



Department
for Education

Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey

Summary of returns waves 1 to 26

August 2021

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Headline facts and figures

Headline figures for Wave 26 of the survey:

Number of children (19 – 21 July 2021)	The total number of children looked after (CLA) was 2% higher than the same time in 2019-20 and the total number of children on a child protection plan (CPP) was 5% lower.
Contact in the last four weeks (21 June – 18 July 2021)	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 (66%, 94% and 60% respectively).
Social worker and residential care worker availability (19 – 21 July 2021)	<p>The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has remained at relatively low levels with 5% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19).</p> <p>The proportion of local authorities reporting over 10% of their residential care staff unable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has also remained low at 3%. Note that some local authorities have small residential care workforces and therefore a small change in the number of staff available may result in a large change in the proportion unavailable.</p>
Referrals (05 – 11 July 2021)	The total number of referrals during Wave 26 was 6% lower than the usual number at that time of year.
Looked after children	The total number of children who started to be looked after reported in waves 1 to 26 of the survey was 10,450. This is around 29% lower than the same period in 2017-20.

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 were asked to report to DfE every two weeks with the exception of four weeks between waves 7 and 8 (over the summer holidays) and waves 16 and 17 (over the Christmas holidays). From April 2021 the survey became a monthly return with the questions remaining the same.

Each 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 are not repeated here.

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

Summary of data

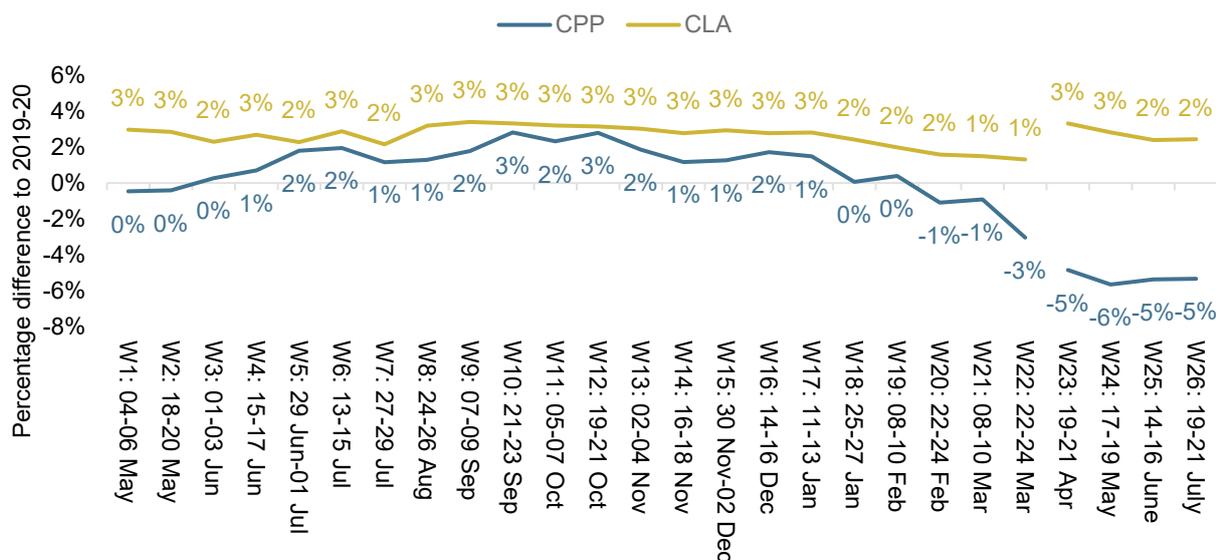
Total number of children supported by local authority Children's Social Care

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 26 the total number of CLA was 2% higher than the same time in 2019-20 and the total number of children on a CPP was 5% lower. Please note that waves 23 onwards are not comparable to previous waves as comparator data from April 2020 is not yet available from the annual CIN and CLA collections. Therefore while waves 1-22 are compared to data from one year ago, waves 23 onwards are compared to data from two years ago. Given over recent years the total number of CLA has been gradually increasing and the total number of CPP has been gradually decreasing, the data received in the survey may be a continuation of those trends; using an older comparator in waves 23 onwards may make the difference appear larger than it did in Wave 22. If March 2020 were used as the comparator, the total number of CLA and CPP in Wave 26 would be +1% and -6% respectively.

Between May 2020 and March 2021, the average difference in the total number of CLA and children on a CPP compared to 2019-20 was +3% and +1%, respectively. Between April and July 2021 the difference was +3% and -5%, respectively.

Figure 1: Difference in the total number of CLA and children on a CPP compared to the same time in 2019-20



Notes:

- 'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.
- Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

