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adoption • fostering • kinship

Private Fostering Survey 2024

Findings and analysis

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Introduction

Private fostering is a private arrangement made between a parent and a responsible adult for the care of a child under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled). The person who will be looking after the child is not a parent or close relative of the child, and the arrangement is planned to last for at least 28 days. As defined by the Children Act 1989, a close relative is a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, a stepparent (including through civil partnership) or a brother or sister.

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 number of children who are privately fostered is not known. In 2015, 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. Therefore, this data would help provide more information and insights into the profiles of harmful private fostering arrangements, and this would therefore lead to policies and practices that are more effective in identifying privately fostered children in the longer term. It seems unclear whether information and insights from child level data in the children in need census have achieved these aims.

Practitioners across the sector are 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 data about numbers, nor about their characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, languages spoken or duration of arrangement. We also know local authorities want to compare their own data on 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 2023 [national kinship care strategy](#) now 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 now eligible for any universal support available to kinship families. This includes both the universal training and support commissioned by the government and delivered by [Kinship](#), 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, and available data could potentially help.

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, as a first attempt to gather some basic data about the national picture from our members.

To stay informed about our work, subscribe to [CoramBAAF News](#) and sign up to our [Private Fostering Awareness Day mailing list](#).

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With support from Katrina Wilson, Information and Knowledge Services Manager at CoramBAAF.

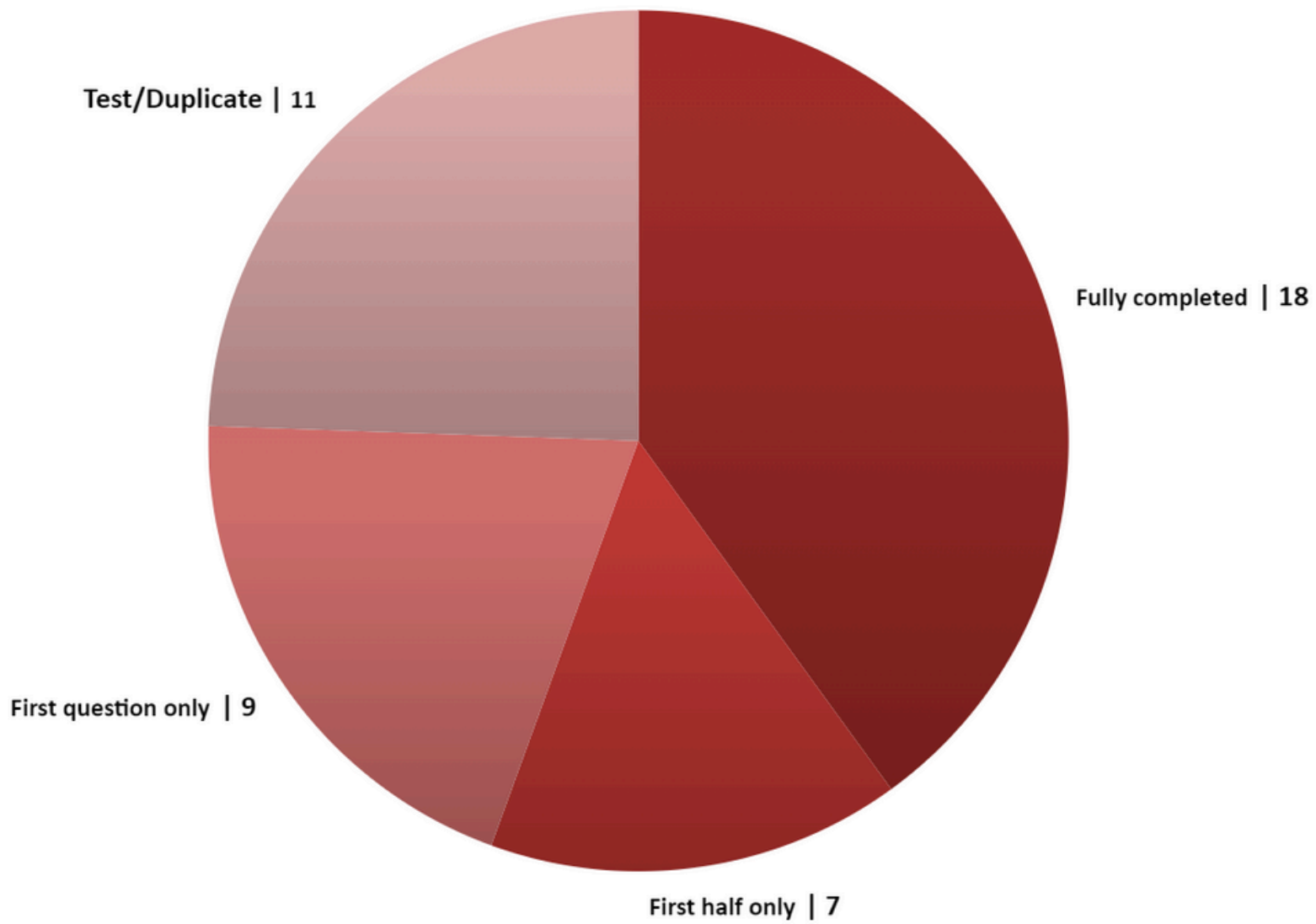
Methodology and responses

We created an online survey to gather data from local authorities in England and Wales on private fostering notifications and arrangements and publicised the survey through our membership communications and channels over a four-week period. We received 45 responses in total, however these included some duplicates and other test responses that were not usable. We asked for data for the period 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024. We deliberately published our survey in June 2024 when we hoped local authorities might already be collating data for 2023 – 2024 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, before moving onto more detailed questions about the number of children living with individuals rather than organisations. We wondered whether there would be less children living with individuals therefore wanted to understand more about those children, including age, ethnicity, relationship to the private foster carer, duration of the arrangement and circumstances leading to it.

