

Private Fostering Survey 2025

Findings and analysis

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Introduction

Private fostering is defined by section 66 of the Children Act 1989 and means looking after (care and accommodation) a child under 16 (or under 18 if they have a disability) for more than 28 days in the home of someone who is not their parent, a person with parental responsibility (PR) for the child, or a close relative. A close relative is defined by section 105 of the Children Act 1989 and means grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt, or step-parent. The familial or birth relationship can be full or half, for example half-brother.

Private foster carers may be from the extended family such as a cousin or great aunt. A private foster carer may be a friend of the family, the parent of a friend of the child, or someone previously unknown to the child's family who is willing to privately foster the child. The period for which the child is cared for and accommodated by the private foster carer should be continuous but can include the occasional short break. The local authority in which the private foster carer lives must be notified of the arrangement.

The Department for Education stopped collection of any data about private fostering in 2015 and therefore the exact number of children who are privately fostered is not known. The Department for Education stated that the data collected was of limited value as it was numerical only, and did not offer any information about the quality of the private fostering arrangements, and therefore it did not contribute in any way to keeping children safe. Their hope was that improved future analysis of child level data in the children in need census would identify children in need or those requiring protection living in private fostering arrangements. The Children in need census 2025 to 2026: guide sets out 'Children in need who are also privately fostered should be included. However, being privately fostered does not automatically mean the child is a child in need. To be included, the privately fostered child must have been assessed to be in need and requiring children's social care services in addition to receiving the required statutory visits because they are privately fostered. If a privately fostered child is only receiving the required statutory visits from children's social care services, then the child is not included in the children in need census' (p12). Therefore, it was hoped that this data would help provide more information and insights into the profiles of private fostering arrangements that needed additional support and this would lead to policies and practices that are more effective in identifying privately fostered children in the longer term.

Information from the <u>Children in need census 2023-24</u> states that 'factors identified at the end of a (child in need) assessment are additional factors that social workers record as being relevant in a case.' This included 2,040 privately fostered children who were subject to a child in

need plan during the year to end March 2024. The available data does not indicate the primary reason for an assessment of these children in need. We are also aware that some local authorities automatically consider any child or young person living in a private fostering arrangement to be a child in need. The children in need data were collected from all 153 local authorities in England and gives some indication of numbers of children living in private fostering arrangements, but only those with a child in need plan.

Practitioners working in private fostering continue to be concerned about the lack of data. At a basic level, it is hard to feel confident that policy makers can effectively consider the needs of privately fostered children when there is no central data about numbers, nor about their characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, faith or duration of arrangement other than limited data that comes from the children in need census. We also know local authorities want to compare their own data about privately fostered children with geographical and statistical neighbours, as this could be one indicator of their success in identifying, assessing and supporting children in private fostering arrangements.

The definition of kinship care as set out in the <u>Kinship care</u>: <u>statutory guidance for local authorities</u> (2024) includes children who are privately fostered by individuals (as opposed to those privately fostered by organisations such as language schools and football academies). Children living in private fostering arrangements and their private foster carers are therefore eligible for any universal support available to kinship families. This includes both the universal training and support commissioned by the government and delivered by <u>Kinship</u>, as well as the extension to the virtual school head role. It seems important that such policy initiatives can appropriately reach privately fostered children and their carers. The <u>Law Commission</u> is currently undertaking a review of the legislation relating to kinship care. One of the areas that is being explored is 'producing a legal definition of kinship care for the purpose of the issues considered in the project' which would include private foster carers, as the definition stands. There will be a period of consultation from Spring 2026 with a view to recommendations being available by the end of 2027.

CoramBAAF would like to support a better understanding of this often hidden group of children. Therefore, we launched a Private Fostering Survey in July 2024, and this report provides information from the second survey that was completed in June 2025. It is CoramBAAF's intention to continue to complete an annual survey with consistent questions, so that data is more easily comparable.

Methodology and responses

We adapted the online survey that was used in 2024 to gather data from local authorities in England and Wales on private fostering notifications and arrangements. We consulted with members of a working party and reflected on responses received in 2024, to ensure the survey questions were as useful and as simple to follow as possible. The working party comprised social workers and managers working in private fostering who had completed the first survey. We publicised the survey through our membership communications and channels over a fourweek period. We received 99 responses in total, however these included some duplicates and other test responses that were therefore removed from the final analysis. We received a larger number of responses this year which suggests that publicising and repeating the survey was effective and we would hope for a further increase in the response rate in coming years. We asked for data for the period 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025. We deliberately published our survey in June 2025 when we hoped local authorities might already be collating data for 2024 – 2025 annual reports.

