

Report of Consultations with Children and Young People on how they would like to have their views heard during their adoption order hearings in the Adoption Authority of Ireland or the Court to inform the drafting of regulations under the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017



August 2018

Disclaimer: While the views of children and young people expressed in this report are a precise account of what they said at the consultations, there may be some instances where they are inaccurate or do not reflect current Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI) practice. A number of the children were adopted at an early age or a number of years ago. The AAI undertook a consultation with children and young people in 2016 on adoption order hearings. As a result of that consultation process the AAI took a number of specific actions in relation to improving its office space, providing child friendly material on the process before the adoption order day, hearing the views of the child and providing a memento of the adoption order day. The full report is available on the AAI website.

Index

Executive Summary.....	4
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	8
Chapter 2: Consultation Day and Methodology.....	10
Chapter 3: Consultation Findings.....	12
Chapter 4: Recommendations.....	38
Appendix A.....	43
Appendix B.....	54
Appendix C.....	60
Appendix D.....	63
Appendix E.....	66

Executive Summary

Background

- This report details the findings of consultations with children and young people to inform the drafting of adoption regulations that will set out how the Adoption Authority of Ireland or Court will hear the views of the child in his or her adoption order hearings.
- The children and young people consulted had already been adopted or were currently going through the adoption process.

Consultation objectives

- The main objectives of the consultation were to get the views and experiences of children and young people on expressing their own views to the Adoption Authority of Ireland or the Court, on nominating a person to express their views, and on who they would like that person to be.

Children and young people's Advisory Group

- An Advisory Group of children and young people who had been adopted or were in the process of being adopted was established to help advise the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the adoption consultation methodologies and process.
- The children and young people's Advisory Group met on three separate occasions in the DCYA to pilot the consultation methodology.
- The findings identified by children and young people from the Advisory group sessions are included in the report as the Advisory Group members did not take part in the consultation day as participants.

Please insert a heading and very short paragraph on the pilot sessions using bullet points, noting that the findings of the pilot are relevant and included in the report because the children in the Advisory Group did not take part in the consultation day as participants.

Consultation day

- The consultation day took place on Saturday the 24th of March 2018 in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in Dublin.

- Children and young people were recruited for the consultation through Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland.
- In total, ten children and young people aged 12 – 17 years took part in the consultation.
- Children and young people from the Advisory Group also attended the consultation but were not consultation participants.

Please insert a concise description of the methodology here under a sub-heading and use bullet points to outline the methods.

MethodologyThe methodologies for the consultation included:

- Individual lifelines exercise
- Consensus building workshop based on the question, *‘What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption journey?’*
- Sticky wall exercise based on the question, *‘Who are the people involved in your adoption journey?’*
- Jotter page session’ on each category of person involved in the journey answering two questions: *‘How did they help you and listen to you?’* and *‘How should they help you and listen to you?’*
- Sticky wall exercise based on the question, *‘What are good ways to explain to children and young people what will happen at the adoption hearing?’*
- Sticky wall exercise based on how children and young people would like to be heard at their adoption hearing
- Poster walls of ideas with the questions, *‘How I felt on Adoption Day’* and *‘Our ideas for making Adoption Day better’*

It is important to note that the children and young people who took part in the consultations did not necessarily understand the unique and different roles of Tusla, the Adoption Authority or the Courts in their individual adoptions. The consultation methodology enabled the children and young people to identify the important aspects and milestones in the adoption process from their own lived experience and they named the entire process ‘the adoption journey’ and the adoption order hearing ‘adoption day’.

Please insert a sub-heading here entitled ‘Findings’

The findings need to be described in policy language with less descriptive text and more impact. Please use bullet points and reduce the text considerably.

Findings

The key consultation findings were:

- Children and young people identified their adoption order hearing as a very significant milestone in their lives and making it a 'special day' was perceived to be the most important aspect of their adoption process.
- The majority of the children and young people would have liked to speak for themselves at their adoption order hearing.
- However, children and young people also felt it was important to have the right to choose not to speak at their adoption order hearing.
- Children and young people would like to be asked more questions at their adoption order hearing and have the opportunity to speak about themselves and the adoption process in more detail.
- Children and young people would like to choose from a list of ways to have their voices heard in adoption order hearings, including through a pre-recorded video or audio recording, a letter or note, drawings, presentations and flashcards.
- If children and young people do not want to speak at their adoption order hearing, they would like to select someone else to speak on their behalf, e.g. parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, godparents, friends or social workers.
- It was recommended that adoption order hearings should be longer and children and young people and their parents should have the opportunity to speak about their adoption process if they wish.
- The key recommendation to improve adoption order hearings was to make them less intimidating and less formal, especially for younger children.
- It should be noted that the Adoption Authority of Ireland have taken measures to strengthen provision for children and young people to be heard and have their views taken into account in the context of Adoption Order hearings affecting them following consultations with children and young people in 2016.

- Suggestions for making adoption order hearings more child friendly included developing materials for younger children such as books, games and colouring pages, an information video, an information letter, developing a child/youth friendly website and online resources.
- Again, it should be noted that the Adoption Authority of Ireland have already taken some of these measures following their 2016 consultation with children and young people. For example, the reception area and family rooms in the Adoption Authority have been redecorated to make them brighter, less formal and more welcoming following the consultation. Books, games and toys are also available.
- Finally, it was suggested that a children and young people’s advisory group should be set up to consult with children and young people on an on-going basis about adoption order hearings.

About this report

This report details the findings of consultations with children and young people to inform the drafting of adoption regulations that will set out how the Adoption Authority of Ireland or Court will hear the views of the child in his or her adoption order hearings. The children and young people consulted had already been adopted or were currently going through the adoption process.

Background information

In November 2012, the Children and young people Referendum was passed giving approval to the insertion of a new Article in to the Constitution. The Thirty-First Amendment of the Constitution (Children and young people) Act 2012 inserting Article 42A titled “Children and young people” into the Constitution was signed into law on 28th April 2015. Article 42A of the Constitution relates to the voice of the child in adoption as follows:

Provision shall be made by law for securing, as far as practicable, that in all proceedings referred to in subsection 1° of this section in respect of any child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the views of the child shall be ascertained and given due weight having regard to the age and maturity of the child.

The primary purpose of the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 is to give effect to Article 42A (Children and young people) of the Constitution, in so far as it relates to adoption.

The Minister for Children and young people and Youth Affairs provided in the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 that Regulations may be made in relation to how children and young people views heard during their adoption order hearings in the Adoption Authority of Ireland or the Court. She also committed to entering into a consultation process with children and young people and young people on how they would like to have their views heard to inform the drafting of these regulations.

The DCYA Adoption Policy Unit collaborated with the Participation Unit of the Department in planning a consultation process. The Participation Unit assigned the development and conducting of the

consultation process to Hub na nÓg, which is the Department's national centre of excellence on children and young people's participation in decision-making. The Hub developed a methodological approach, which included the establishment of an Advisory Group of children and young people to work with Hub na nÓg on the most appropriate consultation methods, pilot those methods and advise on recruitment of children for the consultation process. An Advisory Group of five children and young people was established in November 2017. Children on the Advisory Group were recruited with the assistance of Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland and ranged in age from 12 – 17 years. All members of the Advisory Group had been adopted or were in the process of being adopted. As noted in the Executive Summary, the views of the pilot sessions conducted with the Advisory Group are included in this report.

Objectives of the Consultation

There were two main areas that the consultation focused on getting children and young people and young people's views and/or experiences on:

1. expressing their own views to the Adoption Authority of Ireland or the Court, and;
2. nominating a person to express their views, and who they would like that person to be.

In addition, it was acknowledged that ascertaining the views of the child is also part of the Tusla – the Child and Family Agency adoption assessment process. While it was expected that children and young people and young people's experiences of this process would also be captured in the consultation, the key objective was to discover their experiences in having their views heard as part of the formal adoption process, specifically in front of the Board of the Adoption Authority of Ireland.

Chapter 2: Consultation Day and Methodology

About the consultation day

The consultation day took place on Saturday the 24th of March 2018 in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Mespil Road, Dublin. The consultation began at 11am and finished at 3pm. Members of the Advisory Group attended the consultation, welcomed the other children and explained the purpose of consultation. Members of the DCYA Children Hub na nÓg also provided information on the consultation. The consultation process was facilitated by staff from Hub na nÓg.

Recruitment of children and young people

Children and young people were recruited for the consultation through Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland, who issued letters and invitation packs to families inviting children to take part in the consultations. The recruitment process was slow due to the small number of children adopted every year in Ireland and the sensitive nature of the issue. Initially, it had been envisaged that there would be two consultation days, one with younger children and one with young people. However, due to the small cohort of children who responded to the invitation to participate, only one consultation was held.

About the children and young people

In total, ten children and young people took part in the consultation day. The Advisory Group also attended the consultation day. One young person who had only attended one Advisory Group meeting also took part in the consultation. Of the ten children and young people who took part, five were male and five were female. Children and young people ranged in age from 12 – 17 years. Two children and young people were aged 12 years, three aged 13 years, one aged 14 years, two aged 15 years and two aged 17 years. There was good geographical spread among participants with children and young people attending from counties Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Meath, Monaghan, Tipperary, Waterford and Wicklow. The majority of the children and young people were already adopted, some very recently and others at various stages from early childhood.

Consultation Methodology

The methodologies for the consultation were designed by the DCYA Hub na nÓg Team. As was previously outlined, the consultation methodologies were piloted with the Children and Young People's Advisory Group and adjusted according to their recommendations (see **Appendix C** for full details of the consultation methodology).

Chapter 3: Findings

Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings from the pilot sessions with the Advisory Group and the consultation day with children and young people on adoption regulations.

Findings from the pilot sessions with the Advisory Group

What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption journey?

