



Department
for Education

Children's services statutory returns suppliers' and local authority focus group joint meeting

**2 December 2014 (London); 5 December
2014 (Sheffield) Chair: Alan Brooks (DfE)**

February 2015

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1 Introduction

Alan Brooks opened the meeting and thanked LA, Software Supplier and Ofsted representatives for attending.

These notes are in addition to the presentation slides used during the meeting, which will be available at [Meeting notes on web](#)

2 Actions from previous meetings

2.1 Actions from July 2014 meeting

Action point 1

Children in need (CIN) working group to consider if there is a viable technical option to be developed.

Topic: CIN census changes 2014 to 2015; July meeting notes para 6.2

Background: A local authority asked if 'child ID' could be added to reports. Another asked about the approach whereby a separate table was added to the CSV converter to accommodate 'Risk Factors'. Jessica Vickerstaff reported that this was the optimum technical solution available to address performance issues.

Update: LAChildIDs are already included in the child level reports available in COLLECT. If there is a specific example where local authorities feel they should be included but they are not then please let us know and we will look into it further. At the London focus group it was raised that this could be for exporting the COLLECT data (not the COLLECT reports). The data export functionality in COLLECT only allows the direct downloading of the separate modules. If local authorities wish to analyse this data then we suggest it is loaded into a statistical package, for example Access, for analysis.

We have reconsidered amending the convertor for 2015 to 2016 whereby factors are listed separately, however the suggested changes are not feasible – for larger local authorities this could dramatically increase the number of rows in the convertor and affect its performance.

Action point 2:

Children looked after (CLA) analyst officers to ensure that local authorities receive advanced warning about performance table checking timings.

Topic: SSDA903 2013 to 2014 collection (including performance table indicator discussion); July meeting notes para 7.2

Background: Louise confirmed that, as usual, local authorities would be able to view the data for the performance tables in advance. Local authorities felt that two weeks checking time would be adequate, and early notification of those dates would be extremely helpful.

Update: performance tables and scorecards were sent to local authorities for checking on 23 October allowing 3 weeks for checking and comments to be returned.

Action point 3

CLA analyst officers to contact suppliers if help setting up dummy LA IDs was required.

Topic: SSSDA903 2013 to 2014 collection (including performance table indicator discussion); July meeting notes para 7.2

Background: A supplier commented that for the CIN census they have the opportunity to test XML, and wondered if this could be done in a similar way for CLA. Jessica Vickerstaff said that this may be possible using a dummy LA ID and test data. However, she did not think that this would be possible for year on year data. A supplier added that they would be willing to help set up dummy LA IDs, and that it would be of help to them if the CIN and CLA technical specifications could be published at the same time. Louise advised that we are planning to release the CLA return guide and technical specification much earlier this year than in previous years, in response to previous feedback from LAs.

Update: CLA guide and specification was published at the same time as the CIN guide in October 2014. Software suppliers to continue to contact Jessica Vickerstaff if they require access to the 2015 CLA collection site during the familiarisation period.

Action point 4

DfE to look into making postcodes downloadable in the CLA system.

Topic: Confidential placements for children placed for adoption (postcodes) – discussion; July meeting notes para 7.8

Background: There was a discussion about DfE now using the post code to derive 'distance'. LAs asked whether DfE could store post codes so they could be downloaded from the system as they were needed again by LAs for Ofsted.

Update: When a postcode is uploaded via CSV or XML format and subsequently changed in the system, this new postcode isn't held. Therefore if postcodes were added to the episodes download report, they would not reflect where changes had been made. It was therefore decided not to add this to the 2015 CLA collection, although how postcodes are held in the system is under review.

Action point 5

DfE to check validation around postcode, distance, local authority of placement and placement location to ensure there are no issues when home/placement postcode aren't available.

Topic: Confidential placements for children placed for adoption (postcodes) – discussion; July meeting notes para 7.8

Background: Local authorities commented that there were situations where the post code is genuinely (correctly) not available eg refugees, serious crime, forced marriages. Also cases where addresses themselves were not available eg asylum seekers, abandoned babies. Local authorities needed a way of recording these cases without it being counted as an error. Louise noted that in the case of asylum seekers and abandoned babies, the home postcode and distance would not be available but the local authority of placement and placement location (in/out) should still be returned.

Update: There is no validation to ensure postcode is mandatory given the scenarios described above. However, postcode is being used more for internal analysis so is a valuable field and should be completed where available. There is validation to ensure distance, Local authority of placement and placement location are all provided. Distance is not required for UASC.

Action point 6

CLA analyst officers to ensure LA codes are in tables for September and December releases.

Topic: Tables for September and December children looked after (CLA) statistical releases; July meeting notes para 8.2

Background: A local authority commented that they wanted the LA codes to be present for CLA as for CIN. Jessica felt this would be possible. These will be included in tables for the September and December releases.

Update: LA codes were added to September statistical first release (SFR) and will also be included in December additional tables.

Action point 7

CLA analyst officers to review the removal of Table F2 (care leavers by gender).

Topic: Tables for September and December children looked after (CLA) statistical releases; July meeting notes para 8.2; removal of tables

Background: Table F2 (care leavers by gender): local authorities again thought this table was useful and that table F1 did not give gender. Louise and Jessica said they would look at this. The gender table did not show any large differences between outcomes for males and females, therefore this table will be removed.

Update: They all look like they are slightly different from the ones we've already had.

