

## REPORT TO EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE– 30 MAY 2019

### ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT

#### 1 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 Consider the Adoption Service Annual Report and provide comments to the Service; and
- 1.2 Continue to support the ongoing recruitment of Adopters across Aberdeenshire.

#### 2 Background / Discussion

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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, The Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.
- 2.3 The Service is a regulated Service and is inspected every two years by the Care Inspectorate against the [National Standards](#).
- 2.4 The Service is delighted to present its Annual Report for 2018 (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 the families who commit to offering these children a permanent, loving home.
- 2.5 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this and their comments are incorporated within the report. They satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

#### 3 Scheme of Governance

- 3.1 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 Services.

## 4 Implications and Risk

- 4.1 An equality impact assessment is not required because the report is an annual report and does not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.
- 4.2 There are no staffing implications.
- 4.3 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 2019/20 of £31,620 for one child and £51,000 for a sibling group of two. These fees are set on a national level by the Scottish Government. As per paragraph 10.2 in Appendix 1, Aberdeenshire was in the positive position of being able to match all children who required adoption with Aberdeenshire adopters in 2018.
- 4.4 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.  
[Directorate Risk Registers.](#)

**Laurence Findlay**  
**Director of Education & Children's Services**

Report prepared by Morven Campbell, Adoption Service Team Manager  
Date 22 April, 2019

## Appendix 1

# Annual Report of the Adoption Service

1<sup>st</sup> January – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2018

## 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 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.
- 1.4 In addition to that, the Adoption Service has a duty to provide 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
  - 3 Full Time Social Workers
  - 2 Part Time Social Workers – one having reduced hours in 2018 from 5 to 4 days
  - 1 Part Time Family Support Worker
  - 1 Full Time Family Support Worker – who requested flexible retirement in 2018, reducing her working days to 2 and the remainder of the post was successfully recruited to, resulting in 2 part time FSW posts
- 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 Until around 2015, Aberdeenshire's Adoption Service received a very high level of interest in Adoption which minimised the need for active recruitment of adoptive families. However, 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 we saw an increase in 2018 to **8** families, following a concerted and targeted campaign of recruitment through the media and social media online. The fall in interest in adoption was considered to be partly due to the downturn in the Oil and Gas Industry, significant employers in the area, which bestowed a level of affluence, enabling families to consider adoption and the additional costs that raising children brings.
- 3.2 Equally, the challenging economic factors affecting the UK as a whole are thought to have also had an impact with families simply being unable to afford to raise a child or children via adoption or otherwise. Other local authorities throughout Scotland are understood to be enduring similar shortfalls in families offering adoptive homes to children.
- 3.3 We, in Aberdeenshire, continue to look at proactive ways of reaching potential adoptive families in the communities of Aberdeenshire, through promoting our '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.
- 3.4 A number of children each year are claimed through Adoption by their existing Foster Carers, 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.
- 3.5 There are consistently children 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 education. Most families coming forward, however are focussed on adopting infants, toddlers and pre-school age children and this is theme is common across Scotland.
- 3.6 In 2017 & 2018 we saw a rise in the number of infants and young toddlers requiring an adoptive family, including children relinquished for adoption, which was until recently very rare.
- 3.7 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. However, this has been possible for a few children in 2017/18 who have had the opportunity of Concurrency from birth, and will now remain in that family, which means that the trauma of the separation and loss of primary carers in infancy has been minimised and so the longer term impact of this is largely negated.

- 3.8 In our efforts to recruit suitable adoptive families for our most vulnerable children, we encourage applicants to keep an open mind to 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, as this causes delay for both children and delay for adoptive families when matches cannot be achieved. We are first and foremost a children's service, providing families for children, as opposed to children for families.

**4. Adoption Enquiries** **2018** **2017**

Enquiries made & Information Packs on Adoption sent out: 24 27

Reg. of Interest Returned & Initial Visits Carried Out: 12 10

**5. Preparation of Prospective Adoptive Parents**

- 5.1 Following prospective adoptive families registering an interest in adoption, an initial visit is undertaken by an Adoption Social Worker where full information is shared and questions answered and where prospective adopters indicate a wish to progress their application, 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.

- 5.3 User feedback is sought after every session of the Course and the Team uses this to inform their assessment of the family and to tailor future sessions/courses. It is designed to be an interactive and responsive learning opportunity. Feedback is usually very positive and helpful to future planning.

- 5.4 Input to the course is provided by a range of Adoption and Permanence Social Workers, the Agency Legal Adviser and Medical Adviser, people who have adopted and Foster Carers who have moved children on to adoption.

- 5.5 A number of Adoption and Children's Social Workers are involved in the delivery of the Preparation Course during the course of a year with the Senior Practitioner and Family Support Worker taking lead, co-ordinating roles.

- 5.6 Between January and December 2018, **9** couples participated in and completed the preparation courses and **4** progressed onto full assessment and approval. The remaining families withdrew for varying personal reasons, rather than an Agency decision on suitability.

**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 Panel is chaired by an independent Chair and made up of individuals with both lived experience and professional experience in alternative family care.

<b>Adoptive Families Approved</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2017</b>
	4	13

## **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 2018 the Permanence Panel made recommendations for Adoption Plans in relation to **16** children – **5** boys and **11** girls (2017 – **12** children - **10** boys and **2** girls).
- 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. This can prove very lengthy and legally complex in some cases. We strive to place children with their prospective adoptive families at the earliest opportunity, before legal process inhibits our capacity to do this, so that children can 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**

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.

