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National statistics

Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

Published 8 November 2023

Applies to England

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The [Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023](#) release also includes:

- data tables
- methodology
- pre-release access list

Summary

This release covers:

- the numbers of foster carers and foster places and placements, in both local authority (LA) and independent fostering agencies (IFA)
- data relating to types of foster care, registrations, deregistrations and a range of other subjects
- the period between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023

Main findings

There has been no substantial change in the combined total of mainstream and family and friends households. However, the number of mainstream LA households has decreased since 2019.

At the end of March 2023, there were around 43,400 fostering households in England. This total has remained fairly stable over the last 5 years, but the make-up has altered. Since 2019, the number of mainstream LA households has fallen by 11%, and the number of family and friends households has increased by 21%. The number of IFA households has not changed substantially. The largest subset of fostering households continues to be mainstream LA households, which currently account for 46% of the total.

There is an upward trend in family and friends households.

At the end of March 2023, family and friends households (sometimes known as kinship foster care) accounted for 19% of all active fostering households, an increase from 16% in 2019. The family and friends sector accounted for 48% of all fostering households with newly approved status as at 31 March 2023.

The number of mainstream households has decreased.

Since 2019, the number of approved mainstream fostering households has fallen by 7%. There was no substantial change until 2021 to 2022, when the number decreased in both the LA and IFA sectors. This year, there has been a 5% decrease in the number of LA households, and very little change in the number of IFA households.

The use of IFAs for mainstream foster care is increasing.

The IFA sector now accounts for 43% of mainstream fostering households, up from 40% in 2019. In 2019, IFAs accounted for 42% of all filled mainstream fostering places. In 2023, this had risen to 47%.

There has been a downward trend in the number of applications and newly approved households for mainstream fostering since 2019.

The number of applications received from prospective fostering households in 2022 to 2023 was around 8,000. This is the lowest number in several years and is 18% lower than 2018 to 2019. This year, the proportion of approved applications has returned to its previous level after dropping last year. Similarly, the proportion of withdrawn applications has returned to its previous level. At the end of March 2023, there were around 3,800 newly approved mainstream households. This represented a 26% decrease compared with 2019.

Compared with 2019, a higher proportion of mainstream fostering places are filled or unavailable. Over the same period, the number of vacant places has decreased.

As at 31 March 2023, there were around 72,800 approved mainstream fostering places. Since 2019, the number of vacant mainstream places has decreased by 25%. The most substantial decrease in vacant fostering places over this period has been in the LA sector, where the number has fallen by 29%.

Introduction

This statistical release covers LA fostering agencies and IFAs in England in the year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. It includes data about fostering households, foster carers, retention, recruitment and capacity of providers.

We collected data from 458 agencies (146 LAs and 312 IFAs). This was 99% of all 462 eligible agencies and is likely to account for about 99% of all foster carers.

This year's main findings report is in a new, streamlined format, but the underlying data remains the same.

Fostering sector overview

At the end of March 2023, there were 43,405 fostering households in England. This total has remained fairly stable over the last 5 years, but the make-up has changed. There is an increased reliance on care from family and friends to meet the needs of individual children, but less choice for children who do not have this option. The largest subset of fostering households continues to be mainstream LA households. These currently account for 46% of the total, despite having decreased since 2019 (figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of fostering households by type and sector as at 31 March, over the last 5 years



Estimates are included in the number of places as at 31 March 2020. View the [data for figure 1 in an accessible table format](#).

There is substantial variation in the size and type of fostering agencies within the IFA sector. You can read more about this in our transparency data on the [Largest national providers of private and voluntary social care](#).

Mainstream fostering

Sector stability

The IFA sector accounts for 43% of mainstream fostering households, up from 40% in 2019. This is largely because of a net decrease of 11% in the number of mainstream LA households from 2019 to 2023, with minimal change in the number of IFA households.

Since 2021, there have been year-on-year net decreases in the number of mainstream fostering households in both the IFA and LA sectors (figure 2).

Figure 2: Year-on-year net change in mainstream fostering households by sector over the last 5 years



Estimates are included in the number of households as at 31 March 2020. View the [data for figure 2 in an accessible table format](#).

All regions had a net decrease in the number of mainstream LA households between 2022 and 2023. The percentage in registered IFA households varied across different regions (figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage change in number of approved mainstream fostering households by region between 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023



View the [data for figure 3 in an accessible table format](#).