Action point 8

CLA analyst officers to ensure clear guidance about 'care leavers returning home after six months' is provided.

Topic: Tables for September and December children looked after (CLA) statistical releases; July meeting notes para 8.2

Background: There was a general discussion about 'care leavers'. Local authorities asked for clearer guidance about care leavers who returned home after six months. Some local authorities were including these cases and some were not. This was linked to cases where children were only receiving 'advice and assistance' from services (there were small numbers of these but local authorities still had a confusing decision to make). Local authorities knew about these cases, but they were not in the system and this meant more work for social workers. Jessica noted the issue and said that for this year the data would be heavily caveated when published and revised, clearer guidance will be issued shortly for the 2014 to 2015 collection.

Update: Care leavers' data was caveated in the September SFR stating it was the first year data had been collected covering the new cohort and should be treated with caution. We have updated the local authority guide 2014 to 2015 which gives much clearer guidance on who should be included in the care leaver cohort. We have also added a new code to the 'in touch' categories for 2014 to 2015 which identifies separately those who have returned home for a continuous period of 6 months or more.

Action point 9

CLA analyst officers to ensure there is a clear definition of what should be included as a placement move in the placement stability indicators

Topic: Changes to the SSDA903 2015 to 2016 collection; July meeting notes para 10.2

Background: Reason for placement move: It was confirmed that this would not be required where the reason for new episode was a change of legal status, or new starters. There was some discussion around the performance indicators and Louise confirmed that there would need to be a clear definition of what should be included as a placement move in the placement stability indicators, given the new placement types. Currently, for example, 'adoption by placement carer' does not count as a placement move. A local authority asked whether a move should be recorded from when people became adopters, or when the change was actually made. Louise asked the local authority to email her with the question.

Update: Methodology for the calculation of the performance indicators was issued with the indicators this year. With the introduction of revised 'reason for new episode' codes in 2015 to 2016, the methodology documentation will be updated to explain how the indicators are calculated, given the new codes.

Action point 10

CLA analyst officers to look at what should be recorded if a physical move was made – but the child stayed with the same care provider

Topic: Changes to the SSDA903 2015 to 2016 collection; July meeting notes para 10.2

Background: Question in action point was raised as part of a lengthy general conversation in the section of para 10.2 entitled 'Reason for out of area placements'.

Update: The 'reason for out of area placement' data item is now being considered for 2016 to 2017 so we will consider this issue as part of the discussions/proposals.

Action point 11

CLA analyst officers to provide adequate advanced warning about unique reference number (URN) (and other) changes.

Topic: Changes to the SSDA903 2015 to 2016 collection; July meeting notes para 10.2

Background: Placement URN: DfE would still welcome thoughts on how to increase accuracy for URN data, especially for children's homes. There was a discussion about whether there are two URNs – one for residence and one for education. It was agreed that collecting this (and other) data was a lot of work for social workers and they needed support and clear guidance. It was agreed that software suppliers needed as much advanced warning as possible to make required changes.

Update: Initial guidance was sent to local authorities and software suppliers on the addition of URN to the 2015 to 16 collection on 28 August, in advance of our usual communication in late September. This has now been combined into the 2015 to 16 local authority guide which was published in October.

Action point 12

CLA analyst officers to discuss with Ofsted the best way of disseminating URN data, ideally with all the information the LAs required on just the one list.

Topic: Changes to the SSDA903 2015 to 2016 collection; July meeting notes para 10.2

Background: It was agreed that using Ofsted data would be ideal - both to reduce burdens and for accuracy checks. However, there were timing and security issues to be worked through. Ofsted did provide a monthly update for their data, but this appeared to be very tricky to obtain. Ofsted would ideally be able to provide easily accessible, up to date, central access to the relevant data.

Update: Ofsted were involved in the drafting of the URN guidance. They have stated they will provide complete lists of URNs for inspected providers which are open at any point during the collection year on a monthly basis.

Action point 13

CLA analyst officers to see if access to the CLA system could be provided as part of preparation for the collection.

Topic: Questions from local authorities; access to the children looked after (CLA) site; July meeting notes para 11.5.

Background: A supplier said that it was really useful to have access to the CIN COLLECT site in preparation for the census, and wondered if similar access could be provided to the CLA system. DfE undertook to take this request back and see if this was possible. Enquiries are currently being made with our IT contractors but it should be possible to provide software suppliers with access to the CLA system during the familiarisation period.

Update: Please see update to action point 3.

Action point 14

Local authorities to report performance issues to DfE ie when working later in the day.

Topic: Questions from local authorities; access to the children looked after (CLA) site; July meeting notes para 11.5.

Background: This question led to a discussion of when DfE systems were available during collections (ie when it was safe for local authorities to rely on uploads). DfE advised that this was not a definite time as it depended on what overnight processes had to be run. However, any work done after 6pm was more risky, even though the system was usually available until 8 or 9pm. DfE undertook to see what could be done in the future to provide more advice – and said that if issues were experienced, to report them the next day.

Update: We looked into this a little further following the meeting and added a paragraph to the next collection communication (on 25 July):

At the focus groups this week a number of local authorities asked what time the COLLECT overnight processing begins so they could make an informed assessment on the latest time they could try to upload an extract to the system. Maintenance and back up processes begin from 8pm, and run every day, so local authorities should take this into account when uploading new extracts to COLLECT.

