



**Association of
Child Protection
Professionals**

PROTECTING CHILDREN AT A DISTANCE

A multi-agency investigation of child safeguarding and protection responses consequent upon COVID-19 lockdown/social distancing measures

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Looked After Children (LAC) and Care Leavers

Key points

- **Interviewees expressed concerns regarding many issues facing LAC**, including decreased face-to-face contact with their birth families, as well as the death of a carer or a family member. **Contact was of particular concern for separated babies.**
- Of 81 survey respondents, **36% felt that educational attainment of LAC worsened during the pandemic.**
- Survey respondents endorsed particular concern raised in interviews for **disabled children in care**, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (**UASC**), **LAC in detention** and **care leavers.**
- LAC professionals noted instances of considerable **innovation in supporting children in care, care leavers and foster carers** during the pandemic, including **provision of food parcels, online resources for foster carers, LAC peer-based support and online activities** (e.g. yoga, online cooking classes, art).
- Interviewees pointed out that **a pre-existing shortage of placements was significantly exacerbated**, particularly for **mother and baby units** and **residential units.**
- Concern was raised by interviewees about some **children and young people in unassessed placements**, including **young people housed in an adult facility** and **staff housing two young people in an emergency.**
- **68%** of survey respondents felt that **placement stability** had **stayed the same or improved** during the pandemic and **82%** said that **relationships with carers had improved or stayed the same**
 - only 18% felt that relationships had worsened with carers.
- **55%** of respondents **felt that relationships between LAC and parents had deteriorated** during the pandemic.
- The strategy **most used and found to be successful** by professionals to increase placements was **pandemic information for carers. Increasing the fee for emergency placements** was the **least used strategy.**
- Professionals **expressed concerns regarding remote access to LAC** while also recognising that **some LAC 'opened up' and engaged more with services remotely.**
- Survey respondents felt that during the pandemic, **care leavers had experienced increased isolation (84%); adverse impacts regarding transition planning (44%),** including delays in transitioning out of care; and **reduced professional support (38%).**

Study overview

This research briefing provides key findings concerning the experiences of Looked After Children (LAC) and care leavers from a multi-disciplinary study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on safeguarding/child protection practice in England. The study was designed to engage safeguarding leaders in all professional disciplines involved in safeguarding practice. The first stage of the study took place between June and September 2020 and comprised 67 interviews with London-based safeguarding and child protection leaders within seven professional groups: Children's Social Care, Health, Mental Health, Police, Education, Law and Safeguarding Partnerships. Interviewees' priorities and responses informed the questions and response options for the second stage, a national survey distributed to similar professional groups in February–March 2021, which elicited 417 responses for analysis. Respondents represented all regions in England with London and the South East accounting for 45% of overall survey representation. We accessed a very senior and experienced group of respondents with a predominantly strategic perspective, including Directors of Children's Social Care, Safeguarding Partnership Independent Scrutineers/Business Managers, head teachers or Designated Safeguarding Leads, Named and Designated Health and Mental Health Professionals, Police safeguarding leads at area level, and local authority and children's panel lawyers. Respondents had a mode of 20 years' experience. The survey generated over 1,000 comments (some are highlighted within this briefing).

Looked After Children (LAC)

Interviewees pointed out that a **pre-existing shortage of placements was significantly exacerbated**, particularly for **mother and baby units, residential units and access to high risk, low volume accommodation** in London. Concern was raised by interviewees about some **children and young people placed in unassessed placements**, including reports of **young people being housed in an adult facility** and of **staff housing two young people in an emergency**. Notably, some local authorities reported a **reduction in placement moves** in the first lockdown.

At a later stage in the pandemic (early 2021), **68% of survey respondents** (n=87) felt that **placement stability** had stayed the same or improved during the pandemic, and **82%** said that **relationships with carers had improved or stayed the same** (only 18% felt that relationships had worsened with carers). **However, of significant concern is that 55% felt that relationships between LAC and parents had deteriorated** during the pandemic.

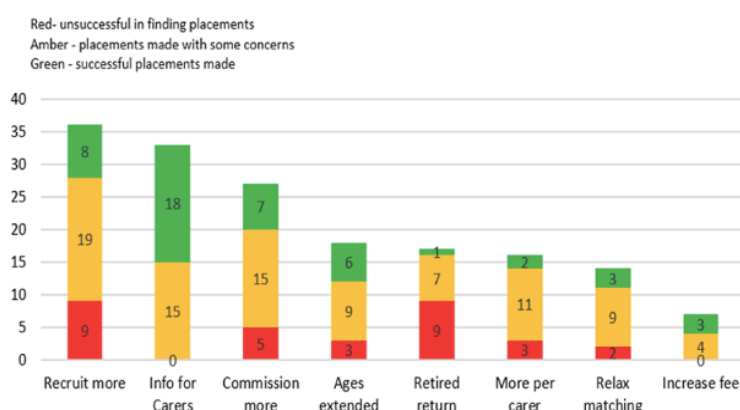


Figure 1: Strategies to increase placements (survey respondents)

In the survey, we asked about **different strategies used to increase placements during COVID** and **levels of success** of applied strategies (summarised from all agencies in Figure 1). Of 38 respondents, most carried out strategies to educate and provide **pandemic information for carers**. Perhaps surprisingly, this was overall the most successful both in terms of numbers of placements

and the number of successful placements. **Increasing the fee for emergency placements** was the least used strategy. However, the three Children's Social Care respondents that used increased fees found the strategy to be relatively successful in finding placements.

