



**ANGUS ADOPTION AGENCY AND FOSTERING PANEL**

**ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This report provides information on the operation of Angus Adoption Agency from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

Angus Council has a statutory duty to provide an adoption service and meets this duty through the Adoption Agency which has been in place since 1 April 1996. Responsibility for the functions and decisions of the Adoption Agency rest with the Chief Social Work Officer with authority delegated to the Service Leader Justice acting as the Agency Decision Maker.

Angus Adoption Agency is responsible for decisions and tasks in relation to adoption and the operation of three panels; the Adoption & Permanence Panel, Kinship Panel and the Fostering Panel.

## Part 1 - PANELS

### 1.1 ANGUS ADOPTION AND PERMANENCE PANEL

The Adoption Panel is appointed to consider and make recommendations to the Adoption Agency. The principal functions of the panel in terms of the legislation are to:

- (a) To consider whether adoption is in the best interests of a particular child and if so, whether a 'Permanence Order with authority to adopt' application should be made
- (b) To consider whether a prospective adopter is suitable or continues to be suitable to be an adoptive parent
- (c) To consider whether prospective adopters would be suitable adoptive parents for a particular child.
- (d) To make recommendations on any other matter referred to it which is relevant to the adoption agency's functions under the Act

In practice, supplementary functions of other issues the panel considers include:

Consideration of permanence plans for children other than adoption (including permanence orders)

- (a) To consider applications for adoption support including adoption and residence allowances and to review the payment of these allowances
- (b) Any other matter relating to permanence.

The Adoption and Permanence Panel makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker.

### 1.2 ANGUS FOSTERING PANEL

The main functions of the Fostering Panel in terms of the legislation are to:

- (a) Make recommendations on the suitability or continued suitability of persons as foster carers.
- (b) To make recommendations as to whether a foster carer would be a suitable foster carer for:
  - a particular child or children
  - any child
  - Certain categories of child.
- (c) Make recommendations on the maximum number of children a particular foster carer may have in their care at any one time, subject to the placement limit set out in legislation.

The Fostering Panel also makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker.

To conform to regulations, the Fostering Panel must be distinct from the Adoption and Permanence panel. Both panels meet on the same day and with the same members, but the business of the two panels is kept separate.

### **1.3 ANGUS KINSHIP PANEL**

The Kinship Panel makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker.

The main functions of the Kinship Panel in terms of legislation are to:

- (a) Make recommendations on the suitability or continued suitability of a person/s as interim/long term kinship carers.
- (b) To make recommendations in respect of kinship care assistance and/or financial assistance towards seeking a Kinship Care Order.

### **1.4 OPERATION OF THE PANELS**

During 2019/20, the Adoption and Permanence Panel and the Fostering Panel have had two chairpersons: A Principal Educational Psychologist and Service Leader ASN and an Independent Chair: The Service Leader, Child Protection and Review has also acted as Chair. Panel membership has changed due to the retirement of an independent panel member and the appointment of Angus Council managers to the panel.

During 2019/2020 the Kinship Panel initially consisted of members from the Adoption and Permanence Panel. In November 2019 a separate Kinship Panel was formed, this consists of two chairpersons: The Manager, Carers Support Service and The Senior Practitioner, Information Officer. There are two further panel members who are Social Workers. We are currently looking to recruit an independent panel member.

In 2019/20 72 panels were arranged: this included 23 Adoption and Permanence Panels, 23 Fostering Panels and 25 Kinship Panels.

### **1.5 MANAGEMENT AND CO-ORDINATION OF PANELS**

The pilot of the Shared Services Panel Co-ordinator between Dundee and Angus has ended with the decision that it was not viable at this time to merge the role for both authorities. The Manager Carer Support has taken on the role of Panel Co-ordinator in the interim whilst other options are being explored.

The Co-ordinator has responsibility for scheduling panel business; ensuring that the panel operates correctly and in line with regulations and sits on each panel as panel adviser. The Co-ordinator also has responsibility for maintaining the panel membership and ensuring they have the required knowledge and training to fulfill the task.

### **1.6 CONSULTATION ON FUNCTIONING OF THE PANELS**

There is a system in place for consulting with people who attend the panel. Birth parent, foster carer, applicant, social worker and team manager who attends the Panel is given a questionnaire to complete regarding their attendance at Panel. The responses are collated, analysed and discussed at panel development events to inform future practice.

