

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Looked After Children

(produced by the Department for Education, the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland)

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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

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

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

Assessment reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

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1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The Act gives the Statistics Authority power to re-assess whether the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*³ continues to be complied with in relation to official statistics already designated as National Statistics. The report covers the sets of statistics produced by the Department for Education (DfE), the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) (collectively referred to as the producer bodies in this report) and reported in the following publications:

DfE:

- *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers)*⁴
- *Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England*⁵

The Welsh Government:

- *Adoptions, Outcomes and Placements for Children Looked After by Local Authorities, Wales*⁶
- *Social Services Statistics Wales*⁷ (parts relating to LAC)
- *Referrals, Assessments and Social Services for Children, Wales*⁸ (parts relating to health checks for LAC, and reviews carried out within statutory timetables)

The Scottish Government:

- *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland*⁹ (parts relating to LAC)

DHSSPS:

- *Children in Care in Northern Ireland*¹⁰
- *Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland*¹¹

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england-including-adoption>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england-31-march-2012>

⁶ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2012/120927/?lang=en>

⁷ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2013/social-services-statistics-wales-2011-12/?lang=en>

⁸ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2012/1209041/?lang=en>

⁹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/03/5229>

¹⁰ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats_and_research_cib_children_in_care.htm

¹¹ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/statistics_and_research_cib_adoption.htm

- *Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland*¹² (parts relating to looked after children (LAC))
- *Northern Ireland Care Leavers Aged 16-18*¹³
- *Northern Ireland Care Leavers Aged 19*¹⁴

1.1.2 The previous assessments¹⁵ of these sets of statistics were reported in Assessment reports 13, 14, 15, 16, 188, 219 and 223. In some cases the ways in which the statistics are now packaged for publication and the names of the individual products have changed.

1.1.3 This re-assessment is the first in what may become a series of topic-based assessments, each covering a variety of producer bodies. It has been designed to focus on issues that are inherent to this particular topic and which arose in the earlier assessments. It does not therefore cover every element in the *Code*. The issues are:

- the quality of the data used to compile the statistics
- the collection and use of child-level (as opposed to aggregate) information
- comparability across the UK
- coverage of the topic area and packaging into statistical products

The specific elements of the *Code* that are relevant to these issues are Principles 4.2, 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 5.1, 5.4, 6.1, 7.5, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6 and Protocol 3.3.

1.1.4 The following Official Statistics are included within this report in order to gain a better overview of the topic area. Because the assessment does not cover all of the practices within the *Code*, they are not being assessed here with a view to designation as National Statistics:

The Welsh Government:

- *Wales Children in Need Census*¹⁶ (parts relating to LAC) (Welsh Government)
- *Fostering and Adoption Intermediary Services, Wales*¹⁷ (the part relating to foster settings for LAC) (Welsh Government)

The Scottish Government:

- *Education outcomes for Scotland's looked after children*¹⁸

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

¹² http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats-cib-children_order.htm

¹³ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats_research_cib_care_leavers_aged18.htm

¹⁴ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats_and_research_cib_care_leavers_aged19.htm

¹⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

¹⁶ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2013/wales-children-need-census-2012/?lang=en>

¹⁷ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2012/1210311/?lang=en>

¹⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/06/9231>

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics in paragraph 1.1.1 are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that these statistics are designated as National Statistics, subject to the producer bodies implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by April 2014.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The collection of data at child level, accompanied by rigorous validation, has improved the accuracy and consistency of these statistics, but their strengths and limitations are not fully communicated to users.

1.3.2 Child-level data collection also offers scope for more detailed and sophisticated analysis, by linking records longitudinally and to other datasets. Each administration has made some progress in this area, but the potential has yet to be fully exploited. These data are beginning to be more widely available (subject to confidentiality constraints) but do not yet seem to be widely used.

1.3.3 Some steps have been taken to inform users about comparability within the UK, but user needs in this area have not been evaluated and the feasibility of producing a common dataset or a common set of indicators has not been fully investigated.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the producer bodies could strengthen their compliance with the *Code*. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1 Publish information about the steps taken to ensure the accuracy and consistency of child-level data and provide guidance on the quality and reliability of the resulting statistics in relation to the range of potential uses (para 3.14) – (Welsh Government).

Requirement 2 Improve and update the information in *A review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom*; investigate user needs for a comparable data subset or a common set of

indicators; and – should a user need exist – explore how such needs might be met (para 3.30) – (All producer bodies).

Requirement 3

Improve the commentary in the reports so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.45) – (All producer bodies).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 Statistics about looked after children (LAC) are produced by the Department for Education (DfE), the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland and are listed in paragraph 1.1.1. In England and Wales, LAC are defined under the *Children Act 1989*¹⁹. They include children who are the subject of a care order; children who are detained on child protection grounds; and children who are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours²⁰. The equivalent of a care order in Scotland is a compulsory supervision order²¹ under the *Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011*²². The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995²³ includes similar provisions to England and Wales.
- 2.2 The reasons for children becoming looked after are very varied: they include neglect, abuse, complex disabilities, involvement in the youth justice system, unaccompanied asylum seeking, and parental illness or substance misuse. Care settings ('placements') can include stays with relatives or foster carers, residential schools or children's homes. Under Scottish legislation it is more common for LAC to remain at home with their usual carers than it is in other parts of the UK.
- 2.3 Responsibility for safeguarding children and providing care; for meeting complex legal requirements; and for keeping relevant information rests with over 200 local authorities (LAs) in Great Britain and with five health and social care (HSC) trusts in Northern Ireland. The collection and presentation of statistics on this topic is a significant challenge, requiring the capture of data on a consistent basis from each of these bodies – about the children themselves; about the episodes of care (varying in length and frequency) that they experience; and about subsequent outcomes (for example in terms of educational attainment, health issues or criminal behaviour).
- 2.4 All four producer bodies have recognised the limitations of collecting aggregate data and have implemented at least some data collection systems that operate at child level. This provides the potential for longitudinal analysis and for linking data to information collected elsewhere (for example, relating to education or healthcare). In England and Wales, section 83 of the *Children Act 1989* – which requires LAs to provide information about LAC to the Secretary of State – has been amended to make it clear that the required particulars may relate to, and identify, individual children. There is no similar legislation requiring LAs in Scotland or HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland to provide central government with data, so the producer bodies there rely on voluntary cooperation.
- 2.5 We understand that the earliest statistics on this topic (covering England and Wales) were published in 1949. The first Scottish statistics date from 1971 and separate Welsh statistics were first published in 1980. The Northern Ireland statistics date mainly from the late 1990s, but with some earlier information in compendium publications from the 1950s.

