

Freedom of Information (Fol) request: summary of data from questions 1 & 2.

Question 1: How many children are Looked-After by the Local Authority?

Question 2: How many children that are Looked-After by the Local Authority have a diagnosis of autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger Syndrome)?

A total of 151 local authorities in England were approached. 4 local authorities did not respond to the request for information:

Darlington Borough Council	North East	Somerset County Council	South West
Medway Council	South East	Torbay Council	South West

The remaining local authorities were broken down by type of response and by region and this data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Local Authorities, by region, providing responses to the Fol request.

Region	No Response	Local Authorities (Responded)	Refused	Full Response	Data Not Held	Specific Criteria
London	0	33	4	25	4	1
South East	1	19	1	15	3	1
East	0	11	1	10	0	0
South West	2	14	2	10	2	1
West Midlands	0	14	0	13	1	2
East Midlands	0	8	1	7	0	1
North West	0	23	3	18	2	1
North East	1	10	2	8	0	1
Yorkshire and the Humber	0	15	3	12	0	1
Totals	4	147	17	118	12	9
	Total LAs Contacted: 151		(Refused) 17 + (Full) 118 + (Data Not Held) 12 = 147			Already counted
	Total LAs Responded = 147					

Note: Nine of the local authorities who gave a full response, which included the numbers of Looked-After Children with an autism diagnosis, specified that their figures were for specific criteria and therefore may not be a true reflection of the actual numbers of Looked-After Children with autism. Others may not have specified but used similar criteria so it is difficult to ascertain the actual figures. See later for more details.

Full Responses

118 local authorities provided a full response, classified as providing answers to both question 1, the number of Looked-After Children in the local authority's care, and question 2, the number of Looked-After Children with a diagnosis of autism. Note from the above table that some of these local authorities specified

particular criteria for when a Looked-After child was counted as having a diagnosis and may not include all Looked-After Children with autism.

Table 2 is broken down by region and specifies the number of local authorities who responded, the number giving a full response and the total number of Looked-After Children whose local authorities gave a full response within that region. Additionally, Table 2 shows the average percentage of Looked-After Children with an autism diagnosis in each region and the total number of those declared. Furthermore, Table 2 shows the number of authorities within each region for this category who have a low percentage of Looked-After Children with an autism diagnosis, the cut-off for which was 2% and those with a high percentage, the cut-off being 5%. A 4% cut-off is also included for interest. Finally, the table shows the range of values for each region from lowest %ASD to highest %ASD.

Table 2: Numbers and proportion of Looked-After Children, and Looked-After Children with autism, by English region.

Region	Total TAs	Total Full Response	Total Full LAC	Total ASD	Average % ASD	Low (2%-)	High (5%+)	4%+	% ASD Range	
									Lowest	Highest
London	33	25	10,051	232	3.1	7	5	6	0	8.8
South East	19	15	9,615	288	3.9	1	4	8	1.6	11
South West	16	10	4,936	138	3.7	0	4	5	2.1	7.2
East	11	10	6,437	215	3.5	2	2	4	1.1	5.6
West Midlands	14	13	9,394	300	3.4	7	2	4	0.5	12.7
East Midlands	8	7	5,138	182	3.6	2	2	4	1.2	5.9
North West	23	18	13,178	226	1.8	10	0	0	1.2	3.4
North East	10	8	4,230	61	1.7	6	0	0	0.8	3.8
Yorkshire & Humber	15	12	7,687	146	2.3	7	1	2	0	5.7
Grand Totals	149	118	70,666	1,788	3.0	42	20	33	0.9	7.1

Table 2 shows that the national average in England of Looked-After Children with an autism diagnosis is 3.0%. However, figures range from 1.7% in the North East, closely followed by the North West at 1.8% to 3.9% in the South East. These figures do suggest a North/South divide in the number of autism diagnoses. Further research would be needed to determine whether this is due to less children with autism or less stringent diagnostic procedures. It is also interesting to see the wide range of %ASD figures within each region. For example, the West Midlands ranges from 0.5%, well below the regional average of 3.4%, to 12.7% which is much higher than the regional average. The overall range is from 0% ASD to 12.7% for children in local authorities which declared the numbers of Looked-After Children. These wide ranges warrant further investigation to ascertain the reasons for these differences. Interestingly, there are many more local authorities reporting lower than average % of Looked-After Children with ASD than those on the higher side, which could suggest general under-reporting of autism.