The Advisory Group identified the following most important things for children and young people about the adoption process or journey:

- **Adoption Day:**
 - children and young people's feelings on the day, e.g. feeling happiness, loved, whole, accepted, proud, nervous, excited;
 - how official and special the day was;

- the legal aspect of the day.
- **Social Workers:**
 - the important role of social workers in the process such as teaching children and young people about the adoption process and ensuring they fully understand the process and its length;
 - asking children and young people what their wishes are in the adoption process at the beginning of the process;
 - making sure children and young people are happy during their adoption journey;
 - meeting with children and young people more often during the process;
 - being more understanding of children and young people;
 - using the right terminology for family members, e.g. step-siblings.
- **Biological Family:**
 - letting children and young people know about urgent hereditary medical conditions;
 - birth parents having a choice in relation to a child's adoption;
 - explaining to children and young people what their biological family know about them and what they are allowed to know about them;
 - letting children and young people know if their biological family would like to know about them.
- **Rules and Length of the Journey:**
 - how long the adoption process takes;
 - explaining to children and young people the length of the adoption journey, making overturning more difficult;
 - explaining how children and young people's adoption orders can be overturned.

Who are the people involved in children and young people's adoption journey?

Children and young people on the Advisory Group identified the following people who were involved in their adoption journey:

- The Adoption Authority of Ireland, e.g. Chairman Dr Geoffrey Shannon, adoption officials;
- Social workers, e.g. child/parent's social worker;
- Adoptive, foster or step parents;
- Birth parents/family;

- Relations, e.g. grandparents, aunties, uncles;
- Siblings;
- Godparents;
- Friends and neighbours;
- Themselves (children and young people).

How children and young people want to be heard at the adoption hearing?

Key findings identified by children and young people from the Advisory Group in relation to how they would like to be heard at adoption hearings included:

- The majority of children and young people from the Advisory Group stated they would like to speak for themselves at their adoption hearing. However, some children and young people said they would prefer not to speak at their adoption hearing as they found it “very intimidating” and described feeling “nervous” and “scared.”
- Ways in which children and young people would like to communicate at the adoption hearing included reading out something they had written about themselves, e.g. a letter; making an audio recording or video that would be played at the adoption hearing; a drawing; a PowerPoint presentation and flashcards.
- If children and young people did not want to speak at their adoption hearing, people they would like to speak on their behalf identified included parents, siblings, aunt/uncle, godparents, grandparents and friends.
- Children and young people felt it was important for the person speaking on their behalf to be someone they trust and knows them very well.
- What children and young people would like the person speaking on their behalf to talk about included their life, experiences, interests, achievements, family, why they want to be adopted and how much they know about it.

Children and young people’s ideas for making Adoption Day better

Ideas for making Adoption Day better put forward by the Advisory Group, many of whom found the day very intimidating, included:

- Have an option to allow the child/young person to speak at the hearing instead of their parents

- Decorate the room in an age appropriate manner to ease the pressure
- Lessen the amount of 'suits' in the room at the hearing
- Provide the option of a one-on-one meeting between the child/young person (and their parents) and the Chairman of the Adoption Authority where they are asked about their adoption so they feel more confident when being asked in the formal adoption order hearing
- Ask children and young people questions such as 'Are you sure you want to be adopted?' and 'How do you feel about this?'

Findings from the consultation day

Lifelines exercise

Children and young people participated in an individual lifeline exercise where they were asked to, "Write and draw the important things you remember in your life" on a large lifeline sheets with clouds/speech bubbles. They were then asked to share whatever they wanted with the group.



The majority of children and young people mentioned their Adoption Day or being adopted in their lifelines, which shows it was a very important milestone in their lives. Even those who did not remember their Adoption Day, as they were young children and young people, featured it in their lifelines. The adoption of siblings was also mentioned in some lifelines. One child mentioned going to the High Court in their lifeline and described it as “very intimidating.”

- *“Adoption Day, don’t really remember it, but have seen pictures of it.”*
- *The High Court was very intimidating. There was a lot of people and I felt very nervous.”*



Important family events also featured in many children and young people’s lifelines. These included siblings and other family members being born, siblings being adopted, parents getting married and meeting birth parents for the first time.

- *“My mum and dad got married.”*
- *“Arrival of my foster sister.”*
- *“Met dad for the first time.”*

The majority of children and young people mentioned starting primary or secondary school as important occasions in their lives, including completing the Leaving Certificate. Some children and young people who were fostered indicated they had moved schools on numerous occasions and starting school was difficult as they did not know anyone. Moving to a new house or foster home were also mentioned as significant events by many children and young people.

- *"Starting secondary school all by myself."*
- *"Finishing my leaving cert."*



Religious ceremonies such as First Communion and Confirmation were identified as important life events by children and young people in their lifelines.

- *"Communion, lots of money!"*

Other life events mentioned by children and young people in lifelines included starting a new activity, e.g. acting, singing; joining a sports club; winning sports competitions; school trips; school plays; learning to ride a bike; getting a family pet; having an accident, e.g. breaking a bone; getting a gift for Christmas; their family building a new house; and meeting a hero.

➤ *“First learned to ride a bike.”*

➤ *“Getting our family dog.”*

What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption journey?

Children and young people took part in a consensus building workshop to reach consensus on the question, *“What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption journey?”*. A number of key issues were identified in the consensus building workshop. Children and young people then voted on what are the most important things for children and young people about the adoption journey. The results of the vote were as follows:

- Special day (Adoption Day)- 7 votes
- Understanding what’s going on- 6 votes
- Child’s opinion – 5 votes
- Takes too long – 5 votes
- A caring and safe environment- 4 votes
- Support – 3 votes
- Comfortable about the journey- 3 votes

Special day (Adoption Day)

Children and young people identified their Adoption Day being a special day as the most important aspect of their adoption journey. Children and young people enjoyed going to Dublin for the day for their adoption order hearing.

➤ *“You get to go to Dublin for the day.”*

Understanding what's going on

Understanding what is going on in the adoption process was highlighted as the next most important part of the adoption journey for children and young people. Children and young people felt they should be taught about the adoption process, helped to understand what is happening in the process, to feel included in the process, to be spoken to honestly about the process and for their opinions and wishes to be respected during the process.

- "To be helped understand what's going on."
- "To feel in the loop/included."

Child's opinion

Children and young people's opinions were identified as the next most important aspect of the adoption process. According to those consulted, asking children and young people for their opinion on the adoption process and letting them have a say was a very important part of the journey for them. Ensuring children and young people understand the process and their right to have an opinion was also considered to be very important.

- *"To have an opinion."*

Takes too long

The next most important issue highlighted by children and young people about the adoption journey was the length of the adoption process. Children and young people felt the adoption process takes too long and should be much shorter.

- *"It takes too long!"*

- *“I had forgotten about my adoption until I got the letter because it took so long.”*

Issues associated with the length of the adoption process were also highlighted by children and young people at the consultation.

- *“When it takes so long you aren’t allowed get a passport and you can’t travel and it causes problems.”*

One child discussed their adoption taking a long time because their birth parents disagreed with the adoption. They felt the adoption process should be shorter and they should have had more of a say in the process.

- *“I think it takes too long because they have to ask other people. It takes longer because my parents disagree with what I want. So, I would like it to be a shorter process, and for people to listen to me.”*

A caring and safe environment

Having a caring and safe environment during their adoption journey was the next most important issue mentioned by children and young people. This included a safe home environment, a caring family and privacy.

- *“A safe home.”*

Support

Ensuring children and young people have support during their adoption journey was the next most important issue identified. Children and young people felt it was very important to have support from family and friends and to have someone to talk to about the adoption process.

➤ *“To make sure the children and young people have support.”*

➤ *“Someone to talk to.”*

Comfortable about the journey

Finally, feeling comfortable about the adoption journey was considered to be important by children and young people. Those consulted judged it to be important that children and young people feel comfortable about their adoption, not to feel worried or afraid of the adoption hearing or about being adopted and not to feel pressured during the adoption process. Having as few social workers as possible involved in the adoption process was suggested to ensure children and young people feel more comfortable about their adoption journey.

➤ *“To be comfortable about the adoption.”*

➤ *“When it comes to the big day don’t be afraid when you get adopted.”*

Who are the people involved in children and young people’s adoption journey?

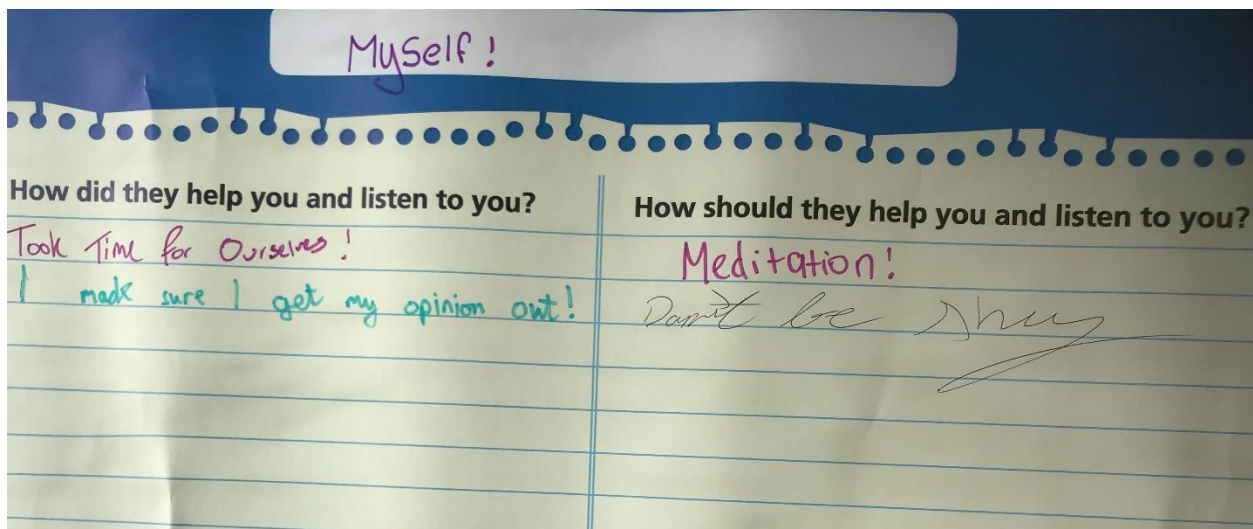
Children and young people were asked, *“Who are the people involved in your adoption journey?”* (right up to the adoption hearing). They wrote their ideas on the A5 pages and grouped them into categories on the sticky wall. The people involved in children and young people’s adoption journey identified were:

- Myself (children and young people)
- Family
- Friends
- Social workers
- The Adoption Authority of Ireland
- The judge

Children and young people then took part in a 'jotter page session' on each category of person involved in the journey answering two questions:

- How did they help you and listen to you?
- How should they help you and listen to you?

