



Scotland's
Adoption Register

Funded by the Scottish Government



Scotland's Adoption Register

Annual Report 2018-2019

Introduction and overview



Robin Duncan
Register Manager

I am delighted once again to share Scotland's Adoption Register's annual report. For the first time, the number of matches achieved by the Register reached 3 figures in 2018/19, with exactly 100 children matched with adoptive families. Behind the statistics there are many remarkable stories as well as encouraging evidence that the Register continues to help place children who would otherwise not be found a family.

Early in 2018 we were fortunate to be able to commission an independent review of Scotland's Adoption Register, the findings of which have just been published. The purpose of the independent review was to take stock of the progress made by the Register since its introduction, consider how well it is currently working in relation to the aims of the service and to explore ideas for future development. This annual report is being circulated rather later than usual, so that it incorporates some of the information gathered by the review. For anyone interested in a more detailed look at the findings, the full report is available on the [Register's website](#).

The purpose of Scotland's Adoption Register is to support agencies across Scotland to make the family finding system work as well as possible for children identified as needing adoptive placements. Since 2016 it has been a statutory service and, as it is fully funded by the Scottish Government, there is no cost to either local authorities or voluntary agencies for using it. The work of the Register involves providing a national online linking service, hosting information events that allow adopters to find out more about children requiring placements directly from the people who know them best, and running activity days where children, adopters, foster carers and social workers have the opportunity to spend some time together. The Register also works directly with agencies and practitioners to support the linking and matching process both at the level of service design and delivery, and in relation to family finding for individual children.

The Register's work links directly to the goal of achieving 'early permanence' for children who become looked after – one of the key priorities identified in the Scottish Government's Strategy [Getting it Right for Looked After Children and Young People](#). The number of children who are unable to stay with their own family and require an adoptive placement is relatively small, but they are a particularly vulnerable group, and the extent to which family finding services are effective, can have a major impact on the chance of finding a placement and on the children's long-term welfare.

The findings of the independent review provide encouraging evidence that the Register's service is meeting its key objectives and is viewed positively by families and professionals alike.

“ Over the last few years the Register has facilitated and supported matches that would not have otherwise happened. The Register's achievement of its desired outcome – of improving opportunities for identifying matches between children and adopters across Scotland – is supported by the statistics the Register produces for monitoring purposes ”

In terms of guiding our current practice, the review helpfully highlights some of the challenges involved in the linking and matching process. It notes for example, the need for adopters to be prepared and supported to manage the pressures of engaging with the new ways of family finding. While many adopters find greater levels of engagement helpful and empowering, the use of an online system, or attending family finding events, can intensify the challenges of what is already an emotionally charged process, and the service needs to ensure that people can engage with the process in the way that suits them best.

Looking forward, the current contract for hosting the Register concludes at the end of March 2020 and the Scottish Government is currently in the process of a tendering process for this role from April 2020 onwards.

In terms of service improvement, the independent review has also been helpful in defining priorities, and an action plan is being developed to take these forwards. In particular, it is proposed that the Register could play a larger role in promoting and consolidating innovative family-finding practice in Scotland, for example, by the production of guidance on the full range of contemporary family-finding practices and services that have been implemented in recent years. It is also suggested that the possibility of the Register's services being expanded to include family finding for children needing other kinds of permanent placements, particularly permanent foster care placements, should be explored.

Wider developments in policy and practice that will impact on the Register, include the welcome focus on the importance of maintaining sibling relationships, and the implications of this for family placement practice – including on the training and preparation of adopters. The Register is also closely monitoring a shift in the pattern of cross border placements, with a rapid increase in the number of children from England being placed with prospective adopters in Scotland evident in 2018/19. As well as potentially making it significantly harder to find adoptive families for children in Scotland, this trend has implications for authorities taking on responsibility for the long-term support of placements made by English authorities.

Our thanks are due for the excellent support and commitment from our partner agencies, not least from St Andrew's Children's Society as the host organisation. The Register remains very much a collaborative arrangement that works effectively only through the participation of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies, and this collaborative approach remains a crucial part of the Register's success.

