



Your Voice is Important

A project collecting the views of Looked After Children, Foster carers and Professionals in Thurrock

A Healthwatch Thurrock commissioned report for Thurrock Public Health

September 2019

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About this project

The definition of Looked after Children (LAC) - a child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours.

In accordance with NICE guidelines, organisations, professionals and carers have a responsibility for providing high quality, nurturing and stable placements for looked after CYP (LAC). The guidance aims to ensure that CYP receive the same opportunities as their peers and are supported to achieve their full potential. However, it is well evidenced that CYP in care have below average outcomes across a range of measures.

It is important, therefore, to engage and listen to those experiencing care placements to better understand the needs, aspirations, challenges and opportunities experienced by LAC in Thurrock.

In addition to seeking the voice of LAC, it is essential to examine the views and feedback from carers and professionals to obtain a clear understanding of the needs of local LAC, in order to inform prevention strategies, service design and delivery now and in the future.

For the purpose of this report:

LAC - child or young person in foster care (looked after child)

CYP - child or young person (aged from 0-18 Years)

Public Health Thurrock is delivering a specialist product on LAC with the aim to:

- Summarise the existing local offer, exploring what interventions and services work well as well as identifying gaps in service provision and investigating ways in which these gaps can be addressed.
- The project aims to improve the care journey for all LAC, and give CYP a voice on their care journey.
- The project also seeks the views of foster carers and professionals to contribute to best practise within the local authority.

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Thurrock is the independent Health and Social care services champion for the people of Thurrock. We gather and represent views of local residents in order to build up a picture of services that are doing well and where they can be improved.

Along with consultation work and gathering the voices of residents, Healthwatch Thurrock also provide an information guidance and signposting service.

Residents are invited to “speak out” via an online forum as well as through targeted surveys, conversations and face to face engagement within the community.

Healthwatch Thurrock presents the voices of Thurrock to aid in identifying the need for change, considerations before commissioning and to support best practice across services.

Learning from a user led approach

Through conversation and engagement with people actually using the services Healthwatch Thurrock highlight and promote improvements.

We know that services are better when people are treated as individuals and are actively involved with shaping support.

To do this, services need to learn from examples of real experiences, how they can be adapted and fit around local needs.

It is also important to understand where services are working well and that should be considered to be a blueprint of change when designing services and support.

Thurrock Picture and Summary of Report

Thurrock has a very wide and diverse community that has been increasing by over 10% each decade. The Office of National Statistics estimate a population of 172,500 in 2018 with an expectation of 178,300 by the next census in 2021.

The estimates for 2018 based on projected data from 2015 (last census - Nomis) show a 0-19 age group population in Thurrock of 47,500. This equates to 27.5% of the total Thurrock population.

According to Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Report 2 July 2019:

Over the period of April 2018 and March 2019, there was an average of 306 CYP in care with a high of 319 in October 2018 and a low of 289 in March 2019.

Thurrock focuses on recruiting in-house foster placements rather than independent fostering agencies. Thurrock currently has 81 fostering households equating to 140 foster carers as of July 2019.

The report indicated that Thurrock's rate of looked after CYP per 10,000 of the population (at 67), meaning that Thurrock is marginally above the national average rate of 64.

Generally experiences for both CYP, foster carers and professionals were good, however, there were some notable themes.

- From CYP surveyed; 93% said they felt safe and secure and 89% were happy in their current placement
- From foster carers surveyed 73% were positive about their fostering experience
- Communication and collaboration between foster carers and Children's Services needs improvement
- Continuity of staff is a concern for both CYP and foster carers
- A very low response was seen by professionals invited to complete a survey

Methodology

Healthwatch Thurrock were asked to contribute to Public Health's work in capturing the voices of:

- children and young people in care
- foster carers
- professionals

Three surveys were designed by Public Health in consultation with the Children in care Council and aimed to understand individual experiences of the care system.

- The survey questions were all guided by Public Health and Children's Services
- Surveys were accompanied with an explanatory letter
- The surveys were sent to all looked after CYP and foster carers via Thurrock Council project leads to ensure identities would not be known outside of the statutory services
- Completion of surveys were optional and could be done anonymously
- professional's surveys were collated via an online link circulated by project leads
- Data was returned to Healthwatch Thurrock for analysis and to create this report
- Children and foster carers were also offered the option to attend focus groups

Foster Carer Survey

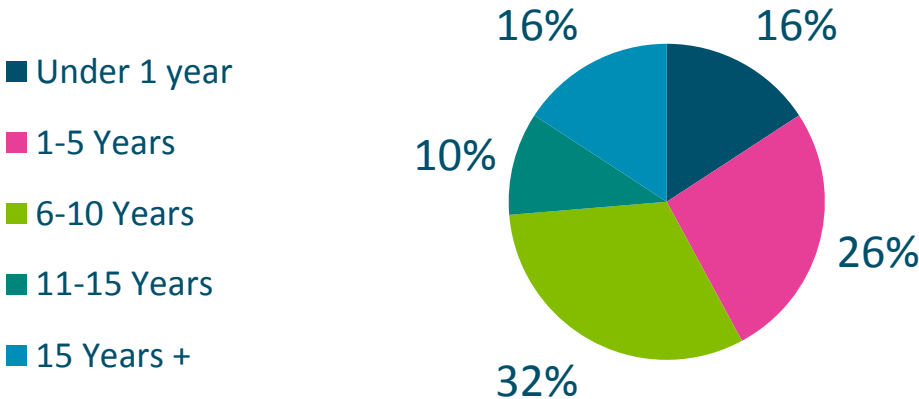
There are 81 foster care households in Thurrock equating to 140 foster carers. CYD can be placed within foster care from birth and may be pre-adoption placements, short-term, short break/respite, emergency or longer placements. Some are statutory placements and other can be placed by their parents/carers for a number of reasons.

Foster carers are rigorously vetted before being accepted as a carer and must meet national standards of practice as part of their training. A training programme is available for foster carers and additional support and guidance is given by their Supervising Social Worker assigned to them when they begin fostering. Each child has a Social Worker, which means a foster carer must maintain contact with both their own and the child's Social Worker during placements.

Healthwatch Thurrock received 19 surveys from foster carers representing 16% of the 81 foster care households. Most of the surveys were from full time carers, with just 1 from a Connected Person, being a relative of the CYP in care.

The survey aimed to understand the relationship with the foster carer and professionals including support given, training available and what services are available for CYP in their care.

