



Department
for Education

Star Chamber Scrutiny Board

Department for Education

**Activity Report: November 2023 to
October 2024**

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Star Chamber Scrutiny Board activity report

The following is a summary of the activity of the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board (SCSB) during its Sixteenth year of operation, covering the period November 2023 to October 2024.

Purpose

This report is written to provide an update on the work of the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board for a range of stakeholders both in the department and local authorities, and representative bodies across the education sector. It is also shared with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), who manage the relationship between Central Government and local authorities, so they are informed how the department's data needs are changing and how this is being managed with the sector.

No specific actions are required of the recipients of this report, but comments on any area are welcome and should be sent to the secretariat via email:

StarChamber.MAILBOX@education.gov.uk

History

The Star Chamber was established in 1999 in the then DfES, to review and control data collection proposals emerging from the department. It was initially an internal body but was strengthened in 2006 by the addition of an external scrutiny group of local authority and school representatives. With the department publicly committing to reducing its data collections, the external scrutiny group was given the power to make decisions on collections. It was re-launched as the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board on 1 November 2008.

This report details activity from the November 2023 to October 2024 reporting period.

The Star Chamber Scrutiny Board usually meets monthly, primarily to consider data collection business cases put forward by policy areas across the department. The meetings also discuss relevant data developments and look at how new collections are progressing, acting as a consultation forum where required. The Board's operations are seen as an excellent example of joint working on the wider education and children's services agenda, something that has been supported by HM Treasury.

As part of the overall drive to manage data burdens that Central Government place on local authorities, MHCLG operates a scrutiny process for mandatory data collection proposals impacting on local government. However, after reviewing the terms of reference and operation of the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board, it was agreed by the two departments that the Department for Education would continue to lead on scrutiny of proposals around schools and children's services.

Cases Scrutinised

In the 2023 to 2024 reporting period, 20 business cases were submitted to the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board regarding data collection from schools and local authorities.

This is on par with the number of business cases submitted across 2022 to 2023. In previous years there has been a trend of reducing numbers of business cases for consideration from a high of 77 in the first year of operation. This number is now likely to remain stable with only modest changes to existing collections due to (1) the maturity of the main DfE data collections; and (2) the limited numbers of single time surveys introduced, which is in an effort not to add unnecessary burden on schools and local authorities.

Of the business cases presented for consideration:

- 14 were fully approved
- 1 was conditionally approved.
- 1 was approved with amendments/conditions
- 4 were rejected

Further information on the cases considered can be found in [Annex 2](#).

The Star Chamber Scrutiny Board has also considered nine of these proposals at an early stage of development and in a discussion format prior to a formal business case being developed. This enabled members to provide valuable and essential contributions to the development of proposals, consult with their colleagues to help feed in comprehensive thoughts, ensured that the burden and the practicalities of a collection were considered early and resulted in the approval of seven of the business cases.

As well as scrutinising changes to data collections, over the period the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board has also provided very useful advice about the proposed method for collecting the data, which has been most beneficial. This advice has led to data sponsors changing their data collection proposals, adjusting their timings or sampling methods, or re-designing their methodology, thereby ensuring better quality data was received from the front-line and with fewer burdens on supplying local authorities, schools and academies.

Compliance Costs

Compliance costs allow us to express the burden imposed on the sector for making data returns to the department. A standardised method, originally developed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), is used by DfE and across government to estimate the compliance cost of each data collection and is based on the time taken to complete, and the grade of staff making the return. As compliance costs are estimated, they should not

be relied upon as a definitive figure and should be used in conjunction with other information available to understand the burden of data collection.

Of those business cases considered by Star Chamber in the 2023 to 2024 reporting year, the additional compliance costs and therefore the burden that will be imposed will total £1.56 million. As this burden is imposed across the entire school and local authority sector it is very low per respondent, although it is £127,875 less than the additional burden imposed in the previous year (2022 to 2023). One of the reasons for the decrease in burden is due to additional data being required for the mandating attendance project in 2022 to 2023.

