Opgroeien

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Summary of Policy Proposals for Foster Care – Adoption

Date: 24/11/2022
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1. SITUATION

Multi-parenting as a new common framework in *Agentschap Opgroeien* [Agency for Growing up]

A large group of children have more than one or two parent figures in their life that are important. This is a social reality. Within the framework of the future story of Opgroeien ('an integrated youth and family policy'), multi-parenting can provide an opportunity for shared responsibility, support and enrichment as a child grows up. This is not just about situations of actual parenting together. Parents who cannot take up their actual parenting role or are absent also deserve due recognition ('you are a parent for life'). The child is central to this process. We use the concept of multi-parenting as a substantive common framework (not limited to the strictly legal aspect).

To avoid tension and conflict, it is important to strive for recognition of all parent figures in their parental roles and to offer transparency and/or make arrangements on what share each parent figure takes up. The child's voice is very important in this process.

The connection with and/or knowledge of children's original context (the parents but also grandparents, siblings, etc.), within any family form, is crucial for the development of identity in children. Giving this theme a place in parenting is an important element of 'good parenting'.

For the purposes of this paper, multi-parenting refers to taking on a role in relation to someone else's child, within the broad spectrum of possibilities in terms of 'help/care in a family context' (support family, crisis foster care, perspective offering/perspective seeking foster care, inter-country adoption, domestic adoption, etc.).

The Flemish Government supports the idea of always examining the willingness of all parties to maintain contact with the parent(s).

The concept of multi-parenting is an important basic idea in adoption and foster care, because all parties involved in the adoption/foster care process can be recognized in their relationship to the child if they so wish, with the nuance that this should be considered on a case by case basis.

Reform of the adoption policy in Flanders

The report of the panel of experts on intercountry adoption was published in the beginning of September 2021.[1] Following the recommendations from that report, the Flemish Government drew up some important outlines[2] on (intercountry) adoption. From these outlines and the report of the panel of experts, a reform of the adoption policy in Flanders is being worked on.

In the spring of 2022, the *Vlaams Centrum voor Adoptie* (VCA) [Flemish Centre for Adoption] drew up an adoption action plan in which four themes from the expert report were developed further. This action plan was endorsed by the Minister for Welfare, Public Health, Family and Poverty Reduction, and was also included in the business plan of the *Agentschap Opgroeien*.

One of the four topics in the action plan concerns connecting the foster care and adoption sectors. The Flemish Government aspires to have part of the preparation process for candidate adoptive parents and candidate foster carers tracked together in order to appeal to the willingness of all candidate parents to welcome a child into their family, temporarily or otherwise. Candidates can ultimately make their own choice of foster care or adoption. They may also be motivated for both.

The action plan describes the following points:

- Knowledge-sharing preparation process on common topics such as attachment, parenting, living together with a child who is not necessarily biologically related, multi-parenting, etc.
- Preparation of candidate parents: making concrete arrangements between the foster care and adoption sectors to work towards joint/integrated information sessions.
- Screening candidate parents: making concrete arrangements between foster care and adoption sectors to work towards joint[3] screening procedures.
- Matching with candidate parents: making concrete arrangements between foster care and adoption sectors to work towards joint matching procedures.
- Creating support and raising awareness in the field of dual-focus pathways (both foster care and adoption).
- An important part of the preliminary process for foster care converges with adoption. Candidate families are given the opportunity to choose foster care, adoption or both. The procedures are aligned from the perspective of prospective families.

Workgroup on foster care and adoption

The workgroup was tasked to develop concrete policy proposals based on the above principles.

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[1] https://www.opgroeien.be/nieuws-en-pers/nieuws/rapport-expertenpanel-interlandelijke-adoptie-in-vlaanderen?fbclid=IwAR0x8qg7BQL-Y4vt6VQi7foAH9KNfDukqdCjUeYBcVzpe33EvWeU0fiZNhU

[2] https://beslissingenvlaamseregering.vlaanderen.be/document-view/61404C18364ED90008000178

[3] This has to do with the fact that there is a lot going on in common in terms of screening and matching in adoption and foster care. We avail ourselves of common ground wherever possible. This does not mean that these pieces will fall in place together. So working towards 'parallel' screening and matching procedures shall be considered for the remainder of this paper.

The workgroup started up in early May 2022 and will finalize its proposals in December 2022. It is supported by VCA and led by chairman, Jan Brocatus, of *Pleegzorg Vlaanderen* [Foster Care Flanders].

