

Scottish Government Debate:
**Reducing the Time Needed to Find a Permanent Home for Looked-
after Children**

Barnardo's Scotland believes that Scotland, as a corporate parent, is currently failing too many looked after and accommodated children (LAAC). Far too many children are waiting too long for a permanent home, enduring multiple short term placements, and developing complex needs as a result.

Stable and consistent care placements are proven to deliver more positive outcomes for children and young people in care. Government and local authorities need to move quicker to ensure that this is a reality for all Scotland's looked-after children and not just an ambition.

Key Recommendations

1. Barnardo's would like to see the Scottish Government:
 - a. help to recruit and support more foster and adoptive parents. Particularly Government must do more to recruit and support specialised foster parents who can support children with complex needs.
 - b. give assurances that it will not just focus efforts on those children best placed to move into permanency, but will look to support those that are most vulnerable and at risk to ensure that every looked after child has a chance of stable, loving home.
 - c. to do more to join up the work of local authorities, the courts, children's hearing panels and children's reporters.
 - d. do more to join up work between all areas of local and national government dealing with early years, family support, looked after and accommodated children and adoption and fostering teams/agencies.
 - e. use the opportunity of the planned Children's Services Bill to review the whole system of looked after and accommodated children to ensure that delays in permanency are minimised across Scotland.

2. Barnardo's supports the recommendations and conclusions set out in the SCRA research report, *Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland* and agrees with many of the actions set out in the Government's response to this report. We do however, have a number of questions to ask of Government with regards to progressing these actions:
 - a. What timescales has Government set itself to achieve the actions set out in its response?
 - b. How will it measure improvements for those children with the most complex needs and challenging problems?
 - c. What additional resources will be made available to ensure that the recommendations are achieved?

About looked after and accommodated children

Children become looked after for a variety of reasons. These can include concerns about the child's wellbeing and risk from poor parenting, abuse, neglect and parental substance misuse. A small number of children are looked after because they have committed offences.

Looked after children are not a homogenous group. The term 'looked after' includes children who are subject to supervision and live with family members as well as children who live with foster carers or in residential schools or care homes. They can move between these groups, some children will experience numerous moves and foster placements.

Finding a permanent solution

There are simply not enough people and families coming forward to be potential adoptive and foster parents in Scotland, while the demand for loving, caring, stable homes is increasing significantly every year.

Adoption has the best chance of success the younger the child is placed.

Children's emotional attachments are made at young ages so the quicker we can make those decisions, painful as they are, then the better it will be for the outcome of the child.

There is clear evidence that those in stable, long term care placements such as foster care and adoption enjoy much greater outcomes in life than those that do not. Looked after children, for example, are out performed on average by five and half times by all school children, yet looked after children in long term stable foster homes achieve better exam results, on average, compared to all school leavers.

A system under pressure

Delays in decision-making and obtaining a permanent home can undermine a child's long-term life chances. Research suggests that children on average can wait more than two years to be placed in a permanent home.

Barnardo's recognises that many local authorities are doing a good job, with committed staff, but are constrained by resources. As a result, we are concerned that professionals are losing sight of the needs of the child as a result of the demands of the process .

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the launch of the National Adoption Register for Scotland. The list includes all children who have a plan for adoption and all approved adopters in Scotland, which will hopefully increase the speed of successful adoptions. However, much more must be done before a child reaches the register.

There needs to be a more robust parenting assessment process that needs to be resourced with clear timescales attached, which are consistent with the needs and developmental stage of the child. Far too often plans are allowed to slip or are not effectively monitored and assessed allowing the child to stay in an environment not suited for their long term care, such as temporary foster care while birth parents address long standing problems including alcohol and drug misuse.

We know that many local authorities have put in place successful diversionary and preventative resources to help children remain with their birth families. However, there can also be a lack of understanding about what works in terms of the right intervention to make. Interventions need to be based on the concept of working alongside families as opposed to simply delivering to them what we think is good for them. How we deliver those services is a real challenge for all service providers.

Ultimately, insisting that a child stay with its birth parents is not always the best decision for a child.

Social work departments are often taking too long to make the decision to move a child onto an adoption plan. Children and family social work staff need to be better supported, including having protected time, in order to help move permanency plans on more quickly. We believe that there needs to be a move towards concurrent planning, where plans to move a child into a permanent care setting, such as adoption and long term foster care are progressed alongside plans keeping a child with their birth parents. This would help speed up the process for many children once a decision to remove them from their birth parents has been made.

