

Submission: The Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill

October 2021

Introduction

- 1 Home for Good is a UK-wide fostering and adoption charity with the aim of finding a home for every child who needs one. We seek to inspire those who might never have considered welcoming a vulnerable child into their family to step forward to foster or adopt, and we journey with them every step of the way – from inspiration through to post-placement and beyond. We also equip churches to wrap around these families and provide vital support. Home for Good has been active in Northern Ireland since 2016. Since 2019, Home for Good has been working with the Southern Trust to support them in the recruitment of foster carers. In 2021, Home for Good secured an agreement with HSCNI Foster Care and now supports the recruitment of foster carers across all five Trust areas. We raise awareness of the needs of vulnerable children and young people and inspire individuals and families to step forward to meet those needs whether through adoption, foster care or supported lodgings.
- 2 So far in 2021, we have journeyed with 109 households who have been considering fostering or adoption. Home for Good has developed a 6-week course called the 'Foundations Course' for those wanting to explore fostering or adoption further. This year, we are pleased to have had 110 individuals from Northern Ireland partake in this course.
- 3 While we seek to find a home for every child, Home for Good is particularly passionate about ensuring that children who wait the longest for permanency are placed in families where they can thrive, whether a foster or adoptive family, or a kinship arrangement. We are committed to working with governments across the UK to identify and remove the barriers that mean that children wait too long, in order that every child is provided with a place of belonging.
- 4 Our interest in the Adoption and Children Bill is motivated and informed by the stories and experiences of children, families and communities within our network. We are willing to support the Committee in considering this Bill and would be pleased to provide oral evidence to expand upon our submission as needed.

Feedback on the Bill

- 5 We are delighted that the Bill is moving forward, with legislative reform around adoption and fostering in Northern Ireland long overdue. It is vital that every child in Northern Ireland is offered the opportunity to grow up in a home where they can experience safety, stability and



love with a family or tribe by their side every step of the way. We identify that this Bill holds the potential to make significant strides in enabling this for children in Northern Ireland. Our feedback identifies aspects of the Bill that we support and highlights some areas that we feel should be strengthened or amended.

- 6 Firstly, we welcome the emphasis within the Bill on ensuring that a child's welfare is the paramount consideration in decisions relating to adoption. We passionately believe that children's needs must be placed at the centre, in order for them to be enabled to thrive.
- 7 As Home for Good, we want to see adoptive families flourish over the long-term. We were therefore pleased to see the inclusion of a new right available to adopted children and their family to request an assessment of their needs for adoption support services. We recognise that the making of the Adoption Order is not the end but the beginning of an adoptive family's journey and that families must be supported both proactively and responsively as needs emerge over the longer term. Over a child's lifetime, families will contend with the legacy of trauma and adverse childhood experiences and therefore, support must be in place in order for the whole family to thrive. Whilst we are pleased that an assessment of needs will be available, we identify that this will not guarantee support being delivered to families in a timely way. The Department of Health must consider the sufficiency of the infrastructure, resources and finance within the Trusts to ensure that they are able to fulfil the duty placed on them and that families will receive the right support at the right time as a result.

RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Health should ensure that Trusts are equipped and supported to develop appropriate infrastructure and resources to implement support in a timely manner, based on the outcomes of the assessment of support needs, as outlined as a duty within the Bill.

- 8 In addition, as a UK-wide charity we know of many families in England who have benefitted hugely from the essential therapeutic support provided via the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), which has been described as a "lifeline" by many families. Along with Adoption UK, we supported the APPG for Adoption and Permanence to conduct an inquiry into the fund to understand its impact on children and their families. Our inquiry found that 77% of children and young people said that the support they had received through the fund had made a huge difference to their family, with 90% telling us that the support had "helped them a lot."¹ Although there are improvements to be made to improve the efficiency of support being made available to families through the fund, the fund has made a radical difference in families feeling reassured that support will be there when needed. In addition, as a central fund, the ASF has helped to address the postcode lottery of support, by enabling families to access support on a more equitable basis. We commend the Adoption Support Fund for its impact

¹ Investing in Families Report; All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence, July 2019



in England and would encourage the Committee to consider how this Bill might pave the way for a similar provision to be made available in Northern Ireland.

- 9 In addition, adopted children in England are able to access funding through Pupil Premium Plus, which supports children in care and adopted children in their education. The Bill is an opportunity to bring about a parity of provision in Northern Ireland with that available in England, Wales and Scotland. We would thus strongly encourage the Committee to consider both the ASF and Pupil Premium Plus and how similar support provisions could be made available in Northern Ireland through the Bill. Vulnerable children in Northern Ireland deserve an equal level of support so that they are able to thrive. We would be pleased to support the Committee in further understanding these two provisions available in England and considering how the Bill might be strengthened to enable a robust provision of support for families.

RECOMMENDATION: The Bill should be amended to include the establishment of new educational and therapeutic support provisions for adopted children in Northern Ireland, drawing on those developed in the other UK nations.

