Children’s homes data pack, DfE

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Summary
The DfE has published a new version of the Children’s homes data pack. Much of the information is being published for the first time, including the Ofsted inspection judgements awarded to the homes of the largest private providers. The data show where there is under- and over-supply of places and the variation between local authorities in their use of out-of-area placements and placements far from a child’s home.

Overview
The DfE has published a new version of the Children’s homes data pack, which draws together a lot of information of interest to local authorities (LAs). It is very largely in the form of charts, and is almost twice the size of the version published in March 2012. The information is taken mostly from two sources, the DfE statistical collection about looked after children (based on LAs’ SSDA903 returns for the year to 31 March 2012) and Ofsted data on children’s homes as at 31 March 2013; much of it is being published for the first time, including the Ofsted inspection judgements awarded to the homes of the largest private providers. A spreadsheet accompanying the pack gives the underlying data for the local authority charts. The Ofsted register data give the total number of children’s homes as around 2,050; secure children’s homes, children’s homes providing respite care or short breaks and residential special schools registered as children’s homes have been excluded, leaving 1,718 homes as the basis for the pack.

The DfE has just consulted on changes to Regulations aimed at improving the quality, and strengthening the inspection and regulation of children’s homes (see ‘Related briefings’), and at making LAs and care homes more accountable for their decisions. This followed publication of the report of the Expert Group on Children’s Homes Quality, which includes the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group on Out of Area Placements; these groups were established in response to the reports of the Joint All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Inquiry on Children who Go Missing from Care and the accelerated report of the Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s (OCC) inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups.

‘The Government believes that more needs to be done, and transparency is an essential tool in driving up quality. This data pack provides detailed information about the location, ownership and quality of children’s homes, in order to help LAs make better decisions about placements for their children… The placement of individual looked after children is determined by local authority policies and their arrangements for commissioning placements. Children should be matched to the placement assessed as most likely to meet their needs.’
Briefing in full

The main headings under which information is provided are: the children; the homes and their quality – including details of location, LA and private/voluntary provision and inspection judgements; LA use of homes – including out-of-area placements, distance from a child’s home and cost; the children’s homes market – including the geographical supply of places and information about private providers, with inspection judgements. The main points from each are set out below.

The children

- 5,930 children (around 9% of looked after children) were in children’s homes and hostels or secure accommodation on 31 March 2012; 4,890 were in children’s homes
- over three-quarters of children in homes were between 14 and 17 years old; residents of children’s homes are more likely to be boys (63%) than girls (37%)
- the duration of placements in children’s homes is quite similar to foster placements, but fewer last longer than one year (20% compared with 28%)
- more than a quarter (29%) of children in homes have had at least six previous placements (in their current period of care) compared with 10% of children in foster placements; around 13% of looked after children had lived in a children’s home at some point, half of whom had since left the home
- more than a third (36%) of children in children’s homes are more than 20 miles from their local communities, compared with 14% of children in foster care; 30% are outside their LA and more than 20 miles from home
- 54% of children in children’s homes were in homes within the LA boundary, 46% were in homes outside it; 60% were in homes in the private (56%) and voluntary (4%) sectors, 40% in LA provision (2% in other LAs); 92% of children in homes outside the LA were in private/voluntary provision, 68% of children within the LA were in the LA’s own provision.

The homes and their quality (Ofsted data from 31 March 2013)

- a map shows graphically the distribution of children’s homes across the country, which is very uneven
- of the 1,718 homes in England on the Ofsted register, 22% are LA-run and 78% are in the private/voluntary sectors (compared with a ratio of 40:60 in placements – see last point above); the proportion of LA-run provision declined from 61% in 2000 to 35% in 2006
- the number and proportion of homes run by the LA varies greatly by region (44% in Yorkshire and the Humber, 15% in the West Midlands)
- LA homes tend to be slightly bigger (average 5.8 places) than private/voluntary (average 4 places); 20% of homes are registered for one (6%) or two (14%) places, with only four homes (0.2%) registered for more than 20 places
- ten LAs had no children’s homes in either sector, nine had no private/voluntary sector homes and 52 had no LA homes; on average, there were 8.9 private/voluntary homes and 2.4 LA homes per authority
- 57% of homes were judged ‘good’ and 15% ‘outstanding’ for overall effectiveness at their most recent Ofsted inspection; 24% were judged ‘adequate’ and 4% ‘inadequate’ (registered homes receive at least one full inspection per year, and an interim inspection to check on progress); the inspection framework was strengthened in April 2011, revised in 2012 and further revised in July 2013
the distribution of inspection judgements is very similar for LA-run and private/voluntary homes. There is no statistically significant correlation between overall effectiveness and size of home, but homes with more than 10 places were more likely to be judged outstanding or inadequate, and no homes with just one place were judged inadequate; there is no statistically significant correlation between the number of homes owned by a provider and the quality of provision, but owners with more than 10 homes had a slightly higher proportion of outstanding judgements and a lower proportion of inadequate ones whilst owners with just one home were the least likely to be rated good or outstanding and the most likely to be rated inadequate.

LA use of homes (based on 2012 data in the accompanying spreadsheet)

- almost every LA uses children’s homes, but the proportion of looked after children in homes varies (from 2% to 18%); on average, LAs had 32 children in children’s homes
- 54% of children in homes were living inside the boundary of their responsible LA, but all LAs with children in homes placed at least some outside their boundary; three LAs placed more than 90% of their children in homes inside their boundaries, three placed fewer than 20% within their boundaries. 55 LAs (up from 40 in 2011) had fewer places in their area than the number of children they placed in homes
- of the children living in homes within an LA area, 55% were the responsibility of that LA; nearly all LAs had children in homes in their area who had come from other LAs – in 15 LAs, the only children in homes in their area were the responsibility of other LAs. (Maps illustrate LAs’ use of placements outside their area and placements more than 20 miles from the child’s home)

How much do children’s home placements cost?

