



Annual Engagement Meeting

Education (incl SEND), Early Help &
Children's Social Care

Self-Evaluation

March 2021





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Introduction

The reports we receive at the Quality Assurance Improvement Committee (QAIC) demonstrate increasing evidence of the effective use of data, good knowledge of the service and a strong sense of what needs to be done to secure further improvement.

In addition, we can see that the development of the quality assurance framework and the effective use of audit are making a real difference to the company's understanding of the quality of practice and the improvements being made.

The commitment to ongoing improvement is tangible and the openness to challenge has given confidence to the Board and to the DfE representatives who have attended QAIC.

The recent lifting of the DfE direction and the ending of formal intervention confirm the growing sense of confidence in the ability and capacity of Brighter Futures for Children to deliver further improvement.

The ending of the period of intervention is a real boost to our ambition towards delivering good and outstanding services for the children, young people and families in Reading.

We are encouraged by the progress we have made but also clear and realistic about what needs to be done.

This self-assessment captures the progress made in the last twelve months and outlines the priority areas for improvement in the coming year.



Di Smith

Chair of the Board and Quality Assurance and Improvement Committee

Brighter Futures for Children

Delivering impactful services

Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) is a not-for-profit company, owned by, but independent of, Reading Borough Council. The Company took over the responsibility for the delivery of children's services in December 2018.

The company is responsible for the delivery of children's social care, education (including SEND), early years, early help and prevention. The transfer to BFfC, supported by Reading Borough Council, was in line with the recommendations of the Department for Education's appointed commissioner and followed the adverse inspection findings in 2016. The Power for Reading Borough Council to discharge care functions is detailed in the Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

On 8 February 2021, the Department for Education formally removed the intervention. In a letter to Reading Borough Council Leader Jason Brock, Vicky Ford, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, confirmed she was lifting the Government direction with immediate effect, as a result of the continuing improvement of children's services in Reading by the council and Brighter Futures for Children.

Governance arrangements are set out in the service level agreement

between the council and the company. In brief, the council has established minimum quality expectations and agreed a ring-fenced budget that is held by Brighter Futures for Children.

The council holds the company to account for its performance. Statutory responsibilities remain with the council, so it in turn will be held to account by Ofsted for the quality of services delivered on its behalf.

The company's Board and senior management structure is illustrated on the next page.

All the Senior Children's Services Directors are permanent.

- **Deborah Glassbrook** – Executive Director of Children's Services
- **Maria Young** – Director of Social Care
- **Vicky Rhodes** – Director of Early Help and Prevention
- **Kate Reynolds** – Director of Education

Councillor Liz Terry has been the Lead Member for Children's Services since May 2018. Councillor Ashley Pearce has been the Lead Member for Education since 2018.

“

I would change 1 thing about the support and that's making sure that when you place a child or care leaver with a support make sure that they understand the support being given

”

“

My social worker always makes sure that I'm doing well and if I need help. She helped me with everything, she is a very nice person. I wouldn't change a thing about the support I get

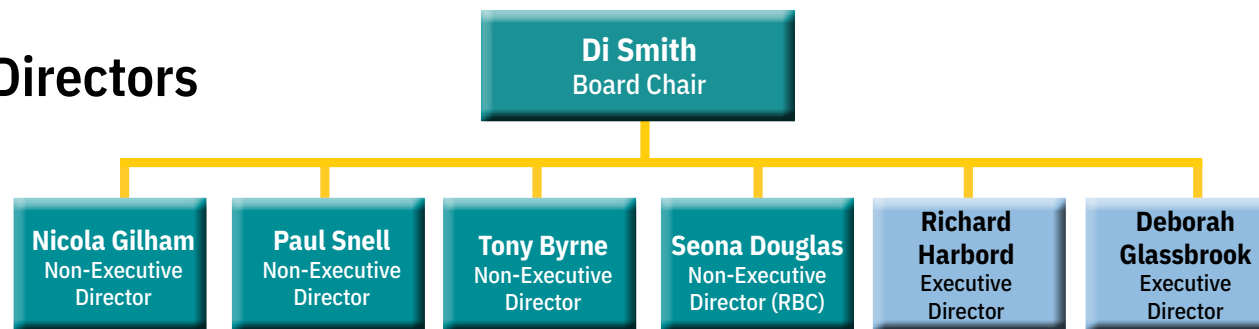
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Delivering impactful services

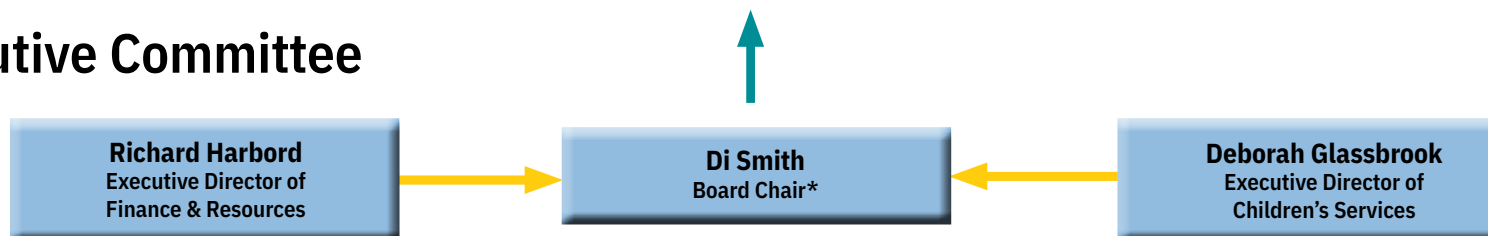
COMPANY LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



Board of Directors



Executive Committee

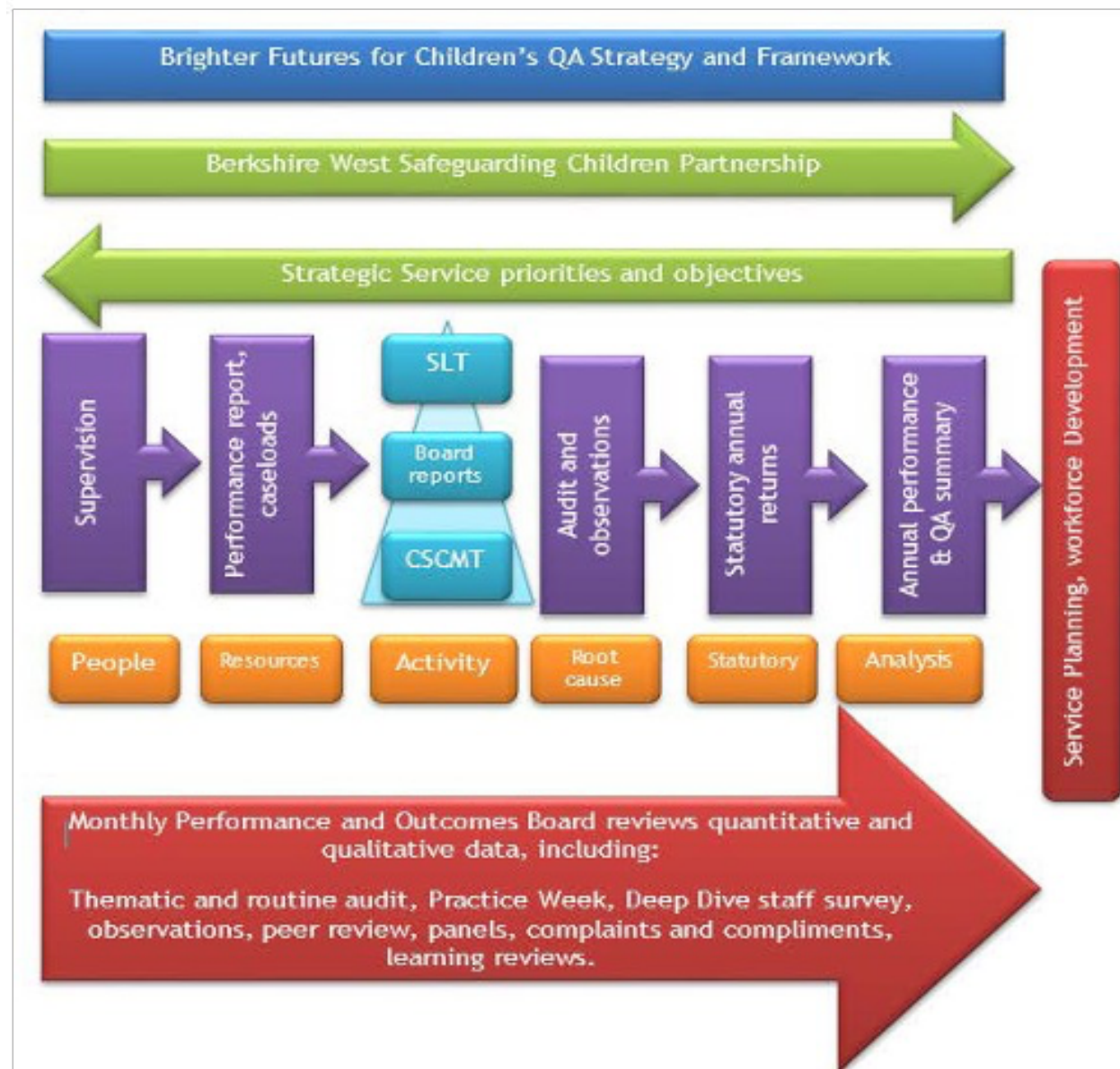


*Acting with DfE-approved executive responsibilities until March 2021

Senior Leadership Team



Quality Assurance Framework





Quality Assurance Framework

Quality Assurance activities

- Our Quality Assurance Framework sets out our approach to quality assurance and sets out our company-wide Quality Assurance Activity Plan. Activities include deep dives, joint and paired reviews, routine audits and thematic reviews, and auditors are drawn from all service areas.
- The programme of quality assurance work is informed by our improvement plan, key areas of focus, and emerging themes, and is a mix of planned and responsive audits and reviews.
- Audit findings and reports are presented to a range of Boards and Committees, including the Quality Assurance and Improvement Committee, the Performance and Outcomes Board and the Executive Committee.

Routine monthly audit programme

- Auditing is a major part of our quality assurance process. Managers at all levels across the Company and our IFA participate in this formal activity.
- There are monthly audits undertaken across early help, children's social care, SEND, adoption and fostering. Routine audits are completed each month and take the form of either quality audits including success reviews, or compliance checklist audits.
- Additionally, we are planning to regularly complete joint and paired audits across service areas and with partners, and formalise our moderation programme.

