



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

**Annual Report
April 2023- March 2024**

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 2023 to 31 March 2024. This Annual Report also sets out plans for future service development until 31st March 2024. The impact examples which are an integral part of capturing a flavour of the work of the service are separated into Operational Area 1 (OA1) which is Richmond and Kingston and Operational Area 2 (OA2) which is Windsor and Maidenhead.
- 1.2 This annual report should be read in conjunction with the Statement of Purpose 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 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 2023-24 , 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 2023-March 2024 .

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 26 and 30 June 2023 and received a good rating in all areas. The Windsor and Maidenhead branch of the IFA was inspected between 2 and 6 August 2021 and also received a good rating in all areas. AfC continues to use the development of the IFA as a driver to raise the quality of and grow the fostering service by aligning policy and procedure across all three authorities. We also seek to use our “hybrid” status of being somewhere in between an external IFA and an in-house local authority fostering service to innovate and improve practice particularly around the assessment and support of Connected Person Carers.

2.3 The vision and value base for AfC's IFA remains being 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: OA2

Foster carers supported a placement of 9 month old twins which was required at very short notice. The carers looked after them for an 8 month period whilst proceedings were ongoing, during which time both babies thrived in their care. Throughout the placement the carers went above and beyond to ensure the best possible outcomes for the children. I frequently observed the children to settle very quickly with the carers and seek them out consistently for reassurance. The carers formed positive relationships with the professional network as well as the birth family of the children, advocating both warmly and professionally for the children throughout all meetings. The care plan for the children was to be gradually rehabilitated into the care of their birth family, though there were some significant factors that could have impacted this positive outcome for the children. As such, there was an extended transition plan which spanned over the course of 9 weeks, during which time the carers worked very closely with the birth family and provided a lot of advice and guidance. At the end of the transition, the children

naturally resettled back into the care of their birth family who were receptive to the additional support that was provided to them during this time.

3 AfC IFA Provision

In 2023-24 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
- Family Link/short breaks
- Viability Assessments
- Private Fostering
- Ukrainian Unaccompanied minor private fostering assessments
- Private Special Guardianship assessments

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

- Mainstream fostering – providing both task-centred/short-term and long term placements to children who are accommodated on various care orders.
- Providing placements to 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.
- Regulation 24 arrangements - providing support to family and friends who are caring for a child/children while being assessed.

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 **Family Link/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 & Ukrainian Unaccompanied scheme:** 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. This now includes private fostering assessments for Ukrainian unaccompanied children who are yet to arrive or already here.
- 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 **Special Guardianship and post order support:** we provide assessment and interim support for prospective special guardians, we also provide ongoing support and guidance post order being granted.
- 3.8 **The Fostering Panels:** Please refer to the Annual Fostering Panel Reports 2023-2024 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. Some panel members cover both panels allowing for greater continuity.
- 3.9 The main Agency Decision Maker is the AD for Provider Services. When he is on leave the Director of Children's Social Care in Richmond and Kingston, or the Deputy Director Children's Social Care & Early Help fulfil the ADM role so that all reports are reviewed in a timely way. Our Agency Decision Maker continues to contact the panel chairs directly to discuss any complex best interest decisions and meets quarterly with panel chairs and vice chairs to develop a shared approach and to listen and respond to feedback from the Panel Advisor on arising trends in each area. Mary Webb and Angela Firth continue to operate as Chair and Vice Chair respectively in Richmond & Kingston/OA1. Chris Mills and Heather Bull continue to operate in the same roles for the Windsor and Maidenhead/ OA2 panel. All the Chairs have many years' experience 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. We have continued with some virtual fostering panels, as there has been a benefit in terms of children's social worker attendance and some carers prefer to attend virtually. However we are exploring a hybrid way of working going forward and would expect face to face meetings for foster carer approval and standards of care concerns.

Impact Examples:

We recently held a Panel Training day where we reviewed the interface between the panel and the ADM in two specific cases and reviewed the challenge about meeting the fostering regulations whilst still taking decisions which were in children's best interests particularly around Connected Person carers. The ADM shared his letters to two families so that the panel were able to see how more challenging and borderline panel decisions had been followed up. In one case the ADM decided he needed to meet directly with the family to address an issue around a family member needing to move outside of the house as they refused to be part of the assessment process. In this case a connected person carer arrangement could not be set up and Special Guardianship was sought but everything was done to try and convince the family that the additional support and monitoring through becoming foster carers would have been in the child's best interests.

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. Meaningful feedback from the child or young person in placement is always sought with a creative approach to capturing this. 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 2023 and March 2024 a total of 59 annual reviews were completed in Richmond and in Kingston and 39 in Windsor and Maidenhead.
- 4.3 During this review period there were 5 allegations of concerns raised about Richmond and Kingston carers made by children in the placement, which resulted in fact finding and standards of care. Within all 5 fostering households under investigation the children were removed to ensure their safety during the investigation process. 2 carers went on to resign, 2 further investigations need to be formally concluded. The final household remains approved with us and has accepted the conclusion and learning from the standards of care process.

In Windsor and Maidenhead we had 2 allegations made by children in placement regarding carers and these resulted in fact findings being completed following strategy meetings whereby the allegations did not meet the threshold for a child protection inquiry. The recommendations from the fact findings were to put in place additional training and learning for the carers.
- 4.4 During this period there were no concerns directly raised by professionals about the standards of care in Richmond and Kingston, or Windsor and Maidenhead.

