

Barnardos

Post Adoption
Service
Evaluation

Executive
Summary

Mandi MacDonald, Montse Fargas,
Suzanne Mooney, Stephen Coulter

May 2021



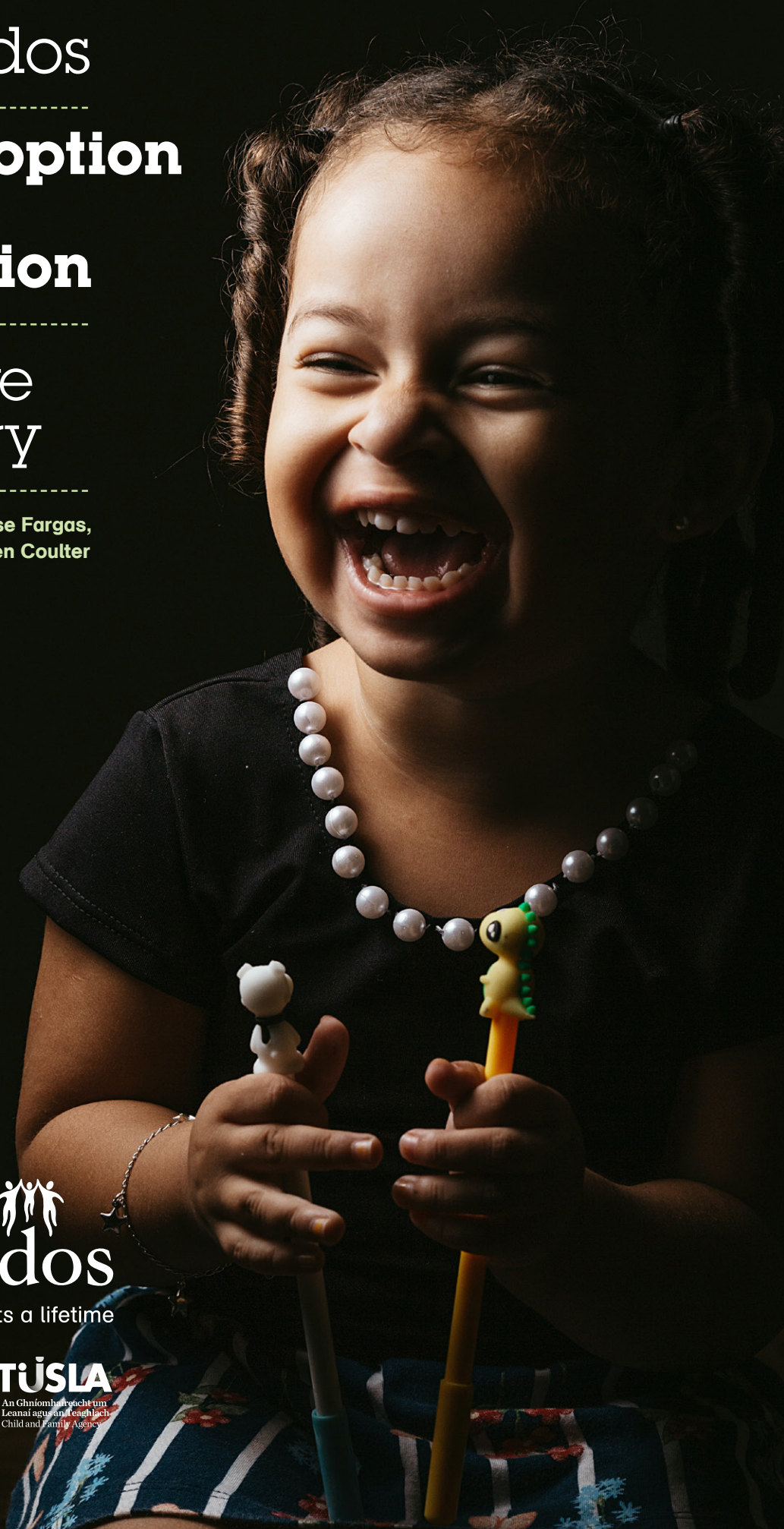
Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

TÚSLA
An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency





Barnardos Post Adoption Service Evaluation Executive Summary

The authors of this report are:

Mandi MacDonald, Montse Fargas, Suzanne Mooney, Stephen Coulter

May 2021

© 2021 Barnardos

Published by:

Barnardos, Christchurch Square, Dublin 8.

Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	5
Barnardos Post-Adoption Service	5
Therapeutic Approaches	7
Evaluation Methods	8
Summary of Key Findings	9
Adoptive Parents' Perspectives	9
Perspectives of Adopted Young People	11
Perspectives of Professionals	13
Participants' Suggestions for Service Enhancement	16
Conclusions	17
References	21
Acknowledgements	22

Foreword

I would like to welcome the evaluation of Barnardos Post Adoption Children's Service and the publication of the findings by Dr Mandi MacDonald and her team at Queens University Belfast. It is important that public services are subject to review to ensure value for money and the provision of good quality services to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and their families.