- 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

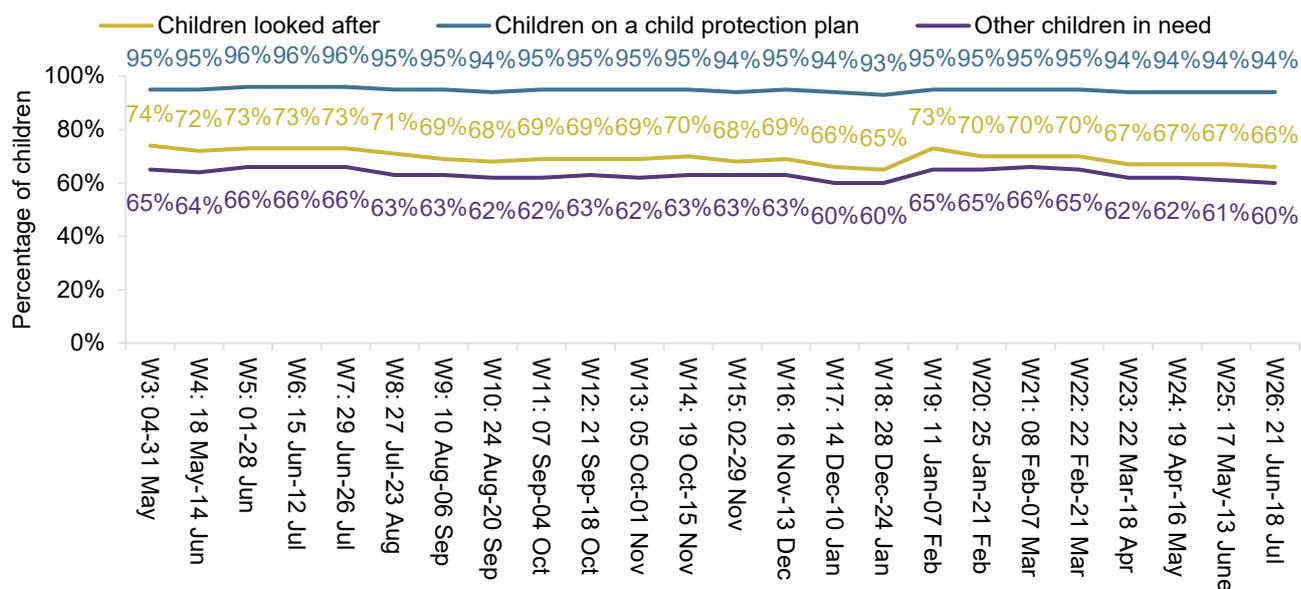
From Wave 3 of the survey, a new question was added which asks how many of CLA, children on a CPP and other CIN have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

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 26, 66% of CLA, 94% of children on a CPP and 60% of other CIN had been in contact with a social worker in the last four weeks (21 June – 18 July 2021). During periods of tighter restrictions, many local authorities reported in the open text question that they were contacting children more frequently than their plan. Over time, as restrictions were lifted, many local authorities reported they were returning to business as usual and contacting children within statutory timescales. 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 survey waves (1-4; May – June 2020) 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 survey waves (5-12; July – October 2020) 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 had not had face to face contact with.

In survey waves 13-17 (November 2020 – January 2021) local authorities reported reviewing their contact arrangements in light of the local and national restrictions introduced in November, December and January. Despite these restrictions, the majority of local authorities that responded to the open text question indicated that they were trying to continue with face to face visits as much as possible, *“there is an expectation that visits will now be face to face in person unless Covid restrictions prevent this (eg. Positive Covid test in the household, self-isolating).”* Some local authorities told us that

they were also considering factors such as assessed risk, case type and the local incidence of transmission of the coronavirus (COVID-19) virus when deciding on frequency and mode of visits.

In waves 18-19 of the survey (late January – February 2021) some local authorities indicated that they were making a return to using virtual visits for some children. One local authority commented, *“the past week has seen 50% of latest contacts made virtually compared to 33% a week ago”*. Another local authority told us, *“the majority of children on child protection and child in need plans are currently being seen remotely, following risk assessments. Children under the age of 5 subject to child protection plans are being prioritised for face to face visits. Children who are looked after are being seen remotely in the majority of cases based on an updated risk assessment.”* Many local authorities went on to add that face to face visits will take place if an *“assessment shows an escalation of risk”* or if children have *“significant and complex needs”*, and that these arrangements are reviewed by managers. Some local authorities also commented on the frequency of visits. Consistent with previous waves, local authorities told us that they were risk assessing cases to determine how often visits are made.

In survey waves 20 – 23 (February – April 2021) responses regarding the mode of visits were mixed. Some local authorities continued to tell us that they were using virtual visits for cases which they assessed as not high risk. However, more local authorities than in previous waves reported that they were maintaining face to face contact with all cases unless there was a specific reason why they could not e.g. if the child/family were isolating. Similar to previous waves, local authorities also told us that they were reviewing visiting arrangements. For example, *“there are some instances where the risk of COVID still requires virtual visits, but these are kept under review. In all cases where there are immediate safeguarding issues identified, face to face visits are taking place”*.

In recent waves of the survey (24 – 25; May - June 2021) more local authorities told us face-to-face visiting was being used as normal practice. For example, *“Its business-as-usual contacts for all children open to CSC and the majority of visits for children on plans or those that are expected to be on a plan are now face to face”* and *“we have now established a steady state of face to face visiting that is only ever interrupted when there is a known positive Covid infection in a household.”* No new themes were reported in Wave 26 of the survey (July 2021).