3 Adoption Leadership Board quarterly collection (Mark Pearson)

3.1 Presentation

Mark reported that the response rates for recent quarters was very good (between 75-100%) and thanked local authorities for this. A good response was critical for robust data for analysis. Completed analysis and adoption maps would be circulated around agencies shortly. There were still some issues in relation to aligning the collection with Ofsted data and this was due to be discussed in the next few days. No major changes were anticipated, apart from those associated with the 'reversal flag' and possibly some new variables.

NB: Mark had to address urgent work and was unavailable to present at the Sheffield meeting, so Adam Whitaker kindly took Mark's place at short notice.

3.2 Discussion

LAs did not raise any issues about the information provided. However, a question had been submitted before the meeting:

Question: Our Adoption Team have asked for clarification on the ALB – can we double check it's rolling data that they want and not just new information.

Update: The answer is rolling data please. We want information on all children and adopters going through the adoption process, even if nothing changed during the quarter.

4 Children in need (CIN) updates (Adam Whitaker, Alison Butler, Anneka Nelson-Girtchen)

4.1 Presentation

There are no major changes planned for the CIN census in the next couple of years. However, CIN officers were interested in finding out local authority and supplier views on what was currently collected and published. Local authorities were asked to break into small groups and consider the following four questions, which had been circulated to attending local authorities and suppliers before the meeting via email as follows:

We would like to use the CIN census agenda item to ask you a few questions about the collection. On the day we intend to ask you to discuss amongst yourselves and either feedback on the day or over the following days via our email address CiN.STATS@education.gsi.gov.uk . You may wish to have a think about these questions beforehand.

Q1: Ideas for analysis: now that we have a time series of reasonable quality CiN data, we are working on a longitudinal CiN/CLA database. What analysis would be useful for local authorities?

Q2: What data does your systems record that we don't already collect which could be useful to compare with other local authorities?

Q3: Which data items in the collection are the most time consuming to prepare and return and why?

Q4: How do you use the published tables? Do you mainly use the underlying data or the local authority interactive tool (LAIT)? Are there some tables you never use?

4.2 Discussion

There were lively discussions held in small groups. Local authorities were asked to provide main feedback via paper forms provided to accompany discussions, and via the mailbox quoted in para 4.1 above. There was a general level of contentment, but their initial thoughts when asked about key issues were:

Q3: A couple of local authorities commented that while they could see the value of collecting assessment factors, this was the most time consuming data to collect because data was often missing and late additions were necessary. This seemed to reflect the views of many local authorities. One local authority said that they had now used local validation within their systems to address missing data issues (ie some data must be present) – and that this had helped.

A local authority said that they had spent a lot of time on assessment factors – and then found that the tables were not at local level. CIN presenters replied that this had been necessary because the transition to continuous assessment had resulted in patchy data nationally, regionally and within local authorities. This had meant that data could not be shown and the tables were not of sufficient quality at lower levels of detail. Data could be circulated to local authorities but it was described as ‘bitty’ even in this context. For coming years, data would be published at local authority level (or underlying at Local authority level) and so benchmarking would be able to take place.

Local authorities also commented that new data items generally take time to collect. One issue was that even though CIN specifications were published six months before the collection, this could mean that the data was not recorded for the full year. It was confirmed that no changes were planned for the next two collections. The six month timescale was fairly standard across DfE collections – but that the department would see if any improvement could be made.

A local authority said that in terms of what they wanted to see, they would like a clear picture of what the child’s ‘journey’ looked like ie from assessment to looked after. Another noted that the department had stopped sharing how CIN and CLA were matched – which was useful underlying data. Alison Butler said this was not in the CIN team’s remit but that they would try to find a response.

At the Sheffield meeting, Adam asked a supplementary question: Was the new education, health and care plans on the same systems as social care? Local authorities mostly indicated this was not the case. One clarified that the education system was used – with relevant data on the social care system.

Action Point 1: Local authorities to provide any further feedback on CIN topics via the mailbox (please see para 4.1). This includes local authorities who did not attend the meeting who wish to comment.

Action Point 2: CIN team to check why CIN/CLA data matching is no longer shared.

Update: CIN-CLA matching rates are passed back to local authorities and work to do this analysis is underway. We anticipate the matched figures for 2013 to 2014 will be passed back to local authorities in February/March 2015.

5 Data Exchange (Andy Clarke, Gwen McGill, Mark Foster, Roger Plant)

5.1 Presentation

Presenters reported that DfE was looking into the feasibility and options for a new way to share data. This was an open study at the moment in that while there was a general approach being proposed – this was not set in stone in terms of what data and what agencies would be involved. DfE was conducting exercises to build up evidence from data providers/users views. The new systems, if introduced, would not be an all embracing system and data warehouse to collect and store all data across all agencies – and dictate internal local authority processes. But the new system would be tailored to meet agreed priorities for data sharing (with future proofing for expansion if and when this was desirable).

The proposed method was to have a data hub with a common set of exchange formats and data standards/protocols to automatically share data with partner organisations (eg DfE). In principle, data would be shared in real time and this would replace `one off` data collections. This would only be where partners agreed this was both possible and desirable. The system would be built, if at all, on the basis of agreed priorities for data providers and the department - and funding available.

The DfE data exchange team had been collecting evidence from data providers (e.g. education data) and the CIN/CLA focus groups were seen as a good opportunity to collect evidence from children's services data providers.

