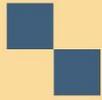




An Independent Review of Scotland's Adoption Register

Briefing



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The main aim of the 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. The aims of the Independent Review were to take stock of the progress made by the Register since its introduction and consider how well it is currently working in relation to its aims. The Review also explored options for the Register's future development. It was carried out between January and August 2019.

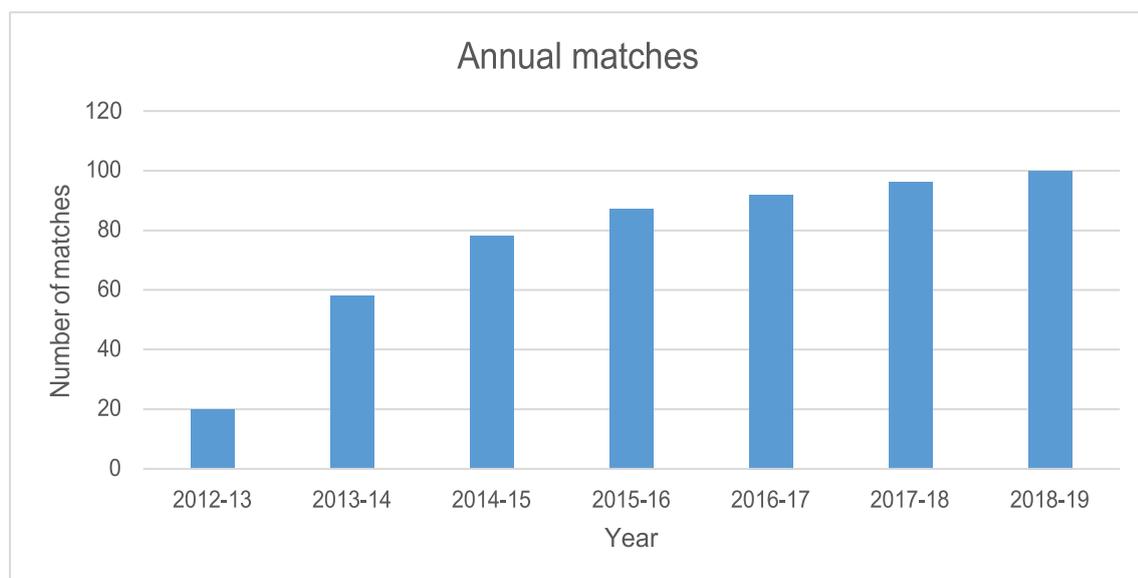
The Review was small scale. The findings need to be considered with those from more in-depth and larger-scale research studies, some of which have been summarised in the Review's full report published on the Register's website. It was not possible to assess the representativeness of the views and experiences the Review heard. Nevertheless, the researchers heard the views reported in this Briefing – both positive and negative views – repeatedly during the fieldwork. The Review's methods are summarised on page 10.

Key findings from the Review

The Review heard many positive views about Scotland's Adoption Register. Collectively, those who participated in the Review generally thought positively about both the Register's Team and its package of services. Their overarching view was that the Register's services have over the last few years facilitated and supported matches that would not have otherwise happened.

The Register's achievement of one of its desired outcomes – of improving opportunities for identifying matches between children and adopters across Scotland – is supported by the statistics the Register produces for monitoring purposes.

Improving opportunities for identifying matches between children and adopters across Scotland



The number of matches resulting from the Register's services has risen each year since the introduction of the Register in 2011. It has increased from 20 in the financial year 2012-13 to 96 in 2018-19. This period has covered both the introduction of the new online register and implementation of the 2016 regulations.

The rate of increase in the numbers of matches in the first three years was higher than it was in subsequent years, as might have been expected from the introduction of a new service. The rate of increase in the last four years has been relatively low but remained fairly steady.

In relation to the Team, there were consistently positive messages about individual members and the ways in which they work together. Members of the Team were commended for their specialist knowledge about adoption and broader child-welfare issues, and their understanding of the complexity of the professional task involved in family-finding for children needing adoptive placements. The Register's Team was also appreciated for their professionalism and dedication to their work. They were recognised as being particularly responsive to feedback. Their commitment to service improvement and service development was considered to be exemplary.

