



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Adoption and Children Bill: Action for
Children; British Association of Social
Workers NI; Home for Good

16 December 2021

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mr Alan Chambers
Mrs Deborah Erskine
Ms Órlaithí Flynn
Mr Colin McGrath

Witnesses:

Mr Avery Bowser	Action for Children
Ms Carolyn Ewart	British Association of Social Workers NI
Ms Malini Colville	Home for Good
Ms Judith Dawson	Home for Good

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Before I welcome our panel, who will appear by StarLeaf, I declare an interest: I previously worked as a social worker, and I am on a leave of absence from that role in one of the trusts. I welcome Carolyn Ewart, who is the national director of the British Association of Social Workers NI (BASW NI). Carolyn, can you hear me OK?

Ms Carolyn Ewart (British Association of Social Workers NI): I can hear you. Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Yes, I hear you loud and clear. We are joined by Avery Boswer, who is a fostering services manager with Action for Children. Can you hear me OK, Avery?

Mr Avery Bowser (Action for Children): Yes, Colm. I can hear you. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Thank you. We can hear you clearly as well. I welcome Malini Colville, who is NI lead at Home for Good. Can you hear us, Malini?

Ms Malini Colville (Home for Good): I can hear you, yes. Hello.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Thank you. I also welcome Judith Dawson, who is a project worker with Home for Good. Can you hear us, Judith?

Ms Judith Dawson (Home for Good): Hello. Yes, I can.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): We are hearing and seeing all of you fine. I very much welcome you all to the Committee and thank you for giving your time, expertise and perspectives to assist us in our scrutiny of this important draft legislation. I will ask each of you to give brief opening remarks, and then we will go to members' questions.

Ms Ewart: I thank the Committee Chair, Colm, and members for giving BASW Northern Ireland the opportunity to present this afternoon. I know that the Committee has already taken evidence on the legislation, so I will try to focus on the issues at hand.

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland is part of BASW, the largest professional body of social workers in the UK. We have 22,000 members, who are employed in front-line management, academic and research positions. BASW Northern Ireland welcomes the Adoption and Children Bill. The association responded to the Department of Health's consultation on the original draft legislation in 2017 and was clear that review and reform of our adoption legislation was long overdue. The Department's 'Adopting the Future' strategy, published in 2006, set out the case for legislative reform. Fifteen years on, the need for change is beyond urgent. The other purpose of the Bill, to incorporate aspects of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, is also welcome.

We encourage the Health Committee to progress the legislation without further delay. It is undoubtedly huge and complex, with much of the detail left to be finalised via supporting regulations. BASW Northern Ireland wants to ensure that there is an opportunity to contribute to subsequent discussions to inform the development of those regulations. Due to the lengthy nature of the Bill, I have no intention — you will be glad to hear — of talking you through every aspect of the proposed legislation. Instead, I will focus my comments on a few key aspects.

The Bill's approach of focusing on the paramountcy of the child is most welcome. That move will bring legislation into line with the Children Order. The principle of no delay is threaded throughout the Bill, which we feel is a very important step. Clauses 4 and 5 set out the issues of support and the right to receive an assessment. We supported those areas in 2017, and, again, they are most welcome.

BASW Northern Ireland would welcome a mandatory duty to provide support services that are assessed as needed. The reality is that to do so will require additional financial investment; I will return to that issue a little later. In our view, the duty to provide should extend beyond social services; it should include health, education, housing, child and adult mental health services, general practice, therapeutic services and the wider welfare system. In some areas, there are no post-adoption services at all. That duty will bring with it a duty to establish services to eliminate the current postcode lottery. In many cases, families tell us that, at the point of adoption, they do not always know what support they will need, and that someone to help them to navigate that would be very beneficial. We also know that adopted children have some of the most complex needs in our population, and that those needs may only become apparent over time. The system needs to be able to respond flexibly to needs over the life course.

Whilst many of the services that are needed exist, some are not available due to exclusion criteria and/or the post-adoption legal status of the child. We would like all those services to be accessible via the adoption hub. We also note that a lot of the expertise needed is already in existence in current services. However, there is no regional consistency. Therefore, one family's experience will not necessarily reflect that of another family in a different trust area. For example, adoption teams are not available across the board. BASW Northern Ireland would see real benefit in having a service that regards the whole family as the service user, rather than focusing on the child or the parent as the primary service user.

