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National statistics

Methodology report: children's social care in England 2021 to 2022

Published 7 July 2022

Applies to England

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Introduction

This page contains quality and methodology information relevant to Ofsted's annual release of children's social care data. This quality and methodology report should be read in conjunction with the background notes contained in the [statistical first release \(SFR\)](#), as those notes will include helpful information that is not in this report.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at the request of the Secretary of State, Ofsted suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020. However, during 2020 to 2021, we continued to carry out our regulatory work, including urgent inspection, which is detailed in the release. Routine inspections resumed during 2021 to 2022 (from 12 April 2021).

The SFR contains data that is sourced from Ofsted's register of social care providers in England and from inspections that we have carried out. It includes data about social care providers and places, and inspections and outcomes.

The inspection outcomes data relates to inspections of:

- local authority (LA) services for children who need help and protection, children in care and care leavers. We carry out the inspections of LA children's services under the inspections of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework

- children's homes
- other children's social care providers and residential accommodation for children

The providers and places data includes:

- children's social care providers, for which Ofsted has a regulatory and/or inspection responsibility
- providers of residential accommodation for children, including boarding schools and further education colleges, for which Ofsted has an inspection responsibility

In terms of the periods covered by the release, data on providers and places always reflects the situation on 31 March. Data on inspection outcomes, for all non-LA provision types, can either be viewed for an annual period (from 1 April to 31 March) or as the latest inspection as at 31 March. For LA inspections, the data in this release shows the picture as at 31 March 2022.

We publish this statistical release as a full version each year, with a supplemental release 5 months afterwards. The full version includes all provision types, as listed above, and contains final data. The supplemental release only includes data and tables relating to inspections of children's homes and LA children's services.

We publish a number of [official statistics covering children's social care, including fostering, adoption and children looked after placements](#).

We welcome feedback about our statistical releases. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions, [contact the social care data and analysis team](#).

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. We release official statistics to promote reform and improvement across government through increasing transparency and citizen participation.

We regulate and inspect registered social care provision under the [Care Standards Act 2000](#). We inspect LA children's services under section 136(2) of the [Education and Inspections Act 2006](#). More contextual information about social care in England, and our inspection activity, can be found in the SFR and the [Annual Report](#).

More information on how we regulate and/or inspect can be found in:

- [children's social care providers](#)
- [LA children's services](#)

Social care inspection outcomes are important for policy development, as well as for planning and providing public services, as they provide information on the quality of social care provision nationally and by area. There is a demand for information on inspection outcomes, for example to help us to meet our obligations under inspection legislation and to influence policy. The data contributes to meetings with organisations such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), and informs policy discussions and decisions. Inspection reports can be found on [our reports website](#).

There are also [statistics about the outcomes of inspections](#).

We also use our official statistics data to enhance insight into this sector. This includes contributing to the reviews of inspection frameworks, evidence and reports.

The aggregation of data for official statistics allows us to communicate to users the main data and messages about children's social care, for example at different geographical levels and within sub-types of provider. The official statistics draw out the main 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 for their own purposes, as the release includes underlying data and guidance on how to create summary tables.

The data may, therefore, be used by stakeholder groups, academics and other interested parties across the sector. LAs 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 the data about children's social care in England is unique to Ofsted and alternative sources are not available. For instance, data about new services in England, and those that have resigned, as well as their capacity and inspection outcomes, is only collected by us. This data is widely viewed as a valuable source of information about services available in England and for providing an in-depth overall picture of the quality of provision in England.

Meeting users' needs

Ofsted's social care data and analysis team is represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs. The ADCS organises these regional meetings. We have presented relevant information and publications to all of the existing regional groups and sought feedback about whether our publications meet users' needs. Our participation in these groups helps to inform us about users' views on our social care official statistics, and we take suggested improvements on board.

Social care outputs are also shared with users in other organisations, such as the Department for Education (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).

We include the contact details for the social care data and analysis team in the releases and we encourage users to provide feedback on any unmet needs that they have or improvements we can make.

You can find more information about [our engagement policy and confidentiality and access policy](#), [as well as our statement of administrative sources](#). We also operate under more detailed internal engagement guidance.

Coherence and comparability

Comparisons of inspection outcomes across different inspection frameworks are not always possible due to the changes to the evaluation criteria and scope of inspection. More information about inspection frameworks can be found in [Annex 1](#) of this quality report. The release itself makes a clear distinction when there are changes in the inspection frameworks, so that it is clear to users where inspections are not directly comparable.