Since 2019 Barnardos have provided a National Post Adoption Service for children, commissioned by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla Adoption service. The service was originally set up in 2009 by Tusla, then known as the HSE Children and Families Directorate, in response to high level of demand from adoptive parents seeking support and advice to assist in the parenting of their adopted children. Many of these children, often having been exposed to early life trauma and abuse in addition to being adopted, required access to a specialised service to address their needs.

Barnardos who have a long history of providing a high-quality service to adopted adults, birth mothers and adoptive parents since 1977 were commissioned to provide this. The service was initially offered to children and families in the eastern region but due the level of demand for access to the service from all parts of the country it was subsequently expanded to a national service in 2019.

Tusla keenly recognises the need to provide a dedicated and specialist independent post adoption supports to compliment the services provided by our own National Adoption Social Work Teams and TESS, the education support service to children. The challenges these children face often impacts on all aspects of their lives including their attendance at school and their ability to manage the school environment.

Barnardos is now working in partnership with Tusla to provide individual and group supports to children and teenagers who were adopted in Ireland as well as from many countries around the world. On foot of the implementation of the Adoption Amendment Act 2017, the service will play a key part in supporting the increasing number of children who are adopted from the foster care system in support of the introduction of permanency planning in the child protection and welfare system.

This independent evaluation of the post adoption services for children demonstrates that Tusla's investment in expanding the service to have a national reach is delivering a high quality and relevant service for adopted children, teenagers, and parents.

Families have responded very positively to the range of supports available and the improved accessibility of these supports in terms of their location. There are now Barnardos Post Adoption Centres in Cork and Galway, as well as Dublin. The ongoing needs of this cohort will be continually monitored to ensure equal and easy access for all adopted children in the country to this specialised service.

The voices of the young people who took part in the study add to our understanding of the importance of accessible and empathetic professionals to assist them in navigating the complexities of adoption. The voices of the parents emphasise the ongoing need for focussed and specialised post adoption skills to support them with their, sometimes very challenging task, of parenting children who have sustained early loss and trauma.

I want to wish adopted children and their families health and happiness in to the future. Tusla, hopes that their partnership with Barnardos through the provision of this specialised service will assist in making this a reality.

Foreword by Ms Siobhan Mughan, National Manager for Adoption Services Tusla

Introduction

Children adopted from care, either internationally or locally, can have diverse, and often more complex, needs to their non-adopted peers. Many children adopted internationally from institutional care, or domestically from foster care, will have experienced significant early adversity, which can cause emotional, behavioural, developmental and attachment-related difficulties. However, research also suggests that adopted children can and do thrive because of the high commitment of adoptive parents, their responsive parenting (Koss *et al.*, 2020), and the availability of post-adoption support services aimed at supporting adoptive family relationships (Misca, 2014). Reinforcing the child's network of caring adults is a crucial component of care for children who have experienced early adversity or childhood trauma, and systemic approaches are recommended to support children who experience trauma-related difficulties (Bath, 2008), meaning that support for adoptive families should be targeted at both individual and interpersonal levels.

For services to be effective it is crucial that they are readily available to families in a timely manner. However, in a range of studies in different countries, adoptive families have experienced difficulties in accessing and availing of the services they need, when they are needed. In Ireland, the arrangements for the provision of adoption services have changed considerably over time, and with recent legislative reform, adoption is moving to a more central position within the child welfare system (O'Brien & Mitra, 2018). Thus, the quality and effectiveness of post-adoption services in meeting adopted children's needs should be examined.

In 2020 Barnardos commissioned the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work in Queens University Belfast in 2020 to evaluate the Post-Adoption Service to extend and deepen understanding of the value of the Post-Adoption Service model of work with participating children and parents, and to inform ongoing service development.

Please see the full report for detailed information on the service, its therapeutic approaches and evidence base, and evaluation findings.

Barnardos Post-Adoption Service

To address the needs of adopted children and families in Ireland, Barnardos National Post-Adoption Service (PAS) is funded by TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, to support parents to meet the needs of their adopted children and teenagers, many of whom have experienced significant early trauma. Initially the service had a single base in Dublin and offered therapeutic Post-Adoption services to children mainly adopted through intercountry adoption (ICA). From 2019, the service was made available to all adopted children, including those adopted from foster care, and was expanded to cover a national remit, with additional centres opened in Cork and Galway. As a result, the service saw a rapid increase in referrals, almost doubling in the first year of expansion – from 158 referrals in 2018 to 331 in 2019.

Aims of the Post-Adoption Service

The Post-Adoption Service aims to provide adopted children and young people and their families with the right support at the right time, tailoring intervention to meet identified need.

As a whole, the service seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- Enhance the wellbeing of each adopted child or person (including improved self-esteem with regard to their adoptive identity, increased capacity for learning and development, improved peer relationships);
- Support and strengthen the parent/child relationship and communication about adoption; and
- Enhance parenting capacity with regard to adoption-specific issues (e.g. birth parent contact, sharing background information, understanding the needs of adopted children).

This can be further broken down into the following outcomes:

- Improved parental understanding of the impact of early trauma on children and teenagers;
- Improved parental understanding of the additional tasks of attachment focused parenting;
- Opportunities for children to explore understanding of birth information, loss and identity issues;
- Increased parental strategies to increase their children's self-esteem and positively manage their children's behaviour;
- Improved relationships within the family; and
- Improved capacity for learning and development.