Joiners and leavers

The number of applications in 2022 to 2023 (8,010) was the lowest in several years, at 18% lower than 2018 to 2019 (9,740). In 4 of the last 5 years there has been a year-on-year decrease in applications. Over the same period, the number of deregistrations has fluctuated. This year, the number of leavers exceeded the number of joiners (figure 4).

Figure 4: Total approved mainstream households at the start and end of the collection period with in-year joiners and leavers



View the [data for figure 4 in an accessible table format](#).

The proportion of applications completed in-year has remained steady over the last 5 years, this year at 65%. This year, one third of these were approved (34%). At the end of March 2023, there were 3,805 newly approved households, representing a 26% decrease since 2019.

Figure 5: Applications received in 2022 to 2023, by status on 31 March 2023



This flowchart shows that, of the 8,010 applications received in 2022 to 2023, 5,190 were completed and 2,815 were still in progress as at 31 March 2023. Of the applications completed in-year, 1,740 were approved, with 3,395 withdrawn and 55 rejected. Of the withdrawn applications, 2,070 were withdrawn by the applicant and 1,325 by the service. This chart is not to scale. Figures are rounded, so subtotals may not sum to the totals in adjacent rows. View the [data for figure 5 in an accessible table format](#).

Of the fostering households that held approved status at some point during 2022 to 2023, 13% had deregistered by the end of the year (5,125 of 40,130). Among mainstream households that deregistered this year, LA households had been registered for longer on average (7 years) than IFA households (5 years).

The data we collect also includes the number of initial enquiries and referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism. This is published in an aggregated form in the [underlying dataset for this release](#). We plan to publish an additional report on fostering recruitment next year, which will include a discussion of the data on initial enquiries.

Foster carers

As at 31 March 2023, there were 59,380 approved mainstream foster carers, an 8% decrease from 2019 (64,295). Of these, 11% were approved during the year. LA agencies accounted for almost half (48%) of these new approvals. This is lower than the proportion of all LA-approved mainstream foster carers (57%) active in March 2023. In the LA sector, the number of carers has decreased by 12% since 2019.

Fostering households

As at March 2023, it was most common for mainstream households to be approved for non-permanent foster care (49%) or permanent foster care (40%) as their primary care type. In line with previous years, many households (62%) offered multiple types of foster care. This was higher in the IFA sector (85%) than the LA sector (44%).

LA households have a lower proportion of households approved for 3 or more children (27%) than IFA households (42%) (figure 6).

Figure 6: Household size for all approved and newly approved mainstream fostering households as at 31 March 2023



Totals include households approved for zero children. All figures are rounded, so subtotals may not sum to the totals in brackets. View the [data for figure 6 in an accessible table format](#).

Fostering places

As at 31 March 2023, there were 72,770 approved mainstream fostering places. This is a decrease of 8% compared with 2019 (78,995). There was a 12% decrease in the LA sector and a 3% decrease in the IFA sector over this period.

A similar proportion of places were filled across both the LA and IFA sectors – 61% and 62% respectively. This has remained stable over the last 5 years.

Since 2019, the number of vacant places has fallen by 25% across both sectors combined (figure 7). As a proportion of approved mainstream fostering places, vacant places reduced from 20% to 17% between 2019 and 2023. The most substantial decrease in vacant fostering places over this period was in the LA sector (figure 8).

This year, 1,635 household places were used exclusively for short breaks, which is equivalent to 2% of all approved mainstream places. This proportion has remained steady over the last few years.

Figure 7: Number of filled, vacant and not available mainstream fostering placements as at 31 March each year, over the last 5 years



Estimates are included in the number of places as at 31 March 2020. View the [data for figure 7 in an accessible table format](#).

There are a number of reasons why a fostering place may be recorded as 'not available'. You can read more about this in the [statistical glossary](#).

Figure 8: Number of vacant mainstream fostering placements as at 31 March over the last 5 years by sector



Estimates are included in the number of places as at 31 March 2020. View the [data for figure 8 in an accessible table format](#).

Family and friends fostering

At the end of March 2023, family and friends households represented 19% of all active fostering households, up from 16% in 2019. This year, the sector accounted for 18% of all approved foster carers and 21% of all fostered children. The sector has grown substantially over recent years, with a 21% net increase since 2019. There is also a high level of turnover in the family and friends sector (figure 9), because specific households are approved and deregistered based on need.