We designed the survey to ask key questions about private fostering. We tried to limit the number of questions to encourage a higher response rate. We asked general questions about the number of notifications received and how many actual children were living in private fostering arrangements, including age range, ethnicity, faith, disability, relationship to the private foster carer, duration of the arrangement and whether the child was subject to a special guardianship order (SGO) or child arrangements order (CAO).

This year, we also ensured that respondents were able to start the online survey and save a partially completed response and return to it when they had access to the data needed. CoramBAAF will be creating a template of questions with guidance that will be available on our website and shared with members well in advance of next year's survey. We hope this will make it easier for local authorities to build and run data reports to ensure they have access to the data they need. We hope this consistency will also enable year on year comparisons and more meaningful understanding of the picture of private fostering in England and Wales.

We also asked for contact details to follow up on data-related issues/questions. However, we were also clear that we would not share any identifying details about local authorities or the private foster carers or children in their care.

Given the changes to the questions this year, there will be limited direct comparison between 2024 and 2025 but we are encouraged by the increased response rate.

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Survey responses

A total of 99 responses were received. We followed up where possible on any duplicate or partially completed responses to confirm which responses should be used. As a result of this process, we were able to use 61 responses for the analysis.

Local authorities

In 2024, we were able to use data from 18 local authorities and in total received data from 33 local authorities in England and 1 in Wales. This represented 21.6% of the 153 local authorities in England and 4.5% of the 22 local authorities in Wales, so 19.4% overall. We noted that the responses came from local authorities across England and Wales, with responses from all regions apart from the North East of England.

In 2025, we received responses from 57 local authorities in England and 4 local authorities in Wales. This represents 37.25% of local authorities in England and 18% of local authorities in Wales, both of which are significant increases from 2024. As with last year, we noted a good geographical spread of responses across England. Due to the changes in questions between 2024 and 2025, we were not able to make a comparison between geographical neighbours but will consider this in future years.

The number of responses, including commentary provided within the survey, indicates ongoing challenges faced by local authorities in either accessing data about privately fostered children, or about providing it in the breakdown or format we requested. As mentioned above, we hope that the creation and circulation of a set template of questions will increase both the response and completion rates in 2026.

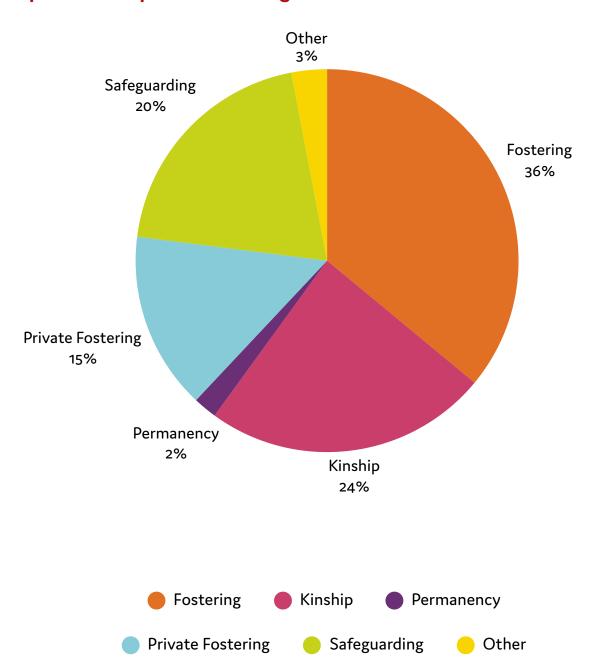


Who has responsibility for private fostering?

The responses we received show that responsibility for private fostering continues to sit across a large range of teams.

Based on last year's responses, we created a drop-down list of teams responsible for private fostering for respondents to choose from. Last year, this information was provided in a free-text field so we are not able to directly compare the two sets of results. Interestingly though, this year more respondents said that private fostering was situated in fostering services than in kinship teams, which was the opposite to 2024.

Teams responsible for private fostering



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Private fostering does not share any regulatory or legislative frameworks with mainstream fostering, and crucially the children are not in the care of the local authority. It is not possible to comment on whether some of those fostering services are also responsible for kinship fostering. The conclusion drawn last year was that there was a logic to private fostering responsibility sitting in kinship teams, given the inclusion of private fostering in the definition of kinship care stated in the Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities and the commonalities shared by a child who is living with private foster carers and a child living in informal kinship care with a close relative. But of course, many kinship teams only support formal kinship carers, although this may change over time. Formal kinship carers are also assessed and supported across a variety of teams.

