



Department  
for Education

# **Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey**

**Summary of returns Waves 1 to 10**

**October 2020**

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## Headline facts and figures

- At Wave 10, a large proportion of children looked after (CLA), children on a child protection plan (CPP) and other children in need (CIN) have been in contact with a social worker in the last four weeks (68%, 94% and 62% respectively).
- The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has reduced over the time period, with 2% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 10, compared to 13% in Wave 1.
- Around four in five local authorities have reported a rise in weekly foster and residential placements costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (82% and 84% respectively in Wave 9). This has remained consistent since Wave 3.
- The total number of referrals during Wave 10 (07 - 13 September) was 6% lower than the usual number at that time of year. This is the first data we have since children returned to schools after the holidays. This follows Waves 8 and 9 where referrals were higher than the usual number at that time of year (+10% and +12% respectively).
- Referrals from police and health services were higher in Wave 10 than the same week in 2018 (+7% and +5% respectively). Referrals from schools were 12% lower than the same week in 2018 compared to 21% lower in Wave 9.
- The total number of referrals reported in Waves 1 to 10 of the survey was 102,910, this is around 13% 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 10 of the survey was 4,320. This is around 30% 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
- Cost pressures (Waves 1 to 9)
- System pressures

Previous publications from the survey<sup>1</sup> contain some analysis of the open text questions that is not repeated here.

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<sup>1</sup> [Vulnerable children and young people survey](#)

## 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. These questions were removed from the survey from Wave 10 because findings remained stable, face to face visits were resuming and carried out within statutory timescales and to reduce the burden on local authorities.

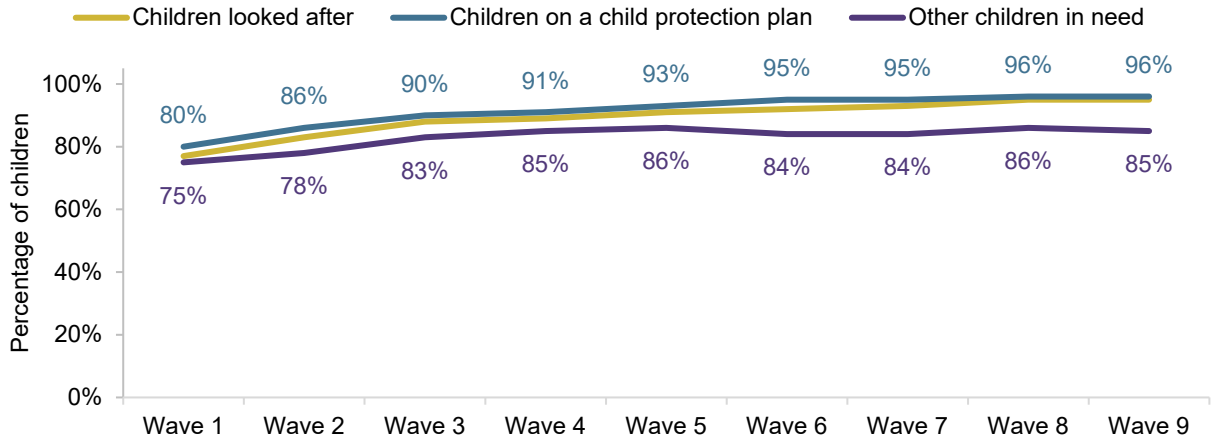
A new question was added from Wave 3 of the survey which asks how many of the children in each group have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

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.

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 shown a slight decrease since Wave 7. In the open text questions many local authorities told us that they are returning to business as usual and contacting children within statutory timescales. In Wave 10, 68% of CLA, 94% of children on a CPP and 62% of other CIN had been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

