

Statistics on
Children Looked
After by Local
Authorities in
England

*Department for
Children, Schools
and Families*

Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England

October 2009

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

Under the provisions of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, the UK Statistics Authority has a statutory function to assess sets of statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, with a view to determining whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated, or to retain their designation, as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice. Whilst the Code is wide-ranging, designation may be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further, for example on the validity of the statistics as a social or economic measure; though reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Designation as National Statistics will sometimes be granted in cases where some changes still need to be made to meet fully the requirements of the Code, on condition that steps are taken by the producer body, within a stated timeframe, to address the weaknesses. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the Code.

Designation is granted on the basis of the information provided to the Statistics Authority, primarily by the organisation that produces the statistics. The information includes a range of factual evidence and also assurances by senior statisticians in the producer organisation. The views of users are also sought. Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

Once designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement on the producer organisation to ensure that the set of statistics continues to be produced in compliance with the Code of Practice.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is one of a series of reports prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*¹. The report covers Children Looked After (CLA) statistics for England, produced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). These statistics cover children who are looked after by local authorities or are eligible for local authority aftercare support services.
- 1.2 The CLA statistics produced by DCSF cover England. Each UK administration produces and releases data on children looked after by its own local authorities (or Health Trusts in Northern Ireland). These distinct publications have different underlying definitions, methods of data collection and dissemination. As part of the initial pilot set of assessments, the CLA statistics from all four UK administrations were assessed. Cross-cutting UK issues are discussed further in Section 5.
- 1.3 The Statistics Authority will be inviting comments on both the process for assessment and the presentation of Assessment reports, with a view to further development of the arrangements in the coming months. The forward programme of assessments can be found on the Authority's website² along with further information on the principles and procedures for assessment³.
- 1.4 The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

Section 2 Summary of findings, highlighting the main strengths and weaknesses in relation to the Code of Practice. This summary includes the UK Statistics Authority's decision in relation to designation as National Statistics.

Section 3 Subject of the assessment, an overview of the statistics and their history.

Section 4 The Assessment team's detailed assessment, providing more details about the assessment of compliance against each principle and protocol of the Code of Practice.

Section 5 The UK position, highlighting cross-cutting issues from the assessment of *Children Looked After* statistics for all four UK administrations.

Annex 1 Suggestions for improvement.

Annex 2 Summary of the assessment process and users' views.

¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pga/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/programme-of-assessment/index.html>

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/principles---procedures/index.html>

1.5 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

2 Summary of findings

2.1 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

2.1.1 The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in '*Children Looked After in England (including adoption and care leavers)*'⁴ and '*Outcome Indicators for Looked-After Children*'⁵ for England are designated as National Statistics, subject to DCSF implementing the enhancements listed in sections 2.4 and 2.5 below and reporting them to the Authority by February 2010.

2.1.2 Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice, and thus that they meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

2.1.3 Designation also signifies that, subject to any caveats in this report, the Statistics Authority judges that the statistics are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

2.2 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

2.2.1 The Statistics Authority is satisfied that statistics published in '*Children Looked After in England (including adoption and care leavers)*' and '*Outcome Indicators for Looked-After Children*' in England are compliant with most aspects of the Code of Practice. Most of the main users' needs are met, and some users are engaged with well through the Star Chamber Security Board (SCSB). The statisticians in DCSF have sought to achieve continuous improvement through moving to child-level data collections, working to reduce data burdens and linking to other data sources to maximise the value of existing data.

2.2.2 DCSF statisticians are aware that their engagement with the wider user base is limited, and they told the Assessment team that they plan to address this by forming a data user group. DCSF has also improved its data quality assurance process in response to a number of errors in recent publications.

2.3 Detailed recommendations

2.3.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DCSF could strengthen its compliance with the Code. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in sections 2.4 and 2.5 below. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not central to their designation, are listed at annex 1.