Robin Duncan
Register Manager
Scotland's Adoption Register



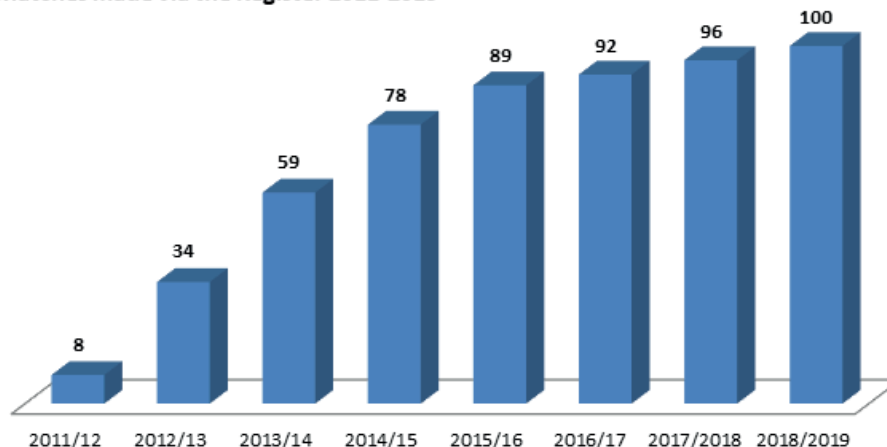
The milestone of 500 matches since the Register began operating was reached in September 2018

HEADLINE ACHIEVEMENTS 2018-2019

- **100** children were matched during the year - the highest annual total to date.
- The milestone of **500** matches since the Register began operating was reached in September 2018.
- During the year, all **32** local authorities in Scotland used at least one of the Register's family finding services. All four voluntary adoption agencies referred adopters.
- The online linking service has been operational for 2 and half years (28 months at end of April) and has been used by all local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) in Scotland
- Support provided to agencies to help them meet their statutory obligations under the Adoption Register Regulations (2016) to refer all children and adopters within specified time limits.
- **4** Adoption Exchange Days: on average **35** children profiled and **29** adopters attended.
- **3** Adoption Activity Days: on average **16** children and **17** adopters attended.
- Working alongside Adoption UK and AFA Scotland to plan and run Adoption Week Scotland 2018
- Completion of small-scale study on the foster carer's perspectives on the transitions of children from foster placements to adoptive families. Linking with Mary Beek's recent UK wide research on Moving to adoption, they have contributed to a continuing practice development project and been presented at AFA Scotland's Family Placement forum.
- Participation in the Moving Images research project, developing resources to support those involved in producing videos of children as part of the family finding process.

Scotland's Adoption Register in numbers

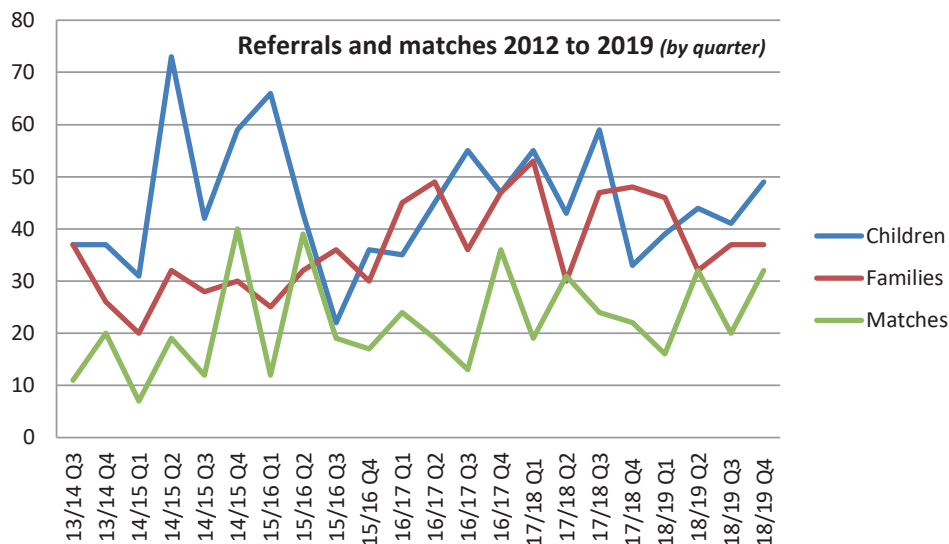
Matches made via the Register 2011-2019



We continually look at new ways to improve the family finding process to support adoption agencies in reducing delays placing children with adoptive families. Most adoption matches continue to be arranged by agencies themselves. However, the continuous increase in matches achieved via the Register is a positive indicator that adoption agencies are finding the register effective in maximising opportunities for children where placement within their own agency is not possible.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ON THE REGISTER

At 31st March 2019 there were: **151** (157) children and **125** (150) adopters on the Register (last year's figures in brackets).