Appeals

An appeals process exists for policy teams who believe that they have strong grounds for exemption or a relaxation to Star Chamber guidance or have good reason to believe that the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board has not acted reasonably in carrying out its functions.

No appeals were heard during this reporting period.

Where required, a further level of appeal exists to a designated Minister, but this was not necessary during 2023 to 2024.

Other work

The examination of business cases is the main area of the Board's work. Board members frequently take questions back to their home authorities to consult with local experts in the particular areas under discussion, pooling the comments they have received on the morning of the regular meetings. Where discussions take place with a policy area prior to the submission of a business case, this can be very beneficial in reducing burdens.

Individual members have also volunteered to support and provide guidance to DfE policy colleagues who are considering new policy initiatives. This has been undertaken outside of the normal activity of the Board and continues to provide a valuable and essential resource of expertise and local knowledge to enable early and meaningful consultation.

The Board has a secondary role discussing and monitoring developments in education and children's services data including changes to the ways of collecting and presenting data. For instance, the Board have acted as stakeholders and have provided valuable feedback and support during the development of new digital services including the PE and Sports Premium digital tool.

Membership and meetings

The Board is chaired by Paul Hirst, the senior leader responsible for sector data collections and burdens who has responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the board. Oversight is provided by the deputy director responsible for Data Operations.

The Board operates with membership remaining open-ended and based on the ongoing commitment provided by members to attend meetings and to take an active role in its operation. Natural change in the group ensures that the turnover of membership happens seamlessly. Local authority representatives are nominated via the Association of Directors of Children's Services, and head teacher / school principal members via the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders.

The department recognises the need to ensure that the Board reflects the current educational landscape and that it has the necessary skills and expertise to consider the proposals put before it.

There are normally eleven meetings each year, once each month, other than August. In the 2023 to 2024 reporting period, the Board met on eleven occasions. This includes an extra-ordinary meeting held in August to look at data required for children's social care which were delayed during the pre-election period and following cancellation of the July meeting which was scheduled to take place on the day of the General Election.

Members would like to call attention to following points of note

The following comments and opinions are provided by the external (independent to DfE) members of the Star Chamber and their inclusion in this report is for transparency purposes and do not necessarily reflect the position, or views, of DfE officials or the government.

The trend of policy colleagues attending Star Chamber to discuss their proposals before they submit their business cases has continued to work well in 2024. In 2023 six of the 19 business cases followed this route with positive outcomes; in 2024 this number rose to 11 of the 19 business cases, nine of which were ultimately approved. We especially wanted to highlight the PE Premium team whose approach we regard as an exemplar in the way a Business Case can be put together, engaging with the Star Chamber early, listening to and taking on board the comments and then presenting the revised business case with draft guidance. We have been recommending that other Policy Teams go to them for advice. It is really good to see good practice in action that can be shared at the DfE.

Five of the business cases were conditionally approved or approved following amendments. Some of the conditionally approved ones were where guidance notes had not been provided.

Last year we suggested “at the decision meeting, guidance for the data collection/ changes be provided to Star Chamber (even if still in draft)”. This has been heeded only in a few cases, despite this being a critical component of a well-designed data collection. As a consequence, the Board frequently has to request them. We feel that well formulated guidance notes can make a huge difference to the data quality of returns to the DfE. They also enable the board members to make better informed decisions on the merits and impact of the business case. Lack of draft guidance often leads to delays in the approval of the business cases or, conditional approval; subject to the guidance being provided and SCSB being satisfied with it.

We have appreciated the DfE taking up SCSB suggestions to review certain collections. We are encouraged that DfE is taking forward our suggestion to examine the overlap between the SEN2 collection (now that it’s child-level) and the AP Census (by our estimate 90% of the children appearing on the AP census also feature in the SEN 2); we are convinced that the data ask can be rationalised to reduce the overall burden to LAs.

