



Department  
for Education

# **Characteristics of children in need in England: 2017 to 2018**

**Data quality and uses**

**November 2018**

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## Purpose

The purpose of this publication is to provide the latest information on children referred to local authority social care services, children assessed to be in need of social services, and children who were the subject of a child protection plan. This document details the key users and uses of the publication statistics, and highlights any known data quality issues and concerns.

# 1. Key users and uses of the data

## 1.1 Key users

The main users of the children in need data are:

- the Department for Education who use the data to provide advice to Ministers on policy monitoring and setting future policies;
- the local authorities who use the information to benchmark themselves against other authorities as well as regional and national averages;
- Ofsted who use the information as part of their inspection activities.

Other known users of the data are:

- the Ministry of Justice who use the data, particularly on the number of children on child protection plans, to forecast the number of public law cases likely to enter the courts;
- the NSPCC Consultancy Service to understand numbers of children who are the subject of a child protection plan;
- the NSPCC Information Service analyse the statistics with a particular interest in breakdowns by age, gender, category of abuse, ethnicity and disability;
- the Metropolitan Police Service (Child Abuse Investigation Command) for research into child abuse;
- Action for Children group looking into the number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan, by local authority and by category of abuse;
- other UK government departments for comparison purposes;
- The Home Office;
- Office of the Children's Commissioner.

## 1.2 User consultation

In previous years we have consulted with users of the data on the format and contents of this publication. We would welcome any feedback users have on any aspect of this document and the statistical publication in general at [CIN.STATS@education.gov.uk](mailto:CIN.STATS@education.gov.uk).

We hold a regular local authority focus group, which meets up to three times a year, and regularly receive feedback on the publication.

### **1.3 Current and planned further uses of children in need data**

The children in need data is linked to the children looked after data collection and the national pupil database (NPD). The linked data provides the outcomes statistics in the additional tables published later in March.

Further analysis could include tracking and analysing the journeys of individual children and exploring how these vary according to their characteristics and needs, for example:

- linking to the children looked after data will allow the analysis of the proportion of looked after children who are disabled and analysis of the original reasons for the child being identified as being in need.
- linking to the NPD will allow the analysis of pupil outcomes for children in need, for example, identifying the attainment of children in need and the progression between key stages following the receipt of services. It will also let us explore other relationships with absence, exclusions and characteristics (such as free school meal eligibility (FSM), looked after and special educational need (SEN) status) and build a more complete local and national picture of the children in need population.

## **2. Children in need 2017 to 2018 census data quality**

### **2.1 General comments on the quality of the returns**

All 152 local authorities provided a children in need census return in summer 2018. In previous years estimates have been used on some occasions where specific quality issues were raised by the local authority. Estimates are highlighted in the tables using footnotes and the method for estimating is outlined in the methodology document accompanying this release.

Figures in this statistical release represent the final position of the 2017 to 2018 children in need census. In order to ensure optimum use of the statistics for end users, we have published local authority level data wherever possible, and footnotes have been included in relevant tables to highlight any issues that have been identified in the data quality or completeness.

### **2.2 Children in need population figure time series changes**

The number of children in need is a key indicator within the CIN publication, however these children are not explicitly identified by local authorities in their returns to the department. Instead, “flags” are derived to highlight the children using a combination of other data items within the return. These metrics are presented for those CIN episodes ‘starting’, ‘ending’, or open ‘at any point’ during the year and those open ‘at 31 March’. The derivation of each of these measures is given in detail below.

#### **Episodes of need open across different reporting years**

As part of the continuing improvement of the processes used to derive these metrics we have identified some inconsistencies within the derivation of these flags, concerning cases that remain open across different census years. We have implemented changes to improve the data processing and quality, which remove these inconsistencies from the data series. As part of that work we have carried out a full review of the historic data processing to enable us to re-calculate the time series, taking account of these changes.

Data is collected on an annual basis and includes information on all cases that were open during any part of the collection year, which is between the 1 April and the 31 March (inclusive); this will include cases that were referred in previous census years and remain open into the current census year. As part of the derivation of the CIN measures certain cases are removed as they are not classed as children in need, these are:

- a) Cases that resulted in no further action after the initial consideration of the referral, meaning that no action is taken by children’s social care services.