The Review also heard many positive messages about Scotland's Adoption Register's collection of services and their coherence. The combination of the services it offers - the online register, Adoption Activity Days, Adoption Exchange Days and training and support - were viewed as complementing each other well.

Particularly-positive views were expressed about the ways in the Register has encouraged and supported inter-agency co-operation and resource sharing across Scotland. The Review heard how inter-agency working frequently creates challenges for both practitioners and prospective adopters. The challenges relate to agencies having different local practices and organisational systems that impact on family finding processes, for instance in relation to the sharing of information about children and families. The challenges also often relate to agencies having different levels of staffing, and financial and other resources. Such differences often have a significant impact on the availability of future adoption support services. The Review learned that the Register's Team plays an invaluable role in resolving difficulties in inter-agency working. The Team shares their knowledge and understanding of differences between agencies.

Testament to this positivity was the Review participants' main responses to questions about the future development of the Register's services. There were suggestions that the Register's services be extended to include family finding for children needing other kinds of permanent placements, particularly permanent foster care placements.

Nevertheless, the Review also heard some mixed views and experiences about individual services provided by the Register. Many participants expressed positivity about them but we also heard some negative views and experiences, and concerns about some 'unintended consequences' of some of the Register's relatively new approaches to family finding.

These views about 'unintended consequences' particularly need to be considered in the context of wider research findings about prospective adopters' experiences of linking and matching. Larger-scale and more in-depth studies than this Review, conducted in both the UK and USA, have found clear evidence that exclusively professionally-led linking and matching processes can have disempowering effects on prospective adopters (Quinton: 2012; Farmer, et al: 2010). Historically some prospective adopters have experienced much 'frustration at not being able to put themselves forward' (Dance, 2015). Messages from such

research have been used carefully to inform the Register's development of more adopted approaches.

The Review heard concerns about what may be lost - or be in danger of being lost - with the introduction of new approaches. The main concerns were about the potential loss of 'a human touch' in the family-finding process and professionals' loss of control over the sharing of highly-sensitive personal information about children's and families' lives.

In the main the negative feedback was about things that could potentially be addressed with:

- *additional* training and support on family-finding practices for social work practitioners
- *additional* kinds of preparation and support for prospective adopters – extra preparation and support that specifically relates to family finding
- *more consistent* practical support across agencies for foster carers' participation in the Registers' services, particularly Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days

There are inter-related messages from the Review's findings for:

- policy makers - at the strategic/government level
- Scotland's Adoption Register's Team
- social work practitioners
- policy makers - at the operational/agency level
- the providers of the online register service, Link Maker

Key messages from the Review

The overarching message from the Review is summed up by the following quote from a participant in the Review:

... I only hope that as it [Scotland's Adoption Register] moves forward it can build on a good mix of effective linking processes and an understanding of the complexity of the professional task underlying all such important [matching] decisions.

Messages for policy makers – strategic level/government level

Review the organisational context of the Register and its governance

There was a general consensus that over the last few years the hosting and governance arrangements have worked well for the Register, despite the haste in which they had to be established after the closure of BAAF Scotland. The fears that were expressed by adoption agencies when the new arrangements were first put in place have been unfounded - the agency that currently hosts the Register is not considered to have unfairly benefitted from its governance role and is well-regarded for the way in which it has fulfilled its role.

However, there was also general agreement that the Register might be better placed in the future within an organisation that has a strong commitment to, and focus on, service improvement clearly linked to research, policy and practice development functions. Any new host organisation needs to be able to support the Register to provide additional evidence-informed training and support that is needed to implement new and emerging family-finding practices. The Register would also benefit from being hosted by an organisation that has wide and well-established links with policy makers and practitioners across Scotland.

A new host organisation would also need to be able to allow and support the Register to maintain its own identity and a degree of independence from the organisation's other

service improvement functions. The Register would need to continue to have, for instance, its own distinct branding, separate website and IT systems, and discreet financial accounting arrangements.

