

ADOPTION PANEL ANNUAL REPORT

**For Year-
end 31st
March 2025**

CONTENTS

1.0	Introduction.....	2
2.0	Overview.....	3
3.0	Executive summary.....	4
4.0	Adoption panel business day and training.....	5
5.0	Adoption panel activity	6
5.1	Children	
5.1.1	Best interest cases- analysis.....	7
5.1.2	Regional data- best interests	10
5.1.3	Informal & formal matching- analysis.....	11
5.1.4	Regional Matching data	12
5.1.5	Legal orders	13
5.1.6	Regional adoption figures	14
5.2	Prospective adopters.....	17
5.2.1	Regional approved adopters.....	19
5.3	Additional roles and functions of the Adoption team.....	22
6.0	Adoption panel feedback.....	24
7.0	Adoption panel core staff.....	24
8.0	Adoption Regional Information System (ARIS).....	25
9.0	Pre linking panel.....	27
10.0	Clinical psychology in adoption services.....	28
11.0	Post adoption support.....	29
12.0	Adoption panel service development.....	30
	Appendix 1 Adoption panel membership.....	31

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This is the twelfth 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. Ms Joan O'Hagan left the membership of panel in November 2024 due to her end of term as a non-executive director on the Trust Board. Ms Sheryl Henderson, Non-executive Director on the Trust Board joined the panel in February 2025.

One of the independent panel members, Ms Brennan, left having reached the end of her second term on panel in December 2024. Interviews for the role of independent panel member took place in January 2025 and three new panel members were appointed, commencing in the 2025-2026 reporting period.

The Adoption Panel Admin Manager post was unfilled for the majority of this reporting period, with several agency admin undertaking the role in order to enable the work of the panel to continue.

(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 2024 – 31st March 2025.

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 nineteen. These twelve males and seven female children ranged in age from seven months old to six years old. Seven children were aged one or younger when they were presented to adoption panel. Four sibling groups were presented to the adoption with a care plan of adoption.
- 3.2 The Panel recommended twenty-five matches throughout the period. Seven recommendations were for informal matches of children to dually approved carers. Eighteen formal matches were recommended, when the child was available for adoption through freeing order or parental consent. Fifteen of these adopters originated from the South Eastern Trust.
- 3.3 The adoption panel recommended eighteen adoptive applicants for approval in this period.
- 3.4 Four former foster carers were assessed and approved to adopt a child in their care.
- 3.5 The Courts freed nineteen children for adoption from the South Eastern Trust in this period; twelve male children and seven female children.
- 3.6 Twelve children from the South Eastern Trust were made subject to Adoption orders; four male children and seven female children.

4.0 ADOPTION PANEL BUSINESS DAY AND TRAINING

The Adoption Panel business meeting took place on 16th April 2024 to consider the annual report of 2022-2023 and to reflect on the functioning of panel. This was the postponed meeting from January 2024.

Actions agreed for 2024-2025 included;

- Induction and integration of new panel members
- Future Training areas on Care planning, supports and assessments with birth families, post adoption services

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

A Regional workshop for adoption panel members took place in February 2025, which was attended by seven SET adoption panel members. Dr Heather Anderson delivered a presentation at this workshop regarding common medical conditions within adoptive applicants. Other presentations included trauma informed Adoption panels, the use of UK wide placements by Northern Irish Trusts, the experience of concurrent care planning and an update on the Adoption and Children's Act for Northern Ireland.

5.0 ADOPTION PANEL ACTIVITY

The Adoption panel dealt with fifty-three separate cases in the course of the twelve months. Eighteen panel slots were unused due to cancelations. One additional panel was convened in October 2024 to meet demand for panel time. Scheduling is still subject to frequent change with fifteen bookings cancelled or postponed in the year.

