

# Responses to Ofsted's consultation on the new inspection framework for adoption support agencies: an evaluation report

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Between 10 January and 3 April 2012 Ofsted consulted on its proposed framework for the inspection of adoption support agencies.

This report details the outcome of the consultation and our next steps.

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## Introduction

1. This report outlines the response to Ofsted's consultation on a new inspection framework for adoption support agencies. It aims to show how the consultation responses have informed the way we propose to inspect these agencies from 1 September 2012.
2. The new inspections will focus on the experiences of children, young people, adults who were adopted, birth relatives, adopters and adoptive families who use the services of adoption support agencies and on the quality of outcomes for them. As the manager of a local authority adoption support agency noted:

'Services are not set up to meet the agency's needs, but those of the service users: those who have been affected by adoption throughout their lives. Agencies need to be sure that the services they offer meet the needs of their service users as much as it is possible whilst operating within both legislation and guidance.'

## Background to the consultation

3. Inspectors conduct an inspection of each adoption support agency every three years. They take account of how well the agency meets the national minimum standards and the regulations and they judge the quality of its outcomes.
4. The Department for Education introduced new national minimum standards for use from 1 April 2011. The inspection cycle was completed in March 2012 and we have taken this opportunity to review the inspection framework and improve its alignment with the national minimum standards. The new framework for the inspection of adoption support agencies will be in place from September 2012.

## The consultation methodology

5. We consulted with the public, children and young people and interested parties about our new inspection framework.
6. Our primary consultation method was an online survey open to the public from 10 January to 3 April 2012. This consultation asked participants quantitative questions as well as providing free text boxes for them to write their views.
7. We received 60 individual responses to this consultation, including responses from adoption support agencies, voluntary adoption agencies, local authorities, provider representative bodies, social workers and adoptive parents.
8. In addition, 31 children and young people responded to a version of the online consultation written especially for them. Nine of these children indicated that they had received help from an adoption support agency.

9. We have carefully considered these responses in developing the new inspection framework.
10. We supported our online surveys with a face-to-face consultation with representatives from the Consortium of Adoption Support Agencies (CASA). We also carried out pilot inspections to test the framework with three adoption support agencies.
11. The results of the online consultation are available in Annex A and the results from the young person's version of the consultation in Annex B.

## **Key themes from the consultation**

12. Overall, the respondents were supportive of our proposed inspection framework and welcomed its focus on improving outcomes for children, young people, adoptive adults and birth relatives.
13. Respondents were also very supportive of the proposed judgements for our inspections: overall effectiveness; quality of service provision; outcomes for service users; safety of children, young people, adults and families; and leadership and management.
14. They welcomed the proposal to enhance opportunities for people who use the services of adoption support agencies to be involved in providing feedback about agencies but raised some concerns about how this would work.
15. Respondents held mixed views about the proposal to reduce notice of inspection from eight weeks to 10 days, citing a variety of reasons why this might not be practical.

## Detailed findings from the consultation

### Proposal 1: Service users providing feedback about adoption support agencies at any time

16. Fifty-five out of 59 respondents supported our proposal to provide a mechanism for users of adoption support agencies to provide their views to Ofsted at any time. In the summary of the views expressed, one respondent remarked: 'it is important for users to comment when their recollection of the details of the service provided is fresh' and an adoptive parent also remarked that '...adopters should be able to feed back how effective support has been and comment on how they might have been better supported or prepared or informed...'
17. Respondents, however, highlighted some reservations about this proposal:
  - agencies must be given the opportunity to respond to any comments that Ofsted receives about them
  - views will often be given at times of frustration and could result in a skewed and inaccurate picture of services
  - Ofsted must guard against raising expectations that it will deal with individual complaints as this could mean that user feedback or complaints about services are directed to Ofsted and not to the agency involved
  - Ofsted should be very clear with users about the purpose of collecting feedback, including how and when the information will be used. This is because respondents may expect that their feedback will be acted upon immediately and, where it is not, this could impact on whether they continue to provide feedback.
18. Twenty-seven children and young people who responded to this proposal agreed that it is quite important or really important for them to be able to tell us what they think about the service at any time. As one young person put it: 'so they [Ofsted] can see what is going on, and see what they [the agency] are like when they are not expecting any one from Ofsted'.
19. They also emphasised the importance of this because:
 

'how are Ofsted supposed to know if anything good or bad has been happening if no-one says a word'
20. After considering these responses, we intend to:
  - provide an online questionnaire from September 2012 to March 2013, so that users can give feedback about the service they receive from agencies – this will enable us to test whether the online system meets the needs of all service users and provides us with the right information

- ensure that any views expressed by users are supported by other types of evidence at inspection, so that our judgements are secure
- make it clear in the introduction to our online questionnaire how we will use the data and information and that we will not look at individual complaints as these should be addressed to the agency.

## **Proposal 2: Reducing the notice of inspection for adoption support agencies to 10 days**

21. Respondents generally favoured reducing the current notice period of eight weeks. However, people held divergent views about whether 10 days is the right amount of notice. Twenty-nine out of the 57 respondents who answered this question 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with 10 days' notice, 16 disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 10 neither agreed nor disagreed with this proposal.
22. Those who disagreed suggested we should adopt a twin-track approach, with larger agencies receiving no notice or the proposed 10 days' notice, while smaller agencies would receive a longer notice period.
23. Respondents cited difficulties that smaller agencies would face in ensuring key staff were available for inspection due to commitments to service users, groups and local authority contract meetings. Others highlighted the difficulty of getting user feedback and pre-inspection data from agencies at such short notice.
24. Children and young people held equally mixed views about 10 days' notice, with 11 out of 31 children who responded agreeing with 10 days' notice, and 12 supporting notice of less than 10 days or no notice at all. Seven children wanted to see more than 10 days' notice given.
25. One young person who supported 10 days' notice commented that 'it strikes a good balance between providing sufficient time to book necessary appointments, without too much time to "cook the books"'.
  - 26. Children and young people who favoured no notice were clear that we should see an adoption support agency as it normally functions, 'as agencies should operate to a high standard all of the time'. They noted that:
    - 'agencies shouldn't know before they're inspected because Ofsted should be able to gather a realistic view of the agency set up'
    - 'any institution should if administered and run correctly be able to be inspected without prior notice. Notice allows weakness and problems to be covered over to be temporarily hidden and this does not benefit the child or the agency'
27. We tested giving agencies 10 days' notice during our pilot inspections in June. We found that while this is practical and works well for larger agencies, it did not work for agencies provided by individuals who work alone; these account for about half

of all adoption support agencies. On the pilot inspections, it was difficult for the agencies to provide pre-inspection data promptly and due to pre-booked work it was impossible to carry out the inspection on the days planned.

28. Given this, and the consultation feedback, we have decided to give 20 days' notice to agencies that are run by individuals working entirely alone. This approach should allow sufficient time to make arrangements for the inspector and ensure that there will be fewer instances where we will have to defer inspections.
29. All other agencies will receive 10 days' notice. For these agencies, we acknowledge that there may be times where key staff, such as managers, are unavailable through illness or holiday leave. However, it is important that agencies have appropriate contingency arrangements in place to continue to deliver to high standards.

### **Proposal 3: Judgement areas under the new inspection framework**

30. Almost all respondents were in favour of our proposed judgement areas:
  - outcomes for service users
  - quality of service provision
  - safeguarding children, young people, adults and families
  - leadership and management
  - overall effectiveness.
31. They provided valuable written comments about factors we should consider when inspecting and making judgements. We have used these to develop our evaluation schedule and grade descriptors, which set out how we will make our judgements, and to inform our inspection practice, as set out in our *Conducting inspections of adoption support agencies*<sup>1</sup> guidance. These areas are outlined below.

### **Outcomes for services users**

32. Respondents commented on the complexity of evaluating outcomes for service users and, in particular, highlighted that no matter how good the services an agency delivers are, there may still be dissatisfaction with the service received due, for example, to unmet expectations or unsatisfactory reunions between birth relatives. Additionally, agencies may not be able to prevent placement disruption as they are not responsible for identifying difficulties in placements. Respondents' comments included:

'...a search for a relative in intermediary services may be unsuccessful but all available avenues may have been pursued...'

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<sup>1</sup> *Conducting inspections of adoption support agencies* (reference no: 120186), Ofsted 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120186](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120186)



'...the views of users must be balanced with the provision available, particularly pertinent in a climate of budgetary constraints...'

