



Northern Health
and Social Care Trust



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Adoption Panel

Annual Report

1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019

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Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) Adoption Panel during the year 2018-2019.

As an adoption agency, the NHSCT is required under the Adoption Agencies Regulations (NI) 1989 to establish an adoption panel of which membership and function are defined in legislation. Adoption panels have three primary functions when considering and making a recommendation to the adoption agency on:

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

Additionally, the NHSCT 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 on a foster care basis
- Providing a consultation service to the Trust on adoption issues
- Making recommendations in respect of the payment of adoption allowances
- Reviewing approved adoption applicants where issues have arisen or where there is a change in approval status or matching criteria.

Adoption Panel Membership

This year has again seen limited change to the membership of the Adoption Panel than in previous years. The Trust Board representation on the panel has remained static and the role continues to be shared between Mr Jim McCall and Mr Gerard McGivern. Mr McCall has been a full and active participant in the panel since February 2017 and Mr McGivern since March 2017. Both individuals have a range of expertise and experience, and their contributions to the panel are greatly appreciated. The social work personnel on the panel has seen some change; Mr Michael Robinson continues to be a panel member, having participated since September 2015; Ms Agnes Carey, Social Work Service Manager, now shares the role with Ms Ursula Crickard, Social Work Service Manager.

The Chair`s role continues to be fulfilled by Mrs Catherine Cassidy, who is currently interim AD for Social Care Governance. Mrs Cassidy new role in the Trust has afforded her a greater level of independence from the work brought to the Adoption Panel.

Mr Chris Johnston has joined the panel as an independent panel member, having a wide range of professional knowledge of adoption and related issues. The other independent panel members are Ms Patricia Barrett and Ms Berna Gormley. Both Ms Barrett and Ms Gormley are adoptive parents and bring a great deal of personal knowledge which is of immense value to the Panel. The independent members rotate their attendance with two members present at any given time.

Dr Feline Small and Dr Yvonne Doherty who continue to complete the medical work for the panel. Dr Small completes all the medical work for the children presented to panel and she attends the panel as medical Advisor. Dr Doherty has continued to comment on all of the adult medicals which has ensured that applications and reviews of applicants continue to be presented to the panel in a timely manner.

Mr Terry Brady remains as Legal Advisor to the panel. He is, however, no longer available to attend the panel in person but he provides any necessary advice by telephone or by email.

Mrs Eithne Daly, the Professional Advisor to the panel continues to be part of a regional group looking at the area of assessment and also at the potential implementation of CARNI and these developments will be rolled out within the Trust when available. She also chairs the Adoption Review panel

Agency Decision Maker (Not a panel member)

The Role of Agency Decision Maker has changed in the past year with Mrs Julie Patterson replacing the Assistant Director who moved to a new post.

Adoption Panel Membership as at 31st March 2019

Catherine Cassidy Head of Service	Chair Person
Agnes Carey/Ursula Crickard Social Work Service Manager	Social Work Representatives
Michael Robinson Social Work Service Manager	Social Work Representative
Berna Gormley Adoptive Parent	Independent Member
Patricia Barrett Adoptive Parent	Independent Member
Chris Johnston Retired Social Work manager	Independent Member
Dr Feline Small/Dr Doherty Associate Specialists in Community Paediatrics	Medical Advisors
Jim McCall/Gerard McGivern Non-executive Trust Board Members	Northern Trust Board Representatives
Terry Brady Solicitor with DLS	Legal Advisor (non-attending, non-voting)
Eithne Daly Adoption Services Manager	Professional Advisor (non-voting)
Collette Campbell	Panel Administrator

Executive Summary

The number of Adoption Orders granted has remained in line with 2017-2018 (15) with 16 Orders granted this year (2018-19). The number of Adoption Orders in a given year generally reflects the number of Freeing Orders the previous year, although with 20 Freeing Orders last year a few additional adoption orders are awaited. An increase in Adoption Orders would be expected next year as the number of Freeing Orders granted has increased to 26 this year as opposed to 20 in 2017-2018. All other figures relating to children have seen an increase with Best Interest decisions increasing from 24 last year to 27 this year. Members are pleased that adoption continues to be considered as a permanence option for Looked-after children for whom rehabilitation to birth families has not been possible to achieve. It is interesting to compare the adoption figures across the Trusts over the past three years and to note that the NHSCT has performed well in terms of applications, freeing orders and adoption orders in comparison to other Trusts. (See Appendix 1)

Adoption was also an option for a considerable number of older children in the past year with two children adopted after their ninth birthday. It was reassuring to note that there was a decrease this year in the timescales from Best Interests recommendation to Freeing Order with 85 % freed within twelve months of the panel recommendation.

The number of applicants approved for domestic adoption showing a significant reduction from **26** last year to **15** this year, two of whom were for specific children in their care on a fostering basis. The reduction is likely to be attributable to the regional reduction in the number of enquiries for adoption or indeed all forms of substitute care. An additional factor may be the changes experienced in the Family Placement Teams with the introduction of a specialist kinship team. While this was a very welcome and much needed development there is no doubt that there was a loss of some very experienced adoption workers.

Panel members are indebted to the many dual approved and concurrent carers recruited by the Trust for their commitment in providing care of children in an uncertain legal process. The Panel in particular welcome the continued increase in the number of applicants prepared to consider concurrent placements and appreciate at times that this can be emotional. Of the **16** children adopted, **9** had the benefit of a concurrent placement, with **8** being placed as very young infants. A further 3 were child specific assessments, one in the case of foster carers for an older sibling group and a second to allow a younger sibling to be placed with his older brother.

What is also very reassuring is that **21** of the children, who received a Best Interests decision in the past year, had been placed concurrently while a further **3** were child specific assessments. Only **4** had their Best Interest recommendation before securing their permanent placement. It is hoped that when children cannot remain in their birth family, earlier planning and the resultant reduction in the number of moves children experience in the Care system will lead to better outcomes.