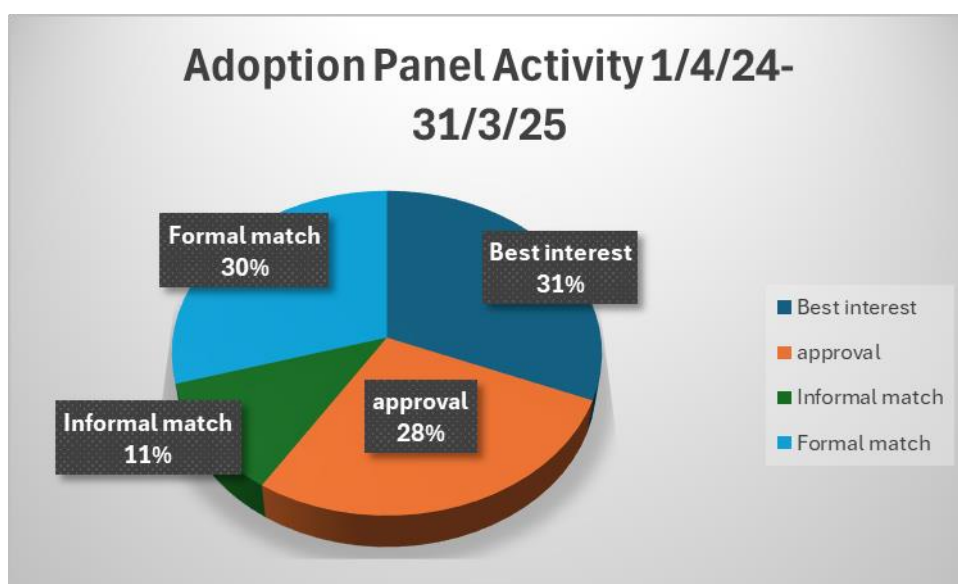
This was due to;

- delays in expert reports being received by safeguarding teams,
- courts permitting further assessment of parents,
- late-stage kinship options to be explored
- change of circumstances for adoptive applicants
- Staffing demands leading to cases not being ready for submission date
- Staff sickness and absences.

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 31%. Approvals of prospective adopters accounted for 28% of panel time. There were no cases brought before the panel for variation on their approval range or for the rescinding of a previous panel decision.

5.1 CHILDREN

Panel Business	2024-2025	2023-2024
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations	Nineteen	Twenty-four
Best interest recommendations deferred	Zero	Zero
Matching Recommendations Made	Twenty-five Informal – 7 Formal* 18	Thirty-one Informal- 10 Formal -21*

**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. Cases originated from across the Trust with the highest number presented from the North Down social work teams.

The number of children who received a Best Interest decision was nineteen, a decrease of five 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.

The majority of these children had parents from Northern Ireland, with only two having parents from outside of Northern Ireland.

Whilst each family situation is unique, there are common themes in the challenges faced by birth parents- mental health issues, domestic abuse and violence, addiction issues, inter-generational issues, criminality, imprisonment and vulnerable parents through trauma.

Data captured over the past 10 years shows a range in the number of best interest cases from 13 to 29 with an average number of 20.

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

	2024 /2025	2023 / 2024
Single Children	Three	Three
Siblings	4 sets of siblings	Six sets of two
Children of a sibling group where older siblings are in care, adopted or Residence orders	Seven	Nine
Children who had been placed concurrently	Zero	One

Age range and ethnicity

Children presented to panel for best interests ranged in age from seven months to six years old. Seven children were aged one or younger when they were presented to adoption panel. There were twelve male children and seven female children.

Siblings

Best Interest recommendations on siblings decreased from twelve children to nine children. The social work assessment concluded all should be placed permanently together to meet their individual and collective needs if a placement could be found to achieve this.

Seven of the children who received a best interest recommendation 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, sixteen children were placed in short term foster care placements and required matching with suitable prospective adoptive families. Three of the children were with foster carers or kinship carers who wished to be assessed to adopt them.

Legal status at time of Adoption panel

The table below shows that the majority of the children were subject to Interim care orders at the time of their presentation to adoption panel for a best interest recommendation. Four children had applications for care orders before the court but the matter was running on the no order principle. The number of children with Full care orders at the time of their adoption panel saw an increase to six, perhaps associated with the older cohort of children who were presented to adoption panel who were 5 and 6 years old.

Legal Profile	2024/2025	2023/2024
No Order	Four	Three
Interim Care Order	Nine	Twenty
Care Order	Six	One
Relinquished for adoption at the time of Adoption panel	Zero	One

5.1.2 Regional data- best interest

Throughout Northern Ireland in this period 2024 – 2025, best interest recommendations totalled ninety-six ranging from eleven to thirty across the five Trusts. The Southern Trust reported the highest number of best interest recommendations at thirty with Northern Trust having the lowest number in this reporting period at eleven. This total number was slight decrease of one from the previous year total.

The ARIS annual report 2024-2025 details the numbers involved regionally who received a best interest recommendation in this year. (See chart below).

Of the ninety-six, there were fifteen sibling groups recommended to be placed together, including one group of three siblings. Fifty- three children were boys and forty-three were girls.

