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Accredited official statistics

Methodology: children's social care in England 2026

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Applies to England

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Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to Ofsted's [annual release of children's social care data](#). 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 official statistics should adhere to. You are welcome to contact us directly on socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk with any comments about how we meet these standards. Alternatively, you can contact OSR by mailing regulation@statistics.gov.uk or via the OSR website.

This release includes data on children's social care providers, places and inspection outcomes across England. It covers the full range of social care provision that Ofsted regulates or inspects, including children's homes, supported accommodation providers, other children's social care providers such as independent fostering agencies, and residential accommodation in boarding schools and further education colleges. The methodology should be read alongside the notes in the accredited official statistics release, which provide additional contextual information. Users should be aware that comparisons over long periods span multiple inspection frameworks and changes in the social care system.

Changes to inspection frameworks and comparability

Inspection outcomes cannot always be compared across frameworks because evaluation criteria and inspection scope change over time. The release highlights when framework changes occurred so that users can identify where comparisons are not appropriate. Comparability may also be affected by the risk-based nature of inspection scheduling, which means that providers inspected in a given period may not be representative of the sector as a whole.

Changes in what is regulated can also affect how provider numbers compare over time. Some types of provision that are now regulated and included in the data, such as supported accommodation, were previously unregulated and not counted, even though they were operating. This means that increases in provider numbers over time may partly reflect changes in what is included in the data, rather than a real increase in provision.

The selection process

Ofsted uses a proportionate, risk-based approach to selecting providers for inspection. Some providers are inspected because they are approaching the end of their inspection cycle, while others are selected due to concerns arising from previous inspection outcomes or intelligence. This means that inspection activity in any given year reflects both cyclical and risk-driven priorities.

Comparing inspection outcomes across years

Comparisons across years should be made with caution. Changes in inspection

frameworks, provider types, registration categories and inspection cycles can affect the comparability of outcomes. Where comparisons are valid, the release uses the most recent relevant inspection outcome for each provider.

Methodology

Changes since last release

This year's release includes several updates to the structure and presentation of the underlying data. The 'provider level as at 31 March' tab and the 'providers and places' tab have been combined into a single dataset. As a result, the separate 'providers and places' tab no longer exists. This change streamlines the dataset and removes duplication, as the combined tab now contains all relevant provider and places information in one place.

In addition, the places and premises columns have been removed from the 'providers in year' tab. These fields are already available in other parts of the dataset, and their removal prevents duplication and improves clarity for users.

For supported accommodation, premises and places data is not included for leavers. This reflects the changing nature of the sector and the fact that premises-level information for leavers does not remain stable enough to report reliably.

We have also continued with the methodological changes introduced in the previous release. These include the incorporation of short-break-only children's homes within the overall count of children's homes and the use of inspection intelligence from Ofsted's policy team to identify short-break-only homes, replacing the earlier approach based on statements of purpose.

Data

Ofsted data

The release uses administrative data extracted from Ofsted's internal system, Cygnum. This includes provider registration details, conditions of registration,

inspection outcomes and places data. While we aim to produce the highest-quality statistics, occasional differences may arise between the administrative system and the final published inspection report due to updates made during the quality assurance (QA) process.

The cut-off period for including published inspection reports is 1 calendar month after the end of the reporting period. This allows time for the majority of relevant reports to be published.

We source places data either from data held on our systems, such as registration conditions or, for settings such as schools, from an annual census that collects the maximum number of residential students they can accommodate. For supported accommodation, we calculate estimates of missing places data at premises level. Single occupancy premises are estimated as having 1 place, while other categories use the average for premises of the same category and sector. If fewer than 10 comparable premises exist, we use the average for that category across all sectors. Provider-level place data for each supported accommodation provider is calculated as the sum of premises places. For other types of provider, where places data is missing, we estimate the number of places using the average for providers of the same type and sector. If fewer than 10 comparable providers exist, we use the national average instead.

Other sources of data

Where appropriate, we reference ONS population estimates to provide contextual demographic information and the Department for Education (DfE)'s annual 'children looked after in England including adoptions' statistics to support understanding of the wider children's social care landscape. These sources offer useful contextual insight but do not provide directly comparable data on provider-level capacity or inspection outcomes.

Methods and quality

The average production time for this release is approximately 12 weeks, including data extraction, cleaning, analysis, drafting, quality assurance (QA), internal sign-off and publication.

