Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey

Summary of returns Waves 1 to 14

December 2020

Contents

Headline facts and figures

Headline figures for Wave 14 of the survey:

Number of children (16 – 18 November)	The total number of children looked after (CLA) was 7% higher than the same time in 2018 and the total number of children on a child protection plan (CPP) was 1% higher.
Contact in the last four weeks (19 October – 15 November)	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 (70%, 95% and 63% respectively).
Social worker and residential care worker availability (16 – 18 November)	The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has stabilised, with 3% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 14. This is similar to 4% reported in Waves 12 (19 – 21 October) and 13 (02 – 04 November), and this is lower than the peak of 13% in May. Almost a quarter of local authorities (23%) reported over 10% of their residential care workers were unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 14, compared to 12% of local authorities in Wave 13 (02-04 November). 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.
Referrals (02 – 08 November)	The total number of referrals during Wave 14 was 12% 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 14 of the survey was 6,030. This is around 29% lower than the same period over the past three years.

Background

Survey

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

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

Previous publications from the survey[1] contain analysis of questions that have been removed from the survey and open text questions that is not repeated here.

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

Summary of data

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

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

In Wave 14 the total number of CLA was 7% higher than the same time in 2018 and this has remained stable since Wave 2. The total number of children on a CPP was 1% higher than the same time in 2018, and this has increased slightly since Wave 4 when it was 2% lower than 2018.

Figure 1: Difference in the total number of CLA and children on a CPP compared to the same time in 2018
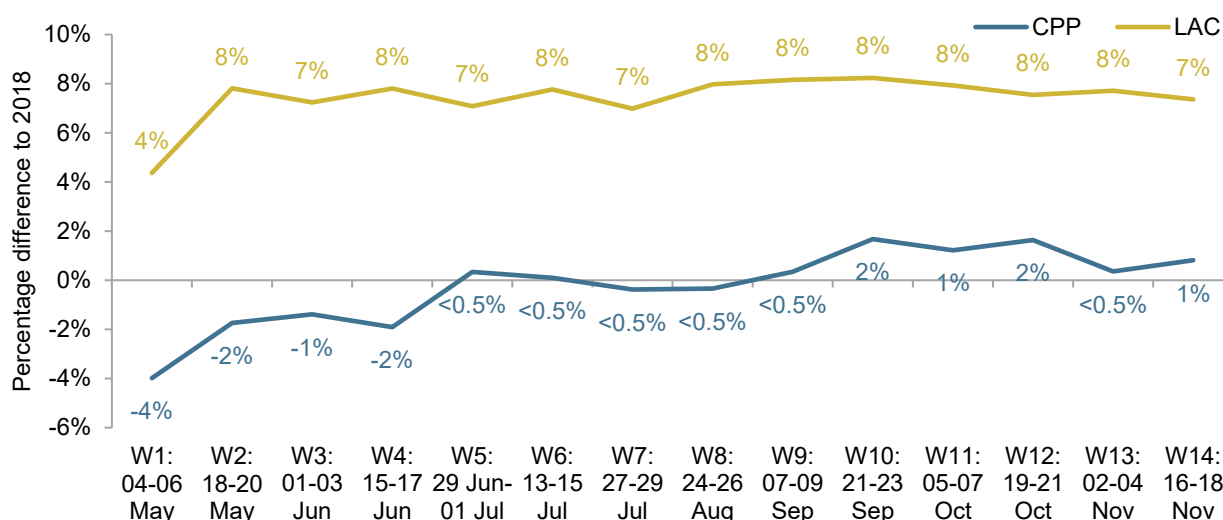
Notes:
'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.
See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

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

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

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

In Wave 14, 70% of CLA, 95% of children on a CPP and 63% of other CIN had been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks. The percentage of children who have been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks decreased slightly in Wave 8 and has remained stable since. In the open text responses in earlier waves, many local authorities report they are returning to business as usual and contacting children within statutory timescales. The Children Act 1989 contains guidelines that differ widely for different groups of children, and indicates that the frequency of visits should be determined on a case by case basis. Therefore it is not expected that all children should be contacted every four weeks.

