

Children Looked After Statistics: Stability Index

Planned developments following user feedback

November 2022

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# Introduction

The Stability Index is an annual analysis previously produced by the Children’s Commissioner’s Office (CCO), aiming to measure the instability experienced by children looked after (CLA). Responsibility for this analysis has now been transferred from the CCO to the Department for Education (DfE).

The handover of the Stability Index from the CCO to DfE has given analysts the opportunity to conduct a review into the methodology and measures reported while considering how it could be developed in the future. We sought feedback plans to:

* develop a DfE stability product, and
* bring the Stability Index social worker data collection to DfE.

In addition to the usual methods of collecting feedback we use to continually improve our data and statistical publications, feedback was gathered on the Stability Index by:

* Asking users to submit feedback on the proposals online. This was published on the Explore Education Statistics webpage. We received feedback from external stakeholders, with local authorities (LAs) making up most of the responses. The questions asked as part of the user feedback can be found in [Annex A](#_Annex_A:_User) and a summary of the user feedback received relating to each question can be found in [Annex B](#_Annex_B_–_1).
* Potential respondents from external organisations were also contacted directly through email and local authorities were reminded of the opportunity to provide user feedback through standard communications issued by the Children Looked After team.
* Following the user feedback exercise, we invited LA respondents to a focus group discussing the implementation of the social worker module and have used the information gathered from this to further inform the design of the module.

This document outlines the Children Looked After Statistics Team’s development plans following this feedback.

# Planned developments following feedback

## Key points from the user feedback exercise

We thank respondents for their feedback. We acknowledge that stakeholders generally view the Stability Index as valuable and are supportive of DfE continuing to publish the information. In summary:

* There was support for DfE to continue to report on stability.
* Users reported that whilst the existing Stability Index is well-used, very few access the main report and the time lag is an issue.
* Users reported that they would like to see some of the breakdowns published previously by the CCO.
* Users welcomed the introduction of the new data module on social workers as part of the established annual return on looked after children.

## Summary of our development plans

### Publication

We intend to publish data on the three stability measures in a phased way over the next three years – to the following timescales:

* November 2022 – extended placement stability analysis (breakdowns by child characteristics) published in our annual Children Looked After National Statistics release.
* Spring 2023 – first school stability analysis published as additional tables to our Children Looked After National Statistics release.
* November 2023 – second round of the extended placement stability analysis.
* Spring 2024 – second round of the school stability analysis.
* November 2024 – third round of the extended placement stability analysis.
* Spring 2025 and then annually – first overarching ‘stability publication’ covering all three measures (including social worker stability). CCO’s equivalent was previously published in August.

The data will:

* be published at national, regional, and local authority levels.
* initially cover stability over 12 months.
* report on all CLA who were looked after on 31 March and will provide breakdowns for children looked after for less than and more than 12 months. This will provide insight into stability at different stages of care.
* include the same breakdowns as used in our annual statistical release, for example, age groups, ethnicity, gender, and grouped placement type.

### Social worker collection

We have worked with local authorities to develop a new social worker module within the SSDA903. The first collection will take place in 2024. No interim spreadsheet collections will be run whilst the SSDA903 module is developed. We anticipate that it will be less burdensome to provide the data through the module on the SSDA903 platform.

The module will be contained in a separate portal and will open at the same time as the SSDA903, allowing LAs the opportunity to complete it within the SSDA903 timeframe if they wish. For the first collection, we plan to keep the module open until the end of September, allowing LAs to submit social worker data after the SSDA903 collection if preferred.

The first collection will gather information for social worker episodes for a single processing year. This means that, for every child looked after on 31 March 2024, information on every primary social worker episode within a given local authority in the reporting period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 would be collected. This will include any social worker episodes in periods within this timescale where the child was not looked after. In subsequent collections, we plan to collect two years’ worth of information, i.e., in 2025 we would collect information on social worker episodes covering 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2025.