Last year we set out some areas where we believed there was further potential for improvement and increasing the board’s effectiveness:

Strengthening links with other stakeholders operating in this space

The links with the Children's Services National Performance and Information Management Group (CS NPIMG), the ADCS Standards, Performance and Inspection Policy Committee (ADCS SPI) and LGA have continued to mutual benefit this year.

In addition to these established relationships, the ability to link into the regional RIIA network (facilitated by NPIMG and other networks) has helped with the two-way communication between the sector and the Department.

The new members of the Star Chamber have brought a wealth of experience and knowledge to add to that of SCSB; derived from members in schools, Local Authority (LA) sectors and independent consultants. There is also a breadth of regional representation within the Board.

A link with the Children's Commissioner's office has not yet materialised, although not for want of trying. In 2025 we hope that it will be possible to develop these links and we will work with the department to do this. In addition to the valuable child centred perspective that the Children's Commissioners representative can bring to the SCSB deliberations, we feel that the SCSB can support the CCO data requests to make them both more efficient & effective for the CCO to administer and slightly less burdensome for the sector. An outcome of which we are excited to be a part.

We would also like to continue to add our voice to the DfE influence with case management system suppliers - to ensure systems are fit for purpose, amendments to meet statutory returns are made in good time (including scheduling in the upgrades with these and other amendments to allow timely implementation) and the sector's need to build their own bespoke reports diminishes as supplier reports become more fit for purpose.

Retaining subject knowledge in DfE

Last year we noted how turnover within the Department of Education had led to a diminution of the understanding & knowledge in certain Department policy areas. Star Chamber and DfE benefitted again this year with some familiar colleagues returning to the Star Chamber on behalf of DfE policy & data areas; generally, this facilitated frank and productive discussions on the topics under discussion.

We again encourage the DfE to continue to consider this issue; we believe the careful retention of that experience and knowledge improves the efficiency of work in these areas and aids future policy development.

Recognition of continuing reduced resources in local authorities and schools

Last year we noted that the reduction of performance and data staff in local authorities and schools across the country has coincided with a rising demand for data and a

stated imperative for better and more creative use of data to drive the improvement of services. If anything, this has accelerated over the last year.

Coupled with that, and in our view, the status of data professionals in education and social care is at an all-time low, with Ofsted removing the need for a discussion with the LA data lead as part of their ILACS inspection regime. Consequently, in many situations, LA & school data colleagues are seen as 'back office' staff with easily replaceable skills, rather than business critical.

From our experience an experienced and knowledgeable data person possesses a nuanced understanding of what an organisations data does, and more importantly, does not reveal about a topic area.

The erosion in the number and status of this talented and dedicated part of the workforce has a detrimental impact on what data can be made available to DfE, whilst simultaneously increasing the per-capita burden on data colleagues in each LA or school, as all the statutory returns still have to be made after all.

Children disappear in data cracks. The statutory data collections provide a datum point, a means to verify the data, remove anomalies, to ensure that local and national datasets are complete and accurate – they are the means by which we verify live data reporting and ensure it is fit for purpose.

The continuing national degradation of the data workforce, will have an impact on data quality, the data cracks into which children can disappear will widen, and there is an increased risk of making poor, or worse, wrong, decisions based on less comprehensive, robust or understood data.

This too, has the 'knock-on' impact of diluting the Nation's data resource on this vulnerable cohort, meaning that research depending on administrative data could suffer from this diminishing data quality. In other areas of the economy, there is large investment in securing robust, good quality data.

Whilst employment and staffing decisions within LAs and Schools is not the direct responsibility of DfE, as we have over the last two years, we feel that the DfE could use its position to influence how Government, LAs and Schools see the importance of performance and data staff and the critical role they play in supporting the improvement in service delivery.

Neglecting this relatively cheap means of ensuring better, richer data, by the simple means of properly recognising, celebrating and promoting the value & status of the data workforce, may ultimately be very costly for the public purse.

We had felt that recent data developments like the new Children's social care data and digital strategy, and the Attendance data project might have offered some mitigation in this area, but so far that does not seem to have materialised to a significant extent and

new data demands continue, each introducing a further demand on the already depleted workforce. We feel that there is a growing risk that at some not-too-distant point this will lead to significant failures in data collection or data submission.

