

Opening Statement - Barnardos

Attendees:

Suzanne Connolly, CEO Barnardos;

Christine Hennessey, Project Leader, Barnardos Post Adoption Service

Barnardos is delighted to speak to the Committee on this important legislation.

I appreciate that language included in this legislation is very sensitive – that some mothers prefer the term *birth mothers* and others prefer the term *natural mothers*. I will use the term birth mothers, as the term currently used in the legislation.

Barnardos has been providing post adoption support services to birth mothers and adopted adults since 1978. Thousands of birth mothers, adopted adults and birth family members have contacted Barnardos for individual support and counselling. Approximately 1,200 birth mothers and adopted adults have attended our group support service.

Additionally, we deliver a specialist therapeutic support service to adults whose births were incorrectly registered as well as providing a national therapeutic service to children and teenagers, adopted both domestically and internationally.

Barnardos particularly welcomes the following provisions in the proposed legislation:

- The right of adopted adults, adults who were incorrectly registered and adults who were boarded out to access birth certs and personal information.
- The Entitlement for those over 16 to apply for their original birth certificate.
- The right of adopted adults to access personal items left on file for them by their birthmothers or birthfathers.
- The placing of information and tracing services and the new Contact Preference Register on a statutory footing.
- The establishment of a new Register of Acknowledged Identity, allowing adults, including those incorrectly registered, to receive a certificate and correct their entry.
- The provision for third party agencies to share information for tracing purposes, without being in contravention of GDPR.

However, we would recommend the following:

1. We recommend increasing the notice period for birth mothers to register their contact preference option from three to a minimum six months.

We have worked with many women who have never disclosed the existence of an adopted child to their partners or family. Birth mothers attending Barnardos support groups have told us the three-month period is too short. They have told us that they need time to consider their options and may need to seek personal and professional support with this.

2. We propose the right to post adoption counselling and support should be placed on a statutory footing for all birth mothers and adopted adults. It should not be confined as currently proposed to birth mothers who register a no preference.

We recommend that statutory counselling is available to those birth mothers who register a yes preference and to those who may not be able to engage with the Register at all. Many mothers we work with have told us of the positive impact counselling and support has had on their lives.

We suggest that all adopted adults should be entitled to statutory counselling and therapeutic support should they wish to avail of it. Most adopted adults tell us that they have had happy family lives. However, some have told us they have had negative experiences of adoption including neglect, rejection and abuse that has left them with lifelong hurt.

We also recommend that young people accessing their original birth certificate should be offered specialist adoption support should they wish to avail of it. Our experience of working with teenagers would suggest that some may struggle to process information on their background that might emerge as a result of their application.

3. We also recommend adopted adults have a right to choose whether or not to attend an information session in the event of no contact. This must be optional.

We have worked with some adults who have found the experience of a birth parent refusing contact to be extremely painful. Some of them have welcomed an intensive level of support to talk about the refusal and its impact on them. Others have not needed support. Therefore, attendance at an information session should absolutely be a matter of choice for the adopted adult.

4. We recommend extending the date to correct inaccurately registered births.

We suggest this as we have provided support to adults whose births were incorrectly registered past the date of 31 December 1970.

5. Finally, we recommend the government adequately resources the adoption sector in order to ensure staffing levels can meet the needs of birth mothers and adopted adults.

Lengthy waiting lists for adoption services already exist and demand is certain to increase considerably following the enactment of the Bill.

Thank you.