



Fostering and adoption 2020–21

A statistical bulletin

Published December 2021



HAPPY TO TRANSLATE

Contents

Notes	3
Fostering and adoption and the Covid-19 pandemic	3
Brothers and sisters	3
Key points	4
Introduction	7
Background	7
Data quality note	8
Section 1: Foster care	10
Fostering services	10
Foster care households	11
Care experienced children and young people	19
Fostering service capacity	27
Fostering service evaluation (grading)	31
Summary of foster care	34
Section 2: Adoption	36
Adoption services	36
New approved households	36
Children and young people	41
Other services	47
Adoption service evaluation	48
Summary of adoption	51

Notes

Fostering and adoption and the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and the temporary changes made to legislation, policies and procedures in response to the pandemic¹ meant that in 2020, fostering and adoption services weren't operating as they did in previous years, and we acknowledge that this will no doubt have had some bearing on the data published here. For example:

- the lower number of children entering the fostering and adoption system in 2020 might in part be attributed to the cancellation of non-urgent children's hearings between April 2020 and September 2020, bearing in mind we were already seeing a downward trend.
- the amendment to the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 to allow local authorities, if they consider that it is necessary for a reason relating to coronavirus, to place more than the current maximum of three children with a foster carer and for a foster carer to look after more children than their current approval allowed. This may have resulted in instances that otherwise would have been recorded as a foster carer exceeding their approval range in the annual return not being recorded as such in this year's annual return.

We have not attempted to quantify the extent to which the pandemic may have disrupted the trends in this report although we have footnoted the tables and charts that we expect might have been affected. We are mindful that the impact of the pandemic on the fostering and adoption sector will most likely present itself in future iterations of these statistics, perhaps even more so than that it has done here.

We would like to acknowledge how grateful we are that, despite the added pressures and disruptions, all of the 59 registered fostering services and the 38 registered adoption services submitted or completed the majority of their 2020-21 annual return.

Brothers and sisters

There has been a long-standing focus and commitment across Scotland around upholding relationships between brothers and sisters and now [Plan 21-24 of 'The Promise'](#) requires that Scotland will stop the practice of separating brothers and sisters, unless for reasons of safety. This has been cemented with new legislation.

This statistical bulletin presents, over time, the proportion of siblings being placed separately into foster care households.

¹ Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership: Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 – Guidance on looked-after children and children's hearings provisions (<https://www.chip-partnership.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Coronavirus-Scotland-Act-2020-guidance.docx.pdf>)

Key points

Foster care in Scotland

- **There were 59 fostering services operating in Scotland at 31 December 2020**
 - There were 32 local authority fostering services and 27 independent fostering services.
 - All 59 fostering services submitted a 2020-21 annual return.
- **Fostering services continued to perform well and achieve positive evaluations**
 - At 31 March 2021, 85% of fostering services were evaluated as 'good' or better across all quality themes and 15% were evaluated as 'adequate' in at least one quality theme. No services received evaluations of 'unsatisfactory' or 'weak'.
- **The number of foster care households in Scotland continued to decrease**
 - At 31 December 2020, the 57 fostering services (that approve foster carer households) in Scotland had a combined total of 3,540 approved foster care households. This is down 2% from 3,617 in 2019, and for the fourth consecutive year.
 - Local authority services approved fewer new households in 2020 than the previous year (190 compared to 197) as did independent services (96 compared to 115 new households).
 - As per previous years, in 2020 more households deregistered than were approved, in both sectors.
- **The number of children and young people in foster care has decreased**
 - The number of children and young people using fostering services has gradually decreased from 5,423 in 2016 to 4,587 in 2020.
 - The 2020 decrease is driven by a fall in the number of permanent placements and emergency placements slightly counteracted by an increase in long-term and interim placements.
- **There were 203 children and young people identified as needing a placement secured by a Permanence Order who were not in or not moving towards such a placement**
 - This equates to 6% of the children and young people in local authority foster care; the same proportion as the two years previous.
 - Seventeen children were living at home or with kinship carers and waiting for a foster care placement, same as the previous year.

- **Throughout 2020 there were 348 placements of children and young people that ended on an unplanned basis**
 - This is less than each of the three years previous.
 - Of the placements that ended, 19% were permanent placements.
- **Placing brothers and sisters together remains very challenging**
 - In 2020, 915 family groups were placed in foster care households, of which 24% were placed separately. This has fluctuated between 20% and 25% over the past few years.

Adoption in Scotland

- **There were 38 adoption services operating in Scotland at 31 December 2020**
 - There were 32 local authority adoption services and six independent adoption services.
 - All 38 adoption services submitted, or completed the majority of, their 2020-21 annual return.
- **Adoption services continued to perform well and achieve positive evaluations**
 - At 31 March 2021, 87% of adoption services were evaluated as 'good' or better across all quality themes and one service was evaluated as 'adequate' across all quality themes.
- **Fewer new adoptive households were approved**
 - There were 232 new adoptive households approved in 2020, down from 259 in 2019 and continuing the downward trend.
 - The year-on-year decrease is only in the local authority sector, with independent services showing a flatter trend.
- **Just over a third of the new households were approved to adopt a family group of two brothers and sisters**
 - less than 5 of the new households were approved for family groups of three or more brothers and sisters.
- **There were 186 approved households at 31 December 2020 waiting for a child to be placed.**
 - At the same time there were 148 children and young people approved for adoption and waiting to be matched to an adoptive household. Of these,

47% were part of a family group (an increase from 31% the previous year) and 30% had been waiting for over one year.

- **Children and young people using adoption services continues to decrease**
 - In 2020 there were 225 children approved for adoption, 207 children placed with their new adoptive families and 206 children legally adopted.
 - All of these figures are down from the previous year, continuing the downward trends.

- **Where adoptions broke down, the majority were before the adoption order was granted**
 - During 2020, 18 adoptions broke down before the adoption order was granted and less than 5 broke down after the order was granted.

Introduction

This report sets out data collected by us from service providers in their annual returns from each of the years 2016 through to 2020. It also includes service evaluation (grading) information, correct at 31 March 2021.

The most recent annual return data covers the period 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020.

At 31 December 2020, there were just under 12,300 care services registered with us, including 38 adoption and 59 fostering services. These are provided by the local authority and the voluntary/not-for-profit sector. We hold a significant amount of data about these services, which informs the public, people using services and commissioners on the quality of these services. The information also supports us to target our scrutiny and improvement interventions.

The data in this report provides insight into the operation of fostering and adoption services in Scotland. We hope this data is of use to providers of fostering and adoption services and other interested parties who invest significant time in providing information to us each year.

Background

Foster care and adoption services are vital in assessing, approving and supporting foster carers and the recruitment and assessment of prospective adoptive parents to care for some of our most vulnerable children. Children who are placed away from their home require high-quality care that addresses their emotional and wellbeing needs. Matching children to families who can provide high quality care is essential to supporting improved outcomes for children. Ongoing assessment and planning are crucial to make sure children are being looked after in families, either their own or in alternative family placements that address their best interests throughout childhood. Where permanency is required, planning for a placement should not be delayed. This is so that children have the best opportunity to make new attachments within an alternative family placement where they can start to feel secure and cared for. Local authorities have a legal responsibility for ensuring that children in need of foster care and adoption are safe and have appropriate placements. Local authorities in Scotland are legally required to provide fostering and adoption services within their authority areas. They can also work with voluntary/not-for-profit fostering and adoption services to place children with carers (where that is in the child's interest).

Over the summer of 2015, we worked with colleagues in the Scottish Government, service providers and their representative bodies to review the content of our annual returns. This work has enabled us to collate a meaningful summary of adoption and fostering statistics across Scotland. This is the fifth in the series of adoption and fostering statistical bulletins; all of which can be accessed [here](#).

A national review of foster care was completed in 2013. One of the outcomes from this was the establishment of national placement descriptors to be used consistently by all fostering services to standardise the description of the types of fostering placements

they make. These were published in 2015 with the expectation that all fostering placements are classified and recorded according to them. We first incorporated the descriptors into the annual return in 2017, and this is the third time we have reported on them. Visit [here](#) for a full glossary.

We added some further questions in the 2018 Fostering annual return regarding continuing care for young people aged 16 to 21 years following the enactment of part 11 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, Continuing Care.² We have continued to collect data in the fostering annual return on continuing care and will publish a national level summary of the responses when we are satisfied that the data being recorded provides statistical evidence for reporting purposes.

For the ease of writing, throughout this bulletin 'children and young people' is often shortened to 'children'.

Data quality note

All data, apart from service evaluation (grading) information, was provided directly by service providers. In this publication, to accurately reflect trends over time and to allow year-on-year comparisons to be made, data has been imputed where a service has not completed an annual return. Data has been imputed from information provided by the service in another year.

All 38 registered adoption services and 59 registered fostering services submitted or at least completed the majority of their 2020 annual return. We have excluded the adoption service Birthlink³ from the adoption statistics that follow (except the evaluation statistics). This means that some of the 2016 figures published in this report do not match those published in the Fostering and Adoption 2016-17 statistical bulletin.

We have also excluded two fostering services, Scottish Adoption (Fostering Service) and St. Margaret's Children and Family Care Society⁴, from all the foster care figures apart from the evaluation statistics. This means that some of the 2016 foster care statistics presented here do not match those published in the Fostering and Adoption 2016-17 statistical bulletin. Tables are footnoted where this is the case.

The data published in this report is consistent with figures published in the Scottish Government's [Children's Social Work Statistics 2019-20](#). The slight differences in

² Continuing Care is the continued provision of accommodation and other assistance that is being provided immediately before a young person ceases to be looked after until their 21st birthday. Only children who cease to be looked after aged 16 years of over and were looked after away from home are eligible for Continuing Care.

³ Birthlink is an adoption support service and is not involved in the approval of households or children for adoption.

⁴ These services are predominantly adoption services that provide a limited fostering service and require two registrations, one for fostering and one for adoption. The focus of these services is the recruitment, approval and support of pre-adoptive and adoptive parents and of post placement and post adoption work with families and adopted adults. The fostering and family placement part of the service is for children who require a fostering placement prior to adoption. In these cases the household is given dual approval (foster care approval and adoption approval). The foster care households do not add to the pool of foster carers in Scotland. See Dual Approval Status section in Chapter 19 of [Guidance on the Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2007](#).

numbers are due to different reporting periods, and differences in the level and criteria at which the data is gathered and cleaned.

