



Achieving for Children (AfC) Independent Fostering Agency (IFA):

**Annual Report
April 2020- March 2021**

Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames
London Borough of Richmond
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead



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1 Background

- 1.1. This annual report on the performance of Achieving for Children's IFA complies with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards which sets out the condition that the Registered Manager will monitor and report to the IFA Board every three months in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and achieving good outcomes for children. This report focuses on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service. It provides details of the AfC IFA activity from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. This Annual Report also sets out plans for future service development until 31st March 2022.
- 1.2 This annual report should be read in conjunction with the Statement of Purpose 2021-2022 which sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which AfC carries out the functions of the fostering service; as well as the two Annual Panel Report 2020-21 , prepared by the chairs of the Fostering Panels and the children Looked after Sufficiency Strategy 2020-2025. A separate Annual Report on Private Fostering will also be written for April 2020-March 2021 .

2 Introduction

- 2.1 The work of AfC IFA is governed by the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, the National Minimum Standards 2011 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and associated amended regulations and guidance. AfC Fostering Service offers a range of regulated foster placements for looked after children and young people across the Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames, the London Borough of Richmond and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. The mandate of the service is to provide safe, stable and nurturing family placements that improve outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people.
- 2.2 AfC became an IFA on 8 August 2018 after Ofsted required that the company register due to being a community interest company. The Richmond and Kingston branch of the IFA was inspected between 9 and 13 September 2019 and received a good rating in all areas. Ofsted conducted an assurance visit at the RBWM branch of the IFA in February 2021 and made no requirements or recommendations in terms of our practice. A full RBWM inspection should be carried out in the autumn of 2021. AfC have taken the opportunity to use the creation of the IFA to breathe fresh life and direction into the fostering service by aligning policy and procedure across all three authorities, taking the best practices from each area and growing in-house provision.

Impact Example:

S was born very prematurely and has multiple and complex health problems which required him to spend the first 6 months of his life in hospital. Professionals were initially not hopeful about his long term prognosis and lifespan. Unfortunately his birth mother was unable to visit him regularly and withdrew from proceedings. In addition to his medical needs including oxygen and tube feeding, S needed nurture through sound, touch and eye contact. Our newly approved foster carers offered to undertake visits to hospital 4 times a week and S and the carers quickly formed an attachment and he clearly recognised and responded to their voices. He started to grow and develop and managed to survive major surgery, perhaps in part due to the love and nurturing he received from the carer's continued visits. He was then strong enough to leave the hospital. After 4 months at home S is thriving and now off his feeding tubes and bottle feeding, enjoying stimulatory experiences afforded to him in the carer's sensory room and outside in the natural world. These carers have been outstanding in working with the multidisciplinary team around S including hospital surgeons, paediatricians, speech and language therapists, dietician, and occupational therapists. Through advocating for S and contributing positively to care planning, S is making great progress. A consultant recently stated S is 'defying all the odds and proving them all wrong'. Our carers have shown exceptional skill, patience, and dedication in providing care above what is normally expected of foster carers in their first year. They are now considering adopting S or long term foster care to secure permanency for S.

2.3 The vision and value base for AfC's IFA is around becoming AGILE

Achieving: Our IFA will put children at the heart of everything we do. We will work hard to achieve the best outcomes and to realise Achieving for Children's mission to provide children and their families with the support and services they need to live happy, healthy and successful lives.

Growing: The larger our pool of foster carers the broader the range of fostering options and the greater choice we have in matching carers to our children's needs. The numbers of unrelated carers in both operational areas was in decline and we want to use the development of the IFA as an opportunity to breathe fresh life and vigour into the service and attract that next generation of foster carers as well as retain our existing carers.

Innovative: Achieving for Children is a Partner in Practice and this allows us to discuss with the Department of Education where we might want to adapt some of the current regulations to provide a better service to our children and foster carers. Developing the IFA will provide opportunities to hear from our

foster carers areas where the regulations have frustrated rather than supported them in achieving great outcomes for the children in their care. We can then ask permission to innovate and try out new ways of working.

Local: We still want to be the main recruiter, trainer and supporter of foster carers in Kingston ,Richmond and Windsor and Maidenhead. We recognise that many of our carers have longstanding ties to their local communities and want to use the IFA to build and enhance these.

Ethical: We are very aware of recent press scrutiny around IFA's particularly where one company has bought and then sold an IFA for profit. Achieving for Children was set up to ensure that all profits are reinvested in front line services and we will ensure there is financial transparency to demonstrate that the IFA is operated on the same lines.

Impact Example:

This is a long term placement of a 15 year old girl with a single female foster carer. This carer has demonstrated great resilience in caring for the young person over the years and is now seeing a marked improvement in terms of her attitude to life, towards others and her education. The foster carer recognises that the young person has had a poor start in life but has not allowed this to hold her back and has encouraged and gently pushed her to recognise her potential.

Despite the challenges, the past year has been their best one yet as they have made the decision to use the extra time they have been spending together to strengthen their relationship. Home learning has been working well for the young person as she has been getting more support from the carer and can study at her own pace. The foster carer and the young person communicate openly about their lives and the young person will come to the carer for advice when she is experiencing difficulties with her friendships. They talked about a conflict the young person had with a friend and the carer tried to show her the other person's perspective and why they behaved in a certain way.

The carer and her foster child have a very close relationship and they laugh and joke a lot using humour to tackle disagreements. The foster carer feels that it is this bond and banter that makes it possible for the young person to trust her and share freely about any challenges she might be facing. By providing this secure base, the carer is also able to set boundaries easily and be an authoritative parent figure. In the foster carer's words:

'We do laugh a lot each day and I think a shared sense of the ridiculous and being able to laugh at ourselves has helped us to cope with the last 12 months admirably.'

3 AfC IFA Provision

In 2020-21 AfC's IFA has provided the following services:

3.1 **Recruitment, assessment and approval of:**

- mainstream foster carers, i.e. unrelated carers
- Connected Persons foster carers – people who are related or have a preexisting connection to a child.
- Special Guardianship assessments

3.2 **Placement and Support of approved carers under the following fostering schemes:**

- Mainstream fostering – providing both task-centred/short-term and long term placements to children who are accommodated on various care orders.
- Specialist fostering – providing placements to “looked after” children with more complex needs and challenging behaviours
- Respite fostering – providing overnight and covering holiday periods to “looked after” children placed with mainstream foster carers
- Connected Persons foster carers – offering permanent foster placements to children who are looked after on interim or full care orders, from within their network.