- in 2011-12, LAs in England spent £3.08 billion on looked after children, of which £1.05 billion was spent on residential care
- the average spent on LA provision was £4,135 per child per week; the average spent on private/voluntary provision was £3,860 per child per week
- there is large variation across LAs in their average spend on residential care per child per week: five spend an average of more than £22,500 pcpw whilst at least ten spend an average of less than £2,500 pcpw (a few high-cost placements amongst a low total number in an LA will significantly affect its average spend).

The children’s homes market – (i) the geographical supply of places and (ii) the private providers

- there is wide variation in the local availability of children’s homes: ten (mostly small) LAs had no homes and nine had one, whilst Lancashire has 89 and Staffordshire 71 (together accounting for almost 10% of the total); the mean number of homes per LA was 11.3
- the number of places available locally varies across the country: 47 LAs (31%) had 24 or fewer places available within their boundary or within 20 miles of the boundary with 43 (28%) having between 25 and 49; two LAs had fewer than 10 places each, whilst Kent had 244 and Derbyshire had 174 (data are not doubled counted: if a place is available to more than one LA it is divided between them)
- the market is not responding so that supply matches demand: many LAs place more children in homes than than they have places locally available (according to the definition
above); homes are disproportionately located in certain areas, with the North West (25%) and West Midlands (17%) having far more of the total than the North East (5%) and London (6%)

- there is no correlation between the location of homes and level of deprivation – they are more or less evenly distributed across the most to least deprived quartiles of local deprivation levels (based on IDACI score of lower layer super output areas) – but there is a slight skew towards deprived areas in the location of homes by local levels of crime and disorder

- the total of 1,718 children’s homes had 507 different providers (100 LAs and 407 private/voluntary); of these, 227 (45%) owned just one home and 97 (19%) owned two, with 69% of private/voluntary owning either one or two

- there are nine owners (which are listed) with more than 15 homes, which account for 385 homes (22% of the total) and 1,421 places (19% of the total). The largest providers had homes in several LAs, but there are some areas where a single provider has a significant proportion of the local supply (eg. in Rochdale and Manchester more than a quarter of the homes are owned by the same provider)

- Ofsted inspection judgements are set out for the nine largest providers, but with some caveats relating to the proportion of their homes inspected, the fact that some homes were closed but still had an active registration etc., so need to be treated with some caution.

Under Conclusions and next steps, the pack sets out that the Government wants to see the best placements and outcomes for children in residential care; that it is publishing the data pack because it believes that greater transparency will help; that the data pack poses questions for central government, local government and private/voluntary providers; and that the Government is working with Ofsted, LAs and providers to explore improvements in the market, on which proposals will be published later in the year.

Comment

The data pack is a source of a wide range of information which will be of interest and value to LAs, especially those responsible for commissioning placements. Whilst it provides a lot more data than previously, the DfE acknowledges gaps in understanding of aspects of provision: ‘it sets out what we know, and the limitations on our knowledge…’.

On LA use of homes, it observes that forthcoming research, *Children’s homes: understanding the market and the use of out of authority placements*, suggests that placements away from home are often made in order to secure specialist provision for children with complex disabilities or severe mental health issues, or to establish some geographical distance to break patterns of risky behaviour, eg. child sexual exploitation (CSE), offending behaviour, gangs and guns. The research also suggests that some LAs are questioning this approach in respect of children at risk of CSE, and are developing more local approaches. LAs may use distant placements to address local capacity issues, and additional challenges arising when children are placed far from home include: reliance on local knowledge and intelligence about the quality of homes or suitability of their locations; significant travel times limiting social work oversight; and limitations on family relationships and the scope for work with the whole family.

The DfE comments that ‘we need a better understanding of the different types of specialist provision, the quality and location of these homes… LAs (working singly or in partnerships so that
Secretary of State Michael Gove was a lot more blunt. Writing in The Daily Telegraph to coincide with publication of the data pack, Gove described as “indefensible” the LA practice of “decanting children to homes far from family, friends and the social workers who knew them”; he also claimed to have been met by a “wall of silence” as “Ofsted was prevented by ‘data protection’ rules, ‘child protection’ concerns and other bewildering regulations from sharing that data with us, or even with the police. Local authorities could only access information via a complex and time-consuming application process – and some simply did not bother.” However, this prompted the Information Commissioner’s office to respond by saying,

“Ensuring that vulnerable young people are properly protected in care homes is essential. There is nothing in data protection legislation that is a barrier to this happening… The Information Commissioner published a Data Sharing Code of Practice in May 2012 which helps ensure that more routine information sharing takes place where necessary, and any myths around data protection preventing proper sharing are dispelled. The Commissioner’s advice has not been sought on any perceived difficulties about sharing care home information, so we are writing to both Michael Gove and Sir Michael Wilshaw at Ofsted today to clarify the concerns and set straight any misunderstandings.”

So it is indeed clear that there is a need for more information, and understanding, around the issues raised in this data pack – some of which are undoubtedly complex. However, the bare facts presented in the pack do suggest that many aspects of the present situation are not satisfactory, and could be improved upon. Such improvements are far more likely to come about as the result of constructive discussion between the stakeholders than from intemperate articles in The Daily Telegraph.

**External links**

DfE: Children’s homes data pack: September 2013

**Related briefings**

DfE consultation on children’s homes, and care planning, placement and case review (July 2013)

For further information, please visit [www.lgiu.org.uk](http://www.lgiu.org.uk) or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk