



13th Report

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON
LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SERVICE COMMISSIONS
AND STATUTORY AUTHORITIES
(INCLUDING THE THA)

on an

**Inquiry into the operations of the Adoption Unit of the
Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it
relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the
Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago**

Fourth Session (2023/2024)

12th Parliament

Thirteenth Report

Of the

Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service
Commissions and Statutory Authorities
(including the THA)

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Inquiry into the operations of the Adoption Unit of the
Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it
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Fourth Session (2023/2024), 12th Parliament

HOR PAPER NO:

SENATE PAPER NO.:

PARL NO: 14/3/48-32

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Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness
of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

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Ms. Cherylee Legair	Parliamentary Research Specialist
Mr. Yasphal Kissoon	Parliamentary Research Specialist

Publication

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the Parliament website using the following link:

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to:

The Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA)
Office of the Parliament
Parliamentary Complex
Cabildo Building
St. Vincent Street Port of Spain Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
Tel: (868) 624-7275 Ext 2277, 2627 Fax: (868) 625-4672
Email: jsclascsa@ttparliament.org

Date Laid in HOR:

Date Laid in Senate: 21.01.2025

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION	ORGANISATION
CATT	Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
OPM-GCA	Office of the Prime Minister - Gender and Child Affairs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 At its twenty-third meeting held on January 24, 2024, the Committee resolved to conduct an *Inquiry into the operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago* and agreed that the following three (3) objectives would guide the inquiry:
- i. To assess the operational efficiency of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago;
 - ii. To assess the effectiveness of the Adoption Unit in the facilitation of adoption procedures in Trinidad and Tobago;
 - iii. To evaluate the adequacy of the regulatory framework that guides the work of the Adoption Unit in the execution of their mandate.
- 1.2. To this end, the Committee identified relevant stakeholders it wished to engage to acquire a holistic perspective on the issues under consideration. Further to this, on April 03, 2024 the Committee convened a public hearing with the primary stakeholders involved including:
- i. Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division; and
 - ii. Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.
- 1.3. Some of the issues which were highlighted during the course of the inquiry included:
- i. Allocations to the CATT and whether these were sufficient to meet the operational needs of the said entity.
 - ii. Policies for adoption as well as the efficiency of the process of adopting a child.

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- iii. The adequacy of existing legislation that guides the CATT in carrying out its primary functions in the adoption process.
 - iv. Efforts to sensitise the public about adoption.
 - v. Post-adoption monitoring and evaluation procedures.
- 1.4. From observations made during this inquiry, the Committee has proffered recommendations which it believes will appropriately address the operational shortcomings and challenges identified based on the evidence received. A summary of these recommendations follows this Executive Summary.
- 1.5. We anticipate that the Parliament, OPM–GCA, the CATT, and other stakeholders will give due consideration to the findings and recommendations contained in this Report to ensure that the CATT is able to adequately execute its mandate. The Committee looks forward to reviewing the line Ministry's response to this Report, which becomes due sixty (60) days after it is presented to the Houses of Parliament.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The key recommendations proposed by the Committee are as follows:

- i. the required legislative amendments should be made to strengthen the Adoption Unit's post-adoption monitoring capacity. This must be supported by the necessary administrative and human resources;**
- ii. the vacancy for a permanent adoption manager must be filled by the end of Fiscal 2024/2025. Once recruited, the Board of the CATT and other executive leadership can hold that officer fully accountable for his/her performance;**
- iii. the Committee endorses CATT's plan to expand the Tobago office to facilitate and improve the adoption process;**
- iv. the CATT should periodically review its decision to outsource Psychologists or Child Support Officers/Caregivers to determine whether this approach is still the most suitable and efficient;**
- v. the Ministerial Response to this report should include a status update on the organisational restructuring of the Adoption Unit.**
- vi. the Adoption Unit should continue to review and update adoption procedures to align with best practices. For example, the Adoption Unit should consider the development of a matching standards framework. It is acknowledged that matching a child with an adoptive family is a complex process and one that requires highly skilled professional staff. Improving the quality of and facilitating timely matching will ensure that adoption procedures remain current and reduce the processing time for applicants to become adoptive parents;**
- vii. the Committee strongly encourages the Adoption Unit to continue collaborating with other entities and stakeholders to support families who may face challenges;**

- viii. the Committee encourages the Adoption Unit to appoint Case Committees as stipulated in Section 40(1b) of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03;
- ix. greater efforts are needed to educate the public about adoption procedures. These can include outreach programmes, optimising social media and digital media platforms, town hall meetings, or public education drives throughout public spaces in Trinidad and Tobago.
- x. The CATT should consider re-evaluating the processes involved in removing a child or children from their foster parents where the safety of a child may be compromised. In this regard, consideration should be given to arranging for a medical examination to be conducted immediately pending the commencement of an investigation to substantiate reports of alleged abuse. The overarching aim should be safeguarding the child's welfare at the earliest opportunity.
- xi. In its ministerial response, the OPM-GCA should communicate, in writing, to the Parliament the status of the review of the Children's Authority Act and related legislation. The Ministry's response should also include proposed timelines for these legislative amendments to be tabled in Parliament;
- xii. Proper monitoring and evaluation systems must be instituted to ensure that adopted children are not subjected to any form of mistreatment such as neglect and abuse.

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INTRODUCTION

Entity Background

The Adoption Unit of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago

2.1. The Adoption Unit of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT/ the Authority) was formed after the assent of the Adoption of Children (Amendment) Act, 2015¹. Section 9(1) of the Act provides that “no person other than the Authority shall make arrangements for the adoption of a child”. This provision effectively removed the responsibility of adoption of children from the Adoption Board. It empowered the Authority with the sole responsibility for “all arrangements for the adoption of a child”.

The Adoption Committee

2.2. Section 11 of Act No. 14 of 2008², the Children’s Authority (Amendment) Act, 2008, amended the Children’s Authority Act to establish an Adoption Committee which has the power to regulate its procedures. The Committee’s composition and functions are set out in Section 7A(1) of the Children’s Authority Act, Chap. 46:10³, which provides, inter alia, that when a decision concerning the adoption of a child arises, a Committee of the Board to be known as the Adoption Committee shall sit to take such decision, which must then be ratified by the Board of Management as required by Section 7A(3).

¹ The Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03. Page 7. Accessed August 05, 2024 <https://agla.gov.tt/downloads/laws/46.03.pdf>

² The Children’s Authority (Amendment) Act, 2008. Accessed August 05, 2024 <https://www.ttparliament.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/a2008-14.pdf>

³ The Children’s Authority Act, Chap. 46:10. Accessed August 05, 2024 <http://laws.gov.tt/ttdll-web/revision/download/106223?type=act>

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The Committee consists of persons who have professional qualifications and skills in the following areas:

- a. paediatrics;
- b. law;
- c. child psychology or child psychiatry; and
- d. social work.

The following persons are also mandated to form part of the Committee:

- a. a person nominated by the Tobago House of Assembly with experience in children's issues appointed by the President;
- b. the representative of the Non-Governmental Organisation; and
- c. the head of the Adoption Unit.

Office of the Prime Minister - Gender and Child Affairs

2.3. The Office of the Prime Minister - Gender and Child Affairs is the line Ministry for the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. The main duties of the OPM-GCA⁴ as it relates to children are:

- a. Implementing strategies of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at a national level;
- b. Guiding the transitioning of State Homes;
- c. Providing a secure and nurturing environment for all children; and
- d. Developing comprehensive, coherent and harmonized initiatives to promote, protect and respect child rights.

⁴ Office of the Prime Minister. Accessed on August 05, 2024 <https://www.opm.gov.tt/about/business-and-departments-of-government-under-the-opm/>

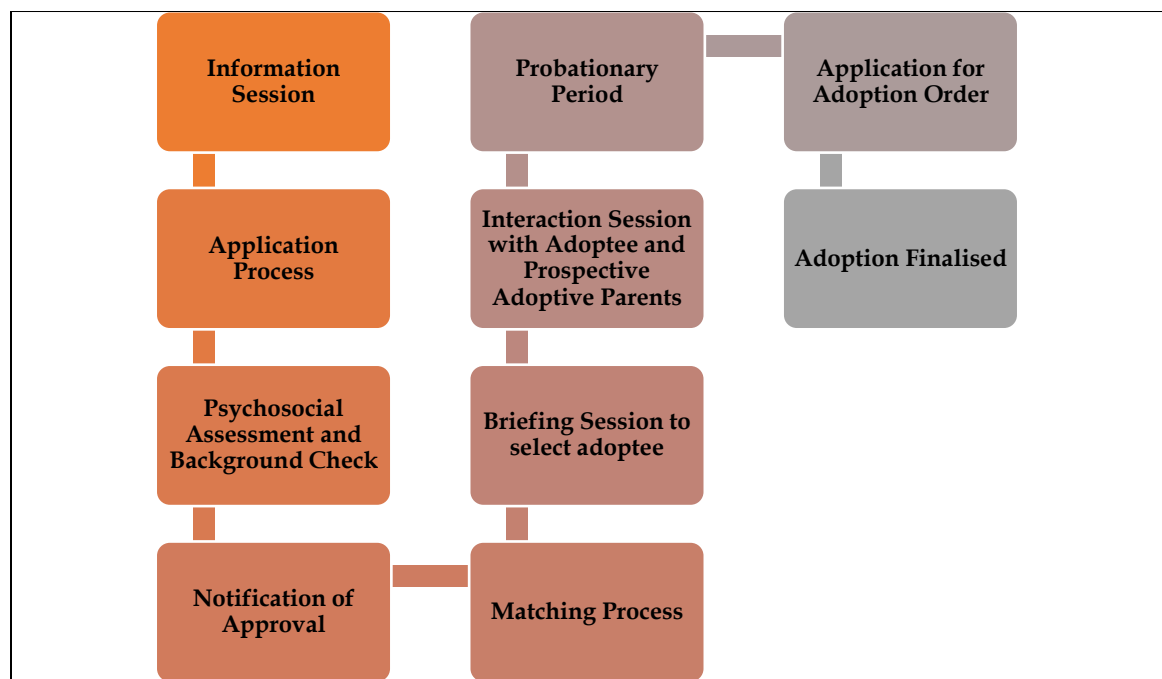
The Adoption Process

2.4. There are three major stakeholders involved in the adoption process:

- i. The Prospective Adoptive Parent;
- ii. The Adoptee; and
- iii. The Birth Parent.

The adoption process managed by the Authority may include the following steps depending on the type of adoption being sought, i.e., an open or closed adoption (see figure 1 below):

Figure 1: Steps in the Adoption Process



2.5. After the adoption is finalised, the Family Court directs the Registrar General's Department of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs to prepare an *Adoption Certificate* which states the Adoptive parents as the child's legal parents. The Adoption Certificate replaces the child's birth certificate which

is sealed. The child's adoption is entered into the Adopted Children Register at the Registrar General's Department.

Adoption Order

2.6. An *adoption order authorises* the applicant to adopt a child. The application is made pursuant to Section 18 of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03⁵. Applications made in respect of children placed by the Authority must be supported by a report on the suitability of the applicants to be submitted by the Authority to the Court. In making adoption arrangements, the Authority is also required to have regard to all circumstances, the first consideration being the need to safeguard and promote the child's welfare and so far as is practicable, ascertain and give due consideration to the child's wishes.

An Order Freeing a Child for Adoption

2.7. The granting of an **Order Freeing a Child for Adoption** involves the transfer of parental responsibility from a parent or parents to an adoption agency, in this case, the Children's Authority, upon which the child becomes available for adoption. Under Section 15(1)⁶ of the Adoption of Children Act, where a person makes an application to the Authority to place a child for adoption and the Authority accepts that application, the Authority is mandated to apply to the Court for an order declaring that the child be freed for adoption. Similarly, pursuant to Section 25(j) of the Children's Authority Act⁷, where the Court is satisfied that a child brought before it by the Authority is a child in need of care and protection, the Court may make an Order freeing a child for adoption. Accordingly, Section 15 of the

⁵ Adoption of Children Act. Accessed on August 05, 2024 <http://laws.gov.tt/tddl-web/revision/download/106208?type=act>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Children's Authority Act. Accessed on August 05, 2024 <http://laws.gov.tt/tddl-web2/revision/download/117208?type=amendment>

Adoption of Children Act states that “where a person makes an application to the Authority to place a child for adoption and the Authority accepts that application, the Authority shall apply to the Court for an order declaring that child freed for adoption.” Upon the grant of this order, the Authority can then match the child with such prospective adoptive parents as are approved by the Authority taking into account the child's needs.

Types of Adoption

2.8. There are two primary types of adoption:

Open: An open adoption is a form of adoption in which the biological parents and the adoptive parents know each other or the child knows the adoptive parent. It involves the adoption of an identified child.

Closed: A closed adoption is a form of adoption where the biological and the adoptive family do not know each other and neither has any identifying information about the other. In this type of adoption, there is no contact. In a closed adoption, the child is matched with a prospective adopter based on their requested child profile.

Categories of Children Eligible for Adoption

2.9. The categories of children who are considered to be eligible for adoption are as follows:

- i. Children who are placed at the disposition of the Authority for adoption by their parents/guardians;
- ii. Children who are the subject of de facto adoptions: children within a family in which the applicant is the spouse or cohabitant of the natural parent of the child;

- iii.** Children who are in the care of the Authority, either in Foster Care or in a Community Residence and for whom an order is granted by the Court to make the child available for adoption; and
- iv.** Children within a family in which one of the applicants is a parent, step-parent or relative of the child, or has been a step-parent or relative of the child.

Inquiry Rationale

- 2.10. The adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago is a topic that was brought to the attention of the Committee after successive media reports highlighted the difficulties being faced by persons who wish to adopt children from Children's Homes/Community Residences. Through this inquiry, the Committee aims to determine the following:
- i.** the annual rate of adoption;
 - ii.** the procedures involved in the adoption of a child;
 - iii.** whether there is a nexus or natural progression from foster care to adoption;
 - iv.** the efforts that are being made to encourage this practice in Trinidad; and
 - v.** the process to monitor adoptees following adoption.

Methodology for obtaining evidence

- a. On Wednesday April 03, 2024 a public hearing was held with representatives of the Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division and the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, at which time the Committee interviewed the representatives on issues relevant to the inquiry objectives. The respective entities represented are provided in **Appendix I**.
- b. Before the public hearing, the Committee sought and received written submissions from the stakeholders mentioned above.
- c. The Committee also conducted a survey to gather views from the public and other stakeholders about the efficiency and effectiveness of adoption procedures in Trinidad and Tobago. The survey collected responses from 101 participants randomly sampled from the public and NGOs as well as 59 foster parents and 115 adoptive parents were randomly selected. The data collection period for responses from the public and NGOs commenced on April 25th, 2024, and concluded on May 17th, 2024. The collection of responses for foster and adoptive parents commenced on May 21st, 2024, and concluded on June 5th, 2024. A breakdown of the sample is shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: Survey Response by Target Group

Target	Survey Period	No. of Responses	Population
Public and NGOs	April 25 th – May 17 th 2024	101	-
Foster Parents	May 21 st – June 5 th 2024	59	90
Adoptive Parents	May 21 st – June 5 th 2024	115	204

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- d. The Minutes and Verbatim Notes relevant to the Committee's public hearing with the listed entities are attached in **Appendix II** and **Appendix III**, respectively.

- e. The survey report is attached as **Appendix IV**.

Summary of Evidence Together with Findings and Recommendations

Objective 1: To Assess the Operational Efficiency of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago

Allocation to the Children's Authority

3.1.1. According to the submission received from the OPM-GCA, the allocation to the Children's Authority has consistently increased over the past three (3) years as follows:

Table 2: Allocation to the Children's Authority over the past three fiscal years

Fiscal Year	Allocation	Percentage Change
2020/2021	\$86,775,000.00	N/A
2021/2022	\$98,110,000.00	13.06% increase
2022/2023	\$132,500,000.00	35.05% increase

The allocation for fiscal year 2023/2024 was \$100,000,000.00, as indicated by the Director/Chief Executive Officer of the CATT, which represented a 25.53% decrease from fiscal year 2022/2023. The authority requests that the allocation be increased to \$150 million in the upcoming budget.

Organizational Structure of the Adoption Unit

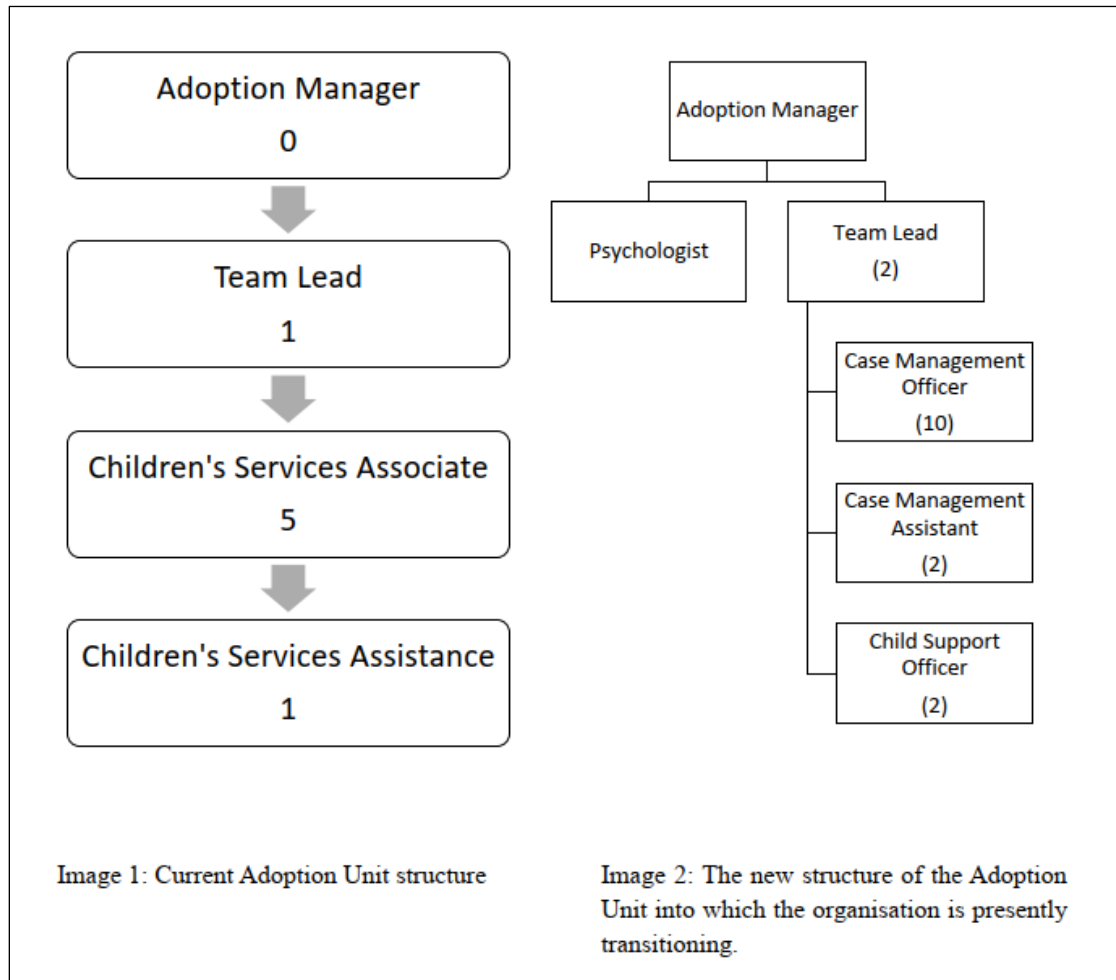
- 3.1.2. Section 11 of the Children's Authority Act Chapter 46:10⁸ states that "for the effective management of its duties and functions, the Authority shall have such units and centres (including an Adoption Unit and a Foster Care Unit) as may be prescribed by the Minister on the advice of the Board."
- 3.1.3. Currently the Adoption Unit consists of seven (7) persons. One (1) team lead, who has been acting as the Adoption Manager, five (5) Children's Services Associates (CSAs/Caseworkers) and one (1) Children's Services Assistant (Administrative Assistant). The position of Adoption Manager is vacant and no Psychologists or Child Support Officers are attached to the team.
- 3.1.4. Notably, the vacancies have not significantly hindered the execution of duties, as contingency measures were implemented to offer coverage. For instance, in their written submission, the CATT noted that the Adoption Team Lead has been performing the substantive duties of this role as well as the duties of the Adoption Manager to avoid any negative impact on the adoption function. Instead of internal Psychologists, the Children's Authority has engaged the services of external private psychologists to conduct psychological assessments of adoption applicants.
- 3.1.5. The Committee was also informed during the public hearing that psychosocial support is provided by the Adoption Unit's social workers who can provide certain kinds of psychosocial intervention to parents. Should there be a need for more support than the social workers can provide, the Unit relies on the Children's Authority's existing cadre of psychologists or the external providers they have on board.

⁸ Children's Authority Act, Chap. 46:10, page 15. Accessed on August 07, 2024 <http://laws.gov.tt/tddl-web/revision/download/106223?type=act>

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3.1.6. According to the written submission provided by the CATT, the Adoption Unit is transitioning into a new organisational structure during the current financial year 2023/2024. This new structure is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: New Organizational Structure of the Adoption Unit



3.1.7. During the inquiry, the Adoption Unit noted that the new structure calls for an increase in staff numbers, which will likely increase the unit's operational efficiency.

Additional Resources That Are Needed For The Optimization of the Adoption Unit

- 3.1.8. According to the Adoption Unit in its written submission, human resource infrastructure is needed to optimise the unit's operations. For instance, there is a need for more Caseworkers in Tobago. At present, when home visits and sensitisation sessions are to be conducted in Tobago, Adoption Unit staff from Trinidad must travel to perform these functions.
- 3.1.9. With respect to Tobago in particular, the Committee was advised that more than three (3) caseworkers are needed to improve the efficiency of its Tobago operations, but this may change as the situation evolves.
- 3.1.10. The Authority's new organisational structure proposes the presence of cross-functional Case Management Officers whose functions may include Adoption.
- 3.1.11. Furthermore, the lack of available Psychologists meant that the Unit operates with two (2) externally contracted psychological service providers. A greater number of service providers and/or internal psychologists will decrease the wait times for applicant assessments and contribute to the overall decrease in application processing time. The Authority's new organisational structure (see Figure 1) provides for a psychologist within the Unit.

Resources That Have Been Provided to the Unit Over the Past Three (3) Years

- 3.1.12. The Adoption Unit has acknowledged that over the past three (3) years, additional resources have been provided in the form of:
- An additional psychological services provider
 - One additional office to accommodate staff
 - Additional user accounts for the Unit's electronic case management software

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- A team to conduct the Community Residences Reintegration project (a project to determine children in the Community Residences who may be candidates for adoption).

Post-Adoption

3.1.13. The Adoption Unit in its written submission reported that no provision in the legislation mandates the Authority/Adoption Unit to conduct post-adoption monitoring once an adoption has been granted. However, in the best interests of the children, the Unit continues to liaise with the adoptive parents to:

- Facilitate the transfer and enrollment of children into their respective schools and health centres.
- Receive progress updates on children's overall development, celebration of milestones and holidays and family bonding.
- Provide guidance on how and where additional resources for support may be accessed.

3.1.14. Regarding post-overseas monitoring is usually conducted by the foreign agency, which liaised with the Authority to complete the adoption according to the submission provided by the CATT. Furthermore, post-adoption monitoring is usually conducted as a part of the foreign agency's process. Examples of the domains in which such monitoring is done include examining positive/unique experiences related to culture and heritage, physical health, disabilities, social integration, and the child's and family's adjustment.

Efforts To Accelerate the Rate of Adoption

- 3.1.15. The Division's Board of Management approved the implementation of two new policies – the *Kinship Foster Care* and the *Foster-to-Adopt* policies.
- 3.1.16. The Kinship Foster Care was established in August 2023, through an amendment to the Children's Community Residences Foster Care and Nurseries Act Chap 46:11. The amendment provided for some relatives to become foster parents. The Children's Authority Act Chap 46:10 defines a relative as a "parent, step-parent, a grandparent, a brother or sister, whether of whole or half blood, an uncle or aunt, whether of whole or half-blood".
- 3.1.17. This policy has resulted in ten (10) placements. Additionally, public awareness campaigns about said policy are already established with brochures being distributed via the mail.
- 3.1.18. The Foster-to-Adopt policy seeks to ensure that a child who is in foster care can transition to adoption as well as the foster carer who seeks to become an adoptive parent. This policy guides the processes associated with those status developments.

Foster Care

- 3.1.19. Concerning post-foster care placement, once a child has been identified as a candidate for adoption and is placed temporarily in foster care, the child is jointly monitored by the Foster Care and Adoption Units until freed and matched for adoption. It is incumbent upon the Foster Care Unit to provide the following points of monitoring:
- **Home Visits** allow direct observations and information on the general day-to-day care of the child, the home environment, and family interactions in their everyday setting. This is beneficial in gaining a holistic perspective of a child's situation,

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including their safety and risk, their family's strengths and needs, and general psychosocial issues.

- **School Visits** – this ensures that the child's educational needs are adequately met and that the rights of the child are upheld in this regard. In addition to being updated by the foster parent as to how their educational needs are being catered to, school visits involve discussions with school personnel on the child's academic performance behaviours, interpersonal style at school, and the family's involvement in the child's education.
- **Supervised Access visits** - To maintain the bond between a foster child and their family, supervised access visits are facilitated where this is possible, appropriate and in the best interest of the child. This maintains their relationships with siblings and others who have a significant role in the child's life.
- **Telephone/virtual monitoring** - The foster parents are contacted via telephone at least once a month to obtain feedback on how the child is progressing in their care. The needs presented by the child often determine the frequency of telephone monitoring. Any concerns or updates are shared with the Caseworker.
- **Monitoring through therapeutic visits and health visits** – Staff from the The Foster Care Unit accompany children on primary medical or therapeutic visits and monitoring of the child can also take place at these visits.
- **Monitoring by the Court** via reports and affidavits submitted by the Caseworkers on various domains of functioning of the child.

