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National statistics

Fostering in England: methodology

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Applies to England

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Introduction

This document contains methodology and quality information relevant to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) annual release of fostering data, covering all fostering provision in England.

You should read this methodology and quality report in conjunction with the background notes in the statistical first release (SFR), because those notes include helpful information that is not in this report.

This release uses data that agencies have returned to Ofsted and so may reflect changes that have happened both in the sector and in how agencies are recording and reporting data. The data helps inform fostering policy and serves as a point of reference for all fostering agencies in the country.

The data includes:

- local authority (LA) fostering agencies, including independent fostering agencies (IFAs) that perform the function of LA fostering agencies
- IFAs

This release of fostering in England data covers the period between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022.

The statistical release is published as a full version annually and contains final data. We publish a number of official statistics covering children's social care, including fostering, adoption and children looked after placements.

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

Ofsted regulates and inspects IFAs under the Care Standards Act 2000.

The Care Standards Act 2000, including regulations made under section 22, sets out the legal basis for regulating fostering agencies. More information is available on how we regulate and inspect IFAs.

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

Uses for the fostering data

Primarily, the data is collected from providers to support inspections of IFAs and LA fostering services. The data is analysed at an agency level and using comparator data to prompt lines of enquiry that we will follow at inspection. The data is also used to evaluate the effectiveness of fostering agencies, including ongoing monitoring of performance and improvement work.

We analyse the data to further enhance insight into the sector. This can then be used by others for planning and providing public services, for example through being informed about the capacity of social care providers nationally and by area. We also use the analysis of the data to inform our policy discussions and decisions, for instance by contributing to the reviews of inspection frameworks, evidence and reports. We also use the data to respond to ad-hoc requests and to give context to emerging issues or the impact of changes in the sector.

Communicating with users

The data is published annually as official statistics. The aggregation of data for official statistics allows us to communicate to users the key data and messages, for example at different geographical levels and by provider type. 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 because the release includes underlying data.

The data may, therefore, be used by stakeholder groups, academics and other interested parties across the sector. Fostering agencies may also use it themselves, locally and regionally, to find out about areas of practice and to improve processes and standards.

Data sources

Some of the 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. This data is widely viewed as a valuable source for information about recruitment and capacity, for identifying vacancies and for providing an in-depth overall picture of fostering in England.

Some data is also published by other sources, such as the Department for Education (DfE). For example, 'Children looked after in England' includes data about fostered children, who make up the majority of children in care.

Response rates

We collected data from 428 agencies (LA and IFA), which is 97% of all 442 eligible agencies. Less than 1% of all returns contained data inaccuracies that had not been resolved. This data has been included in the national, LA and IFA data and in this report, with an acknowledgement where necessary.

Of the 296 eligible IFAs (excluding trusts), we received data from 282 (95%), which included one return with data inaccuracies.

Of the 146 eligible LAs (including trusts), we received data from 146 (100%). The Isles of Scilly and the City of London provided nil returns because their fostering services are provided by Cornwall and the pan-London arrangement respectively, rather than in-house. Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster's fostering services submitted a single tri-borough combined return. Kingston upon Thames and

Richmond upon Thames fostering services submitted a single bi-borough combined return.

We have not used estimates in this year's SFR. However, in the 2019 to 2020 SFR, due to the lower response rate because of COVID-19, we did use estimates for some main comparators. Our methodology for working out these estimates was to take a 3-year average for the 21 agencies (8 LAs and 13 IFAs) that were eligible to submit in 2019 to 2020 but did not. We looked at the data submitted for the previous 3 years for these agencies and worked out the averages for each agency. We then added these numbers to our overall collected data for the year. If estimated figures have still been used in this year's release, it has been clearly signposted.

Meeting users' needs

The content of the survey and accompanying guidance are reviewed annually by the Social Care Data and Analysis and Social Care Policy teams, to develop the collection. Senior managers then 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.

Online data collection

The new portal system was introduced for the 2017 to 2018 collection, following on from a formal consultation in September 2017 about modernising the collection. Feedback was subsequently sought from users, and updates have been made to the system where necessary to suit users' needs. Using the online system enables us to release this publication more quickly.

