

## FAMILY ROUTES

### INTRODUCTION

Family Routes is a Registered Charity in Northern Ireland and is also registered as an Independent Voluntary Sector Adoption Agency.

The stated intent of the organization is to promote “*The achievement of a family life for Everyone.*”

This purpose is grounded on a firm belief in and appreciation of the rights of children to the benefits of being part of a family, to support their ability to meet their individual potential and educational achievement, health and emotional wellbeing.

The contemporary constructions of family life is increasingly complex and diverse. Children are subject to statutory process and permanency plans, placed for adoption but with continued access and connection to birth parents and relatives. Children being placed for adoption will frequently have been subject to trauma, poor attachment, and have developmental needs. Children may be donor conceived or born through surrogacy.

Birth parents and relatives continue to have a relationship with their child who now has a new legal parent and a new family life.

Increasingly adult adoptees seek an understanding of and a connection to their original identity and biological family.

Adopters are required to offer love and stability to children whose needs are great and often whose behaviour can be challenging.

Services designed and implemented by Family Routes reflect this contemporary reality of family life:

- Fertility – Implications and Therapeutic Counselling
- Adoption Routes – Assessment, placement and post adoption support
- Next Step – Therapeutic support and guidance to birth parents and relatives where adoption is the statutory decision for a child
- Origins and connections for adult adoptees
- TESSA – A therapeutic and educational programme for adopters and their adopted children

Family Routes welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the consultation on the Draft Adoption and Children Bill.

We welcome the advent of a legislative and policy framework which will potentially underpin a more contemporary adoption service and practice in Northern Ireland.

The foundations of Family Routes lay within the Church of Ireland, firstly as the Morale Welfare Association and subsequently as the Church of Ireland Adoption Society. In 2018 the organization reconstituted as an independent separate body eventually renamed as Family Routes.

As part of the 'separation' Family Routes undertook the management and maintenance of the archive of both Hopedene Mother and Baby Home and Kennedy House records. We also hold 476 historical adoption files.

Our response to this consultation is based on a significant level of direct contact with adopters, adoptees, birth parents and relatives and adult adoptees and their birth families. Our response is also based on a strong awareness of the historical legacy of adoption in Northern Ireland and the necessity of legislating for the quite different landscape of adoption today. The child, birth parent, adopter configuration is quite different today than it was even 20yrs ago, and legislation, policy, service design and implementation must reflect that reality.

## **Response**

Given the extent of the legislation, Family Routes specifically wishes to comment on post adoption support for adopters and their adopted children, and services for birth parents and relatives and adult adoptee access to records and connection services.

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Considerations Applying to the Exercise of Powers**

##### **Chapter 1 (5)**

We strongly endorse the Children's Rights Foundation adopted in the Draft Bill.

**(20)** The legislation fully recognizes the roles of all parties in the adoption system and the need for their consideration; that inclusivity is welcomed, including the proposal for the assessment needs of all parties for adoption support services.

Current resourcing needs to be more adequate to meet this ambition. As an agency we have experience of placing children from the rest of the UK. The process of assessing need, accessing appropriate resource and monitoring and reviewing support plans has been significant in these placements.

Inter Trust and Inter Agency collaboration will be crucial to the effective delivery of planned support.

We have had positive experience of Independent Review Officers in England bringing oversight to a child's best interests and adherence to support plans. The greater level of empowerment and engagement for service users the higher the level of effectiveness of support.

Individualistic, flexible packages that are costed at the level of the adoptive families needs and circumstances are required; beneficiary focused, the 'age appropriate' service design needs to span all ages and stages.

##### **Contact Pt 1 Chapter 3**

The 'contact' legislation is clear and precise in presentation however, this is one of the most sensitive and challenging areas to negotiate for all parties and requires high levels of appropriate resource and attention to the needs and understanding of all participants.

Simple accessible information should be available to all participants outlining the meaning and implications of the legislation content and process.

##### **Conditions for Making Adoption Orders (4)**

Again, the legislation is clear, but many birth parents in this arena are not clear, feel distressed and disempowered. Dedicated support and educative services such Next Step are critical at this stage.

## **Birth Parents**

Family Routes, in partnership with Family Care Adoption Service, delivers an educative and support programme to birth parents, mainly birth mothers and other birth relatives across all five Trusts.

This is a very vulnerable group especially at the time of permanency decision-making, legal proceedings and establishment of contact plans.

Birth mothers are frequently care experienced and have had other adversities such as mental health issues, domestic abuse, alcohol or substance dependency and homelessness.

It is critical that their support needs arising from their child's adoption are recognized, assessed and an appropriate service delivered at a pace they can manage.

Birth mothers are beneficiaries in their own right and also an important contributor to the child's longer-term outcomes and the stability of the adoption placement.

By the time a child has a permanency plan, despite the best efforts of Statutory Social Workers, the contact with Trusts can be combative and not amenable to providing the kind of service response needed. To be effective the service needs to be independently commissioned with strong service design consideration to meet needs of this specific group.

## **Special Guardian Support Services**

The Special Guardian Support Services as described are to be welcomed and again, as with other assessment and review activity will require resource and effective process if the intent of the provision is to be achieved.

## **TESSA**

Therapeutic Education Support Service in Adoption – providing support to Adopters and their adopted children.

Family Routes has provided this service for 5yrs and we are strongly of the view that a service of this nature and with the level of independence currently in place should be secured for the future and also significantly increase in terms of volume of provision with an extended age group.

We have forwarded a separate specific response from TESSA as part of this consultation exercise.

In general terms the body of this draft legislation is welcomed but the benefits to all parties in adoption will only be manifested with sufficient attention to departmental guidance, oversight, development of strategy and comprehensive implementation.