Aberdeenshire
C O U N C I L   **Education and Children's Services**

REPORT TO EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE – 7 OCTOBER 2021

ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2020

1   Reason for Report / Summary

1.1   This Annual Report (**Appendix 1**) for Aberdeenshire's Adoption Service offers details of the framework for family finding for Aberdeenshire's most vulnerable children requiring an adoptive family, and the services available to anyone affected by adoption through the dedicated work of the Adoption Team who have continued to ensure a robust and sensitive approach to all service users through 2020.

2   Recommendations

          The Committee is recommended to:

          2.1   Consider and comment on the Adoption Service Annual Report and provide comments to the Service; and

          2.2   Continue to support the ongoing recruitment of adoptive families across Aberdeenshire and support to all persons affected by adoption.

3   Purpose and Decision Making Route

3.1   This report is being presented to the ECS Committee as part of Children's Services' commitment to raise the profile of adoption services provided to children and families in need of such services in Aberdeenshire and to invite feedback on both the achievements and challenges for the Service.

3.2   This report contributes to Children's Services' self-evaluation and improvement planning process to ensure that resources are appropriately supported and allocated, and the Service is able to continue to meet local need. The views of children and adults who use the Service inform both service delivery and improvement work.

3.3   The ECS Committee considered the 2019 Adoption Service Annual Report at its meeting on 27 August 2020.

4   Discussion

4.1   The aims of Aberdeenshire's Children's Services are first and foremost to enable and support children to remain in their families of origin and where this is not possible and where alternative, permanent, family based care is required, the Adoption Service recruits, prepares and supports adoptive families who can meet the life-long needs of children.

4.2   Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service has its practice underpinned by the core components, values and principles of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and within the legislative context of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.

4.3   The Service is a regulated Service and is inspected every two years by the Care Inspectorate against the National Standards.

4.4   The Service is delighted to present its Annual Report for 2020 (Appendix 1) which outlines the progress made over the last year to meet the needs of Aberdeenshire's children who require an alternative permanent family and support to the families who commit to offering these children a permanent loving home.

5   Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

5.1   This report helps deliver Council Priority 4 - Priorities: Our People - Education and Health & Wellbeing and,

5.2   This report also helps deliver against Aberdeenshire's Children's Services Plan Priority – 'Corporate Parenting'.

5.3   The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendations are agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		X	
Staffing		X	
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland	IIA attached as appendix 2		
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing	IIA attached as appendix 2		
Climate Change and Sustainability		X	
Health and Wellbeing		X	
Town Centre First		X	

5.4   Financial implications become relevant for the Council when the Service is unable to recruit both enough and the right adopters for the number of children requiring adoption. Scotland's Adoption Register enables children to be matched with adopters from other local authorities or voluntary organisations. This comes at an increased cost for 2020/21 of £31,620 for one child and £52,700 for a sibling group of two. These fees are set on a national level by the Scottish Government.

5.5   As noted at paragraphs 10.2 and 10.3 of Appendix 1, 2 children were matched with adoptive families outwith Aberdeenshire during 2020. Conversely, 1 child was welcomed to Aberdeenshire from another area of Scotland. This therefore offsets the cost to some extent of placing children outwith Aberdeenshire.

5.6 An integrated impact assessment has been carried out as part of the development of the proposals set out above. It is included as Appendix 2 and outlines that there are a number of positive impacts in the continued provision of an adoption service in Aberdeenshire.

5.7 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level:
- ACORP001 – Budget pressures; *Corporate Risk Register.*

The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level:
- BSSR001 – Balancing the books;
- ECSSR003 – Embedding GIRFEC; and
- ECSSR004 – Support inclusive, vibrant and healthy communities.
Link to risk register page on website

6 Scheme of Governance

6.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

6.2 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section E.1.1 (a) of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance, as the matter relates to Children's Social Work Services.

Laurence Findlay
Director of Education and Children's Services

Report prepared by Carol Reilly, Adoption Team Manager
Date 7 July 2021

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 – Annual Report of the Adoption Service 2020
Appendix 2 – Integrated Impact Assessment

Annual Report of the Adoption Service

1st January – 31st December 2020

1. Context of the Adoption Service

1.1 Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service, located within Education and Children's Services, has its practice underpinned by the core components, values and principles of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and within the legislative context of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, The Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.

1.2 The aims of Aberdeenshire's Children's Services sections are first and foremost to enable and support children to remain in their families of origin and where this is not possible and where alternative, permanent, family based care is required, the Adoption Service recruits, prepares and supports adoptive families who can meet the life-long needs of children.

1.3 On average, around 14 children each year require adoptive families with the age range of 0-6 years.

1.4 The needs of children requiring alternative, permanent family care is carefully assessed, and families are matched to children using each of the eight GIRFEC SHANARRI** Wellbeing Indicators, ensuring the child and their needs are at the centre of alternative family finding processes.

1.5 In addition to that, the Adoption Service has a duty to provide support services to anyone affected by adoption, as detailed in the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, s1 (3). This includes adoptees, adopters and birth family members of adopted children/adults. As such we aim to offer a prompt and appropriate response to anyone seeking advice and support.