REFERRAL RATE TRENDS

Referral rates were slightly lower than last year for both children and families: children down from 190 to **173** and families from 178 to **152**.

The reduction in child referrals tallies with anecdotal reports of a significant reduction in the number of children for whom adoption plans are being pursued, with legal complications most often identified as the reason. The fall in the number of adopters referred is less marked but perhaps more surprising. We are aware that the number of Scottish families being matched with children from England has increased – partly reflecting the shift in the balance between approved adopters and children registered for adoption south of the border. For some agencies and adopters, the option of a placement south of the border also appears to be seen as preferable; because of the contrasting legal position of children being placed for adoption in England and the availability of higher levels of support.

MATCHES - TRENDS

Despite the slight downward trend in referrals of both children and families, the number of matches resulting from the Register's family finding events and online system has again risen from the previous year, reaching a total of 100.

The numbers show that most matches were made from the online Register, run in collaboration with Link Maker. Increasingly social workers and adopters are using the range of the Register's services (online service, Exchange Days and Activity Days) as complementary rather than alternative approaches. Many adopters, for example, have attended Adoption Exchange Days and spoken directly about a child/ren they have seen profiled on the online Register. This interconnectedness between services also means it is sometimes difficult to distinguish where a link which resulted in a match was first identified.

Where the matches came from . . .

Online Register 73

Exchange Days 13

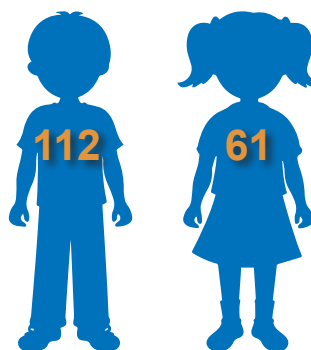
Adoption Activity Day 14



Who are the children referred?

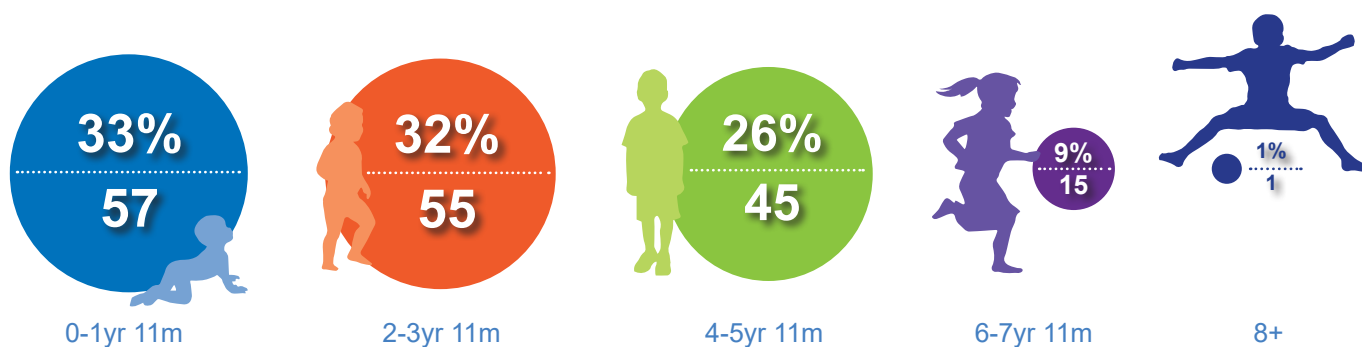
GENDER

Of the 173 children referred this year, 65% were boys continuing the pattern established in previous years of more boys than girls being referred (64% boys in 2017-18).