⁴ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000810/index.shtml>

⁵ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000842/index.shtml>

2.4 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

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| Requirement 1 | Confirm that the views of the new data user group, once it has been established, will be taken into account in determining the statistical work programme (para 4.3) |
| Requirement 2 | Publish plans for engaging with users, and document their needs (para 4.4) |
| Requirement 3 | Publish a revisions policy for these statistics, and provide a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions at the time that they are released (para 4.6) |
| Requirement 4 | Report how DCSF is addressing the recommendations from the NAO report that relate to the quality of CLA statistics (para 4.12) |
| Requirement 5 | Publish the arrangements for protecting confidential data (para 4.13) |
| Requirement 6 | Improve the commentary in both the publications to include more detailed discussion of the uses of the statistics, their context, methods and quality (para 4.20) |
| Requirement 7 | Take appropriate steps to deposit the statistics with the relevant national archive (para 4.21) |
| Requirement 8 | Publish a clear timetable for the release of the tables that follow the main publication (para 4.24) |
| Requirement 9 | Ensure that government statements that cover the statistical releases are clearly labelled as policy statements (or ministerial statements) (para 4.25) |
| Requirement 10 | Review the departmental Statement of Administrative Sources in the light of the recently published guidance from the National Statistician, and include in this Statement more information to identify the arrangements for auditing the quality of the data provided by local authorities (para 4.29) |

2.5 UK-wide requirements

- 2.5.1 Cross-cutting UK issues are discussed further in Section 5. The corresponding requirement is below:

UK Requirement 1

DCSF, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) should document clearly the differences between each administration's CLA statistics and scope out the feasibility and need for a comparable data subset (para 5.2.5)

3 Subject of the assessment

- 3.1 This assessment covers two separate sets of statistics produced by DCSF. These are '*Children Looked After in England (including adoptions and care leavers)*' (CLA statistics) and '*Outcome Indicators for Looked-After Children*' in England (Outcome Indicators).
- 3.2 The term 'children looked after' is used in the *Children Act 1989*⁶ to describe all children who are the subject of a care order, or who are provided with accommodation on a voluntary basis for more than 24 hours. The statistics cover the number of children who entered care, left care or were adopted, and analyses the characteristics of these children. This analysis includes breakdowns by age, gender, ethnicity, category of need, type of placement and legal status. The main statistical release is published in September each year and covers data for England relating to the previous financial year. Additional material, including tables of local authority level data, is published in October, November and December.
- 3.3 The Outcome Indicators publication provides a range of information covering what happens to children who have been looked after or in care. It includes their educational attainment, employment, cautions and convictions, health outcomes and substance misuse at age 19. DCSF publishes the Outcome Indicators publication in April and the data relate to the year ending the previous September.
- 3.4 Statistics on children in care in England have been collected and published by central government since 1949. DCSF collects the data for both publications from local authorities. Apart from a six-year period between 1998 and 2003, local authorities have provided information on all looked-after children in England. Between 1998 and 2003, local authorities were only required to provide data for a sample of children looked after.
- 3.5 The data in the two publications are used to measure progress towards Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets to 'narrow the gap in educational achievement between children from lower income and disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers'⁷ and 'increase the proportion of socially excluded adults in settled accommodation and employment, education or training'⁸. The data are also used as part of a set of indicators to measure the performance of local authorities.
- 3.6 The data are used extensively to inform Government policy on looked-after children. These children are among the most vulnerable groups in society. The statistics provide information about these children and the type of care that is provided for them. The data are important to fostering and adoption agencies, children's charities and other organisations that monitor and campaign for children in need and carry out research in this area. These organisations,

⁶ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1989/Ukpga_19890041_en_1.htm

⁷ PSA 11 http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pbr_csr07_psa10_11.pdf

⁸ PSA 16 http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pbr_csr07_psa16.pdf

Parliament and the public are likely to use the data to evaluate how well local authorities are meeting the needs of the children they look after.

