

Annual report 2020-21



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Frontline is a social work charity working to ensure that all children in England have a safe and stable home, and that their life chances are not limited by their social or family circumstance.

We create social change for these children and their families by developing excellent social work practice and leadership through our programmes, and by building a movement of leaders in social work and broader society as part of our Fellowship.

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Welcome from our chief executive, Mary Jackson



For some of us this has been a year of two halves, as we relished the opportunity to regain some sense of normality towards the end of summer of 2021, having hopefully emerged from the worst of the pandemic. However, the hardships faced by many as a result of Covid-19 cannot be understated – the pandemic has made inequalities even more stark, with families dealt the most difficult hand feeling the impact the most. These are the families who need the best possible social work support.

And social workers have stepped up to meet that need. While there have definitely been significant challenges, there have also been unexpected opportunities, with social workers having much more flexibility in the way they work. We have seen a creative and resourceful workforce collaborating with other agencies more closely and trialling innovative, hybrid approaches to best support children and families.

This is the kind of innovation we encourage and nurture at Frontline. Our participants and growing community of fellows are effecting change and innovating in new and exciting ways, continuing to hone their skills and develop as leaders. Our philanthropically funded Innovation Lab continues to back fellows' innovations, supporting them to bring fresh ideas into the sector and turn them into tangible outcomes that positively impact children and families. This work is key as we continue to drive towards our goal of 4,000 impactful fellows and raising the profile of this amazing profession.

Now settled into the privileged position of leading the charity as CEO, I am hugely proud of all that we have achieved over the last year. I am also proud that all we have done has been underpinned by our continued commitment to racial diversity, and inclusivity more broadly. We will continue to work towards becoming a truly anti-racist and anti-oppressive organisation, internally and across our programmes.



None of this would have been possible without the hard-working, skilled and dedicated team I have worked alongside, or without the continued support of those who make our work possible. I would like to thank the Department for Education, our funders and local authority partners for all their backing to date. I am looking forward to the new partnerships we will undoubtedly make along the next steps of the Frontline journey.

I would like to say a special thanks to Baroness Camilla Cavendish, who has stepped down as chair of the board this year. Camilla has played a vital role in leading Frontline across the last four years, as we have grown, developed and increased our impact. I am delighted to announce that Lord Tony Hall has been appointed as Frontline's new chair of trustees. Tony has vast experience in running organisations and boards, as well as strong networks and contacts across a wide range of stakeholders. The board and I know that with these, and his clear enthusiasm for Frontline and his passion for the charity's work, he will lead us well on the next phase of our journey as we continue to strive to create lasting social change for children and their families.

I would also like to welcome our two new trustees – Cordie Gwilym, who brings her experience of statutory social work, and Sir John Timpson, owner and chair of Timpson and, with his late wife, a foster carer for over 30 years. It is a privilege to work alongside our new and existing brilliant trustees who have done so much to support young people in need of a safe and stable home.

Most importantly, I would like to thank everyone who has made a difference to children and families this year. We have seen the tenacity, commitment and creativity of those working with families in the most demanding of circumstances. We have also seen that it is possible to do things differently, to adapt and be creative. We want to harness this creativity to realise the enormous potential of innovation to improve the outcomes of children and families, which we know is possible if we work together.

Trustees' report

Our vision

As England's largest social work charity, our vision is of a society where no child's life chances are limited by their social or family circumstance. Our mission is to create social change for children who do not have a safe or stable home, by developing excellent social work practice and leadership.

That's why, through the Frontline, Firstline and Headline programmes, we train new and existing social workers, social work managers and senior leaders to bring an innovative approach to social work with children and families. Together, they form a well-structured series of leadership development opportunities that we believe are fundamental for those within the sector, whether working directly with children and families, influencing decision-makers or bringing about system-wide change. We are working to raise the status of this life-changing profession, and to ensure that the workforce is a better reflection of the children and families it serves.

Everyone who completes one of our programmes joins the Fellowship, becoming part of a growing community of 1,900 individuals working to drive broader change for children and families inside and outside of local authority social work.

The trustees have had due regard to the Charity Commission's published guidance on the Public Benefit requirement under the Charities Act 2011 and in the following report explain how the charity has worked towards its purposes for the public benefit.