The data exchange team had collected some user stories which were available to local authorities and suppliers. In London the session continued as a general conversation as a whole group; in Sheffield there was a general conversation but local authorities also viewed the stories and annotated with their views and stories of their own. The stories were structured as follows:

“As a.....”; “I want to.....”; “Because.....”. At the end of the session, local authorities were asked to prioritise the issues/requirements noted, and were invited to send further views to the team (via Alan Brooks).

Next steps were for the team to present evidence and options to the DfE board in February 2015. If time permits, the team hopes to seek for feedback on these options before the board meeting; but would carry out further consultation after the board meeting.

5.2 Discussion

Throughout the general conversation the team emphasised that this was a genuine collection of evidence and that the options for what may actually happen (if anything) would depend on the evidence gathered and resources available. Discussion fell into positive comments, issues and questions:

5.2.1 Positive views

An example of where local authorities would benefit would be the immediate availability of exam results. Local authorities felt they should have this data currently but they do not. Some local authorities pay a third party (Welfare Call) to obtain this data but they don't provide all the data needed.

A local authority felt that while this would be a major cultural change, positive aspects may be in other areas than purely returns eg up to date knowledge of the looked after children in their area.

Another local authority said that they liked the idea of data drawn from everyday use (rather than large census exercises) because it meant that schools data would be more up to date eg requests for unique pupil numbers (UPNs) at the start of the September term. This would also save school to school communications. Andy Clarke said that this point was a recurring one when evidence had been collected.

Local authorities said they often struggled to obtain data from academies and wondered if academies would be made to join in (which would help). Andy felt that access to data would be the same as currently. This issue too had been mentioned often before.

Another local authority mentioned current difficulties in obtaining data about live births (which was important for children centres and education planning).

One local authority (although there seemed to be general support for this comment) felt that what was missing from the 'business case' as presented – was what the benefits were for the actual child and their families ie outcomes. Andy thought this was a useful point and said he would be interested in seeing examples (an example raised at the meeting was for teachers who could have prior warning that a new (or existing) pupil had had disruption in their home (eg police visit)).

5.2.2 Issues

How will data be authorised?

Currently the council head wants to see data before it is shared. The team felt that this need not change as there would still be points at which data was used for the purposes currently served by data collections. Local authorities would need to innovate their internal systems to match their own requirements.

What is the difference between the new approach and Contact Point – will lessons be learned?

One of the differences may be that more consultation is taking place. The team felt that views on Contact Point had been mixed. One issue had been sorting out access protocols. Andy said that Contact Point issues would be revisited and borne in mind.

If collections are not used, Local authorities lack drivers to obtain information (eg from academies).

The team said that there would still be critical 'points in time' for data eg for funding calculations. A benefit of an ongoing approach was that Local authorities would not be 'hit' by high volumes all at once e.g. UPNs would be notified if they changed.

Who takes ownership of a record eg governance?

Andy agreed this was a big issue. At this stage it was felt that this would be with the source (eg a school) as much as possible.

Address data is currently an issue and will still be

It was reported that senior DfE officers knew this was an issue and were taking this forward.

Data cleaning and authorisation

Local authorities reported that they currently clean data at certain times of year in line with collections. They were concerned about benchmarking and data being shared and/or used when it had not been cleaned. They also reiterated their concerns about copies of data being taken without authority. Andy said the team would take away and consider the issue of authority, and would check with local authorities what their preferences were eg maybe - authorisation, sight of reports, dash boards.

The issue about data cleaning itself was discussed at length. The team said that the principle was that as much data cleaning was done at source as possible ie in the software supplier table. Regular use of data would replace data 'validation' which research had shown tended to throw issues to the surface. Local authorities commented that social workers are 'in the field' and won't see the need for the culture change required. Local authorities know that data they hold may look correct but in fact is not until they look at it (eg visits made but not recorded) – and resources are an issue on a daily basis. This is why effort is concentrated on cleaning data for the collections. Local authorities felt that schools probably worked on the same basis for census data (although Andy commented that evidence so far suggested that schools welcomed this change in principle).

Existing systems

Local authorities commented that there are existing solutions already, and that local authorities had been encouraged to buy systems by DfE. However, Gwen McGill commented that there is currently no cohesion between systems, although if local

authorities were happy they should report this to the team. One local authority said that they recognised the principles behind the proposals, but were worried that this would 'snowball' into a bigger demand from the department on local authorities – which could result in a significant cost and burden if local authorities did not have some control. There may also be gaps in the data since local authorities currently, and were likely to develop, different approaches.

5.2.3 Questions

A local authority asked how anonymised data would be obtained. Another that for LAC, notifications and de-notifications may be a problem. Andy and Gwen agreed that 'connections' were a big issue that needed to be resolved.

Andy asked if it would be useful to see what was happening in other local authorities earlier? Some local authorities responded by saying that they already did this using benchmarking. Others said that things changed too often and local authorities felt they may have little time to use this facility.

Local authorities asked what other organisations and agencies would be involved. The team replied that initially this was a DfE development but that any system developed would be future proofed. Organisations and data mentioned in the focus groups were NHS, CPS, child protection, voluntary agencies. It was reported that Ofsted were taking a strong interest in the development.

A local authority asked if the new system would be statutory or whether they could opt out. It is possible that for school census, for instance, the regulations may be changed to reflect the 'data on change' approach. It was felt that a central agreement was best – backed up with regulations if need be.