¹⁹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>

²⁰ Some children are provided with short term care on a respite basis: this is monitored, but excluded from most statistical analyses of looked after children, or presented in separate tables.

²¹ These came into force in June 2013, replacing supervision requirements

²² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2011/1/contents>

²³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1995/755/contents/made>

Sources of data for each report

2.6 The following table shows the child-level and aggregate data collections in each country that relate (in full or in part) to LAC, and how these in turn relate to the information about LAC in statistical reports. The names of the child-level data collections in Wales and Northern Ireland suggest that they originally derived from (or were modelled on) earlier collections developed in the DfE and the Department of Health (DH).

England: child-level data collection	Aggregate data collection	Associated statistical reports
<p>Annual SSDA903 return – used to construct a longitudinal dataset of children looked after (CLA). Includes information about offending, health, substance misuse, emotional health, education and employment status, as well as data on care episodes, placements, care leavers and adoptions.</p> <p>National Pupil Database – contains data on all school pupils, including attainment, qualifications and special needs status.</p> <p>Quarterly adoption survey – collects data on LAC at child-level. Completed by LAs on a voluntary basis.</p>	<p>Quarterly adoption survey - collects aggregate data on adopters. Completed by LAs on a voluntary basis.</p>	<p><i>Children Looked After in England</i> (which includes information about adoptions from care and care leavers) – based entirely on the SSDA903/CLA database</p> <p><i>Outcomes for Children Looked After by LAs in England</i> (based on CLA database and CLA/NPD matched data)</p> <p>Children in Care and Adoption Performance Tables, Adoption Scorecards, Adoption Maps and ‘data packs’ on care leavers, children’s homes, adoption & special guardianship and educational outcomes draw on CLA, Ofsted data and the quarterly adoption survey, but not published as official statistics.</p>
Wales: child-level data collection	Aggregate data collection	Associated statistical reports
<p>SSDA903 children looked after – information about the child, and episodes of care during the year</p> <p>OC1 educational qualifications of care leavers - completed for each young person aged 16 and over who ceased to be looked after during the year</p>	<p>PM1 performance management (children’s services)</p> <p>Information provided by the Children’s Commissioning Support Resource (CCSR)</p>	<p><i>Adoptions, Outcomes and Placements</i> – draws on SSDA903, OC1, OC3, AD1 and PM1</p> <p><i>Referrals, Assessments and Social Services for Children</i> – draws on PM1</p> <p><i>Wales Children in Need Census</i> – draws on CIN, with</p>

<p>OC3 care leavers on their 19th birthday - completed for young people who had their 19th birthday during the year and had been looked after 3 years earlier</p> <p>AD1 – adoptions of LAC</p> <p>Children in Need Census (Welsh CIN) – based on all cases receiving social services (including LAC) that have been open 3 months or longer. Includes information about offending, school exclusions, health, substance misuse, disability.</p> <p>National Pupil Database and other education databases</p> <p>Secure units – part of this return collects information about each child accommodated in the unit.</p>		<p>some matched data from educational databases</p> <p><i>Social Services Statistics</i> – draws on SSDA903 and PM1</p> <p><i>Fostering and Adoption Intermediary Services</i> – draws on CCSR</p>
<p>Scotland: child-level data collection</p>	<p>Aggregate data collection</p>	<p>Associated statistical reports</p>
<p>LAC data collection – used to construct a longitudinal dataset</p> <p>Children on short term placements</p> <p>Care leavers eligible for aftercare services</p> <p>Attendance and absence from school, and school exclusions (currently biennial)</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p><i>Children’s Social Work Statistics</i> – draws on the LAC, short term placement and aftercare data collections (also contains information about child protection, secure care and close support, drawing on other sources).</p> <p><i>Education outcomes for looked after children</i> – draws on LAC data matched (via Scottish Candidate Number) to data from the Scottish Qualifications Authority and to leaver destinations data collected by the Skills Development Scotland. In every other year the data are also matched to the data collection on attendance,</p>

		absence and exclusion from school.
Northern Ireland: child-level data collection	Aggregate data collection	Associated statistical reports
OC1 educational qualifications (as for Wales)	Delegated Statutory Functions (DSF)	<i>Children in Care</i> – based on OC2
OC2 outcome indicators – completed for each child who has been looked after continuously for 12 months as at 30 September	corporate parenting return from the 5 HSC Trusts to the Health and Social Care Board – an extract of which is provided to DHSSPS	<i>Care Leavers aged 16-18</i> – based on OC1 <i>Care Leavers Aged 19</i> – based on OC3
OC3 care leavers on their 19th birthday (as for Wales)	A series of children order and child protection returns from the Trusts to DHSSPS	<i>Children Adopted from Care</i> – based on AD1
AD1 – completed for each looked after child who was the subject of an adoption order during the year.		<i>Children’s Social Care Statistics</i> – compendium style report covering children in need and child protection as well as LAC, drawing on the aggregate returns.

Users and uses

- 2.7 Public and policy interest is concerned with the performance of social services authorities (given the risks associated with inaction or poor decision-making); with improving the long-term outcomes for people who go through the care system; and with the speed and appropriateness of adoptions. LAC tend to have poorer school attendance records, higher rates of exclusion from school, and to obtain fewer qualifications than their peers. They are also less likely to be in employment, education or training after leaving school.
- 2.8 Each administration in the UK uses the statistics to advise ministers, answer parliamentary questions and to monitor trends and the impact of policies. In Northern Ireland they support the commissioning plan direction, which is a legal direction to the Health and Social Care Board on the services to be commissioned from HSC Trusts. LAs and regulatory bodies use the statistics to help monitor performance and identify areas for possible improvement. Charities and pressure groups use them to inform their policy, research, training and campaigns – for example, publicity aimed at encouraging people to become foster parents. It is likely that the statistics are also used in the private sector to monitor and target social care services for children.
- 2.9 In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the statistics feed into a set of performance indicators, as shown in the table below. The Welsh Government’s National Strategic Indicators are audited on a sample basis by the Wales Audit Office and published as official statistics. DfE publishes performance data for England on its website and LAC statistics on Gov.UK. Performance against Northern Ireland ministerial targets is reported in the relevant statistical reports.

Indicator-level	England	Wales	Northern Ireland
National	2 departmental impact indicators ²⁴ covering the attainment gap between LAC and non-LAC at Key Stage 2 and KS 4 respectively.	5 programme for government indicators ²⁵ : multiple placements in a year; changes of school; pathway plans; % in education, training or employment at 19 and KS 4 results for LAC compared with children in need and all pupils.	Ministerial targets (reflected in the Commissioning Plan Direction ²⁶ to HSC Trusts) currently relating to (i) placement changes during the year (ii) the time frame for children to be adopted from care and (iii) the % of care leavers aged 19 in education, training or employment.
Local	Children in care and adoption performance tables ²⁷ (12 indicators) and adoption scorecards ²⁸	5 National Strategic Indicators ²⁹	Performance Direction to HSC Trusts - 5 indicators ³⁰ .

