

Care and Permanence Planning for looked After Children in Scotland

Scottish Government Response

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CARE PLANNING AND PERMANENCE FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

INTRODUCTION

1. The *Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland* report prepared by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) found that, for the majority of children, it took more than two years from their first involvement with services to achieve permanence through Adoption or a Parental Responsibilities Order. The shortest time was 12.5 months and the longest 10 years and 10 months. Only seven children achieved permanence within two years; all of these children had been identified as at risk at birth. Thirty two children achieved permanence in between two to four years and forty four children took more than four years.

2. Of the 100 children, 44% were assessed as being at risk, either before or at birth. Including their final placements, fifty five children had experienced two placements, and thirteen children experienced four or five placements during their time in care. The research focused on the overall timescales and processes associated with permanence and did not look at local authority case files. The report's conclusions should be seen in that context and therefore provides an overall view – rather than case-by-case explanation – of delays and drift in their care management.

3. Every child has the right to be able to achieve their potential and have the best outcomes possible. Unfortunately, some children will experience periods where their family cannot care for them, which may lead to their permanent home being away from their natural parents. These are some of Scotland's most vulnerable children, and their early life is not only affected by their family being unable to care for them, but also a care system which at times can take too long to make effective decisions about the placement of a child.

4. The combination of these factors leads to a negative impact on secure attachments for these children and, potentially, to poorer outcomes in their later lives. These are the children who need to be supported by an active and engaged care planning system which meets their individual needs and provides them with opportunities for permanent care; they require care planning to be swift, effective and focused so that they do not lose out on opportunities available to their peers. It is the corporate parenting responsibility of all services engaged in their lives to be ambitious and focused on the needs and rights of these children in order that they can achieve their full potential.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY

5. It is not only the responsibility of public services to focus upon the rights of the child. Evidence shows that effective and efficient decision making as early as possible in a child's life produces the most cost effective interventions. Rather than intervening when significant risk and potential harm has already taken place, early and effective intervention can divert children from the care experience, or help them to leave care earlier. The Early Years Framework shows us that the economic return on early years investment is significantly higher than for any other stage in the education system.

6. We also need to be the best corporate parents we can be for those children and young people whose needs are best served by being in care. The work outlined in this response is designed to help practitioners and decision-makers address this challenge by looking at the care system as a whole – from early and effective intervention and decision making, through the processes required to ensure that all permanence options are always considered for each child, to ensuring that these permanence options exist.

7. The response builds on a range of policy initiatives to date which include:

- *These Are Our Bairns* and *We Can and Must Do Better* which set out the Corporate Parenting landscape;
- *Moving Forward in Kinship and Foster Care* and the *National Residential Child Care Initiative*;
- *National Anti-Stigma campaign* and the *Corporate Parenting National Training Programme*;
- The *More Choices More Chances* agenda;
- *Chief Executive Letter 16* to Health Boards setting out the role of Directors with responsibility for looked after children; and
- The *Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007* and the newly launched *Scotland's Adoption Register*

8. This response sets out the areas for improvement identified in the SCRA report and outlines key areas of work which will be taken forward by the Scottish Government and our strategic partners to address these areas. The work will include recognising and capturing the good practice and innovation already taking place throughout Scotland.

9. This response is intended to provide an opportunity to discuss specific measures with other Corporate Parents, such as local authorities, the wider care sector, Health and Education, and will provide a basis for more detailed, systemic work in the years to come. Only by addressing the whole system of care for children can we radically and sustainably improve their outcomes.

10. This response is deliberately ambitious. Our ambitions for looked after children should be no less than those for our own children. A collective response will be pivotal to achieving those ambitions and we will work in partnership with other organisations to consider how best to achieve this.

DELAY IN THE SCOTTISH SYSTEM

11. The measures and initiatives in this response require the input from all partners involved in delivering the care of a child, including adult services which can provide parenting support. Full and proper engagement and commitment to the success of addressing these issues is required to make this work. The role of Scottish Government and The Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG) is to provide the policy context, demonstrate good practice and appropriate systems, and support the necessary changes and adaptations required to reach our long term goals for children. However, it is through local authorities, Health, Education and Third sector partners that the implementation must take place.