Key Points – Executive Summary

1. Summary of Panel Activity during 2018-2019

i. Overview

	2018/19	(2017/18)
• Best Interest for Adoption recommendations:	27	(24)
• Children adopted:	16	(15)
• Freeing Orders granted:	26	(20)
• Matching recommendations made:	24	(21)
• Domestic adoption applications recommended for approval:	15	(26)
• Intercountry adoption applications recommended for approval:	0	(1)
• Approvals to adopt rescinded:	8	(4)
• Best Interest Decisions rescinded	1	(2)
• Placement Disruption reports	0	(1)
• Adoption reviews:	47	(56)

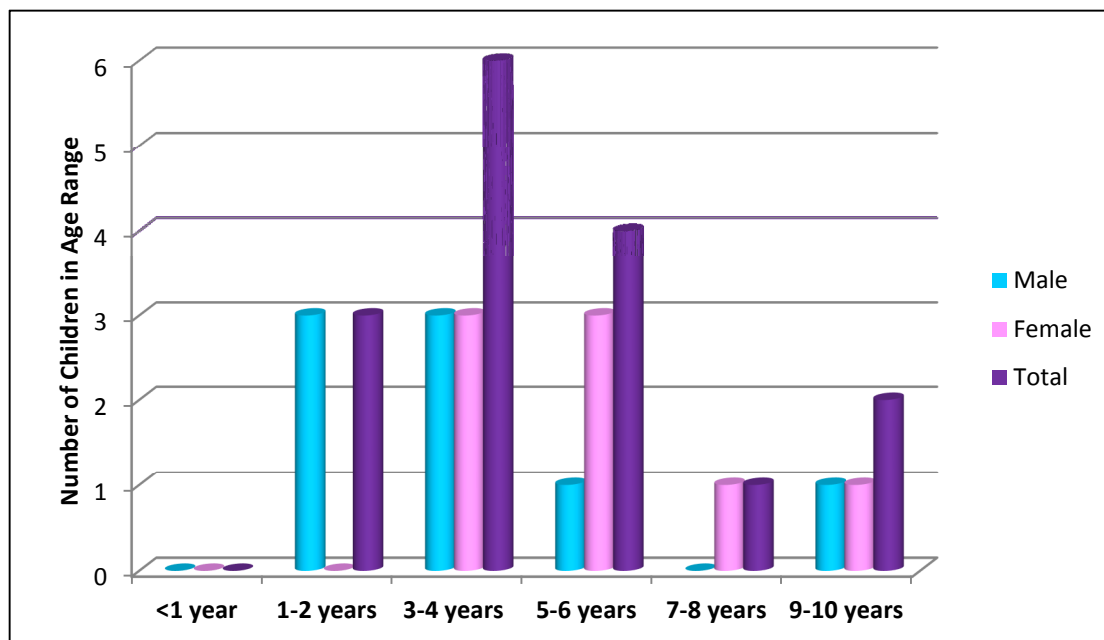
- ii. **12** full panel meetings were convened on the first Wednesday of every month, all of which were a full day in duration. In addition, given the volume of work one additional panel was convened.
- iii. The Review Panel continues to be chaired by Eithne Daly, Adoption Panel Advisor, and is also attended by Mr Michael Robinson, Team Manager, RIAAS. The total number of reviews completed was **47**. **Of these 47 reviews, 41** were considered by the Adoption panel as many required amendments to their approval status or were attached to linking and matching reports for specific children. A total of **8** adopters were de-registered by the panel, a significant increase from previous year. There are a variety of reasons for deregistration of applicants i.e., couples withdrawing from the process, placement disruptions and for some who wait for a potential placement they feel that time simply runs out for them.
- iv. The monthly Pre-Panel linking meetings (advise on the best placement options for the child/children) took place throughout the year. In total **64** children were considered by the pre-panel linking meeting, an increase from last year's figure of 56. These included **7** sibling groups of **2** children.
- v. Panel members frequently challenge placement proposals made by the pre-panel linking meetings. For this current year, however, the panel agreed with all of the placement proposals.
- vi. The high degree of congruity between social work assessments, panel recommendations and subsequent decisions by the Trust's adoption decision-maker is reassuring. This is particularly so as decisions made to place children for adoption were ultimately endorsed by courts through the granting of all but one of the freeing applications made by the Trust during the year. The Freeing Order in respect of one child remains outstanding as the Judge has not given his Judgement. This is a very difficult situation as the child has a very traumatic history and requires stability and permanence as a matter of urgency. The Trust has communicated its views on the delay in this matter on a number of occasions, but the matter remains unresolved.

2. Work with Children

i. Adoption Orders

The age of children adopted during the year ranged from **22 months** to **10 years 3 months**.

Age range of children adopted



- ii. The adoption of the oldest child, aged **10 years and 3 months** was an increase in age from last year. This young boy was adopted with his sibling who was aged **9 years and 3 months**. These two boys were adopted by their foster carers but significant delays had been encountered in the Court process with the Trust having to reapply for a Freeing Order following work with the children's' birth mother around contact. A further sibling group of three children were aged **7 years 10 months, 6 years 9 months** and **5 years 4 months** at the time of their adoption. All three children were adopted together which was very important for this sibling group who had always lived together. This situation encountered significant delays in the Court process and in fact the length of time between a Best Interest Decision being made for these children and the Freeing Order being granted was almost four and a half years. The family situation was also traumatic as the children's adoptive father lost his battle with cancer prior to the adoption.
- iii. It is reassuring that the age profile of the children overall is slightly lower than last year which signifies earlier decision making but it is also important to ensure that adoption is still at least considered as an appropriate Care Plan for all children, irrespective of their age. The youngest child adopted was just **22 months** old. This child had been placed concurrently, directly from hospital. This child was the third sibling in a family group but given the needs of the older siblings she was not able to be placed with them. Two children were adopted just after their second birthdays at aged **2 years 3 months**. They were both individually placed with older siblings, enabling them to grow up within a sibling arrangement. A further **four** children were adopted before their fourth birthday and all **four** of these children had been placed