Delays in obtaining stable placements for these children are likely to impact on their long-term well-being and outcomes in life. It also means that these children can remain exposed to abuse, neglect and violence. The time taken to come to decisions for these children is therefore crucial to their safety and development.

Increasingly those with responsibility for looked after and accommodated children have to work with more children with far less resources. Looked after children remaining at their birth families home are not getting the support they need from their corporate parents due to dwindling resources. Government and local authorities need to consider how we can do things different with less, but still support these vulnerable families.

There needs to be a radical think about how we join all these up to deliver a system that puts the child and their needs at the centre of the system.

Barnardo's recognises the Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) approach that the Government has introduced, but the patchy nature of its implementation has meant that a child centred approach is not always prevalent. We look forward to supporting the Government with legislation in 2013 to enshrine GIRFEC in law. **The Scottish Government should use the opportunity of the planned Children's**

Services Bill to review the whole system of looked after and accommodated children to ensure that delays in permanency are minimised across Scotland.

We are concerned that there is a tendency for policy priorities to focus on aspects of the LAAC system – education, mental health, leaving care, permanency planning. The focus shifts around and the result is we never address the issues as a whole. Barnardo's believes that the only way we will develop coherent and cohesive services that will make a significant impact in changing the lives of these children will be if there is a willingness to adopt a whole system approach.

Supporting the most challenging children

Barnardo's is extremely worried about the number of looked-after children that are coming into residential care with very demanding and complex needs and believe that not enough is being done to support this group of children.

From our experience, those working in residential units have seen an increasing number of younger, more challenging children coming into care, who have very complex needs. This makes them extremely difficult to place with foster carers on short or long term placements. It requires foster carers with specific skills and support, of which there are not enough of in Scotland. Many of these children will have plans to be fostered, but in reality have little chance of ever being placed.

Our concern is that there is huge demand on residential units across Scotland, not just Barnardo's units, and only the most demanding and urgent cases can be taken. This leaves a lot of children in poor environments where needs and challenges become more acute over time, leading them down the path to having serious complex needs by the time they are placed into a residential unit.

More needs to be done to intervene earlier and more effectively with these children and more resources need to be placed into residential units to ensure that services are best placed to manage and support these children.

The worst outcomes

The consequences of not finding a child a stable, consistent and loving long term home with foster or adoptive parents can be devastating.

Those in and leaving care are more likely to leave education with little or no qualifications, are considerably more likely to be unemployed or come into contact with the criminal justice system, suffer poorer health, are more likely to be homeless and suffer from addictions including drugs and alcohol. Many have multiple problems and cost the state considerably.

Key Facts

- In 2010 there were 15,892 children looked after by local authorities, an increase of 4 per cent since 2009. The number of children looked after has increased every year since 2001, and is at its highest since 1982. (Scottish Government)
- Over 9,000 of the 15,982 looked after children were cared away from home.
- Over 4,000 young people leave care every year, a figure which is increasing year on year. Last year of the 4,504 children that left care 3,918 were eligible for aftercare services.
- Scottish Government statistics show that over half of all children looked after away from home have experienced two or more placements. 30% had three or more and 6% had six placements.
- A recent study by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) of a 100 looked after children found that the majority took more than two years to achieve permanence through adoption or Parental Responsibilities Orders. The shortest was 12.5 months and the longest 10 years and 10 months.
- 218 children ceasing to be looked after during the year ending 31st July 2010 were adopted¹
- 466 adoptions took place in 2010 (includes step-parent (27.5%), grandparent(s) (1.1%), other relation(s) (1.7%) and no relation (69.7%) adoptions)
- The statistics also show that children are becoming looked after for longer periods - creating uncertainty and potential long term social and emotional problems

Barnardo's Scotland

Barnardo's works with a number of looked after and accommodated children, as well as those that have been through the care system, including five residential units.

We have recently re-launched our new adoption service, which will assist in placing children who are presently looked after by local authorities into adoptive families, as well as recruit, assess and prepare families to adopt. The service will carefully consider the needs of children on referral and match them with appropriate families provide support to families

Barnardo's has delivered a high quality fostering service in Scotland for many years and we are now recruiting adoptive families for children who need to belong to a new family.

In addition to this, our Barnardo's Scotland Adoption Support Service has over 30 years' experience of supporting all those affected by adoption. We have developed our knowledge and support services based on the experiences and views shared with us by adopters, as well as children and adults who have been adopted or affected by adoption.

¹ Registrar General for Scotland (2010)

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