The national placement descriptors replaced the former placement categories in the 2017 annual return. The extent to which this change affected the count of both foster care households and children and young people using fostering services is unknown, but it is possible that there were categories of households and placements of children that were included in the 2016 counts and not included thereafter.

Section 1: Foster care

Fostering services

At 31 December 2020, there were 59 fostering services in Scotland registered with us made up of 32 local authority services and 27 voluntary/not-for-profit organisations (referred to as independent services in the statistics that follow). There were no new fostering service registrations in 2020.

All 59 of the registered services submitted their 2020-21 annual return.

The data presented in this report relates to the annual returns covering the period 2016-2020 and service evaluation data at 31 March 2021. Where a service did not provide annual return information for a given year, we impute data from the preceding year.

Two of the 27 voluntary/not-for-profit services have been excluded from the statistics that follow (except the fostering service evaluation statistics) because they do not provide a full fostering service (see footnote 3 on page 8) and therefore many of the aspects looked at in this report do not apply to them.

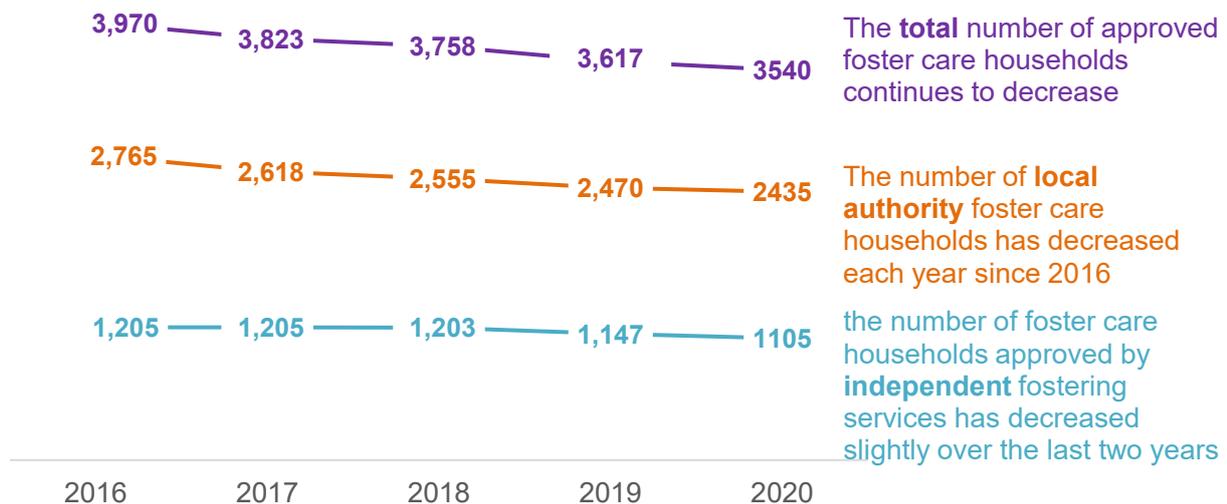
This report covers four different aspects of fostering services:

- foster care households
- care experienced children and young people
- fostering service capacity
- fostering service evaluation.

Foster care households

The total number of approved foster care households has decreased each year since 2016.

Figure 1.1 Total number of approved foster care households at 31 December, with sector split



At 31 December 2020, the 57 fostering services in Scotland had a combined total of 3,540 approved foster care households⁵ (down 77 (2%) from 3,617 in 2019, and down for the fourth consecutive year).

The decrease in 2020 is driven by just over half of the fostering service reporting having fewer approved households than the previous year. A quarter of fostering services experienced an increase in the number of approved households, and the remaining quarter reported no change.

Similar to previous years, 69% of approved households were affiliated with local authority services and 31% were with independent services.

⁵ This may be subject to some double counting. Regulations allow a foster carer to be 'registered' with more than one agency, however this is intended as an enabling provision in certain circumstances not one which should be regularly used ([Guidance on the Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2007 – Chapter 11 The Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers](#))

Figure 1.2 Number of approved foster care households¹ at 31 December, split by sector

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Local authority	2,435	2,470	2,555	2,618	2,765
Independent	1,105	1,147	1,203	1,205	1,205
Total	3,540	3,617	3,758	3,823	3,970

- 1 Excludes those approved exclusively for short breaks.
- 2 The 2016 figures presented here for Independent and total services do not match the figures published in the Fostering and Adoption 2016-17 statistical bulletin because the ones presented here exclude Scottish Adoption (fostering service) and St. Margaret's Children and Family Care Society.
- 3 The national placement descriptors replaced the former placement categories in 2017. This change to the data collection may account for some of the difference between the number of foster care households in 2016 and the number thereafter.
- 4 The 2019 figures presented here do not match those published in the Fostering and Adoption 2019-20 statistical bulletin due to a small revision.

Fifty-three fostering services said they had incorporated the national placement descriptors into their recording system and four said they had not. The four services that were not yet categorising placements according to the agreed descriptors appear to have used a best-fit approach to record the number of approved households by placement type.

The most common type of placement approval (Figure 1.3) was 'all placement types', particularly in independent services, where 69% of households had this type of blanket approval compared to 38% in local authority services.

The increase in the number and proportion of local authority households approved for interim-only placements, from 700 (28% of all local authority approved households) in 2019 to 912 (37%) in 2020, was driven by one service and was not echoed across all services.

Figure 1.3 Number of approved foster care households¹ at 31 December, split by sector and placement type²

		2020			2019			2018		
		Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
Number of approved carer households ¹		2,435	1,105	3,540	2,470	1,147	3,617	2,555	1,203	3,758
Approval to provide all types of placements	no.	930	763	1,693	1,160	883	2,043	1,110	908	2,018
	%	38%	69%	48%	47%	77%	56%	43%	75%	54%
Permanent placements only	no.	347	175	522	355	135	490	384	154	538
	%	14%	16%	15%	14%	12%	14%	15%	13%	14%
Long-term placements only	no.	239	125	364	255	90	345	284	86	370
	%	10%	11%	10%	10%	8%	10%	11%	7%	10%
Interim placements only	no.	912	42	954	700	39	739	777	55	832
	%	37%	4%	27%	28%	3%	20%	30%	5%	22%
Emergency placements only	no.	7	<5	7	<5	0	0	0	<5	0
	%	0.3%	<1%	0.3%	<1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	<1%	0.0%

1 Excluding those approved exclusively for short breaks.

2 Placements are categorised based on the National Placement Descriptors, information on which can be found in the introduction page.

3 Carers were categorised differently prior to the 2018 annual return.

4 Values with fewer than five observations have been replaced with '<5' and excluded from totals.

5 The 2019 figures presented here do not match those published in the Fostering and Adoption 2019-20 statistical bulletin due to a small revision.

At 31 December 2020 (Figure 1.4), there were 488 households approved to provide short breaks only (up 5% from 466 in 2019).

Figure 1.4. Number of foster care households approved only to provide short breaks at 31 December, split by sector

Year	Sector	number of households approved for short breaks only	number of services that have approved short break households
2020	Local authority	325	29
	Independent	163	21
	Total	488	50
2019	Local authority	320	26
	Independent	146	21
	Total	466	47
2018	Local authority	347	29
	Independent	142	18
	Total	489	47
2017	Local authority	285	26
	Independent	138	17
	Total	423	43

1 This data was not collected prior to the 2017 annual return.

Of the 3,540 approved households, 619 (17%) had approval to care for children of any age, down from 20% in 2019 (Figure 1.5). As in previous years, this was more likely to be the case for households registered by independent services (33%) than local authority households (10%).

Figure 1.5 Number of households that have approval for any age range of child or young person at 31 December, split by sector

		number	% of all households
2020	Local authority	249	10%
	Independent	370	33%
	Total	619	17%
2019	Local authority	269	11%
	Independent	439	38%
	Total	708	20%
2018	Local authority	300	12%
	Independent	602	50%
	Total	902	24%
2017	Local authority	342	13%
	Independent	544	45%
	Total	886	23%
2016	Local authority	269	10%
	Independent	643	53%
	Total	912	23%

Private fostering

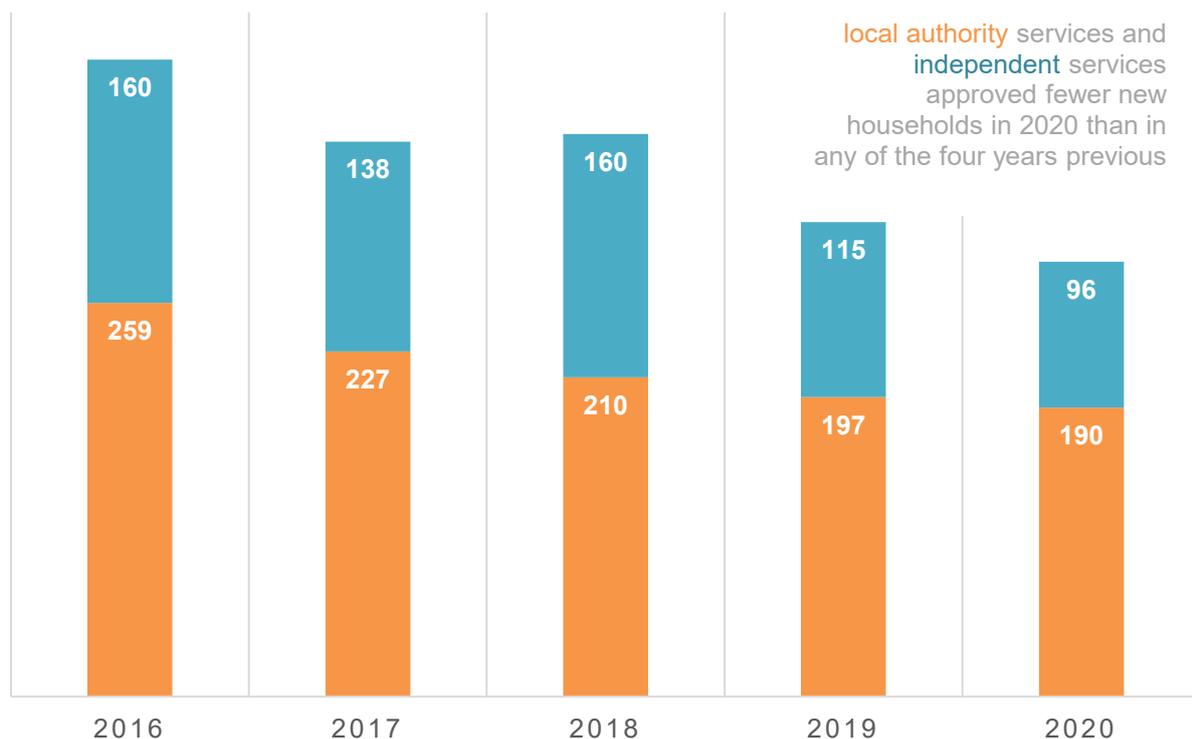
Private fostering is an arrangement where a parent makes an agreement with someone who is not a close relative of the child to care for that child for more than 28 days. These arrangements are not facilitated by the local authority or a registered service. It is very possible that private foster carers will not be aware of their responsibility to notify the local authority of these arrangements or that local authorities do not recognise these arrangements as private fostering. We suspect that there are more private fostering arrangements taking place than we and local authorities are being notified of.

