



Department
for Education

Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey

Summary of returns Waves 1 to 12

November 2020

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Headline facts and figures

Headline figures for Wave 12 of the survey:

Number of children (19 – 21 October)	The total number of children looked after (CLA) was 7% higher than the same time in 2018 and the total number of children on a child protection plan (CPP) was 1% higher.
Contact in the last four weeks (21 September – 18 October)	A large proportion of CLA, children on a CPP and other children in need (CIN) have been in contact with a social worker in the last four weeks (69%, 95% and 63% respectively).
Social worker availability (19 – 21 October)	The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has reduced since Wave 1 in May, but is showing signs of increasing, with 4% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 12, compared to a low of 1% in September. However this is lower than the peak of 13% in May.
Referrals (05 – 11 October)	The total number of referrals during Wave 12 was 6% lower than the usual number at that time of year. Referrals from schools were the closest to usual levels since the survey began (-2%), however, referrals from every source were lower than usual.
Looked after children	The total number of children who started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 12 of the survey was 5,240. This is around 29% lower than the same period over the past three years.

Background

Survey

The Department for Education (DfE) established a survey of local authorities in England to help understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak on Children's Social Care. Local authorities are asked to report to DfE every two weeks with the exception of four weeks between Waves 7 and 8. Each fortnightly survey return is referred to as a 'wave' in this publication, the dates that each wave refer to and the questions asked can be found in Annex A. Details on the number of local authorities that responded can be found in Annex B. Local authorities were asked to report on the following areas:

- Contact with children supported by the local authority Children's Social Care
- Children's Social Care workforce
- System pressures

Previous publications from the survey¹ contain analysis of questions that have been removed from the survey and open text questions that is not repeated here.

¹ [Vulnerable children and young people survey](#)

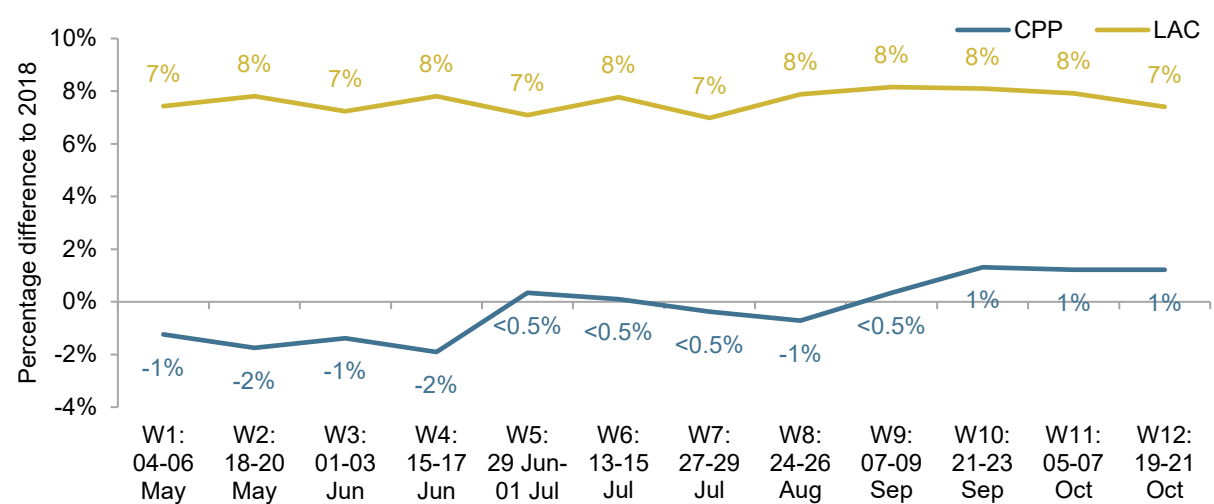
Summary of data

Total number of children supported by local authority Children’s Social Care

Local authorities were asked to report the total number of Children Looked After (CLA), children on a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and other Children in Need (CIN). The number of other CIN has not been included in this report due to data quality issues.

In Wave 12 the total number of CLA was 7% higher than the same time in 2018 and this has remained stable since the survey began. The total number of children on a CPP was 1% higher than the same time in 2018, and this has increased slightly since Wave 4 when it was 2% lower than 2018.

