

Children's social work case complexity has increased due to Covid, councils tell DfE

Regular survey of Covid's impact finds more councils describing a rise in case complexity due to pandemic pressures, though councils split on whether they anticipate increases in referrals

by **Alice Blackwell** on May 6, 2021 in **Children, Coronavirus, Social work leaders**



Image: Supakrit

A growing number of local authorities have reported an increase in the complexity of children's social work cases due to pandemic pressures, a Department for Education (DfE) survey has found.

The report on [wave 22 of the department's vulnerable children and young people survey](#) found councils reporting issues including increased mental health problems among parents and children, parental substance misuse, neglect and emotional abuse, non-accidental injury, more newborns presenting in care proceedings, self-harming in young people, acute family crisis situations and escalation of risk in existing cases.

The survey, which has tracked local authorities' pandemic response since the end of April 2020, found that increasing numbers of councils reported greater case complexity between September 2020 and March 2021, to which the latest wave of the research refers. Some said this had been evidenced in the fact that there had been an increase in conversion rates from contact with families to referrals to social care, and from referrals to assessments.

In addition to the more recent increases in case complexity, the survey has found a "clear and consistent theme" of rising numbers of domestic abuse cases throughout the pandemic.

Councils split on anticipated referrals

Since the start of the pandemic, referrals volumes have lagged behind previous years' levels, a trend that continued into the second week of March 2021, when they were 11% lower than the annual average for the equivalent week in 2017-20. Across all 22 waves, referrals are also 11% down on the previous three years. This has raised concerns about a sharp rise in referrals due to "hidden harms" caused by the pandemic or left unexposed by successive lockdowns and school closures.

The report found a split in whether local authorities anticipated a rise in referrals following the reopening of schools in March, the truth of which will be revealed in subsequent waves of the survey.

Councils not anticipating a rise in referrals said that more children had been in school, and that schools had been in touch with all children during the latest lockdown, compared with previous ones.

Authorities that were anticipating an uptick in referrals upon the reopening of schools said that they were increasing their staff capacity and were working with partners and schools to ensure resources were available to support families.

Some local authorities said that any anticipated rise in referrals and demand would not happen immediately. One council reported: "Referrals from schools have not increased since the return to school – this follows a similar pattern to the last return in autumn and we are anticipating that as things settle we will see a rise."

Social worker absences drop

The proportion of councils reporting more than 10% of their social workers were absent from work due to Covid also dropped in the latest wave of the DfE data, to just 1% of local authorities, from 22-24 March 2021.

This is a decrease from 3% in wave 21 of the data (8-10 March), 6% in wave 17 of the data (11-13 January) and down from the peak of 13% in waves one and two in May 2020, when the first wave of the pandemic hit.

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The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) both responded to the survey results by calling for greater investment in children's services.

A BASW spokesperson said: "Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, social workers have gone above and beyond to meet the needs of the most vulnerable at a time of skyrocketing demand and increasingly complex cases, with members reporting working around the clock to meet the shortfall of available staff in their teams. However, a lack of funding, resources and staffing has meant that inevitably, children and families have not been able to receive the support they deserve.

'Risk of further harm to at-risk generation'

"At a time where children have the odds stacked against them, after a year of being deprived of access to education, social-emotional stimulation, and increased household vulnerability to poverty, poor mental health and substance misuse, the government must pull out all the stops when it comes to investing in social care, or risk further harming an already at-risk generation."

ADCS president Charlotte Ramsden said: "Although Covid-19 appears to pose a lower risk of infection to children and young people, they have been affected by the secondary impacts of the pandemic such as loss of learning, the impact of successive lockdowns on their mental and emotional health and being unable to access services they may have previously relied on. For many, the pandemic will have exacerbated pre-existing challenges such as poverty, hunger, parental ill health and domestic abuse.

"As the survey findings note, local authorities are now seeing greater complexity of need being presented by children and families. Added to this, we know that early help and preventative services across the country are experiencing an increase in demand.

“Now more than ever we need to work with children and families who are at risk of poor outcomes at the earliest possible stage, but only with adequate long-term national investment can we continue to provide this vital support.”