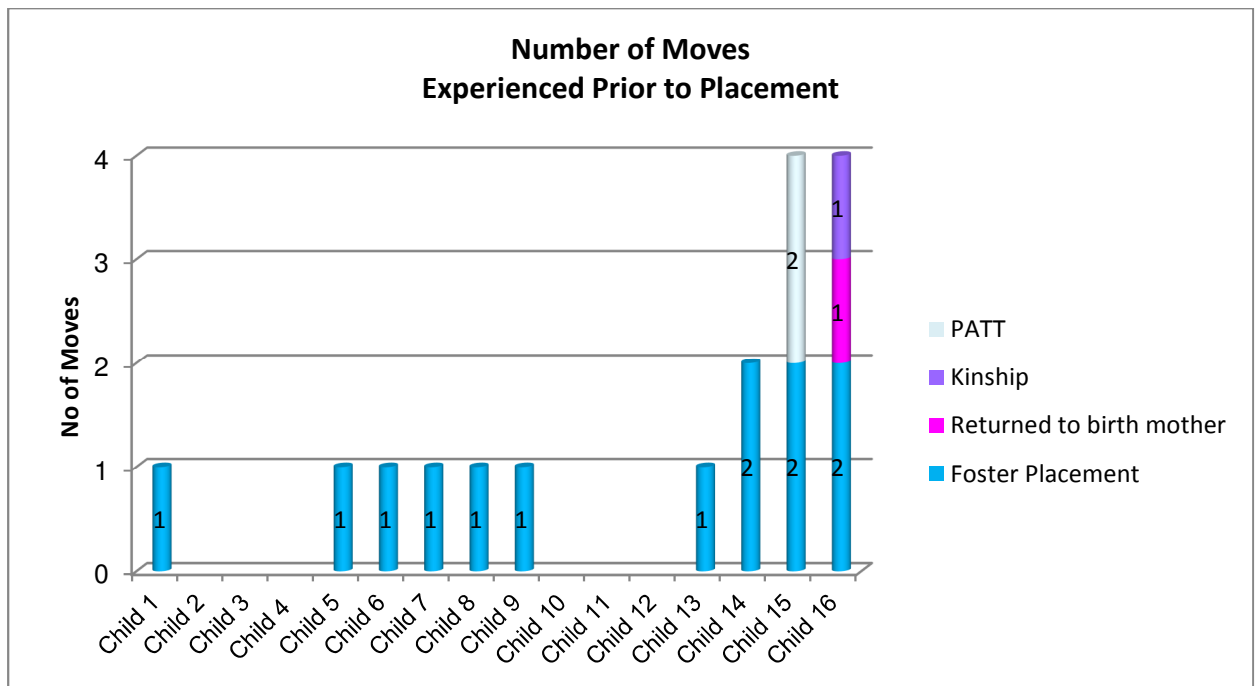
concurrently. Of the **16** children adopted, a total of **10** were placed concurrently and a further **2** were child specific assessments, the older brothers already referred to. Only **5** children had a Best Interest decision made before they were placed in their permanent home which included the sibling group of three referred to earlier.

- iv. Adoption was achieved for a total of **3** sibling groups. The figures include the sibling group of **3** who were adopted together and **2** sibling groups of **2** children, all of whom were placed together. One other child was adopted by the carers of his older sibling, enabling these two siblings to grow up together. The placement of siblings together is considered the ideal as sibling relationships are of significant importance. We continue to be very fortunate as we are generally able to place siblings together, when that is the Care Plan, something which other Trusts have struggled with and have had to use the ARIS service.

“There can be no doubt that sibling relationships can be significant. It is self-evident that they are potentially the most long-lasting. After about the age of five, more interacting goes on between children than between parents and children.”

- v. The panel continues to commend the Trust and the Family Placement Teams in particular in the availability of placements to ensure that siblings can be placed together.
- vi. Unfortunately this year there was a wider variation in the number of moves children had experienced prior to their placement with their permanent families. **4** children were placed with carers with whom they have been able to remain, all **4** being placed directly from hospital with concurrent carers who went on to adopt them. This was an increase from **2** last year.
- vii. **Seven** children had just **1** placement prior to their permanent one; this included the sibling group of three. **One** child had **2** moves, and **2** children had **4** placements prior to achieving permanence. The final sibling group of two, now aged 9 and 10 had quite a chequered history in the care system having two foster placements and a total of 15 respite placements involving a total of 6 different carers. What is very reassuring for these boys however is that their adoptive carers met them initially as respite carers and their permanent placement was secured as a result.
- viii. Kinship care can be a very important permanent option for some children. **One** child had been placed in a kinship placement from which they had to move as the placement was ultimately unable to meet their long term needs.