Strategic report

Key achievements and performance in 2020-21

This report reflects activity and achievements from September 2020 to August 2021.

2025 strategy

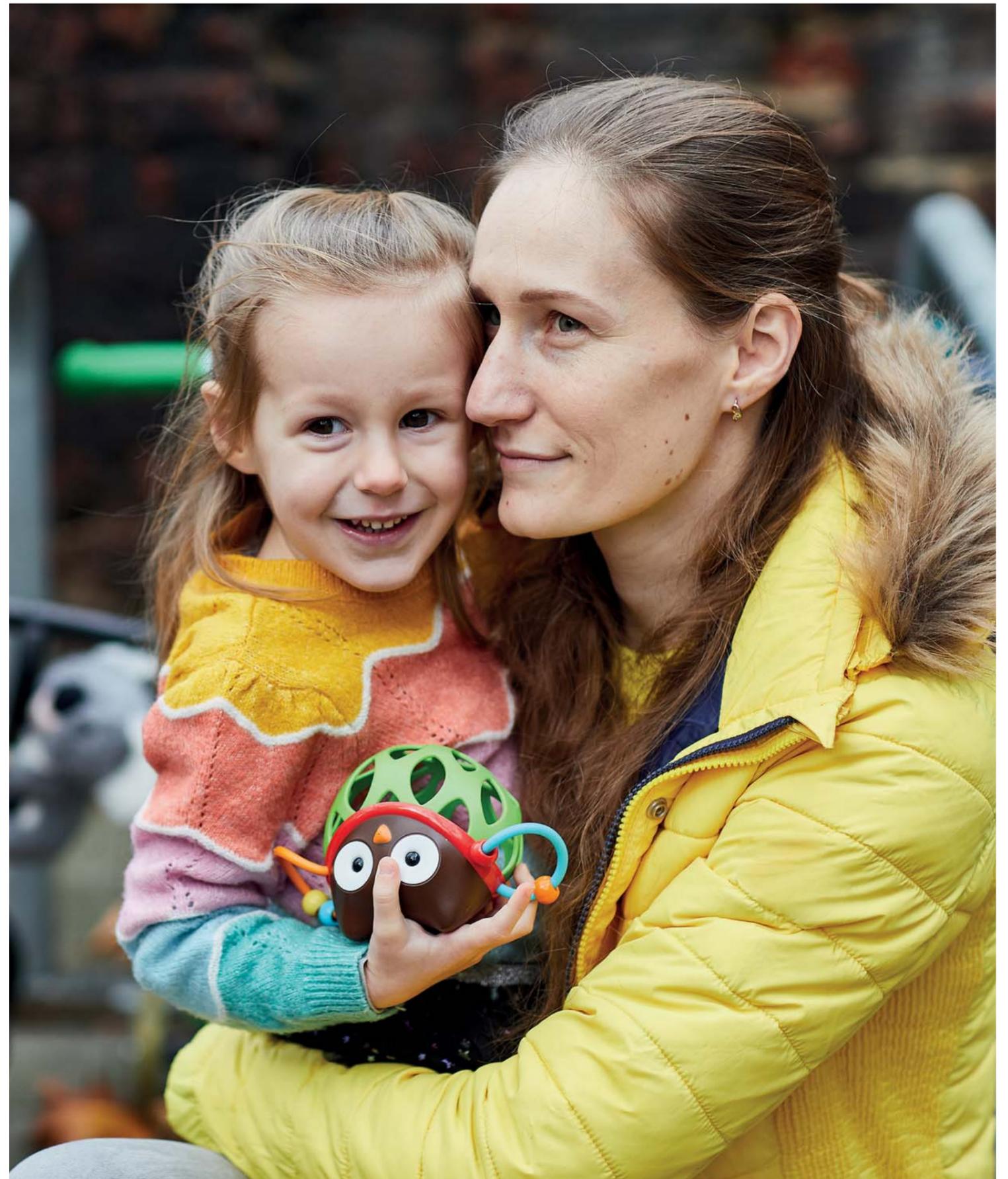
Last year we began formally implementing our 2020-25 strategy, with everyone in the charity working towards our goal of having 4,000 impactful fellows by 2025. Our Fellowship is now just under 2,000 strong, and as this number continues to grow so too does fellows' collective influence and potential to drive real change. To maintain this level of growth and impact we need to continue to bring 600+ people through our programmes each year, developing excellent social work practice, leadership and innovation, and to support our employees to work to the best of their ability to achieve our mission.