Figure 2: Contact with social workers in the last four weeks
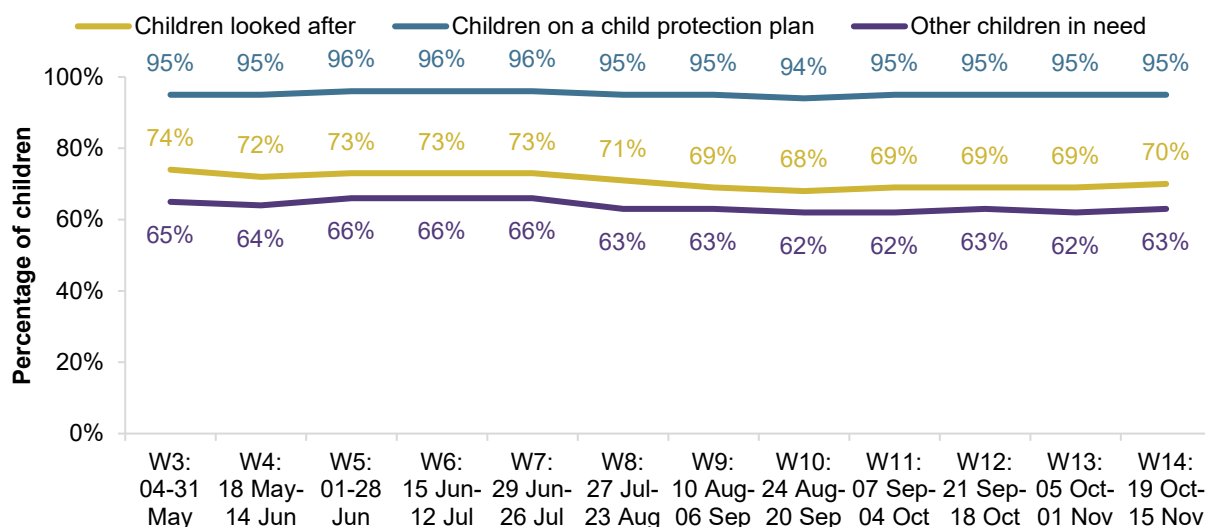
Notes:
'W3' refers to Wave 3 and so on.

Guidance to local authorities on the correct methodology to calculate other CIN was improved at Wave 3. Local authorities were prompted again at Wave 6. This may explain decreases in percentages for this group over time.
See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

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

Across subsequent waves (5-12) many local authorities reported having further adapted their approach with more face-to-face contact resuming. From Wave 5, some local authorities reported activities that were focusing on hidden harms and early help to identify children who may be at risk. Some local authorities were developing new ways to manage risk and monitor contact, for example through new reporting tools, to safeguard the children that they were not in contact with. With children returning to school in September, local authorities in later waves (11-12) once again reported working closely with schools to monitor attendance and ensure children not at school are contacted.

In the most recent waves of the survey (13-14) local authorities have been reviewing contact arrangements in light of the national restrictions introduced in November. Approaches to contact vary but most local authorities emphasised that frequency and modality of visits depends on case type. One local authority explained that *"All CPP children must be visited face to face at least once every 4 weeks, with a virtual visit in addition during this period. The virtual visit for CPP will require approval or it will have to be physical. Children in care will have a minimum of monthly visits virtually and physical visits at least once every 6 weeks. CIN will have a minimum of monthly physical visits and 1 virtual visit during the month."*

The majority of respondents in the open text question also indicated that they are trying to continue with face-to-face visits as much as possible. One local authority told us *"in preparation for the forthcoming lockdown we are communicating with staff that we should maintain 'business as usual' as much as possible; subject to appropriate risk assessments. Practically, this means that we are maintaining direct contact with children and families."* Where virtual visits are used in place of face to face visits, some local authorities told us that they are quality assuring and scrutinising the use of these arrangements. One local authority commented, *"for those that have not been seen in person, the arrangements are reviewed by managers on a monthly basis. The QA activity undertaken highlighted a strong response, demonstrating that children were safe and that care plans continued to progress".* Another local authority explained said, *"where there is a proposal to replace a face to face visit in the next 4 weeks with a virtual visit this will be agreed by the network and then proposed to the IRO for sign off".*

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 stabilised; 3% of local authorities reported more than 10% of their workforce unavailable in Wave 14 compared to 4% in Waves 12 and 13. It remains lower than the peak of 13% in May.

