



Department
for Education

Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey

**Summary of returns: September 2021 to
January 2022**

January 2022

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Headline facts and figures

Headline figures for September 2021 – January 2022:

Number of children	<p>The total number of children looked after (CLA) and children on a child protection plan (CPP) has remained relatively stable between September 2021 and January 2022.</p> <p>In January 2022 the number of CLA was 3% higher than the same time in 2019-20 and the total number of children on a CPP was 2% lower, similar to previous waves.</p>
Contact in the last four weeks	<p>A large proportion of CLA, children on a CPP and other children in need (CIN) had been in contact with a social worker in the last four weeks, and these proportions have remained stable between September 2021 and January 2022.</p> <p>In the latest wave, the proportions were 63%, 93% and 58% respectively.</p>
Social worker and residential care worker availability	<p>Around 1 in 10 (11%) of local authorities reported over 10% of their social workers unable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in January 2022. This increased from zero local authorities between October – December 2021.</p> <p>Almost a quarter of local authorities (23%) reported over 10% of their residential care staff unable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in January 2022. This increased from 4% in November – December 2021. 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	<p>The number of referrals in September were around the same as usual for that time of year, although referrals from schools were 27% higher. The number of referrals then fell to 8% lower in October, 6% lower in November, and 9% lower in December 2021.</p>

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. Survey returns are referred to as 'waves' in this report. This report summarises the survey returns between Wave 27 (September 2021) and Wave 31 (January 2022). The charts show data from all waves of the survey, however previous publications¹ contain analysis including open text questions from earlier waves of the survey that are not repeated here. Themes from the open text questions include working with coronavirus (COVID-19) and the future, working with schools and other safeguarding partners, adolescents, case complexity, placement sufficiency, expectations and planning for referrals and pressures on the care system.

Local authorities were asked to report to DfE on a fortnightly basis between May 2020 to March 2021, then on a monthly basis between April to December. The survey has returned to a fortnightly return from January 2022 in response to the rise in coronavirus (COVID-19) cases. There was a four week break in the collection during the 2020 and 2021 summer holidays and over the 2020 Christmas holidays.

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

The 'Characteristics of children in need'² and 'Children looked after in England including adoptions'³ publications contain statistics on children's social care between the period April 2020 - March 2021 that partially overlap with this survey. Figures may differ due to methodological differences.

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

² [Characteristics of children in need: 2020 to 2021](#)

³ [Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2020 to 2021](#)

Summary of data

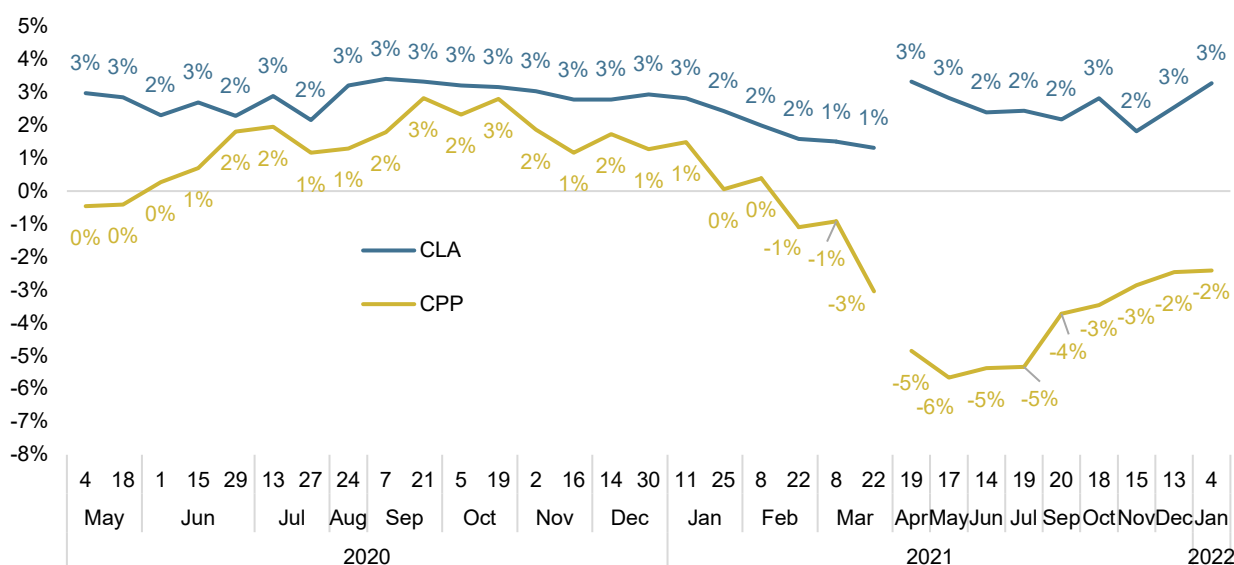
Total number of children supported by local authority Children’s Social Care