Findings and Recommendations

Based on the evidence set out in this section, the Committee concluded as follows:

- i. the CATT has received significant funding increases over the last three (3) financial years, which, according to the CATT, have led to improvements in the operational efficiency of the Authority and by extension the Adoption Unit;
- ii. the Adoption Unit is currently undergoing restructuring and to meet the demands of this transitional phase, additional human resources are needed, particularly in Tobago;
- iii. the Committee is concerned that the absence of internal psychologists can lead to longer processing times for applicants;
- iv. the Committee commends the Children's Authority's efforts to increase adoption by introducing two new policies, the Kinship Foster Care and Foster to Adopt Policies;
- v. the current legislation does not provide for post-adoption monitoring. While the Adoption Unit conducts its own post-adoption monitoring processes, the Committee recommends that the required legislative amendments be made to mandate the Unit to carry out this function;
- vi. the Committee notes the sensitisation efforts by the CATT to educate the public about adoption. However, based on the findings from the Committee's Survey, the majority of the general public was unaware of the adoption process and believed that there was inadequate information available. This finding questions the efficacy of the CATT's marketing and public relations strategy. However, the Committee acknowledges that the issue of adoption and parental rights and control is a highly sensitive matter that must be carefully handled.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence received and further to the foregoing findings, the Committee respectfully recommends as follows:

- i. the required legislative amendments should be made to strengthen the Adoption Unit's post-adoption monitoring capacity. This must be supported by the necessary administrative and human resources;**
- ii. the vacancy for a permanent adoption manager must be filled by the end of Fiscal 2024/2025. Once recruited, the Board of the CATT and other executive leadership can hold that officer holder fully accountable for his/her performance;**
- iii. the Committee endorses CATT's plan to expand the Tobago office to facilitate and improve the adoption process;**
- iv. the CATT should periodically review its decision to outsource Psychologists or Child Support Officers/Caregivers to determine whether this approach is still the most suitable and efficient;**
- v. the Ministerial Response to this report should include a status update on the organisational restructuring of the Adoption Unit.**

Objective 2: To Assess the Effectiveness of the Adoption Unit in the Facilitation of Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

Steps in the Adoption Process

3.1.20. Please refer to Figure 1 (page 19), which describes the steps in the adoption process.

Adoption Statistics

3.1.21. For the period 2018-2023, the total number of adoptions was 107, the total number of foster placements for this same period was 219, and the total number of overseas adoptions was 17.

3.1.22. According to the CATT's submission, the total number of applications being processed as of March 2024 alone was ninety-two (92). The Authority acknowledged that of these 92 applications, three (3) were placed on hold by the applicants for various reasons, such as medical challenges.

3.1.23. For the period 2015-2024, the Authority received five hundred and thirty-five (535) applications for adoptions. And for the same period, one-hundred and twenty-four (124) adoption orders were issued.

3.1.24. There are currently one-hundred and twenty-four (124) children in foster care with ten (10) in kinship foster care arrangements. There are ninety-eight (98) foster care providers with eighty-nine (89) being traditional foster carers and the remainder being kinship foster care providers.

3.1.25. Thus far, there have been only two (2) adoptions not granted where the reasons were instability in the familial network and financial resources; and the lack of consent by the birth parents to relinquish parental rights.

3.1.26. As of March 2024, the total number of children in Community Residences who have been freed for adoption is twenty-eight (28). Only six (6) of these continue

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

to reside in the Community Residence. The first group comprises two (2) siblings whose ages are 13 and 14. The second group comprises four (4) siblings whose ages range from 8 to 13.

Table 3: Adoption and Foster Care Statistics by the CATT

Category	Number
2018 - 2023	
Number of Adoptions	107
Number of Foster Placements	219
2015 - 2024	
Applications for Adoption	535
Adoption Orders Issued	124
Total Number of Applications being processed as of March 2024	92
Foster Care Arrangements	
Number of children in Foster Care	124
Number of children in Kinship Foster Care arrangements	10
Foster Care Providers	
Total number of Foster Care providers	98

Duration of the Verification Process for Prospective Adoptive Parents

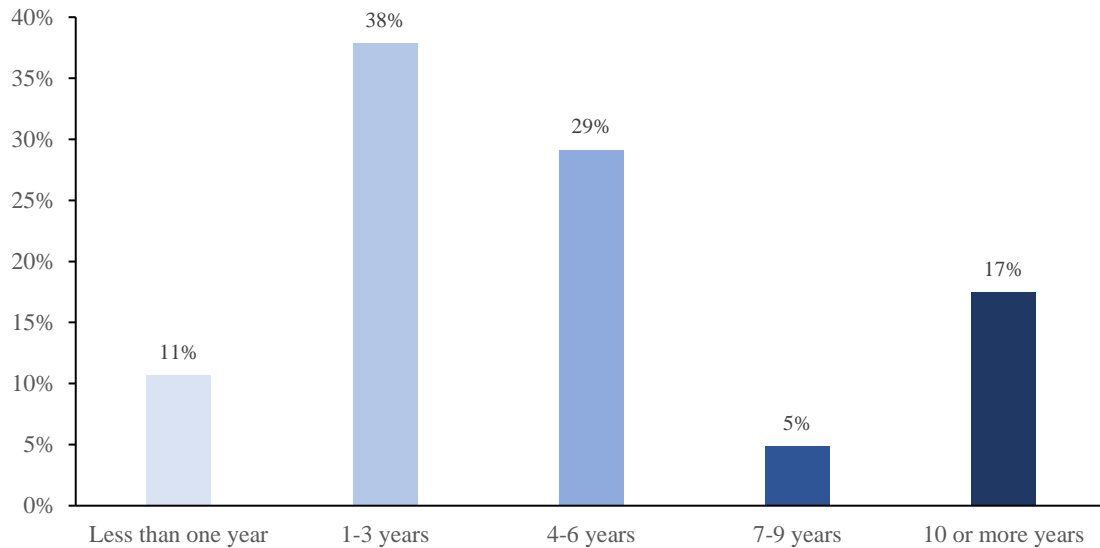
- 3.2.1. The Adoption Unit notes that prior to 2021, it took approximately one to two years for an application to be assigned to a caseworker for processing. Currently, applications are assigned to caseworkers in real time due to the implementation of new processes in the Unit.
- 3.2.2. An application typically takes six (6) months to process, and three (3) months are spent internally conducting the psychosocial process and assessments. This

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involves interviews with prospective adoptive parents, home visits, and school visits. The remaining time is spent on external factors such as the application for a Police Certificate of Character, which can take just over a month, and medical suitability checks.

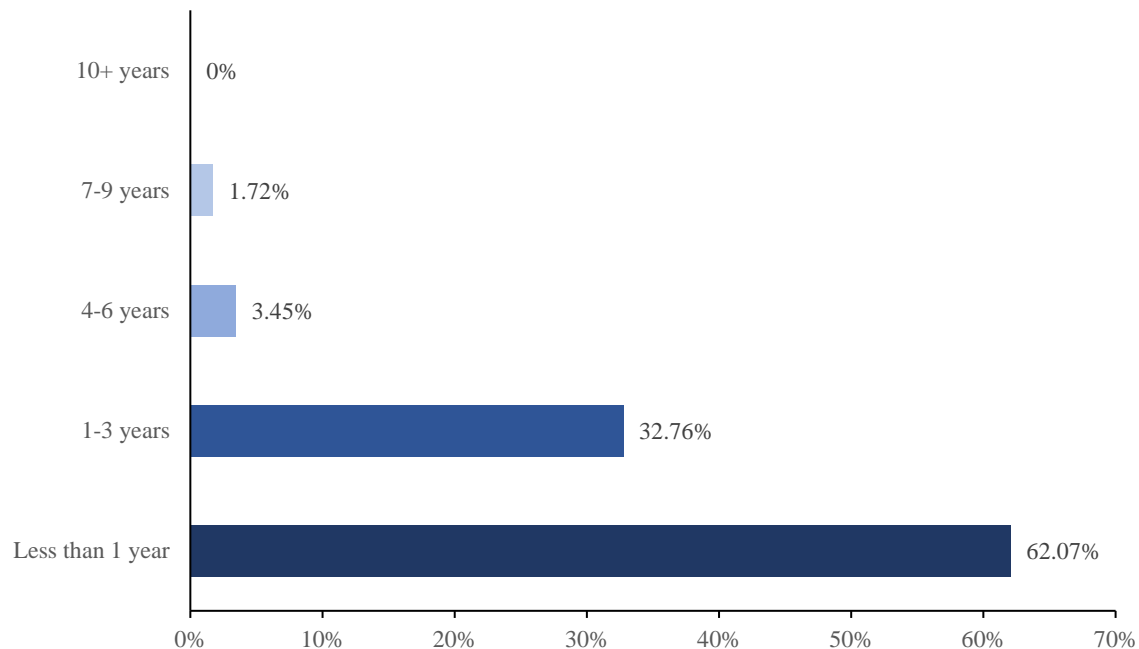
- 3.2.3. In the case of foreign applicants, adequate time is taken for the investigations to occur in their respective home countries and any immigration and citizenship processes.
- 3.2.4. The JSCLASCSA's Adoption survey inquired from adoptive parents about the duration of the adoption process, and findings revealed that out of the 103 survey participants who chose to respond, eleven (11) or 10.68% were involved in the process for less than a year. Most of the respondents however, were engaged in the process for 1 to 3 years (n = 39, 38%). Slightly fewer respondents (n = 30, 29%) were engaged in the process for 4 to 6 years and a small number of respondents (n = 5, 5%) were engaged in the process for 7 to 9 years. It should also be noted that eighteen (18) participants, or 17% of the sample, were engaged in the adoption process for 10 years or more. The data is presented in Figure 4 below.

Figure 3: Bar-Chart showing the length of time respondents engaged in the adoption process



3.2.5. The process of becoming a foster parent appeared quicker for most respondents, according to the survey. Out of the fifty-eight (58) respondents who elected to respond to the question, thirty-six (36), or 62%, indicated that it took less than a year. Moreover, nineteen (19) respondents or 32%, stated that it took 1 to 3 years, and two (2) respondents or 3% indicated that the process took 4 to 6 years. Only one (1) respondent stated that it took 7 to 9 years. Notably, according to respondents, the process did not take or exceed ten (10) years. This data is presented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 4: Bar-Chart showing the length of time to become a foster parent



Adoption Process

- 3.2.6. Any person interested in caring for a child must undergo a suitability assessment. This entails a comprehensive background check including all persons living in the household and community checks.
- 3.2.7. To qualify as a prospective adoptive parent, the prospective adopter must be able to provide for the child holistically – that is, familial, financially, medically and physically.
- 3.2.8. There is no age limit or other forms of discrimination to become an adoptive parent, but the Adoption Committee has discretion over all applications.
- 3.2.9. The authority conducts all psycho-social checks and assessments, whereas a third-party organisation performs the background checks.
- 3.2.10. The child's perspective is considered throughout the adoption process to ensure it is in their best interest.

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3.2.11. The background/home study checks for foreign adoptions occur through an accredited adoption agency in the State where the prospective adopter resides. Additionally, the Authority would be indirect communication with said agency to ensure all requirements are met.

Collaboration With Other Entities

3.2.12. The CATT works closely with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in particular, regarding cases where the families of the child may face challenges.

Challenges Faced by Applicants in the Fostering Process

3.2.13. Respondents faced several challenges during the fostering process. According to the findings from the survey, these were the more common challenges:

- a. Psychiatric Evaluations - This was mentioned by seventeen (17) respondents (29%).
- b. Lengthy Process - This was mentioned by ten (10) respondents (17%).
- c. Physical Tests/Medical Examinations - This was indicated by six (6) respondents (10%).
- d. Taking time off from work/Time constraints - This was indicated by three (3) respondents (5%).

Preparations at home - This was indicated by three (3) respondents (5%).

Challenges Faced by Respondents in the Adoption Process

3.2.14. The survey also inquired about the challenges faced by respondents during the adoption process. The most common challenges were:

- a. Lengthy Process - This was mentioned by forty-one (41) respondents (40%).

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b. Medical and Psychological Assessments – This was mentioned by six (6) respondents (6%).

3.2.15. Other less frequently cited challenges were: difficulties in scheduling court dates, problems with communicating with attorneys, delays in making contact with the case worker, applications were lost, the interview process and biological parents unwilling to relinquish the child.

Process of Monitoring and Evaluation of Potential Adoptive Parents During the Probationary Period

3.2.16. In accordance with Regulation 9 (a)(i), of the Adoption of Children Regulations, “A representative of the Authority or person recognised by the Authority to be competent to conduct requisite supervisory visits shall- visit the child at least once during the first month and thereafter at least once every two months during the probationary period.”

3.2.17. This means that the assigned caseworker visits the child and prospective adoptive parents on the first, third, fifth, and sixth months of the probationary period, during which interviews are conducted to ensure that the child and prospective parents have been coping well with the placement.

3.2.18. A probationary period form and report are completed and presented to the Adoption Committee. Approximately two (2) impromptu visits, outside of the aforementioned scheduled visits are also conducted with the child and prospective parents.

Time Frame for Adoptive Parents Who Wish to Renege On An Adoption Application

3.2.19. According to Section 12 (3)(a) of the Adoption of Children Act Chapter 46:03, at any time during the probationary period, the adopter may give notice in writing to the Authority of his intention not to adopt the child.

3.2.20. Section 5 informs that where the person has given their decision in writing, the Authority may within twenty-one days of the date on which the notice was given, remove the child from the care of the adopter.

Provisions Made by the Authority for the Former Adoptive Child

3.2.21. While it was acknowledged in their submission that no instances of this have occurred, the Authority nevertheless will provide the child with the following:

- a. Psychological intervention provided by the Children's Authority's internal/external contracted psychologists, who will determine the most age-appropriate form of therapeutic intervention to help the child process the experience.
- b. Sourcing of alternative placement.
- c. Ongoing monitoring by the assigned CSA.

Process of Removing a Child From Unsafe Conditions

3.2.22. The Adoption Unit informed the Committee that once the Authority receives a report of a child protection concern of any child under their purview, an investigation is launched to substantiate the report.

3.2.23. Once it is determined that the foster child is in fact at risk of harm, the child is removed and alternative placement is secured. A medical examination is performed and the child's psychological needs are addressed accordingly.

3.2.24. Further investigations continue regarding the details surrounding the unsafe conditions, and where necessary, a Police report is made regarding the foster parent, if they are the alleged perpetrator.

3.2.25. Pending the findings of the investigations, and seeking guidance from the Authority's Foster Care and Child Protection Committee of the Board of

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Management, the foster parent may be removed from the Register of approved foster parents if necessary.

3.2.26. It was mentioned in the CATT's submission that for the period 2018 to 2023, two (2) children were removed from unsafe foster care conditions.

Process of Freeing a Child From Adoption

3.2.27. The process to free a child for adoption is guided by Section 15 of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03.

3.2.28. Once the child is received into care, the unit temporarily places the child with a foster parent or in a community residence until they are freed and matched. They can then proceed to the next stage of the process, which is the probationary period.

3.2.29. During the probationary period, the following is done:

- i. Interviews are conducted with birth parents to determine the reasons for placing the child for adoption and to determine if there are other willing and available family members to care for the child. Should no other family members be willing to care for the child, then a requisite form from the parents to relinquish their parental rights to the child is obtained.
- ii. In cases where the parents are not identified, the Unit will conduct visits to the last known address. If no current address is available, the Authority will place advertisements in the newspapers for two (2) weeks to obtain information on the parent(s).
- iii. The child undergoes a medical evaluation at the Authority's Assessment Centre where the Authority's doctors examine them.
- iv. The findings and medical reports are then compiled and presented to the Adoption Committee with the recommendation to free the child for adoption. Upon approval, it is then ratified by the Authority's Board of Management. The legal team then applies to the Court pursuant to Section 25J of the Children's Authority Act Chapter 46:10, for freeing the child for adoption, in their best interest.

Role of the Case Committee concerning the Adoption of the Child

- 3.2.30. According to Section 40(1b) of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03, a Case Committee is a mechanism which may be set out in Regulations by the Minister to consider the case of every child proposed to be delivered by or on behalf of the Authority into the care and control of an adopter.
- 3.2.31. However, the Case Committee under Section 40(1b) of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03 is akin to the Adoption Committee specified under Section 7A of the Children's Authority Act Chapter 46:10.
- 3.2.32. Duties therefore are partially fulfilled by the Adoption Unit and the Adoption Committee in lieu of the Case Committee.
- 3.2.33. While no Case Committees were appointed during the period 2020 to 2023, there were thirty-nine (39) meetings held by the Adoption Committee.

Sensitisation Efforts

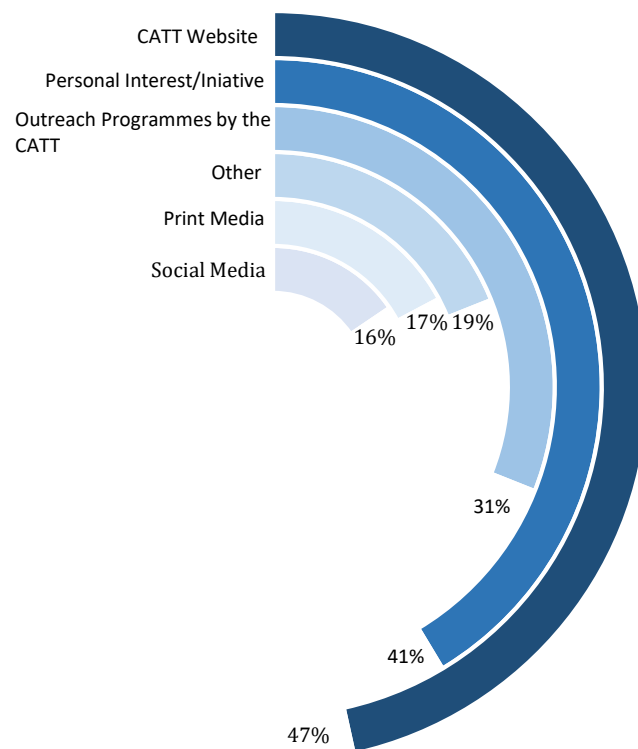
- 3.2.34. The Children's Authority has been sensitising efforts, particularly in clinics and hospitals, emphasising adoption as a valid option rather than abandonment.
- 3.2.35. To this end, the Authority reported that there has been a constant stream of persons bringing their children to the Adoption Unit, rather than abandonment in the communities or in hospitals.
- 3.2.36. The Children's Authority is also engaging in sensitisation efforts to highlight that older children need loving and caring homes as well, as there is a preference from the public to adopt toddlers or babies.
- 3.2.37. Despite these efforts, the Committee's survey report on Adoption highlights that the majority of the public (54%) were not familiar with the adoption process and almost all respondents (99%) thought there was insufficient information and awareness of adoption in their community.

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3.2.38. Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents (97%) thought that not enough attention is given by Government agencies to promote adoption and fostering as family options.

3.2.39. The Committee's survey revealed that, for those interested in the fostering process, most respondents (47%) used the CATT's website as their primary source of information, followed by their own personal interest or initiative (41%). Outreach programmes by the CATT were also used by 31% of the respondents. Print media (17%) and social media (16%) were additional sources of information (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 5: The most common sources of information used by Foster parents

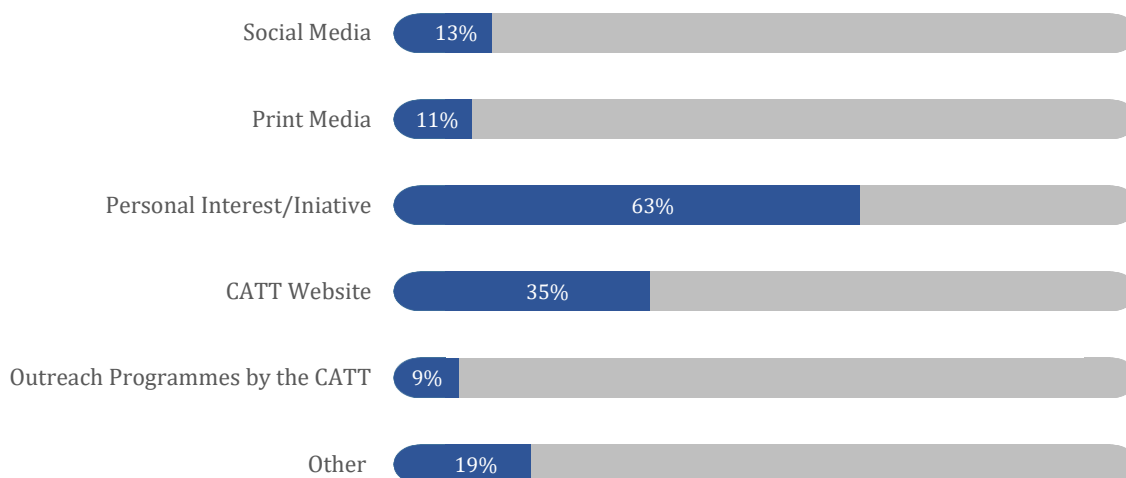


3.2.40. Regarding adoptive parents, the results from the survey showed that the majority (63%) relied on their own personal initiatives and interests as the primary source

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of information regarding adoption. The CATT website also provided an essential source of information for 35% of the respondents followed by social media (13%) and print media (11%). Outreach programmes by the CATT were another source of information for 9% of the respondents, and 19% relied on other sources of information (see Figure 7 below).

Figure 6: The most common sources of information used by Adoptive parents



Findings and Recommendations

Based on the evidence set out in this section, the Committee concluded as follows:

- a. while the Adoption Unit has acknowledged that processing time for applications for prospective adoptive parents has been reduced to six (6) months, evidence from this Committee’s Adoption Survey found that the majority of adoptive parents (38%) indicated the process took one to three years, and 29% took four to six years;
- b. processing time for applications to become foster parents, on the other hand, is significantly shorter, evidenced by the survey’s finding of a majority of

- respondents (62%) having to wait less than a year for their applications to process;
- c. based on the survey's findings, applicants interested in fostering or adopting a child face challenges with the respective processes. A notable challenge is the lengthy period it took to process fostering and adopting applications. Psychiatric Evaluations were also a significant challenge particularly for foster parents. For adoptive parents, other notable challenges include medical and psychological assessments;
 - d. The Committee is concerned about the lack of case committees as mandated by the legislation and questions whether it is feasible in the long-term for the Adoption Unit and Adoption Committee to share duties and functions in lieu of the case committees.
 - e. The Committee noted the process followed to remove a child or children from the care of a foster parent where the circumstances appear to be unsafe. In this regard, the Committee questioned whether it would be more prudent to immediately remove the child from such an environment in the first instance, pending the outcome of an investigation.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence received and further to the foregoing findings, the Committee respectfully recommends as follows:

- i. **the Adoption Unit should continue to review and update adoption procedures to align with best practices. For example, the Adoption Unit should consider the development of a matching standards framework⁹. It is acknowledged that**

⁹ Adoption England: National Practice Standards for Matching. Accessed on August 12, 2024 <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-05/Adoption%20England%20National%20Practice%20Standards%20for%20Matching.pdf>

matching a child with an adoptive family is a complex process and one that requires highly skilled professional staff. Improving the quality of and facilitating timely matching will ensure that adoption procedures remain current and reduce the processing time for applicants to become adoptive parents;

- ii. the Committee strongly encourages the Adoption Unit to continue collaborating with other entities and stakeholders to support families who may face challenges;
- iii. the Committee encourages the Adoption Unit to appoint Case Committees as stipulated in Section 40(1b) of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03;
- iv. greater efforts are needed to educate the public about adoption procedures. These can include outreach programmes, optimising social media and digital media platforms, town hall meetings, or public education drives throughout public spaces in Trinidad and Tobago.
- v. The CATT should consider re-evaluating the processes involved in removing a child or children from their foster parents where the safety of a child may be compromised. In this regard, consideration should be given to arranging for a medical examination to be conducted immediately, pending the commencement of an investigation to substantiate reports of alleged abuse. The overarching aim should be safeguarding the child's welfare at the earliest opportunity.

Objective 3: To Evaluate the Adequacy of the Regulatory Framework that Guides the Work of the Adoption Unit in the Execution of Their Mandate

Adequacy of the Adoption Act

- 3.3.1. Both the CATT and the OPM – GCA agreed that the Adoption Act adequately empowers the Authority to execute its mandate.
- 3.3.2. The CATT acknowledged, however, that current legislation does not mandate the Authority to conduct follow-ups. Despite this, the Authority continues to follow up with its clients and renders assistance where needed, such as enrolment in school or health facilities.
- 3.3.3. According to the OPM–GCA, a package of children's legislation, including the Adoption of Children Act, is being reviewed by a subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Child Protection. Proposed reforms are expected to be finalised by the end of June 2024.

Steps Involved in the Appeals Process

- 3.3.4. The appeals process is provided for under Section 14A of the Adoption of Children Act Chapter 46:03.
- 3.3.5. Where a person feels aggrieved by the decision of the Authority that the adoption of the child is not in the child's best interest, they may file an application to the High Court, naming the Authority as the Respondent and seeking that the Court dispense with the approval of the Authority and grant the adoption.
- 3.3.6. The court then directs the parties to file their requisite documents and determines whether the adoption will be granted.
- 3.3.7. It was noted that for the period 2018 to 2023, one (1) appeal was filed, and this appeal was resolved in favour of adoption. This decision however, has been further appealed and is currently awaiting a decision from the Court of Appeal.

