



Department
for Education

Characteristics of children in need in England: 2016 to 2017

Data quality and uses

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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 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 2016 to 2017 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 2017. In earlier years of the census we allowed local authorities with missing or incorrect children in need data to provide supplementary aggregate figures to supplement their return. However, since 2012 to 2013, given the data quality as a whole is improving we did not allow any local authority to supplement their children in need data with aggregate figures. However, 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 first release represent the final position of the 2016 to 2017 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 inconsistency

Within the Children in Need (CIN) statistical first release, flags are derived to measure if a child is 'in need' at any point during the year, if they started/ended an episode of need, and if they are 'in need' at 31st March. The CIN census data is collected on an annual basis and includes data for the year from April – March, and many of these are ongoing cases that persist from one year to the next.

An inconsistency has been identified within the derivation of the 'in need' at 'any point during the year' and the 'ended an episode of need' flags, which relates to how particular cases that remain open across census periods are dealt with. Referrals opened within the census year, that are then closed within the year with no further action after an assessment, are excluded from the count of CIN episodes 'ended' and 'open at any point during the year'. However, similar cases that were from the previous census year are not excluded, and thus they are counted as a CIN episode 'ending' and 'open during the year'.

As these cases were counted as a child in need as at 31 March the previous year (as the episode was open at that stage) it is deemed that these cases should be counted as 'ending' and 'open during the year' within the current year. This methodology has been in place for a number of years and the time series is consistent in how it treats these cases. However, due to changes in policy around assessments and the time local

authorities have to complete them, the number of episodes that fall into this category has increased over recent years. The figures below show the scale and impact on each of the measures.

| Year | Episodes at any Point | Episodes ending in the Year | Potential estimated overcount of episodes |
|------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 2017 | 777,850 | 388,420 | 34,600 |
| 2016 | 778,980 | 384,580 | 30,400 |
| 2015 | 781,700 | 390,800 | 26,300 |
| 2014 | 781,200 | 384,100 | 7,900 |
| 2013 | 736,100 | 355,800 | 6,600 |

As part of an ongoing project to clarify and simplify the dissemination of the Characteristics of children in need statistical first release, this derivation will be reviewed over the next year with a view to make it more consistent across separate years.

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 2016, which ends in August 2016, and the same child begins another episode of need in December 2016 and is still in need on the 31 March 2017, the child is counted as two starts, one end and one count at the 31 March 2017. Therefore as at 31st March 2017 duplicate cases wouldn't be expected for a child. Due to data issues within a few local authority reporting systems some local authorities do have duplicate episodes open at the 31st of March, these account for less than 0.07% of episodes at 31st March. These are footnoted in the relevant publication tables.

2.4 Ealing child protection plans reviewed within timescales

Prior to publication Ealing confirmed that there was an issue with the child protection plan review data which they submitted with this year's data collection. As a result the reviews data in the collection isn't accurate and we are unable to present the number and percentage of child protection plans that were reviewed within timescales (Table D6). The figure for Ealing is suppressed in the publication tables.

2.5 Slough referral figures

This year Slough included all contacts the Trust received in the year irrespective of whether or not they led to a referral being opened. This has significantly increased their number of referrals.

2.6 Data flows

The number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan at 31 March 2017 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
- the census is a snapshot taken each year and local authorities do not have the facility to amend previous year's data returns.

Evidence to support this has been provided by local authorities at our focus groups and a longer time series of data from the children in need census is required to fully identify these issues.

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

Figures for the number and percentage of referrals in 2016 to 2017 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 2015 to 2016, and 2016 to 2017 children in need census returns. Each referral in 2016 to 2017 is counted in the re-referral figure if there has been another referral for the child within the previous 12 months.

2.8 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. As such, users should be cautious in using these figures.

2.9 Local authorities piloting new arrangements for assessments and timescales

During the 2016 to 2017 collection year, 11 local authorities were given dispensation by the Secretary of State to trial new approaches to assessing children in need. The 11 local authorities involved in the trials were Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Wandsworth, Westminster, Hartlepool, Brent, Leeds, Suffolk, West Sussex and Wokingham. The following table details the approaches trialled:

| Local authority | Removed 45 day assessment timescale timescales | Removed 15 working day timescale from section 47 to initial child protection conference |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Hackney | ✓ | ✓ |
| Hammersmith and Fulham | ✓ | |
| Kensington and Chelsea | ✓ | ✓ |
| Wandsworth | ✓ | |
| Westminster | ✓ | ✓ |
| Hartlepool | ✓ | |
| Brent | | ✓ |
| Leeds | | ✓ |
| Suffolk | | ✓ |
| West Sussex | | ✓ |
| Wokingham | | ✓ |

2.10 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 2017, 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 recent change in methodology, it is hard to draw robust conclusions when analysing year on year comparisons of the number of assessments.

2.11 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 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 2016 to 2017 with those reported in 2015 to 2016. A large difference in figures does not necessarily mean that information provided for 2016 to 2017 is not accurate. Where we see large changes we have gained feedback from local authorities before publication to confirm that the changes are a true reflection in activity.



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