Use of data and intelligence

- The Performance Team produce weekly and monthly performance reports that are disseminated to managers.
- Directors of Education, Early Help and Children's Social Care routinely meet with their team to review key performance indicators.

- Feedback from children, young people and their families
- The views of children, young people and their families about services they receive and the impact these have on their lives, are sought and gathered in several ways, including surveys, bi-monthly audits and reviews.

Practice Weeks

- Practice Week takes place for up to five working days and occurs twice a year, it is a Company-wide activity.
- Our Practice Weeks incorporate a holistic and collaborative approach whereby case discussions and practice activities/observations are completed alongside the practitioner (Practice Week 1 annually) and learning conversations are held which centre on key themes (Practice Week 2 annually).

Measuring our learning and impact

- As our audit activities become embedded in practice, we are looking at what we are learning from these activities, and the impact our findings are having on the experiences and outcomes of children and families. This includes understanding 'wow' moments for children and families that inform transferable skills and knowledge, and how improving specific practice issues support families to achieve outcomes.
- This is a continued area of focus for the year ahead, and the Quality Assurance and Improvement Committee is providing key support and challenge.

Compliments and complaints

- We welcome feedback from service users to inform the improvement of services. All compliments and complaints are logged and disseminated to managers. Issues arising from complaints, how the specific service has addressed them, and emerging themes are then reported to the senior leadership team and relevant Company Boards and Committees.

Workforce

Table 1: The Company establishment as at January 2021.

Service	Permanent	Interim	Vacancy	Grand Total
Children's Social Care	68%	24%	7%	100%
Early HelpService	94%	0%	6%	100%
Education Services	89%	4%	7%	100%
Finance and Resources	81%	6%	13%	100%
Managing Director's Unit	76%	18%	6%	100%
Grand Total	80%	13%	7%	100%

Table 2: Social worker establishment by team

Team	Permanent	Interim	Vacancy	Operational Estab	Budgeted Estab
A&A Team 1	3	2	1	6	6
A&A Team 2	2	3	1	6	6
A&A Team 3	2	4		6	6
A&A Team 4	3	3		6	6
CSPoA	4	2		6	6
CYPDT	5.2	1	2.1	8.3	6.8
FI Team 1	3	4	1	8	8
FI Team 2	4	4		8	8
FI Team 3	6	2		8	8
FI Team 4	3	5		8	8
CLA Team 1	6.5	1		7.5	16
CLA Team 2	6		1	7	
Leaving Care	3	1		4	4
Grand Total	50.7	32	6.1	88.8	88.8

Social worker establishment total is 89 FTE: 33.5 interims, 48.7 permanent, and 6.6 vacancies (as at 31st Dec 2020)

“My IRO always comes to see me before meetings is nice and kind”

Key workforce strategies

- The Board-led Recruitment and Retention working group continues to meet monthly and is currently reviewing options for attracting newly qualified social workers through an “academy style” programme and the infrastructure needed to support this option. This will include an ASYE programme for 2020/21 and an apprenticeship entry level scheme for four students currently employed by the Company.
- The working group is also looking at how we can best retain our staff through effective onboarding and improved managerial support.
- Most of our staff are working remotely due to Covid-19. A number of wellbeing events are planned for February 2021 which aims at supporting staff working remotely from a perspective of mental wellbeing and muscular-skeletal conditions – the two highest causes of sickness absence.



What our children and young people looked after say

The support I get



My social worker



My IRO and review



“
I know who my IRO is
”

“
More support and knowledge
about everything i am entitled
to and services i can get help
from once leaving care
”

“
I have had 12 social workers. Too
many and I can name them all.
I do not like it and don't want
another social worker again! But
I like you as you have been with
me from the start.
”

“
I need my social
worker to sort out
my national insurance
number. I am now
nearly 17 years old.
”

“
I would like her to
come round more, I
don't like video chats
”

“
I never go to my
review as its way
too long
”

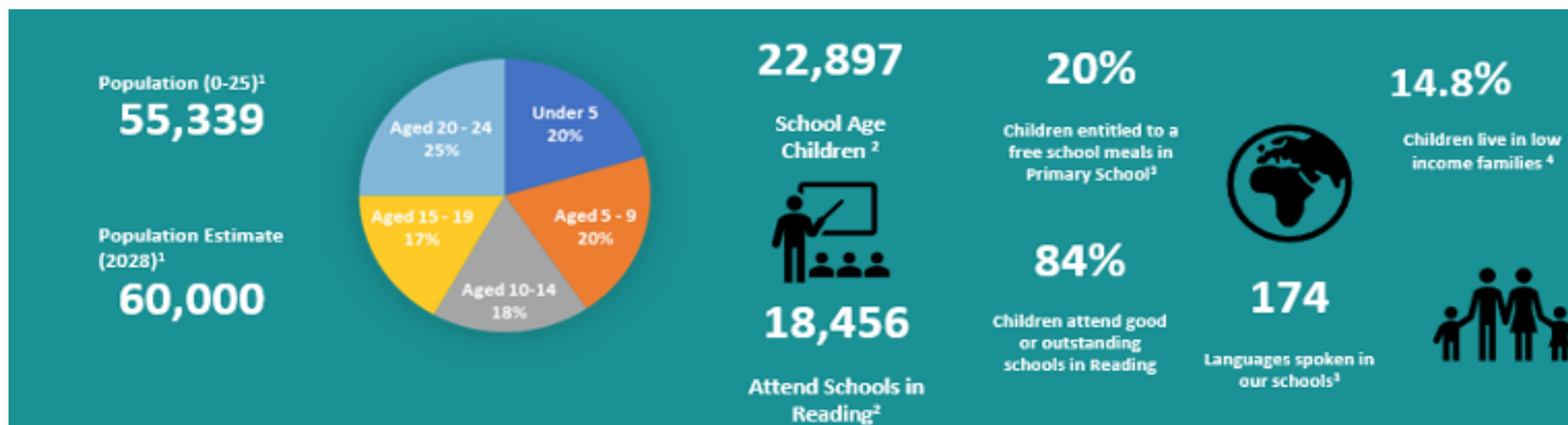
“
My IRO is good at
getting things done
quickly and effectively
and listening to me
”

“
I have been
supported so I'm
out of trouble
”

“
I would like my
social worker to
answer my texts
”

“
The support I get
now is adequate
but should've been
consistent right from
the start
”

The children of Reading



- The estimated number of Reading children aged 0-18 years is 39,736¹.
- Percentage of children (under 16) living in low income families was 14.8% in Reading, and 18.4% nationally in 2019⁴.
- Percentage of primary school children entitled to free school meals was 20% in Reading³, compared to 17.7% nationally in 2020⁴.
- Percentage of secondary school children entitled to free school meals was 12.4% in Reading, and 15.9% nationally in 2020⁴.
- The percentage of BME children in Reading schools is 57.8%⁵
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are White Other and Asian Indian⁵.
- The proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language in primary schools was 36.5% in Reading, and 21.3% nationally in 2020⁴.
- The proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language in secondary schools was 31.8% in Reading, and 17.1% nationally in 2020⁴.

Source of Information: ¹ONS 2019 mid-year, ²DfE SFR Jan 2020, ³School Census Oct 2020, ⁴LAIT Local Authority Interactive Tool 17/12/20, ⁵School Census Jan 2020.

“I like my social worker”



What our children and young people looked after say

The support I get

My social worker

My IRO and review

“

I am not well supported with my money as I can't afford to pay my council tax, it's too much

”

“

I trust Bharti and will only speak to her because she has been with me all this time and is the same as me.

”

“

The support I get from BFFC by updating me everything that's going on

”

“

My social worker left without saying goodbye and I had to learn she had gone in my review. This does not make me feel very important.

”

“

My IRO is good at getting things done quickly and effectively and listening to me

”

“

There always seems to be someone away on holiday when its my review so it has to be rearranged at the last minute

”

“

Maybe not misinterpret when a young one is talking or making things up, or even thinking they said something else to what the young one originally said

”

Our Architecture for Professional Practice

Our Architecture for Professional Practice was approved by the BfC Board in September 2020, and will support our work to improve outcomes for children, young people and families through embedding effective practice, rooted in our knowledge of research and evidence of 'what works'.

Our architecture applies to our leadership and our professional practice across the company. It is fundamental to how we work with children, young people and families and also underpins how we work with each other and our partners across all services and all layers of the organisation.



We will continue to build on the foundations that are needed for successful implementation of our Architecture for Professional Practice. These include developing:

- A stable workforce
- Prioritising staff wellbeing
- Manageable caseloads
- Effective management and supervision
- Mature partnerships with other agencies
- Highly visible leaders and managers
- A strong culture of learning
- Mature partnerships with other agencies
- Good quality assurance, performance monitoring and performance management



Safeguarding Arrangements BWSCP

New safeguarding arrangements

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 provided the framework to re-configure our local safeguarding partnership. The previous separate LSCBs of Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire had worked closely for many years, and a shared Independent Chair and a number of shared sub-groups. We took the decision to bring these areas together under a new multi-agency safeguarding arrangement, called the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership (BWSCP). The new arrangements came into force in June 2019, and information about the partnership, can be found here: <https://www.berkshirewestsafeguardingchildrenpartnership.org.uk/scp>

Achievements during our first 18 months

Much of our first 18 months as BWSCP has been focused on our response to the safeguarding risks from the Covid-19 pandemic.

- As soon as we faced a lock-down situation, the Statutory Safeguarding Partners and other key health organisation colleagues initiated a regular Covid-19 Partnership meeting.
- We compare data, discuss emerging and identify risks and determine what the impact of lockdown continues to be on our families.
- We agreed and shared business continuity plans and changes in working practices, impact of mental health issues, and agreement and swift production of communication materials for practitioners and communities.
- The lockdown 'Speak up be Brave' safeguarding video campaign had over 80,000 views and was shared hundreds of times on Facebook.

To support frontline practitioners, we have:

- developed the new BWSCP website containing a large range of useful information.

- offered free Universal Safeguarding e-learning available via BWSCP website. More than 1500 people have accessed and completed the module since September 2020.
- held six learning events across Berkshire West disseminating learning from our local case reviews, which was well attended by colleagues from all organisations across the partnership including voluntary sector.
- provide threshold guidance that is consistent and aligned across the three areas. The guidance recognises that each area retains their key differences in provision and referral routes, however, the localised information is in the same place in each document, the levels of need are described verbally and diagrammatically very similarly, and the risk factors and protective factors are virtually identical.

Rapid Review Process

Between the start of the first national lockdown to the end of 2020 we had an unprecedented rise in incidents that were reported to the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. Each notification triggers the requirement to undertake a rapid case review within 15 working days.

- During this nine-month period we have undertaken 11 Rapid Reviews across the three localities (five for Brighter Futures for Children), compared to one for Brighter Futures for Children in the previous 20 months.
- Our robust process and identification of early learning has received positive praise from the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel for the quality of this work and our processes have been shared with colleagues in other regions.

“
I like to see my IRO
before my review
that works for me
”



Achievements and Highlights

The past twelve months have provided many opportunities for the company to grow and improve in its delivery of children's services to the families of Reading. Some of our achievements and highlights over this time include:

- Out of DfE Intervention following positive ILACs inspection in Autumn 2019
- Response to Covid-19 in schools and early years providers
- Positive Assurance Visit in November 2020 of BFfC Independent Fostering Agency
- Children in Need Service within Early Help and Prevention services
- Kept quality and timely services in Social Care and Early Help and used minimal relaxations
- Delivery of 656 laptops to vulnerable children
- Tackled food poverty through range of strategies
- Well-being of staff
- Stability of the Operational Senior Leadership Team
- Savings through Transformation Programme
- Robust response to rise in Elective Home Education
- 2,000 risk assessments of vulnerable and children with SEND
- Coaching, mentoring and training programmes for service and team managers
- Trauma Informed Conference
- Practice week in November 2020
- More robust Quality Assurance and audit activities across children's services
- Embedding of Achieving Best Outcomes Panels
- 'Outstanding' Ofsted judgements for our residential and respite provisions for children with disabilities
- One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership is a strong partnership thinking innovatively about how to manage children's needs at earlier stages.

“

My review is really useful and it makes sure everyone is doing what they are supposed to be doing

”

“

Thank you for always being there for my family. You know all my family and have been there from the start.

”

“

The support I get works well because I can rely on the staff that support me

”



Transformation Programme

We have revised and consolidated our Transformation Programme projects to support our improvement journey. In 2020/21, we closed projects that we have completed, we moved pilot project work with beneficial outcomes into business as usual and agreed projects to carry forward into 2021/22. Our projects focus on improvement and efficiency, and are summarised in the table below.

“
I would like people
to talk to me and tell
me what is going on
”

Table 3: Transformation projects by workstream

WORKSTREAM	PROJECTS
A: Improving Practice Standards	1. Court Proceedings 2. Family Group Conferencing
B: Building Community Capacity	3. ONE Reading Children & Young People's Partnership 4. Children in Need cases
C. Stronger Stability for Children	5. Re-imagining Foster Care 6. Placement Solutions Team
D: Consolidating Corporate Resilience	7. Direct Payments 8. Enhanced Short Breaks Service 9. Modernising ICPCs 10. End to End Process Mapping 11. End to End Demand Management 12. Contact Centre Review 13. SEND Transport Review 14. Using Analytics to Improve Referral Workflow



Working in COVID-19 Summary

We have prepared a companion document that specifically responds to the impact of and our response to COVID-19 including for our vulnerable learners and our post-16 young people. In this document, we have presented a summary of this information.

Working in COVID-19

- Maintaining effective interventions with children, young people and families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities. In November 2020, a combined lessons learned from Early Help and Social Care was presented to the QA and Improvement Committee.
- In August 2020, Early Help held four thematic discussions to explore how practitioners made contacts meaningful in the context of virtual working. Thematic discussions focussed on: 0-5s, 5-10s, young people, and parenting.
- In May 2020, Children Social Care provided a Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/ Online Home Visits, supporting practitioners to creatively undertake virtual visits.
- In October 2020 Children Social Care undertook a thematic audit to ascertain parents and children's experience of service delivery, during COVID-19. This, together with feedback from staff, provided a helpful understanding of the learning and key themes.

Adapting to virtual working

- Practitioners initially struggled with moving beyond 'welfare checks' to creative and meaningful engagement. Some children, young people and families responded well to virtual working, sharing more in calls than they would in a home visit. Other families were more reluctant to take part in virtual working. There were particular challenges for virtual working with young people with learning difficulties and non-verbal children requiring creative ways to observe and engage with them in a meaningful way.

- Some families reported feeling overwhelmed by multiple professional contacts. Staff themselves were adapting to primarily working from home away from colleagues and management support.

Strengths

- Improved multi agency attendance at TACs and statutory review meetings
- Increased engagement of parents of older young people
- 100% completion of virtual RHIs
- Launch of One Reading Hub.

Challenges

- Digital Poverty: Family access to laptops, smartphones and broadband, especially when not meeting DFE definition of vulnerable
- Cessation of targeted group work, including parenting programmes, children's centres and youth groups
- Ensuring safe virtual environments for CPCs and CLA reviews
- Sustaining contact arrangements
- Supporting families through virtual, delayed court sessions
- Reduced community support, respite and short breaks.

Responses

- Timely updates to Standard Operating procedures to provide all staff with safe framework
- Refreshed knowledge hub on intranet
- Increased frequency of virtual and reintroduction of direct work when risk assessed as safe.
- Increased use of creative activities/resources to engage and give focus to sessions
- Increased use of doorstep/garden and targeted outdoor group activities when permitted.



Education Summary

Reading has a mixed economy of types of schools - Academies and free schools, community and voluntary aided schools, selective and non-selective, infant, junior, primary and secondary schools.

Strengths

- The investment in building relationships with Headteachers and other key stakeholders has paid off during the pandemic. The Education Team moved swiftly once the first lockdown was announced, putting in place a team of 'go-to' contacts, responsible for supporting headteachers and picking up and resolving issues which could be dealt with at a local level as well as providing an escalation route for matters which required regional or national solutions. In addition, a regular email briefing and a weekly virtual meeting were developed for heads.
- This supportive relationship led to a smooth transition through the pandemic, first through the phase to support attendance for key workers and vulnerable children and then through the 'full' opening of schools from 1 June 2020 and 4 September 2020. All schools were supported in developing a risk assessment for all vulnerable children (some 2000). These were used as the basis for supporting pupils who were not attending school and reintegrating pupils on their return.
- Our strategy enabled attendance at Reading Schools to exceed the national and regional positions and our statistical neighbours. As at the week commencing 7 December, attendance in Reading Schools was 87.4% compared with the England average of 86.3%, the south east average of 86.2% and our statistical neighbours' average of 86%.
- In the secondary sector all of our schools except one (Blessed Hugh Faringdon) are academies. In the primary sector, most of our schools remain maintained (out of 49, 13 are academies or free schools).
- The Reading Primary Heads Association has been resuscitated and alongside the Reading Association of School and College Leaders meet regularly to support each other and provide a 'schools-led' response to the local authority.

- The Director of Education is in regular contact with both groups to help build relationships and to enable early conversations for policy directions. As a result of the pandemic, both groups have been active in lobbying for the prioritization of school staff in the rollout of the vaccinations.
- Alongside the University of Reading, our partnership with schools and others is leading to some early thinking on building a more research informed education community. This work is at an early stage, however, our first Big Education Conversation (held in October 2020 on the topic of 'Do Black Lives Matter: decolonising the curriculum?' was well received and has formed the platform for further education discussion and debate.

Challenges

- In general terms, on leaving secondary school, performance is high with our schools achieving some of the best performance in the country at key stage 5. However, at earlier key stages performance remained stubbornly at or marginally below national averages and for those looking at non-academic pathways at post-16, there are a limited range of vocational opportunities such as apprenticeships, training, and routes into work. As a result of the pandemic, no performance information on education outcomes at our schools is currently available.
- Mirroring the national picture, Reading has experienced an increase in elective home education, particularly at the start of the new academic year. However, our increase is lower than the national increase (some 29% increased for Reading, compared with 38% in England). In particular, although the white British community still represent the highest proportion of children and young people home educated, there has been a significant rise in children and young people from Pakistani backgrounds.

Achievement at key stages

The last validated performance data for schools is for the 2018/19 academic year. Given the situation with Covid-19 and exams, there are no reliable data for 19/20 academic year. We are also aware that SATs and EYFS moderation has been cancelled for 20/21 academic year and at the time of writing the situation is unclear in terms of GCSEs and A levels. BfC continues to work with our schools to support them in ensuring children and young people have access to high quality learning, be it through remote learning or face to face teaching.

This document and the figures and analysis overleaf therefore refers to the previous year 2018/19. Achievement at all key stages except key stages 4 and 5 remains marginally below the national average for all pupils.

Children Looked After achieve significantly higher than national counterparts at EYFSP, however, at key stage 2 they perform at level lower than the national average by key stage 4 they are once again above national average.

Pupils with special educational needs and without EHCP perform below their national counterparts at EYFSP, however, at key stage 2 they perform above the national average. By key stage 4 these young people are achieving in line with national figures.

For pupils with an EHCP, performance in the early years remains in line with national picture, but significantly lower than other pupils. At key stage 2, these pupils are performing above the national average for their peers (although in line with the national picture this remains below the national average for all pupils). By key stage 4, such pupils are exceeding the national average.

In general terms, on leaving secondary school, performance is high with our schools achieving some of the best performance in the country at key stage 5. However, at earlier key stages performance remained stubbornly at or marginally below national averages and for those looking at non-academic pathways at post-16, there are a limited range of vocational opportunities such as apprenticeships, training, and routes into work. As a result of the pandemic, no performance information on education outcomes at our schools is currently available.

In 2019, the number of children in Reading achieving good levels of development (GLD) fell from 71% to 69.2%. This equates to approximately 60 children not achieving expected GLD.

Table 4: Percentage of children achieving good level of development in FSP

Statistical Neighbours		2013	2016	2017	2018	2019	-	Change from previous year
870	Reading	51.10	71.00	70.40	71.10	69.20	-	-1.90
	Statistical Neighbours	47.56	68.16	70.14	71.56	71.86	-	0.30
989	South East	54.30	73.00	74.00	74.70	74.60	-	-0.10
970	England	51.70	69.30	70.70	71.50	71.80	-	0.30

The quality of local early years provision is Ofsted rated as primarily good or outstanding. There is evidence that both maintained and PVI provision is supporting GLD. Whilst the skills, knowledge and experience of early years staff across the sector may be variable, there is insufficient evidence to indicate acute problems in any one area.