ETHNICITY

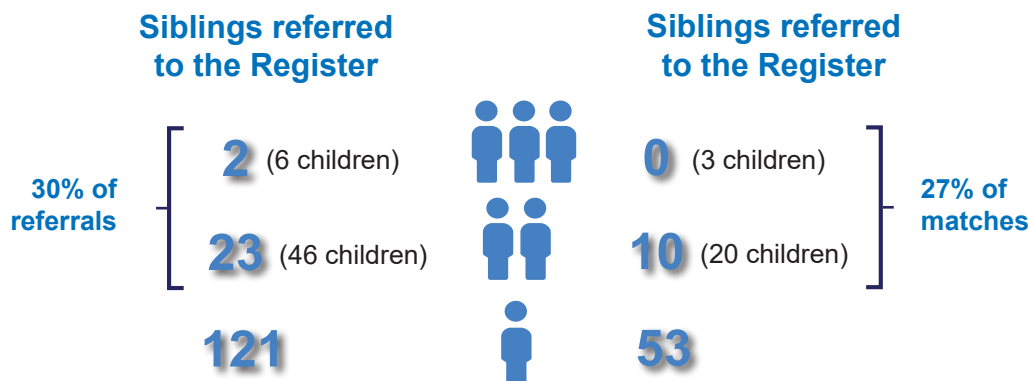
93% (161 children) were of White Scottish ethnicity. 5% (9 children) were of multi ethnic origin and 2% (3 children) were of Black African ethnicity.



The majority of children referred are aged between 0 and 4 years old.

SIBLINGS

30% of referrals were for children to be placed with their brothers or sisters; almost 15% lower than last year (44%).



CHILDREN WITHDRAWN FROM THE REGISTER

47 children were removed from the Register without an adoption placement being achieved (compared to 37 last year) – for 38 children this was because the plan had changed from adoption to permanent fostering. In many cases the child's current foster carers decided to offer a permanent placement – often a positive outcome for the children. In six cases, the child moved to a kinship placement and in three, the child returned home.

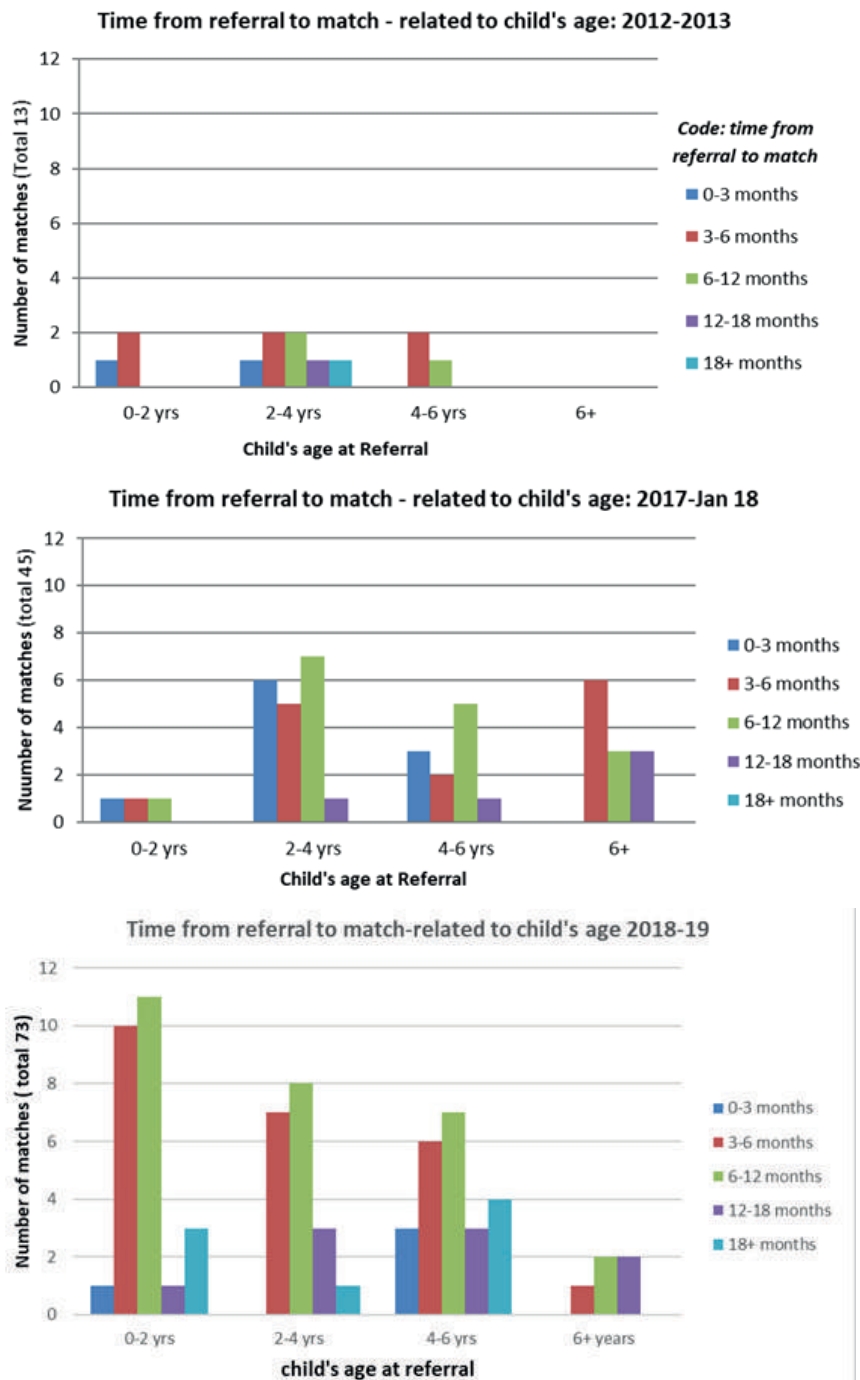
OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

