

ADOPTION PANEL ANNUAL REPORT

**For Year-
end 31st
March 2024**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This is the eleventh Annual Report for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Adoption panel.

The Adoption panel has continued to operate twice a month, usually on the first and third Tuesday of each month for a morning. The adoption panel normally consists of an independent chair, a medical advisor, a non-executive director, a social work representative, an independent panel member and a panel advisor. Ms Jenna Boyce, Solicitor, DLS provides written legal advice for each panel.

The membership of the Adoption panel has had some changes in personnel in this reporting period. Three new Non-executive directors, Ms A. Quirk, Mr K. Donaghy and Mr R. Havlin, received their induction to the panel in March 2024. Mr J. Patton ceased his role with adoption panel in March 2024, as he is Chairman of the Trust.

Three Principal social workers, Ms A. O'Boyle, Ms E. Holmes and Ms S. Hines, joined the pool of panel members, bringing the total to six principal social workers.

The Adoption panel Admin manager, Mr Smyth, left his post in March 2024.

(See Appendix 1 for list of Adoption panel members)

The Trust would like to thank all panel members for their hard work and dedication to their roles as members of Adoption panel.

The Adoption panel's aim has remained the provision of a responsive Adoption panel that is capable of providing a high quality service to both children and prospective adoptive parents.

2.0 OVERVIEW

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the South Eastern Trust Adoption panel from 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024.

The Adoption panel has three primary functions;

To consider and make a recommendation to the adoption agency on;

- Whether adoption is in the “Best Interests” of a particular child and if so, the most appropriate legal route by which this should be achieved.
- Whether an applicant is suitable to be an adoptive parent.
- The suitability of a proposed placement for adoption of a child with approved adopter/s.

Additionally, the Adoption panel has responsibility for;

- Providing an opinion on the suitability of a proposed placement of a child for whom the care plan is adoption, with prospective adopters.
- Providing a consultation service to the Trust on adoption issues.
- Making recommendations in respect of the payment of adoption allowances

3.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Adoption panel continues to manage a high rate of case referrals within the panel timetable.

- 3.1 The number of best interest recommendations made by the panel was twenty-four. These twelve female and twelve male children ranged in age from eight months old to six years old. Six children were presented to panel before their first birthday. Twelve of the children were part of a sibling pair presented to the adoption with a care plan of adoption.
- 3.2 The Panel recommended thirty-one matches throughout the period. Ten recommendations were for informal matches of children to dually approved carers. Twenty-one formal matches were considered, when the child was available for adoption through freeing order or parental consent. Twenty-nine of these adopters originated from the South Eastern Trust.
- 3.3 The adoption panel recommended fifteen adoptive applicants for approval in this period. One set of adopters wished to be considered for concurrent placement. One set of prospective adopters were approved for siblings.
- 3.4 Six former foster carers or kinship carers were assessed and approved to adopt a child in their care.
- 3.5 The Courts freed sixteen children for adoption from the South Eastern Trust in this period. Eight male children and eight female children. 50% of these orders were granted within six months of the adoption panel recommending adoption as in the child's best interests.
- 3.6 Twenty-three children were made subject to Adoption orders; fifteen boys and eight girls.

4.0 ADOPTION PANEL BUSINESS DAY AND TRAINING

The Business meeting planned for January 2024 had to be rescheduled due to adverse weather and took place on 16th April 2024 to consider the annual report of 2022-2023.

Actions agreed for 2023-2024 included;

- Induction and integration of new panel members
- Improvement in the feedback rate from adoptive applicants
- Future Training areas on Care planning, supports and assessments with birth families, post adoption services and adult mental health.

Due to the number of changes to the panel membership and induction training for each, there were no additional panel training dates in this period.

All the independent panel members received an appraisal in 2023-24.

5.0 ADOPTION PANEL ACTIVITY

The adoption panel dealt with seventy separate cases in the course of the twelve months. Seven panel slots were unused due to cancelations. Four panels ran with four cases as opposed to the usual three. One additional panel was convened in September to meet demand for panel time. Scheduling is still subject to frequent change with twenty bookings cancelled or postponed in the year.

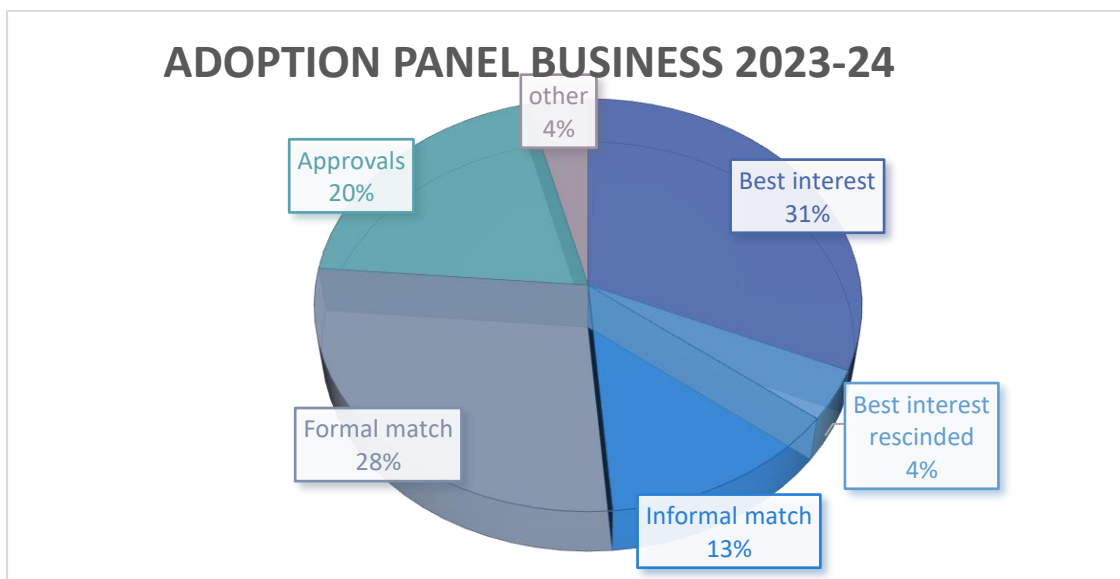
This was due to;

- delays in court,
- delays in expert reports being received by teams,
- courts permitting further assessment of parents,
- late stage kinship options
- staff sickness.

Where gaps in the schedule have arisen, every effort is made to bring cases forward. However, this is not always possible due to the high number of reports required to be submitted to panel by social workers.

We are grateful to the adoption panel members for their willingness to sit on these additional panels and set aside time to read the lengthy list of reports for each case.

A summary of Adoption panel business is noted below;



In this reporting period, 41% of the adoption panel time was spent on matching and best interest cases formed 35%. Approvals accounted for 20% of panel time.

Demand for panel time is under continual review and additional panels were and will continue to be arranged to avoid a wait of more than twelve weeks for a panel date.