600+ people complete programmes annually

Since its inception, Frontline has grown organically and at a remarkable pace. Now that the organisation is well established, the senior leadership team (SLT) identified a need to restructure the areas of the organisation directly responsible for delivering the Frontline programme and local authority partnerships to streamline operations. The aim was to enable teams to deliver greater quality and consistency for both local authority partners and programme participants. The most significant of these changes involved consolidating the Frontline programme delivery team from six regional teams to two, North and South, and the creation of a new and separate partnerships team focusing exclusively on driving deeper, longer-term relationships with local authorities across all of our programmes.

With these changes in place, and despite the ongoing impact of the pandemic, over 400 of the 2020 Cohort completed year 1 of the Frontline programme, registering as newly qualified social workers and moving on to their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) year. Our university accrediting partner, Lancaster University, and external examiners once again commended us on the quality of participant work, the rigour of our assessments and the quality of our feedback.

We were particularly successful at attracting applications for the 2021 Cohort of the Frontline programme, so much so that we were able to close the recruitment window by December, earlier than in past years. We took a more targeted regional approach, achieving all local and regional targets agreed with our local authority partners based on community demographics. We were delighted to enter into partnership with six new local authorities - Barking and Dagenham, Bolton, Devon, North Lincolnshire, Sefton and Southampton. Across our existing partnerships, one in four local authorities increased their intake of participants on the programme.



Develop excellent social work practice and leadership

The quality of our programmes, and the continued development of our fellows, are essential in helping social workers and managers to do, or to lead those doing, excellent social work. To better reflect the position of social work both in decision-making and strategic oversight within Frontline, we created the new role of chief social worker. The chief social worker will also lead the fellowship team, enabling us to shape and share social work knowledge and expertise beyond our formal programmes and amplifying the impact of our fellows through a continued commitment to excellent practice, leadership and innovation.

We believe that relational, systemic social work practice is at the heart of ensuring excellent social work practice and leadership, and this therefore remains at the core of all our programmes and provides both the theoretical and practice bases of the Frontline programme curriculum. We continue to build on our existing theories and models in a way that improves the participant experience and, ultimately, their social work practice. We have therefore been working to further build upon and improve our curriculum design and pedagogic approach. One way we have done this is by introducing a new model of teaching and learning known as deliberate practice across all our programmes. The definition of deliberate practice we have adopted is: 'Practice activities that maximise improvement throughout development toward expert performance' (Anders Ericsson, 1993). In other words, activities where the practitioner deliberately, purposefully, and mindfully seeks out new challenges to enhance their expertise in ways that require sharp concentration and real effort.

As the Frontline programme is the only route into social work with a specific focus on child protection, we have also drawn on recent research to incorporate more teaching on risk, specifically contextual safeguarding and assessment of risk and the multifaceted factors associated with abuse and harm. Participant feedback from the 2020 and 2021 summer institutes saw a 17% increase in how confident and prepared participants felt in this area as they began working in a local authority setting. Satisfaction results across year 2 participants continue to improve, with 96% stating they were very satisfied after we increased the support available to them as they worked to complete their ASYE against the backdrop of the pandemic.

Our teaching and delivery across all aspects of the Frontline programme continues to harness the digital improvements and technologies we implemented in the height of the pandemic. All assessment and selection centres were moved online with no adverse impact to pass rates, an approach we plan to continue for 2021-22. Similarly, our 2021 summer institute was delivered online, with 450 participants securing their place and starting their journey into the profession. We introduced and ran a new series of webinars to familiarise participants with the programme, social work and working life within children's services in a local authority.

The Firstline programme continued its exceptional growth, with high demand from our local authority partners. From September 2020 to August 2021, 90 social work managers completed the programme, which was delivered online. Feedback continued to be excellent, with a 95% satisfaction score from Firstline Leaders in this cohort. This, along with an even higher number of 92 individuals joining the Spring 2021 Cohort, demonstrates how valued and sought after the programme is by our local authority partners and social work managers.