However, as I mentioned earlier, delivery will require additional resources. Delivery through the existing fostering and adoption services is simply not an option. Social workers were in crisis prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has only got worse. We have an over-reliance on agency staff to fill the increasing number of vacant posts. As a result, social workers are leaving the profession in greater numbers than ever before. In 2018, a survey carried out by BASW Northern Ireland, with Bath Spa University, found that 52% of UK social workers intended to leave the profession within 15 months. The social work workforce also faces a retirement bubble. Some 32% of the health and social care social work workforce are aged 50 or older. In the latest year's Health and Social Care (HSC) data, the average age at normal retirement was 61.1 years. That indicates that the impact of retirements is likely to be very significant over the next five to 10 years.

Clause 12, on the establishment of the independent review mechanism in adoption determinations, is welcome. In our original submission in 2017, we suggested that that should be an independent body,

separate from the trusts. We welcome the fact that it now sits with the Department of Health. The role must have a clear remit and bring with it the necessary authority to robustly intervene to ensure best practice, prevent delay and add value to the lives of the children involved. However, consideration will be required of the administrative arrangements for it in Northern Ireland. BASW Northern Ireland holds the view that it may be best for a regional body to carry out the function. We see the role as additional to existing services. A truly first-class service simply cannot be funded by diverting existing funds. New processes and systems will need to be created, which will, inevitably, mean new staff posts.

We particularly welcome the setting of timescales, and, in clause 113, the obligation on courts to draw up timetables for resolving adoption cases without delay. That has been long-awaited. Delay in the system is unacceptable for all involved, particularly the children. Set timescales will, hopefully, lead to improved situations for children involved in adoption cases, but consideration should be given to what measures can be utilised if timescales are not met.

BASW Northern Ireland welcomes, in clause 119, the introduction of special guardianship orders and greater responsibility for carers without an adoption order. However, the association highlights the unintended consequences that were experienced in England, where some saw the introduction of special guardianship orders (SGOs) as a means of withdrawing support from families. That affected those outside the system of care and support, as there was no longer a duty to provide assistance. Carers are still likely to require financial support and access to a range of support services on an ongoing basis. In addition to detailed regulations, implementation of SGOs will require guidance and training in children's services for public bodies and the voluntary and community sector. A multi-agency approach that includes all stakeholders, incorporating the Judicial Studies Board and the Law Society, will be needed to ensure a shared understanding.

BASW Northern Ireland engagement with members and partner associations to inform its position has led the association to endorse the position of Action for Children. Avery from Action for Children is with us this afternoon. We fully support the fact that proposed new article 34DB clearly sets out the extension of support for care leavers to the age of 25. BASW Northern Ireland is delighted to see that progressive step being taken in clauses 128 and 129. For many years, parents of disabled children who use respite care have called for their children to be removed from the looked-after child (LAC) system. We have campaigned for it for a long time, and we are really delighted that that is changing. It forced into the LAC system thousands of families who required just one night's respite. You heard about that from Kathleen Toner in the previous session, so I will not repeat the points.

Clauses 136 to 138, which deal with an extension of the remit of the NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA), will, undoubtedly, bring more demand to an already overstretched service. The agency has already experienced increased waiting lists owing to growth in demand. It is important to note that additional investment in that area will be required.

BASW Northern Ireland is disappointed that clause 143 will revoke article 181 of the Children Order. The association notes that the Department has decided to go for repeal, despite 83% of respondents to the previous consultation supporting a three-year report. We were one of those organisations. BASW Northern Ireland views this as a missed opportunity to provide oversight and political accountability for a protected group in society. The Children Order review board has ceased to exist, and its replacement, the shadow family justice board, has not yet been sufficiently developed. We urge Committee members to seek to retain that requirement for scrutiny, alongside the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The association's view is that repeal would be a retrograde step that would send the wrong signal about the Assembly's priorities on children and young people. We urge the Committee to seek an amendment to article 181 in order to have a three-year cross-departmental report on the functioning of the Children Order and the needs and rights of children.

It is essential that additional funding is provided to resource the services that are required by the draft legislation. Children's social work services are experiencing unprecedented demand. For example, the Department's provisional children's social services data, which was published weekly during the pandemic, indicates that there were 3,564 looked-after children —

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Carolyn, I am sorry to interrupt you. I am very conscious of time. I ask you to make your remarks as brief as possible. Please be conscious that we have the presentation that you sent us as well.