Key Points – Sections 1&2

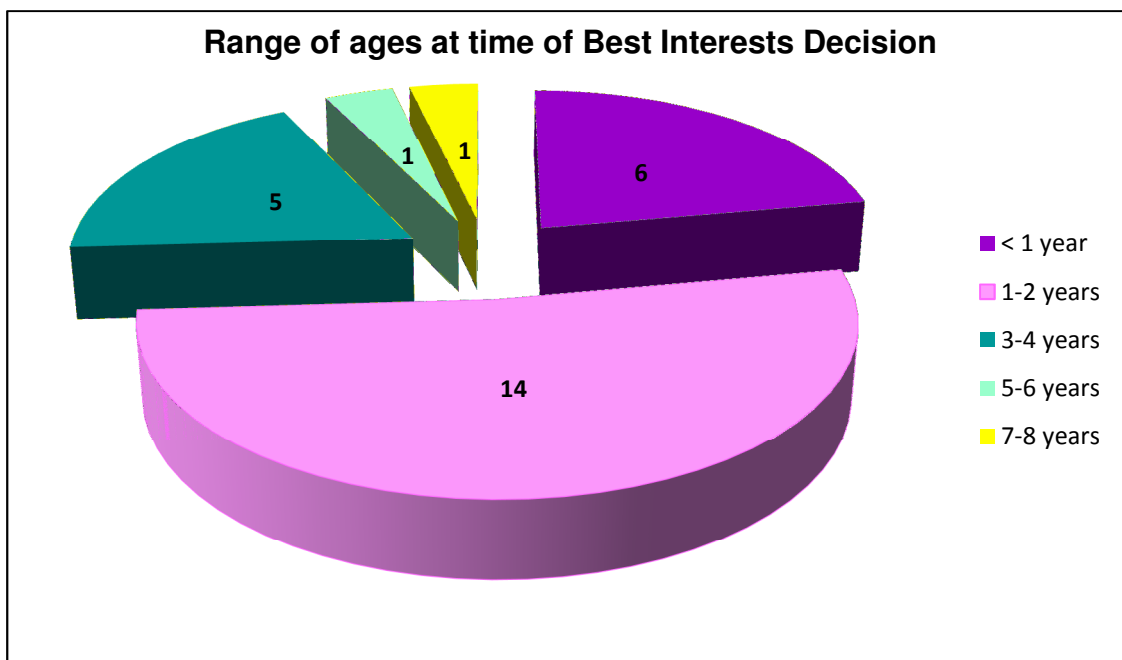


Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations

- ix. For the children adopted the timescales taken from Best Interests recommendation to Freeing Order ranged from **2 months** up to **3 years 4 months**. The average time taken from Best Interests recommendation to Freeing (excluding the case mentioned above) was approximately **18 months**. This is a significant increase from last year's average which was **9 months** and seems to indicate a trend of delays within the Court arena.
- x. Recommendations for adoption were made by the panel in respect of **27** children. Adoption was recommended for **4** sibling groups, one of three children and **3** of two children. Three of the sibling groups have been placed together. For the other two children the needs of the oldest child dictated that they should be placed separately. He was in fact in a foster placement for some time before confirming his placement as an adoptive one. The youngest sibling of the sibling group of three was not placed with her older brothers but remained in her foster placement and a child specific assessment was completed. The panel commends the Trust for its efforts in securing placements which enable siblings to be placed together.
- xi. Of the **16** children adopted during 2018-2019, an adoption allowance was paid in respect of **7** of these children. While the placement of siblings is no longer an automatic eligibility criteria it is taken into account when the overall needs of the children are considered. **Two** of the **3** sibling groups adopted were considered eligible for adoption allowances.
- xii. The age range of the children on whom Best Interest recommendations were made by the panel was from **7 months** old up to **7 years 10 months**. A total of **4** children received their Best Interest recommendation before their first birthday, and a further **9** before their second birthday. **20** children were placed concurrently thereby ensuring they will not be subjected to moves within the care system. A further **3** children were child specific assessments,

one of whom was placed directly from hospital with his older sisters. **4** children were placed on a dual approved basis.

xiii. The breakdown of ages at time of Best Interest Decision is as follows:



6 children were under 12 months, **12** children aged 1-2 years, **4** were aged 3-4 years, **1** aged 5-6 years, **1** aged 7-8 years.

xiv. All but 2 of the children for whom Best Interest for Adoption recommendations were made were already in their permanent placements, and linking reports were also completed. The two children were more difficult to place and both were presented to the Adoption Exchange Day. A placement for one child was secured in the WHSCT and although a link was made for the other child with a couple in SEHSCT, this placement did not proceed and we are looking within our own resources again.

xv. It is very positive to note that there have been no placement breakdowns this year.

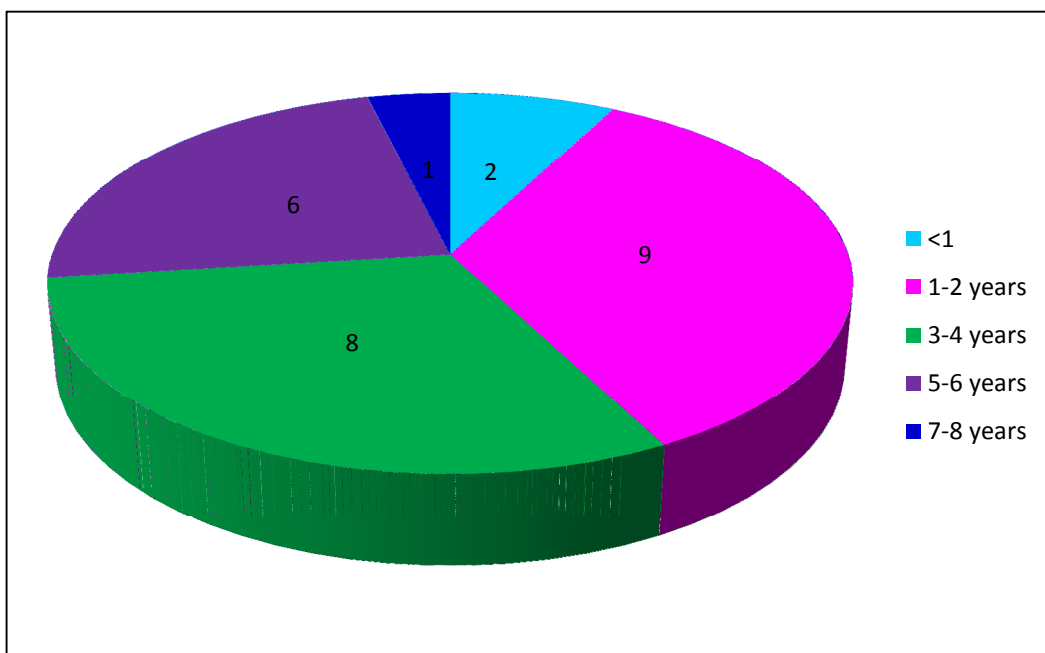
Freeing Orders

xvi. In respect of all the children adopted, the Trust was required to submit Article 18 Freeing Order applications following the recommendation of the panel.

xvii. Freeing orders were granted in respect of **26** children, a considerable increase from 20 last year. All but one of these children had been placed with their prospective adopters in advance of the final hearing, a significant factor which will have been considered by the court in making its judgement. The children on whom freeing orders were granted included **3** sibling groups of **3** including a set of triplets, and a further **4** sibling groups of **2**, three of whom were placed together for adoption. One child joined her older sibling who was already adopted, and a further child was the younger sibling of two children already placed for adoption and unfortunately this child was unable to