Figure 9: Total approved family and friends households as at 31 March, with in-year joiners and leavers, over the last 5 years



View the [data for figure 9 in an accessible table format](#). Estimates are included in the number of households as at 31 March 2020. Slight discrepancies between in-year deregistrations and new approvals and subsequent totals are because the data for each year is based on separate annual data collections.

Revisions to previous release

This is the first release of this data for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

The [Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023](#) 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, please contact Emma Martin socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following for their contribution to this statistical release: Kathryn Leech and Hannah Tempest.

Glossary

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

Annex: data tables for figures

This section contains the underlying data in an accessible table format for all figures.

Data for Figure 1: Number of fostering households by type and sector as at 31 March, over the last 5 years

Sector	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Family and friends (LA)	6,930	7,310	8,045	7,855	8,400
Mainstream (LA)	22,395	21,885	21,495	20,845	19,835
Mainstream (IFA)	15,125	15,345	15,830	15,205	15,170
Total	44,450	44,540	45,370	43,905	43,405

See [Figure 1](#)

Data for Figure 2: Year-on-year net change in mainstream fostering households by sector over the last 5 years

Sector	2018 to 2019	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	2021 to 2022	2022 to 2023
IFA	360	220	485	-625	-35
LA	-220	-510	-390	-650	-1,010

See [Figure 2](#)

Data for Figure 3: Percentage change in number of approved mainstream fostering households by region between 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023

Region	IFA	LA
East Midlands	-4%	-8%

East of England	2%	-9%
London	27%	-3%
North East, Yorkshire and the Humber	-1%	-5%
North West	-4%	-3%
South East	-16%	-3%
South West	9%	-6%
West Midlands	3%	-4%

See [Figure 3](#)

Data for Figure 4: Total approved mainstream households at the start and end of the collection period with in-year joiners and leavers

Group	Subgroup	Number
Approved households as at 1 April 2022	Total	36,055
In-year joiners	New	2,810
In-year joiners	Transfer	655
In-year joiners	Return	215
In-year joiners	Other	400
In-year leavers	Leaver	-4,570
In-year leavers	Transfer	-435
In-year leavers	Other	-125
Approved households as at 31 March 2023	Total	35,005

See [Figure 4](#)

Data for Figure 5: Applications received in 2022 to 2023, by status on 31 March 2023

Group	Number	Percentage
Applications received in 2022 to 2023	8,010	n/a

Applications completed	5,190	65%
Applications still in progress	2,815	35%
Applications completed in approval	1,740	34%
Applications completed in withdrawal	3,395	65%
Applications completed in rejection	55	1%
Withdrawn applications by applicant	2,070	61%
Withdrawn applications by service	1,325	39%

See [Figure 5](#)

Data for Figure 6: Household size for all approved and newly approved mainstream fostering households as at 31 March 2023

Sector	Group	1 child	2 children	3 or more children	Total
LA	Newly approved	985	600	215	1,800
LA	All approved	6,665	7,795	5,370	19,835
IFA	Newly approved	685	835	480	2,000
IFA	All approved	3,145	5,625	6,405	15,170

See [Figure 6](#)

Data for Figure 7: Number of filled, vacant and not available mainstream fostering placements as at 31 March each year, over the last 5 years

Status of fostering place	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Not available	15,840	17,320	17,365	15,940	14,960
Vacant	16,080	14,060	14,005	13,170	12,100
Filled	45,500	46,120	44,750	44,550	44,580

See [Figure 7](#)

Data for Figure 8: Number of vacant mainstream fostering placements as at 31 March over the last 5 years by sector

Sector	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
IFA	6,990	5,965	6,475	6,185	5,640
LA	9,090	8,100	7,530	6,985	6,460

See [Figure 8](#)

Figure 9: Total approved family and friends households as at 31 March, with in-year joiners and leavers, over the last 5 years

Group	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
New approvals (in-year)	5,075	4,615	5,215	4,850	5,465
Deregistrations (in-year)	3,190	3,730	4,180	4,470	4,755
Total approved households (at 31 March)	6,930	7,310	8,045	7,855	8,400

See [Figure 9](#)

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