



ANGUS ADOPTION AGENCY AND FOSTERING PANEL

ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides information on the operation of Angus Adoption Agency from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

This has been a very challenging year for the service due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of this on staff, children, foster and kinship carers and adoptive parents. A special thank you to all our staff this year who have adapted and found creative ways to maintain the service and support placements for our most vulnerable children and young people. We have adapted our training delivery; ways of supporting children to stay in contact with birth parents, our carers and other significant others. We moved to a model of virtual, and then hybrid panels and have continued to offer support to all involved in the work of the Agency.

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 and authority is delegated to the Service Leader Justice and the Service Leader Child Protection and Review to act 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 and Permanence Panel is appointed to consider and make recommendations to the Adoption Agency. The principal functions of the panel in terms of legislation are:

- (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 a prospective adopter would be a suitable adoptive parent 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, the panel also considers:

- (a) Permanence plans for children other than adoption, including permanence orders
- (b) Applications for adoption support including adoption allowances and to review the payment of these allowances
- (c) Any other matter relating to permanence, including the matching of children with foster carers.

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 make recommendations:

- (a) on the suitability or continued suitability of a person as a foster carer.
- (b) as to whether a foster carer would be a suitable foster carer for certain categories of children
- (c) 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 main functions of the Kinship Panel in terms of legislation are to make recommendations:

- (a) on the suitability, or continued suitability, of a person as an interim or long-term kinship carer.
- (b) in respect of kinship care assistance, which can include the payment of a regular allowance as well as financial assistance towards seeking a Kinship Care Order.

The Kinship Panel makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker.

1.4 OPERATION OF THE PANELS

During 2020/21, following government restrictions, the adoption and permanence, fostering and kinship panels continued to operate, albeit virtually. This method of working was a challenge involving the swift deployment of technology and had the effect of individual panels taking longer to conduct. As restrictions lessened, we moved to a hybrid model combining both virtual and face to face attendance to meet the needs of all those attending panel and encourage participation especially for parents and carers. Despite some of the challenges, we have received positive feedback from both workers, parents and carers regarding their experience of attending virtual meetings.

There are two chairpersons for the adoption and permanence and fostering panels: The Service Leader ASN and Lifelong Learning and an Independent Chair. Panel membership has been refreshed over the past year following a recent positive recruitment drive.

The Kinship Panel consists of two chairpersons, the Manager, Carers Support Service and a Senior Practitioner from the Children, Families and Justice Service. There are two further panel members who are qualified social workers and two independent panel members will join the panels in due course.

In 2020/21, 84 panels were arranged, this included 27 adoption and permanence panels, 28 fostering panels and 29 kinship panels. This is an increase in the number of individual panels from previous years and reflects the more time-consuming model of blended panels meaning fewer cases can be discussed in one sitting.

1.5 MANAGEMENT AND CO-ORDINATION OF PANELS

The Manager Carer Support assumed the role of panel adviser following the restructuring of the services and departure in September 2019 of a co-ordinator whose time had been shared with Dundee City Council. A panel adviser post has been established to support the work of the panels and will take up post in the summer of 2021. This will provide critical support to the operation of the panels, including developing panel members.

The panel adviser has responsibility for overseeing panel business along with the carer support co-ordinator. The adviser will ensure that panels operate correctly and in line with regulations and will attend adoption and permanence and fostering panels as a non-voting member. The adviser will offer consultation to workers, oversee, and maintain panel membership, and ensure members 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 panel attendees. Children and young people, birth parents, approved foster, and kinship carers, applicants, social workers and team managers are given a questionnaire to complete regarding their experience of attending panel. Responses are collated, analysed and discussed at panel development events to inform future practice. Given the low response from birth parents, we are trialing alternative ways of seeking their views. The implementation of the My Views app will also promote greater participation of children and young people in the care they receive.

1.7 TRAINING AND RECRUITMENT OF PANEL MEMBERS

Training is important for all panel members, particularly in view of the complexities of the circumstances they are required to consider. The Panel Chairs, Medical Advisers and Legal Advisers meet quarterly with the Service Leader, Manager and Team Leaders in the Carers Support Service. The relevant generic training available to Angus Council employees, as well as the training for approved carers, is made available to all panel members. Newly recruited panel members have been trained for their role as panel members by an Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) consultant.

1.8 REVIEW OF DECISIONS

There is a process in place whereby carers can appeal the decision made by the Agency Decision Maker and in this year two such appeals were lodged. Following review by a different panel and agency decision maker both original decisions were 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 2020/21, the Adoption Agency received 6 notifications of intent to apply to become adoptive parents of relatives/step-children. These reports are now completed within Carers Support Service to ensure consistency of practice.

