

Part B – Updated Statement 12 January 2023

3. Retrospective Acknowledgement/Admission

3.1 Acknowledgement of Abuse

a. Does the local authority accept that between 1930 and 17 December 2014 any children cared for in foster care were abused?

Yes, Aberdeenshire Council accepts that between the dates above, children experienced abuse and harm whilst in foster care.

b. If so, what is the local authority's assessment of the extent and scale of such abuse?

Those children's experiences were traumatic and significant in terms of physical, sexual and emotional harm. They experienced harm in the care of families that were meant to protect them and keep them safe. The full scale in terms of actual numbers is unknown given the nature and sensitivity of disclosing abuse and we can only assume many instances remain unreported.

c. What is the basis of that assessment?

This is based on review and interrogation of these particular children's experiences and those where we know complaints were raised either by children themselves, their birth families or subsequent care givers. Further information was also made available to us through witness statements heard by the Inquiry.

3.2 Acknowledgement of Systemic Failures

a. Does the local authority accept that its systems failed to protect children in foster care between 1930 and 17 December 2014 from abuse?

Aberdeenshire Council accepts that our systems failed children in foster care.

b. What is the local authority's assessment of the extent of any such systemic failures?

As outlined above, the full extent is unknown. However, from the witness statements and the complaints and records we have been able to interrogate, it is clear that appropriate systems were not in place for these children who were often placed in overcrowded and neglectful conditions with families who harmed and/or abused them. Whilst there were expectations of local authorities to monitor and support children in foster care, these were not robust and consequently risks were not mitigated and children exposed to harm and abuse.

c. What is the basis of that assessment?

As above. This is based on review and interrogation of these particular children's

experiences and those where we know complaints were raised either by children themselves, their birth families or subsequent care givers. Further information was also made available to us through witness statements heard by the Inquiry.

d. What is the local authority's explanation for any such failures?

The Inquiry covers a significant time period during which time practice, policy and legislation evolved. Having taken an overview of the whole period, Aberdeenshire's explanation and learning would include:

- Policies and procedures including robust scrutiny and assessment not being rigorously applied at times throughout the period.
- Child's voice not always being at the centre of care planning and service delivery. Children must be listened to.
- Insufficient collation of stakeholder views/analysis of a child's circumstances included in review and planning for the child
- Lack of objective oversight and a blurring of roles and responsibilities across professionals
- Bias and discrimination and lack of challenge
- Deficiency in relationship-based practices
- Missed opportunities to use chronologies and robust recording to see patterns of behaviours and concerns.
- Audit/self-evaluation processes not robustly embedded to support learning
- Practitioners require quality training and support to practice professional judgement safely and understand signs and symptoms of abuse.

3.3 Acknowledgement of Failures/Deficiencies in Response

a. Does the local authority accept that there were any failures and/or deficiencies in its response to abuse, and allegations of abuse, of children in foster care between 1930 and 17 December 2014?

Yes, Aberdeenshire Council accepts that there were failures and deficiencies in its response during the period above. We would wish to take this opportunity to express our sincere apologies to each person who suffered abuse as a child or young person whilst in foster care in Aberdeenshire and to those who continue to experience the adverse impact of this trauma on their daily lives.

b. What is the local authority's assessment of the extent of any such failures in its response?

As outlined above, the full extent is unknown. However, from the witness statements, complaints and records we have been able to interrogate, it is clear that the local authority's response was a times was neither adequate or robust and failed in its response.

c. What is the basis of that assessment?

As above. This is based on review and interrogation of these particular children's experiences and those where we know complaints were raised either by children themselves, their birth families or subsequent care givers. Further information was also made available to us through witness statements heard by the Inquiry.

d. What is the local authority's explanation for any such failures/deficiencies?

As per 3.2 (d)

3.4 Changes

a. To what extent has the local authority implemented changes to its policies, procedures and practices as a result of any acknowledgment in relation to 3.1 – 3.3 above?