2. Aberdeenshire's Adoption Team consists of:

1 Full Time Team Manager
1 Full Time Senior Social Work Practitioner
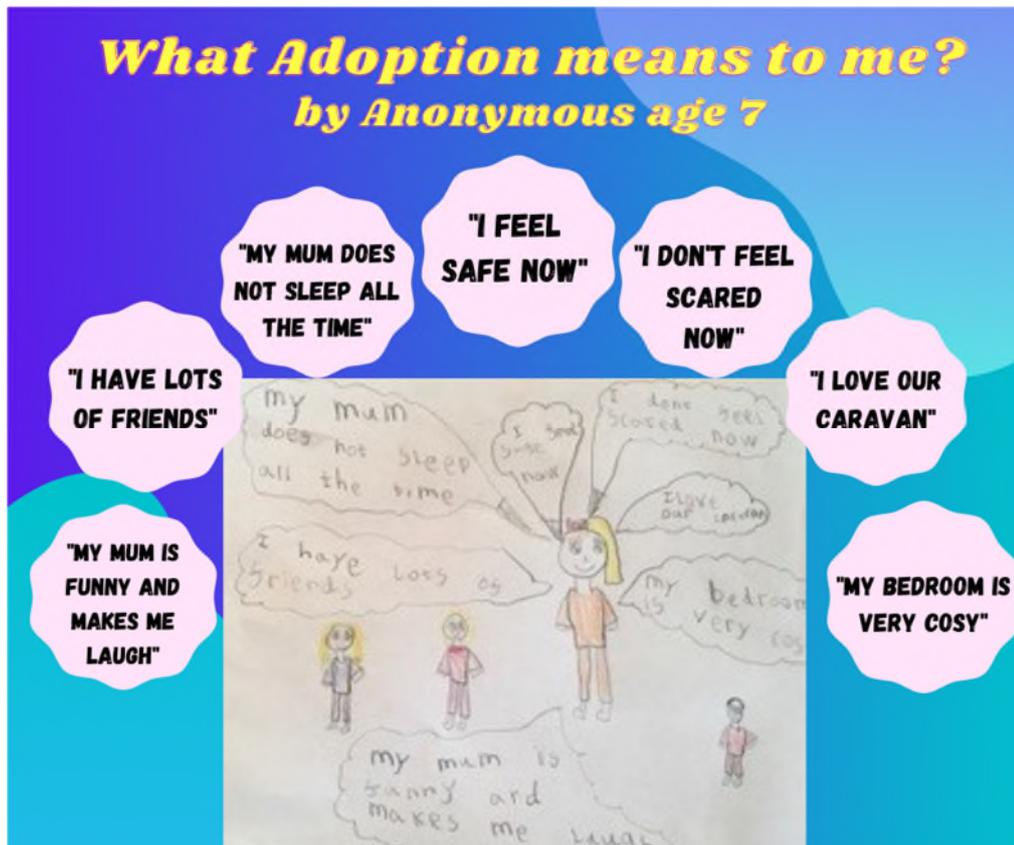**4** Full Time Social Workers
3 Part Time Family Support Workers

2.1 The Service is supported and managed by a Social Work Manager within Children's Services. The Adoption Team is a geographically spread team with workers located in key areas throughout Aberdeenshire.

**SHANARRI – Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included.

3.   Recruitment and Assessment of Adoptive Families

3.1   Since 2015, the Service has seen a significant drop in interest in Adoption, with 2017 seeing the lowest level of interest in adoption to date. In 2015 we successfully recruited and assessed **13** families, in 2017 it dropped to **4**, however following a concerted and targeted campaign of recruitment through the media and social media online through 2018 and 2019 we saw an increase in 2019 to **8** families, with a further **2** returning for a second adoption and **1** fostering family wishing to adopt a child in their care. In 2020 we had **4** families approved as adoptive parents with a further 3 returning for a second adoption and 2 fostering families approved to adopt the child/ren in their care.

3.2   We, in Aberdeenshire, continue to look at proactive ways of reaching potential adoptive families in the communities of Aberdeenshire, through promoting our comprehensive 'in-house' service for children and prospective adopters, and the unlimited, long term support we can offer adoptive families, unlike the Voluntary Organisations whose capacity for support may be time limited and dependant on funding.

3.3   However 2020 introduced us all to new challenges and a collective pause from our busy lives as we experienced a national lockdown amid the Covid 19 pandemic. The adoption team used this time to design a vibrant and targeted online recruitment campaign and develop online virtual information sessions for anyone who may be thinking about adoption. As always we encouraged collaboration with our adoptive families to help us raise the profile of our adoption agency. Our families support us by writing testimonies they allow us to share online anonymously, they support our adoption week campaigns and we always have willing volunteers to co-deliver online information sessions and training sessions, eager to promote the positive life changing experience of adopting a child. In 2020 We generated a lot of interest and sold out two online information sessions in August and November. The feedback was positive, people particularly enjoying meeting the adoption team members and hearing adoptive parents share their own stories. It was also felt helpful being able to hear about the process at an early stage, before any formal requests for information are made.

3.4   Examples from our online recruitment campaign:

What Adoption means to me?
by Anonymous age 7

"MY MUM DOES NOT SLEEP ALL THE TIME"

"I FEEL SAFE NOW"

"I DON'T FEEL SCARED NOW"

"I HAVE LOTS OF FRIENDS"

"I LOVE OUR CARAVAN"

"MY MUM IS FUNNY AND MAKES ME LAUGH"

"MY BEDROOM IS VERY COSY"

What Adoption means to me?
by Anonymous age 8

"I GET LOTS OF GOOD FOOD"

"NOW I AM AWAY FROM DRUGS"

"MY MUM IS ALWAYS WAITING FOR ME"

"MY DAD WORKS HARD TO GIVE ME NISE THINGS"

"I LOVE PLAYING WITH MY SISTER"

"I GET LOTS OF HUGS"

"MY HOUSE IS BEAUTIFUL DECORATE AT CHRISTMAS FOR SANTA"

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3.5 A number of children each year are claimed through Adoption by their existing Foster Families, and the planning and process to this route to permanence for children is no less rigorous nor less scrutinised than for adoption by an unfamiliar family. **3** children; **1** single child and **1** sibling group of two were offered adoption by their foster family in 2020. (2019 4 Children: 2 single children and 1 sibling group of two, 2018 2 single children and 1 sibling group of two were offered adoption by their foster family).

3.6 There are consistently children who are Looked After in Aberdeenshire within a range of age categories who require adoptive families each year. We are occasionally required to recruit families for sibling groups and for children up to the age of six years and who have started their formal education. Most families coming forward, however are focussed on adopting infants, toddlers and pre-school age children and this is a theme which is common across Scotland.

3.7 In 2020 we continued to experience infants and young toddlers requiring an adoptive family, which was until around 2017 unusual, with older children between the ages of 3 and 6 in the main requiring an adoptive family. More rigorous child protection practices in Aberdeenshire are identifying families who are unable to care for their children at an earlier stage and clear processes for early assessment and planning for the most vulnerable children contributes to younger children coming to adoption at an early stage.