Building on this success, in 2021 we expanded our offering by developing the Headline programme. The first and only of its kind, Headline is aimed at high performing heads of service (or equivalents) who have oversight of social work teams and lead the strategic direction of social work in their local authority. The programme will equip leaders with the skills and knowledge to tackle the most common and persistent challenges they face, ultimately better enabling them to develop teams that create social change for the children and families they serve. Demand for places on the first cohort of the programme was exceptionally high, and we were thrilled to have exceeded our target of 20 places, with 24 heads of service starting the programme in autumn 2021. This again highlights both the need and hunger for leadership development programmes in social work, and the strong position Frontline is in to deliver them.



We are proud of all the partnerships we have with local authorities across England, and continue to explore new ways of working that encourage open dialogue and create an environment which supports and promotes excellent, relationship-based social work practice.

This included offering additional sessions with practice tutors, extra coaching sessions and a flexibility with deadlines wherever possible.

We also introduced multiple new support structures (in addition to those already in place) for all of our ethnic minority participants as part of our continued commitment to becoming a truly anti-racist organisation. These were identified by our newly created racial diversity and inclusion steering group, set up in the summer of 2020 and chaired by our chief social worker with the aim of reviewing our programmes through the lens of anti-racism. Details of all the actions and improvements we committed to and have been implementing can be found in our Racial Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan on our website.

We are proud to have shared the learning related to good practice on race and racism that has emerged from the racial diversity and inclusion steering group. The meetings have been opened up to colleagues from local authorities and the Department for Education to share the actions and improvements we are taking to tackle racism. In February we launched our inaugural Frontline exChange which brought together almost 300 fellows and participants to explore and learn more about anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work over three days of online sessions. This work with stakeholders will continue and further shape how we teach, talk about, support and continue to commit to being actively anti-racist.

We continue to take a collaborative approach across all our work. We are proud of all the partnerships we have with local authorities across England, and continue to explore new ways of working that encourage open dialogue and create an environment which supports and promotes excellent, relationship-based social work practice. As well as continuing to share our learning and insights with our partners, more of our staff and fellows have shared their expertise with the wider sector and decision makers than any other year. This includes speaking at the All Party Parliamentary Group for social work, giving evidence at House of Lords' enquiries, speaking at sector conferences and being part of, alongside other academics and social work leaders, a 'Task and Finish group' set up by Social Work England. This group reviewed the qualifying education and training standards for the sector and was a fantastic opportunity to contribute our learning and expertise to the development of national standards.

Enabling sector wide innovation

We are also pleased that the online events and training we created during the height of the pandemic for our fellows have sustained and often increased their levels of engagement. Our fortnightly virtual coffee breaks, open to all social workers in England, continue to be well attended and have covered topics such as intersectionality and social work, trauma and the brain, and domestic abuse. Our Fellowship Practice Network continues to go from strength to strength, offering in-depth workshops and tailored training sessions for fellows and other social workers to ensure their continued development and dedication to the highest quality practice. We held two retreats for fellows on systemic practice and multi-agency working. These were paired with a series of online workshops, followed by six months' support to drive the development of projects to maximise the positive impact they have on children and families.

Our Innovation Lab, a dedicated space for fellows to develop and implement initiatives that create lasting social change for disadvantaged children, continues to grow. Innovations range from initiatives that develop sustainable change at a local level, to those that have the potential to create broader systemic change, both within the statutory sector and wider society. Innovations which we have supported so far include an initiative to help remove excessive bureaucracy and free up social worker time in local authorities, and a productivity and wellness app which aims to support social worker organisation and reduce burnout.

We continue to offer a range of coaching options for fellows: emergency coaching for those at risk of leaving their local authority social work position; career development coaching to help prepare for a more senior role; leadership coaching specifically for fellows from ethnic minority backgrounds; and innovation coaching as part of our Innovation Lab.



Crescendo is an approach influenced by the Buurtzorg community nursing model in the Netherlands, focused on supporting local authorities to implement small changes to reduce bureaucracy and, at a whole service level, increase time spent with families. The team, made up of fellows from West London and Lincolnshire, identify what gets in the way of social workers doing their best work, from the standpoint of those workers knowing best and being the experts. Once clear on barriers, they move to identify the next steps to deliver improvement, and empower local teams to embed these changes in their services. Examples of impact they've had already include unwieldy forms being simplified, and duty systems being redesigned. They are currently working with three local authorities, Warrington, Wandsworth and Tower Hamlets, and plan to broaden their reach in the coming year.



