Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey

Summary of returns Waves 1 to 4

August 2020

Contents

Headline facts and figures

- The majority of children looked after, children on a child protection plan and other children in need have had their cases reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak (89%, 91% and 86% respectively).
- The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has remained stable across the time period, with between 87% and 89% of local authorities reporting between 0 to 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19).
- Just over three quarters of local authorities have reported a rise in foster and residential placements costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (78% and 80% respectively in Wave 4).
- In Wave 4 the average number of referrals to children's social care services per local authority was 12% lower than the same period over the previous three years, this compares to 22% lower in Wave 3.
- The total number of referrals reported in Waves 1 to 4 of the survey was 41,190, this is around 18% lower than the same period over the past three years.
- The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 4 of the survey was 1,640, this is around 34% 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 2 weeks on the following areas:

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

Data coverage

This data release includes data for local authorities from:

Wave 1: Questions asking about the previous week cover 27 April to 3 May, questions about the previous 2 weeks cover 20 April to 3 May.

Wave 2: Questions asking about the previous week cover 11 to 17 May, questions about the previous 2 weeks cover 4 to 17 May.

Wave 3: Questions asking about the week before last cover 18 to 24 May, questions about the previous 2 weeks cover 18 to 31 May, questions about the previous 4 weeks cover 4 to 31 May.

Wave 4: Questions asking about the week before last cover 1 to 7 June, questions about the previous 2 weeks cover 1 to 14 June, questions about the previous 4 weeks cover 18 May to 14 June.

Summary of data

Contact with children supported by the LA Children's Social Care

Local authorities were asked about whether cases had been reviewed for Children Looked After (CLA), children on a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and other Children in Need (CIN), and whether they'd seen or contacted children in the last two weeks. A new question was added to Wave 3 of the survey which asks how many of the children in each group have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.
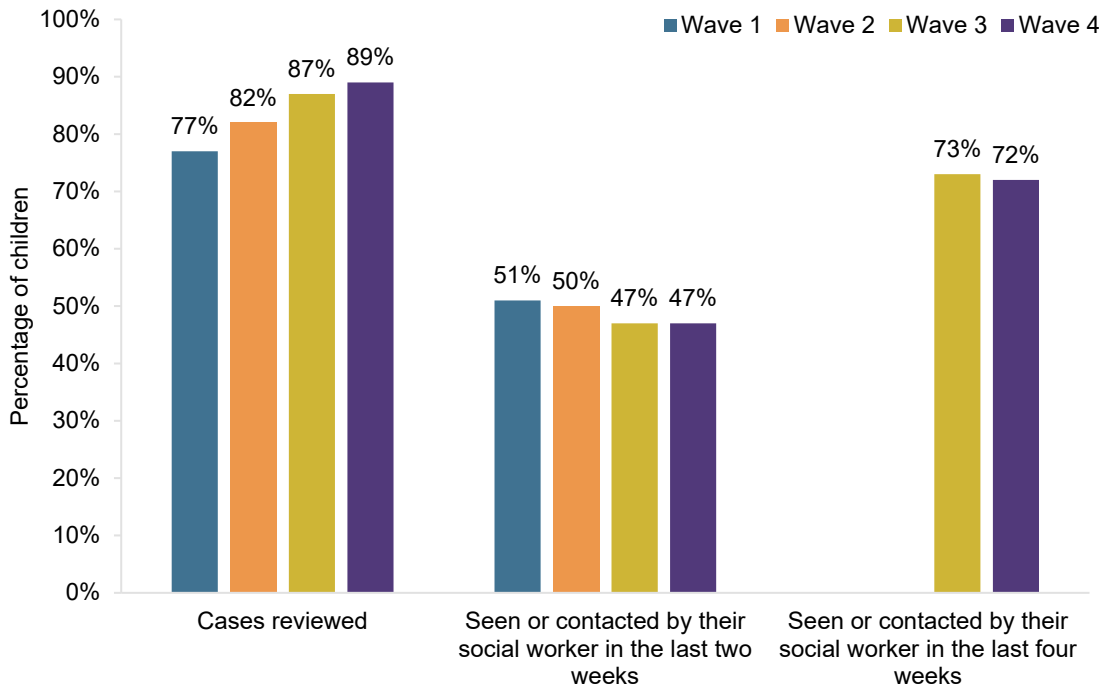
Definitions:

Contact: 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.

