

Resources for Autism Social Impact Report 2020



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Welcome from our Chief Executive

When I joined Resources for Autism as a new Chief Executive in December 2019, I could never have anticipated the year that was to follow. After a couple of months of getting to know the organisation, and receiving a warm welcome from the team, it felt like the world changed overnight. We had to re-imagine all our provision, starting anew in a completely unknown landscape.

My overarching memory of that initial period is of the team pulling together extremely quickly. With the huge impact of the pandemic on our autistic community, it was our mission to adjust, adapt, respond and innovate in order to be fully present throughout this crisis. There were times that were overwhelming and filled with uncertainty while many others fired us with purpose. Staff got sick with COVID, others had to shield for prolonged periods of time. Some had to be furloughed while others carried on throughout. What was consistent was the spirit of a team who pulled together, persevered, and turned adversity into an opportunity to reinvent themselves and the service offering, rising up stronger because of it.

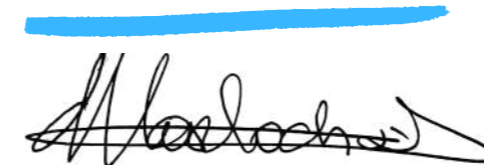
This was a year like no other and I am so proud of what has been collectively achieved. Some of our highlights include:

- **Offering direct support to over 1,400 individuals, of whom nearly 800 were brand new users of our services in 2020**
- **Developing a virtual offering for those we support who have capacity to engage remotely, with over 400 sessions attended across all our services**
- **Developing a new early help service offering short-term holistic intervention to families before they escalate to crisis point, supporting 45 families**
- **Redefining our wellbeing offer to staff and volunteers with so many new and holistic initiatives, aiming to make RfA a mentally healthy place to work.**

What has been achieved this year would not have been possible without the sheer dedication of our staff who, despite the uncertainty, and unprecedented risks and challenges have shown their tenacity, talent and strength of heart. It would also not have been possible without the support of our donors, be they generous individuals, foundations or statutory partners who enabled us to respond to the ever-changing situation. We are truly grateful.

Finally, on behalf of Resources for Autism, I'd like to acknowledge the parents and members of our community. We thank you for trusting us, for shaping our future direction with your feedback, and above all for your willingness, through your everyday actions, to continue to change society's narrative around autism from one of stigma to one of acceptance, celebration and inclusion. We are right here with you

I hope you enjoy the report.



About Resources for Autism

Resources for Autism is a registered charity whose vision is a society where individuals on the autistic spectrum can live as equal citizens in their community. We provide practical services for children and adults with a diagnosis of autism, and for those who love and care for them.

We see autism as a neurodevelopmental difference that can affect how an individual perceives the world and relates with people around them. **Our fundamental starting point is acceptance for an individual exactly as they are.** We work with those around them, including parents, teachers and other professionals, to ensure each individual is understood and supported to be the best version of themselves they can be.

We do not see individuals as having challenging behaviour, we see services which face challenges in responding to their behaviour. Our aim goes beyond developing resilient individuals or families, to creating resilient services that are aware and inclusive of neurodivergence.

We have a team of trained, enthusiastic and kind staff and volunteers offering a wide range of support. All our staff are autism specialists who understand communication and sensory needs. We operate in London and the West Midlands.

In preparing our social impact report this year we went on a collaborative journey. As well as drawing on service user data and reports from our services and activities, we ran a series of workshops to reflect on our impact and learning. We gathered feedback from commissioners who fund our services, and from our volunteers. To make sure we based our report on the experiences of our autistic community, we conducted a survey of over 200 parents and service users, and interviewed individual service users and their families.

In previous years we have run an Autism Community Volunteering Service, supporting autistic adults to take on volunteering roles, and a Sibling Group, but we were not able to operate these services during lockdown. We also work in partnership with schools, local authorities, and health, employment and homelessness services in different London boroughs, providing them with training, advice and support to improve their services for people with autism.



Our Services

Infographic Key:



London



Play Service



Behaviour Support



Reach Out



Art & Music



School Integration



Triage Helpline



Parenting Support



Intensive Support Service



Reach Out



Art & Music



Triage Helpline



Support Groups



Training & Consultancy

West Midlands



Play Service



Behaviour Support



Reach Out



Triage Helpline



Parenting Support



Reach Out



Triage Helpline



Support Groups



Training & Consultancy

Who we work with

Our services work with people of every age and stage of life. The people we support come from a variety of ethnic, social and educational backgrounds. Many live with other conditions alongside autism, including learning disabilities, mental health problems, ADHD or diabetes. We specialise in offering support to people who have been excluded or do not have access to other services.



699 children & young people



401 parents and carers



324 adults



1424 individuals and their families



36,000 unique website visitors

Our Reach in 2020

Ethnicity:



- 25% Black
- 19% Asian
- 46% White British
- 10% White Other

Gender:



- 70% Male
- 29% Female
- 0.5% Trans

Our Pandemic Year - Responding to Covid-19



During 2020, we had to develop completely new ways of working to support our autistic community through the pandemic. **Within the first few weeks of lockdown, we contacted every single family and adult we support to assess their needs, and established a Crisis Helpline, open 7 days a week.**

For our most vulnerable families, we continued with home visits and food drops to provide consistency in routines for children and young people, and respite for families. We made weekly phone and video calls to the rest of our community, along with a range of online resources.

We distributed 650 individually tailored Home Isolation Kits, with items such as a visual timetable, fidget spinners and art supplies.

"We received our isolation pack. I'm honestly blown away. What a lovely gesture and just in time - we were starting to run out of things to do." - Parent

We have found a range of ways to continue providing services throughout the pandemic, including:



A full programme of online events for adults as we created many different zoom resources for all adults



Continuing to work face to face with our service users throughout the lockdowns of the pandemic



Covid-secure face to face activities, including a 4 week Summer Scheme attended by over 200 children, some of whom had not left their homes in months



Online parenting groups and art activities

"Home support during the COVID-19 lockdown has been a lifeline to our family. When I first found out that K's school was closing, I sat in the kitchen and just sobbed. I really didn't know how we'd cope as K needs his routine. He started crying a lot and self-harming and his sleep completely went out the window. It was truly awful... When RfA contacted us to offer home support, I was so relieved. The carers were absolutely amazing and understood my son's needs so well. K being able to go out with them made such a difference! He became much calmer and his sleep improved. I don't know what we would have done without the RfA support. The sensory care packages they delivered to our home were fantastic and so well thought out for K's needs. All in all, RfA provided the most incredible support at a time when our family was in very dire straits. We will be forever grateful." - Parent

Our impact: Children & Young People



What we offer:

We offer a range of services for children and young people up to the age of 18.



Play Service - after school and weekend clubs, and holiday schemes



Behaviour Support, including our pioneering Orange House service supporting people who have been excluded from school



Art and Music Therapy, using play and creativity to unlock emotion, deal with anxiety and help with communication and interaction



Reach Out, a volunteer befriending service enabling children and young people to take part in activities, go on outings and engage with their local community



Community Support Service offering bespoke 1:1 support on a weekly basis, working towards independence within the community

2020 in numbers!