'There needs to be a balance between service users views and other evidence of the appropriateness and adequacy of the service...'

33. We acknowledge the comments received and have included grade descriptors in 'outcomes for service users' and 'quality of service provision' that reflect the potential for disappointment and that there will be triangulation of evidence.
- service users report changes in their situations, although they may not achieve their desired outcomes
  - the focus on individual users permeates every aspect of the agency's work with service users, commissioners and others.

### **Quality of service provision**

34. Respondents were supportive of the thrust of this judgement but highlighted some areas of concern. These included:
- depending on the service being offered and delivered, agencies may not need to have knowledge and understanding of all aspects of adoption, so inspectors should clearly define the parameters within which the agency operates
  - agencies may not always be able to meet the needs of those using birth records counselling/intermediary services.
35. Given these comments, we will ensure that, when writing the inspection report, inspectors describe the range of adoption support services provided and any specialism. The evaluation schedule has also been amended to ensure that agencies only providing specialist services are recognised and given equal weight to agencies providing a range of services.
36. We have written into the evaluation criteria that 'adoptees and birth relatives receive effective birth records counselling and intermediary services. They are appropriately supported to understand their own situations even if they do not achieve the outcomes they want'.

### **Safeguarding children, young people, adults and families**

37. Respondents recognised that safeguarding should be at the core of any agency but emphasised that adoption support agencies will not be the only provider or people responsible for safeguarding children, young people and adults.
38. We have included descriptors in the evaluation schedule, so that inspectors will explore whether:

- the agency has established effective communication channels with child protection agencies and adult safeguarding services so that it is easy to access advice and support
- contacts are maintained with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Local Designated Officer, which adds to the ease and effectiveness of consultation on any concerns and promotes a safe service.

## Leadership and management

39. Respondents acknowledged that all agencies, including those run by an individual, should have robust systems that ensure good management and a strategic overview of their operations. The respondents suggested that:
- joint working with other agencies is important and should be explored by inspectors
  - individuals who operate on their own without staff to lead or manage should have some form of peer support or supervision
  - inspectors should explore and report on innovative approaches to service delivery.
40. We accept the points raised and have included provision for them in the 'leadership and management' and 'overall effectiveness' judgement areas. Inspectors will consider whether:
- the agency has very effective relationships with commissioners and partner organisations and with other agencies
  - staff or the individual provider receive sufficient training and supervision to enable them to provide effective well-informed adoption support
  - staff and providers are trained and demonstrate up-to-date knowledge and understanding of adoption issues relating to the service they provide
  - the agency is constantly seeking new and effective ways to improve.

## Conducting inspections under the new framework

41. The respondents raised some points about how we will conduct our inspections. We have addressed these concerns below.
- **Ability to complete pre-inspection materials:** In order to have a shorter notice period, we will introduce a pre-inspection data form that agencies will complete following notice of inspection. We will publish this data form as part of our *Conducting inspections of adoption support*

*agencies*<sup>2</sup> guidance, so that providers will know in advance what information we will be requesting.

- **Suitably qualified inspectors:** We have included information in our *Conducting inspections of adoption support agencies* guidance setting out how our inspectors will be trained and the level of experience they require.

## The way forward and timetable for further work

42. The final framework documents, which will include *Conducting inspections of adoption support agencies* and *Inspection of adoption support agencies: evaluation schedule and grade descriptors*,<sup>3</sup> will be available on our website in August 2012.
43. We will write to all adoption support agencies and stakeholders when they become available.
44. If you want to read what children and young people said about our inspection proposals, you can access the consultation response report here: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120188](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120188).
45. We are extremely grateful to all respondents who participated in our consultation and appreciate the valuable and insightful views and observations that they made.
46. We hope that this consultation results in inspections that make the greatest contribution to improving outcomes for service users and an 'understanding of the complexities and conflicts of adoption support work and the very individual approach that is often needed in each case'.

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<sup>2</sup> *Conducting inspections of adoption support agencies* (reference no: 120186), Ofsted 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120186](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120186)

<sup>3</sup> *Inspection of adoption support agencies: evaluation schedule and grade descriptors* (reference no: 120185), Ofsted 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120185](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120185)

## Annex A. Online consultation results

### Type of respondent

Chart 1 reflects the types of representative bodies who responded to the consultation.