Numbers of Looked-After Children with known vs unknown ASD status

Table 3 shows a summary for each region of the numbers of children in authorities where their autism status is known and within these local authorities the number and percentage of those children counted by the authority as having an autism diagnosis. Table 3 also shows the numbers of Looked-After Children in the remaining local authorities where the autism status is not known, and the total number of Looked-After Children for each region.

In England there was a total of 70,666 known Looked-After Children based on the local authorities who gave a full response, not including those who did not respond or the Isles of Scilly who withheld all information. 59,453 Looked-After Children live in local authorities where the ASD status is known and disclosed (84.1%) and 3.0% have a diagnosis of autism, as answered by local authorities in response to the Freedom of Information enquiry. A further 11,213 children are in local authorities that do not have or have not disclosed the numbers of children with autism (15.9%). 4 local authorities did not respond to the enquiry.

Table 3: Numbers of Looked-After Children with known vs unknown ASD status

Region	ASD Status Known (total children)	ASD LAC	% ASD Diagnosis	No of children ASD status not known	Total Children
London	7,317	232	3.2%	2,734	10,051
South East	7,409	288	3.9%	2,206	9,615
South West	3,733	138	3.7%	1,203	4,936
East	6,171	215	3.5%	266	6,437
West Midlands	8,814	300	3.4%	580	9,394
East Midlands	5,095	182	3.6%	43	5,138
North West	11,130	226	2.0%	2,048	13,178
North East	3,521	61	1.7%	709	4,230
Yorkshire & Humber	6,263	146	2.3%	1,424	7,687
Grand Totals	59,453	1,788	3.0%	11,213	70,666

Local Authorities with ASD Data Not Held by region (12 in total)

Table 4 shows the local authorities per region who declared that they do not hold information on autism diagnosis. Many of these specified that the information is kept on individual child records and the issue is that the information is not collated centrally. The information should be available but not in an easily accessible form. The number in brackets after the region name is the number of local authorities in that region who did NOT respond. The ‘number of local authorities’ column shows the number of local authorities who do not hold ASD information out of the total number of local authorities in that region. Population density figures are included in this table for comparison with the number of Looked-After Children with an unknown ASD status. Of the 11,213 Looked-After Children who live in local authorities who did not disclose the number of children with an autism diagnosis, 5,846 (52%) were due to not holding the information centrally. London has the largest population density, the highest number of local authorities within the region and the largest number of local authorities who do not hold data on the autism status of their Looked-After Children.

Table 4: Local authorities by region not holding information on autism diagnosis

Region <i>(Number LAs not responded)</i>	Number of Local Authorities <i>(Number not held of total responded)</i>	% of LAs responded with ASD data not held	Total LAC with ASD unknown	Population Density
London (0)	4 of 33	12.1%	1,798	14,078
South East (1)	3 of 18	16.7%	2,206	1,205
South West (2)	2 of 14	14.3%	514	644
East (0)	0 of 11	0%	0	755
North East (1)	0 of 10	0%	0	734
North West (0)	2 of 23	8.7%	748	1,310
West Midlands (0)	1 of 14	7.1%	580	1,323
Yorkshire & the Humber (0)	0 of 15	0%	0	937
East Midlands (0)	0 of 8	0%	0	773
Grand Total	12 of 146		5,846	

This does not include data withheld or non-responses.

Local authorities who stated ASD figures were within a specific criterion

Table 5: Number of local authorities recording autism numbers under a specific other category

Type	No. of Local Authorities	Total LAC	ASD LAC	% ASD LAC
Disability	2	1688	46	2.7%
Statement or EHCP Only	7	4557	123	2.7%
Screened	1	523	9	1.7%
Totals		6,786	178	Average = 2.60%

These figures show only those where the Local Authority specified that the autism diagnosis figures were not necessarily the complete list since the data were not available in a ready format.

Disability: Two local authorities who recorded figures under disability, stated that the figures were for “disability description of autism” and “disability of diagnosed autism”. The latter also stated that the true figure may be higher since lower levels of autism may not have been recorded. This local authority refused to supply a more accurate figure due to the cost of retrieval.