Children who received a Best Interest Decision broken down by Trust, Sibling Groups and Gender

HSC Trust	No. of children	No. of sibling groups*	No. of boys	No. of girls
BHSCT	20	1	13	7
NHSCT	11	1	5	6
SEHSCT	19	4	12	7
SHSCT	30	7	15	15
WHSCT	16	2	8	8
Total	96	15	53	43

*Requiring placement together

In terms of a religious breakdown, the ARIS annual report details that of the ninety-six children who received a ‘Best Interests’ recommendation, forty-six were Roman Catholic, thirty were Protestant, ten were Dual Faith (having parents from both a Roman Catholic and Protestant background), two were classified as Christian, two were Other and six identified religion as None.

Eighty-two children (85.4%) were reported to be of White Irish/British/Northern Irish backgrounds, six were White European (5%), two Irish Traveller, two Black African and four “Other”.

Of the ninety-six children who received a ‘Best Interests’ recommendation, the youngest child was 4 months old and the eldest child was 6 years and 8 months.

Of the 96 children who received a ‘Best Interest’ Recommendation 34 of these children had already been placed concurrently. This accounts for 35% of children.

ARIS annual report, 2024 - 2025

5.1.3 Informal & formal matching- analysis

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

Seven children were informally matched and eighteen children received formal match recommendations from the Adoption panel in this reporting period.

Proposed matches were considered by panel on three of the children who also received a best interest recommendation in the same reporting period.

One child was 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.

A larger number of the children (14) were brought to adoption panel with proposed formal matches after they had been freed for adoption. This number included four sets of sibling pairs.

The demand for sibling placements has been high in this period and these children often have to wait longer for more adopters to become approved by the Trust's adoption team or wait for available adopters from other Trusts or voluntary adoption agencies to go live on the ARIS database. Some of the children were freed for adoption by the court on the basis of *likelihood of adoption placement being found*, sometimes due to their foster carers having almost concluded their adoption assessment. Therefore, a formal match was proposed to the panel on the same day that the child specific assessment was considered for approval.

Six sets of siblings were recommended for matching together.

In total seventeen sets of domestic adopters were considered in matching by the panel.

- Fifteen sets of adopters had been assessed and approved by the South Eastern Trust, including four sets of foster carers who completed child specific adoption assessments.
- Two of the matches were to prospective adopters from other Adoption agencies in Northern Ireland that were linked through ARIS.

Adopters included;

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

Age range of children at matching

The children matched at panel ranged in age from ten months to five years old.

Ethnicity of carers

The majority of the adopters proposed to the adoption for matching in this period originated from Northern Ireland. A small number had moved to Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK or Ireland.

Former carers

Examining the eighteen formal matches considered by the adoption panel, four of these children were formally matched to their former foster carers who had undertaken child specific adoption assessments. Four were formally matched to their dually approved carers.

Concurrent carers

None of the children considered for formal match had originally been placed on a concurrent basis with their carers.

Matched to new carers

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

5.1.4 Regional matching data

The ARIS annual report 2024-25 notes that *in the past 2 years there has been a significant increase in children being placed for Adoption after a Freeing Order; 13.5% in 2024/25 and 14.4% in 2023/24 (an increase from 5.5% in 2022/23 and 2% in 2021/22). This may be related to the lack of adopters available and therefore children being placed at a later stage than desirable and/or impacted by other issues such as judicial decision making.*

60 children were "Live" to ARIS in the year 2024/2025 meaning they were actively seeking adoptive placements via ARIS. This is similar in number to the 61 in 2023/24 which was a record-breaking number since service development.

ARIS annual report 2024-2025

5.1.5 Legal orders

	2024-2025	2023-2024
Freeing orders granted	Nineteen	Sixteen
Parental consent to adoption	Zero	One
Adoption orders granted	Twelve	Twenty- three

Freeing orders- analysis

During this reporting period, nineteen children were freed for Adoption; twelve male children and seven female children. This included seven of the children who had received a Best Interest decision in this period.

In respect of the nineteen children freed for adoption in this period, the time from best interest recommendation to the granting of the Freeing order ranged from two months to one year and seven months. 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,
- elongated court hearings due to birth of a younger sibling and subsequent care planning

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 significantly within South Eastern Trust from twenty-three in 2023-24 to twelve in this reporting period up to end of March 2025. Four were male children and seven were female children. The age of the children at the time of the adoption order ranged from one year to five years old. Two of these children were adopted as part of a sibling group of two. Three were adopted by former foster carers.

In terms of ethnic origin, all of the children adopted were from white Northern Irish/ Irish/British backgrounds.