Children’s Social Care Workforce

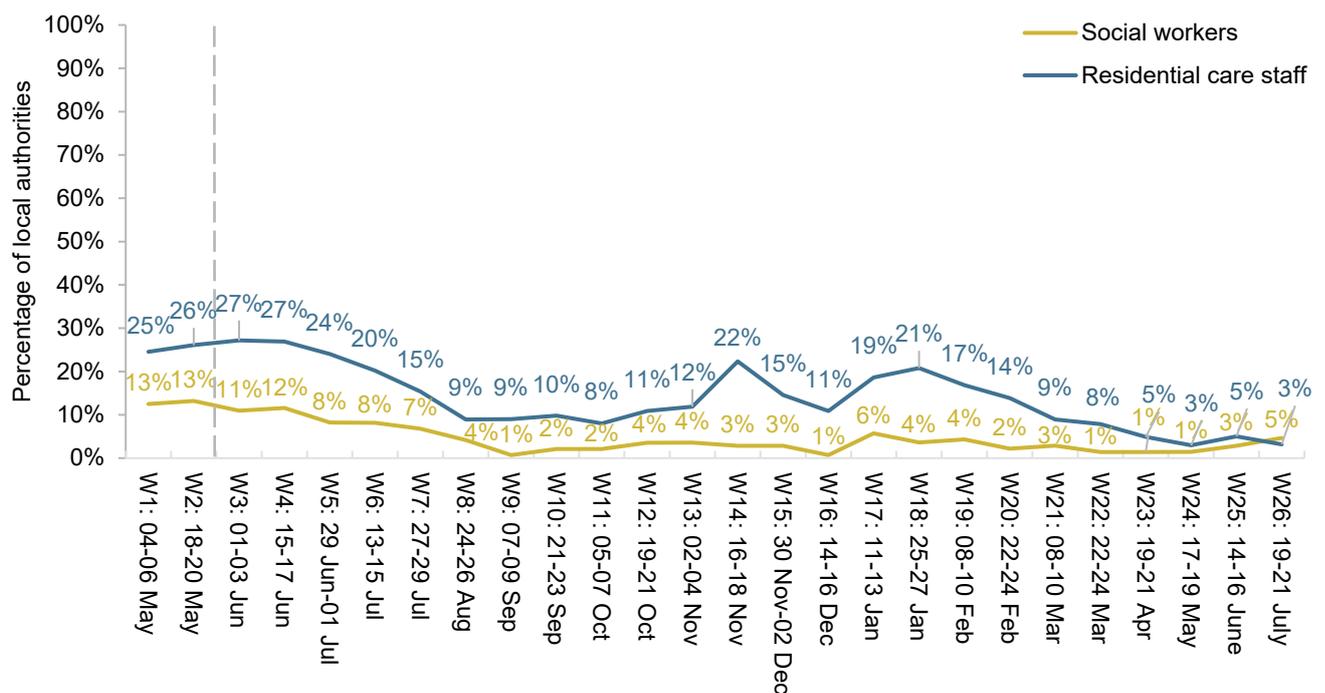
Local authorities were asked about the availability of their staff during coronavirus (COVID-19); both the social worker workforce and residential care staff. A new question was added to Wave 3 of the survey which asks whether the local authority directly employs residential care staff. Note that local 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 remained relatively low; 5% of local authorities reported more than 10% of their workforce unavailable in Wave 26. This is compared to 3% in Wave 25 and a peak of 13% in May 2020.

The proportion of residential care staff unavailable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has remained low, with 3% of local authorities reporting over 10% of staff unavailable in Wave 26, compared to 5% in Wave 25 and a peak of 27% in June 2020. It should be noted that some local authorities have small residential care workforces and therefore a small change 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.
- Read 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 early waves of the survey (1-4; May – June 2020) 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 survey waves 12-19 (October 2020 – February 2021) some local authorities told us that they had some of their workforce that were either off sick, self-isolating or shielding. However, when referring to the workforce, local authorities were more likely to describe the general tiredness and stress amongst their frontline staff. In waves 20-21 (February – March 2021) workforce availability did not feature in the open text responses but some local authorities again described fatigue amongst staff. No common themes about workforce were reported in the open text responses from Wave 22 (March 2021) onwards.

In Wave 26 (July 2021) we asked local authorities to tell us about any anticipated challenges over the summer. The potential impacts from children and staff having to isolate was a key theme. One local authority told us *“the biggest risk likely to face services over the summer holiday period is the potential impact of staff having to isolate as levels of infection rise at a time when there has been a general encouragement to take leave given the cumulative toll of working during the pandemic period with increased activity and the changing nature of need. It is increasingly difficult to secure experienced temporary/agency staff and teams may need to reprioritise work to ensure that the highest safeguarding risks will be covered”*.

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.

In Wave 26 (05 - 11 July 2021), the total number of referrals was 6% lower than a three-year average of the same week across 2017 to 2020. Referrals from all sources were lower than the three-year average in Wave 26 (05 - 11 July 2021).

The total number of referrals to children’s social care services reported in waves 1 to 26 of the survey was 263,150, this is around 10% lower than an average of the same weeks during 2017-20. It is estimated that there have been around 72,000 fewer referrals since May 2020 compared to 2017-20; this estimate takes into account local authorities that did not respond and weeks not covered by the survey.

Table 1: Number of referrals received in the survey compared to the same weeks in 2017-20