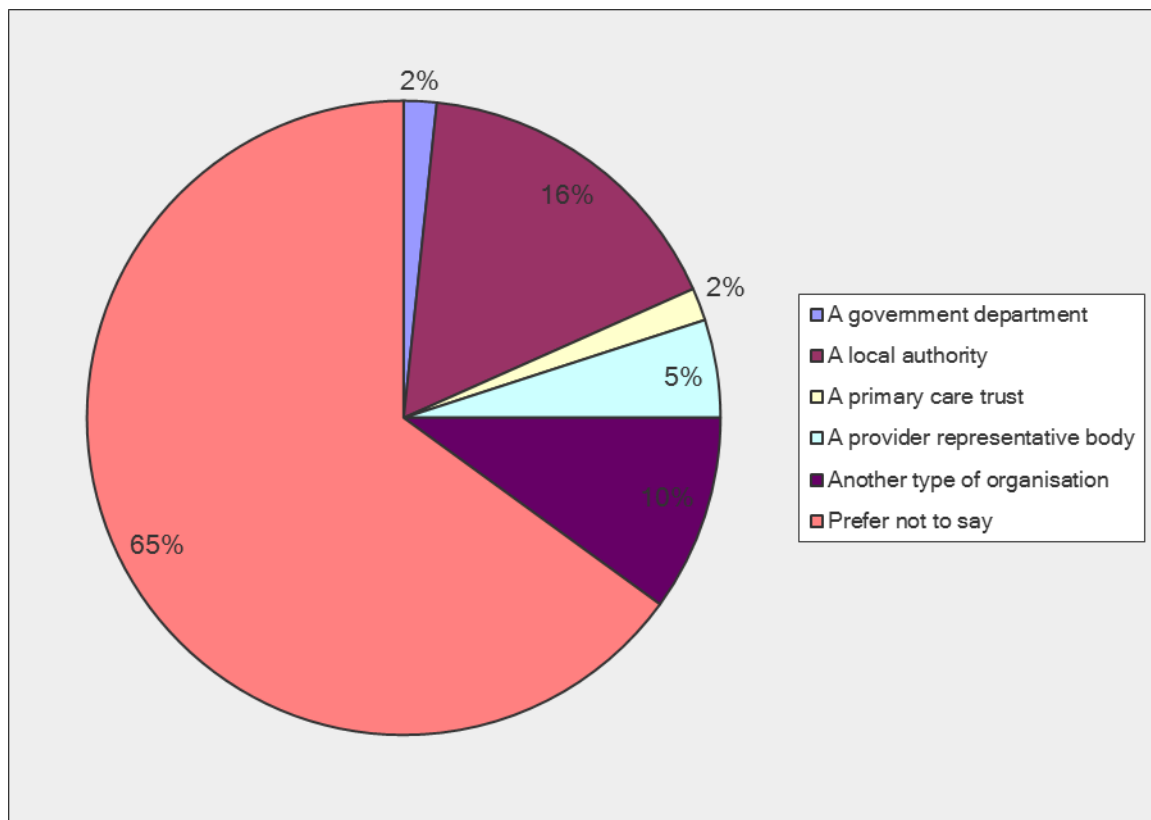
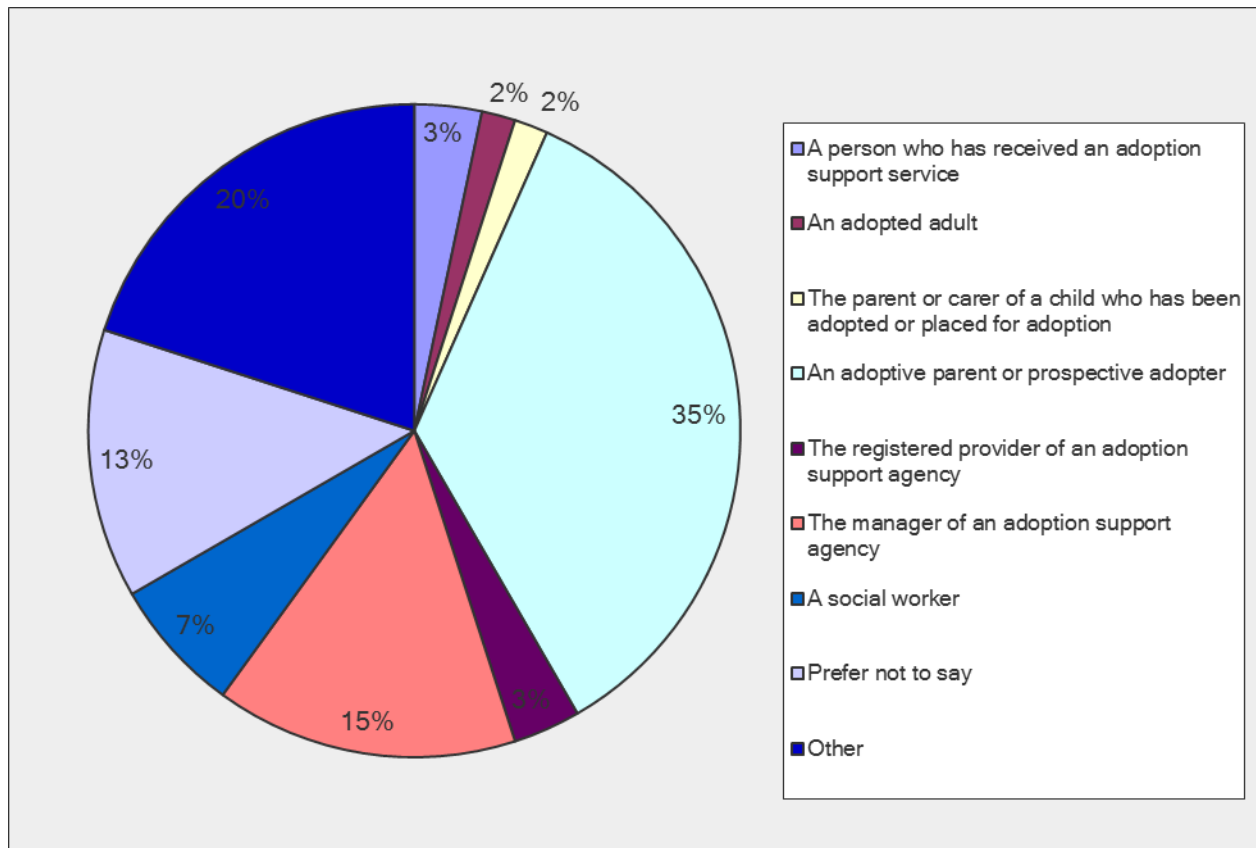
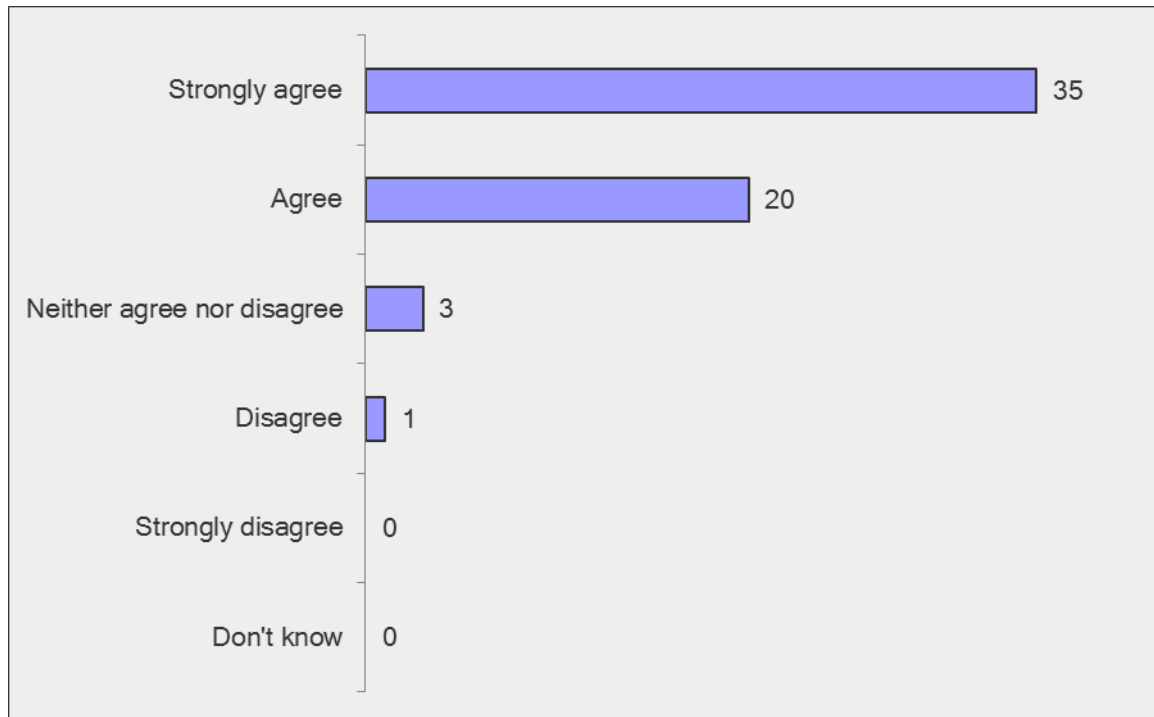


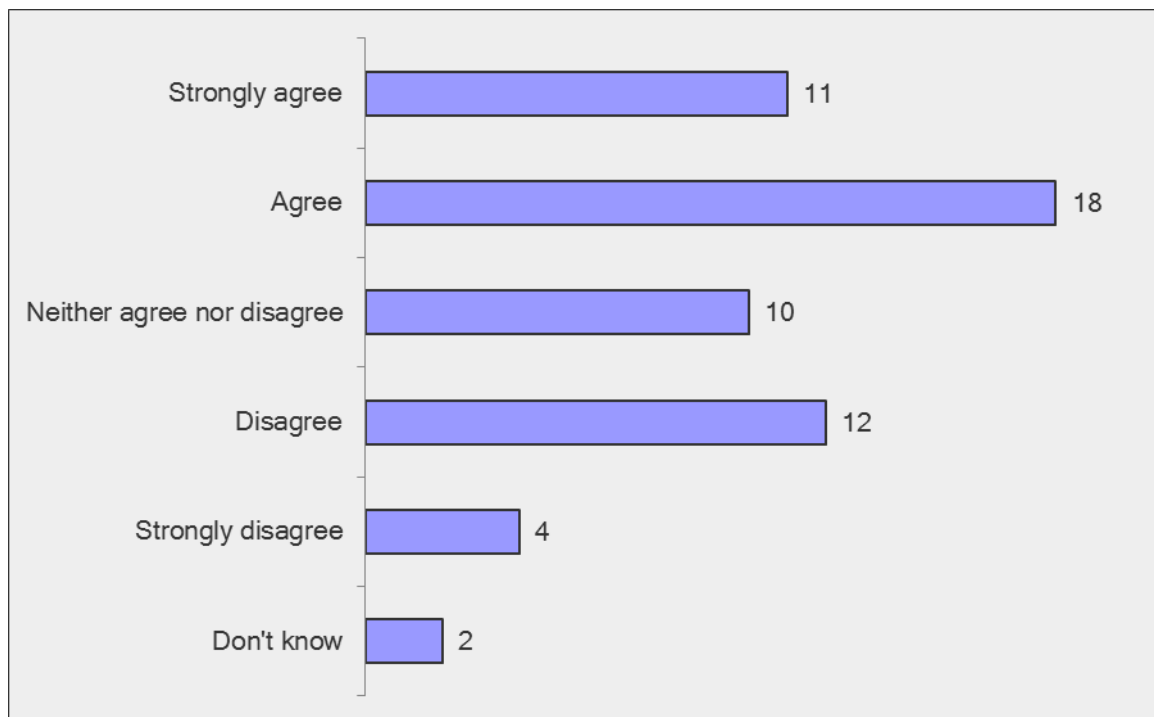
Chart 2 reflects the respondent types and numbers of respondents from within each type.