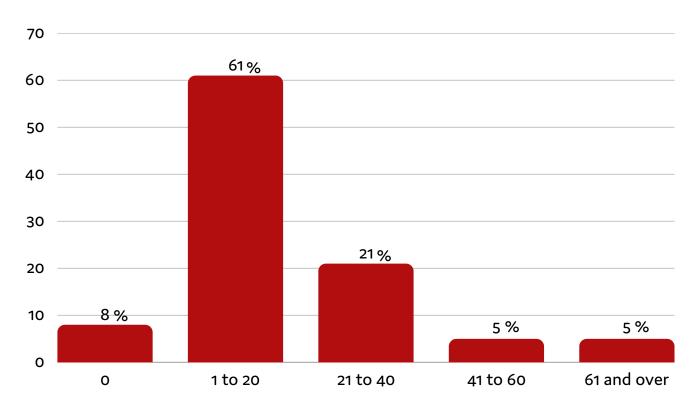
The variance in where responsibility sits is perhaps most important for policy makers and those who provide universal services to kinship carers (which now includes children living in private fostering arrangements and private foster carers). It is important that these privately fostered children and their carers are made aware of what support is available to them, particularly given the requirement to develop kinship local offers which must include private foster carers.



Private fostering notifications

CoramBAAF regularly facilitates a <u>Private Fostering Practice Forum</u>, where our members come together to discuss professional practice, and share knowledge and expertise with colleagues. We therefore know, from our members, that most local authorities have small numbers of children living in private fostering arrangements at any given point in time; the number of children ranges from 5 – 25 on average. At CoramBAAF, we wanted to know about the numbers of notifications received over a year and who those notifications came from.

Private fostering notifications in 2024 - 2025: Numbers reported



8% of responding local authorities (n=5) received no notifications in the year to end March 2025. We did not offer 0 as a response option in last year's survey so no direct comparison can be made.

61% of local authorities (n=37) received between 1 and 20 notifications, an increase of 17% on last year's survey.

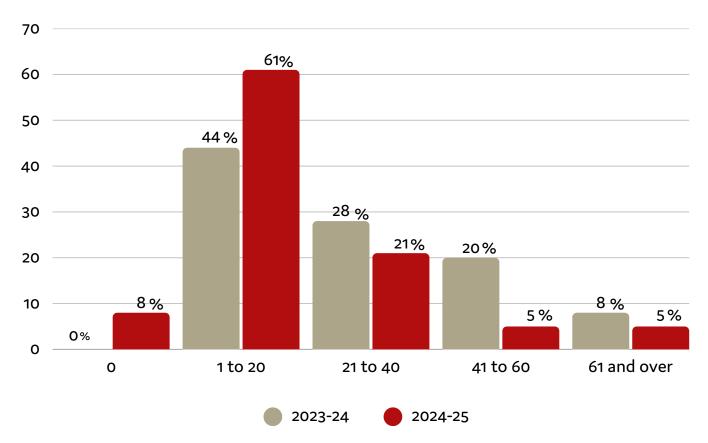
21% of local authorities (n=13) received between 21 and 40 notifications, a slight decrease from last year's 28%.

5% of local authorities (n=3) received between 41 and 60 notifications, a significant decrease from last year's 20%.

5% of local authorities (n=3) received more than 60 notifications, which was a very similar figure to last year. Two of those local authorities were the same as last year and we surmised

that the larger number of notifications could be due to language schools in the area. One of the local authorities with over 60 notifications this year did not take part in the survey in 2024 therefore a direct comparison is not possible.

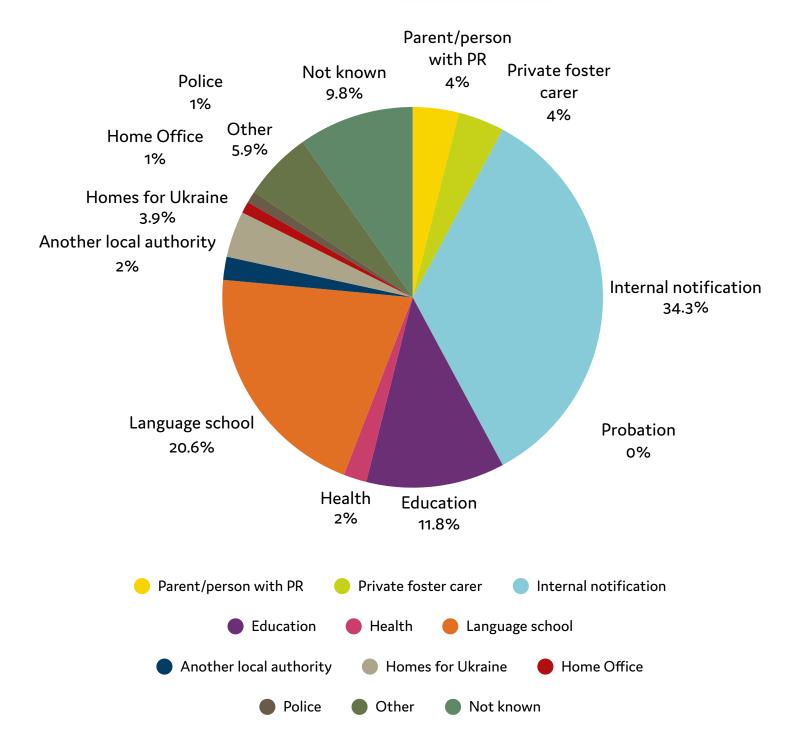
Private fostering notifications in 2023-24 and 2024-25