There were five notifications of private fostering in 2020 and six in 2019 and 2018.

Recruitment and de-registration

In 2020, 286 new foster care households were approved.

Figure 1.6. New foster care households approved between 1 January and 31 December, with sector split



Throughout 2020, there were 286 new foster care households approved across 47 fostering services. Two thirds (66%) were approved by local authority services and 34% approved by independent services. Both sectors approved fewer new carers in 2020 compared to any of the four preceding years.

[Guidance on the Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2017](#) states that authorities should normally aim to

complete an assessment within six months of receiving an application. The length of the assessment is measured as the time between when the application was received and approval by the agency decision maker.

In 2020, 65% of the overall number of new foster carer assessments were completed within six months, up from 52% the previous year. Just over a quarter (27%) were completed between six months and a year. A small amount (25 assessments, 9%) took a year or more to complete.

Figure 1.7 Number of new foster care households approved between 1 January and 31 December, split by sector and length of assessment completion

Year	Sector	Up to six months		Between six & 12 months		12 months or more		Total new carer households
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	
2020	Local authority	116	61%	61	32%	13	7%	190
	Independent	69	72%	15	16%	12	13%	96
	Total	185	65%	76	27%	25	9%	286
2019	Local authority	85	43%	93	47%	19	10%	197
	Independent	78	68%	37	32%	<5	<5%	115
	Total	163	52%	130	42%	19	10%	312
2018	Local authority	99	47%	95	45%	16	8%	210
	Independent	70	44%	78	49%	12	8%	160
	Total	169	46%	173	47%	28	8%	370
2017	Local authority	115	51%	94	41%	14	6%	227
	Independent	73	53%	51	37%	12	9%	138
	Total	188	52%	145	40%	26	7%	365
2016	Local authority	122	47%	105	41%	32	12%	259
	Independent	90	56%	63	39%	7	4%	160
	Total	212	51%	168	40%	39	9%	419

- 1 The measure of assessment completion time does not include households that were not approved.
- 2 The number of new households that are approved may include a small amount of double-counting at the national level, owing to the rare situation where households have dual or derivate approval⁶ (are registered with more than one fostering service).

Recruiting households that would foster sibling groups (Figure 1.8) was a challenge for 34 fostering services (60% of all services) in 2019 and again in 2020. As in previous years, in 2020 this was particularly the case for local authority services, with 78% of services finding it difficult compared to 36% of independent services.

⁶ See ([Guidance on the Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2007 – Chapter 11 The Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers](#)) (regulation 23) for definition of dual approval and derivate approval.

As in previous years, the main reason described by services was accommodation constraints.

Figure 1.8 Number of services that have difficulties recruiting households that will take sibling groups, split by sector

Year	Sector	Number	% of services
2020	Local authority	25	78%
	Independent	9	36%
	Total	34	60%
2019	Local authority	25	78%
	Independent	9	36%
	Total	34	60%
2018	Local authority	22	69%
	Independent	8	31%
	Total	30	52%
2017	Local authority	20	63%
	Independent	6	23%
	Total	26	45%
2016	Local authority	19	59%
	Independent	5	19%
	Total	24	41%

Throughout 2020, 349 foster carer households de-registered from fostering services (Figure 1.9).

Subtracting this figure from the 286 new households that were approved suggests there was a net decrease of 63 foster care households across Scotland in 2020. There is a slight discrepancy between this figure and the difference between the total number of approved households in 2019 and 2020 (77). This is likely due to small inconsistencies in reporting.

At an individual service level, where double counting is removed, the data suggests that 33 fostering services – 58% of all services that recruit and approve foster carers – experienced a net loss in foster care households in 2020.

Figure 1.9 Number of foster care households that de-registered between 1 January and 31 December, and the number/percentage of services that experienced a net loss of foster care households, split by sector

Year	Sector	Number of households that de-registered	Services that experienced a net loss in foster care households over the year	
			No.	% of all services
2020	Local authority	226	18	56%
	Independent	123	15	60%
	Total	349	33	58%
2019	Local authority	265	17	53%
	Independent	169	14	52%
	Total	434	31	53%
2018	Local authority	263	15	47%
	Independent	143	9	35%
	Total	406	24	41%
2017	Local authority	228	16	50%
	Independent	175	10	38%
	Total	403	26	45%
2016	Local Authority	194	Data not available	
	Independent	188		
	Total	382		

1 The number of households that de-register may include a small amount of double-counting at the national level, owing to the rare situation where households are registered with more than one fostering service.

In 2020 up to 30 June (Figure 1.10), fostering services across Scotland received approximately 6,258 enquiries from potential foster carers. Of these, 6% led to applications, 38% of which were approved.

Figure 1.10. Recruitment of foster care households: approximate number of enquiries received between 1 January and 30 June, and the number leading to applications and approved households, split by sector

Year	Sector	Enquiries	Applications	Approvals	% of enquiries to applications	% of applications approved
2020	Local authority	1,028	184	85	18%	46%
	Independent	5,230	174	52	3%	30%
	Total	6,258	358	137	6%	38%
2019	Local authority	954	170	64	18%	38%
	Independent	4,238	110	49	3%	45%
	Total	5,192	280	113	5%	40%
2018	Local authority	982	158	57	16%	36%
	Independent	2,524	110	50	4%	45%
	Total	3,506	268	107	8%	40%
2017	Local authority	1,038	173	73	17%	42%
	Independent	3,094	131	55	4%	42%
	Total	4,132	304	128	7%	42%
2016	Local authority	937	146	41	16%	28%
	Independent	2,859	133	64	5%	48%
	Total	3,796	279	105	7%	38%

Care experienced children and young people

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to provide fostering and adoption services. They are responsible for assessing and planning for children who, as an outcome of this assessment, require alternative care either through voluntary arrangements or compulsory measures of care. Local authorities, through service level agreements with independent fostering and adoption services, may place children with carers through these services. Independent fostering and adoption services also recruit, assess, and provide training and support to carers to ensure that they are providing a high-quality service to children and young people. When children are placed with an independent agency, it remains the responsibility of the local authority to support the child and to review the arrangement to ensure that it continues to meet the child's needs. Where permanency is required, this may be provided through a permanent foster placement or through adoption.

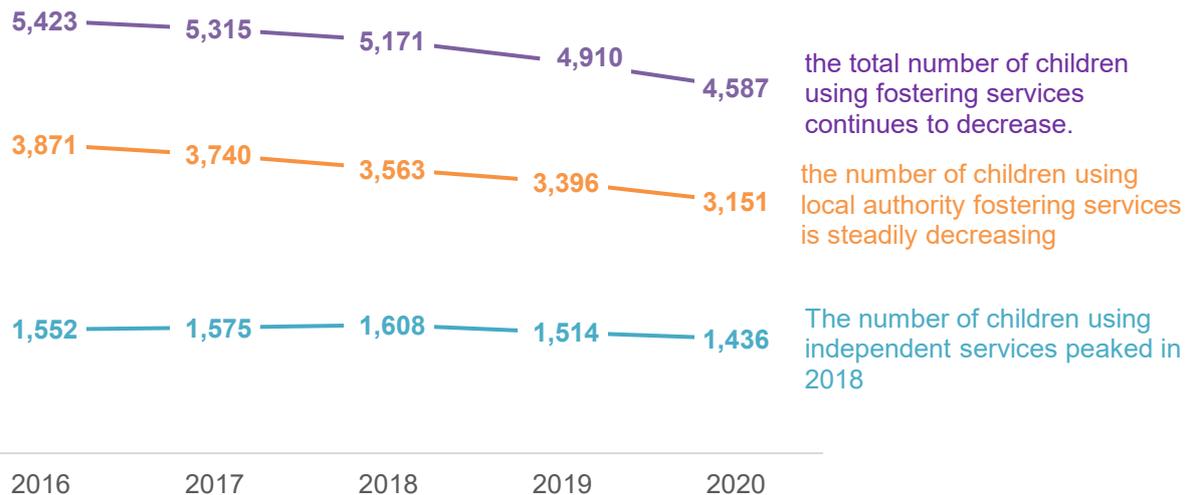
Placements

In the 2020 annual return, services were asked to record the number of children and young people using their service, categorised by the national placement descriptors. The four services that were not yet categorising placements appear to have used a

best-fit approach to record the number of children and young people in each placement type.

The total number of children and young people using fostering services has decreased each year since 2016 (figure 1.11 and 1.12).

Figure 1.11 Total number of children and young people using fostering services at 31 December, with sector split



- 1 'Using fostering services' means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in a way that reduces double counting.
- 2 The decreasing trend may have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

At 31 December 2020, 4,587 children were using fostering services (in a placement with an approved foster care household). Of these 4,587 children, 69% (3,151) were in local authority approved households and 31% (1,436) were in households approved by independent services.