The workgroup is composed as follows:

- Experiential experts[4]: representation of domestic adoptees, intercountry adoptees, foster children and foster carers. They contribute expertise from a wider constituency and field of work in addition to their own experience;
- Partners in the adoption and foster care sector [5]: representation of the foster care services, the three intercountry adoption services, the domestic adoption service, *Steunpunt Adoptie* [Adoption Support Centre] and the social research service;
- Experts[6]: Researcher from the Catholic University of Leuven;
- A number of additional persons participated in the elaboration of the policy proposals through the subgroups.[7]

In addition to the actual workgroup, a wider stakeholder group was involved in the course of October 2022, providing feedback on the completeness and priority needs in the policy proposals, in order to create as much support as possible.

2. WHAT IS THE FOCUS OF THE WORKGROUP?

We are looking to connect the workings of foster care and adoption in the context of caring for an unrecognized child, for whom there is a need for help.

The intention is that as many candidates as possible can be addressed on their commitment to take up one of the presented forms of multi-parenting: foster care, adoption or foster family.[8]

We focus on those forms of foster care and adoption for which we see the most common ground in operation: adoption and foster care for an unrecognized child. Quite a few forms therefore do not fall within the scope of this paper of policy proposals, such as intrafamily adoption, adoptive recognized child, adult foster care and network foster care.

In other words, it is not of matter of merging the adoption and foster care sectors completely. Each operation retains its individuality. We try to make this clear throughout the policy proposals themselves.

Side note: The question of whether adoption can be included as a measure in youth assistance was discussed during the workgroup meetings. We omitted this from the elaboration of this paper with policy proposals because it was not part of the scope.

We are aware that mentioning both forms (foster care and adoption) in the same breath may create the image that adoption can be an end point of any pathway within youth assistance. This is not the case. Bringing the two worlds together should not undermine the approachable nature

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[4] Debby Mattys, Annick Boosten, Veerle Derous, Ward Campo
[5] Karina Van Belle, Inge Stinissen, Nele Goffin, Inge Demol, Kristien Wouters, Katrien Redant, Kathy Colson, Annemie Paeshuyse
[6] Jasmien Deklerck
[7] Kristina Van Remoortel, Ilse Van Grimbergen, Karen Franckx, Katja Verbeek, Delfien Floré, Erika Van Beek, Kaat Mortier, Nina Neuteleers, Tine Wylin, Wendy Mermans, Gera ter Meulen en Johan Vanderfaeillie
[8] Term from 'partners in parenting': https://www.partnersinparenting.be/. E.g.: providing a 'home' for a child on weekends or on Wednesday afternoon.

of supportive foster care. There is absolutely no intention to achieve more adoptions. Adoption is and will remain an exceptional measure: the best possible solution for the child is always considered. It can only occur if the parents relinquish the child and are completely out of the picture. It is not an option if there is still sufficient context and other possibilities. We refer here to the principles of adoptability and subsidiarity. What is common between foster care and adoption: "Every child who cannot grow up with the biological parents has the right to a safe and stable family context. This is a youth protection issue."

We tried to focus on connecting foster care and adoption throughout the consultation moments of the workgroup and sub-workgroups. Consequently, we did not want to dwell too much on current practices of adoption and foster care separately, which could be improved. In this respect, important ideas for improvement emerged throughout the elaboration of the proposals. These can contribute to the success of the connection we seek and are therefore taken along into the future.

3. TERMINOLOGY

Clear terminology when broaching multi-parenting is of the utmost importance, in particular what we mean by:

- 'Child': this includes 'young people' up to 18 years in the case of adoption, up to 25 years in the case of foster care;
- 'Adoption': for the purposes of this paper, the term refers to the (domestic and intercountry) adoption of an unrecognized child;
- 'Foster care': for the purposes of this paper, it the term refers to foster care for an unrecognized child;
- 'Home': we seek a 'home' for a child. In this way, singles are included in the scope. It does not matter whether 1 person, 2 persons, 1 parent with child(ren), 2 parents with children, etc. are concerned;
- 'Parents': the biological, first or birth parents of a child;
- 'Care parents' or 'candidates for foster care and/or adoption': candidates to become adoptive parents, foster carers or play families for a child;
- 'Multi-parenting': multi-parenting as a common framework when talking about welcoming a (foster/adopted) of someone else into your family [9]: it is about openness/willingness for all involved (parents, adoptive parents, foster carers) to maintain contact with the parents, and the fact that all those involved are (and remain) recognized as much as possible in their relationship to the child. For the purposes this paper, the term 'multi-parenting' is used in relation to a minor: what is not within the scope are the unrecognized adults with disabilities and/or psychological vulnerabilities within kinship foster care;
- 'Open adoption': open adoption means that some form of contact is possible between the three parties involved in an adoption (parents and family, adoptee and adoptive parents). Or that adoptive parents actively give the background and/or birth context a place in the life of the adoptee. Open adoption is the attitude we expect in adoption, fully in line with the overarching concept of multi-parenting;
- Matching': An optimal match depends on the relationship between the child's upbringing and developmental needs on the one hand, the upbringing qualities of the (candidate) parent and the upbringing climate in the (candidate) family on the other, as well as the