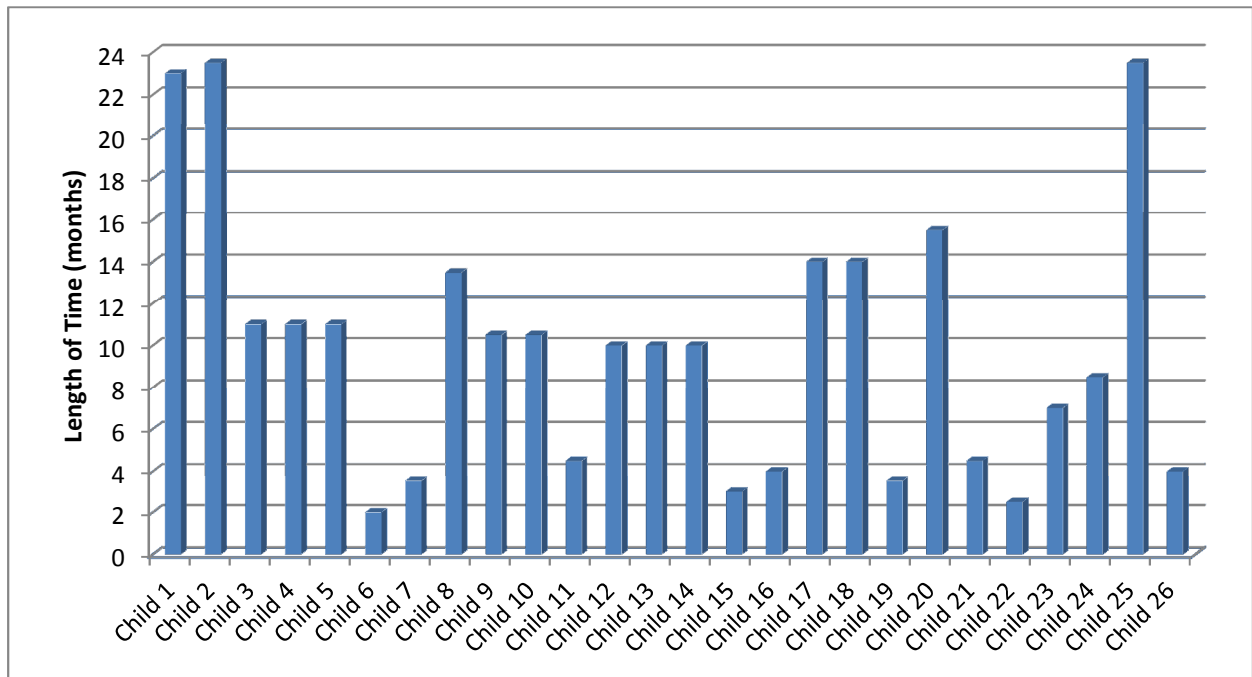
join her older siblings, who were placed together. She was however placed on a concurrent basis, directly from hospital. The panel acknowledge that this provides any child with the best possible chance of attachment to a permanent family.

- xviii. The age range of children made subject to Freeing Orders during the year was from **11 months** (a decrease from last year when the youngest child was 14 months) **up to 7years 11 months**, the oldest in a sibling group of three. The age profile at Freeing stage showed quite a variation. The breakdown of ages at time of Freeing Order is as follows, **2** children under 1 year, **9** children aged 1-2 years, **8** aged 3-4 years, **6** aged 5-6 years, **1** aged 7-8years.



- xix. The length of time between Best Interest recommendation by panel and the granting of the Freeing Order ranged from **2 months** up to **3 years 4 months**. **22 out** of the **26** children were freed within **12 months** of the panel recommendation. All **26** children were freed within two years of the Best Interest decision.

**Of the children Freed for adoption, Length of Time between
Best Interests recommendation and Freeing Order being granted**



- xx. Panel members acknowledge the hard work and commitment of these children’s social workers in their timely completion of Appendix 4 reports enabling freeing applications to be submitted to court without delay. It is very interesting to note that one of the factors highlighted by the Selwyn et al research as a contributory factor in the potential disruption of placement was the length of time it took for children to secure permanence. The Panel would therefore urge social work staff to ensure that Freeing applications are lodged as soon as possible after the Best Interest decision is made.
- xxi. Similarly, to enable prospective adopters to submit their adoption application to court at the earliest possible opportunity, the panel is anxious that social workers refer children for matching as soon as possible following the granting of their Freeing Orders. During the year, placements for adoption were recommended for **25** children, all of whom had already been placed with their prospective adopters on a foster care basis. Only two children were not in placement at the time of their Best Interest recommendation. These two children were subsequently presented to the Adoption Exchange day.
- xxii. Panel members can see the advantages for children of being placed early in the care planning process and commend the many prospective adopters who chose to live with uncertainty and impermanence in initially fostering children they hope to adopt. Their willingness to provide care of children early in the legal process of adoption is crucial in enabling children to form attachments with prospective adopters from the earliest possible opportunity. The crucial role of the Trust’s Family Placement teams in recruiting and preparing carers for this challenging task and in supporting them through the stresses of the

legal process is acknowledged. The length of time that carers are living with the uncertainty is increasing in many cases and the availability of high levels of support is crucial.

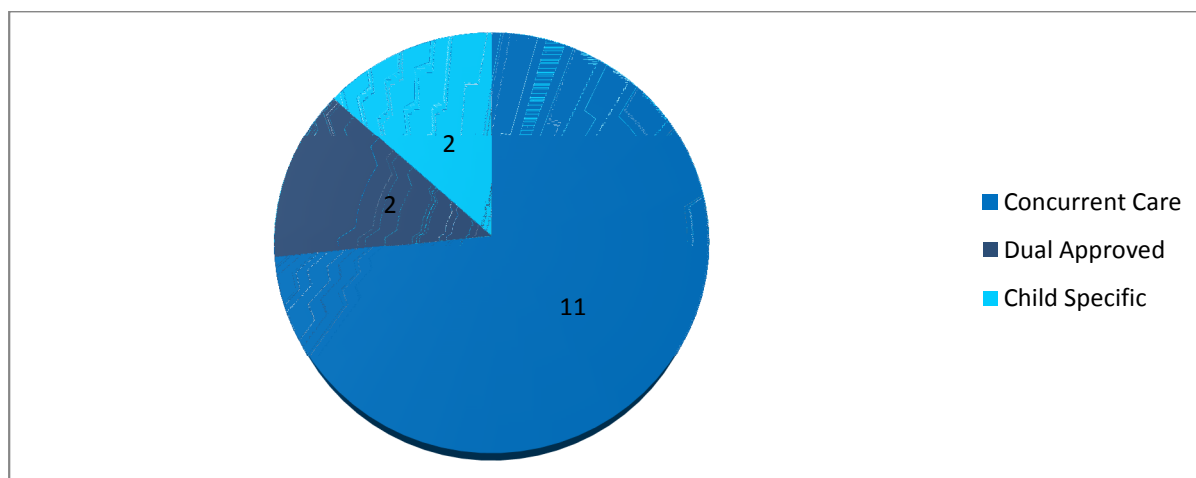
Form E Reports (Children's assessment)

