

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Director of Community Health & Care Partnership

Community Health and Care Partnership Committee: 28th March 2012

Subject: Adoption and Permanence Service Plan

1. Purpose

- 1.1** This report presents the Council's Adoption and Permanence Service Plan which incorporates West Dunbartonshire Council's response to the Scottish Government's request that Local Authorities address the issues raised in the report, "Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland."
- 1.2** The plan is attached as Appendix 1.

2. Background

- 2.1** Section 4 of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 requires a local authority to prepare and publish a plan for the provision of their adoption services. Scottish Ministers have the power to direct the review and timescales of the publication of this plan.
- 2.2** In November 2011, the Minister for Children and Young People asked to receive local authority plans by the end of March 2012. The Minister also indicated that in reviewing their plans she would expect local authorities to take account of the Government's response to the report prepared by the Scottish Children's Reporter's Administration (S.C.R.A.) entitled "The Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland".
- 2.3** The aim of the S.C.R.A. report was to understand the process of permanence planning for Looked After children in Scotland and to consider any changes that may be required.
- 2.4** The report looked at 100 cases across Scotland of children whose supervision order had been terminated in 2009 – 2010 and where a hearing had been held in relation to adoption proceedings.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** The SCRA report identified 3 main areas for improvement covering decision making and decision implementation; the Children's Hearing System and Court processes.
- 3.2** Decision making and implementation refers to the stages just after admission to care when the possibility of rehabilitation back to birth parents is being assessed. The report recognises the clear tensions in this work; the need to balance the rights of parents and the developmental needs of the child; considering whether rehabilitation is possible while planning for alternative care if it is not.
- 3.3** The report in particular identified the need for robust and timeous parenting capacity assessments, carried out at the earliest possible stage of involvement. In response to this the Scottish Government will commission the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children (CELCIS) to develop risk assessment tools; encourage twin track assessments and the production of practitioner tools; and produce information about the value and use of prescribed timescales for decision making. The Government will also consider whether some of these areas for improvement should be reflected in guidance and the National Care Standards.
- 3.4** The SCRA report indicates that there is a need for Management Information in relation to all the stages of the permanency decision making process. This would allow for the assessment of performance at both a local and national level. The Government's response was to recognise that the overall process could be quicker, but acknowledged individual decisions have to take due account of the circumstances of each individual child.
- 3.5** The report makes a number of suggestions about the need to deal with some delays within the Children's Hearing System and the Court process. These are mainly around trying to avoid delays caused by continued Hearings and appeals by Parents.
- 3.6** The Service Plan for Adoption and Permanence in West Dunbartonshire is reviewed annually. The plan for 2012/13 has been reviewed to address the issues raised by the SCRA report, as requested by the Scottish Government.
- 3.7** The Service Plan reports on the commitment made by the Adoption and Fostering Team, in partnership with the Children and Families Teams, to securing permanence for infants and children who cannot be returned to their birth families within speedier timescales.

- 3.8** Key to achieving permanence without undue delay for those children who need it, is clear and thorough care planning and assessment in the period before a child needs to be removed from the care of their own family. Once the child is looked after, rehabilitation attempts and parenting assessments need to be conducted in a timely manner to ensure that children either return home or a decision for permanence is made as soon as possible. Greater emphasis is being given to this.
- 3.9** Considerable progress has been made in reducing the length of time from the point of admission to seeking legal advice about grounds of permanence. The aim is to have no more than 6 months before such decisions are being made.
- 3.10** During the year 2011, of the 10 children where there was a plan for permanence agreed, 8 are now in permanent placements.
- 3.11** The SCRA report makes reference to the fact that some children experience multiple placement moves before eventually finding a permanent placement. In the Government response it is suggested that one way of tackling this issue is to promote the practice of a child's temporary carer becoming an adopter or permanent carer for that child. This is already happening within West Dunbartonshire where 70% of children who require a permanent placement stay with their present carer.
- 3.12** At present we are managing to find suitable placements for the children in West Dunbartonshire who require permanence. In common with all other agencies it is much more difficult to find permanent substitute families for older children and young people or those with particular difficulties, when it can take longer to find a placement.
- We use all channels available to us to seek placements both locally and nationally, sometimes through specific adverts for individual children. It is a feature of the present situation across the country in terms of numbers of families available that there is seldom more than one matching option for any one child. In an ideal world it would be better to have more choice.
- 3.13** For the future, there is support from the Scottish Government for the efforts being made across the country to improving the processes around permanence planning and raising awareness of the need for more families. Locally we are ensuring that all publicity, which has often focused on the need for temporary carers, also now includes the need for people who wish to offer a permanent home.

4. People Implications

4.1 There are no personnel issues arising from this report.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There are no financial issues arising from this report.

6. Risk Analysis

6.1 Failure to plan properly for the permanent care of Looked After and Accommodated Children who require this could lead to vulnerable children not having the best possible outcomes.

7. Equalities Input

7.1 No issues were identified in a screening for potential equality impact.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

8.1 Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and endorse the priority given to planning for Adoption and Permanence as detailed in the Adoption and Permanence Service Plan.

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Director
1/3/12

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Background Papers: Appendix 1

Wards affected: All wards