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[9] Multi-parenting also deals with surrogacy, newly composed families, donors, etc. These aspects fit into the global elaboration of multi-parenting as a (legal) concept. This issue is not addressed in this paper, which deals with foster care, adoption and play families. This list may be supplemented later with other forms of voluntary commitment to an unrecognized child in need.

ability of the parents to cope with the placement of their child away from home and their attitude towards the (candidate) foster family (Van den Bergh & Weterings 2010). In the case of a non-optimal match out of necessity, what (additional) support should be offered to the child and/or the (candidate) family so as to increase the chances of a successful placement must be spelled out (Van Oijen, 2010).

4. CONCRETE POLICY PROPOSALS

We try to describe the policy proposals as concretely as possible. We combine "The Best of Both Worlds" to arrive at a renewed way in which the preliminary process towards multi-parenting should look like. In doing so, we think outside the current regular and budgetary framework of the adoption and foster care sectors.

A. Inform and prepare:
1. Awareness raising (shared)

There is a need for an intensive and comprehensive information campaign and awareness-raising on multi-parenting and open adoption. The workgroup proposes that this be organized from the Agentschap Opgroeien. It is about engaging in 'multi-parenting': *"Would you like to use your home to mean something to someone else's child? A child who is in need of a home or for whom there is a care or youth support question."*
Raising awareness in society with sufficient attention to all opinions/perspectives of stakeholders: adoptees, care parents, parents, ... (such as, e.g.: the shame of parents who give up their child because they cannot care for it themselves). The aim is to paint a complete picture about adoption and foster care within the framework of multi-parenting. This is necessary so that the public can see that adoption and foster care share a lot of common ground: Putting forward adoption as a 'youth protection issue' (as opposed to 'making a child yours'). We want to avoid the idea of 'family formation' being the initial mindset of the candidates, precisely because this does not match the reality of adoption.

It is important to bear in mind at this juncture that multi-parenting is a new concept for many stakeholders. We use 'multi-parenting' as an educational concept throughout the policy proposals. In adoption, we make the link with the openness that is increasingly expected of candidates in recent years. In foster care, it is already inherently part of the attitude expected of foster carers. The intention is to explain the new vision around multi-parenting to the general public,[10] with the important nuance that multi-parenting itself is a lot broader than the forms covered by youth assistance or adoption. The aim is to lead candidates (we do not speak of "recruiting" in adoption) to the broad spectrum: from play-family to foster care and adoption, making clear the numbers of children (annually) involved per form of multi-parenting. We want society to understand that multiple care figures are present simultaneously in a foster care and adoption context and that openness is crucial here.

The family home parents [11] do not fall within the scope of this paper, but can be included later.

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[10] All stakeholders: the general public, applicants, clients, sectors, 'referrers' (consultants from the Ondersteuningscentrum Jeugdzorg (OCJ) [Youth Care Support Centre] and Sociale Dienst Jeugdrechtbank (SDJ) [Juvenile Court Social Services] and Vertrouwenscentra Kindermishandeling [Trust Centres for Child Abuse]).

[11] New concept: These are homes where professionals take care of children round the clock, year round. These can be self-employed or employed. In each case, one of the two parents is involved.

We mention the unrecognized adults with a disability and/or mental vulnerability in kinship foster care so that candidates for multi-parenting are duly apprised and could opt for it. The issue does not hereinafter fall under scope of this paper.

Candidates get the message that they will get support in the process.

Dual-focus pathways

One of the aspects that will come into clearer focus is the possibility for candidates to embark on pathways with a double focus, e.g.: going through the adoption procedure (with a longer waiting period) on a second track for one of the forms of foster care. There is a need for awareness and support in the foster care and adoption sectors to help monitor and supervise this when it occurs and also so that it is not automatically discouraged. The possibility of a double track should not however lead to adoption candidates overtaking other candidates due to actual speed differences between the two sectors and creating inequities in the procedure.

People may embark on both tracks as long as this is carefully monitored (applying the "yes, provided" principle [12]). The option is always considered on a case-by-case basis in direct cooperation by and between the two sectors. For instance, it is important to pay attention to the placement, when it is going to be simultaneous and the impact of upper placement/sub placement on the family must be adequately considered. It is possible unless there are clear objections.