- xxiii. Panel members believe that there continues to be an improvement in the quality of Form E reports presented by children's social workers. These reports provide an analysis of the issues pertaining to children and their families and not primarily a detailed chronology of events involving the child and his family. Social workers are urged to give consideration to the impact and meaning of a child's history at the age and stage of development at which they were then at. Such analysis will also make it easier to select the placement which is most likely to meet the child's needs. The panel are disappointed to see the continued use of expert/independent reports in the Court arena, something which had appeared to decrease in recent years. The expert/independent reports often reflect the conclusions already arrived at by the Trust in their assessment.
 - xxiv. Prior to the demise of BAAF in Northern Ireland a new form had been devised which was to replace the Form E. The form, CARNI has been piloted in two Trust areas and is likely to be rolled out in the other Trusts when training is provided. This form will allow for better representation for parents' views.
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3. Work with Prospective Adopters

- i. Unfortunately there was a considerable reduction in the number of new adoption applications presented to the panel. **15** new applications for domestic adoption were recommended for approval, (last year's was **26**). All applications were approved by panel although two applicants, a couple and a single carer were not approved concurrently as had been their request. The single applicant accepted her dual approved status and has gained experience through the provision of short breaks while the couple did not accept the views of the panel and subsequently withdrew completely from the adoption process.
- ii. Of the **15** new domestic applications approved during the year, **2** were for specific children in their care. All applicants wished to be approved as concurrent carers, but as outlined above the panel felt this was not the right approval status for some. The NHSCT's continued success in recruiting adopters willing to be approved also as foster carers has been crucial in enabling early permanence planning for children who require adoption. This year saw a decrease in Intercountry approval with **0** applications brought before the panel.

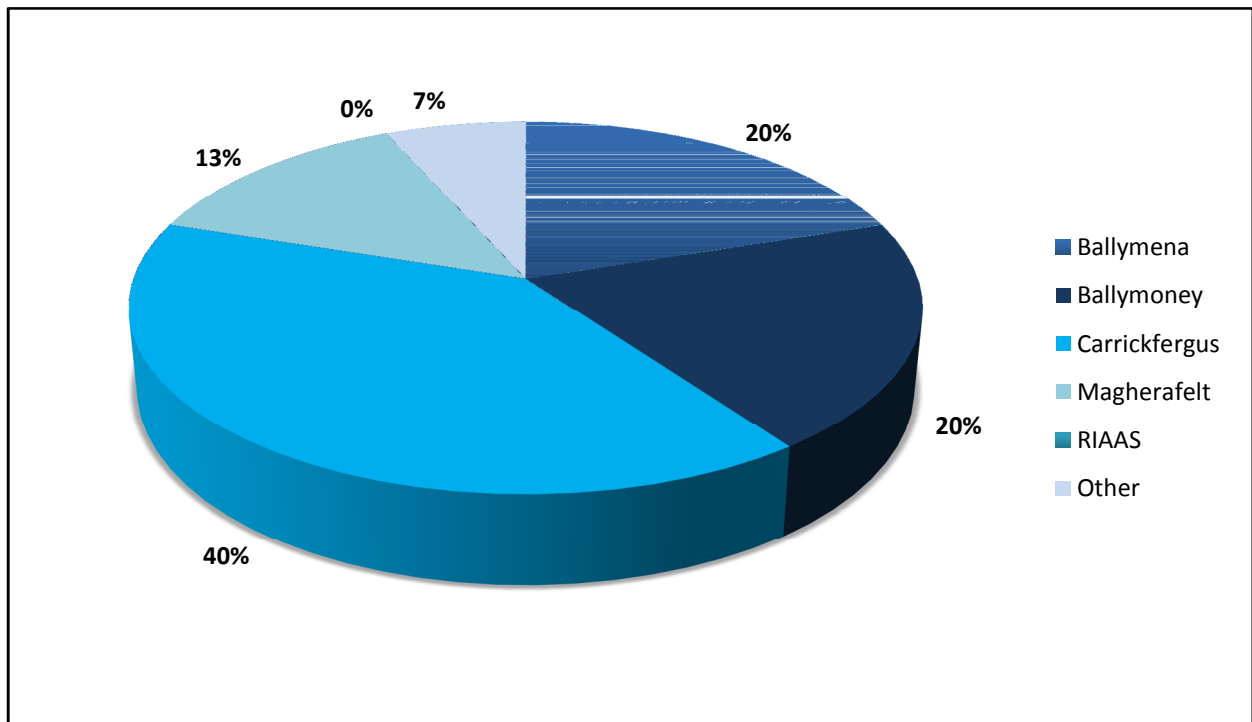
Number of Applications recommended for



- iii. The Panel is delighted with the continued increase in the number of carers able to consider concurrent placement and they remain aware of the particular challenges for carers who chose to provide placements on this basis. The training for concurrent carers is crucial as some struggle to accept their fostering status and to develop respectful links with the birth family through high levels of contact.
- iv. The majority of the applicants were first time applications with three couples making their second application and one couple applying for approval for a third time. **One** same sex male couple was approved and only **one** single applicant was approved, as outlined above on a dual approved basis only. The age range for which applicants were approved was from **0 up to 9 years** in age. **Eleven** applications were approved for children less than five years, with the large majority (7) preferring children under 3. For many prospective adopters it is important to them that they experience the early school days of their adopted children. One couple were approved for 2 children **0-6 years** old, a same sex couple and a further couple were approved for one child **3-9 years**. Four couples were approved for sibling groups of up to two children generally up to **6 years** old. It is disappointing that the number of sibling adopters has decreased slightly this year as the availability of adopters to provide sibling placements remains of crucial importance. Traditionally the Northern Trust has fared much better than other Trust's in the availability of sibling placements and to reflect this the focus of this year's Adoption Week will be the need for adopters to keep sibling groups together.
- v. The number of domestic applications approved from each area covered by the Trust's Family Placement Teams was as follows:

Ballymena	3	Ballymoney	3	Carrickfergus	6
Magherafelt	2	Independent	1	Intercountry	0

Number of Assessments completed in time frame



Form F Reports (adoption applicant`s assessments)

- vi. Form F reports on adoption applicants are generally of high quality and the panel frequently commend the assessing social worker for the quality of the assessment. However the length and quality of reports presented to panel continues to vary considerably and while panel members appreciate and expect a thorough assessment to be completed, the Form F report is intended to provide a summary of the key areas explored together with a full analysis of the implications for the applicants as prospective adopters. Two of the recommendations of the Regional workshop on assessment, an additional and earlier second opinion visit and a Family meeting to identify support, have both been incorporated into assessments. The panel have found both to be useful but continue to be particularly impressed by the Family meeting which is very beneficial in highlighting the support available to families and ensuring families are well aware of the task to be undertaken by the applicants, especially in concurrent placements.