A more contributing factor maybe the percentage of children who do not access any early provision prior to starting school. In 2019, of a cohort of 3,453 children eligible for FSP assessment:

- 30% of children had transitioned from nursery provision attached to the school
- 15% from the Maintained Nursery Schools
- 42% from the PVIs
- 1% from out of area
- 12% had no early years history and of these 34% were English as additional language (EAL).



Tackling exclusions

Cross phase initiatives: Mental Health

Alongside our work with Therapeutic Thinking schools, we have been focusing on the importance of mental health and wellbeing within schools.

- In January 2020, following a successful trail blazer bid, we launched our mental health support team focused on supporting schools to address mental health and wellbeing issues with children and young people through a range of CPD opportunities for school staff.
- Our Mental Health triage has been launched with self-referrals being taken from children and young people, as well as parent/carers.
- Our next step is to embed GP referrals into the process. The service is led by the Principal Child Education Psychologist and has been successful in securing additional funding and support.

Cross phase initiatives: Therapeutic Thinking

Our work to influence schools' behaviour and inclusion policies has been very successful.

- We have shared training on Therapeutic Thinking with schools and colleges including nursery, primary, secondary, and special and higher education settings (such as Reading College). We have also provided briefings for Reading University's teacher trainees and all internal teams who support schools.
- We have attracted interest in this trauma informed approach from a number of neighbouring authorities. Brighter Futures are part of a national steering group. 51 schools have committed to the programme – out of 59 schools in Reading. We have trained over 120 senior tutors in schools and BfC.
- We have also had a commitment from six schools to act as System Leaders, tasked with providing support and sharing innovation as part of our school to school approach.

Between academic year 2015/16 and academic year 2017/2018 the number of fixed term exclusions has decreased significantly (nearly halved). However, we are still experiencing challenges in a small handful of secondary schools and we have followed these up with the schools and their respective trusts as well as the Regional Schools Commissioner.

- As part of our developing research informed approach, we are working with the University of Reading to develop case studies on the three permanent exclusions we had. This work will feed into our partnership with the violence reduction unit, and will also support the creation of a trauma informed, therapeutic tool for school staff and professionals to use when assessing the support for pupils who are at risk of exclusion.
- The tool will also support the identification of gaps in current and future support for these pupils. This toolkit will be based on the experiences of the children within the case studies, giving them and a voice within the system. The toolkit will become part of Brighter Futures for Children Education Services' successful 'Therapeutic Thinking School' project.

Table 5: Exclusion rates

Between 2016/17 and 2018/19 the rate of fixed term exclusions in Reading secondary schools decreased, compared to an increase in England.	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Rate of Fixed term exclusions from secondary school England	9.4	10.13	10.75
Rate of Fixed term exclusions from Reading secondary schools	10.79	8.71	7.49
Number of fixed term exclusions from Reading secondary schools	788	651	720



Tackling exclusions

Reading had previously outsourced its careers advice team. From summer 2019, this was brought in-house under the leadership of the Director of Education and was rebranded as Elevate. Within Elevate, our aim is to create a thriving seamless service that is accessible to young people in Reading, particularly those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and diverse range of cultures, those who are looked after or have special educational needs and disabilities. The service aims to deliver a high-quality career service, helping young people to understand the range of local opportunities available to them in the current economy and gain the skills and qualifications they need to succeed for the jobs of the future. We want young people in Reading to transform their lives for the better and to do this they need to receive a good education, with the qualifications and skills to show for it.

Elevate has a comprehensive and ambitious plan to support young people with post-16 services, that includes actions regarding:

- NEET Prevention/improving Post 16 attainment
- NEET delivery
- Careers digital technology
- Quality, performance and data management

Offers of education or training

With regard to one of our statutory responsibilities, the September Guarantee, a process where we confirm all Year 11 and 12 2020 leavers have a confirmed formal offer of education or training, in 2020/21 we saw an increase of offers compared to last year with 2,777 young people securing a formal offer. Further analysis of the last four years shows this year is the best performance yet.

We have seen another improvement with young people not being contacted successfully to obtain their offer, this year we had 129 young people with no offer recorded. We have and will continue to proactively track and support

these young people. There has been an increase with our NEET numbers, with 36 young people leaving education with no offer secured.

The successful partnerships established with our secondary schools, local colleges, providers and other local authorities resulted in this year's September Guarantee process running smoothly and effectively. Schools, colleges and local authorities were extremely helpful and efficient in gathering and sharing their September Guarantee data helping Reading to achieve such positive results this year.

Table 6: September Guarantee performance

Year	16 & 17yos known to BFFC	Offer made (%)	Offer not appropriate (%)	No offer (%)	Not recorded (%)
2020	2,999	92.6	1.9	1.2	4.3
2019	1,960	57.4	0.4	0	42.2
2018	2,450	71.4	0.2	0.2	28.3

Strengths and achievements in this area include:

- Reading attainment in all Level 3 qualifications (APS per entry is 38.3) ranks us as second nationally, first in the South East and first among our statistical neighbours.
- The proportion of pupils attaining at least three A-levels at grades A*-A is 29.9% is the highest nationally. The proportion of pupils attaining at least three A-levels at grades A*-B is 39.6% is the highest nationally.
- The average point score per entry in Reading for Applied General Studies (32.9) puts us in fourth place nationally and first in the South East (and among our statistical neighbours).

NEET

We continue to work hard in reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and those whose situation is not known. NEET numbers continue to rise, in November there were 88 young people not engaged in education, employment or training. We are performing slightly higher than our statistical neighbours, England and the South East.

Participation and Engagement numbers are improving month by month. In November we had 2,839 young people engaged in formal education or training. This is higher than our statistical neighbours, England and the South East.

Our 'not known' figure has decreased dramatically and we are beginning to see an improved picture on our NEET figure which as at January 2020 was lower than our statistical neighbours.

Table 7: NEET figures

16-17 Olds NEET and Not known	Dec-20		Dec-19	
	All	SEND	All	SEND
Reading	5.4%	10.7%	17.5%	29.2%
England	6.3%	10.1%	6.1%	10.0%
South East	7.6%	11.2%	7.3%	11.0%

Reading's Post 16 Attainment for 2019: Reading attainment in all Level 3 qualifications (APS per entry is 38.3) ranks us as second nationally, first in the South East and first among our statistical neighbours.

Reading's 2019 A-Level performance: The proportion of pupils attaining at least three A-levels at grades A*-A is 29.9% is the highest nationally. The proportion of pupils attaining at least three A-levels at grades A*-B is 39.6% is the highest nationally.

Reading's 2019 performance in vocational qualifications: The average point score per entry in Reading for Applied General Studies (32.9) puts us in fourth place nationally and first in the South East (and among our statistical neighbours). Reading's performance against this measure has dramatically improved from last year when Reading was ranked 90th nationally.

A weekly report is submitted to the Director of Education reporting on actions taken to support the re-engagement of NEETs, particularly children looked after and those with SEND.

Following the issuing of the ministerial letter in autumn 2019 raising concerns about the high level of NEETs, an action plan was implemented with monthly progress being reported to SLT. The table below shows some of actions taken:

Issue	Solution
SEND overrepresented in NEET and exclusion data. Tribunals around lack of vocational work experience/ skills. Lack of vocational pathways for vulnerable learners	Created and trialled a new vocational pathway for SEND learners which has vocational profiling at its heart – produced alongside EHCP. Planned rolled out with the idea of having a vocational pathway from around 12/13 years of age
No supported employment offer	Commissioned Ways into Work to work with young people 16 to 19 with EHCP who have been NEET the longest. Also developing a 3-way model for BFFC linking ways into work (as support) a secondary school (education) and employers (we and jobs) into one model.
No contextual approach to why YP are NEET and what we can do at individual family school community level to prevent NEET and re-engage NEET	Commissioned a creative employment project for young people interested in a career in the arts sector. Have also commissioned a sports project as a pilot.



Elective Home Education

Following the partial opening of schools during the first lockdown when all but keyworker and vulnerable pupils were educated via distance or remote/online learning, a rise in the number of electively home educated (EHE) pupils was anticipated in Reading when schools fully reopened to all pupils in September 2020.

There has been a clear increase in EHE in Reading since Schools opened fully from September 2020. Numbers have risen from 194 pupils in 153 families in September 2020 to the current 263 pupils in 189 families (January 2021).

The main reasons given by parents/carers to EHE for withdrawal, using the DFE categories, are:

- Parents opted out of school system (44 children)
- Unknown (27 children)
- Short term measure due to personal issues (12 children)
- A child's unwillingness/ inability to attend school (8 children).

The largest withdrawal category is "Parents opted out of the school system". This could be divided into three types of opt out:

- a) those parents who have really enjoyed having the children at home and undertaking their education and have chosen to continue with EHE instead of returning the children back to school
- b) those who have opted to EHE through fear and concern over the safety of school with Covid-19
- c) those who have family/ child health issues and have chosen to EHE rather than return to school

Although parents are required to formally notify schools that they are withdrawing their child/ren to educate them other than in school, they are not obliged to give a reason for doing so. This explains the high number in "Unknown" category.

Support for new EHE families

- In response to our concerns about the increasing rate of home educating, a questions and answers guide was produced and circulated to schools to help them give parents and families advice to support their choices.
- Once a family is registered as home educating, they receive an information pack containing the Parent/Carer Information booklet, guidance on employing tutors and a comprehensive resources list divided into subjects together with a covering letter of introduction which includes the Advisory Teacher's details and contact numbers. Due to Civic Office restrictions some families have had to wait two weeks before receiving the information.
- Where possible phone calls or emails are sent to check the pack has arrived safely together with the offer of additional telephone support.
- Currently it is not possible under the Covid-19 restrictions to offer home visits but these will be resumed as soon as they are permitted and subject to family consent.
- Support is becoming more difficult not only due to the Covid-19 restrictions but also due to the large increase in numbers. The Advisory Teacher is currently employed on a 0.5 FTE, so when visits can resume and families are happy to consent, visits will be less frequent with the current increase of families on the list.
- Despite the increase in EHE in Reading (which mirrors the national situation although we are lower than our statistical neighbours), there has been a robust response to supporting parents and families make active choices on whether to electively home educate their child. With schools now required to make remote learning available, we would expect the interest in home education to wane.



