



Accredited official statistics

# Methodology: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

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**Applies to England**

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## Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to the official statistics (OS) release of [Fostering in England](#). We publish these statistics once a year.

Our statistical practice is regulated by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). OSR sets the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) that all producers of OS should follow. You are welcome to contact us directly on [socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk) with any comments about how we meet these standards. Alternatively, you can contact OSR by emailing [regulation@statistics.gov.uk](mailto:regulation@statistics.gov.uk) or via the OSR website.

You should read this methodology and quality report in conjunction with the background notes in the accredited OS, 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 fostering agencies, including independent fostering agencies (IFAs) that perform the function of local authority fostering agencies
- IFAs

This release of fostering in England data covers the period between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025.

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

## Changes since last release

Changes to the most recent data collection are [outlined on the Ofsted fostering dataset returns webpage](#). For the financial year 2024–25, these are as follows:

- Data on ethnicity and disability was collected at agency level, instead of the existing carer level. We collected data for approved carers as at 31 March only. The aggregate protected and personal characteristics section will continue to be optional.
- Additional data on the reasons why households chose to withdraw from the application process before consideration at panel continued to be an optional field for 2024–25. The additional codes are as follows:
  - Fostering was not as the applicant expected (AW1)
  - Assessment process was not as the applicant expected (AW2)
  - Household circumstances changed during the assessment (other than for financial reasons) (AW3)
  - Applicant was unable to continue the process for financial reasons (AW4)
  - Applicant was concerned about the risk of allegations (AW5)
  - Other reason/unknown reason (AW0)
- We amended the response codes for the existing question 'Reason for deregistration'. 'Initiated by foster carer' (DER3) will no longer be available and was replaced with more specific reasons, as follows:
  - Carer retirement (DER7)
  - Personal carer circumstances (DER8)
  - Carer ceased fostering (DER9)
- Fostering hubs in the local authority sector can submit data on initial enquiries

as part of the fostering data collection for the financial year from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. The lead local authority of the hub is responsible for submitting the total number of initial enquiries for the entire hub. Other local authorities in the hub recorded the total number of enquiries as zero. Large providers of IFAs are also eligible to submit national-level data on initial enquiries. The lead IFA may submit data on behalf of others in the hierarchy, if it is collated centrally.

## Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating data to the level of each sector and England as a whole. This processing is done using R and Excel and is reviewed and quality assured before the data is used. No data has been removed.

Analysis is generally based on data from the last 5 years, including the current reporting year. This timeframe allows us to focus on recent and relevant data while also offering a sufficiently long-term perspective.

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.

Throughout the main section of the OS, formal kinship care (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 local authority sector. A dedicated section at the end of the report discusses analysis of data for formal kinship care households and carers.

## 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 2019–20 we stopped collecting child-level data because it duplicated some of the Department for Education (DfE)'s children looked after data collection (also known as SSSDA903); 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 2019–20, when response rates were slightly lower due to the impact of COVID-19, they have been consistently high – above 95% since 2012–13.

## Comparability with previous years

The changes made to the form each year, and particularly the introduction of a new way of collecting data from 2015–16, has meant that some previously comparable data items could no longer be compared with previous years' data.

Since 2021–22, we have separated out formal kinship care carers from all other carers in most of the dataset. Data collected prior to this has been reworked to reflect this change and ensure comparability in the underlying data publication. Publications prior to 2021–22 include combined data on mainstream and formal kinship care carers.

## Relevance to users

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 OS 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 [how we inspect](#) IFAs.

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

## Applying the Code of Practice for

# Statistics

This section is broken down by the 3 core principles of the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#):

- trustworthiness
- quality
- value

## Trustworthiness

The fostering data release is impartial and transparent, with no political or commercial influence. Although the collection is voluntary, response rates are consistently high. We openly acknowledge known limitations so that our users feel confident when engaging with and interpreting these statistics.

### **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 local authorities, to supply data or to provide information on their own data quality. His Majesty's Chief Inspector has also not made use of his powers to compel reporting of this data.

### **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.

### **Response rates**

We collected data from 465 agencies (local authority and IFA), which is 99% of all 469 eligible agencies. This data has been included in the national, local authority and IFA data and in this report, with an acknowledgement where necessary.

Of the 322 eligible IFAs (excluding trusts), we received data from 318 (99%).

Of the 147 eligible local authorities (including trusts), we received data from 147 (100%). The Isles of Scilly and the City of London provided null 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. North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire submitted a combined return as Northamptonshire Children's Trust.

We have not used estimates in this year's OS.