Consideration of the resource requirements in monetary terms

We have made some progress in this area but still don't feel we have got this quite right.

Part of the challenge is the limited time between the issue of the business cases and the meeting at which they are discussed, sometimes a matter of a few days, in which to get a robust sector perspective on the burden.

We will continue to work on this in 2025 but for it to have a meaningful purpose we need to open a dialogue between the DfE and the sector on the managing of this increasing burden. Like the cost of living, the burden only ever goes in one direction.

Voluntary data collections form another element that put pressure on the system and whilst it avoids triggering the 'New burdens' funding mechanism, and to a degree gets round the requirement to give enough notice to implement a statutory collection, collection fatigue can lead to a diminishing return from the sector; meaning the burden shouldered by those who do respond is not good value for money for the public purse.

Future data collection methods, future-proofing scrutiny

Over the last year, new initiatives and now a change of government have been and are likely to, be a catalyst for intense activity in the sphere of children's services data. At times the pace and burden on the sector of being involved, needed though it is, has felt overwhelming.

There is a danger of system overload and the potential for new data initiatives to be implemented whilst not fully formed. It's important that the scrutiny about what data is collected, when and for what purpose remains. To that end we see the role of the Star Chamber in scrutinising these newer types of data collection, as well as those through more traditional routes, continuing to be a vital safeguard to ensure the proper and appropriate levels of challenge and rigour are maintained.

This may be a timely point at which to take stock of the evolving role of Star Chamber and how the scrutiny and challenge process will continue into the future as new collection processes develop.

As an example, we would like to refer to the Daily Attendance project, now enshrined in legislation, which is an example of a new form of data collection (daily extracts from school case management systems) and also of a variation in the role of the Star Chamber. The checks and balances that we required have been adhered to and

reported back to SCSB by DfE colleagues, giving us reassurance on behalf of the sector we represent, about how data can be used effectively and safely for all.

Complementary to this the requirement to 'give something back' to the education sector has led to the DfE making collected data available in readable formats to inform next steps and has driven improvements & efficiencies in data sharing between schools and the DfE.

However, we also note, that the move to other forms of data collection has the potential to increase the burdens on data teams and data entry staff with the continual generation of data errors and issues that need attention and resolution that accompanies these newer collection methods.

Members of the SCSB have taken place in many other 'extra-curricular' engagements with DfE colleagues and those from other areas of government. This has contributed in unseen ways to the formulation of government data-related initiatives and work. SCSB members willingly partake in these additional duties, despite the additional burden, reflecting the commitment of the members to try to make a difference that will ultimately benefit the children, young people and their families with whom we work.

Footnote

Board members again wish to acknowledge the responsibility, privilege and value that membership of the board brings at a personal and professional level. In addition to increasing understanding of the wider system and pressures, it also enables individual board members to involve and feedback to colleagues within their own organisations and through wider national and regional networks; in this way increasing the value of the Star Chamber to both the DfE and the wider sector.

The board also wish to express their continued and profound gratitude to the secretariat, for the continued exceptional support of its work. The management of the facilities, coordination of policy colleagues attending Star Chamber in-person and virtually, and the tenacious pursuit of additional or supplementary information requested by the board has been excellent and enabled us to put our focus on the cases presented.

We would also like to thank longstanding Star Chamber members who left this year; Viktorija Birmingham, who has taken a temporary step away from the SCSB whilst studying and Stuart Beck, both who contributed many years to improving the quality of data collections for the DfE whilst minimising the burdens to the sector; Stuart whilst also looking after his grandchildren, sometimes at the same time! We wish him good luck in his next endeavours (and with his grandchildren!) and Viktorija with her studies.

Annex 1: Star Chamber Members

List of Star Chamber Scrutiny Board members for the reporting year.