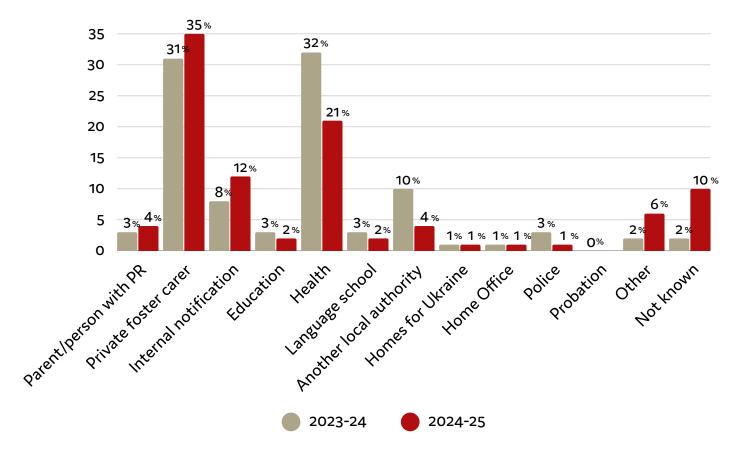
Further analysis in future years will provide an opportunity for better comparison. The nature of private fostering arrangements means that some local authorities are likely to receive more notifications than others, and this will also depend on levels of awareness in local communities. Language schools should always be aware of their responsibility to notify the local authority of any student who will be staying with a host family for more than 28 days. One of the local authorities that reported higher numbers of private fostering arrangements in both years also has a private fostering team which may mean that there are increased rates of notifications due to better awareness of private fostering.



Source of notifications 2024-25



Source of notifications 2023-24 and 2024-25



We provided the same list of sources of private fostering notifications as last year. Interestingly, there is a very similar pattern of notifications overall. One noticeable decrease was new notifications of children or young people living with sponsors via the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. The latest government guidance for applications was published in August 2025 and 'weekly Ukraine visa statistics publication was discontinued on 19 December 2024' (Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data). Responding local authorities in 2024 stated that they were aware of 80 children under this scheme, as opposed to 42 this year. Given the increase in local authorities who responded this year, that is a significant decrease overall.

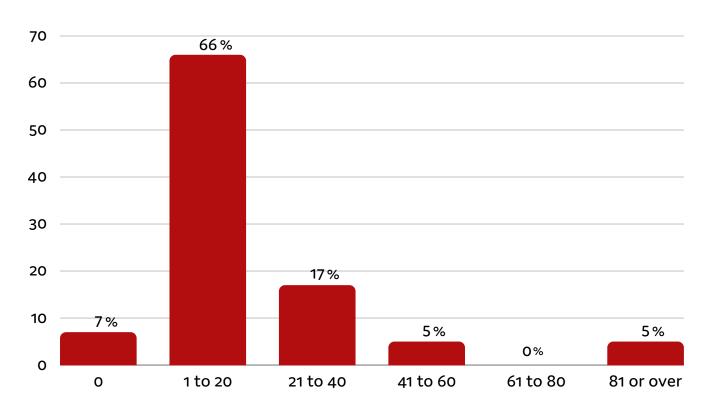
As in the previous year, notifications came from a range of sources with most being internal from other children's teams (34.3%) apart from language schools (20.6%). Interestingly, very few came from parents or private foster carers themselves. This supports the hypothesis that we need to continue to raise awareness of private fostering. It seems evident that many parents and individual private foster carers may not be aware of their responsibility to notify the local authority of the arrangement, hence notifications coming primarily from other sources. It also highlights the ongoing need for local authorities to continue to raise awareness in their local communities as the percentage of notifications from health and education was also lower than might be expected and very similar to last year's figures.

Numbers of children privately fostered

This chart shows the range of numbers of children per local authority who were privately fostered during the year. We asked for the numbers of children who were privately fostered as this could differ from the number of notifications received (one notification might relate to more than one child).