Of course, not all children referred to the Register are found an adoptive family. There are a number of children who wait longer, or for whom no match is found. These children tend to be older (over 5 years old), part of a sibling group, or have significant developmental difficulties. Legal uncertainty about the adoption plan and the requirement to have high levels of contact also appear to be significant barriers for some children.

HOW LONG DO CHILDREN WAIT?

In comparing the tables below, we can see the changes over the years in the amount of time a child waits from point of referral to being matched. 17 of the 73 children matched through the online register in 2018/19 had waited a year or more for a placement. This is a significant increase in the number of children who wait longer compared to last year (7 of the 59 children who were matched through the online Register last year waited for a year or more).

The child's age was less critical in determining the time taken to match than in previous years - younger children continue to be matched in higher numbers but it is concerning that the average time taken to achieve a match is from 6-12 months across all ages. Factors associated with longer waiting times include placements involving direct contact with birth family, or as part of a sibling group. Of the 17 children who waited more than a year, 23% had direct contact with parents, grand-parents or siblings and 47% were part of a sibling group. It is also apparent that there are significant delays between linking and matching panels in some local authorities.



The Adopters

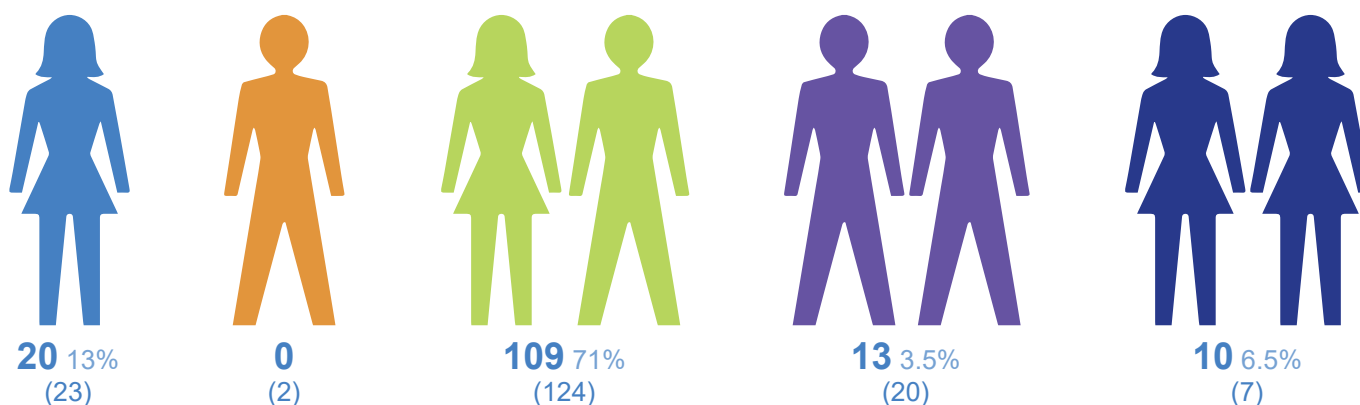
152 adopters were referred to the Register in 2018-19, a decrease from 178 the previous year. 1 adoptive couple referred was from the Northern Irish Register and was referred via the Inter-Register Protocol. Whilst several of the Scottish children matched this year were placed with English families as a result of links created through the online system, we have also noted an increase in Scottish families matched with English children as noted earlier in the report. There can be additional complications arising from these cross border placements, for example in relation to legal issues and the arrangements for continuing support. However, while these issues need to be considered carefully, there have been many examples of positive cross border placements and the practice continues to offer opportunities to achieve the best possible matches for Scottish children.