Limits on Overseas Adoption as Stipulated in the Adoption of Children Act

- 3.3.8. The process for overseas adoptions is governed by Part VII of the Adoption of Children Act, Chapter 46:03.
- 3.3.9. Overseas adoptions of children in Trinidad and Tobago are prohibited unless an Order has been made by the Court under Section 36 of the Act permitting the child to be sent abroad for the adoption, or the requirements of the Emigration (Children) Act are satisfied.
- 3.3.10. Before granting the Order, the Court must be satisfied that the application is made with the consent of every person who is a parent or guardian of the child or who has the custody of the child or who is liable to contribute to the child's support.
- 3.3.11. Furthermore, it is suggested that the child's care and control be transferred to a suitable individual for adoption, which will be accomplished by the recommendation of a TT Consular Officer or any other reliable individual, and that the transfer is in the child's best interest.
- 3.3.12. The Court must be convinced that the adoption is in the child's best interest and that the child would be appropriately cared for by someone suitable to have the child in their care, custody, and control. Additionally, the Court must be convinced that the child would not be subjected to any abuse, neglect, or mistreatment.
- 3.3.13. In the case of foreign applicants, adequate time is taken for the investigations to occur in their respective home countries and any immigration and citizenship processes.

Findings and Recommendations

Based on the evidence set out in this section, the Committee concluded the following:

- i. the Committee is concerned that the existing legislation does not empower the CATT to conduct follow-ups;
- ii. The Committee endorses the work of the OPM-GCA to review the existing package of legislation, identify gaps, and strengthen where necessary.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence received and further to the foregoing findings, the Committee recommends that:

- i. **In its ministerial response, the OPM-GCA should communicate, in writing, to the Parliament the status of the review of the Children's Authority Act and related legislation. The Ministry's response should also include proposed timelines for these legislative amendments to be tabled in Parliament;**
- ii. **Proper monitoring and evaluation systems must be instituted to ensure that adopted children are not subjected to any form of mistreatment, such as neglect and abuse.**

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

The Committee respectfully submits the foregoing for the consideration of the Parliament.

Ms. Sunity Maharaj
Chairman

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
Vice-Chairman

Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP
Member

Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP
Member

Mr. Laurence Hislop
Member

Ms. Khadijah Ameen
Member

Mrs. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal
Member

Ms. Jayanti Lutchmedial-Ramdial
Member

Dated October 30, 2024

APPENDICES

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

Appendix I

List of Officials

Office of the Prime Minister - Gender and Child Affairs Division	
Name	Position
Mr. Vijay Gangapersad	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Mr. Sanjay Singh	Deputy Permanent Secretary
Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago	
Name	Position
Mr. Sheldon Cyrus	Director/Chief Executive Officer
Mrs. Vandana Siew-Sankar-Ali	General Manager, Child and Family Reintegration Services
Ms. Renee Neptune	Adoption Manager (Ag.)

Appendix II B - Minutes - Twenty-Fourth Meeting

**MINUTES OF THE 24TH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO AND REPORT ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES,
SERVICE COMMISSIONS, STATUTORY AUTHORITIES (INCLUDING THE THA)
HELD ON WEDNESDAY APRIL 03, 2024**

PRESENT

Members

Ms. Sunity Maharaj	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Laurence Hislop	Member

Secretariat

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Ms. Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Parliamentary Research Specialist
Ms. Cherylee Legair	Parliamentary Research Specialist

Absent/ Excused

Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julian, MP	Member
Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP	Member
Mrs. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal	Member
Ms. Jayanti Lutchmedial	Member

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

PUBLIC HEARING

- a. The Chairman reconvened the meeting at 10:18 a.m. and advised that the meeting will be streamed live.
- b. The Chairman highlighted the objectives of the inquiry and introductions were made.
- c. The Chairman then invited the lead official of each delegation to make a brief opening statement.

Witnesses Who Appeared

- d. The following officials appeared before the Committee:

Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division

- a. Mr. Vijay Gangapersad Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
- b. Mr. Sanjay Singh Deputy Permanent Secretary

Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago

- a. Mr. Sheldon Cyrus Director/Chief Executive Officer
- b. Mrs. Vandana Siew Sankar-Ali General Manager, Child and Family Reintegration Services
- c. Ms. Renee Neptune Adoption Manager (Ag.)

KEY ISSUES DISCUSSED

- a. The following are the main issues highlighted during discussions with the **Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division:**

Allocation to the Children's Authority:

- 6 The Gender and Child Affairs Division of the Office of the Prime Minister advocates for increases in allocation to encourage greater efficiency. The releases of said allocations occur in equal amounts on a monthly basis.

Policies for Adoption:

- 7 The Division's Board of Management approved the implementation of two new policies – the *Kinship Foster Care* and the *Foster-to-Adopt* policies.

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

- 8 The Kinship Foster Care policy, a policy already being implemented, allows family members to adopt the child. This policy has resulted in ten (10) placements. Additionally, public awareness campaigns about said policy are already established with brochures being distributed via the mail.

The following are the main issues highlighted during discussions with the **Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago:**

Overview:

- a. The Children's Authority is the entity that determines the most suitable placement for the child.
- b. For the period of 2015 to 2024, the Children's Authority have received five hundred and thirty-five (535) applications for adoption.
- c. There were one hundred and twenty-four (124) Adoption Orders granted for the period 2015 to 2024.
- d. There are currently one-hundred and twenty-four (124) children in foster care with ten (10) in kinship foster care arrangements. There are ninety-eight (98) foster care providers with eighty-nine (89) being traditional foster carers and the remainder being kinship foster care providers.
- e. Thus far, there have been only two adoptions not granted where the reasons were instability in the familial network and financial resources; and the lack of consent by the birth parents to relinquish parental rights.
- f. The adoption process can be conducted up until the age of seventeen (17).
- g. The Adoption Unit is staffed by social workers therefore making them qualified to provide a limited level of psychosocial intervention.
- h. While there is no permanent Tobago office for the Adoption Unit, it is a part of the Authority planned restructuring exercise.

Adoption Pool:

- i. There are currently nine (9) children in different stages to be freed for adoption.
- j. The children in care homes such as St. Mary's are **NOT** available for adoption.

Financial Allocation:

- k. The allocation to the Children's Authority for this fiscal year is \$100M. The Authority has benefited from the gradual increase in allocation.
- l. The Children's Authority Adoption Unit is currently undergoing a restructuring.
- m. The Children's Authority's request is \$150M for the upcoming budget.

Foster care Policies

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- n. The Foster Policies implemented heavily feature the concept of permanency planning. Permanency planning, in this context, is the assurance that children are always placed within a family-based environment.
- o. Due to the Children Authority's aim of keeping children with family members as much as possible, the Kinship Foster Care policy seeks to allow members of the child's extended family to become foster parents.
- p. The *Foster-to-Adopt* policy seeks to ensure that a child who is in foster care can transition to adoption as well as the a foster carer who seeks to become an adoptive parent. This policy guides the processes associated with those status developments.

Support for Foster Families

- q. All foster carers receive training regardless of their prior child care experience. This is to ensure that the carers are equipped with the skills necessary to provide for the child's needs.
- r. Additionally, a stipend, within the range of \$2000 to \$5000, is provided on a monthly basis in order to facilitate the basic needs and any additional complex needs to be met.
- s. Psycho-social services provided such as individual counselling, assessments and other specialist interventions are also provided.
- t. Additionally, interventions in order for these prospective carers to become completely resource qualified – such as housing arrangements – the Authority's network aims to support such.

Process to Become a Fosterer/Adopter

- u. Prior to 2021, it took approximately one to two years before an application could be assigned to a caseworker for processing. At present, applications are assigned in real-time to caseworkers.
- v. An application now takes approximately six months to complete its processing where three of those months are used to conduct the psychosocial process and assessments and the remainder involving external factors such as the attainment of a Police Certificate of Character as well as medical suitability checks.
- w. For foreign applicants, adequate time is taken for the investigations to occur in their home country as well as any immigration and citizenship processes.
- x. Any persons who express interest to care for a child has to undergo a suitability assessment. The suitability assessment includes a comprehensive background check which includes all persons present within the household as well as community checks.

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- y. In order to qualify as prospective adoptive parent, the prospective adopter must be able to provide for the child holistically – that is familial, financially, medically and physically.
- z. While there is no age limit or other forms of discrimination present in order to become an adoptive parent, all applications are to the discretion of the Adoption Committee.
- aa. All psycho-social checks and assessments are conducted by the Authority whereas the background checks are conducted by a third party organization.
- bb. The perspective of the child is taken into account throughout the adoption process to ensure it is in their best interest.
- cc. The background/home study checks for foreign adoptions take place through an accredited adoption agency in the State that the prospective adopter resides. Additionally, the Authority would be in direct communication with said agency to ensure all requirements are met.

Relationship with other State Entities

- dd. The Children Authority works closely with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services particularly regarding cases where the families of the child may face challenges.

Legislation/Provisions within the Legislation

- ee. If the Authority deems a parent to be unsuitable based on specific circumstances such as neglect or abuse, but the parent is unwilling to relinquish their parental rights – the Authority, under the Adoption of Children Act, may make recommendations for dispensation of the parents' consent.
- ff. Legislation such as the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act; the Children's Act; the Adoption Act; the Children's Authority Act are being reviewed by a sub-committee of the Standing Committee on Child Protection. The lifespan of this sub-Committee is three years which is also the life of the Board.
- gg. There are legislative provisions that allow for a child, upon coming of age, to be able to seek information about their birth parents if it was unknown.

Public Awareness/Sensitization

- hh. Sensitization, particularly in clinics or hospitals, emphasizing that adoption is a valid option rather than abandonment is conducted by the Authority.
- ii. Based on their approach, there have been a constant stream of persons bringing their children to the Adoption Unit rather than abandoning within communities, or in hospitals etc.

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- jj. The Children's Authority have conducted sensitization session highlighting that there are older children that are in need of a loving and caring home especially as most of the public prefer to adopt toddlers or babies.

Post-Adoption Monitoring/Evaluation

- kk. While there is no mandated function to conduct post-adoption monitoring, in the best interests of the child, the Authority continues to follow-up with their clients and provide assistance where needed – such as enrolment in school or health facilities.

ADJOURNMENT

- 10.1 The meeting was adjourned at 12:13 p.m.

I certify that the Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

May 20, 2024

Verbatim Notes

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH HYBRID MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SERVICE COMMISSIONS AND STATUTORY AUTHORITIES (INCLUDING THE THA), HELD (IN PUBLIC) IN THE LINDA BABOOLAL MEETING ROOM, GROUND LEVEL, CABILDO BUILDING, PARLIAMENTARY COMPLEX, OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, ST. VINCENT STREET, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 03, 2024, AT 10.18 A.M.

PRESENT

Ms. Sunity Maharaj	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Laurence Hislop	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Ms. Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Parliamentary Research Specialist
Ms. Cherylee Legair	Parliamentary Research Specialist

ABSENT

Ms. Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mrs. Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal	Member
Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julian	Member
Ms. Jayanti Lutchmedial	Member

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

Ms. Sherlana Ramdeen

Assistant Secretary

CHILDREN'S AUTHORITY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Mr. Sheldon Cyrus

Director/Chief Executive
Officer

Mrs. Vandana Siew Sankar-Ali

General Manager, Child and
Family Reintegration Services

Ms. Renee Neptune

Adoption Manager (Ag.)

Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division

Mr. Vijay Gangapersad

Permanent Secretary (Ag.)

Mr. Sanjay Singh

Deputy Permanent Secretary

Madam Chairman: A very good morning to everyone in this public hearing that is being recorded for broadcast at a later date. And welcome to the Twenty-Fourth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions, and Statutory Authorities including the Tobago House of Assembly in the Twelfth Parliament. This public hearing is being convened pursuant to our enquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago. We are pleased to have with us today officials from the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Division, good morning all. So, I now invite you to introduce yourselves, and we will follow up with that. So, will the members of the Children's Authority do so?

[Introduction made]

Madam Chairman: I noticed your Chairman is not here, we expected him.

Mr. Cyrus: Yes, I have to apologize for the Chairman, he is accompanying the

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Minister at the launch of an event—an initiative really, for the child abuse and prevention month. So, he really wanted to make it and tried to make alternative arrangements for another board member, but it did not work out. So, we apologize for that.

Madam Chairman: Thank you, will you convey our disappointment in his absence please?

Mr. Cyrus: Yes, please.

Madam Chairman: And members of the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Unit.

[Introduction made]

Madam Chairman: Thank you very much. I am Sunity Maharaj, Chairman of this Committee and with me today are, would you introduce yourselves please?

[Introduction made]

Madam Chairman: Okay, thank you very much. So, we get to the objectives and more specifically of this enquiry:

To assess the operational efficiency of the Adoption Unit, of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago;

To assess the effectiveness of the Adoption Unit in the facilitation of adoption procedures in Trinidad and Tobago; and

To evaluate the adequacy of the regulatory framework that guides the work of the Adoption Unit in the execution of its mandate.

So, I now invite the Children's Authority representative well—yes, Mr. Cyrus, to make a presentation on their work not exceeding two minutes.

Mr. Cyrus: Thank you Chairman, and good morning everyone. Ms. Sunity Maharaj, Chairman of the JSC; Mr. Esmond Forde, Vice-Chairman; members of the Joint Select Committee; Mr. Vijay Gangapersad, Permanent

Secretary, Gender and Child Affairs Division, Office of the Prime Minister; staff of the Children's Authority; members of the national community, good morning. Thank you for giving the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to contribute to this discussion on the adoption process. While fundamentally adoption is a legal process, it is about determining the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents to appropriately respond to the social, emotional, physical and educational needs of a child. The ethos of the Authority is that children thrive best in a family environment. Therefore, all efforts are made to keep children with their families or to seek family reintegration where possible, appropriate, and in the best interest of the child. However, there are times when these are not possible, and other placement options for the child may include kinship foster care, foster care, or adoption. According to the Adoption of Children Act:

“No person other than the...”—Authority—“...shall make arrangements for the adoption of a child.”

Therefore, we take this responsibility seriously as we seek to place a child in a safe, loving, caring, nurturing, and permanent home, with a family where the child can feel loved and have a sense of belonging. We hope that during our discussions today we provide more clarity on the work of the Adoption Unit, to the satisfaction of the JSC and the wider community, I thank you.

Madam Chairman: Thank you very much. And I now call on Mr. Vijay Gangapersad, Permanent Secretary (Ag.) in the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Division.

Mr. Gangapersad: Thank you and good morning again, to the Chair, members of the Committee, colleagues and the viewing audience. Firstly, I want to thank

the Committee for the opportunity to be part of this enquiry. The Gender and Child Affairs Division affirms that child rights and responsibilities remain a national priority including their right to be raised in a family. We hold the position that all children including those who cannot be in their biological families, should be in families who can love, care, and protect them for the long term. For this, adoption is always the preferred option, where this cannot be done for whatever reason, we advocate for other options like foster care, kinship care, and other types of in-family arrangements. The role of the Adoption Unit within the Children's Authority cannot be overstated, it serves as the bridge between vulnerable children in need of loving homes, and prospective parents eager to provide that love and stability in a child's life.

Institution and processes addressing varying issues pertaining to children are regarded as critical elements of a robust child protection system. As societies evolve, we recognize the need for and are committed to continuous improvement. It is for this reason we consider this enquiry an opportunity, not only to share information, but also to benefit from insights and recommendations that will allow for greater numbers of children to grow up in loving, nurturing, and stable homes. Today also provides a priceless opportunity for all of those listening in to learn about adoption and the adoption processes. There are children awaiting the warmth of a loving family, yearning for the stability and security that only a permanent home can provide. Your decision to embrace adoption can transform lives, and shape futures in ways unimaginable. So, I urge you to open up your hearts and homes to the idea of adoption. I thank you very much.

Madam Chairman: Thank you very much. So, we will get on now to the questions.

I would like to remind everyone to address their questions through the Chair, and we will start with some questions to the Gender and Child Affairs Unit, based on your submissions to us. Member Hislop.

Mr. Hislop: Thank you, Chair. First of all let me recognize the work that the Adoption Unit and the Gender and Child Affairs Division has been doing for our children, and we know all of this takes significant funding, so, I just want to touch very quickly. Your submission would have shown that there has been an increase to the Children's Authority consistently over the last three years from \$86 million to \$132 million based on your submission. The question is to what extent has this increase in budgetary allocations been commensurate with the increase in releases to the Children's Authority? And has this increase affected your operational efficiency?

Mr. Gangapersad: Chair, through you, thanks for the question. Over the years, the Division has advocated for increases in the allocation for the Children's Authority, and this is primarily based on submissions and looking at the Authority over the years to encourage a greater efficiency in its operation. In terms of the releases, the Children's Authority would have been receiving their releases on a timely basis. As it relates to how that money is utilized when it is released, the Children's Authority would be in a better position to provide an explanation for that.

Mr. Hislop: But based on the allocations, there is a commensurate—in the increase in the releases. So, your allocation is one, but in terms of the releases? So, if you allocated \$132 million, how close to that do you get in your releases?

Mr. Gangapersad: Thanks again. Chair, through you, the releases are usually equal amounts based on what is received on a monthly basis.

Mr. Hislop: And from your position, acting PS, it translates into more resources

being allocated, in terms of what the Children's Authority requires? That translates into that, right?

Mr. Gangapersad: Yes, it does. I think on an annual basis, we do have discussions with the Authority and what their needs are in terms of human resources and otherwise. They would have been signalling over the years the need for additional resources. In 2023, we actually had a joint meeting with the Authority and with officials at the Ministry of Finance. At that meeting, the Minister of Finance was there, and a firm commitment was made by the Minister of Finance through the Ministry of Finance, to increase the allocation to the Authority based on several processes that would have been conducted at the Authority, including a transformation exercise that they would have done, and projections that they would have done in terms of what is required to make the Authority more efficient, and more effective, in terms of human resources and otherwise.

Mr. Hislop: And my final question is this, Chair, is that PS you have seen—and I do not know if the Adoption Unit could jump in on this—but you have seen that has benefited your increase in allocation, the releases to the unit, has benefited the operation of the Adoption Unit?

Mr. Cyrus: Through you, Chair, yes, the releases have benefited the Adoption Unit and the Authority by extension. So, your question regarding allocation as compared to releases, these figures have actually been released to the Authority, and we have seen commensurate increases in our ability to do what we have to do, thank you.

Mr. Hislop: Okay.

Mr. Forde: Seeing that we brought up that particular aspect, the vacancies that exist presently, are they as a result of remuneration packages? What is the reason

behind the—because you are saying that yes, you got the releases, you asked the Minister of Finance to provide the releases, the Ministry provided it to the Authority. The vacancies that exist, are they as a result of financial concerns? We talk about the psychologists, we talk about caregivers, and somewhere it is stated, like for instance your adoption manager, there is a vacancy right now I understand?

Mr. Cyrus: Yes.

Mr. Forde: What are the reasons? Is it as a result of the financial aspect of the vacancies or is it otherwise?

Mr. Cyrus: No, it is not the financial. We are at a point of transitioning the organization into a new structure, and if you noticed we did provide the current structure as compared to the new structure. So, we are in the process of going through a review of all our operations, and we will be transitioning during the course of this fiscal year, into that new structure that you see there.

Mr. Forde: I just wanted to get that clarified, Madam Chair.

Madam Chairman: Okay. Mr. Cyrus, what was the allocation for this year?

Mr. Cyrus: The allocation for this fiscal year was \$100 million.

Madam Chairman: So, that is a drop, a reduction from last year, which was \$132.5 million?

Mr. Cyrus: Well, the 132 was the accumulation of not only the initial allocation, but also a revision based on the mid-year review for last year. So, we anticipate that for this fiscal year, while we started off with what is a lower figure than the Actual for last year, it is higher than the initial allocation that was made for last year if you were to compare it. So, at the end of this fiscal year, we anticipate that our actual releases would likely surpass the 132 that we received last year.

Madam Chairman: Well, you are very optimistic. I would have thought if your actual releases last year were \$132 million, you would not get less than that this year, knowing what the immediate past has been. Can I ask you, what would have been the initial request in terms of the Children's Authority's financial needs? I am aware that we are doing an overview here before getting into the heart and so along the Adoption Unit, but how much would you have requested from the Minister for this year?

Mr. Cyrus: It would be \$150 million.

Madam Chairman: Alright, well I am hopeful as you are that it will be a bigger sum than \$132 million then. Okay, so, a question I have for the acting Permanent Secretary, is it? Yeah, the Permanent Secretary. Your submission indicated that the board of management approved the implementation of the kinship foster care, and the foster to adopt policies, can you give us some more details about that? There seem to be new innovations in the process, and your timeline for implementation and in terms of where you are in that process?

Mr. Gangapersad: Thanks very much for the question, Chair. These are two relatively new policy arrangements at the Children's Authority, kinship, foster care and my colleagues may be able to also provide some insight. It is really to allow family members to be able to foster children, as it relates to the foster to adopt policy, it really sets out a pathway for foster parents and foster children to move from foster into a pathway to adoption. These are relatively new. My understanding is that the kinship foster care is already being implemented. I know that the Authority has commenced, they have even started some advertisements and awareness campaign on that. I myself saw brochures that were inserted in persons' mailbox highlighting some of

these initiatives, and inviting persons to come forward. As it relates to the foster to adopt policy, I know these things are already approved policy and are being implemented at the Authority.

Madam Chairman: Is there someone else on your team who would like to expand?

Mr. Cyrus: Well, Chairman, I would comment and I would invite my colleagues to expand on it. You see, given what we had mentioned earlier, the Authority always seeks to try to keep children as much as possible with family members. So, even if the immediate family members may not be appropriate, we have always sought the assistance of extended family members. And the kinship foster care arrangement which we have been promoting, seeks to allow extended members of the child family to become foster parents. So, that is a recent drive of the Authority. I will invite my colleagues to give further comment with regard to the foster to adoption pathway.

Madam Chairman: Before you go on to that, can I ask if you, in that process of trying to keep children within a family where there may be problems in the family, difficulties, do you work closely with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services?

Mr. Cyrus: Yes, we do.

Mrs. Sankar-Ali: Good morning, Chair, thank you for your questions. And so just to preface, both policies are hinged on the idea of permanency planning. So, we at the Authority place heavy emphasis on ensuring that children always have a plan for where they can be permanently placed within a family based environment. So, with kinship foster care, as my CEO explained, and PS, we are actually in the process of implementing and we are currently well along our pathway to that. We currently have nine kinship foster care

providers that have been approved, and 10 children that have been placed with those kinship foster care providers. As it relates to the foster to adopt policy, that is a policy that seeks to ensure first that a child who is in foster care, who may be a candidate for adoption, can transition into adoption, and it governs all the procedures involved in that. And then it also speaks to a foster carer who wishes to become an adoptive parent, that policy addresses how that process is governed as well, and that currently being implemented.

Madam Chairman: So, I could see the second your child is with a foster family and they have developed a relationship, and they want to make it a permanent relationship, both sides. But in terms of the kinship, what kind of support, assuming there are any, that they are given to relatives, is that a part of the policy?

Mrs. Sankar-Ali: Absolutely. So, first of all, all our foster carers, whether they are traditional foster carers or kinship foster carers, receive training to become foster carers, so that they are equipped with the skills to be able to meet the child's needs. In addition to that, we provide a stipend, a foster care stipend that is afforded to the kinship foster carers so that they can meet the financial needs of the child in their care.

Madam Chairman: How much is that stipend?

Mrs. Sankar-Ali: It is based on a range. So, we have a range of \$2,000 for basic needs and it moves all the way up to \$5,000 depending on the complexity of the needs of the child. Other forms of support involve provision of psychosocial interventions that the child as well as the foster carer might need. So, that involves individual counselling, specialized assessments, other specialist interventions. If the parent, the kinship foster carer, as well as the parent or guardian—because we are always working back towards

reintegration if that is in the best interest of the child. If they need interventions as well to help them come up to speed, meaning, individual counselling, if they need housing assistance, if they need assistance signing up for other types of grants—this is the parents in particular—the Authority provides and networks to allow for those supports to come into place.

Mr. Forde: Madam Chair, thanks for the opportunity. So, in the framework, let us picture a scenario, alright. Mother is deceased, father is alive, and the father now wants to get that child back into his care, alright, is it that the Authority would give preference to the father versus foster care for other individuals? How rigid is the procedure because you know, there would of been some reason why in the first instance the child would have ended up in some sort of care prior, to now the father wanting to get back the particular child. Just give us a little synopsis on how that will work, how rigid you will work, is it that the father will get the first option or what? Just explain to us, please.

Mrs. Sankar-Ali: Well, through the Chair, we always ensure that any persons who express interest to care for a child undergo a very thorough suitability assessment. So, if a parent presents themselves, their situation, themselves, any person associated with them, their home conditions, all of these will be investigated to ensure that they are suitable. If they are suitable, then by all means placement can happen, and of course, taking into consideration the wishes of the child as well. If they are not suitable then we would look to other persons, first and foremost in the family environment, in the social circle, and if we cannot find persons who are suitable by doing all of those suitability assessments, then the child can be placed, if not then we look into alternative care systems.

Mr. Forde: One other question, Madam Chair. And if the father is declined, could

he then seek redress via the courts of Trinidad and Tobago?

Mrs. Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, yes, any person—

Mr. Forde: Any person.

Mrs. Sankar-Ali:—who wishes to provide care for a child and believes that they are suitable, they can, and the court is the final decision maker in relation to decisions like this.

Mr. Forde: Thanks.

Mr. Hislop: Thanks, Chair. Just a follow-up, Chair, who is the entity that performs the investigation to determine the home that the child goes to or if the parent is suitable?

Mrs. Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, it is the Children's Authority. And if there are other key stakeholders that are working already with the family, then we will also work with those stakeholders to collaborate and ensure that we are on the same page.

Madam Chairman: Okay, so, we would like to move now to some other questions that has to do with the process, procedure and so on. So, we have got some of your submissions from the Children's Authority on the number of children at different stages of the adoption process. One missing piece of information—I do not think we may have asked for it—but in terms of applications, I want to get an idea of how big is the pool of applicants, and to what extent is that when you get down to the actual children who are in the stage of being adopted or have been adopted? What percentage that may look like when the given period of time? And also, if you could describe the process, the workflow as it were, with an idea of how long, in your experience—and not your experience, well, the data would show—each element of that process takes, from application to vetting I imagine. Well, I

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would leave it to you to tell us what the process looks like. Should I ask Mr. Cyrus for that or would you like one of your—the manager?