The proportion of residential care staff unavailable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has seen a large increase in the latest wave, with 23% of local authorities reporting over 10% of staff unavailable in Wave 14, compared to 12% in Wave 13 and a low of 8% in Wave 11. 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)
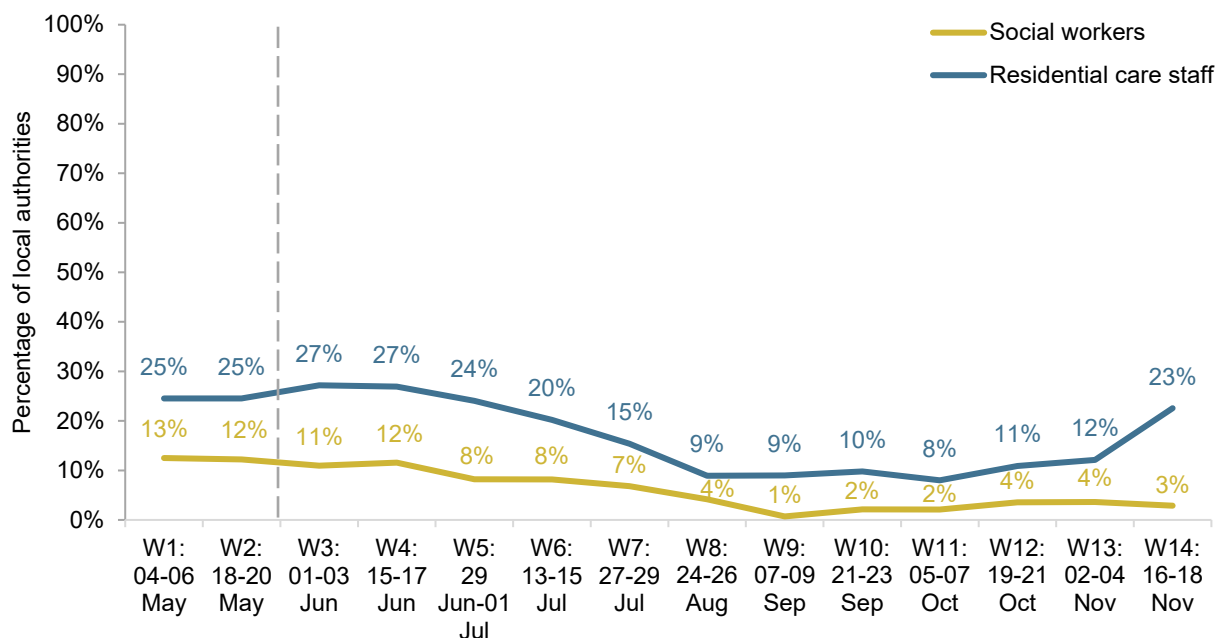
Notes:
'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.
The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.
See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text responses, local authorities told us in earlier waves of the survey (1-4) that workforce availability linked to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was not as problematic as they originally expected at the outset. Some local authorities voiced concerns about the demands on frontline staff and staff isolation with the advent of staff working from home. Some local authorities provided examples where staff had been re-deployed, and training was provided on the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on practice. In later survey waves (5-11), no common themes about the workforce were reported in the open text response. From Wave 12 of the survey, some local authorities in Tier 2 and Tier 3 restrictions started to experience workforce unavailability. In the most recent survey waves (13 and 14) more local authorities are telling us that they have more staff off sick and self-isolating. Some local authorities tell us that they are closely

monitoring this and describe some of their mitigating actions, for example redeploying and recruiting staff and re-prioritising work.