Costs

2.10 The producer bodies in England, Wales and Scotland assume that all the data needed for statistical purposes are entered into management information systems by social work staff in the normal course of their work, so the great bulk of compliance costs are incurred only by the staff who extract, clean and upload the data from these systems. These costs are to some extent determined by the number of LAs (which ranges from 22 in Wales to 152 in England) although they can also be affected by the number of individual cases that give rise to validation queries. In Northern Ireland, social work staff have to locate and input information about each child, so total costs will relate more directly to numbers of children (which range from around 60 annually for the adoptions data collection, to nearly 1,900 for the main LAC collection). We have compiled the table below from information provided by the statisticians in each producer body.

²⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/keystatistics/b00214299/attainment-gap-at-ages-11-16-and-19/impact-indicators-10-and-11>

²⁵ <http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/people/performance?lang=en>

²⁶ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hss/ministerial_priorities.htm

²⁷ <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/adoption/a00199753/children-in-care-and-adoption-performance-tables>

²⁸ <http://www.education.gov.uk/a00208817/adoption-scorecards>

²⁹ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/compendia2009/120904/?lang=en>

³⁰ See footnote 26

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Estimated central costs for data collection and preparation of reports – cash or full time equivalent	4.25 full-time equivalents (FTE)	£33,100	1.05 FTE (£32,600)	0.75 FTE
Compliance costs incurred by LAs (GB) or HSC Trusts (NI)	£224,000 (152 LAs)	£20,000 (22 LAs) In addition, some information about LAC is drawn from the CIN.	192 days (32 LAs x approx 6 days) Average of 3 days to prepare data extracts and resolve queries, and 3 days a year for liaison meetings	£32,100 (1,400 hours) Based on time to complete each form x number of children per form

2.11 The table does not include compliance costs for aggregate collections (such as the Welsh PM1 or the Northern Ireland DSF) that feed into wider statistical reports, or the one-off costs incurred in changing to child-level data collection. Aggregate collections can be relatively expensive: the Welsh Government told us that the PM1 costs LAs a total of £65,000 to complete. This is the same cost as the Welsh CIN (which is record-level) and over three times the cost of the Welsh LAC data collections. In recent years the set up costs for changing to child-level collections has often been covered by grants: the Scottish Government paid a total of £360k in 2008-10 (taken up by 23 of the 32 LAs) and in Wales all 22 LAs took up the offer of assistance when the Welsh CIN was being developed between 2008 and 2010.

Related statistics

2.12 LAC are a subset of all the children referred to social services, and of those who go on to be provided with support for one reason or another. In both England and Wales there is an annual census of children in need (CIN) (again conducted at child-level) which forms the basis of two separate statistical reports³¹. The English publication covers referrals, assessments and children

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/characteristics-of-children-in-need-in-england-year-ending-march-2012> and <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2013/wales-children-need-census-2012/?lang=en>

who have become the subject of a child protection plan, but does not distinguish between LAC and others receiving support from social services. The Welsh publication, on the other hand, presents statistics on LAC, children who have been placed on the child protection register, and other children in need – making it possible to compare the three groups.

- 2.13 In England, monthly figures³² on applications for care are published by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), which is also involved in adoption proceedings. CAFCASS Cymru provides more basic information about care applications in Wales in its annual report³³. In Scotland, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration publishes detailed official statistics³⁴ about Children's Hearings, including supervision requirements by LA area. The equivalent to Cafcass in Northern Ireland is the Guardian Ad Litem Agency³⁵ (NIGALA); it publishes statistics on care and adoption proceedings in its annual report, and we understand that discussions are taking place with statisticians in DHSSPS that may result in information from this source being included in the department's LAC publications.
- 2.14 DfE carries out a quarterly adoption survey³⁶ which is completed by social services authorities on a voluntary basis. This is published as 'research and analysis' rather than as official statistics.
- 2.15 In each part of the UK a small number of LAC are placed in secure accommodation. While information about the children and their placements are collected in the normal way, there are additional data collections (except in Northern Ireland) to gather information from the homes themselves about occupancy rates and the throughput of residents. DfE issues these statistics in a separate report³⁷, while the Scottish and Welsh Governments include them in *Children's Social Work Statistics* and *Social Services Statistics* respectively.
- 2.16 Ofsted is responsible for inspecting LA children's services, children's homes and fostering and adoption services in England. It publishes detailed statistics about its findings³⁸. In other parts of the UK these roles are carried out by: Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, which publishes quarterly summary statistics³⁹; the Care Inspectorate⁴⁰ in Scotland, and the Social Services Inspectorate⁴¹, which is part of DHSSPS in Northern Ireland. The bodies in Scotland and Northern Ireland do not publish statistics.
- 2.17 Local government financial statistics for England⁴² and Wales⁴³ include details of expenditure on services for LAC. These data are collected in England under

³² <http://www.cafcass.gov.uk/news/2013/june-care-application-stats.aspx>

³³ <http://wales.gov.uk/cafcasscymru/home/publications/report12/?lang=en>

³⁴ http://www.scra.gov.uk/publications/online_statistical_service.cfm

³⁵ <http://www.nigala.hscni.net/>

³⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/quarterly-adoption-survey-update-for-quarter-3-of-2012-to-2013>

³⁷ *Children Accommodated in Secure Children's Homes, England and Wales:*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education/series/statistics-secure-children-s-homes>

³⁸ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/statistics>

³⁹ <http://wales.gov.uk/cssiwwsubsite/newcssiwwpublications/quarterlystatistics/?lang=en>

⁴⁰ <http://www.scswis.com/>

⁴¹ <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ssi-funcions-whyweinspect>

⁴² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/expenditure-on-education-children-and-young-peoples-services-academic-year-2011-to-2012>

section 251 of the *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009*⁴⁴ and in Wales under section 52 of the *School Standards and Framework Act 1998*⁴⁵. Expenditure on LAC cannot be identified separately in Scotland and is not collated from the local HSC trusts in Northern Ireland.

Open data

- 2.18 The statistical reports for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are published as PDF files with supplementary tables published in Excel format. This equates to a level 2 rating under the Five Star Scheme proposed in the *Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential*⁴⁶. Tables from the Welsh statistics are, in addition, available on the StatsWales⁴⁷ website. These can be exported in open, non-proprietary formats, which equates to a level 3 rating.