2. General information moment (shared)

Purpose: to inform

"Provide a home so that you can do something for someone else's child in need of care."

Mandatory. Provincial. Free. Physical and online. In the evening. Frequency: offered at least monthly for all.

Content:

- Communicate the different forms of the spectrum (+engagement) of multi-parenting;
  - Proposal to have one website explaining the different procedures (managed by Agentschap Opgroeien);
- including a clear explanation of the subsidiarity principle: from less to more intrusive interventions (legal) on a child's life;
- explain the practical/emotional/psychological experience for the child of the different forms of interventions;
- the conditions for starting a pathway (model 2);
- identify what candidates should always communicate openly and honestly about and why. About: a pregnancy, upcoming renovation, fertility project, new job, … About everything that affects the candidates' trajectory. Create awareness;
- explain the procedure (differences and similarities);
- 'tease' towards the specific modules already;
- explain the minimum expectations for each sub-form;

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[12] This strength-based principle is related to the more integrated operation in foster care. A "yes" vote is given to a placement/matching for candidates, provided sufficient follow-up and support is provided with regard to the risk factors identified.

- number of children in need of a family (show figures regarding foster care and adoption in reality);
- display the profiles of children for whom families are sought.
  - We list the unrecognized adults within file foster care, so that all candidates for multi-parenting know this and could choose this. It is otherwise not within the scope of the preliminary process.

3. Preparation (shared)

Purpose: to inform, reflect and orient

Mandatory (non-binding for play families). About foster care and about adoption. Maximum three moments: Offer free of charge. Frequency to be determined.

You can go into depth with the group (group dynamics) quickly in the form of an interactive workshop. Orientation towards self-reflection, carrying capacity, etc., working as purposefully and practically as possible. Groups of maximum 20 people (sensible size with a view to interaction). In between assignments via an interactive learning platform (focus on theory) + feedback on this in the group meetings. Exactly what will be included in sessions 1, 2 and 3 has yet to be clarified. An initial idea as to the content is nonetheless already given below.

- Content:
- foster care/adoption triangle;
- loyalties of the child;
- parenting skills, values and standards;
- attachment and trauma (sensitive parenting) + culturally sensitive parenting;
- grief and loss: parents, unwanted biological childlessness, not being biologically related;
- address reality of heavy child profiles[13] in intercountry adoption;
- bearing/reflective capacity of candidates;
- place and importance of the parents and broad context of the child within the framework of multi-parenting and openness;
- foster care: bringing in reality: parents themselves often come from difficult socio-economic circumstances, neglect, poverty, psychological problems, …. Create a realistic picture of the trajectory in terms of cooperation and contacts with parents;
- Place of the children already present in the family: the effect of the trajectory on the children and the importance of the children's opinion on the tractor of their parents, etc.;
- Re-identify what candidates should always communicate openly and honestly about and why this is so. About: a pregnancy, upcoming renovation, fertility project, new job, etc. About everything that affects the candidates' trajectory. Create awareness (+ also in the personal space of the candidates in the follow-up system);
- Give mandatory assignments on the learning platform (videos, questionnaires, assignments, etc.) in between.

  Play families also benefit from this preparation because, in practice, this type of care often evolves into supportive foster care. We must point out that the Agency takes this up further.

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[13] The reality of the background of children eligible for intercountry adoption today is that very often these are children with specific support needs (multiple trauma, behavioural problems, sibling groups, older age, etc.)

> **The learning platform can be part of a larger overall system** for following up candidates through their procedure. The system is shared by and between all services involved. **This makes it possible to follow up candidates and their growth process integrally throughout their procedure(s). It is more client-oriented because they do not have to tell the same story countless times, can correct/adjust certain data themselves (contact details, etc.)..**
>
> **The information from this follow-up system can be used in later phases (screening, matching and care and guidance after placement). For example, the housework can be shared with the screening staff depending on the interviews and in order to follow up the process and development of the candidates.**

Candidates can, at their request, be put in contact with an experienced foster and/or adoptive family. We wish to compensate experienced foster and/or adoptive families who wish to cooperate in this process.

4. Panel[14] (shared)

Mandatory. Provincial. Bring together members of the adoption/ foster triangle, four times a ear.

Joint panel with both triangles, with experts by experience. From the time of registration for 'preparation', candidates can participate in a panel, depending on when they are scheduled. The chronology should not be strictly adhered to nor the 'preparation' completed on this front.

After the panel and once the 'preparation' has been fully completed, candidates make their reasoned choice of a form of adoption or foster care. If they are still unsure between foster care and adoption, the matter is addressed during the next step.