- 4.5 There were no grievances or complaints raised against a foster carer by any person or by a foster carer against the agency in any of the local authority areas. The absence of any complaints has led to us promoting our complaints policy with foster carers and making sure all foster children know how to complain and are aware of the Children's Guide.
- 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 reviews the qualifying determinations made by fostering service providers and makes a new recommendation having considered all the relevant information afresh. There were no situations that resulted in IRM referrals.
- 4.7 During the period April 2023 to March 2024 there have been 17 separate notifiable incidents in Richmond and Kingston; (4 were notifications where complaints and allegations were made against a foster carer, 2 was about serious infectious outbreak in the foster home and 11 notifications where emergency services were called to the fostering home- due to children going missing or to provide medical care). There have been 9 separate notifications in RBWM. In the most serious one a child's connected carer allowed them to have unsupervised contact with his birth mother which led to a child protection enquiry and a standards of care, with the child remaining with the carer with additional support and increased monitoring.

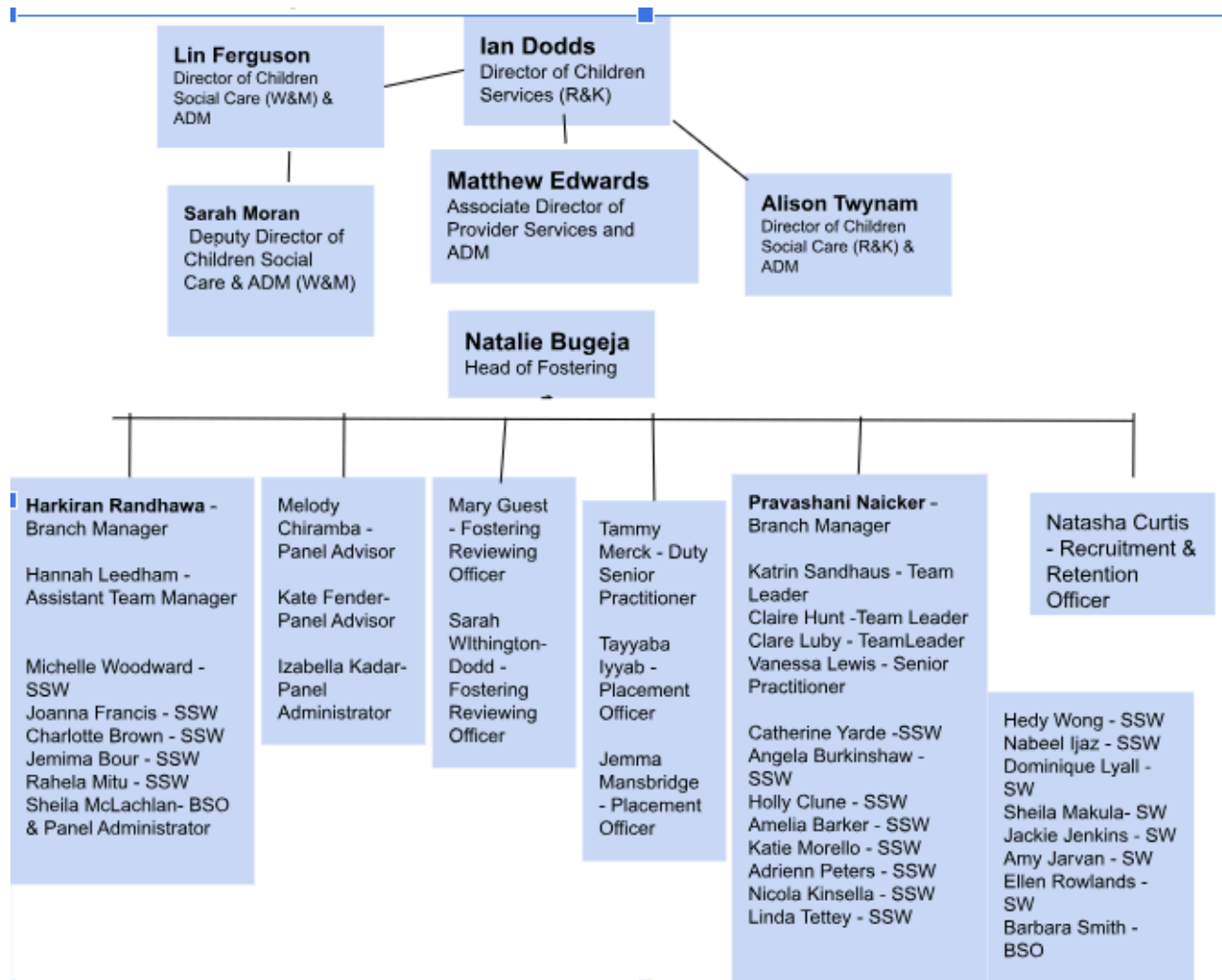
Impact Example: OA1

A foster carer was supported to move to family link fostering due to the increasing demands on their time meaning that mainstream short term placements were not appropriate. This carer has been supported by the family link service to develop a deep and thoughtful understanding of how to support disabled children. The child matched with them stays over once a month and is also offered weekly support to attend local activities. Previously both the child and her family were resistant to any support and scared to try activities after losing her sight. She is observed to have significantly grown in confidence through the range of activities she has been supported to attend including swimming, cycling and horse riding. The trust the family has in this carer has meant they no longer feel overstretched and in crisis. The young person described the carer to me as 'fun, awesome, fantastic 10/10.'