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.

The total number of CLA and children on a CPP has remained relatively stable between September 2021 and January 2022. In January 2022, the total number of CLA was 3% higher than the same time in 2019-20 and the total number of children on a CPP was 2% lower.

Please note that comparisons from April 2021 to previous waves should be made with caution due to the comparator changing from March 2020 to April 2019 in April 2021. Therefore while data up until March 2021 is compared to data from one year previous, data from April 2021 onwards is compared to data from two years previous. Given over recent years the total number of CLA has been gradually increasing and the total number of children on a CPP has been gradually decreasing, the data received in the survey may be a continuation of those trends; using an older comparator in April 2021 onwards may make the difference appear larger than it did in March 2020.

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



Notes:

- Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.
- Date refers to the date at the beginning of the collection period e.g. Wave 31: 04-07 January is presented as 4 January.

- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- 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

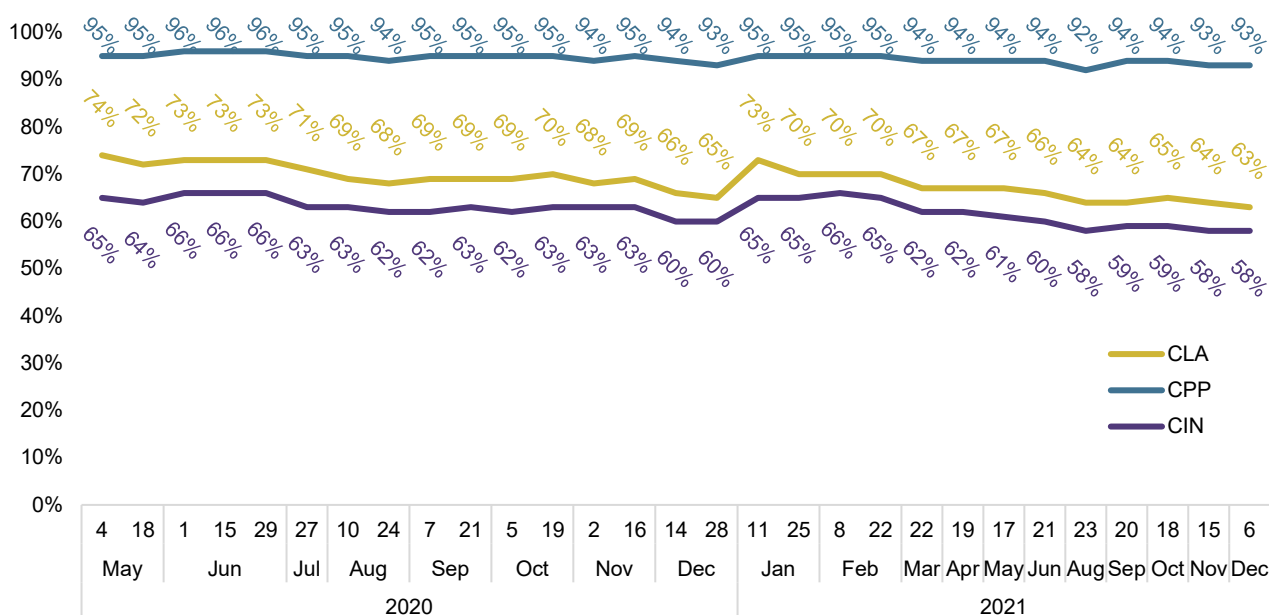
Contact is defined as communication that has taken place with the child/young person, including both face to face visits and remote communication, such as telephone calls or other types of messaging.