Thrive is an app in development to help social workers manage workload and be more aware of their wellbeing to avoid the risk of burnout and absence from work through illness. There are three main modules - 1) A case tracker with all reports due, that automatically updates and syncs to local authority computer systems 2) The 'Daily Thrive' wellbeing tracker that allows staff to share and reflect on their mood/challenges/how supported they feel, helping capture issues early and find a preventative approach 3) A pocket book of resources frequently used in direct work with families for easy reference. Tooba, the fellow leading the project, is currently in the development phase of the app, and will be looking to do trials in local authorities by the middle of the year.



Now Foster involves a new approach to recruiting foster carers, focusing on reaching demographics that have been targeted less in the past. Beth and Laurie, the fellows leading on the project, are now planning to run a number of focus groups and YouGov polls to show the need for this initiative. They hope this, along with additional market research, will highlight the misconceptions that affect people's decision to foster, and the challenges that carers face in the registration process. These learnings will be incorporated into the next stage, where they are planning to pilot in several local authorities.



Seen Heard Believed is an initiative that creates trauma-informed early help services, focused on creating stability for families by breaking the pattern of frequent escalation and de-escalation of cases. The lead fellow, John, has already been trialling this approach in Middlesbrough, the local authority in which he is a service manager. In order to expand and further embed the initiative, John is now looking to recruit a social worker to lead on the approach.

Support employees to achieve goals and ensure Frontline is sustainable

Our people

None of this work would have been possible without continual efforts to improve both our ways of working as a charity and supporting our staff to work to the best of their ability. We are proud of the way all of our employees seamlessly adapted to new ways of working during the pandemic, and how well they reported feeling supported during this time.

We continue to develop our excellent line managers, as well as creating more development opportunities for officer level roles. Drawing inspiration from our programmes and culture, we've designed bespoke training packages for coordinators, officers and managers to develop and practice skills in influencing and building effective relationships and professional authority. Developing leadership skills continues to be a vital part of our work; we've invested in a bespoke leadership training programme for our principal practice tutors,

funding for coaching qualifications as well as continuing to offer coaching to all employees.

To help our people do their best work, we continue to embed our culture of freedom and responsibility. By updating our performance appraisal process to a more informal quarterly conversation, everyone who works at Frontline is getting more frequent feedback on how they're doing while identifying what support and development they need. At each conversation, employees reflect on how they are contributing to a culture of freedom and responsibility. A move to using Objectives and Key Results to help us set more frequent and better team goals has helped us work together more effectively and cohesively as an organisation and hold each other to account. We are now reviewing and updating our culture, gathering feedback from the whole organisation and our board of trustees.

Five highest scoring questions

My manager cares about my well-being	4.5/5
People in my area do their best for Frontline	4.6/5
My manager is honest when dealing with others	4.6/5
My manager recognises and comments when I do good work	4.5/5
My manager is open to receiving feedback from me	4.5/5



Ensuring that we continue to build an inclusive culture that encourages, supports, and celebrates diversity, and where everyone at Frontline (and on our programmes) feels empowered to bring their full, authentic selves to work has been a key focus for us across the year. We have an overarching internal diversity and inclusion strategy, managed by our diversity and inclusion group, with input from our employee-led affinity and action groups (Black, LGBTQ+, wellbeing and mental health).

We have implemented a range of initiatives from our racial diversity and inclusion action plan to help us become a truly anti-racist organisation, including:

- Running a mentoring scheme specifically for ethnic minority colleagues, which 100% of the mentees rated as either 'Excellent' (56%) or 'Good' (44%)
- Adopting the Halo Code and name pronunciation links in email signatures
- Delivering anti-discrimination and allyship in action training for all employees

We have also invested in a partnership with Flair, a people analytics company that measures how anti-racist an organisation is through employee surveys, to add more rigour and evidence to our strategy going forward.

We are pleased that we have increased the number of ethnic minority employees from 16% to 26% from April 2020-April 2021.

Our fortnightly gatherings have provided a space to prioritise information sharing and to strengthen relationships across the organisation. We use these spaces to have open and reflective conversations about all areas of our work, and ensure all employees are aware of key areas of focus beyond the work of their team. A focus on interaction and engagement has resulted in greater opportunities for discussion and a stronger commitment to our organisational culture of freedom and responsibility.

