

# Awareness within local authorities in England of autism diagnoses of Looked-After children

Sarah Parsons\*, Alice McCullen, Tracey Emery & Hanna Kovshoff

\*Centre for Research in Inclusion, ACoRNS, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, [S.J.Parsons@soton.ac.uk](mailto:S.J.Parsons@soton.ac.uk)

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## Background

Major concerns have been raised about the welfare and outcomes of children and young people on the autism spectrum who are in the care of their local authorities (Sebba et al., 2015; Lenehan, 2017).

## Relevance

- Sebba et al., (2015) found that children on the autism spectrum were amongst those identified as having SEN who experienced the poorest educational outcomes of all children who were Looked-After by local authorities, with this group second only to children with severe or multiple learning disabilities in terms of the poorest outcomes at Key Stage 4 (GCSE).
- There are no up-to-date data on the numbers of children recorded as having a diagnosis of autism and who are Looked-After in England.
- It is unclear how aware local authority stakeholders in England are of the needs of this group at a strategic level, and whether diagnostic status is shared and prioritised.

## Key Aims

To use Freedom of Information (Fol) requests to local authorities in England to understand:

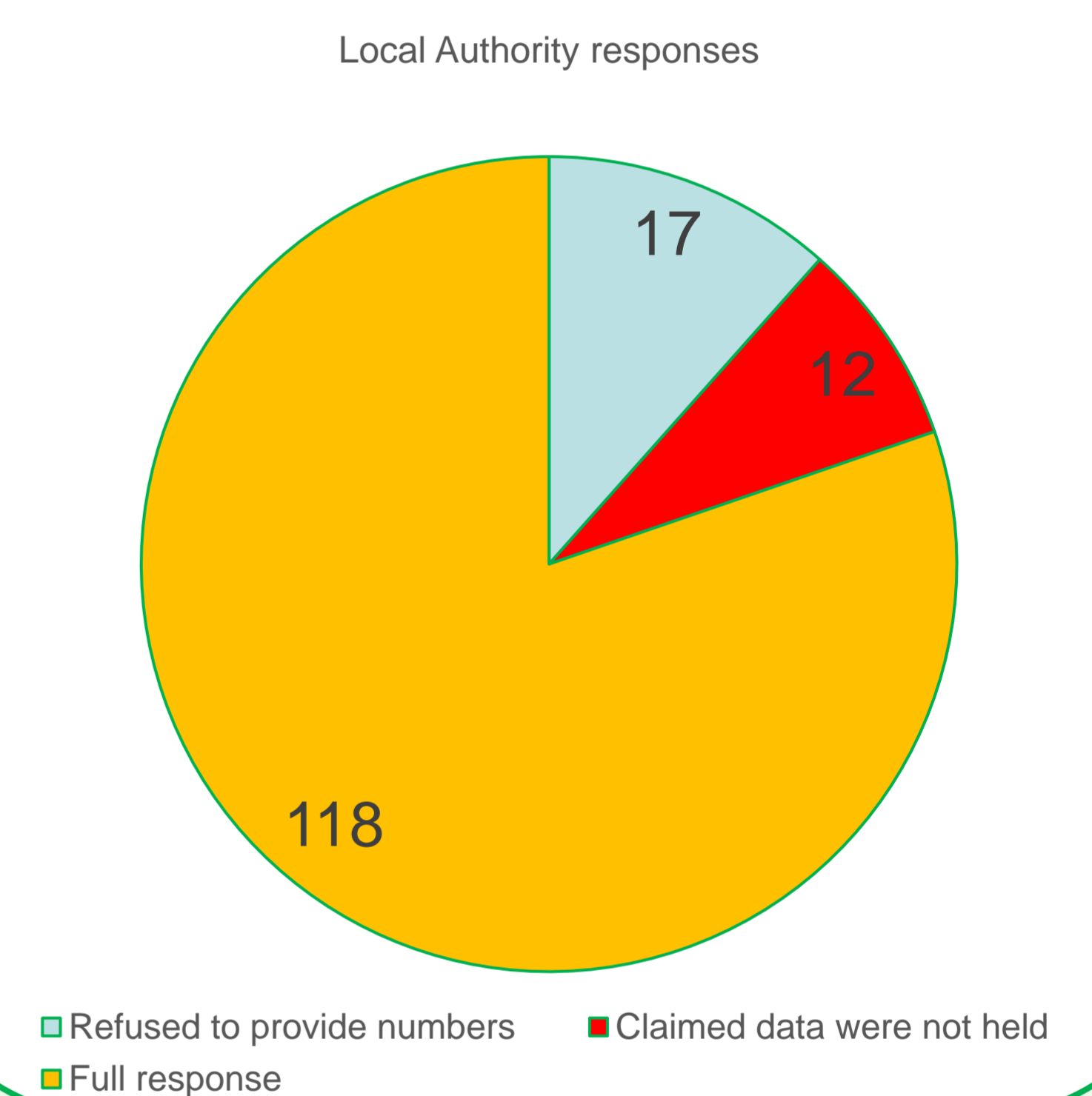
- the total number of children and the number of autistic children Looked-After;
- if the Designated Health Professional/Clinical Commissioning Group and/or Virtual School Head reported to the Corporate Parenting Board about the numbers and needs of Looked-After children with an autism diagnosis;
- whether the local authority has a procedure for communicating diagnostic/needs-based information for Looked-After autistic children.

## Research questions

- 1: How many children with an autism spectrum diagnosis are being Looked-After by local authorities in England?
- 2: Is information about diagnostic status shared between stakeholders with corporate parenting responsibilities within the local authority?

## Sample and procedure

Fol requests sent to 151 local authorities in England between Jan-March 2017. **147 local authorities responded (97%).**



## Fol questions asked

- Fol 1: How many children are Looked-After by the Local Authority?
- Fol 2: How many children that are Looked-After by the Local Authority have a diagnosis of autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger Syndrome)?
- Fol 3: Has the Designated Health Professional/Clinical Commissioning Group ever reported to the Corporate Parenting Board on the numbers and needs of Looked-After children with an autism diagnosis?
- Fol 4: Has the Virtual School Head ever reported to the Corporate Parenting Board on the numbers and needs of Looked-After children with an autism diagnosis?
- Fol 5: Does the Local Authority have in place protocols to ensure that social workers and others (e.g. Independent Reviewing Officers, Virtual School Heads, personal assistants, carers) who support a Looked-After child with autism are always aware of a child's autism diagnosis? If so, please provide details.



## Findings

- **1,788 (3%)** Looked-After children were recorded as having an **autism diagnosis**
- Only **5/147 (3%)** local authorities reported the numbers and needs of Looked-After autistic children to the Corporate Parenting Board
- Only **7/147 (5%)** local authorities said that the Virtual School Head reported on numbers and needs of autistic children to the Corporate Parenting Board
- **61/147 (41%)** local authorities demonstrated that they have protocols in place to ensure that autism diagnostic status of Looked-After children is known and communicated amongst multidisciplinary teams

## Implications

- More autistic children (3%) were reported as being Looked-After by local authorities than the statistics from the Department for Education (2017; 1.4%). This is still an underestimation of the true picture, as some local authorities did not respond to our Fol request or refused to supply relevant data.
- Autism diagnostic status is not a characteristic of Looked-After children that is routinely shared, prioritised or acknowledged at a strategic level within most local authorities in England. This raises important questions about the extent to which the needs of these children are being recognised and met.

## References

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