12. In order to address the areas for improvement identified by the research this response has been considered by the LACSIG Care Planning Hub and the Scottish Government. This response considers five improvement levers:

- Assessment tools
- Care Standards
- Child's plan
- Dissemination of good practice
- Whole systems

13. There is a commitment to resource initiatives to a timetable that delivers real change as quickly as possible, but in a manageable and cost effective way. These initiatives must produce clear evidence of impact to improve the five areas identified by the research.

14. LACSIG and the Scottish Government will work with the new Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children ("the New Centre") to commission and co-ordinate actions that support this plan.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Decision making and implementation - First decision on permanence away from home

SCRA report - area for improvement (p62)

There is a need for discussion and guidance on rehabilitation with birth parents. This needs to balance the rights of parents and the child. Consideration should be given to the level of risk a parent presents to their child from what is known about their history of care of their other children, if other children have been adopted or accommodated, and their offending history (especially offences against children).

15. Adoption is a far reaching intervention in a child's life, and it is important to ensure that, where there may be an opportunity for a child to live in their family environment, that this is maintained.

16. Parenting assessments are an important part of the process for care planning for looked after children and these must be completed robustly. But they are also required to be timely and appropriate. Where a child has been identified at risk, at or before birth, or where, as in 45% of the report's sample, the parents had already had a child separated from them through the care system, these assessments should not be a cause of extended timescales for a looked after child.

17. The assessment should take account, at the earliest stage, of both the needs of the child and the capacity of parents to meet these. The research suggests, however, that cognisance does not always seem to be taken of the fact that older siblings have already been removed. Whilst such evidence will always need to be reviewed, previous history is strongly indicative of the parents' capacity to care safely for subsequent children.

Actions

Assessment tools

18. To provide a robust evidence base on which decisions can be properly evaluated, recognised and supported tools are required. The Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group and the Scottish Government are aware of a number of areas of good practice and innovative working throughout the care planning process which can provide the evidence base to help support decisions.

19. The Scottish Government will commission the New Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children to collate information, evaluate practice and outcomes, and provide access to suitable support in implementing practice improvement. This will be for the benefit of all services involved in care planning, including the Court system and the Children's Hearings. These will include:

- **supporting and encouraging practice which promotes and evaluates twin track assessments and the production of practitioner tools**
- **development of a risk assessment toolkit**
- **information about the value and use of prescribed timescales for decision making**
- **links to support and materials relating to**
 - **good practice on family support, rehabilitation programmes, interpersonal communication and managing conflict**
 - **support services for parents with substance misuse problems**
 - **early years and child development including brain development**

20. Good practice models will be showcased and promoted during new and existing events, in formal communications with local authorities, Health Boards and the Third Sector coordinated by the New Centre and through the work of LACSIG.

Child's Plan

21. The report identified that the majority of delays experienced in care planning were during the early decision making process. It identified that the courts processed applications within an appropriate period and that a significant factor was the prescribed timescales courts were required to work within; and the management of the case to meet these times. Research shows that it is not only the age of the child on entry into care that affects their likelihood for a stable placement, but also the time they spend in care.

22. In order to facilitate appropriate timescales in the journey of a child through care the Scottish Government will ask LACSIG to consider the options available in order to implement tighter decision making processes in the child's plan.

- **The Scottish Government will produce a paper to bring together and evaluate evidence presented by the SCRA report on the impact of strict timescales on decision-making, in particular on reducing the overall time taken to achieve permanence. The findings of the paper will inform further work and detailed engagement with frontline services.**
- **The Scottish Government will review relevant policies to ensure key messages on attachment and child development including brain development are incorporated. In addition, the Scottish Government will consider whether the areas for improvement identified by SCRA should be reflected in outstanding guidance and the national care standards.**

Decision making and implementation - Management of the permanence process

SCRA report - area for improvement (p64)

There is a need for standards and management information in relation to all stages of the permanence decision-making process. This would allow assessment of performance at a local authority and national level.

23. The Court Rules associated with the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 clearly define the case management and timescales involved in hearing adoption order petitions. The report identified that, where these timescales were in place applications were processed within an appropriate period.

24. LACSIG identified that there is great variability in the way in which local authorities and other services involved in the life of looked after children monitor and progress care planning decisions and the timescales involved. The Scottish Government recognises that individual decisions have to take due account of the circumstances of the care of each individual child, but believes overall that processes could be quicker.

Actions

Assessment Tools

25. As well as the work already identified in paragraph 19 with respect to consideration of timescales, the Scottish Government and strategic partners will commission work to identify appropriate structures and responsibilities in case management and provide training opportunities to agencies and other stakeholders.

- **The Scottish Government will continue to support Fife council to carry out a programme of work to accelerate permanency decisions and improve outcomes through changes to processes. The New Centre will evaluate the Fife programme and provide practice improvement materials and a number of practice events throughout the year to share learning from the work.**
- **The Scottish Government will work with key agencies through the LACSIG Health Activity Hub to consider and clarify the roles of Health and Third Sector professionals within the care planning process.**
- **In addition, the Scottish Government will work partners to develop and promote training opportunities available to frontline health workers, including Looked After Children Nurses, to specifically strengthen Health's involvement in early care planning and decision making.**

Care Standards

26. The timescales and case management for the Court system are contained in legislation. Management of timescales is also a clearly defined role of the court system. Whilst also considering the need to do the same for case management by adoption agencies (see paragraph 22), the Scottish Government will consider further options to ensure that case management is appropriate and responsive.

- **The needs of Looked After Children (including those Looked After at home) will be fully reflected in the new child-centred inspection regime. This will build on work by LACSIG to design and introduce self assessment case-file tools which are aimed at improving quality and timeliness of decision-making.**
- **Good practice on supervision of case management will be identified from across Scotland and developed and will feed into the good practice sharing activities set out in paragraph 19.**
- **The Scottish Government will work with the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration to update Children's Panel member training to reflect the principles of good case management and effective, early decision-making.**

Decision making and implementation - Placements

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 65)

Some children experienced multiple moves and placements, others had the security of long-term carers before moving to their adoptive parents. Both these circumstances can impact on the development of a child's attachment to adoptive parents. There are few standards or guidance on numbers or length of placements and we should use this opportunity to discuss, consider and agree the numbers of moves and placements a child should experience which takes into account age and stage of development. Agreement and monitoring of these would allow local authorities to assess their performance in minimising them.

27. Sound attachment is now well understood as a critical underpinning for a child's healthy growth and development. The need for a safe, stable place to live and for ongoing secure relationships must be central to the child's plan and to Children's Hearings decisions made for young people leaving care.

28. While no two cases will be the same, and each child must be placed in a situation that is appropriate to them, the need to secure and maintain attachments is an important factor to be considered in all care planning. Consideration of the most effective means of securing long term stability for a child should include permanent foster and kinship care, or residential care as a positive option.

Actions

Child's Plan

29. All partners and decision makers with corporate responsibilities for a child need to be aware of the damage that multiple placements can have and the need to secure permanency at an early age. This work needs to help practitioners turn an awareness of attachment and child development issues into the skills needed to improve outcomes. In order to ensure that attachment and child development is key in the planning and decision making for looked after children, and to address the number of placements that may be required the Scottish Government and LACSIG will commission work to promote the importance of attachment and child development and its use in decision making. In addition to the actions set out in paragraph 22 on incorporating learning around attachment into policy and national standards, the Scottish Government intends to take forward the following activities.

- **The Scottish Government will work with its partners to map and update training currently delivered to social workers and other professionals on attachment and child development.**
- **The use of foster carers as adopters or permanent long term carers will be promoted.**

- Learning on attachment and child development will contribute to the good practice tools collated by the New Centre for Excellence (see paragraph 19)

Children's Hearings System

Children's Hearings System - Reporter decisions on first referral

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 65)

SCRA will use this research to review Reporter decision making and to improve its performance for current and future cases to ensure that the right decisions are being made to safeguard the welfare of children in the short and long term.

30. SCRA have undertaken to use the findings of the report to reflect upon the practices and policies at first referral. The Scottish Government will work with SCRA and all other parties in order to ensure that consistent messages *across the whole sector* are delivered rather than focussing on individual aspects of service provision. It is the responsibility of all corporate parents across the child care system to work together to promote the well being of looked after children.

Children's Hearings System - Children's Hearings decisions and delays

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 66)

Similarly, decisions made by Children's Hearings can have consequences for permanence planning. There are anecdotal reports about Children's Hearings being causes of delay, however, there has been no study to determine if this is the case or to identify improvements. The opportunity to examine and understand this better would be helpful and consideration should be given to undertaking an evaluation of practices and performance on Children's Hearings held to review Supervision Requirements and to provide advice to the court on permanence cases.