We will collect:

* Social Worker England identifiers (or alternative identifiers if not available)
* the date the social worker episode started
* the date the episode ended, and
* reason for change.

It is hoped that by including reasons for social worker change, consistency and comparability between LAs will be established and the context of social worker changes will be better understood.

Guidance on completing the module and the information required has now been published in the [2023-24 collection guide](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2023-to-2024-guide). If LAs have any further queries, please contact us via the [service request form](https://form.education.gov.uk/service/Data-collections-service-request-form). For other stakeholders, please contact us via [cla.stats@education.gov.uk](mailto:cla.stats@education.gov.uk).

Considered but not included in our development plans were:

* Agency worker status and administrative information, such as team details – this is adequately covered by data from the CSWW return.
* Care leaver instability – we will not be collecting information on this as the SSDA903 return in its current format does not support the creation of a care leaver stability module (episodic data is not collected for care leavers as it is for children in care). However, it may be a consideration for future work.

We will continue to develop DfE’s measure of stability as more data becomes available. We welcome feedback on how this can be improved in the long term.

# Annex A – User feedback exercise

User feedback on the Stability Index

The Stability Index is an annual analysis by the Children's Commissioner’s Office (CCO) aiming to measure and highlight the issue of instability experienced by children looked after (CLA).

The Stability Index focuses on three main aspects of children’s experiences of care:

* How often a child **changes placement** (sourced from the SSDA903 CLA return)
* How often a child **changes school** (sourced from the School Census)
* How often a child’s **social worker changes** (sourced from a bespoke collection by the CCO)

The CCO have published four reports since 2017; the [latest edition](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/stability-index-2020/) in November 2020 related to CLA at 31 March 2019 but it did not contain information on social worker changes due to the disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the CCO have since collected social worker changes data from all local authorities relating to 2018/19 and 2019/20, this has not yet been published.

The CCO and the DfE have agreed that going forward, the DfE will take ownership of analysis on children’s stability. DfE are planning to publish an update on the Explore Education Statistics (EES) platform in 2022 containing stability data for CLA on 31 March 2020 using the 2018/19 and 2019/20 data collected by CCO.

The handover from the CCO to the DfE has given the DfE the opportunity to conduct a full review into the methodology and measures reported while considering how it could be developed in the future. We are, therefore, seeking feedback on the Department’s plans to:

* develop a DfE Stability product
* bring the social worker stability data collection to the DfE

| Providing feedback  Your feedback will be valuable in helping us implement these proposals. Please send your feedback to [cla.stats@education.gov.uk](mailto:cla.stats@education.gov.uk) by 1 April 2022. |
| --- |

## Proposal 1: Publishing future stability data releases

### Background

Following on from the 2022 publication, DfE propose producing stability data for placements, schools and social workers using the most up to date data from the SSDA903 in line with the CLA statistical release.

### Proposal and rationale

At national level, the DfE proposes to keep the main headline measures and report across at least two consecutive years but reduce the amount of analysis concerning characteristics that explain only a small amount of variation in stability.   
  
We propose the following methodological changes:

* Cohort: reporting separately on children who have been in care for more than 12 months at 31 March. This would measure stability in the longer term so not to include children who have just started to be looked after for whom some change would be expected following initial assessments and implementing a care plan.
* Placement stability: Not counting children placed for adoption with their current foster carer as a placement change. This would align with the Department’s current methodology as published in the statistical release <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions>.

We propose reporting the main headline measures that form the core of CCO’s analysis:

* **instability**
  + A change in one or more areas
* **high instability**
  + two or more placement changes
  + a mid-term school move
  + two or more social worker changes
* **multiple** changes in **one or more areas**

All headlines would relate to national and local authority level.

We propose reporting the following periods for all measures:

* during the year
* across 2 years – number of changes across a two-year period
* consecutive years – does a child experience high instability in two consecutive years?
* year on year time series

We propose reducing the amount of analysis concerning CLA characteristics and other factors that explain only a small amount of variation in stability.

