

All Babies Count: Scotland Briefing

Infants Looked After Who Are Adopted

June 2012

SUMMARY

- The number of infants being looked after has risen more sharply in Scotland than in England since 2007 (+31% compared to +22%). The same is true of the change in the number of children in the care system overall;
- In Scotland, the number of young children (0-4s) being adopted from local authority care has almost doubled since 2007 (+96%) whereas in England the number has fallen, by 2%;
- For the most recent year, looked after infants who are adopted expressed as a percentage of all infants looked after is 1.9% for Scotland and 1.6% for England.
- In both countries there is a lengthy delay in achieving permanence for the youngest children.

Background

In September 2011 the Guardian headlined the fact that just 60 babies were adopted in England during 2010 when, at the same time, there were 3,660 infants being looked after by local authorities.¹ Reporting the latest release of figures about looked after children in England, the paper also highlighted the sharp fall in the number of infants being adopted, down from 150 in 1997 and 70 in 2009, and concerns about the length of time it takes for infants to be placed in a permanent home, despite the high level of demand for babies to adopt.²

The Coalition Government signaled its intention to overhaul the adoption system in England in summer 2011 when it appointed an Adoption Adviser, Martin Narey, with a remit to increase the number of adoptions, where this is in the best interests of the child, and to reduce delays in adoption processes. In October 2011 it introduced a Children in Care and Adoption Performance Table, which ranks local authority performance against 15 targets. These include the percentage of children who cease being looked after who are adopted; and the percentage of looked after children adopted during the year who were placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision.³ The Coalition Government simultaneously announced plans to radically reform the family justice system to shorten the time taken to place children, and published an Adopters' Charter setting out key principles for the treatment of prospective adoptive parents.⁴

In contrast to English policy, in Scotland this issue forms part of a broader and more consensual approach to improving both permanency planning for looked after children and the stability of children's placements. This is being taken forward by the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children (CELCIS), the Scottish Government and its Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG) and Scotland's Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA).

¹ 'Just 60 babies adopted last year', Guardian, 29 Sept 2011. Online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/29/60-babies-adopted-england-last-year>

² Department for Education, Statistical First Release, Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England (including adoption and care leavers) - year ending 31 March 2011, 28 Sept 2011. Online at <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/a00196857/children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england>

³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/a00199753/children-in-care-and-adoption-performance-tables>

⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a00199774/local-authorities-challenged-to-do-better-on-adoption>

While the policy responses in the two countries may be different, there are common concerns about delays in achieving permanency for children. These concerns are accentuated where infants are involved. A growing body of research underlines the importance of secure attachment for the cognitive, social and emotional development of infants. This has informed our understanding of the needs of infants identified as at risk of harm, before or after birth. Attention is focused on ways to improve assessment, support the quality of care by caregivers and attachment relationships, and achieve timely decision-making more attuned to infant development.⁵⁶⁷ The care and court systems in Scotland and England face a common challenge: how to achieve stable caring homes for vulnerable young children within the timescale needed to prevent further emotional and physical harm.

Method

This briefing compares infant adoption in Scotland and England, with the significant caveats identified below, using the latest official data on looked after children. In Scotland the main source is the information on looked after children collected from local authorities and published by the Scottish Government now in its Children's Social Work Statistics.⁸ The equivalent data for England is published by the Department for Education.⁹

A number of factors hinder the comparability of data across UK nations. Definitions vary, as does the data collected, reflecting different legal and policy frameworks. The Scottish term 'looked after and accommodated' employs a broader conceptualisation of 'looked after' than that used in the rest of the UK as it includes children subject to compulsory measures of supervision while living at home with their birth parent(s). The annual cycles of official data collection and publication are also different in each country; as a result data do not relate to the same time periods and is published at different points in the year. As a result the national datasets are not strictly comparable. For more information see the Note on Data.

This briefing illustrates these issues. It uses the most recent English data on looked after children, which relates to the year 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011 (released Sept 2011). The nearest equivalent Scottish data, for the year 1 Aug 2010 to 31 July 2011, was released in March 2012. However, due to a delay in local authority returns, data on the destinations of children ceasing to be looked after during this year – including adoption - is not yet available. The Scottish figures used here relate to the earlier year, 1 Aug 2009 to 31 July 2010.

⁵ G. Seneviratne (2006) 'Parenting: mentally ill mothers and babies', in V. O'Keane (ed.) *Psychiatric disorders and pregnancy*.

⁶ H.Ward et al.,(2010) *Infants Suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm: a prospective longitudinal study*. Research Brief DFE-RB053 (London: Department for Education).

⁷ Scottish Government (2011) *A Pathway of Care for Vulnerable Families (0-3)*
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/03/22145900/0>

⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/02/7586>

⁹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001026/index.shtml>

What is the picture of infant adoption from 'care' in Scotland?

Official data for the most recent year presents the following picture for Scotland. Although some comparisons are made with England, the caveats highlighted mean there are significant issues in interpreting difference.