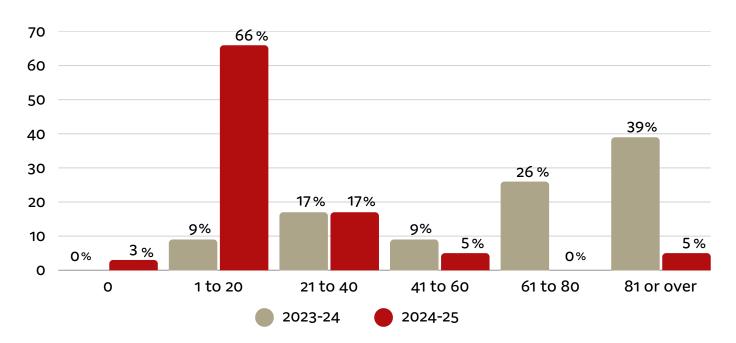
7% (n=4) of local authorities reported no children living in private fostering arrangements, 66% (n=39) reported between 1 and 20 children, 17% (n=10) between 21 and 40 children, 5% (n=3) reported between 41 and 60 children, no local authorities had between 61 and 80 children, and 5% (n=3) having over 81 children living in private fostering arrangements. The latter figure tallies with the number of notifications reported by those three local authorities.

Children privately fostered in 2024-25: Percentage of local authority respondents



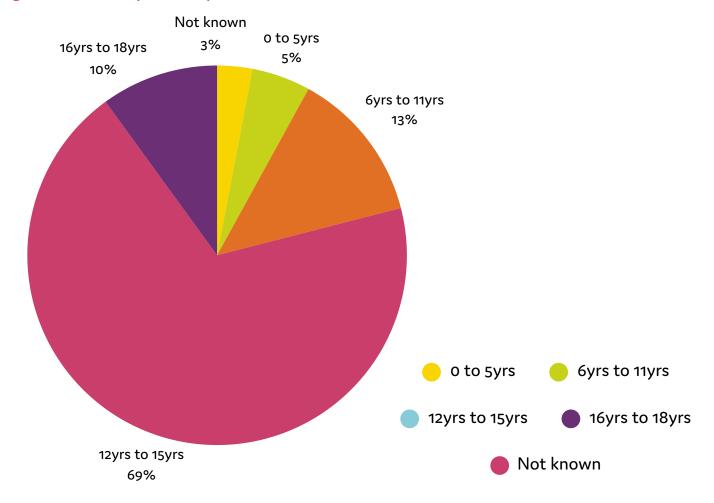
The difference in numbers reported is likely attributable to the increased numbers of respondents this year. The numbers reported in the 2024 and 2025 surveys are compared in the table below.

Children in private fostering arrangements in 2023-24 and 2024-25



Characteristics of children living in private fostering arrangements

Age of children privately fostered in 2024-25



According to the local authorities who responded to this question, 69% of children (n=704) were aged between 12 and 14, compared to 49% (n = 168) last year, but this remains the largest number of children. 5% of children (n=50) were aged between 0 and 5 and 13% (n=132) were aged between 6 and 11.

9% (n=96) were aged between 16 and 18, compared to 20% (n = 67) last year. Private fostering arrangements end at the age of 16 unless a child is disabled or is a child from Ukraine. Children from Ukraine living in private fostering arrangements are entitled to be considered as such until they are 18 years old which may account for the overall percentage reduction in this age category.

It is of note that the largest numbers of children again are in the 12–15 age group. We know from practice experience that children who experience relationship difficulties with parents in adolescence sometimes "place themselves" in private fostering arrangements, perhaps living with a friend of the family or their friend's family, and this may account for the numbers. It is also of note that 3% (n = 32) did not know the age of the children in private fostering arrangements, suggesting that the data had not been recorded or could not be collated, rather than local authorities not being aware of the age of a child known to them. While this is a smaller percentage than last year's 9%, it is exactly the same number of children as reported last year.

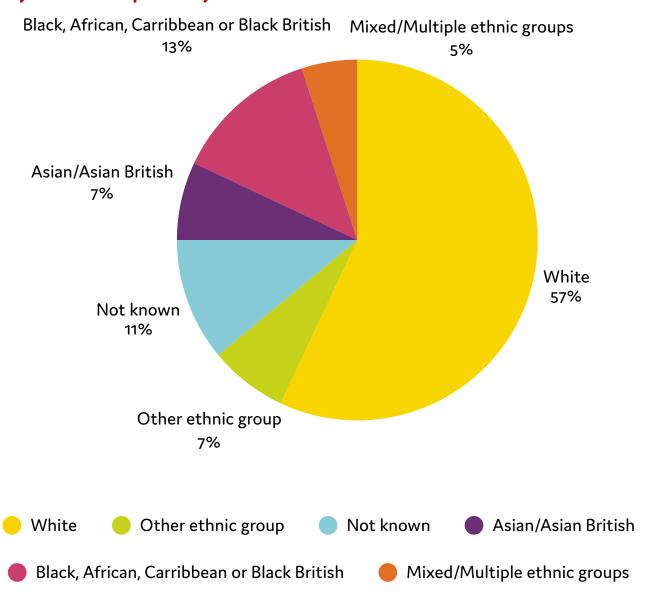
We are curious about the 18% (n = 182) of children who were under the age of 11 and the reason, planning and duration of their private fostering arrangement.