10.45 a.m.

Mr. Cyrus: Yes, I would ask Vandana to respond to that.

Madam Chairman: Okay, thank you.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Okay, so with regard to the applications, your question about the applications, Chair, can you just clarify for one second? My head is into the second part of your question. What was your question?

Madam Chairman: Okay, so what I am getting at, do you have a huge demand—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Right, yes.

Madam Chairman:—from the public—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes.

Madam Chairman:—to adopt children?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: “Mm-hmm.”

Madam Chairman: The figures we have are about how many adoptions pending and how many have actually been completed, and I want to know what that looks like in relation to the pool.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Okay. Yes, so I can actually cite data that we have for the period 2015 to 2024, currently, and in terms of applications, we have received 535 applications for adoption over that period of time. And in terms of Adoption Orders that are finally granted, we have for the same period 124 Adoption Orders that have been granted.

Now, some of the adoption applications in terms of explaining the discrepancy between them, some of them would have dropped off, some of them who might have said, you know, over time that they no longer wish to pursue, others would have been the ones that have been approved, others

would have been the ones that may not have been approved and they would have had to go to the court for themselves if they wished to take it further. There would also be the situation where we have open and closed cases within that. So by open we mean the child is already within the care of the adoptive parent, so they have applied to formalize that arrangement and so those tend to be—we have 226 out of the 535 I mentioned. Those were the adoption applications that we received, and 309 are the closed cases. And a closed case is an application where you do not have a child in your care and you have asked for a child to be placed with you. All right, so that is the statistics that we have so far. I will turn you over actually to my colleague, Ms. Neptune, to speak through the process and the time frames.

Ms. Neptune: Good morning everyone, through the Chair. So with regard to the process and the time frames, I will explain that. The process from submitting the application to us, we have seen now prior to 2021 it took approximately one to two years before this application could have been assigned to a caseworker for it to be processed. Now, due to the implementation of some new processes within the unit, an application can be assigned to a caseworker in real time. So as we receive an application, most of the time now we can assign it to a caseworker for them to begin working on it immediately. That process takes approximately six months for the application to be completed and processed by the caseworker.

Internally, it takes approximately three months for us to do our internal processes, and this is the psychosocial process. It deals with conducting interviews with the prospective adoptive parents, conducting home visits, school visits if a child may be in the care, those sorts of things. The other time accounts for external factors such as persons having to apply for a Police

Certificate of Character, which can take a month—just over a month. It depends sometimes on if the system is working or not, persons having to receive their medical forms back, their blood works, those sorts of things.

Also, for a foreign case, a foreign application, we have to take into account the time for these persons to undergo their investigations in their home country, as well as to receive approvals for immigration and citizenship. So that may push back the time frame by a bit but overall it has been taking under a year for an application to be completed.

With regard to the pool, yes, there is a high demand in terms of persons who want to adopt, as my General Manager indicated, we do have 89 applications in cue, and all of these are with caseworkers and being processed presently.

Madam Chairman: What are the qualifications of a prospective adoptive parent?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. So for the prospective adoptive parent, we ensure that holistically they are able to provide care for a child. So medically, physically, they have the familial support, not just the familial support they have the finances to provide for this child, as well as a home that is safe, sound. So we do home visits to ensure that, you know, the community, the home itself is adequately equipped to care for this child. So within the process, they would have to provide for us their financial information, the medical information, which requires chest X-rays, blood work, they would also have to provide background characters. So in terms of background checks are completed on them for family members, any other members within the household, as well as community checks are carried out by our service providers.

Madam Chairman: Do you have conditions such as whether the person is single, in a cohabitation arrangement, or is married? You have an age, boundaries,

young and older? And do you have an income, I mean stated figures? Do you have any issues with religion, or sexual orientation of the prospective adoptive parent?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. So, yes, we do have persons—single persons can adopt if there are persons cohabiting—their partners are also part of the process. So we do ensure that even though the main applicant goes through the process, the partner also goes through our psychological assessment, security background checks, those sorts of things.

In terms of the age limit, there is no age limit. However, all applications are to the discretion of the Adoption Committee. So once a case is processed and taken to the Committee, all these things will be reviewed. In terms of the finances, there is no specified limit on finances. However, applicants are required to submit their financial statements to us, which is also reviewed. Any other sources of income are also taken into consideration.

With regard to sexual orientation, there is no discrimination. Again, all applications are processed and everything will be taken to our Adoption Committee where it can be reviewed and discussed.

Mr. Forde: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Mr. Hislop: Just to follow up on—you spoke about a service provider that carries out the background checks. Would you be able to provide us with one, the name of the service provider, and what is the service provider's skillset? How did you come about that service provider doing a background check on whether a couple has the ability to adopt? And when the Chairman spoke about single persons being allowed to adopt, you spoke to a partner, is it legally single or if I am a single male or a single female, I am living alone, am I allowed to adopt? And I have another follow up but we could work

with those two for now.

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. So our service provider who carries out the background checks is Amalgamated Security Services. They were sourced by our Procurement Department, but within the sourcing of this background service provider they would have met with the unit to discuss the needs, and the requirements, and the stipulations of this investigation.

Mr. Hislop: So if I could just interject, Chair. I have a challenge with a security company doing a background check in order to determine—so could you share the criteria that the security company uses to do the background check?

Ms. Neptune: Sure. So in terms of conducting the background checks, they would usually interview as well, briefly, the prospective adoptive parents, they visit the home, they conduct community checks. So the applicants would provide references to us and we interview references as well as the background, the company would also carry out community checks where they speak with neighbours who can attest to the character of these prospective adoptive parents.

Mr. Cyrus: Through you, Chair, we need to appreciate that the security company does not get involved in the psychosocial-type checks, right. Those types of checks are done by the Authority. So the security firm would do more of a security background check and verify certain things for us. But our professionals will do the psychosocial-type checks because it is a holistic process. Because at the end of the day, the emphasis is in the best interest of the child. So all these checks come into one space which will be the unit, the Adoption Unit, and then it goes to the Adoption Committee. So it is not that the security firm is solely responsible for doing every bit of the check. They deal with security background checks, which are necessary, just like we have

to get Police Certificates of Character. But in terms of the psychosocial checks, those types of elements the Authority would do those types of checks and follow-up visits.

Mr. Hislop: And Chair, as it relates to the single individual.

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. Yes, a single male or a single female can adopt.

Mr. Hislop: Could you share with us how many adoptions were not granted and based on your statistics what would be the main cause for an adoption not being granted?

Ms. Neptune: Sure. So for the time period since proclamation to present, which would have been 2015 to present, we have only had approximately two adoptions which were not granted. Reasons for this, in one instance we would have found that the individual did not have enough familial support, as well as finances, as well as a stable income to provide adequate care for that child. So the application was not approved but the individual was given the opportunity or has been given the opportunity and some time to see if this can be stabilized before reapplying.

In the second instance, the legislation speaks to us obtaining consent from the birth parents, right, interviewing the birth parents and obtaining consent to relinquish their parental rights for the adoption to continue. In this instance, one of the birth parents was not in support of the adoption and he would have indicated the reasons why. Further investigations were conducted and it was taken that a recommendation was made to the Adoption Committee, and the Committee would have agreed that given the nature of the information shared with us, and the person's interest to still be a part of the child's life, the matter would not have been granted.

Madam Chairman: The parent who objected, would that parent now take

responsibility for the child? The child moves in with that parent?

Ms. Neptune: So, through the Chair. We are very hopeful of this. Within the interviews, one of the things we do ask birth parents if they are not willing to support the adoption, what is your next step? What do you have in place to provide care for this child? How would you now be involved in this child's life moving forward? So that is one of the areas that the parents did highlight to us that they wish to follow through on, in terms of developing a relationship with the child, as well as, you know, trying to develop that bond, more visits, provide financial support, those sort of things.

Mr. Forde: You paint to us the ideal scenario. In all of this, based on the child's age, does the child have any say or aspect of making a choice?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, that is a very good question because, yes. So in the best interest of the child as well as dependent on the child's age, but once the child has an understanding, the caseworkers are mandated to explain what is adoption to this child. We ask them to explain it to us again to make sure that they actually understand what is the process they are going through. We ask them what are their thoughts on this, what are their views on the adoption, if they are comfortable with it, if they are comfortable with the persons who are going to adopt them. We do seek to enquire what is a typical day like. What are their general lives like, with these adopters. So yes, the children do have a big say in the process and we do take that into account.

Mr. Forde: And what age group that adoption process will go up to—the age of the child?

Ms. Neptune: Seventeen. Until 17, yes.

Mr. Forde: All right. And just coming back, Madam Chair, we talk about, you know, getting some consultancy service outside by Amalgamated. Looking

at your org chart, right, we identified probably about 273 individuals, right, in terms of it being there, and then you have your various departments, adoption, assessment, child family services, and child justice, and so on.

So as Mr. Cyrus mentioned, internally you will see about the psychosocial aspect of everything, and then you will use consultancy outside, but in terms of that professional aspect, can that not be provided within the particulars and your human resources planning in terms of what you have presently in your organization?

Mr. Cyrus: Through you, Chair. The psychosocial yes, but in terms of the security background checks we would prefer that to be done independently. So that is why we would source an independent firm to do the security background checks, but the psychosocial, we will do it internally.

Mr. Forde: Again, Madam Chair, an aspect on a yearly financial cost, average that will be paid out to the particular security company accordingly, just an average cost per year or per month depending on the demand?

Mr. Cyrus: Well, I do not have that specific figure with me so I could provide that figure—

Mr. Forde: In writing, yeah? Right.

Mr. Cyrus: Yeah. So I could provide that figure in writing.

Mr. Hislop: Chair, could I just—I cannot remember your name my apologies but I think you would have indicated that if a parent is willing to be in the child's life that you would not go ahead with the adoption process. Could the Adoption Unit, even though a parent is willing, could the Adoption Unit make a determination that the parent does not have the ability, whether it is financially or otherwise, to take care of this child? Do you have that authority to do that? And if you do, how do you legally remove the child—

and I use the word “remove” very guardedly—from the care of this parent who shows an interest in the child?

Ms. Neptune: Through you, Chair. Thank you for the question. Yes, if the parent is still willing to be a part of the child's life, we have seen that in our investigations, parents do indicate that they are willing to be a part of the child's life. We give them a chance, we give them time to follow up and do some of their actions and they do not follow through, based on the Adoption of Children Act, Chap. 46:03 there are grounds within the legislation on which the unit can make the recommendation for dispensation of the parents' consent. And this would be in terms of if they have abused the child, neglected the child, they are not contributing to the upkeep of the child, and these would have to be supported by our continuous investigations, which are also reviewed by our Legal Unit to ensure that we do have sufficient grounds to make these recommendations for dispensation.

Mr. Hislop: How long would it take—or in your experience, how long would it take for you to get from that stage to where you are indicating?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair. I will take this question because it really depends on a case-by-case basis. Each family is different and in some cases, you know, a family may need or a parent may need quite a bit of support to give them the opportunity to come up to scratch, you know, and to work with them. Remember, adoption is termination of parental right; it is a very extreme method. And so before we get to that point we do want to give parents the opportunity to become better, to be rehabilitated, to give them the chance to do so.

So depending on the commitment shown by the parent, the interest shown, the wishes of the child as well, the history, it can be a short process or it can be

a lengthy time that we are working with that family. If we are seeing progress, you know, that we really want to work with them to help them get to the point. But there does come a point where you have to make a decision and at such point in time as Ms. Neptune said, we can and we do have the recourse to dispense with consent if we are seeing that your inability to provide for your child and your inability to give consent is holding back the process.

Madam Chairman: So getting back to the process, you are in a mode of transformation and transition at this moment and you have talked about the improvement in the length of time, you have cut it down significantly. So what would you say if one were to apply today, a lot of things being equal, how long does the process take compared to previous—to this new dispensation as it were?

Ms. Neptune: Thank you for that question, Chair. So I would say from the time from submission of application to the processing of the application to have that person approved, it can take approximately six months. In previous times, it took approximately one to two years.

Madam Chairman: A lot can happen in that two years in terms of the development of the child, right? So we have an idea of applications, about 500-and-something, at the current time, how many children are available at this time for adoption in the country?

Ms. Neptune: So presently, we have approximately nine children who are in different stages of the process to be freed for adoption. We do have two sibling groups of children, older children. The first being a sibling group of four with ages ranging from 13 to eight years old. The second being a sibling group of two whose ages, I believe, are 12 and 13 years old who are already

freed for adoption and awaiting matches.

However, what we have realized is persons really do not wish to adopt older children. Hence the reason that they are still within the community residences. A lot of persons wish to adopt babies or toddlers, very young children. We have been in our sensitization sessions, you know, informing the public there are older children who can also be adopted and are in need of a loving and caring home.

We do have three children who are in the process of being freed for adoption to subsequently be matched with persons who have been approved on our list.

Madam Chairman: So if you go to places like homes for children, those children are not—they are not with their parents, they are in the care of the State as it were, those children are not available for adoption?

Ms. Neptune: Correct. Those are the children within the community residences, through the Chair?

Madam Chairman: Yes.

Ms. Neptune: Yes. So those children are not—

Madam Chairman: I am talking about places like St. Mary's, Jayalakshmi, and so on.

Ms. Neptune: Yes, thank you for that clarification, Chair. Yes, so those children, they are not available for adoption. What we do and we have been doing, and we are in the process of doing, is we have a community residences reintegration project that is currently ongoing, where a team external to the caseworkers within the unit have been in these community residences conducting investigations, liaising with the managers and caregivers of these homes to determine children who can be possible candidates for adoption.

Keeping in mind that this is a legal process, we have to conduct these

investigations. We are presently in the second phase where our internal team is searching for birth parents. So not all of these children in the community residences have family members, parents. Some of them we do not have a last known address, we just have names. So we are in the process of trying to locate these persons so we can conduct our interviews to determine if they are candidates for adoption. A lot of them are older children but we are still working with them because far and few in between, we do receive applications for older children and we are working with them.

Madam. Chairman: So these are abandoned children?

Ms. Neptune: Some yes, or I cannot say for all because we would have received possibly some names or some addresses for family members. It is now on us as part of the process to try to locate these persons, you know, to speak to them to interview their—find out their views on the child being adopted, being freed for adoption and placed with a family.

Madam Chairman: Member Forde has a question, but can you give me an idea of the size of that population?

Ms. Neptune: Sure, Chair. So we would have identified 125 children who can be possible candidates for adoption. That was in the first phase. In the second phase now that we have been doing the investigations, our list is presently at 73 children.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Chair.

Mr. Forde: Tell me something, so the pool of children for adoption where do they come from?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. The pool of children they can come from community residences. So these same children that we are working on this project now, some of them can go on to being freed for adoption, or if a birth

parent or parents come to us indicating that, "I would like to place by unborn child for adoption", or it can already be a child that they have in their care that they are unable to care for and they would like to place for adoption. It can also be children who may be abandoned in the hospitals and referrals from the hospitals have come to the Authority informing us that this child is abandoned and we think that adoption may be in the best interest of the child, the necessary investigations would be carried out.

Also, we have open adoptions as Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali explained before. Open adoptions are, let us say an aunt wants to adopt their niece or nephew that they have been caring for, they can apply to adopt this child.

Mr. Forde: And additionally to that, you mentioned of having siblings, whether three or four as the case may be, and within a particular age group, in terms of the policy for separation or they are going together for one family. What is the policy with regard to the Children's Authority on that?

Ms. Neptune: So in the best interest of the siblings we really do not split them up. We have had sibling groups of four, three, two, adopted before and we try as best as possible to keep these siblings together.

Mr. Forde: And one other question because there is a question I wanted to ask earlier. After the child is adopted into the home, things are going fine, what monitoring system do we have in place, follow-up, check back, to see what is happening after six months, a year, two years, to see what is happening? Give us an insight how that operates?

Ms. Neptune: Thank you for that question, through the Chair. So within the legislation there is no part of it that mandates the Authority or the units to conduct post-adoption monitoring. However, in the best interest of the children and based on the relationship, we really develop a good relationship

with our clients; we continue to follow up with them. So when an adoption is completed the unit still liaises with these families, we still enroll the child—we assist them with enrolling the children into school, within to their necessary health centres to ensure that they continue getting an education as well as their medical follow ups.

We also do liaise with them and they also willingly with us and send us pictures based on their developments, celebration of milestones. So for Christmas time we do get pictures, first day of school. And we also do in our liaising with them, should they require any additional support, let us say they may think or we may think that they need to attend some parenting sessions, to let us say, provide assistance with discipline, those sorts of things, we are able to refer them and provide that assistance even post-adoption.

Mr. Forde: Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Could I go back to the issue of Amalgamated, was that a result of competitive tender or sole select?

Mr. Cyrus: As far as I am aware that would have been as a result of a competitive tender, but it is a process that is ongoing so it does not mean that that would remain the same, you know, forever. So we constantly would be reviewing these matters.

Madam Chairman: Okay. There was the issue of foreign adoptions, are these by foreign nationals or Trinidad and Tobago nationals living abroad, probably married to a citizen of another country? Generally, what are they?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. They are both but we have seen a lot of Trinidad nationals who reside abroad and they want to adopt their relatives who reside here. In terms of them getting better schooling, educational opportunities, or family members, their parents may have passed away and they wish to adopt

them to have with them.

However, we are seeing a slight increase in terms of the international applications being submitted to us as well, but generally, it is nationals of Trinidad and Tobago who reside abroad and wish to adopt.

Madam Chairman: And how are the security background checks done on people who live abroad?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. So, for their process it is slightly a bit different, because they reside abroad, the home study report would have to be conducted by an accredited adoption agency in the State that they live. So we liaise agency to agency. Once they submit an application to us, we reach out to their agency that they have contracted, we inform them of all the things that are needed for the home study, which is the background check, the psychological assessment, the medicals, these sorts of things. We also interview the persons as well, but that agency would supply those to us.

They also have to receive approvals from Immigration and citizenship and a background check conducted by their State as well is also done and submitted to us.

Mr. Forde: I would just like to change, go back to the PS, Mr. Gangapersad. With regard to your submission and I quote:

A package of children legislation including the Adoption of Children Act is being reviewed by a subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Child Protection.

And it is based on the comment that was made by Ms. Neptune, right, where there is no legislation in place for them to do any follow-ups.

11.15 a.m.

My question is, can you list the laws which are included in the package of children's

legislation currently being reviewed? How often does this committee meet to conduct its work? Who are the members of the standing committee on child protection? And then if it is that based on Ms. Neptune's comment, if any of that is being considered with regard to the legislation, which is, you know, the aspect of a mandatory follow-up to know, well, look, what is happening after these children are adopted? Madam Chair.

Mr. Gangapersad: Through you, Chair, and thanks for the question. This committee was established in January 2023. The committee meets mainly on a monthly basis. The committee comprise Ministers as well as senior officials, Deputy Permanent Secretaries and other persons from several Ministries, including the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of National Security. And I would have to outline that further for you in a written submission, and Deputy Permanent Secretaries in those—the chair of that committee is the Minister with responsibility for gender and child affairs.

The legislations that are being looked is the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act; the Children Act; the adoption Act; the Children's Authority Act, and I think there is one other. Those are primarily—I will look as well.

A subcommittee of the committee is—they also meet. I think they have a meeting probably this week or next week to look at submissions that would have been sent out from the various stakeholders/Ministries of suggestions for changes. A number of these changes would have come from the Children's Authority as well as the Division of Gender and Child Affairs, and we have given ourselves a three-month time frame. We expect to make

a submission by the end of June 2024, related to a legislative policy recommending changes to these pieces of legislation.

And to answer your question, the answer is, yes, if the Children's Authority are the operators of the legislation. And if they see that there are changes—and, of course, in my opening statement I did indicate that we would welcome recommendations to strengthen the pieces of legislation that we have, as well as operational efficiency.

Madam Chairman: I noticed you used “open” in the context of family and so on, but in adoption, open also refers to an open and a closed adoption where the child knows their biological parents and there may be even a relationship in the future. Is that something that is used at all here? Is there a policy on that for now? And have you encountered prospective parents, and parents who are interested in a more open relationship, and even bordering on co-parenting?

Ms. Neptune: Thank you, Chair. Through you, we do not have any policies on open and closed adoption. This is what we know them as—the open ones, where there is the relationship or the children know who their birth parents are.

To answer your second question—I will tie it in one time—yes, we have encountered cases where older children, they know their birth parents, but they have grown up with these adoptive parents. They know that they are also their parents and yes, they all maintain a relationship, so we would have parents informing us that, you know, when is this child's birthday or there is a graduation or some sort of milestone. They maintain that relationship and they are present with them. However, that is separate and apart from the Children's Authority. So we do inform them that if they, in these open cases,

do wish to maintain that relationship, that is their personal arrangement.

Madam Chairman: But what about the child's right, or does the child have a right to know, at a certain age, who their biological parents were?

Ms. Neptune: Thank you, Chair. That is a good question. Yes, within our very first interview with prospective adoptive parents, we do inform them that they have to inform that this child is adopted. We rather that the child hear it from them, rather than from somebody outside. A lot of times persons inform us that they are willing to have this done and they will do it at an age where the child is at that age of understanding, and that they will seek guidance in terms of how this information is shared with the child.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Chair, just to follow up on that, there are also legislative provisions that allow for a child, upon coming of age, to be able to seek that information about their birth parents and so. So it is their right, if they wish, to know about their adoption status.

Madam Chairman: So do you follow up—if a parent gives an undertaking that they will tell the child that they were adopted, do you follow up to know when that has been done, and is there an optimal age at which a child—or is it up to an individual child?

Ms. Neptune: Through you, Chair. We do not have those follow-ups to find out if this has been disclosed to the child that they have been adopted. It is really on a case-by-case basis, because we have had persons telling us, with younger children, they would have started to ask questions about they being a bit different from the adoptive parents, and the adoptive parents would have told us, you know, we are thinking about now is a good time to introduce the fact that this child is adopted and to share that with them. We do guide them in terms of receiving any sort of intervention from psychological service

providers on how they can share this information with the child. So each one is on case-by-case difference, and it really depends on child themselves and what stage they are at.

Madam Chairman: I see there are many references to psychosocial support, but I noticed you do not have a psychologist on board. So where is that coming from, that kind of support? Sometimes parents need the help. They would just hold on to that information and say, "I will do it next year, I will do it"—whatever, and they are going on because they do not know how to decide whether the child is ready, whether it is good thing or not. Right?

If a parent, well, you need that support, what is happening in the absence of a psychologist, and what is the optimum number of psychologists needed by your unit to deal with that? I am not going to even ask about the Children's Authority as whole at this point.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: In terms of our psychosocial support, the adoption unit is actually staffed by social workers, so they are able to provide certain levels of psychosocial intervention to the parents. We also have psychologists in other parts of the Authority as well. So if there is a family or prospective adoptive parent who requires more support than a social worker may be able to provide, we often times can rely on the other psychologists in the Authority or the external service providers that we have on board.

In terms of ideal, you know—it really is looking at a match-up between demand for the services as well, but we would say, on average, about two to three psychologists would assist us in better being able to effectively manage those kinds of demands.

Madam Chairman: Would you say the population as a whole is aware of the option of putting their children to adoption as opposed to, "I cannot take care of the

child, so I am just not going to be taking care of the child, leave it for somebody else,” that they know that adoption is an option and this is what I do? Because sometimes information barriers is what just makes people delay and procrastinate. They probably think about, they do not know where the Children's Authority is, they do not know—they might not even know. We often find that we think everybody knows certain things in the country, and you find people just do not know. Do you—what is your experience, and would you say that more needs to go on in that area of sensitizing parents, biological parents, to options, and, you know, adoptive parents?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: That is a great question, Chair, because that is a huge part of the work that we do at the Authority and particularly within the adoption unit, in that doing sensitization, it is really important for us in getting the message out, so that we do not end up with children abandoned, in hospitals, or on the side of the road, or in the bushes, but they do know that adoption is an option that they can present their children forward for. So we do sensitizations.

We try to do it at hospitals, so that persons who are pregnant and, you know, are maybe in this stage of considering what they want to do, they are aware of those options. We do a lot of sensitizations with stakeholders, and that is actually something that we are looking to build out further this year, in this fiscal year, to be out there and get that message a lot more with our stakeholders who may be working with vulnerable families, so that they can also share with their clients this information. We do a lot of sensitizations within clinics and hospital settings, with the staff there as well too, so that they too are equipped with the knowledge to share with the clients as well.

We have been doing some public sensitizations in the media as well, so that is

helping to get the message out. But we at the Authority are always of the belief that more information is needed, and so that is really behind our drive for more sensitizations.

Madam Chairman: What is your evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: I would say that based on the fact that we have been seeing a constant stream of applications coming in, we have been seeing persons coming forward and bringing their children to the Adoption Unit, I would say that there is a trend towards improvement. Of course, more can be done because we still have cases where, you know, persons do not present themselves for adoption, and we hear of those stories and we find out otherwise. But it is improving, and I would say that our continued efforts and ramping up of the sensitization should see us having more improvements in the future.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Madam Chair. Again, to follow up on that same trend of thought, deviant behaviours, is there a trend that you all can identify with regard to the pool of children that you all have for adoption? Are you all able to identify any deviant behaviour that may need mentioning at this time?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, just to clarify, do you mean deviant behaviour among the pool of children themselves?

Mr. Forde: Discipline, you know, discipline, bad attitude—just indiscipline. You know what I mean? Is it that—is there a trend among the pool that you have, you know, the 500? Ms. Neptune, that is the figure, right? Five hundred roughly?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, that is the number for the applications.

Mr. Forde: Applications, right. But within the pool, are you seeing indiscipline, poor attitude, you know?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: The pool of children?

Mr. Forde: Yes.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Okay. So it is just nine children that we have available for adoption, and so, no, those would not be typically what we see. I mean, children who are within the alternative care system have understandably come from a background of trauma or some level of familial dysfunction, and so it is expected that we would see some challenges with behaviours, particularly in older groups of children.