**Figure 1: Cases reviewed in light of coronavirus (COVID-19)**



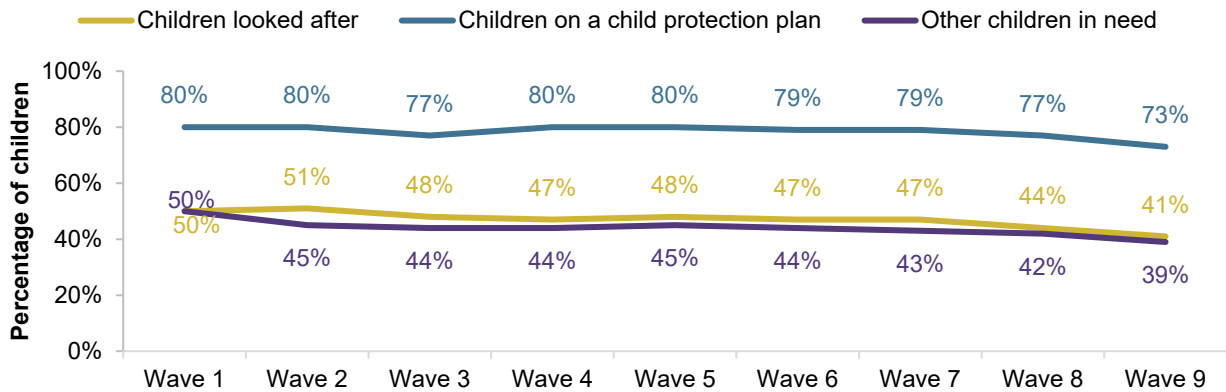
**Notes:**

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.

This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

**Figure 2: Contact with social workers in the last two weeks**



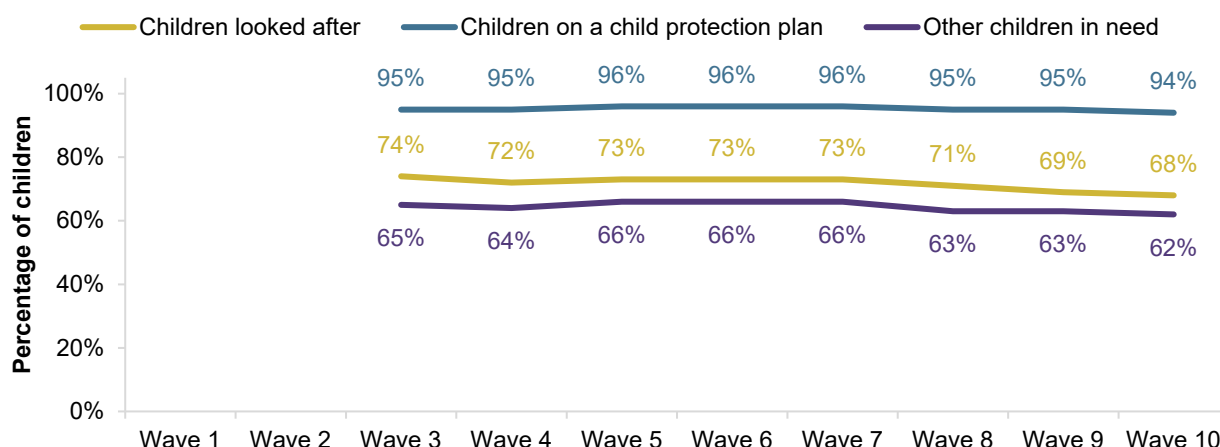
**Notes:**

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.

This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

**Figure 3: Contact with social workers in the last four weeks**



**Notes:**

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 welfare checks and contact was taking place with vulnerable children not attending school.

Across subsequent waves (5-10) many local authorities reported having further adapted their approach with more face to face contact resuming. Since Wave 5, local authorities reported activities focusing on hidden harms and early help to identify children who may be at risk, and developing innovative ways to manage risk and monitor contact, for example through new reporting tools, to safeguard the children that they were not in contact with.