Figure 1: Difference in the total number of CLA and children on a CPP compared to the same time in 2018



Notes:
‘W1’ refers to Wave 1 and so on.
See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Contact with children supported by local authority Children's Social Care

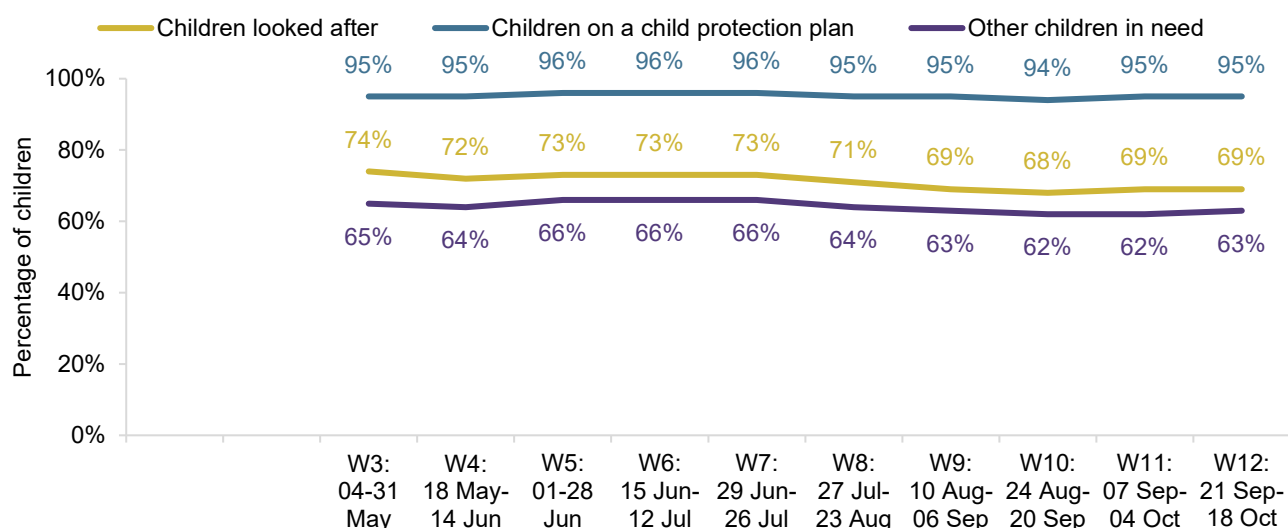
From Wave 3 of the survey, a new question was added which asks how many of CLA, children on a CPP and other CIN have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

Contact is defined as communication that has taken place with the child/young person, including both face to face visits and remote communication, such as telephone calls or other types of messaging.

Local authorities were previously asked how many cases had been reviewed and how many children had been contacted by their social worker in the last two weeks. These questions were removed from the survey from Wave 10 because findings remained stable, face to face visits were resuming and carried out within statutory timescales, and to reduce the burden on local authorities. A summary of responses from these questions can be found in previous publications¹.

In Wave 12, 69% of CLA, 95% of children on a CPP and 63% of other CIN had been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks. The percentage of children who have been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks decreased slightly in Wave 8 and has remained stable since. In the open text responses in earlier waves, many local authorities report they are returning to business as usual and contacting children within statutory timescales. The Children Act 1989 contains guidelines that differ widely for different groups of children, and indicates that the frequency of visits should be determined on a case by case basis. Therefore it is not expected that all children should be contacted every four weeks.

Figure 2: Contact with social workers in the last four weeks



Notes:

'W3' refers to Wave 3 and so on.

Guidance to local authorities on the correct methodology to calculate other CIN was improved at Wave 3. Local authorities were prompted again at Wave 6. This may explain decreases in percentages for this group over time.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Analysis of the open text questions in the earlier waves (1-4) described the local authority activities to safeguard children that they were not in contact with. These comprised of: risk assessing and RAG rating cases, working with other agencies to manage risk and working with schools to ensure that welfare checks and contact were taking place with vulnerable children not attending school.