How long have you been fostering?



Most foster carers surveyed have been fostering between 6-10 years (32%). Their experiences of fostering was generally good and this is reflected in the retention of long serving carers. An impact of length of service indicates a wide ranging experience base, continuity and stability of placements for CYP in care.

Foster Carer Survey

Negatives within fostering experiences were primarily about difficult placements and working with Children's Social Workers.

When asked about improvements carers would like to see, the most prominent request was about improved communications (54%). This related to understanding what changes were taking place in Social care but also around direct communication and retention of Children's Social Workers.

There was also an element of dissatisfaction around being treated fairly, equal and as a professional.

“Communication with fostering. Sticking to one thing and not being told one thing yet someone else being told something else. More structure within the system, and being more valued. To be treated as a professional. Also our decisions being backed and not to feel like you're being judged.”

“There is very little communication, CYP's social workers need to respond to emails phone calls etc. we need to be given numbers that work and a list of people and roles. List of managers to contact when not happy with the situation. foster handbook updated so it is a helpful document. I thought the CYP got holiday pay, birthday money etc. as that is clearly stated in the handbook. I have just joined the team, I had not looked at the pay structure clearly. I was shocked that general carers only get £130 even if they have 2 or 3 or more CYP. This needs to be seriously reviewed, it is unfair. We were told pay would be reviewed when is this going to happen?”

“More communication from management”

One foster carer told of an experience where they had a very challenging placement which they felt was unsuitable and not matched appropriately. As this was their first ever placement as a new carer, they felt very let down by social care. The carer also was made aware that more experienced carers had already turned the placement down due to the child's behaviour which clearly indicated the child needed to be placed with an experienced carer and not someone who had only been fostering for 4 months.

Foster Carer Survey

Support from professionals - What works well?

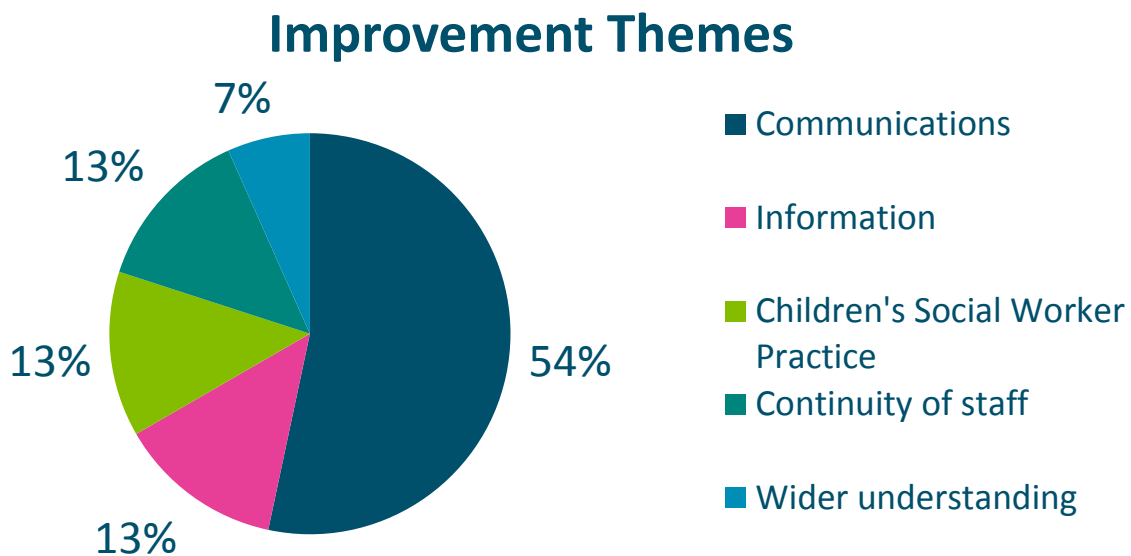
Support from professionals was generally very good with carers reporting good to excellent relationships with their Supervising Social Workers. Other elements of support that were appreciated was peer groups and clinical support offered on a monthly basis. The only negativity was around staff continuity but this was only present in one response as was one individual feeling the morale of carers was affected by current cut backs to services.

“Very happy with the support I receive from SSW but CYP’s SW’s overstretched”

“Being listened to/ being there when placement is breaking down”

Support from professionals - What could be improved?

Most of the improvements were around communications (54%).



“Children’s Social Worker, not being involved in decisions about child”

“Being given information regularly about child and situation”

Foster Carer Survey

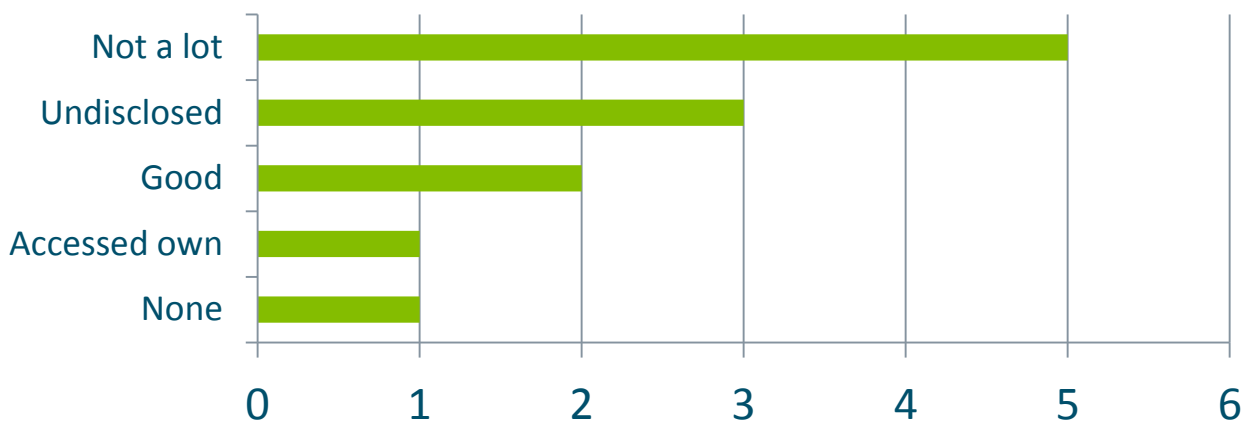
Support received in supporting CYP preparing for independence

Preparing CYP for independence and leaving a care setting is hugely important to their success outcomes as an individual and outlook for life. Young people move to independent living much earlier than their peers who may stay at home into their 20s and beyond. This can mean young people leaving care are at a higher risk of social exclusion, unemployment, homelessness and poverty.