Children with a disability who are privately fostered

From responses received this year, we were told that 28 children (0.03%) were children with a disability. It will be interesting to compare this in future years as we did not ask this question in the first year. Please note that we did not ask a question about the categorisation of disability. A question that arises in our practice forums is whether neurodivergence can be considered as a disability – it is our understanding currently that this would not be the case when considering private fostering regulations but local authorities should be guided by local practice and it is likely that practitioners adopt a social model of disability based on need rather than an explicit focus on diagnosis.



Ethnicity of children privately fostered



Out of a total of 854 children that we received data about, the majority - 57% (n = 490) - were of White ethnicity. This compares to 71% of children in local authority foster care who are of White ethnicity (total number of children in care 83,630 on 31 March 2024. Figures for 2024 - 25 are due to be released later in November 2025). We do know that children from mixed ethnic groups are overrepresented and children from Asian ethnic groups are underrepresented in the looked after child population.

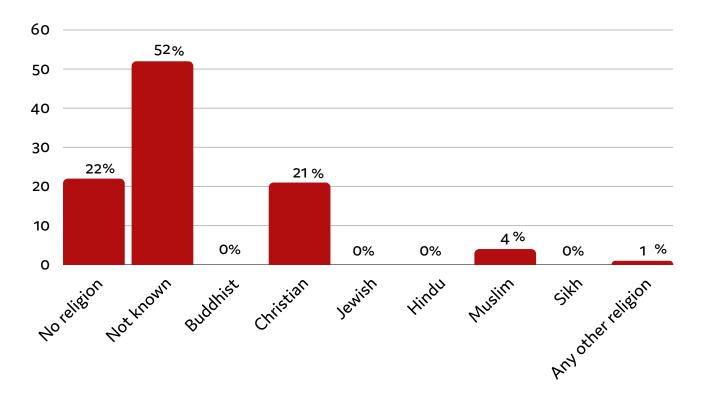
We also know that Black children are overrepresented in informal kinship care and underrepresented in formal kinship care (<u>Understanding Formal Kinship Care Arrangements in England</u>). The <u>2021 census data</u> states that 9.3% of the population are from Asian ethnic groups, 4% from Black ethnic groups, 2.9% from mixed ethnicity and 2.1% from other ethnic groups.

The survey data for this question therefore suggests a similar pattern - with children from Black identities in this data set being overrepresented in private fostering arrangements, and children from Asian ethnicities being underrepresented. This has not changed from last year's survey.

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Faith of privately fostered children

We were not able to report on faith in last year's report due to insufficient or incomplete data. The number of respondents able to report on this is still low but given the increase in respondents there is reportable data.

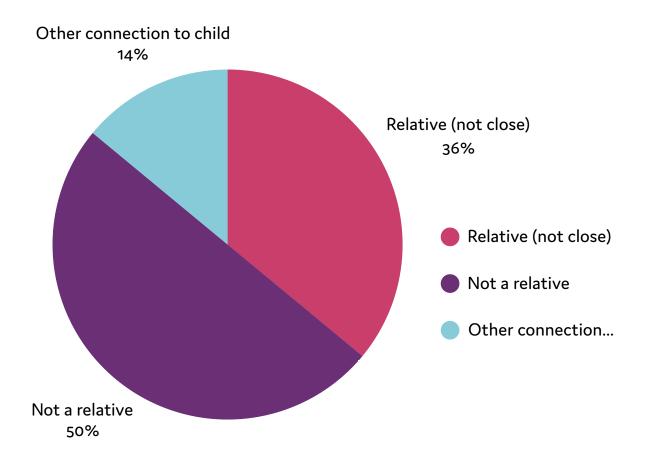


The majority of children's faith is described as 'not known', with 21% being recorded as Christian, 22% with no religion and 4% of children being identified as Muslim. In our practice experience, this lack of data is not uncommon, either because the information is not known, shared or asked for.



Relationship to private foster carer

Relationship of children privately fostered in 2024-25 to their private foster carer



Out of the local authorities who responded to this question, the majority of private foster carers, where the relationship was known (n=412), were not related to the child, whilst 36% (n=303) were related but do not fit the definition of a close relative. Those with another connection to the child amounted to 14% (n=116). We were interested to explore the number of private fostering arrangements organised by a third party but in fact the question posed did not enable a numeric response. However, a few people said that host agencies had made the arrangements in addition to language schools. We remain curious about those private fostering arrangements that may have been made through an agency, where there is no prior connection between the private foster carer and the child or their parents.

