Fostering in England
Methodology and Quality Report

Last updated: 29 January 2019

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 under the heading 'Fostering in England 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018'.

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

This release of fostering in England data covers the period between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018.

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

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[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

Ofsted received data returns from all LA fostering agencies and 99% of IFAs eligible to return data. One per cent of all returns contained data inaccuracies which could not be resolved. This data has been included in the national, LA and IFA data and in this report, with an acknowledgement where necessary.

Of the 308 active IFAs on 31 March 2018, six submitted data but have been re-categorised as LA data because they were operated by IFA Trusts, five were null returns because they were recently registered and did not have any data to report, and four were not eligible to submit data because they subsequently resigned. Of the remaining 294 IFAs that were eligible to submit data, we received data from 292 agencies (99%). This included data from five agencies who were not able to resolve small errors within their dataset before the collection deadline.

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, and submitted a single combined return.

Meeting user needs

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 September 2017, Ofsted conducted a formal consultation about the data collection format and process. Over 150 responses were received, which

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[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-2017-to-2018)

overwhelmingly supported the proposal to modernise the collection using an online collection system.

Moving the data collection online has had a number of advantages for both the sector and Ofsted. It has streamlined and improved the submission process. Importantly for our users, it made the validation and sign-off process easier, quicker, and more transparent. Importantly for Ofsted, it made the processing and production of statistics much easier. Furthermore, Ofsted have been able to publish the statistics more quickly, increasing value to users in the sector.

The portal system will be updated, following feedback from the 2017-18 collection, and it is envisaged that subsequent releases will be published more quickly again.

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. Face to face training and online webinars were offered to familiarise data suppliers with the new online portal collection system. 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 accompanying guidance includes a glossary of terms, to help clarify what is being requested, and descriptions of all codes used for data entry. The online portal allows agencies to quality assure (QA), validate and sign off their data to help make sure data is accurate and complete. Additional troubleshooting guidance was published on the website to assist users with the new process of submitting data though the online portal. 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 Staying Put 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 is referenced.[5] For example, the numbers of children in foster care placed through IFAs or LAs, and those Staying Put in 2017-18, 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.

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[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-2017-to-2018) 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/fosteringservices-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

The underlying data that accompanies the fostering in England release has been streamlined and improved, to increase value to users. As a result of improved data quality in recent years, Ofsted have now been able to publish underlying data to include more detail of fostering types, such as: fostering to adopt and emergency foster care. In previous releases, fostering households had been reported against aggregated categories: mainstream; family and friends; short breaks only. As a result of the decision to improve the reporting of the fostering households cohorts, there has been a slight recalculation of historical data to provide further details, where available.

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.

Accuracy and reliability

All LAs and IFAs are asked to complete this return on a voluntary basis. There was a 100% response rate from LAs and 99% among IFAs in 2017-18. The two IFAs that did not submit data had a negligible impact on the overall figures, 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.

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 2018. Ofsted recognises, however, that the data was collected from 439 agencies and that detailed information on their internal QA processes is not available. In total, six agencies (1%) 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. The online portal system has in-built validation functions which assist data suppliers with checking and amending the data. 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.

There are two tiers of validation carried out by the online portal system: at the point of upload the portal checks all fields contain valid data; then, using the validation tool, the portal checks that data are complete and accurate.

QA checks during upload:

- Invalid data: data that does not match the specified code set and format may be omitted from the upload or prevent the file uploading. For example, 31/02/2018 is an invalid date and WRBI is an invalid code.
- Invalid ID numbers: if any ID numbers have been duplicated within the data, this would prevent the file uploading.

QA carried out by the validation tool:

- Inconsistent data: validation rules compare data submitted across multiple fields to check the data is consistent. For instance, in recruitment data we would expect all 'end dates' to be after 'start dates'. Another example is that we expect the number of filled places submitted in household data to match to the number of children recorded for each household.
- Incomplete data: based on the user-response, additional fields may be expected to be completed. For instance, if there are two foster carers within a household, we expect ethnicity and training data for both carers.

Once the portal has carried out the QA checks, specific guidance is given to direct users to the field(s) containing errors. Guidance is available in three formats to allow maximum flexibility for users to check and amend their data. For instance, some users may prefer to download a validation report and then make changes to their original upload template, whereas other users may prefer to use the webform view where individual records can be edited straight into the portal.

The data is submitted online and stored securely in Amazon's EEA data centre that meets all GDS data requirements. Data which is exported from the online portal is stored 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 deadline for all agencies to submit a validated return was 31 July 2018. As this was the first year using the new online collection method, some agencies asked for extensions in order to validate their returns. The final deadline for the collection closing was 5 October 2018, at which point 98% of expected returns had been validated, 1% (six returns) had errors that could not be resolved and two agencies failed to submit data.

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 99%-100%.

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 was in line with last year.

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 before the final deadline; for example, Lewisham LA submitted an incomplete return.[7] Also, in some cases there were errors in the returns that could not be resolved by the deadline: five IFAs did not fully validate their data and submissions included small errors; such as omitted approval dates for households. As a result, we are aware that the data may not be as robust

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[7] In particular, Lewisham did not provide data about children considered to be at risk of CSE and whether children were in placement on the 31/03/2018.

as hoped. However, using the online portal and in-built validation has streamlined the process and reduced the numbers of data sets submitted with errors (compared to the manual process used up until 2016–17).

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 introduced an online portal for data validation and submission in 2017-18, which substantially reduced the amount of time agencies wait for feedback on the quality of their return. Validation is carried out immediately,

at the point of submission and the validation tool is more comprehensive compared to the previous method.

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 confidentially and disclosure awareness.

Methodology

Data processing involves aggregating data to England and sector level. This processing is done using 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.

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.