However, I would say from among the groups of children that we have currently, I would not say that we have those challenges. But you raised a very important point, because this also speaks to the bigger issue of the child profile that prospective adoptive parents may put forward as the type of child that they may want. And because the majority of persons do ask for younger children, toddlers, infants, you end up in a system where there may be older groups of children who could eventually, through our investigation processes, be identified as candidates for adoption, but not match the kind of child that most people want.

Mr. Forde: So again, Madam Chair, you would have identified 525 applicants, 124 adoptions that were approved, and then there are 309 closed cases. Those are the numbers. Out of that particular aspect, not just the nine that we are talking about.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: To clarify—

Mr. Forde: Yes. So the 309 closed cases, the 124 adoption approved, the attitudes, the discipline of these children, you all are pleased with them? That is what you all are saying?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, to clarify, there are 535 applications

over the eight-year—

Mr. Forde: Period.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: period.

Mr. Forde: Identified.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Of that 535, 309 are called “closed cases”. When we say closed, we do not mean that we have closed off the case. We mean that these are cases where persons do not have a child in their care or do not know the child that they want to adopt. They have put in an application to get a child that is matched to them.

However, to answer your questions about the number of adoption orders that we have gotten, meaning these are children who the court has endorsed that an adoption can move forward, yes, I can confirm that, generally, we do not have challenges with problematic behaviours and where those natural expectable concerns may arise, the Adoption Unit does provide the level of support that we mentioned earlier to help the adoptive parents navigate those challenges.

Mr. Forde: So from your statement, people, persons, individuals provide children for adoption not as a result of indiscipline, not as a result of deviant behaviour, not as a result of bad attitudes? Help me.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, the majority of children who do come forward and are available for adoption, again, are the very young ones. So that is where the difference lies, in that, we have a large population within the children that are in the system that do qualify with those types of behaviours. There are many times they are placed before the court as children in need in supervision and so. But those are rarely the type of

children that are within the pool of adoption, as I mentioned. Because the pool of adoption tends to be currently the younger groups of children.

Mr. Forde: So therefore, it could be a social problem, an economical problem?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: That is right, yes. It can be where parents are unable to provide care for their children, so they have brought that child to be adopted. They do not have the necessary supports. It might be a very young mother who is pregnant, does not have the support, does not have the means. Those tend to be generally the reasons why birth parents present their children for adoption.

Mr. Forde: An average age group?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Of the parents?

Mr. Forde: The child—the average age group of the child. Two years? Three years? Six months? Give the committee a little—

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, a lot of times from birth. So birth parents would come to us and indicate, “I am unable to care for this child. I know I am not going to be able to care for this child, and as child is born, I would like to place the child for adoption.” So from birth, we do get two-year/three-year-olds arising out of the community residences. The age ranges. We have seen a range from about two years to 16 years old.

Mr. Forde: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Madam Chairman: Do we have cases of parents who take children to one of these care homes and are able, subsequently, to bring the children back home, and how do you achieve that?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Thank you, Chair, for that question. Yes, there are parents who present their children in those circumstances or there may be children who the Authority has had to remove from their care based on child

protection concerns. But these parents have been working with the Authority to access the kinds of resources and interventions that are needed to rehabilitate them. And so when we speak about permanency planning and really working towards family reintegration, this is the focus of the work that we are doing there, where we are trying to help the parents, perhaps if they need to get a job; if they need it up their skills so that they can get a job; if we need to network them with certain grants or other resources, material resources that would help them better provide a home for their child; if they themselves have issues of—psychological issues that they need to work through; if they need parenting skills, all of these are interventions that the Authority would be working with them on over time, so that they can come to a place of being able to receive their child back into their care, and we have had stories of successful reintegration.

Madam Chairman: And on the other side of that fence, the child who is taken from home, put into some kind of system, has a certain kind of experience and then is going back home, what is the support? Is there a special support for those children? I imagine one assumes there is support for all children. But the ones who come and the parent knows, “This is the child I sent, I am fixing up myself,” and so on, children can have experiences that make it very difficult to reintegrate. They may have anger issues from having been abandoned and they may have endured experiences. What is level of support for the children?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Okay. So, Chair, what happens is that once a child is a received into care, that child receives a psychosocial assessment, and they may receive other specialist assessments thereafter to be able to, first of all, identify their needs and what types of interventions they may require, again,

with the ultimate goal of the child's rehabilitation, but also working back towards that reintegration. So that child, during their time in care, will also receive psychological interventions, educational support. Where there are issues with the family, family-based interventions with the child and the parent may occur.

We also maintain, where it is possible and in the best interest and appropriate for the child, supervised access and interactions. So that family bond is maintained, and we have the opportunity to see live how the interaction between child and parent looks, and to work through those issues.

So there are opportunities for individual work of the child, individual work at the parent level, but also joint work between both parties, so that when we place them back into the family home, they are better positioned than they were when they first came into care.

Madam Chairman: So is that an unusual situation where parents come and say, "I cannot manage right now, but I want to have you look after my child or children, but I want to have my children ultimately"? Is that normal or is it unusual? Because I am going to ask the follow-up question to that, whether those children should be in the general population, like a half-way house for you to be looked after on your way back home?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: We have a fair amount—I do not have a number to give you, but we have a fair amount of parents that would present in that way, but I would have to say that I think the majority of our cases, unfortunately, are not those. The majority of our cases would be the ones where we have received a report and there is a concern for child maltreatment, the Authority has had to go in, investigative and unfortunately, remove that child from their parent's care.

Now, that does not necessarily mean that the parent will be resistant to working with us. In many of these cases, the parent will cooperate. In some, they may not, and that is a reason why children remain in care for a very long time. But we do continue, whether a parent is willing or not, to give them the opportunity to work it through and, of course, we have the court as the final decision-maker in terms of whether reintegration is indeed in the best interest of that child.

Mr. Hislop: Thanks, Chair. I just want to go back to the issue with the multiple children, siblings. Do you have parents lined up for these children? And do you think if it comes to a situation where you are not getting an adoptive parent to take the siblings together, what is the option that is the unit has?

Ms. Neptune: Thank you for that question. Through the Chair, we do not have persons who are willingly, at this point in time, to adopt older age groups. We do get it far and few in between and we are presently processing some applications where persons have requested children with older age groups that fit into the categories that we have available. So once the process is completed and they have been successfully approved, we will approach them to obtain their views on adopting these children from this age group.

With regard to if there is no one that is found, I will ask my General Manager to explain on that, in terms of if they are split, et cetera.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Okay. Through the Chair, in all instances we try our best to keep children together. It will always come back down to balancing what is in the best interest of the child, balancing the trauma of separation against the benefit of the permanent home. Again, that is a case-by-case analysis, especially where they are close siblings and they are living together and they perhaps have never been separated before. If it will be based on the

determination of a specialist who will assess the risk of the separation against the permanent home. Of course, we would want to ensure that both siblings are placed together, but we would not want one to hold back the other. But if it comes to it that placing them separately will be more detrimental to their well-being, then they may not proceed.

Mr. Hislop: Chair, through you, could you share with us where these children are currently housed?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Unfortunately, we do not divulge the personal details of our children, just because we always would want to protect their confidentiality as well.

Mr. Hislop: No, no. It is not that I want the exact location, but it is whether they are in a community—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: At community residences. Yes.

Mr. Hislop: Right. Thank you. Explain to us the foster care process, because you are saying that when a child is a freed for adoption, based on your submission, the child moves into the foster care kind of arrangement until a parent is found. Just share with us how that is done, the processes.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: So there are two options. There may be children who are freed for adoption who will remain in a community residence, and then there will be another option where children who freed for adoption but may be placed with a foster parent, and that is based on the availability of foster parents to provide care for this age, number of the children, if it is a sibling group, the profile of the child as well too.

So if it is a child or a sibling group is placed in foster care, our regular foster care process will be triggered, in that, we have a monitoring system that exists in foster care where the child or children in foster care will benefit from home

visits to the foster care provider to ensure that they are well adjusted. We will be following up on all of their interventions, all of their schooling. We will do school visits as well. We do announced and unannounced checks with the foster parents, and we also have a process where the foster care unit and the Adoption Unit will continue to continue to commanage the cases. So that in the event that there is a match for the child, that child can easily transition from the foster care system into the adoption process.

For the children who remain in the community residences, the Adoption Unit will do that same level of case management that I just described, but for the child in the community residence.

Mr. Hislop: So I know that may not be directly on you. But, Chair, if I am permitted, do you have the information as to how many foster parents we have in Trinidad and Tobago? What is the cost attached to—how is it paid for? Is it that Children's Authority pays the foster parents? What is that cost to the State?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes, so currently, we have 124 children in foster care. Within this number, 10 of them are in kinship foster care arrangements, and this is split around 98 foster care providers; 89 of those being traditional foster carers, nine of these being kinship foster care providers.

Your second part of the question?

Mr. Hislop: So before you touch the second, for the public, could you again just share what is the difference between the regular foster parent and the kinship foster parent? And then the follow-up was—the question I had asked is, what is the cost to the State? Is it that the State pays the foster parent per child, and what is that cost?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes, okay. Thank you. Through the Chair, the difference

between traditional and kinship foster carers. So kinship foster carers are persons who are qualified in the legislation as a relative—and there are different types of relative—who wish to provide care for a child within their family. They know that child. They have been screened through the Authority's processes and are suitable to provide care for that child, and they would be considered a kinship foster care provider that receives support through the Authority.

A traditional foster carer is one who does not know the child. They put in an application with the Authority, with an interest to provide foster care, and so a child—they will say, for example, that they are interested in providing foster care for a child within X age range, a male child, preferably a child of this religion. They will set out their criteria. They will go through an entire screening process as well. Once they are approved, they will be placed on the register of approved foster carers, and a child within the child care system can be placed with that foster care provider. It is not a child that is known to them or related to them.

Mr. Hislop: Okay.

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: In terms of the cost, we have a foster care stipend, as I mentioned, that is paid to meet the needs of the child. And so that is important because it is not to be used on any other types of expenses of the foster carer, which is why we do financial screening as part of our assessment process as well too, and that ranges from \$2,000 for children between the ages zero to 17, all the way up to \$5,000, depending on the special needs. There is a range.

Mr. Hislop: And that is per month?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Per month, yes.

Mr. Hislop: All right. If I am allowed, Chair, I just want to segue very quickly into where I live, that is Tobago, and your footprint in Tobago. Member Forde is giving me some trouble here. Based on your submission, you are saying that:

The allocation of caseworkers in Tobago presently, when home visits and sensitization sessions are to be conducted in Tobago, adoption staff from Trinidad must travel to perform these duties.

What are your adoption numbers or your adoption requests from Tobago, and do you have—out of your nine, are any of your nine from Tobago?

11.45 a.m.

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, thank you for that question. So our Tobago cases, the numbers are pretty small. We have approximately, let us say five cases from Tobago that we are working on, some were recently approved. Out of the nine children they are all here in Trinidad, however, should a match be someone who is approved on our list from Tobago that would be facilitated. We do have what we call interaction sessions and it is facilitated here whether you get to bond with the prospective adoptive parents, get to bond with the child for the probationary period. Once they get to take that child into their care successfully, they will take the child to Tobago with them and we will travel to facilitate the visits.

Mr. Hislop: The visits?

Ms. Neptune: Yes.

Mr. Hislop: What is the frequency in terms of your adoption staff having to travel to Tobago?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, probably two to three times per quarter and this is to facility home visits, sensitization sessions.

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Mr. Hislop: Do you think that the Children's Authority office in Tobago, there is an adoption unit there?

Ms. Neptune: No.

Mr. Hislop: There is not? Do you think it is feasible to have maybe one or two officers based in Tobago?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: I know that my CEO may wish to speak further on the plans and our organizational structure, but we absolutely see a need for all permanency based options to continue to expand and there are plans in the org structure to have caseworkers, specifically designated to work through foster care and adoption in Tobago.

Mr. Cyrus: Yes and through you Chair, as part of our new structure, we have an expanded Tobago office. So within the construct of that Tobago office, we will have persons whose focus it would be to deal with adoption issues in Tobago. So it would have an expanded office.

Mr. Hislop: Okay.

Mr. Cyrus: And of course, we will continue to monitor depending on the numbers, then we will expand the resources as necessary.

Mr. Hislop: So how many caseworkers Chair, I guess to the CEO, how many caseworkers do you think would be required to improve the efficiency of your operation in Tobago, based on your org structure?

Mr. Cyrus: Well, based on the structure, we would imagine not more than about three at this point in time. But as I say, it is a moving target and we will be reviewing and making determinations for any increases as necessary.

Mr. Hislop: How soon do you expect to send out advertisements for caseworkers for Tobago, CEO?

Mr. Cyrus: Within this fiscal year.

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Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Hislop: So that—subject to funding. B Yeah, because you are looking at—

Mr. Forde: It is five cases.

Mr. Hislop: Yeah, but member Forde, even though it is five cases, you leave that alone—five cases—you are talking about the expenditure for staff to travel to Tobago. And also, that we require Tobago to be placed on as much equal footing as possible, so that if you could find staff in Tobago you may just see the requirement blossom, because you now have staff dedicated to Tobago. So I am hoping that this fiscal year ends when Chair? This fiscal year ends in September.

Mr. Cyrus: Well, and of course, as we mentioned, you know, there is increasing sensitization and awareness that we do through the media, including social media.

Mr. Hislop: Right.

Mr. Cyrus: So, it is a moving target and as we said that depending on the numbers that we see, then, you know, the requisite resources would be made available.

Mr. Hislop: So as it stands now based on the numbers—based on the numbers that you have, as it stands now, you believe that three staff members—?

Mr. Cyrus: Not more than and if you are talking caseworkers who would have more of a focus on adoption, I would say not more than three at this point in time, but it is a moving target.

Mr. Hislop: Right.

Mr. Cyrus: And of course, you know, we have other needs on the island so—

Mr. Hislop: Right, so that is why I am saying, if you could—my suggestion CEO, you have to find a weapon to pin down this moving target. Right. Because if you could find caseworkers who can be cross—is that allowed in the

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Authority that you could have a caseworker who can work a cross—what you call it?—a cross—

Member: Cross function.

Mr. Cyrus: Cross function, yes.

Mr. Hislop: Cross function, that is the terminology—

Mr. Cyrus: Yes.

Mr. Hislop:—so if you could find caseworkers that could work cross functions, then, I think that will be very suitable to Tobago based on the fact that we only have five cases, member Forde, but five cases is significant.

Mr. Cyrus: Well, I mean, definitely as is being discussed, we have our Tobago operation and you know we would ensure that all the requisite resources are in place.

Mr. Hislop: Well, thank you Chair, I think I could pause there for a minute.

Mr. Forde: Thank you Madam Chair, interesting discourse. I got—I just lost it here, my constituent. How is a child—I know the Chairman had voiced something similar—how is the child presented, is it that the parent goes to the Authority and relinquishes the child? Just got a text here from somebody who is tuned in. Could you just explain the situation how the Authority accepts a child?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair. So that is one option, one stream by which a child who is placed for adoption can come through to us. A birth parent can come forward and indicate that they are intending to have a child or they currently do have a child and they would like the child to be placed for adoption. That is one way.

Another way is that we have children in the system right now so, as Ms. Neptune mentioned, we would look at the pool of children that are

currently in community residences and in foster care to determine if they are candidates for adoption. And then we may also have where children may be at the hospital, and medical social workers and other health providers, may bring to the Authority's attention these children as candidates for adoption as well.

Mr. Forde: Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Okay, so let us go back. How many children are in the care of the State in Trinidad and I am not talking about children who are sent by the court, or—what is the total population? And the question that follows is, on what basis do you proceed to initiate an adoption—to clear children for adoption from that population?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Okay, Chair, we would have to give you the exact figure in a subsequent submission. But I would say that there would be under 800 children in total in the care of the State and that would be a combination of children who are in community residences, in foster care, as well as at our reception centres, which are places of safety for children as well. In terms of when the process of adoption would kick in—

Madam Chairman: Not when—but what is the criteria that you select some and not others—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Right.

Madam Chairman: —is it that the parents say, you know, no or what—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes.

Madam Chairman: —or they aged out, or they have come to an age that you do not think—how do you exercise that discretion?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: During the course of our investigations on psychosocial assessments, our clinical assessments of these children, as well as, our

monitoring of these children—through all of these points of enquiry we have looked at—does this child have a relative, a parent, a family member, an interested person who can provide care for this child. And first and foremost, that is the primary criteria. If there are no options, and there are some children like that, that there is no person who is willing or able to provide care for that child, then adoption comes into the picture.

There is also the situation where a parent or guardian will present themselves and say that they are willing to relinquish care and control of the child and they wish for their child to be placed for adoption as well.

Madam Chairman: So how long is that process by which you determine whether this child has an option for adoption, which is within the family, how long are you prepared? And I ask that question because the length of time that a child might stay in the system might change that child and make that child even less attractive.

The Judith Jones Report, for example, did not paint a very good picture of homes that are under the Children's Authority's purview as it were. So do you have some period within which that work must be done or, the factors that would affect how long a child stays in a home before knowing that the older children get, the less likely they are to find a home?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Chair, what I can say is that from the beginning of the Authority's intervention, permanency planning is always at the forefront of our minds. And so from the point of investigation, we are looking at what is the permanent plan for this child, where is this child going to go?

Once we have seen that there are options, that timeframe can differ. It can differ for three months, six months, it could go a year, two years, but we have to see that a parent, a guardian or a relative is making efforts to be able

to, you know, do the interventions and collaborate in the best interest of the child. If from the beginning or during the process, we have determined that there really are no options, from very early on, we can indicate this child is a candidate for adoption and refer that child to the adoption unit, who will continue to do the monitoring and do the work.

The issue is the actual placement of the child for adoption. So the issue is less of identifying if adoption is the option, and more so once we have done so, how long it takes for that child to then be matched with a family?

Madam Chairman: Do you have the resources at the Children's Authority to efficiently undergo that process?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Chair, there is need for improvement and that is the reason why we are undergoing the transformational process and the revised organizational structure.

Madam Chairman: Does the revised organizational structure—I cannot tell from that—call for bigger staff or more departments?

Mr. Cyrus: Chair, are we talking specific to the Adoption Unit?

Madam Chairman: Well, I think the point I am making is the adoption is affected by the children who come into the system, what happens to them before you could get to the point of saying this child is eligible for us initiating the process to get this child cleared for adoption so, the factors that influence. So I am asking about that and the impact that that could have in improving a situation.

The general public perception is there a lot of people want to adopt children and the information provided as in terms of nine children may suggest, well, the competition is too intense, I cannot go in there looking

for—I am never going to—and you could leave this session with people saying: It is not never going to happen, it is too small. But I am saying that the pool of children, there may be more children, but it may be that the process itself is so lengthy that you will always have just a few and I am wondering whether the transformation is going to make that more efficient in the general population to get it to the adoption having more children who can get to a loving home quicker, rather than later or they age out.

Mr. Cyrus: Yes, well the new structure calls for an increase in the staff numbers at the adoption unit so, we would expect an attendant increase in the level of efficiency in that area. Yes.

Madam Chairman: And in the general population?

Mr. Cyrus: Yes.

Madam Chairman: And do we have quantifiable levels of improvement that are targets? Not with the number of children necessarily, but in terms of enhancement and service delivery from the Children's Authority? I heard mentioned, for example, all the initiatives that you are making for sensitization. What I do not hear is, by what percentage do we expect when you evaluate the feedback from the public, say, foster care that we have seen—we have done this campaign and we see a 25 per cent increase in people coming forward. It is one thing to talk about strategies, but the effectiveness must be measurable.

Mr. Cyrus: We would prefer to respond in writing with regard to the targets that are set.

Madam Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Madam Chair. In your submission, Children's Authority, two children were removed from unsafe foster care conditions for the period

2018 to 2023. What were the circumstances that required the removal of these two children, and please indicate the specific dates that the cases occurred and well, what information you can give us that is public knowledge?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, we would have had one situation of alleged sexual abuse and one situation of alleged physical abuse and these would have occurred over the course of 2023.

Mr. Forde: Where are the children now?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: The children have subsequently been removed and they are with alternative providers, care providers.

Mr. Forde: And this is foster care so, this is a home, a particular home?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Foster care providers.

Mr. Forde: Foster care providers. And they receive subvention from the Government?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: A stipend? Yes, for care of the child.

Mr. Forde: Any alternative arrangement took place as a result, any penalties, any taken off the list—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes.

Mr. Forde: —written, you know, what transpired?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, once we would have identified those cases and substantiated at least from the perspective of the Authority, those foster care providers have been removed from the register of approved foster care providers, reports would have also been, of course—and that means stipends and all other forms of support end and, that the Authority also provides reports to the police to conduct their follow up criminal investigations.

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Mr. Forde: And, of course, the psychologist would have been involved with regard to these two children also?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Absolutely.

Mr. Forde: Right. The sexual aspect, in terms of that, the child was a female or male?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: It was a female.

Madam Chairman: With charges—was there a criminal investigation into that matter?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: The Authority Chair, did make a report to the police and the police investigation, as far as we are aware is ongoing.

Madam Chairman: Okay. So currently, we have a lot of reports of crime, where children are left, their parents—parent is killed, a single parent, it might be sometimes both parents. I know that the Authority goes in there, provides support. Are some of these children coming into the system, or in almost every case or in most cases, would you say that they are taken by family and you could monitor their progress in that way?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Chair, in many cases, we are able to identify relatives and other persons who may be able to provide care for those children. In some cases, we may need to receive the child into care. But we have found that, particularly with those types of cases you have mentioned, yes, there may be other persons within the circle who can assume care and control of the children.

Madam Chairman: So, would you say that crime is adding to the burdens of childcare, the State's burden of childcare?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Yes, I will agree with that.

Madam Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Hislop: Chair, I think these may be my final two questions. In terms of your submission, you would have shared with us that the availability of psychologists to the unit—and this was in relation to what additional infrastructure is necessary to optimize the operations of the unit. And you shared with the Committee that presently the unit operates with two external contracted psychological service providers, could you share with us the cost to the State for those two externally contracted psychological service providers? And are they on a retainer or is it that it is a case by case arrangement? And the same question applies also to your service provider, your external service provider for the background checks in terms of the cost.

Mr. Cyrus: As I had indicated before that, we will provide that in writing so I will add the cost of the psychologist to that as well.

Mr. Hislop: Okay, much appreciate. Thank you Chair.

Madam Chairman: Going back to the question about crime, would you be able to provide us, may be not now, the number of children who are victims of crime, losing their parents, that have had to be taken into State care because there is no one, no family relative to take care of them?

Mr. Cyrus: Yes Chair, we will seek to provide that information in writing.

Madam Chairman: Okay, thank you. A question about the birth certificate of children when they are adopted what happens to their birth certificate, do they immediately get—what?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair. So, once the adoption is granted, the original birth certificates for these children are sealed by the court and once he or she turns 18, they can unseal it. Once the adoption is granted, the court order is sent to the Registrar General's Department and an adoption certificate will be generated, where the names of the adoptive parents now appear on the

child's birth certificate. By law, the child has to take the surname of the adoptive parents.

Madam Chairman: Okay, so that is the certificate that they will present to get into school and so on. Right?

Ms. Neptune: Yes, that is correct.

Madam Chairman: Are there conditions, if at that stage the parent is not yet ready to—adoptive parent is not yet ready to tell the child they are adopted, does the child have access to that and are there confidentiality commitments that schools and so on must make?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, with regard to if the children have access to their birth certificates, I know in open cases where there are older children, yes, they do have access, they know that they are adopted. With the younger ones, they do not, I cannot speak directly for the adoptive parents, if they allow the children to say, but in terms of the certificate itself, it just has "adoption", no sorry, it has "certificate" written on it. So, whereas we would have "certificate of birth" written on the normal birth certificates, for the adoptive certificates, they just have "certificate" written on it, in terms of confidentiality.

With regard to the schools, we do inform of this one, we visit these schools to conduct our school visits for processing of cases, we do inform of the confidentiality, we speak directly with the principals as well as the schoolteachers, so there is that confidentiality.

Madam Chairman: So, but the people who know, know the minute they see something saying "certificate" as opposed to birth certificate that this is an adopted child, right?

Ms. Neptune: Yes, Chair.

Madam Chairman: Do State agents, like in hospitals, where you have the nurses and staff and doctors and teachers and so on, have an obligation to maintain that confidentiality? Because the one thing you do not want, if you are not yet ready to tell your child that they are adopted is a careless reference to a child—"no wonder yuh come out so" because, you know, look "dais not yuh mother" whatever. Are there commitments that these people who have access to that information must maintain, or is that something that ought to be written into some law?

Ms. Neptune: Through the Chair, we do hope, especially when we do our sensitization with these agencies, we do speak on the importance of confidentiality with adoption. So, we do hope that it is carried out but again, as PS would have indicated, in terms of recommendations, we are open to that and that would be something that is great, that is recommended that persons throughout maintain this confidentiality. Because as we tell the parents, they should be the ones to inform the children that he or she is adopted, someone could easily—and we know how our communities are—inform the child themselves that they are adopted.

Madam Chairman: Could it be seen as a child protection measure, um?

Ms. Neptune: Yes, Chair.

Mr. Forde: I think I should ask it. Thanks, Madam Chair. In your submission on page nine, Children's Authority, right, you identify a 21-day period where somebody who would have made a request to adopt a child, right. You all have a 21-day period within to renege, but in your discourse, nowhere it is mentioned that, like for example, if a child is in an adoptive home, and let us say there is a complaint with regard to the care of the child or the situation

of the child. Is there a timeframe that you all will work within, in order to get that child out of that home that would have been providing the adoption?

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: Through the Chair, once the Authority receives a report of a child protection concern of any child who is under our purview and that case it is directed by our registry unit to the relevant caseworker, an investigation is commenced immediately. So, our adoption unit in the case of a child who is with an adoptive parent, our adoption unit will go out there and investigate the complaint with the view of substantiating or not.

Mr. Forde: Based on the severity of the complaint, you would know whether you need to work move immediately to get the child out or whether there would be a timeframe—

Mrs. Siew Sankar-Ali: That is correct.

