

## **THE IRISH FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION LAUNCHES**

### **FOSTERING TO ADOPTION POSITION PAPER**

#### **WITH THE MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS,**

#### **DR. KATHERINE ZAPPONE TD**

Today, **Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> November**, the Irish Foster Care Association launched its position paper on Fostering to Adoption. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. Katherine Zappone, TD, was on hand to support the launch along with Dr Geoffrey Shannon, Chairman, the Adoption Authority of Ireland and Justice Catherine McGuinness.

The position paper (which can be accessed on [www.ifca.ie](http://www.ifca.ie)) sets out the changes to achieve permanence for children in Care, brought about by the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 and concludes with a number of recommendations for consideration by policy makers, policy implementers, and those supporting foster carers, birth families and children, in the process of moving from foster care to adoption.

The Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 came into effect on 19 October 2017. Its main purpose is to amend the Adoption Act 2010 to extend the law in relation to the adoption of children and to provide for the repeal of Part 11 of the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015. This innovative piece of legislation intends to better reflect the complex realities of modern life in the context of adoption. Key points from the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 that impact on foster care include:

- It provides for the right for any child to be adopted, irrespective of the marital status of his or her parents, where both parents consent to the placing of the child and to the making of an adoption order;
- It provides (Section 54) for the adoption of children who have been in care for at least 36 months and whose parents have failed in their duty towards them to such extent that the safety or welfare of the child is likely to be prejudicially affected;
- Under the same provision (Section 54), the length of time that the child has been in the custody of the adoption applicants has been increased from 12 to 18 months in order to

ensure that the child has had a home with the adoption applicants for a significant period of time.

These provisions allow a greater prospect of stability for some children in long-term foster care – where they will not return to live with their parents – through the process of adoption by their carers.

Foster care is the backbone of the care system in Ireland with 92% of children in the care of the State growing up with foster families. At the end of Quarter 1, 2018 there were 6,151 children in care, of which 5,666 were placed in foster care (27% of these in relative foster care). This is quite unique within international trends and we need to celebrate the fact that the majority of these children are growing up as happy, confident young people. Children in foster care are thriving and foster families are offering secure, happy, and fulfilling childhoods to children, supporting them to reach their full potential. In 2017, 21 children were adopted from the Irish foster care system and 20 children have been adopted from foster care between January and November 2018. Most of these adoptions related to children in long term foster care who were aged between 16 and 18 years old and it is likely that this age cohort will change as the new legislation embeds.

**Some key recommendations in relation to Fostering to Adoption:**

- All options should be explored to retain a child with his/her birth family in the first instance
- Every child for whom adoption is a consideration should be allocated a Guardian ad Litem.
- Children who are adopted from foster care should retain a prioritised status for all State services into adulthood.
- Children should (where in their best interests) continue to have access to their birth parents and siblings
- Foster carers should receive a transitional payment for at least two years to support the transition from fostering to adoption.
- Foster carers who have adopted should have access to counselling supports
- Training to be provided to social workers in the policy and procedures in receiving and processing applications from foster carers to adopt

- The importance of interagency collaboration to support families prior to and after adoption
- Consideration should be given to initiating the UK “Adoption Passport” for securing all appropriate services for children, but with a wider range of services to be funded.

**Supports needed by foster carers post adoption:**

**Financial** – in the UK foster carers are offered transitional payments of up to two years to support the adoptive placement.

**Supports** – foster carers currently receive a range of supports from their social worker and through organisation like IFCA. Such supports should continue for adoptive carers.

**Support Groups** – Foster carers avail of peer to peer support as a safe space for carers to share experiences, foster carers have indicated they would like this to be available to them post adoption.

**Information** – Information should be made available to foster carers who are considering adopting to include the legal difference between fostering and adoption, what the new status of adopter/adoptee means in reality and the range of current supports available.

**Continuing to Foster** - many foster carers identify fostering as a vocation and the choice of moving from being a foster parent to being an adoptive parent exclusively, can be a barrier to them choosing this route. In the UK, local authorities, and the private fostering agencies, provide for foster carers to continue fostering following a reasonable period after adoption.

**Training** - the needs of children who are fostered today and adopted tomorrow do not change, and foster carers will require access to a range of training which supports them in their role as adoptive parents. The Adoption Authority currently offers a directory of services available to adoptive parents. Barnardos also offers supports for children who have been adopted and to their adopted parents. However, the emergence of adoptive families who have fostered the child, will require further supports and services. IFCA currently offers a range of support services to foster carers and would be well placed to meet this need.

**Policies and Procedures** – Tusla, the Child and Family Agency should develop policies and procedures for processing foster carer adoptions, to include clear expectations around financial and other supports and the potential for the carer to continue to foster. The unique

circumstances of each case should be taken into consideration. However, the rationale for all decisions must be transparent and made known to the foster carer seeking to adopt. Likewise, foster carers who solely seek to only foster, should be respected in their choice, and not be placed under any undue pressures to adopt a child whom they foster.

Speaking at the launch, **Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, TD**, commented: "As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I am conscious of the importance of providing for alternative care and adoption processes for those children who cannot live with their own families, for whatever reason. This Act provides new and important opportunities for some children, who might otherwise have spent years in foster care and for whom adoption is considered an appropriate intervention, with a permanent, adoptive family."

Speaking at the launch, **Catherine Bond, CEO, Irish Foster Care Association**, said "The 2017 Act is a child-centred piece of legislation that modernises the law governing adoption in Ireland. And with some of the changes there is likely to be more children in care that can be adopted. Permanence is essential for these children along with the security of a family structure. We need to support these families through the process of fostering to adoption and importantly afterwards. There is more work to do to ensure that fostering to adoption is a success for all concerned. The Irish Foster Care Association is well placed to deliver many of the supports needed and to work closely with all stakeholders in the process."

Speaking at the launch **Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, Chairman, Adoption Authority of Ireland** commented: "The Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 places the voice of the child and the best interests of the child at the centre of the adoption of children from long-term foster care. It also has regard to the importance of providing every reasonable support to birth parents to ensure adoption is a proportionate option to secure the welfare of children in long-term foster care. What is best for the child must prevail in every case."

**Ends**

**For further information, please contact:**

**Sharon McDonnell M: 087 2269324 E: [media@ifca.ie](mailto:media@ifca.ie)**

### **The Irish Foster Care Association:**

The Irish Foster Care Association is the representative body for foster care in Ireland. Child-centred and rights-based, IFCA promotes excellence in foster care so that children have the best chances in life. We aim to accomplish this by providing information, support, and learning opportunities for all those involved in foster care through our direct work in Advocacy, Branch Development, Support, and Learning and Development. We are an independent, membership-led organisation. IFCA's National Support Helpline runs every week day from 11.00am - 3.00pm and can be contacted at 01 458 5123.

### **Fostering to Adoption Working Group:**

The Fostering to Adoption Working Group, put together by the Irish Foster Care Association, was made up of the following individuals:

- Angela Palmer, Doctoral Student, UCD
- Beatrice Cronin, BL, IFCA Board Member
- Breda O'Donovan, Irish Foster Care Association
- Catherine Bond, CEO, Irish Foster Care Association
- Catherine Mullin, CoramBAFF
- Celia Loftus, Principal Social Worker, Adoption Authority Ireland
- Colette Crotty, Board Member
- Freda McKittrick, Assistant Director, Guardian ad Litem Service, Barnardos