Eighteen local authorities completed all sections of the survey, although two of these had discrepancies in their data that meant we were unable to include their responses in all sections of this report.





Survey responses

First half only

Seven local authorities completed the general questions, but did not provide any detail about private fostering arrangements with individuals.

First question only

Nine local authorities completed only the first question about the team responsible for private fostering, but did not provide any other data.

Duplicate responses

We were not able to use data from 11 local authorities who submitted a test or duplicate response. Eight local authorities started a response then abandoned it and later completed a second response, and a further three local authorities submitted a response containing no name or any other data, which we have treated as test responses.

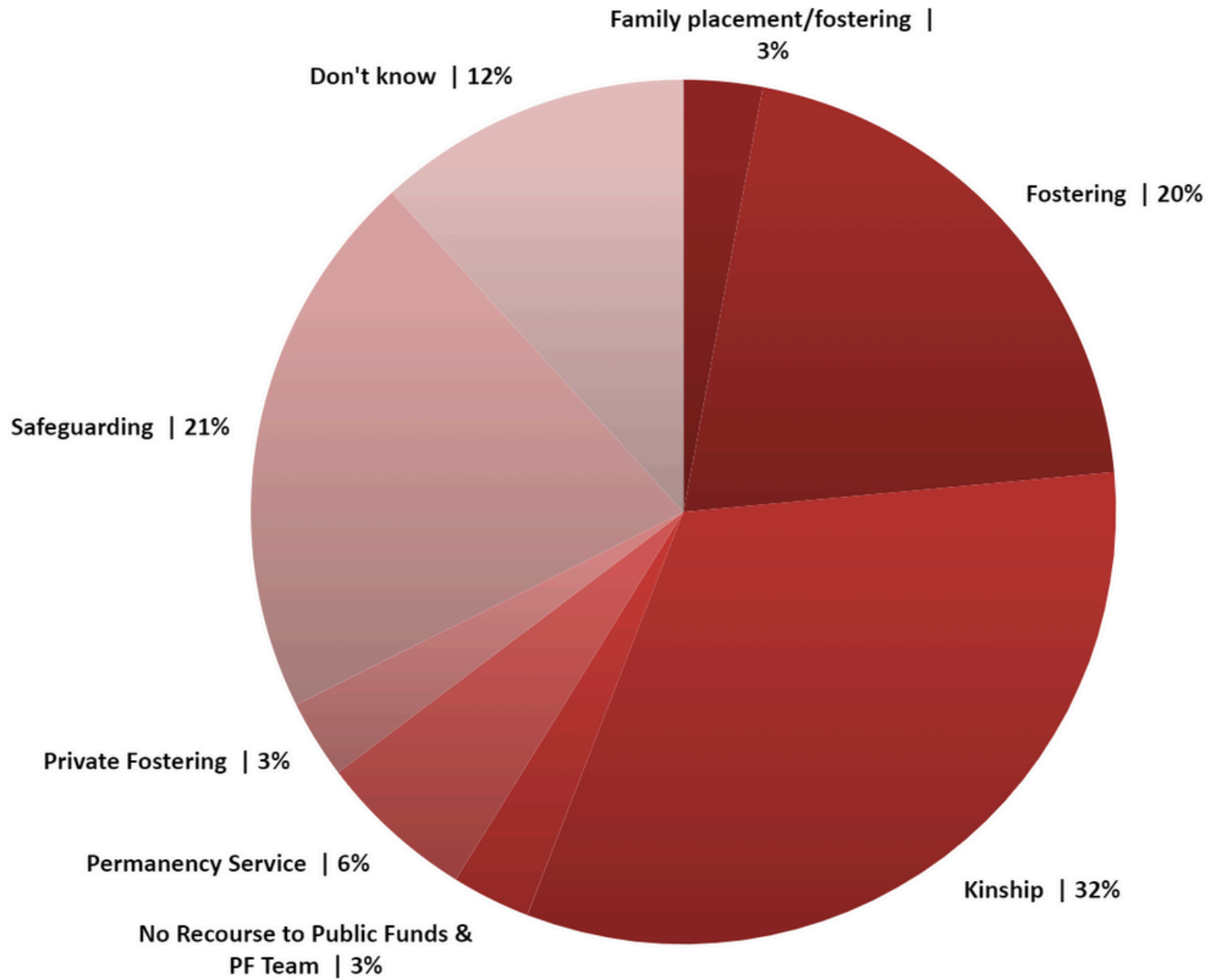
It is of note that therefore we only received data from 33 local authorities in England and 1 from Wales. This represents 21.6% of the 153 local authorities in England, 4.5% of the 22 local authorities in Wales so 19.4% overall. It is interesting that the responses came from local authorities across England and Wales, with responses from all regions apart from the North East of England. A comparison of geographical neighbours was not possible given the amount of data received but we will consider this in next year's survey.

The low number of responses may indicate the challenges faced by local authorities in either accessing data about privately fostered children, or about providing it in the breakdown or format we requested. We did consider the possibility of following up on our initial survey with Freedom of Information requests but recognise that this would be more onerous for local authorities. We will therefore consult further with those members who did complete the survey to improve survey design for 2025.