### Questions

You may find it helpful to consider these questions when providing feedback:

* What would be the value in the DfE continuing to publish the stability data in some form?
* How have you used the Stability Index and how often do you use it?
* Which measures are most valuable to you? Do you use these at national or LA level?
* What would be the impact or removing measures that you use?
* Are there any measures that you don’t use?
* Are there any new measures you feel DfE should consider adding?
* Which reporting periods (e.g. one year, across two years, consecutive years) do you find most useful?
* What characteristics breakdowns would you find most useful for:
  + placements?
  + schools?
  + professional support?

## Proposal 2: Bringing the social worker changes collection to the DfE

### Background

If the DfE were to include social worker stability as part of its new series, they would need to develop a method of securely collecting and storing data on the social worker changes. The DfE would propose to introduce an extra module to the existing looked after children annual collection rather than introducing a new standalone collection. DfE would work with local authorities and software suppliers to develop this module.

### Proposal and rationale

We propose:

* To introduce a new social worker module within the SSDA903 data return. The data would be collected via the same system but outside the main annual collection period. The main annual return would be submitted in the same way by the end of June and the social worker module would open mid-July and then extend until mid-October.
* To make the collection of social worker data timelier by collecting social worker information on the CLA within the collection year. This means that the social worker information would correspond to the same CLA cohort collected in that year’s SSDA903. This would allow the DfE to publish a stability series that uses the most up to date CLA data, a change from the previous Stability Index which included a one-year lag.
* Information collected within this module might include start and end dates of social worker episode, social worker ID and team code, along with child ID and UPN. We are also considering additional information to collect, particularly factors that have previously been shown to correlate significantly with social worker instability, such as on agency workers.
* Given the time required to develop the DfE series and develop the social worker module within the SSDA903 we are proposing that the first DfE collection of social worker data would (at the earliest) cover the year ending 31 March 2024. This would mean the new DfE series would relate to the 2024 reporting year (at the earliest).
* This does mean there will be a pause in reporting on stability as per the CCO Stability Index but as the headline measures have changed very little across the years and we think that trends are unlikely to change much during the gap.

### Questions

You may find it helpful to consider these questions when providing feedback:

* [For data providers] Would you be in favour of having the social worker collection straight after the SSDA903 return?
* [For data providers] How would the timing of the proposed social worker collection affect you? What timescales would work best for you?
* [For data providers] If asked to provide the same information as previously collected, would collecting via an SSDA903 module cause any additional burden to you compared with the previous collection?
* What would be the impact of a pause in production of the stability data?
* Is there any information currently not collected that would be useful in understanding stability in professional support?
* Do you have any alternative proposals that we should consider?

## Any other comments

In addition to the questions posed, we invite any other feedback that you think would be useful for us to consider.

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# Annex B – Summary of responses received

In total, eleven users responded to the user feedback exercise. Following the user feedback exercise, we invited LA respondents to a focus group discussing the implementation of the social worker module and have used the information gathered from this to further inform the design of the module.

As part of the request for user feedback we listed questions on each of the proposed changes that we suggested may be helpful to consider when providing feedback. These can be found in [Annex A](#_Annex_A:_User). We have summarised the responses to these questions below.

## Proposal 1: Publishing future stability data releases

Proposal 1 outlines the plan for DfE to produce stability data for placements, schools and social workers using up to date SSDA903 data in line with the annual CLA statistical release.

Broadly, the proposal suggests DfE keeps the headline measures and reports across at least two consecutive years but reduce the analysis of characteristics that explain a small amount of variability in stability. For specific proposals on methodological changes, headline measures, and reporting series, please see [Annex A](#_Annex_A:_User).

### Question 1

**What would be the value in the DfE continuing to publish the stability data in some form?**

There were five direct responses to this question. Generally, the Stability Index appears to be viewed as a valuable tool for stakeholders and respondents were supportive of DfE continuing to publish this information. It is important to note that one respondent suggested they do not use the published Stability Index analysis due to lack of awareness on the release, lack of resources to be able to action the information and concerns about data comparability.