- 8.1 Between 1 January 2018 and 31st December 2018:

Children matched with adoptive families: **15, including 2 sibling groups of 2 children**  
(2017 – **14** children including **2** sibling groups of two)

## **9. Adoption**

- 9.1 **10** Adoptions Orders were granted in Court in 2018 in respect of Aberdeenshire children including 2 sibling groups: (2017 – **13**)

## **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 used Scotland's Adoption Register Online Linking facility, 'Linkmaker', through 2018 to explore links between children and potential families throughout Scotland. The search can also be extended UK if needed.
- 10.2 Use of Interagency Adoptive Families is costly, at a nationally agreed £27,000 per child (2 siblings- £43k). In 2018, none of the children adopted were done so by families from out with Aberdeenshire. We profiled 5 children on Linkmaker whom we have been unable to recruit local families for, and **3** of those children have been Matched with families within Scotland and their adoption plans are progressing.
- 10.3 Conversely, we have welcomed **2** children from other areas of Scotland to be adopted by Aberdeenshire families and another **1** in progress. This, to an extent, offsets the costs of placing children out with Aberdeenshire, although the lull in recruitment 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 placement.
- 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 support can continue, with familiar and experienced workers for as long as there is a need.
- 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.
- 11.4 Adoption Network Groups and events for Adoptive Parents are available throughout the year. Groups are offered south and central locations, depending on level of interest and need and 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.
- 11.5 Outdoors and indoors family events for children, such as crafting, Den Building with the Outdoor Rangers on Bennachie and Rock-pooling at local beaches have continued to be popular through 2018 and give adopted children opportunities to get to know others. We try and offer these during Easter, summer and October School holiday times.

- 11.6 2018 saw the introduction of our two very popular monthly Pre-School Get Togethers in Peterhead and Inverurie, offering an informal social event for young children and their parents. Adoption team staff provide a crafting activity whilst the parents can have a chat together. The enthusiasm for the development of these events by parents has been promising.
- 11.7 A rolling programme of workshops and learning opportunities for adoptive parents continues and has taken positive steps forward in 2018 with our engagement with online media and workshops, that adoptive parents can join in with either individually at home or with a group of other parents in a local venue. We have welcomed and embraced this very flexible way of offering adoptive parents the opportunity for learning in a way that suits them best. We have appreciated the financial support of the Agency to present these workshops to our adoption network of families.
- 11.8 For those starting their adoption journey, we now offer a learning and resource area using Aberdeenshire's ALDO (Aberdeenshire Learning and Development Online) platform and this has been available in 2018 to both cohorts of the Preparation Course. We plan to continue to build up learning modules over time based on what our adoptive families tell us they would like and make this available to all adopters in Aberdeenshire. We have been grateful for the participation of adoptive parents in contributing to the aspects of the Module.
- 11.9 In 2018 we took 76 referrals for a range of aspects of Adoption Support. Requests included birth records access and counselling from adopted adults, tracing and reunion support with birth family members, adoption support for families with children of all ages, supporting teenagers, assisting birth family member's with Letterbox Scheme letters and step parent adoptions. (2017 – 49).
- 11.10 Examples of some ways in which support is offered are through one off consultation or perhaps a series of sessions using established support programmes, completing referrals to children's mental health services or linking adopters with other adopters for peer support. 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.

## **12. Birth Records Support**

- 12.1 Birth Record 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 throughout learning 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 2018 and 31st December 2018 the Adoption Service received **19** Birth Records Support enquiries and offered tailored 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.  
(2017 – **23**).

### **13. Post Adoption Letterbox Scheme**

- 13.1 Aberdeenshire's Post Adoption Letterbox Scheme was launched in April 2007. Each child who has an adoption plan is considered for 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 parents and birth parents, or other birth family members, via the Letterbox Administrator who is supported by our experienced Social Workers, and there is flexibility to respond to individual needs and changing needs over time. The Letterbox scheme also extends to Kinship families and Permanent Fostering families and we offer support to them in the same ways, where this is in the child's interests.

- 13.3 We understand how difficult it can be for parents whose child has been adopted to maintain positive links, especially in the early days and the pain of losing their child remains very acute and so we try to encourage them to write, 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 2018: **65**  
(2017 – **50**)

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 2018 when a young person reaches young adulthood and elects to withdraw from the scheme, either ending this or taking on communications themselves.

### **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 2018, 1 pre-adoptive placement disrupted. The child was aged 6 when he moved to the family and both he and his prospective adoptive family struggled to adjust to living together. After a year, the situation became untenable for everyone and the child was supported to leave the family. The Adoption Worker involved offered outstanding support during this immensely difficult time to both the child and the family and this was acknowledged by all concerned. The adoptive family elected not to participate in a Child's Life Appreciation Meeting, feeling the support that had received to understand the complexities of the situation very much met their needs, following the child leaving.

## 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 and funded from the set fee paid by the ICA Applicants at no cost to the Agency.

ICA Enquires 2018: 1

ICA Assessment Requested/Completed: 1

## 16. Inspection by the Care Inspectorate

- 16.1 The Adoption Service is inspected as decided upon 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 or recommendations were made of the service.

An Inspection, planned or unannounced, was not undertaken by the Care Inspectorate in 2018, but is anticipated for early 2019.

An Annual Statistical Return for the Adoption Service was completed in February 2018 and submitted to the Care Inspectorate, as required, within timescales.

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

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