Myself:



How did they help you and listen to you?

According to children and young people, the best way to help themselves was to take time for themselves and make sure their opinion was heard.

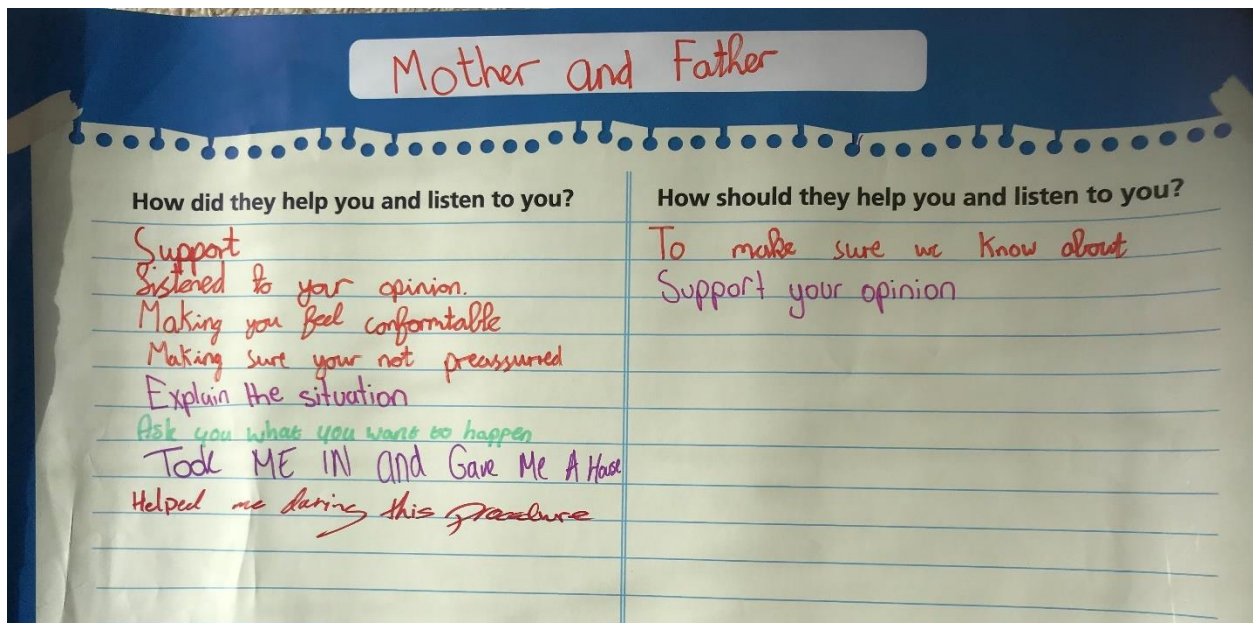
- *"I made sure I got my opinion out!"*

How should they help you and listen to you?

Children and young people suggested they could have helped and listened to themselves through not being shy and relaxation methods such as meditation.

- "Don't be shy."

Mothers and fathers:



How did they help you and listen to you?

The ways in which mothers and fathers helped and listened to children and young people during the adoption journey included offering support and help during the process, listening to their opinions, asking them what they would like to happen, explaining the situation, making them feel comfortable, less pressurised and providing them with a home.

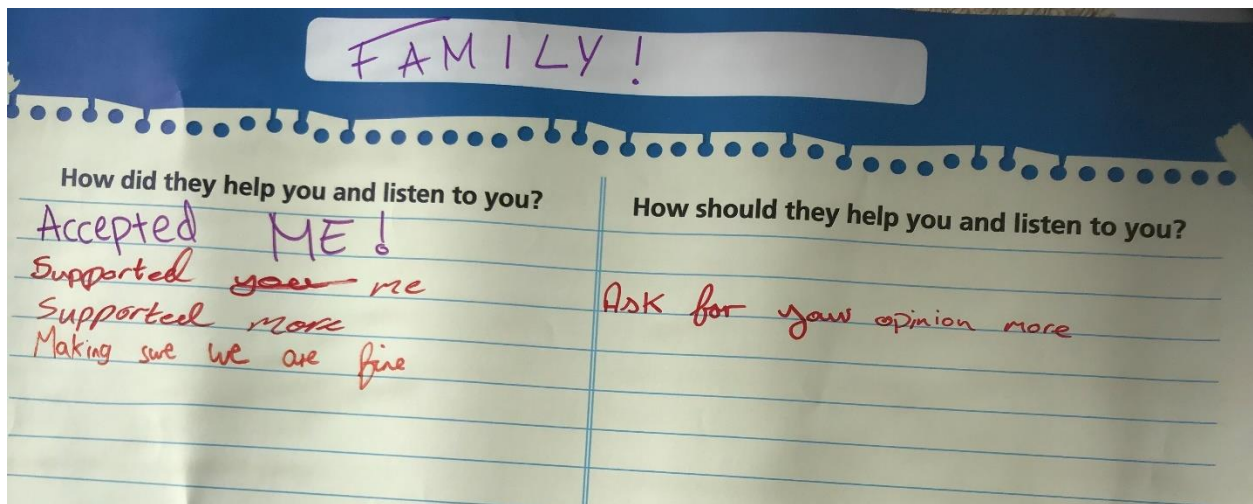
- *“Helped me during the procedure.”*

How should they help you and listen to you?

Children and young people felt mothers and fathers should help and listen to them during the adoption journey through making sure they have enough information on the process and by supporting their opinions on it.

- *“To make sure we know about it.”*

Family:



How did they help you and listen to you?

How children and young people’s families helped and listened to them included by supporting them, accepting them and making sure they were okay.

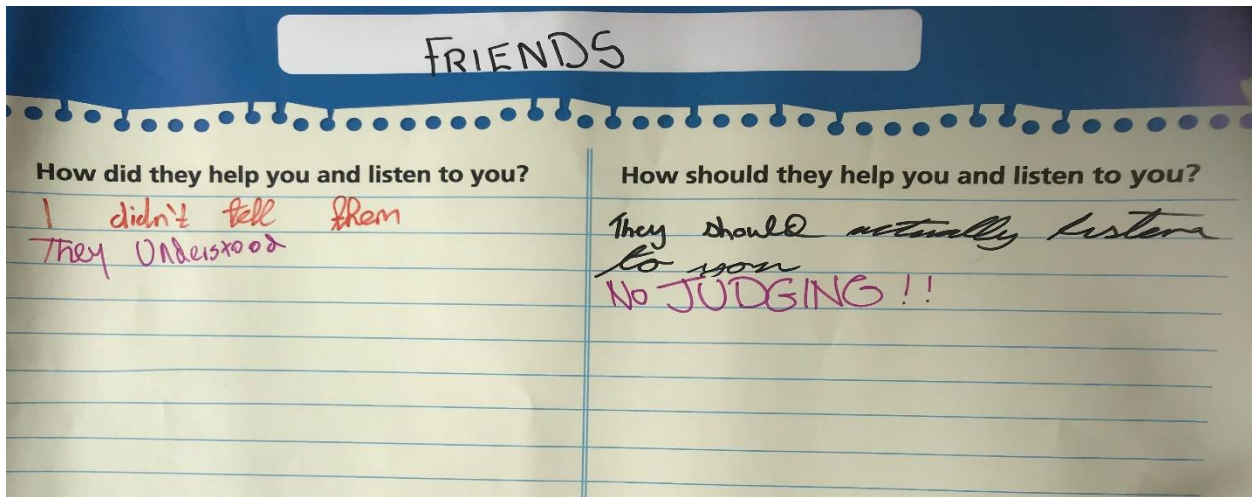
- *“Making sure we are fine.”*

How should they help you and listen to you?

Children and young people felt their families should have helped and listened to them by asking for their opinions more.

- *“Ask for your opinion more.”*

Friends:



How did they help you and listen to you?

While some children and young people said their friends helped them and listened to them during the adoption journey by understanding them and the process they were going through, others said they did not tell their friends about their adoption journey.

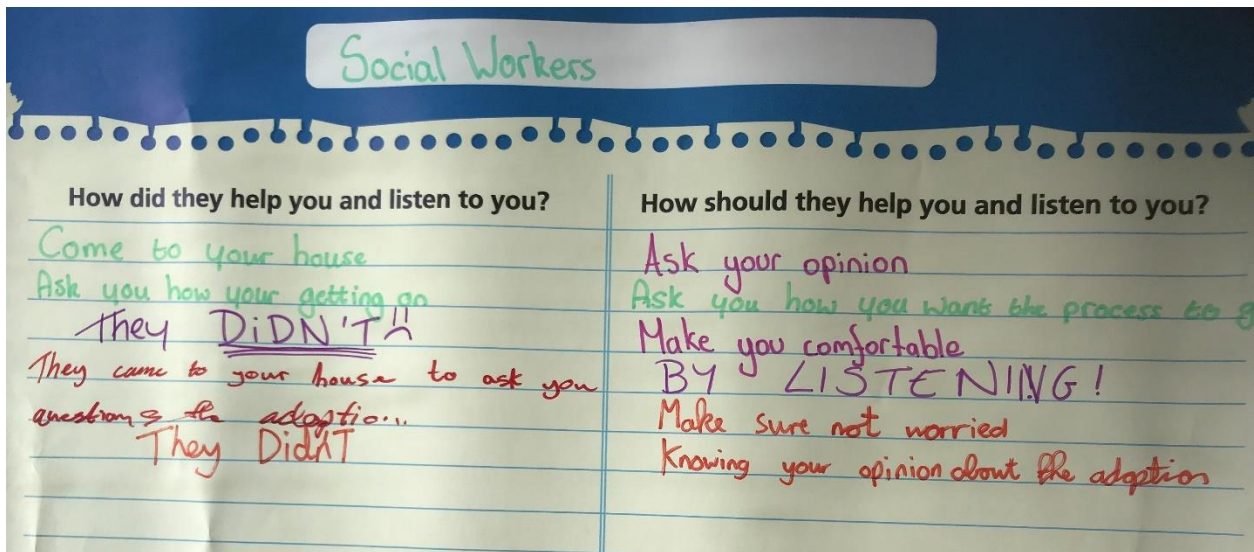
- *“I didn't tell them (friends).”*

How should they help you and listen to you?