To address this, foster carers should be offered support and possibly training for preparing young people for their adult transition into independence.

From those that have CYP of appropriate age the following was described:

Support for preparing a CYPD for independence



“care plan always supports independence at a young age”

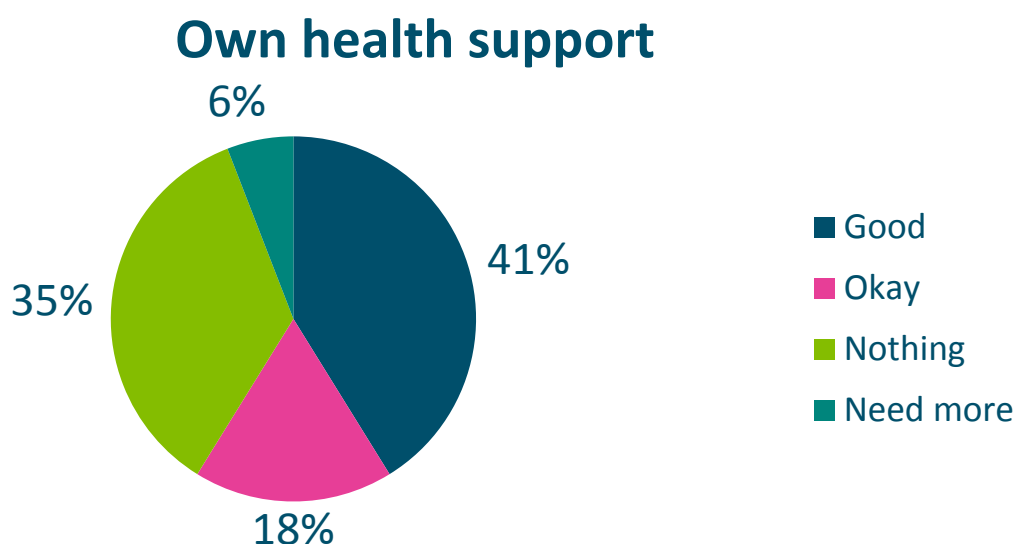
“We went to the careers office”

“I am preparing them for independent living, haven't seen very much of after care worker, however, I can contact if needed”

Foster Carer Survey

Support received in terms of your own health?

Foster carers receive supervision from their Supervising Social Worker and clinical supervision for specific placements types. Support for wellbeing and health is important as is resilience along with the ability to care for CYP with complex needs. Of the carers that completed this section of the survey the following was found:



Whilst most people (41%) did feel they had good support, it is worth noting that a large proportion (35%) did not feel supported. Acknowledgement was seen for the workload of both Children's and Supervising Social Workers as a factor to not providing a lot of support.

For those that did have good support, most cited that this support was from their Supervising Social Worker which is the expected source.

"I think if you have a good supporting S/W as I do whom you can approach this with you will always be supported with your own health. Just to be asked how you are doing and shown some empathy as I am. But I know foster carers that have not had this and this is when Thurrock will lose foster carers. Making sure foster carers are supported is the key to a happy foster carer"

"SSW is understanding and very helpful, supportive"

Foster Carer Survey

Understanding of services available for CYP in your care?

Foster carers had mostly a good or some knowledge of services available to CYP in care. Services mentioned were advocacy and EWMHS, however, there was a feeling that they are not always explained or introduced when people first start fostering. Only one response suggested a negative in that they felt the question did not apply to them.

Awareness of services available for looked after CYP



Training

Most carers spoke favourably about the training offered (74%) and felt that it was useful and accessible to fit in with their schedules. Online training was seen as very useful to those that had accessed it and 21% asked for there to be more training online.

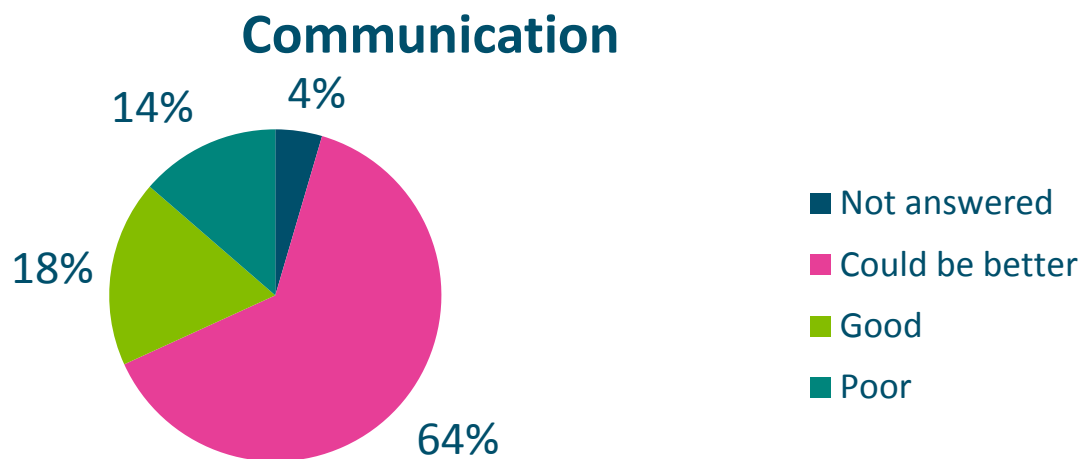
Additional training was requested by nearly half of the carers (47%) and this was specifically:

- How to cope with stress
- Teens to Independence
- Mental Health
- More general online courses
- Attachment
- Empathetic care / communication
- Emotional First Aid

Foster Carer Survey

Communication?

Communication, overwhelmingly could be better according to foster carers. There was also some negativity with 14% saying it was poor.