Helping and meeting with our users

Ofsted's Social Care Data and Analysis team is represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs. These regional meetings are organised by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). We have presented relevant information and publications to all of the existing regional groups, and sought feedback on whether our publications meet users' needs. Our participation in these groups helps to inform us about users' views on our social care official statistics. We take on board suggested improvements. We have also attended workshops to help data suppliers and stakeholders understand the data that is being asked for and how it can be used. An online webinar is available to familiarise data suppliers with the online portal collection system. Our inspectors attend annual conferences, which include sessions on the data we collect and how they can use it to prepare for inspections.

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 accompanying guidance includes a [glossary of terms](#) to help clarify what is being requested, and descriptions of all codes used for data entry. The online portal allows agencies to quality assure (QA), validate and sign off their data to help make sure data is accurate and complete. We publish additional troubleshooting guidance to assist users with the process of submitting data though the online portal. The Social Care Data and Analysis team also offers help and guidance to agencies by email and telephone.

More information

The contact details for the Social Care Data and Analysis team are included in the releases. Users are encouraged to feed back about any unmet needs or suggested improvements and ask questions that are not covered in the glossary definitions and supporting guidance.

See more information about Ofsted's [engagement policy and confidentiality](#)

and access policy, as well as Ofsted's statement of administrative sources. We also operate under more detailed internal engagement guidance.

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 or added, some areas are not comparable over time.

Reasons for these changes include:

- changes in legislation or policy; for example, a question about the staying put arrangement was added when this arrangement was introduced

- feedback from data suppliers; for example, in 2019 to 2020 we stopped collecting child-level data because it duplicated some of the DfE's children looked after data collection (also known as SSDA903). Minimising the collection of duplicate data reduces unnecessary additional burden on data suppliers

- to provide more nuance in the resulting analysis; for example, placement offer data is now collected at household rather than agency level

- to enable new analysis; for example, postcode data is now collected for each household

If it is not possible to make direct comparisons between data over time, notes are given in the release to alert users.

The response rates have varied over the course of the survey. However, excluding the 2019 to 2020 year, when response rates were slightly lower due to the impact of COVID-19, they have been consistently high: above 95% since 2012 to 2013.

Comparable data

Where appropriate, we reference comparable data collected by the DfE or the Office for National Statistics (ONS). For example, we reference the DfE's annual collection on 'Children looked after in England' and the ONS's publication of data from the 2011 census.

Data is presented at England-level and then sub-divided by sector: LA or IFA. Although a small amount of comparable data is collected for other countries in the UK, this is minimal and so has not been included, for example the number of approved LA foster carers and places in Wales and data on children looked after in Scotland in 2020 to 2021. Comparable data for other countries, including through the Eurostat database, is not available.

The underlying data that accompanies the fostering in England release has been streamlined and improved, to increase value to users. As a result of improved data quality in recent years, we have now been able to publish underlying data to include more detail of fostering types, such as:

- fostering to adopt
- emergency foster care

In previous releases, fostering households were reported against aggregated categories:

- mainstream
- family and friends
- short-break only

There has been a slight recalculation of historical data to provide further details, where available. This is because we now include more detail about fostering types in our data.

This is the third year that we have published underlying data at IFA level. This data includes the number of fostering households and the number of foster carers registered with each IFA, as at 31 March 2022.

Comparisons may be adversely affected by different reporting practices across data suppliers. For example, one agency may only record the ethnicity of the primary carer in a household, while most record the ethnicity of both carers where applicable.

The annual collection gives data at consistent intervals. It includes snapshot data as at 31 March and data for the 12 months between 1 April and 31 March. The reporting period used is made clear in the release. An exception to the defined reporting periods may occur in certain circumstances, for example if a new piece of legislation came into effect mid-way through the financial year.

Accuracy and reliability

All LAs and IFAs are asked to complete this return on a voluntary basis. Despite this, we still consistently receive high response rates, above 95%.

We carry out this survey across all LA fostering agencies and IFAs in England, and so there is no risk of potential bias through sample selection. This data is sourced from the agencies' administrative systems and therefore the data returned by each agency reflects fostering households as at 31 March 2022. We recognise, however, that the data was collected from 428 different agencies and that detailed information on their internal QA processes is not available. In total, one agency (less than 1%) returned data with discrepancies that had not been resolved with the agency before the deadline for publication. This was in line with last year.