Factors that contributed to the lower number of adoption orders being granted in this reporting period include;

- complexities in matching for children,
- children requiring a longer period in placement before prospective adopters apply for the adoption order
- court applications for freeing orders being delayed due to further assessment of the parents which then resulted in extended periods of children being placed on a dually approved basis,
- care plans being altered for children post best interest decision due to newly emerging factors in the birth family.

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

There were no children from other Trust areas placed with approved South Eastern Trust adopters in this period.

5.1.6 Regional adoption figures

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

Table 1: Adoption Order breakdown by agency

Agency	Number of Adoption Orders
BHSCT	20
NHSCT	10
SEHSCT	12
SHSCT	33
WHSCT	21

The ARIS annual report details that *in 2024/25 the average waiting time from Best Interests recommendation at Adoption Panel being made to Adoption Order being granted was 1 years 7 months.*

The figures by individual HSC Trusts are:

- BHSCT – 2 years 3 months
- NHSCT – 1 years 3 months
- SEHSCT – 1 years 7 months
- SHSCT – 1 years 8 months
- WHSCT – 1 year 5 months

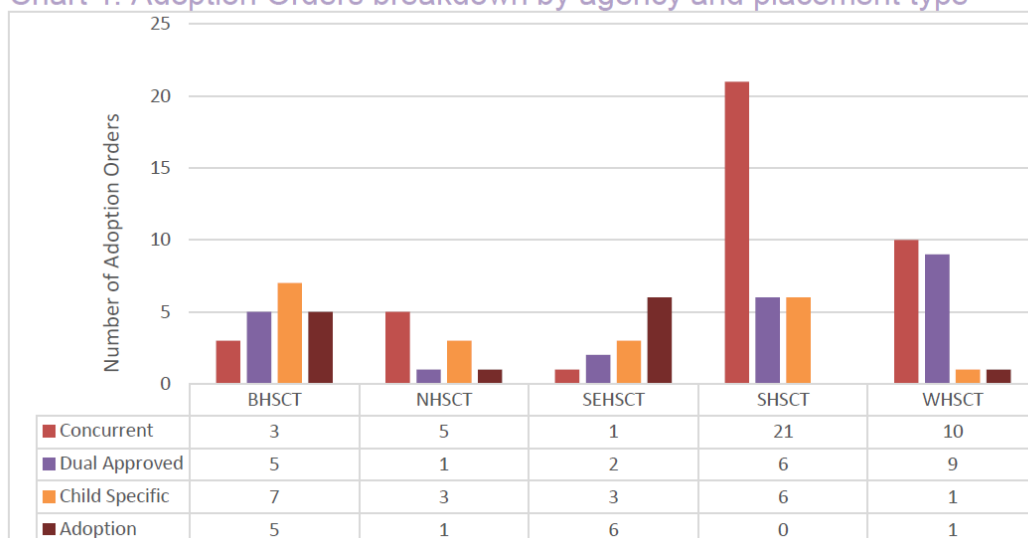
69.7% of children were aged 4 and under at the point of adoption with the average age when an Adoption Order was granted being 3.7 years.

The Children Adopted from Care Northern Ireland Report (CACNI) 24-25 details that *from the child's last entry into care, the average length of time for a child to be adopted in 2024/25 was 3 years 6 months. This was similar to the last three years.*

It is encouraging to note that although concurrent placements are not the predominant placement type in the South Eastern Trust, this did not adversely impact the length of time from Adoption panel to Adoption Order for the children in the South Eastern Trust area.

The table below highlights the different placement types utilised by the five Trusts on the journey towards adoption orders. Within the SET area in this reporting period, the predominant placement type was adoption, i.e. post freeing order. Examination of the children adopted shows that the use of consolidated hearings in the court resulted in children freed for adoption soon after the best interest decision from adoption panel. Therefore, there was no time to place on a dually approved basis and the children were then placed formally for adoption with approved adopters. The other contributory factor for some of the older children was the wait for suitable adoptive placements for children already freed for adoption.

Chart 1: Adoption Orders breakdown by agency and placement type



Regional demographic information on adopted children

Analysis from the collation of data from the children adopted from Care in Northern Ireland report outlines that among those 96 children adopted from care during 2024/25, two-thirds (66%) of children were from catholic religious backgrounds, whilst almost a quarter (23%) of children were from protestant religious backgrounds. Some 11 (11%) came from other, no or unknown religious background.

Most of the children adopted from care were of white ethnic background (89%). Some six children (6%) were Irish Traveller or mixed ethnic group.

Twenty-one children (22%) had special needs or a disability. This included emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties, sensory impairment, physical or long-term health conditions, autism and learning disability.

In 2024/25, 57 of the children (59%) were adopted as a single child adoption, whereas 39 children were adopted as part of a sibling group (41%).