Social Work practice has evolved significantly over the last century with the implementation of the Social Work Scotland Act 1968 and subsequent legislation and policy relating to the care of children and young people. Specifically in relation to 3.1-3.3 Aberdeenshire has:

- 1 Embedded the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 which set out very detailed measures which are required in terms of the assessment of foster carers such as the information which requires to be gathered during the assessment process, statutory checks to be undertaken, the taking up of references and the scrutiny of the assessment by a fostering panel made up of suitably qualified and independent panel members. This more robust assessment process would potentially serve to address some of the concerns identified through evidence given to the enquiry.
- 2 Additionally, ongoing robust assessment of foster carers once approved seeks to further contribute to ensuring that children and young people received attuned care where they are not subject to abuse. For example Aberdeenshire fully incorporates the undertaking of unannounced visits and annual reviews of foster carers incorporating the views of children, young people, parents, and children's social workers. The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 also require foster carers to be reviewed by the fostering panel within 12 months of approval and at least every three years thereafter. Aberdeenshire has also recruited independent Foster Carer Review Officers who undertake annual reviews in between the formal Panel Reviews.

- 3 Aberdeenshire Council Children's Services promotes a culture of relationship-based practice. To deliver on this fully, there is an expectation that visits to children in foster care are undertaken at a much greater frequency than the minimum of once every three months stipulated in the Looked After Children regulations. This also needs to involve the child being seen out with their foster carers' home. The strength of trusting relationships is vital to ensuring that children and young people feel able to share information that is important to them and which will ensure they are kept safe.
- 4 Aberdeenshire Council recently commissioned use of the Bright Spots Survey in conjunction with CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection) to help us hear directly from our care experienced young people about their experiences of being looked after including having a trusted adult they can talk to. The use of such tools will become standard practice and be used to continually improve service delivery based on the voice of children and young people.
- 5 Aberdeenshire Council also employs 3 Children's Rights Workers and commissions Who Cares? Scotland to ensure every child who is looked after by the authority is offered independent advocacy to ensure their voice is heard and listened to about matters that are important to them.
- 6 A commitment to deliver and embed Trauma Informed training to the workforce and carers including residential child care workers, foster carers, kinship carers and adopters has been made by the council and work is well underway to support carers in particular to understand the impact of childhood trauma on behaviours and support carers to respond appropriately. Aberdeenshire Council is currently piloting an alternative approach to recruiting and assessing foster carers: the Therapeutic Fostering Assessment, in conjunction with the Centre of Excellence for Child Trauma. This seeks to ensure that foster carers are assessed and trained in a manner which is rooted in trauma-informed practice.
- 7 Every foster carer has their own supervising social worker who is separate to the child's social worker and both report to different managers to reduce bias and ensure that a safe and child centred approach is taken, and children are listened to, cared for and kept safe. Additionally, the support which is provided to carers through regular supervision, support groups and peer support will also contribute to this. The keeping of logbooks also allows for staff to be informed as to the manner in which carers are approaching particular situations.
- 8 All Looked After Child Reviews include either the child as appropriate or ensure the child's voice and views are represented at their meeting. This is monitored by Independent Review Officers who drive forward good practice in this area. The Looked After Child Review also ensures that parents and stakeholders have an opportunity to share information or concerns about a child's wellbeing and subsequent plan.
- 9 Children's Services Social Work have embedded the use of chronologies to support identification of patterns of behaviour or concerns to inform planning and have clear recording guidelines for practitioners. Files are routinely scrutinised by managers and all practitioners are provided with quality, monthly professional supervision to

support the professional task, development of professional judgement and accountability for decision making.

- 10 All complaints are taken seriously, investigated and outcomes shared and recorded. Aberdeenshire has adopted national guidance pertaining to 'Managing Allegations Against Foster Carers' and fully implements the use of Interagency Referral Discussions where child protection concerns are raised, as per Child Protection National guidance.

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