

# NI Review Consultation - Home for Good's Response

November 2023

## Section 1 – Guiding Principles

This group of recommendations have been categorised as Guiding Principles. They are intended to provide a general steer on how implementation of the Review's recommendations should proceed. One is specific to foster care. There are a total of 8 recommendations in this group as follows:

**Recommendation 1:** Northern Ireland is not that large compared to the rest of the UK and to the Republic of Ireland and this should be considered in how children's services are organised and delivered.

**Recommendation 4:** There is the need for more help for families to assist them to care well for their children.

**Recommendation 5:** Now is the time for action to tackle the difficulties for children and families and for children's social care described in the TOR and within this report, and the action needs to be taken without drift or delay.

**Recommendation 6:** In deciding how to respond to this Review there should be a wide and inclusive consultation which draws on the wisdom of all who have experience and engagement with and within children's social care.

**Recommendation 26:** Foster carers should be recognised and positioned as valued members of the children's social care workforce.

**Recommendation 29:** Do not allow the privatisation of care of children.

**Recommendation 50:** The difficulties facing children's social care services need to be tackled with pace.

**Recommendation 51:** There should be a wide consultation on the proposals and recommendations from this Review.

### **Q1. Do you agree with the categorisation of these recommendations as guiding principles?**

YES. We welcome the identification of guiding principles to undergird the working of the children's social care system. However, it is vital that a framework is developed alongside these principles to assess how effectively they are informing the decisions and practices of the system. Without that, they become aspirational but not actioned.

We would like to emphasise the importance of Recommendation 26 (Foster carers should be recognised and positioned as valued members of the children's social care workforce). In preparing Home for Good's response to this consultation, we hosted a roundtable with foster carers, adoptive parents and care-experienced adults to gather their expertise and perspectives on the proposals. Regarding this recommendation, foster carers emphasised that they felt that some social workers believed that they were just providing a safe space for a child or young person, whereas for the foster carers present, they believed their role was so much more than that; there was significant investment of their time, space, energy and love to provide children with the stability, safety and support they needed. Foster carers identified that where social workers had grasped this, it had changed the way that they brought them into conversations and decision-making, because they recognised that they had important perspectives and insights to contribute.

In particular, foster carers shared that they frequently had not been invited to LAC Reviews for the children they were caring for, or that these Reviews were scheduled during regular working hours which made them impossible to attend if the foster carers were working. Both of these scenarios exemplify a lacking recognition of the valuable role that the foster carers were playing and how their voices and perspectives were not considered a priority in making key, ongoing decisions for the children and young people in their care. As one foster carer said, "*To not be involved in those conversations is a huge missed opportunity.*" While foster carers were not comfortable with being referred to as 'professionals' in the same way as teachers or social workers, they expressed a desire to be heard and valued equally to these stakeholders, as part of the team around a child.

Conversely, one foster family shared a positive instance where in their most recent LAC Review, the social worker had specifically brought them into the conversation and asked them for their opinion. They identified that their social worker was themselves care-experienced and they felt that this made them empathetic and understanding of the importance of the role that foster carers play.

Another foster carer shared that one of their foster children had been moving on to an adoptive home and their social worker had set up a meeting for them to meet the adoptive parents. Through this process they described feeling like their input was valued and they felt part of the team in helping the child transition well to their new home.

These stories demonstrate the difference made both to foster carers and importantly, to the decisions made for children when foster carers are valued by other professionals for the role they play. In fact, foster carers expressed that they felt that decisions were more likely to be '*child-focused*' when they were invited into these conversations because of the day-to-day insight of the child's reality that they were able to bring.

**Q2. Are you content with the proposal to adopt the principles to guide future reform in this area of service provision?**

YES.

**Q3. Do you accept the position taken in connection with recommendation 29?**

YES, We agree with the position set out by this recommendation and previously adopted by the NI Government. We commend Northern Ireland for taking the bold step of seeking to keep to an absolute minimum the levels of privatisation.

Whilst we recognise that a range of providers can help to provide accommodation and settings that meet the range of needs of children and young people in the care system, we firmly believe that provision should always be motivated primarily by wanting to meet the needs of children and young people, and never profit-making. The former enables high quality provision to flourish.

