

TESSA response to the draft Adoption and Children Bill

TESSA is a Family Routes Project that delivers and provides therapeutic and educational support services to families in Northern Ireland, with at least one adopted child between the age of 2-12 years old. Therapeutic support includes parent counselling, therapeutic parenting support, filial therapy, dyadic art therapy, children's art therapy, dyadic and individual equine therapy, music therapy, drama therapy cranial sacral therapy/ osteopathy, therapeutic parenting and self-care programmes.

TESSA will take this opportunity to respond to the draft bill, with focus on Chapter 2, subclause 4 and 5 ; The Adoption Service and Assessments for adoption support services.

Chapter 2.

Subclause 4; The Adoption Service

- (1) (a)(b)(c): We believe this is imperative to the needs of families who have adopted and should be designed to provide wraparound support to each member of the family, including adoptive parents and children. Currently there is no universal level or model of support in this area in NI. This needs to be addressed with urgency and fairness to ensure every family has timely access to the appropriate services, regardless of Trust location or placing agency location.
- (2) (a)(b): All families who adopt should be allowed to participate in the establishment of their family's post-adoption support plan. It is crucial to the stability within a permanent placement that families are given support prior to behavioural or emotional challenges arising. It should be standard practice that every adopted family in NI receives therapeutic support throughout the first year of permanent placement to ensure the foundations are built at the beginning, with an immediate focus on supporting adoptive parents into their parenting journey.
- (3) Subsection (2)(b)-(b) the service must extend to the provision of services to other people to include those playing key roles in an adopted child's life, particularly teachers and educational staff to understand the needs of supporting an adopted child within the education setting.
- (4) (a) – It is paramount that families are given the option to avail of their post-adoption support by an independent voluntary service. Many families do not avail of post-adoption support from their post-adoption social worker as they feel ashamed or embarrassed to go back to social services after assessment and approval to ask for help when things are heading towards crisis.
- (5) Services must, in the least, be co-provided by social care and the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector brings an undisputable benefit to the provision of post-adoption support by providing coordinated, dedicated and highly trained therapists covering a wide proximity of NI and offering much wider capacity, thus reducing waiting times for families and removing potential barriers of location.

Subclause 5; Assessments etc. for adoption support services

- (1) (a) (b)- It is essential that any assessment for adoption support services is completed collaboratively with the adoptive parents. All support plans must be parent - directed, giving empowerment and focus of control to the family themselves. The adoption authority must endeavour to help the parents make informed decisions around their adoption support and its delivery.
- (3) – It is imperative that families have the option to access their post-adoption support and assessment leading into support, from a voluntary service, to ensure support is accessible, timely, coordinated from an independent organisation, which stands alone from trust services.
- (6) (b) The term ‘Prescribed Description’ is unhelpful and unambiguous. This leaves space for interpretation which is not conducive to the fair delivery of services. The terms of support must be explicit, leaving no room for judgment error.
- (7) (8) - If Regulations are to make provision in these areas, it is paramount that voluntary projects who currently deliver therapeutic adoption support are allowed to contribute to this based on beneficiary service user feedback, and they must also be prescriptive to ensure fidelity across services.
- (9) We support this statement.
- (10) We support this statement. Clarification must be provided to alternative services with the HSC body that adoption cannot be used as a clause to reject referrals. For instance, many families within TESSA have reported that referrals to the CAHMS team have been rejected or not implemented as their child holds the status of ‘adopted’ and therefore should be supported by the adoption team, despite a clear and irrevocable mental health need. This leaves children with no specialised support and falling through the cracks of services. This is also replicated within education. Many TESSA families struggle to receive classroom assistant help, despite their child’s clear indication of lack of education achievement and ongoing struggle to settle within the classroom. As ‘developmental trauma’ goes mostly undiagnosed; without a confirmed diagnosis of sorts many support services are unavailable to adopted children, such as classroom assistance, behavioural support, sensory occupational therapy, all of which adopted children, who have experienced trauma, may need to avail of throughout their childhood.

Closing statement: TESSA, as a voluntary organisation currently providing post adoption support to families within Northern Ireland welcomes, on the whole, the introduction of Adoption and Children Bill. We strongly endeavour the promotion and inclusion of the highly valued and unique independent position of the voluntary sector be included in the design, implementation, and delivery of adoption support services throughout the bill. The introduction of this bill provides an opportunity for adoptive parents, children, and families to finally feel that their needs are being recognised, addressed, valued, and adequately resourced to ensure that adoption is the final stage of permanence and that families who are created through adoption, build the foundations, and have ongoing access to therapeutic supports which will ensure they not only survive adoptive family life but to thrive within it.