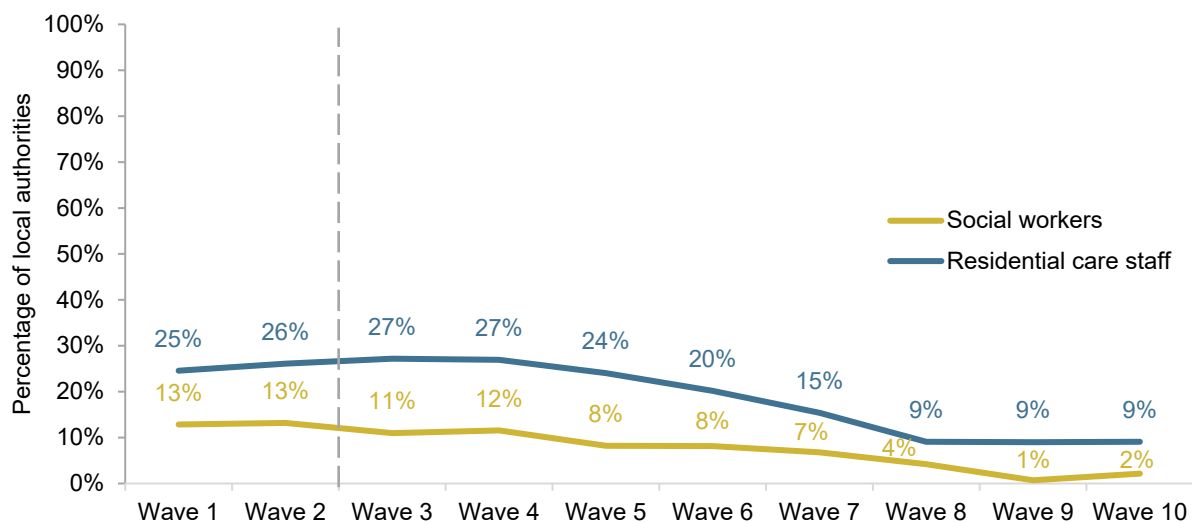
With the re-opening of schools, more local authorities have started to report working with schools to monitor attendance and manage contact. Specifically, in Wave 10 of the survey, some local authorities also told us that they were preparing for the next phase and potential impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) and how they will continue to safeguard vulnerable children.

## 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 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 reduced over the time period, with 2% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 10, compared to 13% in Wave 1. The proportion of residential care workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has also reduced, from 27% in Wave 3 to 9% in Wave 10. It should be noted that some local authorities have small residential care workforces and therefore any small changes in staff availability may result in large changes in the proportion of staff unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

**Figure 4. Proportion of local authorities that reported over 10% of staff not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)**



**Notes:**

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

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 in early survey waves. Some local authorities provided examples where staff had been re-deployed and staff training was provided on the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on practice. In later survey waves (5-10), no common themes about the workforce have been reported in the open text responses.

## Cost Pressures

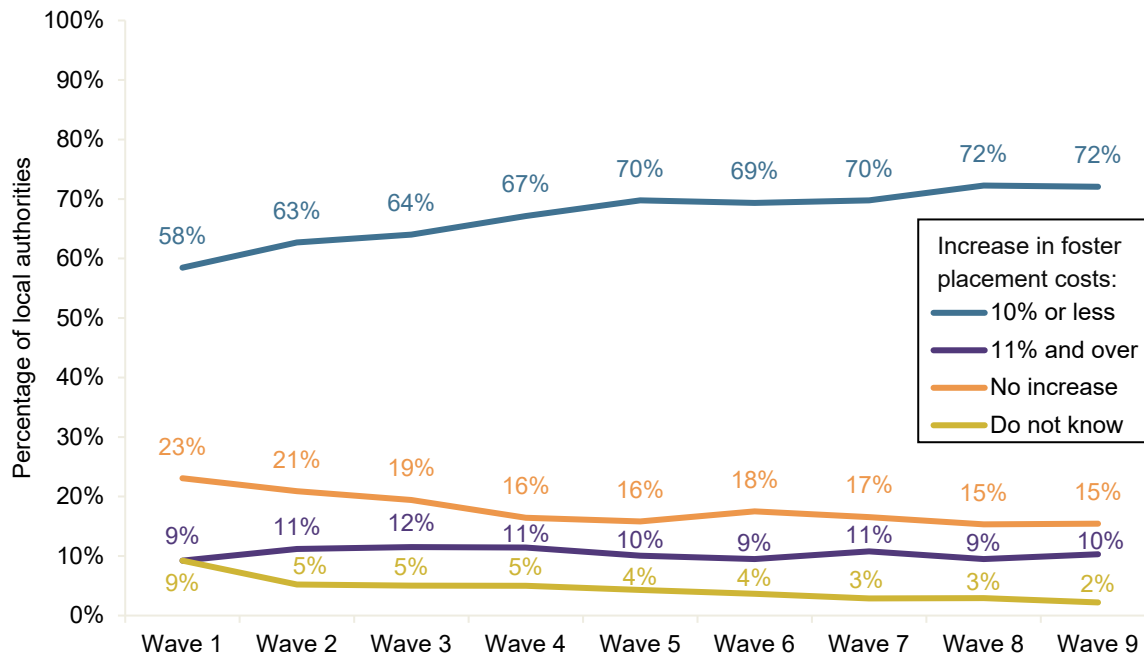
Local authorities were asked to estimate their weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19), for looked after children in foster and residential care placements.