The 'requires improvement to be good' judgement was introduced in 2016. For inspections that took place before this point, we used one of the following terms to describe this judgement: 'requires improvement', 'adequate' or 'satisfactory'. We group all 3 terms in the 'requires improvement to be good' judgement throughout this release to allow comparison with the outcomes in previous years.

Comparisons of inspection outcomes across different timescales within a particular inspection cycle are not always possible due to the way inspections are risk-assessed and selected for inspection. We take a proportionate approach to inspection. We select some providers for inspection because they are approaching the deadline for reinspection and others as a result of their previous inspection outcomes. When this occurs, however, information is given in the release.

Within the main findings, where we make statements about whether inspection outcomes have improved or declined, we base this analysis on comparable inspections only and use the most recent relevant inspection outcome.

Inspections of social care provision in other countries in the UK are carried out by:

- the [Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales](#)
- the [Care Inspectorate in Scotland](#)

- the [Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in Northern Ireland](#)

We are the only inspectorate in the UK that publishes detailed statistics about the quality of social care providers that we regulate and inspect. Although some UK regions publish some figures on numbers of providers and places or the number of inspections carried out, these are generally not detailed enough to allow for a useful comparison. Comparable data for other countries, including through the EuroStat database, is not available.

We consider data both in-year (1 April to 31 March) and as at a fixed date (31 March). We make comparisons between years, if appropriate. We also consider and compare data between provider types, regions, sectors (private/LA/voluntary) and, if appropriate, LAs.

Accuracy and reliability

The data used for this SFR is data that belongs to Ofsted, as administrative data extracted directly from our internal database system, Cygnum.

The data is subject to a rigorous internal quality assurance (QA) process. This QA happens both as part of our internal processes for ensuring data quality in the regulatory records system and as part of the production of this SFR.

The inspection outcome data in the release does not use any imputation or other statistical techniques. We also do not use data to make any estimates about the population or other geographical areas. This is because the data is solely reporting on events that have happened, meaning that the risk of bias or error is reduced.

The data on places comes from 2 sources: conditions of registration and, when these are not part of the registration (such as with schools), from an annual census Ofsted carries out that asks residential providers for the maximum number of residential students they could accommodate. Registration conditions form part of the inspection and so are subject to the same rigorous QA processes as inspection reports.

The providers and places data within the release does include a small number of estimates, when places data is not held in our system. More information about database systems can be found in [our statement for administrative sources](#). These are based on the average number of places for providers of the same type, within the same sector. We exclude providers without places data from the average places calculation, meaning that the reliability of the average is improved by avoiding under- or over-estimation. If there are fewer than 10 providers with valid places data (not null or zero) within a particular sector, we calculate the average from the national group of providers with valid places data. We hold places data for the vast majority (99%) of providers and, therefore, the

risk of error through estimation is negligible. In the 2021 to 2022 dataset, there are only a few providers for which we have estimated places data, continuing the low levels of estimation seen in the last few years.

We are able to extract all data to ensure that any data entered incorrectly at the operational stage is accounted for, and duplicates or incorrect records removed from the data set. This limits the risk of errors in the data. Furthermore, we make data about inspection judgements available to the public. We send all providers copies of their inspection report for a factual accuracy check before publication. Inspection judgements held in the data systems will, therefore, always be verified by inspectors. Providers are also given the opportunity during the QA phase of the report to check and comment on the inspection judgements. Our data offers a high level of transparency and assurance because we publish individual inspection reports – if errors were being brought in at an operational level, there is a clear right of reply for stakeholders. Checks of the statistical data against both the system data source and published inspection reports provide an additional level of assurance.

The dataset is securely stored in Excel format accessible only to Ofsted staff working on the release. We do some initial aggregation of data using a structured query language (SQL) database, but we do the majority of analysis in Excel.

More than one analyst is involved in the production and analysis of the data, and QA is always carried out by a different team member to the person who produced the work. The QA checks required are carried out at various stages of the production process, covering everything from:

- the SQL code used to export data
- all processing and calculations
- the release template
- analysis and contents of the main findings, along with any supplementary statistics that are published

We review all outputs and these are subject to a sign-off process to ensure suitability for publication. If applicable, we consider provider and places data against the DfE data on the children's social care sector in England.

This year, we have continued to include data on short-break-only children's homes. We source this data from statements of purpose that individual children's homes submit to us, which we store on our internal database, Cygnum. We have pulled the data from each statement of purpose and then put it through a rigorous internal QA process.