- b) Cases that proceed to an assessment but were assessed as 'not in need'. These are children who the local authority assess following a referral, but for whom they did not provide services.

As part of the review it was found that cases that were referred in the previous census year were being treated differently to cases referred in the current year, an example is given below.

- a) If a referral was recorded in the current census year (e.g. between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017) and the case was either:
- - i) Marked as referral no further action.
    - ii) Case closed after the assessment using closure code RC8 (case closed after assessment – No further action).

This would be excluded from all the CIN metrics.

- b) If a referral was from the previous census year (e.g. before 1 April 2016) and the case was either:

- - i) Marked as referral no further action.
  - ii) Case closed after the assessment using closure code RC8 (case closed after assessment – No further action).

This would be included within the CIN measure in error.

Inclusion of the cases identified in b(i) above impact on the CIN at 31 March measure, the CIN ending an episode of need in the year measure, and the CIN at any point in the year measure.

Inclusion of the cases identified in b(ii) above impact on the CIN ended during the year and CIN at any point measures. The measure of children at 31 March remained unaffected by the issue b(ii) as to be classed as 'not in need' a case must have been assessed, then closed with no further action on the case. As all cases open at 31 March are by definition open cases, this issue did not affect the figures.

## **Move from initial and core to continuous assessments**

As part of the review of these measures we also identified an error within the data processing for 2014, during which local authorities were in the process of switching from

'initial' and 'core' assessments to 'continuous' assessments<sup>1</sup>. As a result of this change data was returned for both scenarios.

In cases where children had an 'initial' assessment which was closed after being assessed not to be in need, they were discounted from the population figures. Similarly in cases where children had a 'continuous' assessment and were assessed not to be in need they were discounted from the population figures. There were however 1,120 cases which were marked as having *both* an 'initial' and a 'continuous' assessment and then the cases were closed as assessed not in need.

Due to an issue with the processing of the data these children did not get discounted when they should have been. This led to an over count of 1,120 in 2014 for the 'Started', 'Ended', and 'At Any Point' measures.

## Combined impact of data processing changes

The difference in the time series as a result of all of the changes discussed is summarised in the table below for each year 2012-13 to 2016-17.

**Table 1: Estimated impact of data processing errors on time series**

	2012-13*	2013-14*	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Previous published estimate of episodes of need at 31 March	378,600	397,630	390,960	394,400	389,430
Corrected estimate of episodes of need at 31 March	378,030	395,480	390,130	393,910	389,040
(Percentage change from published)	(-0.2%)	(-0.5%)	(-0.2%)	(-0.1%)	(-0.1%)
Previous published estimate of episodes of need starting in the year	395,060	427,740	403,430	401,600	400,160
Corrected estimate of episodes of need starting in the year	394,940	425,710	403,300	401,480	400,110
(Percentage change from published)	(0.0%)	(-0.5%)	(0.0%)	(0.0%)	(0.0%)
Previous published estimate of episodes of need ending in the year	355,780	384,140	390,770	384,580	388,420

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<sup>1</sup> Statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' was revised in 2013 giving local authorities more flexibility when assessing children. Previously local authorities carried out an initial assessment within 10 working days and (where needed) a more in-depth core assessment within 35 working days. Local authorities now carry out a single continuous assessment within 45 working days.