# Referrals to Children's Social Care services

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

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

The total number of referrals from 143 local authorities was 10,450 in Wave 14, compared to 11,100 from 142 local authorities in Wave 13. In the latest wave, the total number of referrals was 12% lower than the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018; this is compared to 8% higher during Wave 13.

The total number of referrals to children's social care services reported in Waves 1 to 14 of the survey was 148,330, this is around 10% lower than the same period over the past three years.

Figure 4: Difference in the total number of referrals compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018
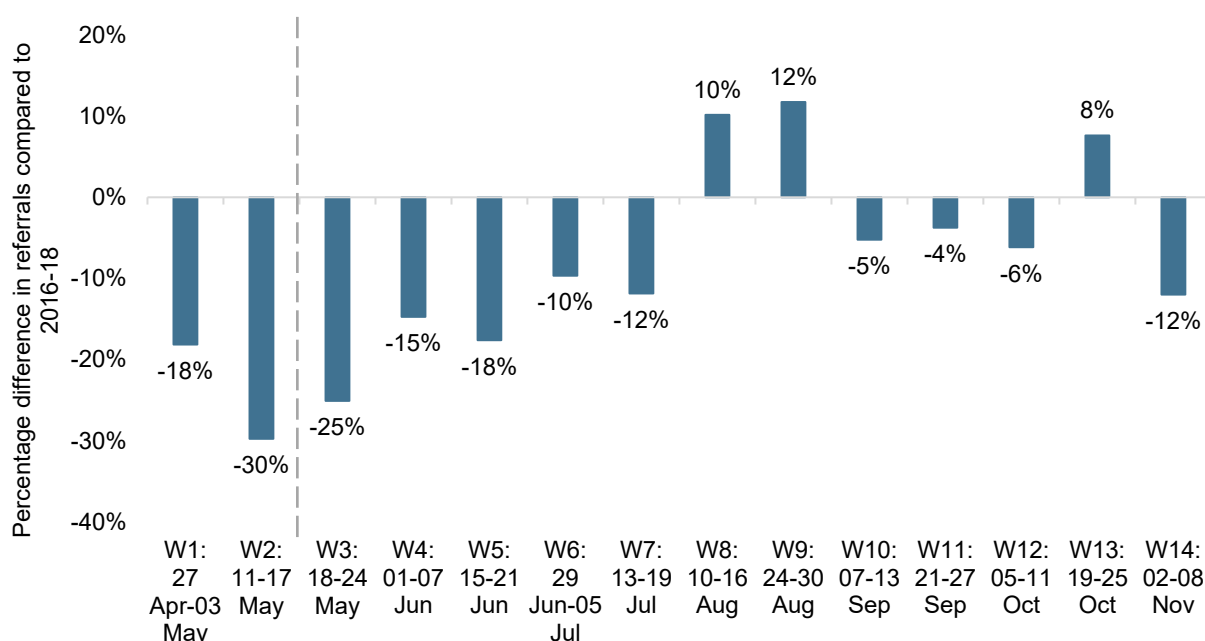
Notes:
'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.
The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.
Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues. Comparator data for these LAs was also removed.

During Wave 14, the increase in referrals from schools that usually occurs following half term did not occur, resulting in 15% fewer referrals from schools compared to usual levels. During Wave 13, referrals from schools were 60% higher than the same week in 2018; note this week was half term for some schools this year, but dates can change from year to year. Health services were the only referral source to have higher than usual levels of referrals in Wave 14 at 3%.