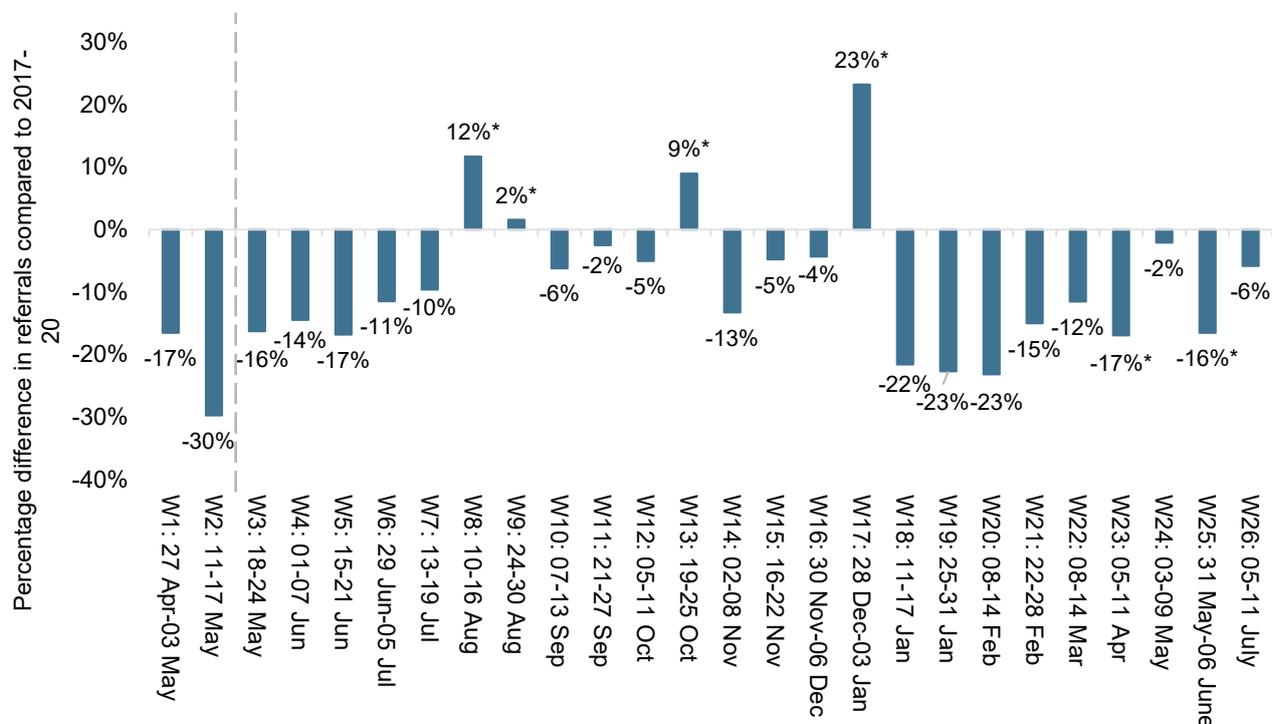
Wave	Total number of referrals	Average referrals 2017-20
W1: 27 Apr-03 May 2020	9,340	11,190
W2: 11-17 May 2020	8,960	12,750
W3: 18-24 May 2020	9,870	11,780
W4: 01-07 Jun 2020	10,670	12,470
W5: 15-21 Jun 2020	11,090	13,330
W6: 29 Jun–05 Jul 2020	11,510	13,000
W7: 13-19 Jul 2020	10,910	12,070
W8: 10-16 Aug 2020*	10,540	9,430
W9: 24-30 Aug 2020*	9,080	8,940
W10: 07-13 Sep 2020	11,040	11,770
W11: 21-27 Sep 2020	12,070	12,370
W12: 05-11 Oct 2020	11,710	12,330
W13: 19-25 Oct 2020*	11,180	10,260
W14: 02-08 Nov 2020	10,500	12,110
W15: 16-22 Nov 2020	11,700	12,290
W16: 30 Nov-06 Dec 2020	11,110	11,610
W17: 28 Dec 2020-03 Jan 2021*	5,130	4,170
W18: 11–17 Jan 2021	9,110	11,610
W19: 25–31 Jan 2021	9,510	12,300
W20: 08-14 Feb 2021	9,350	12,160
W21: 22-28 Feb 2021	9,730	11,440
W22: 08-14 Mar 2021	10,750	12,070
W23: 05-11 Apr 2021*	8,310	10,000
W24: 03-09 May 2021	10,770	11,000
W25: 31 May-06 June 2021*	8,230	9,850
W26: 05-11 July 2021	10,930	11,610

Notes:

- 'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.
- The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to waves 1 and 2.
- *Waves should be treated with caution due to the timing of school holidays from year to year.
- Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues. Comparator data for these LAs was also removed.

- Read Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.
- Comparator data was only included for LAs that responded to each wave.

Figure 4: Difference in the total number of referrals compared to the 3-year average of the same week across 2017 to 2020



Notes:

- ‘W1’ refers to Wave 1 and so on.
- The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to waves 1 and 2.
- *These comparisons should be treated with caution due to the timing of school holidays from year to year.
- Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues. Comparator data for these LAs was also removed.
- Read Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Table 2: Number of referrals received from each source compared to the same weeks in 2017 to 2020

Wave	Individuals	Schools	Health services	Police	Other sources
W3: 18-24 May 2020	-10%	-76%	-18%	16%	-5%
W4: 01-07 Jun 2020	-2%	-74%	-5%	16%	-7%
W5: 15-21 Jun 2020	-2%	-65%	-8%	13%	-11%
W6: 29 Jun–05 Jul 2020	2%	-58%	2%	19%	-10%
W7: 13-19 Jul 2020	11%	-52%	-3%	12%	-13%
W8: 10-16 Aug 2020*	26%	-29%	4%	29%	-3%
W9: 24-30 Aug 2020*	8%	-71%	2%	12%	-4%
W10: 07-13 Sep 2020	3%	-21%	4%	4%	-13%
W11: 21-27 Sep 2020	1%	-15%	7%	6%	-4%
W12: 05-11 Oct 2020	-9%	-3%	-10%	1%	-11%
W13: 19-25 Oct 2020*	0%	100%	-7%	-2%	-3%
W14: 02-08 Nov 2020	-10%	-23%	-9%	-8%	-13%
W15: 16-22 Nov 2020	-11%	-5%	-6%	2%	-6%
W16: 30 Nov-06 Dec 2020	-16%	-9%	7%	4%	-10%
W17: 28 Dec 2020-03 Jan 2021*	26%	-30%	19%	29%	22%
W18: 11–17 Jan 2021	-9%	-60%	-6%	-13%	-10%
W19: 25–31 Jan 2021	-21%	-57%	-8%	-10%	-9%
W20: 08-14 Feb 2021	-5%	-56%	-7%	-11%	-15%
W21: 22-28 Feb 2021	-5%	-41%	-6%	0%	-18%
W22: 08-14 Mar 2021	-7%	-22%	-8%	-3%	-11%
W23: 05-11 Apr 2021*	-15%	-63%	-7%	-1%	-20%
W24: 03-09 May 2021	-5%	3%	3%	0%	-10%
W25: 31 May-06 June 2021*	-14%	-37%	-9%	-5%	-25%
W26: 05-11 July 2021	-4%	-11%	-10%	-4%	-13%