3.8 It remains uncommon that children are relinquished by their mothers and fathers for adoption and when this happens the same rigorous processes are applied to ensuring best outcomes for the child. In 2020 no children were relinquished for adoption by their legal parents. (2019 – **1** 2018 – **2**)

3.9 Aberdeenshire's Concurrency Programme, which offers an opportunity for children to move to a foster family who has the potential to go on to adopt, if the child cannot safely return home, remains an option for children. Due to the nature of the scheme, this is not a widely used option and the criteria for both the child's circumstances and the foster carer's capacity is stringent. The opportunity of Concurrent Planning for a child from birth or early infancy can mean that the trauma of the separation and loss of primary carers in infancy is minimised and so the longer-term impact of this is largely negated. However, in 2020, no children's plans were progressed via the Concurrency programme due to circumstances not meeting the criteria.

3.10 In our efforts to recruit suitable adoptive families for our most vulnerable children, we encourage applicants to keep an open mind in thinking about children as they are, and not minimise opportunities to offer a child a home by being specific about aspects of a child they would prefer, such as gender and narrow age preferences as this causes delay for both children and delay for adoptive families when matches cannot be achieved.

3.11   We are first and foremost a children's service, providing families for children, as opposed to children for families.

4. Adoption Enquiries	2020	2019
Enquiries made & Information Packs on Adoption sent out:	40	34
Reg. of Interest Returned & Initial Visits Carried Out:	18	11

4.1 The initial visits are normally arranged as a home visit. However in response to Covid 19 restrictions we adapted by offering virtual video sessions, to enable us to continue our recruitment and preparing of potential prospective adoptive families.

5.   Preparation of Prospective Adoptive Parents

5.1   Following prospective adoptive families registering an interest in adoption, an initial visit is undertaken to the applicant/applicants' home by an Adoption Social Worker where full information is shared and questions answered.   Where prospective adopters indicate a wish to progress their application, and if they are considered suitable, they are then invited to attend Aberdeenshire Council's five-day Preparation to Adopt Course.

5.2   The purpose of the Preparation Course is to provide concise, realistic and robust information to enable participants to make an informed decision on whether or not to proceed with an application to be assessed as prospective adoptive parents. The applicant/applicants' presentation and participation on the Course also informs the Adoption Team's assessment of suitability for adoption.

5.3   We run the Preparation course twice a year in March and September. This six month gap between the courses is intentional. This allows the social workers the required time to dedicate to the assessment of applicants from one course, in readiness to begin the assessment process with the new cohort of families from the next course.

5.4   In March 2020 we welcomed **5** prospective adoptive families onto our Preparation to Adopt course. Due to Covid 19 restrictions and the national lockdown imposed, we had to cancel the final day. We progressed to assessment with 4 of these families while one family did not progress due to personal reasons.

5.5   The uncertainty of 2020 left us with some significant decisions to make around how we would deliver the September Preparation to Adopt course if we were still operating virtually. We made the decision to invest our time in developing an online Preparation to Adopt course, a prudent choice which has helped us develop a flexible, interactive course, enabling us to continue our robust

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preparation and learning for families interested in adopting a child with Aberdeenshire Council.

5.6   Developed and driven by our senior practitioner, the whole team were able to contribute to the learning material for the course which is hosted on the ALDO (Aberdeenshire Learning and Development Online) platform. We worked closely with the ALDO team to ensure it provided applicants with an interactive engaging learning experience. The online course formed the foundation of the virtual Preparation to Adopt course. However, It was important that we added to this with live virtual sessions via TEAMS, so we could engage with people and allow us to get to know them and begin to form trusting relationships.

5.7   In October 2020 we welcomed 7 prospective adoptive families onto our new online Preparation to Adopt course. Although staff and applicants shared an apprehension, the success of the training was evident in the relationships built and feedback obtained.

5.8   User feedback is sought after every session of the Course and the Team use this to tailor future sessions/courses. It is designed to be an interactive and responsive learning opportunity. In 2020 with this new course delivery, feedback became even more crucial. The responses gathered were honest and helpful. Overall Feedback was very positive with the ALDO course receiving a 4.55 average rating out of 5. The video presentations were also regarded as high quality coming in at an average rating of 4.58 out of 5. We listened to the suggestions that were made for development and improvement, and the course for 2021 was adapted accordingly.

5.9   Some examples of feedback from October 2020 Preparation to Adopt:

Session content was good and listening to the adoptive parents made us feel positive. The presenters made us feel at ease and answered the questions very well. (prospective adopter K)

 I think it was clear, and well presented. I enjoyed the task with the case studies. It was good to hear the next part of the children's stories. I can't really think of anything that was missed out, to be honest. (prospective adopter G)

It was great. Very well put together and organised. Loved hearing from the couple who have already adopted. Looking forward to the next one. I can't think of anything that would have made it better. (prospective adopter L)

The Wall made a real impact on us and we wondered if this video could have been incorporated into the online modules so we could watch again and let it sink in. Was good to do the breakout groups and start getting to know the other families. The presenters are doing a fantastic job in presenting and underpinning the content with

their messages, we also like the informal style you all have and the openness to questions. (prospective adopters P)

I (prospective adopters P) asked a few questions and thought they were answered spot on, group input ... helped and everyone was feeling more comfortable, the breakout room was a great addition (prospective adopters P)

The format of the breakout groups was well organised and the ice breaker was really thought provoking. The stories from the presenters about real life adoptive families and their personal experiences were amazing - thanks for sharing these. (prospective adopters P)

Thank you to everyone for all the hard work behind and in front of the scenes who have made it possible for us to still start our journey to adoption amidst a global pandemic, all your efforts are greatly appreciated, and we have all managed to proceed and learn none the less. Hopefully virtual sessions won't be the norm forever but well done for getting everything up and running so quickly. Sad to have finished our course but super excited for the coming months, hopefully we can all meet in person one day. Thanks again for everything!!!! (prospective adopters R)

I liked the group task. It was good to think about the letter from the birth mother's point of view. It wasn't easy hearing what was written. I found this useful. I've really enjoyed the course. Thank you for organising it, and for the open, and inclusive way in which it was run. (prospective adopter G)

5.10 The Senior Practitioner and Family Support Worker from the Adoption Team take the lead in developing and delivering the Preparation course. In 2020 their expertise and vision enabled a smooth transition to a blended online and virtual course. They co-ordinated the roles of other team members to ensure everyone was able to contribute. Input to the course is also supported by an Agency Legal Adviser and Medical Adviser, people who have adopted and Foster Carers who have moved children on to adoption.