QA process

The data is subject to a rigorous QA process, by both data suppliers and Ofsted. The online portal system has in-built validation functions that assist data suppliers with checking and amending the data. We also discuss with data suppliers any queries or errors in the data and resolve these to ensure the most accurate data the agency can supply. For some agencies with a larger number of issues, or that are new to completing the return, these conversations can be detailed and lengthy.

The online portal system carries out 2 tiers of validation:

- at the point of upload, the portal checks that all fields contain valid data
- using the validation tool, the portal checks that data is complete and accurate

QA checks during upload

Invalid data: data that does not match the specified code set and format may be omitted from the upload or prevent the file uploading. For example, an approval date of 31/02/2020 is an invalid date for newly approved households and WRBI is an invalid code for ethnicity of carer.

Invalid ID numbers: if any household identifiers have been duplicated within the data, this would prevent the file from uploading.

This year, data validation for foster carers' ages did not function correctly, but the data that is included in the dataset has undergone manual QA after data collection and is accurate.

QA carried out by the validation tool

Inconsistent data: validation rules compare data submitted across multiple fields to check that it is consistent. For instance, in recruitment data we would expect all 'end dates' to be after 'start dates'.

Incomplete data: based on the users' responses, we may expect additional fields to be completed. For instance, if there are 2 foster carers in a household, we expect ethnicity and training data for both carers.

After the QA process

Once the portal has carried out the QA checks, specific guidance is given to direct users to the field(s) containing errors. Guidance is available in 3 formats to allow maximum flexibility for users to check and amend their data. For instance, some users may prefer to download a validation report and then make changes to their original upload template, whereas others may prefer to use the webform view where individual records can be edited straight into the portal.

The data is submitted online and stored securely in Amazon's data centre, which meets all Government Digital Service data requirements. Data exported from the online portal is stored in system folders that are only accessible to members of the Social Care Data and Analysis team. As data is now collected at person level, agencies are asked to provide identifiers only and not names.

The deadline for all agencies to submit a validated return was 30 June 2022. However, a very small number of individual extensions were granted beyond this.

QA checks are also carried out on the combined dataset, the analysis and the key findings, along with any supplementary statistics that are going to be published.

Where applicable, data is considered against the DfE's data on children looked after as a 'sense check'. However, the time periods in the 2 returns do not always match up, and so there is limited use to this.

Strengths of the data

High response rates with all data provided: excluding 2020, response rates for the previous 5 years are above 95%.

Thorough QA of the data: we carry out detailed QA of all returns, which means we have a high level of confidence in the data presented. We describe the QA tools, processes and outcomes in the introduction to the main report and elsewhere in this quality report.

Data benchmarking

Where applicable, data returned to us is benchmarked against data submitted to the DfE, and generally found to be in line with the DfE's data. Where there are differences, this is likely due to additional QA work done with individual agencies, particularly IFAs, to ensure quality of data.

Comprehensive picture of fostering: due to high response rates, and the volume of data collected, as well as the mix of in-year and end-of-year

figures, the data provides a comprehensive picture of fostering in England over time.

Embedding of new methodology: the number of agencies that returned forms that still had errors when the collection closed was in line with last year.

Limitations of the data

Voluntary nature of the collection

The data collection is voluntary. As a result, response rates may fluctuate, though usually response rates are close to 100%, with all respondents providing all requested data. As the collection is voluntary, there is no legislation compelling agencies, including LAs, to supply data or to provide information on their own data quality. His Majesty's Chief Inspector has also not made use of her powers to compel reporting of this data.

Comparability with previous years

The changes made to the form each year, and particularly the introduction of a new way of collecting data from 2015 to 2016, has meant that some previously comparable data items could no longer be compared with previous years' data.

In the reporting for the 2021 to 2022 collection, we split out family and friends carers from all other carers. Data going back to 2017 to 2018 has been reworked to reflect this change and ensure comparability in the underlying data publication.

Known issues and variance with the data collected

There are some known issues and variance with the data collected. A small number of IFAs did not fully validate their data and some submissions included small errors, such as omitted approval dates for households. As a result, we are aware that the data may not be as robust as initially hoped for. However, using the online portal and in-built validation has streamlined the process and reduced the number of data sets submitted with errors, compared with the manual process used up until 2016 to 2017.