Who has responsibility for private fostering?

The responses we received show that responsibility for private fostering sits across a large range of teams. Most commonly, responsibility sits in kinship teams, but this is only in 32% of local authorities, and responsibility also sits in safeguarding teams in 21% of local authorities and in fostering teams in 20% of local authorities.

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. Given the inclusion of private fostering in the definition of kinship care stated in the [national kinship care strategy](#), 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, there is a logic to private fostering responsibility sitting in kinship teams. But of course, many kinship teams only support formal kinship carers, although this may change over time. Equally formal kinship carers are assessed by a variety of teams.



Team responsible for, or taking the lead on, private fostering

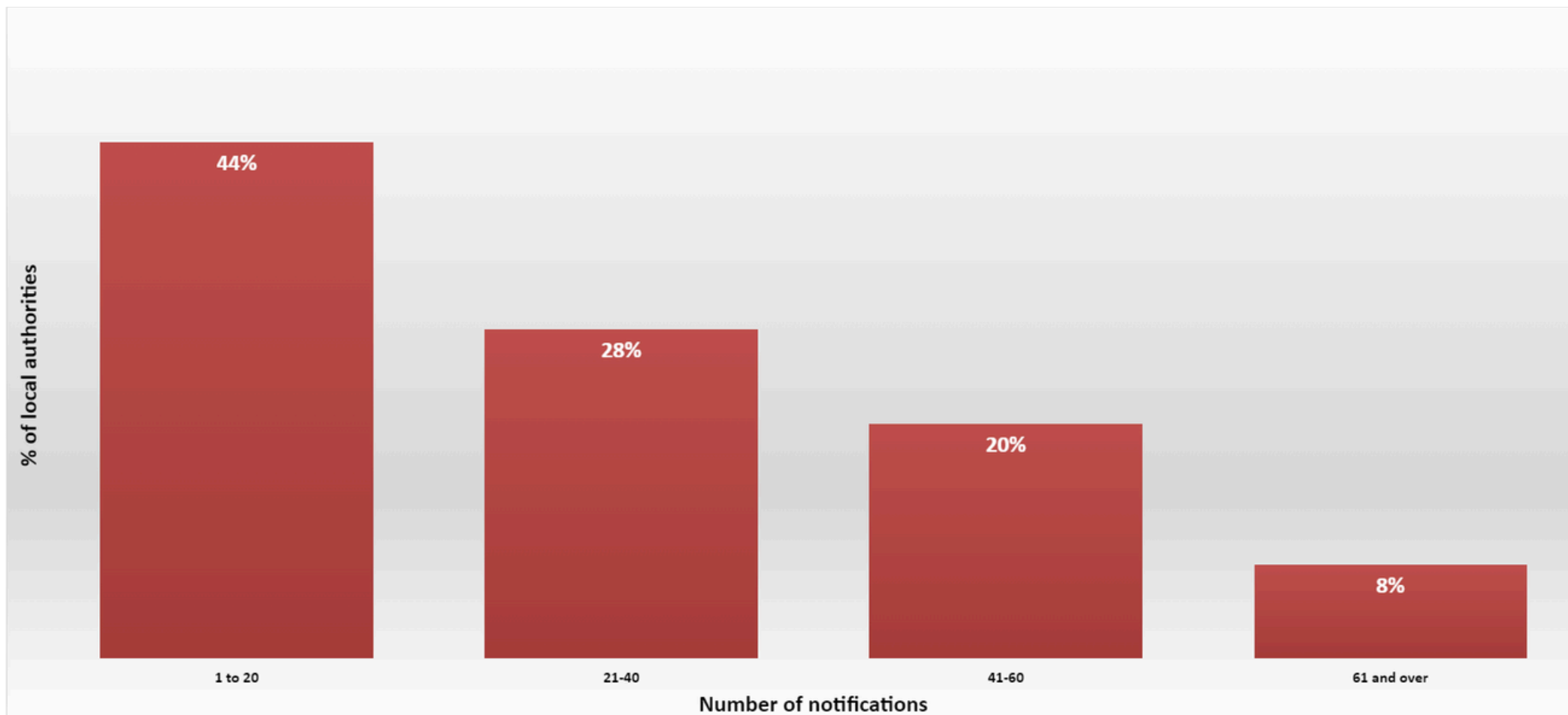
The variance in where responsibility sits is perhaps most important for policy makers and those who provide universal services to kinship carers (which now includes children living in private fostering arrangements and private foster carers). It is important that these privately fostered children and their carers are made aware of what support is available to them, and one route to doing so is through communication with the social work teams working with them.



Private fostering notifications

CoramBAAF regularly facilitates a [Private Fostering Practice Forum](#), 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. For example, in November 2023, Ofsted reported out of the last 20 inspections of 2023, the average number of privately fostered children was 7 and the number ranged between 0 and 27.