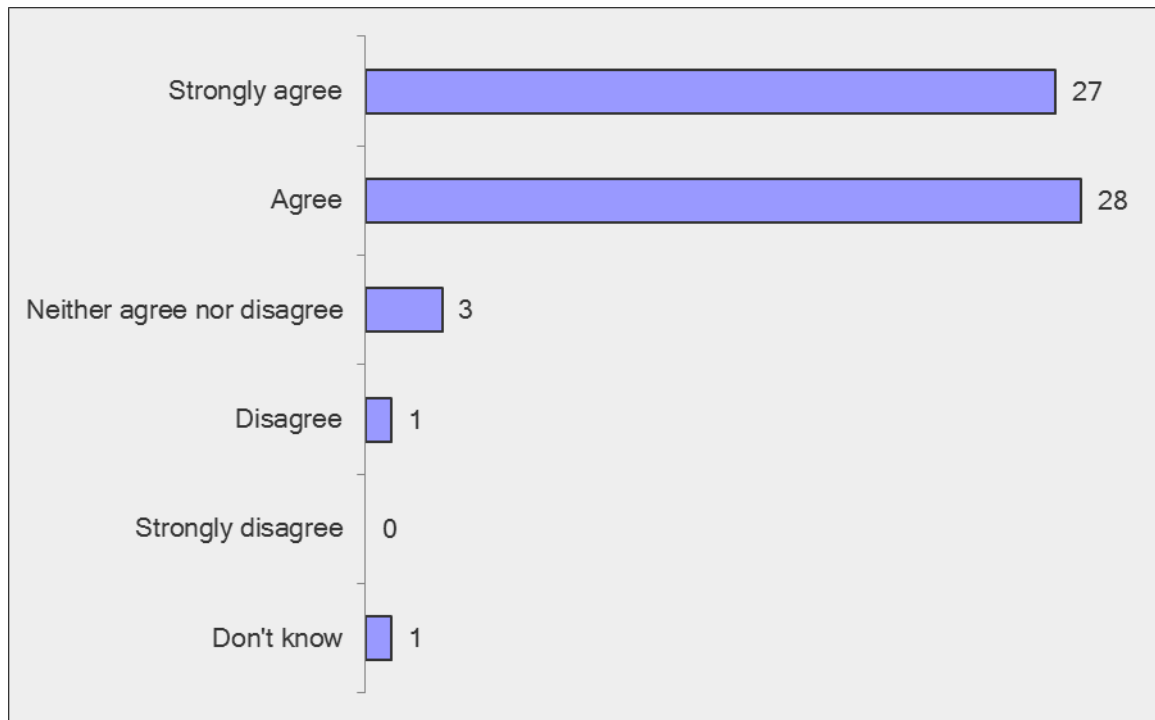
**Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that people who are receiving or have received an adoption support service should be able to comment to Ofsted on those services at any time?**



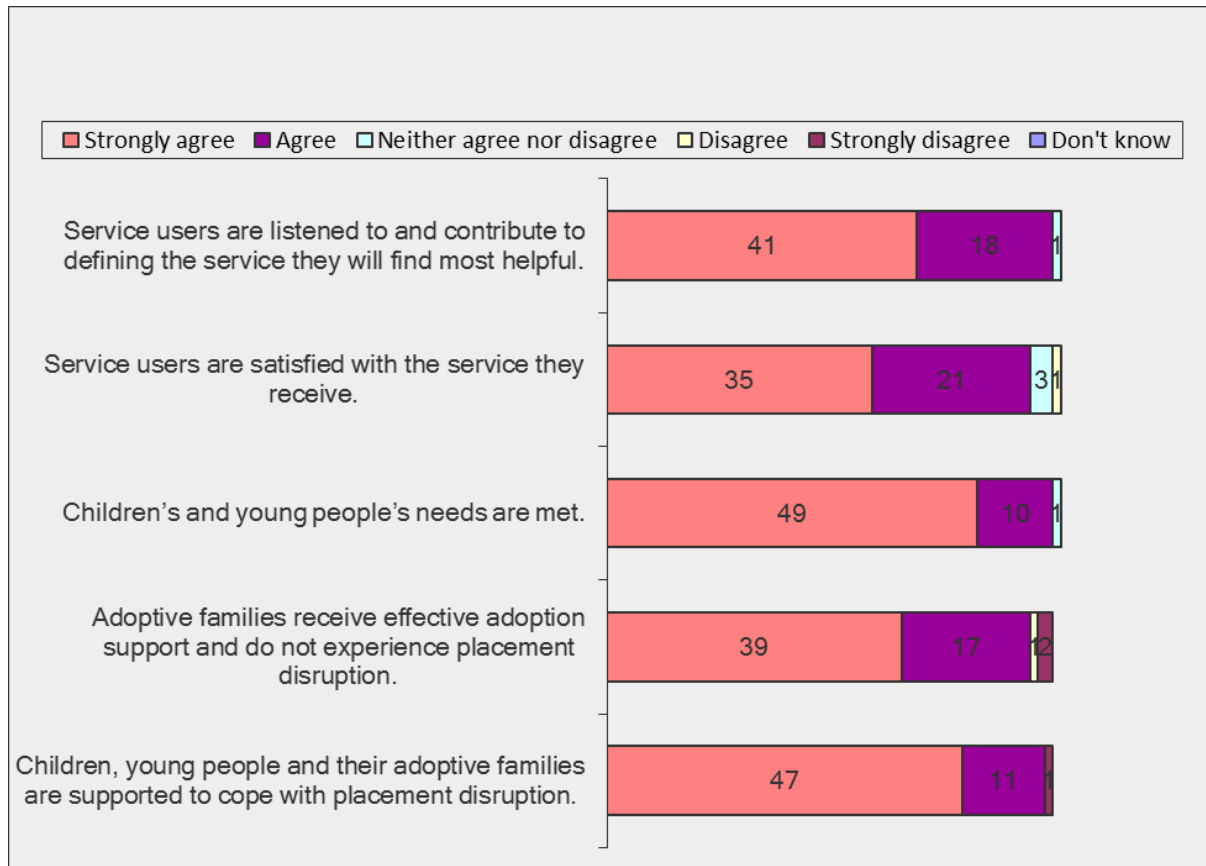
**Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the normal period of notice for inspection for an adoption support agency should be 10 working days?**



**Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that 'outcomes for service users' should be judged when we inspect an adoption support agency?**

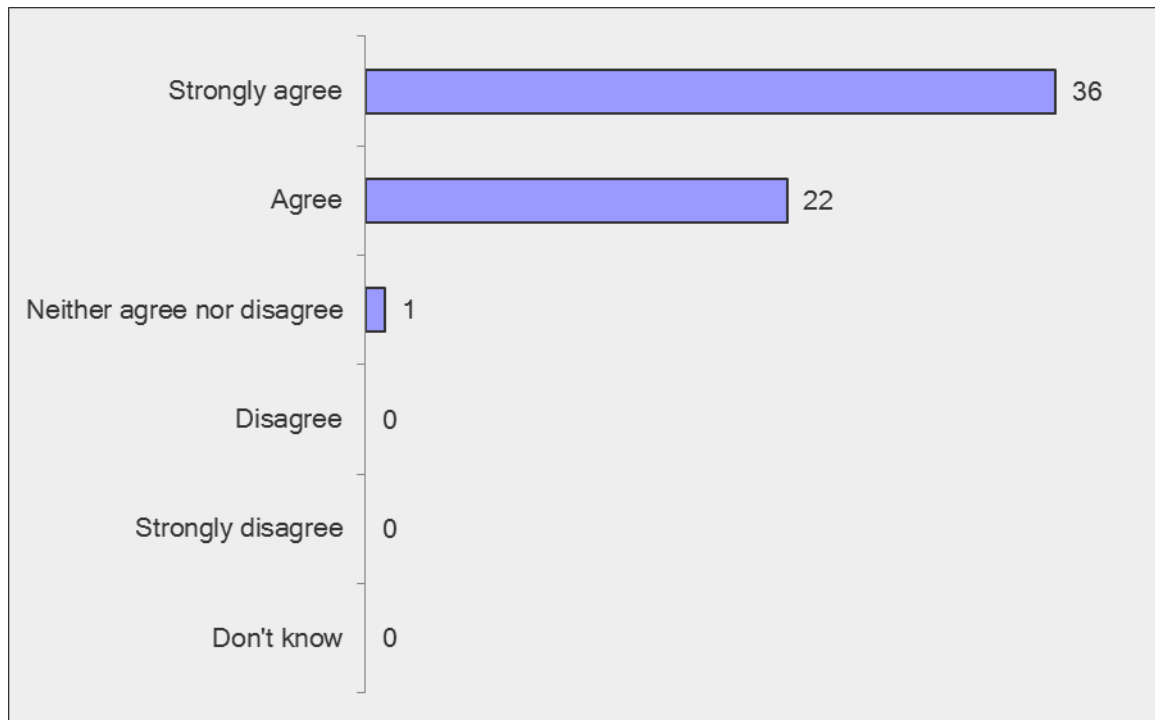


**Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should evaluate the following areas when making our judgement on outcomes for service users?**