Reviews: A review involves the professional oversight of a child's circumstances, with a judgement made about the level of risk to that child either statutorily and/or in the context of coronavirus (COVID-19).
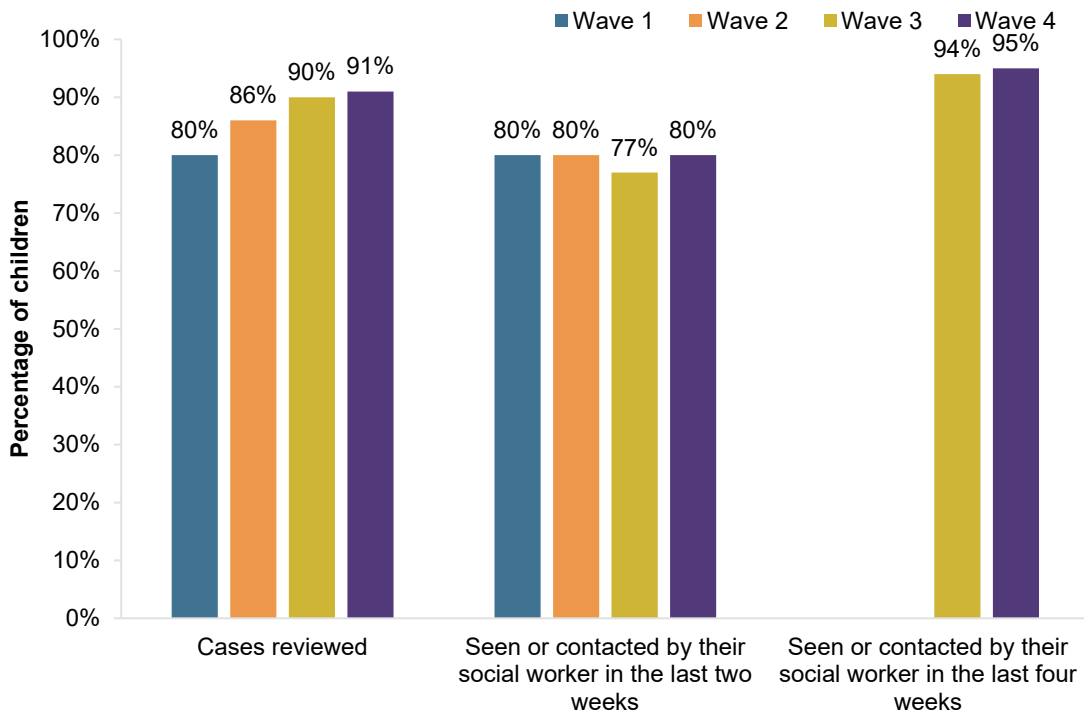
The proportion of children who have had their cases reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has been increasing over time for CLA, children on a CPP and other CIN. The percentage of children who have been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks has remained stable across Waves 3 and 4 of the survey. In Wave 4 72% of CLA, 95% of children on a CPP and 64% of other CIN had been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

Figure 1: Local authority plan reviews and contact with social workers, Children Looked After

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 149, Wave 2 - 147, Wave 3 - 149, Wave 4 - 146.