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 August 2020 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.

A large proportion of CLA, children on a CPP and other children in need (CIN) had been in contact with a social worker in the last four weeks (63%, 93% and 58% respectively) in the January 2022 collection (06 December 2021 – 02 January 2022). These proportions have remained relatively stable over time.

In December 2021, some local authorities told us in the open text question that they are putting in place plans to make sure that contact with children is prioritised in response to the emergence of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) Omicron variant. This is consistent with the actions reported by local authorities during previous periods of rises in coronavirus (COVID-19) cases or tighter restrictions. Prior to December, in previous survey waves, as the coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions were lifted local authorities reported that they had returned to business as usual and children were contacted 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:

- Date refers to the date at the beginning of the 4-week period e.g. Wave 31: 06 December 2021 - 02 January 2022 is presented as 6 December.
- Guidance to local authorities on the correct methodology to calculate other CIN was improved in early June 2020. Local authorities were prompted again in July 2020. This may explain decreases in percentages for this group over time.
- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text responses from September to December 2021, many local authorities told us that face-to-face visiting was being used as normal practice. For example, one local authority said that *“given the Government’s introduction of plan B and reiterating the work from home message we have reviewed our operational guidance to satisfy ourselves that contact with children and families is frequent and this continues to be face-to-face. There continues to be close scrutiny of all key indicators and close monitoring of contacts and visiting...”*. Some local authorities also reported the specific circumstances of children that have not been seen in their area and how they are managing these cases.

In the most recent wave of the survey (January 2022), some local authorities told us how they are revisiting their visiting procedures in light of the rise of the coronavirus (COVID-19) Omicron variant but are trying to maintain face-to-face visiting where possible. For example, one local authority said that *“in response to the impact of COVID and the emergence of the omicron variant, plans have been put into place to ensure that all children continue to be seen wherever possible in person by their allocated social worker*

in line with individual assessed needs” and another local authority said that “we have contingency plans in place to ensure the most vulnerable children continue to be visited in a timely way and are working with partners to maximise efficiencies and opportunities in this.”