The relationship between 3% (n=28) of children and their private foster carer was 'not known' which highlights another gap in data collection.

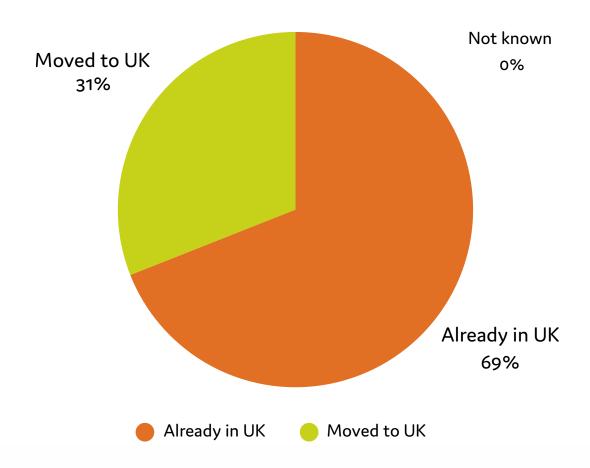
It is evident however that the majority of children in private fostering arrangements are living with carers who are not related to them and this may include a variety of scenarios including arrangements organised by a third party, but also arrangements where children are living with a friend's family or with friends of/adults known to their parents. Situations described included a child living with a guardian or family friend following a parent's death and young people making their own arrangements to live with a friend.

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Location of children prior to becoming privately fostered

We asked about the location of where children were living prior to becoming privately fostered as there has been a presumption in the past that children were being 'sent' to the UK by parents who lived overseas, often to enable their child to receive an education in the UK. The results from this year's survey indicate that a third of children did move to the UK in order to live with private foster carers but the majority were resident in the UK beforehand.

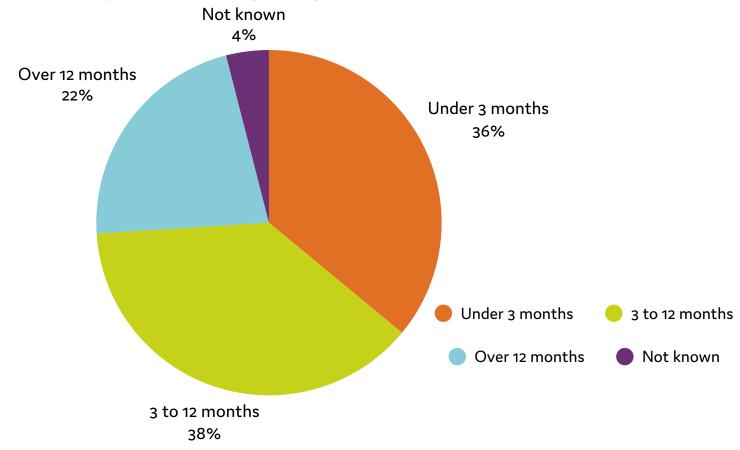
Location of children in 2024-25 prior to becoming privately fostered



The way that the question was asked does not allow further analysis of whether children were privately fostered due to attending language schools or whether plans were being made for more long-term arrangements. We will consider whether this question could or should be modified for next year's survey as it would be interesting to have an understanding of the needs of those children who are not coming to the UK through language school attendance.

Duration of arrangement with private foster carer

Duration of private fostering arrangements for children in 2024-25



36% (n=288) of private fostering arrangements lasted for less than 3 months, 38% (n=302) lasted between 3 and 12 months, with 22% (n=173) of arrangements lasting for more than a year. 4% (n=34) did not know how long the private fostering arrangement had been in place. These figures are not dissimilar to last year's returns although direct comparisons cannot be made as this year we only asked about children living with individual private foster carers, rather than those in other arrangements such as language schools, football academies or boarding schools.

Private fostering regulations state arrangements should be reviewed regularly and at a minimum annually. We know from our members that reviews can be a challenge, although many local authorities work hard to establish review protocols. There is a need for permanency planning for children in private fostering arrangements that last for extended periods, and this can be a challenge, particularly if a child's parents are not actively involved in their life. Therefore, we asked about numbers of children for whom either a special guardianship or child arrangements order had been granted. Of those who responded to this question, 56% (n=25) were subject to a special guardianship order and 44% (n=20) children were subject to a child arrangements order. Many private fostering practitioners are aware of children's need for permanence but the private fostering regulations themselves impose no duty around thinking about permanence for children as these are private arrangements, and therefore a local authority's duty to think about permanence needs will fall under their Children in Need duties.