81 (53%) of the referrals came from 25 local authorities and 71 (47%) from the 4 Scottish Voluntary Agencies.

ETHNICITY

93% of the 152 adopters referred in 2018/2019 were of Caucasian ethnicity with 13 adopters (individuals) from an Asian background; 3 from a mixed or multi ethnic background and 1 from a Black African background. 2 adopters were of a Middle Eastern ethnicity.

The family composition of the adopters referred (previous year's figures in brackets) was;



As previously noted, older children often wait longer for an adoptive placement, partly because many adopters wish to adopt younger children (specifically under school age). In the last year, there has been an encouraging increase in the number of adopters approved, for older children (0-6+ years).

49 adopters were approved for a sibling group, nearly 10% more than were last year (41). 16 of the 49 (32%) were approved for children 6 years and older.



The Online Register

Scotland's Adoption Register has now been using an online register service for all referrals since November 2016. In the intervening 28 months the system has become well established with all 32 local authorities and the 4 voluntary agencies having made at least one referral to the online register.

We have seen a shift in our direct involvement in supporting practitioners and adopters from mastering technical issues to supporting best practice in profiling children and adoptive families. We take an active role in ensuring the quality of the profiles for children and families referred. We have noted that the quality of the pictures chosen as well as the quality of the information makes a difference in interest being shown in both a child's and adopters' profile. The guidance from the Moving Images project (see below) also highlights how videos can have a positive impact in profiling children. The Register will be directly involved in supporting practitioners to create videos through offering development sessions on profiling children and offering practical help with planning, creating and editing videos of children.

The findings of the independent review relating to practitioners and adopters' experience of using the online register (see page 18 of the independent review) provided useful indicators of the support and development still required in relation to this part of the service. On the positive side, the review found that people liked the way the system involves adopters more actively in family finding and accessing profiles of children and families nationally. The challenges reported included the reports by some adopters about a feeling of compulsion having access to profiles 24 hours a day, and for some a feeling of competition. Part of the action plan emerging from the review will be the development of further practice guidance to help adopters and workers manage the family finding process as positively as possible.



Adoption Exchange Days

There were 4 Adoption Exchange Days: on average 35 children profiled, and 29 adopters attended. 13 children were matched as a result of links made at this year's Exchange Days.

The number of matches reached through an Exchange Day this year is a marked reduction from last year. As noted before it is sometimes difficult to fully identify where a match originates from as agencies and adopters are increasingly seeing the Register's services as complementary, for example using Adoption Exchange Days to follow up on initial discussions initiated online or vice versa.

However, we are aware that practice is evolving and changing. While the Exchange Days continue to provide valuable opportunities for conversations between adopters and the people who know the children best, recent feedback from some adopters suggested that the information they received about children profiled was sometimes the same as the information on the online register. Building on this feedback, our focus is on helping agencies use the events to maximise opportunities for meaningful discussion, particularly by encouraging foster carers' attendance - we know that this is found to be especially useful by adoptive families. Two typical evaluation comments from adopters about meeting the foster carers at an Exchange Day were:

“ It was better to be able to speak to foster carers and get more info. ”

“ We had only been on the online register but have found being able to speak to foster carers and social workers better as the profile can be classified. ”

“ Speaking to foster carers and getting more lived understanding with their emotions, seeing more photos and videos to see the children and their personalities. ”



Adoption Activity Days



We held another 3 Activity Days and 47 children attended along with 50 families. These numbers are broadly similar to last year with a slight increase in adopters attending.