Service Overview

A range of services and interventions are provided to address the multifarious needs of adopted children and their parents and families. All services are trauma-informed, attachment-focused and adoption-specific. These services have been developed over time, drawing on models of international best practice (further detail on the main therapeutic approaches used within the service is provided below, and more fully in the main report). A full range of services is offered in the three regional centres. Current child and family services in brief include:

- A national helpline and email advisory service;
- Therapeutic services for adopted children and teenagers individually or together with their parents;
- Group work with children and young people:
 - ▶ Group work with children (8-11 years) and parents together; and
 - ▶ Group work with teenagers (13-15 years).

-
- Support for adoptive parents:
 - ▶ Group support and training for adoptive parents; and
 - ▶ Individual consultation sessions for adoptive parents.
 - School consultations and bespoke trainings (on request).

Barnardos Post-Adoption Service also provides therapeutic services for adopted adults and their birth and adoptive family members, and a group work support service for birth mothers and adopted adults. These services are not included in this evaluation report.

Therapeutic Approaches

There are three main models of therapeutic intervention employed by staff of Barnardos Post-adoption service:

- Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) (<https://ddpnetwork.org/>) holds that children who have been hurt and/or neglected within their families in their early years can suffer developmental trauma that results in difficulties in attachment; the children find it hard to feel safe and secure with their parents; and there are difficulties in intersubjectivity; the children find it hard to give and take in relationships. In this context parents can struggle to manage the child's behaviour and connect to them emotionally. DDP works actively with the parent-child 'dyad' as the platform for healing. Parents are taught a specialised, trauma-informed parenting approach while children learn emotional regulation and interpersonal relationship skills.
 - ▶ DDP has a developing research literature and is showing good promise of effectiveness and (to date) no evidence of harm, it is continuing to build its evidence base support via good-quality research studies, although it is still too early to state that it is an evidence-based therapy in the full technical sense.
- Theraplay (<https://theraplay.org/>) is a child and family therapy for building and enhancing attachment, self-esteem and trust. It is used with families of children who demonstrate the following behaviours: withdrawal, depression, noncompliance, regulatory problems, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or attachment issues/complex trauma. Theraplay sessions create an active, emotional connection between the child and parent or caregiver, with the aim of a changed view of the self as worthy and lovable, and of relationships as positive and rewarding. It utilises interactional play to re-create experiences of secure attachment formation between parent and child.
 - ▶ Theraplay has a strong established research literature, including both controlled and non-controlled studies, showing good promise of effectiveness and (to date) no evidence of harm. However, limitations of these studies mean that Theraplay needs to continue to build its evidence base particularly via good-quality controlled studies, if it to achieve the status of an evidence based therapy in the full technical sense.
- Sensory Attachment Intervention (SAI) (<https://www.sensoryattachmentintervention.com/>) holds that negative experiences in the womb and in early childhood impact on one's capacity to cope with stress throughout life. Traumatized children and adults tend to operate in persistent fear mode, which impedes the capacity for filtering out 'irrelevant' sensory experiences such as background sights and sounds. SAI involves dynamic activation and de-activation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems.

Parents are invited to participate in child-led play and learn about the process of self-regulation and co-regulation, and thus learn how to activate and how to inhibit arousal states, in a fun and nurturing way that is appropriate to the sensory attachment needs of their child.

- ▶ There is emerging evidence in support of a sensory-based approach to treatment and it has potential to demonstrate effective outcomes.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation aimed to identify:

- The range of need among service users;
- How need is addressed through the various service elements;
- The evidence base for the potential effectiveness of intervention approaches;
- Service users' assessment of the support offered;
- Referring professionals' assessment of the service accessibility and effectiveness;
- Priorities for potential service enhancement.

The evaluation sought the perspectives of a range of stakeholders and service users: adoptive parents, adopted young people, professionals in the field of adoption, and the PAS staff team. All participants had direct experience of the service. Data collection methods included:

- Documenting service processes and pathways;
- A review of the research evidence on the PAS main therapeutic approaches;
- An online survey for adoptive parents (completed by 204 adoptive parents);
- An online survey for professionals in the field of adoption (completed by 22 professionals);
- Semi-structured individual interviews with nine adoptive parents,
- Semi-structured individual interviews with 10 adopted young people (aged 12-18years);
- Semi-structured individual telephone interviews with eight professionals;
- Focus group interviews with PAS staff.

Survey response frequencies were calculated and content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) undertaken of qualitative data generated by open-ended survey questions, to organise comments into themes, quantifying how many participants shared each theme. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews were input to Maxqda data analysis software to facilitate an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical approval was granted by Tusla Research Ethics Committee. Initial approval for the evaluation was gained in May 2020. This coincided with nationwide restrictions on travel and social contact imposed by the Irish government to curb the spread of Covid-19. In response to pandemic restrictions, the PAS transitioned quickly to remote working practices, continuing

to deliver the service via telephone and video calls. The pandemic impacted the schedule of data collection for this evaluation. Online surveys were conducted as scheduled in May – June 2020. In-person interviews with adoptive families and PAS staff had to be postponed and an alternative Covid-safe protocol designed. Interviews subsequently took place in November 2020 via the Microsoft Teams video conferencing platform. At the time of data collection, therefore, the PAS service was being conducted via online video calls, telephone, and email.