⁴³ <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Local-Government/Finance/Revenue/Social-Services/SocialServicesRevenueExpenditure-by-ClientGroup>

⁴⁴ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/contents>

⁴⁵ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/contents>

⁴⁶ http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open_data_White_Paper.pdf

⁴⁷ <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After>

3 Assessment findings

Data quality

This part of the report considers whether sufficient steps are taken to obtain data from LAs and HSC Trusts on a consistent basis, and whether the strengths and limitations of the data are properly explained for users of the statistics.

- 3.1 The arrangements for collecting data were set out in paragraph 2.6. Users and data suppliers in all four countries told us they thought that the collection of child-level data had improved the quality (in terms of accuracy and completeness) and the consistency of data between areas. DfE (and previously the DH) have been collecting some information at child-level since 1992, following implementation of the *Children Act 1989*, although we believe child-level data collection may have started under earlier legislation. The Scottish Government started to collect data in this way in 2008-09, initially with six 'early adopter' LAs. In both countries these arrangements have virtually replaced the need for aggregate collections.
- 3.2 The Welsh Government and DHSSPS currently rely on a mix of child-level and aggregate data. There is a marked contrast, however, between the process in England, Wales and Scotland – where the child-level data are recorded by social work staff in the normal course of their work, and subsequently extracted from LA management information systems – and the process in Northern Ireland, where social work staff complete a form for each child, supplementing their own records with information from schools and the court system as required.
- 3.3 On the face of it, this difference could have implications for data quality, timeliness and compliance costs in Northern Ireland. Social work staff are given four months to complete the forms (all four data collections are completed to the same timetable). This inevitably increases the gap between the reference date and subsequent publication – one user told us that this delay was their main problem with the statistics. However, the statisticians pointed out that timeliness has improved: *Children in Care in Northern Ireland*, for example, is now published 9 months after the reference date, compared with 18 months to 2 years previously.
- 3.4 As far as quality is concerned, accuracy and completeness are likely to be better where there is a good match between the information that will be extracted for statistical purposes and the information that is needed to provide an effective service. This appears to be the case in each country, and the comments we received from data suppliers did not suggest that they felt that any of the information was not important or useful.
- 3.5 Consistency between data suppliers requires a tight specification of requirements. Each administration maintains a series of web pages⁴⁸ for data suppliers, containing data collection forms (where relevant) and/or guidance

⁴⁸ <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/research/a00217479/cla2012-13>, <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/about/data-collection/social/child/lookedafter/?lang=en>, <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/about/data-collection/social/child/childneed/guidance/?lang=en>, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/SurveyChildrenLookedAfter> and http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/children_social_care_returns.htm

notes. The statistical reports include a link to this material, so it is also accessible to users of the statistics. The guidance in England, Wales and Scotland is detailed and specific – as is to be expected, given that each LA IT system has to be configured to meet the specification, and social work staff need to be able to integrate the recording practices into their normal work.

- 3.6 In Northern Ireland the instructions for social work staff are less detailed than for the other producer bodies. A data supplier drew attention to the lack of technical guidance as to how data should be specified and recorded on information systems, and the resulting risk of inconsistencies. Northern Ireland has the advantage that the five HSC Trusts use a common IT system (unlike LAs in GB), but the disadvantage that some of the information required for the data collection is not available from this system and has to be obtained by social work staff from other bodies. The statisticians told us that they have contacted the Department of Education⁴⁹ in Northern Ireland in order to explore the scope for extracting and matching child-level data from that department's information systems. This would improve data quality and reduce the burden on social work staff. If that development is successful, we suggest that DHSSPS approach the HSC Board in order to explore the scope for extracting data directly from the IT system, and work with the HSC Trusts to develop a tighter specification of the data.
- 3.7 In each country, data managers in the relevant LA or Trust collate and check the data that are required for statistical purposes, and then upload them through a secure system with built in validation checks. The data managers receive an automated report detailing each record that needs to be corrected because information is missing or contradictory, or takes values that are outside expected ranges. They then either resolve the query or provide a justification as to why the case is an exception. The statisticians in each administration told us that this task is carried out conscientiously and that data managers do not always need to contact the relevant social work team in order to resolve queries. The LAs and the Trust staff who responded to our emails confirmed that they worked to ensure accurate, consistent data.
- 3.8 The statisticians in each country can monitor attempts to upload data, and track the progress of each LA. This provides early warning of deadlines that may be missed, or of particular areas of the data collection that are consistently failing validation and may therefore be presenting problems. The validation reports also provide some indication of the initial quality of each LAs' dataset.
- 3.9 Statisticians in each administration carry out further checks on the resulting data – for example, by making year-on-year comparisons, examining different tables for consistency, and comparing with other data sources. DfE uses grossing factors to compensate for the relatively small number of errors that cause records to be rejected at this stage.
- 3.10 The statistical teams were not aware of any reluctance to cooperate on the part of data suppliers, and apart from Glasgow – which was not able to provide child-level data for the 2010-11 publication – there had been no major or persistent problems in collecting data from particular LAs or Trusts. The statisticians told us that the biggest risk factor is probably staff turnover in LAs.

⁴⁹ <http://www.deni.gov.uk/>

Information provided for users

- 3.11 DfE publishes summary information about invalid records and grossing factors in its methodology document, and a time series of the grossing factors at LA-level is included in a set of additional tables. Both of these can be accessed from the release page⁵⁰ for *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers)* – the methodology document is rather unhelpfully labelled ‘Additional text 1’ and the second part of the statistical report as ‘Additional text 2’. However, the statistical report itself makes very brief reference to the grossing factors and no mention of the thorough validation process; even though DfE does in fact publish a complete list of the validation checks in the data supplier area of its website. The report includes a warning that the number of children missing from their placement is likely to be an undercount. This issue has been the subject of some comment (for example, by an All-Party Parliamentary Group⁵¹). DfE statisticians have identified possible reasons⁵² for the undercount and told us they are taking steps to change recording practice.
- 3.12 The other producer bodies provide a brief overview of the validation process in their statistical reports, but do not publish a complete list of validation checks. The Scottish reports inform users that information is withheld when concerns about data quality outweigh the value of publishing an estimated figure. The example quoted is the legal status of the LAC⁵³, but it is not made clear whether this is in fact the only such example. Readers are also referred to the Scottish Government’s statement of administrative sources for children, young people and social care statistics⁵⁴ which describes the validation process in a little more detail.
- 3.13 DHSSPS has published a series of quality reports which are linked from release web pages, although not always mentioned in the relevant statistical report. The quality reports, in turn, include a link to a document that provides a general description of the validation procedures used in the children’s social care returns (which include children in need, day care and child protection as well as LAC).
- 3.14 The Welsh Government has published a quality report⁵⁵ for aggregate personal social services statistics, which includes some information relevant to *Referrals, Assessments and Social Services for Children, Wales*. There is no equivalent document for the child-level data collections and little or no information about the steps taken to ensure accuracy and consistency is published in the relevant statistical reports. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Welsh Government should publish information about the steps taken to ensure the accuracy and consistency of child-level data and provide guidance on the