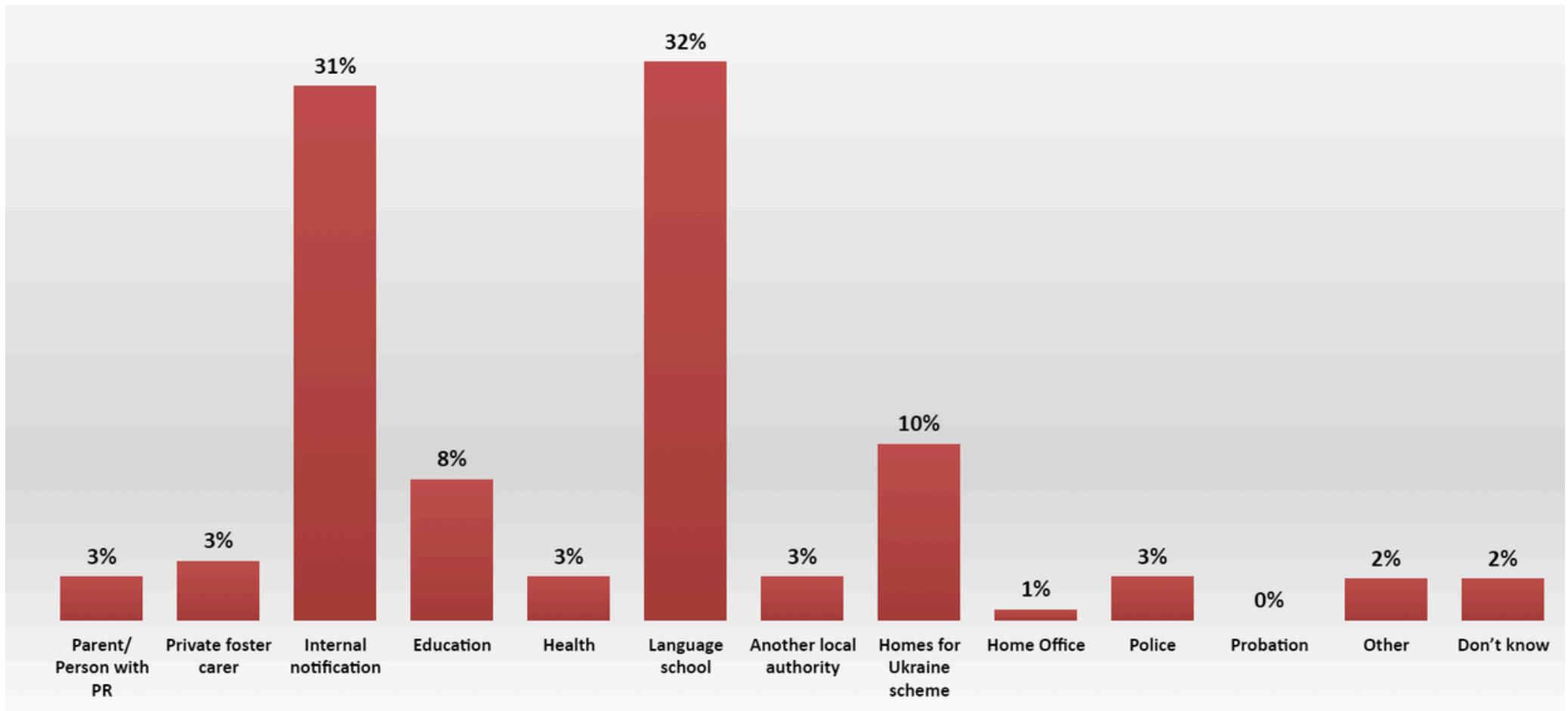
44% of responding local authorities (n = 11) received between 1 and 20 notifications in the previous year, 28% (n = 7) received between 21 and 40 notifications, 20% (n = 5) received between 41 and 60, and 8% (n = 2) received over 61 notifications. The two outlying local authorities were those that either covered a large geographical area or were likely to have a large number of foreign language students due to known demographics which appeared to account for this significant difference.



Private fostering notifications in 2023 - 2024

Notifications came from a range of sources with most being internal from other children's teams (31%), although there are a significant number of notifications from language schools (32%). 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 need for local authorities to continue to raise awareness in their local communities as the percentage of notifications from health and education were also lower than might be expected.