We worked with 699 children & young people



427 in London & 272 in the West Midlands

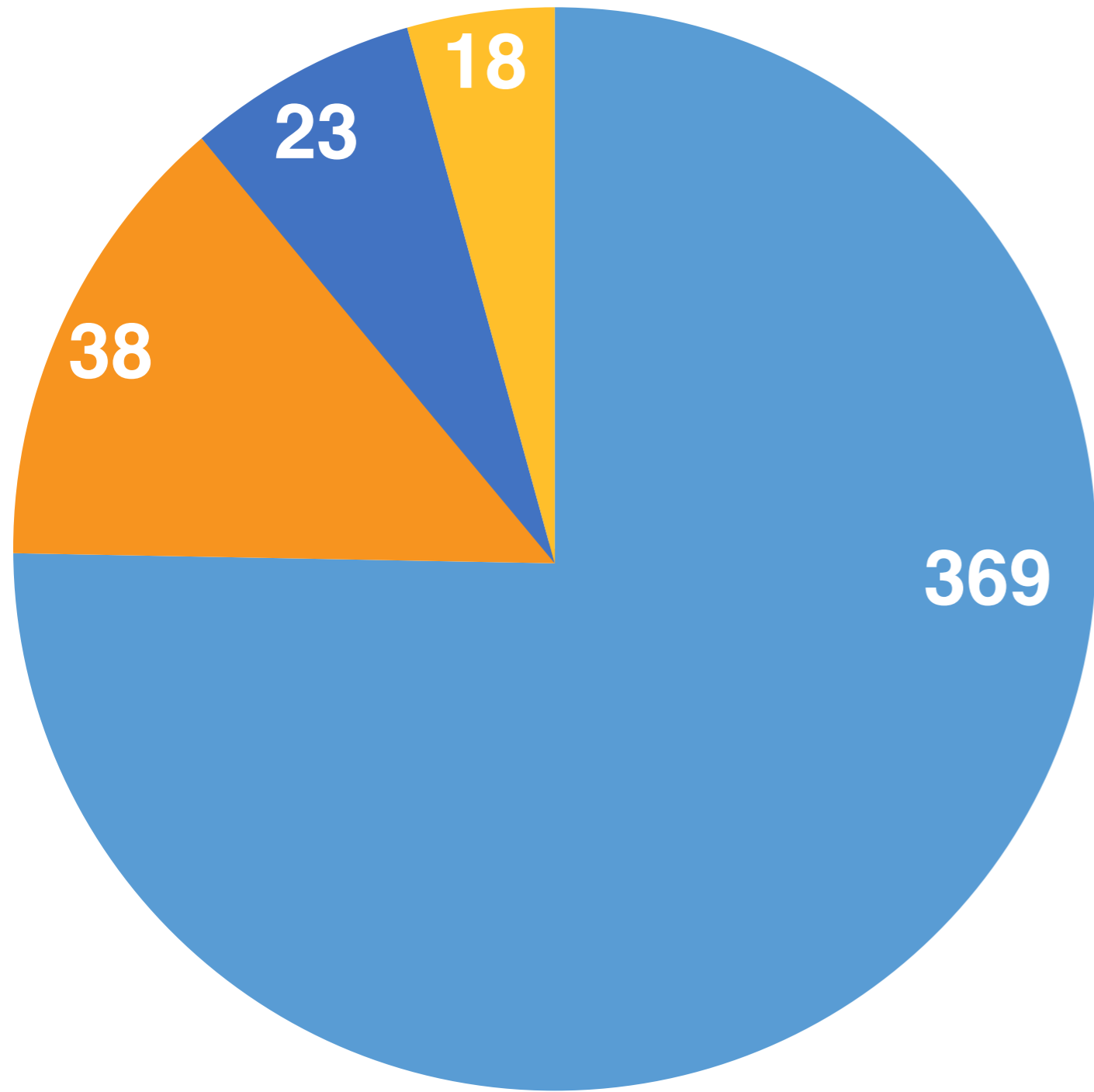


Despite the challenges of Covid, we welcomed over 250 new children & young people to our services for the first time

Around $\frac{3}{4}$ of the children and young people we work with are boys, which is in line with the difference in rates of diagnosis between girls and boys.

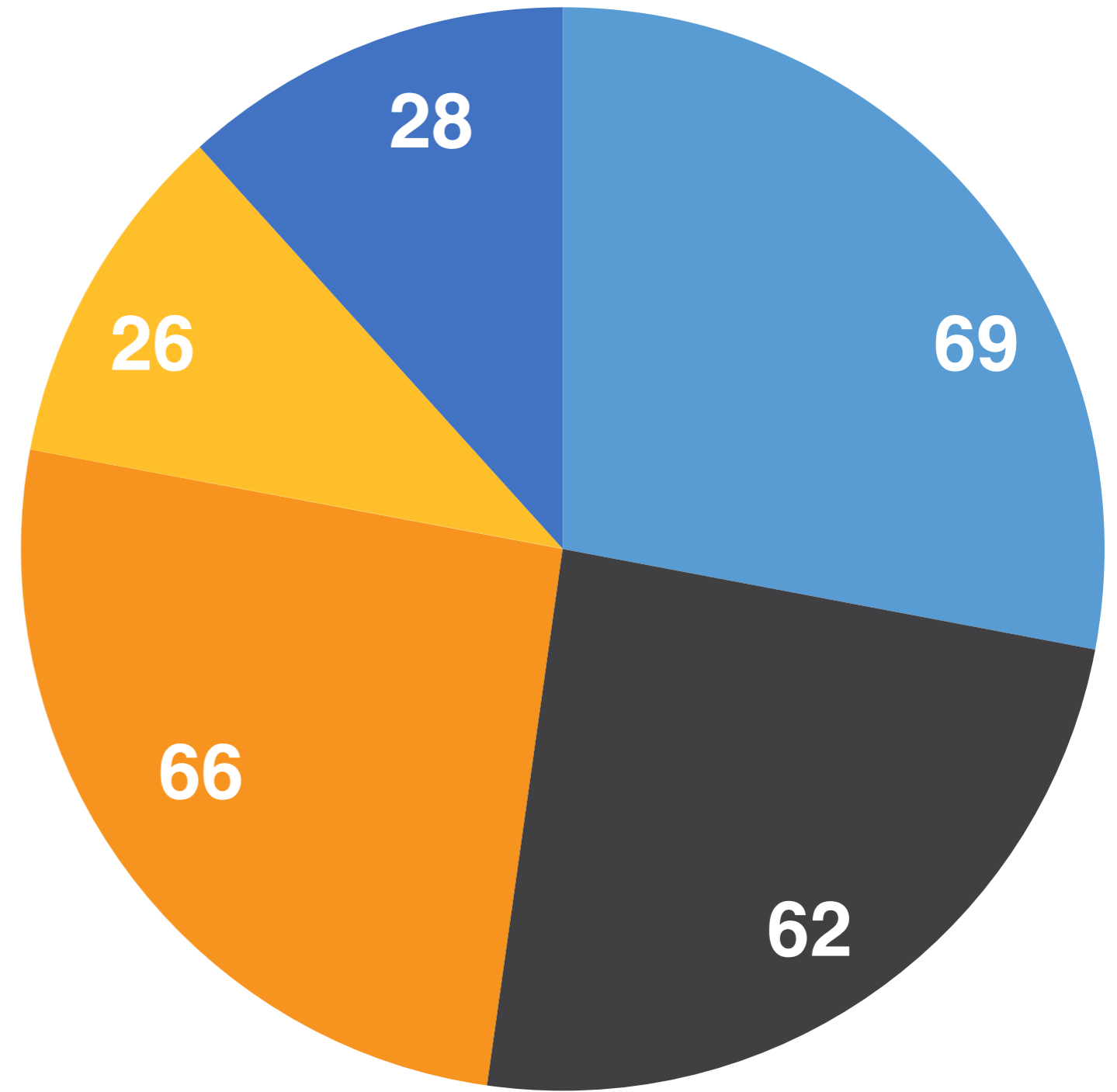


Pre Existing Number of children supported in 2020



- Play
- Community Support
- Reach Out
- Art & Music Therapy

New children supported in 2020



- Play
- Behaviour Support
- Community Support
- Reach Out
- Art & Music Therapy

The difference we make!

Increased confidence and sense of belonging:

Acceptance is fundamental to all our work with children and young people. We provide places and activities where they feel welcomed and valued by people outside their family, often for the first time.

Children and young people can have fun at our play groups without having to worry about being judged or excluded. We offer safe spaces for them to express themselves and release their energy safely. Parents tell us that their children are happier and more relaxed when they come home.

Our Reach Out service helps children and young people go to new places, try out new things and take part in fun activities with support from a trained volunteer or member of staff. Through art and music therapy, children and young people build their confidence and self-esteem, as they discover new ways to express themselves and develop musical and creative skills.

These kinds of welcoming, positive activities create a sense of belonging, and help children and young people to “find their tribe” within our Autism Community. Feeling recognised and validated is a vital first step in building young people’s confidence and resilience.

99%

of respondents to our survey said that RfA has helped them improve their confidence

93%

of respondents said that being involved with RfA has helped them or their children feel more like they belong.



“I didn’t have many people that understood me and knew how to work with me, from the first session at RfA I was amazed how a staff member knew exactly how to work with me without any issues, this made me realise all along it wasn’t me that was too much!”

- Young Person

“The feeling of being accepted is priceless. I can leave home without being panicky when I attend Saturday club or holiday club.” - Young Person

“The only activity I’ve managed to find for my child which will take him”

- Parent

Communication and interaction:

Our play groups and support services allow children and young people to meet and interact with each other, as well as with staff and volunteers. Engaging with other people in a safe and caring environment helps children and young people build their confidence and skills for communication.

97%

of survey respondents told us that children and young people are better able to deal with other people as a result of their involvement with Resources for Autism

Relationships and social connection:

Our Behaviour Support and Community Support programmes directly help children and young people to develop their communication skills and manage their anxiety. They also benefit from fun, relaxed social interaction at play groups and as part of our community support and Reach Out programmes. All this support, formal and informal, helps children and young people to strengthen their relationships with family members, peers and classmates.