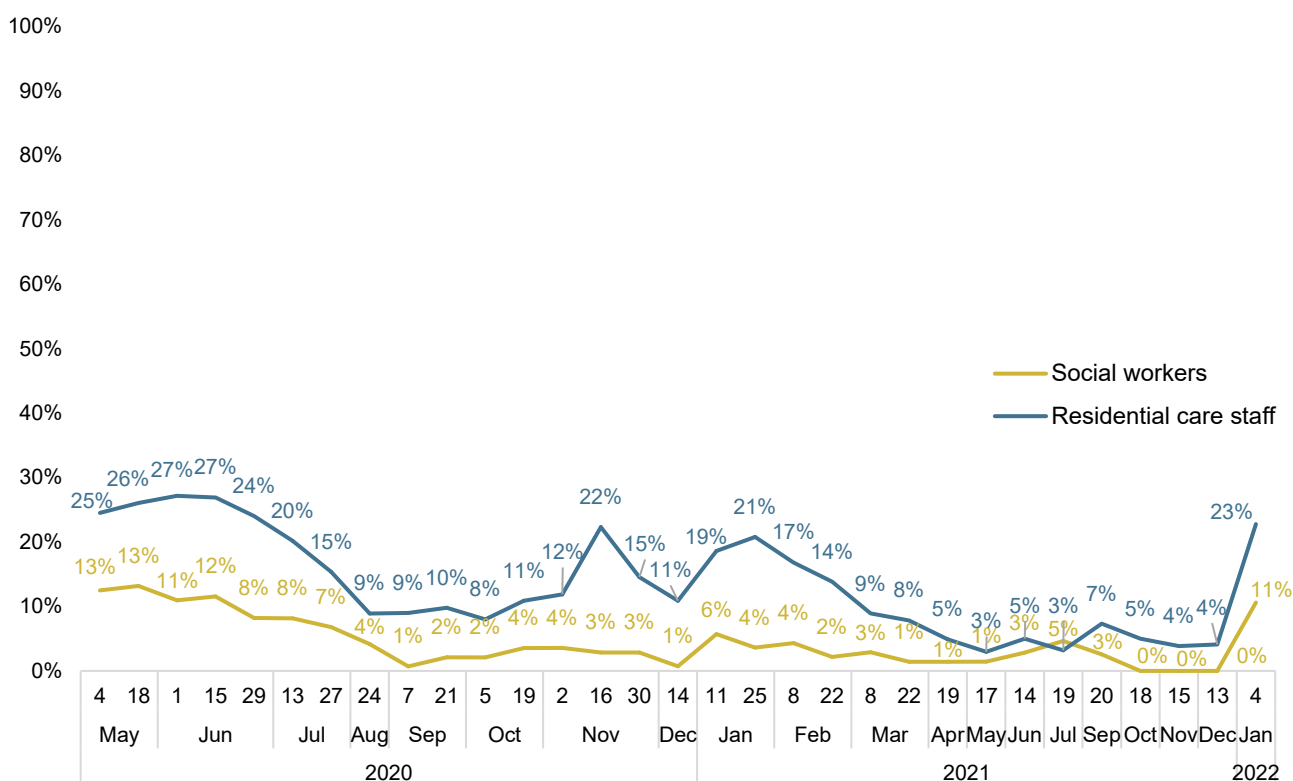
Children’s Social Care Workforce

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 from June 2020 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 June 2020, and the figures from then onwards are not directly comparable to earlier waves.

Around 1 in 10 (11%) of local authorities reported over 10% of their social workers unable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in January 2022, up from zero local authorities between October to December 2021, and compared to a peak of 13% of local authorities in May 2020.

Almost a quarter of local authorities (23%) reported over 10% of their residential care staff unable to work due to coronavirus (COVID-19), up from 4% in November and December 2021, and compared to 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:

- Date refers to the date at the beginning of the collection period e.g. Wave 31: 04-07 January is presented as 4 January.
- The figures from 1 June 2020 onwards are not directly comparable to earlier waves for residential care staff.
- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- Read Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Analysis of the open text responses between September and November 2021 found no common themes about the workforce being reported by local authorities. In December we asked local authorities to tell us about the main challenges they will face in the next three months. Workforce issues were mentioned by some local authorities that provided a response. The potential impact of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) Omicron variant on workforce availability was noted along with concerns about ongoing impacts on staff wellbeing. For example, one local authority told us *“the drawn-out nature of the pandemic and its effect on the working environment may well impact on social work staff resilience in the coming months.”*

In the most recent survey wave (January 2022), we asked local authorities to tell us about any workforce pressures due to any recent rises in coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in their area. Local authorities reported increasing staff absences. For example, one local authority noted that *“We currently have under 10% of staff off sick due to Covid but*

combined with other sickness and absences this increases to 21%”. Some local authorities described the impacts of the staff absences in their area. For example, one local authority said that “Given the intensity of the pandemic where staff need to cover gaps for colleagues who are isolating or sick, adapting to new online working and having less time in the office, and some with caring responsibilities, some experiencing loss, this has had an unavoidable impact on their professional lives.”

Local authorities also told us about their business continuity and contingency plans in light of the current and expected increases in staff absences. For example, one local authority said that *“We are seeing higher levels of absence due to COVID-19 than in the periods of lockdown and this has placed pressure on some areas. We are managing this through tracking of absence and impact and prioritising statutory requirements. We monitor this within service but corporately have also reintroduced silver meetings and contingency plans to ensure service continuity. Within children's services we meet twice weekly to review staffing and any implications and maintain a live record of absence with agreed contingency plans. We are building capacity of casual and agency staff within our children's homes as a contingency to staff sickness and we are also maintaining some vacancies within the homes to allow flexibilities in staff allocation or indeed placements in an emergency.”*

Referrals to Children’s Social Care services

In the first two waves of the survey, local authorities were asked to report the number of referrals to children’s social care services they received in the last week. From the third wave, 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 number of referrals in September 2021 were around the same as usual for that time of year, although referrals from schools were 27% higher. The number of referrals then fell to 8% lower in October, 6% lower in November, and 9% lower in December 2021.