- 10 We welcome the establishment of a NI Adoption and Children Act Register within the Bill to assist in matching children with approved adopters. Research clearly highlights the importance of providing stability and the formation of strong, healthy attachments as soon as possible for children, particularly those who have experienced early adverse experiences. Early Permanence routes have been identified as a helpful route for enabling this and we are pleased that these approaches are widely used in Northern Ireland. However, with children in Northern Ireland waiting on average 3 years and 2 months to be adopted, it is vital that we continue to do everything possible to enable the right matches for children in a timely way.
- 11 Similarly, Home for Good welcomes the provision aimed at mitigating against delays in the courts. We appreciate the importance given to ensuring that no child is waiting unnecessarily but want to emphasise that this should be held in tension with ensuring that the strongest match is found for the child.

RECOMMENDATION: The Bill should be amended to reflect that the aim of timely matches for children should be held in balance with ensuring the strongest matches are made and that children are matched with the right family who have the best chance of meeting their needs.

- 12 The introduction of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is good news for a cohort of children who are unable to return to their birth families but for whom adoption is not an appropriate option. We support the provision that this Order will enable, ensuring that all children can remain living and receiving support from their special guardian until at least the age of 18. It



is vital that sufficient support is provided to families who care for children through an SGO and that this support is specific to some of the challenges that can arise from this arrangement. For example, navigating contact with birth family can be a particular challenge for some special guardians, due to a significant proportion of special guardians being birth relatives such as grandparents. It is vital that there is allocated funding available to meet the support needs of families who care for children through an SGO.

RECOMMENDATION: The Bill should reflect the importance of ensuring that special guardians are supported in navigating contact arrangements and the relationship with a child's birth parent(s), particularly where the special guardian is a birth family member.

- 13 We were pleased to see the inclusion of a new requirement for authorities to promote the child's educational achievement as part of their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child, and to ensure that wherever possible their education or training is not disrupted. In 2020, only 27% of care leavers aged 16-18 had 5 GCSEs (A*-C) or higher.² 34% of this cohort had no qualifications at all.³ We recognise that disruption to education and the positive relationships children have with education professionals can have a huge impact on a child or young person's ability to engage in the school environment and are therefore pleased that the educational implications of decisions will be taken into account. Providing stability by ensuring consistency for children and young people in their attendance of school, the teachers and staff they engage with, and their friends and peers can have a significant impact on a child's wellbeing and their ability to engage in education. However, we also recognise that the school environment itself and the professionals within it can have an equally significant impact on a child's ability to learn and reach their academic potential. We recommend that the Bill go further and place a duty on educational bodies to ensure that all academic professionals and staff receive training on trauma and attachment to enable schools to be a safe, welcoming and supportive environment for care experienced children.

RECOMMENDATION: The Bill should include a duty on educational bodies, including schools, to ensure that teaching staff and other professionals within these environments are robustly trained on the impact of trauma and attachment needs.

- 14 Furthermore, we recognise that educational performance should not be prioritised above a child's emotional wellbeing and that the latter can play a pivotal role in the ability of a child or young person to engage in education. We recommend that guidance published alongside the Bill should reflect this and should ensure that the holistic needs of a child are placed at the centre of all decisions made and the support provided.

RECOMMENDATION: Guidance published alongside the Bill should encourage schools to monitor the holistic wellbeing of children and young people, ensuring that in making

² Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2019-20; Department of Health, published September 2021

³ Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2019-20; Department of Health, published September 2021

decisions for children, a focus on academic achievement is not placed above ensuring their emotional needs are supported.

- 15 We welcome the extension of the age limit for care leavers to receive support from 24 to 25.
- 16 At Home for Good, we know that no individual ages out of the need for a family, not least children and young people who have experienced trauma and instability in their lives. As a result, we were pleased to see the cementation of the Going the Extra Mile (GEM) scheme through the Bill, enabling care leavers to remain living with their foster carers up to the age of 21. We recommend that the Bill go further to enable all young people in fostering arrangements to have the option of the GEM scheme, whether or not they are in employment, education or training. We recognise that experiencing a consistency of support in being able to remain living with their foster carer may enable a young person to be encouraged into education, employment and training further down the line and that their activity at the point of their 18th birthday should not determine whether they are able to continue to receive support from their foster carer by remaining in their home. Furthermore, guidance alongside the Bill should encourage Trusts to review the payments provided to foster carers retaining a young person in their home through the GEM scheme to ensure that they are not disincentivised to continue supporting a young person because of insufficient financial payments. The transition from childhood to adulthood is a critical time for all young people and it is vital that we robustly and comprehensively support those who are care experienced, ensuring that support is there for as long as they need it.

RECOMMENDATION: The provision around the GEM Scheme within the Bill should be amended to enable all children and young people in foster care to remain living with their foster care under this scheme, as appropriate, regardless of whether they are in education, employment or training.

Conclusion

We are grateful for the opportunity to provide our feedback on the Bill and stand ready and willing to support the Committee in ensuring the Bill is as strong and robust as possible, to enable every care-experienced child and young person in Northern Ireland to thrive. We would be willing to give oral evidence to the Committee, as required.

For further information about this submission or Home for Good's work in Northern Ireland, please contact our Northern Ireland Lead, Malini Colville, at: malini@homeforgood.org.uk