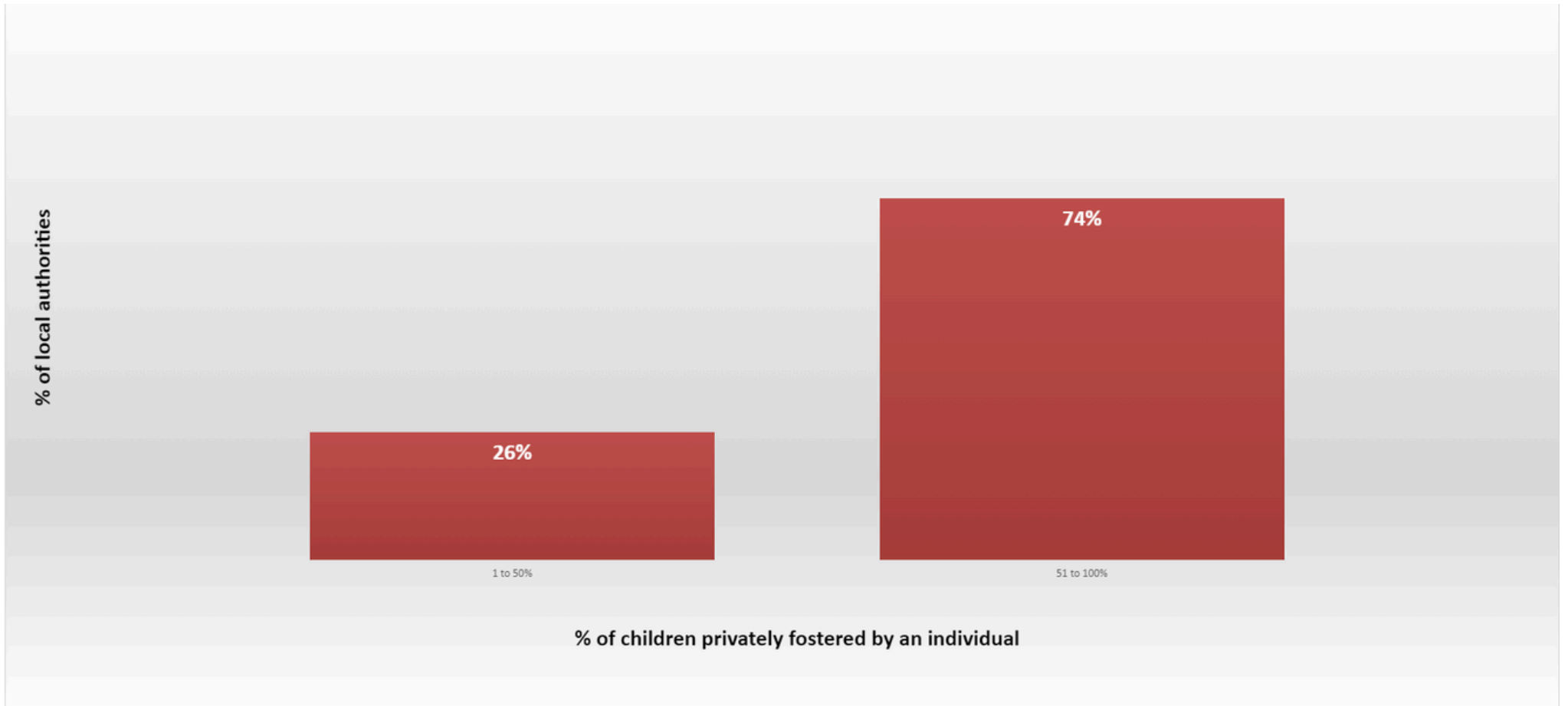
Source of private fostering notifications 2023 - 2024

Private fostering arrangements with individuals

We wanted to know how many children were living in private fostering arrangements with individuals rather than through language schools, boarding schools or other organisations because the latter tend to be aware of their responsibility to notify the local authority of a private fostering arrangement.

The data shows that four local authorities had either 1–20% or 41–60% of children living with individual private foster carers, 10 local authorities had either 21–40% or 61–80% of children living with individual private foster carers and nine local authorities had the vast majority of children living with individual private foster carers (81–100%).





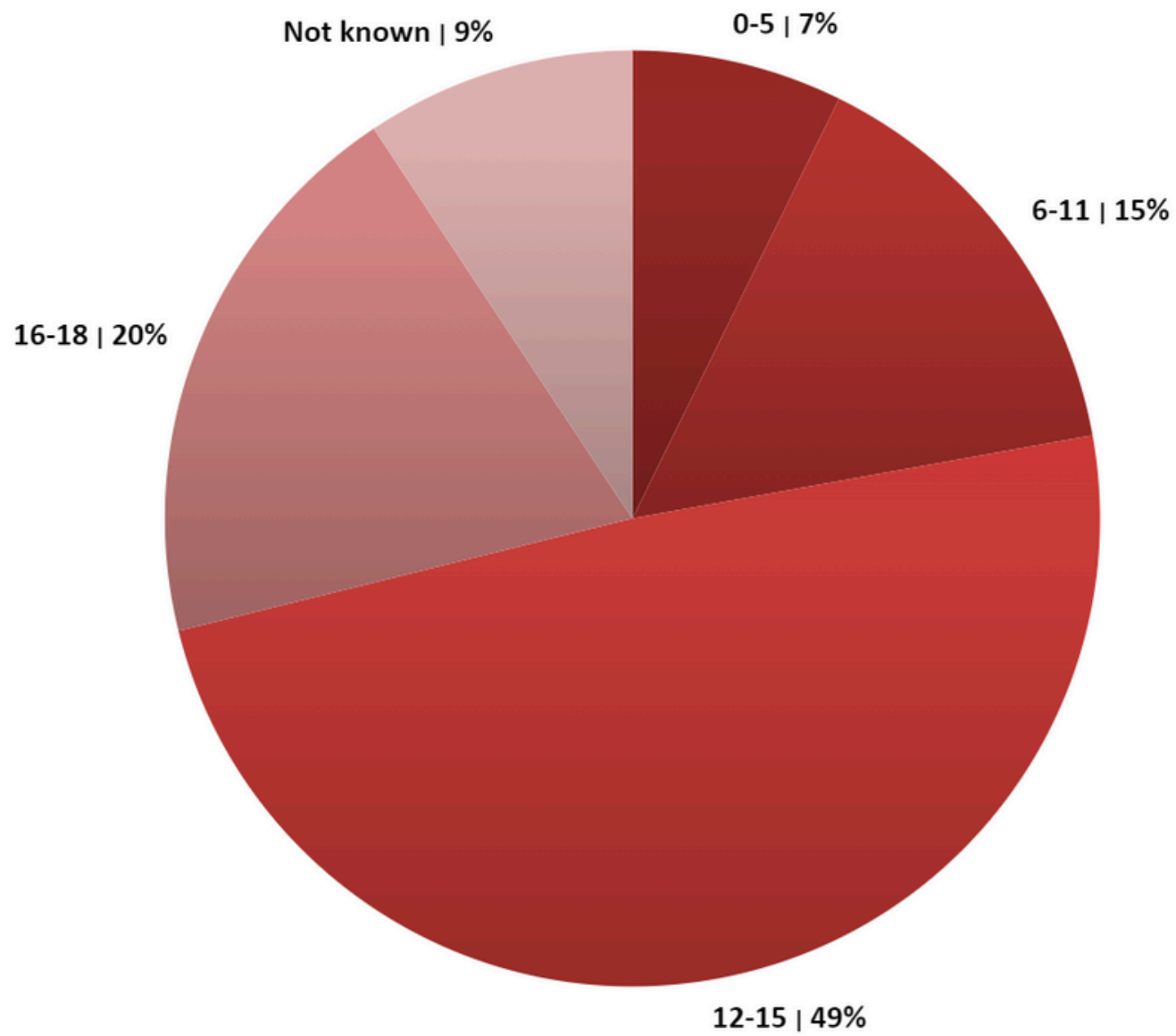
Proportion of children who were privately fostered by an individual