5.11 Between January and December 2020, **12** families (couples & single people) participated in and completed the preparation courses (2019 – 15, 2018 – 9), **11** progressed onto full assessment (2019 – 10, 2018 – 4). One family withdrew who were not ready to proceed with Adoption.

5.12 Relative and Friends Preparation to Adopt training: We know the importance of support in raising a family and due to the complex adoption process and the need for adoptive parents to offer a more trauma sensitive parenting approach, we offer preparation sessions for prospective adopters' family and friends. In February 2021(originally scheduled for December 2020 but delayed due to Covid 19) we offered this virtually via MS TEAMS. This proved a great success

and due to the virtual nature, it meant many more families were able to participate and feel included in the process than if it was offered as a face to face session in Aberdeen. Many of our Prospective Adoptive families live across the UK but were still able to attend. We welcomed 15 families onto the virtual course.

5.13   Feedback from Relative and Friends Preparation to Adopt course:

I really found all the sessions interesting in different ways - I was really captivated by it and the three hours passed really quickly. I think most useful were the subtle message on what is useful to support and what you think might be useful but really isn't.

Everything was fine and very Interesting. It was very easy for us as we are pensioners (Meeting Virtually)

Speaking to our loved ones social worker, was nice to put a face to the name we've heard so much about and getting to speak to her.

Content was clearly presented and explained. Found the whole session very informative. Very easy to attend from home.

Content was clear and concise. Having the agenda sent prior to the meeting allowed my husband and myself to discuss any point that we thought we would like to discuss.

Although I have an awareness of the impact of ACEs and trauma my husband was less familiar and he found this very interesting in gaining understanding of why children's presenting behaviours can appear challenging at times in this situation.

It was a very informative session and we were grateful for the opportunity to discuss specifics for our family when we broke out into rooms. This was especially helpful at this time of restriction as extended families are not able to meet face to face currently.

We found the content presented very professionally and explained everything to us that involved the adoption procession.

6.   Approval

6.1   Following a period of robust, formal assessment, the application for approval is presented to Aberdeenshire's Permanence Panel who scrutinise the application prior to making a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker as required by the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.

6.2 The Permanence Panel is chaired by an Independent Chair and made up of individuals with both lived experience and professional experience in alternative family care.

Adoptive Families Approved	2020	2019	2018
	8*	10*	4*

(* not all applicants are approved in the same year as they apply. Each formal capacity assessment takes around 6 months to complete)

7. Children's Plans

7.1 The Permanence Panel has a further role in the scrutiny of children's permanence plans. Where, after assessment, a child's plan to be permanently cared for away from home, is endorsed by an Options Appraisal Looked After Child's Review, the Permanence Panel consider the plan and accompanying evidence prior to making recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker in accordance with the Looked After Children Regulations 2009.

7.2 In 2020 the Permanence Panel made recommendations for Adoption Plans in relation to **12** children (2019 – 11 2018 - 16) **9 boys** (2019 – 6 2018 – 5) and **3 girls** (2019 -5 2018 – 11).

7.3 Following recommendation by the Permanence Panel and Agency Decision Maker approval, the Local Authority has a legal duty to progress the Permanence Plan by lodging the required applications in court. All applications to date have been successful or continue in Court process, some delayed by the Covid 19 restrictions beginning in March 2020. The process to adoption can prove very lengthy and legally complex in some cases. We strive to transition children to their prospective adoptive families at the earliest opportunity, often before legal process inhibits our capacity to do this, so that children can begin to feel settled in their new families while Court proceedings progress. Legal uncertainty remains a highly challenging aspect of adoption work for practitioners and prospective adoptive families alike.

8. Matching

8.1 Following approval of a prospective adoptive family and subsequent linking with a child or children with an approved Adoption Plan, the potential Match between the adoptive family and the child is presented to the Permanence Panel who are asked to formally consider the Match and again make recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker.

8.2 Between 1 January 2020 and 31st December 2020, **10** Children were matched with adoptive families, including 1 sibling group of 2. (2019 -11 single children 2018 - 15, including 2 sibling groups of 2 children).

9. Legal Granting of Adoption

9.1 **4** Adoption Orders were granted in Court in 2020 in respect of Aberdeenshire children (2019 – 21**,** 2018 – 10). This low number is reflective of the delays experienced due to Covid 19 restrictions in the legal system.

10. Interagency Placements

10.1 As part of the Scottish Government's initiative to reduce the delays for children in finding adoption families, we have continued to use Scotland's Adoption Register Online Linking facility, 'Linkmaker', through 2020 to explore links between children and potential families throughout Scotland. The search can also be extended UK wide if needed.

10.2 Use of Interagency Adoptive Families is costly, at a nationally agreed £31,620 per child (2 siblings- £51k). In 2020, **2** adoptive families were sought from out with Aberdeenshire to meet children's needs. (2019 – 3 2018 – 1) The reasons for being unable to find local families were aspects such as the children's ages (over 5) and ethnicity, for example, where we had no local families approved to meet the Matching Considerations for the child. Of those **2** children; **1** child is living in his new adoptive family awaiting adoption and unfortunately the family matched with the other child withdrew from the process for personal reasons before the child moved.

10.3 Conversely, we have welcomed 1 child from another area of Scotland to be adopted by an Aberdeenshire family. (2019 -2 2018 – 3). This, to an extent, offsets the costs of children joining adoptive families out with Aberdeenshire's own resources, although the lull in recruitment and the covid 19 pandemic has led to a shortage of families who can consider a wide range of children's ages and needs and the use of Linkmaker may become more regular, whilst we hope not. We believe it important to keep children, where safe to do so, in their area of origin and to keep links alive.

11. Adoption Support

11.1 Prospective Adoptive families are involved in shaping and developing the adoption process through every step of the process from the Preparation Course, to assessment, to matching, to planning a child's transition to their care and post adoption**.**

11.2 Support is offered throughout the process from the Adoption Team, the child's Social Worker, our very able Family Support Workers, the Agency Medical Advisor and the Agency Legal Advisor. Once the child is settled in their new home, the level of support offered is assessed and agreed between the family and the Adoption Service and the support can continue with familiar and experienced workers for as long as there is a need.