⁵⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england-including-adoption>

⁵¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-from-the-joint-inquiry-into-children-who-go-missing-from-care>

⁵² DfE guidance currently requires LAs to record a new placement when a child absconds and returns. However, there are a number of reasons why this may not be happening in every case

⁵³ This problem arises because the legal reason for the child being in care can change over time. The data collection has been designed to capture both original and subsequent reasons, but not all LAs keep this information field up to date

⁵⁴ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/sourcesandsuitability/StatementAdminSources>

⁵⁵ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/publications/socialservicesquality/?lang=en>

quality and reliability of the resulting statistics in relation to the range of potential uses⁵⁶ (Requirement 1).

- 3.15 In England and Scotland, the data on each child are matched to the information provided in earlier years, using a reference number used by social services. They are also matched to educational data using unique pupil numbers (UPNs) and Scottish candidate numbers (SCNs) respectively, as well as other information such as date of birth. DfE describes the matching process in *Outcomes for Children looked After by Local Authorities in England* and includes tables showing, for the past six years, the percentages of LAC of different ages with valid UPNs; the percentage of these children who were successfully matched to data on educational attainment; and the number of LAs where fewer than 90 per cent of LAC had a valid UPN. *Education outcomes for Scotland's looked after children* is a relatively new report (published as official statistics) which states that the results should be treated as provisional while social work departments work to improve the quality and completeness of the candidate numbers on their systems. The report gives the overall percentage of LAC with a valid SCN over the last three years of data collection, but we suggest that the Scottish Government publish more information about the proportion of records with valid SCN and about the success of the data matching process.

Conclusion

- 3.16 We found a broad level of agreement among statisticians and data suppliers that the collection of child-level data has improved overall data quality and promoted consistency between areas. All four producer bodies have taken the opportunity to deploy extensive validation checks, but we think that they could do more to explain these checks to users of the statistics⁵⁷. Where further information is available, it tends to be buried in various supporting documents that are not always well signposted from the main statistical reports. We suggest that Northern Ireland and Wales follow the example of England and Scotland in publishing a full list of validation checks, as this will not only give reassurance for users, but also provide users and data suppliers with the opportunity to comment on anything that they think is missing or wrong. We further suggest that all four producer bodies strengthen the references to data quality in the statistical reports and ensure that all supporting materials are clearly signposted. They should also alert users to any issues with particular data suppliers or items of information that might impact on their ability to use the statistics.

⁵⁶ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

⁵⁷ To quote one user (of the Scottish Statistics): '...I have been generally impressed by the level of scrutiny and interrogation to which they subject the annual returns....They...go to considerable lengths to investigate anomalies. The statistical publications themselves do not reflect the extent to which data quality is investigated, and casual users would not necessarily have a proper idea of the work that has taken place to prepare (and quality assure) a release.'

The use of child-level data

This part of the report considers whether the potential benefits of child-level data collection are being fully exploited, and whether sufficient steps are taken to protect the confidentiality of LAC and to avoid undue burden on LAs and HSC Trusts.

3.17 All the DfE statistics covered by this assessment are now derived either from its LAC database, or by linking these data to its National Pupil Database via the UPN. The data are also linked longitudinally, making it possible to track care histories over time. In addition to allowing a wide range of cross-tabulations and more complex analyses, this system gives DfE (and potentially researchers elsewhere) the flexibility to extract information about children who enter or leave care during any time period, and about those who remain in care for a minimum period of time. The Scottish Government has recently achieved a similar level of flexibility, although it will be some time before it is able to examine entire care histories. While there is some scope for Wales and Northern Ireland to link between their existing data collections on LAC, or to link some of these data to other sources, we understand that resources are not available at present for this to be given a high priority.

Realising the full benefits of child-level data

- 3.18 The users and data suppliers who contributed to this assessment thought that the collection of data at child-level had made the statistics more useful, although few had sought direct access to this type of data themselves. Some users in England and Scotland were keen to see the matching process extended to include data held by other government departments.
- 3.19 Although the statistics are widely used for the purposes described in paragraphs 2.7 to 2.9, DfE statisticians were not aware of child-level data being used in published research, and we do not know the extent to which such data are used within the department (for example in briefing for ministers). They told us, however, that they had extracted data for five universities in 2012 – four at child-level and one at LA-level – which suggests that at least some use is being made of child-level data outside government .
- 3.20 The Administrative Data Liaison Service⁵⁸ (ADLS) is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to facilitate the legal and secure sharing of administrative data for research purposes. Its website has a page of information about the National Pupil Database⁵⁹ and provides links to LA-level data on LAC, but when we contacted them the service was not aware of the possibility of obtaining access to record-level data about children in care. We suggest that DfE work with ADLS in order to raise awareness of what data are available, and to monitor their subsequent use.
- 3.21 *Wales Children in Need Census* includes some comparisons between LAC, children on the child protection register and other children who have received social services support – or between LAC, others in need and the whole age

⁵⁸ <http://www.adls.ac.uk/>

⁵⁹ <http://www.adls.ac.uk/department-for-education/dcsf-npd/>

group – in terms of their characteristics, and outcomes such as mental health, substance misuse and educational attainment. We believe it would be possible for DfE to carry out similar comparisons and suggest that DfE investigate whether there is demand from users for comparisons between LAC, children on the child protection register and other children who have received social services support, in relation to characteristics and outcomes such as mental health, substance misuse and educational attainment.

- 3.22 The original reason⁶⁰ why a child became looked after is not collected in Scotland or Northern Ireland. It is available in England and in Wales, but DfE, in particular, presents many of its statistics as simple time series (or for LA areas in the additional tables). In neither country do the statistical reports compare outcomes or placement histories for the different types of need. We suggest that all four producer bodies investigate whether there is a user requirement for analysis based on the original reason a child became looked after, and if so, what might be provided without presenting a disclosure risk.