As a UK-wide charity, we have observed in England the soaring cost of care provision as a result of prolific use of private and profit-making provision. While some of this provision can be high-quality, it is not all so and we are concerned about the impact on children and young people where the motivation behind providing care is profit, rather than providing high quality care for our most vulnerable children and young people.

**Q4. Are there further comments that you would like to make in terms of how we ensure that the guiding principles identified by the Review are being adopted?**

YES - We particularly want to emphasise the importance of Recommendation 26 (Foster carers should be recognised and positioned as valued members of the children's social care workforce). We regularly hear stories about the impact that dedicated, loving foster carers make in the lives of children and young people both during their childhood and beyond. Despite the challenges that arise, foster carers across the nation willingly step in to care for children and young people who have experienced trauma and loss. Through our Enquiry Line, we hear about the challenges they face in playing this crucial role and their expressed desire for greater support to enable them to continue meeting the needs of the children and young people in their homes. We identify that a stronger recognition of the important role they play is an important first step to facilitating them to receive the support they need.

Furthermore, Home for Good aims to inspire individuals and families from within church communities across Northern Ireland to consider whether they could open their home and heart to a vulnerable child through fostering, adoption or supported lodgings. Through this, we have journeyed with 386 families as they consider whether they could play such a role. We recognise that foster carers recruited through the Church often come with an existing support network to wrap around them in this role and are often motivated altruistically by their faith. According to The Fostering Network, there is currently a shortage of 300 foster carers across Northern Ireland. Having enough foster carers is vital to ensure that children in the care system can be matched effectively with foster carers who are equipped and experienced to meet their needs. If a Children and Families Arms Length Body is established, we identify that retaining and recruiting foster carers across the nation as a whole should be a top priority and Home for Good stands willing to support policymakers and senior leaders in doing this.

## Chapter 2 - More Effective Family and Children's Services

**Recommendation 22:** There needs to be a re-set and re-focus for children's social care services to give a greater focus and attention to family support.

**Recommendation 27:** The experience and expertise of foster carers should be harnessed through, for example, the region-wide introduction of the Mockingbird model. (See Chapter 13, page 193, para 13.27)

**Recommendation 31:** Extend the transition period where appropriate and necessary for young people moving to adult services. (See Chapter 13, pages 201 – 204, paras 13.58 – 13.71)

**Recommendation 33:** Accommodation within the positive post-18 services needs to be expanded and more readily available. (See Chapter 13, page 203, para 13.65 – 13.69)

**Recommendation 37:** Children and young people in care, and leaving care, should be able to identify and name a person they trust who will be recognised as a continuing presence alongside the young person in their engagement and relationships with children's social care services. (See Chapter 14, page 213, para 14.11)

### **Q6. Are there specific considerations you think we should bear in mind in taking forward recommendations 25, 28, 30, 33 and 49?**

YES - Recommendation 33 sets out that 'Accommodation within the positive post-18 services needs to be expanded and more readily available'.

We recognise that Supported Lodgings is an effective, important provision within the 16-25 accommodation landscape. Too often, post-18 care provision lacks an emphasis on relationships and whilst not every young person will want a family-based setting, we believe that it can be an essential element for many young people beyond the age of 18, due to no child 'ageing out' of the need to have close relationships in their life.

Supported lodgings strikes a balance between offering a family-based setting with more independence for the young person than foster care. We have heard often from young adults about the positive experience they have had of a supported lodgings placement and recognise that it could be a good option for many more young people across Northern Ireland. We therefore believe that supported lodgings should play a central role in seeking to achieve Recommendation 33.

We welcome the ambition to roll out this provision more widely across the five Trusts and stand ready to work alongside leaders within the system in recruiting more hosts to enable more young people to have this option.

**Q7. Do you agree that there needs to be a reset and greater focus and attention placed on/given to family support? (Recommendation 22)**

YES. The Review highlighted a rapid upscaling of the number of children entering the care system in Northern Ireland; the continuous rise in children needing to enter the care system suggests that families are not being supported sufficiently to be able to continue caring for their own children well. We believe that where possible, children should be supported to remain living with their birth families, provided they are able to experience love, safety and stability in this environment.

