

Title: Quality and Uses of Data: *Private Fostering Arrangements in England: Year Ending 31 March 2012*

Description: This document outlines the use made of these statistics and the types of decisions they inform, provides information on the quality and reliability of these statistics overall, and in relation to the range of potential uses.

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<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001077/index.shtml>

Users and Usage

Department for Education and Central Government

1. The *Private Fostering Arrangements in England* Statistical First Release (SFR) provides figures on notifications of children cared for and accommodated in private fostering arrangements in England. This includes:

- The number of notifications of private fostering arrangements on 31 March 2012
- The number of new notifications received during the year
- The number of new arrangements which began during the year (by age and place of birth)
- The number of arrangements which ended during the year
- Number of cases where action was taken in accordance with requirements for carrying out visits, and of those the number that were carried out within 7 days
- Number and percentage of arrangements where scheduled visits were completed within the timescales

2. A private fostering arrangement is one that is made privately for the care of a child under the age of 16 (or under 18 if disabled) by someone other than a parent or close relative with the intention that it should last for 28 days or more.

3. For more information on the items included in the SFR and how they have been calculated, please refer to the accompanying methodology note which is available at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001077/index.shtml>

4. The purpose of the SFR is to provide the latest information on notifications of children cared for and accommodated in private fostering arrangements in England. Information is used by government officials to monitor the impact of the legislative changes in 2005 under which Local Authorities (LAs) have a duty to promote and encourage notification of private fostering arrangements.

Other users

5. We are very familiar with the uses made of the data within the Department for Education and by the UK Government. However we have less clarity of the uses made of this data by other organisations and external parties. LA users may be interested in the underlying data which presents numbers at the LA level to see local comparisons and trends on how their numbers compare to other authorities.

6. A note was added to the publication informing users that the Department was keen to establish a user group, and that interested parties should contact the lead statistician. However, no responses were received.

7. We will continue to engage with users to ensure that the publication best meets their needs and welcome feedback or suggestions from any new or previously unknown users which we will take on board. Would you like to feed in your views? If so, please contact us through:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/usercons.shtml>

Data Quality

8. The figures in the *Private Fostering Arrangements in England SFR* are taken from the PF1 statistical return for 2011/12, along with historical figures taken from the collections for 2007/08 to 2010/11. The PF1 return provides DfE with aggregate data on the number of children cared for and accommodated in private fostering arrangements at 31 March, the number of new arrangements and the number of arrangements which ceased during the year to 31 March.

9. The figures provided are based on data provided by all 152 LAs. Two of these LAs reported that they had had no private fostering arrangements during the year.

10. The figures reported in the SFR are believed to be an underestimate of the total number of children in private fostering arrangements. This is because there is doubt over whether all parents, carers and other relevant third parties currently report the existence of these arrangements to their LA. We are not clear whether the increase in arrangements seen is due to increased activity in private fostering or an improvement in the reporting of such arrangements. Therefore, some caution should be exercised in the use of the figures.

11. A research document funded by DCSF (Research into Private Fostering) was published in March 2010 and can be found at:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RR229>.

The research had two broad aims. Firstly, to collect evidence of the practices and procedures of local authorities in relation to private fostering arrangements, in order to inform thinking on how to increase notification rates; and secondly, to improve understanding of the characteristics and needs of privately fostered children, with particular reference to safeguarding issues. This report cited research from the Department of Health (2001) which suggested there were around 10,000 children under private fostering arrangements in England at any given time. However, this figure is 11 years out of date and there are also concerns around the accuracy of this figure.

12. The DCSF-funded research explored the sources of private fostering notifications. Overall, most local authorities' notifications were received from statutory agencies, particularly from other social workers and education. Analysis revealed that the groups most likely to notify local authorities of private fostering arrangements are (in order):

- Social workers (this group was a long way ahead in terms of making 'frequent' or 'occasional' notifications)
- Teachers in state schools
- 'Others' (including agencies outside of the Children's Trust/children's

- workforce)
- Health workers

12. The data are collected annually on an aggregate basis from LAs and each year the LA does not update the data submitted in the previous year. This means it is possible that inconsistencies can arise in the number of arrangements collected between years. For example, an LA may not have received a notification for all the private fostering arrangements at 31 March when they submit their annual return. The following year it is possible the return will count an arrangement coming to an end, which was not counted as starting in the previous year's figures. This explains why the number of arrangements at 31 March 2011, plus new arrangements during year ending 31 March 2012, minus cases closed during year ending 31 March 2012 does not sum to the number of cases at 31 March 2012.

13. Two new questions were introduced in the 2006/07 survey about the percentage of foster placements where visits were made to new arrangements at intervals of not more than 6 weeks, and to existing arrangements of not more than 12 weeks. Doubts over whether the percentages were calculated correctly and the quality of the data submitted in response to these questions resulted in figures not being reported in previous publications. However, for 2009/10 onwards, underlying data were collected from which these percentages were calculated which has led to improved accuracy and confidence in the data; therefore we have published the figures in Table 4 of the SFR.