

Fostering in England Methodology and Quality Report

Last updated: 23 March 2017

Introduction

This paper contains methodology and quality information relevant to the 'Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) annual release of fostering data, covering all fostering provision in England. This methodology and quality report should be read in conjunction with the background notes contained within the statistical first release (SFR), as those notes will include helpful information that is not in this report.

This release can be found at the following webpage:
www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics in the 'Fostering' section under the heading 'Fostering in England 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017'.

The SFR contains data which is sourced from local authorities (LAs) and independent fostering agencies (IFAs). The release includes data about fostering providers, foster carers and children in foster placements.

The data includes:

- LA fostering agencies
- IFAs, including IFAs performing the function of LA fostering agencies.

This release of fostering in England data covers the period between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017.

The statistical release is published as a full version annually and contains final data.

Ofsted publishes a number of official statistics covering children's social care, including fostering, adoption and children looked after placements. These releases can be accessed here: www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics.

Ofsted welcomes feedback about our statistical releases. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions, please contact the Social Care Data & Analysis Team on: socialcaredata@ofsted.gov.uk.

Relevance

Ofsted regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. Ofsted official statistics are released to promote reform and improvement across government through increasing transparency and citizen participation.

Ofsted regulates and inspects IFAs under the Care Standards Act 2000.¹ The Care Standards Act 2000, including regulations made under section 22, sets out the legal basis for regulating fostering agencies.² For more information on how Ofsted regulates and inspects IFAs, please go to the gov.uk website:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-to-independent-fostering-agencies and www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-inspections-of-independent-fostering-agencies.

Ofsted inspects LA children's services functions, including fostering, under section 136 (2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.³

Ofsted has two distinct uses for the fostering data. Primarily, the data is collected from providers to support inspections of IFAs and LA children's services. The data is analysed at an agency level, and using comparator data, to prompt lines of enquiry that will be followed at inspection. The data is also used to evaluate the effectiveness of fostering agencies, including ongoing monitoring of performance and improvement work.

A secondary use of the data, is that Ofsted analyses the data to further enhance insight into this sector as well as for planning and providing public services, for example, by informing about the capacity of social care provisions nationally and by area. The analysis of the data informs policy discussions and decisions, for instance contributing to the reviews of inspection frameworks, evidence and reports. The data is also used to respond to ad hoc requests and to give context to emerging issues or the impact of changes in the sector.

The data is published annually as official statistics. The aggregation of data for official statistics allows Ofsted to communicate to users the key data and messages, for example, at different geographical levels and by provider type. The official statistics draw out the key messages and communicate these in an understandable way, appropriate for a wide range of different users. Users are able to interpret and manipulate the data published for their own purposes, as the release includes underlying data.

The data may, therefore, be used by stakeholder groups, academics and other interested parties across the sector. Fostering agencies may also use the data

¹ The Care Standards Act 2000; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/14/contents.

² The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011; The Care Standards Act (Registration)(England) Regulations 2010; The Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) (Children's Homes etc.) Regulations 2007; The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: fostering services.

³ Education and Inspections Act 2006; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/contents.

themselves, for local and regional use, to inform on areas of practice and to improve processes and standards.

Some of the data about fostering in England is unique to Ofsted; alternative sources are not available. For instance, data about the capacity of fostering services and recruitment activity in England, as well as some other indicators, is only collected by Ofsted. This data is widely viewed as a valuable source for information about recruitment and capacity, for identifying vacancies and for providing an in depth overall picture of fostering in England.

Some data is also published by other sources, such as the Department for Education (DfE).⁴

Response rates

	2017			2016			2015			2014		
	LA fostering agencies	IFAs	Total	LA fostering agencies	IFAs	Total	LA fostering agencies	IFAs	Total	LA fostering agencies	IFAs	Total
Number of providers eligible to return (as at 31 March)	149	292	441	150	293	443	152	293	445	152	301	453
Returns in analysis	149	292	441	150	291	441	152	293	445	151	299	450
Percentage of returns	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	99%	99%

Ofsted received data returns from all LA fostering agencies and all IFAs eligible to return data. Just under 2% of all returns contained data inaccuracies which could not be resolved. This was a large decrease from 13% the previous year, likely due to increased familiarity with the format of the collection. This data has been included in the national, LA and IFA data and in this report, with an acknowledgement where necessary.

The Isles of Scilly and the City of London provided nil returns, as their fostering services are provided by Cornwall and the Pan-London arrangement respectively, rather than in house. Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster's fostering services operate collectively as London Tri-Borough, though each individual LA submits a return, which are then combined into a single return. Doncaster's and Slough's fostering agencies are now run by IFAs, Doncaster Children's Trust and Slough Children's Trust.