Sustainability

We continue to be grateful for the funding from the Department for Education and local authority partners to enable us to deliver our Frontline and Firstline programmes.

Our work to create social change through the Fellowship is all thanks to our philanthropic funders. 2020/21 was a challenging year for fundraising across the charity sector, with many funders either pausing their giving, or diverting resources towards direct COVID relief programmes. Despite the challenging landscape, we were delighted that during this financial year, all of our long-term major funders chose to renew their grants to Frontline, some with new multi-year commitments. We were also delighted to welcome three new trust funders to our community of donors. Their interest in supporting the growing number of projects emerging from Frontline's Innovation Lab, was also hugely encouraging.

After eight years with the same visual identity, we also took the opportunity to update our look and feel in 2021. We brought all our programmes and activities under one new logo to show that Frontline is connected and cohesive across our different teams and work areas. Our new logo, typeface, colours and imagery style have been designed to position Frontline more clearly as a charity working to create social change for children and families.

Plans for the future

2022 holds many more exciting developments in store at Frontline, as we continue to deliver our 2020-25 strategy. We are already seeing strong applications for the 2022 Cohort of the Frontline programme, and are pleased that we have seen a rise in prospective participants from ethnic minority backgrounds. In early 2022 we will be launching an early engagement campaign particularly aimed at increasing awareness of social work to men of all backgrounds and women from ethnic minority backgrounds, with the aim of increasing diversity in social work more broadly as well as within future Frontline programme cohorts. We will be continuing to implement our updated curriculum within the Frontline programme to ensure that participants' learning is embedded in theory in a way that best enables them to hit the ground running.

We are looking forward to welcoming two new cohorts to the Firstline programme in 2021, and to leading our first Headline cohort through their journey on the programme. We are also delighted to announce our new Innovation programme. Specifically for fellows and delivered through our Innovation Lab, the programme aims to increase the quality and quantity of ideas coming through the innovation pipeline and harness the power of peer-to-peer collaboration and networking in creating successful innovations.

Our experience of supporting the current initiatives set up through our Innovation Lab has shown that there is a need for innovators to receive more support in specific areas such as funding streams, stakeholder engagement and evaluation. Across the course of six months, the programme will provide workshops, one-to-one mentoring and group surgeries to support on these areas of need and other identified challenges. The programme culminates with the chance to pitch to Frontline's Innovation panel in April 2022 and an opportunity for some of the most impactful and well-developed innovations to receive further support. This could, thanks to the generous support of our philanthropic funders, include financial grants. The first cohort consists of 18 fellows, and we are hoping at least 25% of the ideas presented will be taken on as Frontline-supported initiatives.

We are increasing our focus on evaluation to better measure and demonstrate the impact of our programmes on participants, their social work practice and ultimately on children and families. To enable this, we have doubled the size of our evaluation team to include a data officer and impact lead, allowing our experienced staff to focus in depth on the full breadth of our work in order to accurately evidence our impact. We are adding measures across our programmes to clearly capture the impact of our programmes, to identify ways we can improve and share our learning with others in social work. All of our work will continue to have children and families at the heart as we strive to create social change through excellent social work leadership and practice.



Thank you

Our work is made possible with the support of the Department for Education and our incredible community of philanthropic funders who donate funds, time and expertise to Frontline to support our mission of creating social change for children who do not have a safe or stable home.

We would like to thank the following organisations and their staff, for their support and friendship.

AKO Foundation
Andrew & Belinda Scott CT
Annie Tranmer Charitable Trust
Cliff Richard Charitable Trust
Credit Suisse EMEA Foundation
David Lister Charitable Trust
Davison Charitable Trust
Duncan Ford
Elizabeth Tennier
Fidelity
Gerson Lehrman Group (GLG)
Hedley Foundation
Inner London Magistrates Poor Box
John Swire Foundation
Matthew Rooney
netcompany
Phillips Family Charitable Trust
The Portal Trust
Porticus
Sean Farrell
Sharegift
Shawfield Wealth Management Limited
St James Place Foundation
Worshipful Company of Builder's Merchants
ZVM Rangoonwala Foundation



If you have any questions about our work, please get in touch:

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