Across subsequent waves (5-10) many local authorities reported having further adapted their approach with more face-to-face contact resuming. From Wave 5, some local authorities reported activities that were focusing on hidden harms and early help to identify children who may be at risk. Some local authorities were developing new ways to manage risk and monitor contact, for example through new reporting tools, to safeguard the children that they were not in contact with.

Across more recent survey waves (11-12) some local authorities also described how they are preparing for the next phase and potential impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19). As schools returned in September, local authorities continue to report how they are working with schools to monitor attendance and manage contact. For example, one local authority reported that *“link social workers are in place in each school, enabling structured and routine communication about children where there are concerns”*. Another local authority told us that they are *“establishing a system to be alerted by schools when children are sent home from school, to check names of children now not in school against database, to establish if they have an allocated social worker or are known to early help family support services, so contact can be made”*. Another local authority reported that they are *“closely monitoring the pattern of schools requiring to partially or fully close due to COVID reported cases to ensure we are still maintaining contact with our vulnerable children”*.

In the latest survey (Wave 12) local authorities told us how they are managing contact in Tier 2 and Tier 3 areas, where new restrictions are in place. Local authorities said that they are reviewing whether contact should take place face-to-face or virtually. Some told us that they are still trying to undertake most visits face-to-face and others are taking a “blended approach”.

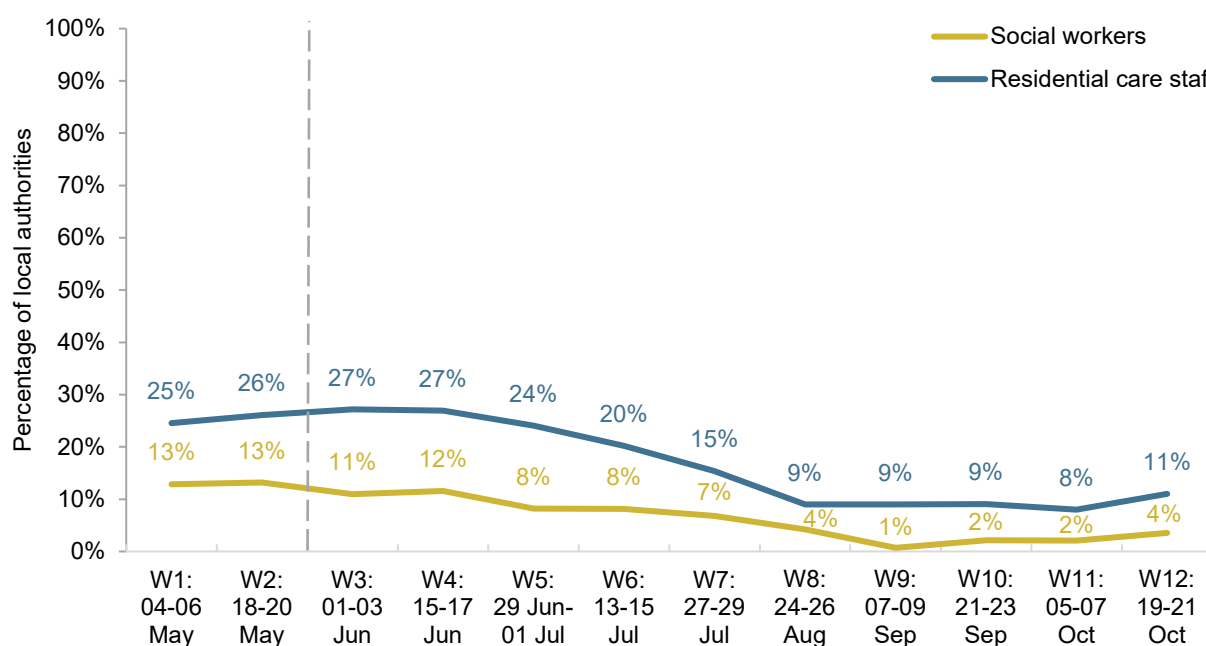
Children's Social Care Workforce

Local authorities were asked about the availability of their staff during coronavirus (COVID-19); both the social worker workforce and residential care staff. A new question was added to Wave 3 of the survey which asks whether the local authority directly employs residential care staff. Note that local authorities were previously reporting 0% if they do not directly employ residential care staff. As such the sample consisted of fewer local authorities from Wave 3, and the figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

The proportion of social workers unavailable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has reduced since Wave 1 in May, but is showing signs of increasing. Around 4% of local authorities reported more than 10% of their workforce unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 12, compared to a low of 1% in Wave 9. It is still lower than the peak in Waves 1 and 2 when 13% of local authorities reported more than 10% of their social workers unavailable.

