

The Highland Council

Education, Children and Adult Services Committee 11 February 2015

Agenda Item	14.
Report No	ECAS 29/15

Annual Report – Fostering and Adoption Services

Report by Director of Care and Learning

Summary

This report updates members on the work of the Fostering and Adoption Services over the past year.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Highland Fostering and Adoption Service comprises of 21 (fte) staff, and is managed by a specialist Resource Manager, who reports through a designated Head of Service to the Director of Care and Learning.
- 1.2 The Fostering and Adoption Service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, supervision, support, review and training of foster carers and prospective adopters. The Service continues to work with adopters post adoption when the children are no longer “Looked After” and provides a search and counselling service to adults affected by adoption.
- 1.3 Although fostering and adoption are managed as a single service, the Care Inspectorate treat and inspect the two functions as separate entities. The Highland Council is registered as both a Fostering and an Adoption Agency. Both service inspections have shown steady improvement since inspections started in 2006, with a grading in 2013 and in 2014 of “very good”. The next inspection for the service is due in February/March 2015.
- 1.4 For many children who require to be accommodated, placement with a family offers the best outcomes. Foster carers and adoptive parents provide a core service based on voluntary effort, supported by the Service. Carers look after children in both the legal and care sense of the words, and thorough assessment and continued support is needed to ensure that families can meet their needs and maximise the potential of the children placed with them. This can be a challenging task, with high expectations, given that the looked after and adopted children population is characterised almost exclusively by children with histories of abuse and neglect, with resulting complex health needs and challenging behaviours. Few, if any, are easy to care for, but foster carers and adopters are adept at finding and building on the positive characteristics of these children.

2. Legislative change

- 2.1 Following the completion of the National Foster Care Review in 2013, the Scottish Government has begun to introduce amendments to the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and regulations, and these will be finalised during 2015. The amendments include a limit on the number of unrelated children who can be

placed with carers, standardising placement descriptors, introducing a learning and development framework for foster carers, creating a national foster carer database and setting a national minimum rate for fostering allowances and fees.

2.2 Alongside this the implementation of the Children & Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 will introduce a number of significant changes for looked after children, including the right to remain with their foster carers beyond 18 years of age and to seek help and support up to the age of 26 years. The Act will also put the use of Scotland's Adoption Register on a statutory footing.

2.3 The Highland Council Adoption Plan was published and agreed by Committee in June 2012, and was required under Section 4 of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. It was due for review in 2015, but this plan will now be incorporated into the local authority Children's Plan and will not be required as a separate document.

3. Fostering

3.1 In 2014, there were 63 "new" admissions of children who were accommodated for the first time by the Local Authority and placed in foster care. This is a reduction from 2013, when there were 88 new admissions. The number of children placed in all categories of Foster Care in 2014 peaked to 150 in May, with a slight reduction by 31st December to 141.

3.2 Of these children, five are placed on a long term basis in purchased placements with independent fostering providers, and an additional 13 children with disabilities are in receipt of regular respite care. An increase in adoptions being granted throughout the year, and a fewer children being accommodated for the first time, has contributed to this reduction.

3.3 Children placed

3.3.1 There continues to be a shift in the age groups requiring foster care, with a marked increase in the number of babies who are accommodated, most of whom have serious health and developmental needs generally associated with parental substance misuse.

3.3.2 The number of sibling groups who need foster care continues to present challenges to the service, as keeping siblings together where possible is one of the many things to consider. These sibling groups range from 2 to 5 children, and are often characterised by profound neglect, with the eldest often having been a carer for younger siblings.

3.4 Recruitment

3.4.1 The number of Foster Carers approved in 2014 was six, with a further four assessments currently being carried out. This is a decrease in the number of assessments being progressed to the approval stage compared to previous years, with several assessments having been started and not progressing due to a variety of circumstances, including applicants being counselled out of the process. Regular advertising in local publications, on the Council website, Twitter and Facebook pages, as well as messages about fostering featuring on Council employees pay slips, have all contributed in raising the profile of fostering across

Highland.

- 3.4.2 Although the number of approved carers has remained relatively static, it is an ongoing challenge to replace those who stop caring, mainly due to retirement, employment, and changes in health and family circumstances. A large number of enquirers do not satisfactorily complete the assessment and preparation phases, often because having learned about the challenges, they decide for themselves that fostering is not for them.

