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Fostering in England 2019 to 2020: main findings

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Summary

This national report:

- the numbers of foster carers and foster places and placements, in both local authority (LA) and independent fostering agencies (IFAs)
- data relating to types of foster care, registrations, de-registrations and approved foster carers
- the period between 31st March 2019 and 31st March 2020

Due to the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19), a small number of agencies did not submit data for the end of year data. Where this is the case, we have used previous years, though we have tried to estimate where possible, and are clear about this where we have not. We have also included some analysis, and Ofsted leaders and inspectors have used this to COVID-19.

Overall, net capacity increased in both number of households and places. However, this differs across the 2 sectors. Net capacity increased in IFAs, but decreased in LAs.

As at 31 March 2019, IFAs have seen a net increase in capacity as a result of 336 additional households and 993 additional places. In contrast, LAs have seen a slight decrease in capacity of 189 households and 396 places.

The number of filled fostering places has increased, while the number of vacant places decreased.

As at 31 March 2020, we estimate that there was a 3% increase in the number of filled fostering places, and 12% decrease in the number of vacant places.

The majority of foster carers in England are over the age of 50.

As at 31 March 2019, of the 71,150 approved foster carers, 61% were over 50 years old and 23% were over 60.

Younger carers have higher levels of occupancy than older carers.

As at 31 March 2020, carers aged 20 to 39 had 87% of available places with children in them, while those aged 60 to 69 had 71%. This suggests that it is more likely that there was a greater proportion of 'not available' places.

Around half of IFA fostering households are registered with agencies operating just 5 local authorities.

On 31 March 2020, there were 91,995 fostering households within the IFA sector. Around half of these (53,240) were registered with IFAs that are owned by 5 local authorities, and 38,755 with IFAs that are not. This proportion has therefore accounted for 19% of all LA households, and 18% of households nationally.

Introduction

This statistical release covers local authority (LA) fostering agencies and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) in England for the period 31st March 2019 to 31st March 2020. It includes data about foster carers, recruitment and capacity of providers. In the latest Department for Education (DfE) published data collection, SFR 41/2020, we have also included some analysis of the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on foster care. Please see Page 4 of this report.

This release uses data that agencies have returned to Ofsted and so may differ from other publications that use data from the DfE's annual children's services statistics collection. The statistical first release looking ahead and serve as a point of reference for all fostering agencies in the country.

Throughout this release, we have included comparisons between the latest 4 years before 2019 to 2020, where available.

We have used the 4 years of data to ensure trends are stable to submit data. We collected data from IFAs agencies (LA and IFAs), or 94% of all eligible providers. This is a high response rate for this data.

We estimate that at the end of the year (31st March), there were around 84,500 fostering households, in 43 agencies, with around 75,300 approved foster carers, and 84,000 places. This is a 3% increase in the number of filled places, and a 12% decrease in the number of vacant places. We estimate that there were around 127,000 initial enquiries from prospective fostering households, and around 14,000 fostering households, in 43 agencies, submitted applications to become foster carers, in the year to 31st March 2020.

The number of households and the number of approved foster carers increased in each year. We estimate that there were around 91,995 fostering places, a small increase in approved places. Capacity increased overall, with a 3% increase in filled places, and a 12% decrease in vacant places. Independent fostering agencies (IFAs) have increased their capacity, in contrast to local authorities (LAs), who have seen a slight decrease in capacity.

We estimate that there were a little more than 2 in 10 foster carers the number of foster carers fell by around 1,500, or 2%. The number of IFA carers grew by 2,000, or 4%, and the number of LA carers fell by 3,500, or 9%. The voluntary IFAs had the greatest increase in number of foster carers, with carers showed that most carers were over 50 and one quarter were over 60. This is the first time that we have reported on the ethnicity of foster carers.

The number of households and carers has remained similar as a long-term, the number of foster places has increased. This has resulted in a greater number of spaces at an older age that before, resulting in a growing unused cost proposition.