Figure 2: Local authority plan reviews and contact with social workers, Children on a Child Protection Plan
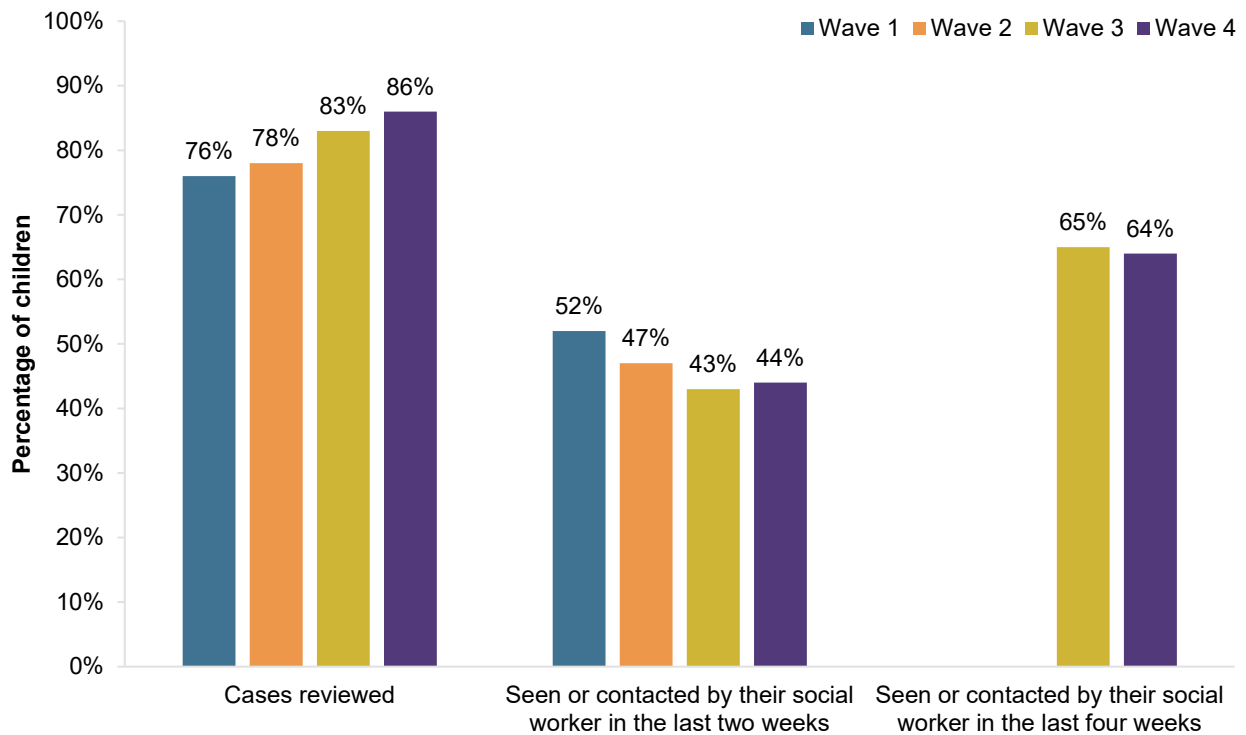

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 149, Wave 2 - 147, Wave 3 - 149, Wave 4 - 146.

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Figure 3: Local authority plan reviews and contact with social workers, other Children in Need

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 148, Wave 2 - 147, Wave 3 - 148, Wave 4 - 146.

Local authorities have reported that not all children in other CIN group are required to be seen every 4 weeks.

Reoccurring themes when local authorities were asked what steps they are taking to safeguard children they are not in contact with included:

- Working with other agencies to manage risk.
- Liaising with schools to ensure welfare checks and contact with children who aren't attending school and are hard for social care to reach.
- Using police welfare checks if there is no compliance with social work visits.
- Risk assessing and RAG rating in light of the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases across the local authority.

Children's Social Care Workforce

Local authorities were asked about the availability of their staff during coronavirus (COVID-19), both the workforce as a whole and residential care staff. A new question was added to Wave 3 of the survey which asks whether the local authority directly employs residential workers. Note that local authorities were previously reporting 0% if they do not directly employ residential workers. As such the sample consisted of fewer local authorities from Wave 3, and comparisons across waves should be treated with caution.

The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has remained stable across the time period, with between 87% and 89% of local authorities reporting between 0 to 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19). The estimated proportion of staff unavailable is slightly higher for residential care staff, with 16% of local authorities reporting between 11 and 20% of staff unavailable, and 7% reporting between 21 and 30% of staff unavailable in Wave 4.

Table 1: Proportion of local authorities that reported staff not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)

	Proportion of staff unavailable			
	0-10%	11-20%	21-30%	31% and over
Social Workers				
Wave 1	87%	9%	3%	1%
Wave 2	87%	10%	3%	0%
Wave 3	89%	8%	3%	0%
Wave 4	88%	10%	2%	0%
Residential care staff				
Wave 1	75%	13%	6%	5%
Wave 2	74%	16%	6%	4%
Wave 3	73%	15%	7%	6%
Wave 4	73%	16%	7%	5%

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 – 140 (social worker figures) and 114 (residential care figures), Wave 2 – 144 (social worker figures) and 115 (residential care figures), Wave 3 – 146 (social worker figures) and 103 (residential care figures), Wave 4 – 145 (social worker figures) and 102 (residential care figures).