This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10 because findings remained stable and to reduce the burden on local authorities.



Around four in five local authorities have reported a rise in weekly foster and residential placements costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (82% and 84% respectively in Wave 9). This has remained consistent since Wave 3.

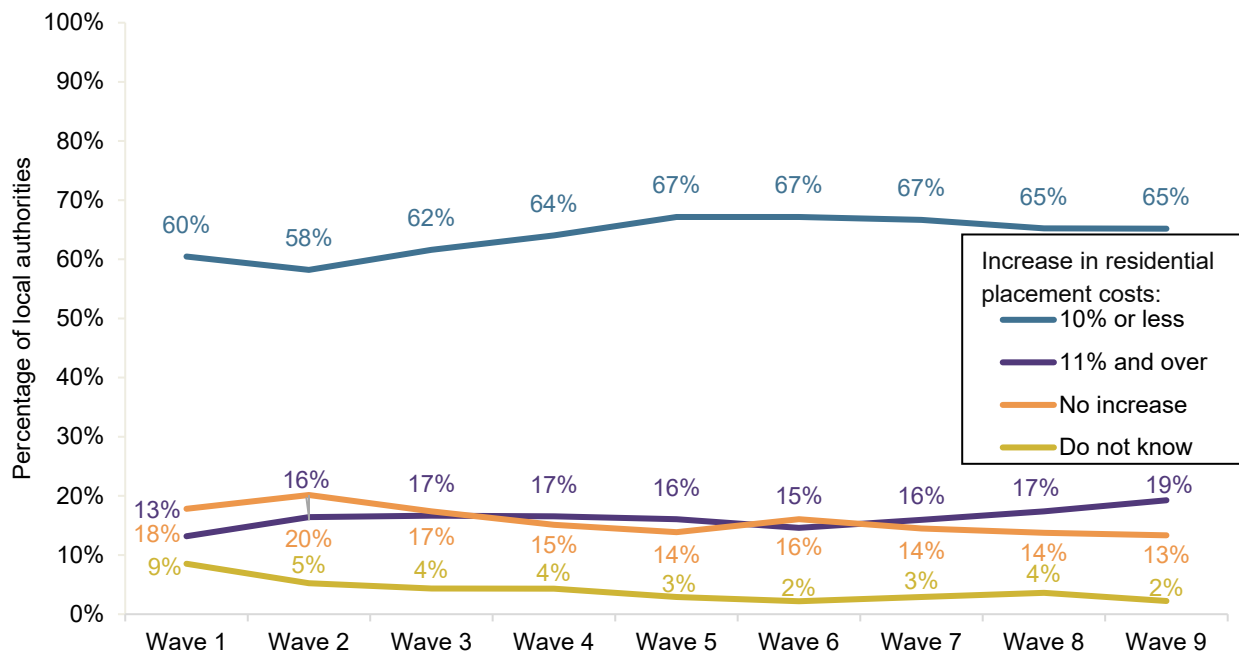
**Figure 5: Estimated increase in weekly costs for foster care placements due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19)**



**Notes:**

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave. This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

**Figure 6: Estimated increase in weekly costs for residential care placements due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19)**



**Notes:**

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

In the open text questions in earlier waves of the survey (1-8), a few local authorities provided examples of increased costs arising as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Examples include: requests for increased fees from residential care providers, costs arising from elevated numbers of children in care and children on child protection plans (due to fewer concluding at this time), costs of foster carer support packages during lockdown and increased placements costs for children with additional needs.

In Waves 9 and 10 no common themes about cost pressures were reported in the open text responses.