Home for Good commends the work of the charity Safe Families, who work to provide support, hope and belonging to people who would otherwise be facing life alone. They work towards this by recruiting volunteers - many of whom come from church communities - to stand alongside families referred by local authorities or Trusts. Support provided by volunteers focuses on three areas of creating safety and security, helping parents and children develop their skills and agency and helping them to develop key relationships and communities of support to wrap around them.

Since February 2021, Safe Families have supported 173 families in Northern Ireland, representing 268 adults and 420 children. Since then, they have completed support with 109 families, with 49 de-escalating in their level of need and 22 closing to Childrens Services.

Among all families where support has finished:

99% felt that their social networks have either been maintained or improved

98% felt their own wellbeing has either been maintained or improved

99% felt their confidence has either been maintained or improved

95% felt they have maintained or improved their ability to meet their family need

97% felt they have maintained or improved their family relationships

97% felt they have maintained or improved their ability to positively parent their children

Families who have experienced the support of Safe Families shared:

*“My supporter was always available if I needed to talk things through, she was flexible when I needed to rearrange because of my mental health dip. She was so nice and approachable.”*

*“Absolutely fantastic! Every other support structure focused on the kids but having a friend to talk to for myself was amazing. Being able to have a good moan with someone that wasn't family was really beneficial.”*

At the point of referral, families are in one of four levels of support; early help, child-in-need, child protection and looked-after child. 29% of families are in the course of escalating to the next level above or beyond at the point of referral. The work of Safe Families in Northern Ireland demonstrates that providing support to these families can prevent families from needing further,

more intensive support further down the line. Crucially, this means that families are able to experience stability and children are more likely to be able to remain living within their home environment, where this was previously at risk.

There are also fiscal benefits to supporting families earlier on. For families accepted onto a programme of support with Safe Families, the support provided produces average savings of £26,454 per family with younger children and £27,846 for families with teenagers. These costs are realised over several years. With increasing numbers of children entering the care system and high costs associated with meeting the needs of these children effectively, alongside the trauma and loss experienced by these children, acting earlier on to support families from further escalation and instability where possible, should be prioritised.

Alongside supporting birth families, we recognise that foster, adoptive and kinship families must be recognised as a specific group of families within efforts to improve family support, because of the vital role they play in caring for children and young people who are not able to remain living with their birth families, many of whom have experienced trauma. Supporting these families is vital for ensuring that instability and disruption is not further compounded but that children and young people can experience and receive the love, stability and consistency that they need. In particular, we recognise that peer support can form a vital part of the support landscape for these families.

Safe Families currently have 135 volunteers across two Trusts in Northern Ireland who are working to support families and enable them to experience belonging. Home for Good have journeyed with 386 families, many of whom are now caring for children and young people as foster carers, adoptive parents or supported lodgings hosts across Northern Ireland. The majority of these volunteers and families have been recruited from churches across Northern Ireland. A renewed focus on supporting families (birth, foster, adoptive, kinship and others) is needed and we identify that communities such as the Church are well-placed to enable this reset and re-focus and have been working for a number of years already to wrap around families in this way. Home for Good and Safe Families have significant reach into church communities across Northern Ireland and would be pleased to work with leaders in harnessing the skills, altruism and willingness within these communities to enable a greater focus on supporting families.

**Q11. Do you agree that we should introduce the Mockingbird Family Model into Northern Ireland? (Recommendation 27)**

YES - Peer support is a vitally important form of support for many foster families and we recognise the value of the Mockingbird Family Model for facilitating this. Alongside the Mockingbird model which provides a formal mechanism for peer support, we want to highlight that there are other more informal peer support options, many of which are delivered through community groups such as churches. As Home for Good, we facilitate 10 peer support groups across Northern Ireland and would be pleased to work with the Trusts and central Government to enable more families to be able to access these vital support services.