Notes:

- 'W3' refers to Wave 3 and so on.
- *Waves should be treated with caution due to the timing of school holidays from year to year.
- 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.

The open text responses across all of the survey waves show very mixed experiences in the numbers of referrals received across local authorities. Some local authorities reported that the number of referrals had increased and were at levels higher than average, whilst others report that referrals remained lower than average or as expected at that time of year. In survey waves 18-21 (January – March 2021) the mixed experiences in the number of referrals received continued but slightly more local authorities told us that their referral numbers had fallen just as they did back in March 2020 during the early stages of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

In waves 20-24 (February – May 2021) we specifically asked local authorities to tell us about the type and volume of referrals anticipated when schools returned to full opening in March. Responses were mixed with some local authorities expecting a surge in referrals and some expecting referrals to increase modestly or not at all (see the 'key themes' section below for a fuller description of this). In Wave 23 (April 2021) we asked local authorities to tell us if they have made or are planning any changes in practice or delivery to help manage any increase in referrals. Changes mentioned included providing support earlier, working with schools to manage demand and making changes to manage staff capacity (see the 'key themes' section below for a fuller description of this).

In waves 25 and 26 of the survey (June and July 2021) there was no clear pattern for the volume of referrals received by local authorities, but some local authorities told us that they are seeing an increase in referrals related to young people's mental health and social/emotional needs. One local authority told us *"there have been specific issues identified in relation to young people (16+) with mental health issues which has been a challenge for all partner agencies to ensure appropriate resources are provided in a timely and co-ordinated way. This is a noticeable issue post COVID lockdown"*.

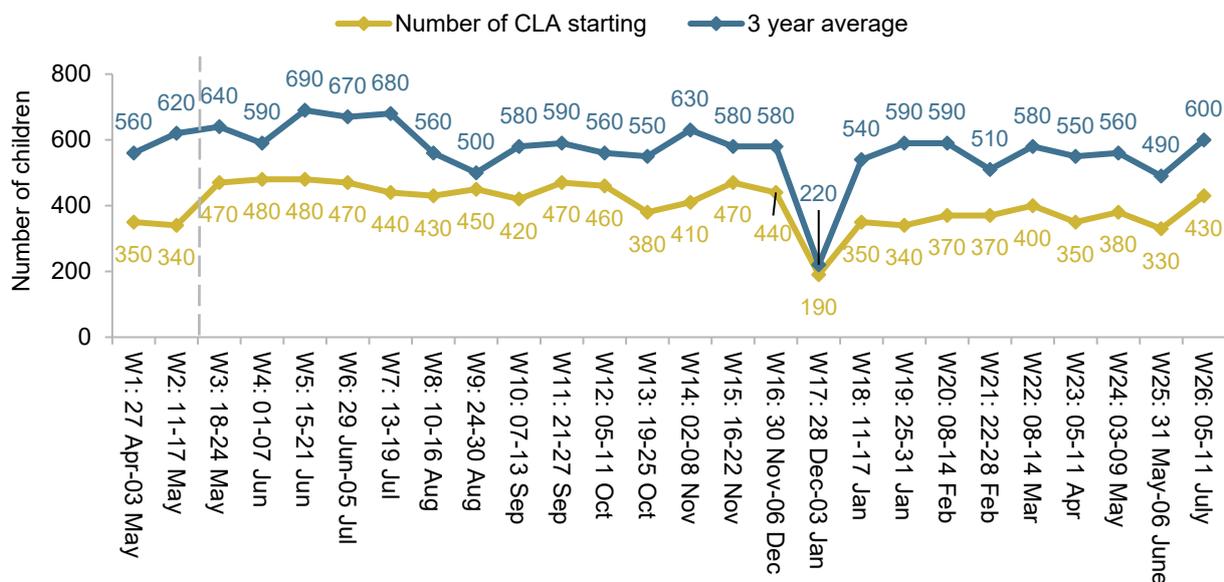
Children who have started to be looked after

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 136 local authorities during Wave 26 (05 - 11 July 2021) was 430 compared to an average of 600 during the same weeks in 2017-20 (-29%). The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in waves 1 to 26 of the survey was 10,450, this is around 29% lower than an average of the same weeks during 2017-20. 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 2017 to 2020.

It is estimated that there have been roughly 10,600 fewer CLA starting since May 2020 compared to 2017-20; this estimate takes into account local authorities that did not respond and weeks not covered by the survey. 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 in 2017-20.