3.3 **Staying Put:** Provision in the main, by approved foster carers, for care leavers between the ages of 18 – 25 years and still in education, who require ongoing support and are not deemed ready to move onto semi-independent residence.

3.4 **Short Breaks:** Assessment, approval and support of Family Link carers (in Richmond and Kingston only) offering respite or overnight care for children with disabilities. Whilst the worker is funded through the Children with Disabilities team, the scheme is governed by Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and therefore jointly managed by the fostering team.

3.5 **Private Fostering:** Supervision and monitoring of arrangements where people who are not close family members i.e. Uncles, Aunts, Grandparents, Step Parents and Siblings, but look after children through private family arrangements for more than 28 days.

3.6 **The IFA:** delivers all of the above components of fostering, undertaking the functions of assessment, approval, supervision, support, training and development, safeguarding and review of foster carers within all of the above groups. The performance data and outcome measures relating to these areas are outlined below.

3.7 **The Fostering Panels:** Please refer to the Annual Fostering Panel Reports 2020-2021 prepared by panel chairs Mary Webb and Chris Mills for full information. As part of our IFA registration process we agreed to greater integration in policy and practice across the two branch areas with the aim of creating a similar experience for prospective and approved foster carers. This has enabled the Panels to be more accessible and responsive to prospective foster carers and for those coming to review.

3.8 **Fostering Panel developments in 2020-21:**

- Our Panel Advisor who attends and advises on both Panels has now been in post for over 2 years. This has provided consistency of processes support and challenge across both areas.
- New feedback processes are in place for robust quality assurance mechanisms that are independent of the team management structure.
- The majority of the documentation is now standardised to ensure consistency and fairness in how Panel minutes are recorded.
- There have been appointments of new panel members from diverse backgrounds though there is always more that we would like to do to improve representation from under-represented groups in both areas.
- Due to lockdown, the panel members have had more opportunities in an accessible format to attend Panel Training. The coming year will focus on embedding Signs of Safety in Panel practice within the panels with this training now set up for panel members .

3.9 We have three Agency Decision Makers, being the Directors of Social Care in Richmond and Kingston, and Windsor and Maidenhead and the AD for Provider Services. Our Agency Decision Makers continue to work closely together to develop a shared approach and to listen and respond to feedback from the Panel Advisor on arising trends in each area. We recruited a new Panel Chair (Mary Webb) and Vice Chair (Angela Firth) in Richmond and Kingston following Sara Nevilles' (previous Chair) departure in July 2020. Sara had been the Chair for many years and felt it was the right time for her to retire from the role. Chris Mills and Heather Bull continue to be Chair and Vice Chair, respectively, for the Windsor and Maidenhead panel. All the Chairs have many years' experience of Chairing and have been members of the AfC Central List prior to appointment provided much needed continuity. The benefits of having two Fostering Panels working together has meant that we continue to have greater flexibility to deal with peaks in demand, by allowing carers to attend in either area and panel members to sit across the two operational areas. This has further been made easier and possible due to working online as a result of lockdown.

Impact Examples:

"...applicants and carers have generally found the online procedure to be user friendly and have participated well from home." **From RBWM Fostering Panel Annual Report.**

"This was a truly lovely experience. I felt heard, understood, encouraged and supported. I hope to be able to update the same Panel members after a successful year of placements." **Panel Feedback from a Carer.**

"Just one carer shared that they found the panel to be judgemental, intimidating and critical. Nevertheless, the panel took these comments on board, reflected on the comments in order to learn and develop an equal approach for everyone that attends" **From K&R Fostering Panel Annual Report**

4 Annual Fostering Reviews, allegations, standards of care and notifications

- 4.1 The IFA benefits from having a dedicated Independent Reviewing Officer in Windsor and Maidenhead and a dedicated Reviewing Officer in Richmond and Kingston who chair all carers' annual reviews and all reviews following an allegation or standard of care concern. The review is completed with the Supervising Social Worker (SSW) who provides a report for the IRO; Feedback from the child or young person in placement is encouraged. There is also a requirement for feedback from the child's social worker as well as from anyone else living in the home. The IRO completes an audit of all statutory requirements and checks, to ensure overall compliance.
- 4.2 Between April 2020 and March 2021 a total of 39 annual reviews were completed in Richmond, 35 in Kingston and 53 in Windsor and Maidenhead. Out of that number 1 was out of timescale in Richmond, 1 in Kingston and 0 in Windsor and Maidenhead. The reasons included; standards of care concerns for one foster carer needed to be concluded before their AFHR could be completed and the second was because the foster carer initially considered staying put only and then wished to continue with their mainstream fostering approval as they wish to consider other children when the staying put child moves on.
- 4.3 During this review period there were 2 allegations of concerns raised about a foster carer and 1 about a connected persons' carer in Richmond and Kingston. 2 were managed and concluded at the fact finding stage and 1 was managed through a Section 47 process. In the latter case the carer was deregistered. In Windsor and Maidenhead we had two allegations of concern. Both allegations started with a Fact Finding exercise, one had a recommendation of training for both carers, the other had a recommendation

of a Standards of Care investigation. The carer promptly resigned when they were informed of the outcome of the Fact Finding. The Standards of Care investigation is in the process of being completed.

- 4.4 During this period there were 0 concerns raised by professionals about the standards of care in Richmond and Kingston. 1 in Windsor and Maidenhead. In Windsor and Maidenhead the concerns triggered a Standards of Care investigation, training was highlighted for the carers involved. The Fostering Services' findings and conclusions were accepted by the social work teams involved. Additional support and training was offered to carers as required to address concerns.
- 4.5 There were no grievances or complaints raised against a foster carer by any person or by a foster carer against a child in any of the local authority areas.
- 4.6 Foster Carers can appeal the Agency Decision Makers decision internally within AfC or by declaring that they would wish to consider the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM England). The IRM review the qualifying determinations made by fostering service providers and make a new recommendation having considered all the relevant information afresh. In Richmond and Kingston 1 case was presented to the IRM and the IRM agreed with the recommendation made for deregistration of the foster carers approval status. In Windsor and Maidenhead we have had no application to the IRM during April 2020 -March 2021.
- 4.7 During the period April 2020 to March 2021 there have been 7 separate notifiable events in Richmond and Kingston. 1 was managed through fact finding, 1 involved a Section 47 investigation which led to de registration of a foster carer, 2 incidents of a serious accident that involved emergency medical care and 3 involved children going missing from the foster home. In RBWM there have been 7 notifications which have been sent to Ofsted (under Reg 36 of the Fostering Service Regulations). The outcomes for each of these are recorded on a tracker so that we can follow up on actions and identify any patterns or concerns. There has been a marked reduction in numbers of notifications, partly due to the fact that one of the young people who generated a number of the notifications is no longer Looked After. Another of the young people has been moved to another IFA. There was also a discussion with our Ofsted inspector who advised that some of our previous years' notifications did not warrant being reported to Ofsted.