Most responses referred to using the Stability Index for benchmarking, for example, comparing against other local authorities or national figures to assess performance.

Other suggestions for DfE to consider when developing measures of stability included:

* Users viewing a draft version of the statistical release to ensure it meets requirements.
* Clear guidance on the publication.
* Regional and local authority (LA) level data and pre-calculated data for statistical neighbours.
* Stability and its impact on outcomes (e.g., attendance, attainment, and potentially OC2 measures[[1]](#footnote-1)).
* Characteristics breakdowns, including age, ethnicity, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)[[2]](#footnote-2) status, Free School Meal (FSM)[[3]](#footnote-3) status.

### Question 2

**How have you used the Stability Index and how often do you use it?**

There were five direct responses to this question. In terms of frequency, the Stability Index was used annually and in six-monthly reviews by different LAs. As previously mentioned, benchmarking was stated as a use of the Index, however, issues were raised by respondents concerning time lag, the usefulness of historic data, and the Index not considering necessary moves.

Other uses of the Stability Index included:

* Performance reviews e.g., Children and Young People (CYP) Performance Boards.
* Reviews through a Corporate Parenting partnership.
* Virtual Headteacher considers it in annual report.
* Outside of LA settings; engaging with young people and public affairs engagement with local and national decision makers, conversations with funders.

### Question 3

**Which measures are most valuable to you? Do you use these at national or LA level?**

There were five direct responses to this question. Social worker and placement stability information were highlighted as being of key value to respondents. Other responses also highlighted that it was helpful to look at multiple changes over time.

In terms of use at different levels, respondents stated they found the information useful at national, regional, and local levels. Use of statistical neighbours was also highlighted.

One respondent highlighted their use of placement stability and while they stated they had previously used school and social worker stability, they believed they would become more valuable with timely and up-to-date data as proposed by DfE.

### Question 4

**What would be the impact of removing measures that you use?**

There were five direct responses to this question. Some responses suggested there may be minimal impact as they had capability to produce similar data in-house (e.g., on social worker and placement data). However, other responses suggested there would be some impact, including:

* Potential loss of comparative data.
* Potential loss of external validation.

It was also suggested that there is an expectation that if data were submitted, comparison data would be available.

### Question 5

**Are there any measures that you don’t use?**

There were four direct responses to the question, showing a mixed perspective. Two respondents stated they used all the measures.

Some respondents suggested they did not use certain measures. For example, one respondent suggested they did not use placement stability because they have monthly in-house measures and benchmark data from the SSDA903. Additionally, two respondents suggested they did not use school stability and certain breakdowns of this measure. However, there was acknowledgement that it could be used in future by the Virtual School team and the figures should still be produced.

### Question 6

**Are there any new measures you feel DfE should consider adding?**

There were three direct responses to this question, which suggested:

* Reason for social worker changes e.g., if the social worker is leaving the LA.
* Not adding any new measures for a few years to establish an ‘as-is’ return without generating additional familiarisation issues and burden beyond necessary changes to timescales and submission.
* A Stability Index for care leavers aged between 18 and 21 that examines accommodation moves, personal adviser changes and disruption to Education, Employment or Training.

### Question 7

**Which reporting periods (e.g. one year, across two years, consecutive years) do you find most useful?**

There were four direct responses to this question and views were generally mixed. There was a view that at least two years or consecutive years would be most beneficial, with the examination of trends being highlighted as important. Additionally, use by senior management and commissioners to see the impact on children over consecutive years was seen as important.

However, there was also a view that one-year reporting periods may be useful to examine information in relation to, and for consistency with the SSDA903 release.

One question regarding reporting periods was whether it will be possible to see if stability has improved during the period, for example, over a two-year period it may appear that there was high instability, but all the changes were in the first year and the second year was stable.