Table 1: Number of referrals received from each source over Waves 3-14 compared to the same weeks in 2018

Wave	Referral source: Individuals	Referral source: Schools	Referral source: Health services	Referral source: Police	Referral source: Other sources
W3: 18-24 May	-16%	-82%	-20%	11%	-4%
W4: 01-07 Jun	1%	-71%	-2%	8%	2%
W5: 15-21 Jun	-9%	-65%	-8%	12%	-4%
W6: 29 Jun–05 Jul	-2%	-60%	5%	10%	-3%
W7: 13-19 Jul	7%	-60%	-1%	13%	-11%
W8: 10-16 Aug	18%	-29%	5%	23%	-2%
W9: 24-30 Aug	16%	-21%	14%	13%	22%
W10: 07-13 Sep	-4%	-12%	6%	8%	-5%
W11: 21-27 Sep	5%	-11%	<0.5%	8%	3%
W12: 05-11 Oct	-7%	-1%	-9%	-1%	-4%
W13: 19-25 Oct	1%	60%	-7%	-3%	9%
W14: 02-08 Nov	-4%	-15%	3%	-7%	-3%

Notes:
'W3' refers to Wave 3 and so on.
Other sources include local authority services, legal agencies and children's centres.
See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Across survey Waves 9-14, analysis of the open text responses show very mixed experiences in the numbers of referrals received across local authorities. Some local authorities reported that the number of referrals has increased and are now at levels higher than average. Whilst others report that referrals remain lower than average or as expected at this time of year.

In early survey waves (5-8) local authorities were generally anticipating a spike in demand and some local authorities described what they were doing to predict and plan for this, for example, by moving resource to assessment teams and strengthening the 'front door'. In later survey waves (11-12) local authorities generally reported that this anticipated spike in demand had not occurred as expected and some local authorities were expecting this over the medium to long term. In the most recent survey waves (13-14) a couple of local authorities remarked that the spike in demand had happened and had now abated.

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 145 local authorities during Wave 14 was 410 compared to 610 over the same period in previous years (-33%). The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 14 of the survey was 6,030, this is around 29% lower than the same period over the past three years. There has been a downward trend in the number of children starting to be looked after in recent 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.

Figure 5: Total number of children looked after starting per week and 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018
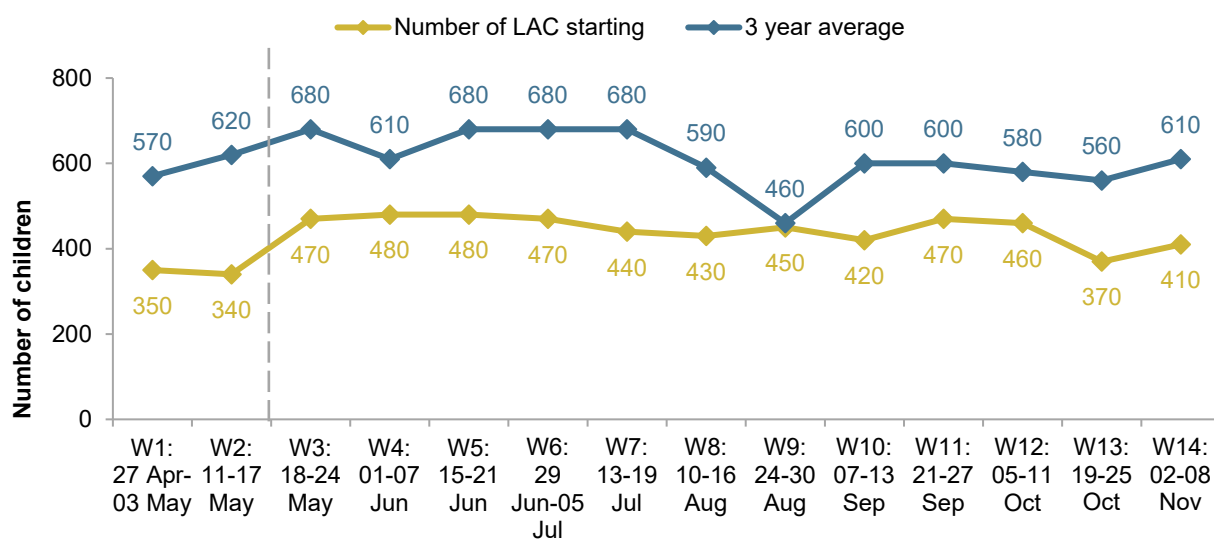
Notes:
'W1' refers to Wave 1 and so on.
The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.
See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text questions from Wave 5 onwards a small but growing number of local authorities report that they are experiencing an increase in the stock of looked after

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

children. The reasons they cite are both a lack of direct work with families and services in support of reunifications and delays in court hearings. This means that planned permanency moves are not happening. One local authority explains *"…at the same time issues with the Courts and problems progressing permanency plans mean there is a huge rise in our overall number of children in care. There is no increase in children entering care but there is a significant reduction in children leaving care or achieving permanency"*.