In 2024/25, the average length of time between the date of the child's last period of care started to the Adoption Order was granted was 3 years and 6 months. Some 14 of the children (15%) were adopted within two years of entering the final period of care, for 35 children (36%) it took between 2-3 years, and for almost half of the children (47 children, 49%), the last period of care lasted three years or longer.

Future legislative changes

The Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which received Royal Assent on 27 April 2022, will modernise existing adoption legislation. Work is ongoing to implement the Act on a phased basis over a number of years, with timescales for implementation depending on the provision of additional and sustained funding. Once implemented, the Act will largely replace the 1987 Order. The Act will also amend the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which is the primary law relating to the care and protection of children. As most children are adopted from the care system, the amendments are designed to improve planning and permanence for children in care.

CACNI 2024-2025

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;

	2024-2025	2023-2024
Total number of domestic adoption applications recommended for approval by adoption panel	Seventeen	Fifteen
Total number of intercountry applications recommended for approval	One	Zero
Child specific adoptive applicants approved	Four	Six
Newly approved to adopt and added to list of available placements	Thirteen	Nine
Adopters open to concurrent and dually approved placements	Five	One
Adopters open to dually approved placements only	Eight	Eight
Adopters open to placement of 1 or 2 children (siblings)	Five	One
Approvals rescinded by panel	Zero	Zero

Adoption team social workers presented four 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.

Thirteen 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

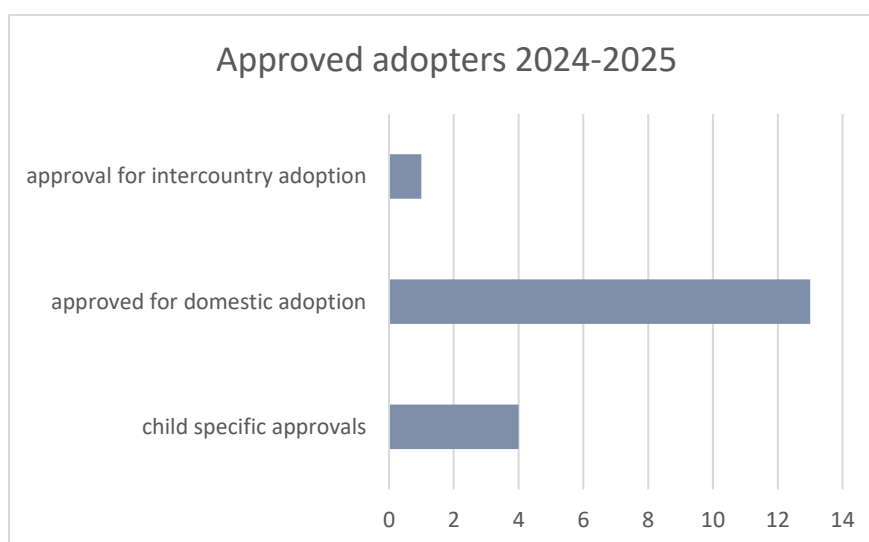
a best interest recommendation but before the freeing order is granted by the Court. Five of the thirteen also wished to consider a concurrent placement. This was a welcome increase from the previous reporting figure of one who was open to a concurrent placement.

In each case adoptive applicants attended the adoption panel and were advised of the recommendation by the Panel chair at the end panel discussion.

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

Five of the fifteen applicants were approved for one or two children and eight were approved for single children. This was also an area that saw an increase from the previous years' figure of one. Demand for sibling placements remains high within the South eastern trust and this number of adopters approved for siblings and added to the list of available adopters at the pre linking panel is a positive step towards enabling potential matches for sibling groups requiring placement together.