Impact Example:

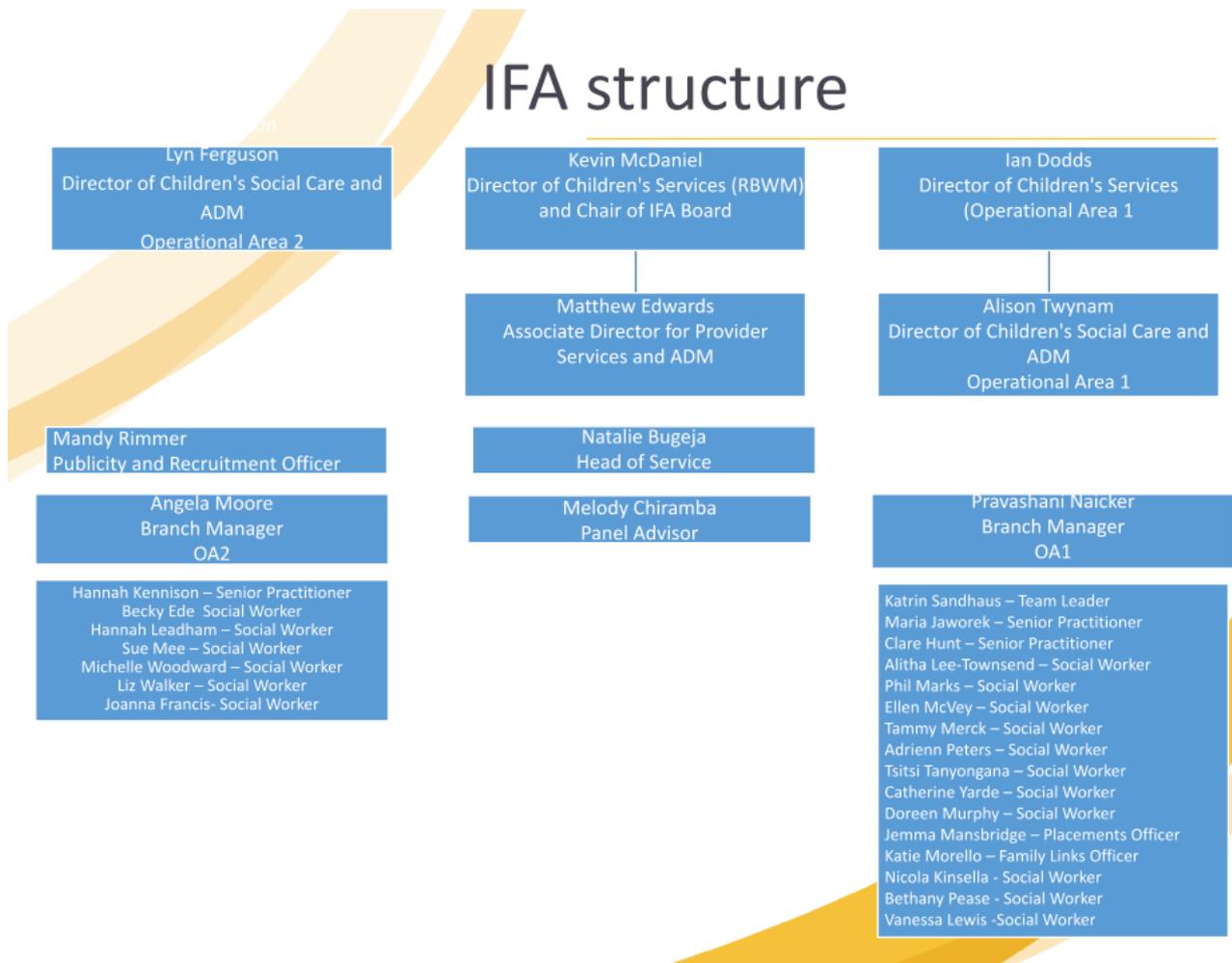
I work with some new carers who were approved in April 2020. Since this time they have looked after a 3 year old boy for regular day respite as his main carer was shielding so unable to take him out. He loved his respite days with the carers and they spent time playing in the park and feeding the ducks which he really enjoyed and benefited from. He learnt new things such as the importance of waiting for the green man when crossing the road and spatial awareness when navigating a climbing frame.

The carers now have a full time placement of a baby who came to them at 3 days old. When she was discharged she was withdrawing from substances and was very unsettled. By working closely with the whole team around the child, as well as giving her a lot of 1:1 dedicated care, she has made significant progress. At 6 months old she is now such a happy, settled, smiley baby who loves music and water play and is showing such curiosity in the world around her.

5 The IFA Establishment

5.1 AFC's IFA is separated into two branches but with several central roles supporting both areas.

IFA Organisational Chart



5.2 All Supervising Social Workers' have a mixture of assessment and supervision work in their caseload. The expected caseload for a full time worker is set at

15 points with an assessment counting for 3 points and supervision of a carer 1 point. Caseloads for part-time staff are pro rata e.g. 12 points for workers contracted to 4 days per week. All supervising SWs in both branches currently hold full caseloads or are slightly above. We have commissioned out some new Form F, and Form C assessments in the last 10 months to make sure these are completed within timescales

6 Children & Young People

6.1 a) Children Looked After (CLA) Population

Kingston	Mar-17	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21
No. of children in care at the end of the month (excl. respite)	115	128	129	124	130
Male	69	81	83	84	92
Female	46	47	46	40	38
Under 1	3	2	4	6	5
1-4	8	6	7	10	16
5-9	15	20	14	16	18
10-15	50	47	55	42	37
16-17	39	53	49	50	54
No. of children looked after at the end of the month (including respite)	118	130	129	125	131
Below figures are excluding respite cohort					
Becoming CLA	60	66	59	69	67
No. placed with in-house carers	33	38	34	37	42
No. placed externally in PV&V sector	48	54	56	45	31
Ceasing to be CLA	55	53	58	66	58