The data benefits from strong QA processes at both operational and statistical stages. While the data is highly complete, some limitations remain. A small number of provider reporting errors may occur, such as incorrect postcodes or sector classifications, though these are usually identified and corrected during QA. Some

data cannot be verified against external sources, and minor inconsistencies in recording may affect comparability between years.

Supported accommodation premises are reported based on the status of both the provider and the premises. We include all premises belonging to active or suspended providers, and all premises with open or pending status as at 31 March. No data has been removed before analysis, and any corrections identified after 31 March are incorporated into the published dataset.

Other sources of similar data

Comparable official statistics are published by other organisations across the UK, but differences in legislation, inspection frameworks and definitions mean they are not directly comparable with the figures for England.

- Wales: Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) publishes [data and reports on children's social care services and inspections](#).
- Scotland: the Care Inspectorate publishes [statistics and reports on care services, including children's services](#).
- Northern Ireland: the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) publishes [information on inspections and regulated services](#).

While these sources provide broadly similar information about children's social care, differences in how services are regulated, inspected and reported mean that direct comparisons should be made with caution.

Data processing and analysis

Data processing involves extracting data from Cygnum, Ofsted's internal case and content management system, using SQL, followed by cleaning, validation and aggregation. The data is analysed using SQL, R and Excel. Analysts review and revise processing steps regularly, and all outputs undergo multi-stage QA. The analysis typically covers the most recent 5 years to provide both a current and a longer-term perspective. Only published inspections are included. For the latest inspection dataset, each provider appears once, reflecting its most recent published inspection. Providers that have not yet been inspected are included with blank

inspection fields.

Who this release is for

This release serves multiple purposes. It enables media outlets to inform the public about the quality of children's social care provision nationally and locally. It allows users to track movement in the sector and monitor the quality of provision across provider types and regions. It provides an accurate picture of the quality of provision, supporting policy decisions about the location and quality of services. It helps identify areas of weak performance, assisting the DfE, local authorities and other stakeholders in developing strategies to address issues. Within Ofsted, analysis of inspection outcomes informs the development of inspection frameworks and contributes to the findings in His Majesty's Chief Inspector's annual report.

Accredited official statistics

This publication has been published as accredited official statistics. This means that it complies fully with the statutory Code of Practice for Statistics, as independently assessed by the OSR. Consequently, the underlying data meets the highest rigorous standards of trustworthiness (impartial and free from political influence), quality (derived from robust and sound methodologies), and value (serving the public interest and user needs).

Who

Our official statistics are developed by analysts within Ofsted's Social Care Data and Analysis Team, working closely with policy colleagues. We actively involve users throughout the development process by seeking feedback on the structure, content and usability of the release. This includes engaging with stakeholders across the sector, such as local authorities, representative bodies and researchers, to ensure that the statistics meet their needs. We will continue to consult users through direct feedback channels and targeted engagement activities to support the ongoing development of these statistics.

Why

Development of these official statistics is needed to ensure that users can fully understand and interpret outcomes within a social care system that is under review. The introduction of supported accommodation as a regulated provider type, the inclusion of short-break-only children's homes, and the evolving nature of the sector mean that some previous analyses are no longer appropriate. At the same time, new data structures and provider categories offer opportunities to present more meaningful insights. The development period allows us to refine the methodology, improve the clarity of the underlying data, and ensure that the release continues to provide high-value information for policymakers, practitioners and the public.

What

We review the structure and content of the underlying dataset to ensure that it is clear and consistent, and avoids duplication. This includes refining how we report on supported accommodation premises, improving the consistency of places data, and assessing whether additional breakdowns or new measures would add value for users. We are also gathering feedback to understand how the release can better support decision-making and sector insight.

When

As an accredited official statistics release, the methodology for children's social care in England is reviewed and updated as part of our annual production cycle. Each year, we assess whether changes in the sector, data collections, inspection frameworks or user feedback require updates to the methodology or underlying dataset. Any methodological changes are incorporated into the next scheduled release and clearly explained in the 'Changes since the previous release' section.

The ongoing review process ensures that the statistics continue to meet the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value expected of accredited official statistics.

Glossary

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

Relevant inspection frameworks for social care providers in England:

[Adoption support agencies](#)

[Boarding schools](#)

[Children's homes](#)

[Children looked after in England including adoptions \(DfE\)](#)

[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 \(VAAs\)](#)

Further information

Contact us

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

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