

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

INTRODUCTION OF ADOPTION AND CHILDREN BILL INTO THE ASSEMBLY

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Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, as Members may be aware, I have now secured Executive approval, by way of the Urgent Decision procedure, to introduce the long awaited draft Adoption and Children Bill into the Assembly.

The Bill enhances and updates the legal framework for adoption in Northern Ireland. The wide-ranging reforms that it will bring about are long overdue, mirroring changes that were introduced for England and Wales in 2002, and for Scotland in 2007.

I intend to make the adoption process as efficient and robust as possible, cutting out unnecessary delay and uncertainty for children. The Bill will ensure that children are firmly at the centre of the adoption process and support mechanisms will be improved for anyone involved in adoption.

This legislation should make it possible for more people to consider adoption and provide much needed loving, stable family homes for the many children that need it. It will mandate support for those affected by adoption. Given that the majority of children are adopted from the care system, post adoption support is critical to prevent disruption and/or breakdown of adoptions.

It will also create greater opportunities for older children to benefit from permanence and stability by offering them an alternative route to adoption.

For children in care and care leavers, provision in the Bill will: place care planning and advocacy services on a statutory basis; create a duty to promote their educational achievement and to prevent disruption to their education and training; and introduce a number of principles which those responsible for their care must adhere to, including promoting high aspirations for them, delivering safety and stability for them and preparing them for adulthood and independent living.

For children and families in need, provision will enable Health and Social Care Trusts to offer them greater financial support and to provide short break care to children with a disability without them needing to become looked after.

The Bill is substantial, with 160 clauses and 5 Schedules. The final draft Bill is the outworking of two public consultations undertaken in 2006 and 2017. My Department's response to the 2017 public consultation, '**The Adoption and Children Bill Consultation Report Summary and Analysis of Responses**', is now available on the Department's website, together with a Children and Young People's Version of the Report.

I would like to put on record my thanks to all those who contributed to the consultation exercise and assisted my officials with the development of policy, some of them over many years. The views shared have been extremely useful and have helped to inform the final draft of the Bill which will be introduced.

A copy of the draft Bill, which will be introduced for scrutiny by the House, has also now been published for information on the website.

I had hoped that the Bill would progress to First Stage before the summer recess. My main concern was to ensure that the Health Committee could proceed to publish its call for evidence over the summer recess (in advance of Second Stage) and that the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill could

commence in earnest in the autumn, when timing will be critical as the end of the Assembly mandate approaches. Unfortunately, I have been advised that there was insufficient time and that the Bill will not progress to First Stage until September. This is disappointing and makes the task much more challenging.

I have, however, been advised by the Speaker that, once he provides confirmation that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly, I may then proceed to share a copy of the Bill with the Committee. It would then be in a position at that point to proceed with a call for evidence, if it so wishes. I thank the Speaker for confirming this and am reassured that such action will help to reduce any delay in progressing the Bill.

I remain committed to ensuring that this long-awaited, critical piece of legislation completes its passage through the House before the end of the current mandate. I look forward to working with Members throughout the Bill's passage to ensure that this vital legislation is successfully enacted, so that outcomes for some of our most vulnerable children and young people are improved and their rights and interests are protected.