Children and young people suggested friends should have helped and listened to them during their adoption journey by listening to them more and not judging them.

- "No judging!"

Social workers:



How did they help you and listen to you?

According to children and young people, the way social workers helped them during their adoption journey was through visiting them in their homes, asking them about their adoption and how they were getting on. However, some children and young people felt their social workers did not help or listen to them during their adoption journey.

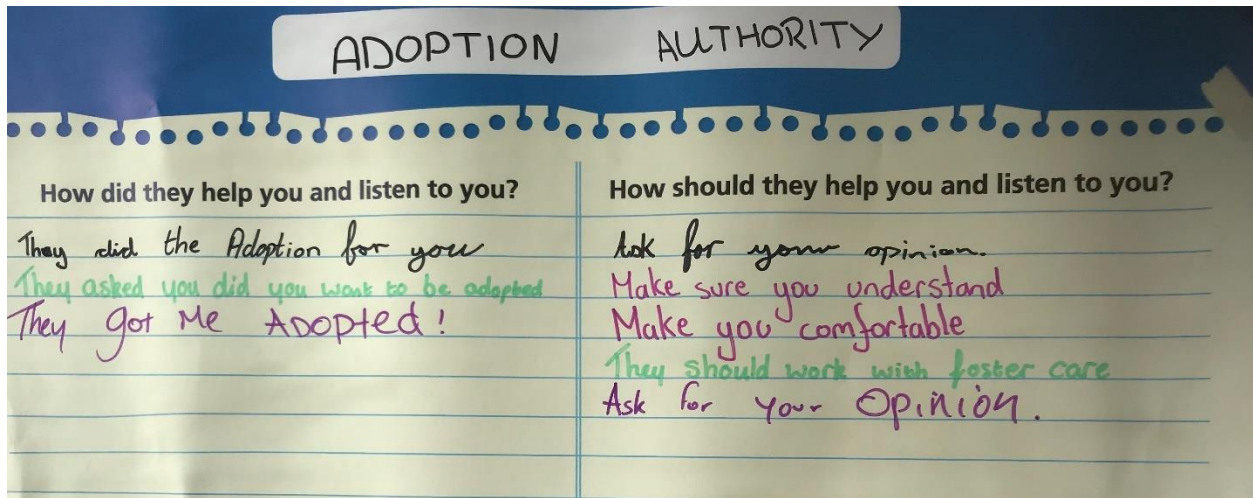
- "They (social workers) came to the house to ask you questions about the adoption."

How should they help you and listen to you?

The key recommendations made by children and young people in relation to how social workers should have helped and listened to them during their adoption journey included asking for their opinions, asking them how they would like the process to go, listening to them, making them feel comfortable and making sure they were not worried about the process.

- *“By listening!”*

The Adoption Authority of Ireland:



How did they help you and listen to you?

The main way in which the Adoption Authority of Ireland helped children and young people in their adoption journey was by asking them if they wanted to be adopted and finalising their adoptions.

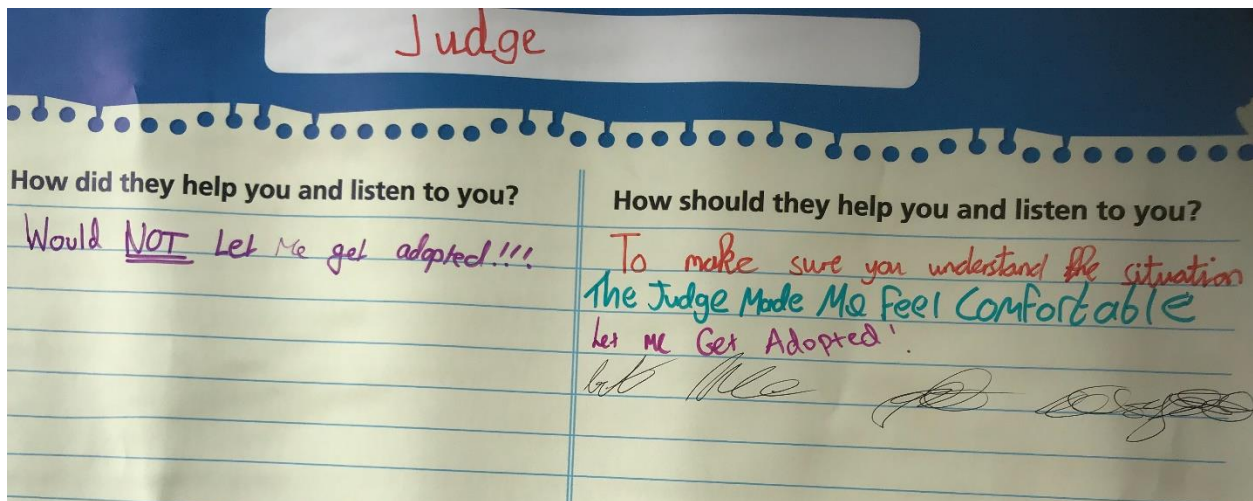
- *“They (Adoption Authority of Ireland) asked you did you want to be adopted.”*

How should they help you and listen to you?

How children and young people thought the Adoption Authority of Ireland should have helped them and listened to them included asking for their opinions, making sure they understood what was happening at the adoption hearing and making sure they felt comfortable at the hearing.

- “Ask for your opinion.”

The Judge:



How did they help you and listen to you?

One child stated the judge in their adoption hearing made them feel comfortable. However, another child stated the judge in their adoption process would not allow them to be adopted.

- “The judge made me feel comfortable.”

How should they help you and listen to you?

According to children and young people, the main way in which the judge should have helped and listened to them was through making sure children and young people understood the situation in relation to their adoption.

- *“To make sure you understand the situation.”*

What are good ways to explain to children and young people what will happen at adoption order hearings?

Children and young people were asked, *‘What would be a good way for children and young people to know what Adoption Day is like?’* According to participants at the consultation, the best way to explain to children and young people what will happen at the adoption order hearing is to get parents, foster parents, guardians, social workers etc. to explain the process to them as it is happening and provide them with all the necessary information.

- *“Parents to give a good explanation.”*
- *“Parents to explain things like if they were explaining a medical decision.”*

Other suggestions made as to how to explain what will happen at the adoption hearing included:

- A video or audio recording from a child or young person who has been adopted which could be played in the Adoption Authority before the adoption order hearing
- A letter from a child or young person who has been adopted explaining what it’s like
- Colouring pages with scenarios about adoptions, foster families, step families etc.
- A children’s book about adoption
- Developing a game for younger children
- Developing a website including information leaflets and an interactive anonymous questions and answers forum

- *“A small video of orientation in the Adoption Authority.”*
- *“Develop a game for younger children and young people, e.g. a matching game with what can happen when you are adopted.”*
- *“Something like a leaflet online because everyone is online now.”*

On your Adoption Day

The facilitators explained that children and young people have the right to be heard on their Adoption Day in any way that suits them, such as drawing, writing, audio, video or another person who talks on their behalf. Children and young people were asked the following questions:

- How do you want to be heard?
- What would you like to tell them about your life?
- If you don't want to talk, who would you like to talk for you?
- What would you like them to say about you?

How do you want to be heard?

The majority of the children and young people at the consultation said they would have liked to speak for themselves on their Adoption Day. However, some children and young people said they would find it intimidating due to the large number of people in the room and felt they would feel too nervous to talk. Other children and young people said they “don't want to say more than I have to.” Some children and young people said they would have liked to say more than they did and be asked more questions. It was suggested that children and young people could write a letter about themselves and read it out at the adoption order hearing.

- *“I would like to speak for myself.”*
- *“All the people in the room are intimidating and you feel too nervous to talk.”*

- *“Get a chance to talk more, if you wanted to. I was asked one question and that was all, but some children might want to talk more. Especially since it takes so long to get there.”*

What would you like to tell them about your life?

Children and young people felt it was important they would be asked more questions on their Adoption Day, both about themselves and the adoption process. Children and young people said they would like to tell people on their Adoption Day about themselves, for example, about their background, their home life, hobbies and interests. They would also like to be asked about the adoption process and how it could be improved. Many children and young people and young people felt the adoption process was too long and should be made easier to be adopted. Some suggested parents should also be allowed to speak on Adoption Days.

- *“At the adoption I would like them to ask me about my hobbies and interests. I would also like them to ask me what I would change about the process. And if I could change the way it was handled what would I change so they can make it easier for other people to be adopted.”*
- *“My adoption took eleven and a half years which is far too long. I went through over twelve social workers. It should have taken a shorter amount of time and it’s a bit ridiculous. On my Adoption Day, I didn’t have the option to say anything and neither did my parents. We were all disappointed because of this. All I was asked was asked was, ‘are you still ok with getting adopted?’”*

What way would you like to tell them about your life?

Children and young people were asked what way they would like to tell people about their life on their Adoption Day. Children and young people felt there should be a number of options open to them other than speaking for themselves on the day. The most common suggestion made was for children and young people to make a video or audio recording that could be played on the day. A number of children and young people said they would like to write a letter prior to the adoption order hearing which could

be read out by themselves or someone else on the day. Other ways children and young people would like to tell people about their life included through drawings, making a presentation and flashcards.

- *“I think there should be more options on how it goes like that if someone wants to do a video or letter rather than talking.”*
- *“Making a video or an audio so that if you didn’t want to talk you still get your point across.”*
- *“A child that doesn’t like to talk, write a letter so they don’t have to talk. I wouldn’t have like to talk because I found it intimidating.”*

If you don’t want to talk, who would you like to talk for you?

Children and young people made it clear that is as important for children and young people to have the right to choose not to speak at their adoption hearing as it is to have the right to speak.

- *“Children and young people, it’s their option what they want to do.”*

According to children and young people, if they do not want to speak on their Adoption Day, they would like the following people to speak for them: parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, godparents, friends or social workers. They felt it was important for someone who knew them well to speak on their behalf.