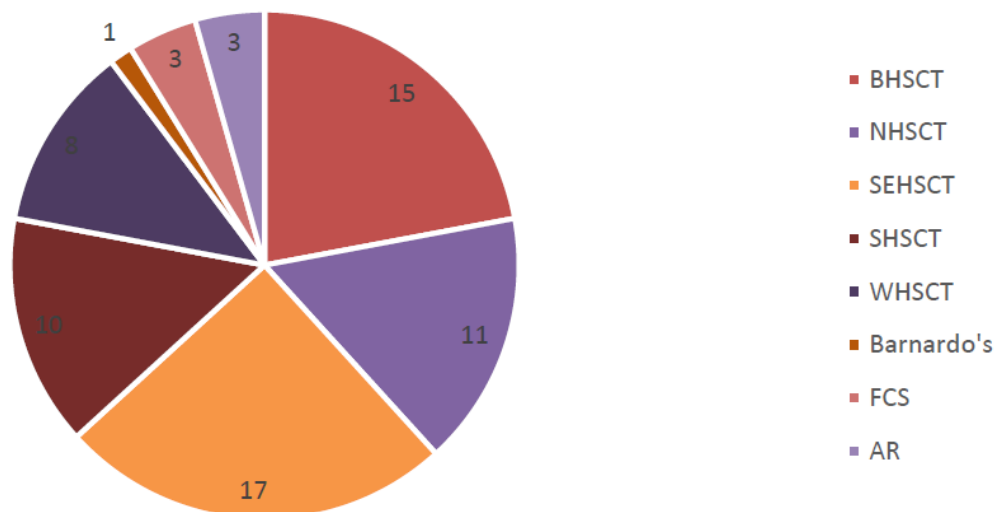
The seventeen domestic adopters approved in the South Eastern Trust was an increase of two from the previous year.



5.2.1 Regional approved adopters

ARIS was notified of 68 newly approved adoptive families in 2024/25. The number of newly approved adoptive families by agency is as follows:

Number of newly approved adopters by each adoption agency in 2024/25

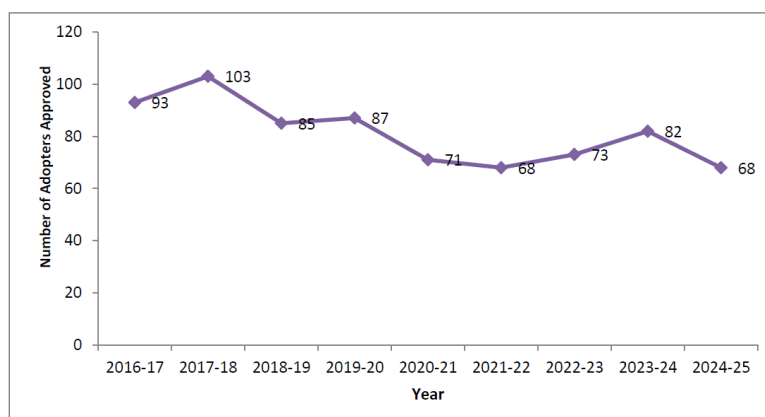


ARIS annual report 2024-2025

Approval Status

Of the 68 newly approved adoptive families, 35 of these families were approved as concurrent carers (51.5%). 16 families (23.5%) were Dual Approved. 1 Adopter was approved for Adoption only.

There has been a downward trend in the approved number of adopters over the past eight 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.



Although there was a downward trend in the regional numbers of approved adopters, within the South Eastern Trust the numbers approved increased to the

highest number to date which was also the highest number of new domestic approvals across the region. This increase will assist in providing suitable placements for children from within the Trust but also will support the numbers approved regionally, perhaps resulting in cross Trust placements if no suitable link can be made within the Trust.

Family Composition

The ARIS annual report provides further analysis on the breakdown of these approved families. Of the 68 families, there were:

6x single females (9%)

50 x mixed sex couples (73.5%)

12 x same sex couples (17.6%)

50 of the newly approved adopters had no children, 11 had birth children, 4 adopted children and 3 foster children.

Religion and Ethnicity

97% of the individual adopters were White British / Irish / Northern Irish, with 2 families identifying as Other.

22 adoptive families identified as Protestant, 28 as Catholic, and 9 as Dual Faith (Catholic and Protestant). 7 families identified as Christian, and 2 as Other.

Approval status

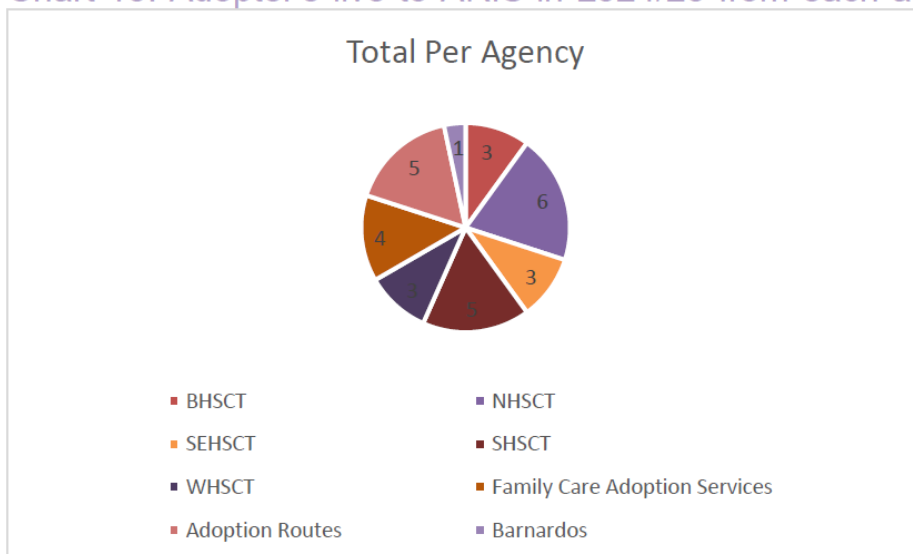
Of the 68 newly approved adoptive families, 35 of these families were approved as concurrent carers (51.5%). 16 families (23.5%) were Dual Approved. 1 Adopter was approved for Adoption only.