Richmond	Mar-17	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21
No. of children looked after at the end of the month (exc. respite)	107	103	118	119	133
Male	70	65	71	63	75
Female	37	38	47	55	58
Indeterminate	0	0	0	1	0
Under 1	4	6	6	8	3
1-4	9	10	12	14	21
5-9	4	7	4	9	12
10-15	45	38	44	41	41
16-17	45	42	52	47	56
No of children in care at the end of the month (including respite)	107	103	118	118	133
Below figures are excluding respite cohort					
Becoming CLA	67	58	83	71	62
No. placed with in-house carers	45	42	38	47	56
No. placed externally in PV&V sector	27	28	28	38	19
Ceasing to be CLA	81	57	55	56	51

Windsor and Maidenhead	Mar-17	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21
No. of children looked after at the end of the month (excluding respite)	109	107	124	119	130
Male	60	59	61	62	67
Female	49	48	63	57	63
Under 1	2	1	4	6	8

1-4	13	12	11	11	17
5-9	16	16	16	18	21
10-15	42	45	51	48	52
16-17	36	33	42	36	32
No of children looked after at the end of the month (including respite)	109	107	124	119	130
Below figures are excluding respite cohort					
Becoming CLA	55	48	72	57	55
No. placed with in-house carers	52	42	55	57	76
No. placed externally in PV&V sector	27	29	35	33	32
Ceasing to be CLA	35	50	56	59	39

6.1 **b) Children placed with in house carers by category (all arrangements).**

Number of children placed with in-house carers at 31.03.2021	Kingston	Richmond	RBWM
Mainstream carers	23	40	40
Respite Only	6	2	0
Family Link Only	0	4	0
Supported Lodgings Only	0	0	1
Family and Friends (Connected)	11	5	26
Temporary Family and Friends (Reg 24/25)	4	8	5
Staying Put (not counted as a fostering placement)	5	7	8

Private Fostering -current arrangements (not counted as fostering placement)	1	1	1
Total	50	67	81

Numbers of children looked after across all 3 boroughs have increased. Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw a number of carers enter the government shielding category for various reasons, and this presented an issue for placement availability with a number of placements going on hold during the lockdown periods. Despite this, the children in our placements remained steady.

6.2 Care Plans and meeting Children’s Placement Needs

To ensure foster placements meet children’s needs as identified in the care plan, Placement Agreement Meetings (PAM) are held within five days of a child being placed with a foster carer. These meetings include the child (if appropriate) and their SW, the carer/s and their SSW. The child’s needs and how the carer will meet them, including any additional support needed is addressed; the fostering household’s Safe Care Policy and house rules are explored, agreeing curfews, boundaries and activities for children as age appropriate; and which authorities are delegated to carers. We are now moving to merging the placement plan and the placement information record. process for stability process

CLA Reviews chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer are held to monitor the progress of placements in meeting children’s needs. During 2020-21 92% of Children Looked-After (CLA) Reviews were held within expected timescales in Kingston, and 98% in Richmond. In Windsor and Maidenhead 98.3% reviews took place within the expected timescale.

Impact example:

A single, older foster carer has successfully transitioned a two year old child to adoption during lockdown. This foster carer has a proven success record of transitioning children to Permanency, but excelled on this occasion during such a difficult time. A complicating factor of this transition was that the adopters were Scottish and had travelled down from Scotland for the introductions with their seven year old son. As part of the preparation for this transition, the foster carer and the adopters took part in a risk assessment and engaged in coronavirus testing.

The introductions went well and the adopters stated that the success of this was achieved due to the foster carer's support, her welcoming attitude and the time she had clearly taken to prepare the child for transition.

The foster carer and the adopters have kept in touch via video call and the foster carer has reported that to see the child settle and become part of a new family has been a richly rewarding experience

Impact example:

I am working with an experienced foster family who accepted a placement that was expected to be short term last spring 2020 during the Covid pandemic. From the start of the placement the young person was testing boundaries and expressing that they did not want to be in foster care.

Within 5 days of the young person being placed with my foster carers the child made an allegation against one of the carers. Although these carers were aware that allegations could be made they had never experienced this before. This was a stressful period but despite these challenges the foster carers continued to care for the young person and worked patiently with them. The carers worked at the pace of the child and were gradually able to establish a positive relationship, implement consistent boundaries and routines.

As their supervising social worker it was lovely to see how the carers worked through those difficult months and persevered with the young person. Their care, nurture and commitment has led to a fantastic outcome. This month these carers were presented to fostering panel and matched as long term foster carers for this child

6.3 Education

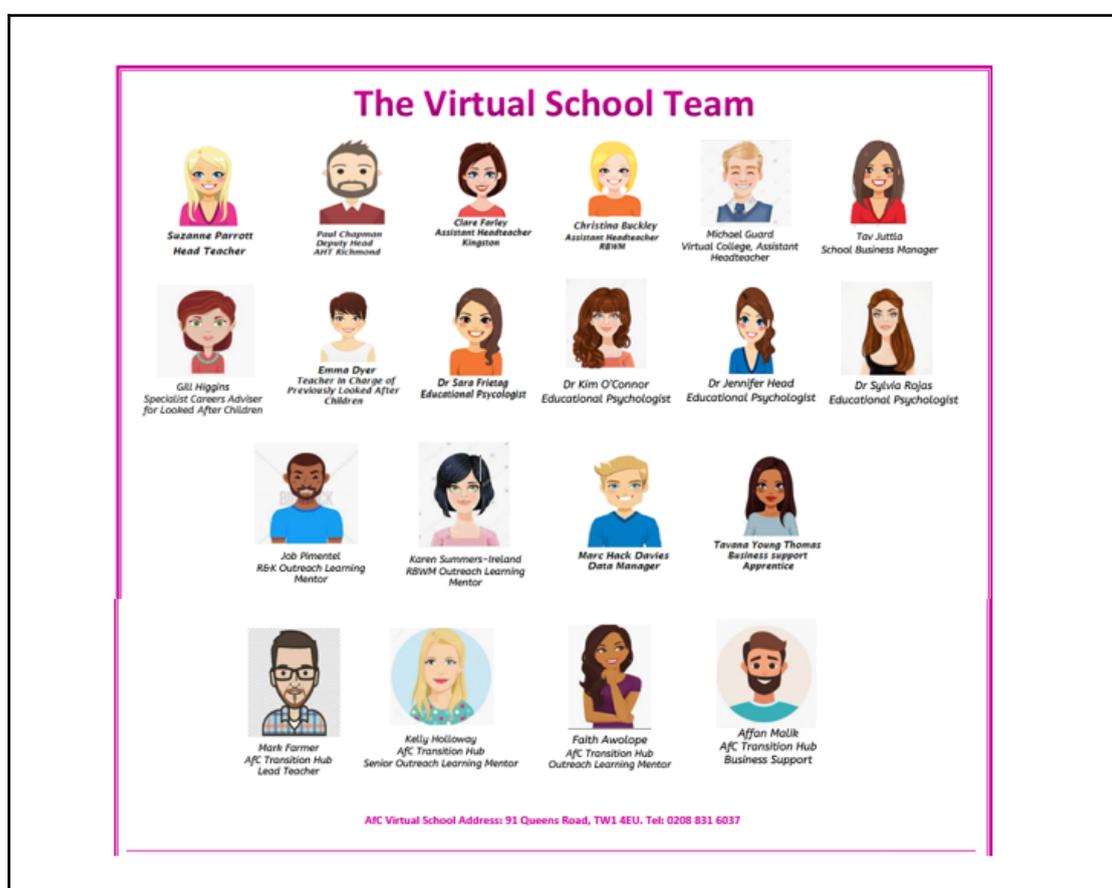
Personal Education Plans (PEP's):