Fostering households

We estimate that there were around 84,500 fostering households at 31 March 2020, in 43 agencies. This is a 3% increase in the number of filled places, and 12,% and 14,% of all eligible agencies. As full submission had first provider, we estimate that the number of fostering households would have increased by around 1,000 to 2,000 in 2019 to 2020. The number of fostering households is at its highest since 2016.

The sector split of fostering households as at March 2020 remained similar to previous years, with 53,240 (63%) in local authority (LA) fostering agencies, and 38,755 (46%) in independent fostering agencies (IFAs). 19,000 households (24%), and 18,755 around 15,000 households (14%).

Figure 1: Proportion of all households by sector, as at 31 March 2020

Of the 43 LA households, 1,695 were newly approved during 2019 to 2020. In the IFA sector, 1,695 were newly approved during 2019 to 2020, and 1,695 approved households (23% of IFA eligible agencies).

As at 31 March 2020, the majority of fostering households had 2 carers. Single carer households accounted for more than one third (37%) of all households, the same proportion as in 2019.

Households by primary placement type

As at 31 March 2020, 3 primary placement types accounted for 97% of all fostering households. Foster carers for family and friends accounted for 24% of family and friends (FFN). Sole placement carers were a little less in size to carers providing foster to such other children.

The proportion of households with this primary placement type of 'sole placement' increased by 2 percentage points since 31 March 2019, whereas proportions of other primary placement types remained similar. The proportion of households with no primary placement type also remained the same.

Foster carers for family and friends accounted for 24% of all households, and 24% of all foster carers and contributed to 24% of newly approved LA households. All contributing to an overall 24% of all fostering households.

The other primary placement types (short breaks, emergency, parent and child, 'other') accounted for less than 5% of fostering households. Short breaks and 'other' accounted for less than 5% of fostering households in England.

Households offering a range of foster care

Along with a primary placement type, many households are approved to offer additional types of care. This enables households to provide different placement types dependent on the needs of the child.

As at 31 March 2020, 60% of fostering households offered multiple types of care, an increase of 2 percentage points from 31 March 2019. Of the 50,500 households in England, 30% were approved to provide 2 types of care, and 30% were approved to provide 3 types of care.

In line with previous years, the proportion of households approved for multiple types of care was much higher in the IFA sector (80%), compared to 43% for LAs. The core types (short breaks, emergency, parent and child, 'other' and 'not specified') were provided by 30% of LA households, and 50% of IFA households, compared to 24% of IFA fostering households in England.

Short breaks (SB) offered LA households were approved for only one type of care compared with a minority (13%) of IFA households.

Table 1: Number and percentage of households approved to offer each type of care (inclusive of other types of care) by sector, as at 31 March 2020

Type of care	Number of LA households	Percentage of LA households	Number of IFA households	Percentage of IFA households
SB (short breaks)	16,000	30%	6,375	16%
Emergency	16,000	30%	6,375	16%
Parent and child	16,000	30%	6,375	16%
Other	16,000	30%	6,375	16%
Not specified	16,000	30%	6,375	16%
Total	53,240	100%	38,755	100%

Percentages relate to the proportion of households offering each type of care. Households in LAs can offer multiple types of care, and therefore total more than 100%.

Foster carers for family and friends (FFN) accounted for 24% of all households, and 24% of all foster carers, and contributed to 24% of newly approved LA households. Foster carers for family and friends (FFN) accounted for 24% of all fostering households in England.

Foster carers for family and friends (FFN) accounted for 24% of all fostering households in England.

Foster carers

Approved foster carers

We estimate that the number of approved foster carers was around 75,300, a very similar figure to that from 2019 (75,150). This is based on the 41,700 foster carers who we have data for, substituted from the 94% of agencies that completed the return.

As in previous years, LA agencies continue to account for almost two-thirds of all foster carers, and around two-thirds (64% to 65%) of households.

The number of foster carers in the LA sector, though, decreased and those in the IFA sector increased.