16 families were approved “child specific”. These families were a mixture of kin and non-kin foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care or families wishing to adopt their adopted children’s younger siblings.

Of the 68 newly approved adoptive families during 2024/25, 42 were approved for the placement of one child (61.8%), 21 (30.9%) were approved for the placement of up to 2 children and 5 (7.4%) families were approved for a placement of up to 3 children.

Of the 30 adoptive families who were ‘live’ on ARIS at some point during the reporting year, all were dual approved and 12 were also concurrently approved (40%).

Chart 13: Adopter's live to ARIS in 2024/25 from each adoption agency



33% of adoptive families available to ARIS this year were approved by Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Northern Ireland.

Of the 10 children matched this year, 5 of these children found their match via an ARIS Exchange Day, 2 via ARIS links made throughout the year and 3 children were matched to adopters in England, Scotland or Wales via an Inter Register Match.

During 2024/25, of the 60 children “live” to ARIS in the reporting year, 10 children were “Matched via ARIS” and a further 5 children were linked awaiting Matching at Adoption Panel. Of these 10 children, 5 were part of a sibling group who had been placed together for adoption.

As a direct result of the two ARIS Exchange Day events held in 2024/25, 4 children have found their adoptive families.

In 2024/25 ARIS worked on 2 child specific recruitment campaigns with the SHSCT and WHSCT.

Quarterly regional development groups are coordinated by ARIS to discuss current issues experienced in adoption practise in Northern Ireland.

ARIS developed and commissioned an animation video was launched in March 2025 to highlight the needs of children who wait on adoptive placements; siblings, older children, children with complex needs. This video will also be useful in future recruitment events for adoption across the region.

5.3 Additional roles and functions of the Adoption team

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

	2024-2025	2023-2024
Approval ranges amended	None	One
Approvals deferred	None	None
Approvals to Adopt Rescinded by Panel	None	None
Approved Adoption Applicants on Trust Adoption Register as of 31 st March 2025	Five	Five
Adoption enquiries	Forty-eight	Ninety*

**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.

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.

One adoption assessment was ceased due to the applicants' withdrawal from the process.

The Adoption team hosted two Preparation to Adopt courses in May 2024 and November 2024 attended by thirty- two people. These compulsory training courses run for three days.

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 2024 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. This is now a well established annual training event.

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.

Dual Approval Panel

Each of the newly approved prospective adopters in the Trust are presented to the Dual approval fostering panel to approve them as foster carers for children who fit with their matching criteria. This panel usually sits once a month. Once a placement progressed to an adoptive placement following formal match, these approved adopters are brought back to the dual approval panel to be deregistered as foster carers.

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 nineteen prospective adoptive households at differing stages of the adoption journey, pre adoption order. Intensive support is provided at the time of transition planning and initial placement with new carers. Support continues throughout the duration of the placement. This period of dual approval placement can be prolonged if there are complexities within the court arena. Additional support is offered to carers from a specialist counsellor when required. Reporting officer reports are prepared for the court, in conjunction with the child’s social worker.

Recruitment

One on-line information event was hosted by the Adoption Team in March 2025 to coincide with the launch of the Adoption animation video.

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

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

Support to Adopted adults

Since 1st April 2024, 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. The Access to Records guidance, enacted in January 2024 is on use by adoption social workers to support those seeking a copy of their original file.

A regional learning event to review of the implementation of the guidance took place in November 2024. Quarterly peer support groups take place to share practise experiences among the professionals involved in this complex and sensitive work.

Engagement with PRONI

Staff from the adoption Tema met with PRONI staff in March 2025 to share information on historical adoption records held in archives by the Trust. This engagement will continue into the next reporting period.

6.0 ADOPTION PANEL FEEDBACK

In this reporting period April 2024 to the end of March 2025, the feedback loop had to be paused due to the absence of consistent admin support staff for the adoption panel business.