Therefore, more children are living with individual private foster carers, as opposed to those living with language school hosts, boarding schools or football academies who meet the definition of privately fostered. This indicates a need for further exploration of the circumstances that might lead to a child living in a private fostering arrangement. The exception to our findings was one local authority who had 88% of children privately fostered through language schools.

Ages of children privately fostered by an individual

Out of the 16 local authorities who responded to this question, 49% (n = 168) of children were aged between 12 and 15 and 20% (n = 67) were aged 16 – 18. The latter figure is somewhat surprising given that private fostering arrangements end at the age of 16 unless a child has disabilities 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 also account for this number. It should be noted that we did not ask for information about children with disabilities within the survey.



Ages of children privately fostered by an individual

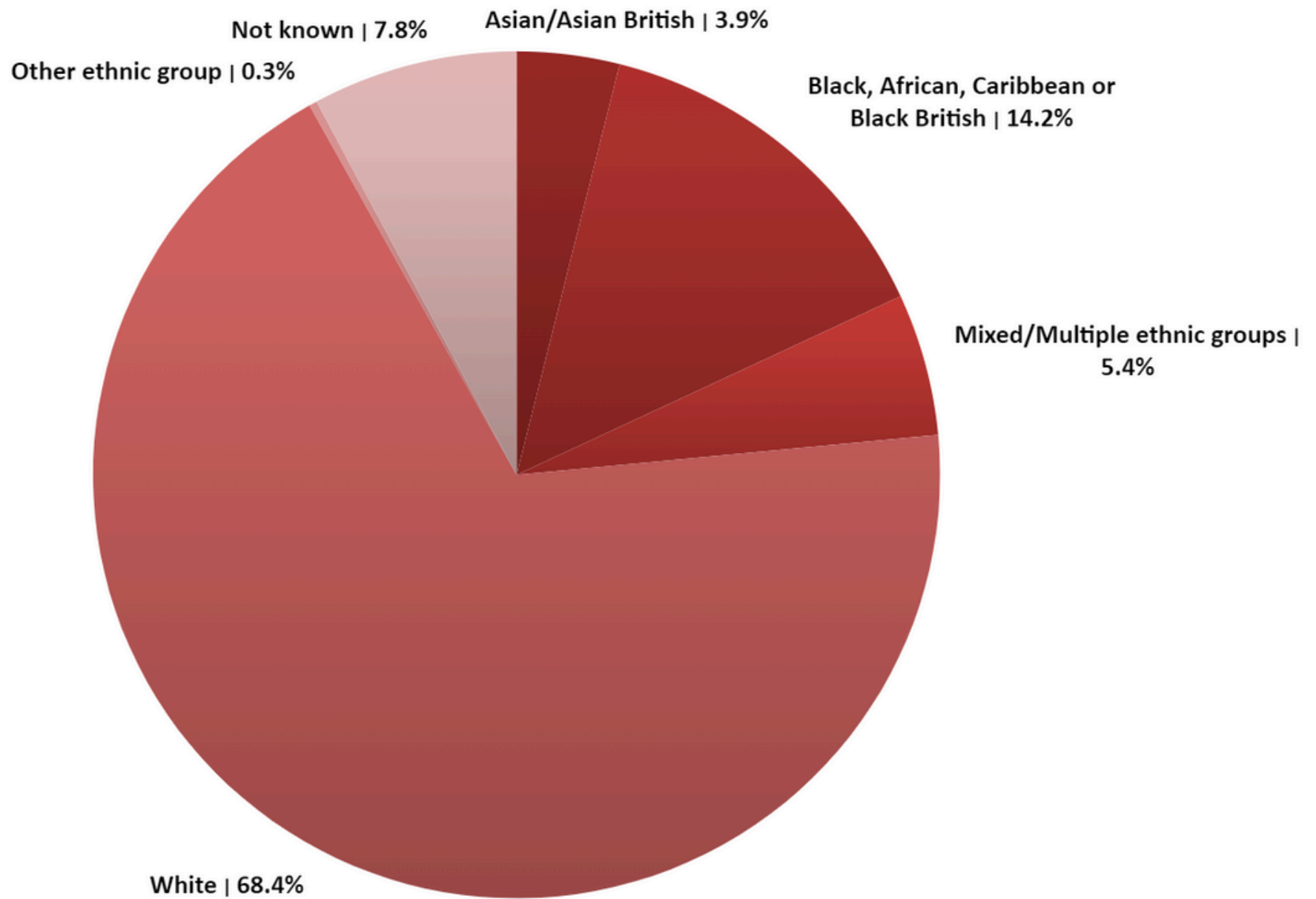
It is of note that the largest numbers of children are in the 12–15 age group. We know from practice experience that children who experience relationship difficulties with parents in adolescence sometimes 'place themselves' in private fostering arrangements, perhaps living with a friend of the family or their friend's family, and this may account for the 49%. It is also of note that 9% (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.