4. Feedback from Adoption Panel Attendees

Presenting Social Workers

- i. Written information on the panel's role and the processes involved in consideration of reports on both children and applicants is circulated to social workers in advance of the panel meeting. This is particularly useful for social workers from Looked-after Children's teams some of whom have little experience of adoption or of attending a panel meeting. Social workers and senior social workers are encouraged to attend the Adoption panel in an observational capacity before they are required to present a case as it gives

them a clearer understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the panel. Presenting social workers are encouraged to provide feedback on their experience of attending panel which, like that provided by applicants, is subsequently considered by the panel. The following comments were provided by social workers during the year and, where necessary, were followed up by the Professional Advisor with team leaders:

“I found the panel conducted themselves very well. My views were listened to with respect. The recommendation was as I had wanted which I was very happy with”

“Panel members introduced themselves, discussion was appropriate to couples assessment. Questions were relevant and clearly specific to the couple.”

“I felt my contribution was valued and listened to”.

“I was given the opportunity to summarise assessment. Panel members intervened appropriately and were professional and courteous throughout.”

The organisation and smooth running of the panel is a very complex piece of work which is undertaken very capably by the Panel administrator.

Adoption Applicants

- ii. Every adoption applicant during the year took the opportunity to attend the panel meeting at which their assessment report was considered. Panel members share the view that the involvement of applicants in the meeting is beneficial in enabling questions to be raised directly. This gives panel members a greater sense of the applicants than is possible to convey in the written report or through photographs and in enabling the applicants to contribute directly to the panel process. All applicants were provided with written information in advance of their attendance at the panel meeting and invited to provide feedback afterwards. Comments received from applicants who attended during the year included the following:

“Everyone was very welcoming and we felt comfortable answering questions and made the meeting very clear and concise”.

“Made to feel relaxed during panel and members were approachable”.

“We both felt okay after the panel. Relieved to have gone through it and knowing the outcome after the panel put our minds at ease”.

“Waiting for letter from decision maker would be hardest part for confirmation of panel decision

Key Points- Sections 3&4

5. Regional Developments in Adoption

- i. Coram BAAF continues to be operational in Northern Ireland, lead by Catherine Mullin who was previously a Trainer/Consultant with BAAF. Catherine provides some training workshops and an annual Conference which is very useful for those working in this field. The ARIS register continues to be operated by the HSCB and has continued to provide a matching service for children for adoption for whom it has not been possible to identify placements within their own trust. ARIS have continued to host two Adoption Exchange Days per year and these are widely attended by carers approved within the Trust. This is in fact the first year when we profiled two children at the Adoption Exchange day. Both children received considerable interest, with one being subsequently placed in the WHSCT area and the other child being initially linked to a couple in the SEHSCT area, however they later withdrew their interest.
- ii. A regional website continues to attract some interest and now provides the vast majority of enquiries to each Trust area. It is worth noting however that the number of enquiries has reduced very significantly over the past couple of years. The Regional Team have continued to provide pre-approval training for adopters in addition to those provided by the Trust and this ensures that people have a greater variety of training opportunities and this means that prospective adoptive carers should not have to wait to receive their preparation training.
- iii. Next Step, an independent adoption counselling and support service managed by Adoption Routes, has continued to be extremely busy. A significant number of birth relatives from the NHSCT have benefitted from this service. The Professional Advisor is a member of the Next Step's advisory committee.
- iv. The TESSA project, Therapeutic Education Support Service in Adoption, funded jointly by Adoption UK and Adoption Roots have continued to provide support to some of the young people and their families experiencing difficulties in their adoption journey. Unfortunately TESSA did experience some financial difficulties in this current year so the service is more limited. Some additional funding has been made available to Trusts to augment post adoption services as there had been an acknowledgement that this is an area of work that to date has been unfunded and under resourced.

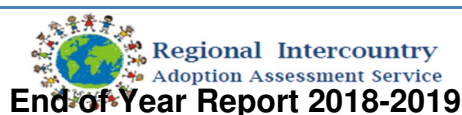
Key Points- Section 5

6. Intercountry Adoption

See addendum 1

7. Conclusion

- i. Trust Senior Management within WCF Division will continue to oversee and monitor the work of the Trust and its compliance with Adoption Policy, Procedures and Regulations including standards and Governance arrangements.
- ii. The continued close working relationship between the fieldwork and adoption social work staff, the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker are essential in ensuring planning for children and young people is appropriate and timely. In addition it is essential that front line staff and managers are adequately trained and skilled in adoption work in order to maintain standards and professionalism within this important area of work.
- iii. In moving forward into 2019/20 the panel has identified the following areas as important.
 1. To Monitor and review the standard of assessments presented at the Adoption Panel and provide feedback/training as appropriate.
 2. To follow up specific case issues where the panel consider reflection of practice with staff will lead to improvement for individual children and practice generally.
 3. To provide regular opportunities for panel members to consider issues impacting on the work of the panel.
 4. To continue to highlight delay in respect of both children and adoption applicants and to work with the Trust in minimising delay for both.
 5. To continue to learn from feedback obtained from applicants and presenting social workers attending panel.