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 - As of March 2024



5.2 All Supervising Social Workers (SSW's) 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 SSWs in both branches currently hold full caseloads or are slightly above. We have commissioned some new mainstream and kinship 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-20	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-23	Mar-24
No. of children in care at the end of the month (excl. respite)	124	130	133	111	130
Male	84	92	97	78	84
Female	40	38	36	32	46
Under 1	6	5	5	4	6
1-4	10	16	13	9	16
5-9	16	18	23	16	23
10-15	42	37	41	39	38
16-17	50	54	51	43	47
No. of children looked after at the end of the month (including respite)	125	131	133	111	130
Below figures are excluding respite cohort					
Becoming CLA	69	67	75	54	70
No. placed with in-house carers	37	42	50	37	41
No. placed externally in PV&V sector	45	31	33	25	39
Ceasing to be CLA	66	58	66	76	54

Richmond	Mar-20	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-23	Mar-24
No. of children looked after at the end of the month (exc. respite)	119	133	123	130	110
Male	63	75	76	75	65
Female	55	58	47	55	45
Indeterminate	1	0	0	0	0
Under 1	8	3	3	8	5
1-4	14	21	14	12	14
5-9	9	12	10	14	14
10-15	41	41	31	40	43
16-17	47	56	65	56	34
No of children in care at the end of the month (including respite)	119	133	123	130	110
Below figures are excluding respite cohort					
Becoming CLA	71	62	60	72	47
No. placed with in-house carers	47	56	39	47	30
No. placed externally in PV&V sector	38	19	28	25	32
Ceasing to be CLA	56	51	62	73	66

Windsor and Maidenhead	Mar-20	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-23	Mar-24*
No. of children looked after at the end of the month (exc. respite)	116	130	128	150	140
Male	61	67	71	88	68
Female	55	63	57	63	71
Indeterminate	0	0	0	0	1
Under 1	0	8	3	7	8
1-4	0	17	15	11	16
5-9	17	21	23	25	25
10-15	47	52	44	50	53
16-17	35	32	43	58	38
No of children in care at the end of the month (including respite)	116	130	128	151	140
Below figures are excluding respite cohort					
Becoming CLA	52	51	46	98	61
No. placed with in-house carers			52	44	47
No. placed externally in PV&V sector			28	29	31
Ceasing to be CLA	62	39	49	73	71

****Mar-24 data is taken from Mar'24 PQI dataset and is provisional pending completion of SSDA903 return.***

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

Number of children placed with in-house carers at 31.03.2024	Kingston	Richmond	RBWM
Mainstream carers	33	30	28
Respite Only	0	0	0
Family Link Only	4	3	0
Supported Lodgings Only	0	0	0
Family and Friends (Connected and Approved households)	8	8	21
Temporary Family and Friends (Reg 24/25)	4	9	7
Staying Put (not counted as a fostering placement)	3	3	5
Private Fostering -current arrangements (not counted as fostering placement)	2	0	2
Total	46	45	63

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 2023-24 the percentage of Children Looked-After (CLA) Reviews that were held within expected timescales

were 99% in Kingston, and 99% in Richmond. In Windsor and Maidenhead 94% reviews took place within the expected timescale.

Impact example: OA2

A foster carer who had previously looked after a little boy who went on to be adopted put herself forward to care for his newborn sister despite already having two other children in placement. She felt very strongly that she wanted to be able to provide the sister with same loving home environment that her brother had experienced. She also had a positive relationship with their mother which would support her to engage during this distressing time of having another child removed from her care. Matching was carefully carried out and a thorough support plan was put together to ensure that the foster carer would be able to manage three children, particularly as she was a single carer. The Agency Decision Maker agreed to sign off a variation of the carer's approval terms in order to allow for her to care for three children in these specific circumstances. It was felt that this continuity of care would help these siblings in terms of their life journeys and identity. Furthermore, the same family who adopted the boy were ultimately identified as a match for his sister too. The foster carer and the adopters had remained in close contact since he was adopted, the carer remains involved in his life and he knows how she fits into his life journey. Therefore when the time came to transition the sister to the adoptive family these existing relationships worked brilliantly to make this a smooth and positive move. Although it was a lot of hard work caring for three young children as a single carer this foster carer showed a huge amount of commitment and was entirely child-focused in supporting the sister to have the best start in life. It is really positive that both siblings had the same experience in foster care and have been adopted into the same family.

Impact example: OA1

A foster carer has been caring for a young unaccompanied asylum seeker from Afghanistan. He is absolutely flourishing in her care. Her nurturing and thoughtful approach enabled her to discover the young person's passion for cricket. He is now playing for his school in the under 15's and for an adult team at a local club because he is so talented. This has allowed him to successfully integrate into the local community and also at his school where his talent is well known.

6.3 Education - AfC Virtual School and College

Children Looked After

AfC Virtual School KS2 students achieved above National Averages for CLA in Reading, Writing and Maths (RWM) with 50% achieving the expected standards. AfC Virtual School's combined KS4 Average Attainment 8 was 28 compared with 19.4 for looked after children nationally. Looking at individual authorities: Richmond achieved Attainment 8 of 34.5,

Kingston 32.9 and RBWM was below national this year at 14.2 showing a drop from last year's three year rising trend. AfC Virtual School Average Attainment 8 for students without SEND is 31.2 which is in line with the national for CLA without SEND which was 31. The average across AfC Virtual School for CLA with SEND (21) was better than for their peers nationally (13.4).

An analysis of sub-cohorts shows that overall, children who are classified as 'Out of Borough' (14 students) performed better than those educated 'In-Borough' (3 students). Due to small cohort sizes this doesn't lead us to have concerns with In-Borough schools rather confidence that AfC Virtual School staff are ensuring that those placed out of the borough have equal access to services.

Education stability is a key component in enabling our children to achieve and to this end we have introduced a school move authorisation form with sign off from Social Care and Virtual School Associate Directors. School stability was maintained in Richmond at 81%, increased in Kingston from 82% (2022) to 84% (2023) and decreased by 2% in RBWM to 78%. We have observed a three year trend of our students who attended an Outstanding school achieving higher outcomes at GCSE than those in a Good School. AfC Virtual School leaders sourced 100% Ofsted Good+ schools in 2022-23 in Richmond and Kingston with one young person in RBWM coming into care in a Requires Improvement school who, for stability reasons, remained with a Risk Assessment. This closes the gap with 89% of all children nationally attending Good or Outstanding provision (2022).