Candidates may, at their request, be put in touch with an experienced foster and/or adoptive family. We wish to compensate experienced foster and/or adoptive families who wish to cooperate.

5. Orientation meeting (shared)

An orientation interview is offered without obligation for candidates who are in doubt.

The aim is to organize the preliminary process in such a way that candidates can orientate themselves. If this is not successful, an orientation interview can be requested. We want this interview to be conducted jointly by a colleague from adoption and a colleague from foster care in the first phase, provided there are sufficient staff and resources. For the future, we wish to move towards a system where colleagues from both adoption and foster care have sufficient knowledge of both sectors to conduct the orientation interview.

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[14] In concrete terms: information and exchange moments where candidates can exchange experiences with experiential experts.

6. In-depth preparation sessions (separately)

In addition, separate in-depth sessions (in groups or individually) can be organized for adoption and foster care on certain topics, countries of origin or forms of foster care. For example, in the adoption service there could be at least an in-depth conversation about expectations, profile/country preference, borders,... In the foster care service, an in-depth conversation could take place about crisis foster care, foster care of unaccompanied minor refugees,... This conversation is necessary to decide when candidates can continue their respective procedure. It is interesting to explore the extent to which the learning platform can be used for this purpose.

The content of this will only be clear once the content of the preparation is known. This will be given concrete shape in a later phase. Only then will it be possible to determine to what extent matters should be compulsorily followed in the in-depth information sessions.

B. Screening for suitability

- The aim is to make the general screening process uniform. Screening for adoption and foster care will however remain separate.
- **Screening starts as and when needed and possible**. For instance, the time of the screening for adoption is moved up in accordance with the current waiting list. Avoid screening too far in advance by applying a flexible waiting list according to needs so as to avoid the need for a new screening after 4-5 years. There is extra time (in particular) for in-depth preparation during the waiting period.
- **We opt for bespoke screening**: targeted screening for the specific profiles initially chosen; for certain ages, 1 child versus 2 or 3 children, medical problems or no medical problems, etc.; and let the candidates name which problems with children they absolutely do not like.
- Gaps in the candidates' knowledge come to the surface during the screening. If desired, candidates are strongly advised/recommended to get in touch with an experienced foster and/or adoptive family. Otherwise, discussions will be held with the candidates on the reason why. In case of adoption, a positive recommendation can be given with the remark that candidates still need additional preparation (e.g. trauma/ attachment). In foster care, specific preparatory content may be addressed during screening.
- **Equivalent screening process**. The screening criteria should be largely equivalent. If a person receives a negative assessment for suitability for adoption or foster care, the initial report can then be shared with the service where a re-screening is requested. In case of a negative assessment by one service, unsuitable candidates are not automatically excluded by the other service. This should be considered on a case-by-case basis. It is possible that candidates who are not suitable for adoption may turn out to be suitable for some form of foster care.
  - It is moreover interesting that a transition (foster care-adoption or adoption-foster care) does not require full re-screening. The process is then limited to questioning what has changed since the previous screening and specifically questioning issues (specific to adoption / foster care) that are not in the initial report.
- Candidates can however follow an (admittedly shorter) adoption-sensitive or foster care-sensitive screening (also tailor-made) in the **transition**, depending on why the initial screening was conducted. This assumes a warm and smooth transfer of screening data between adoption and foster care (and within the adoption sector itself). We want to be careful here that people do not "shop around". 'Shorter' in this context means that candidates do not have to go through all the questions/interviews again, but that further work can be done on information already obtained.

- The **topics/subjects** to be delved into are known. See 'preparation'. The screeners address the answers/information from the learning platform.
    - For example, one of the important topics is how do candidates view cooperation and contacts with parents? In foster care, it is also very important to name the problems with parents and create a realistic picture.