Figure 2: Estimated number of foster carers by sector, as at 31 March 2020

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When looking at the number of carers per household, the majority of carers (approximately 2 in 3) are in 2 carer households. Single carer households, 37% of the carer population, but data after a disproportionate number of children, around 25% (24,500). This was more likely to happen in LA than IFAs.

Of the 71,150 approved foster carers, 11,580 (16%) were newly approved between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020. The same proportion as 2018 to 2019. Of these, 1,695 were in LA and 1,695 in IFA, the same proportion as 2018 to 2019.

Overall, for the 1,695 LA, there were data for, there were fewer LA carers in March 2020 than in March 2019. Of these IFAs, 165 saw an increase in the number of carers, and 165 saw a decrease. Overall, there was a net increase in the part of IFA carers.

While the ability of some IFA agencies, profile IFAs had a net gain of 530 and attuitive IFAs had a net loss of 150 carers.

Ethnicity

As at 31 March 2020, in line with previous years, most foster carers were White (90%). This is similar to the proportion of children in care (77%) in the 2019 and care of population (80%). The figure includes 2,305 foster carers who are mixed ethnicity, and 2,305 who are Asian, and 2,305 who are black and 2% of carers, the same as March 2019.

As with previous years, there was a greater proportion of foster carers from non-White ethnic groups in IFAs than in the LA sector. In IFAs, 20% were non-White ethnic groups, compared with 12% in LAs. The same as March 2019. In IFAs, 2,305 (6%) of foster carers were Asian, and 2,305 (6%) of foster carers also accounted for a slightly larger proportion of foster carers from non-White ethnic groups (7%) than in LAs (2%).

Foster carers from non-White ethnic groups, during 2019 to 2020, 70% were White and 15% were from mixed ethnic groups, and 10% were Asian, 2%. The remaining 4% were reported with their ethnicity marked as 'Not known'. The proportion of foster carers with an agnostic half of which are accounted for by black and Asian carers.

In the LA sector, 82% of newly approved carers were White, compared with 74% in IFAs. In line with previous years, IFAs accounted for a larger proportion of non-White ethnic groups (26%) than LAs (15%).

Figure 4: Ethnicity of foster carers by sector, as at 31 March 2020 and approved during 2019 to 2020

Of all foster carers approved at 31 March 2020, 2 in ten ethnicity of 'Not known'. As a result, the percentage relating to each ethnic group is very low.

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Age

For 2020, we collected the age of foster carers for the first time.

The largest group (61%) of foster carers were in their 50s. Almost one quarter (22%) were in their 60s and one quarter (23%) were over 60. Those over 60 (23%) are almost twice (61%) of carers aged 20 to 39 years (24%) and over 50 years (61%).

The age split across both the LA and IFA sectors is in line with the national split.

Figure 5: Age of foster carers by sector, as at 31 March 2020

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Figure 6: Age of foster carers by ethnicity and sector, as at 31 March 2020

Foster carers of ethnicity data was recorded as 'Not known' and is excluded from this chart.

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Age and number of carers in households

Single carers accounted for 18% of all foster carers, as at 31 March 2020. The proportion of single carers in the IFA sector (20%) was slightly higher than that with the national picture, with the majority of carers aged 50 and above. However, a greater proportion of single carers are aged over 50 (72%), compared to carers in the LA sector (69%).

Single carers aged 50 and above accounted for just 14% of all carers, but also offer 14% of all children placed.

Figure 8: Age of foster carers by number of carers in household, as at 31 March 2020

Download as the pdf file (adoption-data-v1-to-v4.pdf)

Age and type of carer

Family and friends carers are counted for 48% of LA households with carers aged 20 to 24, compared to 22% with carers aged 50 and above.

Across both sectors, households with younger foster carers were less likely to offer permanent care as the primary offer: 28% of households with foster carers aged 20 to 24, compared to 39% of households with foster carers aged 40 and above.