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11.3 Adoptive families can 'dip in and out' of support on offer and/or make contact later on in their lives for support perhaps, for example, when their child reaches adolescence. We encourage adoptive families to remain in touch with the services through our 'Staying Connected' sessions offered throughout the year.

11.4 In normal times Adoption Network Groups and events for Adoptive Parents and adopted children are available throughout the year. Groups are offered in various locations, depending on level of interest and need, and we offer themed options, on topics such as 'Life Story Work', 'Talking to Your Child about Adoption' and 'Social Media & Contact', as well as opportunities for informal discussion and for socialising between adoptive families. However in response to the 2020 Covid pandemic the Adoption team had to find new ways of supporting and connecting with families. As an alternative we engaged with families online and through virtual sessions. Specifically we hosted a virtual session focusing on 'supporting your child to return to school' (following the lockdown) which was supported by our colleagues in Educational Psychology service.

11.5 Disappointingly due to Covid restrictions we had to suspend our usual outdoor and indoors family events for children, such as crafting, Den Building and Bug Collecting with the Outdoor Rangers on Bennachie and Rock-pooling at local beaches. These were popular events through 2019 and give adopted children opportunities to get to know others. We normally offer these during Easter, Summer and October School holiday times. As an alternative way to try and keep connected with our families and children we launched some online events via social media. An example was a sunflower growing competition. We delivered packets of sunflowers seeds to families who wished to take part and encouraged the families to post these on our Facebook page or email us progress. Staff role modelled some lovely gardening skills.

11.6 Although our rolling programme of workshops and learning opportunities for adoptive parents continues, it did pause for a few months at the start of the Covid pandemic as everyone adapted to working from home and developing skills online. We welcomed a flurry of online webinars and training sessions from partner agencies that we could share with our adoptive families to offer support and learning while keeping everyone connected. We have welcomed and embraced this very flexible way of offering adoptive parents the opportunity for learning in a way that suits them best.

11.7 In 2020 we took **74** (2019 – 55 2018 - 76) referrals from both individuals and professionals for a range of aspects of Adoption Support. Requests included birth records access, counselling for adopted adults or young people, tracing and reunion support with birth family members, adoption support for families with children of all ages, supporting teenagers and assisting birth family members with Letterbox Scheme letters.

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11.8 Again the Covid pandemic restrictions have impacted greatly how we are able to engage and deliver key services for people affected by adoption. Being restricted to virtual or phone contact developed our awareness of ensuring we were sensitive to how this may feel for people and the barriers created around building connections, which comes more naturally when you meet someone in person. As a team we were creative in offering support in a safe way sensitive to ensuring we were not trauma inducing in the process. Examples of some ways in which support was adapted and offered were virtual video calls, when restrictions allowed we would do garden visits or outdoor walks so social distancing could be respected. We try to offer support in the ways which best suit the family and the child. We try to be flexible and responsive to each family in a way that works for them. This remains a significant part of Adoption Services – ongoing and enduring support to anyone affected by adoption.

12. Birth Records Support

12.1 Birth Records enquiries come from a variety of sources including self-referral, from other Adoption Agencies or from other professionals, for example. The Adoption Team workers are skilled in assisting adoptees to access their birth records and offer support to help the adoptee learn about their past. This may include support with tracing and reunification with birth family members.

12.2 Equally we can assist birth family members in tracing 'lost' relatives who were adopted as infants and children. We work regularly with adoption agencies across the UK to try and locate adoptee's birth records. We work closely with Birthlink in Edinburgh who are a charitable organisation concerned in supporting those affected by adoption to find out about their heredity and birth identity. Birthlink manage the Contact Register for Scotland where adoptees and their birth family members can register and perhaps one day be reunited. Helping people understand their history is a significant aspect of the services we offer.

12.3 Between 1 January 2020 and 31st December 2020 the Adoption Service received **16** Birth Records Support enquiries (2019 – 23 2018 – 19) and offered individualised services to all those who enquired. Each enquiry is different, and we aim to be responsive to the individual's needs and work at their pace, appreciating the significant emotional context for adoptees. In the adoption team we are attuned to the impact of trauma and this aspect of our work can be extremely sensitive and emotionally upsetting for people, so the challenges of delivering such a service virtually were acute here. The feedback below was not sought from us but offered by the person in recognition of the skilled manner in how she was supported by one of our social workers.

12.4 Feedback sent from Adoptee supported to access their adoption records to the Adoption Team Manager:

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She (Adoption Social worker) has kept me updated with what she is doing, has prepared me for not getting my expectations up about looking into my adoption file, she has shown great warmth and kindness during my interactions with her. She has also gone the extra mile in chasing up with the court to make sure that she had signposted me to the right court which was dealing with an adoption that took place a very long time ago. She could easily just have scanned the file and sent it over to me and not bothered to have done that.

I felt quite anxious about looking into my past and wondering what might emerge, her support has made a very positive difference.

I will certainly update her with any further information that I find, because she was able to clearly convey that she genuinely cares, and I imagine this will be the case for other service users. I know that far too often social workers doing a good job is not recognised nor celebrated and so I asked her for your email address to makes sure you learned that her approach and input was very much appreciated.

13.   Post Adoption Letterbox Scheme

13.1   Aberdeenshire's Letterbox Scheme was launched in April 2007. Each child who has a Permanence Plan either for adoption, kinship care or permanent foster care can use the Scheme, based on their assessed needs for contact with birth family members or other significant people in their lives and within the conditions of any legal orders.

13.2   Letters are exchanged, usually annually, between the adoptive or permanent carers and birth parents or other birth family members, via the Letterbox Scheme Administrator who is supported by our experienced Social Workers, and there is flexibility to respond to individual needs and changing needs over time.

13.3   We understand how difficult it can be for parents whose child has been adopted or is living in an alternative permanent family to maintain positive links, especially in the early days and the pain of losing their child remains very acute. We try to encourage them to stay in touch, taking a sensitive and enabling approach, offering guidance and practical assistance as they require, such as scribing for them and offering ideas about what they might like to write about that the child will find useful and interesting.