- 3.7 The National Audit Office (NAO) carried out a review of the data systems underpinning DCSF's (then known as the Department for Education and Skills) PSA targets in December 2006⁹. The data used for CLA statistics were given an 'amber' rating, meaning the data systems were broadly appropriate but needed strengthening in relation to guidance, desk instructions, audit and web security. The amber rating related to matters that are largely but not entirely outside the scope of the Code of Practice. However, the issues highlighted by the NAO that relate to the quality of the statistics should be addressed (see para 4.12)
- 3.8 DCSF carries out a wider data collection to cover all children in contact with the Children's and Family Services in local authorities, including those who are looked after. This is called the Children in Need Census. DCSF also has a National Pupil Database that contains a range of data on attainment and pupil characteristics. DCSF told us that these two sources present the opportunity to rationalise the data collected for the two outputs being assessed and that they are taking this work forward.

⁹ http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000700/SFR2004_PSA_TargetV1.pdf

4 Detailed assessment

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 4.1 Within Government, these statistics inform policy on looked-after children and are used as a measure for Public Service Agreement targets. The statistics are used as an indicator of the performance of local authorities, and are important to the range of organisations and groups who monitor and campaign for children in need.
- 4.2 The main forum that DCSF uses to engage with users outside the department is the Star Chamber Scrutiny Board (SCSB). This Board consists of local authority representatives and head teachers. Its remit is to assess proposals for new data collections to ensure they do not create unnecessary burdens or duplicate existing collections. DCSF told us that other engagement with external users is limited, often relying on input from internal DCSF colleagues who engage with specific external groups.
- 4.3 DCSF told us it is working to address this by forming a data user group to cover the range of its statistical outputs. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should confirm that the views of the new data user group, once it has been established, will be taken into account in determining the statistical work programme¹⁰ (Requirement 1). This will help ensure that statistical developments are influenced by the wider public interest. We suggest that DCSF reviews the work of the group in the coming year, and publishes an update on progress.
- 4.4 While most users were satisfied with all or part of the publications, some wanted more information to be available. The information collected at child-level has potential to allow more detailed analysis than DCSF currently makes available. Users expressed interest in data and commentary comparing looked-after children with all children. The Outcome Indicators publication already includes some information on this. DCSF told us that an exercise to match the data to the National Pupil Database will further improve these comparisons. Some users expressed interest in longer-term analysis of outcomes, for example, outcomes for looked-after children as they continue into adult life. Currently the data only cover outcomes up to age 19. Some users also expressed interest in having more information on looked-after children with disabilities. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should publish a plan for engaging with users, and document their needs¹¹ (Requirement 2).

¹⁰ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 3 and Protocol 1 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

¹¹ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2, Principle 1 Practice 5 and Protocol 1 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 4.5 The two sets of statistics are available through the National Statistics Publication Hub, which links to a 'product page' on the DCSF website. This product page contains summary information about the publication, including a description of the publication, the pre-release access list, the coverage of the statistics and a contact point for further information.
- 4.6 The data underpinning the statistics are provided by local authorities. Local authorities continually update their systems to reflect changes and new information. At the end of each year, when local authorities provide their data they can amend the data for previous years. The CLA statistics publication makes it clear that data are revised, but neither publication contains any information on the size or extent of revisions. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should publish a revisions policy for these statistics, and provide a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions at the time that they are released¹² (Requirement 3).
- 4.7 DCSF provides its statistical staff with guidance on how to make corrections and this guidance is followed.