Mr. Forde: —where you can delay. Okay.

Mr. Hislop: My last question Chair. What is the life of the Adoption Committee that was just appointed in December 2023, the duration of that Committee?

Mr. Cyrus: Well the Committee would be appointed for the duration of the Board appointment itself. And the Board appointment I believe, is three years, yeah, so it would be for the life of the Board.

Mr. Hislop: For three years?

Mr. Cyrus: Yes.

Mr. Hislop: Okay, right.

Madam Chairman: I noticed the response to the meetings of that Committee were a bit evasive. A question was asked prior to your coming here, how many meetings they had had? And we were told: They met—they meet. So is that—were you satisfied with the regularity with which the Committee

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meets? I know there is a new committee and previous to that, the Committee is—

Mr. Cyrus: The Committee meets on average, once per month.

Madam Chairman: And those have always been regular?

Mr. Cyrus: Excuse?

Madam Chairman: Except in an exceptional circumstance.

Mr. Cyrus: Yes, of course, yeah.

Madam Chairman: Good, thank you. Okay, well, I would like to thank Mr. Gangapersad, Mr. Cyrus and their respective teams for coming to us today with, you know, fairly—your responses have been quite full so we really appreciate that. You have a good team there. And I would like to invite each of you starting with you, Mr. Gangapersad to give us brief closing remarks.

Mr. Persad: Thanks very much Chair. First and foremost, I want to thank you again, for allowing this opportunity and for facilitating a very informative discussion. I recognize the value of it. Clearly, inside of the discussion, we see some opportunities to take some action to fill some gaps and we look forward to the outcome document and any recommendations and suggestions. We at the Gender and Child Affairs, reaffirm our commitment to work with the Children's Authority and to support the Children's Authority in the work that they have to do, and with all stakeholders to ensure the well-being of children in our country. I thank you very much.

Madam Chairman: Thank you. Mr. Cyrus.

Mr. Cyrus: Yes. Chair, we wish to thank the Committee for inviting us and giving us the opportunity to share on what is a very important aspect of our business. As we have been promoting, adoption is an option and we continue to sensitize the public to all the facilities available at the Children's Authority.

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So, we wish to thank you and we look forward to any recommendations that are made and we will take them on board. Thank you very much.

Madam Chairman: Well, thank you very much. We will be inviting submissions from members of the public to get some of their experiences, their ideas and so on and incorporate that in our eventual report. And I would thank all stakeholders, all of you for attending and for sharing your invaluable knowledge with us, and with the members of the public, I would like to thank the Committee members and the staff of the Office of Parliament for their usual efficient and very well done support work, as well as the listening and viewing audience. So thank you all and have a great day.

12.13 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

Appendix IV - Adoption Survey Rep

Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA)

Report on an Inquiry into the Operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Adoption Procedures in Trinidad and Tobago

Introduction

The Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities (including the THA) embarked on an inquiry into the operations of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago from the public and relevant stakeholders about the efficiency and effectiveness of the adoption procedures in Trinidad and Tobago. The Committee collected primary data to support the Committee's broad inquiry into the operations of the Adoption Unit within the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. The primary objectives of the Inquiry are as follows:

1. To assess the operational efficiency of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.
2. To assess the effectiveness of the Adoption Unit of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.
3. To evaluate the adequacy of the regulations governing the operations of the Adoption Unit in the execution of their functions.

By gathering empirical data and insights directly from those involved and affected, the Committee seeks to ensure that the adoption process is not only efficient and effective but

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also well-regulated thus ultimately enhancing the welfare and protection of children in Trinidad and Tobago.

Methodology

Three survey instruments were developed targeting foster parents, adoptive parents, the general public and NGOs. Table 1 provides details on the survey periods and the number of responses received.

Table 1: Survey Response by Target Group

Target	Survey Period	No. of Responses	Population
Public and NGOs	April 25 th – May 17 th 2024	101	
Foster Parents	May 21 st – June 5 th 2024	59	90
Adoptive Parents	May 21 st – June 5 th 2024	115	204

Each survey was administered online using Google Forms (Public and NGOs) while Survey Monkey was used to administer the survey for adoptive and foster parents. Due to policy and legal implications, the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) provided assistance in administering the survey to foster and adoptive parents. The survey instrument contained both closed and open-ended questions and aimed at capturing data on the following:

- Demographics
- Public awareness on adoption and foster care

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- Stakeholders feedback on their experiences with the adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago
- Recommendation by stakeholders to improve the adoption process.

Objectives

General Public

The objectives of the survey were as follows:

- To determine the level of awareness by the public on adoption and fostering in Trinidad and Tobago
- Factors impacting persons willingness to adopt and/or become foster parents

Adoptive/Foster Parents

- To assess the factors that influence persons to become foster parents and adoptive parents.
- To examine the duration of the application process to become a foster parent and adoptive parent.
- To examine the ways in which persons become familiar with the foster and adoptive processes.
- To identify the challenges faced by both potential foster and adoptive parents in the fostering and adoptive processes.

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- To identify those aspects of the adoption and fostering processes that were most useful for potential applicants.

The objectives of the stakeholder surveys were:

- To assess the operational efficiency of the Adoption Unit of the CATT;
- To assess the effectiveness of the Adoption Unit in the facilitation of adoption procedures in Trinidad and Tobago; and
- To evaluate the adequacy of the regulatory framework that guides the work of the Adoption Unit in the execution of their mandate.

SECTION 1: GENERAL PUBLIC AND NGOS

Executive Summary

1. A total of 101 persons from the general public and selected NGOs responded to the online Adoption Survey which was undertaken over the period , April 25th – May 17th 2024.
2. Of the 101 respondents, 74% were females and 26% were males. The majority of respondents were in their 30s (37%) and 40s (33%).
3. Only 9% of respondents surveyed said they were very familiar with the adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago. In contrast, more than half (54%) were not familiar at all, while 37% had some level of familiarity with the adoption process.
4. Four out of 5 respondents stated that they had not seen any information in the media nor the internet concerning the process of adopting a child in Trinidad and Tobago.
5. Almost all respondents (99%) were of the opinion that there is insufficient information and awareness about adoption in their community.
6. Overall, adoption was the most favoured option among the alternatives¹⁰ presented followed by foster parenting.

¹⁰ Four options were provided to respondents viz. Adoption, Assisted Reproductive Medicine/Technologies, Foster Parenting and Surrogacy

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7. The vast majority of respondents were of the opinion that not enough attention is given by government agencies to promote adoption and fostering as family options in Trinidad and Tobago.
8. Almost all of the survey respondents (99%) believed that there is insufficient information and awareness about adoption in their community.
9. Only 9% of respondents claimed to be very familiar with the adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago. In contrast, over half (54%) were not familiar at all, while 37% had some level of familiarity with the adoption process.
10. The data highlighted a multifaceted approach to improving the adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago, with key areas of focus being awareness, legal reforms, financial support, and inclusivity.

SECTION 2: FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Executive Summary

1. A total of 59 foster parents and 115 adoptive parents participated in the surveys.
2. Out of the 59 foster parents, 84.75% were female and 15.25% were male. Similarly, out of the 115 adoptive parents, 77.39% were female and 22.61% were male.
3. Regarding adoptive parents, 84.21% were residing in Trinidad and Tobago and 76.52% were nationals of Trinidad and Tobago.

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4. A significant percentage of respondents (43.36%) cited infertility or the inability to have children biologically as their primary motivation for considering adoption.
5. Approximately 59% of respondents indicated an interest in parenting as a motivation for fostering a child.
6. Approximately 47% of foster parents familiarized themselves with the process through the CATT website. Moreover, approximately 63% of adoptive parents familiarized themselves with this process through their own initiative and personal interest.
7. A further 35% of adoptive parents have not as yet finalized the adoption process but are in the process. Approximately 33% however, have finalized one adoption.
8. A significant percentage of foster parents (74.14%) are of the view that information on fostering available to the public is comprehensive enough for persons interested in fostering.
9. The fostering process took less than one year to complete from application to having the child at home according to 62% of the foster parents.
10. On the other hand, the process for adopting a child is longer, with 38% of adoptive parents stating it took 1 to 3 years and 29% stated it took 4 to 6 years. Approximately 17% stated it took over 10 years to adopt a child.
11. Both foster and adoptive parents met unique challenges. For the majority of foster parents, the psychological evaluations were seen as problematic, while for adoptive parents, the most challenging aspect of the adoption process was the lengthy waiting period for approval.
12. Despite these challenges, foster and adoptive parents were appreciative of the support and training they received from the CATT staff and were highly likely to recommend fostering and adoption to potential applicants.

Survey Findings

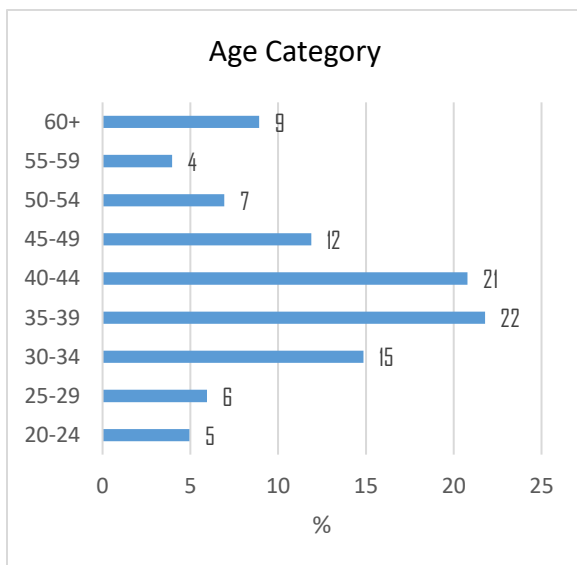
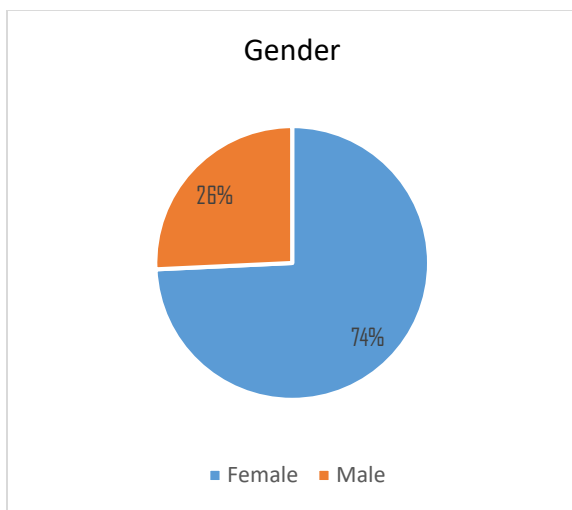
The following analysis is based on data gathered from the surveys.

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SECTION 1

General Public and NGOs

Of the 101 respondents who responded to the survey, 74% were females and 26% were males.

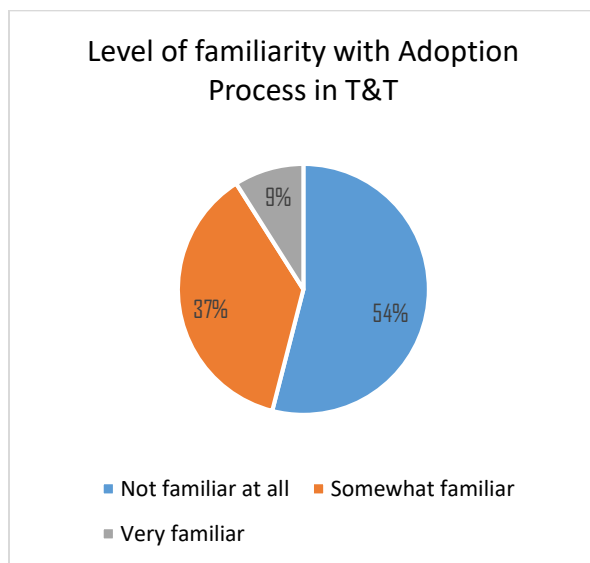


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The majority of respondents were in their 30s (37%) and 40s (33%). The characteristics of these age categories are as follows: Persons in their 30s tend to start or expand their families. This stage often involves balancing work and family responsibilities.

For many, this decade includes significant relationship milestones such as marriage or long-term partnerships.

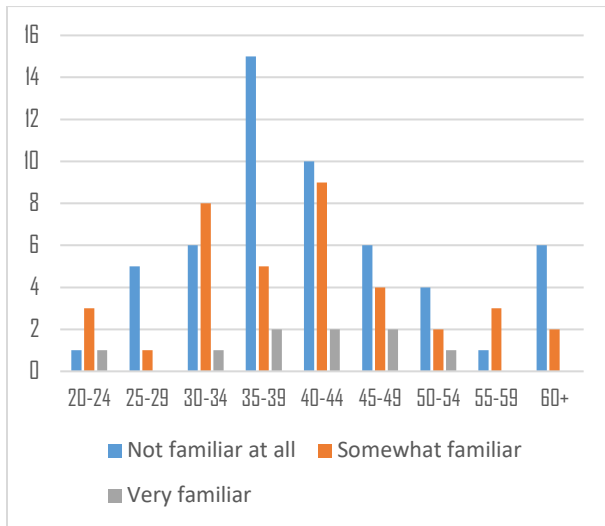
Persons in their 40s are usually at the peak of their careers often holding senior or executive positions. Continued focus on financial planning, including retirement savings, paying off mortgages, and funding children's education. For those with children, this period may involve parenting teenagers, which can come with unique challenges and responsibilities. Some may start to take on caregiving roles for aging parents, adding another layer of responsibility.



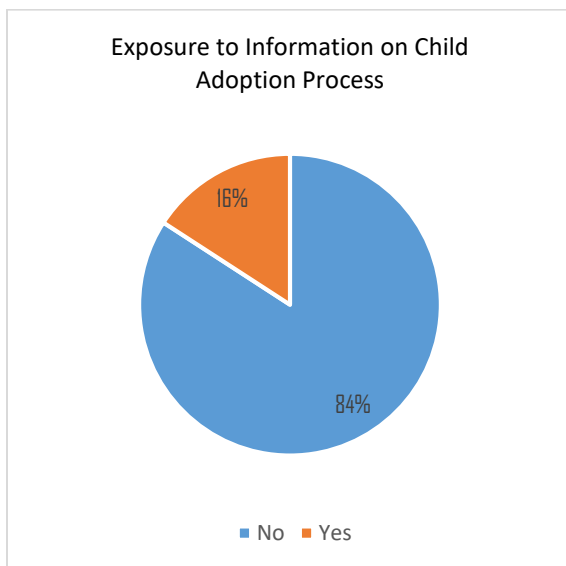
Only 9% of respondents surveyed said they were very familiar with the with the adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago. In contrast, more than half (54%) were not familiar at all, while 37% had some level of familiarity with the adoption process.

Familiarity with the adoption process by Age

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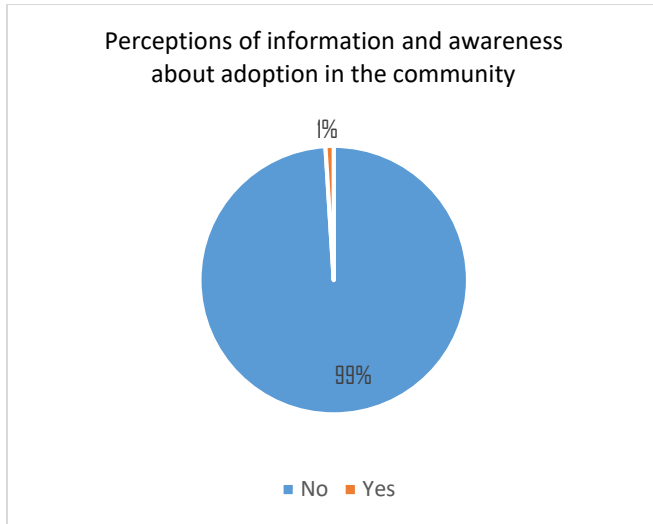


- The 35-39 age group had the highest total respondents (22), with a notable portion not familiar with the process.
- The 30-34 age group shows a balanced familiarity with a relatively high number being somewhat familiar.
- Older age groups (50+) showed lower familiarity overall, with just a few being very familiar.



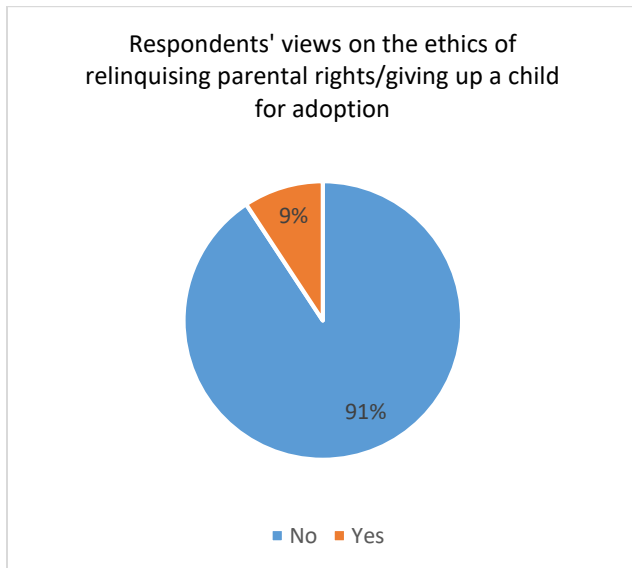
Four out of 5 respondents stated that they had not seen any information in the media nor the internet concerning the process of adopting a child in Trinidad and Tobago.

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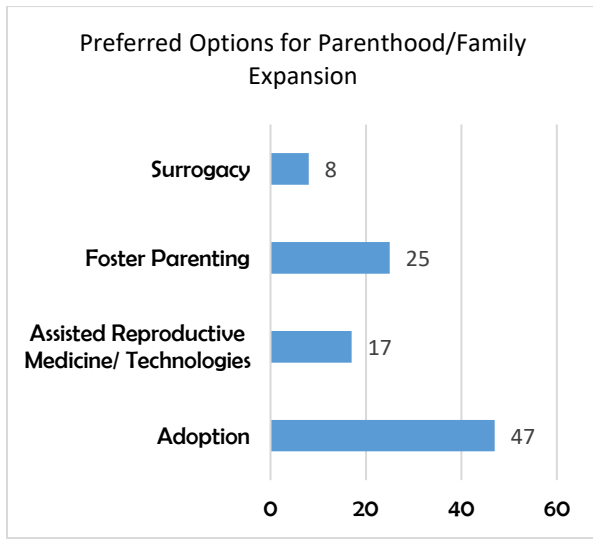


Almost all the survey respondents (99%) of respondents were of the opinion that there is insufficient information and awareness about adoption in their community.

Nine out of 10 respondents did not consider relinquishing parental rights for adoption as unethical.



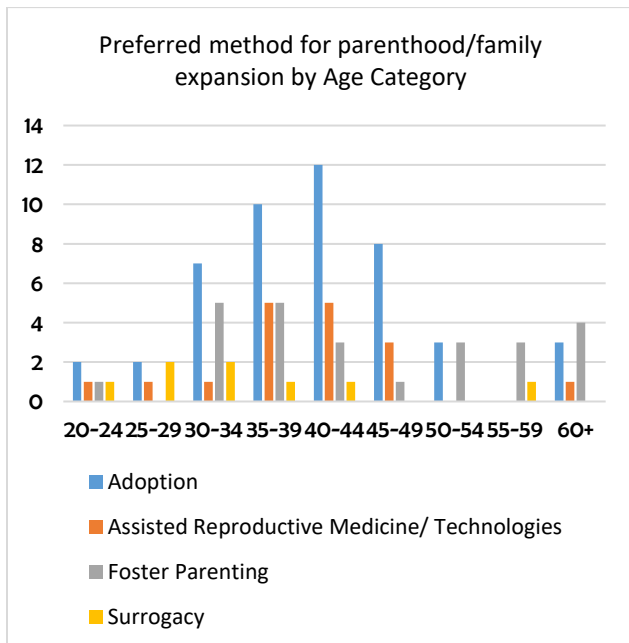
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Overall, adoption was the most favoured option among the alternatives presented followed by foster parenting.

Assisted Reproductive Medicine/Technologies garnered a moderate level of interest, with 17 respondents considering it as a potential means of expanding their families.

Surrogacy received the least number of responses, with only 8 respondents opting for this option.



Further analysis by age category shows adoption was the most popular option chosen by respondents under 50 years while those over 50 chose foster parenting.

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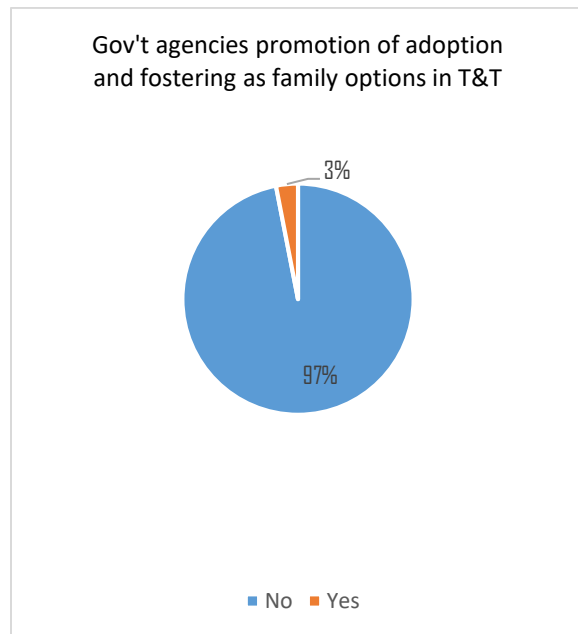
In particular, the highest number of respondents in the 35-39 and 40-44 age groups chose adoption, indicating a strong inclination towards this option among individuals in their mid to late thirties and early forties.

As regards Assisted Reproductive Medicine/Technologies, there was consistent but relatively lower preference across age groups, with a notable number of respondents in the 30-34 age group considering it. It suggests that while some individuals in their early thirties explore assisted reproductive options, adoption remains a more popular choice.

The preference for foster parenting varied among age groups, with a highest number of respondents in their 30s showing interest. However, it was not as popular as adoption across all age brackets. Persons in their 50s also showed interest in fostering.

Surrogacy received the least preference overall, with fewer respondents across all age groups opting for it as a means of expanding their families. Generally, individuals in their late thirties and early forties seem to have a higher preference for adoption, possibly due to factors like stability and readiness for parenting at that stage of life.

Overall, adoption emerged as the most preferred option across age groups, followed by assisted reproductive options and foster parenting. Surrogacy was the least favored choice, suggesting that traditional adoption methods and assisted reproduction are more widely accepted among respondents in Trinidad and Tobago as means of becoming parents or expanding their families.

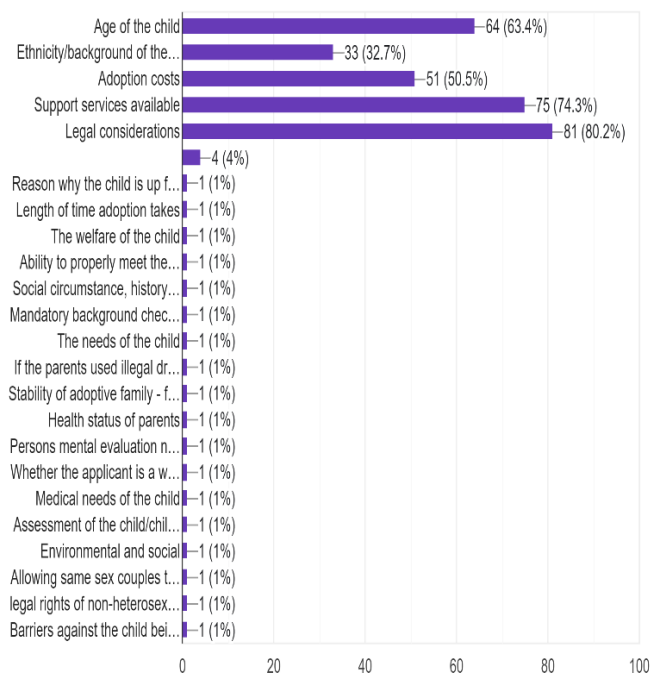


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The vast majority of respondents were of the opinion that not enough attention is given by government agencies to promote adoption and fostering as family options in Trinidad and Tobago.

7. What factors do you think are most important when considering adoption? (Select all that apply)

101 responses



Factors that are most important to respondents when considering adoption

Respondents were asked to indicate the factors that were most important to them when considering adoption.

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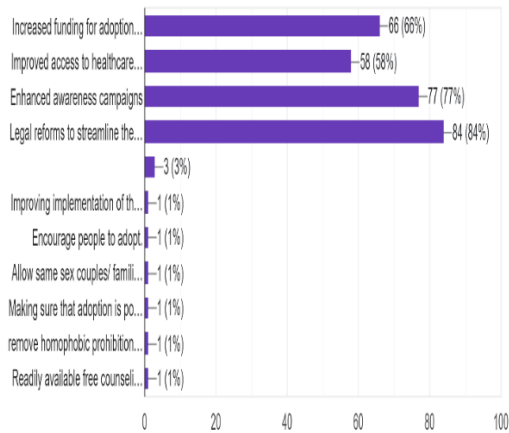
- **Legal Considerations:** Legal considerations, such as the legal rights of non-heterosexual parents, legal rights of the biological parents, and legal rights of the adoptive parents, were mentioned in the majority of responses. This suggests an awareness by the local population of the legal complexities involved in the adoption process.
- **Support Services Available:** The availability of support services for both the adoptive parents and the adopted child were highlighted. This included support for mental evaluation, medical needs, and ensuring the stability of the adoptive family.
- **Age of the Child:** The age of the child was mentioned in various combinations with other factors. This indicates that the age of the child is a crucial consideration for prospective adoptive parents, likely influencing their decision-making process.
- **Adoption Costs:** This factor was mentioned frequently, thus indicating that the financial aspect of adoption is a significant concern for prospective parents.
- **Ethnicity/Background of the Child:** The ethnicity and background of the child were mentioned in several responses, suggesting that prospective parents considered cultural factors when considering adoption.