5.1 CHILDREN

Panel Business	2023/2024	2022/2023
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations	Twenty-four	Twenty-three
Best interest recommendations deferred	Zero	Zero
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations Rescinded	Three	Zero
Matching Recommendations Made	Thirty-one Informal*- 10 Formal -21*	Twenty three Informal*-7 Formal*- 16

**An informal match is one made before a child is available for adoption- through freeing order or parental consent. This enables a child to be placed on a dually approved fostering basis.*

**A formal match is made after a child is freed by the courts for adoption or the parents consent to the child being adopted.*

5.1.1 Best interest cases- analysis

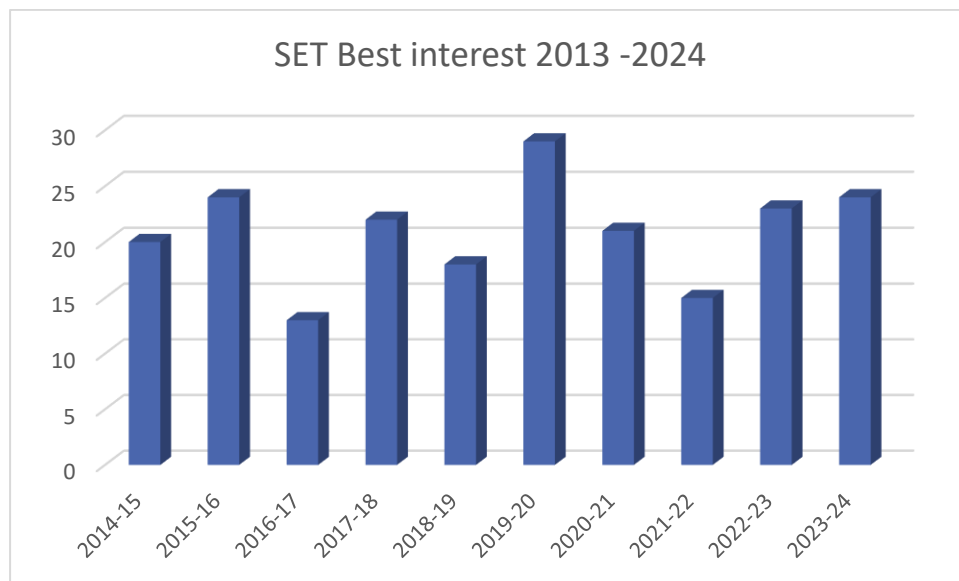
Cases are presented to Adoption panel by Child and Family social work teams (CAFT) following the care planning process and a careful, balanced analysis of care planning and placement options for a child. When the outcome of a Looked after Child (LAC) review is to refer the matter to Adoption panel for an examination of whether or not the panel consider adoption to be in the child's best interest, the case is then prepared for adoption panel.

The number of children who received a Best Interest decision was twenty-four, an increase of one from the previous year. Adoption is considered the most appropriate care plan for these young children having determined that these parents are not able to safely parent on conclusion of assessments, there are no kinship options suitable and where long term fostering or residence order are not appropriate permanent options.

Twenty-three of these children had parents from Northern Ireland, with only one having parents from eastern European countries.

Whilst each family situation is unique, there are common themes in the challenges faced by birth parents- learning disability, mental health issues, domestic abuse and violence, addiction issues, inter-generational issues, limited supportive networks or kinship care options, criminality, imprisonment, vulnerable parents through trauma or premature death of one parent.

The table below shows the South Eastern Trust's Best Interest figures since the 2014/2015 reporting period:



The profile of the twenty-four children where the Adoption panel made a Best Interest recommendation is broken down as follows:

	2023 / 2024	2022 / 2023
Single Children	Three	Six
Siblings	Six sets of two	Two sets of two
Children of a sibling group where older siblings are in care, adopted or Residence orders	Nine	Thirteen
Children who had been placed concurrently	One	One
Best Interest recommendations rescinded	Three	Zero

Age range and ethnicity

Children presented to panel for best interests ranged in age from eight months to six years old. Six children were presented to panel before their first birthday. There were twelve male children and twelve female children.

Siblings

Best Interest recommendations on siblings increased from four children to twelve children. In these sibling pairs, social work assessment concluded all but one set they should be placed permanently together to meet their individual and collective needs.

A significant number of the children who received a best interest recommendation (nine) had older siblings in care, adopted or subject to residence orders. The plan for the majority was to place them as single children or remain in their foster family via

adoption. This figure highlights the longevity of adverse issues faced by birth parents which can impact a number of children in the family.

Placement at time of best interest

On the date of the best interest adoption panel, twenty -one children were placed in short term foster care placements and needed matching with suitable prospective adoptive families and. Two of the children were with foster carers who wished to be assessed to adopt them.

One child who received a best interest recommendation had been placed concurrently at an earlier stage with approved adopters. Concurrent adopters offer a foster placement for a child when the care plan for the child/children is rehabilitation to a parent or adoption. In these cases, the birth parents were still in assessment at the time the child moved to this placement and following the conclusion of the assessment, the care plan became permanence via adoption.

Best interest recommendations rescinded

Three best interest cases were returned to Adoption panel in this period to have their best interest recommendation rescinded. Two had care plans altered to Residence orders as a more suitable form of permanence. A permanent adoptive placement could not be sourced for one five year old child with complex emotional needs. Therefore, the care plan altered to long-term foster care.



Legal Profile	2023/2024	2022/2023
No Order	Three	Two
Interim Care Order	Twenty	Fifteen
Care Order	One	Six
Relinquished for adoption at the time of Adoption panel	One	One* (as above- no order)

The legal profile of the children referred to the Adoption panel for a Best Interest recommendation was predominantly those subject to Interim care orders. One of the children was subject to a full care order at the time of adoption panel.

Sometimes it is the case that birth parents will not provide consent to information being gathered by the social worker for the child's presentation at adoption panel so therefore Interim care orders are required to enable the Social work manager to provide this consent.

Where a child is subject to an interim care order or running on no order before the court, courts often provisionally timetable for consolidated final hearings of Care and Freeing applications, which can streamline the court applications, focus on one phase of assessments of parents and avoid drift for children by confirming their legal status.

5.1.2 REGIONAL DATA- BEST INTEREST

Throughout Northern Ireland in this period 2023 – 2024, best interest recommendations totalled one hundred and seventeen ranging from eighteen to twenty-six across the five Trusts. The Western Trust reported the highest number of Best interest recommendations at twenty-six with Northern Trust having the lowest number in this reporting period at eighteen. This total number was slight increase of three from the previous year total. Variations in numbers between the Trust areas is small. (See chart below).

HSC Trust	No. of children	No. of sibling groups*	No. of boys	No. of girls
BHSCT	24	4	13	11
NHSCT	18	2	6	12
SEHSCT	24	5	12	12
SHSCT	25	3	15	10
WHSCT	26	1	10	16
Total	117	16	56	61

*requiring placement together

Of the 117, there were 11 sibling groups recommended to be placed together, including 2 group of 3 siblings.

56 boys and 61 girls were made the subject of a ‘Best Interests’ recommendation.