¹² In relation to Principle 2 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 4.8 No incidents of political pressures, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 4.9 The data are collected by local authorities for their own operational purposes. The method of collecting and holding the information varies by local authority. DCSF provides local authorities with detailed guidance on the information required and this guidance is available on the DCSF website.
- 4.10 Between April and June local authorities transmit the data for the CLA Statistics release to a database held by DCSF. The database subjects the data to a range of automated validation checks at the time they are submitted. Local authorities are required to make any necessary corrections before they can complete the data submission. At the end of June DCSF closes the database and takes a snapshot for analysis. This snapshot goes on to become the published statistical release in September. The data collection for the outcome indicators publication follows the same process. DCSF carries out a range of data checks during the quality assurance process, mostly looking for inconsistencies in year-on-year trends. In spite of these checks, there have been a number of errors in recent outputs.
- 4.11 DCSF told us that it has improved its data quality assurance process to reduce the risk of errors. This involves greater staff resource spent on double-checking the analysis. We suggest DCSF keep this under review, and if necessary consider options for improving data quality assurance to ensure the accuracy of the data.
- 4.12 In 2006, NAO carried out a review of the data systems underpinning DCSF's PSA targets. The data used for CLA statistics were given an 'amber' rating. The report explained this 'should become green with some further straightforward amendments'. The report made recommendations on guidance, desk instructions, audit and web security, not all of which have been implemented. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should report how it is addressing the recommendations from the NAO report that relate to the quality of CLA statistics¹³ (Requirement 4).

¹³ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

4.13 DCSF has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. This includes secure transfer of the data from local authorities, Criminal Records Bureau checks of those who work on the data in DCSF, a secure work area with restricted access, and disclosure controls to ensure no personal information is published. DCSF also writes to local authorities to advise them of their obligations to provide Fair Processing Notices to the children whose information they collect. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should publish the arrangements for protecting confidential data¹⁴ (Requirement 5).

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 5 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

- 4.14 As outlined under Principle 1, the burden on the local authorities who supply the data is monitored through the SCSB. All proposed changes to data collections are put to the Board as a detailed business case, and the Board considers the costs and benefits. The Assessment team views this as a model for good engagement with a large group of data suppliers, such as local authorities.
- 4.15 DCSF has a department-wide project, Reducing Data Burdens, which assesses where cost savings can be made in data collections. This project has identified the scope for efficiencies by linking CLA data with the Children in Need Census and the National Pupil Database. This is discussed further in Protocol 3.
- 4.16 We suggest DCSF engages with the producers of CLA statistics for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to learn from their experience in estimating the costs to local authorities of supplying the data and develop an approach to producing estimates for England¹⁵.

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 6 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

- 4.17 The production of these statistics appears to be sufficiently resourced. The producers of these statistics within DCSF told us that they meet with internal colleagues and with the SCSB to discuss the development of these statistics, and that this informs the allocation of resources. The wider data user group that DCSF is setting up (see Principle 1) will provide an opportunity to strengthen these planning arrangements and ensure that statistical developments take account of the needs of external users.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 4.18 DCSF presents a range of tables and charts in the publications, together with accompanying text on the key messages from the data. The statisticians told us that they review the content of the publications every year to assess the relevance and the need for new information. They review requests and Parliamentary Questions from the previous year to determine whether these highlight further analysis which could benefit all users.
- 4.19 Some users felt that the commentary could be broadened to include historical comparisons and more detailed discussion of the data, including the policy context. DCSF has the opportunity to establish what users want to see in the publications by consulting their new data user group (see Principle 1).
- 4.20 In the view of the Assessment team, the publications do not give the user enough information on the data collection, definitions and uses of the statistics. Although there is a lot of information available on the statistics pages on DCSF website, including the guidance given to local authorities who provide the data, the publication would benefit from information geared towards data users rather than suppliers. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should improve the commentary in both the publications to include more detailed discussion of the uses of the statistics, the context, methods and quality¹⁶ (Requirement 6).
- 4.21 As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should take appropriate steps to deposit the statistics with the relevant national archive¹⁷ (Requirement 7).