3.5 Intensive Fostering scheme

- 3.5.1 Highland has been successful in establishing good quality services which, although under ongoing pressure, mean that the needs of children who require to be accommodated in foster care can generally be met within the authority. The intention of the new Intensive Fostering Scheme is to provide the opportunity for children with complex needs or significant behavioural issues to remain within Highland and be cared for by specially trained and experienced carers, reducing the number of young people who are placed in out of authority placements.

- 3.5.2 We have recently successfully returned a young person from an out of authority placement to Highland foster carers who provide specialist placements. There have been about ten enquires during the past year, since advertising the scheme on the Council website, local media and during National Foster Care fortnight. However the nature of the remit has made it difficult to recruit, and few people have chosen to progress to assessment. Advertising is continuing, targeting specific groups and communities within Highland, and we will continue to promote and develop this part of the service.

3.6 Remuneration

- 3.6.1 All foster carer households get a weekly fee in recognition of the work they do, and an age related allowance for the children in placement. It is though, the personal dedication of carers to make a difference to children's lives that remains the core motivation. An event was held for carers in November 2013 to mark the Council's appreciation of the commitment of its carers. The Scottish Government will be implementing national minimum allowances for foster carers in the next year, and there are proposals for fees at this meeting of the committee.

3.7 Preparation, training and support

- 3.7.1 There were four preparation courses for fostering delivered by staff from the service in 2014. In addition, a wide range of training continues to be delivered to staff and carers, both 'in house' by experienced colleagues, and through 'specialists' from other agencies.

- 3.7.2 All current and prospective carers are offered training, locally and centrally, during the day, evenings and at weekends.

- 3.7.3 Staff and carers will sometimes be given the opportunity to attend training outwith Highland, which provides opportunities for learning, sharing experiences and networking, and is viewed as both valuable and worthwhile. As part of the budget savings proposals for the next two years, the service has run a pilot of on line training for carers, initially offered to those carers who live in rural areas. Though not replacing face to face training, this is seen as complementing the training

opportunities for carers, particularly during the winter months, and will be rolled out across the service during 2015.

- 3.7.4 The child protection training programme has a dedicated “Safer Caring” course for carers, as well as local multi-agency training. This, with the on-going training on internet safety, has helped raise awareness of risks, and helped make both staff and carers more confident that children’s safety in foster care is ensured.

3.8 The work of the Fostering Panel

- 3.8.1 The Fostering Panel functions are defined by Regulation and makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker about:
- The suitability of applicants wishing to foster
 - The type of placements foster carers can provide - temporary, permanent or short break carers for children affected by disability
 - The number of children than can be placed in a fostering household
 - Reviewing approval status following the carer’s annual review and whether this approval is continued, changed or withdrawn.
- 3.8.2 During 2014, the Fostering Panel met monthly and approved 6 applications for fostering, including temporary and long term carers, and considered an increased number of annual carer’s reviews. There were two appeals in relation to deregistration.
- 3.8.3 There are ten panel members, including a legal and a medical advisor, lay member with experience of fostering, adoption and kinship care, and representatives from health, education and social work.

4. Adoption

- 4.1 Outcomes for younger children who have been abused and neglected who are adopted are generally better than for children who are fostered. Risks of adoption breakdown increase the older the age at placement and the longer the child is in care beforehand. Therefore, focussed planning and evidenced decision making are key to the process, whereby delay is minimised. Proactive processes, including permanency planning and recruiting and approving adopters continuously, have meant that most children are placed within Highland.
- 4.2 There is recognition that children who are adopted are not a distinct population, but are primarily children who have been on the child protection register who cannot return home safely. Adoption gives these children the chance for some emotional recovery.
- 4.3 The range and needs of children requiring adoption are increasing, and there continues to be a number of children accommodated at birth because of chronic parental drug or alcohol misuse, resulting in children being placed for adoption who are born with neo-natal abstinence or foetal alcohol syndromes. Knowledge about the life long impact on their development of these syndromes is increasing.
- 4.4 Several children born with other disabling conditions also benefit from adoption, and a considerable number of children benefit from being placed with one or more siblings. We are gradually increasing the number of older children being placed for

adoption or in other permanent families. For all of these reasons, the numbers, range and capacity of adopters that are required are also increasing. There was one relinquished baby placed for adoption in Highland in 2014. This is a rare occurrence; the first being placed since 2010.