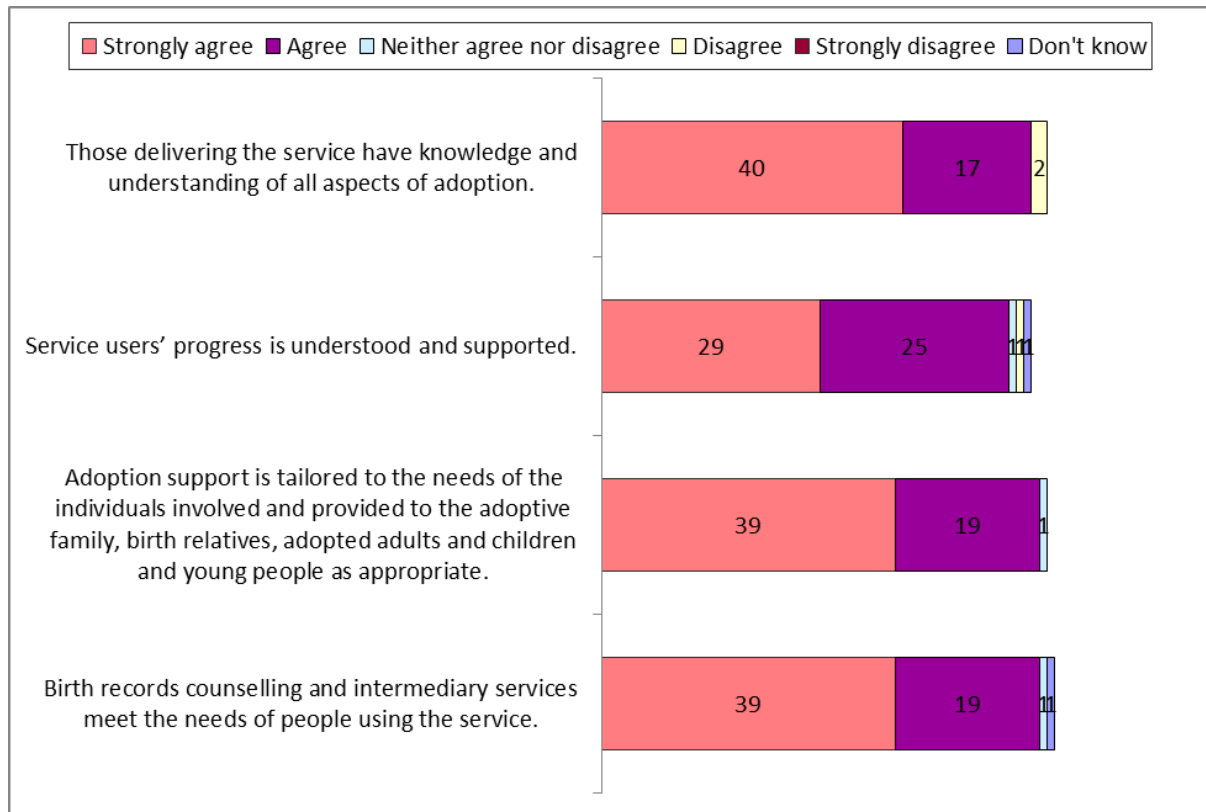




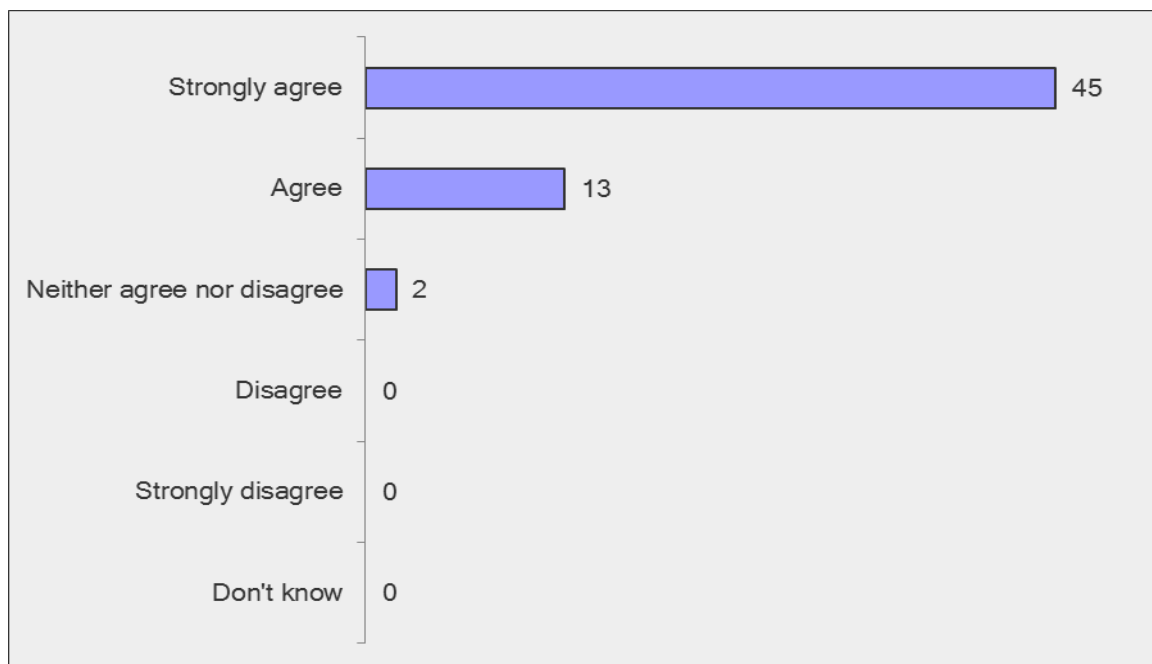
**Q5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 'quality of service provision' should be judged when we inspect an adoption support agency?**



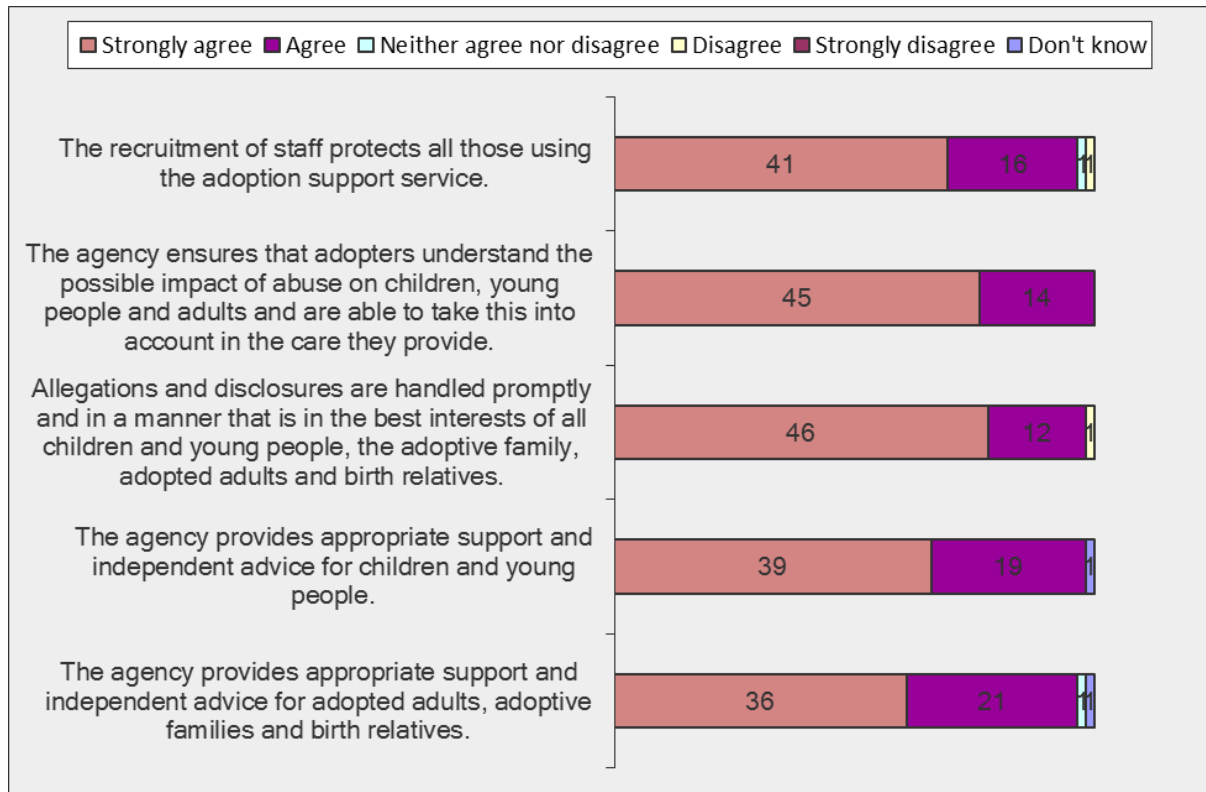
**Q6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should evaluate the following areas when making our judgement on quality of service provision?**