Protecting confidentiality

- 3.23 Although none of the data collected by central government include names and addresses, they do include dates of birth and postcodes which are essential for analytical purposes, and may be used in addition to reference numbers when matching datasets. The postcode of the child's original home and subsequent placements are used to monitor distances – DfE treat the percentage of children placed outside the LA area and more than 20 miles from where they used to live as a performance indicator⁶¹.
- 3.24 The Scottish Government's data collection web pages⁶² include its privacy notice for LAC. DfE and the Welsh Government have produced suggested text⁶³ or guidelines⁶⁴ for a privacy notice that could be used by LA, but we suggest that they and DHSSPS also publish a privacy notice that covers the data collections on LAC, explaining what information is collected, how it is protected, how it is used, and the arrangements for sharing with third parties.
- 3.25 The Scottish Government publishes the data access agreement⁶⁵ that must be signed by any organisation wishing to make use of the linked dataset that includes educational outcomes. DfE told us that it has been bringing its arrangements for access to child-level data on LAC data into line with those for the National Pupil Database⁶⁶. We suggest that DfE ensure that relevant web pages inform potential users of the National Pupil Database and the LAC

⁶⁰ This refers to the types of reason described in paragraph 2.2 and is distinct from the legal basis for being looked after, as described in paragraph 2.1

⁶¹ Out of area placements are sometimes essential for safeguarding reasons, or because a young person needs specialist facilities, but they can also disrupt schooling, healthcare and other established ties

⁶² <https://www.scotxed.net/Data%20Collection%20Pages%20for%20all%20Statistics%20Surveys/Looked%20After%20Children%204.aspx>

⁶³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/datatdatam/a0064374/pn>

⁶⁴ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/about/data-collection/social/child/childneed/?lang=en>

⁶⁵ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/SurveyChildrenLookedAfter/LACEducationalOutcomesDAA2011-12>

⁶⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/national-pupil-database/b00212283/national-pupil-database/approvals-process>

Database that data relating to LAC are available, and provide appropriate links from the LAC statistics pages.

- 3.26 Those users of the DfE statistics who had sought access to child-level data attested to the stringency of the confidentiality arrangements, but appreciated the reasons for this. Users of local area statistics expressed some frustration about the rounding or suppression of data in tables where numbers are low, as this can impact on their attempts to benchmark performance. Users of Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish statistics face even more restrictions in this regard, especially in relation to adoptions data.

The burden on data suppliers

- 3.27 Estimated compliance costs were set out in paragraph 2.10. The four data collections in Northern Ireland that require the submission of a form for each child appear relatively burdensome at first sight, although the numbers in some categories (for example, children adopted from care) are low. Some of the information is common to each collection (mainly characteristics of the child such as date of birth, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on) but in practice there is probably little duplication because relatively few children or young people will crop up more than once.
- 3.28 In addition to its five child-level data collections, the Welsh Government collects aggregate data relating to performance management and to referrals and assessments (paragraph 2.6). We were told that it is not currently possible to merge the child-level returns or incorporate the aggregate returns because the format in which child-level data are submitted does not permit the creation of more than one record for each child.
- 3.29 The data suppliers who responded to this assessment seemed relatively resigned to the burden, perhaps because (in contrast to some other topic areas we have assessed) they all used the resulting statistics. One supplier commented that Ofsted has recently started asking for information that duplicates some of DfE's data collection. DfE told us that it was meeting Ofsted in the near future to discuss the matter. The other administrations told us they were not aware of any duplication with the bodies responsible for inspecting children's services.

Comparability across the UK

This part of the report considers whether differences between the statistics in each part of the UK are adequately documented for users, and whether the potential for making comparisons is fully exploited

- 3.30 In the first round of Assessment reports, the four producer bodies were required to document clearly the differences between their respective statistics on LAC and to scope out the feasibility and need for a comparable data subset. A joint paper *A review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom*⁶⁷ set out the comparability of the statistics. It was subsequently published on all four producer bodies' websites. It provides helpful information about the range of statistics available on different populations of LAC and young people (for example, those starting or ceasing to be looked after, or care leavers reaching their 19th birthday). The document also includes a table comparing rates per 10,000 resident population and the percentage of LAC in each type of placement. However, this information is now out of date, and does not fully meet the requirement to scope out the feasibility and need for a comparable data subset. Nearly all the users who responded to the current assessment expressed some degree of interest in making comparisons across the UK, but those who had actually attempted such comparisons found the exercise hugely frustrating. In addition, while the review includes extensive extracts from the legislation in each country, it fails to spell out the consequences for data collection⁶⁸. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the four producer bodies should improve and update the information in *A review of the comparability of statistics of children looked after by local authorities in the different countries of the United Kingdom*; investigate user needs for a comparable data subset or common set of indicators; and – should a user need exist – explore how such needs might be met⁶⁹ (Requirement 2).
- 3.31 All four producer bodies have a section at the end of their reports providing links to the statistics in other parts of the UK. The English and Welsh statistics do not include any comparisons with other parts of the UK, but there are some comparisons with England and Wales in the Northern Ireland statistics. Each section of the Scottish Government's statistical reports concludes with a paragraph headed 'cross UK comparisons'. Where direct comparisons are not possible, the paragraph points this out and explains why, but also confirms whether or not the trend in Scotland is in the same general direction as the rest of the UK. We think this is good practice and suggest that the other producer bodies adopt the approach taken to 'cross UK comparisons' in the Scottish Government's statistical reports on LAC.
- 3.32 The detailed specification and guidance provided for data suppliers necessarily varies between administrations, according to legislation, policy and the

⁶⁷ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/publications/children/?lang=en> (DfE subsequently commissioned a review on the wider topic of safeguarding children, which is linked from the same web page)

⁶⁸ It is clear, for example, that the Scottish definition is wider and includes more children who are looked after at home, but the review does not explain whether there are any practical differences between the counts of LAC in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. And while it is helpful to have the legal extracts, they refer in turn to other sections of the same or different legislation and are therefore difficult to follow

⁶⁹ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

intended uses for the statistics. However, looking at some of the more straightforward measures, it seems likely that some differences are simply due to varying levels of precision and that each administration might benefit from reviewing how a particular item is specified by other producer bodies. We suggest that they therefore examine whether there is any scope to align the specification of data more closely.

- 3.33 The statisticians responsible for LAC and the other statistics relating to children's social services meet as a 'four nations group' around three or four times a year. They exchange information about changes to data collections and publications, and about areas of mutual interest such as children missing from care. We suggest that the four administrations use this group in the course of implementing Requirement 2 (and Suggestions 7 and 11) and in particular that they consider a joint approach to users about requirements for comparable data.

Packaging and utility of the published outputs

This part of the report considers how well the overall topic area is covered by the various reports of commentary and data from each administration.