## **1.7 TRAINING OF PANEL MEMBERS**

Training is important for all panel members particularly in view of the complexities of the cases they are required to consider. Panel members and Chairs attended diversity training in August 2019 and a kinship training undertaken by Elizabeth Ross, Manager Carers Support Service. Panel Chairs have the option of attending Adoption and Fostering Alliance's Panel Chairs Meetings. The Panel Chairs, Medical Advisers and Legal Advisers meet with the Service Leader and Manager in the Carers Support Service too.

## **1.8 REVIEW OF DECISIONS**

There were three reviews of a kinship care approval decision and in each case the original panel decision was upheld.

## **Part 2 - ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS OF THE AGENCY**

### **2.1 ADMINISTRATION OF SECTION 18 NOTIFICATIONS**

Section 29/30 of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 deals with adoption by a person who wishes to petition the court for an adoption order. The Adoption Agency does not arrange these placements, but Section 19 of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 requires the agency to become involved by producing a report for Court.

In 2019/20, the Adoption Agency received 4 notifications of intent to apply to become adoptive parents of relatives/step-children.

### **2.2 ADOPTIONS WITH A FOREIGN ELEMENT**

The Adoption Agency may be approached by applicants wishing to adopt a child from overseas. Following any such approach, the Adoption Agency has a duty to assess applicants and provide information to the Scottish Government.

Angus Council introduced a charging policy in relation to inter-country adoption applications in 1998. Under this policy applicants will be charged a fee to cover the costs of the assessment. No such assessments were undertaken this year.

### **2.3 ADOPTION ALLOWANCE SCHEME**

Angus Council currently operates an adoption allowance scheme. During 2019/20, Angus Council paid adoption allowances for 17 children.

### **2.4 RESIDENCE ALLOWANCE SCHEME**

The Scheme for the Payment of Residence Allowances has been in effect since 1997. The Kinship Scheme has also been revised and was approved at the Children and Learning Committee in September 2018.

## Allowances Paid as of 31 March 2019 and 19/20

	18/19	19/20
Adoption Allowances	19	17
Residence Allowances Kinship Order	49	69
Kinship Looked After	54	48

There has been a reduction in the number of kinship looked after allowances being paid. Work has been undertaken in partnership with locality teams to ensure that children only become "looked after" where this level of legal intervention is not necessary to secure their wellbeing. This includes ensuring that children are not being accommodated on a voluntary basis when the family situation may not require this. This has resulted in fewer formal kinship care arrangements being implemented.

Positively, there has been an increase in allowances paid for Kinship Orders demonstrating children are being secured legally in kinship arrangements for the long term.

### 2.5 ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

The Local Authority, as an Adoption Agency, has a duty to provide a service to people, including children, who have been or may be adopted, their parents or guardians and those who have adopted or may adopt a child. This includes a duty to provide counselling to adopted children and adults, adoptive families and to others who are affected by adoption including birth families.

The adoption counselling service is coordinated and provided by the Permanence Team. Services delivered can include individual counselling such as birth record counselling.

A post adoption contact service is provided by the Adoption Agency where an adoption includes an agreement that the adoptive parents and birth family will continue to share information.

### 2.6 INTERAGENCY PLACEMENTS

An arrangement exists between local authorities to allow children to be placed with adoptive parents. An interagency fee is charged by the authority, or voluntary agency, providing the assessment and support of the carers.

During 2019/20, 1 child was matched with prospective adopters in Angus by another authority, but there has been a delay in placing the child due to the Covid-19 situation.

## 2.7 ADOPTION REGISTER AND RECORDS STORE

All adoption files relating to adoptions arranged by Angus Council are stored locally in secure conditions. Staff from Angus Council Adoption Agency have access to this archive for adoption counselling purposes. The Permanence Team Leader is the Keeper of the Adoption Index.

## Part 3 - OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION AGENCY BUSINESS

### 3.1 VOLUME AND BREAKDOWN OF PANEL BUSINESS

In 2019/20 72 panels were arranged; this included 23 Adoption and Permanence Panels, 23 Fostering Panels and 25 Kinship Panels.

Panel Submissions	18/19	19/20
Children's permanence plans considered or reviewed at panel	19	10
Children matched with permanent foster carers	4	1
Children matched with adoptive parents	4	8
Foster Carers approved	18	9
Carers reviewed	34	28
Carers de-registered	16	16
Adoptive parent approved	4	5
Kinship carers approved (interim)	0	12
Kinship carers approved	25	15
Kinship carers reviewed	0	16
Residence allowance application	6	2
Residence allowances reviewed	43	0
Adoption allowance applications (no of children)	1	0
Adoption allowance reviews (no of children)	1	1

There continues to be a focus on permanence for children who cannot live within their birth family. This year, we have seen a reduction in the number of children being presented with permanence plans but an increase in the number of children who have been matched with prospective adoptive parents. Whilst some children have successfully been placed in permanent families, there remains a number for whom family finding is a challenge and in particular, finding permanent fostering families. We have developed profiles for the children which we share during "preparation to foster" training and during the home study for permanent fostering assessments.