Spring Term PEP completion for AfC Virtual School across Richmond, Kingston and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead were at 100%. Due to COVID-19 PEPs transitioned to being carried out on-line from March 2020 onwards.

During 2020-21 AfC Virtual School has worked with Social Worker and Health colleagues to source a shared Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) approach. Designated Teachers in schools have carried out SDQ assessments and data will be triangulated. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to support our children.

Pupil Premium Plus has been used to support our children's progress e.g. through 1:1 tuition and their wellbeing through mentoring and therapeutic provision. We continue to fund Letterbox and research tells us that the parcels not only impact on reading age but on family routines. Young people across Richmond, Kingston and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead took part in this year's Summer Activity week which was delivered online due to the Pandemic.

AfC Virtual School produces reports on a Termly and Annual basis outlining progress across the following areas: Learning and Progress; Attendance and Exclusion; Educational Quality and Stability; PEP completion; Training; Pupil Premium; Communications, Previously Looked After Children, AfC Virtual College and AfC Transition Hub. Reports are available on request.



6.4 Health and Dental

CLA Medical:

On 31.03.21, there were 98% of children looked after in Kingston with an up to date medical check. This compares to 99% reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.21, there were 90% of children looked after in Richmond with an up to date medical check. This compares to 78% reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.21, there were 96% of children looked after in Windsor and Maidenhead with an up to date medical check. This compares to 85% reported in the previous year.

Dental Checks:

On 31.03.2021 in Kingston 59% of children looked after have an up to date dental check recorded. This compares to 95% reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.2021 in Richmond 47% of children looked after have an up to date dental check recorded. This compares to 90% reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.21 in Windsor and Maidenhead 63% of children looked after have an up to date dental check recorded. This compares to 63% reported in the previous year but the number will rise after further data cleansing.

Note that there is a recognised significant delay noted by the Local Authority CCGs around peoples access to non emergency dental checks, including the children looked after community during the pandemic, and this is likely the reason for the significant dip. However these are being monitored and raised at the multi-disciplinary health meetings in Richmond and Kingston.

Note that the medical and dental figures for 2020-2021 are all provisional and we expect them to increase following further data checks and cleansing. Health reports will be coming to Corporate Parenting Panels later in the year

6.5 Emotional and Mental Health

Priority access to CAMHS continues to be available to children looked after and foster carers to support their emotional and mental health but there is major pressure on the service. In Richmond and Kingston both the Emotional Health Service and Strengthening Families Plus provide in-house foster carers with a range of support services including building resilience, mentoring, life story work, parenting strategies, and preparing for independence. In Windsor and Maidenhead; Cherry Croft offers a matching range of therapeutic services. There is an in house Wellbeing Team who offer therapeutic support to all children who are looked after and the youth service also runs regular 'esteem groups' that they can tap into. One of the priorities of the IFA this year is to develop a consistent therapeutic model of fostering across both branches supported by specialised training for foster carers.

6.6 Supporting Permanency

Promoting permanency for our children has remained a focus point in the past year with the use of the recently developed guidance and offer of training for social workers, permanency is being more thoroughly explored through the regular PPM's across the service. The process remains in place for children under 16 years are presented to the fostering panel for recommendations before being sent to the Agency Decision Maker for the final decision. With both IFA branches supporting these discussions earlier on in the placement, and supporting thinking around the child's identity is proving the strengths. However there is more to be done, with consideration of support and practices for once matches are formalised and permanency has been met.

7 Fostering Recruitment

7.1 Mainstream Foster Carer Recruitment, Apr 2020 to Mar 2021:

	Kingston	Richmond	RBWM	Total
No. of Initial Enquiries	42	36	36	114
No. of Approvals of new Mainstream Carers	9	8	2	19
Potential mainstream fostering households currently booked for skills to foster or in assessment at 20.05.2021	6	4	2	12

Over the last 12 months we have delivered key components of our Recruitment Strategy and we have a strategic working group now overseeing this critical area of our work. We have updated AfC's fostering website emphasising the IFA's unique selling points and making it easier for applicants to apply and gain information. We redesigned all of our recruitment materials to give a more positive message after the pandemic. We also have developed specific marketing and recruitment materials for Sibling placements, Family Link, Parent and Baby Carers and the Supported Lodgings scheme. We have continued with targeted Facebook campaigns. Our "refer a friend

scheme” for foster carers, AfC staff, and wider partners has attracted an increased response. Skills to foster courses are now being run by dedicated staff ensuring that delivery is consistent and regular, 6-8 a year, covering both operations. We have moved to delivering this online and some weekend training has been introduced to enable working partners to attend.

The plan sets out the following targets.

- To receive 300 enquiries over the next three years (approx.100p/yr)
- To have 49 new mainstream carers approved over the next three years. We require an additional 22 mainstream carers in Kingston, 13 in Richmond and 14 in RBWM to be placing 85% of children who are fostered with in-house carers.
- To improve local placement offer for young people but particularly for teenagers and children requiring respite care.
- To increase the number of in-house placements and reduce the usage of independent fostering agencies and residential units.
- To identify suitable foster carers so that we can step down children from residential care to fostering each year
- To be able to offer two foster carers each year to other authorities where we have no local placements for them to maximise our use of carers

7.2 Approvals: Reg 24 Temporary & Connected Persons Carers 2020-21:

	Kingston	Richmond	RBWM	Total
New approvals of Connected Persons carers	7	8	7	24 (up by 8)
Referrals for connected persons assessments	12	13	22	47 (increase of 9)
Reg 24 Temporary Approvals of Connected Persons at 31.03.20	4	8	2	14 (increase of 5)
Connected Persons applicants in assessment at 31.03.2020	3	7	1	11 (increase of 3)

Connected Persons Fostering: In the vast majority of these referrals children had already been placed in an emergency with someone from within their family network and the carers temporarily approved under Regulation 24. Where appropriate Connected Persons fostering assessments are undertaken

in parallel with Special Guardianship assessments of the same applicant. Depending on individual circumstances, the preferred care plan in most cases is Special Guardianship rather than Connected Persons fostering. Hence at the conclusion of care proceedings, there may be more SGOs granted following approval of Connected Person.