### **Potential sources of error and bias**

We have no direct knowledge of the agencies' data storage systems, or the checks and quality assurance (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. We also have evidence of improvement in the quality of the data submitted 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 be concerned that we will use the data to form a judgement on their services. This could introduce bias to their return. To reassure them, 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.

### **Known issues and variance with the data collected**

There are some known issues and variance with the data collected. A small number of agencies did not fully validate their data, and some submissions included small errors. 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 we used up until 2016–17.

### **Different reporting practices**

Different agencies will have different reporting practices; there is no standard across all fostering agencies. This may affect the burden of completing the return on some agencies.

### **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 quality assure the data to ensure its accuracy.

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:

- carrying out the analysis
- drafting the findings
- creating the statistical release
- quality assuring all outputs
- publishing 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](#).

## Quality

The fostering data is quality assured, with clear documentation of limitations and continuous improvements to methods, validation and reporting.

### **Accuracy and reliability**

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

We carry out this survey across all local authority fostering agencies and IFAs in England, 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 2025. We recognise, however, that the data was collected from 465 different agencies and that detailed information on their internal QA processes is not available.

### **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.

### **Minimal knowledge of data quality at provider level**

Although we extensively quality assure 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 through QA and providing guidance on how to complete the form.

### **QA process**

The data is subject to a rigorous QA process, both by 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 DER3 is now an invalid code for reason for deregistration.

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

### **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 2025. 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.

### **Reproducible analytical pipeline**

A reproducible analytical pipeline (RAP) process in R is used to generate most of the dataset and report. The RAP code imports the fostering data, performs QA checks, filters and aggregates data for analysis, and outputs charts, a basic report and the dataset. Additional analysis is carried out manually. QA of all analysis and aggregated data is then carried out.

### **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.

## **Value**

The fostering data supports inspection, policy, and public understanding. It is shaped by user feedback, and presented and published in accessible formats to enable reuse.

### **Uses for the fostering data**

Primarily, the data is collected from providers to support inspections of IFAs and local authority fostering services. The data is analysed at an agency level, 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 example 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 to the impact of changes in the sector.

### **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 2017–18 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.

## **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 2016–17 collection) to introduce Ofsted unique reference numbers (URNs) into the statutory SSDA903 data collection from local authorities.

As discussed above, we introduced an online portal for data validation and submission in 2017–18. 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.

## **Helping and meeting with our users**

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, 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).

The accompanying [fostering collection 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, 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 through the online portal. The Social Care Data and Analysis team also offers help and guidance to agencies by email and telephone.

## **Communicating with users**

The data is published annually as OS. The aggregation of data for OS allows us to communicate to users the key data and messages, for example at different geographical levels and by provider type. The OS draw out the key messages and communicate these in an understandable way, appropriate for a wide range of different users. Users can 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.

### **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 2014–15. In the 2019–20 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.

### **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 DfE. For example, [Children looked after in England](#) includes data about fostered children, who make up the majority of children in care.

### **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 2021 census](#).

Data is presented at England level and then sub-divided by sector: local authority 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. 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
- formal kinship care arrangement
- 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 sixth year that we have published underlying data at IFA level. This data includes the number of fostering households, the number of foster carers and the number of approved fostering places registered with each IFA as at 31 March 2025.

The underlying data table includes a distinct formal kinship care tab as this data is excluded from all other tabs (unless explicitly stated) except for the 'Allegations and complaints', as there is no distinction made between mainstream and formal kinship care households at agency level.

The underlying data also includes information on the age of children that households are approved to look after. This has been structured: '0 to 18', '5 to 18' and 'other' to align with the most prevalent categories.

We adjusted the methodology for some data items in the recruitment and retention tab of the dataset from 2023–24. Now, we give a breakdown of all applications completed in-year regardless of when they were started. In previous years, application outcomes were included in the dataset only for applications that were received and completed in-year. This excluded a portion of applications from the data. The revised methodology offers a more complete picture of the sector. This year, we have included both approaches to provide continuity with previous reporting while also offering a fuller perspective on the sector's recruitment activity.

From 2023–24 onwards, we have added additional items to the dataset that help to better capture how long the fostering application process is taking. In addition to reporting on the number of applications completed in-year, we also report on the number of applications that are being completed within 180 days and 240 days. This provides insight into whether applications are being processed in line with [government guidance](#), which states that applications are supposed to go to panel within 8 months (approximately 240 days).

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.

## Glossary

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

## Further information

## Contact us

We welcome feedback on our statistical releases. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions about the data, or its presentation or interpretation, please contact the [Social Care Data Analysis Team](#)

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