“Not enough, we are always last to know about young person ie therapy, advocate, schools, they bypass foster carer”

“It depends on child SW at the moment good, but in the past and especially new SW don’t understand or respect the role of a foster carer”

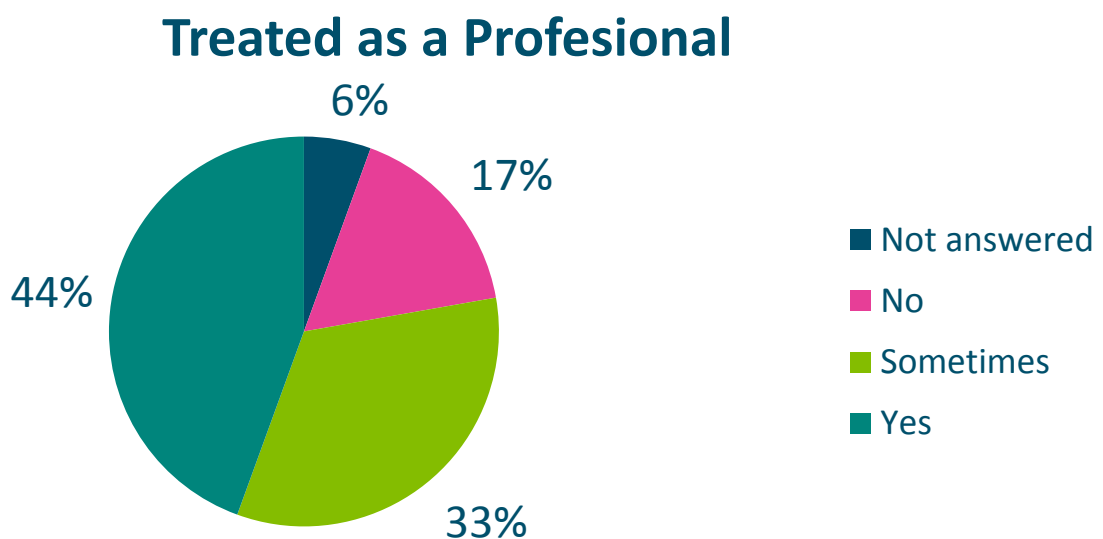
“I still haven't seen my placements files, she has been here 10 weeks”

“Decisions are not always communicated. Children's SW can be very secretive towards carers who are trying to care for a child. It is better to be open and honest.”

Foster Carer Survey

Treated as a professional?

The majority of carers (44%) felt they were treated as a professional and can influence decisions about CYP in their care.



“Yes, SSW & CSW work as a team and will listen to my input before a decision is made.”

“I feel I am listened to and supported”

“Once again this can be hit and miss. All depending on the childs S/W, IRO and all professionals involved with individual child.”

Foster Carer Survey

Any other comments?

“More accessibility to speak to CYP's social workers. E.g. contact arrangements”

“We received Clinical Supervision which is an excellent resource and allows time for reflection and helps build better understanding”

“Very unhappy at the moment, with the treatment we have received in the past 12mths, we feel like we are just a commodity and not valued or listened to: our supervising social worker requested us to have a break as very ill, child's social worker refused because he didn't want to”

“I feel at present there is a lot of anxiety within the carers awaiting new handbook re: payments etc. and also a lot of people are leaving”

“As a Therapeutic carer with years of experience & training would be good if all other professionals understood this”

“To know who is available for respite, carers details and dates can be arranged in advance”

“Communication needs to be better”

“I love my job, especially now we work direct for Thurrock”

“We will continue to work for Thurrock, overall their support is good. I enjoy my role as foster carer. Sometimes I feel like I am fighting the child's corner but this is why I love my job as I support the CYP in my care as I do my own CYP. I am a professional but also I am the person that is able to keep these CYP safe and loved and isn't that what being a foster carer is all about”

“Caring is a rewarding role that makes a difference to a child. However the system has to be supportive & robust for things to work smoothly.

“The majority of carers felt they were treated as a professional and can influence decisions about CYP in their care”

Professionals Survey

Type of professional

There was a return of 7 Professional’s Survey so this should be considered when looking at the responses.

- Safeguarding Team x 1
- Social Worker x 3
- School Nurse x 1
- Contact Service x 1
- Youth Offending Case Manager x 1

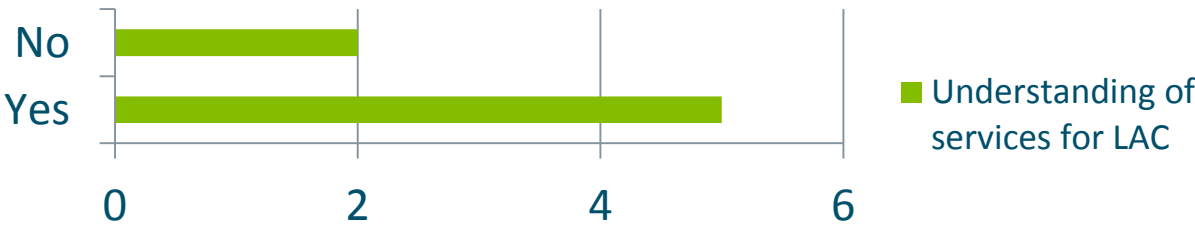
Due to the minimal response from the original survey, Thurrock Council will be running an internal mop-up consultation for professionals to understand their knowledge of LAC services.

Understanding of services available to LAC

Most professionals were aware of services available. Of the 2 that did not, 1 said they were aware of some but not sure of others. The other said more information should be sent to all staff so they are aware.

Those members of staff that were aware of services listed quite a few although 1 mentioned advocacy.

Understanding of services for LAC



Professionals Survey

Support for carers

Most professionals were aware of support for carers. The graph below shows what professionals are aware of.

Support for carers you are aware of



Are there any services you feel are missing?

There was 2 positive responses to this question, 1 spoke of specialist services being under review and the other felt that services were not missing but the issue was around long waiting lists for mental health and mentoring.

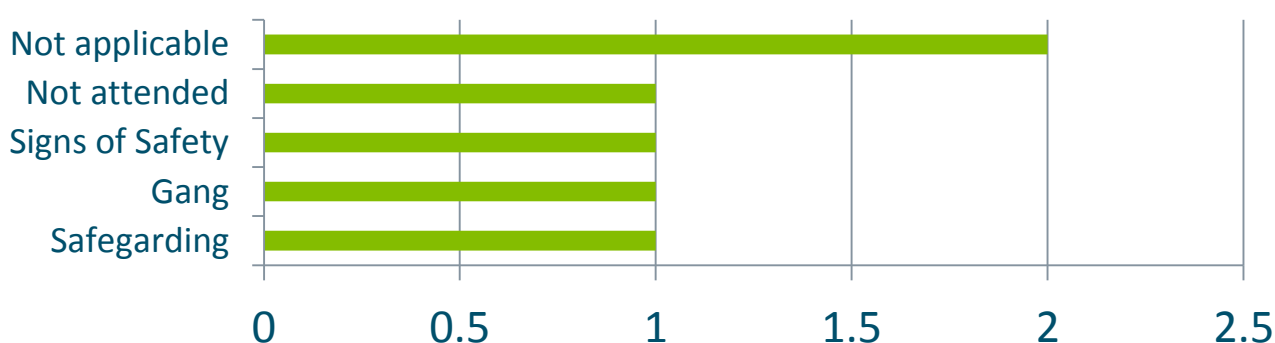
Professionals Survey

Training or support offered to you to support LAC

Responses to this question outlined training that professionals had attended. There were 3 responses that had not attended training, 1 citing that they were not aware of any and 2 that felt this type of training was applicable to them.