A local authority asked how this fitted into the data transformation portfolio. Andy confirmed that this project is being managed within this area.

5.2.4 Conclusion

The team said that the concept of 'data interoperability' could lead to all data providers across all agencies sharing data in real time – but there was a long way to go to achieve this. The development was based on trying to share data more quickly and the project was based on prioritising which data was the most important for this to happen rather than trying to cover all data at once. Linking data looked like a good feature – but this would depend on data being kept up to date. DfE accepted this would mean a culture change within Local authorities – and that Local authorities would need to innovate their own internal systems and practices. However, DfE was not seeking to say how this should be done and this is meant to amount to plugging into a new system (not rewriting a whole system). For the development to continue – it must be assessed as doable and valuable for partners as well as meeting DfE needs. This development was a start point –

not a complete change to all data collections. Peaks where certain data was critically important would still exist but DfE would not ask for a return – it would simply have a look ie share not collect. The system would work on a set of agreed formats which would be automatically recognised – although these would have to be specified and understood. The system worked with microscopic/granular data (not aggregated data) and once formats were described the systems should be able to communicate easily.

The team had recently visited West Midlands, where a demonstration system for schools data had been tested. Schools liked the fact they could see new pupil data immediately – and the system had successfully replicated school census requirements on a daily basis. Children’s services data may be more complicated to work with, but while the West Midlands system did not include all data – it did have flags eg for LAC.

6 Children looked after (SSDA903) (Louise Feebrey)

6.1 2014 to 2015 collection

Changes for the 2014 to 2015 collection had already been announced. Today's presentation was to clarify some points following questions received from Local authorities.

6.1.1 Care leavers

Please refer to the care leavers slides in the accompanying pack.

Louise confirmed that 'in custody' should always be reported as unsuitable accommodation and that validation and guidance will be in place for the collection.

Louise said that although numbers were small, she wanted to check that data for suitable and unsuitable accommodation made sense for children that had been deported, gone abroad or where their residence was not known. Local authorities reported that the choice of values for this data could be misleading in terms of local knowledge of the situation. Most local authorities agreed that they might know the accommodation for children who were classed as 'gone abroad' but most said they would not know for children who had been 'deported'. The only way suitability of accommodation would be known at all for 'residence not known' was word of mouth. On the basis of discussion Louise said that DfE would look at the possibility of introducing a new suitability category of 'not known', but this would now not be possible until the 2016 to 2017 collection. In the meantime, Louise will consider how the suitability should be coded for the purposes of the 2014 to 2015 and 2015 to 2016 collections and update the guidance if necessary.

Louise also confirmed the addition of RHOM (returned home) as an 'in touch' code. This is because when a child returns to parents (or someone with parental responsibility) for a continuous period of six months or more they are no longer deemed a 'former relevant child' and are therefore excluded from the OC3 cohort. This information has been added for the 2014 to 2015 collection and is in the guidance. The approach is similar to that taken for children who have 'died after leaving care'. Local authorities generally agreed with this change – but one said it would be helpful if such changes were always highlighted in the guidance cover email.

A local authority said it would be really helpful if they could simply 'press a button' to obtain the 19 to 21 year old cohort for the following year so that they know the cohort in advance. So for example, in the 2014 to 2015 collection, local authorities would like to see a list of child IDs of those children who will be in the OC3 cohort for the 2015 to 16 year. Local authorities also said there had been errors in the list of children missing from the OC3 cohort for the past year. Louise said she would check on errors – but could not promise the delivery of the development request as it was a late requirement.

One local authority said that if children were away every weekend (ie an agreed arrangement) then this tripped the limit for number of days and automatically triggered when the child was 18+. Louise said she would look into this.

Action Point 3: Louise to check that any errors outstanding on the list of missing OC3 records are being corrected ahead of this year's collection.

Action Point 4: Louise to see if the 19 to 21 child list for the coming year could be obtained at the press of a button.

Update: Louise has confirmed that it will not be possible to introduce this for the 2014 to 2015 collection but it will be considered alongside other changes for the 2015 to 2016 collection.

Action Point 5: Louise to look into the automatic trigger of OC3 for children who are away for agreed days over a period of time.

6.1.2 Previous permanence arrangement

Louise confirmed that the 'unknown' category should only be used when it is not known whether the child had a previous permanence option, rather than when it is not known which of the three options is applicable. Please see the 'previous permanence arrangement' slide (1) in the slide pack accompanying these notes for a table showing the options. A quick discussion covered what should happen if it was known that a previous permanence arrangement was in place but not which one. It was felt that this would be highly unlikely to happen and Local authorities should be able to find this out.

6.1.3 Missing from care

Please see the description and example on the 'missing from care' slides (1 and 2). Louise confirmed that if a child had an open 'missing' placement as their last episode in the 2013 to 2014 return (ie was missing at 31 March 2014, then for the 2014 to 2015 collection, the first episode for 2015 should match the last episode prior to the missing episode in 2014 (eg same placement type, start dates, etc).

This approach was in guidance, but local authorities had some questions. Local authorities asked if this was for one year only, and Louise confirmed it was. Local authorities also asked about gap recording and the recording of secondary episodes. Some local authorities were concerned that different systems would make this difficult to achieve – especially those where manual amendment was not possible, but it was noted that there are a very small number of children recorded as missing at 31 March so the impact was thought to be minimal. There were also concerns about how this will affect the statistics in cases where children are missing for very long periods. One local authority noted they have an airport in their area and have relatively large numbers of children who go missing for long periods of time. In these cases, it is not practical to keep

the placement open, so children will be recorded as being at a placement for long times when they actually aren't.