Average Absence in Richmond was 12.4% up from 11.2% in 2022. In Kingston Average Absence was 7.1% down from 8.2% in 2022 and in RBWM 8.4% up from 7.5% (2022). The National Average Absence for looked After Children in 2023 was 8.3% showing that in RBWM attendance is in line with national peers, Kingston it is below however in Richmond it is above. Persistent Absence figures Nationally for looked after children in 2023 were 20%. In Richmond Persistent Absence was increased from 24.3% in 2022 to 34.2% in 2023 and in RBWM from 17% to 18.8% which was still below national figures. In Kingston Persistent Absence has reduced from 27.9% to 21.6% bringing it in line with national Persistent Absence for all children (21.5%).

There continue to be no permanent exclusions of looked after children. Suspensions are increasing in Richmond and RBWM with Richmond at 17.6% up from 13.2% in 2022 and RBWM at 17.6% up from 8.9%. In Kingston suspensions have reduced from 9.9% in 2022 to Kingston at 7.4% in 2023 and are improved against national looked after suspensions of 12.2% in 2023.

In response to this concerning Attendance and Suspension picture, which is out of character for AfC Virtual School pre COVID cohorts, we have introduced a new Attendance Strategy across AfC Virtual School, College and Extended Duties teams.

Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion and quality remains strong across AfC Virtual School with 100% total completion and 94% PEP documents being quality

assured as Good or Outstanding.

The Attachment Aware Schools Award

The programme was devised by the Executive Headteacher and Lead Educational Psychologist and launched in October 2020. The programme includes coaching from Educational Psychologists, regular Designated Teacher training and whole school training for all participating schools in Attachment and Emotion Coaching. An initial Attachment Audit enables schools to identify areas for development and an area is selected as the Whole School Change Project. We have now developed a three year programme and have seen 103 schools through the Award.

AfC Virtual College

AfC Virtual College was opened in September 2020 offering support for the 16-25 age group. This included Education Excellence Pathways; strategies to increase numbers of those in Education, Employment and Training and the establishment of Care Leaver Executive Boards to champion an

The Stable Education Experience Pledge

ACHIEVE OUR GOALS:

'Provide us with a stable education experience to enable us to achieve our full education potential and to achieve our goals.'

BELONGING AND FRIENDSHIP:

'Provide us with a stable education experience to allow us to find secure and meaningful friendships and offer us a sense of belonging.'

CONFIDENCE TO BE HEARD:

'Provide us with a secure and stable school experience so we can build positive relationships with teachers and adults which gives us chance to have our views heard, to grow in confidence and make positive decisions.'

DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSITION:

'Provide us with a stable school experience to enable us to thrive in all aspects of our educational development and prepare us for successful transition to college, university, work and beyond.'

Feedback from Carers Summer School 2023

CARERS & YOUNG PEOPLE FEEDBACK on PUPIL PREMIUM FUNDED PROJECTS

The girls thoroughly enjoyed the events and enjoyed meeting others that were fostered or adopted. Their favourite event was paddle boarding.

Just to say a big thank you to you and the team! X and X had a brilliant time at all the different activities they attended and liked them all.

All the events were well attended which was good to see. As foster carers we saw the week was promoted well albeit it was our adopted children who attended! Keep up the good work.

X had an amazing week! He already can't wait to meet his new friend next year! Thanks for your hard work.

My young person absolutely loved all the sessions but Albany Outdoor day was her favourite. I think the mix of people along with the staff and volunteers just made it such a memorable experience. All the days were run really well and communication was fantastic from yourself.

X had a great time. Giving 46 out of 50, his favourite activity was Water Sports. Thank you so much for putting the program on. It was a great selection.

Thank you so much for another great session! X loved it and was so happy to see her new friend from Monday, X - I also made friends with X's Mum!

Thank you so much for such wonderful opportunities on offer for a 10 year old. There was a real variety. I think it's so important for children in care to have the chance to connect with other children who share some of their life experiences. X has been in care for 5 years, but had never been to so many activities in a week. She said it's been the best start to the holidays, something different each day & I feel so much calmer.

As a carer the scheme has been really fab and we are very grateful for the enrichment opportunities she has had with you. Thank you! I think it's fantastic, we really valued you.

The specific activity X enjoyed the most was the boat cruise. It was really a unique experience

The best part for X is making friends – friends who he would love to see at future events.

Fun Fest, X would definitely go again – X was so busy on the day he didn't have "time" to eat his lunch!

6.4 Health and Dental

CLA Medical:

On 31.03.24, there were 87% of children looked after in Kingston with an up to date medical check. This compares to 73% finally reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.24, there were 78% of children looked after in Richmond with an up to date medical check. This compares to 79% finally reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.24, there were 95% of children looked after in Windsor and Maidenhead with an up to date medical check. This compares to 97% finally reported in the previous year.

Dental Checks:

On 31.03.24 in Kingston 91% of children looked after have an up to date dental check recorded. This compares to 84% finally reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.24 in Richmond 82% of children looked after have an up to date dental check recorded. This compares to 85% finally reported in the previous year.

On 31.03.24 in Windsor and Maidenhead 91% of children looked after have an up to date dental check recorded. This compares to 79% finally reported in the previous year.

6.5 Emotional and Mental Health

In the past year both operational areas have enhanced their in-house emotional health services. This supports priority access to children looked after to support their emotional and mental health but there is major pressure on the service. In fostering we continued to offer the therapeutic foster carer support group which was run by CherryCroft to all carers across the service, we complete themed sessions and allow a form or peer reflection for carers. We also introduced trauma informed practice training specifically for foster carers. 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 and foster carers. Permanency is being more thoroughly explored through the regular PPM's across the service which the fostering service attends as part of the panel. The process remains in place for children under 16 years are presented to the fostering panel for recommendations before being formalised to the Agency Decision Maker for the final decision. Both IFA branches are participating in the chairing roles of the PPM's, alongside supporting these discussions earlier on in the placement, and supporting thinking around the child's identity is proving the strengths. Earlier permanency discussions and expanding the PPM offer to ensure all children still awaiting permanency are regularly discussed.