Of the 296 registered IFAs on 31 March 2017, four provided nil returns, as they had no activity during the year, due to being very newly registered. The 292 returns in this dataset, therefore, represent 100% of all eligible IFAs in England.

⁴ For example, "Children Looked After in England" includes data about fostered children, who make up the majority of children looked after (www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2016-to-2017)

Meeting user needs

The presentation of underlying data for this release was reviewed and amended for the 2014-15 collection by Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team, who produces the social care official statistics, in agreement with the Social Care Policy Team. This was done in order to allow greater usability of the data, as well as enabling better comparability of similar data within the same dataset. The major changes were to the grouping of data so that all data is presented in a single table, with similar data being grouped together.

Further changes were made for the 2016-17 collection, to take account of the changes to the data collection; these are detailed in the underlying data tables.

The content of the survey and accompanying guidance are reviewed annually, by the Social Care Data & Analysis and Social Care Policy teams, to develop the collection, and senior managers then sign off any changes that are required. This review process ensures that the survey will meet the data requirements for inspections and takes into account any policy changes or emerging issues.

In response to feedback from data suppliers, the 2015-16 collection was conducted at a child and household level, rather than the previous aggregated data level. This was intended to simplify data reporting for agencies, as well as allow for more in depth analysis of the data. Further small changes were made to the collection in 2016-17 in response to feedback from data suppliers on the new method.

The major changes to the collection for 2016-17 were:

- Household types were removed from the fostering households tab, and Family and Friends, and Connected Persons were combined into a single group;
- Children data was expanded to include children who left placements with the agency during the year, with additional data collected on why they left;
- Questions were added around the child's placement type, and their educational provision;
- Additional questions were moved from the aggregate to the child/household level;
- Fostering household IDs were added to the children data, to enable matching of children to their foster carers;
- Some data items were amended, or new codes included, to more accurately collect data on short breaks placements;
- Questions about brothers and sisters placements were streamlined to simplify data entry for data suppliers;
- A small amount of data on provision of "shared care" placements was collected for the first time;
- Guidance notes were also incorporated into the form instead of being a separate document, to ensure that all data suppliers have easy access to these.

Ofsted's Social Care Data & Analysis Team are represented at regional meetings of performance leads from LAs. These regional meetings are organised by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). Ofsted has presented relevant information and publications to all of the existing regional groups, and sought feedback about whether its publications meet user needs. Ofsted's participation in these groups helps inform about user views on Ofsted's social care official statistics, and suggested improvements are taken on board. Additional workshops have been attended to assist data suppliers and stakeholders to understand the data that is being asked for and how it can be used. Ofsted inspectors attend annual conferences which include sessions on the data that is collected and how this can inform inspection preparation.

Social care outputs are also shared with users in other organisations, such as the DfE, LAs, and representatives from the private and voluntary sectors at Ofsted-led stakeholder meetings. These organisations use the data for a range of purposes including informing their own social care outputs (DfE) and benchmarking performance (LAs).

The data form includes a glossary of terms, to help clarify what is being requested, and descriptions of all codes used for data entry. The data calculations built into the form as validation checks provide a method of quality assurance (QA) for the agencies helping them to accurately complete the form. Additional guidance has also been circulated in the form of frequently asked questions and a guidance document. The Social Care Data & Analysis team also offers help and guidance to agencies via email and telephone.

The contact details for the Social Care Data & Analysis team are included in the releases and users are encouraged to feedback about any unmet needs, ask questions that are not covered in the glossary definitions and supporting guidance, or feedback improvements that can be made.

More information about Ofsted's engagement policy and confidentiality & access policy, as well as Ofsted's statement of administrative sources can be found here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics. Ofsted also operates under more detailed internal engagement guidance.

Coherence and comparability

Ofsted has reported on fostering data in England since 1 April 2008. Over time, the data collection has been developed and improved. As the survey is reviewed and questions are amended or added, some areas are not comparable over time.

Reasons for these changes include:

- Changes in legislation or policy; for example, a question about Raising the Participation Age was added when this was introduced;

- In response to data supplier feedback; for example, where the DfE SSDA903 collection and Ofsted duplicate some of the same data which was proving an additional burden on data suppliers, this has been reduced;
- To provide more nuance in the resulting analysis; for example, placement offer is now collected at household rather than agency level.