There was a long discussion about how to record children who are missing when they start to be looked after. There is not a placement agreed (or would not have been when the incident actually happened). Louise noted that the guidance currently says to record the placement the child 'would have gone to' but some local authorities said a placement may not have been agreed. Louise said she would clarify this.

Local authorities asked what they should do with the open 2014 episode. Louise said that the department would see it as closed, but conversation generally pointed to the episode being treated appropriately in local authority social care systems. Louise said that validation would be amended this year to ensure that errors were not raised about this.

There was a discussion about placement stability indicators and how these would be dealt with. Louise noted that the intention is ultimately to remove 'missing' as a placement type from the calculations, however, because the indicators are based on 3 year averages, further thought needs to be given to how these will be calculated in the next couple of years.

Action Point 6: Louise to feedback on issues raised in paragraph 6.1.3 ie replicating missing episodes between 2014 and 2015.

Action Point 7: The department will inform local authorities as to the methodology of the placement indicators when it has been fully considered.

6.1.4 Change in fostering codes

Please see descriptions of new fostering codes, and how they relate to old fostering codes, on the 'change in fostering codes' slide in the accompanying pack. These changes and how to deal with them are in collection guidance.

6.1.5 Long term fostering

Please see slides about long term fostering (1) (report); and (2) (table of codes) in the accompanying slide pack. Louise apologised that the definitions for long term fostering are yet to be published. Because of this, data on long term fostering will not be published in 2015 (only that for U2, U3, U5 and U6). Local authorities can choose whether to return U1 and U4 codes during the 2015 collection – but these will be coded as U3/U6 for publishing purposes. Guidance covered these changes.

There was a discussion about how the changeover will look in terms of what actually happened in the field. Local authorities generally thought that if a foster placement becomes a long-term fostering placement, the placement will be updated on the system,

rather than a new episode recorded. Otherwise it might look like a like a change of carer. Louise had thought that a new episode would be created – but agreed to check this.

Action Point 8: Louise to let local authorities know when the long-term fostering definition would be released.

Update: We are aiming to publish the draft regulations and guidance late February/early March and that they will come in force on 1 April.

Action Point 9: The department to inform local authorities as to the methodology of the placement indicators when it has been fully considered.

6.1.6 Postcode data

Louise ran through the developments shown on the postcode data slide in the accompanying slide pack. Postcode data was important eg for travel times. A local authority said that there were some placements that they were literally not allowed to know. Louise confirmed that in these cases, validation would enable them to leave the postcode blank, but for all placements the placement location field (ie in/out of local authority) and local authority of placement should be returned.

Local authorities said that the DfE system was always out of date in terms of postcode data eg new housing estates (whereas the Royal Mail data was up to date). Louise apologised but said that the system was loaded in February which was as late as possible.

A local authority also noted that the home post code reflects the address of the family when the child was placed into care – but the family may have moved. It seemed that only updates by local authorities could resolve this.

Action Point 10: Louise to look into whether a more up to date set of postcodes could be available in the DfE system.

6.2 2015 to 2016 collection

Louise ran through the changes which are listed on the reminder of changes slide in the accompanying pack. All these changes were advised in the September letter. A local authority asked if, in the performance tables, care leavers would be published in one group or split into different ages. A DfE officer (Miguel Marques-Dos Santos) replied that some ages would be split and some grouped together.

6.3 2016 to 2017 collection

Please see the 'reason for out of area placement' slide in the accompanying pack. Louise said that the feedback provided at the July 2014 focus groups had been very

useful and that developments had been refined into the draft code set shown on the slide. The aim was that the list was useful for local authorities but not too long for social workers. Local authorities had the following questions and comments:

- A local authority said that they would like IT companies to make these codes compulsory as if they are not present it will be burdensome to look back through case loads.
- How should SEN be coded? Louise said she would consider and cover in guidance.
- Did 'network maintained' mean consortia? Louise said this did not mean consortia – but was about friends, school and personal networks
- A supplier said that the out of area criteria needed attention i.e. how far out of the area counted. There was a long discussion about the reasons and scenarios concerned eg small local authorities and those with major towns near boundaries are likely to have more of these type of placements naturally. A child may change where they live but maintain the same educational placement. Some local authorities may not have the facilities to provide certain types of specialist care. Louise said all these scenarios would be considered and would inform guidance.
- Some local authorities noted that there may not be any provision of a certain type in their area (eg secure unit, YOI, children's home) so the guidance should be clear on where such cases should be recorded.

Action Point 11: Louise to consider the feedback, and update the list of reasons why children may be placed out of area as necessary.

Action Point 12: Louise to check whether the intended criteria for the 'reason for out of area' placement is required for just out of area placements or those out of area and over 20 miles.

Action Point 13: Louise to consider if the new 'reason for out of area placement' should only be returned if there is a change of carer (otherwise the options/guidance would need to cover scenarios such as foster placements moving from within the local authority to outside).

6.4 Statistical first releases

Dates for publications are given on the statistical first release slide in the accompanying pack. The plan was for the performance tables to be published on 10 December (plus scorecards). A local authority asked what happened if they disagreed with SFR release figures. Louise confirmed that the methodology was largely unchanged from previous years, and therefore she didn't expect there to be any issues, but that if a local authority thought that the DfE had wrongly calculated something they should raise it with DfE.