92%

said RfA has helped them improve their relationships

"My child had several speech and language therapists before joining your playscheme but none of them was able to make him talk at all. So when I saw him talking to your staff at the scheme, how surprised I was!!"

-Parent

Independence and resilience:

79%

of survey respondents told us that RfA had helped them to improve their independence

86%

of survey respondents said that they were better able to cope from day to day

These improvements in confidence, communication and relationships can make a huge difference to the ability of children and young people to manage everyday life.

Our Behaviour Support and Community Support programmes help children and young people and their families understand what can trigger behaviour, provide strategies to help regulate those triggers and adapt the environment around them to optimise their potential.

As well as the Community Support service, our Reach Out volunteer befrienders help children and young people take new steps towards independence, from leaving the house or taking the bus to go on outings or take part in activities that interest them. Staff and volunteers support children and young people to deal with environmental and social anxiety, and build up the skills and confidence to do things by themselves.

"My worker takes walks with me along the route so that I can learn it and he is teaching me social cues when out."

- Young Person

School Integration Service, Orange House

The Orange House project in Newham provides intensive specialist support to autistic children who have been excluded from special or mainstream schools, because their behaviour is perceived as “too challenging”.

A group of highly experienced staff and a specialist teacher offer a personalised curriculum and a safe space to work on behaviour management strategies and communication, working with up to six children at a time, for up to a year. As in all our work, the team provides a welcoming and accepting environment, helping children to rebuild trusting relationships with adults and other children as they recover from the breakdown of their school placement. The service does not aim to change the individual, but to understand their behaviour in order to change the narrative around them.

“Often a child will come in not being able to sit still or concentrate for any time, and we help them to build up until they are completely ready to go back into a school setting.”

Alongside our work directly with the children, the Orange House team works closely with schools and other professionals to increase their understanding of autism, and help them develop techniques and strategies to create a suitable placement for the child to return to.

This often involves playing an advocacy role on behalf of the parents of excluded children, especially for single mothers, parents who don't have English as their first language, or who are autistic themselves. Parents often don't know what their children are entitled to, and an important part of our work is to be ‘on their side’ in a system which can seem to work against the family.

“It's about changing the narrative - away from ‘this is an unmanageable child who can't go to school’ to talking about how we can support this child in school.”

- All five children supported by Orange House in 2020 have successfully returned to school.
- All 23 children supported throughout the start of this project in 2018 are back into school.



CASE STUDY: Dre's Story



'I'm Dre, I'm a singer/songwriter. I also like football, food and cooking. I like watching telly, reality shows and cooking shows. I love lots of different brands and cars!'

"There's a lot people don't know about autism. I got my diagnosis when I was really young. So I know that autism - is where people have disabilities, and are not normal like this who can move about or talk, some people are non-verbal, some people have other conditions."

Dre has been coming to a Resources for Autism youth group since he was 12. He has learning disabilities, and struggles with anxiety. It's important for him to have a routine to help him manage in his daily life. For Dre, the group gives him an opportunity to have fun and try different things.

"The staff take us out on trips trampolining, going in parks. We have done loads of talent shows where we can show the staff and each other what we're made of. It's a fun way to get the energy going, that's what I really appreciate - lots of fun. The thing I love about RfA is that we're like an amazing family. We all get on really well. We all tend to go a little crazy, and a little silly sometimes."

Most of all, it's a safe and welcoming place where he can spend time with his friends and interact with people without feeling anxious or stressed. The support from RfA has helped Dre see the good things about autism.

"For me it's about not being ashamed of having autism. It's something that I've been really proud of. Because of this I get to go to autism schemes and get to meet lots of people."



Our Impact: Families

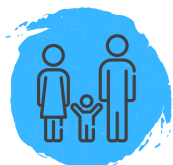


What we offer:

We aim to meet parents and carers where they are, treating them as experts on their own story and supporting them to gain confidence, awareness and resilience.



Our Triage helpline service is often the first place parents or carers come after a child's diagnosis - as well as a source of information and advice, it is also the gateway to support from Resources for Autism and other services



Parent Support Groups and Drop Ins allow parents and carers to share experiences with others, and get advice and support from people in similar situations



Behaviour Support works actively with parents and carers to help them develop tailored behaviour management strategies with their loved one



Our new Intensive Family Support Service provides emergency support to families at points of crisis

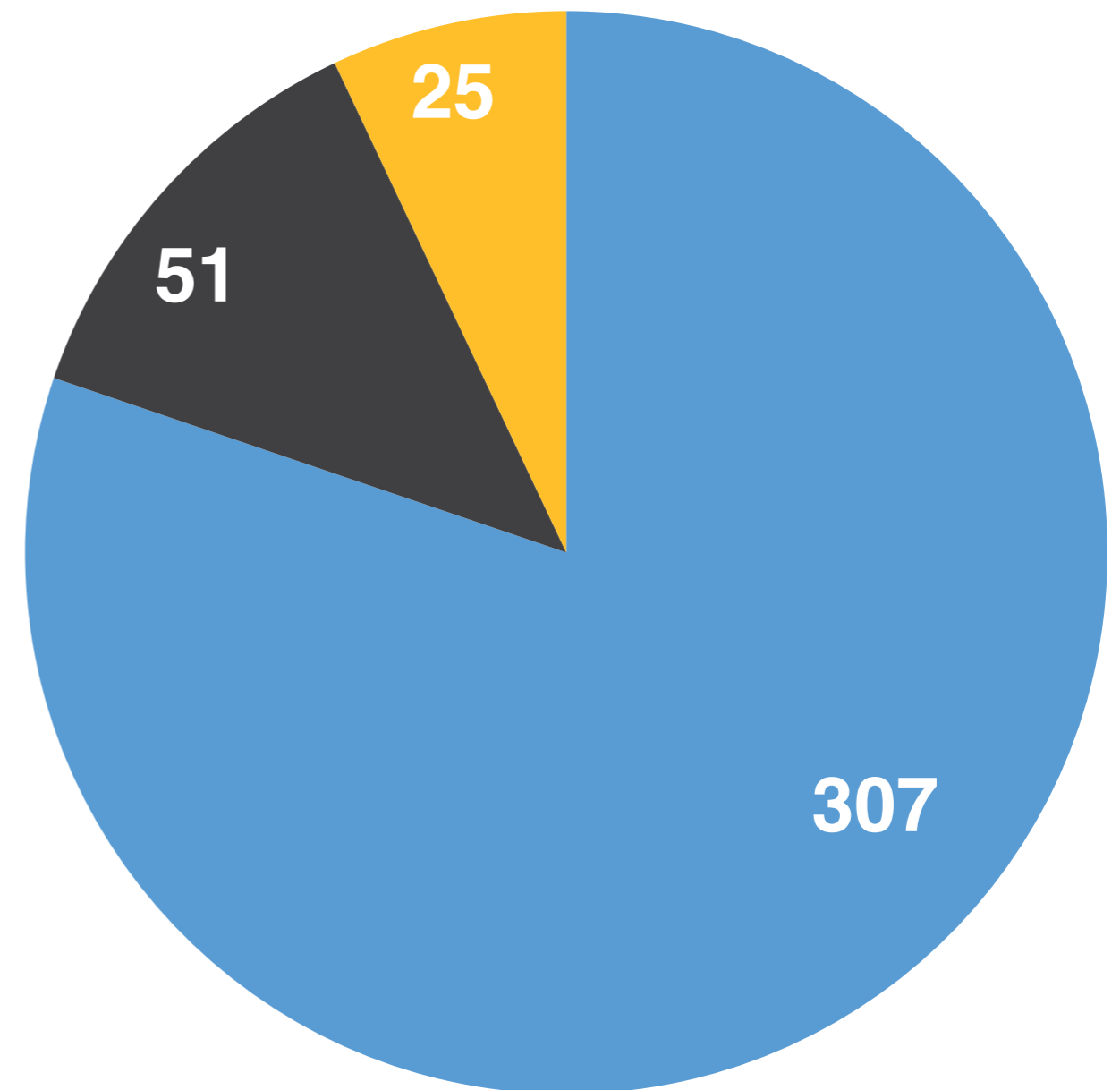


Our Play and Community services provide much needed respite for families

Families we worked with in 2020



We worked directly with over 400 families through our Triage, Parent Support and Early Help services, over and above the 700 children we supported individually



■ Triage ■ Parent Support Groups ■ Intensive Family Support

The difference we make!

Validation and recognition:

Caring for an autistic child can feel overwhelming. Right from the initial triage session, we are there with parents and carers, providing reassurance and a listening ear.