31. The child's care planning team and the Children's Hearing need to be clear about the significant impact on permanency planning of existing or changed contact arrangements. Although the research did not find evidence of the Children's Hearing contributing to delays, it did identify anecdotal reports of the Hearing contributing to changes to contact arrangements.

32. A child's journey through care is also affected where parents consistently do not attend a Hearing or rehabilitation service. This often results in a continuation hearing which again delays decision making for the child.

Action

33. The Scottish Government will work with SCRA and the Children's Hearing Training Units to ensure that information, good practice and training

is provided to all decisions makers in the care system, including both the Children's Hearing and the Court systems. Special consideration of the needs of the people making these decisions and their knowledge of social work practice and current evidence in child care should be made when delivering them.

- **Training on good case management and the importance of early decision making on the outcomes for children will be updated to specifically address any identified needs for Children's Hearing members and the courts. This will include learning on attachment, child brain development, contact arrangements and the effect of multiple placements.**
- **SCRA will consider the impact of practices and performance of Children's Hearings held to review Supervision Requirements. SCRA will work with the Scottish Government and its partners to take forward its findings.**

Children's Hearings System - Advice Children's Hearings

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 66)

SCRA, local authorities and the courts should explore ways of improving communication mechanisms (including feedback), as part of their interagency working.

34. SCRA will work with local authorities and the courts to ensure that the appropriate reports are being sent to the right people promptly.

35. In addition, the feedback arrangements in the Children's Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011 will also provide opportunity for discussion and learning on the various interventions determined by hearings, how local authorities responded to these and what impact they have on children.

Court processes

Court processes - Section 23 report

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 67)

There is an opportunity for SCRA, local authorities and the courts to improve the permanence application process by considering whether a single report would suffice for the advice Children's Hearing and the court.

36. The *Getting it Right for Every Child* approach identifies a single plan and process for all children when it is appropriate, including looked after children. Scottish Government will work alongside LACSIG with all partners with corporate parenting responsibilities for child and decision making forums to take this work forward within the wider *Getting It Right For Every Child* context.

- **Material and training for practitioners and decision-makers on integrating all looked after children care planning and permanence decisions within a (“Getting It Right”) single shared planning process and plan will be developed if needed. This would include integrating decisions around additional support needs.**

Court processes - Curators ad litem and Reporting Officers

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 67)

There is scope for improving the operation of curators ad litem and Reporting Officers nationally.

37. This will be considered by the Scottish Government as part of the response to the Report of the Scottish Civil Courts Review by the Lord Justice Clerk, the Rt. Hon Lord Gill.

Consideration of all Looked After Children

SCRA report - area for improvement (p 61)

If, as this research has found, there are delays in decision making for those children who go on to be adopted, including babies accommodated at birth, we should consider whether this is also the case for other looked after children.

38. The care planning process applies to all looked after children as decisions about their long term care and their final destinations take a similar route. It is clear from Scottish national statistics that most children have a plan in place, but there is evidence from the research that these plans can be subject to considerable drift due to oversight or supervision issues, decisions not being implemented or papers not being lodged in court.

39. Similarly, drift in the system was identified in terms of the processes of decision makers, such as where hearings were postponed to allow for more evidence or birth parents to be in attendance. The importance of clear planning in the first six months of being in care has been recognised for many years and this is particularly important for very young children, who are an increasing proportion of those looked after. The findings of the research should also be considered in wider care planning procedures.

Action

Care Standards

40. In order to ensure that the care planning process focuses the balance of rights and welfare with those of the child, LACSIG and the Scottish Government will work with Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland and other strategic partners to deliver the work and practice as widely as possible.

- **The New Centre will work with LACSIG to influence existing training, and develop and introduce new materials and training opportunities on care planning processes for practitioners and decision-makers across Health Boards, Education, the Courts and Children's Hearings where gaps exist.**

Good practice

41. LACSIG and the Scottish Government are aware of a range of good practice throughout the care system, and have been actively collecting and evaluating this information. Further, in creating the New Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children, the Scottish Government aims to offer corporate parents a one-stop-shop to access good practice as well as consultancy support. The focus of this paper is to improve practice. While some actions will take time to show results, there are a number of shorter term activities which could make a valuable contribution to the aims of this paper.