7 Fostering Recruitment

7.1 Mainstream Foster Carer Recruitment, Apr 2023 to Mar 2024:

	Kingston	Richmond	WM	Total
No. of Initial Enquiries	21	12	7	40
No. of Approvals of new Mainstream Carers households	1	0	1	2
Potential mainstream fostering households currently booked for skills to foster or in assessment at 31.06.2024	3 (2 Kingston and 1 assessment being completed for the City of London)	0	2	5

We had a really difficult year with recruitment compounded by staff changes and the IFA has put considerable resource into trying to improve mainstream carer recruitment in 2024-25 including active involvement in the South East Regional foster carer recruitment hub. We have developed our strategic plan and have planned recruitment campaigns in the community. We continue to update AfC's fostering website, reviewing other websites and ensuring we emphasise the IFA's unique selling points and making it easier for applicants to apply and gain information. In the previous year we redesigned all of our recruitment materials, and have been enhancing this through showing the diversity of our community, animation videos and direct stories from carers telling us of their journey. We also invested in a social media campaign. We continue to offer and promote "refer a friend scheme" for foster carers, AfC staff, and wider partners. Skills to foster courses are now being run by dedicated staff ensuring that delivery is consistent and regularly through the year, covering both operations. We offer separate skills to foster for family and connected care, which is often supported by an approved connected carer. We continue to deliver this online to offer flexibility.

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 offers 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 2023-24:**

	Kingston	Richmond	RBWM	Total
New approvals of Connected Persons carers	4	6	4	14
Referrals for connected persons assessments	15	9	4	28
Reg 24 Temporary Approvals of Connected Persons at 31.03.23	3	8	7	18
Connected Persons applicants in assessment at 31.03.23	6	8	2	16

Impact Example: OA2

AfC has a connected carer who is caring for a CLA who does not trust social services and had a very poor professional relationship with her previous social worker. I have worked with this connected carer since January 2023 and during this time period, the carer and CLA have become much more confident in working with myself and allowing AfC to support them. This young person has significant mental health difficulties, and the carer has supported their needs massively and allowed the young person to gain access back to school part time and work on their GCSEs despite previously wishing to no longer continue with education. The carer has supported our young person with their emotional and physical wellbeing and educational needs in which professionals have seen a very positive turn around in this young person's life. The young person remains with their connected carer under a long term foster placement and is likely to remain under a staying put arrangement. Both the connected carer and young person are able to work with AfC and have a willingness to engage with us as well as other professionals. It has been a pleasure working with these two individuals.

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carer and young person are able to work with AfC and have a willingness to engage with us as well as other professionals. It has been a pleasure working with these two individuals.

8 Teams

8.1 Social Work Support from Supervising Social Workers

All carers all have an allocated Supervising Social worker (SSW) who visits within statutory timescale, every 4- 6 weeks when placements are stable. More regular visits are arranged when additional support is needed. There are some long term matched arrangements that support an extended timescale of visiting which is monitored through child looked after reviews. 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. Supervising social workers identify additional supports and arrange stability meetings where needed, we explore services like respite, additional training and other resources.

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 7 Approved Family Link Carer households and collectively they are providing 100 overnight placements per year in OA1. One carer is also providing weekly support to their link child during the day. Another carer has continued to provide day support to a child who moved to a 44 week placement, providing continuity and stability while he is home for 6 weeks per year.

We currently have one fostering household who have expressed an interest in providing family link placements, and a suitable match is being explored. There is currently one OA1 household in assessment, and it is anticipated that they will come to the fostering panel in October 2024. Additionally, AfC has been commissioned by the City of London to assess a household for a family link arrangement, and this assessment is at the initial stages.

The family link social worker has continued to work closely with family link carers and professional networks to ensure children's complex needs are met, and children have the best opportunities to enjoy and achieve in life. This has included close partnerships with schools, OT, Physiotherapists, Paediatricians and the Emotional Health Service. During this operational year, one of our carers has worked closely with a local school, OT and the Continence Service to support a child to become fully continent during the day. The carers identified that the child had potential to be more independent in this area, and relatively quickly the child was no longer wearing pads when they came to family link. The carers joined a multidisciplinary meeting facilitated by the school, and shared their experiences of how they supported the child to achieve this fantastic milestone. An agreement was made across all settings that the same approach would be adopted, and the child is now fully continent during the day.

Impact Example OA1:

This year we have been able to utilise the skills and experience of an existing foster carer to support a 6 year old boy in family link. H was referred to family link for overnight short breaks as his mother is finding meeting his day to day care needs difficult. He is currently on a Child Protection Plan for neglect. He is at risk of coming into care, but it is hoped that strong multi-agency working will help him to remain at home.

He loves trains, buses, cars and planes, and his dream day would involve all forms of transport! He loves water play, animals, marble runs and doll houses. He has a diagnosis of autism, social and communication needs, a learning disability and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder. Due to his age, he is unable to attend AfC's overnight short break provision, Rainbow House, as this is registered to care for children from the age of 8 years old.

A respite foster carer was identified and funding was agreed for 2 overnights per month. The carer spent time getting to know him at school. School facilitated 4 separate visits, where the carer was able to see how and what the child eats, how he likes to be supported with personal care, and the things he enjoys playing with. The time spent with his TA was incredibly valuable. School created a communication pack for the carer to use when she supported the child, and they helped to prepare him for his visits to the carers home, by showing him social stories, created by the SSW.