Ms Ewart: No problem. I will finish up now.

That data shows a 6% increase on the pre-COVID figure and a 42% increase in the number of looked-after children since 2011. Added to that is the fact that social work vacancies sit at 8.5%.

The Bill is complex and far-reaching and requires a number of new duties. It will require training, and adequate time needs to be allowed for that. Freeing social workers up from front-line duty to undertake training will, ultimately, increase pressures across the system. The Bill is to be welcomed. The system urgently needs the reform that it will deliver, and the case for review has been well made. There is much to support in the Bill, and we urge the Committee to accept it. Thank you for listening. I am happy to take any questions.

Mr Bowser: I am a fostering services manager for Action for Children in Northern Ireland. I am responsible for our regional fostering service. I am also a member of our senior leadership team. I have been a qualified social worker for 28 years. I started my career in family and childcare, working in a pre-Children Order environment, in the old Northern Health and Social Services Board. For clarity, I am also a member of BASW NI and have just joined the Northern Ireland committee. However, I will speak on behalf of Action for Children. For transparency, I should also say that I have been an adoptive parent for the last 14 years.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you. I want to keep my remarks brief to give you an opportunity to ask us questions and to be as helpful as possible to you. We welcome the Bill and strongly support getting it through in this mandate. We are quite concerned that time is running out. We recognise that large parts of the Bill are about enabling and that the detailed work will come in regulations, standards, guidance and implementation. With that in mind, we would like to get a clearer sense of what is happening with the fostering regulations. They sit as a companion to the Bill. The Department has signalled that they are coming, but we are waiting.

Carolyn's point about the level of resources that will be required is exactly right. That should not be underestimated, particularly as, over 10 years, we have seen the steady impact of austerity on services and staff, and, now, we have a pandemic. The Department has also signalled that children's services reform is coming down the line next year. That is a lot to be done in the current space.

We will highlight two key issues from our presentation. Again, we totally agree with what Carolyn said about article 181 of the Children Order. We share BASW NI's view that repealing it would be a very big mistake. In the previous session, Alyson Kilpatrick made comments about "progressive realisation". That is even more of a reason why you would want to retain article 181: to track it and align it with UNCRC requirements.

The other bit is the missed opportunity on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. In the 2017 consultation, it was clearly signalled that the direction of travel would be to put that on a statutory footing. There is widespread support for that in the sector — and widespread frustration that it is still not on a statutory footing. I know that the Bill is huge and that it would have taken a lot to put that in. However, the Health and Social Care Bill, which has just gone through the Assembly, will make the board changes and put in place the integrated care system that will underpin those. There could have been some enabling legislation in here. There is a worry that that keeps finding its way onto the back-burner when, unlike the integrated care system, it is very well established and is critical to these reforms and the reforms in the children system.

Ms Colville: Thank you, Chair and Committee, for the opportunity to give evidence. It is great to be with you. I have led the work of Home for Good in Northern Ireland since 2016. I am an adoptive parent to three wonderful children.

Ms Dawson: Hi, everybody. My role is Southern Trust coordinator with Home for Good. That involves facilitating information sessions about fostering and adoption, and training and journeying with people who are exploring whether they could provide a home for a child through fostering, adoption or supported lodgings. Together with my husband, I have four children: three birth children and one daughter who joined our family through adoption. We have also had the privilege of being foster carers for the past four years. It is a privilege to be with you. Thank you.

Ms Colville: Home for Good is a UK-wide charity with a vision to find a home for every child who needs one. We raise awareness of the needs of vulnerable children among the church community and inspire individuals to consider whether they could care for vulnerable children through fostering,

adoption or supported lodgings. We also work to equip churches to wrap around families and support those who care for vulnerable children.

Since 2019, Home for Good has had Judith working with the Southern Trust to support its recruitment of foster carers. This year, Home for Good secured an agreement with HSCNI foster care and now supports the recruitment and retention of foster carers across all five trust areas. During lockdown, we partnered with the team that oversees the Adoption Regional Information Service (ARIS) register by supporting social workers with faith literacy training. This year, we have journeyed with 109 households that have been considering fostering or adoption. We have a network of 45 champions and volunteers and connections with lots of families around Northern Ireland, whose perspectives have underpinned our submission to the Committee on the Bill.