Figure 5: Total number of children looked after starting per week and 3-year average of the same week across 2017 to 2020



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 from July 2020 onwards a small but consistent number of local authorities reported that they continued to have higher numbers of open cases and that care proceedings were taking longer to complete. The reasons cited include the lack of direct work with families and services in support of reunifications and delays in court hearings; this means that planned permanency moves were not happening. One local authority explained “...whilst the volume of contacts and referrals has returned to expected levels there continues to be considerable pressure in the system. This is caused by the backlog of cases in court proceedings which are either progressing very slowly or are paused. This is causing additional work in those cases, but more importantly this is also showing an adverse impact on children's wellbeing. A further effect of this is the pressure on placements, which are being lengthened to match the

² [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2019 to 2020](#)

duration of proceedings. This is reducing the availability of suitable placements for children newly coming into care, or for children who have experienced an unexpected change in their placement”.

Key themes from open question responses

These findings are derived from the open text questions in the survey. One of the questions asks 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 latter question was changed from Wave 9 (September 2020) when we asked local authorities to tell us about any changes in the demand for children’s social care services that they are seeing. In later survey waves (from Wave 17, January 2021) in our covering email about the survey, we have asked local authorities to tell us about specific issues (e.g. current pressures and planning and expectations about referrals), these are reported below.

Not all local authorities respond to the open text questions, and those that do so provide views reflecting the unique circumstances and challenges in their area. These 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; May – June 2020), 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 (5-10; July – September 2020), 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 (11-21; October 2020 – March 2021) local authorities reported reviewing and readjusting their practice depending which coronavirus (COVID-19) local and national restrictions were in place, as discussed on page 7. Local authorities reported using the same arrangements as earlier in the pandemic to manage risk and protect children, *“The infrastructure and arrangements we put into place in April and May 2020 (including pre-visit risk assessments, guidance to staff, arrangements for PPE and increased management oversight) continue to serve us well with only small adjustments required when guidance changes”*. Some local authorities also told us that they were making plans based on their experiences at the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, *“the planning is in place for the forecasted increase in demand at the end of the lockdown and when the schools are back to normal. The impact seen in the first lockdown is being used as a predicting model for the impact of the third lockdown”*.

In survey waves 20-22 (February – March 2021) local authorities reported themes consistent with previous waves. In response to us asking, some local authorities also told us how they were planning and preparing for a possible increase in referrals when the schools fully re-opened. In Wave 23 (April 2021) some local authorities described the changes in practice that they had made or were planning to help manage any increase in referrals (see the ‘expectations and planning for referrals’ section below for a fuller description of this). The same themes were also reported by a small number of local authorities in waves 24 to 26 (May – July 2021).

Working with schools and other safeguarding partners

Across earlier survey waves, local authorities provided examples of joint working between local authorities, schools and other safeguarding partners on issues associated with the pandemic (see earlier publications for examples). Over the summer of 2020, local authorities carried out activities to encourage attendance in preparation for schools returning to full capacity and some provided specific support (for example holiday activity programmes and provision of food parcels) to vulnerable children during this time. In later survey waves (9-19; September 2020 – February 2021), local authorities resumed their close working with schools to track the attendance of vulnerable children and children isolating due to coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreaks. Responses to the open text questions suggest that processes for sharing information with schools became more embedded over time. Some local authorities told us that they monitored which children had been seen at school and this helped inform decisions around social work contact and support. For example, *“we know from education partners which children have additional vulnerabilities, including whether they are engaged in education, and are taking a risk managed approach to support those families who need it”* and *“we continue to work closely with schools in identifying vulnerable children who are not in school to clarify reasons and ensure any safeguarding concerns are appropriately addressed”*.

From Wave 20 (February 2021) onwards some local authorities told us that they were continuing to work closely with schools to monitor-attendance and to ensure schools receive the support they need if there is an increase in safeguarding needs. For example, one local authority told us *“the number of contacts required between school and social workers where pupils are absent for any reason remains comparatively low. We have established a system to follow up on non-attendance of pupils with a social worker, including following up with schools themselves”*. Some local authorities also mentioned working closely with virtual school heads in their responses, *“we are working closely with other agencies to promote school attendance. Virtual school heads are tracking and facilitating communication with school/social workers.”*

No common themes about working with schools and other safeguarding partners have been reported in the open text responses from Wave 20 (February 2021) onwards.

Case Complexity

Across all the survey waves local authorities described the types of cases that they are seeing. A common and consistent theme has been an increase in cases involving suspected domestic abuse. From Wave 9 (September 2020) onwards a growing number of local authorities also described an increase in the complexity of their cases.

The examples of increased case complexity cited in the open text responses vary but include cases involving: elevated mental health issues amongst parents and children, neglect and emotional abuse, parental issues relating to alcohol and mental health, cases involving non-accidental injury, increases in the number of new-born children that are being presented in care proceedings, increases in cases involving young people self-harming, referrals where the family are in acute crisis and escalations of risks in cases that are already open to children’s social care. Some local authorities told us that case complexity is evidenced through the increase in the contact to referral and referral to assessment conversation rate that they are experiencing.

Local authorities described how the presenting issues and case complexity are related to the pressures arising from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The following example (from Wave 17, January 2021) exemplifies the challenges that local authorities continue to face: *“the referrals that we are receiving do appear to be a crisis point for example: lack of face to face interventions and support from other services; an increase in demand on Substance/DV/MH services which has led to longer wait times for services; children not being in school/having periods of self-isolation and demands on parents; financial pressures due to parents losing their jobs or being furlough; families general anxieties about COVID and restrictions on family support which have led to crisis. There appears to have been an increase in young people on the edge of care with parents appearing to not be able to manage and situations reaching crisis which again could be due to impact of COVID”*.

