



Report focus

This insight piece explores the nature, availability and use of child level administrative data at the local and regional level, by children's social care departments.

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About this report

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The full report is available to download from www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk

About the authors

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About the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, the Nuffield FJO will provide accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

The Nuffield FJO has been established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advice social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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Use of children's social care data at the local and regional area level

In this insight piece we explore the nature, availability and use of child level administrative data at the local and regional level, by children's social care departments. The use of these data are considered within the context of the requirements to submit annual administrative data to the Department for Education. Consideration is also placed on the issues related to the capacity of local authority performance management teams which have been drastically reduced in many local authorities as a result of austerity.

Research has highlighted that the data submitted to government departments (for example, the Department for Education) as part of national statutory returns, such as the SSDA 903 children looked after data and the Children in Need Census constitute a small proportion of the data held and utilised within local authority children's services departments (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008ⁱ; Holmes and McDermid, 2012). Local authorities provide administrative data to government departments on an annual basis, the analyses of which - in the form of national statistical releases - are published up to eighteen months after the commencement of the data collection period (i.e. analysis of data for year commencing 1 April 2018 is published in September and December 2019), consequently providing a retrospective analysis for a sector that is evolving, in terms of organisational structures, the populations they serve and the wider societal contexts in which they work.

The way in which data are presented in the Department for Education National Statistical Release provides a series of year on year snap shots and a trend analysis. The break down by local authority facilitates an exploration of trends over years, for example in terms of the number of children looked after (from the SSDA 903 children looked after data) and the number of Section 47 enquiries (Children in Need Census). However, these analyses do not provide an indication of the longitudinal pathways of children. A recent longitudinal analysis of the pathways of children in need by the Department for Education, provides a preliminary analysis of social care pathways and educational outcomes (Department for Education, 2018). These longitudinal analyses provide an indication of the potential use of the data, if a longitudinal approach is taken.

The process of preparation of data for submission to the Department for Education has been reported to be onerous and time consuming for most local authorities, with the process of preparing data taking up to three months (local authorities submit data by the end of June each year). Current research has identified that where local authorities have to spend the full allotted time preparing the data for submission the data tend not to be used for local strategic and planning purposes (La Valle et al, Hart, Holmes and Pinto, 2019).

As part of a recent Research in Practice (RiP) Change Project (Bowyer et al., 2018) work was undertaken with nineteen local authorities to explore their data usage at a local and regional level to inform strategic and operational planning and decision making. The focus of the project was on support for children and young people at the 'edge of care', but included an exploration of the child level, and finance data to better understand the throughput and trajectory of cases from early intervention, through statutory children's social care services (including child protection, children in need, looked after children and care leavers). The project identified a range of practices and initiatives whereby local area data sets are being

linked and matched, either between agencies or across different parts of the children's social care system. Some of these examples provide an insight into how some local authority children's services departments have developed regular (i.e. monthly or quarterly) analyses of their administrative data, using routinely recorded data. Some local authorities have also been able to build their analytical capability with analysts proficient in the use of specialist analytical software and/or techniques (for example, the use of 'R' and Power Bi)¹. However, the extent of this work is incredibly variable and a substantial amount of time is required to ensure that the necessary data sharing protocols are put in place before data are shared.

The RiP project also highlighted the substantial reduction in the size of many local authority performance management teams as part of austerity measures, consequently for some local authorities there is only sufficient capacity to carry out statutory reporting.

Sebba and colleagues (2017) also provide recent examples of how local area decisions have been better informed through the use of local level data in the Department for Education Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (Round One) projects, including the use of embedded data analysts; increased practitioner use of data and the development of data warehouses (ibid), although again these are isolated examples, rather than widespread practice.

The Children's services Analysis Tool (ChAT) provides another recent example of secondary use and meaningful visualisation of administrative data. The ChAT uses child-level data from Annex A (Ofsted's Single Inspection Framework) and the last five years of published statistics for Children in Need, Children Looked After, and Adoptions, to provide an aggregated analysis for the Local Authority as well as comparisons with its Statistical Neighbours and England. ChAT was developed as a part of the collaborative 'Data to Intelligence' project between Waltham Forest Council, Hackney Council, and Ofsted and has been made available to all local authorities as a free resource.

A majority of the information that the ChAT displays is captured using the LAIT², which also displays data annually in national, regional and statistical neighbour contexts over the past seven years (where data is available). ChAT provides the information in a dashboard format.

As with LAIT, ChAT is reliant upon yearly returns data and so does not provide up-to-date analysis of a local authority. There is a facility to import data sets on a more regular basis,

¹ 'R' is a programming language and free software environment for statistical computing and graphics supported by the R Foundation for Statistical Computing.

Power Bi is a business analytics service by Microsoft. It aims to provide interactive visualisations and business intelligence capabilities.

² LAIT (Local Authority Interactive Tool) is an on-line tool developed by the Department for Education that features comparable information at national, regional and statistical neighbours' level, so that local authorities can assess their performance against national and regional trends. It includes information such as: Child Protection, Looked after Children (LAC), Children in Need (CiN), early years and youth offending. LAIT is driven by data received from mandatory returns such as the SSDA 903 data and CiN Census data. The limitations are that it only features data for a full year and this data takes time to get onto the system.

LAIT is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-interactive-tool-lait#history>

however this would be reliant on local authorities routinely and more frequently extracting the necessary data from their management information systems to then import into the tool.

It is evident that there is value in children's social care data being analysed locally and regionally, as well as purely being exported by local authorities to meet the statutory reporting requirements, but that the capacity and capability of performance management teams impacts on the ease and frequency that this can take place. There have been recent efforts to share learning and to explore ways in which capacity and capability can be increased. Pivotal learning is being shared between local authorities as part of the Children's Services National Performance and Data Management Group³, and attempts are also being made to share learning between local authority analysts, academics, and national organisations, such as the Department for Education and Ofsted as part of the Children's Social Care Data User Group⁴. In times of austerity and reductions in analytical capacity it is essential that we all work together, and find creative solutions to build our collective capacity to utilise the wealth of data that already exist.

³ The Children's Services National Performance and Data Management Group is made up of two representatives of each of the nine regional social care performance and information management groups. All members are directly involved with the day to day production and management of performance data and intelligence in local authority children's services departments.

⁴ The Children's Social Care Data User Group (CSC-DUG) was established in 2018 by the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford and the Thomas Coram Research Unit at University College London. The group has been set up to provide a forum to share expertise and learning between data users and potential users (academic, practice and policy) and to provide opportunities for collaboration and joint-working between data teams, including users of comparable international data.

References

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