There are around 3,500 children in care in Northern Ireland. That number has increased by 22% over the past five years. Each of those children is brimming with potential. We are delighted that the Bill is moving forward, with reform in adoption and fostering legislation in Northern Ireland long overdue. In our submission to the Committee, we highlighted a number of areas that we were pleased to see and a number of aspects where we believe the Bill should be amended or go further. Due to our limited time, I will highlight for the Committee's consideration just three of those aspects; those which resonate most strongly with the stories that we hear on the ground.

First, we welcome the opportunity for adoptive families to request an assessment of support need. However, we believe that the Bill should go further to recognise that infrastructure, resources and provision must be in place to actually implement support when needs are identified. We know that the families who we connect with would welcome an assessment of needs. However, we are aware that needs can arise throughout the life of an adoptive child and young person and that an assessment will need to be revisited accordingly due to early trauma and loss.

Secondly, we know that the majority of children who enter care have experienced abuse or neglect and that, as has already been mentioned, families contend with the legacy of trauma in an ongoing way. Other nations in the UK have developed national support provisions that ensure that families have a recognised and accessible route to high-quality support. We would love the Bill to consider what could be developed in Northern Ireland. My personal experience is that we were able to access that funding in England to support our children as we made the move to Northern Ireland, ensuring that they were equipped to feel safe and secure in making such a huge move, which can often bring added anxiety and trauma to children who have experienced care. With such targeted and funded support, my children moved and are thriving in Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, we welcome the Bill's position that children should be provided with homes in a timely way, and that no child should be left waiting. However, we want that to be held in tension with ensuring that the strongest matches are made for children in order that families thrive, that there are enough families ready and waiting, and that sufficient consideration is given to the process of matching children with families. We believe that the Bill should be amended to reflect that those aspects must be held in tension.

Overall, we believe that the Bill holds the potential to improve the experiences and stories that we hear from children and families on the ground. We are grateful for the opportunity to come and give evidence to the Committee. Thank you. *[Pause.]*

The Committee Clerk: Colm, you are muted.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. Thank you. I had to go on mute because Santa Claus arrived in Market Square in Dungannon here, just outside my office window. There was a loud cacophony of horns and things that I thought that you would not want to hear. On that happy note, I will go to members.

Ms Bradshaw: Thanks to the panel for coming along. My first point relates to Carolyn's commentary about the pressures of vacancies, etc. Is a university degree needed? I go back to the issue of people who are not even qualified social workers yet. Will a body of work need to be undertaken in that regard?

Ms Ewart: Yes, Paula. The Department is finalising its workforce strategy. It has taken some time for the Department to focus on a workforce review, but that is being done now. There are a lot of helpful measures in the workforce review. It recognises that social work is in crisis. We have an over-reliance

on agency staff. People are refusing jobs in children's services. We have started a regional recruitment process, but people are still refusing jobs. They do not want to work in children's services, and are moving to an agency to take up posts elsewhere. The review has recommended that the number of university places be increased. The recommendation is for, I think, 40 new, additional social work places. Obviously, it will take some years to introduce those social workers into the system, but that is very welcome. The report contains a number of other measures. It looks quite dynamically at the changes that we need in the system.

We need to retain social workers. Social workers are genuinely at the point of burnout. We need to support their well-being. We need to focus on why people come to work for us and what we can do to help them to stay in the system once they are in it. There is a real willingness to do that. It will take some time for it to produce the results that we need, but I am glad to say that the Department is looking at that, Paula; yes.

Ms Bradshaw: I have one quick question for Home for Good. It relates to your paper. I appreciate all the submissions and the recommendations in them. A recurring theme is not just the educational settings but the community settings, and how we can best support young people of all ages to fit in, integrate and feel part of their community as quickly as possible. Is there anything in the Bill that you feel should be augmented in order to accelerate that process?

Ms Colville: Thank you, Paula. We work very closely with the Health and Social Care Board. On the ways in which we connect with community, we have only a small niche: we are looking at the faith community. However, there is some cross-learning on how we support families so that they do not feel isolated when they adopt or foster. We often connect families who have similar settings. For example, if a family is adopting a sibling group, we will connect them with somebody who has also adopted a sibling group, so that they can start talking and have peer-to-peer support. We are not a therapeutic service, so we cannot do the added therapeutic work, but we can provide general peer-to-peer support. We have support groups across Northern Ireland that are connecting families and children, and just being people together. It takes a village to raise a child; we need to learn something from that. We have conversations on that; absolutely.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, everyone.