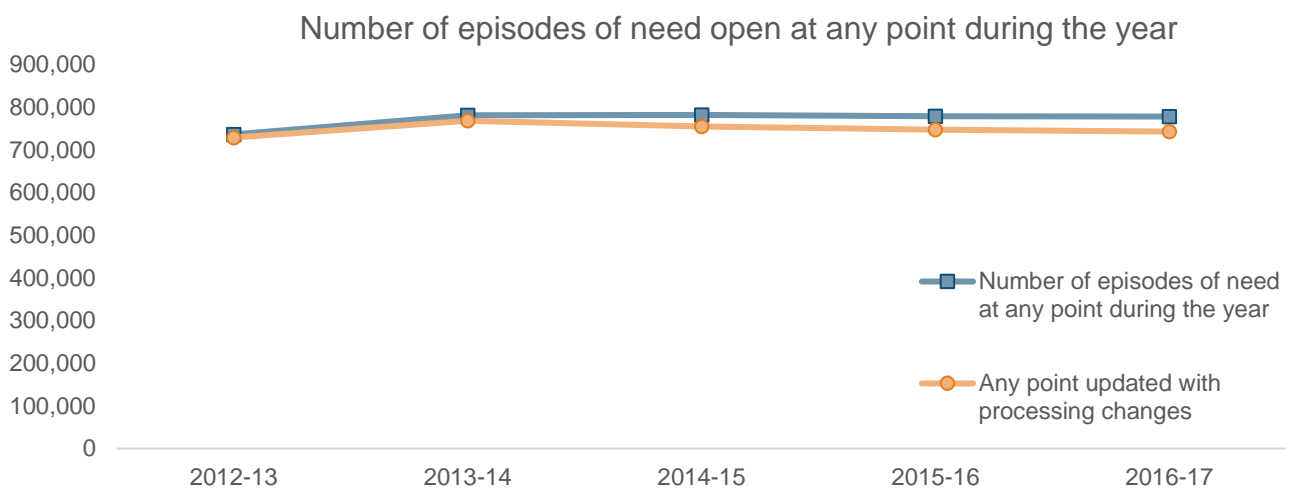
	2012-13*	2013-14*	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Corrected estimate of episodes of need ending in the year	348,930	373,100	364,330	353,590	353,860
(Percentage change from published)	(-2.0%)	(-3.0%)	(-6.8%)	(-8.1%)	(-8.9%)
Previous published estimate of episodes of need at any point in the year	736,110	781,150	781,730	778,980	777,850
Corrected estimate of episodes of need at any point in the year	728,840	767,910	754,460	747,490	742,890
(Percentage change from published)	(-1.0%)	(-1.7%)	(-3.5%)	(-4.0%)	(-4.5%)

Notes: All figures are rounded to the nearest 10. \*Totals for 2012-13 and 2013-14 include estimates for missing or incomplete data.

The over count of children in need for the ended and any point measures increases over time; for episodes ending this percentage difference increases from 1.9% in 2012-13 to 8.9% in 2016-17 and for the episodes at 'any point' increases from 1.0% in 2012-13 to 4.5% in 2016-17.

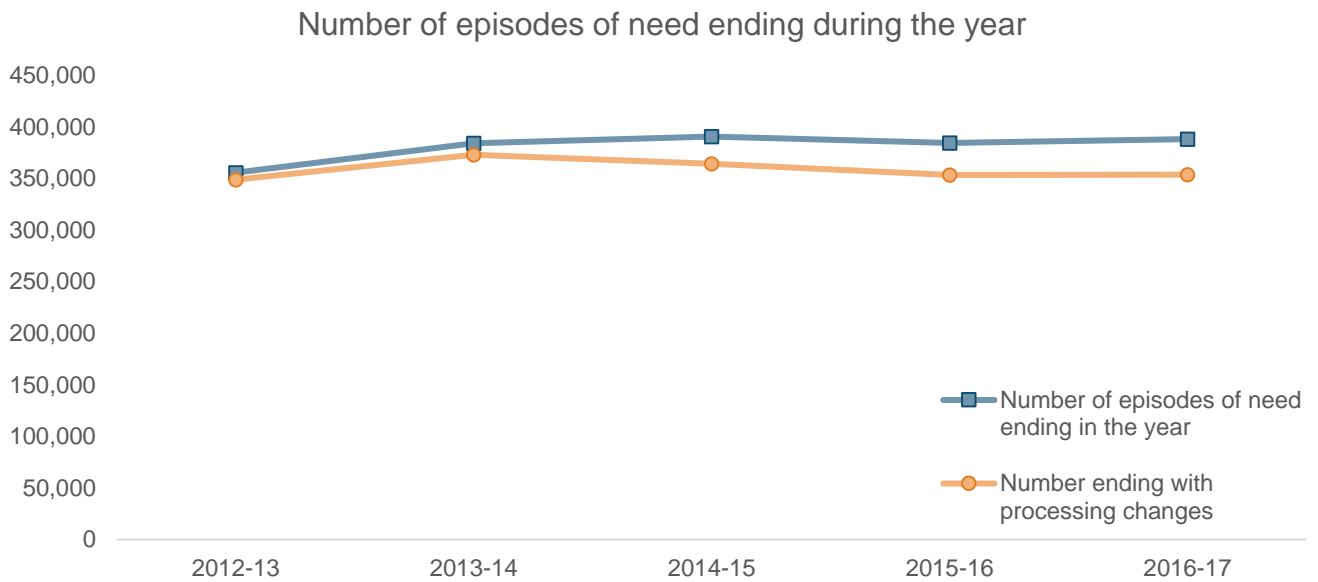
The change to the time series for episodes starting and at the 31 March have very little impact on the overall series as the changes are small in comparison to the population as a whole.