The proportion of residential care staff unavailable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) shows a similar pattern, with 11% of local authorities reporting over 10% of staff unavailable in Wave 12, compared to a low of 8% in Wave 11 and a peak of 27% in Waves 3 and 4. It should be noted that some local authorities have small residential care workforces and therefore any small changes in staff availability may result in large changes in the proportion of staff unavailable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

Figure 3. Proportion of local authorities that reported over 10% of staff not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)



Notes:

'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.

The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text responses, local authorities told us in earlier waves of the survey (1-4) that workforce availability linked to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was not as problematic as they originally expected at the outset. Some local authorities voiced concerns about the demands on frontline staff and staff isolation with the advent of staff working from home. Some local authorities provided examples where staff had been re-deployed and training was provided on the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on practice. In later survey waves (5-10), no common themes about the workforce were reported in the open text response. In the most recent wave of the survey (Wave 12), some local authorities in Tier 2 and Tier 3 restrictions told us that they are beginning to experience issues with staff availability, *“more workers are symptomatic, tested and leading to isolation in their wider team for a period... the national phone app is a driver for this issue as well, with its notifications of contact etc”*

Referrals to Children’s Social Care services

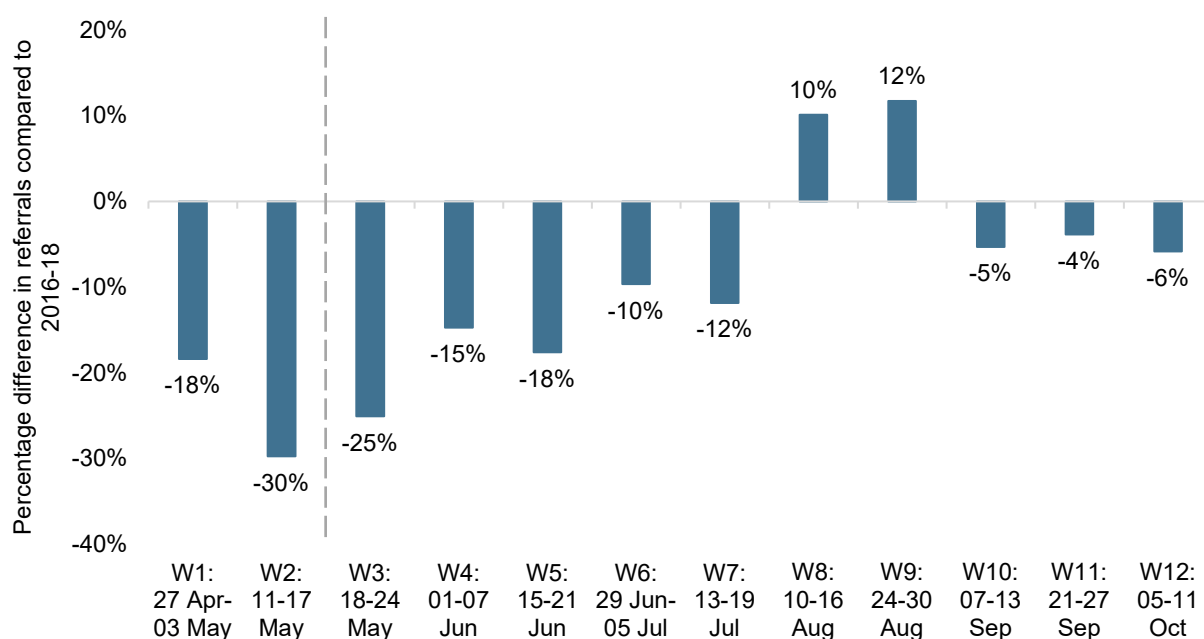
In Waves 1 and 2, local authorities were asked to report the number of referrals to children’s social care services they received in the last week. From Wave 3, local authorities were asked for the number of referrals to children’s social care services the week before last to account for the lag in reporting that affected Waves 1 and 2. As such, the figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

From Wave 3 onwards local authorities were also asked to report the sources of their referrals.