Age and approvals

Households approved with younger foster carers were more likely to be approved to look after a smaller number of children: Just over one third (37%) of households approved with foster carers aged 20 to 24 looked after two, compared to a quarter (25%) of households with foster carers aged 50 and above. This can be partially explained by the fact that younger carer households were more likely to be initially approved (25%) than older carer households (7%).

Age and status

Over 40% of the fostering places had children in them. The highest occupancy, though, tended to be with younger age groups of foster carers. This can be partially accounted for by the smaller household size seen in these younger age groups. Foster carers aged 20 to 24 had 0.7 children per household in Ofsted, while those aged 50 had 0.6. This, in turn, may be a factor in the fact that there was a greater proportion of 'not available' places for younger carers.

Table 3: Age of foster carers by occupancy of places

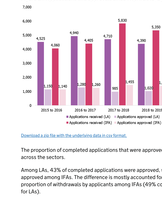
Age of foster carers	Number of fostered children	Number of available places	Number of vacant placements	Total
20 - 24	31	11	20	42
25 - 29	165	205	89	459
30 - 34	1,080	1,285	815	3,180
35 - 39	1,820	2,165	1,480	5,465
40 - 44	1,961	1,962	1,600	5,523
45 - 49	1,725	1,551	1,449	4,725
50 - 54	1,485	1,249	1,040	3,774
55 - 59	1,159	1,000	1,040	3,199
60 - 64	1,034	1,000	1,040	3,074
65 - 69	1,034	1,000	1,040	3,074
70 - 74	1,034	1,000	1,040	3,074

Figure 20: Applications received in 2019 to 2020, by status on 31 March 2020

This chart is not to scale.

Across the sectors, the conversion rate of applications received to applications approved was very similar. Around 1 in 4 applications were approved in both sectors. However, IFAs accounted for both more applications and approvals than LAs.

Figure 21: Applications and approvals since 1 April 2015, by sector



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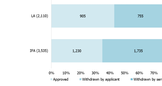
The proportion of completed applications that were approved, however, differs across the sectors.

Among LAs, 43% of completed applications were approved, while 35% were approved for IFAs. The difference is mostly accounted for by a higher proportion of withdrawals by applicants among IFAs (49% compared to 36% for LAs).

Figure 22: Outcomes of completed applications during 2019 to 2020, by sector



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Fostering agencies

We collected data for 2019 to 2020 from 138 LA fostering agencies and 272 independent fostering agencies.

There were 224 private IFAs and 48 voluntary IFAs.

Agency size

The largest single agencies are LA ones: Leeds (810 households and 1,290 carers) and Kent (680 households and 1,230 carers). The largest IFA, and third largest agency in the country overall, is 1 of the 5 national fostering agencies (600 households and 985 carers).

The 5 national fostering agencies, if their resources are added together, would form an agency with more households (1,265) and foster carers (2,150) than the very largest LAs. Meanwhile, the 3 smallest, single agencies are IFAs with 1 household and 2 carers each.

The large majority of IFAs are small. On average, LA agencies had 330 carers and the median was 265 carers. On average, IFAs had 95 and the median was 60. Private IFAs are, on average, larger than voluntary IFAs.

Table 5: Agencies, by sector and number of carers, at 31 March 2020

Agencies	0-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201-250	251-300	301-400	401-500	501-600	600+	Total
LA	0	0	5	40	35	20	20	10	5	15	140
IFA	120	50	50	10	5	5	5	0	0	0	270
Total	110	75	90	40	30	30	30	15	5	15	400

Numbers may not add up exactly due to rounding.

Independent agencies ownership

Although many IFAs are small, a number are nested within a larger company or organisation ownership. Some of these companies only own a few IFAs, but some own a considerably larger number.

Of the 272 IFAs that we have data for, 128 (or 47%) are owned by 21 larger companies or organisations. Seven of these large agencies organisations are voluntary non-profit and 14 are private companies.

Just over half (144 or 53%) of all IFAs were not owned by larger organisations or companies. These single IFAs account for 4,475 households and 7,555 carers in total, or around one third of non-LA non foster care.