From the open text responses, local authorities provided examples where staff had been re-deployed, and some described cases where virtual training had been delivered to assist practitioners in reflecting on the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) upon practice. Some local authorities said that they have a rota for when social workers can work in the office. One local authority did stress that the demand on frontline staff is unprecedented at this time and another local authority was concerned about staff isolation. One local authority said that they have continued to successfully recruit staff and foster carers virtually.
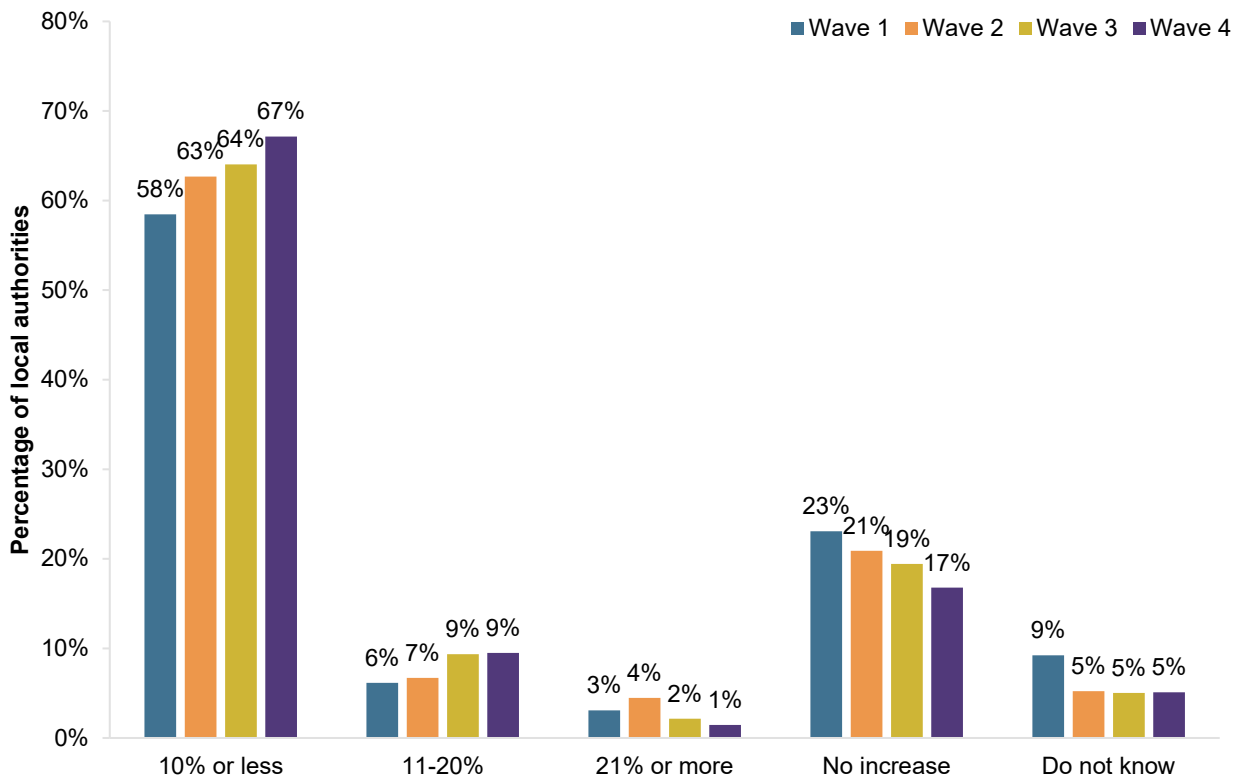
Cost Pressures