Mrs Cameron: Thank you to everybody on the panel. It is a very important and complex subject. We appreciate the evidence that you are giving today and what you gave us in writing. I have a couple of questions for Carolyn. I am very appreciative of not being subjected to the Santa racket in Dungannon, but we appreciate your lovely tree in the background, Carolyn. Thank you for that *[Laughter.]* You talked about the pressures on social workers. We understand that it is a difficult job. The fact that the Chair, who is a social worker, is sitting here, chairing the Committee, and not in social work may be a testament to that. It is obviously a very stressful career choice, and, given the challenges, it is probably difficult to encourage people to go down that route. Do you think that the Bill misses a trick by not aligning the revised legislative framework for adoption with a root and branch review of staffing? That is my first question. What options might there be, in the external training, to provide support to prevent the loss of front-line staff during the roll-out of the Bill?

Ms Ewart: Sorry, Pam. I have totally forgotten what you have just said. What was it that you asked about? I am sorry.

Mrs Cameron: That is OK. My first question is if you think that the Bill misses a trick by not aligning the legislative framework for adoption with a root and branch review of staffing.

Ms Ewart: I think that it does miss a trick. The Department's workforce plan is timely. It takes cognisance of the fact that this legislation will be coming on board. Lots of other legislation will also be coming on board. It tries to quantify how many more social workers we will need to have in post to be able to meet our existing need and our growing need over the next 10 years. That has been done, Pam. We, as a collective, need to accept that the system is genuinely in crisis. I do not say that lightly: it genuinely is in crisis. We urgently need to take forward something to support staff now, as well as in the future. The Department is very keen to do that. It is important that we take stock of that and move forward with it.

The other point that you raised was on training. There are lots of agencies out there that provide training and support services for social workers. As you said, we need a root and branch review of the staffing pressures. So many additional pieces of legislation are coming down the track. Social workers

simply cannot continue to take on more and more if they have to continue doing what they are already doing; they simply cannot. For example, social workers already spend 80% of their working life on bureaucratic tasks. Only 20% of their time is spent actually seeing children and families who really need to see them.

Social workers are an expensive resource. They are a highly skilled resource. In many ways, a social worker coming to your home should be seen as a service in itself. Nowadays, they are often doing a tick-box assessment. They are so pressured and in demand that their role has become quite perfunctory. That is a danger because we, then, do not see the wide breadth of assessment and the wrapping around a family the support that the whole family needs. A root and branch review will happen through the workforce strategy. As Avery mentioned, a review of children's services, as a whole, has been announced. We do not know the detail of that yet. It will be very important to find that out and to ensure that staffing, including staffing within children's services, is part of that review.

Mrs Cameron: OK. Thank you, Carolyn, for that. Finally, why should the independent review mechanism be regionally constituted as opposed to having distinct arrangements for each trust?

Ms Ewart: Avery, do you want to take that?

Mr Bowser: Yes, do you want me to take that?

Ms Ewart: That would be great, Avery. Thanks.

Mr Bowser: I think that I should, given that it is my area and is one of the things that we have discussed with BASW NI. The problem is that we are so small here that it is really difficult to find people who are genuinely independent. For the five trusts, it would be a waste of resource to set themselves up separately, given the relatively small number of appeals that you would expect to hear. This will be a cry from ourselves, from my colleagues who are also in the independent fostering providers' group and, I suspect, from those who are doing adoption: we could all benefit from having one mechanism rather than having six or seven competing mechanisms. With one mechanism, the search for a group of people who are genuinely independent might be done locally. That could even involve asking somebody from Scotland or the Republic, who would actually be genuinely independent and not have worked in the system here, to come and chair it. That would potentially be of reassurance to applicants or approved carers who may be going through a process because their application has been refused or they are appealing the termination of their registration. That was the thought. Some careful thought needs to go into how that mechanism will relate to the agency still having ultimate responsibility for its own decision-making. Some questions about liability need to be sorted out, but that is what regulations are for.

As shown from the conversation a bit earlier, there is lots of detail to be worked out, but we need to take the Bill's provisions as enabling. It was always going to be progressive, because there is no way that you could implement everything all in one go; it will have to be done in chunks. Measures like special guardianship orders are huge in and of themselves, and it would take a lot of Committee time to put them properly in regulation.