The total number of referrals from 142 local authorities was 11,670 in Wave 12, compared to 12,050 from 145 local authorities in Wave 11. In the latest wave, the total number of referrals was 6% lower than the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018; this is similar to Waves 10 and 11 (-5% and -4% respectively). The only time referrals were higher than usual was during Waves 8 and 9 (+10% and +12% respectively).

The total number of referrals to children’s social care services reported in Waves 1 to 12 of the survey was 126,860, this is around 11% lower than the same period over the past three years.

Figure 4: Difference in the total number of referrals compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018



Notes:

'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.

The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues. Comparator data for these LAs was also removed.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In Wave 12, referrals from every source were lower than the same period in 2018.

Notably, referrals from schools were the closest to usual levels since the survey began (-2%) while referrals from police were lower than usual for the first time (-1%).

Table 1: Number of referrals received from each source over Waves 3-12 compared to the same weeks in 2018

Wave	Referral source				
	Individuals	Schools	Health services	Police	Other sources
W3: 18-24 May	-16%	-82%	-20%	11%	-4%
W4: 01-07 Jun	1%	-71%	-2%	8%	2%
W5: 15-21 Jun	-9%	-65%	-8%	12%	-4%
W6: 29 Jun-05 Jul	-2%	-60%	5%	10%	-3%
W7: 13-19 Jul	7%	-60%	-1%	13%	-11%
W8: 10-16 Aug	19%	-30%	5%	23%	-2%
W9: 24-30 Aug	16%	-21%	14%	13%	22%
W10: 07-13 Sep	-3%	-12%	6%	8%	-5%
W11: 21-27 Sep	5%	-11%	<0.5%	8%	3%
W12: 05-11 Oct	-6%	-2%	-8%	-1%	-3%

Notes:

'W3' refers to Wave 3 and so on.

Other sources include local authority services, legal agencies and children's centres.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Across the survey waves (9-12), analysis of the open text responses show very mixed experiences in the numbers of referrals received across local authorities. Some local authorities reported that the number of referrals has increased and are now at levels higher than average. Whilst others report that referrals remain lower than average or as expected at this time of year.

In earlier survey waves (5-8) local authorities were generally anticipating a spike in demand and some local authorities described what they were doing to predict and plan for this, for example, by moving resource to assessment teams and strengthening the 'front door'. In more recent survey waves (11-12) local authorities generally reported that this anticipated spike in demand has not occurred as expected. Some local authorities told us that they are expecting a spike in demand over the medium to long term.

Across all survey waves some local authorities described the types of cases received. A common theme has been an increase in domestic abuse being reported. In more recent waves (9-12) some local authorities describe an increase in the complexity of their cases. Examples vary but include increases in cases involving non-accidental injury, increases in the number of new-born children that are being presented in care proceedings, increase in cases involving young people self-harming and escalations of risks in cases that are already open to children's social care.