6.5 Performance indicators

6.5.1 Presentation

Louise said that during the July focus groups, Local authorities provided some very useful feedback on the 2013 to 2014 collection, including raising issues around communications and the calculation of performance indicators (PIs) within the collection system. On the former, Helpdesk were presenting a session later in the agenda. On the PIs, there were problems with the calculations not working properly during the collection, causing some frustration and anxiety amongst local authorities and delaying the collection.

These views had been considered within DfE and also discussed with some Local authorities. However, Louise noted that there are some difficult issues that are not easily resolved: changes to adjust indicators (and introduce new ones) do not fit well with necessary development timetables (the specification has to be completed by August; and developed/tested by April) in the year prior to the release of the performance tables. There were also concerns that the presence of indicators and the work by Local authorities to fully understand the methodology, replicate and check their figures at the point of collection -distracts from the actual collection and sign off since they take up part of the collection period. Louise felt it was unusual for indicators to form part of a data collection. The proposal from DfE is to remove performance indicators from the collection period – but to retain the reports as part of outputs after the collection period, enabling a review period for local authorities as in previous years. The csv download reports and the basic stats reports would still be included in the data collection system to give local authorities the ability to check they had uploaded their data correctly, and these could be used alongside the local authorities own MI reports used throughout the year, to ensure the data are valid.

6.5.2 Discussion

Local authorities were generally concerned by the potential removal of performance indicators from the collection. They felt the issues last year showed how important they were. Local authorities said they needed the confidence checks the indicators provided, and that local authority senior managers wanted to sign off the indicators and this would be very hard to replicate within local authority systems (eg for reviews).

Local authorities said that indicators were the only reliable way that they could check the accuracy of their data. Louise asked why checking throughout the year and internal local authority systems could not be used. Local authorities generally replied that internal systems worked on a rolling basis at the back end with internal data. Whereas supplier systems and DfE indicators represented a snap shot of what would be released (ie front end) which highlighted errors or inconsistencies in the data, especially year on year issues (which would be very burdensome to check using reports). Resources within local

authorities (and pressures on social workers in the field) often meant that resources to clean data were focused at year end when data issues were identified by indicators and could be investigated and corrected. Local authorities felt that the indicators were useful and should not be dispensed with just because a couple of them caused issues. Viewing reports for two weeks post-collection was not considered by local authorities to be enough. One local authority commented that although the reviews indicator had caused issues in the past – it was very useful for highlighting late reviews and errors. Another found the care indicators very helpful e.g. for the new codes.

Some local authorities felt they needed to be able to trust supplier systems more than they currently can. Suppliers responded that checking XML tables as they can for the CIN census would really help (NB: Suppliers should contact Jessica Vickerstaff if they wish to check systems in the familiarisation period).

Local authorities asked whether, if indicators were removed, they could have a longer window to make equivalent checks. Louise said this is something that could be considered although there was a 3 week window for checking this year. However, re-submissions of data would not be possible at that stage. However, if Local authorities found that their data was wrong, DfE could add a footnote. In the event that DfE had made an error when calculating the indicators, the data would obviously be corrected.

One local authority noted that the adult social care collection included indicators and another local authority thought that the CIN census had indicators within the collection system. However, Alison Butler said that it worked differently for CIN. For the indicator that isn't based solely on the current years data (child protection plan reviews within timescale), Local authorities resubmit the last review in the previous year in their current years data so no matching to previous years' data submissions is required to calculate the indicator.

Local authorities said that indicators were far more helpful than the reports/downloads as it enabled local authorities to check the validity of the data. They felt that if they were not correct, or if they were removed, then this would make a big difference – especially for smaller local authorities. Local authorities generally felt that the removal of indicators would be a risk for data quality; would mean a cultural change in the way data was collected and validated; and would increase burdens on them and social workers – and that the only beneficiary would be DfE timescales.

Louise thanked local authorities for their feedback but reiterated the difficulties in implementing indicators within the system a year in advance of publication, the likelihood of delays to the collection window each year if local authorities are checking all the indicators within the system, and the need to separate the data collection from the data outputs.

7 Helpdesk (Gale McNiff)

7.1 Presentation

Gale reported that the issues raised at the July focus groups had been considered by DfE. The service request form method could not be altered as this was a policy for communications across government. Gale also reported that the resources used in the past to cover telephones could not be sustained and that in most cases the officers answering the phone had to forward calls to officers working on the collections, since helpdesk staff had to deal with several collections and could not have the detailed knowledge to answer most of the queries raised. Thus, the service request form method was similar except that it was not carried out by phone (which had the benefit that requests could be worked on out of normal office hours). Nevertheless, the following developments were planned:

- Better systems were to be implemented to ensure that the five day deadline was not breached – and that cases were followed up more effectively before and after the five day period. The new DfE helpdesk collection lead will monitor this (Claire Rice – who was introduced).
- The five day period would not now be refreshed if the query was passed onto another officer
- All existing helpdesk guidance and training was being reviewed and updated (in response to local authority concerns about the advice they were given).
- Trend analysis of recurring questions and how they were recorded was also being reviewed and improved.
- A webchat service was now available. This was staffed so that responses should be to very short timescales. For complex queries the local authority could also request that they are telephoned by helpdesk staff.
- A forum would also be set up shortly. DfE would monitor this, but conversation between local authorities could also mean that queries could be discussed by many people at the same time – and also answers observed by many local authorities at the same time.