106 children (91%) were reported to be of “White Irish/British/Northern Irish” backgrounds. 6 were “White European” (5%), 3 had a mixed ethnic background, 1 Irish Traveller and 1 Roma

35% of children in Northern Ireland had been placed with concurrent carers by the time of their best interest recommendation.

Draft ARIS annual report, 2023-2024

5.1.3 Informal & formal matching- analysis

The number of matching cases brought before the SET Adoption panel increased in this reporting period from twenty-three in the previous year, to thirty-one proposed matches in this year. This constituted 41% of the panel time for the year.

There were ten informal matches and twenty-one formal match proposals presented to the Adoption panel in this reporting period.

Proposed matches were considered by panel on ten of the children who also received a best interest recommendation in the same reporting period. One child was informally matched with their concurrent carers at the time of their best interest recommendation panel.

Three children were presented at Adoption panel twice in this reporting period - for informal and then formal matching, having been placed dually approved and then freed for adoption by the court.

One set of siblings were recommended for matching together.

In total twenty- four sets of adopters were considered in matching by the panel.

- Twenty-two sets of adopters had been assessed and approved by the South Eastern Trust, including eight sets of foster carers who completed child specific adoption assessments.
- Two of the matches were to prospective adopters from other Trust areas or one of the Voluntary Adoption agencies and were sourced through ARIS.

Adopters included;

- Heterosexual married couples
- Cohabiting couples
- Kinship carers
- Same sex couples
- Concurrent carers
- Foster carers with existing attachments to the child

Age range of children at matching

The children matched at panel ranged in age from nine months to eight years old.

Ethnicity of carers

Five of the prospective adopters originated from outside of Northern Ireland.

Former carers

Examining the twenty- one formal matches considered by the adoption panel, eight of these children were formally matched to their former foster or kinship carers who had undertaken child specific adoption assessments. Six were formally matched to their dually approved carers.

Concurrent carers

One child was formally matched to their former concurrent carers.

Matched to new carers

Six children formally matched had not yet been placed with the prospective adopters. This was due to Freeing orders or parental consent to adoption already being in place at the time of family finding and formal matching at adoption panel.

5.1.4 LEGAL ORDERS

	2023-2024	2022-2023
Freeing orders granted	Sixteen	Sixteen
Parental consent to adoption	One	Two
Adoption orders granted	Twenty- three	Twenty-nine

Freeing orders- analysis

During this reporting period, sixteen children were freed for Adoption; eight male children and eight female children. 50% of these orders were granted within six months of the adoption panel recommending adoption as in the child's best interests.

Of the twenty-four children who obtained a Best Interest recommendation in this period, seven were freed for adoption before 31st March 2023.

In respect of the sixteen children freed for adoption in this period, the time from best interest recommendation to the granting of the Freeing order ranged from six weeks to over two years. Factors that added time to the progression of the case to final hearing for freeing included;

- late stage kinship options coming forward and being assessed,
- court permitting further assessment of birth parents within the freeing proceedings
- children with complex health needs and associated placement finding issues,
- change of Judge mid case
- elongated court hearings

Those cases that progressed to Freeing hearing the fastest were consolidated hearings of care order and freeing order.

Adoption orders- analysis



The number of adoption orders has decreased from twenty-nine in 2022-23 to twenty- three in this reporting period up to end of March 2024. For the third year this figure has been over twenty children adopted in South Eastern Trust. Fifteen were male children and eight were female children. The age of the children at the time of the adoption order ranged from one year to nine years old. 87% of the children adopted in this period were 5 years old and under at the time of their adoption order hearing. Six of these children were adopted as part of a sibling group of two. Three children were adopted by a family member and six were adopted by former foster carers.

In terms of ethnic origin, the majority of the children adopted were from white Northern Irish/ Irish/British backgrounds, while one of the children was of Eastern European heritage.

All new adoptive placements are supported by SET Adoption Services both pre and post Adoption Order. Post adoption support plans are submitted to Adoption Panel with every formal match to outline how this support will be delivered. This is particularly important when placements are in other Trust areas and roles and responsibilities for contact, support and finances are divided. Post adoption support plans are reviewed regularly by the Trust's post adoption team.

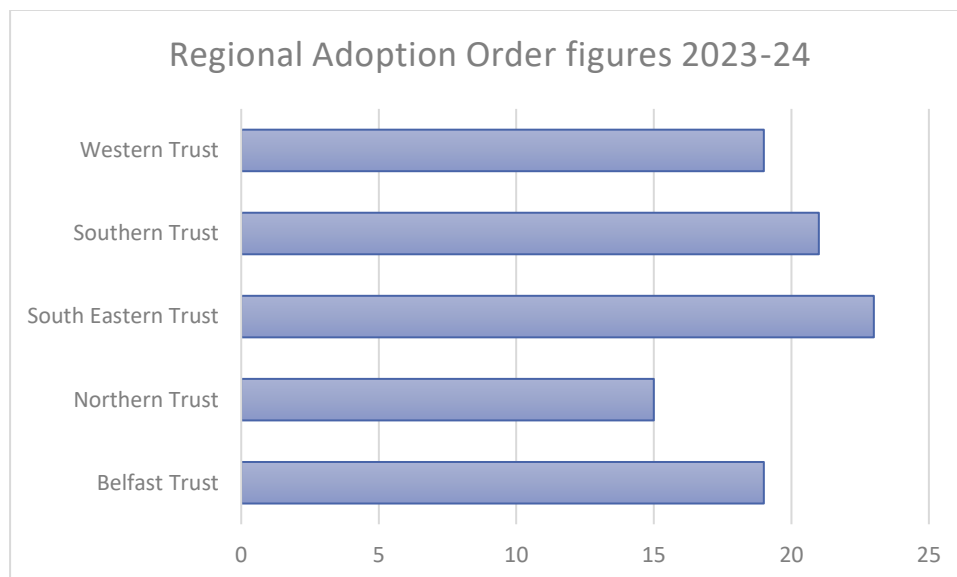
Children received into SET area

Three children from another Trust area who had been referred to ARIS were matched at other Adoption Panels and placed with approved adopters in the SET area in this period.

5.1.5 Regional adoption figures

There were 97 Adoption Orders made in the twelve-month period, a decrease on the previous year's figures of 108. This slight downward trend is reflected in the South Eastern Trust numbers.