For the episodes 'open at any point in the year' the previous series showed an increase between 2013-14 and 2014-15 followed by slight year on year decreases. The revised time series shows a decrease between 2013-14 and 2014-15 followed by year on year decreases which are larger than in the previous series.



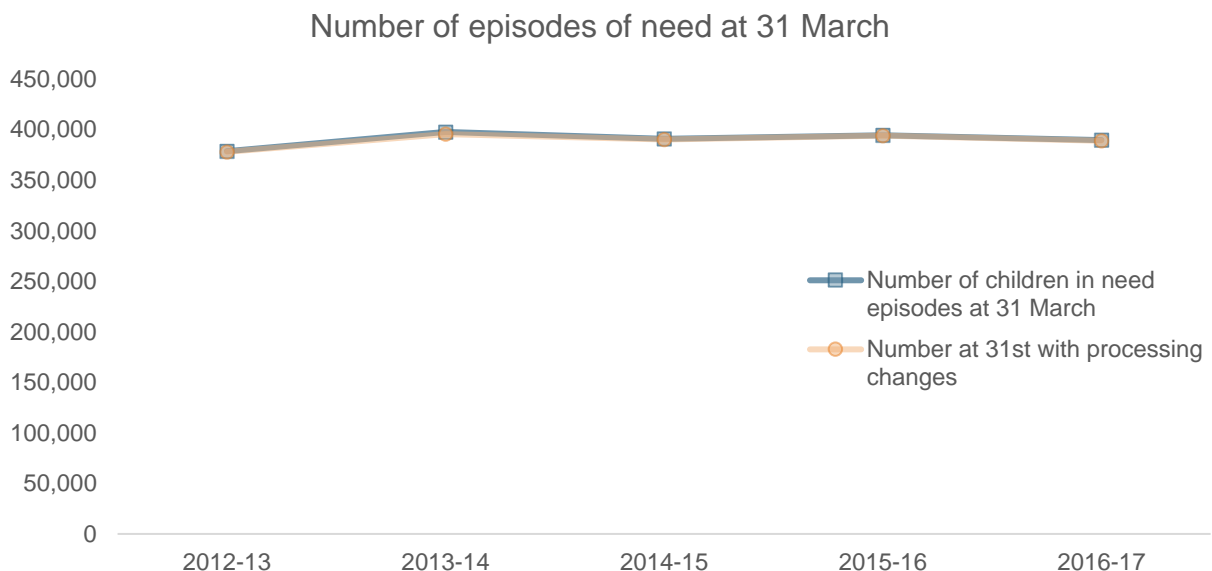
Source: Children in need census 2012-2017

For the episodes 'ending' during the year the changes have reversed the trend between 2013-14 and 2014-15 from an increase, of 1.7%, in those ending to a decrease of 2.4%. For the years after the general trend remains in the same direction but the magnitude of the changes have changed.



*Source: Children in need census 2012-2017*

The number of episodes of need at the 31 March is largely unaffected by the changes, for comparison purposes the series is displayed below.



*Source: Children in need census 2012-2017*

## Changes to the publication tables

The national tables presented within the statistical publication will be updated to reflect the changes described above for all years; we will also make these changes to the local authority tables within the current publication. We do not intend to retrospectively revise previous statistical publications to reflect these changes. We plan to provide an enhanced underlying data file as part of the publication to allow access to a fuller historical series.

