



Department
for Education

Star Chamber Scrutiny Board

Department for Education

**Activity Report: November 2024 to
October 2025**

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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 Seventeenth year of operation, covering the period November 2024 to October 2025.

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 2024 to October 2025 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 2024 to 2025 reporting period, 10 business cases were submitted to the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board regarding data collection from schools and local authorities.

This is a reduction in the number of business cases submitted across 2023 to 2024. 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. Whilst there has been a further reduction this time, it is likely that numbers will remain relatively 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:

- 5 were fully approved
- 3 were conditionally approved.
- 1 was approved with amendments/conditions
- 1 was rejected

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

The Star Chamber Scrutiny Board has also considered four of these proposals at an early stage of development and in a discussion format prior to a formal business case being developed. In particular, the board discussed the business case SC Ref 963, three times before the business case was submitted for approval. 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 all the business cases that followed this route.

As well as scrutinising changes to data collections, over the period the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board has also provided useful advice about the burden imposed on the sector, which has been most beneficial. This advice has led data sponsors to reconsider data collection proposals, ensuring burden on local authorities, schools and academies is minimised where possible. The Department will continue to engage with the board in respect of sector burden discussions.

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 2024 to 2025 reporting year, the additional compliance costs and therefore the burden that will be imposed will total £841,000. As this burden is imposed across the entire school and local authority sector it is very low per respondent, and it should be noted that it is £717,632 less than the additional burden imposed in the previous year (2023 to 2024).

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 2024 to 2025.

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 example, in this reporting year:

- the Board have acted as stakeholders and have provided valuable feedback on numerous occasions and support during the development of the new termly early years census, which will enable data to be collected on the expansion to early years childcare provision. The boards input and challenge lead to the comprehensive and successful conversion of an annual collection to a termly collection.

- the board regularly receives updates throughout the year on past approved initiatives as they continue to develop. In particular, members have discussed updates around:
 - Children's Social Care Dashboard
 - Daily attendance collection
 - Young carers

The board continues to provide comment and support based upon their setting experience, so officials can understand the impact of changes to the sector.

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 Enterprise Data for Access and Sharing.

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 2024 to 2025 reporting period, the Board met on eleven occasions.

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 with discussion cases prior to raising a business case reversed in 2025. In 2024 nine of the 20 business cases followed this route with positive outcomes; in 2025 this number fell dramatically to four of the 11 business cases, all of which were ultimately approved. A further four discussion papers have not yet led to a business case. Of the seven business cases that came without a discussion paper, three were approved (two were amendments to existing collections and one a one-off collection), of the other four, three came back twice before being approved, and was rejected and has not returned as business cases so far.

The message is clear, if it's a new collection, it's best to come to Star Chamber for a discussion first so that the members can support it's development.

Five of the business cases were conditionally approved or approved following amendments.

For the last two years we have suggested "at the decision meeting, guidance for the data collection/ changes be provided to Star Chamber (even if still in draft)". This has still been heeded in far too few cases, despite this being a critical component of a well-designed data collection. As a consequence, the Board still has to request them frequently. 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.

Sadly, the review of the overlap between the SEN2 collection and the AP Census (by our estimate 90% of the children appearing on the AP census also feature in the SEN 2) we suggested has been paused following changes in personnel and the postponement of the planned SEND reform. We hope this can be continued as soon as possible; we remain 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.

The link with Children's Commissioner's office is in place and we feel that Star Chamber is already benefitting from the child centred perspective that the Children's Commissioners representative brings to the SCSB deliberations.

We have also been heartened by initiatives that DfE has launched to explore bringing data and API standards to the case management systems (CMS) that LAs and Schools rely on to manage the services they deliver. We share the hope that this will ultimately lead to greater flexibility and better value for LAs and Schools from the CMS providers. We feel that CMS providers will also benefit from these standards and that it will lead to greater innovation in this area.

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

For the last two years we have 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. Following the acceleration in this trend last year, we have been particularly alarmed, that if anything, this is accelerating further.

We note that recent regional improvement money had specific funding for three analyst roles to lead the development of regional data on children's social care, SEND and other data. This is a welcome mitigation for this alarming trend but on its own, is not enough, to combat this trend.

Coupled with that, and in our view, the status of data professionals in education and social care is at an all-time low. A year ago 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 and drawing on the experiences of colleagues across the country, 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 the data provided to DfE and used within LAs, 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.

Children disappear into 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.