Explore the potential for the data held within Link Maker's online register's system to contribute to our understanding of outcomes for looked after children

Link Maker has ideas about how some of the data it holds about children and prospective adopters within its databases could be used to contribute to the more general monitoring outcomes for looked-after children in Scotland. Opportunities need to be created for those responsible within government for the design, collection, and analysis of Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS), together with the Register's Team and Link Maker, to explore 'what's possible' and 'what would be valuable' in potentially using some of Link Maker's data for monitoring purposes overtime.

There may be some challenges to be overcome in the potential linking of data from a social enterprise that is also a Private Limited Company with national administrative data. There are likely, however, to be some precedents and experiences that could be drawn on in the linking of data from private companies providing other public services and local authority data, for instance in adult social care.

The Review learnt that Link Maker has done some preliminary work on this in relation to linking of its data to the National Statistics for Children looked after in England including adoption (collected through the SSDA903 returns).

Explore the potential for Link Maker to be extended to other kinds of Permanent Placements

As noted above, the Review's participants' main responses to questions about the future development of the Register's services were suggestions that they be extended to include family finding for children needing other kinds of permanent placements. There was particular interest in the extension of its services to include family finding for children needing permanent foster care placements. The Review also heard there is potential within Link Maker's existing platform for its extension in Scotland to other kinds of permanent placements. Link Maker already offers this service to agencies in England. The potential benefits of extending the use of the platform for such placements will, however, need to be considered carefully in relation to the potential costs of increasing numbers of out-of-authority long-term foster placements. Such placements often result in children being placed further away from their birth families and social networks.

Messages for the Register's Team

The main message for the Register's Team is that there is support for the Team to continue to do most of what it is doing in the way it is doing it. More particularly, the Review's findings suggest the Team should continue to:

Engage with professionals' ambivalence about new family-finding practices

The Review heard some participants express an underlying ambivalence about family-finding practices which have developed over the last few years. Unease was voiced about ethical aspects of family-finding practices.

There was concern that children were by implication 'being lied to' if they were considered to be too young to understand the purpose of the day. In addition, there were concerns about whether children receive appropriate and/or adequate support after Adoption Activity Days if they are not subsequently matched. There was an unease that the introduction of the online register means that highly sensitive personal information about children and families is being shared with much larger numbers of prospective adopters

than in the past. One consequence is that adoptive families who come together for post-adoption support may unwittingly know information about each other's children they might not have chosen to share.

Provide information about the Register's services (leaflets, DVDs and other written and web-based materials) and, most importantly, review how best to continue to disseminate them

The Register's promotional materials were generally well-regarded by the Review participants but the awareness of them was variable within agencies. There was particularly variable awareness of the information pack the Register produced in 2018, which included DVDs about Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days. The lack of awareness was explained by agency's teams in terms of practitioners who were familiar with them having moved on and also materials simply being forgotten about.

Consider whether more information about the children who will be featured or attending Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days could be shared with prospective adopters in advance of the events

In attending Adoption Exchange Days, prospective adopters expressed a strong desire for information about children that is additional to that which is available to them on the online register to make their attendance worthwhile. Prospective adopters were keen to know about the 'characteristics' and needs of children in advance of Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days to make better informed decisions about whether to attend. They had experiences of attending events and discovering that there were no children being featured or attending with whom they could potentially be matched.

Also, occasionally prospective adopters had attended Adoption Exchange Days to seek follow-up information about children they had seen profiled on the online register. Some had disappointing experiences, however, of attending Days without the foster carers and social workers of the children in which they had an interest being present. Prospective adopters also expressed frustration about marked inconsistencies in the availability and quality of photos and film of children at these events.

Review the balance between the number of children and number of adults that attend Adoption Activity Days

The Review heard that the Register's Team has made significant efforts to ensure a comfortable balance between children and adults attending Adoption Activity Days, in response to feedback from participants about these events. Recent Activity Days were still, however, viewed as having too many adults present in relation to the number of children.