## 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.

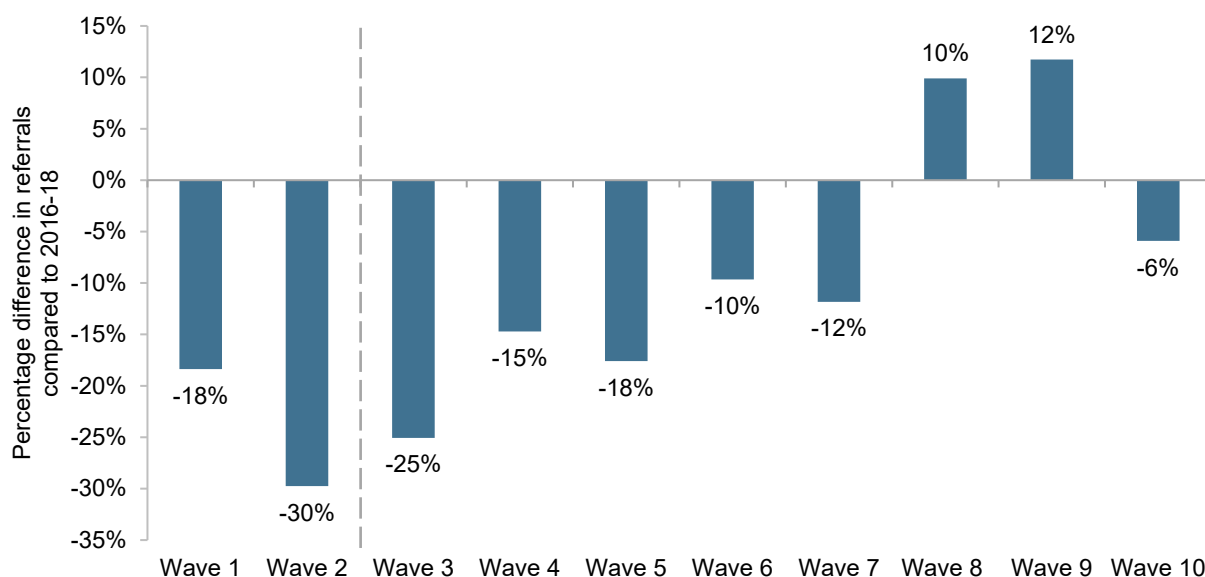
From Wave 3 onwards local authorities were also asked to report the sources of their referrals.

The total number of referrals from 141 local authorities was 10,800 in Wave 10, compared to 9,080 from 144 local authorities in Wave 9. The data in Wave 10 covers 07 – 13 September which is the first data since children have returned to school after the school holidays. In Wave 10, the total number of referrals was 6% lower than the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018. This follows Waves 8 and 9 where referrals were higher than the usual number at that time of year (+10% and +12% respectively). Approximately 88% of pupils on roll in state-funded schools were in attendance on 10 September<sup>2</sup>. The total number of referrals to children's social care services reported in Waves 1 to 10 of the survey was 102,910, this is around 13% lower than the same period over the past three years.

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<sup>2</sup> [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

**Figure 7: Difference in the total number of referrals compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018**



**Notes:**

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. See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Referrals from police and health services were higher in Wave 10 than the same week in 2018 (+7% and +5% respectively). In Wave 10, referrals from schools were 12% lower than the same week in 2018 compared to 21% lower in Wave 9.

**Table 1: Number of referrals received from each source over Waves 3-10 compared to the same weeks in 2018**

Wave	Referral source				
	Individuals	Schools	Health services	Police	Other sources
Wave 3	-16%	-82%	-20%	11%	-4%
Wave 4	1%	-71%	-2%	8%	2%
Wave 5	-9%	-65%	-8%	12%	-4%
Wave 6	-2%	-60%	5%	10%	-3%
Wave 7	7%	-60%	-1%	13%	-11%
Wave 8	19%	-30%	4%	23%	-3%
Wave 9	16%	-21%	14%	13%	22%
Wave 10	-4%	-12%	5%	7%	-7%

**Notes:**

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 the latest survey waves (9-10), analysis of the open text responses show mixed experiences in the numbers of referrals across local authorities. Some local authorities reported that the number of referrals has increased and are now higher than average.

Whilst others reported that referrals remain lower than average or as expected. However, most local authorities continue to tell us that they are expecting and preparing for a spike in demand. In earlier survey waves (5-8) local authorities described the work that they had done to predict and plan for the anticipated demand spike, for example, by moving resource to assessment teams and strengthening the 'front door'.