- *“A person who you really know and know about you. Maybe your parents or an older brother”*
- *“If I didn’t want to talk for myself, I would like an older brother who I may have spent a lot of time with to talk.”*
- *“A friend because I trust him, and he might understand my opinion better.”*

Some children and young people suggested they could write a note of what they would like to say at the adoption hearing and someone else could read it out on their behalf.

- *“You could write a note and someone else could read it out.”*

What would you like them to say about you?

Children and young people would like people who are speaking on their behalf on their Adoption Day to talk about them, e.g. talk about their life, where they go to school, their hobbies, interests and achievements, the sports they play, their opinion on the adoption process and what they would change about it, the person/people adopting them, why they want to be adopted and how much they know about their adoption.

- *“I would like them to talk about the essential parts of myself like what school I went to and why I want my parents to adopt me.”*
- *“How I feel about being adopted and the things that were bad about the process. The things that could change and talk about my hobbies and interests.”*
- *“I would like them to say why I want to be adopted and what I know about it.”*

How children and young people felt on their Adoption Day

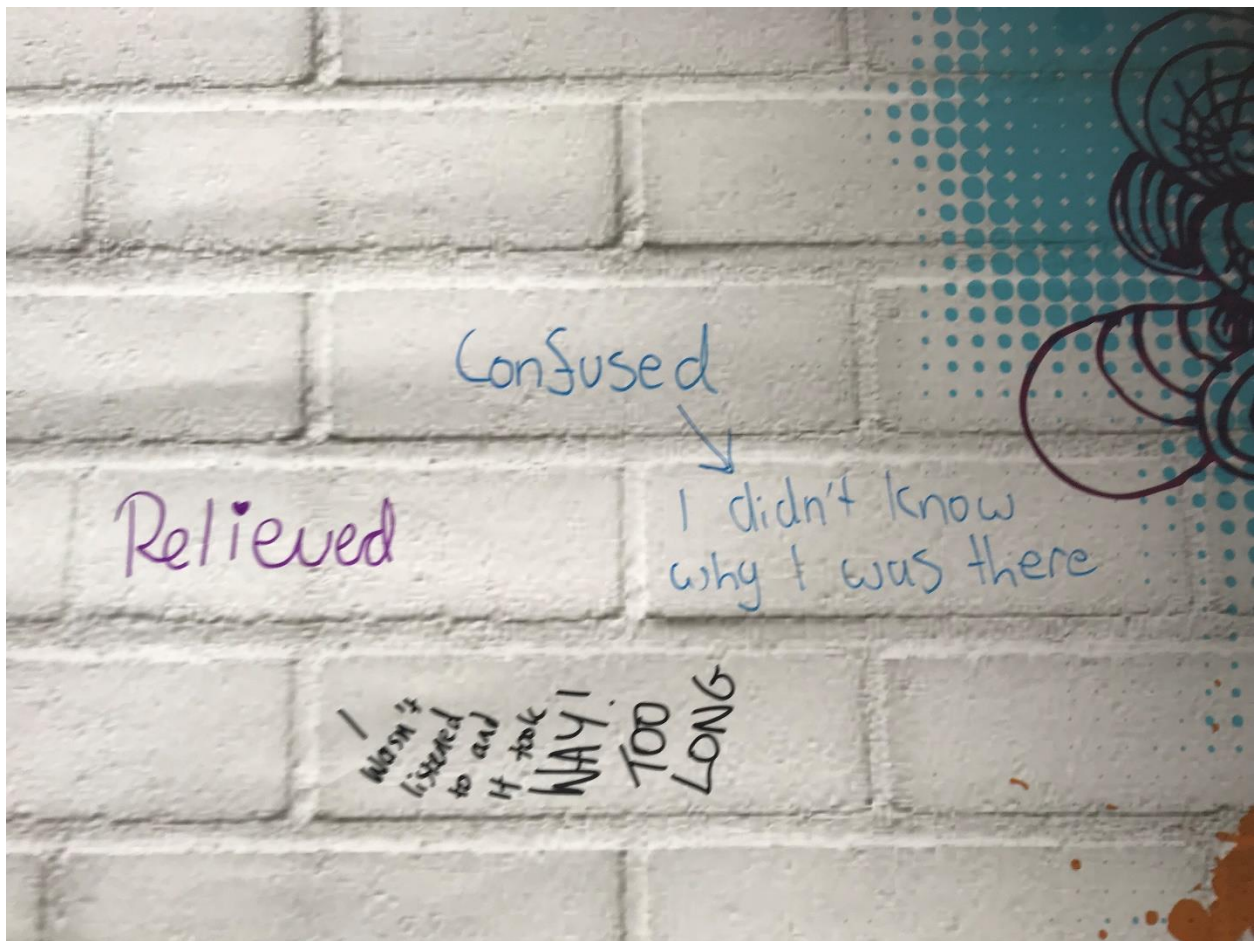
Children and young people were asked how they felt on their Adoption Day and wrote on a ‘poster wall of ideas’. The most commonly mentioned emotion felt by children and young people on their Adoption Day was happiness. They also said they felt excited, exhilarated and amazing. Some said they felt relieved on their Adoption Day.

- *“I felt happy on the day.”*
- *“When its finished you’re relieved its done and you can get on with your life.”*
- *“I felt amazing, but I also felt I wasn’t listened to (on Adoption Day)!”*



However, some children and young people said they felt nervous, very intimidated and confused as to why they were there. For example, one young person attended their adoption order hearing when they were seven years of age but were not told they were adopted until they were older so they were confused as to why they were there. A number of children and young people said they felt they were not listened to by the Adoption Authority on their Adoption Day and felt the Adoption Authority “wasn’t a very organised place”. Some who were adopted at a young age did not remember their Adoption Day.

- *“I didn’t know what it (adoption order hearing) was. I was seven at the time and I was only told I was adopted when I was 12.”*
- *“Some of the Adoption Authority just sat there. They didn’t introduce themselves, they were just watching. They weren’t very human.”*
- *“It would be intimidating for young children and young people seeing a line of people in suits.”*



Children and young people’s ideas for making Adoption Day better

The most frequently mentioned suggestion put forward by children and young people for making Adoption Days (adoption order hearings) better was to make them less intimidating and less formal, especially for younger children. Children and young people suggested making adoption order hearings less intimidating and formal through having less people from the Adoption Authority, members of the

board and staff present, everyone introducing themselves at the beginning of the hearing, more family and friends of the children and young people being present, ensuring children and young people feel comfortable and reassured and taking their feelings and experiences into consideration.

- *“Why does there have to be so many people around the table at the Adoption Board? Could there not be just one or two people from the Adoption Board.”*
- *“Everyone should introduce themselves.”*
- *“You would want more people that would reassure you and you would feel comfortable with.”*



Children and young people also felt it was important to be asked more questions on their Adoption Day, e.g. about themselves and how they are feeling. They would like the opportunity to speak and for the Adoption Authority, board members and the judge to listen to them. However, they stated that children and young people should have the choice not to speak if they so wish. Children and young people felt

being asked questions and having the opportunity to speak would make their Adoption Day into a more special and important occasion.

- *“Being asked more questions about yourself and how you felt.”*
- *“Make more of a deal of it.”*

Ensuring children and young people understand the adoption process and what is happening at the adoption order hearing was also considered to be very important.

- *“Explain the adoption process properly.”*
- *“To make sure the child understands about it.”*

Other suggestions made by children and young people related to improving Adoption Days included having regional offices where hearings can take place rather than just in Dublin, providing children and young people with a souvenir of the day such as a photo and making sure there is parking available close by. While some children and young people felt adoption hearings should be shorter, others felt it should be longer.

- *“There should be an Adoption Authority in Cork, Dublin and a few places around the country.”*
- *“You drive far too long for too short a thing.”*
- *“They could take a photo of you and your family and give it to you at the end of the day.”*

Chapter 4: Recommendations

Introduction

The recommendations are taken from the findings of consultation day and the pilot sessions with the Advisory Group.

Recommendations on how children and young people would like to have their views heard at their adoption order hearings:

- Children and young people would like the opportunity to speak for themselves at adoption order hearings
- Children would like a list of ways in which they could have their voice heard at adoption order hearings including through a video or audio recording, reading out a letter/note, making a presentation, drawings or flashcards
- Children and young people would like to be asked more questions at adoption order hearings, e.g. are they sure they would like to be adopted, how do they feel about being adopted, questions about themselves, about their adoption journey, any changes they would like to make to the adoption process
- Children and young people would like the option to have a one-to-one meeting with the Chairman of the Adoption Authority of Ireland, alongside their parents, to be asked about their adoption prior to the main adoption order hearing to help them feel less nervous
- Children and young people would like judges to make sure children and young people understood the situation in relation to their adoption
- Children and young people would also like the right not to speak at adoption order hearings

Recommendations on who children and young people would like to speak on their behalf at their adoption order hearings:

- The children and young people at the consultations noted that not all children want to speak at their adoption order hearing
- If children and young people do not want to speak at their adoption order hearing, people they would like to speak on their behalf include parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, godparents, grandparents, friends and social workers
- Children and young people felt it was very important for the person speaking on their behalf to be someone they trust and knows them well

- It was suggested that people who are speaking on behalf children and young people could read out a letter/note written by the child
- Children and young people would like the person speaking on their behalf to talk about their life, experiences, interests, achievements, family, why they want to be adopted, how much they know about their adoption, their opinion on the adoption process and what they would change about it

Recommendations on making adoption order hearings more child friendly:

- Adoption order hearings should be ‘special occasions’ for children and young people
- There should be less people from the Adoption Authority of Ireland, members of the board and staff present at adoption order hearings to make it less intimidating for children and young people
- All adults present should introduce themselves to children and young people at the beginning of adoption order hearings
- Children and young people should be made aware of what is happening at adoption order hearings using child friendly language
- Children and young people should be made feel comfortable and reassured during adoption order hearings and their experiences and feelings should be taken into consideration
- Members of the Adoption Authority should consider not wearing suits at adoption order hearings to make it less intimidating for children and young people
- Children and young people should be allowed have more family and friends present at adoption order hearings
- The room where adoption order hearings take place should be decorated in a child friendly way
- The Adoption Authority should consider providing children and young people with a souvenir on their Adoption Day such as a photo
- The Adoption Authority could develop materials for younger children that would explain what happens at an adoption order hearing, e.g. books, games, colouring pages
- The Adoption Authority could play a video before the adoption order hearing of a child or young person who has been adopted explaining what will happen at the adoption order hearing
- The Adoption Authority send a letter to children and young people from a child or young person who has been adopted explaining what will happen at the adoption order hearing