There were 9 foster carers approved this year: 3 as interim carers; 5 for short breaks; and one long-term carer. This is a 50% decrease from last year despite an ongoing active recruitment campaign. We also said goodbye to 15 fostering families this year following deregistration: 9 interim; 5 short breaks; and two support carer families (one supported a fostering family, the other supported long-term carers). These much valued colleagues left due to a variety of reasons including retirement and other personal commitments. We currently have 8 fostering families on time-out or waiting to be de-registered.

### **3.2 MEETING CHILDREN'S NEEDS FOR PERMANENCE**

The first consideration when working with children who become looked after is the ability of the child's birth family to provide safe, permanent care for the child, and for this to be achieved within a reasonable period. If this is not possible, it is critical that alternative plans are made to provide the child with stability and security as they grow up. Unless members of the child's extended family can take on this role, the main routes to long term security are adoption and permanent fostering. In the latter case, the child's position is likely to be secured legally by means of a Permanence Order under section 80 of The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007.

Achieving permanence for children continues to be a complex and time-consuming area of work. It involves detailed work across several relevant teams, including the Council's legal services. Although children in this position may no longer be exposed to immediate physical risk, there are potentially significant risks to their long-term well-being and development if the security of permanent care is delayed. The Adoption Agency has an important role in enabling permanence decisions to be made and implemented without undue delay. In 2019/2020, two permanence orders, six permanence orders with authority to adopt and two adoption orders were granted.

### **3.3 RECRUITMENT AND APPROVAL OF PROSPECTIVE CARERS**

Recruitment of foster carers remains a challenge and we continue to make every effort to encourage growth in this area. We have an active social media recruitment campaign and our processes are reviewed regularly to ensure we engage anyone who is interested. Having an overall target provides a useful aim for recruitment initiatives, although the actual capacity of the service is determined as much by the skills and abilities of individual carers as it is by the overall number of carers available.

On 31 March 2020, we had 26 fostering families offering interim placements to 45 children and 16 short-breaks carers. Two short-break fostering families were offering interim placements to two children on an "out with approval" basis. We had six fostering families offering long-term placements to nine children, plus a further two children placed on an interim basis. Twelve fostering families were offering long-term care to 13 children, plus four children who were placed on an interim basis. A total of 73 children were looked after and accommodated with approved Angus foster carers.

So that we can ensure the greatest flexibility and support for our children, we also assess and approve support carers. These are relatives of approved foster carers who can provide respite support for the children in placement. This means that children can stay with their extended fostering family rather than stay with carers they may not know. On 31 March 2020, we had eight approved support carer families.

In November 2019, the service took responsibility for continuing care and supported lodging providers in line with the Children, Families and Justice Service review. On 31 March 2020, we had 10 carers offering continuing



care placements to 12 young people, and two carers offering supported lodgings to one young person. One supported lodgings provider had a vacancy.

### **3.4 FOCUS AND MONITORING OF EXTERNAL COMMISSIONED PLACEMENTS**

Externally commissioned placements are only used when we are unable to identify a suitable placement within our own resources. On 31 March 2020, we had nine external fostering placements for 11 Angus children, one of whom was placed on a continuing care basis. We continue to have a shared service approach with Dundee City and Perth and Kinross Councils and offer placements to each other when we cannot resource one in house. At 31 March 2020, we had one child placed with a Dundee City Council carer. In the past year, we also had one child placed with an Angus carer from Dundee for a period. There is a small administration fee incurred for these arrangements, but it is more cost effective than procuring an external resource. There is also a reciprocal agreement for the charging of such placements.

When we are unable to place a child within Angus Council resources, and subject to authority being granted by the Resource Panel, the Fostering Team will contact external agencies on the Scotland Excel National Framework to identify a suitable resource for the child. Once a resource had been identified, there is close consultation with the child's social worker to take a placement forward, including a joint visit to the potential placement and an assessment of suitability to meet the child's needs.

All external agency foster carers have a supervising social worker from the Angus Fostering team who monitor the placement in respect to the carer's role. This is in addition to the independent agency's own support and monitoring arrangements and the child's social worker's ongoing assessment. As well as maintaining contact, the service also visits the foster carer's home a minimum of once every six months.