5 Responses to *Children's social work case complexity has increased due to Covid, councils tell DfE*

Anony mous May 6, 2021 at 7:52 pm #

It's not just the lived situations of children and young people which have become increasingly complex, it's also the workload of Social Workers themselves. My authority had held several 'audits' throughout the pandemic which had led to an increase in work for us – child and family assessments for every single looked after child (with an 8 week time limit set before management discussions around why they aren't completed – despite the continuing need for LAC planning documents!), permanence reviews and pushes to progress children to permanence, education audits and a push to get children away from being NEET (in the current climate of all times!) and much more. On top of this we have had to remain in fortnightly contact with all of our children and carers throughout and ensure that this is recorded within 48 hours for DfE reporting. It feels as though management have more time on their hands and assume that social workers must also have had this increase but as described above it's simply not true, if anything the complexity of the children and families I am working with has only increased – leading to longer days and more difficulty in progressing plans.

Anon May 8, 2021 at 10:49 pm #

That sounds like good management to be honest. Our aspirations for children shouldn't stop due to covid. Preventing NEET should be an all time aspiration. Assessments must be done in 8 weeks – there's a statutory 45 days so sounds like they've given you the max timescale – we have to do ours in 10 days. What you're describing is the basics and if you weren't doing those, good on your management. If you don't understand the importance, then that's problematic for you, but sounds like they won't make it problematic for children. Just my thoughts anyway.

Helena May 19, 2021 at 6:57 am #

You clearly missed the point. The person expressed his/her workload increased without an increase of resources, which created additional stress and pressure on Social Workers.

Carol May 13, 2021 at 6:22 pm #

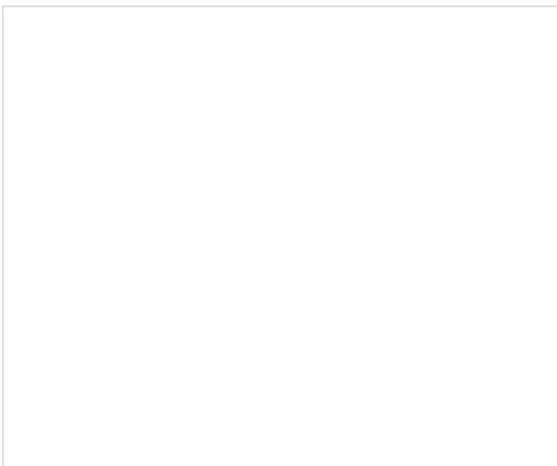
It may be due to lack of resources and timescales but, from my own experience, I have found there are Social Workers who don't deal with 'complexity', everything is so 'black or white' and life is never that straightforward especially for victims of domestic abuse. There just doesn't seem to be the time or need to understand or want to support long term and that must be down to top management.

I know you have to assess and have reviews in order to support but at times it just seems that's all what Social Care is about today without actually really helping people.

So if this was the situation already how are Social Services going to cope with the complexities of problems arising from this pandemic?

Helena May 19, 2021 at 7:04 am #

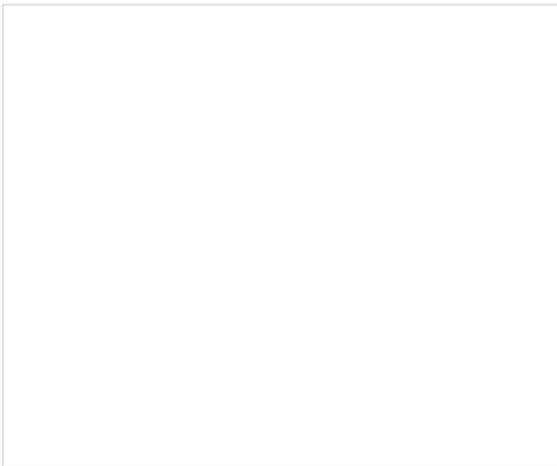
Due to a lack of resources, high caseloads and pressures, we tend to put a sticky tape over problems which loosens as time goes by. The family are then re-referred back into the service with same or similarly problems. Will we ever break the cycle!!!?



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