- The Adoption Authority could develop a website aimed at teenagers to explain what happens at an adoption order hearing with information leaflets and an interactive anonymous questions and answers forum
- Adoption order hearings should take place in regional areas rather than just in Dublin
- Parking should be available at adoption order hearing venues
- A children and young people's advisory group should be set up to consult with children and young people on an on-going basis about adoption order hearings

Recommendations for Tusla on how children and young people would like to have their views heard in the adoption process:

- Children and young people would like social workers to ask for their opinions and what their wishes are at the beginning of the adoption process
- Children and young people would like social workers to listen to children and young people more during the adoption process
- Children and young people would like social workers to ensure they feel comfortable and are not worried during the adoption process

Recommendations for Tusla on making the adoption process more child friendly:

- Children and young people would like the adoption process to be shorter
- Children and young people would like to be given more information about the adoption process and its length and helped to understand what is happening during the process
- Children and young people would like to feel included in the adoption process, to be spoken to honestly about the process and for their opinions and wishes to be respected during the process
- Children and young people would like information on what their biological family know about them, what they are allowed to know about them and if their biological family would like to know about them
- Parents should be provided with more information about the adoption process, so they can explain it to children and young people
- Children and young people would like more support during the adoption process and to have someone to talk to about it, e.g. family and friends

- Children and young people would like to be made feel comfortable about being adopted and not to be put under pressure during the adoption process
- Social workers should use appropriate terminology when referring to family members, e.g. brother and sister rather than step-brother and step-sister
- Children and young people should have as few social workers as possible during their adoption process

Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation Letters, Information Sheets and Assent/Consent Forms

INVITATION

Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs invites children and young people to become part of the:

Advisory Group for Consultations with Children and Young People on Adoption Regulations

I want to get the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. My Department will hold consultations (meetings) with children and young people to help me to make regulations (rules) about this.

We want these consultations to be very successful. So, we are setting up an Advisory Group of six or seven children and young people, who have been adopted or who are in the adoption process, to work with facilitators in my Department. The Advisory Group will suggest ways of making the consultations interesting and fun and help the people who are planning them.

Below is some information about why my Department is holding these consultations:

The Children Referendum which passed in 2012 inserted a new Article, 42A (Children) into the Constitution. Part 4.2° of this new Article states:

“Provision shall be made by law for securing, as far as practicable, that in all proceedings referred to in subsection 1° of this section in respect of any child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the views of the child shall be ascertained and given due weight having regard to the age and maturity of the child.”

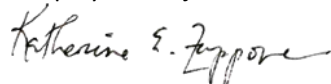
The Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 amends our adoption law to ensure that all the parts of Article 42A that relate to adoption are provided for. I want to make sure that it is clear how the Adoption Authority or the Court will hear the views of children in adoption proceedings, so I am making regulations. In order to do this my Department will consult with children and young people. In particular to discover their views on:

- a) expressing their own views
- b) nominating a person to express their views, and who they would like that person to be.

The children and young people who will be consulted include those who have already been adopted and who are in the adoption process. I promise to take the views of the children and young people very seriously in drafting the regulations.

If you would like to join our Advisory Group, you and your parents will need to fill in the attached forms and return them in the prepaid envelope within two weeks of receiving this invitation. If you have any questions please contact Orla Campion at orla_campion@dcya.gov.ie or phone Orla on 086 4674816.

I hope you will join our Advisory Group.



INFORMATION NOTE FOR PARENTS, GUARDIANS, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Advisory Group for Consultations with Children and Young People on Adoption Regulations

Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to get the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. Her Department will hold consultations (meetings) with children and young people to help make regulations (rules) about this. To help make the consultations a success, we are setting up an Advisory Group of six or seven children and young people, who have been adopted or who are in the adoption process.

What will the Advisory Group do?

The Advisory Group will suggest ways of making the consultations interesting and fun and help the people who are planning them. The Advisory Group will have approximately four meetings between October and December. Children and young people on the Advisory Group can also take part in the consultations which will be in November or December.

What do we do if a child or young person in this family is interested in getting involved?

1. Children or young people need to complete the Assent Form
2. Parents or guardians need to complete the Parental/Guardian Consent Form
3. Please post the forms in the pre-paid envelope to Orla Campion, Administrator, Children and Young People's Participation Hub, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road, Dublin 4.
4. Please send the forms within two weeks of receiving this information.

What will happen after we send in the forms?

Orla Campion or Anne O'Donnell from the Participation Hub will contact you to discuss days that would suit you to come to the first Advisory Group meeting with other children and young people.

How will the child or young person get to the meetings?

We will pay all travel expenses of children, parents or guardians and help make arrangements for children and young people to come to meetings.

If you have any questions or would like to talk to someone, please email Orla Campion at orla_campion@dcya.gov.ie or phone Orla on 086 4674816.

INFORMATION NOTE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Advisory Group for Consultations with Children and Young People on Adoption Regulations

Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to get the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. Her Department will hold consultations with children and young people to help make regulations about this. To help make the consultations a success, we are setting up an Advisory Group of six or seven children and young people, who have been adopted or who are in the adoption process.

What will the Advisory Group do?

The Advisory Group will suggest ways of making the consultations interesting and fun and help the people who are planning them. The Advisory Group will have approximately four meetings between October and December. Children and young people on the Advisory Group can also take part in the consultations which will be in November or December.

What do you do if a child or young person is interested in getting involved?

1. Please give the invitation from the Minister to the child or young person and her/his parents/guardians.
2. Please ask interested children or young people to complete the Assent Form.
3. Please ask parents or guardians to complete the Parental/Guardian Consent Form.
4. Please post the forms in the pre-paid envelope to Orla Campion, Administrator, Children and Young People's Participation Hub, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road, Dublin 4.
5. Please send the forms within two weeks of receiving this information.

What will happen after you send in the forms?

Orla Campion or Anne O'Donnell from the Participation Hub will contact the parents or guardians who have completed the forms to discuss days that would suit children and young people to come to the first Advisory Group meeting with other children and young people.

How will the child or young person get to the meetings?

We will pay all travel expenses of children, parents or guardians and help make arrangements for children and young people to come to meetings.

If you have any questions or would like to talk to someone, please email Orla Campion at orla_campion@dcya.gov.ie or phone Orla on 086 4674816.

INFORMATION NOTE FOR PARENTS, GUARDIANS, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Consultations with Children and Young People on Adoption Regulations

Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to get the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. Her Department will hold consultations (meetings) with children and young people to help make regulations (rules) about this.

There will be two consultations – one for 8-12 year-old children and one for 13-17 year-old young people. They will take place in Dublin in February and we will pay all travel expenses for children and parents (see below).

All children and young people who take part will receive a certificate signed by the Minister.

The design for the consultations has been strongly influenced by an Advisory Group of children and young people who have been adopted or are in the process of being adopted. This Group has worked with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs since last November.

Please read the letter from the Advisory Group encouraging children and young people to come to the consultations and have their say.

What do we do if a child or young person in this family is interested in getting involved?

1. Children or young people need to complete the Assent Form
2. Parents or guardians need to complete the Parental/Guardian Consent Form
3. Please post the forms in the pre-paid envelope to Orla Campion, Administrator, Children and Young People's Participation Hub, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road, Dublin 4.
4. Please send the forms within two weeks of receiving this information.

What will happen after we send in the forms?

Orla Campion or Anne O'Donnell from the Participation Hub will contact you to let you know the date and venue for the consultation.

How will the child or young person get to the consultation?

We will pay all travel expenses of children, parents or guardians and help make arrangements for children and young people to come to consultation.

What day of the week would suit the child or young person in your family to attend the consultation?

- Weekday
- Saturday
- Sunday

If you have any questions or would like to talk to someone, please email Orla Campion at orla_campion@dcya.gov.ie or phone Orla on 086 4674816.

INFORMATION NOTE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Consultations with Children and Young People on Adoption Regulations

Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to get the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. Her Department will hold consultations (meetings) with children and young people to help make regulations (rules) about this.

There will be two consultations – one for 8-12 year-old children and one for 13-17 year-old young people. They will take place in Dublin in February and we will pay all travel expenses for children and parents (see below).

The design for the consultations has been strongly influenced by an Advisory Group of children and young people who have been adopted or are in the process of being adopted. This Group has worked with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs since last November.

Please read the letter from the Advisory Group encouraging children and young people to come to the consultations and have their say.

What do you do if a child or young person is interested in attending a consultation?

1. Please give the information note and the letter from the Advisory Group to the child or young person and her/his parents/guardians.
2. Please ask interested children or young people to complete the Assent Form.
3. Please ask parents or guardians to complete the Parental/Guardian Consent Form.
4. Please post the forms in the pre-paid envelope to Orla Campion, Administrator, Children and Young People's Participation Hub, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road, Dublin 4.
5. Please send the forms within two weeks of receiving this information.

What will happen after you send in the forms?

Orla Campion or Anne O'Donnell from the Participation Hub will contact the parents or guardians who have completed the forms to confirm the date and venue for the consultation.

How will the child or young person get to the consultation?

We will pay all travel expenses of children, parents or guardians and help make arrangements for children and young people to come to the consultation.

If you have any questions or would like to talk to someone, please email Orla Campion at orla_campion@dcya.gov.ie or phone Orla on 086 4674816.

Invitation to children and young people from the Advisory Group

Dear _____,

We are a group of young people from all across Ireland aged 12 to 17, who have been adopted or are in the process of being adopted. The people writing this letter are Shania who is 17, Aidan who is 13, Chantelle who is 12 and Kelly who is 17. Shania comes from Galway, Aidan from Monaghan, Chantelle from Kildare and Kelly from Cork. Some of us were adopted by step parents and some by foster parents.

We are an Advisory Group set up by Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, who wants to get the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or a Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs will hold meetings with children like us to help make rules about this. We in the advisory group are suggesting ways of making the meetings interesting and fun, and we also help the people who are planning them.