4.5 There are currently 17 children matched and placed with their prospective adoptive parents in Highland. However, there are 12 children who are described as “difficult to place” and are awaiting matching with adoptive parents, including two very young children with profound disabilities and a life limiting condition, and two sibling groups of older children. In 2014, there were 19 children adopted, and 10 couples and single people were approved as prospective adopters.

4.6 **Recruitment**

4.6.1 The Highland Council Fostering and Adoption Social Workers recruit and prepare adopters for all children identified by the Permanence Panel as requiring an adoptive placement. Information is given about the ages and needs of children who are seeking permanent families. Children’s profiles are featured on the Council website as well as advertising locally and further afield in national publications.

4.6.2 Preparation groups for prospective adopters are planned in advance, and are usually very well attended, with two adoption preparation groups being held in 2014. Experienced adoptive parents joined the groups to share their experiences of the process and offer support and advice to new applicants.

4.6.3 Our strategy is to recruit prospective adopters to meet the needs of Highland children for whom adoption is the plan, and prioritise applications for those interested in adopting older children, sibling groups and children with additional health or medical needs. If prospective adopters have not been matched with a child within a year of approval, they can, at their request, be referred to the North East Consortium or to the Adoption Register for consideration for matching by other Local Authorities. There have been no referrals of prospective adopters to the Consortium or the Register during the last year, having successfully matched most of our children with adopters approved by Highland Council.

4.6.4 Some children still wait too long to be matched with a permanent family. We therefore actively encourage people in the early stages of the process to consider the more difficult to place children, making it clear that support is available to them before and after adoption. A small number of children have also remained with their foster carers, with whom they have lived for a considerable period, where attachments and relationships have been established and it is deemed to be in the best interests of the child to remain with the family and be adopted by them.

4.7 **Preparation and matching**

4.7.1 Information about the children who need new families is given to adoption enquirers. This information highlights the need for family groups, and in the past three years we have been successful in placing sibling groups of two, three and four children with adoptive families.

4.7.2 We have also been able to place children under five who have differing degrees of developmental delay and disabilities. Our approach is to be honest and positive;

nevertheless the number of prospective adopters who, after careful reading, thought and contact with the medical advisor, say “no” to a child, has increased significantly over the years. As a result, it takes longer to match some groups of children.

4.8 The work of the Permanence Panel

4.8.1 The Permanence (Adoption) Panel’s statutory functions are defined by regulations.

4.8.2 The Panel makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker about:

- The suitability of applicants wishing to adopt
- Reviewing approval status following the annual review and whether this approval is continued, changed or withdrawn.
- Whether permanence away from home is in a child’s best interest and the most appropriate legal route
- Matching children with prospective adopters

4.8.3 The Permanence Panel is made up of people who have experience of working in social work, including children and families and fostering and adoption, a lay member who is a retired Educational Psychologist, a member with experience of adoption and an independent chair. The panel also has a medical and legal advisor.

4.8.4 The increasing number of children needing permanent fostering as well as adoption placements, and the increasing number of prospective adopters approved, has kept the Permanence Panel very busy throughout 2014. The panel meets monthly, with additional panel meetings being held if necessary, for shortlisting children with potential adopters to reduce the time they wait for a suitable family and to reduce delay in planning for their future. The Permanence Panel has also approved 8 new adoptive families, with no approvals for overseas adopters. There was one appeal in relation to deregistration.

4.8.5 During 2014, there were 19 adoption orders, 15 Permanence Orders and 9 Permanence Orders with Authority to Adopt granted in Courts across Highland.

4.8.6 The Highland Council has an Agency Decision Maker and a substitute to hear appeals. The Agency Decision Maker makes decisions based on the Childs Plan meeting and panel recommendations.

4.8.7 Both the Permanence and Fostering Panels have held at least one business meeting in 2014, as well as an annual joint business meeting that the Agency Decision Maker, the manager of the Fostering and Adoption Service, the Fostering and Adoption Team Managers and panel members also attended.