Where it is not directly possible to compare data over time, notes are given in the release to alert users.

The response rates have varied over the course of the survey; however, they have been consistently high at around 98-99% for the last five collections (2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17). An exercise was conducted to review the impact of the changing response rates, specifically around the impact of any missing data. The exercise considered the potential for grossing up or using imputation when agencies did not return data, and found minimal impact from any missing data. Therefore, it was not deemed necessary to use any estimation or imputation. Data comparisons are therefore made generally for these four years where applicable.

Where appropriate, comparable data collected by the DfE or the Office for National Statistics are referenced.⁵ For example, the numbers of children in foster care of different ethnicity groups, and with disabilities, are compared against the DfE's annual report on looked after children and the ONS census statistics.

Data is presented at England level and then sub-divided by sector (LA/IFA). Although there is a small amount of comparable data collected for other countries in the UK, this is minimal and so has not been included.⁶ Comparable data for other countries, including via the Eurostat database, is not available. Where applicable, regional comparisons have been made; however, these are limited.

Comparisons may be adversely affected by different reporting practices across data suppliers; for example, one agency only records the ethnicity of the primary carer in a household, while most record the ethnicity of both carers where applicable.

The annual collection gives data at consistent intervals. It includes snapshot data as at the 31 March and periodical data for 12 months between 1 April and 31 March. The reporting period used is made clear in the release. An exception to the defined reporting periods may occur in certain circumstances; for example, if a new piece of legislation came into effect mid-way through the financial year.

⁵ For example, the DfE's annual collection on Children Looked After in England (www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2016-to-2017) and the ONS' publication of data from the 2011 census (www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/index.html).

⁶ For example, the number of approved LA foster carers and places in Wales is available here: www.statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Fostering-Services/fostering-services-by-localauthority-measure and data on children looked after in Scotland in 2014-15 is available here: www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/03/5133/0

Accuracy and reliability

All LAs and IFAs are asked to complete this return on a voluntary basis. There was a 100% response rate from both sectors in 2016-17; therefore, this release does not currently use any imputation or other statistical techniques, and data is not used to make any estimates about the population or other geographical areas. If the response rate changed at the 2017-18 collection, the impact of this on the data collected would be assessed and would be made clear to users in the release.

The survey is conducted across all LA fostering agencies and IFAs in England, and so there is no risk of potential bias through sample selection. This data is sourced from the agencies' administrative systems and therefore the data returned by each agency reflects all fostered children and fostering households as at 31 March 2017. Ofsted recognises, however, that the data is collected from 441 agencies and that detailed information on their internal QA processes is not available. In total, seven agencies (2%) returned data with discrepancies which could not be resolved with the agency before the deadline for publication; this was much lower than in 2015-16, and in line with the years before that.

The data is subject to a rigorous QA process, by both data suppliers and Ofsted. Validation rules within the template, and the enclosed guidance, assist data suppliers with checking the data prior to submission; these are developed with reference to the high quality data that Ofsted, as regulators of social care provision, holds on all registered providers. Ofsted also engages with data suppliers in conversation via email and telephone to clarify any queries or errors in the data and resolve these to the most accurate data the agency can supply; for some agencies with a larger number of issues, or who are new to completing the return, these conversations can be detailed and lengthy. The validation checks built into the template provide support to agencies around resolving errors. From the 2015-16 form onwards, a "validation engine" was used to perform checks and produce an error report on the data under three categories:

- Missing data: required data that has not been supplied;
- Not valid data: data that has been supplied in an incorrect format e.g. dates as 01-Jun-2016 instead of 01/06/2016;
- Other errors: data that does not meet a validation rule when reviewed against other cells e.g. an end date before a start date, or data supplied for only one carer when a household has two carers.

An example of an error report is given below.