In cases where the proceedings do not end with the granting of a SGO the supervising social workers support carers to a point where they feel able and confident to pursue Special Guardianship. Carers' usually want the support of an SSW to manage complex dynamics with birth parent/s and in some cases they may have specific training needs themselves.

Impact Example:

“Working with AFC for the first time was an overall great experience and interesting throughout. In the beginning it was difficult as a new fosterer but the procedure of fostering was made easy by AFC, they were really helpful and made it comfortable for both me and children in my care - an extremely approachable company. Before the Panel Meeting I was quite nervous but there was absolutely no need, they made me relaxed and were reassuring, especially useful in a pandemic. At the start of fostering it was a little overwhelming, but a year on we are comfortable and confident foster carers thanks to the support of AFC and SSW.”

8 Support to Approved Carers during the Covid pandemic

8.1 Social Work Support from Supervising Social Workers

Carers all have an allocated Supervising Social worker (SSW) who visits within statutory timescale, every 4- 6 weeks when placements are stable in most carers across the past year these have taken place in virtual settings. More regular visits are arranged when additional support is needed, when appropriate visits take place face to face during the pandemic. In addition to this, SSWs complete annual review reports and support the completion of a Personal Development Plan for each carer. Prior to their review, identifying training that is relevant to their development and the presenting worries of children in their care. The annual review process and review meeting gives a chance to explore the supports in place and breakdown what might be needed to continue to support through the coming year.

Impact Example:

I work with carers who have recently managed a very difficult transition of a three year old (that they have fostered for 18 months), to his fathers care. This was a very complex transition, as the father needed a great deal of support and guidance to recognise and meet his son's needs. The carers managed this in a sensitive way, addressing any areas of concern but supporting the father to overcome these. They ensured that the child remained the focus of these introductions and that they were taken at his pace. This included opening up their home for introductions to take place there, something which was difficult as the UK was still in lockdown at this point. They provided photo books and social stories to help this child understand the transition and make sense of these changes.

Ultimately their contribution and hard work meant that this transition went as smoothly as possible. Feedback from the child's social worker was: "These are extremely high calibre foster carers. Having cared for B for over 18 months they have laid down some robust foundations for him to be able to reach his optimum later in life. I would like to wholehearted thank both of them for the work they have done for B and his family. The transition back to his family would not have been possible without their skill, knowledge and huge personal sacrifice".

8.2 Family Link Scheme.

The Family Link Scheme provides short breaks for Children with Disabilities up to the age of 18 years. There are currently 6 Approved Family Link Carer households and collectively they are providing 60 overnight placements per year in OA1. We currently have a working group to develop the scheme in OA2 with two children identified through commissioning and RBWM carers currently being assessed. Due to the pandemic, many short break provisions for disabled children needed to reduce their capacity or close entirely. This placed an enormous amount of strain on families, and confusion for children, many of whom did not understand why they could not do the things they had previously enjoyed. The concept of social distancing made little sense to many of our children, and their disabilities and complex needs added another layer of vulnerability during the pandemic. Several family link carers took the decision to continue caring for their link children, despite the fact that social distancing was entirely impossible given the nature of their link children's needs. Our Family Link lead worked with colleagues in other settings to create guidance on minimising risks associated with Covid, and this, alongside PPE was delivered to the family link carers.

Impact Example:

One carer went above and beyond to offer additional support to her link child. The child is considered clinically vulnerable, so initially shielded and did not attend school. However the impact of caring for him without any form of respite was incredibly challenging. The carer and I worked with parents to re-introduce family links. At the time it was the only provision parents felt comfortable with. We started with trips outside, from his home, which typically involved three hours or more on his specially adapted trike - he was ecstatic at being able to go outside with someone different! This soon progressed to a return to his regular overnights. My carer has shown an enormous amount of empathy and flexibility, and the precautions she took at home to make the environment as safe as possible demonstrated her professionalism and commitment to him. These precautions even included the purchase of a steam cleaner.

In December 2020, the child and both his parents contracted Covid-19. His symptoms were thankfully mild, but his parents were very unwell and his father was admitted to hospital. The carer provided additional respite once the child had recovered, enabling his parents to rest and recuperate. My carer has a wonderful bond with the child, and despite his multiple disabilities and non verbal communication, they share many laughs. When describing him recently, she stated *'he doesn't communicate verbally, but his eyes speak many words'*.

Impact Example:

Another set of family link carers also continued to provide care for their link child throughout the pandemic. They reflected on how due to Covid-19, their link child's world 'shrunk', and they worried that he and his parents could become isolated.

Initially the carers started taking their link child out for short trips from his home. He was always absolutely delighted to see them, and on several occasions he tried to get in their car - a sure sign he was keen to go for an overnight!

In the height of the pandemic, his parents described a moving occasion when one of the carers arrived at their home to take him out for a walk. On seeing her, the child lunged forward in his wheelchair in excitement to hug her, and the carer gave him a huge hug in return. His parents described being brought to tears, as this reciprocal show of affection meant a lot.

Overnight respite resumed quickly, with additional safety measures in place. The carers have also provided additional day and overnight sessions while his access to other short break provisions has reduced. His parents have described the regularity of the support as a lifeline.

When asked to describe their link child, his family link carers said '*he has a sense of fun, he enjoys life, and it's lovely*'. They added '*sometimes we don't know what he is laughing at, he's so happy*'.