Local authorities were asked to estimate their weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19), for looked after children in foster and residential care placements.
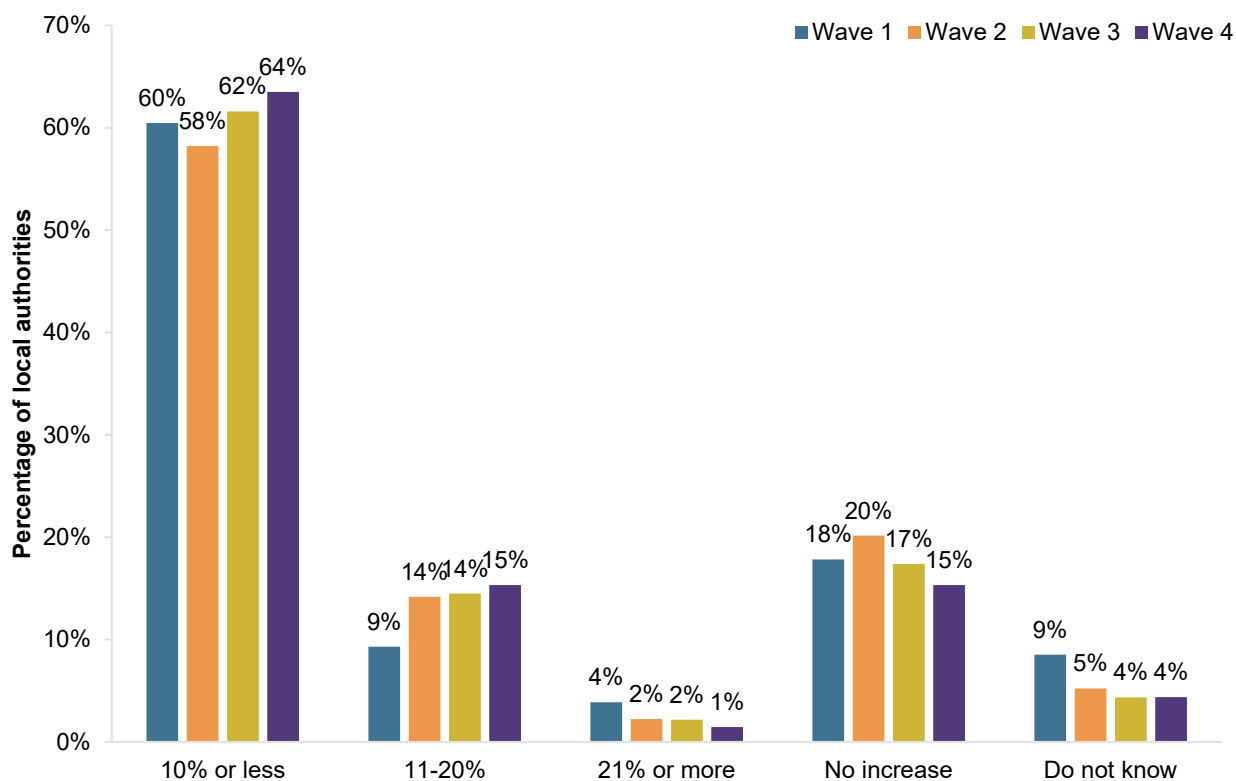
There has been an increase in the proportion of local authorities reporting a rise in weekly costs for foster care and residential placements. Just over three quarters of local authorities have reported a rise in foster and residential placements costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (78% and 80% respectively in Wave 4).

Figure 4: Estimated increase in weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19), foster care placements

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 130, Wave 2 - 134, Wave 3 - 139, Wave 4 - 137.

Figure 5: Estimated increase in weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19), residential care placements

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 129, Wave 2 - 134, Wave 3 - 138, Wave 4 - 137.

In the open text questions, local authorities have reported the financial pressures coming from a larger than usual numbers of both children in care (through reduced step-downs) and CPPs (because fewer are concluding).

Referral to Children's Social Care services

Local authorities were asked to report the number of referrals to children's social care services they received. From Wave 3 the survey asks 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.