Ethnicity of children privately fostered by an individual

16 local authorities responded to this question and out of a total of 332 children, the majority - 69.2% - were of White ethnicity. This compares to 71% of children in local authority foster care who are of White ethnicity (83,840 on 31 March 2023. Figures for 2023-24 are due to be released later in November 2024). 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. The 2021 census data 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, representing 9.1% of the 175 local authorities in England and Wales, 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.

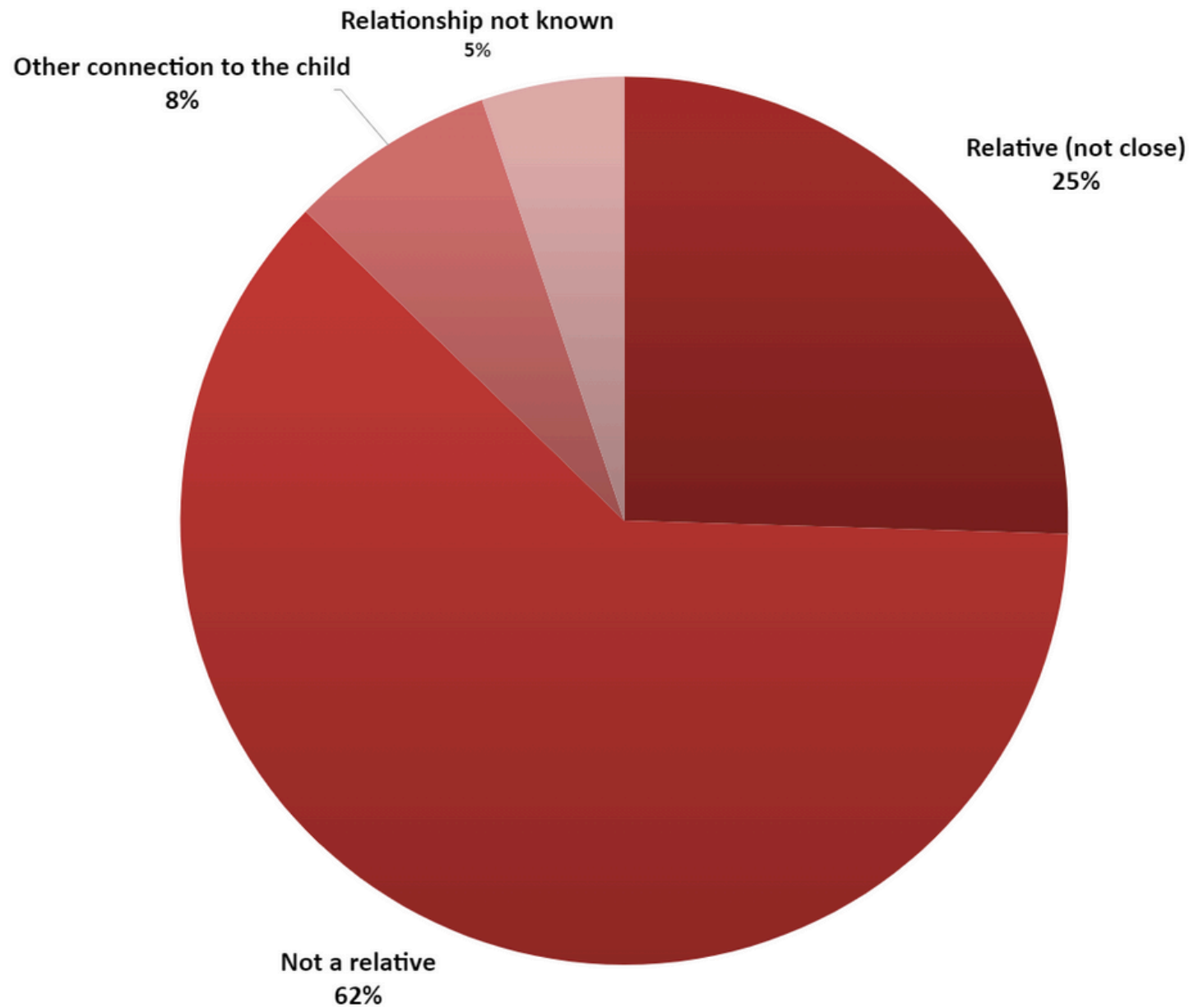


Ethnicity of children privately fostered by an individual

Relationship to private foster carer

Out of the 14 local authorities who responded to this question, the majority of private foster carers, where the relationship was known, (n = 147) were not related to the child, whilst 25% (n = 54) were related, but do not fit the definition of a close relative. 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 detailed enough response.

It is evident however that the majority of children in private fostering arrangements are living with carers who are not related; and this may describe 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.



