based on children who started or ceased to be looked after within 2013-14; gender is based on those who cease to be looked after; all others include all children looked after.

The annual collection gives data at consistent intervals of snapshot data as at the 31 March.

Accuracy and reliability

All local authorities are asked to complete this return on a voluntary basis. There was a 100% response rate for 2013, 2014 and 2015; 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 are sourced from the LA's administrative systems, and therefore the data returned by each LA reflect all looked after children that they are responsible for on 31 March in the most recent year. Ofsted recognises, however, that the data are 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. Ofsted also engages with data suppliers in conversation via

email and telephone to clarify any queries or errors in the data and resolve these to the most accurate data the agency can supply; for some data suppliers with a larger number of issues, or who are new to completing the return, these conversations can be detailed and lengthy. The validation checks built into the template provide support to LAs around resolving errors; for example, inconsistencies between unique reference numbers (URNs) and provider types.⁹ QA by Ofsted also includes checks that data are on the correct tab (Ofsted/non-Ofsted registered), confirmation of border postcodes (to Wales/Scotland), completion of missing URNs, checks on dates including date of birth and placement start date, etc.

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 securely in Excel workbooks and stored securely in system folders which are only accessible to members of the Ofsted Social Care Data and Analysis team.¹⁰

The collated dataset is also Excel format. No databases are used for the production of these statistics.

The deadline for all agencies to submit a return is 31 July. Each individual form is checked by Ofsted for completeness, accuracy and consistency. Where discrepancies are identified through Ofsted checks, these are followed up with the data suppliers via telephone and email to check and confirm accuracy, until the final deadline for revisions (17 November).

Quality assurance checks are also carried out on the combined dataset, the analysis, and the key findings, along with any supplementary statistics that are published. Where applicable, data are considered against the DfE data on Children Looked After.

Strengths of the data are:

1. High response rates with all data provided: response rates for the last three years have been 100%.
2. Links to DfE SSSA903 return: this return builds on data submitted to the DfE which would have been checked by authorities prior to submission, and therefore starts from a basis of data quality.
3. Robust QA of the data by Ofsted: Ofsted completes detailed QA of all returns, which means a high level of confidence in the data presented. The QA tools,

⁹ URN: the unique reference number assigned to each social care provider on successful registration.

¹⁰ 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>

processes and outcomes are described in the introduction to the main report, and elsewhere in this quality report.

4. Data benchmarking: where applicable, data returned to Ofsted are benchmarked against data submitted to the DfE, and generally found to be in line with DfE data. Where there are differences, this is likely due to additional quality assurance work done with individual LAs, to ensure quality of data; or due to the LA making changes to their return after submission of similar data to the DfE.

5. Comprehensive snapshot of children looked after: due to high response rates, and the volume of data collected, as well as the inclusion of ONS and ownership data, the data provide a comprehensive picture of children looked after in England over the last three years.

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%. As the collection is voluntary, there is no legislation compelling local authorities to supply data, or to provide information on their own data quality. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has also not made use of his powers to compel reporting of these data.

2. Recording of Unique Reference Numbers (URNs) is not yet of a high standard: Recording of URNs has improved as this becomes more embedded, and with the inclusion of URNs in other datasets (e.g. children looked after data collected by the DfE going forward, adoption data collected by the Adoption Leadership Board). Ofsted takes several actions to mitigate the impact when URN recording is not yet of the highest standard, including providing resources via secure website to assist data suppliers to identify the correct unique reference number. Ofsted also uses the address and name fields to supply a URN when quality assuring data. 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 impact of this on reporting is minimal however, as data are not reported at agency (URN) level.

3. Rounding: data presented in the underlying tables are rounded to the nearest 5 (data under 5 are rounded up to 5) to protect confidentiality while enabling data to be shared. Some categories are also amalgamated or excluded for the same reasons.

4. Limited knowledge of data quality at LA level: although all data returns are extensively quality assured by Ofsted, we do not specifically collect information from LAs on how they ensure the accuracy of their own data. However, there is some information available via the DfE on the SSDA903 collection, which is likely to also apply to Ofsted's data collection, as the data for both is similar. In particular, there is information on the technical specifications and validations rules, along with a

guidance document for local authorities, all of which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/children-looked-after-return>. Additionally, steps are taken by Ofsted to mitigate the impact of this limited knowledge, including the use of QA, and the provision of guidance on completion of the form. As with provision of URNs, 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. We are aware that, by keeping our survey open beyond the deadline for the SSDA903 collection, LAs often supply to Ofsted more accurate data. We have worked in conjunction with the DfE and LAs to suggest improvements to the quality of the SSDA903 data collection. We have shown, for example, how data for children's homes can be miscoded as residential care homes.

The DfE also describes, in their own quality report for the SSDA903 statistical first release,¹¹ the number of records amended by LAs between years (p.5), and their own validation processes (p.6).