Across all survey waves some local authorities described the types of cases received. A common theme has been an increase in domestic abuse being reported. In more recent waves (9 -10), some local authorities describe an increase in the complexity of their cases. Examples vary but include increases in cases involving non-accidental injury, increases in the number of new-born children that are being presented in care proceedings, increase in cases involving young people self-harming and escalations of risks in cases that are already open.

## 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.

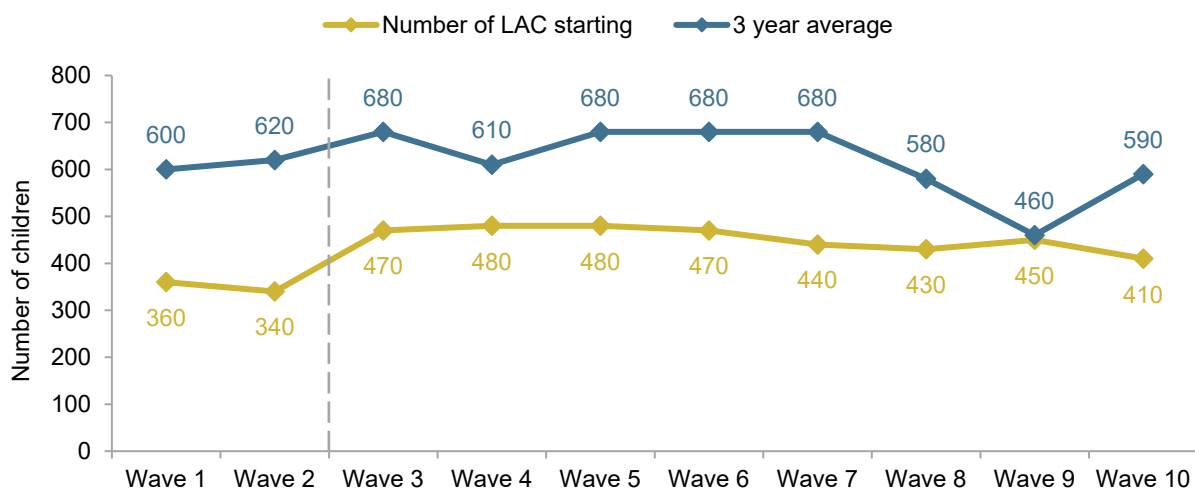
The total number of CLA starting in 143 local authorities during Wave 10 (07 – 13 September) was 410 compared to 590 over the same period in previous years (-30%). The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 10 of the survey was 4,320, this is around 30% lower 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<sup>3</sup>. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019](#)

**Figure 8: Total number of children looked after starting per week and 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018**



**Notes:**

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 in later waves of the survey (5-10) a small number of local authorities reported that they are experiencing an increase in the stock of looked after children. The reasons they cite were both a lack of direct work with families and services in support of reunifications and delays in court hearings. This meant that planned permanency moves were not happening.

## 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.

Previous publications from the survey<sup>1</sup> contain some analysis of the open text questions that is not repeated here.

## Working with coronavirus (COVID-19) and the future

From the early waves of the survey local authorities told us about how they adapted working arrangements in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and about their recovery plans.

For instance, that they risk assessed and RAG rated their cases and 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 subsequent waves of the survey (5-8) local authorities told us that working arrangements and recovery plans involve:

- moving from a crisis response towards 'business as usual - living with coronavirus (COVID-19)' whereby local authorities are relying more on their usual assessment and planning processes.
- reassessing the required intensity of visiting children and families and taking a "blended" approach to visits which comprise of both virtual and face to face contact. In the later waves, many local authorities reported that visits would be face to face unless there are ongoing health concerns of staff or family.
- updating safety procedures and making adjustments to buildings, carrying out contingency activities in preparation of an increase in demand and continuing to review and anticipate priorities.

In the most recent wave of the survey (9-10) local authorities continue with these arrangements. Some local authorities also told us:

- they are currently either faced with or preparing for a potential local lockdown measures. As a result, staff working arrangements, face to face visits and contact between parents and children are again being reviewed.
- they are also reviewing plans to ensure support for vulnerable children who may have to isolate from schools.