Children who have started to be looked after

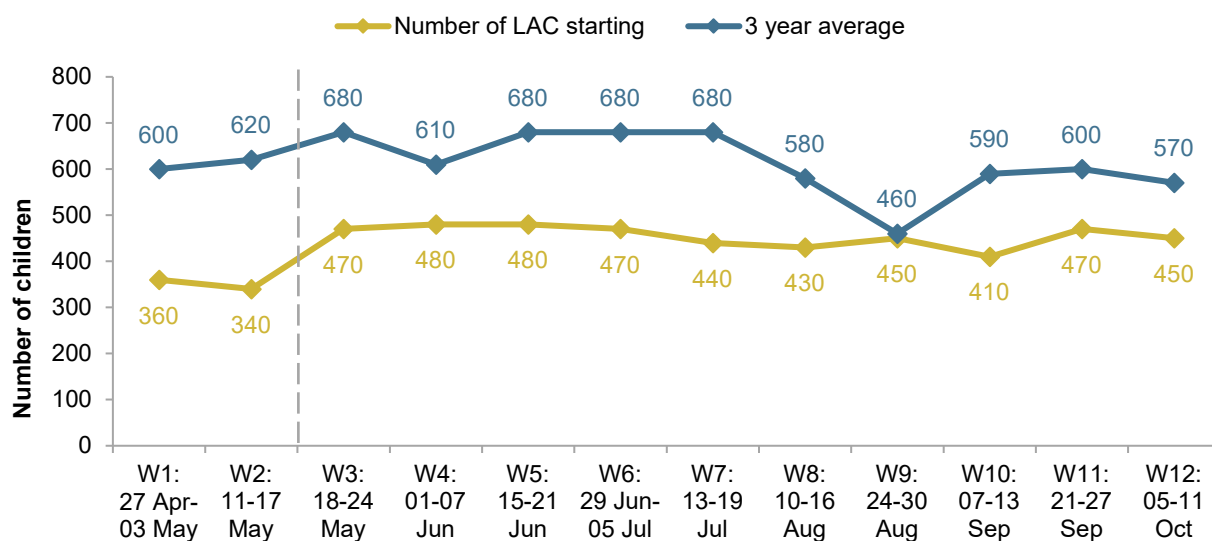
In Waves 1 and 2, local authorities were asked to report the number of children that started to be looked after in the last week. From Wave 3 local authorities were asked for the number of looked after children starting the week before last to account for the lag in reporting that affected Waves 1 and 2. As such, the figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

The total number of CLA starting in 144 local authorities during Wave 12 was 450 compared to 570 over the same period in previous years (-22%). The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 12 of the survey was 5,240, this is around 29% lower than the same period over the past three years. There has been a downward trend in the number of children starting to be looked after in recent years², therefore we may expect the numbers returned in this survey to be lower than the same period over the past three years.

² [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019](#)

For the majority of local authorities there has been a difference of up to 5 children compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018.

Figure 5: Total number of children looked after starting per week and 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018



Notes:

'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.

The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text questions in waves 5 to 12 of the survey a small number of local authorities reported that they are experiencing an increase in the stock of looked after children. The reasons they cite were both a lack of direct work with families and services in support of reunifications and delays in court hearings. This meant that planned permanency moves were not happening.

Key themes from open question responses

These findings are derived from the open text questions in the survey. One of the questions asked about the 'steps local authorities have been taking to safeguard children that they are not in contact with' and the other asks about any 'trends, challenges and good practice'. The phrasing of this question was changed, we previously asked local authorities to tell us about any trends, challenges and best practice and from Wave 9 we asked local authorities to tell us about any changes in the demand for children's social care services that they are seeing.

Not all local authorities responded to the questions, and those that did so provided views reflecting the unique circumstances and challenges in their area. This may not be comprehensive of all issues, nor reflective of views and practices of all local authorities. A note of caution should therefore be exercised when reading these findings.

Previous publications from the survey¹ contain some analysis of the open text questions that is not repeated here.

Working with coronavirus (COVID-19) and the future

In the early waves of the survey (1- 4), local authorities told us how they were adapting their working arrangements in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and about their recovery plans. Local authorities risk assessed and RAG rated their cases and at that time these informed the scheduling and mode of social work visits (carried out virtually and face to face where possible). To stay in touch, alternative forms of communication, for example telephone calls and WhatsApp were used and some local authorities provided children and families with new technology to enable this. Early recovery plans focused on incremental approaches to direct work, gradual reopening of offices and requests for government guidance to assist them with these.

In the following waves of the survey (5-8), the working arrangements and recovery plans that local authorities described involved moving from a crisis response towards a 'business as usual - living with coronavirus (COVID-19)' approach. Local authorities were reverting to their usual assessment and planning processes, they continued to assess the required frequency of contact with cases and took a "blended" approach to visits which comprised of both virtual and face to face contact. In the later survey waves, many local authorities reported that visits were taking place face to face unless there were ongoing health concerns of staff or family. Local authorities updated their safety procedures and made adjustments to buildings and some told us about their contingency plans in preparing for an increase in demand.