One of the other great things about this group is that it lets us all get to know people who are in and around our own age and have been through the same process or are going through it. It also gives us a chance to meet others who are in a similar situation. The advisory group gives us all a chance to give our own opinions and to share our own experiences with people who will understand us. We in the group feel privileged to be a part of helping to make the adoption process better in the future. We each felt that personally it was our opportunity to have our say. We felt like we got to show other people how important it was to us, and how amazing it was.

This is your chance to give your opinion. We would love you to join us in giving your opinion on how you would like to have your views heard before the Adoption Authority or a Court during your adoption proceedings.

Yours sincerely,



Chantelle



Kelly



Shania



Aidan

Assent Form (to be filled out by children and young people)

Advisory Group for consultations on adoption regulations

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to ask children and young people how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. The Minister has asked her Department to get the opinions of children who have been adopted or are in the adoption process, to help write rules for this.

We will invite children and young people to consultations (meetings) to hear their opinions. To help make the consultations a success, we are setting up an Advisory Group of six or seven children and young people who have been adopted or are in the adoption process to work with facilitators in the Department Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

If you join the Advisory Group you will:

- Come to meetings in the DCYA with the other children and young people in the Advisory Group
- Help the people who are planning the consultations
- Advise on the best ways to encourage children and young people to come to the consultations
- Suggest ways of making the consultations interesting and fun

We will:

- Give you pizza and other tasty food!
- Pay your travel expenses and any other expenses
- Make sure you are safe and have a good time

Information about you	
Your name	
Your address	
Your date of birth	
Your age	
Your medical conditions or special needs	
Foods you cannot eat	

Please read and tick the boxes you agree with:

- I understand why I am joining the Advisory Group or someone has explained it to me.
- I agree to take part in Advisory Group meetings in the next few months.
- I agree that photographs, video and voice recordings of me can be used can be used for publicity and promotional purposes and in printed and online reports.
- I know that a researcher is writing a report and will attend some of the meetings, but my name or the name of any other child will not be used in the report.

Signed.....

Date.....

Parent / Guardian Consent Form

Advisory Group for consultations on adoption regulations

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to hear the opinions of children and young people on how the Adoption Authority or Court should hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. The Minister has asked her Department to consult with children and young people who have been adopted or are in the adoption process, to inform the development of adoption legislation regulations. The views of the children and young people will be strongly considered in the drafting of the regulations.

To help make the consultations a success, we are setting up an Advisory Group of six or seven children and young people who have been adopted or are in the adoption process to work with facilitators in the Department Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

The role of the Advisory Group will be to:

- Come to meetings in the DCYA with the other children and young people in the Advisory Group
- Help the facilitators who are planning the consultations
- Advise on the best ways to encourage children and young people to come to the consultations
- Suggest ways of making the consultations interesting and fun

We will:

- Give the children and young people meals and snacks during the meetings
- Pay the travel expenses of children and/or parents and any other expenses
- Make sure that the children and young people are safe and have a good time

Details of child or young person

Name	
Address	
Date of birth	
Age	
Dietary requirements	
Other relevant information (medical conditions or special needs)	

Contact details of parent/guardian/care worker

Name of parent or guardian	
Relationship to child/young person	
Address	
Parent/guardian contact number	

Assent Form (to be filled out by children and young people)

Consultations on adoption regulations

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to ask children and young people how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. The Minister has asked her Department to get the opinions of children who have been adopted or are in the adoption process, to help write rules for this.

We would like to invite you to come to a consultation (meeting) to hear your opinions.

To help make the consultations a success, we worked with an Advisory Group of children and young people, who have been adopted or who are in the adoption process.

Please read the letter from the Advisory Group encouraging children and young people to come to the consultations and have their say.

Information about you

Your name	
Your address	
Your date of birth	
Your age	
Your medical conditions or special needs	
Foods you cannot eat	

Please read and tick the boxes you agree with:

- I understand why I am coming to the consultation or someone has explained it to me.
- I agree that photographs, video and voice recordings of me can be used can be used for publicity and promotional purposes and in printed and online reports.
- I know that a researcher is writing a report and will attend the consultation, but my name or the name of any other child will not be used in the report.

Signed.....

Date.....

Parent / Guardian Consent Form

Consultation on adoption regulations

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wants to ask children and young people how the Adoption Authority or Court will hear the views of the child in adoption proceedings. The Minister has asked her Department to get the opinions of children who have been adopted or are in the adoption process, to help write rules for this.

We would like to invite your child or young person to come to a consultation (meeting) to hear their opinions.

To help make the consultations a success, we worked with an Advisory Group of children and young people, who have been adopted or who are in the adoption process.

Please read the letter from the Advisory Group encouraging children and young people to come to the consultations and have their say.

Details of child or young person	
Name	
Address	
Date of birth	
Age	
Dietary requirements	
Other relevant information (medical conditions or special needs)	

Contact details of parent/guardian/care worker	
Name of parent or guardian	
Relationship to child/young person	
Address	
Parent/guardian contact number	
Contact details of person collecting the child/young person (if different from above)	
In case of emergency, please contact (if different from above)	
Contact details for the child/young person's doctor	

Appendix B

Key Findings from Children and Young People’s Advisory Group Meetings

The Advisory Group met on three separate occasions in advance of the consultations in the DCYA in Dublin and was facilitated by staff from Hub na nÓg:

- The first meeting was on the 28th of November 2017
- The second meeting was on the 12th of December 2017
- The third meeting was on the 23rd of January 2018

First Advisory Group meeting

The first Advisory Group meeting took place on the 28th of November 2017. The key issues discussed included:

- The aim of the consultation
- Explanation of the role of the Advisory Group
- Advice on recruitment of children and young people for the consultation
- Next steps in the process for the Advisory Group and how often they need to meet

Methodologies and questions piloted and discussed at the first Advisory Group meeting included:

Individual lifelines:

- Individual lifelines where children and young people were asked to, *“Write and draw the important things you remember in your life”*
- Children and young people shared whatever they wanted with the group from their individual lifelines
- Children and young people were asked for their opinions on whether lifelines would work for the bigger consultations
- Other questions asked about lifelines included:
 - Are individual lifelines a good place to start?
 - Should we start with “Write or draw your adoption journey or story”?
 - Would a big lifeline work better?

- Or both – individual followed by group lifeline?
- Children and young people provided positive feedback on the use of individual lifelines to record the important things they remember about their lives, noting that they enjoyed it found it a good way to meet new people. They suggested individual lifelines should be included at the start of the consultations.

Consensus Building Workshop:

- Children and young people took part in a Consensus Building Workshop on the key question, *“What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption process or journey?”*
- A consensus building workshop is a method that enables a group of people with different backgrounds, opinions and goals to help reach consensus on a question (for more information see the full consultation methodology in Appendix C)
- The Advisory Group identified the following most important things for children and young people about the adoption process or journey:
 - **Adoption Day**, e.g. feelings of children and young people on the day such as feeling happiness, loved, whole, accepted, proud, nervous, excited; how official and special the day was; the legal aspect of the day.
 - **Social Workers**, e.g. the important role of the social worker in the process such as teaching children and young people about the adoption process and ensuring they fully understand the process and its length; asking children and young people what their wishes are in the adoption process at the beginning of the process; making sure children and young people are happy on their adoption journey; meeting with children and young people more often during the process; being more understanding of children and young people; using the right terminology for family members, e.g. step-siblings.
 - **Biological Family**, e.g. letting children and young people know about urgent hereditary medical conditions; birth parents having a choice in relation to a child’s adoption; explaining to children and young people what their biological family know about them and what they are allowed to know about them; letting children and young people know if their biological family would like to know about them.
 - **Rules and Length of the Journey**, e.g. how long the adoption process takes; explaining to children and young people the length of the adoption journey, making overturning

more difficult; explaining how children and young people's adoption orders can be overturned.

- The feedback from the children and young people on the consensus building workshop was very positive. They found it “fun” and “like a game or a competition” and agreed it should be included in the consultation methodology.
- The children and young people suggested that the best way to recruit other children and young people to the consultations would be a letter from them (Advisory Group) explaining the reason for the consultations and encouraging children and young people to attend.

Second Advisory Group meeting

The second Advisory Group meeting was held on the 12th of December 2017. The key issues discussed included:

- Review of previous Advisory Group meeting and consensus building workshop information
- Development of a letter inviting other children and young people to the consultations
- Next meeting of the Advisory Group

Methodologies and questions piloted and discussed at the second Advisory Group meeting included:

Placemat exercise:

- Children and young people tested a placemat exercise based on the question, ‘*Who are the people you meet on the journey?*’
- Children and young people wrote their ideas on post-its
- The people you meet on the journey identified by children and young people included:
 - The Adoption Authority,
 - Social workers,
 - Foster or step parents,
 - Birth parents,
 - Older family members (grandparents, aunties, uncles etc),
 - Siblings,
 - Friends and neighbours.
- Placemats were then divided into pizza slices

- Children and young people voted on the top three people they met on their adoption journey and on how they should be listened to using sticky dots.
- The feedback from the children and young people on the placemat exercise was that they did not really enjoy it and found it “took too long”. They recommended not using this method for the consultation.

Wall of ideas exercise:

Children and young people were asked to pilot a wall of ideas exercise in relation to ‘Ideas for making Adoption Day better.’ Ideas for making Adoption Day better put forward by the Advisory Group, many of whom found the day very intimidating, included:

- Should be an option to allow the child to speak at the hearing instead of their parents
- To decorate the room to ease the pressure, depending on age
- Lessen the amount of ‘suits’ in the room at the hearing
- There should be an option for a one-on-one meeting with the Chairman of the adoption
- Have a small meeting with the Chairperson and your parents and be asked about your adoption and be asked again in the [adoption hearing] room, so you can feel more confident
- Some questions I’d like to be asked:
 - Am I sure I want to be adopted?
 - How do I feel about this?

Third Advisory Group meeting

The third Advisory Group meeting took place on the 23rd of January 2018. Key issues discussed at the meeting included:

- Explanation of the role of the report writer (who attended the Advisory Group meeting)
- Update on the consultation
- Distribution of a final version of the Advisory Group letter inviting other children and young people and young people to the consultation
- How the Advisory Group would like to be involved in the consultation day
- Consent and assent to be involved in the child friendly evaluation tool

Methodologies and questions piloted and discussed at the third Advisory Group meeting included:

How children and young people want to be heard at the adoption hearing?