## Adolescents

- Local authorities provided positive examples of working virtually with young people and some are finding that older teens prefer virtual contacts. One local authority said that *"there has been further feedback from children that they would want the virtual offer to continue"*.
- In the early waves of the survey, ensuring lockdown and social distancing compliance amongst teenagers was a challenge for some local authorities. Some local authorities told us *"this older cohort is difficult to engage and many have expressed their dismay at the increased frequency of contact as 'harassment'"*.
- In later survey waves some local authorities told us how prolonged lockdown is affecting young people, including increased mental ill health issues and anxieties about schooling and education.

- In Waves 9 and 10 no additional common themes about adolescents were reported in the open text responses.

## **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 (1-4) local authorities told us how they were working with schools to coordinate and collect information on attendance and contact with vulnerable children. In later survey waves (5-8), in some local authorities this joint working appears to be more embedded.
- Local authorities carried out activities in preparation for schools reopening. For example to encourage attendance: city wide media campaigns; joint messaging from children's services and public health; guidance booklet for carers of looked after children; a multi-agency reintegration panel to support schools with pupils that might find the transition back into school challenging.
- A few local authorities told us how they supported vulnerable children and families over the summer months. This included the provision of information for families about how to access food over the school holidays, summer activity programmes and youth outreach.
- In the most recent survey waves (9-10) local authorities resumed working closely with schools to track attendance of vulnerable children and manage risk.

## 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 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? (Waves 1 to 9)
- b) have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 2 weeks? (Waves 1 to 9)
- 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 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 (Waves 1 to 9)

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?

**Question 7 (Waves 1 to 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 7 (Wave 10 onwards)**

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 8**

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	Last 2 weeks	Last 4 weeks	Last week	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

## Annex B: response rates

**Table B1: overall survey response rates**

	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
Wave 1	149	99%
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	146	97%
Wave 9	146	97%
Wave 10	143	95%

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

	Cases reviewed		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
Wave 1	129	130	128
Wave 2	137	137	136
Wave 3	141	141	140
Wave 4	143	143	141
Wave 5	146	146	143
Wave 6	146	146	145
Wave 7	146	146	146
Wave 8	143	143	142
Wave 9	142	142	141

Note: This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

**Table B3: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1b**

	<b>Seen or contacted a social worker in the last two weeks</b>		
	<b>Children looked after</b>	<b>Children on a child protection plan</b>	<b>Other children in need</b>
Wave 1	130	134	131
Wave 2	136	136	135
Wave 3	141	141	140
Wave 4	143	144	142
Wave 5	145	145	143
Wave 6	147	147	145
Wave 7	147	147	145
Wave 8	144	144	142
Wave 9	145	145	143

Note: This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

**Table B4: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1c**

	<b>Seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks</b>		
	<b>Children looked after</b>	<b>Children on a child protection plan</b>	<b>Other children in need</b>
Wave 1	-	-	-
Wave 2	-	-	-
Wave 3	138	138	138
Wave 4	139	140	139
Wave 5	141	141	140
Wave 6	146	146	144
Wave 7	147	147	145
Wave 8	144	144	142
Wave 9	145	145	143
Wave 10	142	142	140

**Table B5: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 2**

	<b>Proportion not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)</b>	
	<b>Social workers</b>	<b>Residential care workers</b>
Wave 1	140	114
Wave 2	144	115
Wave 3	146	103
Wave 4	147	104
Wave 5	146	104
Wave 6	147	104
Wave 7	147	104
Wave 8	142	99
Wave 9	142	100
Wave 10	140	99

**Table B6: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 3**

	Increase in weekly costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19)	
	Foster placements	Residential care
Wave 1	130	129
Wave 2	134	134
Wave 3	139	138
Wave 4	140	139
Wave 5	139	137
Wave 6	137	137
Wave 7	139	138
Wave 8	137	138
Wave 9	136	135

Note: This question was removed from the survey from Wave 10.

**Table B7: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 4 and 5**

	Number and source of referrals to children's social care
Wave 1	147
Wave 2	145
Wave 3	147
Wave 4	147
Wave 5	147
Wave 6	147
Wave 7	147
Wave 8	144
Wave 9	144
Wave 10	141

Note: Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues.

**Table B8: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 6**

	Children starting to be looked after
Wave 1	149
Wave 2	147
Wave 3	149
Wave 4	149
Wave 5	149
Wave 6	149
Wave 7	149
Wave 8	146
Wave 9	146
Wave 10	143



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