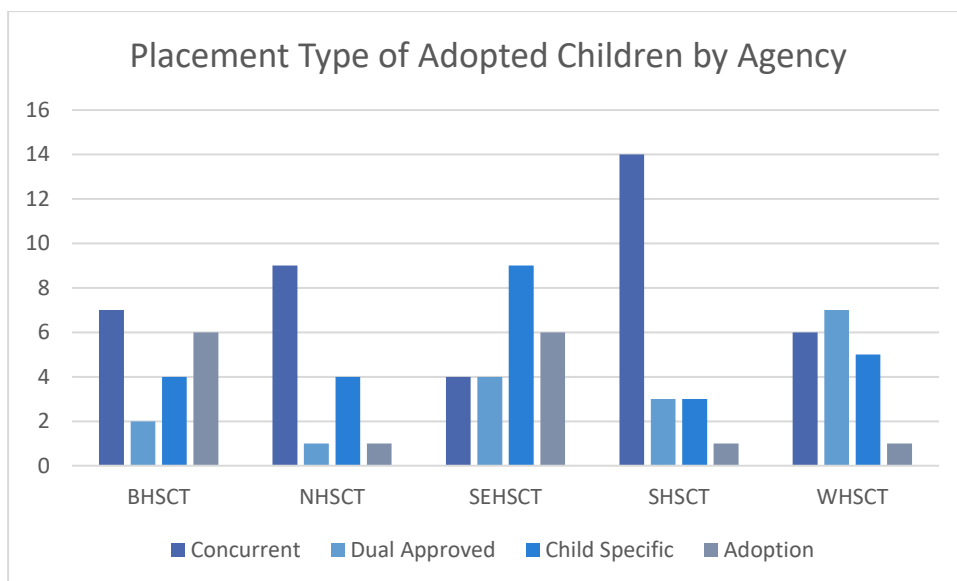
Included in the ninety- seven Adoption Orders are fifteen sibling groups (30 children) who were adopted as part of a sibling group.



The table below highlights the different placement types utilised by the five Trusts on the journey towards adoption orders. Within the SET area, the predominant placement type was child specific. These children benefit from emotional permanence at an earlier stage but the duration of finalising their adoption orders can be longer as the foster carers require an adoption assessment and approval process before they can be matched with the child and then apply to the courts for an Adoption Order.

Concurrent placements remain small in number. This is largely down to the limited availability of concurrent carers and geographical factors influencing concurrent placement suitability when referrals are received. Demand for placements is outstripping supply within the Trust. Due to the high number of children who are only referred to pre linking panel following conclusion of the care planning process, often approved adopters, who would consider concurrent placements, are being linked with children in need of dual approved placements (already have a best interest decision from adoption panel and a freeing application is before the court). The Trust's Adoption team is working on increasing the pool of approved adopters to provide more choice when linking a child for a concurrent or dually approved placement, particularly for siblings. A higher number of children were matched and placed for adoption following their freeing orders. This highlights the pace of court cases using consolidated hearings and also accounts for these children who have

foster carers being assessed to adopt. Often by the time this assessment is concluding and being brought to the Adoption panel, the court process for the child has concluded, resulting in a formal match and formal placement for adoption.



Draft ARIS annual report 2023-24

Regional demographic information on adopted children

The majority of the children adopted from care were of white ethnic background (93%). Some seven children (7%) were Irish Traveller or mixed ethnic group.

Eight children (8%) had special needs or a disability. This included emotional or behavioural difficulties, physical or long-term health conditions, autism and learning disability.

In 2023/24, 54 of the children (56%) were adopted as a single child adoption whereas 42 children were adopted as part of a sibling group (44%).

The average age of children adopted from care was 4 years and 2 months, and ranged from 1 year and 8 months to 11 years and 10 months.

The Children Adopted from Care NI 2023/2024 report notes that although every child's situation is unique, with regards to the children adopted during 2023/24, the average length of the adoption process was shorter than the last two years.

For children adopted in 2023/24, the average duration from the Trust Looked After Child Best Interest Proposal to adoption was 2 years 4 months, slightly lower than the previous three years. In 2023/24, this ranged from 1 year 1 month to 7 years 1 month.

Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland 2023/24.

5.2 PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

The South Eastern Trust Adoption team is responsible for assessing those who live in the Trust area and who wish to adopt. They also undertake assessments of foster carers who already have the care of a child for whom the care plan has become adoption. These carers can live anywhere in Northern Ireland. They may be related to the child or be the current foster carers of a child. Proposals are presented to the Adoption panel for recommendation of approval based on comprehensive assessments.

Domestic applications recommendations made at panel are detailed below;

	2023/2024
Total number of Domestic Adoption Applications Recommended for Approval by Panel	Fifteen
Child specific approved adopters	Six
Approved to adopt and available for placement	Nine
Open to concurrent or dual approval placements	One
Open to dual approval placements	Eight
Open to placements of one or two children	One
Adoption approvals rescinded	None

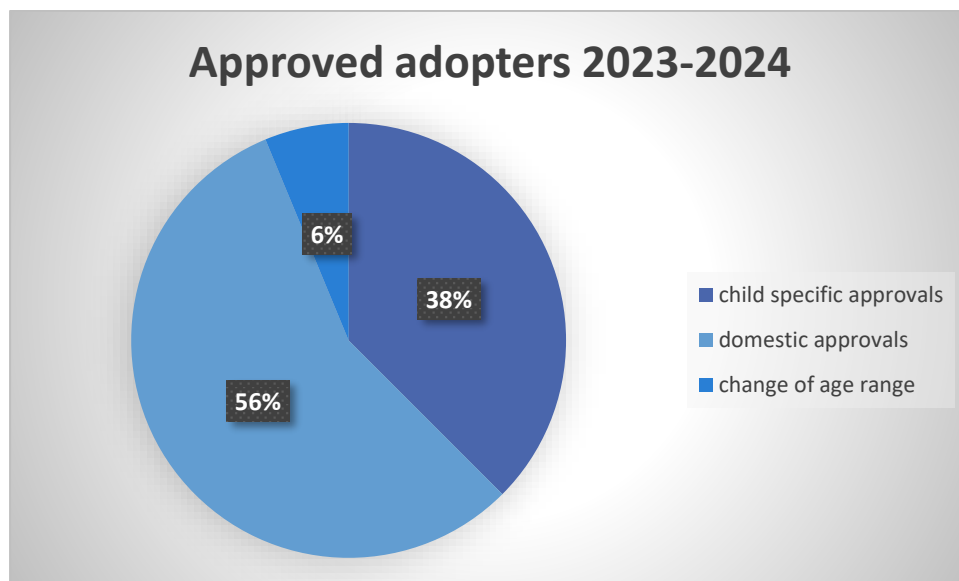
Adoption team social workers presented six child specific adoption assessments to the Adoption panel for foster carers in this period. These child specific approval cases were considered at panel along with the proposal to informally or formally match the child to these carers.

Nine adoption assessments were recommended for approval by the panel who wished to take a child on a dually approved basis - fostering a child initially who has a best interest recommendation but before the freeing order is granted by the Court. One of the nine also wished to consider a concurrent placement.

Those recommended for approval to adopt in this period included married heterosexual couples, same-sex cohabiting or married couples, single carers, second time adopters and those with birth children.