¹⁶ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

¹⁷ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

4.22 The requirements for this protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 4.23 DCSF has brought forward the timetable for both publications in recent years, to provide users with the data they need as early as possible. Some users would still like the Outcome Indicators to be published earlier and more frequently. DCSF has told us that there is no scope to improve timeliness further, given the work required to produce the statistics. We accept DCSF's view that this is not possible, given reasonable resource constraints.
- 4.24 The main release of CLA statistics for England is published in September each year, with more detailed tables in the following months up to December. The lack of a clear publication schedule for the remaining tables causes some inconvenience to users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should publish a clear timetable for the release of the tables that follow the main publication¹⁸ (Requirement 8).
- 4.25 Any ministerial statement relating to the statistics is released as a standard press release on the same day as the statistics are published. While DCSF issues such press releases separately from the statistics and does not publish them ahead of the publication of the statistics, they are not sufficiently distinguishable from a statistical news release. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should ensure that government statements that cover the statistical releases are clearly labelled as policy statements (or ministerial statements)¹⁹ (Requirement 9).

¹⁸ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

¹⁹ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 9b of the Code of Practice

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

- 4.26 DCSF is currently involved in two data-matching projects to make better use of existing data sources on looked-after children in England. It has told us that it aims to link to data collected in the new Children in Need Census to replace the data collection on the ethnicity of looked-after children. It is also developing a link between the Outcome Indicator data and the National Pupil Database. This matched data source will provide information to replace part of the data collection for the Outcome Indicators without altering the information it is able to publish. DCSF told us that it also hopes to improve the information on comparisons between looked-after children and their peers.
- 4.27 DCSF has taken positive steps to exploit existing data sources related to looked-after children by creating links between different datasets. We suggest that DCSF explore ways of ensuring that statistical needs are considered at the earliest stages of development of new administrative systems covering all children services. This will make it easier for these systems to be designed with statistical purposes in mind from the start.
- 4.28 The publications do not include information on the quality of the underlying data held by local authorities. The data undergo validation checks when they are submitted, but DCSF statisticians do not undertake any wider quality assurance or audit of the data held by local authorities. In common with the administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, DCSF relies on local authorities to submit accurate data. This issue was raised by an NAO review of the data systems underpinning DCSF's PSA targets in December 2006. The review included the following recommendations²⁰
- The Department should tap into audits done by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Audit Commission (AC) and Ofsted; and
 - Direct checks should be instituted by the Department to ensure records are completed for all looked-after children.
- 4.29 As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF should review its Statement of Administrative Sources in the light of the recently published guidance from the National Statistician and include in this Statement more information to outline the arrangements for auditing the quality of the data provided by local authorities (Requirement 10)²¹. We also suggest that DCSF follow up the NAO recommendation to establish closer links with audit organisations, to ensure that relevant information from the audits is passed to the statistical team.

²⁰ http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000700/SFR2004_PSA_TargetV1.pdf

²¹ In relation to Protocol 3 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice. Practice 5 (e), requires the Statement to identify the arrangements for auditing the quality of administrative data used for statistical purposes.

5 The UK position

5.1 The assessment programme

- 5.1.1 The CLA statistics produced by DCSF cover England. Each UK administration produces and releases data on looked-after children to cover its own local authorities (or Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland). This results in distinct publications, each with different underlying definitions, methods of data collection and dissemination.
- 5.1.2 The CLA statistics produced by all four administrations were included in the initial assessment programme to enable the assessment team to explore these statistics from a UK perspective. The statistics produced by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are the subject of Assessment Reports 14, 15 and 16 respectively. This chapter considers cross-cutting UK issues.