Whilst the child's needs are the priority, the needs of parents are very important too. The carer welcomed his Mum into her home, listening and talking to her with empathy and without judgement. Mum was able to see where her son would be sleeping, talk to the carer about her son, and contribute to his short break care plan.

It is early days, but he has had 4 tea visits so far, with the carer collecting him from school, having a play and tea, then taking him home. Each visit has been slightly longer, and the last two visits included giving H a bath and getting him completely ready for bed. His next visit will be overnight.

H's Mum has already shared how she feels she is being listened to, and she is happy her son has started to build a trusting relationship with a local family. She feels the break from her caring role will give her the opportunity to rest and build her resilience. His Mum has expressed that she doesn't want her son to come into care, and she hopes family link will help her to persevere with some of the changes she needs to make at home.

Impact Example OA1:

This 11 year old boy loves bubbles, play dough and balloons (but don't tie them - he likes to watch them go!). He has a diagnosis of autism, tubular sclerosis and epilepsy. He communicates predominantly with Makaton and PECS. He uses a wheelchair in the community. He has been going to his family link carers for 3 years now, and is very much part of their extended family.

His mum said 'he really feels like he belongs there. He can make his needs known. If he couldn't make his needs known, he wouldn't go'. She shared that recently he got his communication book, and asked to go to his family link carers home by finding their family photo and pointing at it.

His parents have shared that the regular overnights enable them to take a break from their caring role, and spend time with their daughters. During the last overnight, they were able to take their 13 year old daughter to Cadbury World in Birmingham. They shared that they had a very special day, and it helped to know that their son was being well cared for, and was having a fabulous time too. His mum added 'my parents can't help anymore so the regularity of the overnight short breaks are very valuable. We get a break, but he has a lot of fun, he can be around other children his own age and that is really important for him'.

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 the 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 AfC Learning Portal. In addition we offer foster care specific provision around trauma informed practice, safer caring, online safety, behaviour management, education support, managing allegations, life story work and child sexual exploitation at foster care friendly times.

It is recommended that staff access a minimum of 12 professional development opportunities per year which links in with the Personal Development Scheme. This year AfC recommended carers complete 6 professional development activities with a minimum of one CPD session to be accessed from the Safeguarding and Child Protection programme, SEND and attendance at a minimum of one forum and one other related to their current needs.

During the period of this report AfC is offering a hybrid approach to training. This has ensured that carers are still able to actively engage with provision at flexible times that meet their needs (536 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.

Attendance at learning events has been extremely positive, 75.29% (increase 5%) of carers have attended at least one centrally organised CPD session whilst 54.1% attended multiple sessions over the period.

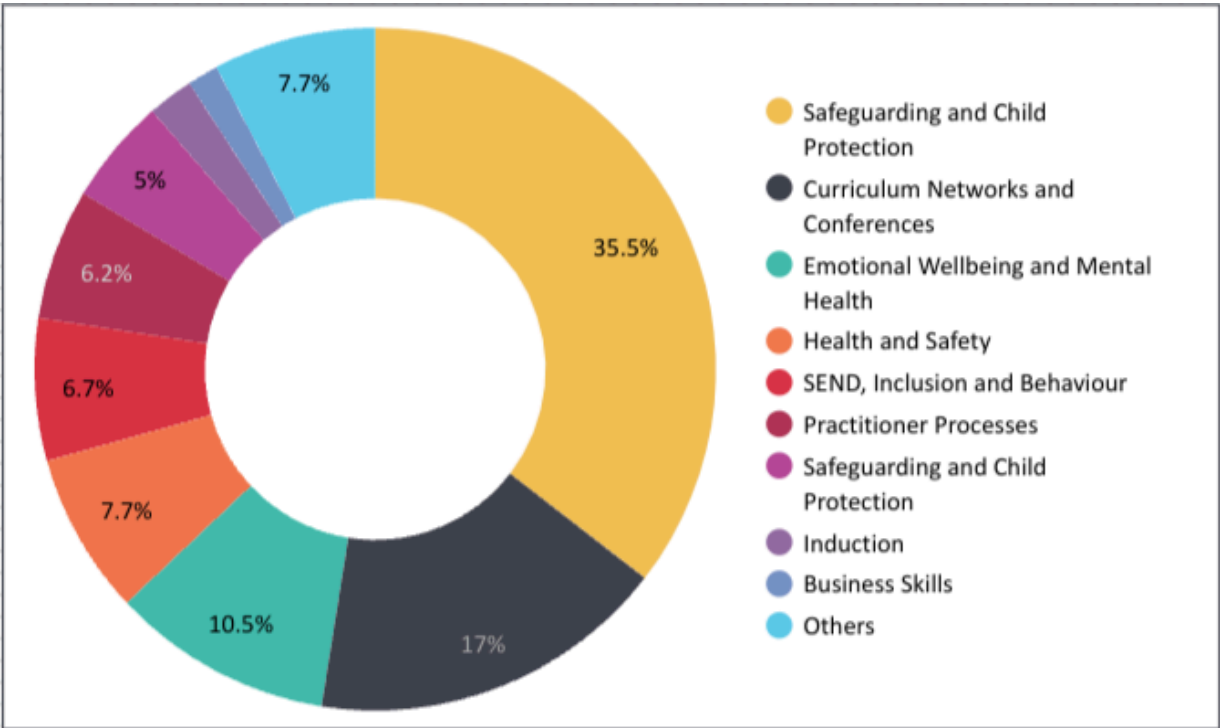
Elearning

The Fostering and Learning Development teams have been working with our Local Authority Designated Officer to build a bespoke training package for foster carers.