Choose the geographical location of the events with great care

The Review also heard that the Register's Team has taken care to arrange Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days in the northeast and northwest of Scotland. Nevertheless, the Review heard from prospective adopters who felt disadvantaged by the geographical locations of these events, and were frustrated at having to travel significant distances to attend. Agency teams that were not located in Scotland's Central Belt also felt disadvantaged by the locations.

Provide training on different aspects of family finding

The Review heard positive feedback about the training provided by the Register's Team on different aspects of family finding. There is, however, a need for a rolling programme. There is instability within the workforce and social work practitioners with experience of the current approaches to family finding move on. The Register's Team was identified as having

an important role to play in supporting agencies to ensure all social workers involved in family finding have the relevant up-to-date knowledge and expertise.

The Register's Team has recently provided much-needed training on the development of children's profiles. The Review heard that the quality of profiles that are shared on the online register and at events is extremely variable. One particular concern was that profiles often do not include enough about the spirit of the child. The training needs a particular focus on the language that is used in profiles. The Review learnt that social workers are often involved in 'translating' and 'deciphering' the content of profiles for prospective adopters.

Consider publishing a Good Practice Guide for Family Finding in Scotland

Social work participants in the Review suggested a CoramBAAF-like practice guide is needed covering the full range of contemporary approaches that have been implemented in recent years in Scotland.

Messages for the provider of the online register, Link Maker:

Review the system's approach to providing feedback to prospective adopters when an expression of interest is not or is no longer being pursued

Prospective adopters can be deeply frustrated and upset by a lack of information and feedback from social workers after they have expressed interest in children. Prospective adopters described their discomfort when they are 'left hanging'. When they receive rejections via the online register - sometimes after significant time delay - minimal explanatory information is provided. A lack of timely and meaningful feedback had a significant impact on their emotional state and could exacerbate their feelings of rejection and any existing sense of loss. Social workers also expressed frustration about receiving little or no explanatory information from social work colleagues in other agencies about why prospective matches were not being pursued.

Review the information that's provided in the drop down boxes that explains social work concepts and processes

The information provided within the online register's system that explains social work concepts and processes has not been reviewed for some time. This information may therefore not reflect the latest research evidence or good practice guidance and needs to be reviewed.

Review the online register's approach to providing IT support to social work practitioners who generally may not use computer software intuitively

There are practitioners in the workforce who find learning new software and IT systems challenging and daunting, and also may not be using the online register very frequently. They may therefore need particularly patient support from the online register's technical support staff.

Messages for practice

The Review heard that many social workers are acutely aware of and responsive to these messages:

Adopter-led matching can be experienced as an additional responsibility/burden by prospective adopters

A strong message from the Review was that not all prospective adopters want to take a lead in finding a family. Some prospective adopters would rather use more traditional family-finding methods and want professionals and their adoption agencies to do so. They would prefer professionals to have the responsibility of finding a match for them. There are also

prospective adopters who feel it would not be appropriate, perhaps for professional reasons, to share details of their personal lives widely and/or on an online forum.

Online family finding can become a compulsion for prospective adopters

There can be a considerable emotional cost to prospective adopters with the online register being available to them in their homes, 24/7. Some described finding it very difficult to put boundaries around their searching on the online register and needed more help and support to do so.

Family finding can be experienced as competitive by prospective adopters

Prospective adopters can feel they are in a competitive market for children in need of adoption. Their competitive feelings can be heightened when they attend Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days, and meet other prospective adopters more generally. Some wanted more professional support to manage the additional stresses and pressures associated with the adoption-related situations they experienced as competitive.

Family finding can be experienced as an emotional roller coaster by prospective adopters

Prospective adopters may want and need a considerable support with the ups and downs of family finding. The highs and lows may be experienced more frequently than in the past with the availability of the online register, with the associated potential for prospective adopters to express interest in more children than they would have historically.

Family-finding events can be experienced as an extension of the assessment

Despite many reassurances from the Register's Team that the Register's events are not part of any assessment process, prospective adopters can experience them as such. In reality it may be difficult, if not impossible, for practitioners in their decision making to ignore completely their observations of prospective adopters' general behaviour and responses to information shared at events. More particularly, it may be hard for them to discount their observations of prospective adopters' interactions with children and their foster carers at Adoption Activity Days. It is important, however, that practitioners reflect carefully on the significance of their observations in the context of the stresses and pressures the prospective adopters may have been feeling and the unusual nature of the events.