Different reporting practices

Different agencies will have different reporting practices; there is no standard across all fostering agencies. This may impact the burden of completing the return on some agencies. There is also some anecdotal evidence of different recording practices in different agencies.

Minimal knowledge of data quality at provider level

Although we extensively QA all data returns, information is not generally available on how agencies ensure that their own data is accurate. We take steps to mitigate the impact of this, including QA and providing guidance on how to complete the form.

Potential sources of error and bias

We have no direct knowledge of the agencies' data storage systems, or the checks and QA that they carry out on this. We are currently unable to explore this in any depth due to the time and resources needed. However, we perform extensive QA of data to minimise risks. Also, the data collected is broadly similar year on year, so it is likely that agencies 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.

There will always be situations that do not fit easily into the categories supplied. In these cases, personal interpretation may mean that different data suppliers code similar situations in different ways using a 'best-fit' approach. We aim to minimise this through use of guidance and support.

Agencies may perceive that the data will be used to form a judgement on their services, which could introduce bias to their return. To alleviate these concerns, we include guidance on the purpose of the collection.

Finally, all agencies are asked to, and most do, submit data. Therefore, there is minimal risk of sample or response bias in the data.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis.

Data is published on the date pre-announced in the publication schedule. You can also find information on any delay in publication 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 its accuracy. We announce publications on our Twitter account and other social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for producing the fostering data release is approximately 6 months. This includes approximately 3 months for collecting the data, including validation of the data, and an additional month for support and follow-ups with agencies. A further 6 weeks of the production involves:

- the analysis
- drafting the findings
- creating the statistical release
- QA of all outputs and publication on GOV.UK

Pre-release is given in accordance with the Pre-Release Access to Official

Statistics Order (2008), as detailed in [Ofsted's pre-release policy](#).

Accessibility and clarity

Ofsted releases are published in an accessible format on GOV.UK. The information is publicly available and there are no restrictions on access to the published data.

[Data covering children's social care](#) is held on a collections page on GOV.UK.

The primary function of the data is to meet Ofsted's data requirements for inspections. However, the data is 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. The underlying data presentation was amended to better support public use and re-use from 2014 to 2015. In the 2019 to 2020 year, we removed child-level data from the collection and the published data. We implemented this change to reduce the duplication of data within the DfE's children looked after data collection and minimise unnecessary burden on data suppliers.

Performance, cost and burden on respondents

We attempt to minimise the burden on respondents by improving the clarity of questions and definitions through direct consultation and feedback and queries.

In order to reduce the burden on agencies around producing this data, Ofsted and the DfE agreed (before the 2016 to 2017 collection) to introduce Ofsted unique reference numbers (URNs) into the statutory SSDA903 data collection from LAs.

As discussed above, we introduced an online portal for data validation and submission in 2017 to 2018. This substantially reduced the amount of time

agencies wait for feedback on the quality of their returns. Validation is carried out immediately, at the point of submission, and the validation tool is more comprehensive compared with the previous method.

Confidentiality, transparency and security

When 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 Ofsted's confidentiality and revisions policies. All staff using sensitive data have been trained in confidentiality and disclosure awareness.

Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating data to England- and sector-level. This processing is done using R and Excel, and is reviewed and quality-assured before the data is used. No data has been removed.

For data protection and disclosure purposes, all figures in the key findings and the underlying data have been rounded to the nearest 5; this has also been applied to figures from previous years used in the release. The purpose of the rounding is to ensure non-disclosure of sensitive data while maintaining its usefulness. This means, however, that some total figures and calculations may not match exactly with data aggregated at provider type, England or regional levels.

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

Throughout the main section of the SFR, family and friends carers have been excluded from our calculations, as they are only approved to provide foster care for a specific child or children. These households are only provided in the LA sector. A dedicated section at the end of the report discusses analysis of data for family and friends households and carers.

This approach differs from previous years. Last year, we excluded family and friends from the retention and recruitment sections but included them in other sections. Before this, they were included in all sections. Due to these changes in calculation methodology, figures in most sections will differ from trends seen in previous years' publications. Comparisons used in the current publication are to reworked data for previous years.

Glossary

Definitions of terms are in our [statistics glossary](#).

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