In direct answer to your question, that is the reason; it is just about acknowledging that we are quite small. We also should, in that implementation, take some more considered time to look at how it has worked in England and really take the time to iron out the kinks and make some changes relative to our size. For me, and this is a point for the independent providers, we are not very good at doing things as a whole sector. We have a situation where the trusts are doing business and we are an afterthought, yet we are, between the four agencies, providing somewhere in the region of 20% to 25% of the non-family foster placements. That is a function of the growth in the number of children in care over the last period, but it also goes directly to the heart of what Carolyn talked about, namely the crisis — we will use that word — in social work at the moment and the pressures due to there not being enough people in the profession. That impacts on recruiting and retaining foster carers and on the ability to find adopters; all of those pieces.

Mrs Cameron: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): I have two members left: Deborah and Colin. I ask that questions and responses be as brief as possible while covering the information. Go ahead, Deborah.

Mrs Erskine: I will be as brief as I possibly can be, Chair. I have two questions for, perhaps, Action for Children and then one for Home for Good. I will start with Action for Children. Avery, can you elaborate on the concerns about the not-for-profit stipulation on adoption agency fees? How are authorities in England dealing with fears around exposure to unregulated accommodation?

Mr Bowser: I will take the first one. I was interested to see the way that the fees measure, which is one that I welcome, had slipped into the legislation. We have a view that, clearly, there should not be profit in the system, but, obviously, we have different fostering agencies with different statuses. We are a charitable fostering provider and are part of one of the biggest and longest standing children's charities in the UK. In common with England and other parts of the UK, we have providers who are, ultimately, privately owned. The ones here have local charitable status, but they are the charitable arm of another organisation, so there are always questions about the finances of that. Is money effectively leaving the system and going into private equity at some point along the journey? That is difficult to answer when you have different organisations involved.

My problem is that trusts, and we find this when we deal with them on commissioning, view the whole independent sector as being expensive. In one sense, it is, because it is on top of their budgets. However, realistically, the cost of what they would need to pay to deliver what we deliver is broadly similar. The problem is that we do not have a good whole-system view of how we commission and provide all that and see the independent providers as being out there and last minute. We are clearly not last minute, because we account for 20% to 25% of the provision. Our view is that that goes to wider commissioning issues in the voluntary sector and to the fact that we should have more partnership-based arrangements, rather than strictly narrow tendering and procurement processes. One thing that we do not want to do is find ourselves treating children as commodities, which is where we are with private fostering provision in England. Effectively, children are assets to be traded by companies that have shares.

Your other question was on the concerns about what is happening in England. Again, it all comes down to how you present legislation. They passed legislation to firm up things for those aged 15 and under so that they cannot be in any kind of unregulated accommodation, but they left out 16- and 17-year-olds. Article 39, which is a charity in England, is campaigning actively on that and has taken the Government to the High Court over it. The Government are saying, "Oh, we have not made the legislation any worse", but it does open the door to lots of unregulated accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds. We are not without that issue here, because of the sheer demand for that kind of accommodation, sometimes for children who still have a care status or who are on the edge of care, maybe having left custody. Sorry, have I lost you?

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): No. You broke up a bit picture-wise, but you are OK sound-wise.

Mr Bowser: Yes, my picture froze. That is the thing to watch out for, and it is one of my concerns. I heard Kathleen talk about it earlier: obviously, you do not want disabled children going into care for the purpose of short breaks. I can see where she is going with the type of service they run, but that needs to be watched really, really, really closely — like a hawk — to ensure that you are not creating a back door to unregulated accommodation and unregulated placements and that children do not, effectively, go into care by the back door. It goes back to the Children Order, the voluntary placement of children in care and not letting a voluntary placement drift when a child should be on an order. That problem is still around today, and, again, that is a resource issue. I am not having a go at anybody for poor practice; it goes straight to the point that people have not got the ability to attend to everything that they need to.

Mrs Erskine: I have one question for Home for Good. Does the Bill strike the right balance between operating a more effective and timely framework for adoption and fostering and ensuring due diligence to provide the best outcomes for the children and young people concerned?

Ms Colville: We are pleased that it is in the Bill, because we are very much about seeing that every child finds the home they need, getting the match right and getting the times right. Judith, do you want to tell one or two stories about people and children who have had to wait longer?