13.4   Letterbox Scheme Participation

Total Number of Letterbox Agreements in Place in 2020 was **107** (2019 – 104, 2018 – 65) with **4** new agreements made in 2020.

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These figures include all new agreements following an adoption being granted and also retrospective agreements which have been made sometime after adoption was achieved for a child, where birth family members perhaps felt unable to engage at that time but have since indicated their wish to participate. We offer to support all participants in Letterbox exchanges to write letters which will benefit the child and support their sense of identity growing up. The figure also reflects Agreements that have come to an end in 2020 when a young person reaches young adulthood and elects to withdraw from the scheme, either ending this or taking on communications themselves. There remains discretion around how long an agreement can continue, where it meets a young person's needs.

14.   Disruption

14.1   Disruption, which is where a child permanently leaves their adoptive family is, fortunately, rare. The increased risks of disruption as a child grows older are well documented, as well as other risk factors such as the length of exposure to abuse and neglect prior to becoming accommodated, age on being accommodated, number of primary carers and disrupted and/or severed attachments, etc.

14.2   When a placement ends in this way a Child's Life Appreciation Meeting can be convened to review and reflect to inform practice and planning for the child. This is decided upon on a case by case basis, including all involved on the whether this meeting would be of benefit and the appropriate timing of this.

14.3   In 2020, we are pleased to report that **0** adoptive placements disrupted that we were aware of or involved in supporting.

15.   Inter-country Adoption

15.1   In past years and in contrast to the majority of local authorities in Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council had generally received a high level of interest in Intercountry Adoption. This was considered to be due to the impact of the affluence and multi-cultural population created by the Oil and Gas Industry. In recent years, enquiries have fallen dramatically, reflecting trends across Scotland. This is thought to be in relation to complexity and uncertainty of Intercountry Adoption processes, time frames and rising costs, both in the UK and overseas. Intercountry adoption assessments are completed by Independent Assessing Social Workers recruited by the Adoption Team Manager for that sole purpose and funded from the set fee paid by the ICA Applicants at no cost to the Agency.

ICA Enquires 2020:   **1** (2019 – 0 2018 – 1)

ICA Assessment Requested/Completed: **0** (2019 – 0 2018 – 1)

16.   Inspection by the Care Inspectorate

16.1   The Adoption Service is inspected routinely by the Care Inspectorate in Scotland.

16.2   The Agency was last inspected in February 2017 against National Care Standards for Adoption Agencies in Scotland.

16.3   The grading's received from the Inspection in February 2017 across two overarching Quality Theme Aspects were:

Quality of care and support   **6 - Excellent**
Quality of staffing   **6 - Excellent**

No requirements of recommendations were made of the service.

An Inspection, planned or unannounced, was not undertaken by the Care Inspectorate in 2018, but was carried out in **June 2019.**

The grading's received from the 2019 Inspection were:

Quality of care and support   **5 - Very Good**
Quality of staffing   **not assessed**
Quality of management and leadership **5 - Very Good**

An Annual Statistical Return for the Adoption Service was completed in February 2021 and submitted to the Care Inspectorate, as required, within timescales. We are expecting an Inspection by the Care Inspectorate this year.

16.4   Grading's reflect performance of the Service in these areas.   The Care Inspectorate Grading Structure is as follows:

6	Excellent	3	Average
5	Very good	2	Weak
4	Good	1	Unsatisfactory

17. Plan for 2021/2022

- The Scottish Independent Care Review has taken place over 4 years and has been the largest and most unique review of the care system having listened to the voice of over 5000 care experienced young people. The review was published and findings presented in 'The Promise' in February 2020. The Promise is built on five core foundations; Voice, family, care, people, scaffolding – which we will use to focus our service development.

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- One of the key shifts to emerge from The Promise is the tilt in focus from *risk of possible harm to the risk of not having stable, long term loving relationships.* This allows us to view adoption through a different lens and recognise the acute risks, vulnerabilities, and losses for children in creating new family relationships. The Adoption service welcomes this shift of focus which builds on our inherent trauma sensitive value base. We are excited to develop more collaborations in practice to help shape, drive and develop the care we provide for our children in Aberdeenshire.

Voice:

We know from the review that children need to grow up knowing their story. However, in reality we are often retrospectively trying to gather information for children to help them and their parents make sense of their story as they grow up. Many children who join their adoptive family do not have their own lifestory book. This would provide them with the beginning of their narrative, which can be built on as they grow up in the safe hands of their adoptive families. The Adoption service holds a unique position within Children's Services in this domain and this is something we need to work harder to share with our colleagues in the front line service, to help them understand the importance of their role in collecting and preserving this precious information for the child, so every child that moves into an adoptive family has their own life story book started. As a team we will be making stronger links with our colleagues in children and families teams, volunteering to attend their team meetings to highlight the need for this and their role in giving children a healthy narrative.

Family:

- **Post Adoption contact**, is an area of rapid change and our role is to ensure prospective adoptive families understand the importance of children growing up knowing their family heritage. This will continue to be a focal point of the Preparation to Adopt training and the staying connected sessions to ensure the message is consistent and families are supported to maintain links.

- **Supporting Birth families**– we support birth families in managing post adoption contact whether that be to write a letter to their child and his/her adoptive family or to support a direct contact. We are acutely aware in the adoption team that caring and supporting birth parents to heal from their loss will untimely benefit the child in the years ahead, if they do choose to re-connect. We have a long-term goal of developing services for birth families but recognise our limited capacity at this time. Our first step will be to try and connect with the birth families we have relationships with and seek their views on services that would help and support them to process their loss in the adoption journey.

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- **Brothers and Sisters** - We will also be updating the Preparation to Adopt course to include *The staying together and connected: getting it right for sisters and brothers national practice guidance*. Which has been published to support the implementation of the new duties for Scottish local authorities; that every looked after child will live with their brothers and sisters, where appropriate to do so.

- Further to this we will focus our recruitment of Prospective adoptive families and prioritise families who can offer adoption to a sibling group. Recognising that for children to grow up together (if they are not able to grow up in their family of origin) we need adoptive families to be approved and ready.