"As my child was out of school, then everyone was out of school, then was in school under social distancing, RfA was the first place that I was able to actually meet other parents. This was both a pleasure and of immediate practical benefit."

- Parent

An important part of our work with families is helping people feel understood and welcomed into our community. From triage staff celebrating what parents have already achieved, often in challenging circumstances, to parents encouraging and supporting each other, we help families feel that they are not alone any more.

"Sometimes it's the first time they've ever spoken to someone about autism or even heard the word."

- Rfa Triage Staff

"The parent spaces to offload when we were struggling with the pandemic and behaviour were lifesavers."

- Parent

Respite

When someone on the autistic spectrum takes part in one of our play schemes or community support activities, family members also benefit. Knowing that their child is safe, happy and seen for who they are, they can focus on other areas of their life without feeling guilty.

"Sam joining the club has been the best thing ever. First week was a bit of a struggle. Second week he got ready without me even asking him. Me and the girls are finally knowing what Saturdays are."

- Parent

Families use this respite time for activities that usually take a second place to caring - catching up on work, shopping, chores or sleep, dedicated time with siblings, a coffee with friends or other parents, and even a date night! This helps them keep things running, and improves relationships and stress levels for the whole family.

"It has helped not only my child but the whole family. We have a break from our caring obligations hand back to normality."

- Parent

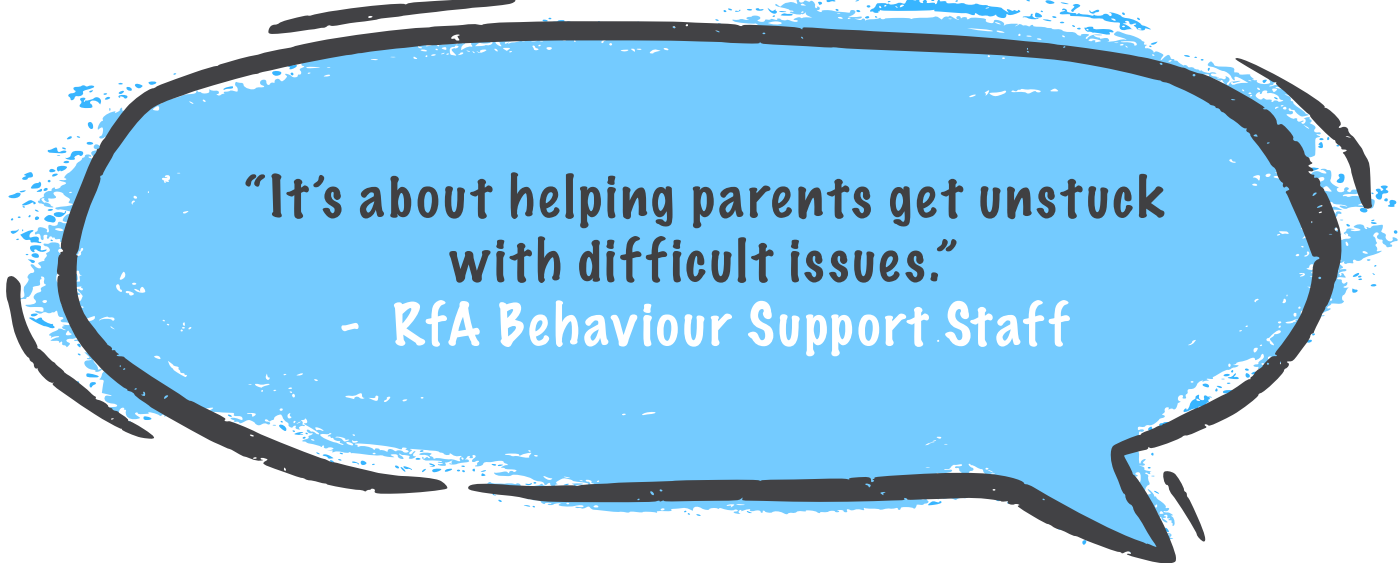
"We've made friends with the parents and helpers and it has given us some time alone with my child's sibling."

- Parent

Skills and Confidence:

Our Triage and Behaviour Support services provide parents and carers with information, advice and skills to help them support their child. These include behaviour management strategies and safety plans, equipment and resources like countdown timers and time planners, and other practical tips and techniques. We also provide information and advice on other services and sources of support.

Parents and carers report increased confidence, and a greater sense of security and control over their situation as a result of their new knowledge and skills.



**"It's about helping parents get unstuck with difficult issues."
- RfA Behaviour Support Staff**


Access to wider services and support:

We work with families to help them access education, benefits, care or other support for their child. Our staff provide information and advice, and sometimes act as an advocate on behalf of families to support them to get a school placement or claim Disability Living Allowance or Carer's Allowance.

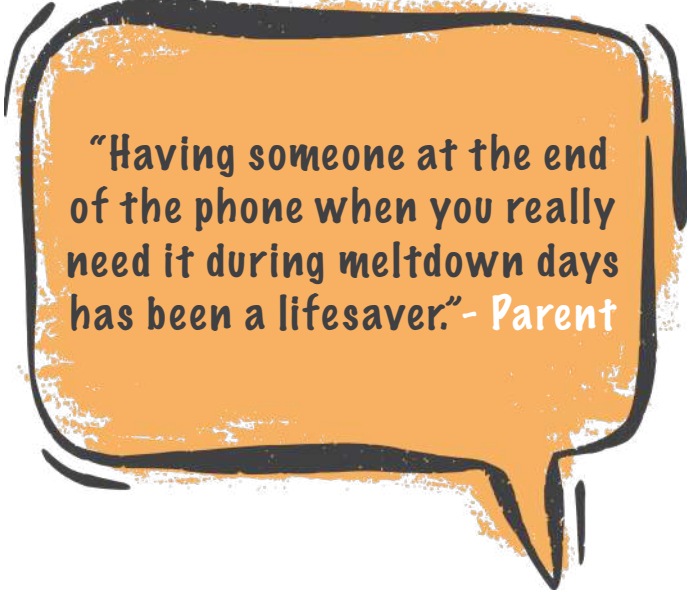
This kind of support can be particularly important when it comes to difficult transitions - for example, from primary to secondary school, or when older parents have to work out who will care for their adult children if they are no longer able to. We help parents and carers to understand their options, make decisions, even when these are tough, and take the next steps on the pathway, whatever they decide.

Resilience:

All our work helps families to become more resilient - able to cope better with day-to-day crises, and better equipped for the long term. Parents and carers can draw on a wide range of immediate support when they need it, from friendships with other parents to the helpline and behaviour support services.

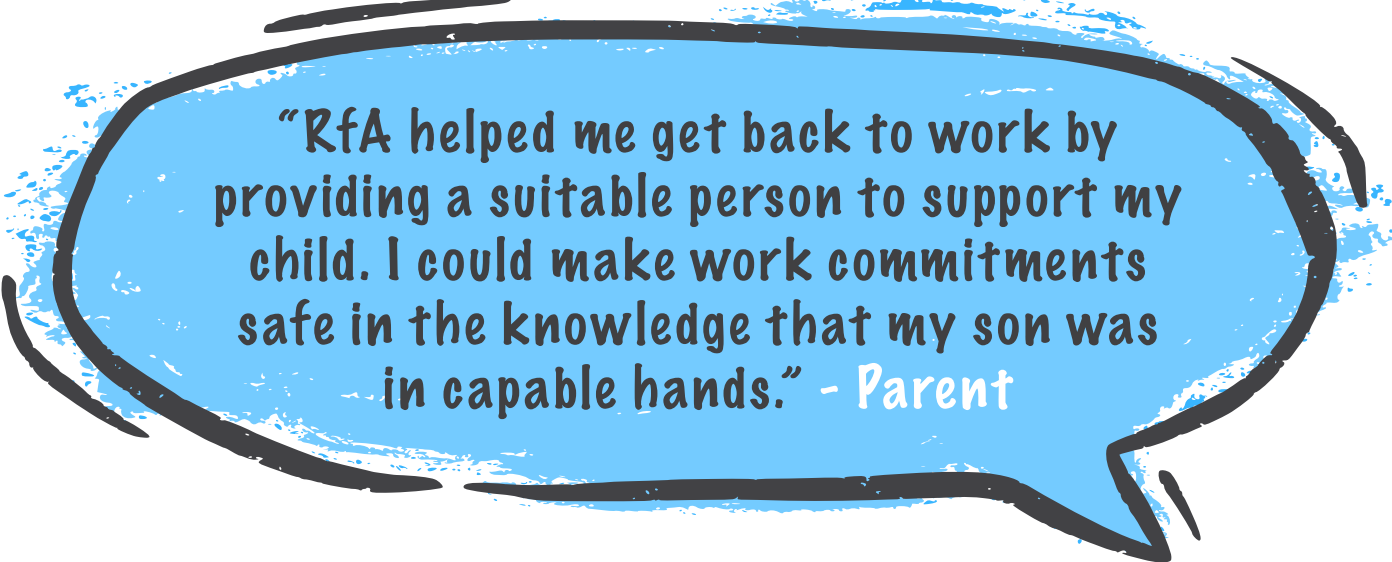


"The playscheme staying open makes the difference between a fantastic weekend or a weekend where we can have a series of behavioural issues." - Parent



"Having someone at the end of the phone when you really need it during meltdown days has been a lifesaver." - Parent

Through ongoing community support, and helping families to plan for the future and access other services or benefits, RfA enables parents and carers to establish lasting solutions for themselves and their children.