Error Type	Detail	Link
Missing Data	Please indicate whether stages 1 and 2 ran concurrently (at the same time) (E6)	Go to data row >>
Missing Data	Please indicate whether stages 1 and 2 ran concurrently (at the same time) (E6)	Go to data row >>
Other Errors	The number of children in placements (C1) must equal the number of children given under this family ID on the children sheet.	Go to data row >>
Other Errors	The number of children in placements (C1) must equal the number of children given under this family ID on the children sheet.	Go to data row >>
Other Errors	Date of enquiry (E1) must be on or before date Stage 1 started	Go to data row >>
Other Errors	The number of children in placements (C1) must equal the number of children given under this family ID on the children sheet.	Go to data row >>
Missing Data	Please indicate whether there was an exemption in operation during 2016-17 (B5)	Go to data row >>
Missing Data	Please indicate whether there was an exemption in operation during 2016-17 (B5) Please enter the date of enquiry received (E1) Please enter the date stage 1 started (E2) Please enter the date stage 1 ended (E3) Please enter the date stage 2 started (E4) Please enter the date stage 2 ended (E5) Please enter the date of panel (E8); this is required for all households approved in 2016-17	Go to data row >>
Missing Data	Please indicate whether there was an exemption in operation during 2016-17 (B5)	Go to data row >>
Not Valid	Please enter ethnicity using the codes given (A3); for unknown ethnicity, enter NOBT	Go to data row >>
Not Valid	Please enter the main type of care offered by this household, using the codes provided (B3); for unknown, enter POFO	Go to data row >>
Not Valid	Please enter TSD status using the codes given (A6); for unknown status, enter TSD0	Go to data row >>

The data is submitted in Excel workbooks and stored securely in system folders which are only accessible to members of the Ofsted Social Care Data & Analysis team. As data is now collected at person-level, agencies are asked to provide identifiers only and not names.

The collated dataset is also in Excel format. No databases are used for the production of these statistics.

The deadline for all agencies to submit a return was 30 June 2017. Each individual form is checked by Ofsted for completeness, accuracy and consistency. Where discrepancies are identified through Ofsted checks, these are followed up with the data suppliers via telephone and email to check and confirm accuracy, until the final deadline for revisions in October.⁷

QA checks are also carried out on the combined dataset, the analysis and the key findings, along with any supplementary statistics that are going to be published. Where applicable, data is considered against the DfE data on Children Looked After as a "sense check"; however, the time periods in the two returns do not always match up, and so there is limited utility to this.

Strengths of the data are:

1. High response rates with all data provided: response rates for the last five years have been around 98-99%, and in 2016-17 were 100%.

⁷ In some cases (less than 1% of returns), this cannot be done because the agency has de-registered between 31 March and the QA date. Where this occurs, the data supplied by the agency prior to QA is used.

2. Robust QA of the data by Ofsted: Ofsted completes detailed QA of all returns, which means a high level of confidence in the data presented. The QA tools, processes and outcomes are described in the introduction to the main report and elsewhere in this quality report.

3. Data benchmarking: Where applicable, data returned to Ofsted is benchmarked against data submitted to the DfE, and generally found to be in line with DfE data. Where there are differences, this is likely due to additional QA work done with individual agencies, particularly IFAs, to ensure quality of data; as the DfE collects data from LAs only, this level of QA work is not always possible for them.

4. Comprehensive picture of fostering: due to high response rates, and the volume of data collected, as well as the mix of in-year and end-of-year figures, the data provides a comprehensive picture of fostering in England over time.

5. Embedding of new methodology: The number of agencies who returned forms which still had errors at the point that the collection was closed decreased from an unusual high in 2015-16. This was likely as a result of this being the second year with the new methodology, leading to increased confidence and accuracy in completing the dataset, as well as a reduction in the time taken by agencies to do this.

Limitations of the data are:

1. The voluntary nature of the collection: as a result, response rates may fluctuate, though response rates to date have been close to 100%, with all respondents providing all requested data. As the collection is voluntary, there is no legislation compelling agencies, including LAs, to supply data, or to provide information on their own data quality. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector has also not made use of her powers to compel reporting of these data.

2. Comparability to previous years: The changes made to the form each year, and particularly the introduction of a new way of collecting data from 2015-16 meant that some previously comparable data items could no longer be compared to previous years' data.

3.. Known issues and variance with the data collected: Some agencies reported that they were unable to provide some data items; for example, one LA recorded that they were unable to report on the status of foster carers' training completion; and in some cases there were errors in the returns that could not be resolved prior to the production of this report, such as IFAs recording that they had Family and Friends carers in post. As a result, we are aware that the data may not be as robust as hoped. We intend for data to be collected, validated and submitted via an online portal for 2017-18, which should streamline the process and reduce the numbers of data sets submitted with errors.

5. Different reporting practices: different agencies will have different reporting practices; there is no standard across all fostering agencies. This may impact the burden of completing the return on some agencies. There is also some anecdotal evidence of different recording practices in different agencies, such as around children going missing for short periods (less than 24 hours).

6. Minimal knowledge of data quality at provider level: although all data returns are extensively quality assured by Ofsted, information is not generally available about how the agency ensures that accuracy of their own data. Steps are taken to mitigate the impact of this, including QA, and the provision of guidance on completion of the form. A helpline number is also operated such that data suppliers are able to speak to a member of the Social Care Data & Analysis team for queries.