The total number of referrals to children's social care services reported in Waves 1 to 4 of the survey was 41,190, this is around 18% lower than the same period over the past three years. In Wave 4 the average number of referrals per local authority was 12% lower than the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018, this compares to 22% lower in Wave 3.
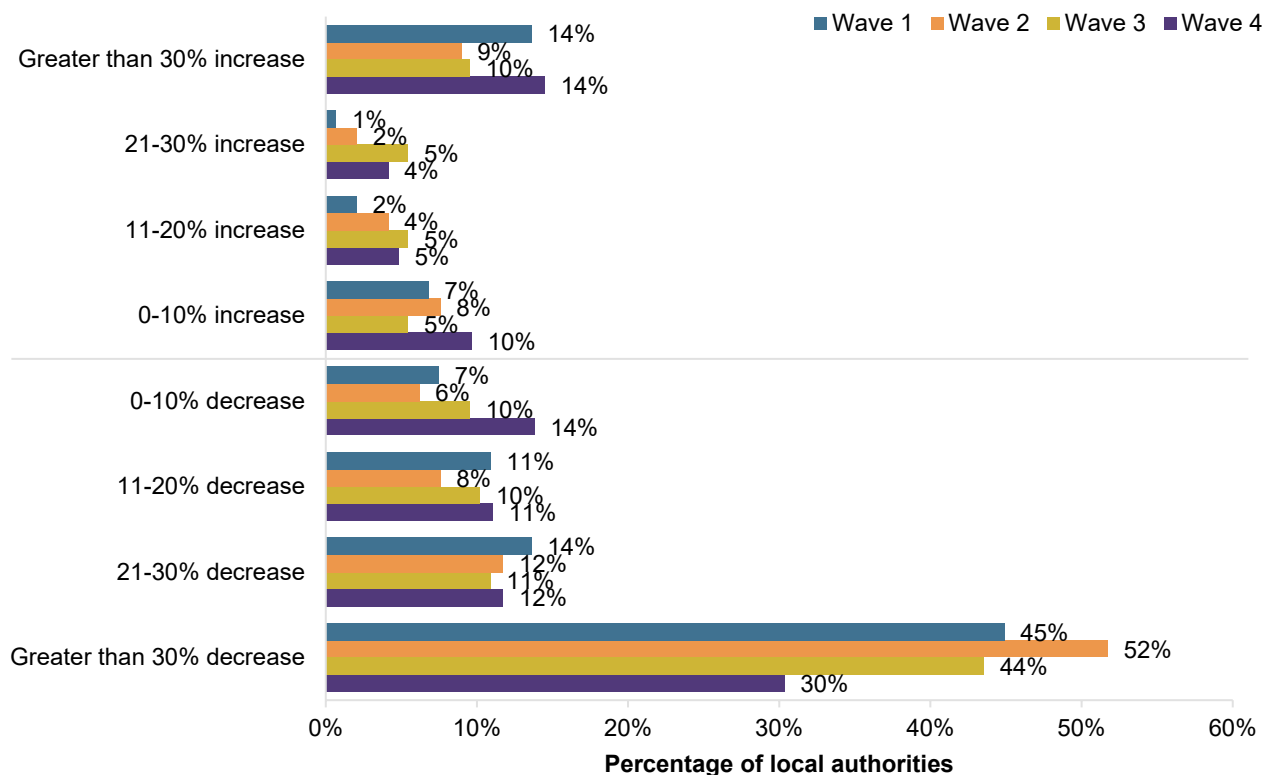
Table 2: Average number of referrals per local authority, compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018

	Survey	3-year average	Percentage change from 3-year average
Wave 1	49	63	-22%
Wave 2	49	72	-32%
Wave 3	56	72	-22%
Wave 4	63	72	-12%

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 148, Wave 2 - 146, Wave 3 – 148, Wave 4 – 145.

The majority of local authorities have seen a greater than 30% decrease in the average number of referrals compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018. This has decreased in wave 4 and there are a greater proportion of local authorities seeing a 0-10% difference. However there are large variations between local authorities.

Figure 6: Comparison between reported referrals and 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018

Notes:

Note: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 148, Wave 2 - 146, Wave 3 - 148, Wave 4 - 145.

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There has been a decrease of approximately three quarters in referrals from schools, and an increase of 16% in referrals from police compared to the same weeks in 2018.

Table 3: Source of referrals from Waves 3 onwards compared to the same weeks in 2018

Source of referral	Survey Waves 3 onwards	Same weeks in 2018[1]	Percentage change from 2018
Individuals	1,810	1,920	-6%
Schools	1,360	5,960	-77%
Health services	3,270	3,580	-9%
Police	8,440	7,300	16%
Other sources	6,580	6,340	4%
Total	**21,570**	**25,570**	

Notes: Referral source figures do not sum to the total due to the source missing. Other sources include local authority services, legal agencies and children's centres.

In the open text questions local authorities reported that contacts/referrals remain lower than usual but that these are starting to increase, particularly compared to the immediate weeks post-lockdown. Some local authorities are anticipating a future spike in demand.

Children who have started to be looked after

Local authorities were asked to report the number of children that started to be looked after. From Wave 3 the survey asks 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.

Note that due to small numbers, there are large fluctuations in weekly data.