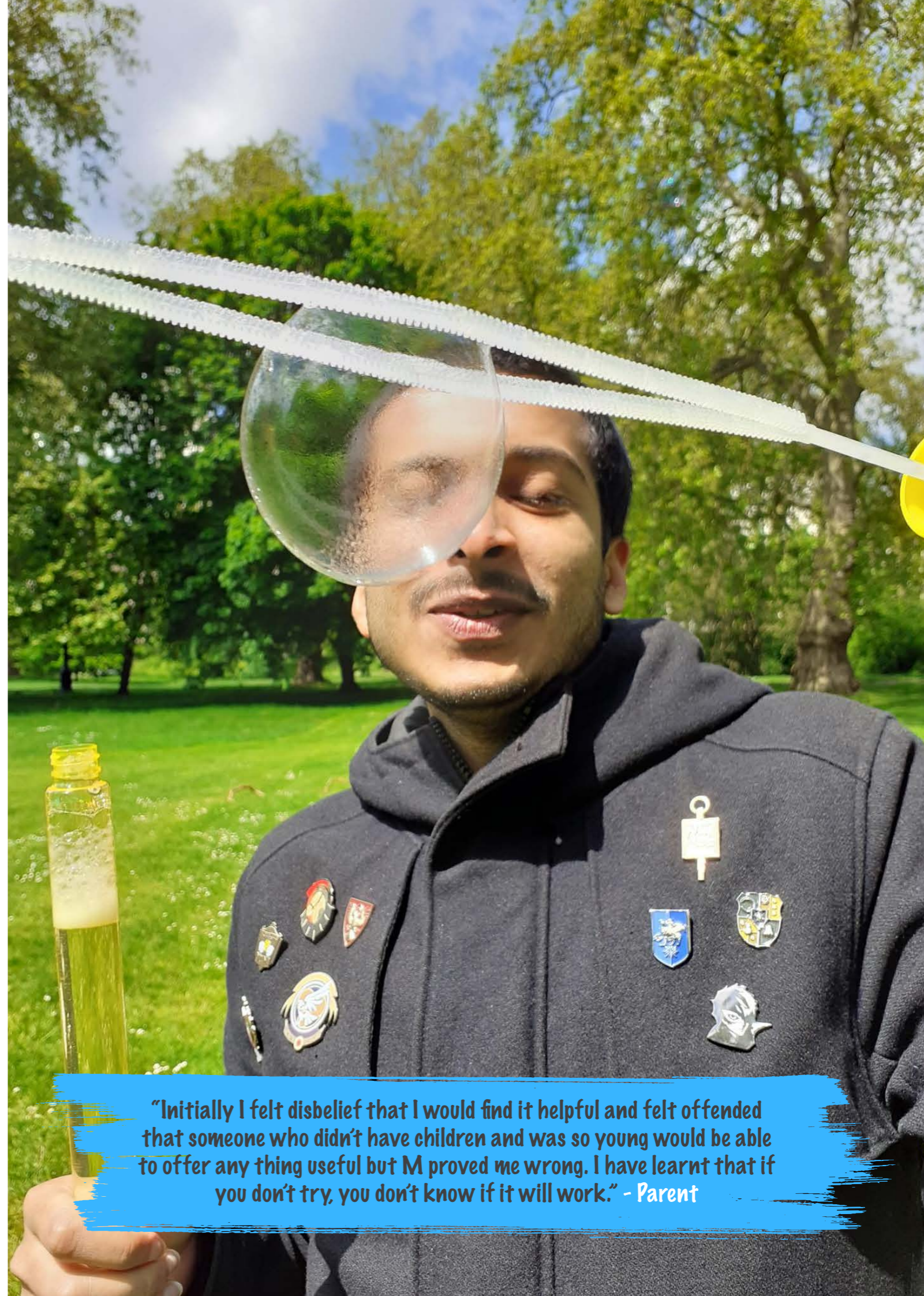
"RfA helped me get back to work by providing a suitable person to support my child. I could make work commitments safe in the knowledge that my son was in capable hands." - Parent

Intensive Family Support:

The Covid – 19 restrictions put further pressure on families who were already near to the edge. Schools closing and the impact on the structure and routine were devastating. In addition to parental working patterns changing, loss of income and no in person activities impacted further with no respite from the difficulties.

In response we set up a new Intensive Family Support Service in September 2020 in partnership with London Borough of Barnet. This provides urgent, short term holistic support to families before they escalate to crisis point.

So far over 45 families have received this intensive tailored support in London. All had been pushed to their limits and needed new strategies and advice. There were multiple reasons for the struggles to be unpicked with one of our expert team who offered a new positive perspective and way forward. We empowered households to avoid family breakdown and to preserve their wellbeing. They all benefited from innovative ideas and were given resources, plans and most importantly modelled to see how this would work. The families were at different stages and severity of social services involvement during this time. However following the input from the Intensive Family Support team all families have reported improvements and none have been re referred to social services so far



“Initially I felt disbelief that I would find it helpful and felt offended that someone who didn’t have children and was so young would be able to offer any thing useful but M proved me wrong. I have learnt that if you don’t try, you don’t know if it will work.” - Parent

CASE STUDY: Rachel's Story

I'm Rachel and my son goes to a weekly play session. He loves adventure play! He always feels warmly welcome and that he's valued. People forget within this person is someone swimming around, diving around just not able to externalise it.

Rachel's first contact with the charity was when she worked as a social worker herself and the charity came to one of our services to do a talk there. Someone came to speak at her son's school. We learnt about the weekend services and the holiday services. As her son left full time education he really doesn't get much social interaction with others, he was invited to join the weekly group.

'He can have fun and he always comes away very happy, because it's all been about him. They recognise him and see him, he feels warmly welcomed and he knows he's valued.'

Rachel's son has now left full time education. He goes to a weekly club at Resources for Autism, which is one of the few places where he can spend time away from home. Rachel says that the club makes a real difference for her son. Our services are a lifeline for parents like Rachel, who can't access support anywhere else.

"People like us rely on RfA as it allows us to get out of the house, people don't get to go out to the park or anywhere. I want to watch him having fun. To get out, to go somewhere."

What Rachel values most is that we start by accepting her son, and build our support around him and what he needs. Like many parents in her situation she is also frustrated about the lack of government funding for more services like RfA and the need for what the charity does to scale, so that more people with autism can live well and thrive in society as a whole.

"I would love to be able to take my son to the park - but how am I supposed to explain to him why everyone else is looking at him? People should be able to understand him, and talk to him, but they don't. As a charity they are super capable and special, because they base everything they do around the individual. It's unique the way they try to address all the problems for different people, because no one else does it. They don't make judgements, they don't restrict anything. They reach out to families and they give us the opportunity to see our children thriving. They are innovative because they are always looking for ways of establishing it somewhere else." - Rachel, Parent

**"The RfA actually cares about the children.
The staff are so friendly and supportive."
- Parent**

Our Impact: Adults



What we offer:

We run several services for autistic adults (aged over 18):



Support Groups - weekly sessions with fun activities and discussions of interesting topics



Special Interest Groups that concentrate on hobbies or skills such as mindfulness or confidence



Community Support service offering bespoke 1:1 support on a weekly basis, working towards independence within the community



Reach Out, a volunteer befriending service enabling people to take part in activities, go on outings and engage with their local community



Art and Music Therapy (London only)

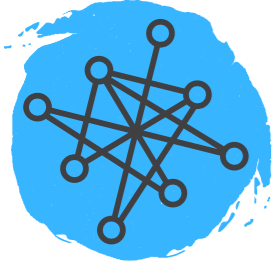


Triage - adults with autism also contact our helpline and triage service to seek information, advice and support for themselves