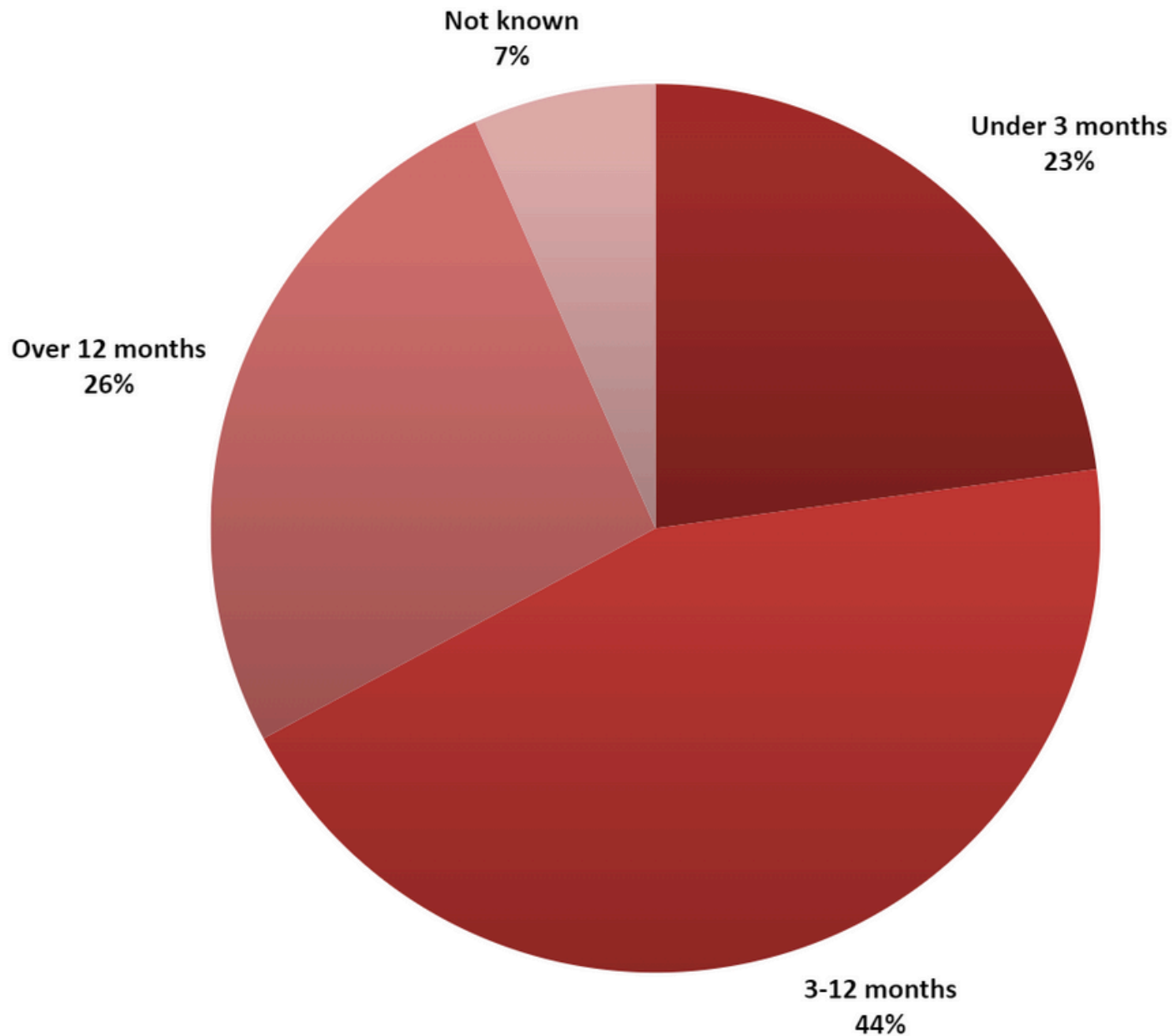
Relationship to private foster carer for children privately fostered by an individual



Duration of arrangement with private foster carer

Out of the 15 local authorities who responded to this question, 67% of private fostering arrangements (n = 182) lasted for less than a year with 26% (n = 71) lasting for more than 12 months. 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 to permanency plan 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.



Duration of arrangement for children privately fostered by an individual



Conclusion and next steps

Despite the relatively low number of responses, there are some interesting patterns in the survey data. It is a useful starting point to gather further information about the numbers of children living in private fostering arrangements in England and Wales. We intend to conduct another survey in 2025 and we will incorporate the learning from this survey into the design. We will consult with our members who attend CoramBAAF's private fostering practice forum to ensure that the survey design captures data that is either already available to them or could easily be collected.

One key finding is the confirmation that private fostering sits in many different teams 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 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](#). Recently published [statutory guidance for local authorities](#) 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.

Despite limited data, our analysis highlights a number of key areas we can research further, including:

- the number of children living in private fostering arrangements subject to a child in need plan
- the impact of raising awareness on the number of notifications received
- the number of private foster carers that access support from the local authority or other providers - such as [Kinship](#)
- a better understanding of local authority demographics and the number of private fostering arrangements
- further analysis of the ethnicity of children living in private fostering compared to assessed kinship arrangements and children in mainstream foster care
- further understanding of the reasons why older children are living in private fostering arrangements and the reasons for this
- linked to the above, information about the number of children with disabilities that are remaining in private fostering arrangements

Recommendations

- Department for Education to consider collecting data on private fostering from local authorities as part of their annual data collection
- Department for Education to consider examining data relating to number of private foster carers who are accessing the government's commissioned training, advice and support offer provided by [Kinship](#)
- 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 contact 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 to design a new survey for 2025, to include working party of local authority members



CoramBAAF is encouraged by the responses received in this year's survey and 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. Our first survey is a contribution towards greater understanding of this often hidden group of children.

References

- [Championing kinship care: national kinship care strategy - GOV.UK](#)
- [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)
- [Department for Education consultation response re private fostering data 2015](#)
- [Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities 2024](#)
- [Understanding Formal Kinship Care Arrangements in England](#)