Vulnerable groups

Strategy

- Our strategy was formally approved by Reading's Health and Well Being Board in 2017. It was further refreshed in 2018 and again through a stakeholder workshop in 2019. The underlying workstreams for the strategy remain:
 - » Strand 1: Improving communication
 - » Strand 2: Early intervention through to specialist provision
 - » Strand 3: Consistent approaches to emotional wellbeing
 - » Strand 4: Preparing for adulthood
 - » Strand 5: Support for families / short breaks

Regular progress is reported to the SEND strategy board and from there to the Health and Well Being Board.

- The overall strategic direction remains to ensure that children with SEND are educated as close to home as possible whilst meeting their needs. Given the increasing demand for autism and SEMH support, we have opened one resourced provision for social and communication difficulties in mainstream schools in September 2020 and are discussions to open a second, and, in partnership with Wokingham Borough Council, a school for autism and SEMH students (all through school) from September 2023.
- We are working alongside colleagues in Reading Borough Council to increase places from September 2021 at The Avenue School – an outstanding special school academy.
- We are also investing in SCD facilities in early years and primary schools to increase our ability to support children at an early stage of their school career.

“
My teacher and social worker
have been really nice to me
”

Achievements

- We have invested in our staff and brought additional capacity to the SEND team. Alongside this we have introduced a new quality assurance approach (using the software Invision) to ensure our EHCPs are of the highest quality. Our performance in terms of issuing plans has continued to improve with us regularly issuing 100% of plans within statutory deadlines.
- For children with SEN support at key stage 1 (R,W,M), our schools' performance is in the top 25% of all Local Authorities.
- For children with EHCPs, our school performance is in the top 10 at key stage 1 (R,W,M).

Children Looked After

Our virtual school continues to be recognised as a strength. Alongside being committed advocates in our corporate parenting role, the virtual school ensures that children looked after receiving high quality education. At early years and foundation stages children looked after continue to perform significantly higher in terms of a good level of development than their peers.

However, as these children enter primary school there is a dip in their attainment which mirrors the overall dip in performance across all schools with 33% children looked after reaching expected levels compared with 61% of their peers (2019 figures). The gap at key stage 2 has widened this year but has been significantly lower in the previous two years.

By key stage 4 attainment 8 figures showed that the gap between Reading looked after and their peers is slightly larger than the gap nationally.

Achievements

- Reading ranked third in the country for the percentage of children looked after achieving 9-4 pass in English and Maths (2018 latest figures).
- At 42.1% this was significantly higher than south east average at 18.6% and all England national average of 17.8%.



Virtual school

Our Virtual School has supported schools and Designated Teachers to prioritise the needs of children looked after with an identified special educational need via termly virtual Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings. Where appropriate, PEP meetings have been scheduled to coincide with Annual Review meetings.

During lockdown, the Virtual School advocated determinedly for children looked after, setting up virtual systems of working and continues to work hard to support children, foster carers, social workers, designated teachers and schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Virtual School worked closely with social workers and designated teachers who ensured that during lockdown children looked after had risk assessments in place which determined whether they should attend school or remain with their carers and be supported via home learning.

In addition to the children looked after remit, the headteacher of the Virtual School was the daily contact for seven Reading primary schools offering support and reassurance throughout the period of lockdown. This support has continued on a weekly basis throughout the pandemic.

Key strengths of our Virtual School include:

- **Voice of the child:** Listening to the wishes and views of children, giving them the opportunity to express how they are feeling and responding to their needs has been critical during this pandemic. This is captured in a comment shared by one of our children looked after in relation to the impact of COVID-19 and online learning and how it has supported their emotional and wellbeing and mental health.
- **Emotional health and well-being:** Using the Strengths, Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is an important tool which can serve as an indicator of the level of children's emotional health and well-being. This has been particularly important during this period and social workers continued to receive support from the Virtual School's Educational Psychologist in the SDQ process, indicators and analysis.
- **The Virtual School's Emotional Health and Well Being Triage Support Group** transferred to meeting via Microsoft Teams with continued

attendance from our partners in CAMHs, Health, Primary Mental Health, Education Psychology and the Virtual School. Social workers made referrals to the panel often based on high SDQ scores and expert advice and guidance was offered to support the emotional health and well-being of our children looked after.

- **The Virtual School Educational Psychologist** has continued to complete assessment's which have informed and supported the delivery of targeted interventions funded via Pupil Premium Plus funding and which has also served as evidence towards requests for statutory assessment.
- Support on attachment and developmental trauma has been offered to foster carers, social workers, designated teachers and schools along with the promotion of therapeutic thinking approaches to support children's emotional health and well-being.

The Virtual School continued to track attainment and progress through personal education plans and feedback at virtual PEP meetings from children, social workers, foster carers and designated teachers was key in understanding how children were attaining and making progress whether they were attending school or were home learning. These include:

- Bespoke support for children and carers was offered prior to and on KS4 and KS5 examination results day. Children received letters of congratulation from the Lead Cllr for Education and the Director of Education and have also received on line vouchers from the Virtual School.
- There were some creditable individual achievements at KS4 and three KS5 students gained places at university and continue to receive support. One young person in their first year at university received intensive support during lockdown, following issues around their mental health, which enabled them to complete assignments and successfully progress into their second year in September.
- Support for all children looked after was critical at this time but particularly for children looked after with an identified special educational need and education, health care plan. The following comment from a designated teacher for children looked after in a Reading specialist setting for children with education, health care plans evidences this.

We have produced a COVID-19 SEF which was updated in early January 2020. This identifies our approach to support children and young people with SEND throughout the pandemic.

Table 8: Pupils identified by schools as receiving SEND support and pupils with EHC plans¹

	2018	2019	2020
Reading	3,499	3,766	4,025
Reading %	13.7	14.6	15.3
Statistical Neighbours %	15.4	15.5	15.4
England %	14.6	14.9	15.4
South East %	14.5	14.9	15.5

¹Source: School Census, Percentage of pupils with SEND (SEND support and a statement or EHC plan), based on where the pupil attends school at January, and expressed as a percentage of the total number of pupils on roll.

Since 2016 the overall number of pupils increased in Reading schools by 5%, while the number of pupils with SEND has increased by 25%. The percentage of pupils with SEND in Reading schools is similar to our statistical neighbours and slightly lower than the South East and England overall. At January 2020 there was an increase in the total number of pupils with SEND across schools in Reading, a net increase of 526 pupils with SEND since January 2018.

The percentage of pupils with special educational needs across all schools will be influenced by the number of pupils across all schools at SEND support, as only a relatively small proportion of pupils have an EHC plan. At January 2020, 19% of pupils with SEND had an EHC plan in Reading schools compared to 81% identified as receiving SEND support.

Our Local Assessment Protocol is being reviewed to ensure it includes fuller information regarding the expectations for our children with SEND and pathways.

Co-production in SEND

Co-production is at the heart of our work and is increasingly 'business as usual'. Reading Families Forum (RFF) are key members of the SEND Strategy Group and involved in the key workstreams. Regular meetings are held between RFF and our head of SEND.

Achievements over the past year include:

- We have refreshed the EHCP process to ensure the 'voice of the child' and the views of families are central.
- We respond annually to the RFF's survey of parents, producing a 'You Said, We Did' response which is added to information on the local offer.
- RFF were centrally involved in our proposals for the new SEND special school which will open in Wokingham from September 2022.
- Co-production is embedded in the work of the Berkshire West SEND Joint Implementation Group (JIG) and some work streams such as the recent equipment review have been led by Parent Carer Forum members.
- A former CAMHs service user supported the CCG and Public Health to lead a 5 Ways To Wellbeing social media campaign for young people during the first lockdown period. The CCG is currently updating the Little Blue Book of Sunshine which was co-produced with Young People about 4 years ago.

Feedback from service users on their experience of service delivery continues to shape care pathway transformation across health partners. An example is the recommissioning of Neurodiversity support service (Autism and ADHD) where members of local parent carer forums shaped the service specification, outcomes framework and were involved in evaluating the tenders. A further example is the scoping work in Transforming Care work streams such as Alternatives to Admission. Service user feedback gathered during a successful trial of online Autism assessments prior to the COVID-19 pandemic helped to expedite the move to online interventions. The DCO is seeking audit results and recommendations on the experience of service users during this period to further inform future planning.

SEND EHCPs

Reading children and young people with EHCPs

At January 2020, Reading funded 1,364 EHC plans and in January 2021 there are 1,426. Over the last eight years, the number of EHC plans has increased year on year in Reading, England and the South East. The population has also increased so it should be expected that the number will increase, and this increase will have an impact on capacity in services.

Since 2017, the percentage of pupils with an EHC plan across all schools has increased by about 10% in England and the South East. Across our statistical neighbours the same cohort of pupils has increased by 7%, while in Reading the percentage increase is 17%.

Table 9: Percentage of pupils with an EHCP

Area	Dates:	Reading	SN	England
% of pupils who have an EHCP (primary)	2019	1.7 %	1.65 %	1.6 %
	2018	1.4 %	1.56 %	1.4 %
	2017	1.4 %	1.46 %	1.3 %
% of pupils who have an EHCP (secondary)	2019	1.9 %	1.76 %	1.7 %
	2018	1.8 %	1.72 %	1.6 %
	2017	2.0 %	1.76 %	1.7 %
Total % of Pupils with an EHCP in maintained schools	2019	2.8 %	3.15 %	3.10 %
	2018	2.5 %	3.0 %	2.9 %
	2017	2.4 %	2.89 %	2.8 %

In 2019 Reading was in line with the national average for primary aged pupils without an EHCP requiring SEN support. This was lower than our statistical neighbours and is a similar picture in the secondary sector and taking both primary and secondary pupils as one cohort.