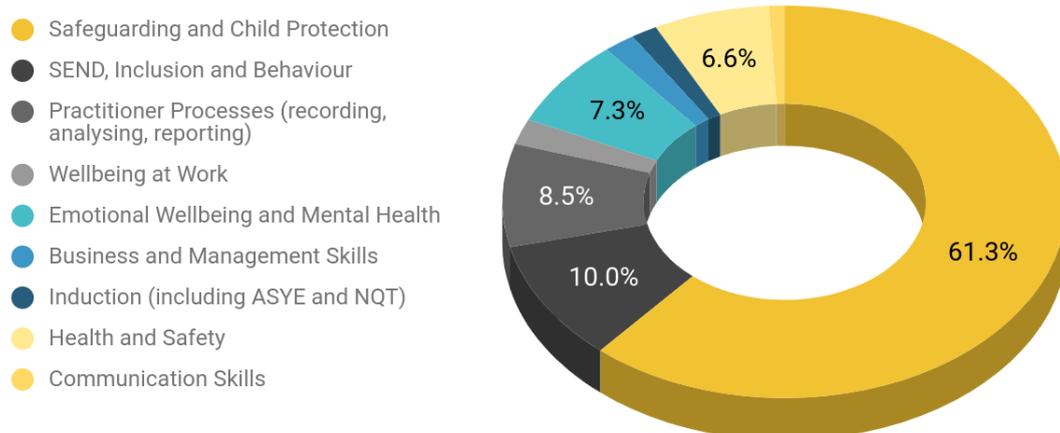
8.3

Training

Continuing professional development is essential to ensure that carers and staff remain up-to-date with changes in their profession, have the right skills and knowledge and can adjust their practice in line with new evidence, sector updates and theory. Learning can, and does take place in a range of different ways across Achieving for Children (AfC). Likewise learning for carers is not always associated with a 'centrally based course' and the development need may be met through a range of different activities as outlined in Achieving for Children Foster Care Progression Scheme and Competency Framework. Foster carers and Connected persons have access to all of Achieving for Children's Multi agency provision via the online booking portal on CPDonline. In addition we offer foster care specific provision around Safer caring, online safety, behaviour management, education support ,managing allegations and child sexual exploitation at foster care friendly times.

Following the announcement of lockdown due to the Covid 19 in March 2020 all face to face provision was converted to virtual classroom provision, webinars or e-learning . This has ensured that carers are still able to actively engage with provision at flexible times during these unprecedented times (1775 virtual events). This means that AfC have been able to continue equipping carers with the essential skills and knowledge to ensure that they are skilled in effectively supporting the children and young people who are in their care. The AfC Annual Fostering Conference (all carers and SSWs) had been scheduled to take place on the 25 April 2020 focussing on Supervision but unfortunately this had to be postponed until a time when we can safely accommodate that number of people under social distancing requirements.

Despite the challenges being faced during the pandemic , attendance at virtual learning events has been positive. This shift has afforded carers choice of multiple dates across in both operational areas, we have also seen strong uptake from our carers, due to the flexibility of timings. 83% of carers have attended at least one centrally organised CPD session, 75 % attending multiple sessions over the period.



(Chart : attendance breakdown by CPD programme)

The chart above clearly outlines that Foster carers and the AfC fostering team have accessed the largest majority of provision from Safeguarding and Child protection programme of learning (61.3%) . This is to be expected as this includes sessions on Safer caring , Safeguarding Children: A Shared Responsibility Level 2 and Safeguarding Children: Child Protection Processes Level 3 which all appear in Priority 1 of the Foster carers and Social Care pathway which was introduced in the previous year. The pathway ensures that there is a clear and consistent approach to learning and that identified needs are met. These sessions in addition have a requirement to be renewed regularly. Practitioners' processes include Signs of safety and all our Supervising social workers have attended this. It is refreshing to see that our carers are accessing sessions from across our extensive multi agency provision.

In response to ongoing engagement with carers through carer forums, Training Needs surveys and weekly promotional emails around their training needs the following new foster carer specific CPD provision were introduced into the annual programme.

- Support for Foster Carers: Understanding, identifying and responding to anxiety
- Understanding Income Tax and National Insurance Workshop for Foster Carers
- Culture, Diversity and Identity for Foster Carers
- Safer Caring Refresher Training
- Impact of Fostering on Birth Children
- Compassion Fatigue Training
- Positive transitions - supporting academic success through enhancing school belonging
- Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy Training (PACE)
- Trauma Informed Practice for Foster Carers
- Hypervigilance & Transitions: Supporting the Transition Out of Lockdown for Foster Carers

Induction - induction is now established every quarter and we have refined the process for ensuring all new carers attend. 57 carers have attended so far over 4 events.

Elearning resource -The equalities and diversity e learning training is still part of the induction offer for carers and we have included Unconscious Bias training to the package. This piece of elearning was introduced in June in light of the Black Lives Matters movement.

We now have dedicated colleagues in the team to build our own in house webinars/elearning/ briefings. This resource helped to tailor our learning to carers and we have successfully introduced Record keeping for carers.

Impact Example: Feedback from our attachment trainer:

I had foster carers returning for a refresher session. They told the group that the attachment training had helped them to think differently about their foster son. Before the training, they experienced him as intimidating and aggressive. After the training, they began to realise that he was terrified rather than terrifying, and frightened rather than frightening. They said that they realised that he needed them to help him feel safe, and that their job was to be as predictable and attuned as possible. He had experienced 9 placements in a year, as they had all broken down because of his aggression, but he has now been with them for three years and is in mainstream school. This was so lovely to hear - often as trainers we don't know the impact of our work, so this was a real joy.

8.4 **Support Groups and developing Peer Mentoring Scheme**

During this reporting period Richmond and Kingston held 3 support groups (a group for connected persons carers, mainstream foster carers and a specialist foster carers group). The latter group will be amalgamated into the mainstream support group in 2020/2021.

In Windsor and Maidenhead a therapeutic group is available for connected carers and mainstream carers. There is also a whatsapp group where carers can get support and advice. Carers are currently being canvassed about the best way to support them. Some of the male carers are interested in forming a men's group. Both fostering branches acknowledge the importance of having support groups for all carers where they can get both peer and professional advice in an informal setting. A Facebook group for carers has been set up and the feedback is that all carers find it a very useful source of

advice about day to day fostering issues. a foster carer support group that is available for mainstream and connected carers and there are discussions going on about

8.5 Fostering Forums

AfC Fostering Forums continued to meet at least quarterly in both branches via virtual system. The attendance has fluctuated over the past year with anywhere between 5 and 20 carers at each session. These forums remain critical to hearing from carers about what is working well and where the service needs to improve. Children Looked After Health and Learning & Development regularly attend the forum to address issues around improving foster carer training and to update on recent issues. In addition, the fostering service sends regular newsletters via email which have service and team updates, training and upcoming event information as well general information.