From Wave 17 (January 2021) onwards a small but consistent number of local authorities continue to report an increase in case complexity.

Placement Sufficiency

When we issued Wave 17 of the survey (January 2021) in our covering email about the survey we asked local authorities to tell us in their open text responses about any current pressures related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (e.g placement capacity, working with partners etc). Some local authorities told us that they were experiencing some placement sufficiency issues. For example, finding placements for children with more complex needs and behaviours. Please refer to earlier versions of this publication where the open text responses about placement sufficiency are described in more detail. From Wave 17 (January 2021) onwards a small but consistent number of local authorities continue to describe placement sufficiency issues. In the latest survey wave (26; July 2021) one local authority told us *"the issue we are finding difficult is finding placements for our most complex young people particularly where their behaviour is not assessed as mental health but their behaviour is very challenging and dangerous to themselves. We continue to see children in mental distress where there is a lack of appropriate placements. Secure welfare is now at capacity leading to local authorities needing to commission placements that deprive the young person of their liberty without the order"*. Another local authority said *"there is an increasing difficulty in finding placements for children - especially secure placements and for children with a disability. In the north of the county we have noticed an increase in parents insisting we accommodate children - so we are putting lots of support in to try and prevent breakdown"*.

Expectations and Planning for Referrals

In waves 20 and 21 of the survey (February – March 2021), in our covering email about the survey we asked local authorities to tell us about their **expectations and planning for referrals when schools reopened fully**. Responses were mixed with some local authorities expecting a surge in referrals and some expecting referrals to increase modestly or not at all. The local authorities that were not anticipating an uptake in referrals when schools reopened fully said that their referral numbers had maintained at the usual levels across the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and they were not expecting to see an increase. The local authorities that were anticipating an uptake in referrals told us about their plans and mitigating activities in preparation for this. Most of the responses described how they were increasing staff capacity. Some local authorities told us that that they were working with partners and schools to ensure there were resources to support families and the provision of earlier support to families was mentioned by some local authorities. In waves 20 and 21, some local authorities were anticipating that the uptake in referrals and demand would not happen immediately. Some local authorities were also anticipating that any uptake in referrals and demand would be short lived.

In wave 22 of the survey (March 2021) in our covering email about the survey we asked local authorities to tell us about the **referrals received after schools reopened fully and expectations about referrals over the coming weeks**. Responses were mixed. Some local authorities reported an increase in referrals whilst others told us that referrals remained at or below normal levels. Local authorities told us that they would continue to closely monitor referrals over the coming months. Similar to earlier survey waves, some local authorities were expecting referral rates to stay the same, saying that throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic their rates had maintained at the usual levels or that they did not experience any increase in referrals following the previous re-opening of schools. Among local authorities that reported an increase in referrals during wave 22, from the open text responses provided, local authorities appeared able to manage this demand. As in waves 20 and 21, some local authorities told us that any anticipated uptake in referrals and demand would not happen immediately.

In our covering email for Wave 23 of the survey (April 2021) we asked local authorities to tell us if they have **made or are planning any changes in practice or delivery to help manage any increase in referrals**. The responses can be categorised into three broad themes (as at waves 20 and 21): providing support earlier, working with schools to manage demand and making changes to manage staff capacity. Similar themes were also reported by a small number of respondents in waves 24 to 26 (May - July 2021).

Pressures on the care system

In our covering email for waves 24 and 25 of the survey (May and June 2021) we asked local authorities to tell us about **pressures on the care system – their experience of both new entrants to care and care leavers – and if they have made or are planning to make any changes in practice or delivery to help manage these pressures**. Local authorities interpreted the question in different ways, some described their care numbers across the entirety of the pandemic, whilst some talked about care numbers in more recent months.

Responses provided were very mixed. Some local authorities said that care numbers had increased, for example one said *“we have seen an increase in care proceedings being initiated and children and young people coming into the care of the authority. The age ranges of the children being accommodated varies, but is largely very young children or those in later teenage years”*. Other local authorities said care numbers remained consistent *“in regards to pressures on the care system, (LA name)’s children’s looked after population has remained relatively stable over the last few months and (LA name) have not seen huge fluctuations in the number of children coming on or ceasing to be looked after on a monthly basis.”*

A sizeable proportion of local authorities told us that their care numbers have reduced and told us about the introduction of work that they thought had enabled this, for example one local authority said *“Our numbers of children in care are now below pre-pandemic figures... the lowest they have been for over four years... The reduction, we attribute to*

improvements in our ways of working based on our systemic practice model. Specifically, we have continued to make improvements to our approach to pre-proceedings processes, discharge from care processes and special guardianship orders. We are continuing to innovate in our edge of care and care systems, which we expect will reduce our children in care numbers further and strengthen our internal provision.”

Similar themes were also reported by a small number of respondents in Wave 26 (July 2021).