Conclusion and next steps

This is the second private fostering survey that CoramBAAF has undertaken and we recognise that there are further lessons for us to learn to enable us to gather more complete and comparable data on private fostering practice in future. Despite meeting with a working party to inform the design of the survey this year, there are areas that need further discussion and refinement before we are in a position to share a template that will form the basis of future surveys and enable local authorities to build and run the required data reports. The template will be accompanied with more detailed guidance with the aim of consolidating the learning from this feedback and analysis of the last two years of responses.

It is positive that there has been a significant increase in the number of local authorities who responded to this year's survey which we hope was aided by increased awareness and a simplified survey combined with the option of returning to the survey once started, which allowed respondents the time to gather the data that had been asked for. As a result of the questions not being exactly the same as last year, it has not been possible to provide comparisons in all areas, but with consistent questions in future years, year on year comparisons will be possible and hopefully provide more useful information for local authorities.

We received reflections from some respondents about the fact that data was not readily available and in one case, relationships between child and private foster carer not being accurately available. Some respondents acknowledged the need for ongoing awareness raising, particularly for parents and private foster carers. There was a reflection that notifications may not be received due to the lack of financial support available to private foster carers or parents being concerned that their children would be 'in care' due to their understanding of the word 'fostering' and not appreciating that private fostering is different.

One key finding again is the confirmation that private fostering sits in many different teams and services in children's services. Our members have told us this can lead to practitioners feeling isolated. It can also contribute to a sense that private fostering is an 'afterthought', or not a priority. In reality, private foster carers may be caring for vulnerable children with many of the needs of other children living away from their parents, such as children in other types of kinship care.

Most local authorities do not have the need for a dedicated private fostering team due to the small numbers of children living in private fostering arrangements. There may be only one social worker with responsibility for these children. It can therefore be hard to share practice ideas and ponder dilemmas with colleagues. It is likely to be a reason for the high numbers attending our practice forums, where practitioners appreciate the opportunity to share knowledge and experience with others in the same role.

Private fostering is now included in the definition of kinship care in the recently published <u>Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities</u> which states that local authorities must

include what support is available to private foster carers and the children they are looking after in the kinship local offer. CoramBAAF will be running a community of practice over the next 6 – 9 months, to support managers who have responsibility for developing kinship local offers. We would encourage social workers with lead responsibility for private fostering to speak to those managers and highlight the importance of private foster carers and the children they care for being properly considered in the kinship local offer.

To our knowledge, there is no research exploring the experience of children and young people or of their private foster carers and this reflects the gap in kinship research more broadly.

Recommendations

- Department for Education to consider collecting data on private fostering from local authorities as part of their annual data collection, over and above data collection of children in need
- Department for Education to consider examining data relating to the number of private foster carers who are accessing the government's commissioned training, advice and support offer provided by <u>Kinship</u>
- Ongoing need to continue to raise awareness of private fostering with agencies such as health and education, and with families and private foster carers

Next steps

- CoramBAAF to continue to liaise with the Department for Education about these findings and engage with them about the scope for national data collection about children living in private fostering arrangements
- CoramBAAF will review the questions to inform the design of a template with guidance with a working party to ensure that questions asked are realistic and relevant for those who will complete the survey in coming years

CoramBAAF is encouraged by the responses received in this year's survey and very appreciative of those people who took the time to respond. It highlights the significant numbers of children living in private fostering arrangements and the need for more data collection.

It also raises questions about how we could begin to explore the hypothesis that there are significantly higher numbers of children in private fostering arrangements that are not known to local authorities, and therefore whose arrangements are not assessed or supported. There remains an ongoing need to raise awareness of private fostering and local authorities need to consider this when developing their kinship local offers. CoramBAAF will continue to support their members with awareness-raising information and resources and continue to discuss local networking and information sharing opportunities to support local authorities in working more closely together to support children and private foster carers.

References

<u>Championing kinship care: national kinship care strategy - GOV.UK</u>

Children in need, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

Children in need census 2024 to 2025: guide

<u>Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK</u>

Department for Education consultation response re private fostering data 2015

Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities 2024

<u>Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data - GOV.UK</u>



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How will I recognise if a child is privately fostered?

If you're aware of a child under 16 years of age (or 18 if they have a disability) who isn't residing with their parent(s), they could be in a private fostering arrangement if they've been away from home for more than 27 days and are living with an adult who isn't a close relative.

- Has the child mentioned that they are no longer living at home / living with someone else?
- Is the child accompanied to school by someone other than a parent/recognised carer?
- Has a patient turned up at the GP surgery with a new child/ series of different children?
- Is a child frequently absent from school?
- Is there anything unclear on files/records about the child's living arrangements?
- Is it clear who the child is living with, and what relation the person is to the child?
- Has the child come from overseas? Do you know the reason for the child's entrance to the UK?
- Is the child in the UK for the purpose of education?
- Is the child an unaccompanied asylum seeker?

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