Of those that did attend training, all participants felt it was useful and that the time/location was convenient.

Training offered/attended



Collaboration, communication and multi-agency working

Responders to the survey were asked about what works well when different agencies and professionals were working together to support LAC. There were varying responses as below which due to the low dataset is difficult to theme as many were specific. The survey asked two questions, what works well and what can be improved:

What works well

“Everything”

“I think this is currently quite good through LC reviews/health assessments and PEPs.”

“Matching with fostering to child, is a great process, the foster carers have extensive knowledge and this makes it less stressful for the child coming into care.”

“Statutory review meetings.”

Professionals Survey

What works well (contd)

“Key professionals in Health, Education & Independent reviewing officers assist in making the process work well.”

“The contact service is a very knowledgeable dept. of certain families. Maybe they can be of more help in some way.”

“Multi-agency work and sharing of information.”

“It depends on the worker. Some are good at keeping us updated but some are really poor. Also YOS isn't always consulted regarding placement decisions. An example is a LAC with bail conditions not to enter a certain area being placed in that area anyway.”

What could be improved?

“The IHA form's are too big, they double up on information needed and when there is more than one child in the family this can take a lot of time to complete. This process needs to be much easier.”

“professionals to emphasise the need to find out the young persons wishes as much as possible.”

“I think this is currently quite good through LAC reviews/health assessments & PEP's.”

“The need for urgent responses from SW's. For urgent requests to be actioned straight away with urgency.”

“More communication and if all professionals could take time to attend LAC reviews.”

“For social workers to have a better understanding of what the youth offending service does and for some workers to keep us better updated. One of the biggest gaps is housing for LAC youths that turn 18 in custody. Sometimes we don't know where they will be living until they are released which is detrimental to resettlement.”

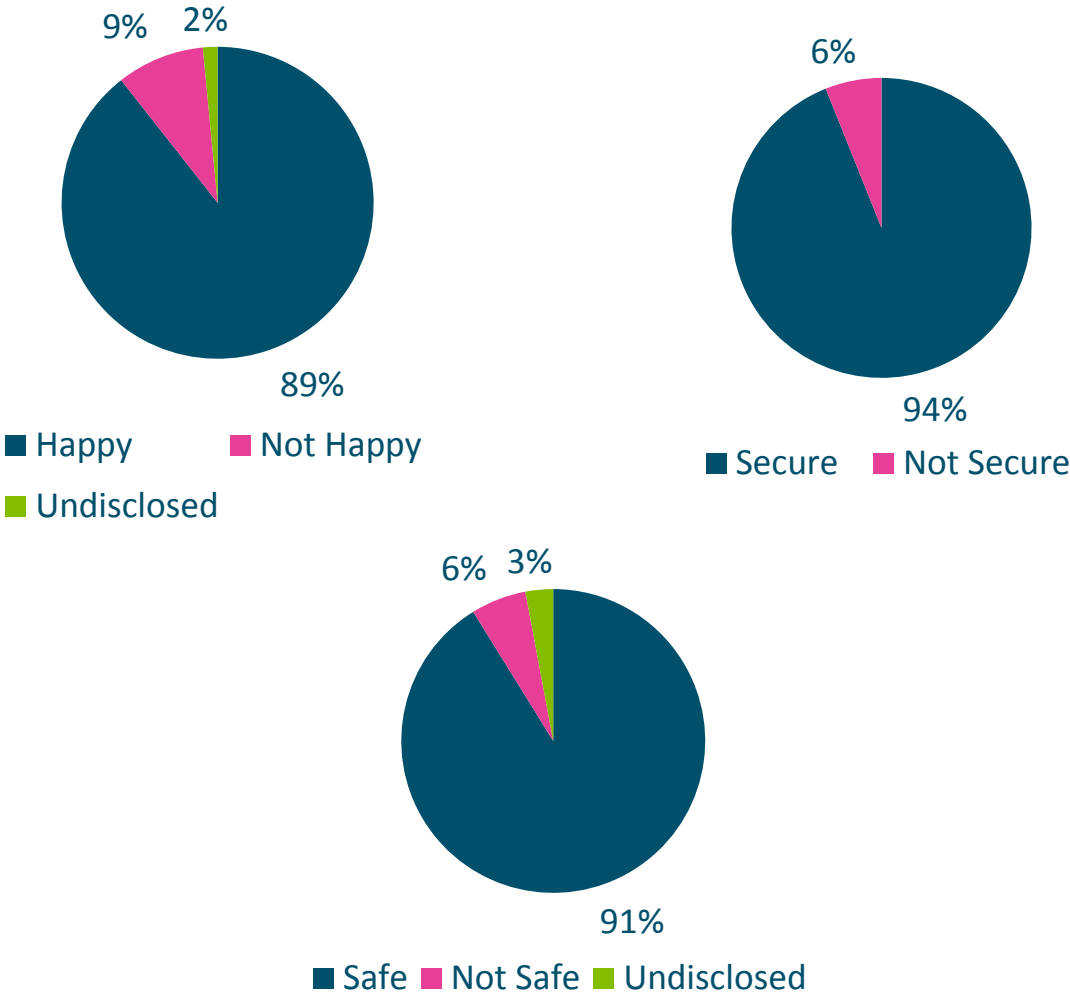
“Everything”

Children’s Survey

The Children’s Survey had a good response of 66 which equates to 22% of LAC in Thurrock based on the March 31st figures of 289 LAC in Thurrock.

The questions asked were to gain insight into what a child’s experience is of being in care but also to identify where improvements can be made from the perspective of their own voices.