The number of children using fostering services in 2020 was 323 less than the previous year, continuing the overall downward trend. The number of children using independent fostering services peaked at 1,608 in 2018 and has decreased each of the two years since.

At the service level, some fostering services (around one third) had more children in a foster care placement in 2020 compared to 2019, but generally more services (63%) reported having fewer children using their service, resulting in the overall decrease that can be seen Figure 1.11.

The trend is consistent with figures published in the [Scottish Government's Children's Social Work Statistics 2019-20](#), which also show a decrease over time in the number of children in a foster care setting.

Figure 1.12 Total number of children and young people using fostering services at 31 December, split by sector

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Local authority	3,151	3,396	3,563	3,740	3,871
Independent	1,436	1,514	1,608	1,575	1,552
Total	4,587	4,910	5,171	5,315	5,423

- 1 'Using fostering services' means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in a way that reduces double counting.
- 2 The decreasing trend may have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2020, interim placement was the most common placement type, particularly in the local authority sector. Of the total number of children in foster care, 49% (2,245) were in this type of placement (Figure 1.13).

Figure 1.13 Children and young people using fostering services¹ at 31 December, split by sector and placement type²

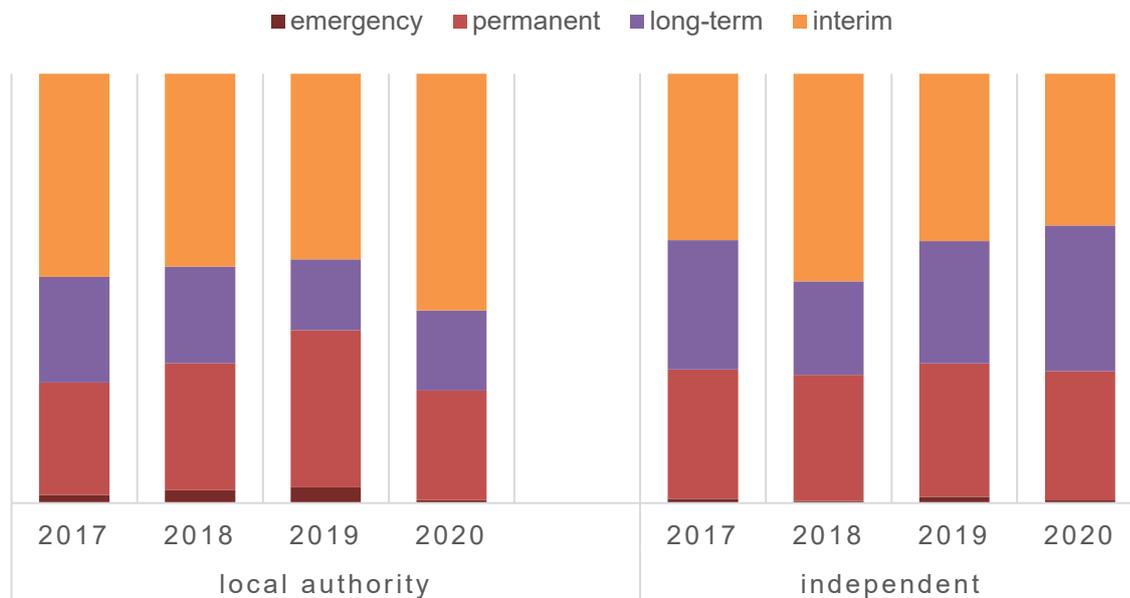
Year	Sector	Permanent placement			Long-term placement			Interim placement			Emergency placement		
		No.	% of sector	% of total	No.	% of sector	% of total	No.	% of sector	% of total	No.	% of sector	% of total
2020	Local authority	804	26%	18%	588	19%	13%	1737	55%	38%	22	1%	0%
	Independent	432	30%	9%	487	34%	11%	508	35%	11%	9	1%	0%
	Total	1,236		27%	1,075		23%	2,245		49%	31		1%
2019	Local authority	1242	37%	25%	562	17%	11%	1,467	43%	30%	125	4%	3%
	Independent	471	31%	10%	431	28%	9%	590	39%	12%	22	1%	0%
	Total	1,713		35%	993		20%	2,057		42%	147		3%
2018	Local authority	1054	30%	20%	801	22%	15%	1,600	45%	31%	108	3%	2%
	Independent	472	29%	9%	351	22%	7%	777	48%	15%	8	0.5%	0%
	Total	1,526		30%	1,152		22%	2,377		46%	116		2%
2017	Local authority	981	26%	18%	920	25%	17%	1,769	47%	33%	70	2%	1%
	Independent	474	30%	9%	475	30%	9%	610	39%	11%	16	1%	0%
	Total	1,455		27%	1,395		26%	2,379		45%	86		2%

- 1 'Using fostering services' means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in such a way as to eliminate double counting.
- 2 Placements are categorised based on the National Placement Descriptors, information on which can be found in the introduction page.
- 3 Prior to 2017, placements were categorised differently, so cannot be compared.
- 4 Trends, particularly associated with interim placements, may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In each of the years 2017 to 2019, interim placement has been the most common type, however, in the local authority sector, the proportion of children in this placement type (and in long-term placements) has been gradually declining and the proportion in emergency and permanent placements has been rising. In contrast to this, 2020 saw a

larger proportion of children in local authority interim placements (38% compared to 30% in 2019) and a lesser proportion in permanent placements (18% compared to 25% in 2019). This is illustrated in figure 1.14 below.

Figure 1.14 Children and young people using fostering services at 31 December, split by sector and placement type



1 Trends, particularly associated with interim placements, may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic

The increase in the proportion of children placed in local authority approved interim placements was echoed across many of the local authority fostering services. This was also the case for the decrease in the proportion of children placed in permanent placements, however most of the decrease was on account of just a couple of services.

Children and young people awaiting permanent placement

At 31 December 2020, there were 203 children and young people identified as needing a placement secured by a Permanence Order who were not in or not moving towards such a placement (Figure 1.15). This only includes children that were in local authority approved foster care households.

While the absolute value fluctuates from year to year, relatively speaking the overall proportion of children using fostering services and not in a permanent placement is around the same as the previous two years - 6%. This ranges from 0% in some services through to 52% in others.

At the same time, there were 17 children, across five local authority services who were living at home or with kinship carers and waiting on a foster care placement to become available.

Figure 1.15 Number of children and young people using local authority fostering services at 31 December needing a permanent placement and the number that were waiting for a foster care placement to become available

Year	Children not in or moving towards permanent placement		Waiting for placement to become available	
	Number of children	Number of services	Number of children	Number of services
2020	203	20	17	5
2019	188	20	17	7
2018	232	18	29	8
2017	224	20	23	7
2016	209	18	25	6

1 Only includes children and young people where a decision has been made to place them in foster care.

Placements ending on an unplanned basis

The table below (figure 1.16) shows that 348 placements involving 336 children and young people ended on an unplanned⁷ basis throughout 2020. This is less than each of the three years previous.

Of the placements that ended, 66 (19%) were permanent placements.

⁷ Unplanned is defined as 'when removal of a child from a foster placement stemmed from a crisis or unexpected event occurring'.

Figure 1.16 Number of foster placements that ended on an unplanned basis, between 1 January and 31 December, split by sector

Measure	Year	Local authority placements	Household provided by placing authority	Household approved by another local authority, purchased by placing authority	Independent placements	Total
Number of placements that ended	2020	213	190	23	135	348
	2019	248	206	42	147	395
	2018	235	199	36	137	372
	2017	232	203	29	123	355
	2016	255	232	23	132	387
Number of permanent placements that ended	2020	44	39	5	22	66
	2019	52	43	9	24	76
	2018	52	47	5	17	69
	2017	43	43	<5	28	71
	2016	47	42	5	23	70
Number of services with placements ending	2020	30	29	5	19	49
	2019	28	27	10	15	43
	2018	31	30	10	20	51
	2017	28	27	10	19	47
	2016	27	26	7	17	44
Number of children that experienced a placement end	2020	203	180	23	133	336
	2019	211	174	37	144	355

1 the 2018 value for 'Total' and 'Local authority placements' has been revised in this table and will therefore not match the figure published in the 2018-19 report.

Local authority commissioned placements

Throughout 2020, 330 children were placed in a foster care placement purchased by a local authority (Figure 1.17). This is a considerable drop from the previous year although this level of change from one year to the next is not unusual.

Just over three-quarters (79%) of the places were purchased through the national contract; 2% were exclusively short breaks.

Figure 1.17 Number of children and young people placed by a local authority into a foster care household approved by another service, between 1 January and 31 December

	number of children and young people placed ¹	Number of placements purchased through the national contract (and percentage of placed)	Number of placements that were exclusively short breaks
2020	330	261 (79%)	7 (2%)
2019	483	379 (78%)	16 (3%)
2018	490	339 (69%)	17 (3%)
2017	569	317 (56%)	9 (2%)
2016	864	382 (44%)	21(2%)

1 Includes placements that were exclusively short break situations, as well as temporary placements, permanent placements, and any other type of placement.

2 2020 decrease may have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Asylum seekers and refugees

There are several children and young people placed in care services who have come to Scotland without the support of an adult and have the status of being asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people. To get a picture of the extent of this in the foster care system, we asked in the annual return if services had any children with refugee or asylum-seeking status using their service.

In 2020, 11 fostering services placed children with refugee or asylum-seeking status. Seven were local authority and four were independent fostering services (Figure 1.18).

Nineteen children with asylum-seeking and refugee status were using fostering services in Scotland at 31 December 2020 (Figure 1.19).

