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Friday 30<sup>th</sup> November 2012

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am pleased to take this opportunity to respond on behalf of 4Children to the consultation *Adoption and Fostering: Tackling Delay*.

4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children's services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Sure Start Children's Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain.

We develop, influence and shape national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families. As the Government's strategic partner for early years and childcare we have a crucial role in co-producing policy with the Department for Education and representing the sector's views and experiences.

In 2010 we published the *Family Commission* report – a 2 year research project which talked to 10,000 families across the UK, including families who had experienced the care system and child protection proceedings. This work gave us a clear insight into what is required to reduce family crisis and improve the outcomes for children and families within the system. We are committed to helping to shape legislation affecting adoption and fostering, so that all children are given the best start in life.

As a result, we welcome the government's commitment to speeding up the adoption process, which can be a long, fraught and complicated process for families. Anything that can make the adoption process faster, and simpler, has the potential to benefit the record number of children going through the care system. These children can be very vulnerable and we risk letting them down if we allow a slow adoption process to stand in the way of their future happiness.

However, we would also call on government to take a wider focus, putting an equal emphasis on the following to ensure that families receive the support they need to prosper:

- Reducing family crisis, so that more children remain safely within their own family;
- Seeing families – especially extended families, who should be a first choice for adoption and fostering – as assets; and

- Ensuring that quality of outcome remains paramount alongside the welcome drive to speed up the process.

## Information sharing

The proposals on better sharing of case records between fostering and adoption agencies are welcome changes. It is vital that fostering and adoption, whilst independent processes, are as joined-up as possible to make it easy for foster parents to adopt children in their care. Particularly when fostering is long-term, foster families often build very strong bonds which make an ideal basis for adoption. Whilst many foster parents will not want to pursue adoption, for those that do, making this option available and straight-forward is a positive and important objective.

## Adoption panels

We are concerned that the government's proposals around the size of adoption panels will not do anything to speed up the process of adoption, and in some cases may make the situation worse. Ofsted's 2012 report *Right on time* found no evidence that the size or composition of adoption panels was contributing to delay.<sup>1</sup> A larger panel is in fact better equipped to eliminate unnecessary delays, since it provides for cases when individual panel members are unable to attend.

We do recognise that some potential parents find large panels intimidating, and efforts to help parents feel more at ease are to be welcomed. However, instead of reducing the sizes of adoption panels, support should be offered to parents in the form of a representative whose role is to act as an ally in adoption proceedings. This would help families feel more at ease and also provide them with a trusted person whom they know is on their side.

## Reducing delays and bureaucracy in fostering and adoption

We are happy to see the government's recognition that the most important outcome of the adoption process is that children are placed in a loving family, which provides them with the quality of care they need, rather than a family which exactly matches their ethnicity or background, and welcome the proposed changes to speed up the adoption process in this area.

However, we must be realistic in our expectations of the improvement to adoption speeds that any changes will create. The *Right on time* report by Ofsted indicates that the most significant delays to adoption proceedings are not created by either adoption panels or ethnic matching, but rather by the length of time taken for care proceedings to be

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<sup>1</sup> *Right on time: exploring delays in adoption*. Ofsted. April 2012. p. 24

concluded before an adoption plan can be confirmed.<sup>2</sup> As it is not always possible to begin adoption assessments until after the conclusion of legal care proceedings, reducing delays in this area is clearly not a simple matter.

However, Concurrent Planning Services, as outlined by Barnardo's, offer a welcome possibility of streamlining these procedures in cases where it is clearer that it is in the child's best interest to be put into care.<sup>3</sup> In July, the government announced its support for concurrent planning, but more leadership needs to be shown on this. We would like to see Concurrent Planning Services rolled out across the country to help speed up adoption and fostering wherever possible.

In addition, more efforts should be made to recruit adopters and foster parents from a wide range of backgrounds. Children may currently be languishing in care as a result of a failure to appropriately tap into the opportunities offered by thousands of skilled and loving potential parents from ethnic minority backgrounds. Greater use of the extended families of children in need of adoption would also help to both eliminate any delays based on ethnic matching, and ensure that existing living situations which work for children are fully exploited.

## **Kinship Carers**

Family breakdown can be devastating, particularly when it results in children being taken into local authority care. While this is unavoidable in some cases, there are a number of ways that professionals can minimise the harm and upset experienced by children, by working to keep what remains of families together. In our Family Commission, we found that siblings who were taken into care were often split up – and that this process led to further isolation and vulnerability. Wherever possible, local authorities should work to keep families together – whether by placing siblings in the same foster family or care home, or by supporting older siblings to take care of their younger brothers and sisters.

The government should also do whatever it can to promote wider kinship caring. Where children are being fostered either formally or informally by kinship carers, real consideration should be given to whether adoption is a viable option. Kinship carers we spoke to during the Family Commission told us that too often they felt that the system was biased against them. Removing barriers to the adoption of children by their extended family would result in a greater number of properly supported foster placements becoming family based adoptions, and a greater number of positive outcomes for children.

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<sup>2</sup> *Right on time: exploring delays in adoption*. Ofsted. April 2012. p. 6

<sup>3</sup> *Concurrent Planning Service: A new fostering and adoption service for children under two years old*. Barnardo's. URL <[http://www.barnardos.org.uk/14525\\_concurrent\\_planning\\_booklet\\_final.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/14525_concurrent_planning_booklet_final.pdf)>

## Providing a loving family

With the government's March figures showing that as many as 5,540 children in England have been identified for adoption, but are still waiting to be adopted, the government's commitment to cutting this number is admirable and timely.<sup>4</sup> However, whilst adoption is an essential part of making sure that children taken into care are given healthy homes, improving adoption processes cannot be the government's only approach to the volume of children for whom care proceedings are initiated. Family breakdown and crises are the most common sources of this issue, and the approach best suited to dealing with these costly and often tragic situations is investment in preventative early intervention.

4Children's recent reports as part of its Give Me Strength campaign point to family violence and alcohol and drug use as major factors in family breakdown, which in some cases can lead to the commencement of care proceedings. In our initial report into these issues, *Crash Barriers*, we found that as many as 52% of children in some local authorities are subject to child protection plans as a result of domestic abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, our recent report into alcohol abuse, *Over the Limit*, found that 62% of children who were subject to care proceedings were from families with parental alcohol misuse.<sup>6</sup> Given these figures, we urge the government to work with local authorities to move towards a rigorous early intervention approach to delivering services aimed at reducing family violence and alcohol abuse. By strengthening families, we can avoid many of the crises that lead to children being placed into care.

A preventative approach should include delivering earlier support via GPs, schools and children's centres, and funding new approaches to these issues such as parenting and relationship classes, family support, mental health support and alcohol awareness programmes.

## Family Justice Bill

4Children also supports the recent proposals in John Hemming MP's Family Justice Bill, especially those regarding the role of the extended family in supporting vulnerable children, and children in care.

Our Family Commission in 2010 called for all families facing family court proceedings to be offered a Family Group Conference, in order to give them the opportunity to find their own solutions to their care needs, and to help keep children out of the local authority care system.

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<sup>4</sup> *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2011*. Department for Education. 28 September 2011. Table A2.

<sup>5</sup> *Crash Barriers: A new approach to preventing family crisis*. 4Children. 13 April 2011. p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Over the Limit: The Truth about Families and Alcohol*. 4Children. 10 October 2012. p. 6.

*Adoption and Fostering: Tackling Delay* is a welcome first step in the right direction from the government on the possible ways to reduce delays so that more children can get the best start in life.

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss our submission further.

Yours sincerely

(by email)

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