Ms Dawson: We see delays at different stages throughout the process. For example, we had a couple who, after attending one of our recent information events that focused on older children, who tend to wait longer, were keen to pursue the process. However, there is a long wait, even for an assessment to become an approved adopter; for our family, it took at least 18 months. We want to see available adopters there at the right time for children who need homes. There are delays at that stage

of the process which, again, are resource-based and due to not having enough social workers available to carry out the assessments. That is a really important angle to look at.

There is also an issue with children who are at the interim stage where assessment is taking place as to whether adoption is going to be the best care plan for them permanently. At times, there are delays there and, post that, in the matching process. We are striving for something to be done at each of those three stages so that children can find safety and security at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Bowser: I will just make a quick comment, Chair. We have a problem with timely decision-making on permanence, which, again, is a function of resources. In our submission, we ask what the future arrangements will look like. We do not need those permanence decisions being hived off into one for residence, one for adoption, one for the SGO and one for long-term fostering. We need robust panels in the trusts that can do that early and be empowered to make child-focused decisions.

Ms Ewart: I will add a really quick point. I was talking earlier about the vacancy rate in social work sitting at 8.5%. However, the vacancy rates in children's services are very skewed, so the overall rate is 8.5% but the rate in children's services is about 30%. Some 30% of social work posts are vacant; they do not have a social worker in them.

Mrs Erskine: Thank you.

Mr McGrath: Thank you to the panel. I have one quick question, in recognition of the fact that we have a very short period of time left in the mandate to get the Bill through. Having discussed the matter with people in the sector, I know that there is an urgency to get it passed and, then, perhaps, use some of the regulations that flow from it to finalise some of the details. I do not want to put you on the spot, because you want to see as perfect a Bill as possible, but would you be broadly content with what is there at the moment and to see it passed so that it flows and happens, or would you say that it needs to be done right, even if that means bringing it back in the next mandate?

Mr Bowser: Do you want to go first, Carolyn?

Ms Ewart: I do. We support the Bill at this stage and we want to see it getting through. The case has been well made, and we have waited for a long time. We are quite happy to work with the Department on sorting out regulations.

Mr Bowser: I echo that. The whole spirit of our submission was to say that we need to get this done. That is why we only identified a couple of issues in the Bill. Honestly, if there is something that is too difficult, do not do it at this stage. If it does not unpick the whole Bill, just drop it out and pick it up later. Home for Good can speak for itself, but, speaking as an adopter, the adoption part of the Bill has to be got across the line. If it does not get through this time, there will be such a cry of exasperation from the sector. There is a whole raft of stuff with guidance and regulations that we cannot get to unless we get some of this across the line.

Ms Colville: We absolutely agree with that and echo it. Having looked at the Bill in 2016 and 2017, we feel that for our children and our families it is vital that it gets through. If we need to unpick some of it and look at regulations and practice and how we are going to structure things, we can do that outside of getting the Bill through. We have a cohort of children coming through who will really benefit from a lot of the Bill's provisions, if we can get it through.

Ms Dawson: I will give you some live examples really quickly. This week, I spoke with two adoptive parents who are paying privately for their children to get assessments for their health and educational needs because they do not have the services and support that they need. That is putting financial pressure on that family, and they are wondering what the final cost will be, but they have to weigh that up against the risk of not having a timely assessment and intervention. If they are waiting for a year, or a year and a half, for example, for an occupational therapist to have input, what impact will that have on their child? That is the kind of tension that adoptive parents are managing, so it is really important that all that is considered.

Mr McGrath: That seems to be as loud as the Santa Claus from Dungannon, so we will take that message on board. Thank you to everybody.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): There are some really important and clear messages coming across from the combined presentation, including the issue of resources, never mind resources for the future. I am acutely aware of how bad we are at doing assessments of any kind, let alone the vacancy rates that you indicated range from 8% overall to 30% in children's services. That is really worrying.

I also note the comments on clause 143. We will take a look at that. Some very useful pointers have been identified for the Committee, which we appreciate and will take a closer look at, on foot of the evidence that you have presented.

I thank you all for attending. In light of the seasonal disruption that we have had, I wish you all a very peaceful — more peaceful than I have had this past 10 minutes — safe and happy Christmas. I thank you all for appearing before the Committee.

Mr Bowser: Thank you.

Ms Colville: Thank you.

Ms Dawson: Thank you.

Ms Ewart: Thank you.