Figure 1.18 Breakdown of whether services had placed children and young people with asylum seeking and refugee status at 31 December, split by sector

Year	Sector	Had placed	Had not placed
2020	Local authority	7 (22%)	25 (78%)
	Independent	4 (16%)	21 (84%)
	Total	11 (19%)	46 (81%)
2019	Local authority	10 (31%)	22 (69%)
	Independent	2 (7%)	23 (85%)
	Total	12 (20%)	45 (76%)
2018	Local authority	7 (22%)	25 (78%)
	Independent	3 (12%)	23 (88%)
	Total	10 (17%)	48 (83%)
2017	Local authority	7 (22%)	25 (78%)
	Independent	3 (11%)	25 (89%)
	Total	10 (17%)	50 (83%)
2016	Local authority	7 (22%)	25 (78%)
	Independent	2 (7%)	25 (93%)
	Total	9 (16%)	50 (85%)

Figure 1.19 Number of children and young people with asylum seeking and refugee status using fostering services at 31 December, split by sector

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Local authority	14	23	17	14	16
Independent	5	<5	<5	<5	<5
Total	19	23	17	14	16

- 1 Values with fewer than five observations have been removed and replaced with '<5'. These revised values have been excluded from totals and subtotals.

Fostering service capacity

In 2020, the number of children coming into foster care exceeded the number of new foster care households in 31 of the 32 local authority services (figure 1.20).

Figure 1.20 Number of local authority services where the number of children and young people coming into foster care between 1 January and 31 December exceeded the number of new foster care households

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Total number of services	31	31	30	29	25
Percentage of local authority services	97%	97%	94%	91%	78%

In situations where the number of children exceeds the number of available foster care households, an option for local authority services is to commission places with other fostering services. Where this is not feasible or possible, the local authority services may approve placements with their own foster care households that result in the household exceeding their approval range.

Figure 1.21 shows that throughout 2020, households exceeded their approval range on 544 occasions across 30 local authority fostering services and 14 independent fostering services. This is notably lower than any of the four years previous.

As with previous years, where foster care households exceeded their approval range, it was for a variety of reasons, mainly to keep sibling groups together and to facilitate emergency placements. Other common reasons included: to enable child/young person to remain close to their home community and school; to enable existing placements to continue beyond age approval; to make the most appropriate match between child/young person and their foster carer.

Figure 1.21 Number of occasions and number of services where children and young people placed in foster care households resulted in the household going out-with their approval range, split by sector

		Number of occasions	Number of services
2020	Local authority	458	30
	Independent	86	14
	Total	544	44
2019	Local authority	595	32
	Independent	116	14
	Total	711	46
2018	Local authority	681	30
	Independent	104	11
	Total	785	41
2017	Local authority	619	32
	Independent	130	11
	Total	749	43
2016	Local authority	635	31
	Independent	89	10
	Total	724	41

1 Note that approval range can be age, gender, numbers or other.

2 Trend may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Scottish Government laid in Parliament an amendment to The Looked after Children (Scotland) Regulations to introduce a maximum foster care placement limit of three unrelated children, with exemptions for family groups and emergency placements. The amended Regulations came into force on 29 December 2014.

To ensure compliance with this standard, the Final Report of the Scottish Government's Foster Carer Review recommends that all exemptions from the maximum limit that are granted by fostering panels, and all emergency placements made above the maximum limited, be recorded in the annual return submitted to us. The information was first gathered in the December 2018 annual return (Figure 1.22).

In 2020, across 17 fostering services there were 55 placements above the maximum limit of three unrelated children.

Figure 1.22 Number of placements made above the maximum limit of three unrelated children, and the number of services where this occurred.

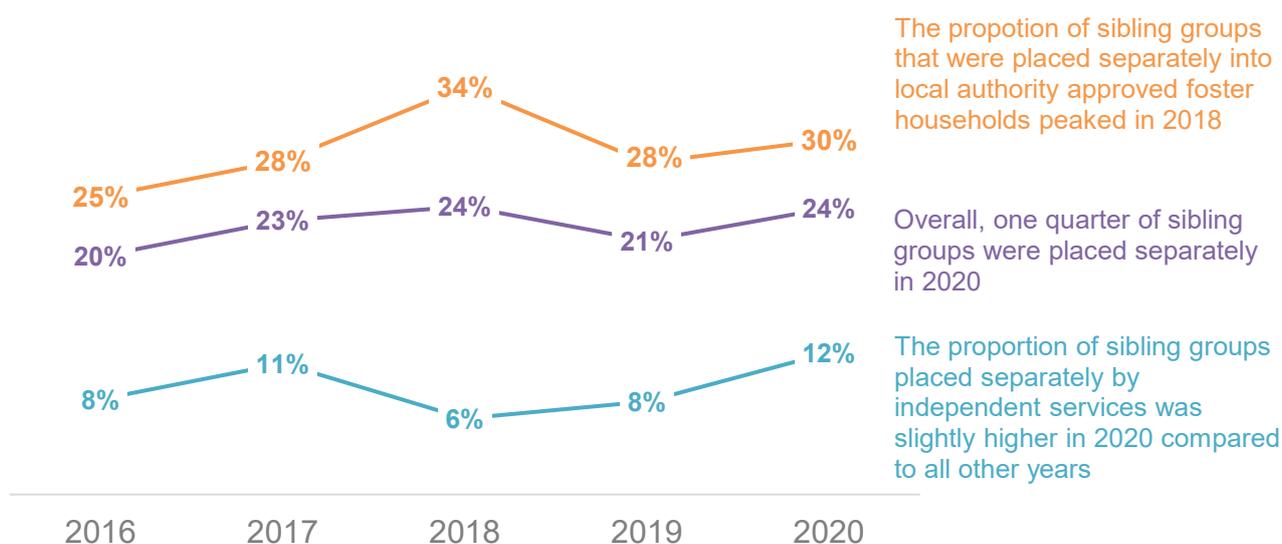
	Number of services	Number of placements above max limit	Decision made by the Panel	Happened on an emergency basis
2020	17	55	19	52
2019	16	59	21	52
2018	18	76	28	71

- 1 This data was not collected prior to 2018
- 2 Trend may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sibling groups

At 31 December 2020, there were 915 sibling groups in foster care, 185 (24%) of the sibling groups were placed separately, a similar proportion to the two years previous (see figures 1.23 and 1.24).

Figure 1.23 The proportion of sibling groups at 31 December that were placed separately, with sector split



1. Trend may have been disrupted/compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic

Thirty per cent of the sibling groups using local authority fostering services (185 of 621) were placed separately and 12% of the sibling groups using independent fostering services (35 of 294) were placed separately (Figure 1.24).

Local authority fostering services commission independent fostering services to place sibling groups if the independent service can place them together. This is why independent services have reported a consistently lower percentage of siblings being

placed separately, and mostly cite 'following assessment' as the reason, while local authority services also cited 'lack of resource' and 'emergency situation' as reasons (Figure 1.25).

Figure 1.24 Number of sibling groups using fostering services at 31 December, and the number that were placed separately

		Number of sibling groups	Number of sibling groups placed separately	% placed separately
2020	Local authority	621	185	30%
	Independent	294	35	12%
	Total	915	220	24%
2019	Local authority	632	176	28%
	Independent	307	24	8%
	Total	939	200	21%
2018	Local authority	666	228	34%
	Independent	376	24	6%
	Total	1,042	252	24%
2017	Local authority	703	199	28%
	Independent	309	33	11%
	Total	1,012	232	23%
2016	Local authority	755	189	25%
	Independent	282	22	8%
	Total	1,037	211	20%

- 1 The 2016 figures presented here for independent services and total services have been revised to exclude Scottish Adoption (fostering service) and St. Margaret's Children and Family Care Society and therefore do not match the figures published in the Fostering and Adoption 2016/17 statistical bulletin.
- 2 Trend may have been disrupted/compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1.25 Reasons siblings were placed separately, by number of services

		Following assessment	Lack of resource	Emergency situation	Other
2020	Local authority	15	23	12	5
	Independent	8	<5	<5	<5
	Total	23	23	12	5
2019	Local authority	19	22	10	8
	Independent	8	<5	<5	<5
	Total	27	22	10	8
2018	Local authority	18	23	13	8
	Independent	8	<5	<5	<5
	Total	26	23	13	8
2017	Local authority	23	24	17	6
	Independent	8	<5	5	<5
	Total	31	24	22	6
2016	Local authority	22	22	17	5
	Independent	9	<5	<5	<5
	Total	31	22	17	5

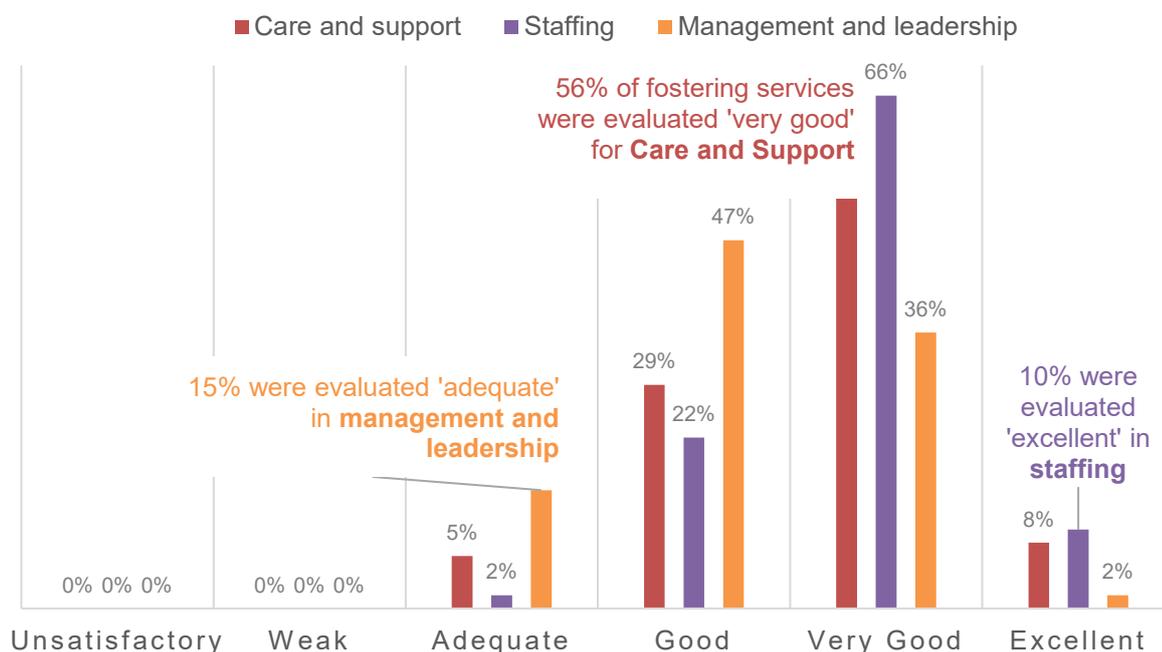
1 Services were able to select as many reasons as were applicable.