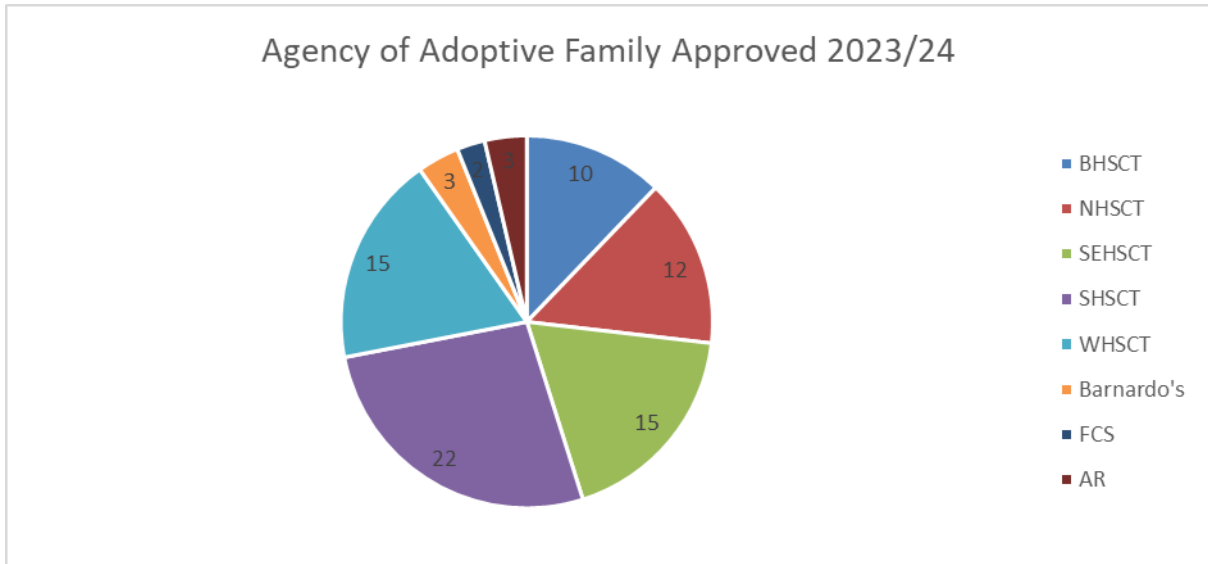
One of the fifteen applicants were approved for one or two children and fourteen were approved for single children (of which nine were available to be matched to children with care plans of adoption).

The fifteen adopters approved in the South Eastern Trust was an increase of three from the previous year.

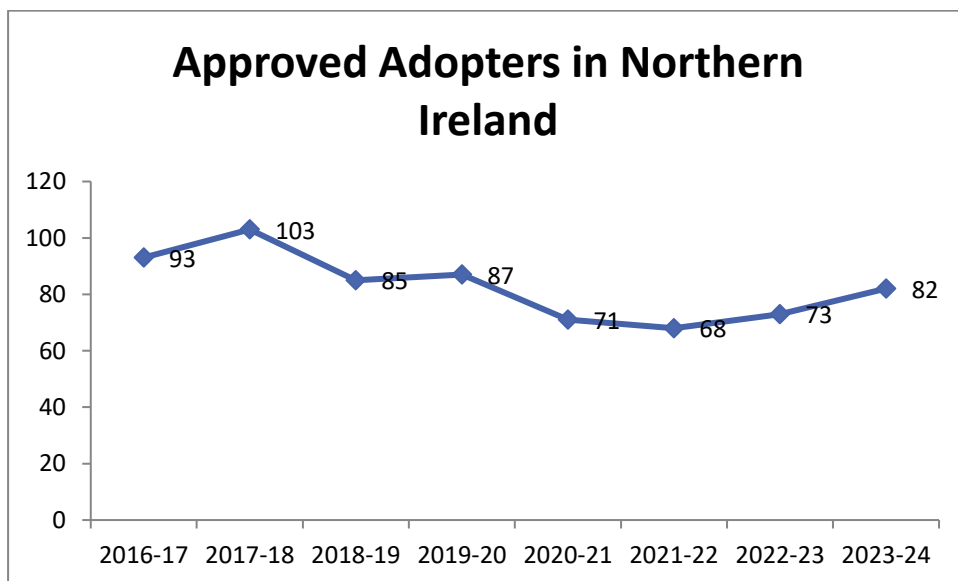


5.2.1 Regional approved adopters

ARIS was notified of 82 newly approved adoptive families in 2023/24. The number of newly approved adoptive families by agency is as follows:



While this is a slight increase from the previous year. There has been a downward trend in the approved number of adopters over the past seven years, which coincides with an increase of the number of Looked After Children and an increase in the Looked After Children's Population with a Care Plan for Adoption requiring placement.



Family Composition

The ARIS annual report provides further analysis on the breakdown of these approved families. Of the 82 families, there were:

11x single females (13.4%)

55 x mixed sex couples (67.1%)

16 x same- sex couples (19.5%)

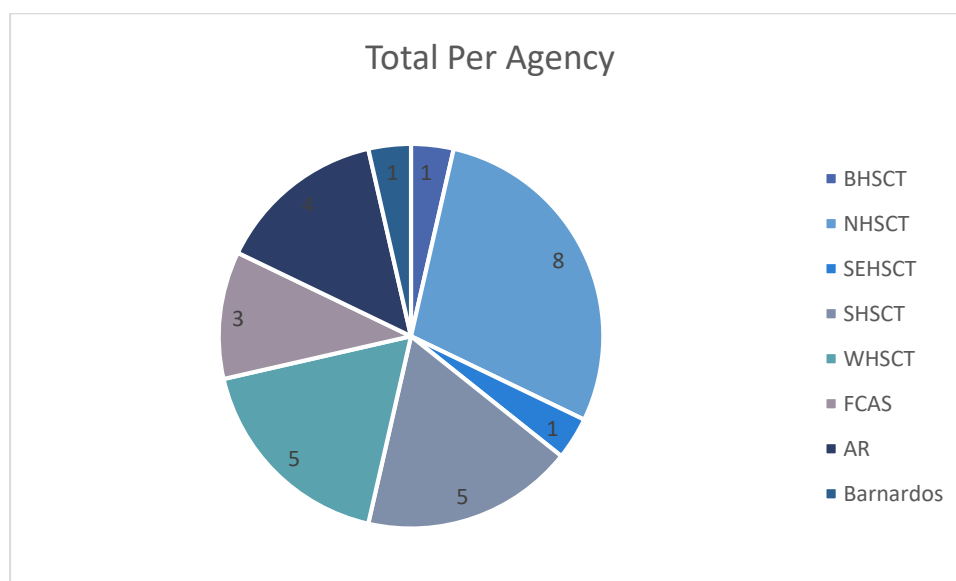
While 50 of the newly approved adopters had no children, 13 had birth children, 15 adopted children and 4 foster children.

Of the 82 newly approved adoptive families, 36 of these families were approved as concurrent carers (43.9%). 27 families (32.9%) were Dual Approved.

There were 19 child specific adoptive assessments completed, this was a mixture of kin and non-kin foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care and families wishing to adopt their adopted children's younger siblings. No families chose to be approved for adoptive placements only.

During 2023/24, 28 approved adoptive families were 'live' on ARIS at some point meaning placements could actively be sought for them via the service.

This is broken down by agency as follows:



25% of adoptive families available to ARIS this year were approved by Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Northern Ireland.

The number of adopters available to ARIS continues to fall. This is seven less than were available during the previous year and the lowest recorded number of available adopters in the past 10 years¹.