We have also identified, as part of this review areas where we can make the current presentation of the data easier to understand. There are some cases at the 31 March which have been referred but are yet to have an assessment, these are counted as a child in need but a number will subsequently be assessed as not in need. To further improve the understanding of the data series we will be including the number of episodes, at the 31 March, who are yet to have an assessment undertaken.

## Further improvements to episodes data

As part of the lessons-learned exercise from each data collection we make continuous improvements to the census guidance and validation checks within the data collection to further improve the quality of the data and subsequent statistical publication. Similarly common data anomalies that have emerged as part of the wider review of the data processing will lead to additional data validation in future collections at the point at which local authorities send their data to the department.

### 2.3 Duplicate episodes of need at 31 March

A child can start or end an episode of need more than once during the year, but they should not have over-lapping episodes. For example, if a child begins an episode of need in May 2017, which ends in August 2017, and the same child begins another episode of need in December 2017 and is still in need on the 31 March 2018, the child is counted as two starts, one end and one count at the 31 March 2018. Therefore as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 duplicate cases wouldn't be expected for a child.

This year Leicestershire and West Sussex had data issues leading to duplicate episodes open at the 31 March. West Sussex have consistently submitted overlapping episodes every year in the revised time series.

The decision was taken this year to remove duplicate episodes at 31 March so as not to artificially inflate this measure, this change is reflected in each year presented in the

tables from 2013 to 2018 and also in the underlying data files. This is footnoted in the relevant publication tables.

## 2.4 Data flows

The number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan at 31 March 2018 does not equate to:

- the number at 31 March in the previous year, plus
- the number started in the year, minus
- those ceased in the year.

The same applies for the numbers of children in need.

Possible reasons are:

- improving data quality as local authority systems adapt to returning the census data.
- where estimates were used for local authorities who could not return their data; this applies to figures in 2012-13 and 2013-14, and referral figures for 2014-15
- the census is a snapshot taken each year and local authorities do not have the facility to amend previous year's data returns. Therefore it reflects the position at that point in time and any retrospective changes may not be included in the following years data return as they fall outside the collection period.

Evidence to support this has been provided by local authorities at our focus groups and work is underway to assess data across years moving forward.

## 2.5 Referrals within 12 months of a previous referral (table C1)

Figures for the number and percentage of referrals in 2017 to 2018 which occurred within 12 months of a previous referral are presented in the publication again this year. They are based on data returned by the local authority in both their 2016 to 2017, and 2017 to 2018 children in need census returns. Each referral in 2017 to 2018 is counted in the re-referral figure if there has been another referral for the child within the previous 12 months.

## **2.6 Referrals resulting in no further action and children assessed not to be in need (table C1)**

Figures for children referred and no further action are referrals where, after initial consideration, no further action is required and therefore the case is not formally assessed.

Figures for children assessed not to be in need are identified as referrals which only resulted in an assessment, and which end with a case closure reason of 'RC8 – Case closed after assessment – no further action'. Supporting guidance for the collection explains that this closure code should only be used for cases where the child has been assessed not to be in need.

There appears to be a significant variation between local authorities in the number of referrals resulting in no further action and the numbers of children assessed not to be in need. This could be down to differing local practices on the thresholds of when certain assessments are carried out, or it could be a data issue.

## **2.7 Assessments data**

Revised statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015' was released in early 2015. This revised guidance allowed local authorities more flexibility in carrying out assessments. This resulted in a mixed approach reported by many local authorities in 2014 to 2015, which continued until the 2015 to 2016 collection. By the end of March 2018, all local authorities had confirmed that they had begun to implement continuous assessments (which should be completed within 45 working days) rather than initial and core assessments (which should be completed within 10 and 35 working days). No distinction between the types of assessment carried out was recorded in the data collected this year. Due to this change in methodology, it is hard to draw robust conclusions when analysing year on year comparisons of the number of assessments.