Summary of Key Findings

Adoptive Parents' Perspectives

Online Survey for Adoptive Parents

- The 204 adoptive parents who completed the online survey collectively had experience of all elements that the PAS offers, and most had been engaged in two or more different aspects of service provision.
- Almost all respondents rated their experience of the service very highly and had found their engagement helpful.
- One fifth of adoptive parent respondents had approached the service because they had been feeling stressed about parenting (n=43). However, their concerns related primarily to emotional or behavioural difficulties for their adopted children. They sought support for the following issues for their child or young person (in order of prevalence):
 - ▶ Behavioural difficulties (n=108)
 - ▶ Anxiety (n=82)
 - ▶ Emotional immaturity (n=81)
 - ▶ Issues with social skills (n=67)
 - ▶ Attachment difficulties (n=66)
 - ▶ Difficulties with school (n=61)
 - ▶ Low self-esteem (n=56)
 - ▶ Aggressive or risk-taking behaviour (n=50)
 - ▶ Loss and grief (n=34)
 - ▶ Understanding birth information (n=25)
 - ▶ Race or ethnicity issues (n=23)
 - ▶ Support for contact with birth family (n=22).
- Many noted improvement in these areas as a result of engagement with the service. Direct benefits identified for adopted children included notable improvements in: emotional difficulties, behaviour problems, self-esteem and difficulties at school.

'In times of stress, when a parental ear won't suffice, our son has total confidence in expressing his feelings through Barnardos.'

- Two thirds of adoptive parents completing the survey indicated that their child had attended a group session for young people, and almost all (94%; 67) said this had been helpful.
- Most adoptive parents identified direct benefits to themselves in terms of: lowered stress; a better understanding of their child; feeling less isolated and more confident in their parenting; a better relationship with their child; feeling more comfortable communicating with their child; and better knowledge of how to access other supports.
- The predominant theme in comments to open-ended survey questions was the value of increased parental confidence engendered by the high level of: i) emotional support; ii) increased understanding of their children's needs; iii) and advice they received. The positive impact on the parents was seen as most significant contribution to helping their children.

'I felt there was no judgment being made of us even when I was admitting to having made mistakes in my dealings with some of my child's issues. I was reassured that I had done my best with the knowledge I had at that time. This was a great relief to me.'

'Contact with the service has completely changed my understanding of my son's difficulties and my interpretation of his behaviour. That alone is hugely helpful to me in approaching our challenges differently and hopefully more successfully.'

Interviews with Adoptive Parents

- Adoptive parents identified a range of issues that their children were struggling with, including: attachment; peer relationships (bullying and difficulties in making and keeping friends); lack of self-esteem and self-confidence; poor emotional regulation; behavioural difficulties; poor mental wellbeing; and identity issues.

'She probably will not ever get over the trauma but she definitely has learned to recognise what it has done in her life and what it does in her life and what she needs to manage it so she's a very, very different child now compared to what she was.'

- Adoptive parents were less explicit about their own needs. The two most common issues they mentioned were: understanding of the child's needs, feelings and behaviours; and appropriate guidance on how to deal with the children's behaviours.

'Well, it would be a different kind of parenting, not the kind of parenting you ever dreamt you would be doing, to be quite honest... as in when you're in a confrontational situation, to learn how to self-regulate yourself, and how to allow distance and how to repair basically.'

- Adoptive parents described PAS as beneficial and useful. They particularly valued the following features of the service provision:
 - ▶ The personal approach and feeling that they knew and were known by staff;
 - ▶ Staff were approachable and readily available;

- ▶ Staff were highly knowledgeable and experienced in adoption-related issues;
- ▶ The consistency in the staff team;
- ▶ Group sessions were well-organised, informative and helped them feel 'on the same boat' as other parents; and
- ▶ Staff communicating with the child's school outlining issues and how to deal with them.

'The parent workshops are a great place to share issues and concerns that adoptive parents understand... they were very, very well run sessions and you came away feeling you weren't alone, you weren't going crazy, you know, because it wasn't just you.'

'(PAS worker) was a complete breath of fresh air because she came across as if she knew exactly what we were talking about, was completely focused on adoption and the effect that adoption would have.'

- A particular benefit of the service was its long-term approach. Parents recognised that their children's issues often could not be resolved quickly and needed extended engagement that changed as they grew older. Parents valued the fact that their children were able to form a positive and long-lasting connection with their worker.

'You always felt that they were there for you and they were always willing to hear your issue no matter how small you felt it was or big you felt it was, they always would take the time.'

- Prior to the nationwide expansion, the geographical distance to attend services in Dublin had been prohibitive for some parents. Access to the service had increased with the opening of centres in Cork and Galway and was appreciated by parents who were able to make fuller use of the range of supports offered.