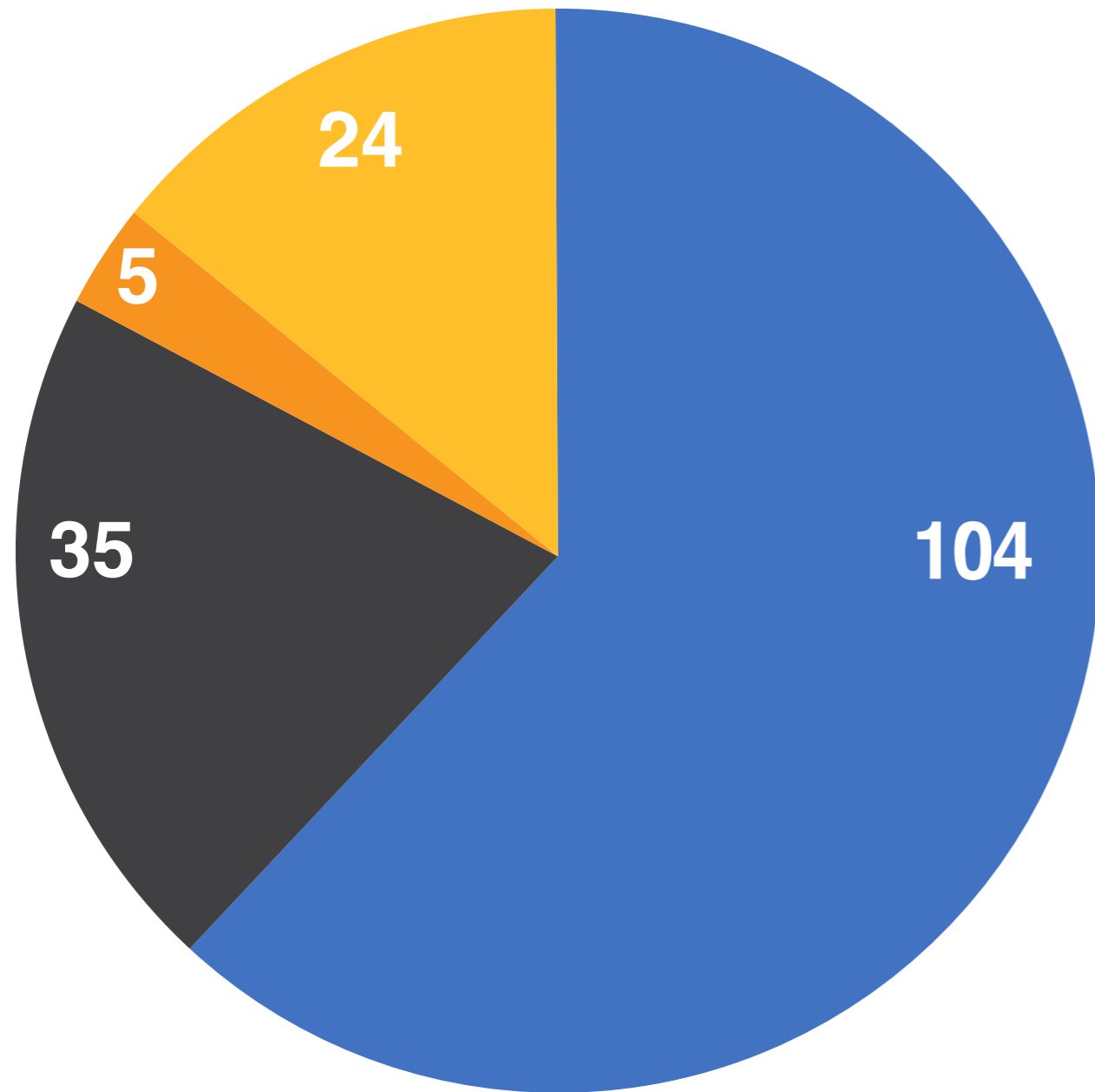


Advocacy, crisis interventions and support to access services

Pre Existing Number of adults supported in 2020



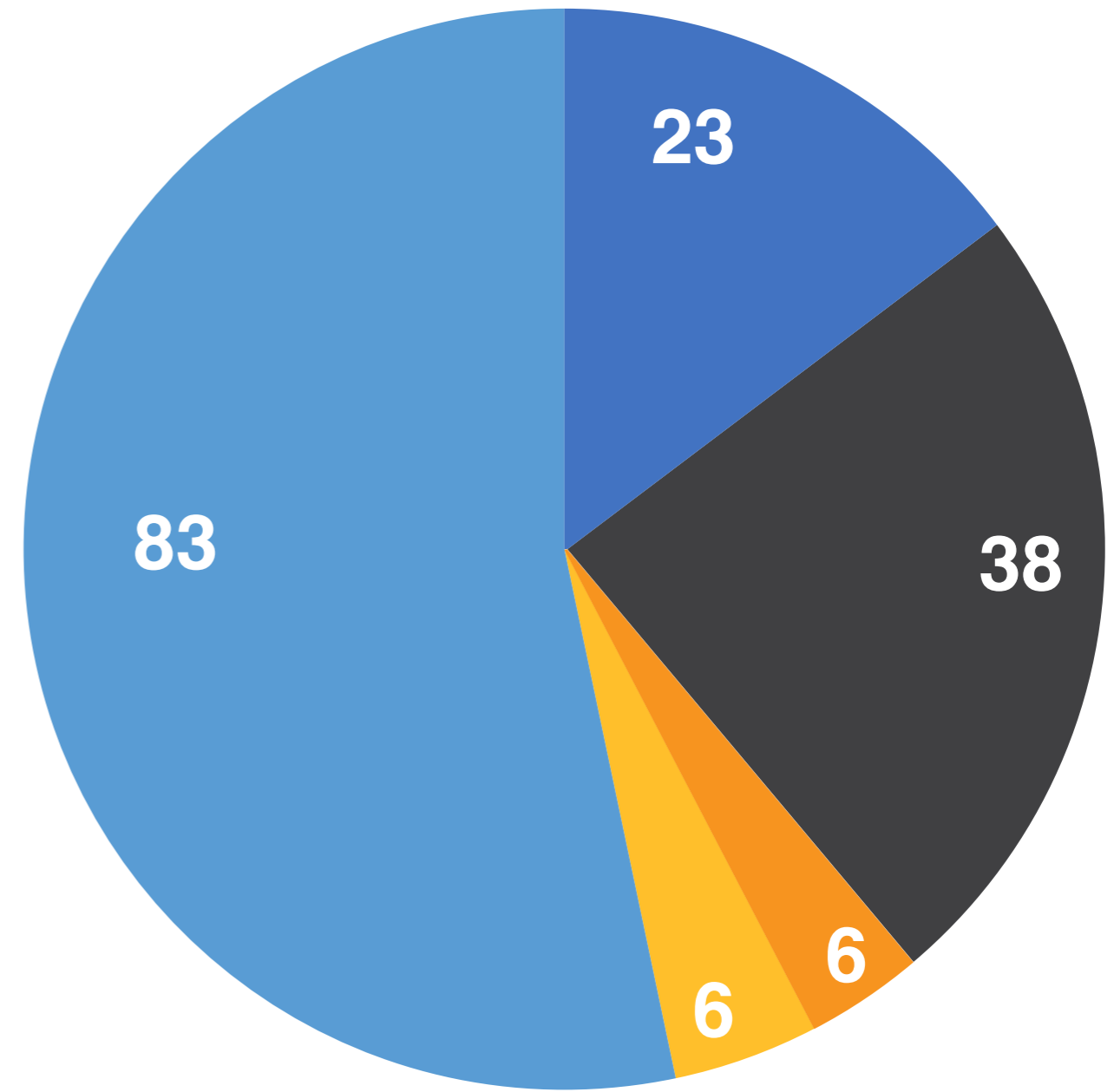
We worked with 324 adults in 2020. This year, a total of 156 adults got involved with our services for the first time



■ Adult Support ■ Community Support ■ Reach Out ■ Art & Music Therapy

New adults supported in 2020

Around 1/3 of the adults we work with are women. This is a higher proportion than we see among children and young people, partly reflecting the fact that women and girls often don't receive a diagnosis until they are older. We are proud of reaching more adult women.



■ Adult Support ■ Triage ■ Community Support ■ Reach Out ■ Art & Music Therapy

The difference we make!

Social interaction and connection:

Adults have fun, pursue their interests and learn new things at our groups and therapy services. They also meet others, and interact in a low pressure, autism-friendly environment. Through group activities and one-to-one support, we create opportunities for them to improve social interaction and communication skills, and to develop friendships with others with similar experiences.