Of the 28 adoptive families who were 'live' on ARIS at some point during the reporting year, all were dual approved and 15 were also concurrently approved (53.6%).

All HSC Trusts aim to place children within adoptive families that are in keeping with the faith or community background of the birth families, however they will consider placing children outside of their cultural and religious background if no suitable adoptive placement can be found.

Of the families 'live' on ARIS, 17 were approved for one child, 10 were approved for two children and 1 was approved for 3 children.

During 2023/24, of the 61 children "live" to ARIS in the reporting year, 11 children were "Matched via ARIS"², and a further 1 child was linked awaiting Matching at Adoption Panel. Of these 11 children, 2 were part of a sibling group who had been placed together for adoption. It is highly likely that many of these children would never have been matched for adoption without the service.

Of the 11 children matched this year, 3 of these children found their match via an ARIS Exchange Day, 4 via ARIS links made throughout the year and 4 children were matched to adopters in England, Scotland or Wales via an Inter Register Match.

¹ Statistics not available for 2015/16

² Formal match has taken place at Adoption Panel, Informal Match has taken place at adoption panel or child has been placed with prospective adopters on a concurrent basis.

5.2.2 Additional roles and functions of the Adoption team

The table below shows the breakdown of activity in the adoption team.

	2023/2024	2022/2023
Approval ranges amended	One	None
Approvals deferred	None	None
Approvals to Adopt Rescinded by Panel	None	One
Approved Adoption Applicants on Trust Adoption Register as of 31 st March 2024	Five	Six
Adoption enquiries	Ninety*	Eighty-six

**29 of these enquiries related to the child specific campaign in October 2023*

Domestic applications for assessment

Adoptive applicants attended Adoption panel in person to participate in the discussion.

There was one approval age range increased in this reporting period at the request of the approved adopters. Support was offered in this process.

The Adoption team continue to work with Adoption Services across the region to celebrate adoption in National Adoption week and co-ordinate regional recruitment campaigns when required.

There was limited recruitment in this reporting period due to the numbers already undertaking preliminary checks and a waiting list for assessment.

Two adoption assessments were put on hold or the applicants withdrew before the assessment was presented to adoption panel for approval. Three other cases were

allocated to social workers for assessment but the applicants withdrew before the assessment commenced.

The Adoption team hosted two Preparation to Adopt courses in May 2023 and November 2023 attended by thirty-seven people. These compulsory courses run for three days.

Profiling Event August 2023



A profiling event on a number of harder to place children was held in Lisburn Civic Centre in August 2023. This was coordinated by staff from Adoption and Permanence teams and delivered on the night by a collaboration of staff from adoption, permanence, children and families teams from Lisburn and Down and clinical psychology. Fifty-one people, who were all pre approval, attended on

the evening to hear about the needs of the individual children and had the opportunity to speak with the social workers for these children. Twenty-three follow up meetings took place with those who had expressed an interest in hearing more about some of the children. Arising from this event, 60% of the children have now had potential placements identified and adoption assessment are underway.

Feedback received from attendees at the event was very positive.

Thank you for hosting and inviting us to the adoption event, I personally thought it was emotional & extremely interesting. It was beneficial and well organized.

It was very meaningful to see how much the staff care for these kids.

Thank you for such a great event and please pass on our thanks to the whole team who brought it to life.

A presentation on this profiling event was delivered by the Principal social worker for Adoption and the Senior social worker from Permanence at the Regional Adoption symposium hosted by ARIS at Belfast Castle in March 2024, as an example of innovative practice in adoption.

Training

Prospective adopters and approved adopters have also linked into webinars and numerous courses including additional training offered by SET fostering service, Beacon house and Adoption UK on childhood trauma, emotional regulation, Theraplay, minimising sensory overload, building your network, childhood trauma, fetal alcohol, caring for siblings and core skills to foster.

Adoption Services staff delivered a half day of training in November 2023 on “Making the Move”, which explored the transitions of young children from foster placements to dually approved/ prospective adoptive placements. This training included a mix of prospective adopters and foster carers who are involved in moving children. Eleven people attended and heard input from social workers, Psychologist and a foster carer and an adopter on their experience of this phase of the journey.

Adoption reviews

Following the approval of prospective adopters, the social worker should visit and review their circumstances on a six monthly basis; a written report should be considered by a manager and forwarded to the holder of the list of approved prospective adopters. Most prospective adopters have obtained a placement within the first year to eighteen months of being approved as prospective adoptive parents.

Adopters on register

At the reporting period end, five approved adopters were on the register as available for placement. This number corresponds to the high number of children being matched and placed.

Placement support

In this reporting period, the adoption team provided support to fifty prospective adoptive households at differing stages of the adoption journey, pre adoption order.

Step- parent adoptions

The adoption team are responsible for the assessment of step- parent adoption applicants. There was one adoption order granted for step- parents. All of the other step- parent cases remain with the team until the matter concludes in court.

Intercountry adoption

The Adoption Team supported two children placed with intercountry adopters in the South Eastern Trust area. The Adoption Team social workers undertake statutory monthly visits to these children until the Court grants Adoption Orders. Three review meetings are conducted at intervals.

There is one further set of intercountry adopters who at period end were awaiting placement and are reviewed on a six monthly basis.

There was one adoption orders granted in the reporting period for intercountry adoption. No further intercountry adopters were approved.

Support to Adopted adults

Since 1st April 2023, enquiries from adopted adults have continued to come in at a steady rate with an average of three a month. This continues to be an area of growth and focus, directly affected by the publication of the Mother and Baby Home report in January 2021. Ms K. Leonard, Senior social worker of the Adoption team has been a member of a regional working group developing agreed protocols for access to records for adopted adults. This procedure was enacted in January 2024 after adoption staff were trained on the access to records process.

6.0 ADOPTION PANEL FEEDBACK

In the period April 2023- end of March 2024, presenting social workers and senior social workers received feedback forms regarding adoption panel.

Feedback was requested using seven questions on a Likert scale.

For example; 0= not very clearly communicated to 5=Very clearly communicated to me.

Twenty five feedback forms were received from those social work staff which is an increase of 50% from the previous year. These staff came from a good cross section of teams; Children and families teams, adoption teams, permanence teams, senior social workers and social workers.

- The booking of the panel and details for submission of reports was communicated clearly to me. 100% (clearly or very clearly)
- Support and guidance was available to me for preparation of my case for panel- (100% said available or very available)
- I was welcomed into panel and the panel members introduced themselves clearly (100%-very welcoming)
- The questions that the panel members asked were relevant and fair- 16% of social workers considered this to be mostly relevant (4) with 84% considered the questions as very relevant;
- I was given the opportunity to clearly explain the assessment / care planning/decision making process in my case- 100% (good or plenty of opportunity)
- The recommendation of the panel was communicated clearly to me at the end of the panel- 100% (clearly or very clearly communicated)

Social worker comments

Panel was running on time, which was great.