**Q12. Are there other ways to better support foster carers in Northern Ireland and to deliver the aims of the Mockingbird Family Model? (Recommendation 27)**

YES - Please see our response to Q11.

**Q15. Should a transition period be case specific or apply to all children and young people transitioning to adult services? (Recommendation 31)**

We think that an extended transition period should apply to all children and young people transitioning to adult services. Decisions should always be child- and young person-centred and we should aim to provide as much stability and consistency as possible. Where this requires an extended transition period, this should be implemented.

We also recognise that the switch to adult services may result in a sudden shift in the level of independence required of the young person and that the majority of 18-year olds, whether in the care system or not, are not ready to be fully independent at this age. Decisions made for children and young people should be reflective of where a young person is at and fit around them, rather than creating a system where young people have to fit within a rigid system that applies a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to readiness for independence and adulthood.

However, in extending the transition period, we must also be mindful that decisions are not kicked along the pavement. As such, there should be a dedicated timeframe set out within guidance about the point in a young person's life where decisions about transitions and the future should commence.

**Q24. Do you agree that children and young people in and leaving care should be able to identify and name a person they trust to negotiate their engagement and relationships with and within children's social care services? (Recommendation 37)**

YES - A primary aim of the system should be to enable children to have lifelong, loving relationships. We suggest that where young people are leaving the system without being able to identify a person they feel they can go to, this indicates that the system has failed to truly meet their needs. Every young person needs an individual or family by their side every step of the way, whether the relationship is recognised formally or informally.

Home for Good consulted with a group of foster carers and adoptive parents on this recommendation. Families involved in caring for children and young people were supportive of this recommendation in principle, but emphasised that were it to be developed as a formal role, there would need to be clear lines of accountability, standards and clear expectations set. They expressed concern about how it would be enabled in practice and felt that a formal or official mechanism to recognise this ongoing relationship was not necessarily the way forward. They were in agreement that where possible, this role might be best played by an adult who has already been involved in a young person's journey, rather than necessarily needing to be a new person

who steps in to play this role at adulthood. One individual expressed that this ongoing role could be an extension of the existing role that Independent Visitors play. Either way, it was identified that a one-size-fits-all approach to enabling these ongoing relationships would not be suitable and that ultimately it should be the decision of a young person about who, if anyone, they want to continue supporting them in their life as they journey on. For some, that may be a former foster carer or a youth worker and for others it could be their independent visitor, or a sports coach. There should be openness to the range of individuals who could play this role rather than too prescriptive an approach.

Families and carers also emphasised that there are existing initiatives that any work in this area would do well to join up with, to avoid replication of efforts. One such example mentioned is the REACH programme which is a youth work initiative supporting young people through schools.

### **Chapter 3 – Operational/Organisational Effectiveness and Efficiency**

This group of recommendations is intended to deliver organisational arrangements which are focussed on children and young people at all levels, from the Department of Health through to front-line children's social care services. There are 17 recommendations in total in this group as follows:

**Recommendation 7:** There is a clear and firm recommendation for a region-wide Children and Families arms-length body. So much which follows is likely to be dependent for its impact on having a regional ALB. *(See Chapter 6, Pages 113 – 116, paras 6.1 – 6.10)*

**Recommendation 12:** Statutory children's and families' social care services need to be located within an organisation where this is the primary focus of the organisation. *(See Chapter 8, pages 127 – 129, paras 8.5 – 8.9.2)*

**Recommendation 13:** Future arrangements need to allow the leaders of statutory children's social services to focus on the services without the allocation of other roles and responsibilities. *(See Chapter 8, page 129 – 131, para 8.10 – 8.15)*

**Recommendation 14:** The relationship with the Department of Health should be re-set in line with the intentions of the 2022 Health and Social Care Act (Northern Ireland). *(See Chapter 9, pages 133 – 138, paras 9.1 – 9.21)*

**Recommendation 15:** Consideration should be given to establishing a children's and families social care division in the Department of Health. *(See Chapter 9, pages 140 – 142, paras 9.31 – 9.33)*

**Recommendation 16:** There should be the further development and deployment of multi-professional and multi-agency frontline teams and services to assist children and families. *(Chapter 10, page 150 – 152, paras 10.32 – 10.39)*