The voluntary sector accounted for a small proportion of foster care. There were a total of 48 voluntary IFAs, with 1,600 households and 2,890 carers. This equated to around 4% of foster care capacity. The IFAs run by the 7 voluntary organisations make up over two thirds (71%) of all voluntary foster care. The Adoleasent and Children's Trust is the largest voluntary organisation with 370 households and 630 carers.

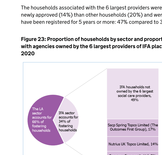
The private sector accounted for 135 IFAs, with 13,060 households and 22,965 carers. This equated to around 31% of all foster care capacity. The largest single IFA was 1 of the 21 agencies owned by Sacp Spring Topco Limited (The Outcomes First Group) and made up around 22% of that company's nearly 4,400 carers.

In July 2020, we published management information regarding the largest private and voluntary providers of children's social care in England, using data on the number of fostering places from 2019. We looked at companies (as listed on Companies House) that offered the most fostering placements through the IFAs they owned, with a capacity for more than 1,000 children.

As at 31 March 2020, of the 14,995 fostering households registered with IFAs, half (51%) were registered with IFAs owned by the 6 largest providers. The 7,650 households associated with these large providers accounted for 13,340 registered foster carers: 52% of all IFA carers and 10% of carers nationally. Similarly, the number of children placed within these households (10,035) made up 52% of all children placed in IFAs and 19% of all children placed in foster care nationally.

The households associated with the 6 largest providers were less likely to be newly approved (14%) than other households (20%) and were more likely to have been registered for 5 years or more: 47% compared to 36%.

Figure 23: Proportion of households by sector and proportion registered with agencies owned by the 6 largest providers of IFA places, as at 31 March 2020



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Safeguarding

Restraint

During 2019 to 2020, there were 990 reported incidents of physical restraint.

As with previous years, the IFA sector reported most incidents of physical restraint (79% of all instances). Some of the differences between sectors may be affected by variations in reporting processes between IFAs and LAs.

Allegations of abuse

During 2019 to 2020, there were 2,495 allegations of abuse made against foster carers.

Just under two thirds of allegations of abuse in 2019 to 2020 (1,580 or 63%) were made by fostered children against their foster carers, which is a similar proportion as 2018 to 2019 (65%). The other third came from other sources.

In the same way as previous years, more allegations (56%) were made in the LA sector, which is to be expected because more children are placed with LAs (64% of fitted places).

Physical abuse has continued to account for the largest number of allegations. In 2019 to 2020, 56% of all allegations were related to physical abuse, this percentage has remained very similar since 2014 to 2015.

Allegations of sexual abuse continue to be the least common, accounting for 8%. This is a slight increase from 2018 to 2019 (6%) but returns to the level seen in years before this.

Over half (58%) of all allegations resulted in an outcome of no further action, in line with the previous year. This outcome was more common for IFAs (67%) than for LAs (51%). A slightly lower proportion of allegations were subject to continued monitoring of foster carers (33%) than in previous years (17% in 2018 to 2019). A slightly higher proportion (28%) were referred on to the fostering panel for review compared with previous years (26% in 2018 to 2019). This outcome was more common for LAs (32%) than for IFAs (23%).

Figure 24: Outcomes of investigations into allegations of abuse in 2019 to 2020 split by sector

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Half of all investigations into allegations were resolved in less than 21 days. A quarter of allegations took more than 50 working days to conclude. On average, allegations were concluded more quickly in IFAs than in LAs. Of all allegations in IFAs, 59% were resolved in less than 21 days, compared with 46% in LAs.

Revisions to previous release

This is the first release of this data for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020

The Fostering in England 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 page also includes:

- data tables
- methodology
- pre-release access list

Contacts

If you are a member of the public and have any comments or feedback on this publication, contact Adam King adam.king@ofsted.gov.uk or the social care team socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk.

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If you have any comments or feedback on this publication, please contact Adam King on 03000 130020 or socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk

Glossary

Definitions of terms are within the statistical glossary.

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