Potential sources of error and bias:

1. Quality of agencies' data: Ofsted has no direct knowledge of the agencies' data storage systems, or the checks and QA they carry out on this, and currently is unable to explore this in any depth due to the time and resource needed. However, we perform extensive QA of data to minimise the impact of this; additionally, the data collected is broadly similar year-on-year, so it is likely that agencies would have systems in place to collect and report on the required data. There has also been evidence of improvement over the years as a result of this data collection.

2. Best fit requirements: there will always be situations which do not fit easily into the categories supplied and, in these cases, personal interpretation may mean that different data suppliers code similar situations in different ways. Ofsted aims to minimise this through use of guidance and support.

3. Agencies' perceptions: agencies may perceive that the data will be used to form a judgement on their service, which could bias their return. Ofsted includes guidance on the purpose of the collection in an aim to reduce this concern.

4. Other considerations: all agencies are asked to, and do, submit data; therefore, there is no risk of sample or response bias in the data.

Timeliness and punctuality

Statistics are produced and published on an annual basis.

Data is published on the date pre-announced in the publication schedule here: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/statistics. Information on any delay in publication can also be found on the publication schedule. Reasons why a delay may occur include, for example, where more time is necessary to properly QA the data to ensure its robustness. Publications are announced on Ofsted's Twitter page and social media channels on the day of release.

The average timescale for production of the fostering data release is approximately seven months. This includes approximately three months for the collection of the data and approximately the same period for QA of the data and follow-up with agencies. A further six weeks of the production involves: the analysis, drafting the findings, creating the statistical release, QA of all outputs and publication on the gov.uk website.

Pre-release is given in accordance with the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order (2008), as detailed in Ofsted's pre-release policy here:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics.

Accessibility and clarity

Ofsted releases are published in an accessible format on the gov.uk website. The information is publicly available and there are no restrictions on access to the published data.

Data covering children's social care is held on a collections page on gov.uk:
www.gov.uk/government/collections/childrens-social-care-statistics

The primary function of the data is to meet Ofsted's data requirements for inspections. However, the data is shared for public use with the intention of informing about the fostering sector and for re-use by analysts and researchers as may be required. The underlying data presentation was amended to better support public use and re-use from 2014-15.

Performance, cost and respondent burden

Through direct consultation and the use of feedback and queries, Ofsted attempts to minimise the respondent burden by improving the clarity of questions and definitions. Some work was done in 2011, for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) single data list, to establish the annual respondent burden in terms of resource hours.

In order to reduce the burden on agencies around producing this data, Ofsted and the DfE reached an agreement prior to the 2015-16 collection to introduce Ofsted URNs into the statutory SSDA903 data collection from LAs. This data is intended to be included in a supplementary release, and Ofsted will assess how effectively this change has worked for all parties, and what amendments may be needed to ensure the process runs smoothly and continues to reduce burden for data suppliers.

As discussed above, we are also intending to introduce an online portal for data validation and submission in 2017-18, which will reduce the amount of time agencies wait for feedback on the quality of their return. This will also allow validation to run much more quickly, and reduce the risk of compatibility issues, compared to the 2016-17 form.

Confidentiality, transparency and security

Where sensitive or personal data is held by Ofsted, the disclosure control processes we have in place ensure that this data is not published. All data releases follow Ofsted's confidentiality and revisions policies which can be found here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-standards-for-official-statistics. All staff using sensitive data have been trained in confidentiality and disclosure awareness.

Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating data to England and sector level. This processing is done using SQL, Knime, Tableau and Excel, and is reviewed and quality assured before the data is used. No data has been removed.

For data protection and disclosure purposes, all figures in the key findings and the underlying data have been rounded to the nearest five; this has also been applied to figures from previous years used in the release. The purpose of the rounding is to ensure non-disclosure of sensitive data while maintaining its usefulness. This means, however, that some total figures do not match exactly with data aggregated at provider type, England or regional levels.

Figures are rounded to the nearest five. As a result, no suppression is required.

IFA agency level data is not published, as IFAs are subject to different legislation and frameworks than LA fostering agencies, as described above. IFAs are also often smaller, meaning that the risk of disclosure is higher if data is shared at agency level for this group. IFAs also include private organisations, for whom this data is commercially sensitive, and therefore not applicable to being shared widely. Definitions are provided in the SFR; for instance, the glossary includes placement types and what these mean, as well as references to relevant legislation where applicable.