The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 4 of the survey was 1,640, this is around 34% 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 years[2]. Therefore we may expect the numbers returned in this survey to be lower than the same period over the past three years.
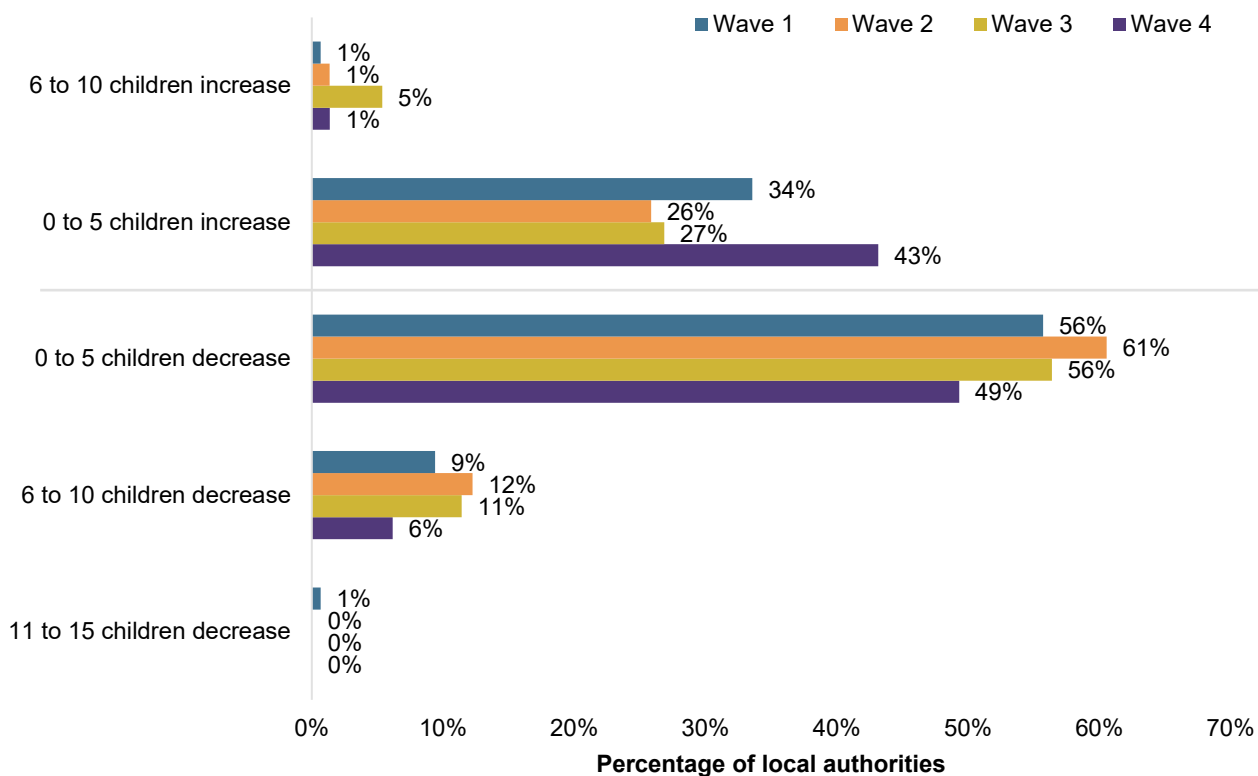
For the majority of local authorities there has been a difference of up to 5 children compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018. In wave 4 there

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[1] Characteristics of children in need: 2018 to 2019

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

has been an increase in the proportion of local authorities who have seen an increase of up to 5 children starting to be looked after compared to 2016-18.

Figure 7: Comparison between number of children starting to be looked after and 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018

Notes: Based on returns from the following number of local authorities: Wave 1 - 149, Wave 2 - 147, Wave 3 - 149, Wave 4 - 146.

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'. 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.

Alternative ways of working

Some local authorities mentioned the alternative steps they are taking to safeguard children including:

- Risk assessing and RAG rating in light of the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases across the local authority.
- Varying the frequency of visits in line with RAG ratings (some local authorities are not seeing all children every 2 or 4 weeks because this is not deemed to be necessary).
- Conducting a mix of face to face and virtual visits and carrying out face to face visits with higher risk cases.
- Using alternative forms of communication, for example telephone calls and WhatsApp to stay in touch.
- Providing some children and families with technology and food packages to stay in touch.

Adolescents

Some local authorities specifically talked about **adolescents** in the open text questions.

- Local authorities provided positive example of virtual working and some are finding that older teens prefer virtual contacts: "*there are examples of **improved engagement** from some young people as a result of the digital approach to virtual visits, and creative approaches being used by social workers to engage and complete direct work with children*". One local authority said that "*there has been further feedback from children that they would want the virtual offer to continue*".
- However whilst virtual contact appears preferable for some, a small number of local authorities spoke specifically about **struggles engaging with teenagers**: "*this older cohort is difficult to engage and many have expressed their dismay at the increased frequency of contact as 'harassment'*".

