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Accredited official statistics

Methodology report: children's social care in England 2023 to 2024

Updated 15 July 2024

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Introduction

This paper 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.

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. The release includes data about social care providers and places, and inspections and outcomes.

The inspection outcomes data relates to inspections of:

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

As part of ongoing efforts to improve the data and commentary, we have made changes to the 2023 to 2024 SFR, which are listed on [Changes to children's social care in England accredited official statistics](#). These changes include:

- removing data and analysis on local authority children's services from the main publication. This information will now be released as a separate publication
- data on regulatory activity in children's homes and supported accommodation not appearing in the main publication. Instead, it will be published as annual management information and commentary
- now including data on supported accommodation providers

In previous years, we reported on short-break-only children's homes separately from other children's homes. However, to align with other publications, from March 2024 these homes will be included in the overall count of children's homes. A separate section will discuss the subset of short-break-only children's homes. Any sections of this year's report affected by this change are clearly identified. For comparison purposes, data from previous years has been recalculated to include short-break-only children's homes within the category of children's homes.

When we talk about 'other children's social care providers', we are referring to all providers other than children's homes (all types). In this release, as in last year's, independent fostering agencies (IFAs) are included in the 'other social care providers' data. In previous releases, 'other social care providers' has excluded IFAs.

The providers and places data includes:

- children's social care that Ofsted regulates and/or inspects
- providers of residential accommodation for children, including boarding schools and further education colleges, that Ofsted inspects

In terms of the periods covered by the release, providers and places data always reflects the situation on 31 March. Inspection outcome data for all non-local-authority 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.

We publish this statistical release as a full version annually, 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 local authority 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 and area SEND 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.

Ofsted regulates and inspects registered social care provision under the [Care Standards Act 2000](#). We inspect local authority children's services under section 136(2) of the [Education and Inspections Act 2006](#). You can find more contextual information about social care in England, and Ofsted's inspection activity in the SFR and the [social care section of our Annual Report](#).

All social care providers are inspected by regulatory inspectors and His Majesty's Inspectors under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF), except for secure training centres, where we carry out a joint inspection with other inspectorates.

We inspect most providers annually. These include:

- children's homes
- residential special schools
- secure training centres
- residential holiday schemes for disabled children

We inspect IFAs on a 3-year inspection cycle.

You can find more information on how we regulate and/or inspect in [children's social care providers](#).

Social care inspection outcomes are important for policy development, as well as for planning and providing public services. For example, they give information about the quality of social care provision nationally and by area. There is a demand for inspection outcomes information, for example to help Ofsted meet its 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 are on the [Ofsted reports website](#).

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

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

Aggregating 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 can 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. Local authorities may also use the data, for local and regional use, to inform 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, we are the only organisation that collects data about

services in England that are new or resigning, their capacity, and their inspection outcomes. This data is widely viewed as a valuable source of information about services available in England and is useful for providing an in-depth overall picture of the quality of provision in England.

Meeting users' needs

Ofsted's social care and area SEND analysis team is represented at regional meetings of performance leads from local authorities. The ADCS organises these regional meetings. We present relevant information and publications to all the existing regional groups and seek feedback about whether our publications meet users' needs. Our participation in these groups gives information about users' views on our social care official statistics, and we take suggested improvements on board.

We also share social care outputs with users in other organisations, such as the Department for Education (DfE), local authorities 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 (local authorities).

We include the contact details for the social care and area SEND analysis team in the releases and we encourage users to give us feedback about any unmet needs or improvements that 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](#).

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. You can find more information about inspection frameworks in [Annex 1](#) of this report. The release itself highlights when framework changes occurred 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 because of their previous inspection outcomes. When this occurs, however, we give this information 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 \(CSSIW\)](#)
- the [Care Inspectorate in Scotland](#)
- the [Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in Northern Ireland](#)

Ofsted is the only inspectorate in the UK that publishes detailed statistics about the quality of the social care providers that it regulates and inspects. 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 and sectors (private/local authority/voluntary) and, if appropriate, between local authorities.

Accuracy and reliability

The data used for this SFR is data that belongs to Ofsted. It is 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 about other geographical areas. This is because the data is solely reporting on events that have happened, so 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 that Ofsted carries out that asks residential providers for the maximum number of

residential students they can 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 includes a small number of estimates, when places data is not held in our system. You can find more information about database systems 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, so 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 great majority (99%) of providers and, therefore, the risk of error through estimation is negligible. For the full picture of changes in the number of providers and places since September 2011, see the 'Children's social care in England underlying data' file and select the 'Providers+places_Time_series' tab.

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 are 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 are introduced 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 R and 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 from 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. The Ofsted policy team provides this data, gathering it from inspection teams and published Ofsted reports. This is a change in methodology from past releases, which relied on text pulled from statements of purpose submitted to us by individual children's homes.

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 the two 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 may be inaccurate (for example, there may be 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 have an impact on comparability between years, although 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 annually. 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, more time being necessary to QA the data thoroughly to ensure its robustness. We announce publications on Ofsted's social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for producing the children's social care data release is approximately 12 weeks. This includes obtaining and cleaning the data, drafting findings, quality-assuring all outputs and putting the information onto 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 giving information about children's social care in England, and for reuse 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 all children's social care providers includes inspections that were carried out during the annual period 1 April to 31 March.

The latest inspection data covers all social care providers, irrespective of when we carried out the inspections. Only one 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 chose the points in the main findings document to focus on the main areas of the SFR, in order to provide immediate and relevant findings to users of the document.

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 agencies \(IFAs\)](#)

[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 in the [statistical glossary](#).

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