In the recent audit, ‘National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse’ Baroness Casey said the following about the data she was examining; (when talking about data on child sexual exploitation) *“It is a failure of public policy over many years that there remains such limited, reliable data in this area.”* Later in the same report;

“i) Data, information sharing, training and other processes Time after time, failures are identified in the ways services follow established processes, gather, use and share intelligence and data, or ensure staff have the awareness, knowledge and skills necessary for the job. Repeated recommendations are made for improvements across these areas. In response, new bodies are set up to provide support or oversee improvements, or to collect and analyse new data. Guidance is updated and local processes reviewed and strengthened. They seem to fade over time as new priorities emerge, improvements trickle through rather than wash over, but information is still not sufficiently shared on vulnerable children.”

Clearly there is an urgent need for recognising the importance of the workforce that work on data and the role they play in ensuring good quality data is available, so that this does not become a recurring theme in future audits.

Whilst employment and staffing decisions within LAs and Schools is not the direct responsibility of DfE, as we have over the last three 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.

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

This remains a concern and we will continue to work on this in 2026 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 which appears to only increase.

Adding items to existing returns and Voluntary data collections put pressure on the system and whilst those routes avoid triggering the 'New burdens' funding mechanism, the burden continues to increase.

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.

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;

Jeanette Miller, a founder member of Star Chamber and its predecessor, finally hung up her scrutiny glasses and will be sorely missed by the group. Her unflagging dedication over two decades, eye for detail and determination to say what needed to be said was a force for a lot of the good work of Star Chamber over that time.

Derek Hills, whose systems knowledge was a valuable asset contributed much to improving the quality of data collections for the DfE whilst minimising the burdens to the sector. We wish them all the best for their future endeavours.

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.

Viktorija Birmingham	Ealing LA (on Sabbatical)
Robert Campbell	Sheffield City Council
Stephen Clark	Associate LA member
Mathew Downs	Highcliffe School, Dorset
Chris Elliott	Diverse Academies Trust
Chloe Grier	Associate LA member

Chris Hill	Associate school member
Derek Hills	Ark School, London
Michael Howe	Ofsted
Elliot Howles	Kirby Muxloe Primary School, Leicester
Chris Hudson	Leeds City Council
Laura Humber	Manchester City Council
Rashid Jussa	London Innovation and Improvement Alliance (LIIA)/ London Councils
Damien Kearns	Associate Headteacher
Judith Kemp	Suffolk Virtual School
Sharon McBriarty	Kirklees LA
Jeanette Miller	Bursledon Federation
Mike Parkin	Worcestershire LA
Daryl Perilli	Brighton and Hove LA
Cathy Piotrowski	Associate LA member
Kerry Stamp	Bursledon Federation
Judith Stott	National Association of Head Teachers
Simon Utting	Hackney Learning Trust
Christopher Woolf	Saracens Multi Academy Trust
Nigel Wright	Oakmoor School, Hampshire

The department and the sector are grateful for the work of these individuals, in particular, Derek Hills and Jeanette Miller who resigned their positions from the Board. Chris Elliott, Elliot Howles and Judith Stott were welcomed as new members following an open exercise to attract complimentary skills and experience to 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)
958	January 2025	EHE and CME data collection 2025	The Board approved this business case	M
959	January 2025	Termly EY census and addition of workforce and SEND data	The Board approved this business case	M
963	July 2025	Families First Partnership Programme – Child-Level Data Collection	The Board approved this business case	V
964	July 2025	Children Looked After (CLA) data collection requirements – 2026 to 2027	The Board approved this business case	M
966	July 2025	Early Years Data collection for established entitlements	The Board approved this business case	M

Cases approved following amendments

Business case number	Consideration date	Business case name	SCSB comments	Voluntary (V) or Mandatory (M)
957	March 2025	Exclusions 25/26	Following SCSB scrutiny of policy changes, draught guidance and data items, the business case was approved.	M
961	July 2025	Pre-proceeding data in CiN census	Following SCSB scrutiny of policy changes, draught guidance and data items, the business case was approved.	M
962	June 2025	Altering items in the SEN2 data collection	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)
965	October 2025	Collection of data relating to adoption support assessments.	Following agreement to return to the Board in 2 years, to obtain approval to continue to collect or make mandatory.	V

Cases rejected

Business case number	Consideration date	Business case name	SCSB comments	Voluntary (V) or Mandatory (M)
968	October 2025	School based nursery providers and places collected via School Census	SCSB rejected the business case as enough geographical workforce data is held to identify LAs to engage with.	M

Cases referred to appeal

No referrals made in 2024 to 2025 reporting year.



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