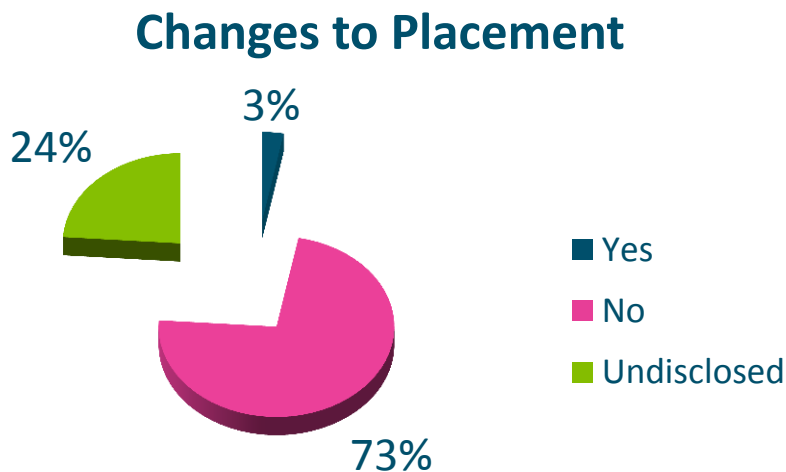
The initial understanding was sought around how safe, secure and happy CYP are in their current placement.



Most CYP reported that they were happy, safe and secure. What is notable however, is that 6% of CYP feel unsafe or unsecure in their current foster placement.

Children's Survey

Most CYP surveyed were happy with their current placement (89%). When asked if they would change anything only 3% said that they would.



The comments from those that would like changes were:

“A lot of rules, doing homework, phone on silent”

“Yes, get out of jail”

For those that did not want to see changes, comments were very positive:

“No, because they treat me as part of the family”

“Not for the world, no one will separate me from my family”

The survey asked “What is the best thing about being in care?”. The question invited free text and the most prominent theme was around the connection CYP have to their foster carers and feeling part of a family. Other things were the advantages and opportunities they had including basic things like activities, clothes and feeling safe.

“That there are people to keep me safe and happy”

Financial and emotional support. I have really connected with my foster family”

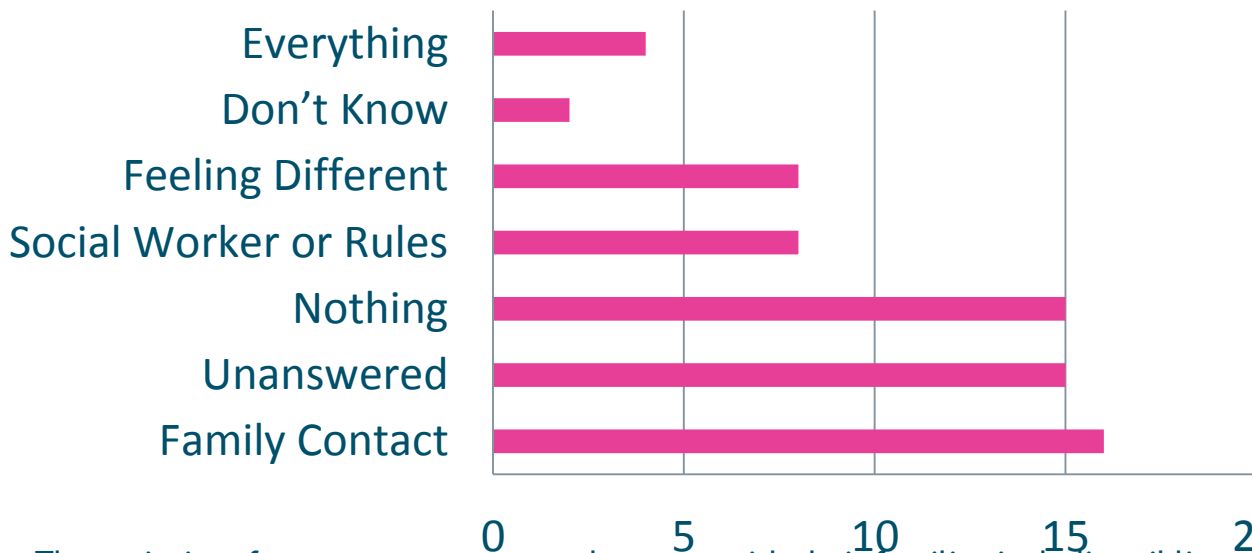
“That everyone is very friendly and kind to me and we do some very amazing things”

“I've got a new family. I've got regular food, I do different activities & holiday”

Children's Survey

The survey invited CYP to say “What is the worst thing about being in care?”

Worst thing about being in care



The majority of responses were around contact with their families including siblings. This related to both the amount of contact and generally that they wanted to be living with their families.

There was a proportion of surveys that had no response to this question and an equal amount saying there was “nothing” bad about being in care. Eight responses said they didn’t like the feeling of being different, although in varying ways:

“Not enough family contact, social workers because they make you feel different”

“Having to pretend that to your friends that your carers are your family”

Eight responses claimed that “everything” was the worst thing about being in care. Similarly eight responses cited their Social Worker or restrictive things like rules and processes being the worst thing.

“Change of social workers”

“Not being able to plan”

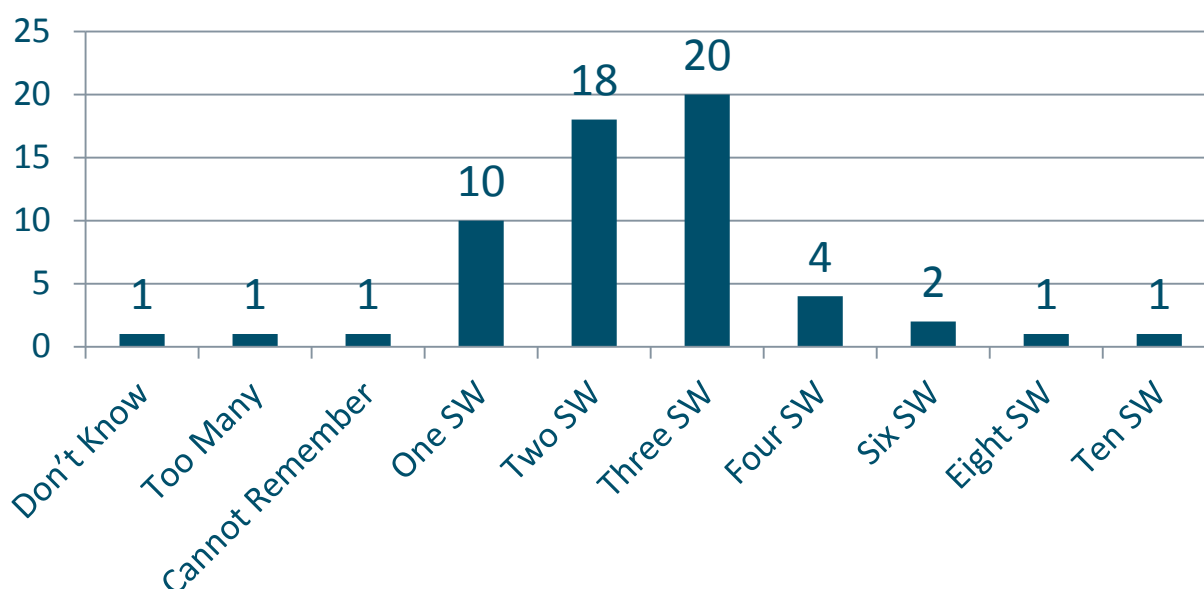
“Everything is shit”