### Question 8

**What characteristics breakdowns would you find most useful for:**

* **placements?**
* **schools?**
* **professional support?**

There were six direct responses to this question. Generally, breakdowns thought to be of use included age/ age group, ethnicity, duration of care as CLA, SEND status and FSM (if possible), out of area placements, and specific cohorts who may experience worse stability, for example, children in independent living arrangements, or adolescent males.

In relation to specific constructs of the Stability Index, suggested breakdowns included:

* Placement
* Type of placement, legal status, age, gender, out of area placements.
* Schools
* Age, primary/ secondary school split
* Professional support
* Age, gender, type of placement.

## Proposal 2: Bringing the social worker changes collection to the DfE

Proposal 2 highlights the need for DfE to develop a method of securely collecting and storing data on the social worker changes. Therefore, introducing an extra module to the existing CLA collection rather than introducing a new standalone collection is proposed. DfE have worked with local authorities and software suppliers to develop this module.

For specific proposals on the social worker module, the timing of the collection, information to be collected, and subsequent publication, please see [Annex A](#_Proposal_2:_Bringing).

### Questions 1 and 2

**[For data providers] Would you be in favour of having the social worker collection straight after the SSDA903 return?**

There were six direct responses to this question. It was generally agreed that the collection should take place in the same year as the SSDA903. However, there were mixed views on the precise timings of when the social worker collection should occur.

Half of the responses were in favour of the timing. Several responses were explicitly not in favour of the timing of the social worker collection taking place straight after the SSDA903.

Several issues were highlighted in relation to this:

* Fitting in with other collections e.g., Children in Need (CIN)[[4]](#footnote-4), academic attainment.
* There was suggestion that it could be aligned with Children’s Social Work Workforce (CSWW) collection, but another response stated this would not be of benefit because of mismatched internal systems.
* Due to the fluidity of the role, collecting data on the agency status of social workers may present some difficulty in terms of identification, given the reference date and collection date are 6 months apart and is subject to change over time.

**[For data providers] How would the timing of the proposed social worker collection affect you? What timescales would work best for you?**

There were six direct responses to this question and there were mixed views on timing. Four respondents stated the timing made sense, as did other indirect responses relating to timescales, but there were caveats:

* The proposed timings would mean there is rarely a time with no statutory collections.
* The proposed start date for the social worker collection was before the final month of the Children in Need Census, which in the context of the Children in Need collection size and staff needing to complete the census was implied to be a particularly resource-intensive time.
* If the social worker collection is part of the SSDA903, it should follow the same timescale (submission on 30th June).

There were disagreements with the proposed timescale. One of the respondents stated the mid-July to mid-October window seemed excessive and that on month would be more practical. They highlighted this may mean a clash with the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB)[[5]](#footnote-5) data collection, though it is dependent on the Stability Index timescales.

Respondents made several suggestions regarding timescales:

* Opening the social worker module during the SSDA903 collection and leaving it open beyond the SSDA903 deadline.
* Aligning the timescale with the CSWW collection as some information, such as Social Worker England (SWE) identifiers, are linked with CSWW, potentially easing data collection and validation.
* Adding the module to the Children in Need or CSWW collections. However, issues such as system capabilities, ensuring all relevant data were provided and a mismatch between timescales were highlighted.
* The social worker collection should take place after the main SSDA903 and Children in Need collection periods and after a break for staff leave.

A question was raised on whether DfE intended to maintain the existing CCO methodology of collecting two years’ worth of social worker information each year, including changes within that timeframe but which occurred outside a child’s period of care. The respondent suggested that as the SSDA903 represents a continuous longitudinal record for each child, potential issues such as data contradictions or duplication could arise if it was retained and asked whether any value would be lost by not collecting it (i.e., prior year social worker involvement for a new entry to care).