Strengths of the data

The strengths of the data are that:

- the data belongs to Ofsted, which allows for certainty around the QA carried out on all data
- we carry out a robust QA of the data, including a detailed QA of all tables, underlying data and reports created from this data
- if applicable, we benchmark our data against data submitted to the DfE, and we generally find both to be aligned
- it provides a comprehensive snapshot of the children's social care sector over the last 5 years, due to the known quality of the data as well as the inclusion of DfE data
- all required data is present and there is almost no missing data because it is internal data
- there is no risk of bias, as this SFR reports on events that have already happened

Limitations of the data

The limitations of the data are that:

- much of the data is only held by Ofsted and therefore cannot be verified against other sources
- it is open to incorrect reporting by providers and, in a small number of cases, it does not appear to be accurate (for example, an incorrect postcode). This has minimal impact on this particular SFR, however, and is usually identified during QA
- there can be minimal errors or corrections in recording (for example, a setting is recorded as being private instead of voluntary provision), which can impact on comparability between years, though these errors are usually identified and accounted for during the QA stage
- we estimate some of the data because, in some cases, the number of places for a provider has not been supplied

Timeliness and punctuality

We produce and publish these full statistics covering all Ofsted social care inspections on an annual basis. When possible, we also publish supplementary data to improve the accessibility to, and usefulness of, the data. This includes the publication of management information.

We publish data on the date pre-announced in the [publication schedule](#). Information on any delay in publication can also be found on the publication schedule. Reasons why a delay may occur include, for example, when more time is necessary to properly QA the data to ensure that it is robust. We announce publications on Ofsted's Twitter page and social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for production of the children's social care data release is approximately 12 weeks. This time includes obtaining and cleaning the data, drafting findings, quality assuring all outputs and getting the information on to the Ofsted website.

Pre-release is given in accordance with the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order (2008), as detailed in [our pre-release policy](#).

Accessibility and clarity

We publish our releases 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.

[We hold data covering children's social care on a collections page](#) on GOV.UK.

The primary function of the data is to meet Ofsted's data requirements for inspections. However, we share the data for public use with the intention of informing about children's social care in England and for re-use by analysts and researchers.

We also publish [data for all remits, including social care, as part of the annual Data View](#).

Performance, cost and respondent burden

There is no associated cost or respondent burden with our data because this is administrative.

Confidentiality, transparency and security

If we hold sensitive or personal data, the disclosure control processes we have in place ensure that this data is not published. All data releases follow [our confidentiality and revisions policies](#). All staff using sensitive data have been trained in confidentiality and disclosure awareness.

We have redacted some data fields from the underlying data for data protection purposes. Data affected by redactions includes fields related to provider names and addresses. We provide all inspection judgements in full without redaction. All inspection data presented in statistical tables is actual figures; the data is not subject to rounding or suppression.

Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating numbers of inspections, listed by inspection type, provision type, region and inspection outcome. We do this processing using SQL and we review and revise it regularly; it is also quality assured before the data is used for analysis.

We summarise inspection data in 2 formats:

- inspections carried out in a defined period
- latest inspection as at a particular point in time

Both types of inspection data only include inspections that we have published (at the time specified in the SFR).

The defined period of inspection data is dependent on the type of provision. Data about inspections of:

- LA children's services includes inspections that were carried out under the current framework, and therefore does not reflect an annual period (the period covered is detailed in the release)
- all children's social care providers includes inspections that were carried out during the annual period of 1 April to 31 March

The latest inspection data covers all social care providers, irrespective of when we carried out the inspections. Only 1 inspection per provider is counted. The data reflects the latest inspection for each provider (for example, the most recent published event at the time of producing the data). This means that the data will include some inspections that were carried out under previous inspection frameworks; we give further explanatory notes in the release.

We have not removed any data before analysis.

We provide definitions in the SFR. For instance, [the glossary](#) includes a list of the provision types and describes what each provision type offers.

We choose the points in the main findings to focus on the main areas of the SFR, in order to provide immediate and relevant findings to users of the release.

Annex 1

Relevant inspection frameworks for social care providers in England:

[Adoption support agencies](#)

[Boarding schools](#)

[Children's homes](#)

[Further education colleges with residential accommodation](#)

[Independent fostering services \(IFAs\)](#)

[Inspections of local authority children's services \(ILACS\) framework and guidance](#)

[Residential family centres](#)

[Residential holiday schemes for disabled children](#)

[Residential special schools](#)

[Secure training centres](#)

[Voluntary adoption agencies \(VAAs\)](#)

Glossary

Definitions of terms are within the [statistical glossary](#).

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