Perspectives of Adopted Young People

- The young people we spoke to highlighted the emotional experiences of adoptees, suggesting that a sense of insecurity and finding it hard to trust people might be common.
- The two main support needs they identified for adopted children and young people were:
 - ▶ The opportunity to talk openly about adoption; and
 - ▶ To have their experiences as adoptees understood by those around them.
- Young people identified four main needs among adoptive parents:
 - ▶ Insight to understand their adopted children's feelings;
 - ▶ Guidance on how to approach adoption related issues with their child;

- ▶ Skills to communicate openly about adoption;
- ▶ Emotional support to provide comfort when the things that adopted children say or do are hurtful or confusing.

'They (adoptive parents) are going to get things thrown at them by us that they are not prepared for, and I think they need a lot more insight into how an adopted child feels, not for their benefit but for like the parents benefit, and knowing how to deal with it and knowing not to get hurt by it as well ya know, there's a lot of comfort they need.'

- Like their parents, the young people we spoke to were very positive about their experience of the PAS and the benefits they had achieved through attendance at groups and individual sessions. As one young person said:

'It's definitely made my life and my family's life a lot better.'

- Young people very much appreciated the one-to-one opportunity to talk about personal issues with someone outside of their family. Individual sessions were a safe space in which to speak openly about their thoughts and feelings without fear of causing offence or hurt, as they felt they might with parents. They enjoyed learning more about adoption and about themselves.

'I found it quite difficult to talk to my parents about the situation and I was like one of the main worries about me being adopted was offending my parents so like if I said I missed my mum I'd feel that was very hurtful towards them.'

'They are so kind and they were there to listen and to help you get through it I found it so helpful.'

'I could say what was in my mind and just say it... I just needed to say it, get it out, get it out.'

- The aspects of the service that young people most appreciated were:
 - ▶ The personal approach of the service and consistency of the staff team, allowing them to get to know one or two staff members very well;
 - ▶ Longer term engagement meant that their worker had come to know and understand them;
 - ▶ Staff were flexible and responsive to their changing needs, offering more frequent sessions when these were needed, but not insisting on seeing the young person if things were 'good';
 - ▶ As they got older, they faced different challenges and appreciated the way their worker tailored the sessions to their changing interests and abilities;
 - ▶ Staff created a relaxed, welcoming and informal environment in which the sessions felt light and enjoyable; and
 - ▶ The opportunity to interact with adopted peers.

'I was able to open up was really it felt like I was able to take the pressure off my shoulders and like just inner stress you know let it out and just talk about it like she was able to give me advice sometimes about how to say it to my parents or how to say it to someone else.'

'Just happiness there would have been a lot of like sadness around me and that was never who I was because it was as I went into my teens it got worse and my parents always used to say where's the happy bubbly child gone, and they can honestly say they got that back since I have gone there.'

- The young people we spoke to identified three main benefits arising from their individual therapeutic sessions:
 - ▶ The opportunity to talk about adoption;
 - ▶ Gaining insight into their own needs and reactions; and
 - ▶ Learning to manage stress and difficult feelings.

'She's honestly just really helped me understand that not all of this needs to affect your life and that I do have a future that doesn't have to be based of the trouble I had when I was younger... now I am not half as upset about it.'

'It helped me in so many ways to love myself more.'

'It helps me understand things I do now or reasons I might think certain ways and it just all ties together now so.'

- They identified benefits that their parents had gained through engagement with the Post-Adoption Service:
 - ▶ Access to guidance about adoptive parenting;
 - ▶ A better understanding of the young person and their needs and behaviours; and
 - ▶ Emotional support to help them overcome feelings of worry and sadness.
- Several of the young people we spoke to reported that relationships within their family were more positive and harmonious following their engagement with PAS and that they were now more comfortable about talking openly with their parents.

Perspectives of Professionals

- Professionals recounted a wide range of needs of adopted children which were thought to vary depending on the individual child; their age and stage; their placement; whether they were inter-country or domestic adoptions; and their early life history, so that the support offered needed to be tailored rather than a 'one size fits all approach'. Common issues identified included:

- ▶ Sense of identity and belonging;
- ▶ Emotional dysregulation and anger outbursts;
- ▶ Poor social skills impacting children's capacity to make friends and their school experience; and
- ▶ Risk-taking behaviour.

'They need to know where they came from, who they are, and to be able to I suppose learn to accept the two identities.'

'The door doesn't get closed when the child gets to 5 or 10 or whatever... because each stage of development... brings up new questions... new concerns about their family origin... or the feelings that they have of being abandoned or feeling isolated... the families will need to have support to respond to that in a healthy way.'

- Complex child presentations were also reported to place considerable strain on the family system. Parent support was, therefore, highlighted as critically important. Participants spoke of how PAS worked very well with parents, helping them to see what they could do differently rather than focusing on changing the child's behaviours.

'As we all know... parents cannot support their children unless they are being supported themselves.'