Fostering service evaluation (grading)

Fostering services are graded by our inspectors, using a six-point scale, across three quality themes – care and support, staffing, and management and leadership. Information on the evaluation criteria can be found in the document [How we inspect](#). The following evaluation is correct for fostering services on 31 March 2021.

Overall, the quality of fostering services was high, with ‘very good’ being the most common evaluation for the quality theme care and support and for staffing.

Figure 1.26 Evaluation of fostering services resulting from inspection, by quality theme at 31 March 2021



As figure 1.27 presents, at 31 March 2021, 85% of fostering services had evaluations of ‘good’ or better across all quality themes. Furthermore, 31% were evaluated ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ across all quality themes. No services were evaluated as ‘adequate’ or lower across all quality themes and 15% were evaluated adequate in at least one quality theme.

Figure 1.27 Overview of fostering service grades at 31 March 2021, split by sector

	Local authority		Independent		Total	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Grades of very good and excellent for all quality themes	7	22%	11	41%	18	31%
Grades of good or better for all quality themes	25	78%	25	93%	50	85%
Grades of adequate or lower for at least one quality theme	7	22%	2	7%	9	15%
Grades of adequate or lower for all quality themes	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

The grading profile of fostering services for care and support is very positive (Figure 1.28), with many services (33 of 59) being evaluated as ‘very good’ and 17 evaluated as ‘good’. Five services in the independent sector were evaluated as ‘excellent’. Four local authority services were rated ‘adequate’ for care and support.

For staffing, (Figure 1.29) six independent services were evaluated as ‘excellent’. The majority of services were rated ‘very good’.

Two independent services and seven local authority services were rated ‘adequate’ for management and leadership (Figure 1.30). The rest were evaluated as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, with one independent service rated ‘excellent’.

Figure 1.28 Breakdown of grades of fostering services for care and support at 31 March 2021

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Unsatisfactory	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Weak	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adequate	4	13%	0	0%	4	7%
Good	14	44%	3	11%	17	29%
Very Good	14	44%	19	70%	33	56%
Excellent	0	0%	5	19%	5	8%

Figure 1.29 Breakdown of grades of fostering services for staffing at 31 March 2021

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Unsatisfactory	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Weak	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adequate	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Good	10	31%	3	11%	13	22%
Very Good	21	66%	18	67%	39	66%
Excellent	0	0%	6	22%	6	10%

Figure 1.30 Breakdown of grades of fostering services for management and leadership at 31 March 2021

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Unsatisfactory	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Weak	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adequate	7	22%	2	7%	9	15%
Good	14	44%	14	52%	28	47%
Very Good	11	34%	10	37%	21	36%
Excellent	0	0%	1	4%	1	2%

Summary of foster care

At 31 December 2020, there were 59 fostering services registered with the Care Inspectorate that recruit and approve foster care households; 32 were local authority services and 27 were independent services. All fostering services submitted a 2020-21 annual return.

The December 2020 annual return data shows a continuation of the downward trend in approved foster carer households – in total and across both sectors. In 2016, there were 3,970 foster carer households across Scotland; this number has decreased year on year and now stands at 3,540.

The decrease seen in 2020 is driven by just over half (57%) of fostering services having fewer foster care households than the previous year. The remaining fostering services either showed an increase or no change in the number of households.

Local authority fostering services approve and place children and young people in foster care placements. The total number of children in a placement with an approved foster carer household as recorded in the annual returns has decreased year-on-year since 2016 and now stands at 4,587.

Since 2016, there has been a steady decrease in the total number of children placed in local authority approved foster care households and a gradual increase in the total number of children in independent foster care households until 2020 when the number of children placed in independent households decreased. The 2020 overall decrease is driven by a fall in the number of permanent and emergency placements slightly counteracted by an increase in long-term and interim placements. This is contrary to the trend seen prior to 2020, whereby the number and proportion of emergency and permanent placements was increasing, and the number of long-term and interim placements was decreasing.

The number of local authority commissioned places fell from 483 in 2019 to 330 in 2020.

The proportion of children and young people in local authority foster care placements at 31 December 2020 that needed a placement secured by a Permanence Order but were not in or not moving towards such a placement has not changed from previous years, remaining at 6%. This equates to 203 children. There were also the same number, as the previous year, of children (17) living at home or with kinship carers and waiting on a foster care placement.

In terms of capacity, 97% of fostering services reported that the number of children and young people coming into foster care exceeded the number of new households. This hasn't changed from previous years. Also, siblings were still being placed separately due to lack of capacity, although some siblings are separated following assessment. In

total, 220 of 915 family groups (24%) were placed separately – a similar proportion to previous years.

There were notably less occasions, compared to previous years, where households went outwith their approval range.

After three years of growth, the number of placements of children that ended on an unplanned basis decreased to 348 in 2020. Of the placements that ended, 66 (19%) were permanent placements.

Overall, the quality of fostering services was high. At 31 March 2021, 85% of fostering services had evaluations of 'good' or better across all quality themes. Furthermore, 31% were evaluated 'very good' or 'excellent' across all quality themes. No services were evaluated as 'adequate' or lower across all quality themes and 15% were evaluated 'adequate' in at least one quality theme.

Section 2: Adoption

Adoption services

At 31 December 2020, there were 38 registered adoption services in Scotland; 32 were local authority services and six were voluntary/not-for-profit organisations (referred to as independent services in this report).

All 38 registered services submitted or completed the majority of their 2020-21 annual return.

One independent service (Birthlink) operates as a support service for those who have been affected by adoption with a Scottish connection and does not offer a full adoption service. Therefore, this service has been excluded from the statistics that follow (except the evaluation statistics).

The 2020 data in this report is therefore based on the data reported by 37 adoption services in their 2020 annual return, together with evaluation data as at 31 March 2021 for 38 adoption services. This bulletin also includes data from annual returns covering the period 2016-2020 and, where a service did not submit an annual return for a given year, we impute data from the preceding year.

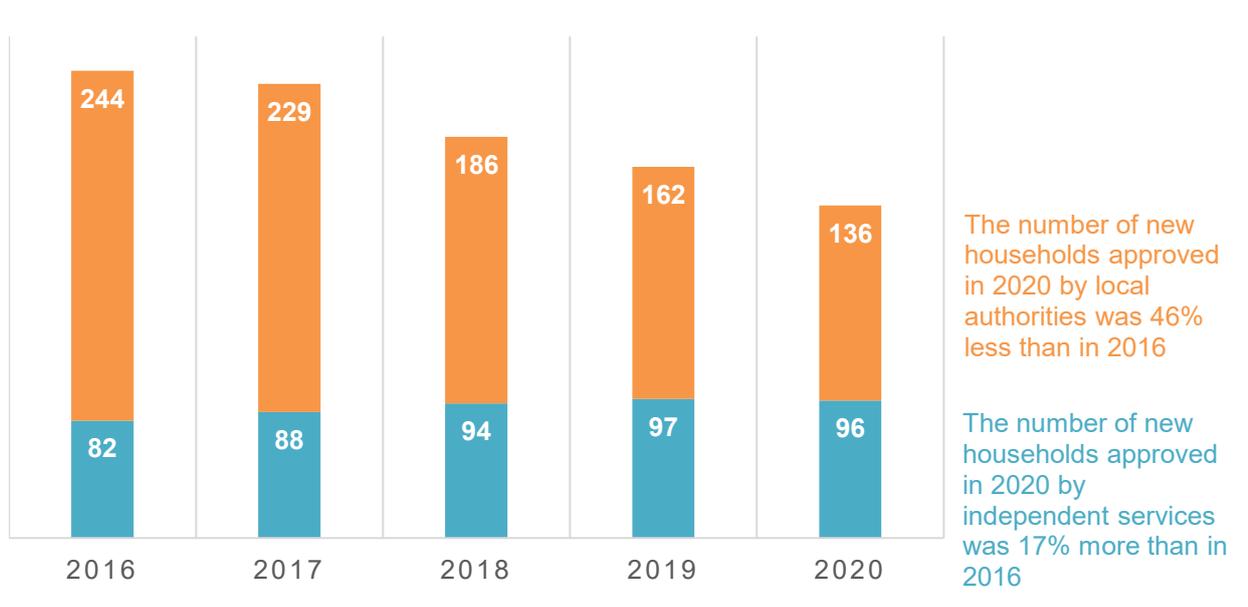
This report covers four different aspects of adoption services:

- new approved households
- children and young people
- other services
- adoption service evaluation.

New approved households

In 2020, there were 232 new adoptive households approved across 32 of the 37 adoption services that can approve new households (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 The number of new households approved between 1 January and 31 December, by sector



Some services approved more adoptive households in 2020 compared to 2019, but many services approved fewer, resulting in the continued downward trend that can be seen in figure 2.1.

Timescales to approval

The way 'timescales to approval' is recorded in the annual return changed in 2020. In previous reports, Figure 2.2 presented the number of services, however in this report Figure 2.2 presents the proportion of new approved adoptive households. For example, 43% of new households were approved within six months.

Figure 2.2 Proportion of new adoptive households by length of approval completion time, between 1 January and 31 December 2020

Sector	Completed within six months %	Over six months but less than a year %	One year or more to complete %
Local authority	45%	42%	13%
Independent	41%	51%	5%
Total	43%	46%	10%

Age group approval

Most of the new households (69%) were approved to adopt children aged two to five years old; 28% were approved to adopt infants under two years old (down from 40% the previous year) and 12% were approved to adopt older children (aged six plus) (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Number and proportion of new approved households approved between 1 January and 31 December, split by age range approval

Year	number of new households	Approved to adopt children in the age range:					
		less than two years old		two years old or more but less than six		Six years old or more	
2020	232	66	28%	161	69%	27	12%
2019	259	104	40%	189	73%	28	11%
2018	280	148	53%	173	62%	35	13%
2017	317	145	46%	198	62%	50	16%
2016	326	170	52%	201	62%	39	12%

Sibling group approval

Almost one in every three of the new households that were approved in 2020 were approved for sibling groups of two children. There were less than five households approved for groups of three or more siblings. This is similar to previous years.