“Being away from my family and having to do background checks whenever I want to have a sleepover”

Children's Survey

Children and Young People can experience a number of social workers and the survey asked how many they had had in the past 12 months. The majority of LAC had three social workers in the past 12 months (20). Notably however, some LAC had six social workers and two CYP had 28 social workers between them in the past 12 months.

Amount of Social Workers



A total of 54 CYP had a good relationship with their social worker and a few said they didn't know, or sort of. There were 9 however, that said they did not have a good relationship with their social worker.

“On time, reliable and nice”

“She is emotionally understanding, gives advices and gets my views, thoughts and opinions across to social services”

A number of CYP reported having bad experiences with their social worker (19). Some of which were:

“She don't listen to anything we say. All for the family, not me”

“My previous SW acted very strange and put his religious views across to me which made me feel very uncomfortable”

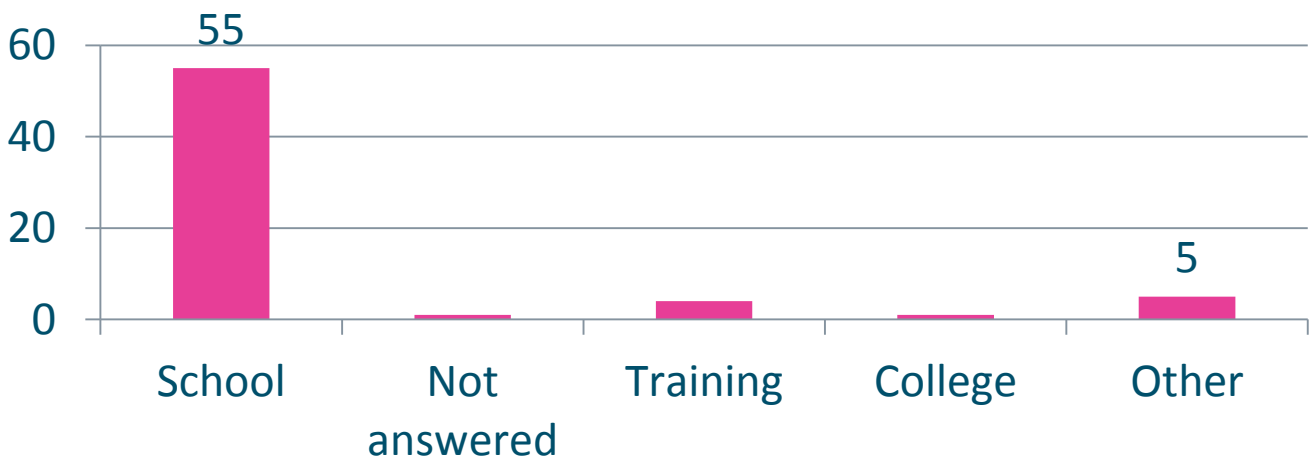
“Not being able to contact them”

“Lots of them don't go through my file, so have to repeat”

Children's Survey

Young people in care tend to have less opportunities and may miss out on education at various points in life putting them at a disadvantage to their peers.

School, Education, Employment or Training



Most of the CYP surveyed were attending school. One did not answer the question and 5 reported being in “other” which may suggest that they are not attending any kind of training, employment etc., 1-1 tuition, or an alternative provision.

A total of 54 CYP had a good relationship with a few saying they didn’t know, or sort of. There were 9 however, that said they did not have a good relationship with their social worker.

The majority of responders said they were being prepared for independence when they leave foster care with 4 reporting they were not.

The question around “Do you know what your future plans are for when you leave care” split with 36 saying they did know and 27 saying they did not. There were 3 blank responses to this question. As most of the CYP are still attending school, they may not have started this development yet.

Types of Placement

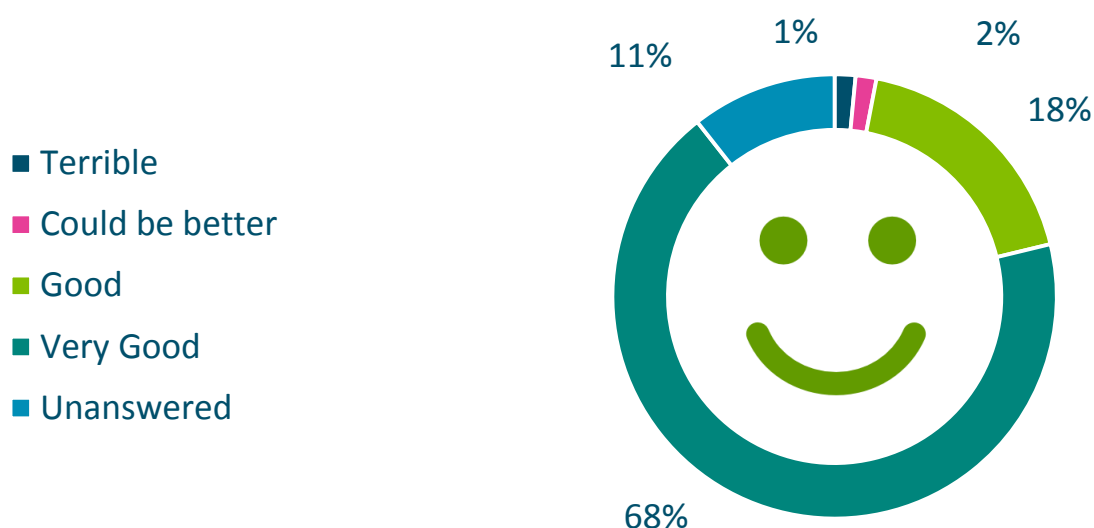
The majority of surveys said that foster care placements (48) were preferred and the next highest was Connected Person (7).