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. No such assessments were undertaken this year.

2.3 PAYMENT OF ALLOWANCES: ADOPTION ALLOWANCE SCHEME AND KINSHIP ASSISTANCE

Allowances Paid as of 31 March 2020 and 31 March 2021

	19/20	20/21
Adoption Allowances	17	16
Residence Allowances Kinship Order	69	69
Kinship Looked After	48	49
Kinship Pre-Assessment	N/A	6

Angus Council currently operates an adoption allowance scheme. During 2020/21, Angus Council paid adoption allowances for 16 children.

The number of kinship looked after allowances/pre-assessment allowances have increased slightly this year.

Work continues in partnership with locality teams to ensure that children only become "looked after" when this level of legal

intervention is required 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.



There are 69 children subject to kinship orders, promoting their long-term security. The Kinship Team have continued to work in partnership with locality teams to ensure that children are secured in a long-term arrangement within a timely period.

Kinship orders legally secure the child's future and allows access to financial support to become more normalised as kinship carers can then access the child element of universal credit. This also has the effect of reducing the level of kinship allowance paid by the Council.

2.4 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. Support was quickly moved to virtual support and groups which usually run 4 times a year, increased to 4-6 weekly to ensure families felt supported during the pandemic period.

The adoption counselling service is co-ordinated 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. The permanence team has offered additional support to ensure the smooth running of the contact service for adoptive and birth families during the pandemic during which time there has been increased anxiety for families around welfare of individuals.

2.5 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 2020/21, 1 child was matched with prospective adopters in Angus by another authority and subsequently adopted.

2.6 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 2020/21, 84 panels were arranged; this included 27 Adoption and Permanence Panels, 28 Fostering Panels and 29 Kinship Panels.

Panel Submissions	19/20	20/21
Children's permanence plans considered or reviewed at panel	10	15
Children matched with permanent foster carers	1	2
Children matched with adoptive parents	8	5
Foster Carers approved	9	9
Contingency Foster Carers Approved	0	1
Foster Carers Temporary Variation in Approval	0	15
Carers reviewed	28	31
Carers de-registered	16	14
Adoptive parent approved	5	2
Kinship carers approved (interim)	12	22
Kinship carers approved (long-term)	15	9
Kinship carers reviewed	16	10
Residence allowance application (Kin Assistance)	2	5
Kinship One Off Payments (Legal Costs)	0	8
Residence allowances reviewed	0	44

Panel Submissions	19/20	20/21
Adoption allowance applications (no of children)	0	1
Adoption allowance reviews (no of children)	1	0

Permanence for children who cannot live within their birth family is a complex and critical area of social work practice which continues to be an improvement focus for the service.

This year, we have noted some delay in considering children's permanence plans because the progress of parenting capacity and rehabilitation assessments were impacted by Covid 19. However, we have also seen an increase in the number of children being presented with permanence plans from last year and despite Covid 19, we have matched and placed children with prospective adoptive parents.

Whilst some children have successfully been placed in permanent foster families, there remain some children for whom family finding is a challenge. We have developed profiles for children and share these during "preparation to foster" training and during the home study for permanent fostering assessments.



Nine fostering families were approved this year; 1 family approved as interim carers, 5 for short breaks, 2 for permanent and 1 specific approval short breaks carer. The numbers approved were consistent with the previous year.

Importantly, we also said goodbye to 14 fostering families following deregistration. Our valued carers left for a variety of reasons including retirement and other personal reasons and we wish them well. We currently have 4 interim fostering families and 4 short break families on time-out or waiting to be de-registered.

In line with the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, we recruited one fostering family who were approved as contingency foster carers providing short breaks care for up to 2 children.

During the pandemic, we have noted a significant increase in the number of foster carers who are caring for children 'out with their approval' resulting in their approval being varied on a temporary basis. These situations have arisen due to government restrictions which have impacted on the progress of the children's planning process and resulting in increased demand for fostering resources. The flexibility and commitment shown by our fostering community has resulted in the majority of children who require a foster placement remaining in their local community.

There continues to be a focus on keeping children within their family and the increase in the number of approved interim kinship carers reflects this. In addition, 9 kinship carers have been approved as long-term kinship carers for the children in their care. This figure is a decrease compared to the previous 2 years due, a positive reflection on the reduced delay in supporting kinship carers to secure legal permanence for the children in their care.

3.2 MEETING CHILDREN'S NEED 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 that 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 recognises its important role in enabling permanence decisions to be made and implemented without undue delay.