Figure 2.4 Number and proportion of new approved households between 1 January and 31 December, split by sibling group approval

		Sibling group of two children / young people		Sibling group of three children / young people		Sibling group of more than three children / young people	
		No.	% of new households	No.	% of new households	No.	% of new households
2020	Local authority	45	33%	0	0%	<5	<1%
	Independent	38	40%	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	83	36%	0	0%	<5	<1%
2019	Local authority	48	30%	<5	<1%	0	0%
	Independent	27	28%	<5	<1%	0	0%
	Total	75	29%	5	2%	0	0%
2018	Local authority	43	23%	5	3%	0	0%
	Independent	35	37%	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	78	28%	5	2%	0	0%
2017	Local authority	59	26%	<5	<1%	0	0%
	Independent	30	34%	<5	<1%	0	0%
	Total	89	28%	<5	<1%	0	0%
2016	Local authority	50	20%	<5	<1%	0	0%
	Independent	28	34%	<5	<1%	0	0%
	Total	78	24%	<5	<1%	0	0%

1 Values with fewer than five observations have been removed and replaced with '<5' and '<1%'. These revised values have been excluded from any totals and subtotals.

Households waiting

At the 31 December 2020, 186 approved households, across 27 of the 32 local authority services and in all five of the independent services, were waiting for children to be placed.

Figure 2.5 Number of approved households, at 31 December, that were waiting for children or young people to be placed, split by sector

		number of households	number of services
2020	Local authority	108	27
	Independent	78	5
	Total	186	32
2019	Local authority	111	27
	Independent	70	5
	Total	181	32
2018	Local authority	138	26
	Independent	49	5
	Total	187	31
2017	Local authority	159	29
	Independent	56	5
	Total	215	34
2016	Local authority	155	
	Independent	50	
	Total	205	

1 Excludes those approved exclusively for inter-country adoptions.

Recruitment

An estimated 938 enquiries from potential adopters were received across all adoption services between 1 January and 30 June 2020 (Figure 2.6). Of these, 18% progressed to applications, of which 38% were approved. Overall, a lower proportion of applications were approved in 2020 compared to 2019.

Figure 2.6 Recruitment of adopters: approximate number of enquiries received between 1 January and 30 June, and the number leading to applications and approved households, split by sector

		enquiries	applications	approvals	% of enquiries to applications	% of applications approved	services with enquiries
2020	Local authority	458	92	30	20%	33%	32
	Independent	480	81	36	17%	44%	5
	Total	938	173	66	18%	38%	37
2019	Local authority	388	95	28	24%	29%	31
	Independent	431	70	48	16%	69%	5
	Total	819	165	76	20%	46%	36
2018	Local authority	421	104	16	25%	15%	31
	Independent	361	71	40	20%	56%	5
	Total	782	175	56	22%	32%	36
2017	Local authority	372	89	23	24%	26%	27
	Independent	399	52	29	13%	56%	3
	Total	771	141	52	18%	37%	30
2016	Local authority	520	119	46	23%	39%	Data not Available
	Independent	465	47	37	10%	79%	
	Total	985	166	83	17%	50%	

Children and young people

Children and young people approved for adoption

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 place a duty on local authorities to provide an adoption service. They are responsible for assessing and planning for children who require alternative permanent care. Local authorities may, after following robust legal and matching processes, place children with adopters approved by them or by independent adoption services. Local authority and independent adoption services recruit, assess and provide training and support to prospective adopters to ensure that they can meet the needs and provide high-quality care to children.

The number of children and young people approved for adoption each year continues to decrease (Figure 2.7).

Figure 2.7 Children and young people approved for adoption by local authority services between 1 January and 31 December



In 2020, there were 225 children approved for adoption (across 29 local authority adoption services), which is 16% less than in 2019 and down for the fourth consecutive year.

The decrease at the national level was not echoed across all services. Some services approved more children for adoption in 2020 compared to 2019 but many services approved less, resulting in the overall downward trend (figure 2.7).

In terms of the ages of the children and young people approved for adoption, half of the children were younger than two years old and just under half (44%) were aged two to five years old. A small proportion (6%) were age six years old or more (figure 2.8).

Figure 2.8 Number of children and young people approved for adoption¹ by local authority services between 1 January and 31 December broken down by the age of the child at the time of approval

		2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Total number of children approved for adoption		225	270	323	375	403
Age less than two years old	number	113	136	171	166	207
	% of total	50%	50%	53%	44%	51%
Age two years old or more but less than six	number	98	119	135	175	167
	% of total	44%	44%	42%	47%	41%
Age six years old or more	number	14	15	14	30	29
	% of total	6%	6%	4%	8%	7%

¹ 'Approved for adoption' means that the child has an approved plan for permanence, which recommends adoption. This includes all such children whether placed or not placed within the year.

Timescales to approval

Research has found that it is the early stages of care and permanence planning following a child being accommodated that take the longest time in the overall process⁸.

Once it has been identified that a child should be permanently placed away from home, the adoption and permanence panel decides whether to formally recommend adoption.

In the annual return, we ask local authority adoption services about their assessment completion time. This is from the point of the looked after child review agreeing the need for permanence to approval at the adoption panel.

Figure 2.9 below presents the variation in assessment completion time. The numbers represent the number of services. For example, three services completed all assessments within three months, many completed some within three months and also had assessments which took six months or longer.

Figure 2.9 Number of services by minimum and maximum assessment completion time, 2020

		Maximum time to assess		
		Within 3 months	3 to 5 months	6 months or over
Minimum time to assess	Within 3 months	3	1	9
	3 to 5 months		3	8
	6 months or over			4

Children and young people approved and placed with families

In 2020, 207 children were placed with their new adoptive family across 27 local authorities (Figure 2.10). This includes children approved for adoption in 2020 or in the previous year/years.

Just over half of the local authority adoption services placed less children in 2020 than the previous year and very few services placed more children in 2020 than the previous year, resulting in a 15% decrease (from 242 in 2019) in terms of the total number of children placed with their new adoptive family. This decrease is a continuation of the downward trend seen over recent years.

⁸ Permanence Planning and Decision Making for Looked After Children in Scotland: Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, published by the Children's Reporter and Scottish Government, 3 December 2015.

Figure 2.10 Number of children placed with prospective adoptive families between 1 January and 31 December

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Total	207	242	255	352	362
Proportion placed in households approved by another local authority	24%	21%	22%		
Proportion placed in households approved by independent agencies	47%	45%	44%		Data not available

1 Trend may have been affected by Covid-19 pandemic

Timescales to match

Adoption and permanence panels find a 'match' for the child in terms of who their long-term carer should be. In the annual return, we ask local authority adoption services about the time it took to match children with adoptive families, from the point of registration at panel to matching at panel.

Figure 2.11 presents the variation in matching time. The numbers represent the number of services and exclude services that carry out registration and matching at the same time.

For example, of the 23 services that placed children with a family and do not carry out registration and matching at the same time, only one made all matches within three months. Many made some matches within three months but also had cases that took three months or longer.

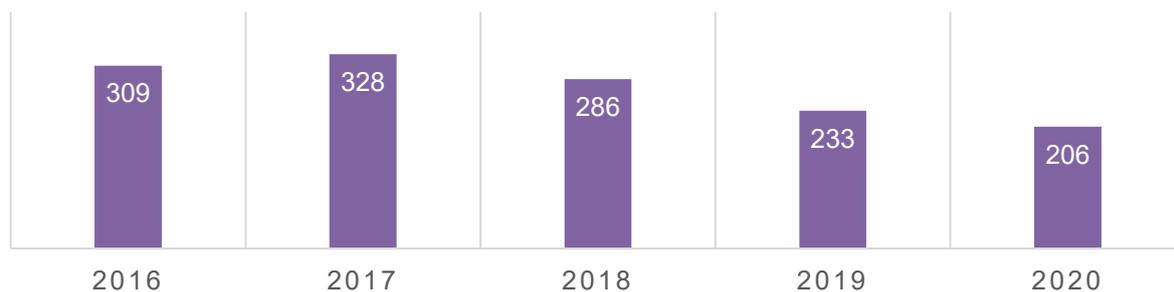
Figure 2.11 Number of services by minimum and maximum time to match children with adoptive families, 2020

		Maximum time to match			
		Within 3 months	3 to 5 months	6 to 11 months	12 months or over
Minimum time to match	Within 3 months	1	1	4	6
	3 to 5 months		1	0	3
	6 to 11 months			3	0
	12 months or over				2

Children and young people adopted

The total number of children and young people legally adopted during the calendar year decreased for the third consecutive year.

Figure 2.12 Children and young people adopted (by court order) between 1 January and 31 December



Throughout 2020, 206 children were legally adopted; down 12% from 233 in 2019.

The Scottish Government reported in Children’s Social Work Statistics 2019-20 that between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020, 192 children ceased to be ‘looked after’ by the local authority because they were adopted. This was down from 265 the previous reporting year, and down for the third consecutive year. This is consistent with the trend found in our annual return data.

Some local authority services reported no change in the number of children legally adopted in 2020 compared to 2019, an equal number reported an increase, and around half of all local authority services reported a decrease, resulting in the overall decrease and continuation of the downward trend seen in figure 2.12.

Timescales to adopt

In the annual return, we ask local authority adoption services about the time it took to grant full adoption orders after placing a child with their adoptive family.

Figure 2.13 below presents the variation in the time taken to grant full adoption. The numbers represent the number of services. For example, of the 30 services that completed adoptions, there were none that granted all orders within six months. Most services had cases where it took 12 months or more to grant the full adoption order.

Figure 2.13 Number of services by minimum and maximum time to grant full adoption order, 2020

		Maximum time to grant adoption order		
		Within 6 months	6 to 11 months	12 months or over
Minimum time to grant adoption order	Within 6 months	0	0	13
	6 to 11 months		1	10
	12 months or over			1

Children and young people awaiting placement

At 31 December 2020, there were 148 children and young people across 21 local authority services that had been approved for adoption and were waiting to be matched with approved adopters (Figure 2.14).