8.6 Out of Hours (OOH) Support

Out of Hours support from experienced supervising social workers is provided between 6-11pm every evening and 12 noon to 11pm during weekends and bank holidays. This service compliments the Emergency Duty which is available to carers through the night. During the Covid 19 crisis fostering managers have also been on call to support any potential placement breakdown.

8.7 Peer Group Supervision for Supervising Social Workers.

Peer group supervision is held every 3 weeks and all fostering team members are encouraged to attend the group. During the meeting each social worker has the option of either presenting a case, facilitating the session or taking minutes. We use the solution based Signs of Success model in our approach. In Operational area 1 there are two leads (the team leader and a senior social worker). The sessions are structured and last for an hour. Social workers can either present pieces of work they find challenging or talk about work which has been successful. Discussing aspects of the work which we are proud of allows the worker to celebrate their achievements whilst allowing the group to think about how they can achieve similar outcomes themselves.

This model of group supervision has been taking place for almost 3 years. The hardest part has been sticking to the questioning, as social workers we have a tendency to give answers and provide solutions. The model of questioning is extremely useful when we are supervising foster carers particularly if we become stuck in a negative cycle. Practice Leads and practitioners across AFC are invited to attend group supervision with other teams to share good practice and work on solutions in a safe, contained space.

Foster carer file audit themes

During 2020-21 a range of audit activity has been undertaken to assess both mainstream and connected person foster carers across both Operational Areas. A further table top audit of Placement Identity and Planning was undertaken in Operational Area 1.

In addition to the above activity the fostering service is now participating in Achieving for Children's service wide audit programme

In 2020-2021, a total of 42 files were audited across both operational areas, there were 9 auditors who contributed to this process. Themes identified in the audits of this past year were:

- Annual foster carer home reviews. Most foster carer annual reviews took place within timescales and outcomes for children were noted to be good. Contributions to review reports from children's social workers, the carers themselves and adult members of the household were good. Children's independent reviewing officers were not always able to contribute effectively and this has been discussed with the review service.
- Foster carer's valued the support of their supervising social workers however their supervision did not always take place within required timescales i.e. between 4 and 6 weeks, and the supervision records were not regularly completed in a timely way. In some cases the 'lived experience' of the children being looked after was not reflected in supervision recordings. Changes to the supervision recording format and practice have now been put in place and the quality of supervision recording is improving.
- The level of carer participation in placement planning has been the subject of regular dissatisfaction for carers and they often have not received appropriate reports and assessments in a timely way. The evidence for this has been seen in carer file auditing in both Operational Areas and in the placement planning and review audit completed in Operational Area 1. All children audited had placement plans however in 40% of cases it was not possible to evidence the provision of placement plans to foster carers. Placement planning meetings regularly took place after a child or young person had been placed and some outside the 5 day timescale. In order to support more timely completion and distribution of placement plans and information about children a new format for the placement plan which combines the information previously held in 2 different plans has been developed and was launched in January 2020.
- Management support for supervising social workers is provided in formal and informal supervision. Supervising social workers report being well supported by their managers and Ofsted in both Operational Areas have noted the

positive relationships within the fostering teams. Audits of professional supervision have shown that the recording of decisions and the follow up of actions are not always noted in supervision records and in some cases the timeliness of formal supervision has slipped. Improving this will be a focus of future work with both teams and professional supervision is now monitored and reported on every month.

10 AFC IFA Development in 2020-21

- 10.1 Whilst the pandemic took its toll on everyone during 2020-21 as an IFA we not only supported carers to keep placements stable but took incremental steps forward. We had an assurance visit by Ofsted in OA2 in February 2021. They stated:
- Foster carers have positive and nurturing relationships with children.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging, and supervising social workers have increased the amount of support they give to foster carers.
 - Foster carers have used this time to strengthen and develop relationships with children. This has helped children to feel safe and to continue making good progress.
 - Despite the challenges faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, foster carers have been creative in promoting children's learning and health needs. They have also supported children to keep in touch with friends and family who are important to them. This positive approach has ensured that children's education and their physical, social and emotional well-being continue to be developed.
 - Foster carers, supervising social workers and managers use a variety of methods to seek children's views. This includes consultation with the children's council, and consultation during home visits and joint visits with the children's social workers.
 - Children are able to influence changes to the agency and talk about their personal needs, wishes and feelings. This helps children to take ownership of their care and feel valued.
 - Foster carers are well supported. The fostering agency has adapted the support available in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 10.2 During the past 12 months we have:
- updated our policy around placements stability and standards of care investigation
 - embedded use of the matching matrix and individualised safer care plans and delegated authority
 - strengthened and increased our monthly auditing to focus on the impact of fostering on children's outcomes
 - run regular foster care induction days, introduced bespoke courses for foster carers on recording and developed peer led training

- begun to embed our buddying scheme for new carers

11 New Developments for the IFA in 2020-2021

11.1 Changing the way the AfC IFA is financed to create a culture of investment and growth:

The IFA has begun to grow but if we are to hit our ambitious targets we need to invest in marketing, recruitment and have sufficient staff to cover the assessment and supervision of new carers whilst ensuring we support and retain existing carers. We are therefore setting up a trading account which charges for the number of children we have placed in house and covers our assessment costs. This will enable more resources to be invested into the IFA whenever we expand and will reduce pressure on our supervising social workers whose caseloads are already full.

11.2 Maximising our use of in house carers.

We want to establish a more effective placement matching process in both branches. We need to maximise fostering capacity by reducing the number of in house carers who are either on hold or have less children placed than they are approved for. During the pandemic we had some carers particularly those who only offered respite who were underused. We need to ensure that all our carers are meeting fostering requirements and have sufficient placements to evidence this. We also need more capacity to offer our mainstream carers respite. We are appointing a Senior Practitioner that will oversee our matching process and ensure every in house carer is being employed effectively. This post will lead on developing reciprocal arrangements with neighbouring local authorities where in house carers have vacancies that cannot be filled with children from Richmond, Kingston or Windsor and Maidenhead. They will also develop and oversee a step down programme where we identify children in residential that could be placed with in house foster carers.

11.3 Developing reflecting fostering practice

In the past year, we have been developing reflective practice within the service. This has been mostly focused on a pilot training and support program with 6 households with a focus on placement stability. We have also been pursuing an option to be a participant in a research study from Anna Freud of reflective fostering, should this be approved we will participate in the 2021-2022 study aspect. In addition, we have been supporting further reflective discussions within the team, supervisions and supporting a more signs of success approach to our templates.

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