Infant adoptions from care

- **7 infants** were adopted in Scotland from being looked after in 2009-10¹⁰, down from 9 the previous year. This is in the context of **373** infants being looked after by local authorities in Scotland in the same period.
- In total, **143** children aged 0-4 **were adopted** from being looked after (**3,341** children aged 0-4 **were being looked after** by local authorities).¹¹
- Almost two thirds (65%) of children adopted from being looked after were aged 0-4. Infants accounted for 3% of the total (Table 6).
- In England the overall number of looked after children being adopted has been falling (-8% since 2007). Infant adoptions have fallen by 60% since 2007, and adoptions of under fives by -2% (0-4 years).
- Trends for infant adoption in Scotland are not known as figures are available for the past 2 years only.¹² However the trend is towards greater numbers of young children being adopted after ceasing being looked after. Since 2007 **the annual number of 0-4s adopted from care has almost doubled** (from 73 to 143). Over the past decade the number has steadily increased (from 53 in 2001).
- While the incidence of adoption is higher for **under 4s** than for older children, **infants** are less likely to be adopted and more likely to be returned to their biological parents after ceasing being looked after (Table 5).

Trends in infants being looked after

The longer term trend is for a growing number of children to be looked after in Scotland. The number grew by 46% over the past decade (2001-2010).

- Within this overall trend, there has been a marked increase in the number of very young children being looked (Table 1). The number of infants looked after has almost doubled in a decade (+93% - from 193 to 373). The number of looked after children in the 1-4 year age group has grown by 84%.
- Since 2007 there has been a 31% increase in the number of infants being looked after in Scotland (+22% in England). The total number of children being looked after in Scotland rose by 13% (+9% in England).

¹⁰ Year ending 31 July 2010.

¹¹ The figure at 31 July 2010.

¹² That is since the introduction of individual level data collection. Prior to that, infants were included in the 0-4 year age category, which could not be disaggregated.

Infants looked after in 2010-11

- 711 infants started to be looked after in Scotland in 2010-11; 15% of all children who started to be looked after.¹³
- In England, infants comprised more than a quarter (26%) of all children who entered care that year.
- In the same period infants were also ceasing to be looked after for a range of reasons and, overall, infants comprised **2%** of all children being looked after in Scotland (373 in total).¹⁴

Duration of periods looked after and destinations

Of the 109 infants who ceased being looked after in 2009-10 in Scotland:¹⁵

- 52% were looked after for less than 6 weeks;
- 43% were looked after for less than 6 months but more than 6 weeks;
- 5% were looked after for more than 6 months;

It should be noted that these figures count more than once those children who had multiple episodes of being looked after in a single year.

A majority of infants return home to their birth parent(s) on leaving care (Table 3b). In the most recent year:

- **80%** of infants (60% of 0-4s) **returned home to their birth parent(s)**;
- **6%** of infants were **adopted** (16% of 0-4s);
- **14%** of infants went to other destinations (24% of 0-4s).¹⁶ These figures are suppressed (low count).

The trend over the past decade is for infants to spend shorter periods being looked after (see Table 4 below). However we need to distinguish between the duration of episodes of being looked after – given that children can experience repeat episodes of being looked after - and the achievement of permanence for infants and young children.

Duration of the adoption process

Because of the limitations of the data collected, separate studies have recently been conducted by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration. One study looked at the journey through the care and court system of 44 infants assessed as at risk either at birth or prior to birth.¹⁷ It found that:

- None of the infants were adopted before their first birthday

¹³ Children who were taken into care are children who started to be looked after under a care order, police protection, emergency protection order.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The year ending 31 March 2010.

¹⁶ Other destinations for 0-4s were: relatives/friends (12%), former foster carers (1%), 'other' (4%), 'not known'(7%).

¹⁷ Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (2011) Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland. Supplementary Report – Children Assessed as at Risk at or Before Birth (Stirling: SCRA).

- For most the overall process from birth and first contact with services to the Order being made, took **between two and four years**. This meant most were over two years old before they were adopted.
- The most common number of placements for children was 2 (77% of cases). But 21% of children experienced 3 or more placements.
- 60% of the children were in their final placement before they were two years old, 21% were two years old and 9% were at least three years old.

The situation in the rest of the UK is fairly similar. In England, for children who entered care as infants, it took an average of 2 years and 3 months between entering care and being adopted. For children who were aged 2 or 3 years old on entering care the average time taken to be adopted was over 3 years.

In Wales it now takes less time for infants to progress through the different stages of the adoption process. For children who entered care as infants in 2003, it took on average 3 years 1 month to be adopted. By 2011 this had reduced to 2 years 3 months.¹⁸

In Northern Ireland the average length of time for an infant to be adopted in 2010, from last entry into care, was 3 years 4 months.¹⁹

¹⁸ StatsWales, Adoptions of Looked After Children
<http://www.statswales.wales.gov.uk/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=24568>

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (2011) Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland 2009/10
http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/first_release_tables_2010_final.pdf