Organization of the screening

- **Methodologies**. Various methodologies have been worked out and used in the two sectors: genogram, life line, ecogram, duplicate method, involving experienced foster carers, balance with strengths and points of attention, semi-structured interview, screening interview for foster care (what is this?), paying a **visits experienced foster/adoptive family** in between,... The screening interviews actively involve all residents (own children, wider family,...) under the same roof.
  There is a multitude of methodologies to choose from. The way in which it is done can be filled in very differently. This should be clarified later.
- **Number of screeners per interview**: the elaboration is free. It is especially important that information be shared sufficiently by and between the screeners.
- **Linking preparation and screening**: creation of link through direct exchange of information and follow-up that is possible through the shared follow-up system of multi-parenting candidates.
- **Team discussion**: it is moreover also important that the reports be reviewed by neutral readers (colleagues who did not participate in the screening interviews) from the team and the matter be jointly discussed in the team.
- **Screener profile**: social assistant, psychologist, etc.
- **Number of interviews**: here, too, the elaboration is free depending on the purpose, e.g. sometimes an extra interview with an acquaintance/friend when it concerns a single person.
    - **Question from matching subgroup**: that the adoption services responsible for matching are involved in the screening. Looking at good practices, we notice that in foster care and in adoption procedures in Wallonia, an employee of the matching service is part of the screening. It is also useful to be able to organize a good process around the delineation of child profile.
- **Location**: service (2 adoption locations and several foster care locations per province), at the home of candidates. **Idea**: make premises available for each operation so that it is more accessible to candidates (more choice). Important to bear in mind: all extra travel time for staff cannot be used to do interviews. Still to be clarified how this can be further (functionally) designed.
- **Reporting**: open report with opportunity for candidates to add to it. This creates trust and a more organic process. **Idea**: to state in the conclusion that someone is suitable for adopting a child and for a specific form of foster care. For this, it is important that candidates are not afraid that such an open choice would threaten their chances for either form.
- On the example of foster care, we examine whether screening for adoption can also result in a **defined child profile** for candidates.

C. Matching

- On the matching front, we look as much as possible for common ground between how adoption and foster care work. We wish to apply the **most common criteria possible** in both sectors. Foster care and adoption services rely on the same **considerations** in matching, such as the age and health of the candidates. Foster care and adoption services

each use statutory exclusion criteria.[15] In addition, assessment criteria are used in foster care. These are the factors, needs and wishes of both the child and the candidate parents that a matcher takes into account when matching.[16] See also the manual on methodical matching (point 5, c). It is important to match these criteria interprovincially (between foster care services) and between adoption and foster care, possibly through additional consultations.

- We can use the **same methodologies** in the guidance process for adoption and foster care throughout the preparation for matching: genogram, duplicate, involve experienced adopters and foster carers, balance with strengths and areas of concern, semi-structured interview versus more 'open' interview, etc.
- Following the example of foster care, adoption services wish to pursue **more continuity in the guidance process**. For instance, there should be greater overlap between the staff involved in screening and the staff who advise and guide candidates at the adoption service. It is important that adoption services know the candidates well at the time of matching in order to obtain an optimal outcome.
- Matching is done by a **multidisciplinary team** (welfare worker, psychologist, etc.) and in an open dialogue with those involved. A colleague in one service (e.g. foster care) can participate in a matching by the other service (e.g. adoption) in cases where one service has known the candidates for some time because of a previous placement.
- In the matching phase, we organize **exchanges with foster and/or adoptive families**, who can answer candidates' concrete questions thanks to their expertise gained through experience. This is also already covered at the panel and screening, but candidates were already matched with a specific child at that stage.
- **Matching reports** can be exchanged smoothly between all the different services via the shared follow-up system, previous matches can always be looked at for a subsequent matching.
- In case of doubt when matching because of multiple special/complex care needs, **(external) experts** such as a paediatrician, trauma psychologist, child rights expert, etc. **can be called in.**
- A **customized acclimatisation** process follows, if possible, after the final matching.

5. BACKGROUND OF THE POLICY PROPOSALS

What are the core objectives?
The core objective is to offer a suitable home to as many children as possible. We aim for an integrated preliminary pathway for candidates who are open to multi-parenting with exchange and cooperation by and between the foster care and adoption sectors.

- o Existing expertise and good practices are exchanged to the maximum. Candidates for foster care and adoption are informed, prepared and screened for an optimal matching, so that they can take care of a child that is not theirs as well as possible;
- o Risks of parallel pathways are avoided;
- o Flexible consideration can be given to switching from one form of multi-parenting to another;

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[15] This pertains to issues such as minimum age, sufficient housing and a blank criminal record.

[16] This pertains to matters such as the region (depending on visits), the number of children that one wants/is able to take care of, the age of the children, form of foster care, certain problems with parents that candidates are NOT comfortable with, and ditto for the children, certain peculiar characteristics of the candidate family, e.g. willingness to invest in therapy, halal cooking, etc.

- If no candidates for (urgent) placement are found for a child at one echelon, we look at another echelon: other foster care provinces and domestic and intercountry adoption services;
- A single preliminary process under the same roof (Agentschap Opgroeien) and optimal exchange of files (information from preparations, screening reports, etc.) between all services. For instance, families in which placement is difficult, but who opt for a placement again, can be followed up effectively;
- With a continued focus on **openness** between parents, foster carers, adoptive parents, child and the wider context.

a) For whom is this recommended offer intended? Be as specific as possible

For candidates for adoption, foster care and other forms of multi-parenting for an unrecognized child

b) Explain the relevance and background. What (scholarly) literature and/or opinions of experiential experts support the importance of this offer?