- Intercountry adopted children's needs were thought to differ from domestic adoptions in the following ways:
 - ▶ Previous histories of institutionalisation which could result in developmental delays, behavioural challenges and sensory issues;
 - ▶ Children's unknown early life histories;
 - ▶ The abrupt nature of transition; and
 - ▶ Transracial adoption issues and identity challenges.
- Participants also noted some of the additional pressures experienced by adoptive parents who may have waited a long time to become a parent. This was thought to leave parents with few informal support opportunities with peers and reluctant to seek help with fears that they may be judged.

'You don't need judgment, you just need somebody to listen and say you know what we can help, we can help you with this... just that kind of confidence that it's not broken, that it is fixable.'

- Professional participants noted how adoptive parents benefited from a specialist service as adoptive parenting was considered different to 'normal parenting' given the complex range of children's needs.

-
- The fact that PAS offers a specialist postadoption service delivered the following benefits:
 - ▶ Parents could check out which issues were normal development issues and which were connected to adoption;
 - ▶ Long-term support for parents to adapt to children's changing developmental needs;
 - ▶ Supports parental wellbeing, which critically influences how children cope;
 - ▶ Supports parents to talk to their children about their history; and
 - ▶ Understands and responds supportively to children with behavioural difficulties and developmental delays.

'I am delighted that there is a service like this to refer families to. Adoption and the attachment/behavioural/mental health issues that can arise for these children are so specific to the adoption experience. I'm glad a specialist service exists.'

- Participants commented on the referral process, noting how the response had been swift and 'helpful' for both the parent and the professional. This was reported as a 'highlight' as it was thought to prevent family breakdown and encouraged professionals to refer to the service again.

'I feel confident when referring families to Barnardos Post-Adoption that they will receive an excellent service, and that they will be seen by very skilled workers who understand the issues for the children and their families. It is a very specialised service and an invaluable resource, and really important that it is available to adoptive children and their families whose issues can be really complex and challenging.'

- All professional participants spoke very highly of the service. A range of helpful practices were noted:
 - ▶ Working first with the adoptive parents to help them change or adapt their responses;
 - ▶ Avoiding problematising or 'blaming' the child;
 - ▶ Flexibility of the service in meeting the unique needs of the child and family;
 - ▶ Longer term involvement, with families able to return if and when needed;
 - ▶ Communication between the service and the referring professional; and
 - ▶ Outreach and responding to information requests about the service.
- Participants spoke positively of the outcomes of service engagement and identified the following benefits for children and young people:
 - ▶ Improved attachment;
 - ▶ Normalising help-seeking; and

-
- ▶ Meeting other adopted children with similar concerns.
 - Children were also thought to benefit from the services received by their parents:
 - ▶ Parental ability to respond more appropriately to the child's behavioural needs;
 - ▶ Talking openly and positively about birth families; and
 - ▶ Addressing issues of race and identity.
 - Adoptive parents were perceived to benefit from increased reassurance, confidence and hope, feeling that the service 'understood' their circumstances.
 - The independence of PAS from statutory social work was thought helpful to parents, allowing them the 'freedom to talk' about emerging challenges, which they might not have felt 'comfortable' to do with a social work service that had initially undertaken their pre-adoption assessment.

'The helpline was always a good starting point as they would get advice on the helpline and it was a way for parents to start trusting Barnardos, it was a way in.'

'I never got the sense that this was like a generic response to families that it was much more individualised... it was much more talking to families where they were at, at the time.'

- Parent group work allowed adoptive parents to meet others experiencing similar challenges, countering a sense of isolation.
- Given the changes to adoption in Ireland, professionals welcomed the recent Tusla funded expansion of the service to help support domestically adopted children whose needs they felt had been somewhat 'forgotten' with previously limited post-placement support.

Participants' Suggestions for Service Enhancement

- Each of our participant groups identified suggested priorities for further enhancing and developing what they considered an already very helpful service.
- Adoptive parents suggested:
 - ▶ Courses about parenting older children or teenagers;
 - ▶ More courses in general, particularly outside of Dublin, with more sessions; and
 - ▶ Issue-specific group work, e.g. For parents of children with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome.
- Young people suggested:
 - ▶ Having input to the group workshops from adopted young people;
 - ▶ Organising over-night trips for adopted young people to get to know each other better; and
 - ▶ More activity-based work in individual sessions.

-
- Professionals suggested:
 - ▶ Further extending the geographical reach and accessibility of the service in other regions of Ireland;
 - ▶ Outreach from PAS to local social work teams to build better working relationships with referrers, with increased knowledge of each other's work;
 - ▶ A consultation service for social workers, given their expertise and independence, which might enhance the services offered to children and families; and
 - ▶ Further expanding the current engagement and outreach with schools.

Conclusions

Across all elements of this evaluation, feedback from adoptive parents, adopted young people and professionals has been overwhelmingly positive. Below we summarise the key strengths of the PAS and identify some challenges for the future.

Where dissatisfaction was expressed, these views were in the minority. A few individuals who had seen little improvement in their family difficulties, while not representative of general experience, did raise important learning points (included below) that might inform ongoing service enhancement.