5.2 UK data availability and common issues

- 5.2.1 Statistics on looked-after children for the UK as a whole are included in *Regional Trends*, produced by the Office for National Statistics. The Northern Ireland *Children Order Statistical Bulletin* also includes a section on UK-wide data. Neither of the other administrations include UK data in their CLA releases.
- 5.2.2 There are differences in the coverage of the *Children Looked After* statistics for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, mostly due to differences in the legislative backgrounds. In Scotland, children who are in need of care and protection may have a supervision requirement placed on them. Most of these children are allowed to stay at home under the supervision of a social worker. The legal definition of looked-after children in Scotland includes these children. This is not the case in the rest of the UK, where looked-after children are those placed in the care of a local authority or provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours. This is the single biggest definitional difference across the outputs, and has a considerable effect on the comparability of the data. For example, the proportion of children placed in foster homes in Scotland is considerably lower than elsewhere in the UK, because more children are looked after in their own homes in Scotland.
- 5.2.3 The UK data in both *Regional Trends* and the Northern Ireland bulletin are accompanied by a number of caveats, to reflect the differences in the definitions in each administration.
- 5.2.4 Users who responded to this assessment exercise were usually interested in one particular set of CLA statistics, but some users specifically look for UK data, and there were some common issues that arose across the different administrations. These issues include producing outcome indicators for older age groups, and challenging the quality of the data provided by local authorities (or HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland). Users who specifically look for UK data said that their use of the statistics is limited by the definitional differences and the inconsistent time-periods across the different sets of CLA statistics.

- 5.2.5 As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DHSSPS should document clearly the differences between each administration's CLA statistics and scope out the feasibility and need for a comparable data subset²² (UK Requirement 1).
- 5.2.6 A common issue across the UK set of *Children Looked After* statistics is the quality assurance or audit of the data held by local authorities. In England, this issue was raised in December 2006 by a National Audit Office review of the data systems underpinning DCSF's PSA targets. The Code, under Protocol 3 Practice 5e, requires the organisational Statement of Administrative Sources to identify the arrangements for auditing the quality of administrative data used for statistical purposes. The position in each administration differs slightly and this issue has been addressed in section 4 of the individual assessment reports.
- 5.2.7 There is a four-nation data working group on these statistics. This group meets twice a year and we were told that it is an effective forum, providing the statisticians from each administration with an opportunity to update each other on recent issues and developments. It is important that this forum is used to consider how best to meet the needs of users of UK data. It should also be used to share best practice. This will ensure developments are based on existing experience, rather than each administration investing resource to develop independently. Specific examples of good practice across the four administrations include the work in DCSF to link to other data sources (Children in Need, National Pupil Database); and in Wales, the collection of information on the cost to local authorities of providing the data. We suggest DCSF, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DHSSPS ensure best practice is shared, to make best use of resources across the four administrations.

²² In relation to Principle 4 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the statistics, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

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| Suggestion 1 | Review the work of the data user group in the coming year, and publish an update on progress (para 4.3) |
| Suggestion 2 | Keep data quality under review, and if necessary consider other ways to improve data quality assurance, to safeguard the accuracy of the data (para 4.11) |
| Suggestion 3 | Engage with the producers of CLA statistics for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to learn from their experience in estimating the costs to local authorities of supplying the data and develop an approach to producing estimates of these costs for England (para 4.16) |
| Suggestion 4 | Explore ways of ensuring that statistical needs are considered at the earliest stages of development of new administrative systems covering all children services (para 4.27) |
| Suggestion 5 | Follow up the NAO recommendation to establish closer links with audit organisations, to ensure that relevant information from the audits is passed to the statistical team (para 4.29) |
| Suggestion 6 | Ensure best practice is shared with the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DHSSPS, to make best use of resources across the four administrations (para 5.2.7) |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from March to August 2009.

A2.2 The Assessment team met representatives of DCSF at an initial meeting in April 2009. Some background information was provided by DCSF during April 2009, and Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 22 May 2009. The Assessment team subsequently met with DCSF on 2 July 2009 to confirm and clarify the written evidence provided.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 The assessment team received 14 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

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|-------------------------|---|
| Academia | 5 |
| Government departments | 4 |
| Third Sector (Children) | 4 |
| Local Authorities | 1 |

A.2.4 Some users were satisfied with the statistics and viewed them as an excellent data source. The statistics were seen as effective for assessing progress against PSA targets. Other users were dissatisfied with certain aspects, such as the statistics being driven by short term policy requirements and government targets, the lack of comparison figures for children not looked after, and data quality.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000810/index.shtml>

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000842/index.shtml>