- 3.34 The four producer bodies present statistics about LAC in very different ways. In Northern Ireland, four of the DHSSPS statistical reports map directly onto the four child-level data collections (paragraph 2.6), while the aggregate returns on LAC feed into *Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland*. This is a large compendium-style publication that ranges widely over referrals to social services, child protection, residential homes and day care provision.
- 3.35 In both England and Scotland the split in content between the two main statistical publications seems to be determined by the complexities and extra time required for data matching or preparing longitudinal datasets. This is understandable, but it does not always result in the most logical combination of topics from a user perspective. In the Scottish statistics, for example, educational attainment of LAC, initial and follow-up destinations of care leavers and a longitudinal analysis of placement length and type are bundled in one publication, while cross sectional information about placements and the economic activity of young people eligible for aftercare services are in the other publication. DfE's *Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England* covers everything from offending and health checks to employment status after leaving year 11 of compulsory education, but the follow up statistics on 19 year olds are in *Children looked after in England*.
- 3.36 Setting aside these production issues, the other major decision facing producer bodies is whether to combine all the statistics on LAC into stand-alone publications, or whether to integrate them with closely related topics such as child protection and referrals to social services. The biggest contrast here is between the English and Welsh statistics. In DfE, LAC statistics and the children in need (CIN) census are produced by different teams of statisticians, and although CIN data includes LAC, they are never identified separately in the statistical report. We think that this makes it difficult to gain a good overview of children's social services, and it is hard for the non-expert to work out where LAC fit within the system⁷⁰.
- 3.37 With the Welsh statistics, on the other hand, an active effort has been made to compare LAC not just with their age group (as is done to some extent in all four producer bodies) but with children who receive support from social services without being taken into care. Both the *Wales Children in Need Census and Referrals, Assessments and Social Services for Children, Wales* adopt this approach. In addition, *Social Services Statistics Wales* is the only statistical report in this assessment to present statistics on children's social services in a publication that also contains statistics on social services for adults. This degree of integration provides context that is missing in the English statistics, although it can have the disadvantage of making access more difficult and time consuming for users wanting to focus only on LAC. A user told us that the while the level of detail in the Welsh statistics was good, the number of publications was confusing.

⁷⁰ *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* tackles this issue with an info graphic on the first page

3.38 We suggest that each producer review the distribution of information about LAC between existing statistical reports and consider how to improve the experience for users, for example through better signposting.

Outcomes for LAC

3.39 We received quite detailed suggestions from users about items of information they would like added to the various data collections, and about ways in which some of the existing data items might be changed or clarified. Several users wanted better information about disability: in England, this information is not collected unless it is the reason for entering care. Many users expressed a desire for improved outcome measures over a longer time period, so that the long-term consequences of being in different care settings can be evaluated. Other suggestions included data on failed adoptions, and on changes of social worker.

3.40 The following table shows the availability of data in each part of the UK for a variety of outcome measures (in the broadest sense of the term):

	England ⁷¹	Wales ⁷²	Scotland	Northern Ireland ⁷³
Missing from placement	✓	Not published (low numbers & disclosure risk)	Not collected	Not published (low numbers)
School attendance or absence	✓	✓	✓ Every 2 years	✓
School exclusions	✓	✓	✓ Every 2 years	✓
School attainment	✓ KS 1 & 2	✓ Foundation stage and KS 2 & 3		✓ KS 1, 2 & 3
Qualifications	✓ GCSEs of LAC in relevant year group	✓ GCSEs of care leavers, and points score at 16	✓ Average tariff score on leaving school	✓ GCSEs of care leavers aged 16-18
Immunisations	✓	✓		✓
Dental checks	✓	✓		✓

⁷¹ In England and Northern Ireland the base for many of the outcome measures is children who have been looked after continuously for 12 months at the reference date

⁷² Some of the Welsh statistics are drawn from the LAC data collections, and some from the Welsh CIN – to qualify for the latter, the child’s case must have been open for at least 3 months at the date of the census

⁷³ See footnote 71

Health checks	✓	✓		✓
Development assessments for <5s	✓			✓
Emotional health	✓			
Mental health		✓		
Substance misuse	✓		✓	✓
Offending	✓			✓
Out of area placement	✓			
Multiple placements	✓	✓	✓	✓
Multiple schools				✓
LAC who are parents	✓			✓
Economic status	✓ After year 11, and at age 19	✓ Age 19	✓ At 3 and 9 mths after leaving school	✓ After year 12
Type and/or suitability of age 19 accommodation	✓	✓		✓
Timings for the adoption process	✓	✓		✓

3.41 Scotland currently has the narrowest range of outcome measures. The Scottish Government told us that it is funding a graduate student to help identify policy priorities and develop a data strategy in this area. Northern Ireland has a relatively wide range of measures, many of which are cross-tabulated with other variables in the statistical reports.

Performance information

3.42 While many users are interested in long-term outcomes, others take a close interest in performance measures. The Scottish Government told us that in a recent meeting with users (mainly LAs) the need for more information about process times was regarded as a priority.

3.43 The Welsh Government collects extensive information about LA performance and publishes the results as official statistics. *Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England* provides statistics for the two national impact indicators, but does not mention the performance tables and scorecards for LA areas compiled by analysts working alongside DfE policy staff. Much of this performance information is derived from the LAC dataset. We suggest that DfE publish its performance tables and scorecards as official statistics.

Commentary in the statistical reports

- 3.44 In all four countries statisticians compare the educational attainment of LAC with others in the same age group, but less context is provided for other measures (for example the economic activity of care leavers or the suitability of their accommodation). Statistics are presented on the ethnic origin of LAC but no comparison is made with the ethnic composition of the child age population. Statistics for LA areas in England, Wales, and Scotland are available as supplementary tables and where applicable on the performance areas of relevant websites, but there is little or no local contextual information for local areas. It may not be feasible to write commentary about the local statistics or to calculate value added scores (as is done for school league tables in England), but we think it is important to alert users to the fact that local employment conditions, for example, may affect the proportion of care leavers in employment, education and training.
- 3.45 Although the statistical reports are generally of a good standard, we identified some areas for improvement. As part of the designation as National Statistics, each administration should improve the commentary in the reports so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics⁷⁴ (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this requirement, they consider the points summarised in the table below:

	DfE (England)	Welsh Government	Scottish Government	DHSSPS (NI)
Contextual information	<p>Improve comparisons between LAC or young people and others in the same age group</p> <p>Provide more background explanation about pathways into and out of care, and alternatives to care</p>	<p>Improve comparisons between LAC or young people and others in the same age group</p>	<p>Improve comparisons between LAC or young people and others in the same age group</p>	<p>Improve comparisons between LAC or young people and others in the same age group</p> <p>Replace the first paragraph of <i>Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland</i> (page 8) with factual information about the adoption process in NI</p>
Terminology	<p>Add glossary (for example 'special</p>		<p>Update and improve definitions (for</p>	