Once they have left school, autistic adults may find themselves living alone, or with very limited contact with other people except parents or carers. Friendly spaces to socialise are particularly important to help people avoid becoming lonely and isolated.

15%

said Resources for Autism has given them more of a feeling that they belong

"The best thing about RfA is it keeps me socialising with people who are more my age." - Adult

Access to other services and sources of support :

Our Triage services provide advice, information, advocacy and other support to autistic adults. Our listening ear and carefully tailored help are especially important for people who've received a diagnosis of autism as adults, and have to adjust to a new identity, often by themselves with little or no support.

Specialist adult staff provide ongoing support and advocacy after the initial triage process. We make links with other services, such as social services, housing, health and work and benefits. Our staff act as advocates, mediating with other professionals on behalf of adults we work with, to help them access the support they need.

In crises, such as when people are in danger of eviction, experiencing serious mental health problems, or involved with the police or criminal justice system, we help services understand the person's situation and respond appropriately. Our staff are also alongside people when things are less extreme, accompanying them through the ups and downs of everyday life.



Safety:

From the initial risk assessment by the triage service onward, we help keep adults with autism safe. Group activities create an opportunity for friends / peers and trained staff to check in, noticing how people are from week to week, and spotting any early warning signs. We support people to access other services, from healthcare to home improvements, that can keep them safe.

We also help people stay safe with others. A major focus of our group activities for adults is building healthy relationship models. Through training and discussions, we give people the knowledge and skills to spot and respond to potential danger signs in romantic and sexual relationships, as well as friendships and family relations.

76% of adults said we have helped them cope better with their day to day life



CASE STUDY: Leah's Story



"I'm Leah, I love the smurfs, my favourite one is hackus. He is the ADHD side of me - he goes all crazy and insane at everything - he always wants to be accepted all the time. He get's in trouble because he's impulsive and he gets into trouble all the time. He's like a mini me."

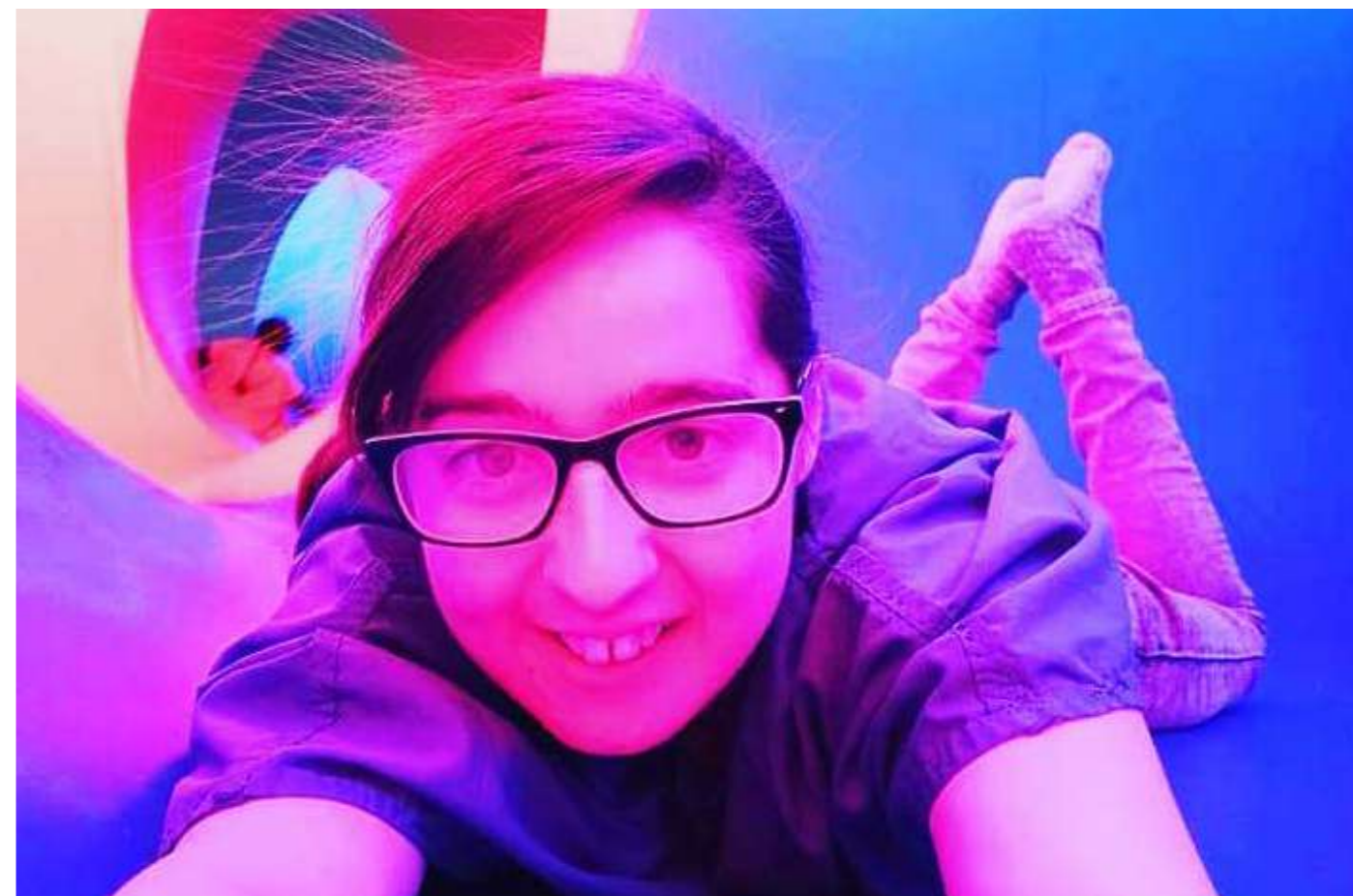
Leah was diagnosed as autistic in 2014 at age 20, after a traumatic and frustrating journey. During her teenage years, she was misdiagnosed with a series of other conditions, which led to her family relationships breaking down. As a result, Leah found herself homeless in 2014 and again in 2017 when her student accommodation was demolished. Finally she was offered the council flat that she now lives in.

"I was refused help from hostels due to being in education. I was told to quit my degree to get a home. I stayed at someone's house on the floor for 3 months, this had a massive impact on my mental health as I was very close to not wanting to wake up any more. I begged many services for help to get me somewhere to live."

She joined one of our Adult Support Groups in Birmingham about 3 years ago, just at the point where she finished her degree. She immediately felt that she had found her tribe. It is one of the only places she can go, and feel safe, confident and able to relax. An RfA keyworker supports Leah to participate in the group, helping her to maintain structure and take time out, and making sure that other members understand and avoid her triggers. The group has really helped Leah manage feelings of stress and anxiety from day to day.

Leah and other members play an active role in running the group, planning activities such as yoga, trips or outings like crazy golf, or sessions on communication or social skills. Leah has now joined Resources for Autism's co-production group, working with other adults on the development and improvement of our services. During her time on the co-production group she designed a resource for other people living with autism who are homeless from her own experiences.

"RfA understood me in seconds. I'd never had that, it's the only place where I feel that I can just be me, I can just be autistic. If I'm stressed or I feel a meltdown happening I know it's okay. They aren't scared of them, I know I'll be supported in the right way. Imagine you've got a bottle of coke. Before the session the lid is on. Then the lid goes off and the coke goes 'fizzle fizzle' during the session and it goes all nice and flat. And then I'm all chilled and afterwards the bottle is all fine until the next week. I feel ready to carry on with everything else, I need the session to be able to get through the week."



When the group could not operate during lockdown, Leah struggled severely. Recognising this, we provided 1:1 support - initially over the phone and then in person. Since becoming involved with Resources for Autism, Leah says she has really grown in her confidence and independence, as well as her ability to interact with other people.

“At the beginning, I would go into a room and just sit on a table - and I wouldn’t talk in the group because I couldn’t manage doing any of that. And now I want to talk to everyone. Some of my friends I have on facebook and I never ever would have done that before!”

Leah is focused on giving back what RFA has given her - helping to teach children and young people who are in the same situation that she was in. She now works with children with special educational needs, and will start her PGCE teacher training in September.

“Since I got diagnosed, I knew that I wanted to give other kids what I didn’t have, someone that really gets what it’s like.”

The support group remains one of the most important things in Leah’s life

“By May I broke, I couldn’t go horse riding any more and I couldn’t go to the Monday club any more. So then a key worker started reaching out and saw me once a week. And that made such a difference. Things got a bit better - but then they got really bad in August and they put more support in. RfA were brilliant at stepping in.”