Overall, the responses given by respondents reflect the multifaceted nature of adoption and the various considerations that prospective parents take into account when deciding to adopt a child.

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10. How do you think the government or society can better support adoptive families and children? (Select all that apply)

100 responses



Measures Government or society can undertake to better support adoptive families and children

The responses given by respondents indicate various measures that could potentially improve the adoption process and encourage more people to consider adoption in Trinidad and Tobago. These measures include the following:

- i. **Enhanced Awareness Campaigns:** This theme appeared frequently, either alone or in combination with other measures. It highlights the importance of increasing public knowledge about adoption, which could address misconceptions and inform more people about the process and benefits.
- ii. **Legal Reforms to Streamline the Adoption Process:** This is another recurring theme, suggesting that many respondents believed that the current legal

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- framework is a barrier to adoption. Streamlining legal procedures could make adoption more accessible and less cumbersome.
- iii. **Encouraging People to Adopt:** Combined with legal reforms and awareness campaigns, this measure emphasized the need to actively promote adoption as a viable option for expanding families.
 - iv. **Improved Access to Healthcare and Education:** This factor was often mentioned alongside awareness campaigns and legal reforms. It indicates that providing better healthcare and education support for adoptive families and children is seen as crucial.
 - v. **Allowing Same-Sex Couples to Adopt:** Some responses specifically mentioned the need to remove barriers for same-sex couples, reflecting a push for more inclusive adoption policies.
 - vi. **Increased Funding for Adoption Services:** Many responses highlighted the need for more financial support for adoption services, which could enhance the resources available for adoptive families and streamline the adoption process.
 - vii. **Improving Implementation of Existing Legislation:** Specific reference was made to legislation passed around 2015 to expedite the termination of parental rights, suggesting a need for better enforcement of existing laws.
 - viii. **Readily Available Free Counseling:** Mentioned in combination with other measures, this underscores the importance of mental health support for both adoptive parents and children.

The data highlights a multifaceted approach to improving adoption processes, with key areas of focus being awareness, legal reforms, financial support, and inclusivity. Enhanced awareness campaigns and legal reforms were the most frequently mentioned, often in combination with each other and with other factors like healthcare, education, and funding. The emphasis on allowing same-sex couples to adopt and improving the implementation of existing legislation also suggests specific areas where respondents see room for significant improvement.

Conclusion

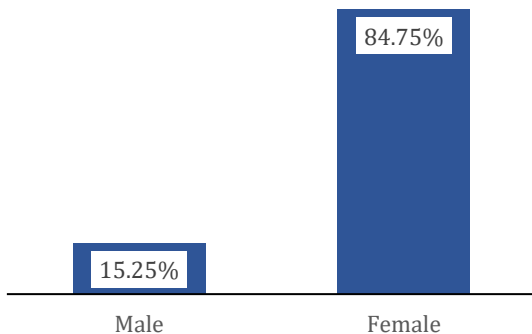
Generally, the analysis consistently highlighted the lack of awareness and understanding of the adoption process in Trinidad and Tobago, indicating a clear need for increased awareness and education about the process. The survey findings also indicated a general willingness by respondents towards the idea of adoption. In particular, individuals in their late thirties and early forties showed a stronger inclination towards adoption, possibly due to factors such as stability and readiness for parenthood at this stage of life. However, the vast majority of respondents were of the opinion that not enough attention was given by government agencies to promote adoption and fostering as family options. Overall, the analysis underscores the need for targeted informational campaigns and outreach programmes to improve understanding and familiarity with the adoption process.

SECTION 2: Survey for Foster Parents and Adoptive Parents

1. Foster Parents

Gender Profile of Foster Parents

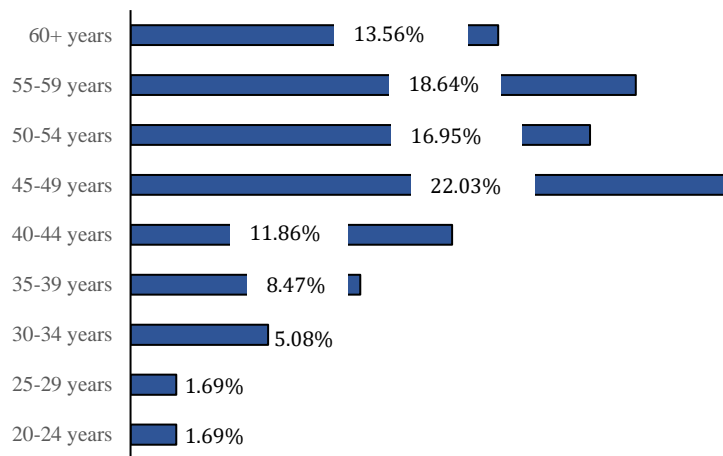
Of the 59 respondents who completed the survey, 9 (15.25%) were male and 50 (84.75%) were female.



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Age Profile of Foster Parents

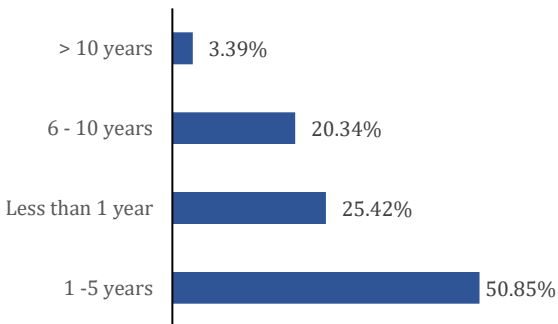
An examination of the age profiles of the respondents suggests that most foster parents are older with the majority in the 45-49 year age bracket (n = 13, 22.03%). This was followed by those in the 55-59 year age bracket (n = 11, 18.64%), 50-54 year age bracket (n = 10, 16.95%) and those 60 years and older (n = 8, 13.56%).



Length of Time Serving as a Foster Parent

Respondents were also asked to indicate how long they have been serving as a foster parent. Thirty respondents (50.85%) indicated 1-5 years followed by 15 respondents (25.42%) who indicated they were serving for less than 5 years and 12 respondents (20.34%) who served for 6-10 years. Two respondents (3.39%) indicated that they served for more than 10 years as a foster parent.

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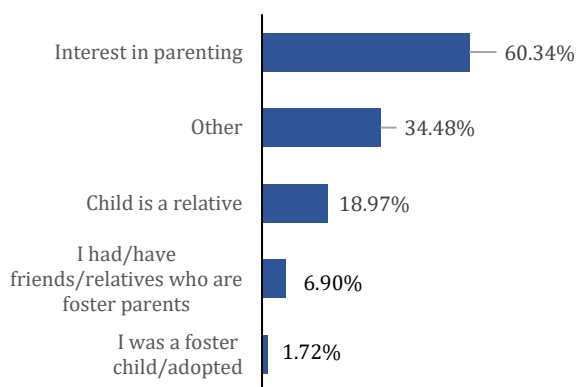
Factors that Motivated Respondents to become Foster Parents

An analysis of the factors that motivated respondents to become foster parents indicate an interest in parenting as the most popular factor (n = 35, 60.34%). Other factors included “child as a relative” as selected by 11 respondents (18.97%), “I had/have friends/relatives who are foster parents” as selected by 4 respondents (6.90%), “I was a foster child” as selected by 1 respondent (1.72%). Twenty respondents (34.48%) selected “other factors” which required them to specify what they were. Based on their responses, the following factors were generated:

- **The need to help children:** Five respondents indicated this as a motivating factor for becoming foster parents.
- **As a way of contributing to society:** One respondent mentioned becoming a foster parent was a way of giving back to society.
- **The need to provide a safe space for children:** Seven respondents stated the need to provide children with a safe and loving environment motivated them to become foster parents.
- **A passion for children:** Two respondents mentioned that having a passion for children was their motivating factor for becoming a foster parent.
- **A higher calling:** One respondent indicated that they felt that becoming a foster parent was what “God intended”.

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- **Desire for a large family:** One respondent indicated a desire to have a large family as a factor for becoming a foster parent.
- **A belief that children should be loved and cared for:** Two respondents indicated this was a motivating factor.
- **Child in foster care:** One respondent indicated that their child was in foster care.



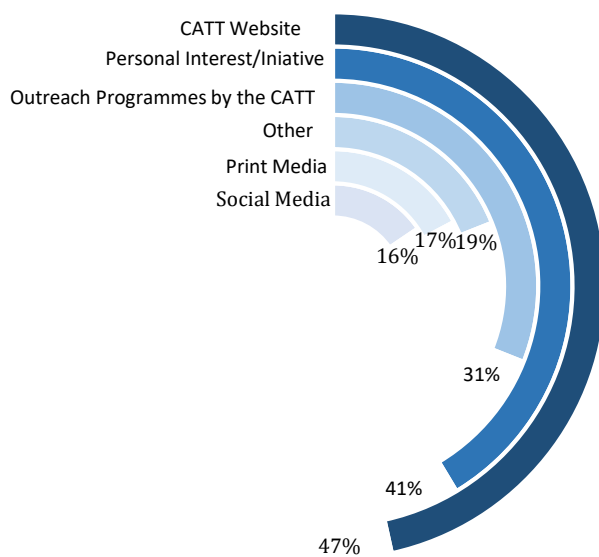
Familiarization of the Process of Fostering a Child

According to the respondents, the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) was the most frequently used source of information about the process of fostering a child (n = 27, 47%). This was followed by respondents' own personal interest or initiative (n = 24, 41%). Eighteen respondents (31%) made use of outreach programmes by the CATT and the print media (n = 10, 17%) as well as social media (n = 9, 16%) were frequently used. However, 11 respondents (19%) made use of other sources of information namely:

- Two respondents made direct calls to the CATT.
- One respondent heard about the process on radio.
- The Catholic Church Immigrants Programme as indicated by 1 respondent.
- Family members provided information about the process according to two participants.
- One respondent indicated familiarity was gained through a neighbour.

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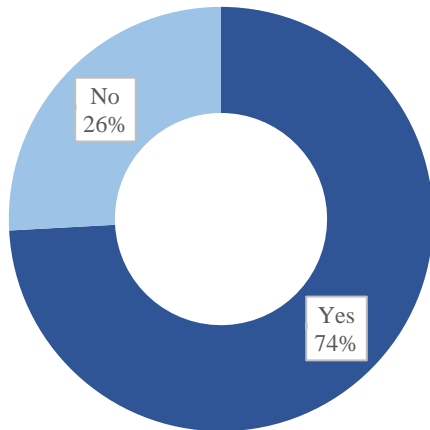
- One respondent stated that through the Big Brother Programme, children from different orphanages would come under the care of his wife and himself.
- One respondent mentioned being a reference for another person interested in fostering.
- One respondent heard about it through other foster parents.
- One respondent mentioned already being a foster parent.



Comprehensiveness of the Information on Fostering

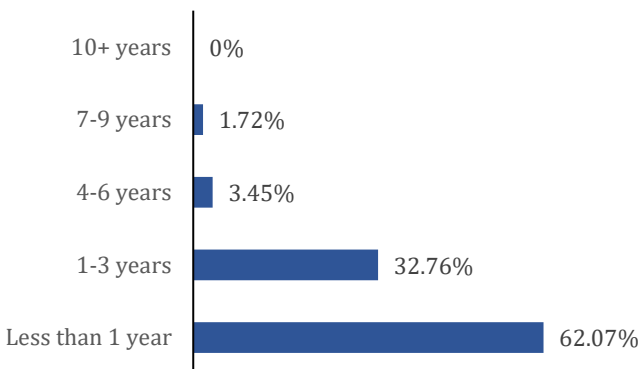
The majority of the respondents (n = 43, 74.14%) believed that the information on fostering available to the public was comprehensive. However, fifteen respondents (25.86%) did not believe that this was the case.

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Length of Time Taken to become a Foster Parent

Respondents were asked to indicate the length of time taken to become a foster parent from the time they submitted an application, to the time they brought the children at home. Thirty-six (62.07%) stated it took less than a year and nineteen respondents (32.76%) stated it took 1 to 3 years. Two participants (3.45%) stated that it took 4 to 6 years and one participant (1.72%) mentioned the process took 7 to 9 years. Notably, the process of fostering a child did not exceed 10 years.



Challenges Faced by Respondents in the Application Process to become a Foster Parent

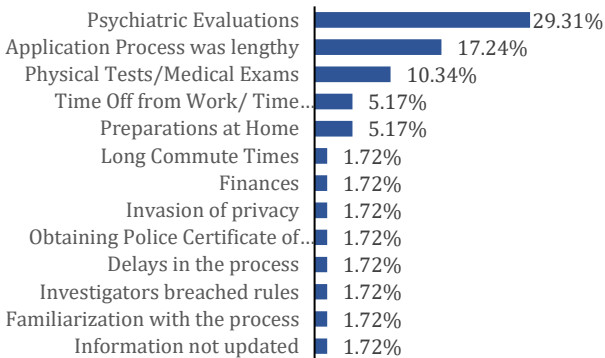
Respondents were asked to state the challenges they faced during the application process to become a foster parents. It must be noted that 10 respondents (17.24%) indicated that they did not encounter any challenges in the application process. However, for most respondents the most common challenges were:

- **Psychiatric Evaluations:** This was mentioned by 17 respondents (29.31%).
- The process was **lengthy:** Mentioned by ten respondents (17.24%)
- **Physical Tests/Medical Examinations:** This was mentioned by six respondents (10.34%)
- **Taking time off from work/Time constraints:** This was indicated by three respondents (5.17%)
- **Preparations at home:** Three respondents (5.17%) mentioned that preparing their respective households to accommodate the child/children is a challenge.

Less common challenges identified by the respondents (1 respondent each) included:

- Long commute times
- Local Welfare Departments did not have up-to-date information
- Keeping up with court dates
- Finances
- Invasion of privacy
- Obtaining Police Certificate of Character
- Delays in the process
- Investigators breached rules
- Familiarization of the process

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Key Aspects of the Application Process that were Useful or Helpful for Foster Parents

The respondents were also asked to state those aspects of the application process that were useful or helpful to them. The most commonly cited were:

- **The training sessions:** Indicated by 29 (52.73%) of the respondents
- **Help and guidance from staff:** This was by 7 respondents (12.73%)

Less commonly cited aspects included:

- **The interview sessions:** This was indicated by 2 respondents (3.64%)
- **The physical training/Medical Examinations:** This was indicated by 2 respondents (3.64%)
- **The psychological evaluations:** Indicated by 2 respondents (3.64%)
- **Diversity of views about fostering:** As indicated by 2 respondents (3.64%)
- **Information on fostering was readily available:** As indicated by 2 respondents (3.64%).
- **Background checks:** As indicated by 1 respondent (1.82%)
- **Interactions with other parents:** As indicated by 1 respondent (1.82%)
- **Gaining new knowledge about fostering:** This was indicated by 1 respondent (1.82%)

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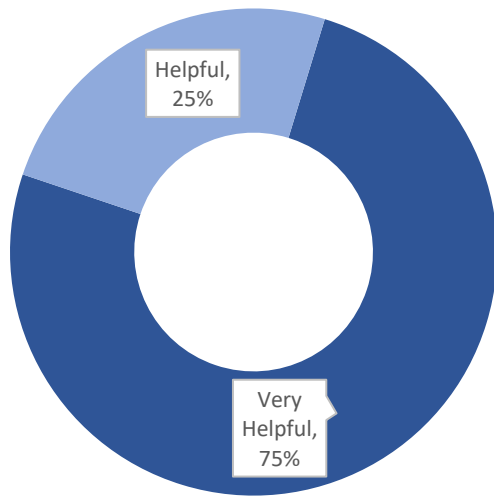
- **The sharing of experiences from experts:** As indicated by 1 respondent (1.82%)
- **Peer support meetings:** This was mentioned by 1 respondent (1.82%)
- **Availability of children:** As stated by 1 respondent (1.82%)
- **Knowledge about the physical attributes of the child:** As mentioned by 1 respondent (1.82%)



Helpfulness of the Staff at CATT

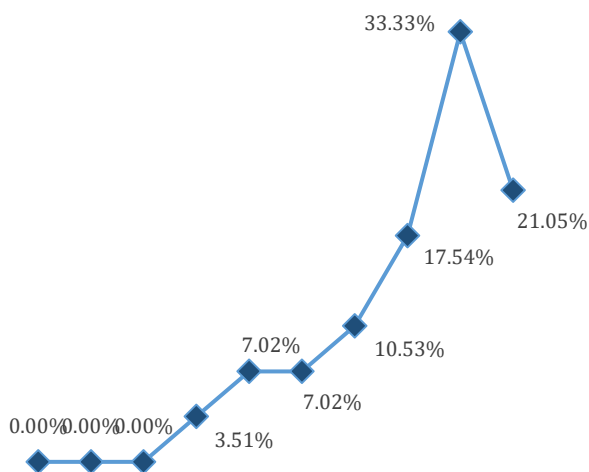
Respondents were asked to rate the helpfulness of staff at the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. The majority (n = 43, 75.44%) indicated that the staff was very helpful while 14 respondents (24.56%) indicated that they were helpful. It should be noted that there were no respondents who rated the staff as unhelpful, very unhelpful or somewhat helpful.

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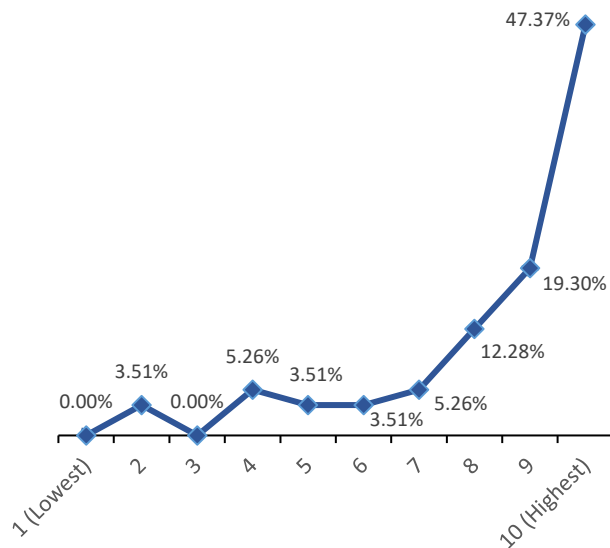
Overall Experience with the Application Process

Respondents were also asked to rate their overall experience with the application process. The majority of respondents (n = 47, 82.45%) gave ratings of 7 and above, indicating that they rated their experience highly. Only 10 respondents (17.55%) gave ratings of 4 to 6, indicating that their experience with the application process was moderate. It should be noted that no respondent had any negative experiences with the application process.



Likelihood of Recommending Fostering to Potential Applicants in Trinidad and Tobago

Similarly, respondents were also asked to rate how likely they would recommend fostering to potential applicants in Trinidad and Tobago. Most respondents (n = 50, 87.72%) gave ratings of 6 and above which implied they were highly likely to recommend fostering to potential applicants. The greatest concentration of these ratings were 8 to 10 (n = 45, 78.95%). On the other hand, relatively fewer respondents (n = 7, 12.28%) gave lower ratings (5 and below) implying they were least likely to recommend fostering to potential applicants in Trinidad and Tobago.



Level of Satisfaction by Foster Parents

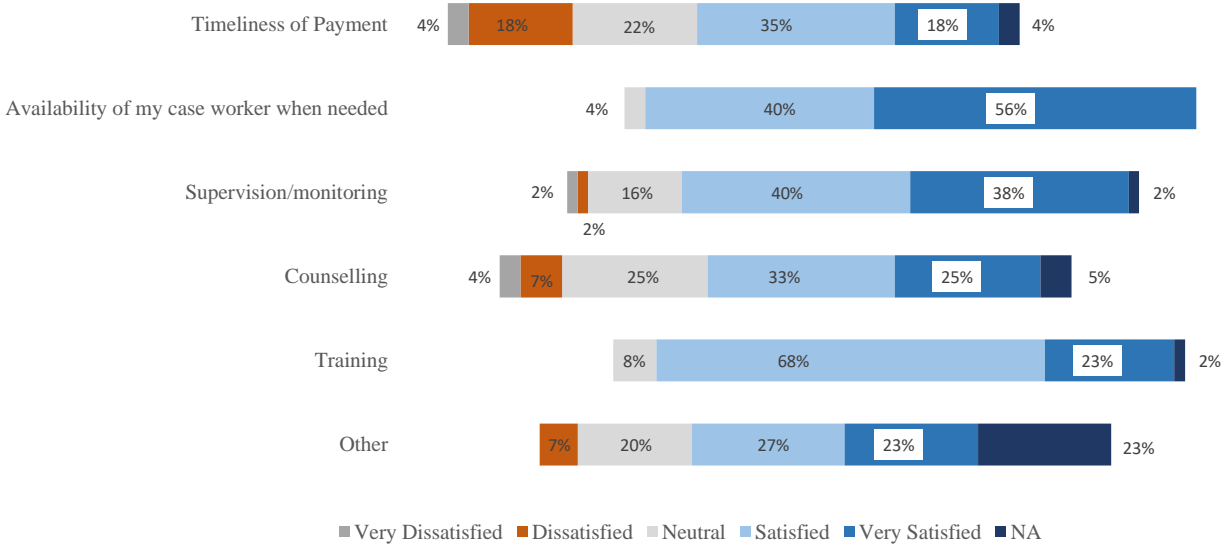
Respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction on several criteria as follows:

- **Timeliness of Payment:** Ten respondents (18.18%) indicated they were very satisfied while 19 respondents (34.55%) indicated they were satisfied. Twelve respondents (21.82%) chose to remain neutral. Fewer respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied (n = 10, 18.18%) or very dissatisfied (n = 2, 3.64%). Only two respondents (3.64%) believed that this was not applicable to them.

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- **Availability of my Case-Worker when needed:** Most respondents were either very satisfied (n = 31, 56.36%) or satisfied (n = 22, 40%). Only two respondents (3.64%) did not have an opinion. It should be noted that no respondent indicated that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied or that this was not applicable to them.
- **Supervision/Monitoring:** Most respondents indicated that they were either very satisfied (n = 21, 38.18%) or satisfied (n = 22, 40%). Nine respondents (16.36%) chose to remain neutral. Relatively fewer participants were dissatisfied (n = 1, 1.82%) or very dissatisfied (n = 1, 1.82%). Moreover, only one respondent (1.82%) stated that this was not applicable to them.
- **Counselling:** Most respondents indicated that they were very satisfied (n = 14, 25.45%) or satisfied (n = 18, 32.73%). Also of considerable note is the number of respondents who chose to remain neutral (n = 14, 25.42%). Relatively fewer respondents were either dissatisfied (n = 4, 7.27%) or very dissatisfied (n = 2, 3.64%). Three respondents (5.43%) stated that this was not applicable to them.
- **Training:** Most respondents were either very satisfied (n = 12, 22.64%) or satisfied (n = 36, 67.92%). Four respondents remained neutral (7.55%). No respondent indicated feeling dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and one respondent (1.89%) stated that this was not applicable.
- **Other:** Few respondents indicated feeling either very satisfied (n = 7, 23.33%) or satisfied (n = 8, 26.67%) with other aspects of the adoption process. Six respondents (20%) chose to remain neutral but two respondents (6.67%) felt dissatisfied. There were no respondents who felt very dissatisfied but seven respondents (23.33%) stated that this option was not applicable to them. This option required the respondents to specify their responses. These were:
 - Payment and Counselling were still outstanding.

- Greater efforts need to be placed to facilitate contact between children and their biological parents.
- Additional financial aid by the CATT was appreciated.
- Picking up and dropping off the kids.
- Information given on the child to be fostered.
- School visits, guidance
- Peer support for foster parents
- Transport



Aspects of the Fostering Process that Potential Foster Parents should be Aware of

Respondents were asked to state what other aspects of the fostering process, potential foster parents should be aware of. A summary of the responses are given below:

- The in-depth inquiries were intense
- The process is completed by 1 year
- The process is not easy
- Potential foster parents must be aware of Government policies, guidelines and laws that legislate the rights of the child.
- Time flexibility to facilitate interviews and training.
- The process can be mentally and emotionally draining.
- Potential foster parents are given the choice to select a child/children based on age, sex and behavioural characteristics.
- Potential foster parents must be dedicated and committed.
- The process is well organized.
- Not a clear path from fostering to adoption.
- There are financial obligations towards taking care of the child but foster parents should be mindful that it is unlikely it will lead to adoption.
- There's no meeting before they're placed in the care of the foster parents.

Suggestions for Improvement of the Quality-of-Service Delivery

Finally, respondents were asked to give suggestions for the improvement of the quality-of-service delivery to foster parents in Trinidad and Tobago. Listed below are some of the more pertinent suggestions:

- More information needs to be given about the process of fostering.
- Clear and accurate information about the child should be given in a timely manner.
- More home and school visits should be conducted.
- An increase in the stipends for foster parents.
- Delays in payments should be reviewed and addressed.

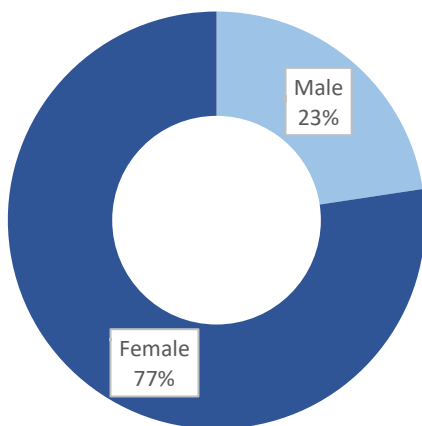
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- More financial support is needed especially for children who have special needs.
- Additional training and support for the foster parents are needed.
- There is a need for additional staff to meet the needs of foster parents.
- Case workers need to be more transparent and patient with the foster parents.
- There should be book grants and insurance policies for the foster child.
- The setting up of an emergency fund to cater to the needs of the child as well as private educational facilities for special needs children.