Children's Survey

Foster carer Relationship

We used an emoji scale to determine how well CYP get on with their foster carers. Again, the connection and relationship with carers was positive with 57 reporting that it was “good” or “really good”.

How well do you get on with your foster carer?



Advocacy

Three questions were asked around advocacy:

	Yes	No	Unanswered /Don't know
Do you know what an advocate is?	31	33	2
Do you know how to get in touch with an advocate?	25	39	2
Do you currently have an advocate?	14	44	8
If no, would you like one?	7	47	12

Children's Survey

Your Voice

It is important that a child's view is considered and sought when decisions are being made. This impacts on both a child being kept informed and feeling included so they can have their say. This includes all decisions and how much information is given to a child before they are placed with foster carers. Most surveys reported they were informed and included and had information about their placements. However a large amount felt they would have liked more.

	Yes	No	Not really	Unanswered /Don't know
Are you informed and included in decisions about you so you have your say?	58	3	2	3
Did you have any information about your placement before you went there?	33	17		5
Would you have liked more?	11	-	-	-

The sort of information that CYP would have liked based on survey feedback was:

“Are they nice?”

“What they are like, if they have any CYP and if they are the same age as me”

“What previous kids who had stayed there thought of them”

“Who is there, will I fit in?”

Contact with birth family

A higher proportion felt they had enough contact with their birth family or other relatives (39), however quite a few felt they did not (22). There were 4 surveys that said they didn't know and 1 that did not answer.

Children's Survey

Any other comments

The survey asked one last question to solicit any other comments about being in care:

There were 15 comments. All other responses were either blank or felt they had nothing more to say.

"It's fun because they take you places"

"I hate being placed with horrible people"

"It has given me a chance to do well in life"

"It's ruined my childhood its horrible. Want to live with my mums mate"

"More football I want to be in goal"

"I love living here"

"I get extra help at school."

"I thoroughly enjoy it"

"I feel safe and happy"

"It is very enjoyable and happy"

"It's not as scary as you think"

"It's fabulous"

"I don't like being in care"

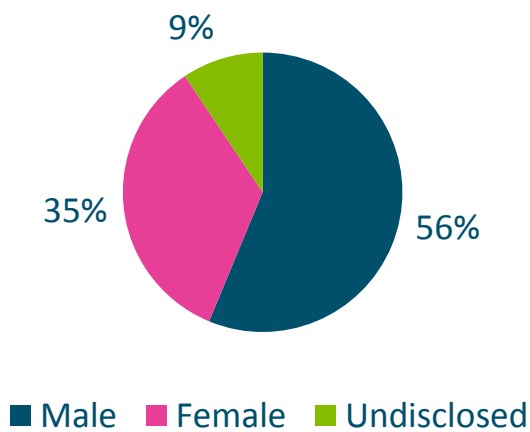
"It is really incredible & it has built up my confidence"

"There are good days and bad days just like in a real family"

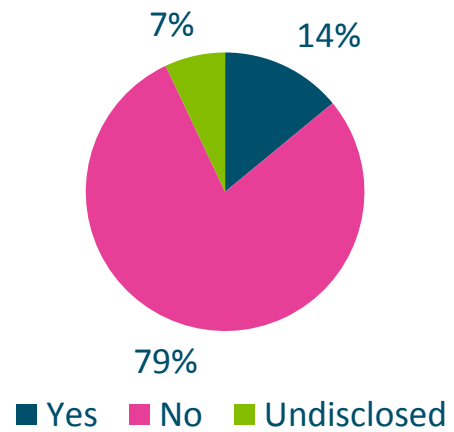
Children's Survey

Demographics

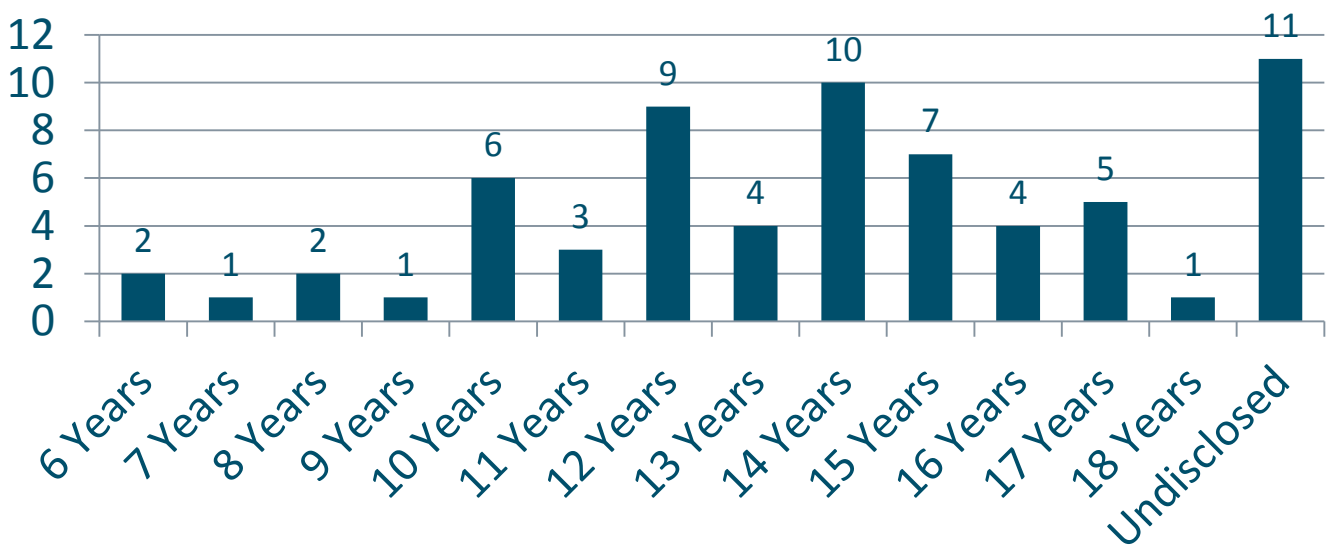
Gender



Disability



Age



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