In later survey waves (9-10) the themes reported by local authorities remained largely unchanged. In the most recent waves (11-12) local authorities reported varied experiences and priorities depending on which coronavirus (COVID-19) tier the local

authority is in. Those in high tiers are readjusting practices to ensure children and families are protected. Some local authorities reported that cases are being RAG rated and prioritised accordingly *“we have now resumed the face-to-face meetings highlighted as priorities i.e hybrid child protection conferences, pre-proceedings meetings where parents need more support than virtual meetings could offer and some assessment work. This appears to be progressing well”*.

A small number of local authorities in waves 11 and 12 also told us about some of the challenges they are facing e.g. greater pressure on the workforce due to the illness and the impact of self-isolation requirements from track and trace, coupled with the impact of school bubble/year group isolation requirements.

Adolescents

In early survey waves (1-8), local authorities provided positive examples of working virtually with young people and some found that older teens preferred virtual contacts. One local authority said that *“there has been further feedback from children that they would want the virtual offer to continue”*.

In the early waves of the survey (1-4), ensuring compliance with restrictions and social distancing amongst teenagers was a challenge for some local authorities. Some local authorities told us *“this older cohort is difficult to engage and many have expressed their dismay at the increased frequency of contact as ‘harassment’”*.

In later survey waves (5-8) some local authorities told us how prolonged restrictions were affecting young people, including increased mental ill health issues and anxieties about schooling and education.

In the latest survey waves (9-12) no additional common themes about adolescents were reported in the open text responses.

Working with schools and other safeguarding partners

Across all survey waves, local authorities provide examples of joint working between local authorities, schools and other safeguarding partners on issues associated with the pandemic (see earlier publication for examples).

In the early survey waves (1-4) local authorities told us how they were working with schools to coordinate and collect information on attendance and contact with vulnerable children. In later survey waves (5-8), some local authorities told us that joint working between schools and children’s social care had improved.

Over the summer, local authorities carried out activities in preparation for schools reopening. Examples to encourage attendance include: city wide media campaigns; joint messaging from children’s services and public health; guidance booklets for carers of

looked after children; a multi-agency reintegration panel to support schools with pupils that might find the transition back into school challenging.

A few local authorities told us how they supported vulnerable children and families over the summer months. This included the provision of information for families about how to access food over the school holidays, summer activity programmes and youth outreach.

In more recent survey waves (9-12), local authorities resumed close working with schools to track the attendance of vulnerable children and children isolating due to coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. In the most recent survey waves (11-12), some local authorities told us that their processes for sharing information on attendance with schools are becoming more embedded and, in some cases, automated. One LA told us that they have *"secured a system to continue to receive pupil level attendance data without the need for additional manual returns from schools"*.

Annex A: survey questions and time periods

The questions asked in the survey are shown below. All local authorities were asked to complete the form.

Question 1

How many children do you have in the following groups?

- a) Children looked after, children on a protection plan and other children in need
- b) Children looked after, children on a protection plan and other children in need that have had their plan reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak? (Waves 1 to 9)
- c) Children looked after, children on a protection plan and other children in need that have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 2 weeks (Waves 1 to 9)
- d) Children looked after, children on a protection plan and other children in need that have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 4 weeks
- e) What steps are you taking to safeguard those children that you are not in contact with?

Question 2

How many of the following staff are employed by your local authority and approximately what proportion of them are not working at the moment due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (FTE)? Choose from: 0-10%, 11-20%, 21%-30%, 31-40%, 41-50%, 51-60%, 61-70%, 71-80%, 81-90%, 91-100%.

- a) Social workers - permanent or agency
- b) Residential care staff

Question 3

How many referrals to children's social care services you received in the week before last?

Question 4

Please tell us about the source of referrals received in the week before last:

Referral Source:

- a) Individual
- b) Schools
- c) Health services
- d) Police
- e) Other

Question 5

How many children started to be looked-after in the week before last?

Question 6

Can you please tell us if you are seeing any changes in the demand for children's social care services (e.g. increases in referrals, changes in case complexity or the profile of children being supported) and the impact of these changes.

Question 7

Use this space if you would like to tell us how you have calculated any of these data items and any assumptions that you have made.