Potential sources of error and bias:

1. Quality of LAs' data: Ofsted has no direct knowledge of the LAs' data storage systems, or the checks and quality assurances they carry out on this, and currently is unable to explore this in any depth due to the time and resource needed. However, we perform extensive QA of data to minimise the impact of this; additionally, the data collected are broadly similar year-on-year and build on the SSDA903 return, so it is likely that LAs would have systems in place to collect and report on the required data. There has also been evidence of improvement over the years as a result of this data collection, some of which is described in the introduction to the main report.

2. Best fit requirements: there will always be situations which do not fit easily into the categories supplied, and in these cases, personal interpretation may mean that different data suppliers code similar situations in different ways. Ofsted aims to minimise this through use of guidance and support.

3. Local authorities' perceptions: LAs may perceive that the data will be used to form a judgement on their service, which could bias their return. Ofsted includes guidance on the purpose of the collection in an aim to reduce this concern.

4. Other considerations: all LAs are asked to, and do, submit data; therefore, there is no risk of sample or response bias in the data.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>

Data are published on the date pre-announced in the publication schedule here: 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 robustness. Publications are announced on Ofsted's Twitter page and social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for production of the children looked after placement data release is approximately seven months. This includes approximately three months for the collection of the data, and approximately the same period for QA of the data and follow-up with LAs. 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: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>.

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.

Data covering children's social care are held on a collections page on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics>

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). The underlying data presentation was amended to better support public use and re-use from 2015.

Rounding conventions in underlying data:

Absent data are shown by a '..'. Data may be absent because they have not been supplied or because they do not relate to that provider type i.e. there are no local authority run independent fostering agencies.

Not applicable (or unknown) data are shown by '~'.

For disclosure control purposes, all data have been rounded to the nearest five, aiding non-disclosure of sensitive data whilst maintaining the data's usefulness. In addition, any figures below five have been rounded to five. This means that some totals do not match exactly with secondary breakdowns. All row and column totals in bold font have been rounded: the data at England level, regional levels, and the data item totals.

Some categories in data items have also been amalgamated, to balance usefulness of data against non-disclosure of sensitive data.

Totals include all placed children, including those for whom the particular data item (e.g. gender, deprivation) is unknown, and so the sub-totals may not add up to the total. This also applies to England level data, which includes data items where the sector is unknown, and so may not match the sub-totals.

Although totals for England level, regional levels, and the data items have been presented unrounded in some previous years, for consistency, all totals are presented rounded in this dataset.

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. The collection template is also designed to closely mirror the data fields as used by the DfE.

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. The questionnaire was returned by 73 of the 152 LAs who completed the data forms (48%). These 73 respondents reported that they spent a total of 1,750 hours on the return, ranging from one to 112 hours. This equates to an average of 24 hours per agency; or around three working days. The majority of respondents (71%) reported that they found the guidance notes helpful. As discussed below, an agreement has been reached which will likely result in the discontinuation of this collection by Ofsted; however, should this not happen, Ofsted will continue to monitor these figures to ensure that the respondent burden is appropriate.

In order to reduce the burden on local authorities around producing these data, Ofsted and the DfE have reached an agreement to introduce Ofsted URNs into the statutory SSDA903 data collection from local authorities.¹² 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 SSDA903 submissions to meet Ofsted's data requirements. The potential to cease collection would result in further reduction of burden to LAs, the data suppliers.

Confidentiality, transparency and security

Where sensitive or personal data are held by Ofsted, the disclosure control processes we have in place ensure that these data are not published. All data releases follow Ofsted's confidentiality and revisions policies which can be found

¹² DfE statutory 903 collection guidance: www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2015-to-2016-guide

here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics>. 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.

Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating data to England and sector level. This processing is done using MS-SQL and MS-Excel, and is reviewed and quality assured before the data are used. No data have been removed prior to analysis; where data has been excluded, this is noted in the underlying data tables; for example, a comparison may be made only between those children whose ethnicity is known, excluding those for whom it is not known, in some areas of the report. Not all data have been included in the underlying data tables, particularly data around ownership which could be considered commercially sensitive.

Definitions are provided in the Statistical First Release; for instance, the glossary includes placement types and what these mean, as well as references to relevant legislation where applicable.

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 (where applicable)
Establishment postcode (where applicable)
Placement postcode (where applicable)
Placement start date
LA Notes/Comments (if required)

Non-Ofsted inspected providers:

Child ID
Gender
Date of birth
Ethnicity
Placement Code
Placement Provider Code
Establishment name (where applicable)
Establishment address
Establishment postcode
Placement postcode
Placement start date
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 used in this collection 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
P1	Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility
P2	Independent living
P3	Residential employment
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.
U1	Foster placement with relative or friend – long term fostering
U2	Fostering placement with relative or friend who is also an approved adopter
U3	Fostering placement with relative or friend who is not long-term
U4	Foster placement with other foster carer – long term fostering
U5	Foster placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter
U6	Foster placement with other foster carer – not long term
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

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	U1 – U6
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	P3, R1 - R3, Z1