Key themes from open question responses

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

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

Previous publications from the survey[1] contain some analysis of the open text questions that is not repeated here.

Working with coronavirus (COVID-19) and the future

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

In the following waves of the survey (5-10), 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 waves (11-12) local authorities reported varied experiences and priorities depending on which coronavirus (COVID-19) tier the local authority is in. Those in high tiers reported readjusting practices to ensure children and families are protected.

In the most recent waves of the survey (13-14) local authorities reported reviewing their practice in light of the national restrictions introduced in November. In particular, local authorities told us that they were reviewing the frequency and mode of contact arrangements, as discussed on page 7. A few local authorities also reported reviewing their local operational guidance and business continuity planning.

In response to changing demand and staffing pressures, some local authorities also told us in Waves 13 and 14 that they are recruiting and reorganising social work teams to ensure they have suitable capacity to work with children and families in need; *"extended recruitment of residential workers is supporting edge of care work and the resilience of residential staff teams"*; *"we have responded to this (increase in referrals) by agreeing and recruiting an extra team on our front door"* and; *"we are planning how to prioritise further should staffing resilience decrease in the short term due to the impact of Covid locally"*.

Working with schools and other safeguarding partners

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

In the early survey waves (1-8) local authorities told us how they were working with schools to coordinate and collect information on attendance and contact with vulnerable children.

Over the summer, local authorities carried out activities to encourage attendance in preparation for schools reopening and some told us that they provided support to vulnerable children during this time.

In later survey waves (9-14), local authorities resumed 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 have become more embedded over time.

Case Complexity

Across all the survey waves some 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. In later survey waves (9-14) a growing number of local authorities also describe an increase in the complexity of the cases that they are seeing.

Examples of increased case complexity vary but local authorities tell us that these 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 LAs told us that case complexity is evidenced through the increase in the contact to referral and referral to assessment conversation rates that some local authorities are experiencing. One local authority told us "*contacts and referrals are where they were pre-covid and have been since May 2020 but the conversion rate from contact to referral has increased by an average of 3%"* and another LA said "*this conversion rate of 30% is higher than anything we have seen in the last 12 months, generally we have between 19% and 25%. This is going to cause onwards pressures throughout the service which is being monitored".*

Some local authorities tell us that case complexity is associated with the amount of time families have spent together which has led to a more pressurised home environment. Some local authorities think that the increase in case complexity is in part explained by the reduced availability of some support services and that some services that are provided virtually do not always have the desired effect. This is particularly the case for services for children and parents suffering mental ill health.

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:
      Referral Source:
   a) Individual
   b) Schools
   c) Health services
   d) Police
   e) Other

Question 5
How many children started to be looked-after in the week before last?

Question 6
Can you please tell us if you are seeing any changes in the demand for children's social care services (e.g. increases in referrals, changes in case complexity or the profile of children being supported) and the impact of these changes.

Question 7

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

Table A1: Time periods referred to in questions

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

Annex B: response rates

Table B1: overall survey response rates

	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	144	95%
Wave 14	145	96%

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

	Total number of children			Seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
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	144	144	144	143	143	141
Wave 14	145	145	145	143	143	141

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

	Proportion not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)		Number and source of referrals to children's social care	Children starting to be looked after
	Social workers	**Residential care workers**		
Wave 1	136	110	143	145
Wave 2	139	110	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	140	102	144	146
Wave 11	143	100	145	147
Wave 12	141	101	143	145
Wave 13	139	100	142	144
Wave 14	139	102	143	145

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