The total confirmed matches for activity days was 14. This includes 7 for the 3 events which took place in 2018/19 and another 7 from previous year's events. The long timescales for confirmation the matches, reinforce the points noted earlier in the report about delays in progressing to a match once a link has been identified.

We have now organised 9 Activity Days and on average achieved a matching rate of 22%. This remains one of the most effective ways of family finding for children.

The continuing collaboration with the theatre company, Puppetship, has been hugely beneficial. They help us manage activities on the day for both children and adults and the feedback on their involvement is always very positive. Adults in particular can feel very nervous about the day and the focus on activities where adults and children can create something together has been invaluable in helping them relax and in promoting easy interaction.

We are grateful to the practitioners who have returned event after event to help run the days, and who have become strong advocates about the positive opportunities Activity Days can offer.

QUOTES FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE ATTENDED AN ACTIVITY DAY:

ADOPTERS

“Very positive overall experience.”

“Daunting at first. Ice breaker activity was good to ease nerves.”

“We were anxious as it was our first time. The children seemed to have a great time which is important.”

“Really positive. Really well run with a good brief at the start and great interaction. Everyone was very friendly.”

FOSTER CARERS

“Fantastic event. Very exciting for kids and very relaxed for adults.”

“Was very anxious as had never been before but it was very welcoming and lots to keep the children amused.”

“I thought it was fantastic.”



SOCIAL WORKER FOR CHILD

“Very positive. The activities are well-thought out to provide opportunities for adopters to join in. There was something for everyone.”

500th Match



The Register reached another significant milestone in its history in September 2018, when the 500th child was matched since the service was established in 2011.

Moving Images Work

The Register was involved throughout the Moving Images project, and in developing the guidance which has now been published by AFA Scotland. One development which emerged from this work was to involve the Register in directly supporting practitioners to plan, create and edit videos for use as part of the family finding process – and that we should add this to the range of supports we currently offer to practitioners. This work is part of the Register’s focus on creating opportunities to engage directly with agencies and practitioners and supports a practice development that will improve family finding options for children. The Moving Images group very kindly donated an iPad and tablet to the Register to facilitate this work.



Developing Practice

TRANSITIONS FROM FOSTER PLACEMENTS TO ADOPTIVE FAMILIES: FOSTER CARERS' PERSPECTIVES

The new approaches to family finding promoted by the Register generally mean that foster carers and prospective adopters are directly involved at an earlier stage than they would have been in the past. The Register undertook a small study focussing on the perspective of foster carers in relation to family finding as well as the transition process in 2018. Linking with recent UK wide research (for example, Neil et al 2018), this was intended as a contribution to the development of new guidance about managing the transition process in the best possible way for the child.

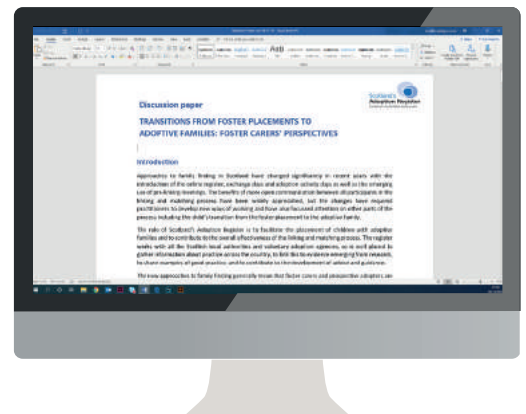
The study was carried out in Scotland and was based on the subjective views of a relatively small sample of foster carers. Face to face interviews were carried out with 11 foster carers and a further 8 foster carers completed an online survey via Survey Monkey.