Compliance

Compliance against mandatory courses Safeguarding, Safer Caring and First aid have been the primary focus this year. Monthly reminders are sent out to all carers and Supervising Social workers as their course expires. At the time of writing 79.3% of carers are Safeguarding compliant which is an increase of 6.3% since the last report, rising to 84% when future bookings are taken into consideration. This remains a focus for the L&D team into the next year to better understand the barriers to prevent compliance.

The chart below shows the programmes which are most attended by our carers . Just under 50% of courses attended are from the Safeguarding and Child Protection programme which would be expected given the priority and needs of carers.



(Chart : carers’ attendance breakdown by CPD programme)

Trauma Informed Practice Training (Foster Carers)

AfC introduced training for foster carers on trauma informed practice in 2023. Two successful cohorts have been delivered to date (Cohort 1 March 2023 and Cohort 2 November 2023). The training is delivered over three sessions to give time to cover all aspects of trauma, embed knowledge and allow time for reflection.

This training addresses the need for foster carers to become more trauma-informed and to become:

- More adept at recognising where people are affected by trauma and adversity;
- Better able to respond in ways that prevent further harm while supporting recovery; and
- Capable of addressing inequalities and improving life chances.

Across the two cohorts 22 foster carers completed the training. 100% of the feedback received rated the training as excellent or good. 71% of delegates feel that as a result of attending this training they are confident in trauma informed practice and would only require guidance in complex situations.

Impact Example: Feedback from a carer

This course has helped me understand what trauma is, the types of trauma and how it affects behaviours. Good tips for dealing with trauma. I particularly liked to learn about the different functions of the brain, and what happens in the brain when trauma occurs. It will help me recognise signs of trauma, be more aware and be able to respond accordingly.

Therapeutic Life Story Work (Foster Carers)

Therapeutic Life Story Work Training has been delivered across AfC for many years and delivered to a multi agency audience. In 2023 we introduced a session that is specific for Foster Carers, this enables the training to be tailored to foster carers and their role in gathering memories and milestones that will contribute to life story work to ensure that creation of books help children and young people make sense of their past.

Two sessions have been delivered to date and sessions are available for bookings up to May 2025. Across the two dates run so far 18 foster carers have attended the training. 100% of the feedback received rated the training as excellent or good. 100% of delegates feel that as a result of attending they have a good (60%) or high (40%) level of knowledge on the topic.

Impact Example: Feedback

This course has given me a greater understanding of different techniques to help a child to talk. It will help me to provide better records of the time children spend with us. This was a very interesting course with a lot of helpful content which was informative and interesting.

8.4 Support Groups and Peer Mentoring Scheme

During this reporting period both operational areas held 3 support groups consisting of a mainstream foster carers support group, a connected persons support group and a birth children support group. Richmond and Kingston held monthly face to face support groups for mainstream carers. Windsor and Maidenhead also held monthly support groups for mainstream carers. We offer combined connected persons support groups held as a combination of virtual and face to face groups throughout the year. The birth children support group is run during term break and holidays, with activities planned.

AfC IFA offered a virtually run therapeutic group available to all carers run by The Cherrycroft Practice. This is held monthly and focuses on a different topic or theme each session. 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. There is a carer whatsapp group that is monitored by carers only and is a space for carers to access support and advice from other carers.

In 2021 AfC launched the peer mentoring scheme for foster carers. The process involves linking experienced carers with newly approved carers. We hope this will increase the support network new carers make especially in their early stage of fostering.

In 2021-2024 AfC participated in a national study funded by DfE and designed and implemented by Anna Freud centre. Our first study cohort completed the training program in March 2024 and the feedback was overall positive. AfC was the first IFA to join this study and we continue to support the study development. The hope is that reflective fostering will become a national training offer to carers.

Through 2023 Windsor and Maidenhead set up their first Mockingbird constellation which launched in January 2024. Kingston and Richmond are in the process of setting up their first constellation and are in the early stages of developing this.

Impact Example: OA2

Carers who attend the support group utilise these sessions to discuss any challenges when they arise and as an opportunity to connect with other carers. We have a connected carer who lives quite a distance away in another local authority and was feeling quite isolated. She was encouraged by her SSW to attend the mainstream support group which has been a very positive experience as she has developed relationships with other carers, has given her the confidence to share her views and opinions but also to seek support from carers during these support groups. Since attending her first support group, the carer has regularly met up with another carer and had the confidence to attend the foster carer dinner in April.

8.5 Fostering Forums

AfC Fostering Forums continued to meet at least quarterly in both branches via virtual system. We alternate between daytime sessions and evening sessions. 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 virtual school, alongside the Learning & Development regularly attend the forum to address issues around improving foster carer training and to update on recent issues. We also invite the Directors of Children Social Care. In addition, the fostering service updated the newsletter template and is sent 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 complements the Emergency Duty service 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. The number of calls taken by the service has varied throughout the year but the need for support has tended to be more prominent at certain points during the year, such as during the school holidays (July/August) or the festive holiday season (December). The out of hours service also serves to complement the day service; for example workers often follow up regarding work that has been carried out by the day service, such as a young person being placed with a foster carer in the afternoon or evening. This support ensures that the foster carers feel supported with new placements of children and young people and helps them to feel more confident in their fostering role.

Examples of the types of support offered via the service include feedback surrounding contact arrangements which often take place at weekends, supporting foster carers around children going missing from placement and reporting these incidents to the relevant agencies, giving advice and support around relationships between the foster carer and young person and allowing foster carers to share concerns and talk through potential solutions.

The feedback from foster carers about the service has been positive and several foster carers have noted that they feel supported and “held” by the service and they are reassured that they do not have to hold all of the challenges and emotions related to their role until they can speak with their allocated social worker. This is especially important for new foster carers who are still learning all of the intricacies of their role.