Table 10: Percentage of SEN pupils without an EHCP

Area	Dates	Reading	SN	England
% of SEN pupils without an EHCP (Primary)	2019	12.7 %	13.06 %	12.6 %
	2018	12.3 %	12.96 %	12.4 %
	2017	11.6 %	12.68 %	12.2 %
% of SEN pupils without an EHCP (Secondary)	2019	11 %	11.5 %	10.8 %
	2018	9.8 %	11.82 %	10.6 %
	2017	8.5 %	11.84 %	10.7 %
Total % of Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support (All Schools)	2019	11.8 %	12.3 %	11.9 %
	2018	11.2 %	12.4 %	11.7 %
	2017	11.0 %	12.9 %	11.6 %

We continued to collect the data on our performance regarding support to our vulnerable learners throughout the COVID-19 period (April to August 2020). This data shows that:

- an average of 23.4 assessments requested each month with an average of 20.4 started
- a total of 74 EHCPs issued – an average of 14.8 per month.
- the average number of Reading children with plans as 1408. This has started to increase from September 2020.
- on average 22% of annual reviews were delayed each month during the period. This will be mainly due to shortages of professional capacity during the period.

An audit was completed in early 2020 to examine the quality of EHCPs. As a response to that audit, we have acquired a licence for a new quality assurance programme (Invision), and there is regular audit and reporting activity using this software. We are prioritising plans issued during COVID-19 within this activity.



Early Help Service

Summary

The 2019 ILAC recognised that Early Help services were a real strength in Reading. COVID-19 has challenged ours, and partners, capacity to deliver effective early interventions in a virtual environment.

We have continued to adapt our services whilst helping to mobilise the One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership response to emerging needs.

COVID-19 Responses

- Sustaining timely Early Help Assessments with an average completion time between April – December of 92%
- Delivering a blend of 9661 virtual and 4165 direct visits
- Summer programme with 400 + YP seen in summer programme (240k walked by team!)
- Delivered an amended free EWO offer to all schools reaching 485 children and young people in Autumn Term
- One Reading Transitions Project. 29 supported by EWS with 70% achieving 90%+ attendance in autumn term
- Ensuring health partners access to children centres to continue direct support to expectant and new Mums
- Half term food project – 300 meals/hampers provided
- Winter Support Grant – 3400 FSM children vouchers

Progress on Areas for Development

- Five staff completed Graded Care Profile 2 train the trainer and training roll out in progress. 15 staff completed, monthly slots to May fully booked. Mosaic workstep in place to report on completed assessments.
- Delivered a more integrated audit cycle and practice week, routine audits sustained and Q3 audits focused on children with an EHCP.
- Whilst unable to develop a 3-year budget with growth, we have sustained all external funding into the service.

Further Areas for Development

- Complete GCP2 roll out and explore expansion to partner agencies
- Increase numbers of vulnerable children attending school
- Embed learning from practice week into service re-design for 2021

Transformation

Early Help transformation projects continued to deliver integrated working with children's social care.

In December 2021, the numbers of families being supported and project highlights are set out in the table below.

Table 11: Outcomes from Transformation projects in Early Help

Project Team	Total number of families supported since April 2019	Families being currently supported	Outcomes for children and young people
Community Adolescent Support	55	17	Prevented 43 care entries of at-risk young people. Of the nine young people who did enter care while open to the service, the team have supported five back into home environments
Intensive Pre-Birth Support	33	18	Prevented 14 removals at birth
Reunification	24	14	Reunified 11 children



Early Help Service

Transformation

Progress on Areas for Development

- Pilot with Thames Valley Police to triage police notifications agreed
- Full evaluations for all projects completed in September 2019 with plans to integrate the learning into business as usual from April 2021
- Regular co-presentation with Social Care on the Child in Need project securing additional in-year DFE resources
- Exit strategies /mainstreaming plans in place.

ONE Reading Children and Young Peoples Partnership

We continue to coordinate the ONE Reading Children and Young People's Partnership. Working groups have been condensed with a focus on under 5s, adolescents and emotional wellbeing.

- The Mental Health Triage Partnership Hub has supported 13 children
- The Family Support Partnership Hub has supported 16 families
- The Youth Diversion Hubs has coordinated responses to 80 young people (April – Dec 20) at risk of entering the youth justice system.

An online form was designed and launched in December to reduce the demand on social care. Extended allocation approach launched with two local partners for young people mentoring and domestic abuse holistic support. A pilot project with Royal Berkshire Hospital agreed to intervene early with those presenting at A&E.

Strengths

- Enthusiastic partnership committed to extending early intervention
- Integration of the mental health triage into the Partnership Hub
- Trauma Informed Conference in December with 142 attendees from 30 agencies.

Areas for Development

- Agree the 2021/23 Early Help partnership strategy
- Evaluate the impact of online form, extended allocations model and hospital link post
- Design a place-based demonstration project to measure the impact of a system wide trauma informed approach
- Redesign Early Help youth services integrating YOS, CAST, and mental health support
- Deliver YOS prevention activity with local school to reduce 1st time entrants and employ specialist to address incidents of serious violence.

Early Years

Early Help deliver in-house nurseries (Sure Start Whitley, Coley and the Lodge). All have remained open since April 2020. The Early Years team have supported an increasingly fragile sector to ensure sufficient COVID-19 secure provision in line with guidance

Strengths

- Over 95% of settings opened in 2020
- One Reading under 5s multi-agency partnership group established.

Areas for Development

- Increase the percentage of vulnerable children accessing provision
- Renewed focus on the COVID-19 impact on reduced take up of 2-year-old funding
- Continue focused activity (in light of disapplication of EYFS) to increase FSP
- Continue to influence the re-commissioning of health visiting/school nursing with a focus on speech and language development
- Transfer data into EMS to better identify children not accessing provision.



Children's Social Care

Update from ILACS Ofsted Inspection. In September 2019, Ofsted conducted an inspection using the ILACS framework. The judgements were as

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good


follows:

In order to support a service that is progressing to 'good', our CSC Service Managers have been training to undertake project management. This has included them selecting projects, for example to have a pre-birth process, assessment and intervention established; or to create investment through the contact centre. These projects are linked to service improvement and by virtue of them receiving the training, they are empowered to improve service areas. As a result of the inspection, Ofsted identified seven key improvement areas. Progress against these areas are noted below:

Recommendations: what needs to improve?	Progress
1a) The quality of assessment and planning for children in need and children living in private fostering arrangements	The 'scaffolding' (process, guidance and tools) is in place to undertake quality assessments; plans and interventions. This is an improving measure to evidence consistent 'good' assessments, interventions and plans. Private fostering has transferred to the Permanence Team and has better governance. This is a recent development and sustained impact is yet to be evidenced. A Project Plan is in place for this team to actively support awareness raising and assessment and monitoring processes.
1b) The quality of assessment, planning and provision for 16- and 17-year-old young people who are homeless	A joint housing protocol is in place and housing options for young people has been clarified and sourced. Young people are now consistently been spoken to in respect to their wishes and their rights are made known to them, considering their needs for Section 17 or Section 20 accommodation. This has led to the appropriate consideration for young people to also cease to be children looked after as they understand their rights and practitioners act on their wishes.

Update from ILACS Ofsted Inspection

Recommendations: what needs to improve?	Progress
1c) The quality of assessment, planning and provision for children living with connected carers	The established system and process to undertake Connected Carers assessments are in place; training has been made available and these placements are monitored through weekly performance reports. Children are also appropriately assessed and placed in these placements. The timely use of family group conferences/network meetings and the timeliness of assessments are areas that receive focus in order to demonstrate and sustain clear impact.
2. The participation and engagement of the police in child protection processes	Police attendance has remained in the upper 90%. Some late notifications remain to be received from the police, but is addressed with police through timely and frequent operational multi-agency meetings.
3. The timeliness of initial health assessments for children in care	Many attempts and systems have been set in place to address this recommendation – without sustained improvement. A business analyst is now in place to assist in identifying a system solution.
4. The number of local placements for children in care, the completeness and accuracy of foster carer records, and the quality assurance oversight of commissioned placement arrangements	Recent IFA inspections have provided reassurances in respect to the improvement of the service. Impact of activity to increase the recruitment of new carers, providing in the needs and profile of the children requiring placements is an area of focus.
5. Care leavers' access to their health histories, and staff and young people understands of care leavers' rights and entitlements.	All care leavers have access to their health histories (100%) and a Care Leavers Offer has been developed and is in process of a further update. Care leaver's right and entitlements is known but not yet consistently evidenced in their Pathway Plans.
6. The impact of quality assurance processes on children's cases	An improved auditing programme is in place, inclusive of thematic audits. Learning is disseminated to teams and more engaged workshops and conversation style auditing allows for learning through doing. The impact has been noted.
7. The stability of the workforce to reduce the numbers of changes of social workers for children	The percentage of agency social workers remain high (37%). Issues around retention and 'onboarding' has more recently been identified as areas to improve and is in process of being addressed. Recruitment activity has been impacted upon due to COVID-19.



Identifying and responding to children's needs

CSPoA

Since the September 2019 inspection Children Single Point of Access (CSPoA) has strengthened practice, with good multi-agency participation and sustained improved performance.

Strengths

- Children Single Point of Access (CSPoA) is robust; with consistent threshold application and timely decision-making.
- Consistent responses/feedback to referrers.
- Re-referrals have reduced – YTD at 20%.
- Pre-contact triaging with police to reduce the number of police notifications to CSPoA.
- Online notification form for professionals, to enable comprehensive referral information that leads to better decision making.
- Reduction in inappropriate strategy meetings and better engagement from multi-agency partners.

Areas for improvement

- Reduction of inappropriate contacts.
- Increase in referrals to Early Help or Universal Services where appropriate.
- More effective utilisation of Early Help Hub to increase consultation and early intervention for children that require such support.

“
I do not like being
taken out of class
for my review”

“
I only trust Bharti because she
has been there from the beginning
and knows what I am like.”

“
I am well supported
because my leaving care
adviser is in regular
contact with me”

Children's Social Care

The focus within the Social Care service has been on assessment, visits, plans and supervision. By focusing on these key performance areas practice has improved and performance has been sustained.

Strengths

- Social workers know their children well, records their views and wishes and provide an analysis of a child's lived experience.
- Due to COVID-19 and an increase in referrals relating to under 5s, our focus has been on pre-birth assessments to ensure a holistic assessment informs care planning for a child, and provides support to parents to make the changes necessary to safely care for their child.
- Performance in seeing children, within 10 days of the start of an assessment has improved.

Areas for improvement

- Although the majority of assessments are completed within the 45-day timeframe, the focus is also to undertake, where appropriate, some assessments in a shorter, more timely time period.
- Consistent use of chronologies and genograms to inform assessments is not yet consistent practice, an integrated chronology was developed that allows for only one continuous chronology to be in place for a child.