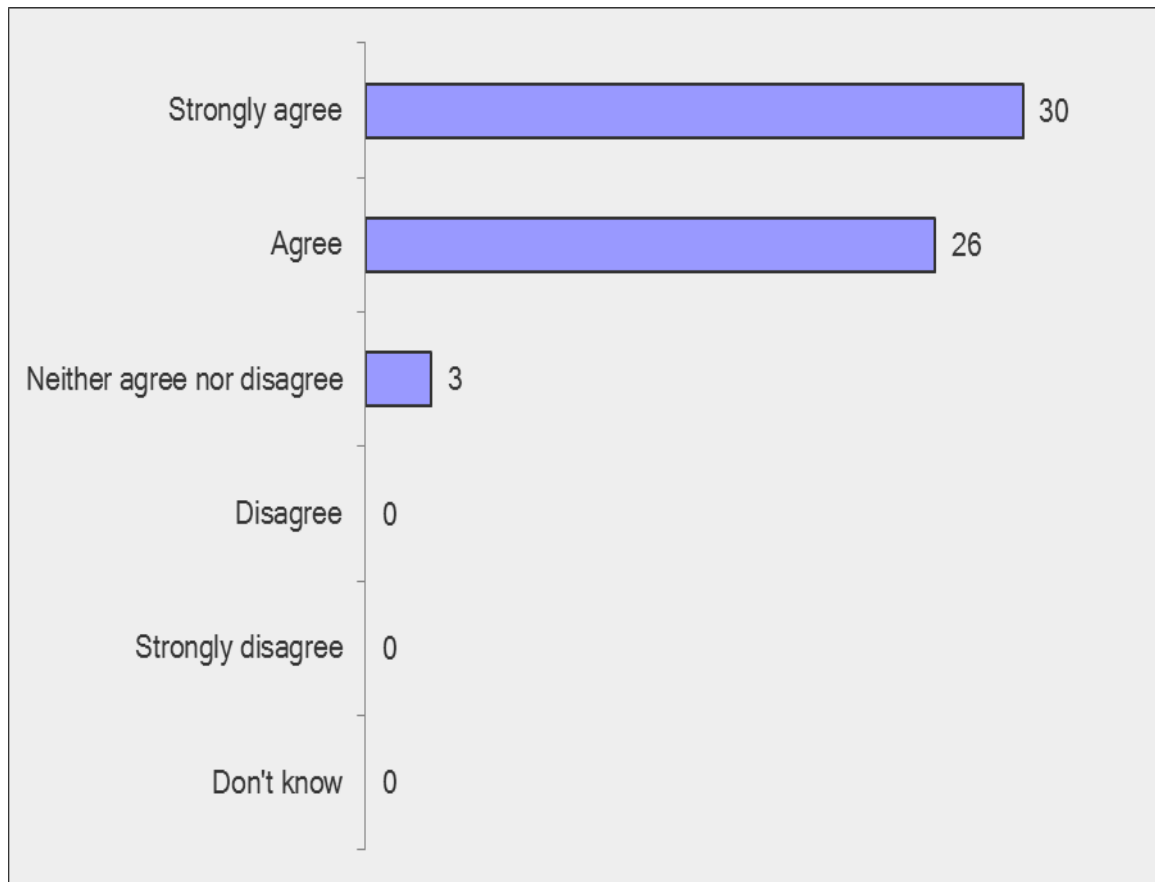
**Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that 'safeguarding children, young people and adults' should be judged when we inspect an adoption support agency?**



**Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should evaluate the following areas when making our judgement on safeguarding children, young people and adults?**



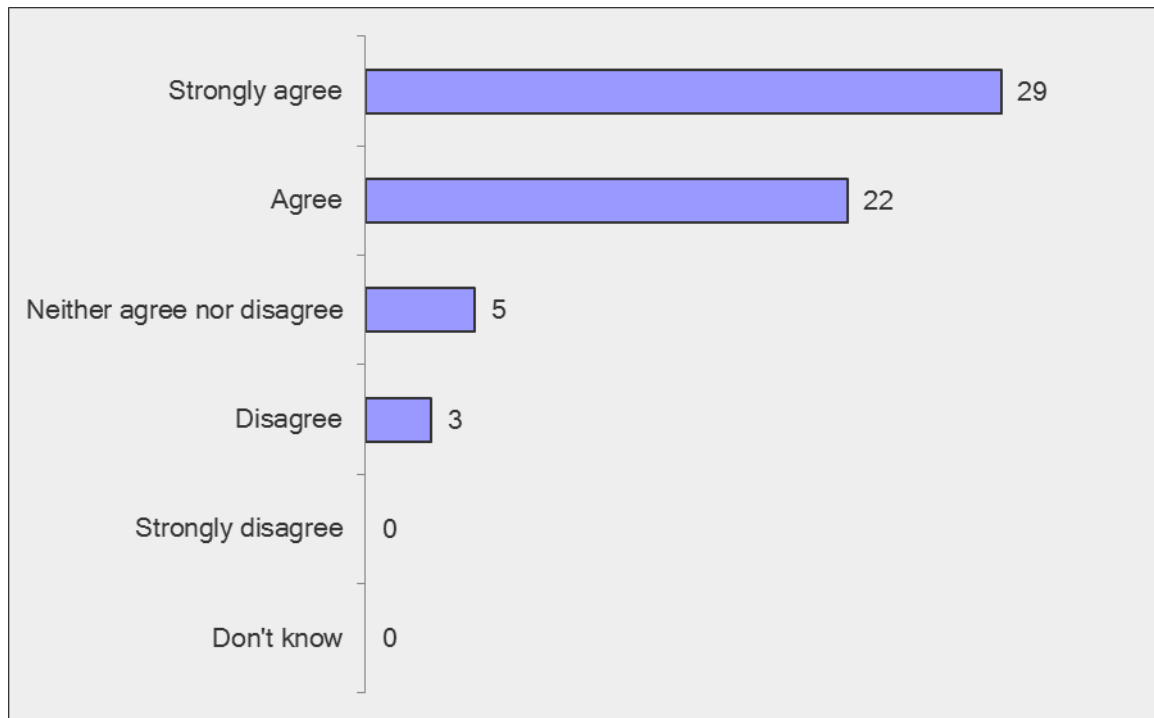
**Q9. To what extent do you agree or disagree that 'leadership and management' should be judged when we inspect an adoption support agency?**



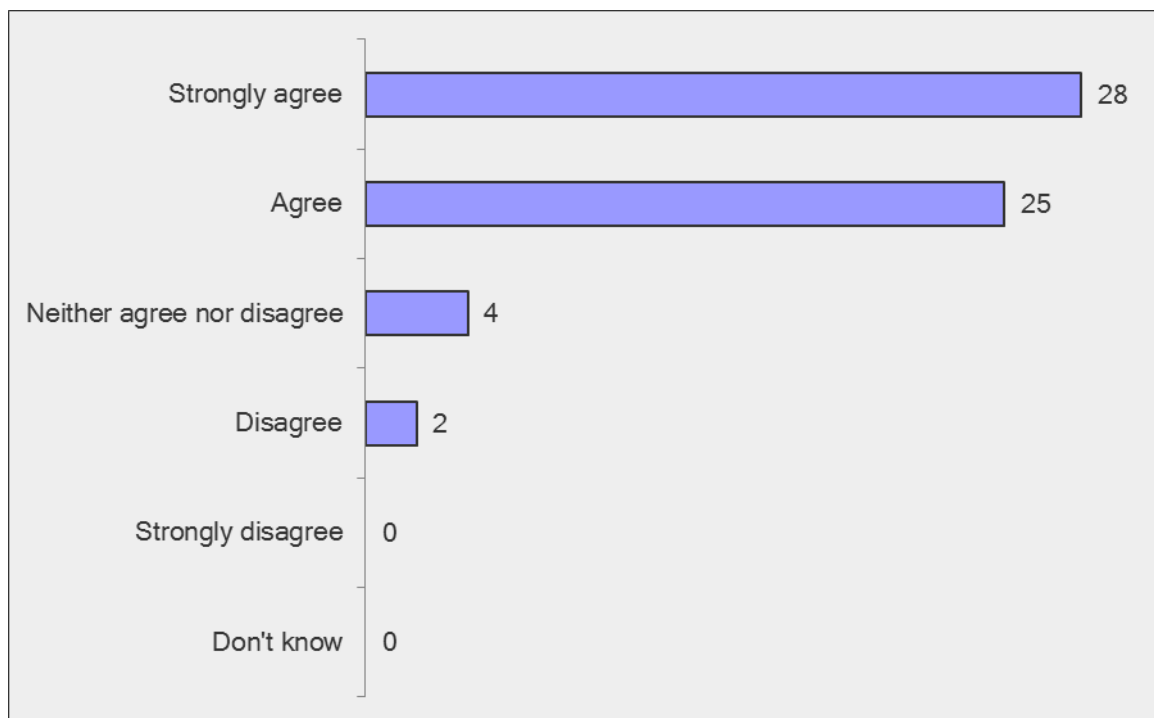
**Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should evaluate the following areas when making our judgement on leadership and management?**