Table A1: Time periods referred to in questions

Wave	Questions referring to:				
	Collection dates	Last 2 weeks	Last 4 weeks	Last week	Week before last
Wave 1	04 - 06 May	20 April - 03 May	-	27 April - 03 May	-
Wave 2	18 - 20 May	04 - 17 May	-	11 - 17 May	-
Wave 3	01 - 03 June	18 - 31 May	04 - 31 May	25 - 31 May	18 - 24 May
Wave 4	15 - 17 June	01 - 14 June	18 May - 14 June	08 - 14 June	01 - 07 June
Wave 5	29 June - 01 July	15 - 28 June	01 - 28 June	22 - 28 June	15 - 21 June
Wave 6	13-15 July	29 June - 12 July	15 June - 12 July	6 - 12 July	29 June - 05 July
Wave 7	27 - 29 July	13 - 26 July	29 June - 26 July	20 - 26 July	13 - 19 July
Wave 8	24 - 26 August	10 - 23 August	27 July - 23 August	17 - 23 August	10 - 16 August
Wave 9	07 – 09 September	24 August – 06 September	10 August – 06 September	31 August – 06 September	24 – 30 August
Wave 10	21 – 23 September	-	24 August – 20 September	-	07 – 13 September
Wave 11	05 – 07 October	-	07 September – 04 October	-	21 – 27 September
Wave 12	19 – 21 October	-	21 September – 18 October	-	05 – 11 October

Annex B: response rates

Table B1: overall survey response rates

	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
Wave 1	149	99%
Wave 2	147	97%
Wave 3	149	99%
Wave 4	149	99%
Wave 5	149	99%
Wave 6	149	99%
Wave 7	149	99%
Wave 8	147	97%
Wave 9	146	97%
Wave 10	145	96%
Wave 11	147	97%
Wave 12	144	95%

Table B2: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1a

	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan
Wave 1	149	149
Wave 2	147	147
Wave 3	149	149
Wave 4	149	149
Wave 5	149	149
Wave 6	149	149
Wave 7	149	149
Wave 8	147	147
Wave 9	146	146
Wave 10	145	145
Wave 11	147	147
Wave 12	144	144

Table B2: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1b

	Cases reviewed		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
Wave 1	129	130	128
Wave 2	137	137	136
Wave 3	141	141	140
Wave 4	143	143	141
Wave 5	146	146	143
Wave 6	146	146	145
Wave 7	146	146	146
Wave 8	144	144	143
Wave 9	142	142	141

Note: This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

Table B3: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1c

	Seen or contacted a social worker in the last two weeks		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
Wave 1	130	134	131
Wave 2	136	136	135
Wave 3	141	141	140
Wave 4	143	144	142
Wave 5	145	145	143
Wave 6	147	147	145
Wave 7	147	147	145
Wave 8	145	145	143
Wave 9	145	145	143

Note: This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

Table B4: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1d

	Seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
Wave 1	-	-	-
Wave 2	-	-	-
Wave 3	138	138	138
Wave 4	139	140	139
Wave 5	141	141	140
Wave 6	146	146	144
Wave 7	147	147	145
Wave 8	145	145	143
Wave 9	145	145	143
Wave 10	144	144	142
Wave 11	146	146	143
Wave 12	142	142	139

Table B5: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 2

	Proportion not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)	
	Social workers	Residential care workers
Wave 1	140	114
Wave 2	144	115
Wave 3	146	103
Wave 4	147	104
Wave 5	146	104
Wave 6	147	104
Wave 7	147	104
Wave 8	143	100
Wave 9	142	100
Wave 10	140	99
Wave 11	143	100
Wave 12	140	100

Table B6: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 3 and 4

	Number and source of referrals to children's social care
Wave 1	147
Wave 2	145
Wave 3	147
Wave 4	147
Wave 5	147
Wave 6	147
Wave 7	147
Wave 8	145
Wave 9	144
Wave 10	143
Wave 11	145
Wave 12	142

Note: Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues.

Table B7: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 5

	Children starting to be looked after
Wave 1	149
Wave 2	147
Wave 3	149
Wave 4	149
Wave 5	149
Wave 6	149
Wave 7	149
Wave 8	147
Wave 9	146
Wave 10	145

Wave 11	147
Wave 12	144



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