The various filters provided within the online register need to be used carefully.

They need to be used to limit the interest that may be generated by the profiles of children who are likely to generate high levels of prospective adopter interest

The introduction of the online register has generated significant additional work for family-finding social workers. Many described how they can feel overwhelmed when children's profiles attract especially high levels of interest from prospective adopters. This particular issue was anticipated by Link Maker when it designed the online system. There is concern within Link Maker that, despite its many efforts to encourage and support the use of filters within the online system, features that would help to contain prospective adopters' interest are not being used well.

Children's profiles need to be updated regularly

Prospective adopters and social workers expressed much frustration about out-of-date information within profiles on the online register. The profiles need to be updated routinely and regularly.

Support foster carers' participation in Scotland's Adoption Register's events

Foster carers need social-work support to prepare for and attend Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days, but sometimes feel their social workers are unable to provide

this. Bespoke training may therefore be needed to support foster carers' participation in events. Training could helpfully cover foster carers':

- contributions to the preparations for the events, including written profiles, photographs and moving images
- information sharing with prospective adopters at events
- emotional attachments to children they have been caring for, and the sense of loss and grief they may experience during the children's adoption process

It could also address the difficult judgements they may need to make in relation to their personal and families' decisions about whether to apply to adopt the children themselves.

Messages for policy – operational level

Support foster carers and social workers' participation in Scotland's Adoption Register's events

Some agencies have restrictive policies on travel and other budgets that make it hard for foster carers and workers to participate fully in Adoption Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days. Agency resources and support are needed for professionals', foster carers' and children's travel, overnight accommodation and/or child care costs for foster carers.

Consider carefully the breadth, depth and timing of preparation and training on family finding for prospective adopters

Historically, family finding has been covered routinely in preparation courses for prospective adopters. However, if this aspect of preparation and training is delivered before prospective adopters have been to panel, the learning cannot be applied straight away and consequently may be easily lost. Some agencies have found at least one additional training and preparation session post approval is valuable for introducing prospective adopters to the Register's various services in a more detailed and timely way.

Caroline Thomas & Jenny Blackmore, November 2019

The full report of the Independent Review of Scotland's Adoption Register is available at: <http://www.scotlandsadoptionregister.org.uk/independent-review-of-scotlands-adoption-register-published/>

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Key references

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Many people have been involved in the Independent Review of Scotland's Adoption Register. The Review would not have been possible without the contributions of those who founded, use and provide Scotland's Adoption Register's services. Thank you therefore to all the prospective adopters, and professionals who work in adoption and wider children's services, who generously shared their experiences of, and reflections on, the Register's services for the Review.

A special thank you to the Register's Team and Steering Group. (A list of members is given in Appendix 2.) In addition to participating as interviewees, they helped us to determine the scope of the Review and briefed us on aspects of the operation of the Review to inform our key questions and methods.

We are also particularly grateful to those working in the Family Care, Looked After Children, Care and Protection, Children and Families Directorate, who supported the Review within government.

Appendix

Methods

The methods included the collection of primary interview and social-work team discussion data; observations of events; and secondary analysis of data collected by, and reports and other information produced by, the Register's Team. The following data were collected and analysed:

Review participants	Method	No. of participants
Permanence Teams, including managers	Team Discussions	6
Adoptive/Prospective Adoptive Parents	In-depth, semi-structured phone interviews	8
Steering Group Members	In-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews	4
Scotland's Adoption Register Team Members	In-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews	4
'Founders' of the Register	In-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interview	1
Adoption UK in Scotland	Team Discussion	1
Scottish Adoption	Team Discussion	1
The Fostering Network	Phone interview	1
Link Maker	In-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interview	1

Other data source	Method
Exchange Day	Observation
Activity Day	Observation
SAR routinely collected statistics	Secondary analysis
Minutes of Steering Group meetings	Documentary analysis
Correspondence between SAR and Link Maker	Documentary analysis