8.7 Peer Group Supervision for Supervising Social Workers.

Peer group supervision is held every 3 weeks in RBWM, every 4 weeks in Kingston & Richmond. All fostering team members are encouraged to attend the group, including business support, placement officers, panel advisors. 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 Belonging (previously Signs of Success) model in our approach, combining this with other tools such as systemic questioning and Social Graces to create opportunities for reflection. Both branches run sessions in person, 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, or discuss a reflective/Signs of Belonging strategy. Discussing aspects of the work which we are proud of allows the worker to celebrate their achievements whilst allowing the group to learn from this and think about how they can achieve similar outcomes themselves.

AfC IFA will be embedding the STAR training model for Signs of Safety/Belonging which we hope will help the everyday language and fostering practices. Within our IFA we are incorporating our learning from the STAR training model for Signs of Safety/Belonging and our vision is that we write using child centred language. We have started to write to the child in our records and we capture the things that they excel in and areas where they can benefit from our collective support. Our foster carers are embracing this and they are at the start of the journey where they consistently capture the child's voice in our weekly records.

Impact Example: OA1

Reflection from a team member: I have been working with the prospective carer completing her assessment to be a connected carer. The carer had been open and honest throughout the assessment about these experiences, reflected on how this could impact or benefit her connected carer role and these experiences previously have had a significant impact on her mental health. In assessment visits, they presented as self aware and stable in her mental health. I spoke to a number of referees, support network and completed a back up carer assessment.

In a team discussion I shared some of the complexities of the situation. However, speaking to my colleagues, hearing how they have managed similar situations in the past and gathering their views was helpful. They helped me to reframe this in my mind and recentre focus to the progress made by

this person. This connected carer has been to fostering panel this morning with a unanimous approval recommendation.

9 Foster carer file audit themes

The fostering service continues to participate in Achieving for Children's service wide audit programme. This includes monthly impact audits completed by the management team, and quarterly analysis reports of the audits. During this year we also engaged in 2 practice weeks and 1 mock inspection as well as an Ofsted IFA inspection in Richmond and Kingston

In 2023-2024, a total of 30 files were internally audited across both operational areas; there were 6 auditors who contributed to this process. Themes identified in the audits of this past year were:

- 14 were audited as Outstanding, 10 were audited as Good and 5 were audited as requiring improvement.
- Foster carer's valued the support of their supervising social workers. 80% scaled the support from their allocated social worker as higher than 8
- 86% of social workers reported their supervisions were reflective with their supervisor

10 AFC IFA Development in 2023-24

10.1

In Operation 1 we have been piloting undertaking viability assessments for the front line teams. Since January 2024 we have completed 42 viability assessments. This is improving the quality and timeliness of initial viabilities. The fostering team is noticing a significant difference in prospective carers understanding of what is being asked of them. Very strong assessments which are balanced, good analysis and fully considering the impact of becoming foster carers or going down the special guardianship route. We would like to branch out the offer to all teams, and increase our offer. Given the dearth of mainstream placements there is a need for a focus on family network meetings to consider family options earlier.

10.2

During the past 12 months we have updated our statement of purpose, connected carer policy, foster carer agreement and Regulation 24 guidance. We updated our fees and allowance policy and were able to get all three local authorities to agree to an 8% rise in fostering fees as well as the DfE increase in fostering allowances.

10.3

We have strengthened our training offer through the development of the reflective fostering study. This is the largest ever UK study to evaluate the impact of a foster carer support programme. The study utilises a model which has been developed and tested by the Anna Freud Centre. Foster carers and their supervising social workers are trained in the programme of 'reflective fostering' enabling them to think about the thoughts and feelings of themselves and the child in their care, thereby improving the strength of the relationship. So far we have participated in two study programs of the training, and we endeavour to expand the training offer once we have completed our involvement in the wider study.

Impact Example - both operational areas

The team members present as a strong and confident team where we are all open to learning. There was one learning lessons review within our Service and this was shared with AfC as a whole. The team participated fully in this considering things that we could have done differently with this particular carer and the young people involved. It was emotive as a number of social workers and managers were directly involved. We all saw this complicated fostering situation as a case that we can learn from so that we go on to provide children in care with a warm and nurturing home where they can thrive.

11 New Developments for the IFA in 2024-2025

11.1

We have been working with neighbouring local authorities as part of the South East regional cluster focusing on the recruitment of mainstream carers in response to the DfE paper "Stable Homes built on love". Linked to the report's findings around foster carer retention, we have opened our first Mockingbird Satellite in RBWM and will open a second in Richmond and Kingston by autumn 2024 once we have identified suitable hub carers. We are developing a consistent therapeutic model of fostering across both branches supported by specialised training for foster carers.

11.2

In response to Championing Kinship Care: the national kinship strategy published in December 2023 we have developed a working group which will be reviewing the outcomes from the DfE funded pilots. We are developing frontline staff in their ability and capacity to hold child/family network conversations to increase stability for families and where necessary identify potential kinship carers at an earlier point. We are reviewing Family Group Conferences to see where they could support children on the edge of care as well as those in care proceedings. We continue to extend our work around viability assessments to identify potential kinship carers and avoid the need for children to be placed in mainstream fostering. We are also reviewing the support to special guardians to make sure this matches post adoption support.

11.3 All three local authorities remain under considerable pressure to reduce their placement budgets and one of the areas that fostering may be able to contribute is in identifying foster carers suitable for stepping down a child from a residential setting. We will be exploring the training and support package we would be able to offer carers interested in this role. We will also be seeking to increase our pool of emergency foster carers particularly for adolescents where there has been family or placement breakdown.

11.4

We are incorporating our learning from the STAR training model for Signs of Safety/Belonging and our vision is that everything we write uses child centred language. We are also focusing on how all assessments and reviews capture the voice and lived experience of the child and monitoring this will be central to our audit programme.

Report Author: Natalie Bugeja, Head of Fostering

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