Student SW was able to attend and observe which was great experience for her

As this is a cross Trust placement, I very much appreciated the opportunity to attend the panel via Zoom as opposed to having to travel even though the other panel members were there in person. Having been given the option of attending via Zoom made me feel respected and that consideration had been given to the length of time needed for travel. All of the panel members were very welcoming, kind and I felt my contribution was taken on board. All in all a lovely experience and one in which I will remember going forward." SW

Waiting I time was longer than expected which can create anxiety for presenting social workers

Multiple questions from panel members could be asked one at a time rather than as complex multi-part questions.

Having a shared folder of all documents required for panel is very helpful. These could perhaps be labelled with more detail.

Adoptive applicant feedback

Adoptive applicants received a Feedback questionnaire to gauge service user feedback. These were posted along with an explanatory letter. Three responses were received.

Adopter feedback

- **Information was communicated clearly to me in advance of the panel**
- **I was welcomed into panel and the panel members introduced themselves clearly**
- **I was treated with respect on the day of Adoption panel**
- **I believe my adoption assessment was carefully considered by the Adoption panel**
- **The questions that the panel members asked were relevant and fair**
- **The recommendation of the panel was communicated clearly to me at the end of the panel/following the end of panel**
- **How content were you with your experience of attending adoption panel?**



Feedback was requested using a Likert scale.

Comments included;

Attending panel was a lovely experience this time. We felt very supported and welcomed

Analysis

From the feedback forms received from social workers, the experience of attending adoption panel has been largely positive in this reporting period.

Social workers have been generally positive in their experience of the booking system, support provided to them pre panel and their experience of panel as welcoming, fair and balanced.

Feedback received from adoptive applicants in this period was very positive across all questions.

Based on the small sample of feedback forms received, the adoption panel continues to deliver a good quality, sensitive service to staff and applicants. Further work is required to improve the return rate of feedback forms from adoptive applicants.

7.0 ADOPTION PANEL ADVISOR

Ms Pamela Robinson has been in the role of Adoption panel advisor since July 2019 working for 18 hours a week on adoption panel business in addition to other Principal social worker roles in Children's Services.

This role has involved;

- Assisting the Chairperson and administrator in agreeing the agenda and finalising the Panel record.
- Checking of documentation for adoption panel and requesting additional information from social workers in advance of the panel date when necessary.
- Guidance to social workers in case preparation for panel
- Prioritisation of pre adoption medicals with child health
- Liaison with Community Paediatricians
- Interface with Children and Families teams, permanence and adoption teams regarding adoption panel issues.
- Liaising with legal advisors on legal issues arising in cases
- Monitoring demand on panels and organising additional panels to meet demand.
- Consulting on cases regarding concurrent care and twin track care planning
- Providing advice to social workers following Best Interest recommendation regarding the next steps
- Clarification of practice for panel members during panels
- Providing a conduit between Adoption panel and social work teams regarding cases that are presented to the panel
- Delivering induction to new Adoption panel members
- Coordinating training for panel members
- Being part of a work stream in the planning and delivering of care planning training to social work staff in children's services

8.0 ADOPTION PANEL MEDICAL ADVISOR

Dr Heather Anderson has been the medical advisor for the South Eastern Trust adoption panel since August 2016 and is contracted to the adoption panel for 40 hours per month. She is also a practising GP since 1994.

This role with the Trust has a number of aspects. Dr Anderson screens medical assessments which applicants, who are seeking to adopt, have had completed by their GPs. Requests for further information from GP or hospital consultants is sought where required regarding any medical concerns. Dr Anderson provides advice on any conditions that may potentially affect prospective adoptive parents' health and ability to parent in the longer term and make recommendations regarding this.

Dr Anderson also advises on the current and potential health issues affecting children who are coming forward for adoption and how these may impact their future and their prospective adoptive family. The focus is always on how best to meet the child's needs now and into the future and what training and support can be provided to adopters for a successful outcome. Dr Anderson completes medical summaries on the children presented to panel for best interest recommendations and this summary is used within court applications for Freeing orders as well as in the process of family finding the matching.

When appropriate, Dr Anderson will meet with potential adoptive parents to discuss a child with complex needs, in the process of exploring the link. This ensures fullness of information sharing and provides an opportunity to discuss the medical and developmental needs of the child/ children prior to proceeding to matching at adoption panel.

As a general member of the panel, Dr Anderson reads all the prepared documentation in advance, participates in the discussion of any issues arising in the cases presented and contributes to the decision making process of the panel.

9.0 ADOPTION REGIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEM (ARIS)

Referrals of prospective adopters

From the 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024, all approved adopters were notified to ARIS. The profiles of nine approved adopters were considered each month at pre linking panel as potential placements for children. Approved adopters go-live on the ARIS database three months after their approval if they have not been linked by their own Trust. This may result in links to children referred to the database from other Trust areas.

Referrals of children

Twenty-four children from the South Eastern Trust were notified to ARIS as having a Best Interest decision in this reporting period.

From the 1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024, the Trust referred seventeen children to ARIS for live searches of the database for dually approved or concurrent placements as no suitable matches were available within the South Eastern Trust area. This included three sets of siblings. While some profiles were received via the database checks, only one was matched with suitable carers by the period end.

Exchange day profiling was used for five of the children in this period. Unfortunately, this did not result in placements for these children and their wait for a suitable adoptive family continued. Children continue to be reviewed on the pre linking panel list as more adoptive applicants become approved to adopt.

The Draft ARIS annual report notes that,

During 2023/24, ARIS hosted two Adoption Exchange Days (13th October 2023 & 22nd March 2024). These events allow prospective adopters to consider the profiles of children who are waiting for a family. The event in March 2024 returned to being held in person in Belfast Castle.

The ARIS database and Exchange days continue to be a valuable resource for matching of children when they cannot be matched in their own Trust area or when it is unsuitable for them to remain in the Trust area. All approved adopters, who are not yet linked to a child, are invited to attend Exchange days.

A child specific recruitment event took place for a child from South Eastern Trust in October 2023. A short video was produced with non- identifying information about the child. This generated a high number of enquiries which were dealt with by the Adoption Team. Follow up meetings were offered but very few were availed of. One link was identified and a couple commenced a child specific assessment in February 2024, the outcome of which has been positive.

10.0 SOUTH EASTERN TRUST PRE- LINKING PANEL

The South Eastern Trust Pre-Linking panel meets on a monthly basis to identify potential links between children and concurrent carers, dually approved carers and prospective adoptive parents, depending on the stage of the respective care plan for the child. Panel members consider written profiles of each child along with details of those on the list of available adopters in the Trust area. The Clinical Psychologist, Dr Crawford also undertakes her own enquiries with Foster carers and social workers on each referred child who needs a link identified and formulates a profile for linking purposes. The pre linking panel identifies and reviews the potential links before agreeing on the strongest link to propose as a match to the Adoption Panel. When no links are available, then the pre linking panel agree when placements will need to be sought in other Trusts for these children via a referral to ARIS. Any links received from ARIS are explored and reviewed through the pre linking panel similarly to in-Trust placement links. Links to concurrent carers are progressed using core group meetings to plan for transition to this placement. When a child who was initially placed concurrently, is later presented to the Adoption panel for a best interest recommendation, the proposed match is also presented to panel at that stage.