The adoption services indicate that there are limitations to the way the adoption landscape is currently organized. Adoption in Flanders has gone from 'little regulation - market model/supply-driven - adoption process', to a 'regulated adoption process - a sequential process' – a separate (fragmented) operation among services through the steps of the adoption process.

The development in foster care: there has been an increasing focus on screening and preparation of prospective foster carers over the last 30 years, and more coordination between provincial services since the decree of 2014 in terms of this preparation and screening process.

Literature
- Assessment report on the Foster Care Decree of 2017 by Jongerenwelzijn [Youth Welfare];
- Handboek Methodisch Matchen, https://www.nji.nl/system/files/2021-04/Handboek-Methodisch-Matchen.pdf;
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c) **An impact analysis**

General

Specific nature of adoption: what is the risk of making it one (more connected) pathway? Possibility of opting for more merging/unity in the pathway after all because the risks of the past (see previous point) are no longer there?

The detection of important information such as pregnancy, upcoming renovation, ... falls at a later point in this policy proposal than is now the case. This could potentially create too large groups in the preparation.

Risk in organizing the preparation: A large influx could lead to a waiting list. It should not slow down the process, which could lead to waiting fatigue among candidates.

There is a significant difference in speeds in processing adoption files in the family courts in Flanders. There are large regional differences, which means that waiting times in similar cases can vary widely. We mention this here for the smooth information flow (exchange) by and between screening services and matching services with a view to the integrated process.

The adoption screening service has raised concerns about offering multiple locations for screening: as currently organized (location in Ghent with staff there), staff are not able to pay home visits all over Flanders. A great deal of time would be lost travelling throughout Flanders.

Question from the adoption sector: look sufficiently into the impact of the policy changes on the services.

Impact on regulations

- Adoption: people with criminal records with 'non-reconcilable' offences are not allowed to initiate a process (analogous to decree provision in foster care);
- Adoption: offering free information-training- screening for adoption requires changes to regulations;
- Adoption and foster care: it should be possible to exchange (screening and matching) information on candidates. To this end, the regulations must be adapted to a **shared professional secrecy** for foster care services and adoption services so as to make more exchange possible between the two operations as well as within the adoption sector as such (screening and matching/guidance). This opens the door to the development of a shared follow-up system for candidates, taking into account privacy regulations;
- Enshrine mandatory steps in the preparation;
- Multi-parenting and open adoption enshrined in law? See Flemish Government action plan;[17]
- Adoption: adapt the practice/regulations around the possibility for adoption candidates to add cases to the social investigation report (as is possible in foster care);
- Foster care: funding as currently organized for foster care (per module) will have to be organized differently. Preparation of candidates for multi-parenting will be a separate task for which separate funding will have to be provided;

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[17] From the Flemish Government's action plan: efforts will be needed in the area of the regulatory framework, perception and communication regarding multi-parenting. The regulations are largely federal matters. The Agentschap Opgroeien will examine what can be delivered to the federal level and what decretal adjustments are needed to introduce multi-parenting. Multi-parenting transcends the topic of adoption. It will be further included in the business plan of the Agentschap Opgroeien.

- Foster care and adoption: there are specific regulations concerning the possibility of rescreening in another province. If the possibility of rescreening is extended to rescreening for multi-parenting, it should be included in the regulations on foster care and adoption;
- If candidates opt for the foster care pathway first and decide to switch to the adoption pathway after more than a year after they have undergone the preparation, their certificate of preparation is more than a year old and then they can no longer file for an interlocutory judgment to obtain a suitability judgment because this must be done with a certificate of preparation that is no more than 1 year old. This is a major legal obstacle to switching easily between the two procedures.

Budgetary impact

- To be able to offer the preparation free of charge for everyone;
- A joint effort is needed in order to organize the general information moments and preparation, but also more resources (money/staff) to make this happen;
- Additional resources are needed to ensure personal contacts for the preparation for everyone;
- Workplaces and staff have to be provided if each candidate has to be able to choose from several locations for screening;
- An elaborate IT system is needed for information to be shared and exchanged more easily between foster care and adoption operations;
- If work can be carried out at several locations for a process to prepare matching for adoption, workstations and staff should be provided;
- If work can be carried out at several locations for a process to prepare matching for adoption, workstations and staff should be provided;
- Financial resources should be provided for the remuneration of experts by experience (panel, home visits) and for the advice of the experts who will look at files.
- General: more staff needed.

d) Preconditions

It is important that all professional stakeholders put the best interests of the child first in their operations. As an underlying precondition.