Referrals from schools fluctuated compared to usual levels between September – November 2021, from 27% higher in September to 7% lower in late November. Referrals from the police remained close to or above usual levels, at 8% higher in September and 1% lower than usual in late November. Referrals from all other sources (individuals, health services and other sources) have been trending towards usual levels since September 2021. See Figure 5 for more details.

The total number of referrals to children’s social care services reported in each wave of the survey since it began was 303,800, this is around 10% lower than an average of the same weeks during 2017-20. It is estimated that there have been around 82,000 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. These estimates are broadly supported by the ‘Characteristics of children in need’ publication² which found that referrals between April 2020 – March 2021 were 7% lower than the previous year.

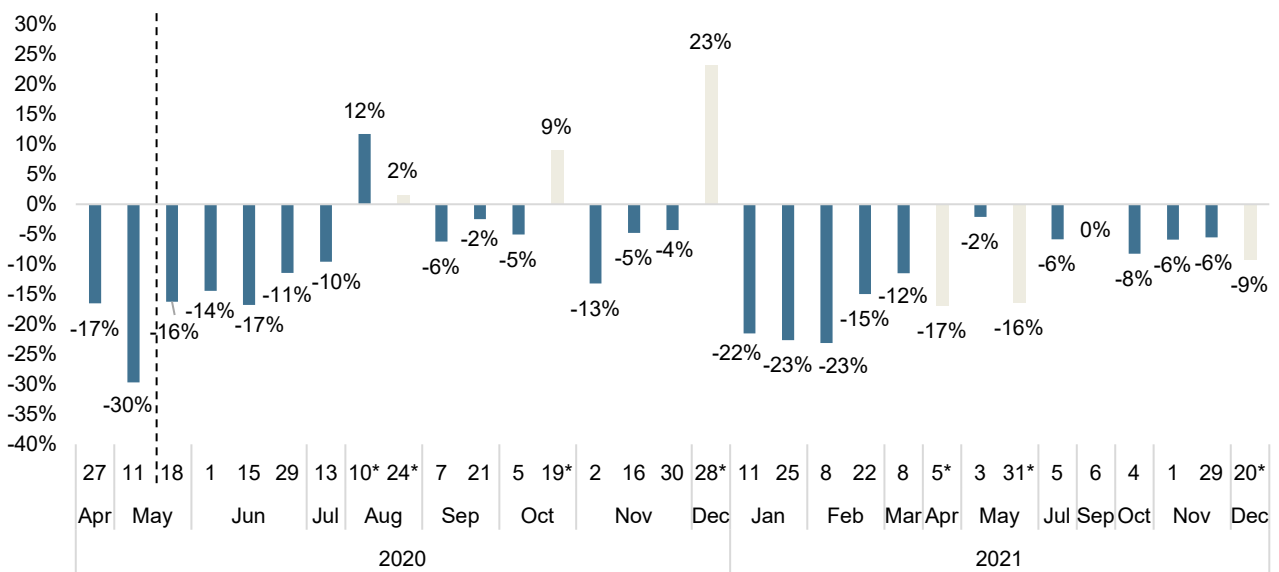
Table 1: Number of referrals received in the survey compared to the same weeks in 2017-20

Date	Total number of referrals	Average referrals 2017-20
06 - 12 September 2021	8,370	8,380
04 - 10 October 2021	8,960	9,760
01 - 07 November 2021	8,350	8,870
29 November - 05 December 2021	8,560	9,060
20 - 26 December 2021*	6,400	7,060

Notes:

- Data from previous waves of the survey can be found in earlier publications¹.
- *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.
- Comparator data was only included for LAs that responded to each wave.
- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- Read Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