4.8.8 Scotland’s Adoption Register is a nationwide “linking service” to improve the opportunity of finding an adoptive family and to reduce the time children wait to be placed. The Register will also provide national statistics about adoption activity, in relation to the number of children registered for permanency by adoption and the number of approved adopters across Scotland.

4.8.9 Highland continues to refer difficult to place children to the North East Consortium and the Adoption Register. When the Register was introduced in 2009, Local

Authorities could choose not to refer children. However, the Children & Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 will make it statutory for all Local Authorities to register all children for adoption, and this will be introduced from April 2015.

- 4.8.10 The British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) in Scotland, along with staff who manage the Register, organised a number of adoption exchange days in 2014. Prospective adopters were able to attend and find out more about the children who require adoptive families.
- 4.8.11 Highland featured a number of children at these exchange days, and successfully matched and placed a sibling group of two boys with prospective adopters out with Highland who had been waiting for a considerable period of time for a permanent family. We have also held an adoption information evening during 2014, invited along prospective adopters and featured a number of children who have been waiting for a family for some time. This has been positively received, and has raised the profile and further awareness and understanding of the needs of these children with our prospective adopters, resulting in matching progressing for a number of children.

4.9 **Post Adoption Support**

- 4.9.1 The Council has, in acknowledgment of the greater needs of the children being placed for adoption, continued to develop services after adoption. Adoption support planning meetings with health and education colleagues, have been established for several years and have made a very positive contribution to the understanding of the challenges that adopted children bring with them. Adoption allowances are paid where the children have identified needs, with the Adoption Allowance Scheme having been updated by Committee in 2012.
- 4.9.2 Adopters are integrated within the fostering system, before the adoption order is granted, and have opportunities to attend training. Adopters are also deployed to provide short carer breaks (i.e. when a Foster Carer goes on holiday) which can help enhance their confidence and develop their experience. Adopters are primarily childless couples, and this hands on experience helps them to become more aware of the needs of looked after children.
- 4.9.3 The Service provides an Adopters Forum which meets quarterly in the evenings and at weekends. This is a learning and support group, and is well supported by adopters, in order to benefit from peer support and gain further knowledge and understanding of their children.
- 4.9.4 The specialist consultation service to adopters continues to be delivered by a Primary Mental Health Worker who has a particular interest and background in attachment and the lifelong implications of adoption, and this is invaluable in problem solving with adopters.
- 4.9.5 Written feedback from adopters has been extremely positive. The profile of the need for support to adopters continues to be highlighted locally and nationally, and this has helped create a corporate responsibility for these children who have faced considerable adversity in their lives, and the families who have made a lifelong commitment to them.
- 4.9.6 The integrated approach to services after adoption has paid benefits over the

years, and the approach of fostering and adoption staff means that adopters make contact when they have a problem, rather than wait until difficulties become insurmountable.

4.10 Services to adults affected by adoption

4.10.1 This skilled and painstaking area of work involves file finding, searches, liaison with other jurisdictions, counselling and mediation. It has increased in the last five years, due to more openness in adoption and greater media interest in family history. Traditionally focussed on adult adoptees finding their birth parents, there are now more requests to find brothers and sisters, and birth parents wanting information about their children.

4.10.2 *Birthlink* is a voluntary organisation, to which all Scottish Councils subscribe, and provides linking information to a range of people affected by adoption. In 2013, *Birthlink* dealt with 49 enquiries from Highland, which included adoptees, birth parents, adopters, birth relatives and social workers. This is a slight increase from the previous year.

4.10.3 The Archive, which has been organised under local government boundaries, is catalogued alphabetically with cross referencing from children to adopters, and there is a procedure and system for releasing and returning files. Work continues on moving the archived files from their current locations across Highland to the Archive Centre, which will help with locating, storage and security of records.

5. Care Inspectorate

5.1 The Care Inspectorate inspects all fostering and adoption services annually. This contributes to the on-going registration of agencies to provide these services. The inspection of the Fostering and Adoption Service took place in March 2014. The findings of the Care Inspectorate inspections of the Service, were graded 5 and “very good” on all quality indicators in the last two years.

5.2 The Care Inspectorate carries out a Regulation support assessment prior to inspections, which takes account of complaints activity, service changes, and previous recommendations. On the basis of this assessment, it was determined that the inspection in 2014 would be a low intensity inspection.