Identifying and responding to children's needs

Child in Need

Practice in respect to Children In Need has improved and frequent, robust intervention and monitoring is now in place.

Strengths

- Children in Need are supported by teams in Early Help and Children's Social Care. This has enabled CIN to be afforded an intervention that reduce re-referrals and the escalation into Child Protection.
- New CIN policy and updated CIN Plan has led to better outcome focused planning.
- Reduction in the number of repeat Child Protection Plans, indicating robust response to safeguarding thresholds (from 14% in Dec 2019 to 4% in Dec 2020, within a two-year period).
- Improved visiting practice to CIN (82% in Dec 2019 – 87% in Dec 2020). Better quality visits and intervention has led to greater practitioner compliance and outcomes for children.
- Group supervision support thoughtful, planned intervention.
- Improved 'throughput' between teams, allowing children to receive the intervention they require, from the appropriate team/service area.
- Robust leadership of Children with Disability service, inclusive of Short Breaks has led to improved performance and oversight; a Resource panel was created to monitor support offered to parents' caring for children with disabilities and children with special educational needs are presented at a partner panel (EHCP) to ensure robust tri-funding of their needs – leading to overall better co-production.

Areas for improvement

- Workers to remain professionally curious especially around mental health and sexual abuse. Covid-19 has led to an increase in these areas.

Court work

Covid-19 led to an increase in risk and threshold and hence an increase in Child Protection Plans. Pre-proceeding (PLO) work has become more focused and timelier and to improved diversion from care proceedings.

Strengths

- Sustained decrease in care proceedings in past 12 months.
- 46% diversion within pre-proceedings, with less leading to care proceedings being initiated.
- Quality of evidence to court has improved, with compliments from judiciary.
- Increase in 'foster for adoption' placements, securing early permanence for children.

Areas for improvement

- Use of research in care planning.
- Authoritative confident social work practice evidenced in statements, evidenced in court.
- Improvement of CPRs where adoption is the care plan.

“

It would be nice to have the same social worker as I have had so many I get bored of having to start again with a new one

”



Identifying and responding to children's needs

CYPD: Short Breaks

- CYPD Resource and Short Breaks Panel has been developed and consistently being held fortnightly to review short break packages and recognise gaps in provision. COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the plans for Short Breaks, however a new Short Breaks Co-Ordinator is in post and is supporting our offer for school holiday periods.
- All short breaks are being reviewed, along with the commissioning process to ensure we are able to support all children as necessary with disabilities. CYPDT works closely with the Local Offer team to jointly identify areas of increasing demand and varying need.
- A consultation is planned to develop a wider understanding of what the local community's preference would be for short breaks and how parent carers and young people would like to achieve their identified outcomes.
- Our Personal Budget and Direct payments policy has been reviewed, parental guides are being co-produced and there is a drive to widen the use of personal budgets and direct payments to support parental choice and independence. To support this the Children's Disability Service is working closely with an external consultant (Tricia Nicoll) to develop workshops for our staff and parent/ carers to encourage creative thinking and child focused use of Direct Payments and Personal Assistants.
- Crisis support is very challenging, especially in the current climate. Family Group Conferencing is being developed to work proactively with families to identify support mechanisms in advance of a crisis occurring.

Management Oversight

Regular performance datasets and reports has enabled the service to become confident with good management grip in respect to performance indicators, and quality of service delivery.

Strengths

- Increase in managerial 'grip' across all layers, with impact and strategies to improve performance when the needed.
- All managers have been trained as coaches, to support solution-based practice and encourage authoritative social work.
- Practice is more thoughtful, with mostly timely care planning.
- Bespoke training programme offered to respective layers of management to equip them in leading their teams.
- Updated Supervision policy to allow for joint supervision across Early Help and Social Care and a simplified format that allows for reflective conversation, clear actions and timescales to be identified, with follow through in supervision sessions.

Areas for improvement

Group supervision and 'Stop and Think' sessions to enable a deeper understanding and joint learning experience of 'stuck' cases and problems.

Transformation Project Outcomes

Our Transformation projects have also achieved good outcomes in response to children's needs, including:

- 342 placement and care packages reviewed
- 22 children left care under Special Guardianship Orders
- 54 young people aged 18+ stepped out of care
- 57 care packages were progressed to meet children's needs.



Participation with children, families and partners

To strengthen our work with children and families, we have undertaken some key activities regarding participation and direct work, and been informed by recent reports. These include:

- Our Youth Council prepared and presented a report on Mental Health
- Regular reports are received from our Reading Families Forum
- ‘Growing Up in Care Report’ - RVA
- Coaching, mentoring and training programmes for service and team managers.

Direct work strengths

- Direct work tools made available to each team; with an online resource library being established.
- Audit activity that seeks out a child and family’s views of service delivery.
- Participation Officer has created forums for children to provide their feedback.
- Robust Youth Council arrangement with 80+ young people attending annual event.
- Direct work being uploaded to Mosaic system.
- Complaints and compliments informing practice improvement.
- Greater stability in workforce allows for relationships with children and families to develop to understand their lived experience.
- PAMs training provided to practitioners to enable assessments to be undertaken for parents with learning needs.
- Training of practitioners to confidently engage in direct work with children.
- Graded care profile to be utilised and practitioners trained in the application thereof (neglect).

Identifying and responding to all forms of abuse

In addition to well-understood risks regarding private fostering and accommodation of 16/17-year-olds, locally, risk and harm factors are increasingly moving beyond familial risk, to extra-familial risk including context safeguarding concerns. We are working with young people, families and partners to support our identification of risk and need, and plan and deliver appropriate support to young people and families. Contextual safeguarding remains a central theme in our quality assurance work, and in our discussions with partners.

Strengths

- Pro-active response to children exploited and missing; with links being identified between different vulnerable groups and police diversion taking place.
- Awareness raising re private fostering, with updated brochures. Clarified systems and processes within BFfC for assessing and reviewing private fostered children.
- Updated Housing Protocol to support homeless 16- and 17-year olds to obtain the right level of support – positive partnership between housing, early help and social care.

Areas for improvement

- Reviewing service provided re Return Home Interviews and consideration to provide an in-house service.
- Providing practitioners with a ‘crib’ sheet re Southwark Judgement to provide consistency on assessing 16- and 17-year-old homeless children’s needs.

“
Social workers need
to write down what
I say not what they
think I have said
”

“
She always sends me
a card for Christmas
and birthdays
”



Participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers

We have a full time Participation Officer that supports young people in care and care leavers to ensure they are kept at the heart of everything we do. 2020 presented some challenges and a need to work differently to ensure all children and young people in care could participate in a meaningful way. As well as maintaining the Care2Listen and Care2HaveFun groups online, the Participation Officer also carried out doorstep visits to group members to keep them connected and check in.

Children in Care Council – Care2Listen

- Care2Listen continued to thrive throughout 2020, despite members having to adapt to an online presence, this has allowed young people out of area to join in and participate in the group on the same level.
- The Care2Listen group meetings became a life line for some young people as they provided a platform for emotional support, it helped to overcome the feeling of isolation during lockdown, it was an opportunity for socialization, and the young people carried on being listened to.
- Care2Listen training was offered online. 120 staff members were trained in 2020, including student social workers and ASYEs.
- Care2Listen members have attended the Corporate parenting meetings and have trained all the corporate parents.
- Care2listen have worked on campaigns and a number of projects throughout the year. The group are empowered and supported to be part of the solutions.

Care2HaveFun

- This group is for all children in care to meet once a month to take part in fun activities. This is accessible to all children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities and is targeted at six-years-old plus.
- These children are afforded the chance to be themselves; free from judgement or prejudice for who they are or what they have experienced.

Care Leavers' Participation

Several activities have taken place throughout this last year to engage, involve and to allow participation of care leavers.

- Independent living skills - A 'Skills 4 A Brighter Future' group was set up and started at the beginning of the year, they met every week. After completing the accredited six-week programme, they were awarded certificates as a record of achievement.
- Care leavers hub – is a monthly drop in for care leavers to make lunch together, discuss any issues, difficulties or anything they need support with and to participate in projects.

Care Leavers' Forum

- After difficulties in trying to establish a care leavers' forum, a different approach was taken by setting a closed Facebook group, which was set up at the start of the first lockdown for all Reading care leavers. To date, there are 30 members that benefit from five posts a week. Posts range from national and local news appropriate to care leavers, employment and education vacancies, sexual health support, COVID-19 guidance and reminders, competitions, freebies or items for sale. More recently, mental health advice and things to try from a BFFC trauma-informed practitioner.

Care Leaver Ambassadors Group

- The ambassador role was set up to encourage participation from care leavers, with all care leavers given the opportunity to apply to become part of the group of ambassadors, to represent all Reading Care leavers and give them a voice. There are now 10 ambassadors that meet every six weeks.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children Participation Group

A newly formed group has been established just for UASC with eight members. The topics for discussion have been around volunteering and activities.



Sufficiency of social care placements

Children in care and care leavers' placement sufficiency

We have a total of 15 children placed in unregulated provision:

- 11 of these children are aged 16 and 17 and are placed in these unregulated placements to support them towards independence.
- One of these children are in an unregistered placement. The child will shortly turn 16 and at that point their placement will no longer be unregistered. OFSTED are aware of the current arrangements for both young people.
- Three of these children were placed with family and friends carers, and are subject to care proceedings. This is one sibling group and they have since been placed in a foster placement.