Confidence and independence:

Our group activities and one-to-one support make a major contribution to people’s sense of confidence and independence. This starts with making their way to the group, and getting used to travelling by themselves. In group sessions, people learn life skills such as turn-taking or ordering in a restaurant. Through group and individual support, we help people try things they might not do alone, such as visiting the theatre.

Over time, these activities help adults with autism reduce their reliance on family and carers, and take on new things with less support.

“It’s being able to ‘adult’ - being somewhere with no parents, carers or siblings, and having to find your own way.” - Rfa Adult Staff

“Gaining independence was a gradual process which began with the intervention of Rfa staff.” - Adult

Over time, these activities help adults with autism reduce their reliance on family and carers, and take on new things with less support.

The way that groups are organised is an important part of the journey to independence. Members are involved in planning and organising activities, allowing them to exercise more control and take on responsibility while still being able to draw on staff support when needed.

“It’s good that I get to plan the activities I like. I get to be a bit more independent” - Adult

CASE STUDY: Tyler's Story

"My support worker reassured me that someone like me could have a life and I was entitled to it. Now I know that Autism is cool. We are different. But we see things so differently to normal people that it's really cool!" - Adult

76% of adults who responded to our survey said we have helped them improve their confidence

"RfA has helped me realise my potential as a person, and that there is more to me than just struggles. My Autism does not have to be a negative thing." - Adult



Tyler is a young adult who attends a group at Resources for Autism.

It hasn't always been easy for Tyler to know how to initiate social interaction and be part of the group. He would separate himself off to interact with inanimate objects instead, and would respond in an anxious loud way when others tried to join in.

Through structure and patience we have modelled ways of interacting with Tyler. We have found he has an amazing sense of humour and have been able to build bridges with this and sensory activities. We began team games such as building the tallest tower. Tyler responded really positively, taking his turn and helping out others who were not as physically able.

Through song and sensory storytelling Tyler was able to spot when it was his turn and when he needed to do different actions and rhythms. His behaviours have all but disappeared and he is now a really popular member of the group.

We have begun to build on this together and Tyler has joined a second group concentrating on fitness. He has transferred his skills with familiar staff seamlessly. He has been belly dancing, playing darts, yoga, circuit training, ball games and more and all with a massive smile on his face.



Our Impact: Changing the Narrative on Autism

What we do:

A major part of our impact lies in raising awareness of autism within society so the narrative shifts from looking at what isn't possible to what is possible for autistic people.

Alongside our direct support for children, adults and families, we work with other providers of services, including schools, employers and local authorities to help them understand, embrace and celebrate what it means to be autistic.

In addition to individual case consultations, examples of our work in this area include:



Behaviour management training for schools



Autism Awareness Training for other organisations such as hospitals and local authorities



Partnerships to improve services for people with autism - employment with Barnet Job Centre Plus, and homelessness support with Homeless Link in Westminster

2020 in numbers!



We held 31 training sessions for teachers, social workers and other professionals



We provided professional advice and consultations in 14 cases

The difference we make!

Inclusion:

Our work with schools and local authorities helps teachers, social workers and other professionals to improve their knowledge and understanding of autism, and develop better strategies to support people. Many of our families have struggled to get the right support, and we see this kind of enabling work as a key part of our offer.

“Thank you for all your support and perseverance across this year and for continued unwavering support to help families.”

- Local Authority Commissioner

With better support, pupils are able to stay in school and continue learning safely. Avoiding placement breakdown and school exclusions saves money for local authorities, who would otherwise have to find alternative provision. Above all, it matters for children and families, with huge benefits for their confidence, social interaction and anxiety levels as well as their educational attainment and future life chances.

Improved services for adults:

Our work with Work Coaches in Barnet or homelessness support workers in Westminster similarly means that adults are better supported. 1/3 of autistic adults are in paid employment compared to 75% of adults in the UK. We know that autistic adults are at greater risk of unemployment and homelessness.

Research in one London borough found that 12% of people supported by the homelessness team showed signs of autism, compared to 1% in the general population. Building on the toolkit we developed with Homeless Link and other partners organisations in 2019, we provided support and advice to frontline staff. We helped them develop techniques for outreach and engagement with homeless people, along with a more targeted support offer. By linking with other services and advocating for access to benefits and other help, we are helping more homeless autistic people come off the streets.

Autism-friendly organisations

As well as better outcomes for the individual pupils, jobseekers or homeless adults involved, our work with service providers and employers helps change the way their organisations work. By increasing awareness of the specific needs of autistic people, and demonstrating that it is possible to achieve good results, we play our part in shifting wider organisational attitudes and practices around autism.

"I have always found Resources for Autism to be a professional and reliable organisation. The team are well trained and can be relied upon to deliver services to some very vulnerable children and young people."
- Local Authority Commissioner



Neurodiversity in the Workplace at Virgin Media

This year we formed a new partnership with Virgin Media, to support them in their commitment to create a work environment that celebrates the neurodiversity of their employees. This partnership is another example of our work to change the narrative, supporting a major UK company to address diversity in the workplace.

In the initial stages of this partnership, we have provided a number of articles and resources on neurodiversity, including:



Neurodiversity in the workplace



Mythbusting around Autism



Diagnostic Pathway

These have been shared through the organisation's internal communications channels, reaching 10,000 Virgin Media employees.

Since launching the partnership, Virgin Media has developed a Neurodiversity Membership Network which now has over 100 new members. We continue to provide support and advice to the organisation on developing and supporting a more neurodiverse workforce.

Staff and Volunteer Wellbeing

The Covid-19 pandemic placed enormous stresses on our staff and volunteers, as well as our Autism Community. One of the main lessons from this period has been the need to focus more on the wellbeing of our workforce.

During the pandemic, many people who couldn't continue their work offered their services for free to charities, to support people on the frontline. For RfA, which has always directed every penny raised to service delivery, this was a unique opportunity, and we made the most of it! We benefited from the generosity of a range of professionals:



Clinical psychologists who offered counselling to staff



A yoga teacher who ran sessions for staff, volunteers and families



Coaches who helped build the resilience of our workforce

These experiences opened our eyes to a whole new dimension of impact we can make for our Autism Community of children, young people and their families. We learned that wellbeing support for staff and volunteers is crucial for service delivery during a pandemic. Helping the workforce cope with change and bounce back means that we can keep helping those who need us the most.

"The counselling sessions during lockdown were much needed to be able to continue working and deal with life and pandemic. It helped expressing and managing my emotions and anxieties, change behaviours, habits and a boost in self-esteem and confidence." - RfA Support Worker

After these professionals returned to work, we were lucky enough to secure additional funding for continued workforce wellbeing. Since November, we have introduced:



Employee Assistance Programme



8 month management training programme for group leaders & managers



Offered training on embodied management and appropriate boundaries



Dedicated spaces for peer to peer supervision



Regular wellbeing emails and access to a wellbeing portal



Music jam sessions

In 2021, we want to develop a long-term wellbeing strategy for RfA. Our vision is a mentally healthy organisation, achieving more for our Autism Community by supporting those who support them to be the best they can be.

Looking Forward: Final Thoughts

This year, we have responded, adapted and found ways to innovate. As the effects of lockdown on our community have become more visible, we know we cannot stand still. We need to look into the future with clarity and determination.

Over the coming year, in addition to our core work, our ambition is to focus on the following priorities:



Breaking isolation for adults living independently - this has been one of the most impacted groups, and we want to create more opportunities for them to socially connect, engage in physical activity and develop skills to gain employment.



Building resilience in parents and carers - we know that many parents have carried the full responsibility of caring for an autistic child struggling with a thoroughly disrupted routine. Targeting services to this group is key to supporting family recovery.



Offering specialist mental health support across all age groups - we are researching how we could create holistic initiatives such as therapy, behaviour support, mindfulness groups, and groups to encourage physical movement and wellbeing for our community as it recovers.

We are thankful to all those who made it possible for us to show up this year in the way that we did.



BEING AUTISTIC

We see the world in a different light
We are the warriors of the rainbow fight
Not a puzzle to be unravelled
Not people to be fathomed
Full of enterprise and wisdom beyond measure
We are more than an international treasure
We live each day as if it's our first
Fitting in isn't our natural thirst
We celebrate our uniqueness when others misunderstand it
So don't minimise it
Squash it or judge it
We express with great passion
We have our own autistic reason
Your unusual is our normal
We like being totally colourful
We are focused and detailed
Sometimes overwhelmed
We stim and repeat
To deal with the defeat
We are not naughty or haughty
So don't stare at us blankly!
We offer the world a new perspective
We offer a different objective
So embrace our autistic quality
And join us on our lifes journey

Written by Helen Aldhous