- Ensuring lockdown and social distancing compliance amongst teenagers is a challenge for some local authorities.
- A theme mentioned by several local authorities in the later survey waves is how **prolonged lockdown is affecting adolescents**. A local authority has experienced an increase in mental health-related referrals amongst young people: *"there are concerns about the increased mental ill health and risk of suicide among children and young people".* Another local authority, from a recent survey that they had undertaken, described some of the things that young people are worried about: *"advice for young black people as the news state the black ethnicity are at more risk to catch the coronavirus (COVID-19)… worries about how progression into university and coronavirus (COVID-19) affecting their chances to get into a course of their choice… anxiety around returning to school".*

Working with schools and other safeguarding partners

Some local authorities provided examples of how they are working with schools and other safeguarding partners in the open text questions.

- Local areas appear to differ in the way that the 'contact with children' information is being coordinated and collected across schools. Some **local authorities contact their schools** about priority children. One local authority told us *"our safeguarding unit contact schools weekly to determine which vulnerable children have attended school… this has helped social workers to manage risk and target increased visits to those children who are not attending school and being seen by other professionals".* In other areas, **schools contact the local authority:** *"all schools have a dedicated email to notify social workers of children not in school (if expected). Any non-school attendance is followed up by the social worker and all parents have been written to encouraging them to send their children to school with support from their social worker. If contact is not made as agreed within the risk assessment, a home visit will be carried out."*
- Local authorities also provided examples of how they are working with wider safeguarding partners. A shared mailbox is in use in one local authority: *"children's services set up a partnership mailbox for agencies to provide information about contact with children to social workers and other partnership agencies working with the family. This ensures that lower level concerns are shared across partners. … We have extended use of the mailbox and GP practices have now started to use the mailbox, providing information on over 50 children during April".* Local authorities told us how they have set up multi-agency working groups and forums dealing with coronavirus (COVID-19) issues *"as part of the safeguarding partnerships response to coronavirus (COVID-19), weekly meetings between the statutory partners have been taking place to ensure that we are working collaboratively."*

Recovery planning

In later survey waves, local authorities told us about their recovery planning in the open text responses:

- Local authorities are planning incremental approaches to direct work.
- A return to office-based working is taking place in some local authorities.
- Local authorities talked about some of the issues that they are experiencing as lockdown eases, for example "*reset planning has provided some questions: how to accommodate staff needing child care and not able to use grandparents / before and after school clubs not running, anxieties re use of public transport, the built environment and physical space needs*".
- Guidance would be welcomed by some local authorities, for example "*clear national guidance around the key principles and expectations in relation to face-to-face parenting assessments and family contact time, and how these can safely take place. The courts are indicating that they expect more face-to-face contact with families, and whilst desirable, this presents complex issues for local authorities to manage*".

Methodology

Survey

The latest version of the survey is shown below. All local authorities were asked to complete the form.

Question 1

How many children looked after, children on a protection plan and other children in need do you have in the following groups?
   a) have had their plan reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
   b) have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 2 weeks?
   c) have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 4 weeks?

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 (FTE) 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

In the last week, what do you estimate has been the increase, if any, in your weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19)? For each part, choose one of the available options: 10% or less, 11-20%, 21% or more, no increase, don't know.
   a) Foster care placements
   b) Residential care placements

Question 4

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

Question 5

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 6

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

For children and young people with EHC plans, we are asking local authorities to work with educational providers, families and the child or young person to carry out risk assessments in order to judge whether the child or young person should be attending school or college rather than remaining at home during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

This question asks about the children and young people with EHC plans who have undergone this risk assessment process in your LA.

Question 7

What is the total number of children and young people aged 0-25 who have EHC plans for whom your LA has responsibility?

Question 8

Of these children and young people, how many have been risk assessed to judge whether they should be attending an educational setting?

Question 9

Use this space to tell us about any other trends, challenges and best practice that you wish to share (open text – 3000 character limit)

Question 10

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

Validation of submitted data

Comparisons are made to previous waves of the survey, other reported data and information obtained by discussions with local authorities to provide reassurance that the data is a fair reflection of the national picture.

Response rate

The overall response rate for Wave 1 was 99%, 97% for Wave 2, 99% for Wave 3 and 97% for Wave 4, however the response rates for individual questions vary. Where a question was not completed by all local authorities this is indicated in the relevant section.

Department for Education

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