The number waiting to be matched was down 3% from 153 in 2019, akin to the fall in the number of children approved for adoption.

Of the children waiting to be matched, 70 (47%) were siblings that services were trying to keep together.

In total, 45 (30%) of the children waiting to be matched had been waiting for over one year, up from 25% the previous year.

Figure 2.14 Number of children and young people approved for adoption waiting to be matched with approved adopters at 31 December, the number that were part of a family group, and the number that had been waiting for over one year

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	
Total number of children approved and waiting	148	153	194	217	228	
Waiting and are part of a family group	number	70	47	67	94	90
	per 100 children waiting	47	31	35	43	39
Total number of family groups waiting		33	24	33	48	45
Waiting for over one year	number	45	39	43	54	57
	per 100 children waiting	30	25	22	25	25

- 1 'Approved' means that the child has an approved plan for permanence which recommends adoption.
- 2 'Matched' refers to the making of a recommendation by the adoption panel.
- 3 Services were instructed to count children individually, so two children who are siblings were counted as two.

We asked local authority services about the ages of the children and young people who were waiting to be matched.

Figure 2.15 shows that 10 local authority adoption services (48% of all services with children waiting to be matched) had children younger than two years old waiting to be matched; 16 (76%) had children aged two to ten years old waiting to be matched. No services had children 11 years or older waiting to be matched.

Figure 2.15 Number and percentage of local authority services with children and young people waiting to be matched with approved adopters at 31 December, split by the age category of the children

		2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Less than two years old	number	10	17	23	17	16
	%	48%	74%	85%	53%	50%
Two or over but under six years old	number	14	20	22	24	24
	%	67%	87%	81%	75%	75%
Six or over but under 11 years old	number	2	8	14	14	13
	%	10%	35%	52%	44%	41%
Eleven years old or over	number	0	0	5	0	0
	%	0%	0%	19%	0%	0%

1 'Matched' refers to the making of a recommendation by the adoption panel.

Adoptions that break down

In 2020, between 18 and 22 adoptions broke down (disrupted).

Of these breakdowns, the majority (18) happened before the adoption order was granted, with less than five occurring after the adoption order was granted. While many of the breakdowns took place in households approved by the placing authority, there were also some interagency adoptions that broke down. There were no breakdowns post an adoption order being granted recorded by independent services.

Figure 2.16 Adoption breakdowns between 1 January and 31 December, by timing of placement and type of placement

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Before adoption order was granted	18	21	12	16	17
After the adoption order was granted	<5	14	0	0	0
Total	18	35	12	16	24

1 Values less than 5 are shown as <5 for disclose control purposes.

Other services

Post-adoption support

Local authorities have a duty to provide post-adoption support to families who adopt and to children who are adopted. They also have a duty to provide support and guidance to adult adoptees who wish to obtain their birth records.

All local authority adoption services provided post-adoption support to adoptive households in 2020, ranging from supporting fewer than five to supporting 375

households. Just over 2,000 households received post-adoption support from local authority adoption services, which is more than any of the previous years as recorded in the annual return.

Independent services also provided post-adoption support to their adoptive households – 570 in total.

Services outside Scotland

Very few of Scotland’s local authority adoption services and none of the independent services placed children from elsewhere in the UK, and very few placed children with adoptive households outwith Scotland. In 2020, five children from outwith Scotland were placed in an adoptive household in Scotland and 13 children were placed outside Scotland. There were fewer than five children in each of these situations. Because the numbers are small by the nature of the situations they refer to, they are prone to fluctuate from one year to the next (Figure 2.17).

Figure 2.17 Number of children and young people placed to and from elsewhere in the UK, between 1 January and 31 December

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Placed in Scotland from elsewhere in the UK	5	<5	37	13	6
Placed elsewhere in the UK by Scottish local authorities	13	<5	10	31	28

Adoption service evaluation

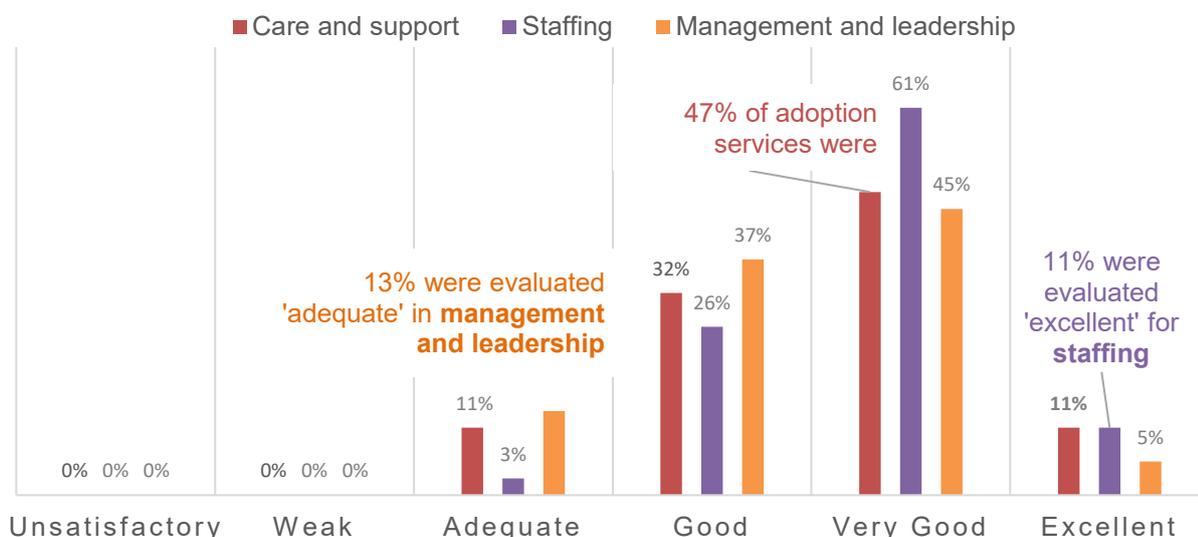
Adoption services are graded by our inspectors, using a six-point scale, across three quality themes – care and support, staffing, and management and leadership.

Information on the evaluation criteria can be found in the document: [How we inspect](#).

The following grading information is correct for adoption services on 31 March 2021.

Overall, the quality of adoption services was high, with ‘very good’ being the most common evaluation (Figure 2.18).

Figure 2.18 Evaluation of adoption services resulting from inspection by quality theme, 31 March 2021



At 31 March 2021, 87% of the adoption services had evaluations of ‘good’ or better across all quality themes (Figure 2.19). Furthermore, 45% were evaluated as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ across all quality themes. One service was evaluated as ‘adequate’ across all quality themes.

Figure 2.19 Overview of adoption service grades at 31 March 2021, split by sector

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Grades of very good and excellent for all quality themes	13	41%	4	67%	17	45%
Grades of good or better for all quality themes	28	88%	5	83%	33	87%
Grades of adequate or lower for at least one quality theme	4	13%	1	17%	5	13%
Grades of adequate or lower for all quality themes	0	0%	1	17%	1	3%

A breakdown of grades for each quality theme is provided in Figures 2.20 to 2.22.

The grading profile of adoption services for care and support is positive, with the 18 of the 38 services (47%) evaluated ‘very good’ and four evaluated ‘excellent’. None were rated ‘weak’ or ‘unsatisfactory’. Likewise, for staffing, 23 services (61%) were evaluated ‘very good’ and none were rated ‘weak’ or ‘unsatisfactory’. Half of the adoption services were evaluated ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ for management and leadership, and none were rated ‘weak’ or ‘unsatisfactory’.

Figure 2.20 Breakdown of grades given to adoption services for care and support, at 31 March 2021

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Unsatisfactory	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Weak	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adequate	3	9%	1	17%	4	11%
Good	12	38%	0	0%	12	32%
Very Good	16	50%	2	33%	18	47%
Excellent	1	3%	3	50%	4	11%

Figure 2.21 Breakdown of grades given to adoption services for staffing, at 31 March 2021

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Unsatisfactory	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Weak	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adequate	0	0%	1	17%	1	3%
Good	10	31%	0	0%	10	26%
Very Good	21	66%	2	33%	23	61%
Excellent	1	3%	3	50%	4	11%

Figure 2.22 Breakdown of grades given to adoption services for management and leadership, at 31 March 2021

	Local authority		Independent		All	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Unsatisfactory	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Weak	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Adequate	4	13%	1	17%	5	13%
Good	13	41%	1	17%	14	37%
Very Good	14	44%	3	50%	17	45%
Excellent	1	3%	1	17%	2	5%

Summary of adoption

At 31 December 2020, there were 38 registered adoption services in Scotland, comprising of 32 local authority services and six independent services. All 38 submitted or completed the majority of their 2020-21 annual return.

All but one of these services recruit and approve households for adoption and in 2020, 232 new households were approved across Scotland. Some services approved more adoptive households in 2020 compared to 2019, but many services approved fewer, resulting in a continued downward trend. The length of the assessment of adoptive households varies, with some new households being approved within the six months and some taking a year or more to complete.

Like previous years, few new households were approved to adopt older children (age six and over) and less than five were approved for groups of three or more siblings. However, 83 new adoptive households were recruited with approval to adopt groups of two siblings.

In 2020, 225 children were approved for adoption, 207 children were placed with their new adoptive family, and 206 children were legally adopted. All these numbers continue the downward trends.

At 31 December 2020, 148 children were waiting to be matched with approved adopters. Of these children, 30% (45) had been waiting for over one year and 47% (70) were part of a sibling group that services were trying to keep together – up from 31% (47 children) the previous year.

Overall, the quality of adoption services was very high. At 31 March 2021, 87% of adoption services had evaluations of 'good' or better across all quality themes. Furthermore, 45% were evaluated as 'very good' or 'excellent' across all quality themes. Only 13% had an evaluation of 'adequate' or lower in at least one quality theme. One service was evaluated as 'adequate' across all quality themes, and no services had evaluations of 'weak' or 'unsatisfactory'.

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