The services should get to know each other better. This can be done through more intensive cooperation.

The success of this project depends partly (in the field of adoption) on the concrete elaboration and success of the 'care and guidance' project, which focuses on expanding post-placement care and guidance in the adoption sector. A sound (and more comprehensive) post-placement care policy for adoptive families is needed to ensure the success of important aspects of the intent of these policy proposals on the preliminary process.

In developing the joint preparation: set up a group per province to deal with this matter, with people from Agentschap Opgroeien, adoption and foster care.

e) Other relevant topics, ideas and points of criticism

General

- Need for a clear definition of the 'best interests of the child';
- Attention to care and guidance after placement in case of adoption;
- Importance of having training and screening as close as possible to the actual placement (matching) of the child. Sometimes they have to wait years (including in foster care), then certain information is refreshed when a placement arrives. Importance of close monitoring (for both forms);
- Idea: introduce the practice of alternate learning for training staff and screeners. Tutoring so that the role can be taken up alternately;
- Criticism from 'client perspective on youth care':
    - the term 'multi-parenting' is not correct because they are not all 'parents'. Ask to look for another term. Giving recognition to care parents entails taking away recognition from parents. Prefer to use the term multi-parenting only internally;
    - naming adoption within the 'spectrum' of family support and care is tantamount to a youth aid measure, which it essentially is not. By visibly mixing the two forms, you create the image of 'the slippery slope towards adoption'. Risk of a major negative impact of bringing the two forms together;
    - consider sufficient the different perspectives of all involved, including first parents.
- Question from the perspective of adoptees regarding the practice of adoption: there are serious questions as to why there is no **maximum age for candidates for adoption in Flanders**. It is true that this grew historically and was worked out by the federal legislator. This topic was outside the scope of the policy proposals but it is important to follow the matter up further in consultation with the minister.

Preparation
- Important observation regarding the preparation: adoptive children often start asking questions about parents at a very early stage, sometimes bringing them into the picture sooner than the adopters had expected. This picture should certainly also be up to date and may be included in the information and preparation of candidates;
- What about adults (with disabilities) in foster care? They should not be forgotten. How do we address this issue?
- Criticism from the 'perspective of candidate adopters and adopters':
    - Providing a great deal of information does not mean that the candidates will absorb it all. It is necessary to repeat and delve deeper into the information depending on the individual pathways;
    - This proposal should not be reduced to pushing towards foster care and discouraging adoption. Risk: the intrinsic motivation of candidates to choose one of the pathways must be correct.

Screening
- Idea for the future regarding splitting screening specifically for adoption. The situation is currently as follows: candidates are still going through the process after screening and are still evolving in terms of child profile. Once they have a suitability ruling from the family court, nothing can be changed about the report because it is part of the ruling and goes with them to the country of origin. Idea: first a basic screening for adoption by the screening service, then an additional 'screening' at the adoption service to determine the final child profile. This still enables candidates to evolve;
- Idea for linking: looking into the possibility of specific screening for domestic and intercountry adoption candidates, if they are open to crisis foster care. Sufficient consultation is needed for this to succeed, i.e. ascertain whether it is a good match between the two sectors. Risk: crisis care often takes longer than initially planned. If bonding occurs after a few months, it can become difficult for this family. Moreover, it is

also a very different profile and commitment (being able to let go when the child goes back). We want to think further about this kind of practical collaboration, as there are potential gains here;

- Different function/purpose of screening in adoption and foster care;

    - Adoption: at issue is an 'objective' screening, a report for the court, with no interpretation therein. In adoption, candidates must have additional skills from the outset because there is not a large supply of assistance towards adoptive parents and adopted children in Flanders. Candidates are therefore screened for having extra skills to be able to recognize and deal with cases independently;

    - Foster care: this is a coaching screening, the report is a helping tool, with interpretation possible.

- Critique from the 'perspective of candidate adopters and adopters': it is important for courts to know that the negative opinion of the social research service for adoption, has implications: A demand to provide specific training on adoption for judges.

Matching

- Use the matching game (screening tool from foster care in West Flanders) also as a matching tool? It serves to make candidates think about their profile;
- Important to note: the term 'matching' in the manual on methodical matching is much broader than it is currently understood in foster care;
- When matching and getting used to foster care: before candidates meet a foster child, the parents and the candidate foster family are introduced to each other first.

f) What is the timeframe (roadmap) within which we want to achieve this?

2023 we want to use the resources to make the policy proposals concrete in 2023, and proceed with the initial implementation in 2024.