7.0 ADOPTION PANEL CORE STAFF

Adoption panel chair

Ms Kate Anderson has continued in her role as Adoption panel independent chairperson.

Adoption panel advisor

Ms Pamela Robinson remains in the role of Adoption panel advisor.

Adoption panel medical advisor

Dr Heather Anderson continues in her role as medical advisor for the South Eastern Trust adoption panel.

Legal advisor to the adoption panel

Ms Jenna Boyce, DLS solicitor has continued to provide written legal advice to the adoption panel.

8.0 ADOPTION REGIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEM (ARIS)

Referrals of prospective adopters

From the 1st April 2024 – 31st March 2025, all approved adopters were notified to ARIS. The profiles of available 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

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

From the 1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025, the Trust referred twenty 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 six sets of siblings. While some profiles were received via the database checks, only one was matched with suitable carers by the period end.

During 2024/25, ARIS hosted 2 Adoption Exchange Days (27 September 2024 & 28 February 2025). These events allow prospective adopters to consider the profiles of children who are waiting for a family. 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.

Exchange day profiling was used for eight of the children in this period. This included four sets of siblings. Unfortunately, this did not result in placements for these children and their wait for a suitable adoptive family continued. Children who are waiting on a suitable placement continue to be reviewed on the pre linking panel list as more adoptive applicants become approved to adopt within the Trust.

9.0 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
- Senior social worker, Fostering Duty Team

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

- Nine sets of siblings were referred, all of whom needed a placement together.

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.

10.0 CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY IN 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 referred to the 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 and Post adoption 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.

11.0 POST ADOPTION SUPPORT

The Post Adoption team in South-Eastern Trust was formed on the 1st of March 2025. The specialist team offers support, training, advice and signposting to all families in the South Eastern area following the granting of an Adoption Order. The team is based primarily in Ballynahinch with two workers based part-time in Newtownards office.

Social workers are trained in Theraplay and in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) with two workers currently undertaking level two in DDP.

There are plans in place to commence the provision of complementary therapeutic services from within the staff team.

During the reporting period the team has worked with families offering 98 direct post adoption contacts and 32 indirect contacts. The team undertake preparation work with both the adoptive families and the birth parents around these visits.

The team has worked with approximately 104 families. The intensity of the support would vary from family to family and is dependent on the presentation of the children and their needs. The types of post adoption support offered include mentoring, training, family fun days and a range of attachment-based activities; including swimming, forest school and paddle boarding'.

The team has been liaising with schools, nurseries and colleges. Other work included updating narrative work with older children, working to support children and parents to build on their relationships in the therapeutic manner. The team also looked at help with teenagers, school moves and transitioning onto adulthood.

Advice on the use of DDP and Theraplay is part of the Teams remit.

The team will also signpost to outside groups with whom we work alongside most notably Tessa and Adoption UK and Adopt NI.

The post adoption groups are run throughout the year and target different age ranges and people at the different stages of their adoptive journey.

The post adoption team is now working under the ethos of the new adoption legislation and will be offering reviews of the post adoption plans on an annual basis for those wishing to avail of this service.

Independent counselling is also available to the adopters. Eleven people have availed of this in the last twelve months.

We have worked with the edge of care service and managed to provide intensive wrap around support to families experiencing temporary acute family stress.

The team, in conjunction with TESSA, can provide some support with regards to Art, Drama and Play based Therapies.

Within this service is the clinical psychologist to ensure all work carried out is child focused, trauma informed and delivered in suitable manner to scaffold families.

Sitting within the area of post adoption support is the 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. This type of support is delivered by social workers within the Adoption Team.

12.0 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 and establishment of new independent panel members
- Relevant training on adoption related issues.

Appendix 1

ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP

Adoption panel membership for the period 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025 is set out below.

Ms Kate Anderson	Independent Chairperson
Ms Nuala Hanna	Vice-Chairperson and Head of Service Fostering, Adoption +Permanence Interim ADM from end of April 2024- end of March 25
Dr Heather Anderson	Adoption Panel Medical Advisor
Ms Anne Quirk	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mr Raymond Havlin	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mr Kieran Donaghy	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Ms Sheryl Henderson	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Ms 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 April 2024
Ms Jenna Boyce	Panel Legal Advisor (Non –Voting) Directorate of Legal Services
Ms Pamela Robinson	Adoption Panel Advisor (non-voting)
Ms Carole Wright	Senior Admin Manager (Overseeing Panel Administration in the absence of permanent panel admin manager)

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.