Care:
- **Transition from foster family to adoptive family** - Children have told us that they don't want to lose touch with important people in their life which is especially true for their brothers and sisters and foster families. We know that during childhood children must rely on the adults in their life to maintain these relationships. In the Adoption service we set this expectation during preparation to adopt and into assessment, linking and matching processes, we work hard to teach the value of positive relational experiences in buffering the impact of trauma for children. Covid 19 has had an impact here in some ways with the loss of professional working relationships, loss of opportunities for families to meet in person and develop trust – which is essential to reassure the child that the adults are connected and will keep them safe together. Emerging from Covid 19 we need to re-establish joint collaboration and training with fostering services to develop practice during times of transition. This work will be ongoing.

People:
- **Trauma Informed** - The Promise speaks about being good parents and investing in the workforce. The role of the team manager is pivotal here in practicing what a good parent should look like. The focus of the Promise is on the development of a trauma informed workforce and this begins with how teams are cultivated and led. Modelling what you want to see in others means leaning into the challenges and guiding people through the discomfort of change. Alongside wider 'top down' organisational culture shifts we all need to be able to shine the focus on ourselves, not to force change but to create a desire to change, showing up for yourself with compassion and kindness is the first block to be laid for a strong foundation.
- To help achieve our grass roots 'bottom up' approach to becoming trauma informed we aim to introduce frequent development days, so we can come together and create space for reflection and learning. We aim to focus on the use of our language, development of post adoption support plans and

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the home-study process for Prospective adoptive families. We are committed to offering trauma informed support to our families and recognise to have the emotional capacity to offer this, we must ensure we as professionals feel supported, valued and seen.

- **Student** - We recognise the challenges faced by Students during Covid 19 restrictions and would want to offer a Social Work student the opportunity to join our team and learn with us.

- **Training** – We recognise that continual professional development is essential to support families appropriately while developing a confident workforce for service delivery. We hope to source and secure training specifically around working and healing developmental trauma. Investing in staff is crucial for a healthy service delivery.

Scaffolding:
- **Post adoption support** - In line with one of the main themes of The Promise is the recognition of the risks for children of primary attachment relationships being fractured and severed – with this lens we can view adoption as child protection at its very most acute. Our service recognises the need to support adoptive families develop healthy safe attachment relationships with their child. Although the abusive relationships may have ended for the children, this does not end the emotional business of the relationship, which we know may be lifelong. This means for some adoptive families; intensive family support may also be needed throughout their childhood. Our aim is to take a more trauma reducing approach to offering support by being proactive and inclusive in how to connect with our families during significant developmental stages. Rather than wait for families to contact us when things feel in crisis for them.

Carol Reilly
Team Manager, Adoption
07-07-21

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Aberdeenshire Council

Integrated Impact Assessment

Aberdeenshire Council Adoption Service Annual Report 2020

Assessment ID	IIA-000121
Lead Author	Andrew Dick
Additional Authors	Carol Reilly
Service Reviewers	Norman Wylie
Subject Matter Experts	Lynne Gravener, Christine McLennan
Approved By	Leigh Jolly
Approved On	Friday September 03, 2021
Publication Date	Monday September 06, 2021

1. Overview

This document has been generated from information entered into the Integrated Impact Assessment system.

Report on the work of Aberdeenshire Council Adoption Service for the period January - December 2020.

During screening 4 of 10 questions indicated that detailed assessments were required, the screening questions and their answers are listed in the next section. This led to 2 out of 5 detailed impact assessments being completed. The assessments required are:

- Childrens' Rights and Wellbeing
- Equalities and Fairer Scotland Duty

In total there are 17 positive impacts as part of this activity. There are 0 negative impacts, all impacts have been mitigated.

A detailed action plan with 1 points has been provided.

This assessment has been approved by leigh.jolly@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.

The remainder of this document sets out the details of all completed impact assessments.

2. Screening

Could your activity / proposal / policy cause an impact in one (or more) of the identified town centres?	No
Would this activity / proposal / policy have consequences for the health and wellbeing of the population in the affected communities?	No
Does the activity / proposal / policy have the potential to affect greenhouse gas emissions (CO2e) in the Council or community and / or the procurement, use or disposal of physical resources?	No
Does the activity / proposal / policy have the potential to affect the resilience to extreme weather events and/or a changing climate of Aberdeenshire Council or community?	No
Does the activity / proposal / policy have the potential to affect the environment, wildlife or biodiversity?	No
Does the activity / proposal / policy have an impact on people and / or groups with protected characteristics?	Yes
Is this activity / proposal / policy of strategic importance for the council?	No
Does this activity / proposal / policy reduce inequality of outcome?	Yes
Does this activity / proposal / policy have an impact on children / young people's rights?	Yes
Does this activity / proposal / policy have an impact on children / young people's wellbeing?	Yes

3. Impact Assessments

Children's Rights and Wellbeing	No Negative Impacts Identified
Climate Change and Sustainability	Not Required
Equalities and Fairer Scotland Duty	No Negative Impacts Identified
Health Inequalities	Not Required
Town Centre's First	Not Required

4. Childrens' Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment

4.1. Wellbeing Indicators

Indicator	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Unknown
Safe	Yes			
Healthy	Yes			
Achieving	Yes			
Nurtured	Yes			
Active	Yes			
Respected	Yes			
Responsible	Yes			
Included	Yes			

4.2. Rights Indicators

UNCRC Indicators upheld by this activity / proposal / policy	Article 1 - Definition of a child Article 3 - Best interests of the child Article 4 - Protection of rights Article 5 - Parental guidance and a child's evolving capacities Article 6 - Life, survival and development Article 9 - Separation from parents Article 12 - Respect for the views of the child Article 19 - Protection from all forms of violence Article 21 - Adoption Article 23 - Children with disabilities Article 27 - Adequate standard of living Article 39 - Recovery and rehabilitation of child victims

4.3. Positive Impacts

Impact Area	Impact
Achieving	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service supports adoptive families to ensure that the educational needs of the children placed with them are met.
Active	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service works with adoptive families to ensure the children they are caring for having access to appropriate social opportunities in order to be active.
Healthy	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service ensures that all families approved to adopt children can meet the health needs of the children placed with them.
Included	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service works with adoptive families to ensure they can support children requiring adoption to be fully included within the adoptive family. Alongside this adoptive families are supported to help children understand their dual identity as part of a birth family.