- Questions on how children and young people want to be heard at the adoption hearing were piloted with the Advisory Group.
- It was explained that children and young people have the right to be heard in any way that suits them, such as drawing, writing, audio, video or another person who talks on their behalf.
- Draft questions on cards were put up on the sticky wall which included:
 - On the day of your adoption how do you want to be heard?
 - If you were a child that did not like speaking, are there other ways you would like to give your opinion?
 - If you were a child that did not want to speak or give your opinion, would you like someone else to give your opinion? Who would the best person be?
- The majority of children and young people from the Advisory Group stated they would like to speak for themselves at their adoption hearing.
- However, some children and young people said they would prefer not to speak at their adoption hearing as they found it “very intimidating” and described feeling “nervous” and “scared.”
- Ways in which children and young people would like to communicate at the adoption hearing included reading out something they had written about themselves, e.g. a letter; making an audio recording or video that would be played at the adoption hearing; a drawing; a PowerPoint presentation and flashcards.
- If children and young people did not want to speak at their adoption hearing, people they would like to speak on their behalf identified included parents, siblings, aunt/uncle, godparents, grandparents and friends.
- Children and young people felt it was important for the person speaking on their behalf to be someone they trust and knows them very well.
- What children and young people would like the person speaking on their behalf to talk about included their life, experiences, interests, achievements, family, why they want to be adopted and how much they know about it.
- The views of the Advisory Group were sought on the wording of the final questions for this exercise.

Post-it note session:

- Questions for the post-it note session on a sticky wall were piloted with the Advisory Group which included:
 - Who are the people involved in your adoption journey?
 - Who are the people who have a say in your adoption journey?
- The views of the Advisory Group were sought on the wording of the final questions.

Jotter page exercise:

- A jotter page exercise was piloted with the Advisory Group with a session on each category of person involved in the journey on two questions:
 - How did they help you and listen to you?
 - How should they help you and listen to you?
- Children and young people worked in groups of two or three and got the chance to work on each category of person/people
- The people involved in your adoption journey identified by children and young people on the Advisory Group included the following:
 - Family, e.g. parents (adoptive/foster), grandparents, siblings, godparents, relations, person adopting you
 - Social workers, e.g. child/parent's social worker
 - The Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI), e.g. Chairman of the AAI Dr Geoffrey Shannon, adoption officials
 - Birth family, e.g. birth parents
 - Child/young person, e.g. 'our amazing self's
- Sticky dot voting took place on the top three on how they helped or listened
- Sticky dot voting took place on the top three on how they should help or listen
- The children and young people provided positive feedback on the jotter exercise and suggested it should be included as a methodology in the consultation.

Appendix C

Consultation Methodology

Individual lifelines exercise

The first exercise children and young people participated in was an individual lifeline exercise. Children and young people were asked to, *“Write and draw the important things you remember in your life”* on a large lifeline sheets with clouds/speech bubbles. They were then asked to share whatever they wanted with the group. Lifelines are a way of drawing out the important parts in people’s lives and can be especially useful for children and young people who find it hard to contribute to a group. They are also useful to facilitators in terms of noting some of the common important issues and using that to start discussion on what matters to children and young people.

Consensus Building Workshop

Children and young people then took part in a consensus building workshop based on the question, *“What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption journey?”* A consensus building workshop is a method that enables a group of people with different backgrounds, opinions and goals to help reach consensus on a question. There are five stages to a consensus building workshop:

- brainstorm,
- cluster,
- naming,
- resolve and
- full group vote on top priorities.

Sticky Wall

In the next exercise, children and young people were asked, *“Who are the people involved in your adoption journey?”* (right up to the adoption hearing). They wrote their ideas on the A5 pages and grouped them into categories on the sticky wall.

Jotter page session

Children and young people then took part in a 'jotter page session' on each category of person involved in the journey answering two questions:

- How did they help you and listen to you?
- How should they help you and listen to you?

Children and young people worked in groups of three and got the chance to work on each category of person/people.

Sticky wall

The next exercise looked at the question, *'What are good ways to explain to children and young people what will happen at the adoption hearing?'* Children and young people worked in pairs and put ideas on the wall.

Session 'on Adoption Day' on Sticky Wall

The next exercise was a session on Adoption Day. It was explained that children and young people have the right to be heard on their Adoption Day in any way that suits them, such as drawing, writing, audio, video or another person who talks on their behalf. Children and young people wrote their ideas for the following questions and stuck them up on the sticky wall.

On your Adoption Day:

- How do you want to be heard?
- What would you like to tell them about your life?
- If you don't want to talk, who would you like to talk for you?
- What would you like them to say about you?

Poster walls of ideas

Children and young people then had the opportunity to write on 'poster walls of ideas', which were large posters with individual bricks for each idea with the following headings:

- How I felt on Adoption Day
- Our ideas for making Adoption Day better

This exercise was done at tables with one group of children and young people working on each poster and then swapping to the other poster, so everyone had an opportunity to write down their ideas.

Finally, children and young people were asked to complete an evaluation form on the consultation event. The results of the evaluation can be seen in **Appendix E**

Appendix D

Adoption Consultation Final Methodology

11.00 Welcome by Advisory Group – explain purpose of consultation (10 minutes)

11.10 Individual lifelines – in groups of 6 (30 minutes)

“Write and draw the important things you remember in your life”

Share whatever you want with the group

11.40 Consensus Building Workshop on Sticky Wall 1 (55 minutes)

“What are the important things for children and young people about the adoption journey?”

BRAINSTORM

1. Individual children and young people make lists
2. 2 children and young people per group develop cards
3. 1 idea per card
4. 3-7 words per card

CLUSTER

5. Most important cards get put up first from each group of 2 children and young people
6. Cards are grouped under symbols according to which ones are similar
7. Review cards and make sure all similar ones are together in clusters

NAMING

8. Start with largest cluster and ask group to propose a name or title that answers the focussed question
9. Create new groups if necessary
10. Move cards from group to group

RESOLVE

11. Focus the group on consensus by reading all the title cards

12. Discuss the significance of the consensus
13. Discuss what they think are the next steps – or what should be done as a result of the consensus
14. VOTE on top 3 (All topics are written on cards by workshop assistants and each one is assigned a number) – Each child is given 3 cards and votes on their top 3 in the ballot box

FULL GROUP VOTE

- The top three priorities from each group are put on a big screen and assigned a number.
- Each child/young person votes for their top 3 priorities in a ballot box (three blank voting cards each).

12.35 Sticky Wall 2 (15 minutes)

“Who are the people involved in your adoption journey?” (right up to the Adoption Hearing)

- Children and young people and young people write ideas on A5 pages
- Group A5 pages into categories on the wall

1.00 Lunch

1.30 Jotter page session on each category of person involved in the journey on two questions: (40 minutes)

- How did they help you and listen to you?
- How should they help you and listen to you?

Children and young people and young people work in groups of 3 and get the chance to work on each category of person/people

VOTING:

- Sticky dot voting on the top three on how they helped or listened (using different colours for 1st preference, 2nd preference and 3rd preference)
- Sticky dot voting on the top three on how they should help or listen

Question on the wall: (clear consensus material from the wall in advance)

What are good ways to explain to children and young people what will happen at the adoption hearing?

- Work in pairs and put ideas on the wall
- Priorities with 3 dots each

2.10 Session on 'ADOPTION DAY' on Sticky Wall 2 (40 minutes)

Explain that children and young people have the right to be heard in any way that suits them, such as drawing, writing, audio, video or another person who talks on their behalf

ON YOUR ADOPTION DAY

- How do you want to be heard?
- What would you like to tell them about your life?
- If you don't want to talk, who would you like to talk for you?
- What would you like them to say about you?

2.50 Poster walls of ideas with individual bricks for each idea – done at tables

Each group works on a poster and then swaps to the other poster (allot time for each poster session) (30 minutes)

- How I felt on Adoption Day
- Our ideas for making Adoption Day better

3.20 Evaluation

3.30 Close

Appendix E

Consultation Evaluation Findings

Introduction

Children and young people completed an evaluation form at the end of the consultation event. They were asked the following questions to which the answers were 'yes', 'sometimes' and 'no' and included corresponding smiley faces.

- Did you feel listened to?
- Did you have fun?
- Was the meeting interesting?

Children and young people were also asked to comment on the following questions:

- The thing you enjoyed most about the day was...
- The things that could have been better about today was...

Did you feel listened to?

All (100%) 14 children and young people who participated in the consultation event said they felt listened to.

Did you have fun?

Thirteen out of fourteen (92.9%) children and young people who took part in the consultation agreed they had fun at the event whereas one child (7.1%) said they sometimes had fun at the event.

Was the meeting interesting?

Eleven (78.6%) children and young people found the meeting interesting while three (21.4%) children and young people said they sometimes found it interesting.

The thing you enjoyed most about the day was...

According to children and young people, the thing they enjoyed most about the day was having a say, voicing their opinions about the adoption process and being listened to and heard in a meaningful way. Children and young people felt they were treated with respect and were allowed to get their points across which was important to them.

- *“That they really listened to me and let me have my say!”*
- *“That I was heard.”*

Children and young people also enjoyed meeting other children and young people who are adopted, interacting with them and listening to their opinions on adoption. Some children and young people said it made them feel less alone talking and listening to others who have been in similar situations as they may not have had the opportunity to speak to their peers about their adoption.

- *“Meeting other people in my situation.”*
- *“Getting to hear other people’s opinions who have been in similar situations and to know you’re not alone as most my friends don’t know.”*

Other things children and young people enjoyed about the day was the food, particularly the pizza, the activities and “the craic”.

The things that could have been better about today was...

Half of the children and young people at the consultation said there was nothing that could have been better about the day. Suggestions made by children and young people to make the consultation better included giving children and young people the opportunity to tell their adoption story if they wished, going into the adoption process in more detail, talking more about the fostering process and making the day shorter.

- *“Should have opportunities to tell our story.”*

- *“Talk more maybe about the fostering process, going into adoption more.”*