**Recommendation 18:** The Executive and Department of Health should create and use powers to mandate, and processes to assist, the development of integrated multi-agency services. *(See Chapter 10, pages 150 – 152, paras 10.32 – 10.39)*

**Recommendation 19:** The existing children's social care information systems should be compared and the best performing adopted as the region-wide system rather than Encompass being developed to incorporate the integrated care records requirements for children's social care. *(See Chapter 10, page 147 – 150, paras 10.17 – 10.31)*

**Recommendation 24:** Re-arrange statutory services team structure to have more of a community focus and presence. *(See Chapter 12, pages 182 – 185, paras 12.51 – 12.62)*

**Recommendation 38:** A decision should be taken to introduce a region-wide children's and families Arms-Length Body which includes current HSCTs' statutory children's social care services along with other allied services and professions closely related to children's social care. *(See Chapter 15, pages 215 - 239)*

**Recommendation 39:** Appoint a Minister for Children and Families to give political leadership and focus to the intentions of the 2015 Children's Co-operation Act and to be a children and families champion across government and alongside the Children's Commissioner. *(See Chapter 15, page 226, para 15.22 – 15.23)*

**Recommendation 40:** Within the context of developing a region-wide Children and Families ALB there should be the development of a regional care and justice centre within the Woodlands site. *(See Chapter 16, page 242 – 247, paras 16.7 – 16.16)*

**Recommendation 41:** The Lakewood site could then be available for repurposing to provide within-region services as an alternative to young people being placed within services outside of Northern Ireland. *(See Chapter 16, page 242 – 247, paras 16.7 – 16.16)*

**Recommendation 45:** The regional Children and Families ALB should develop its own quality assurance and development processes and with independent participation within the processes. *(See Chapter 16, pages 254, Paras 16.30 – 16.36)*

**Recommendation 46:** The process, as already intended, of undertaking Case Management Reviews should be speedier and more participative. *(See Chapter 16, page 256, para 16.39 – 16.40)*

**Recommendation 47:** The relationship between the statutory funders of services and the VCS sector which provides services needs to be re-set as more of a partnership rather than a purchasing relationship. *(See Chapter 17, page 259 – 262, paras 17.5 – 17.14)*

**Recommendation 48:** There should be longer-term funding commitments and horizons rather than the insecurity of annual budgets. *(See Chapter 17, pages 260 – 261, paras 17.6 – 17.11)*

**Q36. Are you content for recommendation 47 to be considered through the Children’s Social Care Strategic Reform Programme and ongoing work relating to the Department’s Core Grant Scheme?**

YES - As part of this, we want to highlight the potential within faith communities, including churches, as part of the VCS sector to support and help meet many of the needs within the children’s social care system. Home for Good has reach into churches of all denominations across NI and would be delighted to work with the Trusts and central Government to better harness the potential within these communities.

**Q37. Do you agree with the group of recommendations relating to the establishment of a Children and Families ALB in place of current arrangements? (Recommendations 7,12,13,38,45 and associated recommendations 40 and 41)**

YES - Home for Good has consulted with foster and adoptive families around the Review’s recommendation to establish a Children and Families Arm Length Body. Families echoed the reflections of the Review in recognising the high inconsistency in practice, policies and processes between the Trusts at present. Families highlighted inconsistency in the assessment process, payments for foster carers, communication patterns between social workers and families and support available. They highlighted that these inconsistencies were undoubtedly having an impact; these included families choosing to foster with a neighbouring Trust rather than their own due to better support, or families choosing to drop out of the assessment process to foster or adopt because of the lack of clarity provided about the process involved and support provided. There was therefore wide agreement that greater consistency is needed and that bringing together the Trusts under one Arms Length Body could enable this. As one individual remarked: *“There is definitely a need to level the playing field and address the disparities across the Trusts.”*

There were a number of key considerations that families wanted to draw attention to as this recommendation is explored further:

**1. The importance of continuing to listen well**

Families identified that the Review had been effective in listening well to stakeholders across the system, including children, young people, families, social workers and others. They felt that perspectives shared had been heard by the Reviewer and that this had allowed those engaging with the Review to go on a journey of exploring solutions, confident that their experience was being taken into account. Families expressed that in order to set up an Arms Length Body that works effectively for Northern Ireland, there must remain a commitment at the heart to continuing to listen to children, families and

professionals across the system, so that it is co-designed by those who will be most impacted by the changes.