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 been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 4 weeks
- c) 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:

- 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	Questions referring to last 4 weeks	Questions referring to last week	Questions referring to week before last
Wave 1	04- 06 May 2020	-	27 April - 03 May 2020	-
Wave 2	18 - 20 May 2020	-	11 - 17 May 2020	-
Wave 3	01 - 03 June 2020	04 - 31 May 2020	-	18 - 24 May 2020
Wave 4	15 - 17 June 2020	18 May - 14 June 2020	-	01 - 07 June 2020
Wave 5	29 June - 01 July 2020	01 - 28 June 2020	-	15 - 21 June 2020
Wave 6	13-15 July 2020	15 June - 12 July 2020	-	29 June - 05 July 2020
Wave 7	27 - 29 July 2020	29 June - 26 July 2020	-	13 - 19 July 2020
Wave 8	24 - 26 August 2020	27 July - 23 August 2020	-	10 - 16 August 2020
Wave 9	07 – 09 September 2020	10 August – 06 September 2020	-	24 – 30 August 2020
Wave 10	21 – 23 September 2020	24 August – 20 September 2020	-	07 – 13 September 2020
Wave 11	05 – 07 October 2020	07 September – 04 October 2020	-	21 – 27 September 2020
Wave 12	19 – 21 October 2020	21 September – 18 October 2020	-	05 – 11 October 2020
Wave 13	02 – 04 November 2020	05 October – 01 November 2020	-	19 – 25 October 2020
Wave 14	16 – 18 November 2020	19 October – 15 November 2020	-	02 – 08 November 2020
Wave 15	30 November – 02 December 2020	02 – 29 November 2020	-	16 – 22 November 2020

Wave	Questions referring to collection dates	Questions referring to last 4 weeks	Questions referring to last week	Questions referring to week before last
Wave 16	14 – 16 December 2020	16 November – 13 December 2020	-	30 November – 06 December 2020
Wave 17	11 – 13 January 2021	14 December 2020 – 10 January 2021	-	28 December 2020 – 03 January 2021
Wave 18	25 - 27 January 2021	28 December 2020 - 24 January 2021	-	11 - 17 January 2021
Wave 19	08 - 10 February 2021	11 January - 07 February 2021	-	25 - 31 January 2021
Wave 20	22 - 24 February 2021	25 January - 21 February 2021	-	08 - 14 February 2021
Wave 21	08 - 10 March 2021	08 February - 07 March 2021	-	22 - 28 February 2021
Wave 22	22 – 24 March 2021	22 February – 21 March 2021	-	08 – 14 March 2021
Wave 23	19 – 21 April 2021	22 March – 18 April 2021	-	05 – 11 April 2021
Wave 24	17 – 19 May 2021	19 April – 16 May 2021	-	03 – 09 May 2021
Wave 25	14 – 16 June 2021	17 May – 13 June 2021	-	31 May – 06 June 2021
Wave 26	19 – 21 July 2021	21 June - 18 July 2021	-	05 – 11 July 2021

Annex B: response rates

Table B1: Overall survey response rates

Wave	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
Wave 1	145	96%
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	148	98%
Wave 9	146	97%
Wave 10	146	97%
Wave 11	147	97%
Wave 12	145	96%
Wave 13	145	96%
Wave 14	146	97%
Wave 15	145	96%
Wave 16	142	94%
Wave 17	142	94%
Wave 18	142	94%
Wave 19	142	94%
Wave 20	141	93%
Wave 21	143	95%
Wave 22	143	95%
Wave 23	144	95%
Wave 24	143	95%
Wave 25	143	95%
Wave 26	136	90%

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

Wave	Total number of Children looked after	Total number of Children on a child protection plan	Total number of Other children in need	Children looked after seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks	Children on a child protection plan seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks	Other children in need seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks
Wave 1	145	145	144	-	-	-
Wave 2	147	147	147	-	-	-
Wave 3	149	149	148	138	138	138
Wave 4	149	149	149	139	140	139
Wave 5	149	149	149	142	142	141
Wave 6	149	149	149	146	146	144
Wave 7	149	149	149	147	147	145
Wave 8	148	148	148	146	146	144
Wave 9	146	146	146	145	145	143
Wave 10	146	146	146	145	145	143
Wave 11	147	147	146	146	146	143
Wave 12	145	145	144	143	143	140
Wave 13	145	145	145	144	144	142
Wave 14	146	146	146	144	144	142
Wave 15	144	144	144	142	142	140
Wave 16	142	142	142	141	141	139
Wave 17	142	142	142	141	140	139
Wave 18	142	142	142	141	141	139
Wave 19	142	142	142	141	141	139
Wave 20	141	141	141	140	140	138
Wave 21	143	143	143	142	142	140
Wave 22	143	143	143	141	141	139
Wave 23	144	144	144	143	143	141
Wave 24	143	143	143	142	142	140
Wave 25	143	143	143	142	142	140
Wave 26	136	136	135	134	134	131

Note: The question asking how many children were seen or contacted by a social worker in the last 4 weeks was added from Wave 3.

Table B3: Number of local authorities that responded to Questions 2 - 5

Wave	Proportion not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19): Social workers	Proportion not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19): Residential care workers	Number and source of referrals to children's social care	Children starting to be looked after
Wave 1	136	110	143	145
Wave 2	144	115	145	147
Wave 3	146	103	147	149
Wave 4	147	104	147	149
Wave 5	146	104	147	149
Wave 6	147	104	147	149
Wave 7	147	104	147	149
Wave 8	144	101	146	148
Wave 9	142	100	144	146
Wave 10	142	102	144	146
Wave 11	143	100	145	147
Wave 12	141	101	143	145
Wave 13	140	101	143	145
Wave 14	140	103	144	146
Wave 15	140	103	143	145
Wave 16	139	101	140	142
Wave 17	140	102	140	142
Wave 18	138	101	140	142
Wave 19	139	101	140	142
Wave 20	138	101	139	141
Wave 21	138	101	141	143
Wave 22	140	101	141	143
Wave 23	141	102	142	144
Wave 24	139	101	141	143
Wave 25	141	100	140	143
Wave 26	129	94	134	136



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