⁷⁴ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

	guardianship', 'placed for adoption', 's.20 agreements')		example permanence order)	
Advice for users regarding quality in relation to uses, and interpretation of the statistics	Describe validation process and signpost users to list of checks Provide basic advice about comparing LA areas	Publish list of validation checks and link these from the reports Provide basic advice about comparing LA areas	Provide basic advice about comparing LA areas	Publish list of validation checks and link these from the reports Provide basic advice about comparing trust areas
Comparisons with other parts of the UK	Add some comparisons and consider suggestion 14	Add some comparisons and consider suggestion 14		Consider suggestion 14
Signposting to other parts of the topic area, and related statistics	Insert table of contents Improve signposting between reports and to additional tables, following the migration to Gov.UK Add links to performance information, Ofsted statistics, and DfE statistics on expenditure.	Provide more guidance for users about the data available from the statistical reports, on StatsWales and from 'benchmarking Wales' ⁷⁵ , Insert page numbers where missing	Move contents table to the beginning (currently on pages 3 or 4) Improve signposting between the statistical reports Signpost users to the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration statistics and flag up that the link to the data specification includes validation checks	Improve the signposting between the statistical reports

3.46 We suggest that DfE and the Welsh Government include more comparisons in their statistical reports – looking, for example, at outcomes by placement type and history.

3.47 We suggest that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.5 are put forward for assessment.

⁷⁵ <http://www.benchmarkingwales.net/IAS/> (available to central and local government users only)

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the statistics on LAC, 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.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Suggestion 1 | Approach the HSC Board in order to explore the scope for extracting data directly from the IT system, and work with the HSC Trusts to develop a tighter specification of the data (para 3.6) – (DHSSPS). |
| Suggestion 2 | Publish more information about the proportion of records with valid SCN and about the success of the data matching process (para 3.15) – (Scottish Government). |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish a full list of validation checks (para 3.16) – (Welsh Government and DHSSPS). |
| Suggestion 4 | Strengthen the references to data quality in the statistical reports and ensure that all supporting materials are clearly signposted. Also alert users to any issues with particular data suppliers or items of information that might impact on their ability to use the statistics (para 3.16) – (All producer bodies). |
| Suggestion 5 | Work with ADLS to raise awareness of what data are available, and to monitor their subsequent use (para 3.20) – (DfE). |
| Suggestion 6 | Investigate whether there is demand from users for comparisons between LAC, children on the child protection register and other children who have received social services support, in relation to characteristics and outcomes such as mental health, substance misuse and educational attainment (para 3.21) – (DfE). |
| Suggestion 7 | Investigate whether there is a user requirement for analysis based on the original reason a child became looked after, and if so, what might be provided without presenting a disclosure risk (para 3.22) – (All producer bodies). |
| Suggestion 8 | Publish a privacy notice that covers the data collections on LAC, explaining what information is collected, how it is protected, how it is used, and the |

arrangements for sharing with third parties (para 3.24) – (DfE, Welsh Government and DHSSPS).

- Suggestion 9** Ensure that relevant web pages inform potential users of the National Pupil Database and the LAC Database that data relating to LAC are available, and provide appropriate links from the looked after children statistics pages (para 3.25) – (DfE).
- Suggestion 10** Adopt the approach taken to ‘cross UK comparisons’ in the Scottish Government’s statistical reports on LAC (para 3.31) – (DfE, Welsh Government and DHSSPS).
- Suggestion 11** Where differences do not arise from legislation or policy, examine the scope for closer alignment of the data specifications for LAC (para 3.32) – (All producer bodies).
- Suggestion 12** Use the ‘four nations’ group in the course of implementing Requirement 2 (and suggestions 2 and 3) and consider a joint approach to users about requirements for comparable data. (para 3.33) – (All producer bodies).
- Suggestion 13** Review the distribution of information about LAC between existing statistical reports and consider how to improve the experience for users, for example through better signposting (para 3.38) – (All producer bodies).
- Suggestion 14** Publish performance tables and scorecards as official statistics (para 3.43) – (DfE).
- Suggestion 15** In meeting Requirement 3, consider the points summarised in paragraph 3.45 – (All producer bodies).
- Suggestion 16** Include more cross tabulations in the statistical reports – looking, for example, at outcomes by placement type and history (para 3.46) – (DfE and the Welsh Government).
- Suggestion 17** Submit *Education outcomes for Scotland’s looked after children* for assessment (para 3.47) – (Scottish Government).
- Suggestion 18** Submit *Wales Children in Need Census and Fostering and Adoption Intermediary Services* for assessment (para 3.47) – (Welsh Government).

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from June to September 2013.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Jill Barelli and David Duncan-Fraser – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the four administrations in June. They subsequently met the statisticians in each producer body during August to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the evidence already available on websites.

Summary of users and data suppliers contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users and data suppliers. For this assessment we approached people and organisations who were known to be regular users of the statistics, and a number of LAs and HSC Trusts who supply the data from which the statistics are compiled (and who use the statistics themselves). We also invited comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enabled us to gain some insights about the issues highlighted in this report, including data quality and the packaging of the data into statistical outputs. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare Assessment reports.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 22 responses from this consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	E&W, GB or UK	Total
Central government		1		1		2
Local government	4	1	1	1		7
Regulators and non-departmental public bodies	2		1		1	4
Academic			1		2	3
Charities, pressure groups etc	2			1	2	5
Individuals				1		1
Total	8	2	3	4	5	22

- A2.5 Many users (including data suppliers) welcomed the collection of child-level data and felt it had improved the quality of the statistics, although not all were aware of the full extent of the validation process. The loss of precision due to the suppression and rounding of numbers in tables was a source of frustration for some, particularly those wishing to use devolved and local statistics. The small handful of users who had obtained access to child-level data confirmed that they had undergone a rigorous vetting process, but they understood the reasons for this.
- A2.6 While acknowledging the progress that had already been made, there was a strong desire for a wider and more meaningful range of outcome measures – with young people being followed over a longer period of time – and for the recording of additional information (for example on disability) in those countries where such information was not already collected. Data suppliers (in their role as practitioners) were sometimes keen for performance measures to be more contextualised.
- A2.7 Several respondents reported that they had ‘got used’ to the way that the statistics are presented in each country – even if they had found them a little daunting or confusing at first – and there seemed to be general acceptance of recent changes in the way that the statistics are packaged. Some users were more or less resigned to the lack of comparability across the UK, but this was a source of real frustration for others.