Impact Area	Impact
Nurtured	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service supports adoptive families to care for children requiring adoption in a nurturing manner, recognising the previous abuse, trauma and/or neglect that the children may have experienced.
Responsible	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service supports adoptive families to understanding the changing needs of the children and young people they are caring for as they grow older. In doing so the service promotes understanding of age-appropriate responsibility and developing independence.
Respected	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service ensures that the service provided is shaped by listening to the views of looked after and care experienced young people, adoptive, and birth families.
Safe	Aberdeenshire's Adoption Service provides robust recruitment, training, assessment and support of adoptive families to ensure that children requiring adoption have safe places to live.

4.4. Evidence

Type	Source	It says?	It Means?
Internal Data	Aberdeenshire Adoption Service Data and Statistics	The annual report of the Adoption Service 2020 outlines feedback from adoptive families and children who have been placed with adoptive families. The report contains relevant statistics on the number of adoptive families approved and the number of children who have required adoption during the reporting period.	Aberdeenshire's Adoption Service are continuing to meet the needs of children who require adoption by recruiting, training, assessing and supporting adoptive families, and matching children with these families.

4.5. Accounting for the Views of Children and Young People

Young people's views on adoption are contained within the annual report. In seeking these views and acting upon them to shape the direction of the Adoption Service, this upholds the key principles of the Aberdeenshire Children and Young People's Charter.

4.6. Promoting the Wellbeing of Children and Young People

Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service strives to ensure that adoptive families are skilled to meet the needs of the children within Aberdeenshire who require adoption. This is achieved through extensive training, a robust assessment and approval process, and the provision of continued high-quality support following children moving to their adoptive family, and following the granting of an adoption order, for as long as this is required. This ensures that all of the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators are met for these children and young people.

4.7. Upholding Children and Young People's Rights

Where children are placed for adoption, all efforts to support them to remain with their birth families have been exhausted. Through ensuring the provision of high quality adoptive families for children who cannot live at home with their birth parents, Aberdeenshire Council is upholding children's rights to a safe, stable, nurturing place to live for the duration of their childhood and beyond.

4.8. Overall Outcome

No Negative Impacts Identified.

The ongoing provision of an Adoption Service in Aberdeenshire will ensure that there continues to be high quality provision of care for children who require to permanently live away from home. There are no negative impacts identified through the continued provision of such a service.

5. Equalities and Fairer Scotland Duty Impact Assessment

5.1. Protected Groups

Indicator	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Unknown
Age (Younger)	Yes			
Age (Older)		Yes		
Disability	Yes			
Race	Yes			
Religion or Belief	Yes			
Sex	Yes			
Pregnancy and Maternity	Yes			
Sexual Orientation	Yes			
Gender Reassignment	Yes			
Marriage or Civil Partnership	Yes			

5.2. Socio-economic Groups

Indicator	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Unknown
Low income		Yes		
Low wealth		Yes		
Material deprivation		Yes		
Area deprivation		Yes		
Socioeconomic background		Yes		

5.3. Positive Impacts

Impact Area	Impact
Age (Younger)	Children who cannot live at home with their birth families and who are assessed as requiring adoption are matched with adoptive families who are assessed as being able to meet their lifelong needs.
Disability	Children with a disability or additional support needs are matched with adoptive families who are assessed as being able to meet these needs.
Gender Reassignment	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service provides a service to all adoptive families and all children requiring adoption and does not discriminate on the basis of gender reassignment status.
Marriage or Civil Partnership	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service recruits adoptive families from all walks of life. The service recruits families who are single people, couples who are married, those who are in civil partnerships, and those who are not married/not joined in a civil partnership.

Impact Area	Impact
Pregnancy and Maternity	In instances where a parent makes a decision to relinquish their child for adoption during pregnancy, the Adoption Service will provide support to this parent.
Race	Children who require adoption are either matched with a family who reflect their race or who are assessed as being able to actively promote links to their race/cultural heritage.
Religion or Belief	As part of the assessment process adoptive families are supported to understand the importance of a child's religion or beliefs. Consideration is given within the matching process to an adoptive family's ability to meet this need for the children they are being matched with.
Sexual Orientation	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service recruits adoptive families of all sexual orientations. Similarly, support is provided to all children of all sexual orientations.
Sex	Aberdeenshire Council's Adoption Service provides support to adoptive families of children of all sexes.

5.4. Evidence

Type	Source	It says?	It Means?
Internal Data	Aberdeenshire Council Adoption Service Data and Statistics	The annual report of the Adoption Service 2020 outlines feedback from adoptive families and children who have been placed with adoptive families. The report contains relevant statistics on the number of adoptive families approved and the number of children who have required adoption during the reporting period.	Aberdeenshire's Adoption Service are continuing to meet the needs of children who require adoption by recruiting, training, assessing and supporting adoptive families, and matching children with these families.

5.5. Engagement with affected groups
The report contains details of engagement with, and feedback from, adoptive parents and adopted children/young people.

5.6. Ensuring engagement with protected groups
The Adoption Service provides support to a diverse range of adults and children including those with protected characteristics.

5.7. Evidence of engagement
The report contains details of the engagement there has been with users of the Adoption Service - feedback from adoptive parents who have attended preparation to adopt courses, comments from family members who have been consulted with, and the views of children who have been placed for adoption.

5.8. Overall Outcome

No Negative Impacts Identified.

As can be seen from this assessment, the Adoption Service provides a high quality service to a diverse range of Aberdeenshire's population. The impacts are all considered to be positive and no negative impacts have been identified.

5.9. Improving Relations

The Adoption Service continues to work with a range of partners to promote good outcomes for children and young people.

5.10. Opportunities of Equality

Care experienced young people statistically experience a range of poorer outcomes compared to their non-care experienced counterparts. The continued provision of a high quality adoption service will ensure that strides continue to be made to reduce this inequality.

6. Action Plan

Planned Action	Details	
Ongoing recruitment, training assessment and support of adoptive families in Aberdeenshire. Ongoing matching of children who require adoption with these families.	**Lead Officer**	Carol Reilly
	Repeating Activity	Yes
	Frequency	Ongoing
	Duration	Ongoing
	Expected Outcome	Continued provision of high-quality adoptive care for children who require this.
	Resource Implications	Staffing Costs.