As this evaluation was ongoing, the emergent Covid-19 pandemic meant that the PAS underwent a rapid transition to remote working to adapt to government-imposed restrictions. This flexibility meant that families continued to be able to engage in the full range of supports using telephone and online video conferencing platforms. As restrictions ease, hopefully over the coming year, it is anticipated that group work and individual sessions will return to in-person delivery to facilitate the important relational aspects of this work. Drawing on service user feedback, however, it will be useful to reflect on whether there are aspects of the service that can be effectively delivered online, or where this mode of delivery is useful for extending access to families distant from the three PAS centres.

- The Post Adoption Service aims to address a range of needs that have been confirmed by research as particularly pertinent for adoptive families. It has a systemic orientation with a focus on strengthening family relationships, drawing on evidence informed, trauma-sensitive approaches that are appropriate for adopted children and young people.
 - ▶ The PAS focuses on supporting adopted children and adoptive parents with issues of loss, attachment difficulties, early childhood trauma, behavioural, social and educational difficulties, and parental stress. A broad range of international research concurs that, as a consequence of early adversity, adopted children, both intercountry and domestic adoptees (adopted from care), are more likely than their non-adopted peers to display this range of developmental and attachment-related difficulties.
 - ▶ The Barnardos' Post Adoption Service targets support at both individual and interpersonal levels within families – providing services to adoptees and adoptive parents, together and individually, with a primary aim of strengthening their

relationship. These services, which reinforce the child's network of caring adults, are a crucial component of care for children who have experienced early adversity or childhood trauma, and systemic therapeutic approaches, such as those offered by PAS, are recommended to support children who experience trauma-related difficulties (Bath, 2008).

- ▶ The main therapeutic approaches that inform PAS individual and family work – Theraplay, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, and sensory-based approaches – are recognised by the research and practice communities as appropriate to the needs of adoptive families. Emerging evidence of their effectiveness is encouraging.
- Timing and accessibility of post-adoption support services is crucial to their effectiveness – the PAS makes it easier for adoptive families in Ireland to benefit from support at their point of felt need.
 - ▶ The staged range of service elements offered by PAS – advice service, group workshops for young people and parents, individual and family therapeutic sessions – addresses varying levels of need. It also means that families can engage in some elements of support even if there is a wait for individual sessions.
 - ▶ The PAS fills a service gap for families whose children do not meet the threshold criteria for CAMHS intervention but who, nonetheless, have significant emotional and behavioural challenges and who need a service specialised in addressing attachment and trauma-related difficulties.
 - ▶ Some children attending the service may, however, need additional support from other services such as CAMHS, underlining the importance of ongoing awareness of the remit and referral pathways of other agencies.
 - ▶ Families can re-connect with the service if issues re-emerge, or they encounter changes as children grow and develop. The small staff team and relationship-based working make it easy and non-threatening for families to seek re-engagement when needed.
 - ▶ To date, the majority of referrals into the service have come from families themselves. The option for self-referral makes the service accessible to families directly without the added complexity and wait time of seeking referral by another professional. If referrals from child welfare services increase as anticipated, it would be important not to lose this option for self-referral for those who are not connected with other professional services.
- The potential to promote parental coping is a key strength of the service. While some adoptive parents saw little change in their children's difficulties, most reported that their own ability to cope with these issues had improved and this is likely to have a transactional benefit for their children over time.
 - ▶ Some children experience complex difficulties arising from developmental trauma and the PAS team understand that these issues are not resolved quickly. Families are helpfully encouraged to engage in the full suite of services on offer.
 - ▶ Use of subjective assessment tools at the beginning, mid-point and end of intervention can help service users to clarify their own realistic goals and recognise areas where progress has been made. Further developing a participatory approach to the use of assessment tools to may help families to measure change and identify the gains they have made together with the service.
- Barnardos PAS has undergone a period of rapid expansion. Initially situated in Dublin,

from 2019 the service has expanded to cover a national remit, with additional centres established in Cork and Galway. As a result, the service saw a rapid increase in referrals, almost doubling in the first year of expansion – from 158 referrals in 2018 to 331 in 2019. The majority of referrals up to March 2020 were made to the Dublin office, but significant numbers of families used the services offered in Cork and Galway. Opening of centres outside of Dublin has been welcomed by professionals and by adoptive families themselves who might previously have been prevented from accessing support due to travel constraints. This expansion has delivered clear benefits and presents some potential challenges.