The Panel is comprised of;

- Principal Social Worker for Adoption (Chairperson),
- Principal Social Worker for Permanence and Post Adoption Teams and Fostering Step up Step Down Services
- Senior Social Worker for Permanence and Post Adoption Teams(x2),
- Senior Social Worker for Adoption Team
- Clinical Psychologist, SET Connects attached to Adoption Services

In this reporting period, the pre linking panel considered the needs of thirty children in need of family finding. The majority were in respect of dually approved placements.

- Seven sets of siblings were referred, six of whom needed a placement together.
- The panel considered the needs of 15 females and 15 males.

The Pre Linking panel facilitates a transparent process of reviewing links considered for prospective adoptive parents. A linking criterion is used following consideration of the child's profile and reading of suitable assessments; this assists in the decision of the strongest link to be explored before proposing a match to adoption panel.

Pre linking panel identifies those children whose future permanent placement needs cannot be met within the SET area, either due to availability of suitable placements or due to risk assessment and proximity issues. Any links identified by ARIS are explored and reviewed through this panel.

A pre linking panel summary is prepared by the pre linking panel chairperson at the time of the initial match being proposal to the adoption panel.

11.0 CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY SUPPORT FOR PERMANENCE AND ADOPTION SERVICES

There are two Clinical Psychologists providing support within Adoption services - Dr Leigh Crawford, Specialist Clinical Psychologist (3.5 days a week) and Dr Holly McSpadden, Clinical Psychologist (2 days a week).

Dr Crawford provides advice and consultation in relation to all children presented at Pre linking panel. A detailed profile is compiled of a child's emotional and developmental needs, to contribute to the family finding process.

Dr Crawford attends monthly Pre linking panel and is available to meet with potential adopters, once a match is being progressed. Support can be provided in planning a child's move to their concurrent, dually approved or adoptive home and remains available following the transition, whether this placement is in SET or another Trust area.

Dr Crawford offers post adoption support for Permanence Social Workers and adoptive parents, providing short-term guidance around issues such as narrative work, education, contact with birth family and general therapeutic parenting. She also signposts to other therapeutic or support services where needed, including to Post Adoption Intervention, which is provided by Dr Holly McSpadden.

Dr McSpadden's approach is based upon longer term and more intensive Therapeutic Parenting and, if appropriate, dyadic direct therapeutic intervention with parents and child. Dr McSpadden's work is informed by models such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Just Right State and Theraplay.

Dr Crawford contributes to part of the Preparation to adopt course and is involved in Making the Move training (for Foster Carers and approved Adopters). She is available to join professional discussions and core group meetings and also provides monthly consultation opportunities with Adoption team social workers in relation to more complex adoption assessments.

12.0 POST ADOPTION SUPPORT

The South Eastern Trust Permanence & Post Adoption Teams continue to offer support to families following the granting of an Adoption Order. There are currently two teams undertaking this work- one based in Newtownards and one in Ballynahinch.

Social workers trained in Theraplay and DDP are available within the permanence and post adoption team to provide direct assistance with the children and their parents.

During the reporting period, the Teams worked with 100 families with 114 children being supported. Intensity of the support varies depending on the presenting needs. Types of support included mentoring, liaison with education, revisiting narrative work with older children, support to parents on therapeutic parenting and navigating change, support regarding contact, advice on use of Theraplay, signposting to outside groups and SET Post adoption groups, review of post adoption support plans and post adoption contact plans.

Support is delivered from the Team assistant, Social Worker and/or Clinical Psychologist.

Two clinical psychologists for the Adoption service, Dr Leigh Crawford and Dr Holly McSpadden continue to support adoptive families where there are more complex attachment and developmental trauma based issues. In a small number of cases, these children are on the edge of care due to their complex needs.

The Trust has provided funding for play therapy and art therapy following an assessment of need.

During the reporting period fifty-four families were supported with direct post adoption contact and forty- five supported with indirect post adoption contact by the Permanence and Post Adoption Team.

In the past twelve months, the Trust ran a summer fun day, attended by seven families (10 children). There was also a four-week programme run by *Relax Kids NI* attended by seven children and a hugely popular *Pumpkinfest 2024* attended by 75 children and adults. For the younger age group of children the Trust ran its bi annual six-week attachment-swimming course attended by six families and six children.

Counselling sessions with a freelance post adoption Counsellor is also available to adoptive parents when required.

Adopters are signposted to training by Adoption UK, Beacon House, web-based resources and on line Webinars.

Sitting within the post adoption support is the area of support to adopted adults who wish to gain access to information contained in their original file. This can sometimes lead to contact being established with relatives in their birth family.

13.0 ADOPTION PANEL SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS

There are a number of areas of service developments relating to adoption panel business to be progressed in the coming year.

- Induction of new independent panel members and NEDS
- Regional seminar for adoption panel members
- Relevant training on adoption related issues.

Appendix 1

ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP

Adoption panel membership for the period 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 is set out below.

Mrs Kate Anderson	Independent Chairperson
Ms Nuala Hanna	Vice-Chairperson and Head of Service Fostering, Adoption +Permanence
Dr Heather Anderson	Adoption Panel Medical Advisor
Dr Maura Briscoe	Non-Executive Trust Board Member until January 2024
Mrs Joan O'Hagan	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mr Jonathan Patton	Chairman of the Trust Board- until March 2024
Ms Anne Quirk	Non-Executive Trust Board Member- from March 2024
Mr Raymond Havlin	Non-Executive Trust Board Member- From March 2024

Mr Kieran Donaghy	Non-Executive Trust Board Member- from March 2024
Mrs Nicola Cherry	Independent Member
Mrs Claire Brennan	Independent Member
Mr Stephen McVey	Independent Member
Mr Wesley Graham	Independent Member
Ms Gillian Forrest	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding
Ms Sara Hines	Principal Social Worker-Safeguarding
Ms Alison O'Boyle	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding
Ms Angela Kerr	Principal Social Worker- Permanence and Post adoption
Ms Lesley McKenna	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding
Ms Emma Holmes	Principal Practitioner for Court

Mr Maurice Largey	Assistant Director - cared for services. ADM to adoption panel January 23- March 23
Jenna Boyce	Panel Legal Advisor (Non –Voting) Directorate of Legal Services
Ms Pamela Robinson	Adoption Panel Advisor(non-voting)
Mr Conor Smyth	Adoption Panel Admin Manager- until March 2024
Ms Carole Wright	Senior Admin Manager (Oversees Panel Administration in the absence of Mr Smyth)

Please note the social work representation, non-executive director and independent members attend panel on a rotational basis.

****Agency Decision Maker**

The Agency decision maker is a senior manager in the Agency with expertise in adoption and childcare who has been designated to make decisions on behalf of the Agency, including those specified in the Adoption of Overseas Children Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002.

It is the role of the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to review the Adoption panel recommendations, before making a decision on behalf of the Trust. The Agency Decision Maker can approve the recommendation, refuse the recommendation, and ask for additional information or request further work be completed.