Local authorities were still very concerned that for critical/urgent queries there was no contingency number for them to ring (eg complete system failure; very complex queries). Gale described how approver details could be obtained but that the route to a telephone conversation would have to be through the service request form or webchat (if the query cannot resolved otherwise).

Local authorities commented on coordination of communications from DfE. They said it was frustrating to be waiting for one or more answers to queries – and then to receive a call from DfE staff chasing their return. Gale said she would look into this.

Action Point 14: Gale McNiff to look at how response and courtesy call communications can be better coordinated (especially in relation to outstanding queries).

Local authorities commented on the service request form itself. They said they it would be useful to have a case reference and the case content fed back to them as a receipt. This is because of the delay for response but also because they often had more than one request ongoing at any one time. Another local authority said it would be useful to have a local authority specific request form as the basic details were burdensome to complete when so many requests had to be made. Gale said she would see if this was possible given the over- arching nature of the request form system

Action Point 15: Gale McNiff to see if the content of the service request form could be enhanced eg to include query content; to be local authority specific.

One local authority questioned the five day SLA and said that this had not been signed up to by local authorities. Gale said this was a standard period. Many local authorities said that they found FAQs very useful. Gale said that it was government policy not to have FAQs because guidance should contain all necessary information and be updated so that it remained comprehensive and accurate – and that guidance was being reviewed and updated. However, local authorities strongly missed FAQs and suggested some alternatives (eg within bulletins (‘top query of the week), on the forum), local authorities strongly commented that good FAQs reduced calls to helpdesk. Gale commented that guidance would be increasingly in web content rather than PDF. Local authorities asked that the bulletin was produced more frequently.

Local authorities overall were still very concerned that they had no direct recourse to expert DfE officers. They said that they communicate with each other but that solutions reached may not be the ones DfE would want (thus data quality may be compromised). Local authorities felt that the webchat system would be no cheaper – and that in the end costs would be borne by local authorities rather than DfE. The lack of accountability and consistency for contacts was an issue for local authorities. Local authorities felt the complexity of children’s services queries meant that email and web responses were often not clear enough – and that this may increase the time taken to resolve queries until a phone call could take place. Local authorities commented that if they experienced ongoing difficulties they may be tempted to send in both a webchat and service request form at the same time. Gale said this would slow up processing but recognised local authority concerns and the need for a quick response, however, in order to avoid duplication on the helpdesk it would be appreciated if local authority colleagues only used one form of request at a time.

12 Attendance Lists

Organisation	Name	Organisation	Name
LONDON MEETING		Solihull	Rachel Robinson
Barnet	Elena Timotheou	Stoke	Katie Hammersley
Bexley	Tracey Beeson	Tameside	Andrea Doyle
Central Bedfordshire	Peter Worthington	Wakefield	Helen Murray
City of London	Elizabeth Malton	Warrington	Helen Lawes
Ealing	Andy Leung	Wolverhampton	Paul Crawford
East Sussex	Rob MacLean	Worcestershire	Sally Gray
Enfield	Yvonne Seville	SUPPLIERS	
Essex	Penny Powling	CACI	Jes East
Gloucestershire	John James	Capita	Steve Baxter
Greenwich	Debbie Farrell	CIVICA	Stuart Chandler
Hampshire	Jenny Lovell	Corelogic	Pippa Young
Hertfordshire	Michael MacAllister	Liquidlogic	Chris Ffelan (London)
Hillingdon	David Mellor	Liquidlogic	Nick Holmes (Sheff'd)
Kent	Ian Valentine	OLM	Fiona Nicol
Kingston & Rich'nd	Wai Chan	Tribal Group	Salina Howard
Lambeth	Lorna Brown	Welfare Call	Stuart Henderson
Lewisham	John Payne	OFSTED	
Merton	Lynne Doyle	Judith Swindell	London
Milton Keynes	Jane Spencer	Stewart Hartshorne	Sheffield
Oxfordshire	Danny Hearn	DfE	
Redbridge	Keith Hurst	Alan Brooks	Mark Pearson

Sutton	James Whitfield	Miguel Marques-Dos Santos	Adam Whitaker
Thurrock	Bob Mills	Anneka Nelson-Girtchen	Alison Butler
Waltham Forest	Maria Theodosi	Louise Febbrey	Jessica Vickerstaff
West Berkshire	Alison Roe	Claire Rice	Gale McNiff
Wokingham	Sarah Robinson	Gwen McGill	Andy Clarke
SHEFFIELD MEETING		Mark Foster	Roger Plant
Birmingham	Sandra Dawkes		
Bradford	Cat Moss		
Cheshire East	Debra Sloan		
Doncaster	Chris Wells		
East Riding	Neviana Paunova		
Halton	Susan Davies		
Hartlepool	Kay Forgie		
Leicestershire	Emma Patrick		
Manchester	Yuen San Ling		
Middlesbrough	Jo Hudson		
Newcastle	Ann Howard		
North Lincs	Lisa York-Robinson		
North Yorks	Abby Mansbridge-Beard		
Nottingham City	Matt Thompson		
Nottinghamshire	Hannah Lomas		
Sefton	Jim Conalty		
Sheffield	Robert Campbell		



Department
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