Actions

The New Centre will work in partnership to:

- **establish a “Permanence Team” to provide bi-lateral support to all local authorities to help reduce their outstanding permanence caseloads, and develop and disseminate good practice across Scotland through events, seminars and workshops.**

The Scottish Government will:

- **work with the local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to scope ways to ensure sufficient capacity exists to assess prospective adopters or permanent carers, especially for children with complex needs.**
- **commission research to evaluate the costs and benefits of key elements of good practice, multi-disciplinary working, early and effective decisions and faster permanence and trial a cost-calculator model to aid economic planning for local authorities when considering investment in services.**
- **work with local authorities to determine baseline information on the use of Permanence Orders and on key aspects of how each authority operates its care system.**
- **provide support for adoption consortia to determine what role they can play in delivering the aspirations of this paper.**
- **support Scotland’s Adoption Register to hold a number of ‘exchange’ days to facilitate adoptions by those already approved as adoptive parents.**
- **take forward work to link health indicators in relation to Looked After Children to the Children Looked After Statistics to provide a baseline of health outcomes and monitor improvements in the future.**

Whole systems

42. The research undertaken by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, provides an ideal opportunity to undertake a generational change to our current system for looked after children. In order to make the ambitious changes that are required to make the care system work for the children involved, the Scottish Government will consider the system as a whole, identify any duplication and delay and work with its partners to replace these with the effective and innovative practice. Therefore, alongside the work previously identified in this response the Scottish Government will work with partners to consider opportunities to develop a whole systems change management process.

43. This process will not be one which starts in isolation. It will utilise the outputs of all of the work to date and the information, processes, practice and tools developed through the work already outlined in this response. Similarly, it must gather all partners with strategic, corporate and decision making responsibilities throughout Scotland to help to identify a modern, coherent and child-centred system. The change programme will seek to design a system which can support the child, the natural family, the potential permanent placement and the key workers making the case for the permanent care of the child. It will be developed around a systems-thinking model – with the intention that a future model would be streamlined and tailored to each local authority.

44. An initial step towards establishing a whole systems change model is to critique the full journey of care experienced by a child on a path to permanence. The Scottish Government will work with LACSIG, the New Centre and one or more local authorities to map their care journey, with an initial focus on permanence and adoption. This work will allow for detailed analysis on what a potential future model could look like within the local authority.

45. Integral to the operation of a whole systems approach is the need to engage with decision making forums as early as possible. The success of a whole systems approach within the youth justice system has been possible in large part due to the close involvement and buy-in from key local officials within the Courts and Hearings services. The Scottish Government will therefore engage with the Scottish Courts Service and the Children's Hearing system early in the programme to ensure their needs continue to be met. This will build on work around a single planning process as identified on page 11 and 12.

Actions

The Scottish Government will ask the New Centre to begin work to scope and then introduce a whole systems approach in partnership with one or more local authorities. This will involve:

- utilising the outputs of all of the work to date and the information, processes, practice and tools developed through the work already outlined in this response;
- working with all partners with strategic, corporate and decision making responsibilities to identify what a coherent system could look like;
- mapping and critiquing the full journey of care experienced by a child on a path to permanence in one or more local authority areas;
- implementing and monitoring the systems change in one or more local authorities;
- engaging with the Scottish Courts Service and the local Children's Hearing early in the programme to ensure their needs continue to be met.

Conclusions

46. The SCRA report is a timely and credible contribution to the overall debate about permanence in Scotland and the need to move more quickly and effectively to safeguard the best interests and outcomes for our looked after children.

47. The findings warrant serious consideration. Protracted timescales work against the well being of the child, their outcomes and their future. The resources involved in protracted decision making processes are unsustainable for all organisations involved in delivering services to looked after children.

48. The research and findings warrant a comprehensive response which addresses a range of widely known issues. This response seeks radical change and the success of this work will be determined in a number of ways, some of which are set out below.

- Survey-based information from local authorities, Health boards and Third Sector on changes in local procedures, the speed of decision-making, number of placements and the numbers of permanence orders applied for and completed.
- Integration of all partners in the decision making process for children, including the Courts and Children's Hearings so that the rights of the child are always held central to the process.
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for all those involved in the care planning system based upon the findings of good practice and appropriate processes.
- Assessment and reporting tools that are streamlined and fit for purpose.
- Increased use of permanence orders to secure the stable future for children who would benefit from their use.
- The beginning of a sustained increase in adoption rates in the CLAS from 2013/14.