## **4 KEY ISSUES, DEVELOPMENTS AND PRIORITIES**

Whilst the workload of the Adoption and Fostering panels continues to be busy, feedback from those who attend panels suggests they have continued to fulfill the statutory obligations in an effective and professional manner.

The importance of sustaining high quality placements to meet the needs of children; continued development of the fostering service; and the ongoing identification of permanent carers for all children who require such placements, continue to be key issues in Angus and across Scotland. These areas will remain the broad priorities in the coming year.

The key issues and identified service development priorities for 2020/21 are:

### **4.1 The Permanence Forum for children**

The Permanence Forum was established to provide a more streamlined and consistent approach to progressing plans for children. There has been a significant reduction in the numbers of children being considered at the

Forum, as reflected in the numbers of children being registered as in need of permanence. It is likely that the reduction is due to children being supported in the community either in their birth families or kinship.

#### **4.2 Establishment of a Kinship Team**

A Kinship Team and separate Kinship Panel has been established to assess and offer advice, guidance and support to kinship carers. The Kinship Team have had a very successful first year and are looking to develop their role further as link workers to kinship carers in order to ensure that work around support and/or training needs identified at the panel are taken forward.

Feedback from kinship carers has been complimentary, many stating that they feel reassured that the kinship team are on hand to give them consistent and ongoing support, advice and guidance. A kinship group was formed in August 2019 and has been very successful with as many as 16 carers attending fortnightly support sessions. We celebrated Kinship Week by hosting a children's party for children and their carers which was well attended. Other social activities will recommence in due course.

The kinship scheme has now been operational for a year and will be reviewed as part of ongoing service development.

#### **4.3 Recruitment of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers**

Increasing the number of approved carers remains key to achieving better outcomes for Looked After Children but despite an active social media campaign, we continue to have small numbers coming forward to foster. We will continue to invest and develop our social media campaign with the catch phrase "Change lives for the better. Adopt or foster an Angus child today". To compliment the social media work, we have developed a dedicated website which will be launched in 2020/21.

#### **4.4 Development plans for the Fostering for the forthcoming year**

The skills level based scheme has been in place for a number of years and will be reviewed over the next year.

The service is developing a proposal to support the wider use of "informal carers" as part of our package to support children and young people. Informal carers are trusted adults who are well known to the carer/s and child and who can provide care for the child up to a period of 23 hours.

The development of the proposal is part of our work to recognise and act on feedback from our looked after children and care leavers who told us that they want access to more "normal" experiences, like staying over with their extended foster family and trips away. Further work will be taken forward in consultation with approved carers in the first instance.

The continuing care and supported lodging service will continue to be developed to ensure the availability of the best support and choice for our looked after children and care leavers. This will include refreshing arrangements for the recruitment, assessment and training of supported lodging providers.

#### **4.5 Training Developments in Carer's Support Services**

"Siblings together" training will be delivered to all relevant staff, foster carers, prospective adopters and kinship carers to promote the importance of promoting and maintaining sibling relationships.

The "secure base model" is an attachment and resilience-based model of caregiving. Work is on-going to introduce this model across our carer support and residential services in Angus to promote a unified approach in caring for children across all our care giving environments.

We have developed the family finding training we deliver to foster carers and now include carers in our pre-linking meetings. This is where we consider whether approved adopters can meet the needs of a specific child in need of permanence. This training has been received positively by carers and workers enabling them to share their experiences of caring for children which can support identifying the right match for a child.

The Permanence Team have had a successful recruitment drive and in recognition of their specialist function, a full development plan for the team has been designed to promote a consistent understanding of the permanence planning process, assessments, family finding and offer an opportunity to explore why children experience delays in permanence and how we overcome these.

#### **4.6 Adoption Support**

The service has reviewed how best to support birth parents when their children are registered in need of permanence and/or adoption is granted. Birth parents are offered individual support in the first instance and we will work to support the development of a birth parent group.

Plans are underway to expand our adoption support by running a group for approved adopters who are waiting for children to be placed. They can currently attend the adoption support group but an additional group specific to their stage in the process has been suggested as helpful.

#### **4.7 Resource Panel**

The Resource Panel was introduced in September 2019 following service redesign. All referrals for a family placement resource are now considered by the Forum. All children who have been looked after and accommodated for more than 12 months and who do not have a plan for permanence will be reviewed at panel. The operation of the Resource panel is reviewed internally.

There have been 67 children referred to the Resource panel for a fostering placement and 31 were reviewed by the Forum. The Forum helps to ensure that children in the greatest need can access the resources required to support their development. Regular reviews allow plans to progress and minimise unnecessary drift.