Chair:

Paul Hirst, Data Operations Division, DfE

Secretariat:

Nicola Berryman, Data Operations Division, DfE

Members:

One member takes a lead each month in feeding back the comments of the Board to attending policy representatives.

Stuart Beck	National Association of Head Teachers
Viktorija Birmingham	Ealing LA (on Sabbatical)
Robert Campbell	Sheffield City Council
Stephen Clark	Associate LA member
Mathew Downs	Highcliffe School, Dorset
Chloe Grier	Dorset Council
Chris Hill	Associate school member
Derek Hills	Ark School, London
Chris Hudson	Leeds City Council
Laura Humber	Manchester City Council
Rashid Jussa	London Innovation and Improvement Alliance (LIIA)/ London Councils
Damien Kearns	Academies Enterprise Trust

Judith Kemp	Suffolk Virtual School
Sharon McBriarty	Kirklees LA
Jeanette Miller	St Marks C of E School, Southampton
Mike Parkin	Worcestershire LA
Daryl Perilli	Brighton and Hove LA
Cathy Piotrowski	Associate LA member
Kerry Stamp	Bursledon Federation
Simon Utting	Hackney Learning Trust
Christopher Woolf	Wellington College International
Nigel Wright	Oakmoor School, Hampshire

The department and the sector are grateful for the work of these individuals, in particular, Stuart Beck who resigned his position from the board.

Annex 2: List of business cases

Cases fully approved

Business case number	Consideration date	Business case name	SCSB comments	Voluntary (V) or Mandatory (M)
938	December 2023	Collecting Down Syndrome data through School Census	The board approved this business case	M
939	December 2023	Tutoring: School Census 2024/25 and 2025/26	The board approved this business case	M
940	January 2024	Elective Home Education and Children Missing Education mandating	The board approved this business case	M
942	February 2024	Addition of Social Worker pay data for Local Authority employed Social Workers to the 2024-25 Children's Social Work Workforce (CSWW) census collection onwards	The board approved this business case	M
944	March 2024	National minimum allowance - foster carers	The board approved this business case	V
945	April 2024 & September 2024	Data assurance of minimum English and maths teaching hours from 2025/26	The board approved this business case	M
946	June 2024	Parental Responsibility Measures Attendance - attendance Policy	The board approved this business case	M
947	June 2024	2YO entitlement take up	The board approved this business case	M
948	June 2024 and September 2024	PE and Sports Premium digital tool	The board approved this business case	M
949	August 2024	UAS children costing data exercise	The board approved this business case	V
950	August 2024	Children Looked After (CLA) data collection requirements – 2025 to 2026	The board approved this business case	M

951	September 2024	Children living in Kinship Care	The board approved this business case	M
955	October 2024	Home-to-school travel data collection	The board approved this business case	V

Cases approved following amendments

Business case number	Consideration date	Business case name	SCSB comments	Voluntary (V) or Mandatory (M)
937	November 2023 and December 2023	Proposal to amend Wraparound Childcare questions in the School Census from academic year 2024/2025	Following SCSB scrutiny of policy changes, draught guidance and data items, the business case was approved.	M

Cases conditionally approved

Business case number	Consideration date	Business case name	SCSB comments	Voluntary (V) or Mandatory (M)
943	February 2024 & March 2024	Agency child and family social worker use and cost' quarterly data collection	Following agreement of continued input from SCSB, the business case was approved.	M

Cases rejected

Business case number	Consideration date	Business case name	SCSB comments	Voluntary (V) or Mandatory (M)
941	September 2024	LA SEND	SCSB rejected the business case as enough geographical workforce data is held to identify LAs to engage with.	M
953	September 2024	Breakfast Clubs	SCSB rejected the business case as SCSB approval is not required for data research via a voluntary school pilot.	M
954	October 2024	Mental Health Support Teams - School Coverage	SCSB rejected the business case as the data should be requested from Mental Health support teams.	M
956	October 2024	Pre-proceedings data collection	SCSB rejected the business case as it was too late to implement.	V

Cases referred to appeal

No referrals made in 2023 to 2024 reporting year.



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