**Q11. To what extent do you agree or disagree that 'leadership and management' should be judged when we inspect an individual provider of an adoption support agency?**

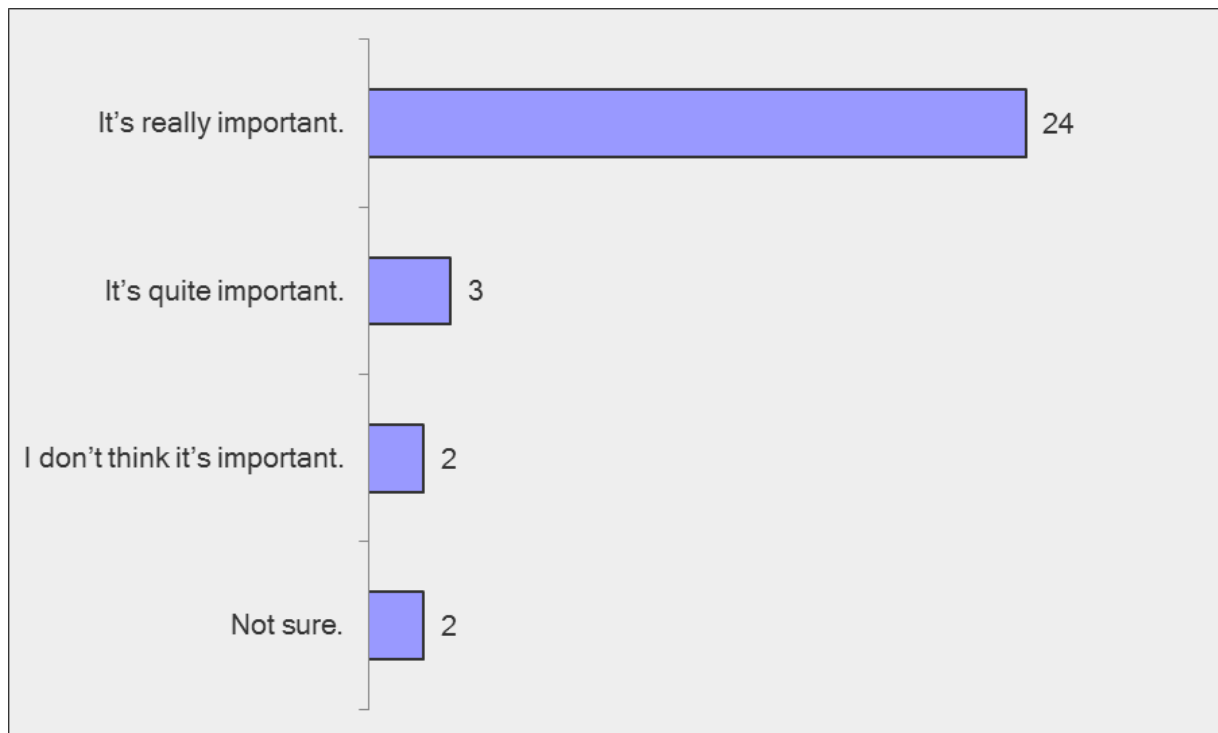


**Q12. To what extent do you agree or disagree that 'overall effectiveness' should be judged when we inspect an adoption support agency?**

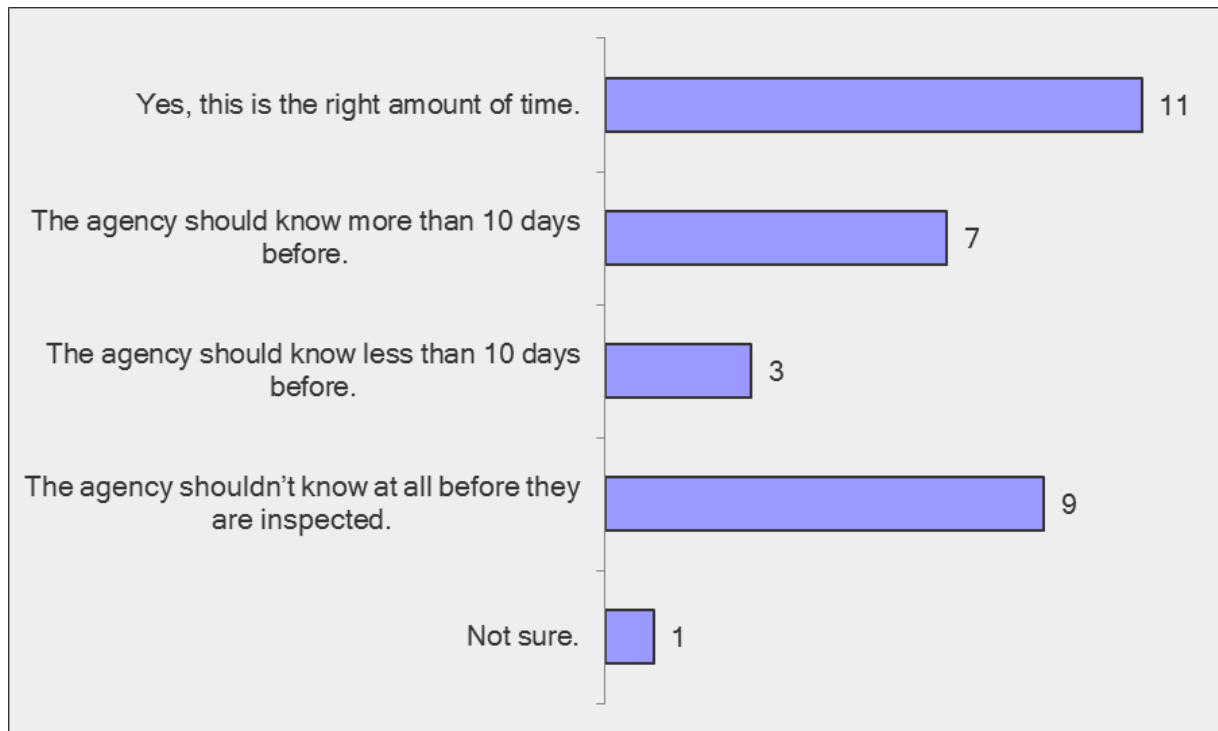


## Annex B. Online consultation results for children and young people

**Q1. We inspect adoption support agencies once every three years, but you might want to tell us what you think about your agency at another time when it matters most to you. This might be when you stop getting help from the agency, or if you are feeling very pleased or unhappy with the agency. Is it important for children, young people and adults who use adoption support agencies to be able to tell Ofsted what they think about their agency whenever they want to, not just when an inspection is happening?**