Tables - Scotland

Table 1: Number of children looked after by age, 2000 - 2010

Age/gender	Children looked after on 31st March....										on 31 July	% change	% change
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2007 - 2010	2001-2010
All people													
Under 1	235	193	183	181	247	247	266	284	326	356	373	31.3	93.3
1-4	1,685	1,612	1,768	1,768	1,848	1,952	2,098	2,382	2,585	2,800	2,968	24.6	84.1
5-11	3,569	3,522	3,781	3,914	4,065	4,257	4,495	4,794	5,255	5,509	5,897	23.0	67.4
12-15	4,487	4,251	4,224	4,115	4,176	4,287	4,524	4,746	4,857	5,015	5,047	6.3	18.7
16-17	1,333	1,319	1,284	1,410	1,339	1,441	1,379	1,558	1,605	1,460	1,423	-8.7	7.9
18-21							220	296	258	148	184	-37.8	na
Not known						1	0	0	0				
Total	11,309	10,897	11,241	11,388	11,675	12,185	12,982	14,060	14,886	15,288	15,892	13.0	45.8

Figures are provisional and may be revised in 2010-11.

The 18-21 category in this table includes a small number of looked after young people who were over 21yrs

Table 2: Number of children in Scotland ceasing to be looked after who are adopted, by age, 2001-2010

Age	Children ceasing to be looked after and being adopted in year ending									
	31 March...									
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Under 5s	53	56	54	83	58	54	73	87	153	143
5-11	17	30	48	72	51	52	53	47	47	68
12-15	4	3	4	44	3	8	4	3	2	4
16+	0	1	5	11	5	5	3	0	2	3
TOTAL	74	90	111	210	117	119	133	137	204	218

Source: Scottish Government Children Looked After Statistics 2009-10 Additional Tables²⁰

Table 3: Number of children ceasing to be looked after, by destination and age, 2001-2010

Age	Destination after leaving care	Children ceasing to be looked after in year ending										% of 2010 totals
		31 March...										
		2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	
Under 5												
	Home with (biological) parents	398	471	431	530	293	374	339	393	540	536	60
	Friends / relatives	35	71	68	81	43	61	59	71	107	108	12
	Former foster carers							1	7	13	7	1
	Adoption	53	56	54	83	58	54	73	87	153	143	16
	Supported accommodation / own tenanc	2	0	1	0	3	0	0	2	0	4	0
	Other	190	115	89	38	32	90	93	51	39	36	4
	Not known					160	89	143	184	47	59	7
	Total	678	713	643	732	589	668	708	795	899	893	100

Source: Scottish Government Children Looked After Statistics 2009-10 Additional Tables

Table 4: Infants and under 5s ceasing to be looked after, year to 31 July 2010 - destination on discharge

Destination on discharge	Age					All
	Under 1	1yrs	2yrs	3yrs	4yrs	
Home with (biological) parents	87	97	117	120	115	536
Home with newly adopted parents	7	33	42	31	30	143
Friends/Relatives	16*		25	38	29	92
Other**						122
All	109	156	216	215	197	893

* cell combined due to small numbers (total shown is the aggregate figure for children <2 years of age)

Children may be counted more than once if they left care more than once during the reporting period

** 'Other' destinations include 'former foster carers', 'other', 'not known'. The numbers are suppressed (low cell count).

Source: Scottish Government Children Looked After Statistics 2009-10

Table 5: Children ceasing to be looked after, year to 31 July 2010 - % of children to each destination

Destination on discharge (%)	Age							All
	Under 1	1yrs	2yrs	3yrs	4yrs	5yrs	6+yrs	
Home with (biological) parents	80	62	54	56	58	62	63	62
Home with newly adopted parents	6	21	19	14	15	13	1	5
Friends/Relatives	n/a*		12	18	15	12	12	12
Other destinations	n/a*		15	12	12	13	24	21
All	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

* cell combined due to small numbers (so shows total <2 years)

Source: Scottish Government Children Looked After Statistics 2009-10 Additional Tables

Table 6: Number of children ceasing to be looked after who are adopted, by age, year to 31 July 2010

	Age							All
	Under 1	1yrs	2yrs	3yrs	4yrs	5yrs	6+yrs	
Number of children	7	33	42	31	30	24	51	218
% of total adopted	3%	15%	19%	14%	14%	11%	23%	100%

Source: Scottish Government Children Looked After Statistics 2009-10 Additional Tables

Note on Data

The UK Statistics Authority asked the four national administrations to review the comparability of their looked after children statistics. A note setting out the differences was published in 2010.²¹ Further information on the comparability of national data on looked after children is available on the Scottish Government website.²² The four governments have recently been working together to address some of these in relation to looked after children statistics.

There has been a longstanding lack of comparable Scottish data about the length of time it takes for children to progress from care through the different stages of the adoption process. Recent changes to data collection for looked after and accommodated children in Scotland will help to redress this. Since 2008-09, Scottish data has been collected at an individual level, enabling linkage with education and other administrative data. Another development is the launch of Scotland's Adoption Register, in March 2011, with funding for an initial three years from the Scottish Government. This will provide a national overview of adoption practice and activity, including information about the characteristics of children & families on referral, the length of time children wait to be linked to a family, the likelihood of placement and the number of placements.²³ The first full year reported on will be 2012-13.

²¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/933/0108099.pdf>

²² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/socialservicestats>

²³ <http://www.scotlandsadoptionregister.org.uk/facts-and-figures>