Interviewees expressed concerns regarding many issues facing LAC including decreased face-to-face contact with their birth families, as well as the death of a carer or a family member. **Contact was of particular concern for separated babies.** Face-to-face contact was ordered by some courts, for example, in parks, creating considerable challenges for local authorities. Communication in distant placements between birth parents and their children was better than usual by virtue of virtual contact. **Fewer LAC than expected went to school during the first lockdown;** it was speculated by interviewees that this might relate to carers' concerns such as shielding, as well as young people's wishes. 36% of 81 survey respondents **felt that educational attainment of LAC worsened during the pandemic.** Survey respondents endorsed particular concern for **disabled children in care, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and LAC in detention.** LAC professionals noted instances of considerable **innovation in supporting children in care and care leavers** during the pandemic: **66% provided food parcels** for LAC in care; and **online resources** were provided for foster carers by **90%** of respondents overall. Respondents also indicated implementing opportunities for **LAC peer-based support and virtual activities** (e.g. yoga, online cooking classes and art).

Professional work with LAC

Eighty-six percent of total respondents (n=72) noted increased remote contact with Social Workers/Personal Advisers/Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO). Most Children's Social Care respondents (**n=26**) reported that the Local Authority introduced **in-person contact with LAC in alternative places (92%),** and this was said to be **ongoing** (at the time of the survey) by **64%** of the total respondents (n=66).

Some respondents expressed concerns related to professional work with LAC. For example, a Health respondent commented that **children were not having physical initial health assessments (although one Designated LAC respondent suggested that this may at times be appropriate),** that there was a waiting list, and importantly that **LAC were not receiving interventions** other than these assessments. Another respondent reported that **access to CAMHS services remained problematic for LAC children placed out of area.** Remote access is of concern given the issues raised in this research about safety and **appropriateness of remote contact**

'Some looked after children found online so much better and evidence of being really open ...'

– Designated Nurse for Safeguarding, South West England

for young people involved in safeguarding. For example, one Education respondent commented that a particular area of concern during the pandemic was that **'children without face-to-face contact with social workers, especially LAC, felt unsupported at times.'** However, in relation to remote communication, social workers and health respondents **reported greater engagement with children and young people** as it was felt that many (but not all) were more comfortable communicating remotely, and **some LAC 'opened up' more.** Interestingly, a Health respondent noted that while LAC children within their services engaged better remotely, they [the professional] also questioned whether this was on account of LAC services not being 'child friendly' prior to the pandemic.

Care Leavers

The first stage interviews and discussion at a policy lab with safeguarding/child protection professionals highlighted that care leavers, particularly those who had recently transitioned out of care, were **rendered particularly vulnerable during the pandemic**. Survey respondents with LAC responsibility felt that during the pandemic **care leavers had experienced increased isolation (84%); adverse impacts regarding transition planning (44%)**, including delays in transitioning out of care; and **reduced professional support (38%)**.

We asked survey respondents to suggest one aspect of safeguarding/child protection process or practice in order to improve outcomes for children and young people. These included:

‘A relaxation of the regulations around IHAs for children looked after to allow for them to continue to be done virtually if this is the preference of the young person and safe to do so.’

– **Designated Nurse for LAC, Yorkshire & The Humber**

‘Listen to the voices of young people and families about what helps. Especially the voice of the Looked After Child.’ – **NHS England, London**

Recommendations

- Ensure that alternative and skilled provision is available should a children’s home need to close.
- Explore the impact of the pandemic on the carer experience, including trends in placement stability following rapid induction during COVID-19, develop strategies to strengthen support to current carers and review carer training and suitability.
- Consider whether the increased severity and complexity of cases has translated into more complex placements to maintain and in this context assess the training and support needs of social workers and carers.
- Develop further contact centres that can also cater for separated mother and babies in a pandemic safe way as part of the planning requirement.
- When digital communication is used as part of practice, regular reviewing of how this medium is being used must be enacted to reduce the risks associated with this form of communication.

For more information about this study and to download stage 1 and 2 summary of findings reports and the final report, please visit the study project page:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/protecting-children-at-a-distance>

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