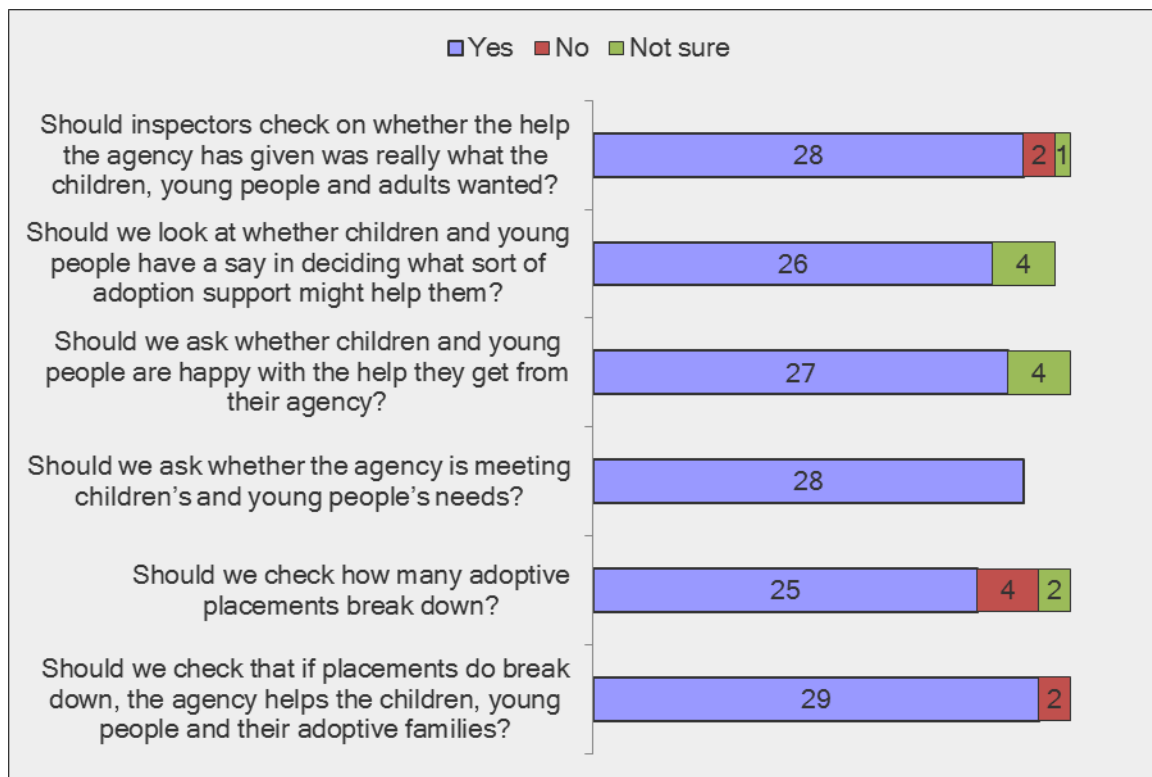


**Q2. We are thinking of telling an adoption support agency that we will be inspecting them 10 days before the inspection will happen. We think this will be enough time to arrange to talk to some children, young people and adults who are using the agency, but not so long that they will have time to make things look better than they really are. Is this the right amount of time?**

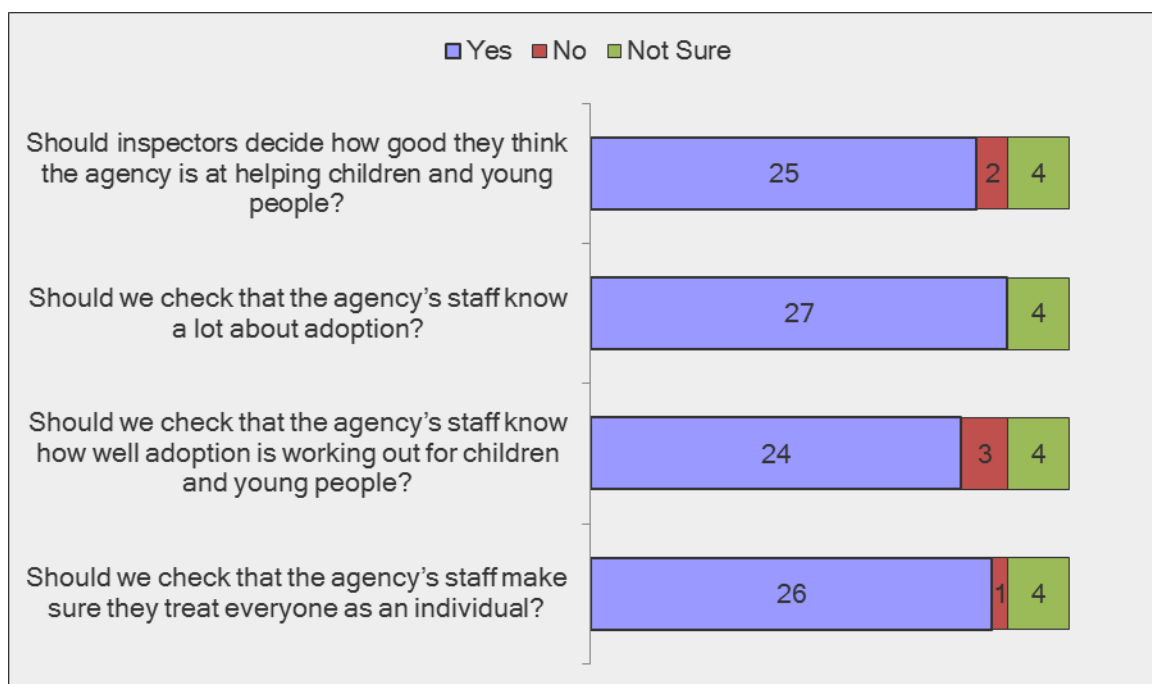




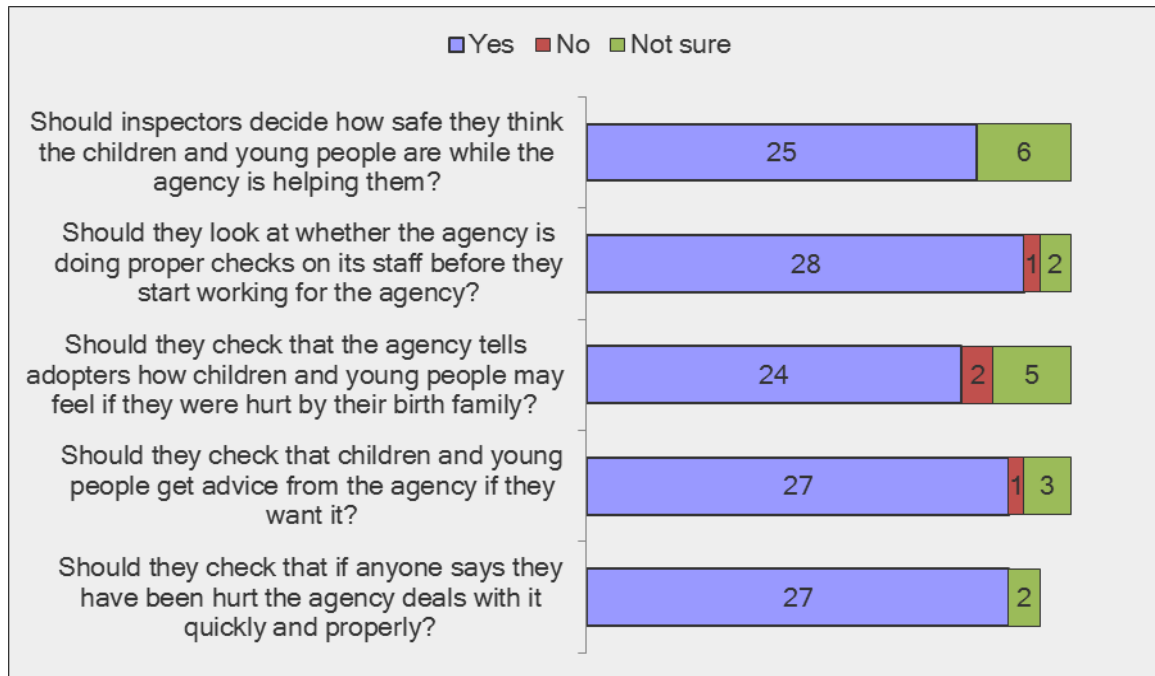
**Q3. We asked if inspectors should check on whether the help the agency has given was really what the children, young people and adults wanted and then asked about some of the things that inspectors will look for.**



**Q4. We asked if inspectors should decide how good they think the agency is at helping children and young people and then asked about some of things the inspector will look for when deciding this.**



**Q5. We asked if inspectors should decide how safe they think the children and young people are while the agency is helping them and then asked about some of the things inspectors will look for when deciding this.**



**Q6. We asked if inspectors should decide how well they think the agency is managed and then asked about some of the things inspectors would look for when deciding this.**