In 2020/2021, four permanence orders with authority to adopt and six adoption orders were granted.



3.3 RECRUITMENT AND APPROVAL OF PROSPECTIVE CARERS

Recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents has been impacted significantly this year and due to government restrictions. For example, we have not hosted any face to face recruitment events or open days. All initial discussions with prospective carers have been held virtually. We continue to have an active social media recruitment campaign and our processes are reviewed regularly to ensure we engage anyone who is interested in fostering and support diversity in recruitment.



The fostering team have undertaken 4 preparation to foster training courses over the year and the permanence team have facilitated 2 preparation to adopt training sessions. This was a new challenge for the teams as they had to adapt, develop, and deliver the training programmes virtually. Despite the different presentations, courses received positive feedback from those who attended.

A total of 72 children were looked after and accommodated with approved Angus foster carers.



On 31 March 2021, we had 28 fostering families offering interim placements to 46 children and 17 short-breaks carers. Two short-break fostering families are offering interim placements to three children on an "out with approval" basis. Two short break families are caring for 2 children on a shared care basis with the children's parents.

So that we can ensure continuity of care, with adults who are known to 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 2021, we had nine approved support carer families.

Since November 2019, the service has been responsible for continuing care and supported lodging providers. On 31 March 2021, we had 4 carers, 2 of whom are offering continuing care placements to 2 young people, and 2 carers are offering supported lodgings to 2 young people.

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 2021, we had 9 external fostering placements for 12 children, one of whom was placed on a continuing care basis and two children have been matched on a permanent basis.

There has been an increase in the purchase of external foster placements, due to the increased demand for placements described above.

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. We were able to secure a 2 week placement through this arrangement.

All external agency foster carers have a link with a supervising social worker from the Angus fostering team who monitor the placement in respect to the carer's role. As well as maintaining contact, the service also visits the foster carer's home a minimum of once every six months.

It has been noted over the last year that there has been a higher number of placement breakdowns for our children who live with external agency foster carers; 4 placements broke down (5 children) compared to 2 Angus Council placements (2 children). Unplanned endings meetings were held to review these unplanned endings following each placement breakdown and learning identified.

4 KEY ISSUES

Whilst the workload of the Adoption and Fostering panels continues to be busy some, of the development work over the past year has been difficult to progress and will be taken forward in this year as restrictions allow. Feedback from those who attended virtual and hybrid panels suggests that panels have continued to fulfill their 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 families for 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 2021/22 are:

4.1 EXIT INTERVIEWS

Exit interviews are offered to all foster carers who leave the fostering service, giving them an opportunity to provide feedback on their fostering experience. This information presents the service with an opportunity to make changes and improve practice.

The themes emerging include the importance of having a consistent approach from the supervising social worker; the need for training

and development sessions which reflect carers' developmental needs, and the importance of the level of foster carer experience when placing a child. Work around these areas has been taken forward with all social workers in the fostering service attending a training session on their role as supervising social worker. It has also been recognised that more emphasis needs to be placed on holding placement support meetings and ensuring clear plans are in place focused on repairing, supporting relationships and sustaining the placement. Placement support meetings are now embedded in practice.

4.2 THE PERMANENCE FORUM FOR CHILDREN

The Permanence Forum provides a more streamlined and consistent approach to progressing plans for children and reviews the work undertaken to date to secure children's long-term futures. 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.

4.3 RESOURCE PANEL

The Resource Panel continues to meet weekly to consider all referrals for a family placement resource.

All children who have been looked after and accommodated for more than 12 months and who do not have a plan for permanence are reviewed at panel, along with children receiving respite from home, or additional support in their placement. All external foster placements are reviewed every 6 months unless permanence has been agreed. The Forum helps ensure that the children in greatest need can access resources.

A breakdown of resource panel business is as follows:

1 April 2020- 21 March 2021

Total number of cases referred	171
Total number of reviews of resource	114
Total number of new referrals	57
Request/review respite placement	31
Request/review interim placement	104
Request/review permanent placement	4
Request for additional respite	6
Review external placement	23
Request supported lodgings	3

4.4 SUPPORT TO CARERS

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, carers have faced different challenges this year with many having to home school the children in their care. A variety of support has been provided by the service through home visits, virtual and telephone support. Practical support provided included additional financial assistance to purchase digital equipment so that children and their carers can access support. We also introduced an additional fee which has been paid to foster carers engaged in home schooling.

The Kinship Team continue to support kinship carers who care for looked after children and children on kinship orders. The team are developing their role further as supervising workers to kinship carers in order to ensure that work around support and/or training needs identified at their approval panel are taken forward.