2. Adoptive Parents

Gender Profiles of the Adoptive Parents

Of the 115 respondents, 89 (77.39%) were female and 26 (22.61%) were male.

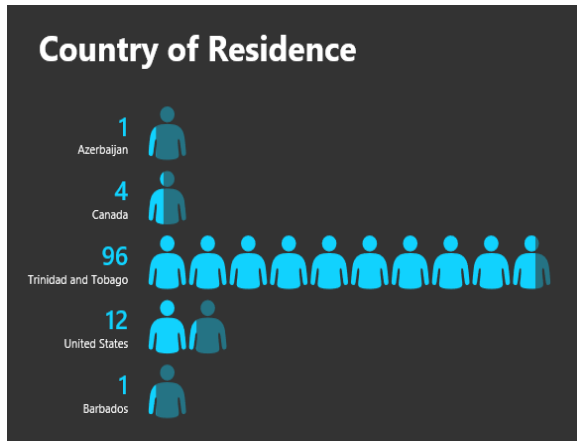


Country Profile of Adoptive Parents

An examination of the country profile of the respondents revealed that they were predominantly from Trinidad and Tobago (n = 96, 84.2%), followed by the United States (n

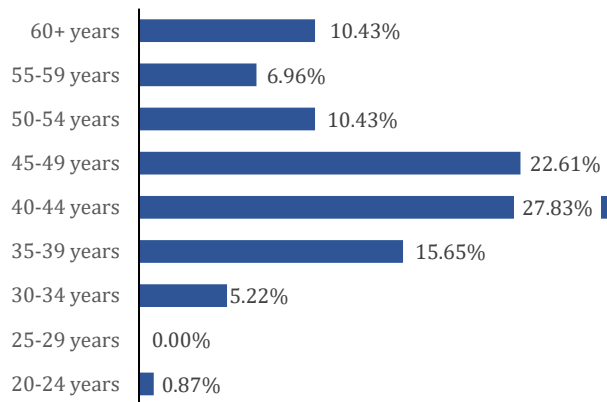
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= 12, 10.5%) and Canada (n = 4, 3.5%). Respondents originated from Azerbaijan (n = 1, 0.9%) and Barbados (n = 1, 0.9%) constituting the additional countries represented in the sample.



Age Profile of Adoptive Parents

The age profiles of the respondents suggests adoptive parents came from various age groups. Most respondents were in the 40-44 year age category (n = 32, 27.83%), followed by those from the 45-49 year age category (n = 26, 22.61%). Eighteen respondents (15.65%) were in the 35-39 year age category. Furthermore, there is representation from older age groups, with 12 respondents (10.43%) aged 50-54 years, 8 respondents (6.96%) aged 55-59 years and 12 respondents (10.43%) aged 60 years and above. The least represented age groups tended to be younger respondents with 6 respondents (5.22%) aged 30-34 years and 1 respondent (0.87%) aged 20-24 years.

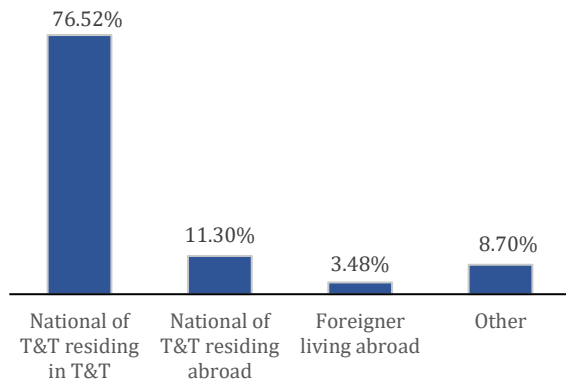


Nationality of Adoptive Parents

The results indicate that the majority of respondents (n = 88, 76.52%) are nationals of Trinidad and Tobago residing within the country. Additionally, thirteen (13) respondents (11.30%) are Trinidad and Tobago nationals living abroad, reflecting a notable presence of the diaspora in the survey. Four (4) participants (3.48%) were foreigners residing abroad, highlighting a small but significant international contingent. Finally, 10 respondents (8.70%) fell under the category 'other' indicating diverse affiliations or residency statuses not captured in the primary categories. The responses are listed below:

- United States citizen (1)
- National of both T&T and the United States (2)
- Canadian with T&T citizenship (3)
- National of St. Vincent, residing in Trinidad (2)
- Jamaican (1)
- Guyanese (1)

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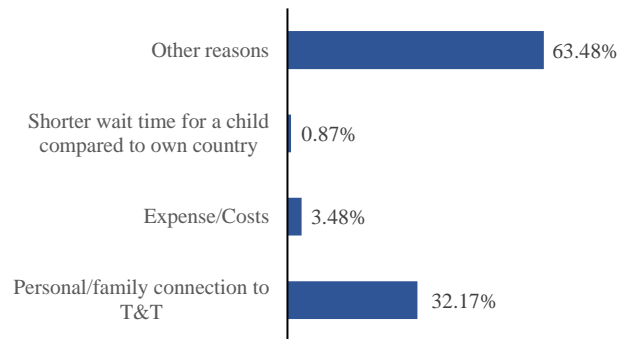
Reasons for Adoption by Foreigners who lived abroad

For those respondents who were foreigners living abroad, they were asked why they chose to adopt a child from Trinidad and Tobago. The results reveal a variety of reasons why respondents chose Trinidad and Tobago as their preferred location to adopt a child. A significant portion (n = 37, 32.17%) cited a personal or family connection to T&T implying that familial ties or personal relationships is a driving force in guiding adoption choices.

Additionally, a smaller number of respondents (n = 4, 3.48%) noted that the perceived expenses or costs associated with adoption in Trinidad and Tobago were favourable compared to other countries. Furthermore, a minimal number of respondents (n = 1, 0.87%) indicated that the shorter wait times for adopting a child in Trinidad and Tobago, compared to their own country or other adoption destinations influenced their decision.

Also noteworthy, is the significant number of respondents (n = 73, 63.48%) selected “other” reasons for adopting a child in Trinidad and Tobago. However, a vast majority did not indicate specific reasons. However, 1 respondent indicated that the reason for adopting in Trinidad and Tobago is to start a family.

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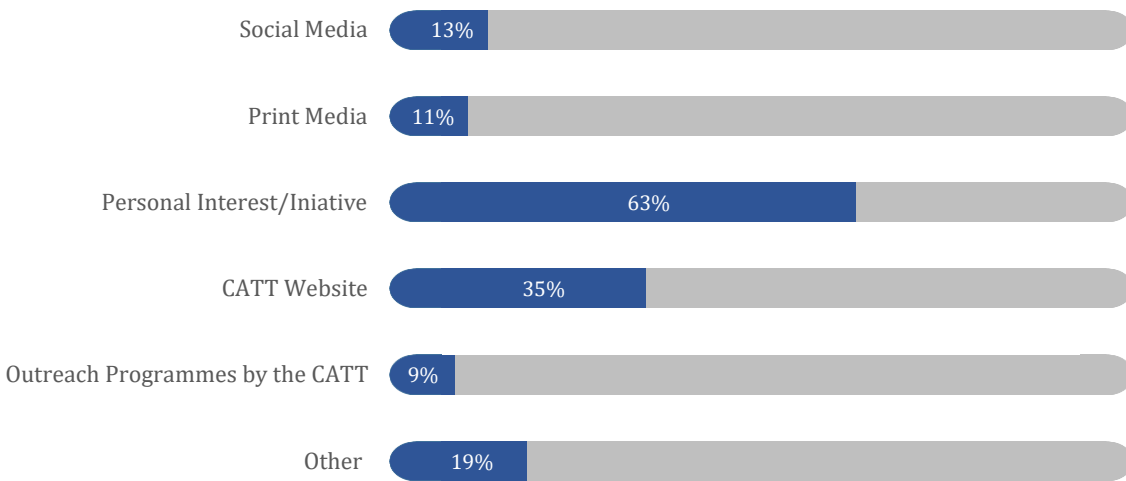
Sources of Information Regarding the Process of Fostering/Adopting a Child in Trinidad and Tobago

Respondents were asked to indicate their sources of information regarding the process of fostering/adopting a child in Trinidad and Tobago. A significant number of respondents (n = 71, 62.83%) indicated personal interest or initiative as their primary source. This suggests that many prospective adoptive parents actively seek out information through their own research and exploration, driven by personal motivations or recommendations.

The CATT website is also a major source according to 39 respondents (34.61%). Moreover, the role of social media is a key source based on the 15 respondents (13.27%) who chose this option. Other sources of information included the print media as indicated by 12 respondents (10.62%) and outreach programmes by the CATT as selected by 10 respondents (8.85%). Notably, 21 respondents (18.58%) relied on 'other' sources of information which included:

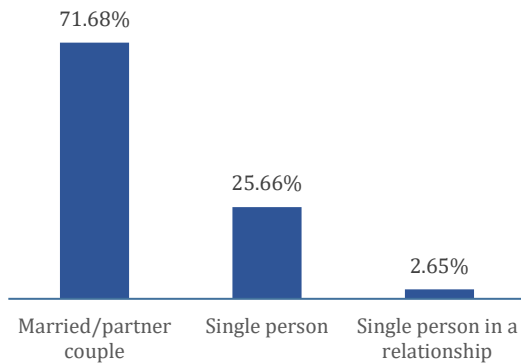
- Spoke to a lawyer (3)
- Contacted the office directly (5)
- Searched on Google (1)
- Other persons who participated in the process (1)

- Through the adoption board before the launch of CATT (3)
- Due to death of relative (1)
- Friends (1)
- Social Worker (1)
- Marriage (1)
- Family member (1)
- The Adoption Act (2)



Relationship Status of Adoptive Parents

The majority of respondents (n = 81, 71.68%) identified themselves as part of a married or partnered couple. This finding underscores the prevalent choice among couples to pursue adoption as a shared endeavor within a traditional family unit. Conversely, a substantial minority (n = 29, 25.66%) of respondents indicated they were single individuals considering adoption. A smaller proportion (n = 3, 2.65%) identified as single individuals currently in a relationship.



Reasons for Adopting a Child

Respondents gave varied reasons for adopting a child. A significant number of respondents (n = 49, 43.36%) cited infertility or the inability to have children biologically as their primary motivation for considering adoption. This highlights adoption as a pathway for individuals and couples who face challenges in conceiving naturally, seeking parenthood through alternative means.

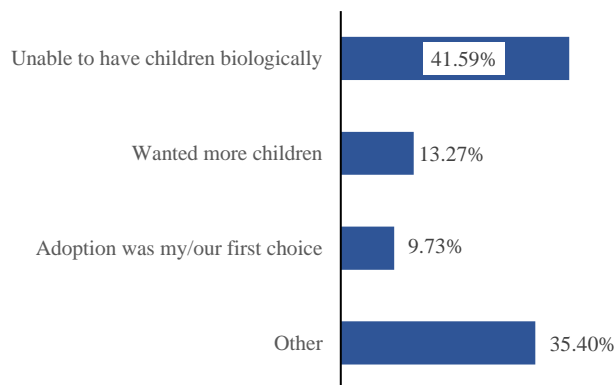
Additionally, a notable number of respondents (n = 15, 13.27%) expressed a desire to expand their family further, whether through adoption or biological means. This group indicated a preference for adopting to fulfill their aspirations for parenthood beyond their existing family structure.

For a subset of respondents (n = 11, 9.73%), adoption represented their initial and preferred choice for building a family. This underscores adoption as a deliberate and prioritized option among various family-building alternatives. Furthermore, a substantial portion (n = 37, 32.74%) selected "Other" reasons not specified in the survey options.

These included:

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- Creating opportunities for the child (14)
- Desire to adopt a family member (8)
- Desire to give a child a loving, stable home (1)
- Suffered a miscarriage (1)
- A decision to not have children out of wedlock (1)
- Adoption was a personal choice (1)
- Being exposed to children’s homes instilled a desire to adopt (1)
- Family Issue (1)
- Death of biological parent (2)
- Interest in a specific child (1)
- Family member unable to take care of the child (1)
- To keep family together (1)
- Desire to have more children (1)
- Divine appointment (1)
- Multiple reasons (1)

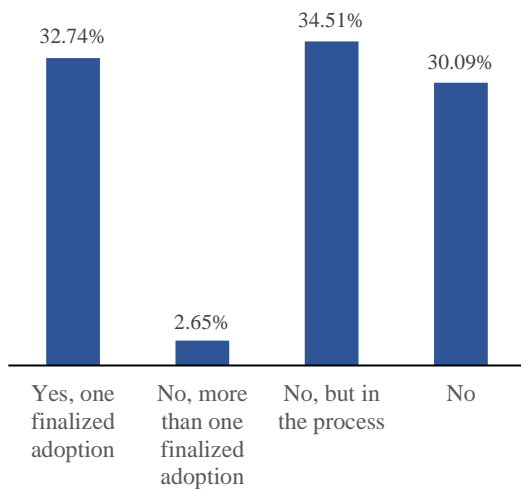


Finalizing of the Adoption Process

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not the adoption of the child was finalized. Approximately one-third (n = 37, 32.74%) of respondents have finalized at least one adoption, indicating they have successfully completed the adoption process and welcomed a child into their family through adoption.

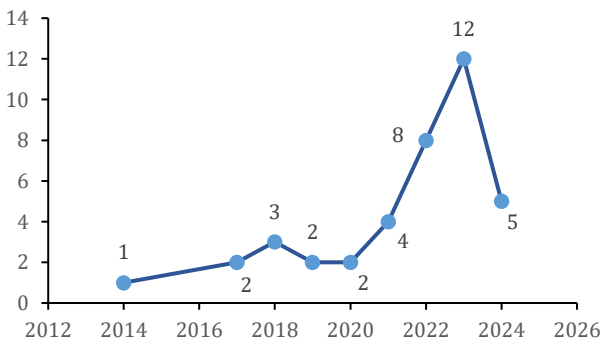
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A small number of respondents (n = 3, 2.65%) reported finalizing more than one adoption, suggesting a continued commitment to adoption as a means of expanding their family. A significant portion (n = 39, 34.51%) of respondents are currently in the adoption process. Finally, nearly one-third (n = 34, 30.09%) of respondents have not yet finalized the adoption process.



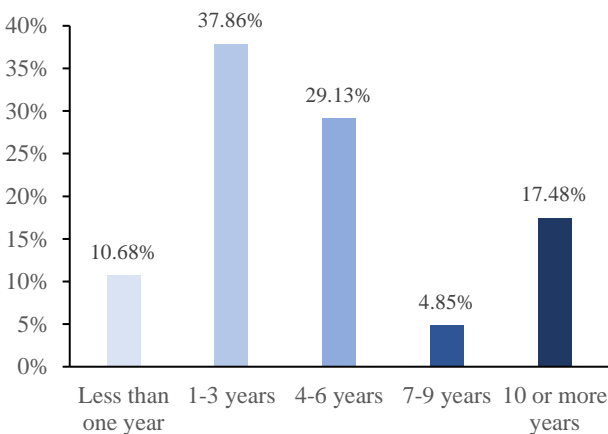
Year in Which Adoption Process was Finalized

Respondents who affirmed their adoption being finalized, were asked to indicate what year this was finalized. Twelve (12) out of the 39 respondents (30.77%) stated that adoption process was finalized in 2023, eight (8) respondents (20.51%) stated in 2022, five (5) respondents (12.82%) stated in 2024 and four (4) respondents (10.26%) stated in 2021. Other years stated were 2018 (n = 3, 7.69%), 2019 (n = 2, 5.13%), 2017 (n = 2, 5.13%) and 2014 (n = 1, 2.56%).



Duration of the Adoption Process

Respondents were then asked to indicate the duration of their involvement in the adoption process. Eleven (11) respondents (10.68%) reported being involved in the process for less than one year. Moreover, a significant number of respondents (n = 39, 37.86%) have been engaged in the adoption process for 1 to 3 years. Thirty (30) respondents (29.13%) have been involved in the adoption process for 4 to 6 years. Moreover, a smaller group of respondents (n = 5, 4.85%) reported being engaged in the adoption process for 7 to 9 years and eighteen (18) respondents (17.48%) have been involved in the adoption process for 10 years or more.



Discrepancy between Expectations and Actual Experience of the Adoption Process

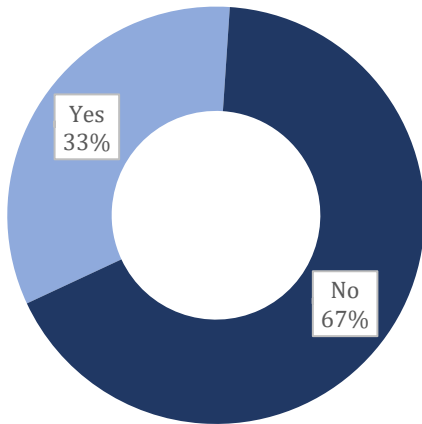
Regarding the differences in what respondents were told and what they actually experienced, a significant number of respondents (n = 69, 67%) indicated no difference and thirty-four (34) respondents (33%) stated that was a difference. For those that did indicate a difference, respondents were further asked to specify what those differences were. Based on these responses, the following were observed:

- The support according to one respondent was 'fantastic'.
- The process was lengthy
- Delays in the process
- Process was unclear and the database was not up to date

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- Various new requirements by the CATT that seemed random
- Adoption Board's attorney lied to the court about submitting documents
- Placed with older children although it was initially made aware that this was not the case
- Lack of accurate records

The most frequent response was the length of time, as 19 respondents mentioned that the process was lengthy.



Challenges faced by Respondents in the Adoption Process

Respondents were also asked to specify in their responses the most challenging aspect of their adoption process. One of the most dominant challenges that emerged from these responses was the lengthy process of adoption. This view was held by 41 out of the 103 respondents (39.81%). Another frequently cited challenge as indicated by six (6) respondents (5.83%) is the medicals and psychological assessments. Other challenges faced by a minimal number of respondents (2 or fewer) were: difficulties in scheduling court dates, communication with attorney, delays in making contact with the assigned case worker, applications were lost, the interview process and biological parents unwilling to relinquish the child.

Aspects of the Adoption Process that was Useful to Respondents

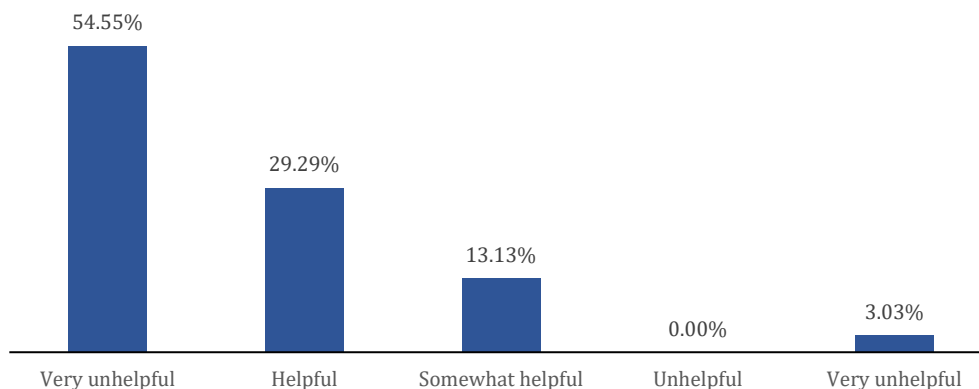
In terms of what aspects of the adoption process were most useful to respondents, the majority of responses singled out the support received from staff and case workers. This view was held by twenty-eight (28) out of the ninety-nine (99) respondents who chose to answer this question, which represented (28.28%) of the sample. Moreover, five (5) respondents (5.05%) mentioned that the interviews were the most useful aspects of the

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adoption process. The counselling sessions also found favour from four (4) respondents (4.04%). Training classes offered to parents were considered to be most useful for three (3) respondents (3.03%).

Helpfulness of the Staff at CATT

Respondents were asked to indicate the helpfulness of the staff at the CATT and the results seem to lend support to the previous question that asked respondents to specify the most useful aspects of the adoption process. That is, a significantly large number of respondents (n = 54, 54.55%) rated the staff as ‘very helpful’ while twenty-nine (29) respondents (29.29%) found the staff just ‘helpful’. Moreover, thirteen (13) respondents (13.13%) found the staff to be ‘somewhat helpful’ and just three (3) respondents (3.03%) indicated that the staff was ‘very unhelpful’. Notably, there were no respondents who stated that the staff was ‘unhelpful’.

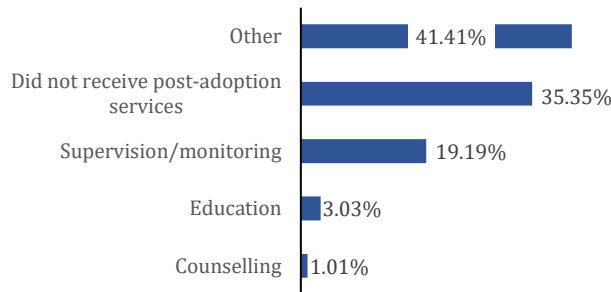


Post-Adoption Services offered by the CATT

The responses regarding post-adoption services were analyzed. Nineteen (19) respondents which represented approximately 19.19% of the sample indicated receiving supervision and monitoring in the form of phone calls, home-visits and reports. One (1) respondent (1.01%) however received counselling. A further three (3) respondents (3.03%) reportedly received educational services such as assistance with school enrollment. A significant majority of respondents (n = 35, 35.35%) however, did not receive post-adoption services and slightly more respondents (n = 41, 41.41%) received ‘other’ services that did not fit neatly into categories not

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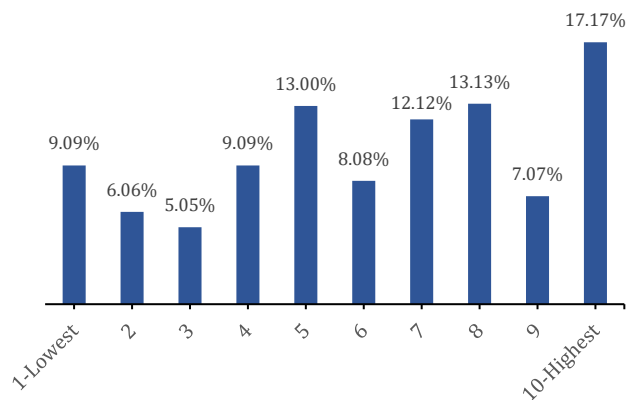
specified in this survey. For these respondents, they were still in the adoption



process.

Overall Experience with the Adoption Process

Respondents were asked to rate their overall experience with the adoption process and the ratings given were varied. Fifty-seven respondents (57) out of the ninety-nine total responses gave scores that ranged between 6 and 10 which implied that they rated their experience highly. On the other hand, forty-two respondents gave scores that ranged between 1 and 5. This implied, that these respondents did not have favourable experiences with the process.



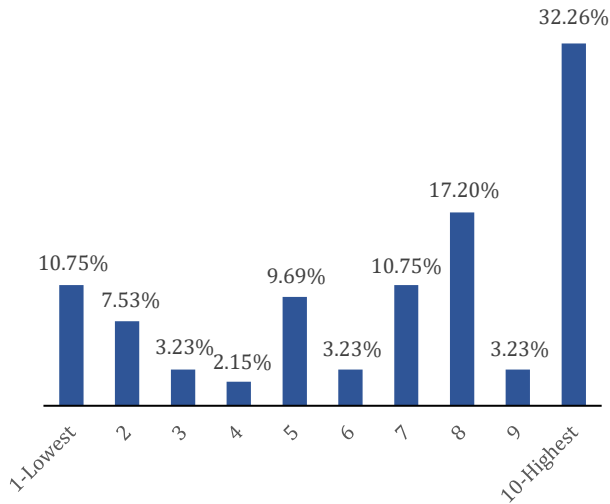
Likelihood of Recommending Adoption to Potential Applicants

Respondents were also asked to rate their likelihood of recommending adoption to potential applicants. Sixty-two (62) out of the ninety-three (93) respondents who chose to answer this question gave scores that ranged between 6 and 10 indicating that they were highly likely to recommend adoption. This represented 66.67% of

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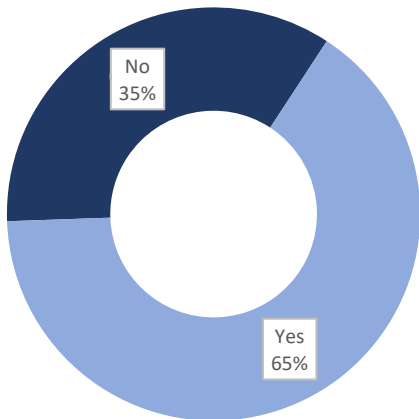
the sample. On the other hand, thirty-one (31) respondents gave scores that ranged from 1 to 5 indicating that they were unlikely to recommend

adoption. This represented 33.33% of the sample.



Respondents' Willingness to Share Their Experiences

Moreover, sixty (60) out of the ninety-two respondents (65.22%) who chose to answer this question, indicated that they would like to share their experiences of the adoption process further. However, thirty-two (32) respondents (34.78%) preferred not to share any more of their experiences.



Finally, the majority of the respondents indicated that even though the adoption process was long and tedious, it was very thorough and comprehensive but worth it.

Conclusion

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Overall, the findings show that the majority of foster and adoptive parents were female, and tended to be middle-aged or older. Specifically, most adoptive parents were nationals of Trinidad and Tobago residing in the country. Most foster parents have been doing so for 1 to 5 years and their primary motivating factor was an interest in parenting.

While the majority of foster parents depended on the CATT's website for information regarding the process of fostering a child, most adoptive parents leaned on their own personal initiative or interest to actively seek out information regarding the adoption process. Both foster and adoptive parents noted the helpfulness and support of staff, were generally satisfied with the process and would likely recommend fostering and adoption to potential applicants.

However, there were some challenges. Both foster and adoptive parents found difficulties with the psychological evaluations and for adoptive parents in particular, believed the adoption process to be very time consuming and lengthy.

Generally, suggestions for improvement, particularly in the process of fostering, include more training for parents, more information about the details of the process to foster a child and the need for more home and school visits by CATT staff.

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