## **2. Pace**

Families expressed concern about how long it would take to transition to an Arms Length Body from the current arrangement, particularly without a functioning Assembly. However, they also recognised that social workers across the children's social care system in Northern Ireland were under considerable pressure already and that moving to a new system, with new mechanisms, ways of working and priorities holds the potential to make a clunky and potentially risky transition. Therefore, families expressed that the pace of change should be given careful consideration, to balance the need for urgent change in the system with ensuring that the transition and process is as smooth as possible and that children and families do not fall through the gaps.

## **3. Joined-up working**

Families recognised the benefit of the singular focus of an Arms Length Body, but also highlighted the need to ensure that the ALB is joined up sufficiently with other sectors where there is clear overlap. In particular, they welcomed and supported the proposal to ensure that youth workers, who currently sit within the Education authority, should be brought within the remit of the ALB, in order to prevent siloed and disjointed working around children and families.

**Q39. The Review Report identifies which services should fall within the scope of a new ALB and those which should not. Do you agree with the report's assessment of those services? (Recommendations 7,12,13,38,45 and associated recommendations 40 and 41)**

Please see our response to Q37.

**Q51. If appointed, which areas of children's policy should a Minister for Children and Families for Northern Ireland have responsibility for? (Recommendation 39)**

We suggest that a Minister for Children and Families should have responsibility for the following areas of policy:

- special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including high needs funding
- alternative provision
- children's social care
- children in care, children in need and child protection

- adoption and care leavers
- early years and childcare
- family hubs and early childhood support
- disadvantaged and vulnerable children
- children and young people's mental health
- policy to protect against serious violence
- freedom of speech in education
- online safety and preventing bullying in schools

**Q52. Would having a dedicated Minister help to give full effect to recommendation 39, that is, give political leadership and focus to the intentions of the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 and to champion children and families within the government of Northern Ireland?**

We believe that a dedicated Minister for Children and Families would provide political leadership to champion the rights and views of children and families within the government of Northern Ireland. However, we recognise that at present, this is an impossibility without a functioning Assembly.

The lack of a functioning Assembly is adding ongoing delay to the progression and implementation of vital legislative and policy developments aimed at supporting and improving the lives of children and families across Northern Ireland. While we wait for the Assembly to function again, childhoods are continuing and the system is held back from developing and innovating to meet the changing needs within it, despite the tireless work of families and professionals. We urge all political parties across Northern Ireland to work together to reestablish a functioning Assembly as soon as possible, so that children and families are not left behind.

**Recommendation 53:** There should be an annual conference, with participation by young people and parents and all who seek to provide help, to track progress and with a key role for a proposed cross-cutting Children's Minister along with the independence of the Children's Commissioner in facilitating the conference.

**Q64. Are you content with the proposal to host a conference in Autumn 2024? (Recommendation 53)**

YES

**Q65. Are you content with the proposed theme of the conference? (Recommendation 53)**

YES - We support the proposed theme of the Conference; to 'reflect on what would be the contemporary state of children's social care and to review developments and progress in addressing issues which had been identified as needing attention and action'.

We support this focus as it keeps the issues and solutions raised through the extensive consultation process of the Review on the agenda. In order to ensure that the Review does not sit on the shelf, we recognise the Conference as an important opportunity for progress made on the recommendations to be shared and reflected on, particularly by children and young people in attendance. We particularly welcome the emphasis on their participation and involvement in the Conference and also encourage the Conference to ensure that carers, hosts and adoptive families are included.

We also identify that there will be a need for ongoing consultation on the implementation of the Review recommendations and that the Conference would be a good opportunity to continue seeking the views of stakeholders across the children's social care system in order to inform the development of policy and practice.