Ensuring quality placements

- In August 2019, the Company procured a semi-independent provider framework. This framework is due to expire in August 2021. A procurement timeline and working group is in place with a view to this moving over to a Dynamic Purchasing system in September 2021, which will give access to a greater number of providers across more lots. This will not only bring flexibility to ensure better outcomes for young people but support a more competitive market which brings financial efficiencies.
- Due diligence has been undertaken on all framework and non-framework providers. A system is in now place for this to be reviewed quarterly via the KPI monitoring schedule. This has been in place since Q2.
- The Commissioning Team receives placement referrals via a child-centred upload to Mosaic, ensuring all information is centralised. Mosaic records the needs and outcomes of the placement in the child's voice, including risks. Placement option/s are identified and uploaded centrally. The social worker discusses these placement options with the young person.
- All placements are initially approved by the DCS via an Authorisation into Care form, and then reviewed at the Achieving Best Outcomes panel.
- There is further scrutiny provided by the IRO, linked to the young person's pathway plan and needs assessment. There is oversight by the strategic lead (placements solutions team) who whilst reviewing plans for young people to move on particularly in respect of their plans for independence, will also escalate to the commissioning team any concerns that are found in relation to the placement. This is then addressed accordingly.
- If social workers have concerns regarding provision, they will notify the Commissioning Team who will undertake an unannounced provider visit, identifying areas for improvement and ensure the provider addresses all concerns, whilst keeping the social worker informed. When there is a safeguarding issue, the commissioning team will immediately identify alternative accommodation.
- From January 2020, the Commissioning Team has been undertaking two unannounced placement visits per week to monitor quality and compliance of placements and raise findings with allocated social workers. This process is followed with all non-framework IFA and residential providers, as well as all unregulated provision. These visits now take place virtually as a result of Covid-19. For all residential and IFA South Central providers, the framework lead have carried out these visits on our behalf. These do not replace statutory visits to individual CLA carried out by the allocated Social Worker.
- The Commissioning Team have strengthened the relationship between commissioning and social care, with a dedicated social care and edge of care commissioning function, and a focus on co-production. This ensures that when new services are being procured, it is informed by the child's voice and social care colleagues.



Independent Fostering Agency

Brighter Futures for Children has its own Independent Fostering Agency registered with Ofsted. The IFA is integrated into Children's Social Care Services and provides placements for up to 80 local children in care. We have 76 approved foster carers within our IFA.

The IFA was inspected in February 2019, resulting in a judgement of 'Requires Improvement to be Good'. Since that time significant efforts were put into ensuring that progress was made on the nine requirements identified by Ofsted during the inspection.

In November 2020, Ofsted completed a virtual Assurance Visit over a two-day period. Good progress over the seven-month period was noted, resulting in the nine requirements being reduced by six, with an additional requirement being included.

Areas of improvement and development required

There are now four requirements of our IFA:

1. There needs to be more robust matching: it has been concerning that there have been so many unplanned placement endings.
2. Notifications in relation to Schedules 6 and 7 need to be sent in a timelier way.
3. Individualised Safer Caring Agreements need to be in place for all children.
4. Adding children's and parents' views and experiences to the Supervising Social Workers recordings and within the Annual Foster Home Reviews.

A robust action plan to address the requirements has been completed and is being implemented by the IFA.

We are also focusing on improving our sufficiency of local provision by having a team focusing on recruitment and a better utilisation of current in-house placements.

Strengths

- All foster carers are approved by BFfC
- The structure of the IFA has been reviewed and re-designed
- Fees and allowances have been reviewed
- Children have been well supported by their carers through the pandemic
- Foster carers support children to maintain relationships with their family and friends
- Children's emotional and physical health and well-being needs are well supported
- All children are encouraged to attend full-time education
- Newly developed foster carer profiles
- Children feel safe and secure while living with their foster carers
- Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses
- Leaders and managers have focused on improving the culture
- Staff and foster carers have been well supported this year through regular effective supervision, performance management, team meetings and training
- The independent fostering agency committee is effective in ensuring that the agency considers strategic issues and monitors the agency's risk register
- Quality of panel minutes and the agency decision-maker notes has improved.



Evidence of positive impact on children living with BFFC foster carers

LDR was bonding well with CB who helped LDR with issues regarding personal hygiene. They went to the pub together to watch the football and LDR commented that 'he was living the dream'. It was good for them to have that one-on-one male bonding.

Michelle and her family postponed their family holiday twice in order to avoid their little child looked after having to go into respite prior to the child transitioning into their prospective adoptive placement. This took place with delay.

This young person has been in a stable long-term matched placement. It is a success for her that she attended college completing a Level 2 childcare course and is now doing an apprenticeship in order to complete her Level 3. She also has a part-time job in childcare. It is noticeable that she continued to complete this whilst life in the foster home had been challenging and impacting on her due to the other child in placement.

Aaron Zinyanya (guest speaker) went through the training of the MOMO app for the benefit of social workers in the team, all workers should be

set up with their own accounts. Social workers to check that their carers have done the training which has been sent out to them via email. Aaron is available to help with any issues the social workers may have using the app.

Improvement of confidence as FC taught TJ how to ride a bike, which not only improved his balance but was also seen as a milestone achievement for him.

Foster carer is ensuring that children are fully integrated and feeling part of her family. It is acknowledged that the whole family embrace the girls being part of their lives and consistently involve them in activities and, in doing so, ensuring the close family connection.

Foster carer aware of the young person's needs and that she has the tendency to feel low when in the bath. Foster carer appropriately engages with the young person whilst in the bath by walking passed the door and having conversations with her. This allowed the foster carer to gauge the young person's mood and safety throughout.

Foster carer supported the child in her wish of wanting to purchase a new handbag and whilst the child had initially chosen a very expensive designer handbag which wasn't affordable, over time the foster carer encouraged her to use her savings for a handbag that would have more purpose. MS took on board the advice and the foster carer described MS walking around with pride when showing her new handbag and this having a huge impact on her self-confidence. This was an important learning for MS in terms of saving and budgeting within one's means.

Foster carer provided stability to the young person for the first time in her life. This was the longest and consistent placement the young person had been living until KL moved into residential.

Young person recognised the level of care her foster carer had for her despite many challenges. This was leading to the young person opening up to the FC and even giving her a 'Thank you' card.



Voluntary Adoption Agency and Adopt Thames Valley

Adoption and Permanence Service

Over the last 15 months, Permanency Planning has become well established for BFfC CLA. From 1st November 2020, all of the local authority's 'permanence' services for children looked after were transferred to the BFfC Adoption and Permanence Service. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Permanency Planning for all Children Looked After aged up to 14 years
- Family finding for children with Care Plans of permanent fostering
- The assessment of Connected Carers and Special Guardians for our Children Looked After and those on the edge of care
- Supervision of and support to Connected Carers
- The provision of Special Guardianship Support Services
- The registration of Private Foster Carers and the monitoring and support of private fostering arrangements
- The day-to-day management of our Regional Adoption Agency contract (with Adopt Thames Valley)
- The management of the BFfC Permanence Allowance Scheme.

Early permanency planning is increasingly being put in place for children who are subject to PLO where it is anticipated that Care Proceedings are likely to be progressed, including for as yet unborn babies (this has supported early placements being achieved for some very young children who have had an adoption plan from birth with BFfC pursuing Fostering for Adoption (FfA) when this is judged to be appropriate to the case). Permanency planning continues until children are either returned to parental care, placed with Connected Carers or have prospective permanent foster carer or adopters identified for them.

Where children are to be placed for adoption, their social workers then remain fully involved in the matching and placement process for each individual child.

- Since the formation of the Adoption and Permanence Service, an additional twice-monthly Fostering Panel has been established which concentrates on consideration of 'permanence' cases (i.e. proposed 'matches' for children requiring permanent fostering and approval of Regulation 24 and 25 Carers and Connected Carers).
- Our focus on improving our permanency services for our BFfC children looked after and in preparation for the launch of our Adoption and Permanence Service in November 2020, a range of new procedures and written Practice Guidance were produced for staff during 2020.
- Close liaison is established with our RAA – Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) and BFfC has two designated Family Finders within ATV, who are responsible for identifying suitable adoptive placements for our CLA who have a Care Plans of adoption.
- BFfC meet regularly with the ATV Team and Service Manager both to monitor individual children's cases and to agree strategies and resolve any emerging practice issues. Our Director of Children's Social Care also sits on the ATV Management Board.
- Our numbers of CLA achieving placement have reduced this year (2020-21), however this is seen to be due to delays in Care Proceedings caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and mirrors the situation in other LAs. A positive outcome of this is that across the RAA concentration has been focused on securing suitable adoptive placements for some children who were deemed to be 'harder to place', and at the current time our numbers of children who have a PO in place and do not have prospective adopters identified for them is at an all-time low.
- The BFfC Adoption Committee meets bi-monthly and monitors the actions of the Adoption Agency including our timeliness in terms of achieving matching and placements for children.
- A written Policy and Practice Guidance on Life Journey Work, and the completion of Life Books and Later Life Letters has been produced (January 2020) and made available to all staff. A 'template' has been produced for the completion on Life Books for CLA.

Conclusion

Our ambition within Brighter Futures for Children continues to be to deliver 'outstanding' services for all the children and young people of Reading. We are delighted that we have made such progress that we are no longer in DfE intervention in relation to our Children's Social Care, and that we can evidence good progress in many areas of service delivery across Education and Early Help and Prevention as well despite the significant impact of COVID-19.

Our focus for year three is to continue to embed quality practice, re-align demand and continue to respond to COVID-19. As page 14 highlights and evidences achievements, there is much we have achieved in year two. However, we are not complacent and recognise that there is much more to do in relation to strengthening our workforce in Children's Social Care, to manage demand across the Company, continue to support our schools and early years providers. We are also strengthening our SEND offer, our local placement sufficiency and further developing partnership working to recognise children's needs at the earliest point.

We will be continuing to invest in our partnerships with colleagues in the council, in health, local police and the Violence Reduction Unit, schools and Reading College, and the voluntary sector. We are looking forward to using the benefits of collaborative relationships through the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership, Community Safety Partnership, Integrated Care Partnership, Health and Wellbeing Board and the One Reading Children and Young People Partnership.

We cannot ignore that, in the past five weeks there have been two murders in Reading involving young people. One involved the death of a 13-year-old, with a 13-year-old and 14-year-old currently charged with murder and three other 13 and 14-year-olds bailed (currently without charge) for the same offence. The other involves the death of a 26-year-old, where two 16-year-olds and a 17-year-old have been charged with murder.

We are, at the time of writing, closely examining any involvement with these

young people and the incidences have heightened the need to work closely with our partners to identify any trends and to be tuned to the increase in serious violence in Reading by young people and our collective need to address this.

We will be continuing to strengthen our work with partners and across the system to further improve innovative, comprehensive and collaborative delivery of services to our children and their families in Reading.

We will be doing all of the above while using a trauma informed approach, thinking restoratively and whole family so that we can use all the resources available to us to continue to improve children's potential to live safer, happy, healthy and successful lives.



Deborah Glassbrook

**Executive Director of Children's Services
Brighter Futures for Children**