Despite lockdown adoption and kinship weeks were a great success with a programme of activities and fun provided by the teams. Each of these sessions were well attended and positive feedback was received.

4.4 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 and adopt. To compliment the social media work, we have developed a dedicated website which was launched in 2020/21, www.fosteringandadoption.angus.gov.uk. A recruitment campaign focusing on Angus Council employees during fostering fortnight also highlighted the supports available to employees of Angus Council who are kinship or foster carers. These policies reflect the Council's ongoing commitment to delivering its broader Corporate Parenting duties.

5 DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND PRIORITIES

5.1 SKILLS LEVEL SCHEME

The skills level based scheme has been in place for a number of years and is currently under review. A consultation process is underway involving foster carers, care experienced young people and key stakeholders. The service will progress to review the findings and adapt the scheme accordingly.

There will be an ongoing focus on developing continuing care and supported lodging services to ensure the availability of the best support and choice for our looked after young people and care leavers. This includes refreshing arrangements for the recruitment, assessment, and training of supported lodging providers.

5.2 TRAINING DEVELOPMENTS IN CARER'S SUPPORT SERVICES

Workers within the fostering, permanence and kinship teams have worked hard to offer training opportunities for carers and adopters, moving from face to face training to virtual training. Alongside training sessions, additional support groups were also offered to foster carers and adoptive families.

The Children (Scotland) Act 2020 places a new duty on local authorities to take steps to promote, on a regular basis, personal relations, and direct contact between a child in their care and their brothers and sisters. In line with these changes to legislation, "siblings together" training was delivered to all relevant staff, foster carers, prospective adopters and kinship carers to highlight the importance of promoting and maintaining these relationships.

The Secure Base Model is being implemented across the Resource Service, as it is recognised that a secure base is at the heart of any successful, caregiving environment - whether within the birth family, in foster care, kinship care, residential care or adoption. The Carers Support Service has embraced this model by facilitating training around the key themes of secure base to support carers and adoptive parents to promote security, confidence, competence, and resilience in the children they care for. The model is also used by supervising social workers, including in the supervision of carers and staff and is used to inform the assessment of carers.

Two staff members from the Carers Support Service are now accredited to co-ordinate, facilitate and chair Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) meetings. This service promotes the engagement of families in decision-making about the safety and welfare of children. In putting the family at the centre of decisions. Research has shown that on the occasions where alternative accommodation is required for a child, FGDM can support the child to remain within the family.

5.3 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, however due to Covid 19 the development of a birth parent group

has not been possible. Plans are underway to reintroduce these once restrictions allow.

Adoption support groups have continued to operate albeit virtually. These continue to be well attended.

Plans are also underway to expand our adoption support services to extended family members of prospective adopters in order that we can develop a shared understanding of an adopted child's journey and associated support needs.

5.4 DEVELOPMENT OF AN ADULT PROVISION PANEL

Plans are underway to develop an Adult Provision Panel for the review and approval of continuing care providers and supported lodging providers in order to bring a consistent and objective approach to the approval of this group of carers.

5.5 THE PROMISE

Between 2017 and 2020, the Independent Care Review listened to the experiences of over 5500 care experienced children, young people, adults, and professionals working in the care system to create a vision to improve the care system in Scotland. The work of the Care Review culminated in the publication of seven reports in February 2020, including 'The Promise'.

'The Promise' report sets out a vision for what the future of care for Scotland's children and young people could be. It advocates for the provision of more intensive, preventative support to families to keep them together where it is safe to do so. It also says that, where that is not possible, the alternative should provide children with a loving home, with positive and lasting relationships and support to thrive.

Over the coming year, the Carers Support Service will collaborate with our carer community so that we can support the delivery of that vision, building on the good practice that already exists. We are currently delivering information sessions to all staff and carers about The Promise with a view to developing an action plan, aligned to the Council's Corporate Parenting Plan, to detail how we will help make this ambition a reality.

5.6 SIBLINGS TOGETHER

As noted above, there are changes to the legislation (namely the introduction of Section 13 of the Children (Scotland) 2020 Act and the Looked After Children (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021) which are coming into force on 26 July 2021.

These changes confer a duty on the local authority to place brothers and sisters, where appropriate, with the same carer (foster carer or kinship carer), or place brothers and sisters in homes which are near to each other (if this would better safeguard and promote the welfare of a child than a placement in the same home).

The changes will also allow the extension of foster placement numbers to more than three children per household. Recruiting and supporting foster carers to care for brothers and sisters together will continue to form part of our strategy.