

Barnardo's NI

Department of Health

Transitional Adoption Support Services

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the last year we worked with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods, and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department of Health's consultation on Transitional Adoption Support Services. Barnardo's NI warmly welcomed the passage of the Adoption and Children Act 2022, and we hope that the full implementation of the legislation will have a significant positive impact on the lives of children and families throughout Northern Ireland. Given the long lead-in to full implementation of the legislation, Barnardo's NI was pleased to see specific provision for transitional support services so that families are not waiting years longer to receive much needed support.

Our comments in this response are informed by our extensive experience and expertise working with children and families in Northern Ireland. For over 40 years our Family Placement service has recruited and supported foster carers for children with extra needs, this includes children who have suffered early childhood trauma and attachment difficulties. Our fostering service provides a variety of foster care placements: short term, long term, emergency overnights, parent and child placements, fostering to adopt, and young people leaving the care system. In 2022, our family placement service was approved as an adoption agency in Northern Ireland, allowing for a smoother transition through the adoption process for the children and families we support.

In our response we provide some general, overarching comments before providing feedback on specific proposals within the consultation document.

1. General comments

- 1.1. While Barnardo's NI welcomes this consultation and the provision of transitional adoption support services, we are concerned that the implementation of the legislation in full is still many years away. In particular, while the transitional arrangements require Trusts to carry out an assessment, the arrangements do not require or obligate a Trust to provide the support or service once it has been deemed necessary. We are concerned that not only will this raise expectations for children and families, only for them to feel let down when support is not forthcoming, but that with no obligation to provide support services, Trusts may de-prioritise the funding and resourcing of much needed adoption support.
- 1.2. Barnardo's NI is deeply concerned about the current pressures on Northern Ireland's health and social care system and workforce. In terms of adoption support, we have already started seeing the impact of these pressures on the help that children and families receive. In some instances, adoption support has already been de-prioritised with staff being moved into other areas of work. We are concerned that adoption support is being viewed as a luxury, rather than an essential service that children and families rely on.
- 1.3. Furthermore, we are now seeing the knock-on impact of these decisions manifesting through delay in the adoption process. Children who are in care are not moving on to adoption, and applicants to become adopters are not seeing their applications progress. This has both an immediate impact on the lives of those children and families, but also a long-term impact on the system, with waiting lists increasing and the number of children in care increasing, leading to the inevitable increase in demand for resourcing and staffing that those waiting lists will require.

2. Specific comments

Key definitions

- 2.1. Barnardo's NI encourages the Department to move away from the use of the term 'natural parent'. This terminology implies that other parents the child may have, such as adoptive parents, are 'not natural'. We recommend that the Department uses less stigmatising language such as 'birth parent'.

Assistance in relation to arrangements for contact

- 2.2. We ask the Department to provide more clarity regarding 'a person who is related to the adoptive child'. Earlier in the proposals, the Department sets out the definition of 'related person', which has a broad scope, including people who have a relationship with the child that is beneficial for the child. Barnardo's recommends that the Department continues using this language, rather than 'person who is related' as this implies a relationship through birth or law.

Assessment

- 2.3. Barnardo's NI welcomes the clarity provided in the proposal, that both the placing Trust and the resident Trust have a responsibility for the assessment process, regardless of the timeframe of the adoption.

Notification of proposal and final decision

- 2.4. We reiterate our concern that while the clarity on the assessment process is welcomed, we remain concerned that children and families who are assessed as being 'in need of support', may either face a long wait for services, or not receive any support. What support will be provided to children and families who are assessed as being 'in need of support' but where the Trust decides not to provide the service?
- 2.5. We would also welcome further information on how a request for assessment will be processed, particularly where the child was not placed by the resident Trust. In this case, the family may not be known to the resident Trust. Further information should outline how those cases will be processed and how they will be assessed alongside cases where the placing and resident Trust are one and the same.
- 2.6. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Department explore options that would ensure assessments are processed and undertaken fairly. One option would be to establish a panel that would assess the applications and determine the level of priority. Given that many specialist services that care experienced children avail of are regional, this panel could also function regionally, ensuring that children are fairly assessed and support is identified, regardless of where they are living. This panel would triage cases and ensure that those deemed as urgent are prioritised for support.

Preparation of plan and review of provision

- 2.7. Barnardo's NI would welcome further information on what constitutes a 'change in circumstances' that the Trust must be notified of.

Notices

- 2.8. We welcome the proposal to inform children in writing of any decisions related to them. As noted in the proposals, it is essential that, where appropriate, the adoptive parents are also informed of these decisions. Relationships in adoptive families should be carefully considered and it is essential that adoptive parents are not undermined, particularly as children enter their teenage years and establish their growing independence. It is essential to minimise any potential negative impact on the important relationship between parents and children.

Financial support

- 2.9. We welcome the proposal where circumstances for financial support includes where there is a strong relationship between the child and potential adoptive parents.
- 2.10. Barnardo's NI asks the Department to consider, under the 'matters considered to determine the amount of financial support', any loss of income related to the child. We are concerned that where a person transitions from fostering to adoption, the adoptive parents will no longer receive the financial support that they received as foster carers. This creates a gap in support for parents which could have a very real detrimental impact on their ability to financially support the family. Financial payments should be child-focused and child-led, rather than being focused on the income of adoptive parents. A child and their family should not be placed at a disadvantage as a result of a successful adoption.
- 2.11. We would also welcome further information on what financial support will be available to adoptive parents where the child needs to access specialised therapeutic interventions based on their previous experiences linked with their journey in care. Often this support needs to continue throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Service for persons outside the area

- 2.12. We welcome these proposals.

For further information, please contact:

Trása Canavan

Senior Policy & Public Affairs Lead

trasa.canavan@barnardos.org.uk