### Question 3

**[For data providers] If asked to provide the same information as previously collected, would collecting via an SSDA903 module cause any additional burden to you compared with the previous collection?**

Of six direct responses to this question, four stated that they did not believe it would cause additional burden. However, this was assuming the platform remained the same, the module was usable and practical and if the same data were collected.

Issues highlighted in responses to this question include:

* Previous collections asked for historical information and to only include changes under certain circumstances e.g., if the collection asked for information on changes due to holiday, it was not recorded as a reason for a change, so there would be difficulty if the return requested this.
* Differences between LAs means data would not be comparable and that year-on-year differences mean their own data may not be comparable over time. A solution may be to distinguish between planned (including reason for change) and unplanned changes.
* Providing HR data in a timely way due to poorly connected management and HR systems. When completing CSWW this takes up most of their time. They suggest completing a “mini workforce return” for relevant cases.
* Collecting information about agency status due to the difficulties in tracking details of agency workers who have left the LA as the information is not held on internal HR or case management systems, an issue consistent with the CSWW collection due to its ‘snapshot’ nature. Additionally, many data items in the CSWW are non-mandatory due to difficulties in collection.

There were several suggestions from respondents in relation to burden:

* Only providing national social worker reference number, not team details due to internal administrative changes, which would enable some automation of reporting, thus reducing burden.
* Provide early indications of any additional workforce data e.g., if including agency workers.
* A trial may be beneficial as some development work with their ICS providers may be required.
* The CCO collection allowed local IDs for non-SWE registered workers outside allocated period of care; DfE may wish to consider this in design and validation.

### Question 4

**What would be the impact of a pause in production of the stability data?**

There were six direct responses to this question, the majority of which suggested there would be minimal impact. It is important to note that one respondent stated the information does not have operational use in the LA due to its retrospective nature.

Other respondents highlighted some potential impact, including:

* Not being able to track social worker stability at a high level or compare with other LAs.
* It reduces the evidence available to support cases for more resources to be put into the system.

### Question 5

**Is there any information currently not collected that would be useful in understanding stability in professional support?**

There were five direct responses to this question, two of which suggested no further data would be useful in understanding stability in professional support. Suggestions for other information included:

* Linking with the CSWW collection e.g., examining differences between non-qualified social workers and more experienced social workers.
* Including personal advisor changes for care leavers as part of the module.
* Including information on agency workers as an important factor in understanding instability.

### Question 6 and Additional Comments

**Do you have any alternative proposals that we should consider?**

There were four direct responses to this question, three of which did not state any alternative proposals.

One response highlighted the need for clarity on the criteria used to ensure consistency across LAs and to consider how integrated children’s systems might provide support to the statutory return.

A further response suggested preference for only providing social worker information for the existing OC2 cohort (children who had been looked after for over 12 months on 31 March).

A question was raised concerning the gap in recording social worker information, and why the CCO methodology and return could not be continued under DfE until a new SSDA903-integrated collection has been developed.

**Any other comments**

There were two additional comments for Proposal 2.

The first refers to the criteria of 2+ social worker changes for instability, stating that they would not agree with the criteria because while a child may experience multiple changes, they may not necessarily mean they experience instability. Consequently, they would welcome the opportunity to workshop with other LAs to agree best practices for identifying instability in social worker changes.

The second comment suggests examining care leaver instability to pre-empt future requirements and changes to the SSDA903 collection that could reduce the comparability or quality of the data across different years.



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1. OC2 measures refers to the health and behavioural outcomes for children who are continuously looked after for 12 months on 31 March. Please see Section 2.9 of the CLA Collection Guide for more information on this cohort: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/children-looked-after-return-guide-to-submitting-data> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. SEND status refers to whether a child or young person has an identified Special Educational Need. See <https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs> for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. FSM status refers to whether a child or young person is eligible for Free School Meals. See <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals> for more information on these criteria. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Children in Need (CIN) National statistics collection: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ASGLB refers to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board, who lead quarterly collections on the number of adoptions and special guardianship orders in the UK. For more information, see: <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)