49. Above all, this work has the potential to make a lasting and significant improvement to the care systems across Scotland and to looked after children. For this to happen however corporate parents at all levels across Scotland need to consider their role and take responsibility for improving the outcomes for the children in our care.

Scottish Government
June 2011

ANNEX A

BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

1. At 31 July 2010 there were 15,892 children in care in Scotland, representing 1.4% of the population of 0-18 year olds; a 4% increase from the previous year. Over 60% of these children could no longer live with their birth families. The age profile of children coming into care is dropping; fewer children came into care during 2009-10 than in previous years (down 7%), but more children under the age of one (a 1.4% increase) started being looked after. The fact that more young children are coming into care, and fewer young children are leaving care, than in previous years suggests that, overall, the experience of care is getting longer.
2. That children are coming in to care younger, and the number of children coming in to care is falling, suggests professionals are getting better at identifying the children who need effective interventions in their life *at an early stage*.
3. Research by Julie Selwyn of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies in Bristol University shows that every year of delay in the system reduces the chances of the child being adopted by 20%.¹ It also identified that age at placement was a significant key predictor of placement stability for adoption. Children who were adopted were not only younger on entry to care (aged 3 or younger) but were also subject to speedier decision making when they entered care. Both age at entry to care and the length of time between entering care and having a best interests decision were found to be significant predictors of the likelihood of being adopted.
4. In response to the findings of the National Residential Child Care Initiative reports, the Scottish Government brought together the Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG) to lead and drive forward an implementation programme to improve the outcomes for looked after children and young people in Scotland. The group is comprised of principal stakeholders who, in partnership with the Scottish Government, is taking high level ownership of the implementation agenda for looked after children, including those leaving care, and the development of appropriate services to ensure their stability, wellbeing and security.
5. During the early work of LACSIG a number of discussions took place about the pathways and decision making processes for looked after children. The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) agreed to undertake research exploring these pathways and processes through the care and court systems in Scotland. The research made use of case files of 100 looked after children from the point they were first identified as at risk, to the point of adoption or permanence placement.

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<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/projects/completed/2002/rk5822/rk5822executivesummary.pdf>

6. The children were identified using SCRA's case files, which contain reports and information from social workers, police and other agencies, as well as all the referrals and decisions made by Reporters and Children's Hearings. Further information was obtained from Sheriff Courts.

7. Given the period in which SCRA were operating in terms of identifying children who had achieved permanence through the care and court systems, and the need for consistency of practice across all the cases investigated, the report only considered cases completed using adoption orders under the Adoption (Scotland) Act 1978 ("the 1978 Act") and the Parental Responsibilities Orders under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 ("the 1995 Act"). On 28 September 2009 the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 ("the 2007 Act") came into effect which modernises, improves and extends the provisions for adoption. The 2007 Act also repeals Freeing Orders and Parental Responsibilities Orders and replaces them with a new court order - the Permanence Order.

8. The research undertaken by SCRA found that, for the majority of children, it took more than two years from their first involvement with services to when they achieved permanence through Adoption or Parental Responsibilities Order. The shortest time was 12.5 months and the longest 10 years and 10 months. Only seven children achieved permanence within two years; all of these children had been identified as at risk at birth. Thirty two children achieved permanence in between two to four years and forty four children took more than four years. Of the 100 children, 44% were assessed as being at risk, either before or at birth. Including their final placements, fifty five children had experienced two placements, and thirteen of children experienced four or five placements during their time in care.

9. The research by SCRA identifies a number of areas that could be improved in order that the care system best meets the needs of looked after children: decision making; court processes and Children's Hearings. The research builds upon previous evidence and information gathered by LACSIG, and reflects some of the findings of good practice examples throughout the country. The Scottish Government accepts that the systems in place at the moment, alongside good practice being identified by LACSIG, need to be reviewed with a view to focussing the system firmly on the best interests of the child and ensuring a permanent, stable home is provided as early and effectively as possible. This report provides a timely opportunity to update practices and procedures across the public and third sectors to ensure they meet the aspirations of the Early Years framework and the principles of the Getting It Right approach.

10. This response builds on a number of important activities by the Scottish Government to improve permanence and adoption planning. Comprehensive guidance on the Adoption (Scotland) Act 2007 was issued in March 2011 to support local decision makers to achieve permanence earlier, and for more children. In addition, the Scottish Government also commissioned Scotland's first National Adoption Register in order to facilitate adoption matching processes across Scotland.



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