## **2.8 Factors identified at assessment**

Recording of all factors as understood at the end of assessment relevant to:

- the impairment of the child's health and development,
- the parent/carer's capacity to respond to the child's needs, and
- other people in the family/household e.g. a sibling or lodger.

Where more than one factor was relevant, then all were reported.

Factors identified at the end of assessment were collected and reported for the first time in the year in 2013 to 2014; however, data was only published at a national level due to some concerns about its quality. The quality has continued to improve this year so we have again published information at local authority level. Experience tells us that it can take a year or two for new data items to 'bed in' so users should use the historical data with some caution.

If more than one factor has been identified at assessment, each can be reported within the census. Most children will have more than one factor identified and reported.

### **3. Comparability between CPR3 and the children in need census**

There are a number of issues to consider when comparing figures reported through the aggregate CPR3 return (data up to 2008 to 2009) and the children in need census (2009 to 2010 onwards). Whilst broad comparisons can be made between the two collections, users of the statistics should be cautious in doing so.

#### **3.1 Referrals**

Whilst the number of referrals often fluctuate year on year, there was a large increase when the reporting moved from the CPR3 return to the children in need census. In some cases, this was due to multiple referrals being reported by the local authority (for example, reporting new information on an already open case as a referral); this issue has now been resolved in most local authorities. At the same time as the change in data sources, there was a lot of media interest in the 'Baby P' case which is likely to have had an impact on the numbers of referrals received by local authorities. However, it is not possible to determine for certain if the scale of the increase in referrals was solely down to this, or if it was down to the change in data collection method.

#### **3.2 Initial and Core Assessments**

The number of both of these assessments completed in the year increased when they were reported through the children in need census which seems to confirm that the increase in referrals was a real one (as the increase in referrals has led to an increase in the number of assessments carried out). However, we do know that the number of core assessments has historically been undercounted as not all section 47 enquiries had a corresponding core assessment recorded (statutory guidance states that a section 47 enquiry is carried out through a core assessment or through a continuous assessment from 2013). Child level validation on the CIN return is helping to ensure that these core assessments are consistently recorded.

#### **3.3 Child protection plans**

The number of children who were the subject of child protection plans has been rising over the recent years, a pattern that has continued through the collection of data from both sources. However, whilst it is likely there was an increase between 2008-09 and 2009-10, due to the differences in the data sources it is not possible to confirm if the increase was solely down to an increase in the number of children who were the subject of a plan, or if the increase is partially explained by the change in data source.

### **3.4 Numbers of children in need**

Children in need were not collected in the CPR3 return. Whilst there was a periodic children in need collection, the latest covering a week in February 2005, it was carried out on a very different basis to the current children in need census and so the figures are not directly comparable.

### **3.5 Other general comments**

Collecting data at child level has allowed us to work on getting the base child level data consistent between local authorities. In turn this has meant that on the whole, key indicators calculated from the data are more comparable than they were with CPR3 data as definitions have been applied consistently. For example, consistent definitions of 3 and 6 months have been applied when calculating the number of child protection plans that have been reviewed within the required 3 and 6 month timescales.



## **4. Data quality**

In previous children in need publications we have provided data confidence indicators alongside some of the published tables. These indicators have been in place since the start of the children in need census and were designed to reflect issues with data quality. However, as this is an established collection and data quality continues to improve, it has been decided that data confidence indicators will not be provided within this publication. This decision was made following consultation with all local authorities. In line with other statistical publications we have provided footnotes within the relevant tables to highlight any data quality issues.

### **4.1 Data quality**

Each local authority can add notes to their data return to highlight any year on year changes or any issues with data quality. These notes are examined during the quality assurance process and, where applicable, followed up with individual local authorities. For local authorities that mentioned issues impacting on their data quality, we have included footnotes within the relevant table of the publication.

### **4.2 Year-on-year comparability**

We carry out comparisons of the reported figures for 2017 to 2018 with those reported in 2016 to 2017. A large difference in figures does not necessarily mean that information provided for 2017 to 2018 is not accurate. There are validations build into the data collection that highlight where key measures have increased or decreased between census years. Where changes exceed the threshold we set we gain feedback from local authorities within the collection asking them to confirm that the changes are a true reflection in activity.



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