Despite the small scale of study, the findings make a useful contribution to the development of practice in this area. There were several common themes among the foster carers' responses including their experience of loss (which they felt was often dismissed), the process of meeting the adoptive family for the first time, the preparation of the child, and contact post move. It became apparent that there is wide variation in the way foster carers are involved in the process, particularly at the stage of introductions and transitions when the child is moving to the adoptive family. A number of foster carers told us that they often felt that their voice was not heard in planning for children who were moving from their care. This included feeling that transitions did not take into account the strong relationships that children had developed with their foster carers and other members of the foster carers' household.

This study supports the idea that there should be a wider discussion about how we can best meet the needs of children and the people that matter to them during transitions and in particular how we can support foster carers to have an active role in this process.

The findings were presented at a seminar in Glasgow on Monday 18th March at which Mary Beek from the University of East Anglia described the research study that she and colleagues have undertaken about the best ways of helping children make this transition. It is hoped that the seminar and the wider work will lead to the development of practice guidelines for practitioners involved in this process.

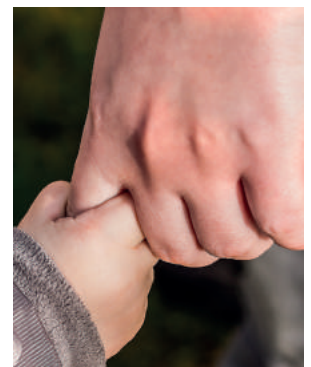
The report into the study is available on the Register's website: www.scotlandsadoptionregister.org.uk/adoption-news/current-research/



Links With Other Parts Of The UK

The online Register allows social workers to extend the search for placements across the UK if they decide that this is the appropriate for a particular child or family. Link Maker is primarily used amongst the Regional Adoption Agencies in England and by the National Adoption Service in Wales. Direct contact with other UK registers is therefore a less important part of our role than it was in the past. There is some continuing contact with the equivalent service in Northern Ireland and one adoptive couple was referred via the Inter-Register Protocol. This link will continue, particularly for family finding for children with particular additional needs.

We continue to invite adopters from England to attend our Exchange Days and Activity Days, but the change in the balance between approved adopters and children seeking placement south of the border, means that very few people now take up that opportunity.



Plans for 2019-2020

Alongside the Register's linking service, a full calendar of events is planned for the year including four Adoption Exchange Days and three Adoption Activity Days. The Register will once again be closely involved in Adoption Week Scotland 2019 and will engage with other policy initiatives, including the Independent Care Review, wherever possible. The independent review has also been helpful in identifying specific needs to be addressed which will be detailed in our action plan (attached).

The core of the Register's work is providing support to agencies to help find matches for children as quickly as possible through a range of family finding options. In order to assist practitioners and adopters navigating the complexities of the process we would like to:

- Develop a profiling children training, and continue supporting practice in developing profiles for children i.e. using videos, taking pictures
- Directly supporting practitioners in creating videos for children
- Develop guidance on family findings to ensure adopters are as prepared as possible.
- Develop our social media presence to increase our visibility and people's awareness of our service.
- Information dissemination: work with a designer in redesigning leaflets about our family finding events and practice tips.



From left: Robin Duncan (manager), Jess Austin (admin co-ordinator), and Pascaline Mollard (senior practitioner)

Acknowledgements

Scotland's Adoption Register has been successful largely as a result of the strong support and collaboration of colleagues in local authorities, voluntary agencies and the Scottish Government. Particular thanks are due to:

Fiona Aitken – Adoption UK - Steering Group member

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Amy McKellar – Inverclyde Council-Steering Group member

Jacquie Roberts – Steering group chair

Aileen Shaw – Glasgow City Council-Steering Group member

Stephen Small – Director St Andrew's Children's Society and Steering Group member

Robert Swift – Independent steering group member

Avril Thomas – North Lanarkshire Council-Steering Group member

Caroline Thomas – Independent researcher/ lead author of the Independent Review of the Register

Puppetship – Alison, Alex and Elena who provide thoughtful and exciting entertainment at our activity days

St Andrew's Children's Society staff for the support they provide the Register.

Perth and Kinross Council, South Lanarkshire Council and West Lothian Council for providing us with venues for our activity days and all the volunteers who helped us at each of our activity days to make each day a success.





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