Statement or EHCP Only: Seven local authorities reported that their figures were for children with a statement of SEN or an EHCP recording a diagnosis of autism only. Of these, three gave no other information except that a manual search would be required for more complete data, which was refused. One local authority reported that their figures were for those with a Statement or EHCP with “a primary need of autism.” A further reported that ASD diagnosis is recorded as part of the care plan, EHCP and IEPs and another stated that a diagnosis of ASD is not routinely recorded in an extractable format. Hampshire’s response may shed light on some of these other statements. They claimed that they do not record ASD diagnosis because it is not a statutory requirement. However they do keep electronic records on SEN/EHCP

to allow them to produce a required annual report for the Department of Education on the numbers of Children in Need.

Screened: One local authority reported that their figures were for Looked-After Children who “have an open classification of ‘Autism’ or ‘Autistic Behaviours’ (screened but not diagnosed)”

It is likely that these local authorities are under-reporting the numbers of children with autism in their care. It is also possible that other local authorities are under reporting but have not indicated this. It would be valuable to ascertain whether children with autism are missed from these figures because they do not have an EHCP or Statement of SEN. It may also be worth considering the statement from Hampshire indicating that local authorities seem to respond to a statutory requirement to produce information.

Local Authorities who refused data by region (17 in total)

Table 6: Number of local authorities not disclosing, and reasons for non-disclosure, by region

Region	No. of Local Authorities	Reason for Refusal		Total LAC with refused ASD data
		Time/Cost	Low Numbers	
East	1	0	1	266
East Midlands	1	0	1	43
North East	2	0	2	709
North West	3	0	3	1,300
London	4	4	0	936
South East	1	1	0	220
South West	2	1	1	290+
Yorkshire & Humber	3	2	1	913
Totals	17	8	9	4,677+

Table 6 shows that of the 17 local authorities who withheld data, nine gave a reason that disclosing the information could allow individuals to be identified when combined with other sources, therefore risking confidentiality, citing section 40 exception and in some cases the Data Protection Act. Of these nine, the Isles of Scilly (South West) withheld all information, including the total number of Looked-After Children, citing a very low population that meant any disclosure could risk confidentiality. The remaining eight local authorities refused ASD data because they did not hold the data centrally and a manual search would be required which would exceed the upper limit of cost and time within the Freedom of Information act search parameters.

In total 4,677 known looked after children were in local authorities who withheld ASD data; 2,515 (53.8%) in local authorities with low numbers (not including the Isles of Scilly) and 2,162 (46.2%) in local authorities citing time and/or cost. The Isles of Scilly had a total population of 2,352 in 2015. It is unknown how many of these are Looked-After Children.

Summary of the data

Of the 151 local authorities who were contacted in England, 4 did not respond. Of the 147 who did respond, 17 refused information regarding autism diagnosis and 12 claimed the data was not held. The remaining 118



local authorities gave a full response. However, it can be seen that the figures given by these local authorities may not give the complete picture for Looked-After Children with autism diagnosis. The reasons for this are centred around the lack of central or electronic recording systems that log autism diagnosis. Some information is held centrally by many local authorities which may contain information on autism diagnosis. In particular, information is more likely to be held where there is a statutory requirement to report, for example, on the Looked-After Children with statements or EHCPs. Additionally, there appears to be clear regional differences in the numbers and percentages of Looked-After Children reported as having a diagnosis of autism with a potential North-South divide consisting of higher averages in London and the South compared to the North. Whether this reflects actual differences in children with autism, differences in access to diagnostic services, differences in record keeping and reporting systems or other unidentified factors cannot be determined by the data in this study. Further investigation would be appropriate. Additionally, there are wide ranges in the percentage of Looked-After Children with an ASD diagnosis within each region, which would be interesting to investigate further.

The majority of Looked-After Children in England are in local authorities where their autism status is known. However, there is a significant minority of children living in local authorities where the autism status appears to be unknown, potentially due to the inadequacy of recording systems. A survey of which recording systems are used by each authority would be of interest, and standardisation across the country would be ideal.

Further to the potential inadequacy of recording systems, it was noted that some of the figures for autism diagnosis are likely to be lower than the actual number of Looked-After children with autism. It is also apparent that different local authorities used different criteria to answer questions, some of which kindly stated their criteria. These criteria included only those children having a Statement of SEN or EHCP or a disability description of autism. On the other hand, at least one local authority gave figures for children showing autistic traits through screening without a diagnosis. It is therefore suggested that care is taken in interpreting numbers and comparisons shown in this report. There is likely to be considerable under-reporting in many local authorities with perhaps some over-reporting in others. It is suggested that further study employ a questionnaire/survey design which would specify the criteria for answering each question, perhaps with several subcategories where appropriate. This design would allow more accurate comparisons across the data sample.