- ▶ The service appears to have retained coherent working practices and a consistent ethos of supportive relationship-based support across its three centres. Going forward with a larger staff team, maintaining the following are likely to be important for sustaining the consistency of approach across the service: access to shared training in therapeutic approaches; maintaining a sense of team cohesion; and agreeing clear assessment, engagement and closure protocols.
- ▶ Documented use of robust, well-developed screening or assessment tools, such as those recently implemented, may have some benefits for the expanded service: help document outcomes for funders; help families identify change; help staff assess need, tailor intervention, agree closure and referral to other services as needed.
- Families appear to have particularly benefitted from the option for longer-term participation with the service. This is an evident strength of the service, but with PAS expansion it may be challenging to sustain this extended engagement.
 - ▶ Young people and parents valued the opportunity to get to know, and become known by, their PAS worker over an extended period of engagement. This enabled the therapeutic support to be tailored flexibly to the young person's changing developmental needs.
 - ▶ Extended engagement and consistency of worker has been possible because PAS has been delivered by a small, stable staff team. As the service expands, staff turnover is likely to become more of an issue.
 - ▶ It may be helpful to consider what realistic expectations should be communicated to families about the timeframe for intervention.
 - ▶ Similarly, it will be important to maintain clear protocols and assessment guidelines, consistent across the service, for when and how to end therapeutic engagement.
- Most of the PAS family work to date has been with intercountry adoption, reflecting legislation and patterns of adoption in Ireland. The staff team have developed a wealth of understanding and expertise relating to the needs and experiences of internationally adopted children and their families. It is anticipated that the service is likely to see an increase over coming years in referrals of Irish children adopted from foster care. Research has shown that domestic adoptees experience many of the same issues as intercountry adoptees and staff expertise is largely transferable to their needs. However, their experiences are also distinct in a number of ways.
 - ▶ Adoption is moving to a more central position within the Irish child welfare system (O'Brien & Mitra, 2018). From January 2014 to December 2019, there were 123 adoptions from long-term foster care, 60 of which (49%) involved children aged over 16 (late age adoptions from long-term foster care). While the numbers of children adopted by their foster carers in Ireland is currently low, rates are slowly rising, from 17 in 2013 (AAI, 2015) to 25 in 2018 (AAI, 2018).

- ▶ Children adopted from foster care are likely to be engaged with a range of professionals and this can make for a potentially more complex engagement with families as part of a multi-agency network of intervention and support. Because of their varied disciplinary backgrounds, the PAS staff team are well equipped for effective inter-disciplinary working.
- ▶ As the PAS becomes a more formally integrated component of Tusla's suite of support provision for adoptive families, a challenge may be to retain their valued independence and autonomy while nurturing good communication and collaboration with statutory children's services.
- ▶ Children adopted from foster care have some different identity challenges from their intercountry adopted peers. They are also more likely to have ongoing contact with birth relatives throughout childhood, and thus have a closer encounter with the complex dynamics associated with dual adoptive and birth kinship. The PAS team already has close links with adoption support providers in the United Kingdom where adoption from foster care is much more prevalent, and are therefore well placed to learn from UK experience both in terms of effective intervention and potential challenges.
- The adopted young people and adoptive parents we spoke to as part of this evaluation were insightful and generous in sharing their experiences for the benefit of other families. A strength of PAS is the sense of connection to the service and staff team felt by young people and parents. Ongoing service development will be enhanced by incorporating service users' voices and co-production with experts by experience.
- Barnardos PAS delivers a specialised service tailored to the needs of adoptive children and families that is rated highly by service users and referring professionals. The effectiveness of the service is driven by the sensitivity and dedication of the staff team who have garnered a wealth of specialist adoption-specific expertise over many years. It is crucial that these highly 'adoption-competent' supports (Atkinson *et al.*, 2013) are retained in the process of expansion and change. There is limited literature documenting effective post adoption supports. We believe it would be useful for PAS and the wider post adoption research and practice communities to systematically capture the experiences and outcomes of service engagement through analysis of longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data, possibly in partnership with a research institution.

References

- AAI. The Adoption Authority of Ireland (2015), *Annual Report 2015*. Available at: <https://aai.gov.ie/images/Publications/Annual-Report-2015.pdf>
- AAI. The Adoption Authority of Ireland (2018), *Annual Report 2018*. Available at: https://aai.gov.ie/images/Publications/AAI_Annual_Report_2018.pdf
- Atkinson, A. J., Gonet, P. A., Freundlich, M., & Riley, D. B. (2013), Adoption competent clinical practice: Defining its meaning and development, *Adoption Quarterly*, 16(3-4), 156-174.
- Bath, H. (2008), The three pillars of trauma-informed care, *Reclaiming children and youth*, 17(3), pp.17-21.
- Koss, K. J., Lawler, J. M., & Gunnar, M. R. (2020), Early adversity and children's regulatory deficits: Does postadoption parenting facilitate recovery in post-institutionalized children?, *Development and Psychopathology*, 32(3), 879-896.
- Misca, G. (2014), The 'Quiet Migration': Is Intercountry Adoption a Successful Intervention in the Lives of Vulnerable Children?, *Family Court Review*, 52(1), 60-68.
- O'Brien, V. and Mitra, S. (2018) *An Overview of Adoption Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland*. Available at: https://www.irelandwebsite.com/images/Report_2_An_Overview_of_Policy_and_Legislative_Change_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the parents, young people and the professionals working in this field who took the time to respond to our surveys and participate in interviews. We appreciate the honesty and the level of detail with which they shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

We would also like to thank Barnardos Post Adoption Service management and staff – this evaluation could not have been completed without their enthusiasm, hard work and organisational skills.

Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by Tusla Research Ethics Committee and we would like to thank the review group for their guidance and careful consideration of the project methodology.

This study was initiated and funded by Tusla in partnership with Barnardos. We welcome their commitment to understanding and learning from the experiences of adoptive families, and their contribution to identifying and sharing best practice in post adoption support.

The authors of this report can be contacted via Queens University Belfast:

Dr Mandi MacDonald

Email: m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk