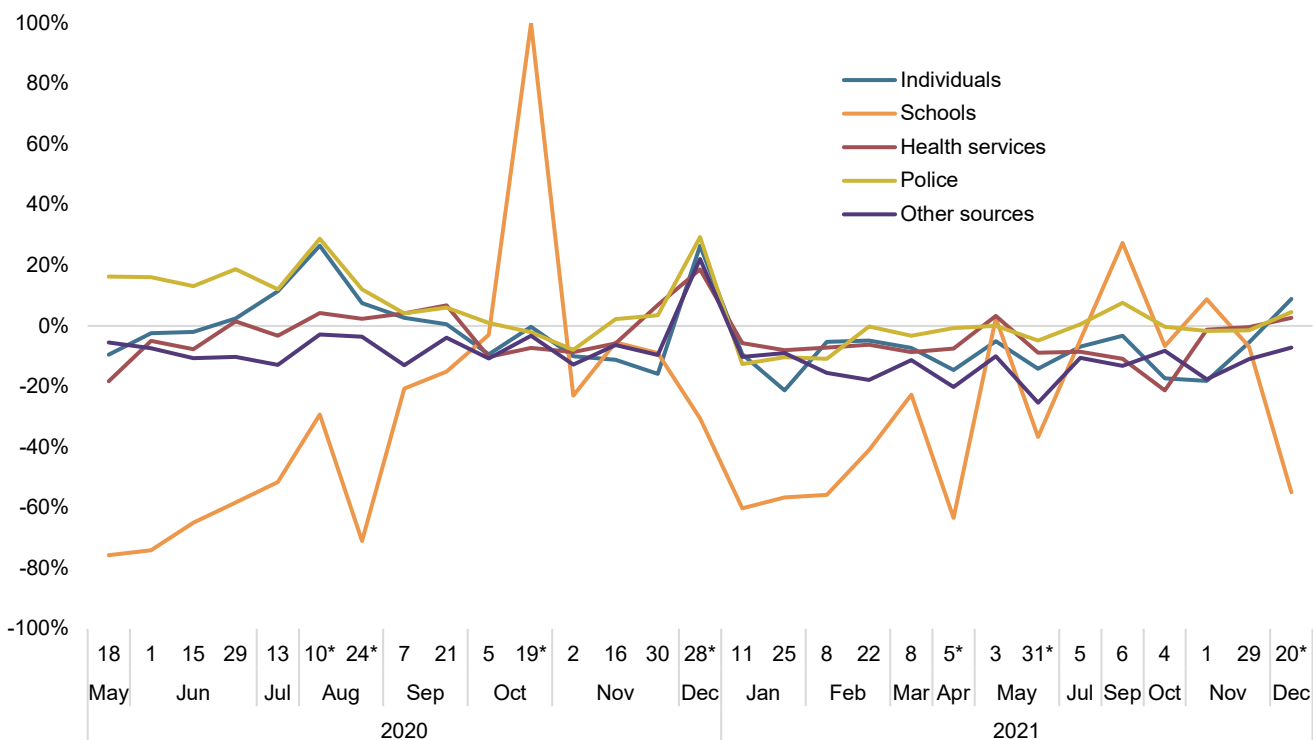
Figure 4: Difference in the total number of referrals compared to the 3-year average of the same week across 2017 to 2020



Notes:

- Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
- Date refers to the date at the beginning of the collection period e.g. Wave 31: 20 - 26 December 2021 is presented as 20 December.
- The figures from 18 May onwards are not directly comparable to earlier waves.
- *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.
- Comparator data was only included for LAs that responded to each wave.
- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- Read Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Figure 5: Number of referrals received from each source compared to the same weeks in 2017 to 2020



Notes:

- *These comparisons 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.
- Date refers to the date at the beginning of the collection period e.g. Wave 31: 20 - 26 December 2021 is presented as 20 December.
- Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues. Comparator data for these LAs was also removed.
- Comparator data was only included for LAs that responded to each wave.
- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- Read Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

No common themes about the numbers of referrals received across local authorities were reported in the open text survey responses between September and November 2021. In December we asked local authorities to tell us about the main challenges that they will face in the next three months. An increase in the volume of referrals is expected amongst some local authorities; as a result of the emergence of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) Omicron variant and recent child death cases that have been reported in the media. The following quotes exemplify some of the concerns amongst local authorities:

- *Over the next three months, we are anticipating an increase in referrals due to the new COVID-19 restrictions and the heightened media attention on children's safeguarding and safety.*
- *In light of Arthur's death, we anticipate an increase in both referrals and system anxiety/tension as a consequence...*
- *... we anticipate a significant increase in referrals from partner agencies as a result of the sentencing of the father and step-mother of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes.*

In the most recent survey wave (January 2022), some local authorities provided a commentary on the volume of contacts and referrals that they are receiving. The experiences reported were mixed but case complexity featured amongst some. For example, one local authority noted that *"We continue to see demand and complexity in relation to young peoples mental health needs. We are working with partners in Clinical Commissioning Group and have devised additional pathways to support for schools in supporting young peoples emotional health needs"*. Another local authority said *"We have seen increased complexity as more families struggle with the impact of Covid. Higher rates of Strategy Discussions and then Family Assessments are leading to higher numbers of CIN in the frontline teams."*

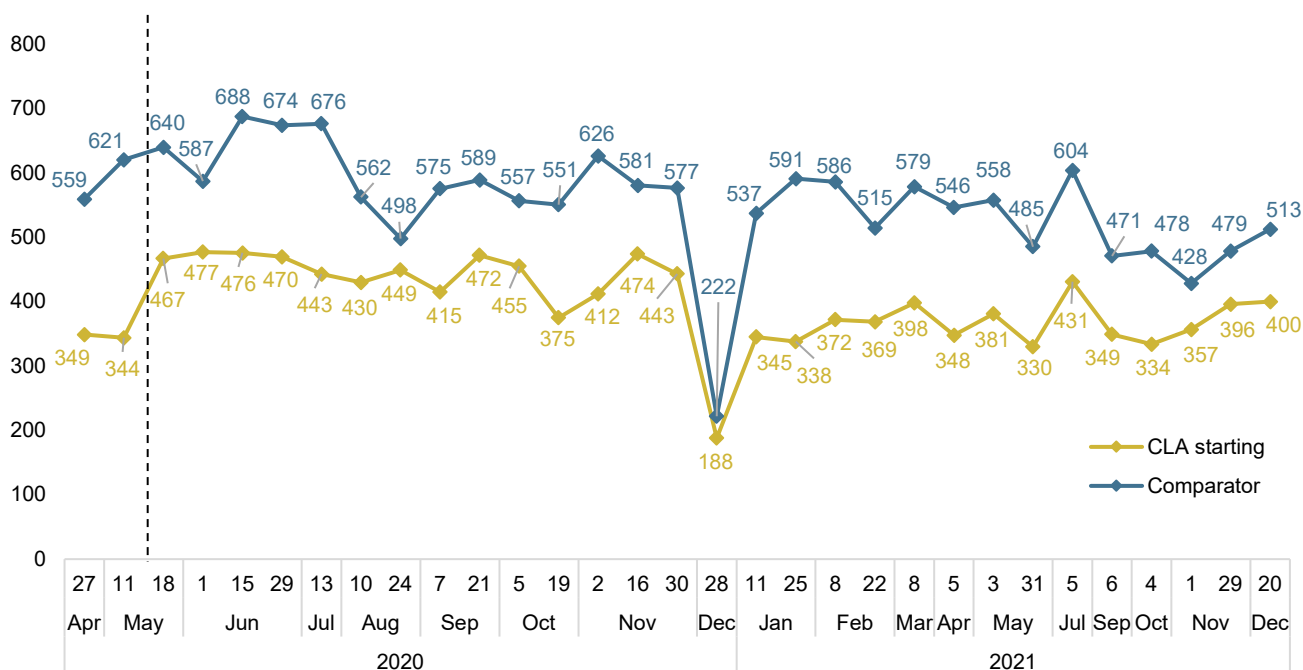
Children who have started to be looked after

The number of children starting to be looked after should be treated with caution because some local authorities reported that there can be a delay in adding start dates to their management information systems, so children may have been missed from the VCYP survey. This means that the survey is underestimating the number of children starting to be looked after. The 'Children looked after in England including adoption' statistics³ should be used for the period April 2020 – March 2021.

In the first two waves, 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 number of CLA starting was 26% lower in September, 30% lower in October, 17% lower in November and 22% lower in December 2021. 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.

Figure 6: Total number of children looked after starting per week and 3-year average of the same week across 2017 to 2020



Notes:

- Date refers to the date at the beginning of the collection period e.g. Wave 31: 20 - 26 December 2021 is presented as 20 December.
- The figures from 18 May onwards are not directly comparable to earlier waves.
- Comparator data was only included for LAs that responded to each wave.
- The survey was collected on a fortnightly basis with the exception of April – December 2021 where it was collected monthly. There was no collection during August 2021.
- See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text question in the October 2021 survey, we asked local authorities to tell us about any reduction in the number of children starting to be looked after, their interpretations of any reductions, whether the reductions posed any risks and about any of their resulting mitigating activities.

Of the local authorities that responded, the most common explanation for the fall in children starting to be looked after were linked to specific activities within the local authority to divert children from entering care. For instance:

- *Any drop in numbers of children coming into care in [LA name] is in part due to a new [name] approach which is reinforcing our edge of care work...*
- *Our [model of practice] emphasises supporting children to remain with their parents where it is safe to do so. The collaborative and relational approach to our work with children and families promotes trust and a solution focused approach to supporting families to overcome difficulties where possible; this includes children and families receiving intensive support from our edge of care team. This overall*

approach has broadly maintained the stability of the numbers of children within our care.

- *Our staff are trained in systemic practice, caseloads are more manageable, and staff have opportunity to build relationships with families and work with them to bring about change effectively.*

In response to this question, some local authorities told us about the numbers of children leaving care in their area. A handful of local authorities indicated that they were seeing more children leaving care because of court backlogs clearing. At the same time however, some local authorities told us that their care numbers were increasing. Continued court delays and an increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) amongst some local authorities were the main reasons provided, as shown in the following quotes:

- *...rate of discharge remains for the time being lower than care entry rate hence month on month growth. [LA name] experienced a high number of UASC care entries in September which has also impacted overall growth.*
- *From April - June (Q1) [LA name] had more children coming into care than those exiting the system due to delays in Discharge of Care Orders, and other permanency orders; as a result of COVID-19.*
- *The number of CLA in [LA name] is at a record high - some of this is impacted by a significant increase in the number of UASCs in care.*

A small but significant number of local authorities also told us about placement sufficiency challenges within their area, as shown in the following quotes:

- *There are still significant placement challenges - it is important to note the considerable impact at present of low numbers of placements available and great caution amongst providers of placements.*
- *Placement challenges remain with a lack of availability for more challenging children (again, linked to children with more complex and / or Mental Health issues)...*
- *Currently there is a lack of availability of suitable residential placements for our children in care and we are currently reviewing our own residential offer.*

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

Time periods for earlier waves of the survey can be found in previous publications¹.

Wave	Questions referring to collection dates	Questions referring to last 4 weeks	Questions referring to week before last
Wave 27	20 - 22 September 2021	23 August - 19 September 2021	06 - 12 September 2021
Wave 28	18 - 20 October 2021	20 September - 17 October 2021	04 - 10 October 2021
Wave 29	15 - 17 November 2021	18 October - 14 November 2021	01 - 07 November 2021
Wave 30	13 - 15 December 2021	15 November - 12 December 2021	29 November - 05 December 2021
Wave 31	04 – 07 January 2022	06 December 2021 – 02 January 2022	20 – 26 December 2021

Annex B: response rates

Response rates for earlier waves of the survey can be found in previous publications¹.

Table B1: Overall survey response rates

Wave	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
Wave 27	122	81%
Wave 28	116	77%
Wave 29	117	77%
Wave 30	116	77%
Wave 31	118	78%

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 27	122	122	122	120	120	118
Wave 28	116	116	116	114	114	112
Wave 29	117	117	117	116	116	114
Wave 30	116	116	116	115	115	114
Wave 31	117	117	117	114	114	113

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 27	117	82	120	122
Wave 28	112	80	114	116
Wave 29	108	78	115	117
Wave 30	106	73	114	116
Wave 31	113	79	115	117



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