



Department
for Education

Notifications of Private Fostering Arrangements in England: Year Ending 31 March 2013

Quality and Uses of Data

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Description

This document outlines the use made of statistics covering notifications of private fostering arrangements and the types of decisions they inform. It provides information on the quality and reliability of these statistics overall, and in relation to the range of potential uses.

Users and Usage

Department for Education and Central Government

The Notifications of 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 2013
- the number of new notifications received during the year
- the number of reported new arrangements which began during the year (by age and place of birth)
- the number of arrangements reported to have 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 reported arrangements where scheduled visits were completed within the timescales

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.

For more information on the items included in the SFR and how they have been calculated, please refer to the accompanying methodology note on the publication webpage.

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 local authority (LA) performance against requirements for carrying out visits under the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005.

Other Users

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.

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.

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 see the contact details in the publication.

Data Quality

The figures in the Notifications of Private Fostering Arrangements in England SFR are taken from the PF1 statistical return for 2012-13, along with historical figures taken from the collections for 2008-09 to 2011-12. The PF1 return provides DfE with aggregate data on the reported number of children cared for and accommodated in private fostering arrangements at 31 March, the number of new reported arrangements and the number of arrangements reported to have ceased during the year to 31 March.

The figures provided are based on data provided by all 152 LAs. Two LAs reported that they had not been notified of any private fostering arrangements during the year.

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 changes in the number of reported arrangements seen is due to changes in activity in private fostering or changes in the reporting of such arrangements. Therefore, some caution should be exercised in the use of the figures.

There have been long-running concerns about the under-reporting of private fostering arrangements as evidenced in a leaflet for professionals produced by the Department of Health (2001) . This suggested there were around 10,000 children under private fostering arrangements at any given time. However, this figure is 11 years out of date and there are also concerns around the accuracy of this figure. These concerns were reiterated in a research document funded by DCSF (Research into Private Fostering) was published in March 2010 and can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-into-private-fostering>

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.

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

The same research identified some common circumstances where private fostering arrangements occurred through surveys and case studies:

- African and Caribbean children with parents and family abroad
- children attending language schools
- children sent to the UK for educational purposes
- local children living apart from their families due to parental problems
- "sofa-surfers" – teenagers making their own arrangements to stay with friends' families or adults

The research also cited the following as some reasons why private fostering arrangements are failed to be reported:

- lack of awareness or confusion as to what constitutes as a private fostering arrangement
- concerns about confidentiality
- agencies not aware of their responsibility to notify
- insufficient awareness among parties involved in private fostering arrangements

Supporting underlying data will be published at the same time as the publication and can be available from the publication webpage. Users should exercise caution when comparing figures at local authority level. Differences might be due to genuine

differences in private fostering activity, but could also reflect the efforts made by LAs themselves to raise awareness of the legislation.

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 reported number of arrangements collected between years. For example, a 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 reported arrangements at 31 March 2012, plus new reported arrangements during year ending 31 March 2013, minus cases reported as closed during year ending 31 March 2013 does not sum to the number of reported cases at 31 March 2013.

Two new questions were introduced in the 2006-07 survey about the percentage of 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.

Bournemouth local authority reported an error in their 2011-12 PF1 return after publication. All their new private fostering arrangements were incorrectly reported as aged 5 to 9, rather than aged 10 to 15. Data in Figure 2 of the publication text has been corrected and will therefore differ to what was published in the 2012 publication.

When making comparisons between 2013 and 2012 data, it came to light that Bournemouth local authority has incorrectly reported their number of children reported to be privately fostered at 31 March 2012. The figure for 2012 has been corrected in Table 1 of the publication. The number of children reported as being under private fostering arrangements at 31 March 2012 in the South East and England will not match the reported number in the 2012 publication.



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