

Adoption and Children Bill

Consultation response from the Evangelical Alliance.

1. Introduction

The Evangelical Alliance is a membership organisation representing thousands of churches and Christian organisations across the UK. We exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society. We have been working in Northern Ireland for over 30 years and engage across a wide range of policy issues.

This draft Bill is an important development in the wider commitment of the Executive through the Programme for Government that, “our children and young people have the best start in life” ([Children and young people's survey - Programme for Government - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)); and more specifically through the Children and Young People’s Strategy - 2020-2030 that promised, “To work together to improve the well-being of all children and young people in Northern Ireland - delivering positive long lasting outcomes” ([final-executive-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030 \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#))

We appreciate the Executive’s specific commitment to this draft Bill which will protect some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society. However, we acknowledge the wide scope of this draft Bill, and we are aware of the current, huge pressures upon our social care system in Northern Ireland and how that will impact the delivery of these reforms.

2. Aims and Objectives of the Bill

When Health Minister Robin Swann announced his intention to introduce a new Adoption and Children Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly back in October 2020, the Health and Social Care Board shared the following statistics.

“Each year around 85-90 children are adopted in NI. Significantly, last year 111 children were adopted from care of which almost one third were adopted as part of a sibling group. The children who wait the longest for adoption are brothers and sisters who need to be adopted together, children aged 4 and over and children with disabilities or developmental delay.” , ([Adoption Changes Lives - New Bill imminent - HSCB \(hscni.net\)](#)) Just this week, Minister Swann spoke in the Assembly on the progress of the Bill. He said that “There are currently 3,564 looked after children in Northern Ireland, an increase of 45% since 2002 and 6% since the beginning of the pandemic.” ([Progress on the Adoption and Children Bill | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#))

The Adoption and Children Bill aims to reform and modernise the legislative framework for adoption. It contains provisions which could improve the efficiency and robustness of the adoption process and eliminate unnecessary delay and uncertainty for children. It could ensure that the child is put firmly at the centre of the adoption process and support mechanisms could be improved for anyone involved in adoption.

We share the hopes expressed by Minister Swann for this Bill to considerably change the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in Northern Ireland. As he said, “I believe that, by way of the Bill, we can significantly improve the whole adoption experience and help more children find their forever homes”.

3. Our Response to the Draft Bill

We met with some member organisations and church leaders with experience and expertise in adoption, fostering and caring for children in Northern Ireland and listened to their response to the proposed amendments in this draft Bill. We appreciate just how important this Bill is in updating and enhancing the current legal framework in Northern Ireland. We would like to make the following response points:

- We welcome the child centred approach and a system that recognises that the needs of the children must come first. We want to see all children that need a family placed in families that can meet their needs and for the families to receive the support that they need to thrive.
- We welcome the amendments to the current legislation that will mitigate delays in the social care system and the court processes. For children adopted in 2019-20, the average length of time between the last entry into care and the granting of the Adoption Order was 3 years 1 month. ([Statistics: Northern Ireland | CoramBAAF](#))
This is a long time for a child to live with the insecurity that comes from waiting for an adoption to become official. We don't just want to see the fastest match but the best match for the child in the best time possible. With regards to fostering we would like to see the exploration of a shorter process for foster respite care approval to help relieve carers in this moment with so much strain on existing carers and children.
- We appreciate the new assessment processes proposed for support of adopted children in section 5 of the Bill. This brings Northern Ireland legislation closer in line to the approach applied in other jurisdictions. We understand that each adoption authority is responsible for the assessment and the provision of support needs; but wonder if an independent support fund available for the equal provision of such support services across all authorities could mitigate the struggles currently faced by families seeking support like the fund announced by the British government in 2013 to support adoptive families. ([New £19.3 million support fund for adoptive parents - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#))
- We are pleased to see the proposal of an extension to the age of looked after children being able to remain with their carers up to the age of 21. This could help to increase stability at a crucial transitional period in the lives of some of the most vulnerable in our society.
- We recognise the value in the education outcomes-based approach being proposed for children in care. It was reported that 25% of children in care in 2019/20 had a statement of Special Educational need ([Children in care in Northern Ireland 2019/20 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)). Children in care are typically more likely to be excluded from school, gain fewer qualifications and are less likely to go on to higher education. Most children in care have experienced trauma and instability and can have difficulties settling into the routine or discipline of school life. These children often need support and encouragement to fulfil their potential in education. We also echo the recommendation from a 2021 report called Strengthening Families by the Westminster APPG for Adoption and Permanence who said, "Schools and teachers must be better trained so that they can help adopted children who have gone through challenging experiences."
([APPG Report Strengthening Families Sept 21 Final.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#))
- Finally, because of the breadth of this draft Bill and the number of amendments proposed, we recommend an outcomes-based review mechanism that would commit the Executive to a timeframe to evaluate the impact of these amendments on those that matter most in all the processes, the children in care.

4. What can we do?

Christians have a biblical mandate to care for children just like Jesus exemplified in Matthew 19:14 when he said, “let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Christians have a further call to take special care of orphans, the most vulnerable in our society. James 1:27 reads, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress”. Furthermore, Christians hold dear to a theology of family, understanding that God Himself has adopted us into his family through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:5)

The latest figures available on the breakdown of youth work groups in NI show that 68% of youth organisations in Northern Ireland are faith based with a membership of 98,902 young people. ([Faith Based Youth Work in Northern Ireland by Youthnet - issuu](#)). This shows just how invested churches and faith organisation are in the lives of our children and young people. A lot of pre-emptive support is provided by the church for parents and children throughout the course of the child’s transition into a young person and adult.

The Evangelical Alliance are working to raise awareness of the need for adopted or foster care families across the Church. We are also working to encourage churches to be the village needed to raise a child, that is to support families within their church communities that are adopting or fostering and to become the community of support and wraparound care needed to see children thrive in their adopted or foster families. We believe that churches are a wonderful community resource to help meet these needs and we long to see the Church in Northern Ireland be at the forefront of welcoming those who find themselves on the edge of society.

Our member organisation, [Home for Good](#) believe that the Church can be part of the solution in finding a home for every child who needs one and believes we all have a part to play in caring for the most vulnerable children in our communities. They work to mobilise the Church in the UK to respond to the needs of vulnerable children through families stepping forward to foster or adopt and churches wrapping around families with support, and to influence wider society through advocacy and engagement to create systemic change. In Northern Ireland Home for Good works with the HSCNI Foster Care, which covers all five Trust areas, in their goal to find a home for every child who needs one in Northern Ireland. They are also involved in ongoing activity within the Southern Trust as a result of local churches wanting to make a difference.

Another member organisation, [Safe Families](#) are offering pre-emptive solutions. They link children, young people and families with local volunteers who can offer them help and support. The volunteers mostly come from local churches that have gone through a vetting and training process with Safe Families. Safe Families are currently partnering with the Northern Trust to provide these connections with families that have children that have been identifies as close to a threshold to access care. Often these connections offer friendship, support and belonging that can be enough to keep children with their families. In 2021 they have supported 100 families in Northern Ireland.

We would be happy to meet with the Department at any point to discuss further any or all these points. Please find our contact details below.

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