5.3 During the inspections, inspectors meet with the manager of the service, foster carers, adoptive parents, social workers and managers. They attend staff meetings, take the opportunity to observe both the Fostering and Permanence (Adoption) Panel and speak with carers, and attend training and “drop in” sessions. They examine records of identified children and carers, local surveys, practice guidance, training records, staff supervision records and any other evidence of practice.

5.4 The Care Inspectorate publish separate reports on the Fostering Service and the Adoption Service. Both inspection reports for 2014 are available at www.scswis.com, and are published on The Highland Council website.

6. Developments and pressures on the Service

6.1 A fostering recruitment campaign was carried out in May 2014 during National

Foster Care Fortnight. Primarily, this was to highlight and raise awareness of the need for foster carers to provide a range of placements, including emergency, temporary, respite and permanent placements. Profiles of several children who would benefit from a permanent family, were also featured.

- 6.2 The response was fairly promising, with the Service offering four preparation courses across the authority in 2014. From these, a number of families have come forward for assessment and have indicated their interest in the children featured.
- 6.3 In addition a very successful local recruitment campaign was held in Caithness and North West Sutherland in November, to raise awareness of the need for foster carers in these locations, with information evenings, a press release in the local newspaper and posters and flyers in the busiest public areas of the community. A number of people came along to the sessions and have expressed an interest in progressing to the preparation course, and this will be delivered in Caithness in the next few months.
- 6.4 There are currently 176 approved carers in Highland, and with the increase in demand for permanent foster and respite placements for children affected by disability, the service has to advertise and recruit continuously. The concern about the impact of allegations on carers and their families is the primary concern voiced by applicants during preparation and assessment.
- 6.5 The number of moves that some children have in foster care needs to continue to be monitored. The information that has been collated shows a complex picture, and there is a significant shift in the balance of number of moves beyond the point the child has been looked after for a year. The longer a child remains in a temporary placement without clear plans for their future being made, the risk of that placement breaking down increases, resulting in the child moving to an alternative carer.
- 6.6 More foster carers are using their entitlement to have breaks without children for up to three weeks annually. These breaks are needed to help families “recharge their batteries” and spend time with their own children. This means that the Service has to find alternative placements for children, and requires considerable preparation and organisation especially during the school holiday periods. In order to manage this, the Service has continued to recruit families who just provide short breaks, rather than substantive placements, and more prospective adopters have been willing to undertake this remit.

7. Staffing Establishment

- 7.1 Staffing in the service had been relatively stable for several years. However, more recently, there have been vacancies, mainly due to ill health and retirement. Though previously it had been difficult to fill long standing vacancies in the more rural areas, the Service has been successful in 2014 in recruiting full time social workers in these locations. Currently, we have the equivalent of 1.3 vacancies in the service, with a plan to delete 0.8 of these posts as part of the 2015/16 budget savings.

8. Private Fostering

- 8.1 The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 Regulations and Guidance state that the local

authority has a duty to check the welfare of children in private fostering arrangements. Parents or guardians have a responsibility to notify the local authority when a private fostering arrangement is made.

- 8.2 Private fostering is when a parent or guardian places a child who is under school leaving age in the care of someone who is not a close relative or an officially approved foster carer, for a period of more than 28 days. Private foster carers also have a duty to notify the local authority of any child placed with them and of any change in circumstances relating to the care of the child. The Scottish Government campaign in November 2013 was aimed at raising awareness of private fostering and all Local Authorities were given supplies of posters and leaflets to display in public places. During 2014 there were 2 private fostering arrangements notified to Highland Council.

9. Implications Arising From this Report

- 9.1 Resources: a separate report to this meeting of the Committee sets these out.
- 9.2 Legal: the report shows how the Council meeting its legal obligations under current legislation.
- 9.3 Equalities: the Fostering and Adoption Service addresses the range of children's needs.
- 9.4 There are no climate change/carbon clever, risk, rural or Gaelic implications arising from this report.

<h2>10 Recommendation</h2>

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| <p>10.1 Members are invited to consider and comment on the issues raised in this report.</p> |
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Designation: Director of Care and Learning

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Date: 2 February 2015