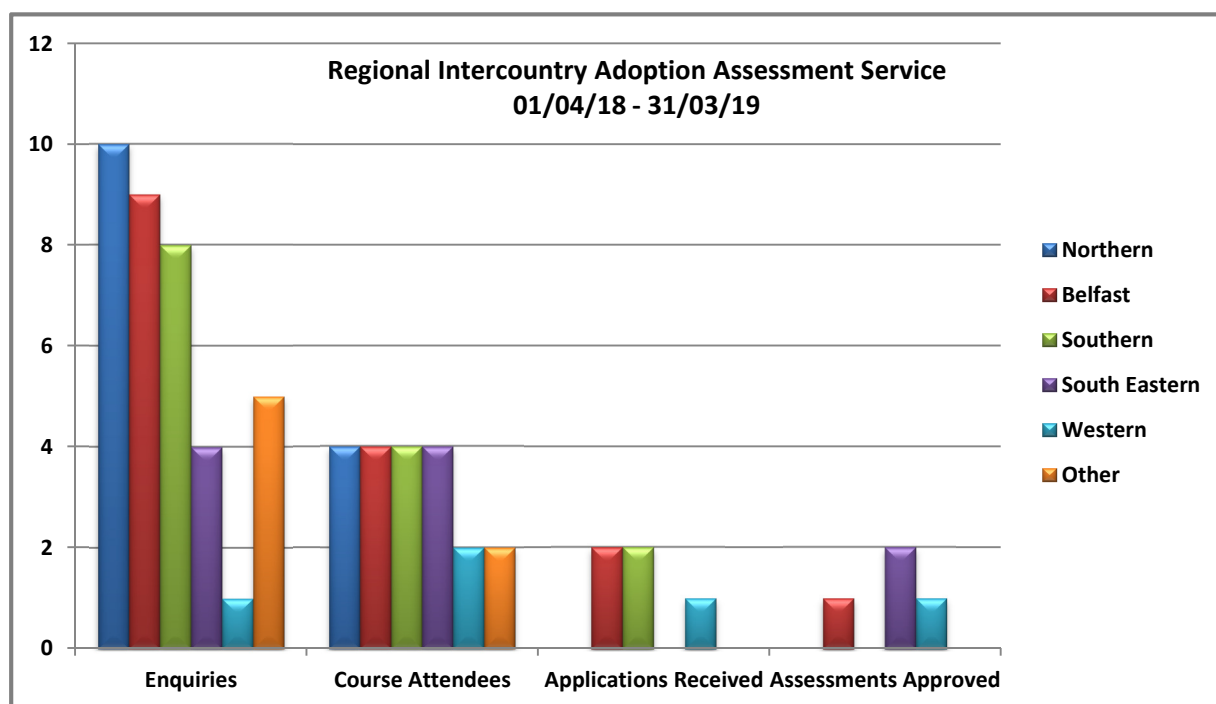
Regional Intercountry Adoption Assessment Service

Since January 2015, the Regional Intercountry Adoption Assessment Service has been providing a highly specialist service to all of those people in Northern Ireland who are interested in adopting from overseas. Under the leadership of Michael Robinson, the team of **4** sessional social workers undertake assessments spread across all Trust areas. This specialist and complex service provides a consistent high level of knowledge and expertise to all prospective overseas adopters in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

Dr Yvonne Doherty and Dr Feline Small, provide the paediatric assessments of all of the children placed for adoption in the NHSCT from overseas. Dr Doherty, or Dr Small, meet with prospective adopters following notification of a placement match and the receipt of medical reports on the child from their country of origin. This service is invaluable to prospective adopters in reaching a decision on whether to accept the proposed placement

The Regional Intercountry Adoption Assessment Service (RIAAS) continues to meet the demand of enquiries, training, assessment and support for people who wish to adopt in this manner.

During 2018-2019, the service received **37** enquiries. Of these, **21** consultations were held. RIAAS facilitated **2** Information Days and **2** Preparation Courses which all have received excellent feedback from those in attendance (**20** attendees/**10** couples). **Five** applications were received during the time period. One couple withdrew their application as they decided to adopt domestically, and **4** assessments were undertaken, all of which were approved by the respective Adoption Panel. There were no applications or assessments within the NHSCT area. In addition, **1** child was placed from Thailand. The entry of children into the Trust from overseas involves a significant amount of complex work.



The graph below illustrates, by Trust, the amount of activity within the timeframe:

Developments in RIAAS

Thailand continues to be one of the countries with the highest levels of applications from the region. Thailand operates on a quota system for the amount of applications they receive per year. The United Kingdom was granted a quota of 8 applications this year of which Northern Ireland was allocated 5 of these 8.

The question arises, why are numbers of applications to RIAAS dropping? Over recent years the number of applications to be assessed has seen a drop from 15 in 2015-2016 to 5 during 2018-2019. This drop in applications can be due to a number of factors:

- Previously, applicants were motivated to adopt from overseas so they would be placed with a younger child than they would be domestically. With the development of the domestic concurrent process, applicants can be placed (on a fostering basis) with very young children.
- Intercountry adoption used to be thought of to be a quicker way to get a placement. However, again with the concurrent process, applicants are often approached about potential placements relatively soon after approval.
- Intercountry adoption used to be considered as a less 'risk' option. However, we have seen countries such as Ethiopia close, as well as more stringent eligibility criteria for other countries. The risks associated with considering a domestic adoption on either a concurrent or dual approved basis is now seen as more informal.
- A significant amount of initial enquiries have resulted in applicants deciding to consider domestic adoption rather than intercountry adoption. This has been due to careful explanation of processes, the benefit of positive birth family

contact, development of adoption support services as well as a realistic expectation of cost and timescales.

Conclusion

Intercountry adoption remains a very fluid and changing area of expertise. In the last year there have been a number of developments from concerns about the process in Ethiopia, development of adoptions from South Africa, the quota of five applications per year remaining in Thailand and enquiries continuing for many other areas of the world. It continues to be essential to provide a regionally consistent service to prospective adopters from overseas, giving realistic expectations and a professional service.



Michael Robinson
Senior Social Worker
RIAAS

Definitions

Concurrent Carers – Approved as both prospective adopters and foster carers. Perform the role of foster carers as soon as the child becomes looked after. These carers look after the child as foster carers while the Trust and the courts decide whether or not a child returns to its birth family. If this is not possible and the child is subsequently freed for adoption, these same carers can then apply to adopt the child. Such placements avoid multiple moves for a child and the associated impact on the child's attachments.

Dual approved Carers – Approved as both prospective adopters and as foster carers. The child will be placed on a fostering basis with these carers after the 'Best interest Decision' is made by the Adoption Panel. These carers will then be able to apply to adopt this child after he or she has been freed for adoption. A dual approved placement would carry less risk of the child being returned home to birth parents or family as the Trust Adoption Panel has made a Best Interest Decision.

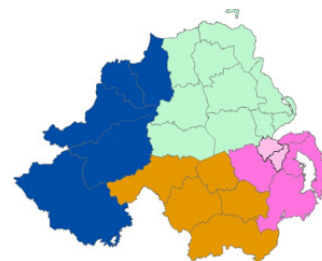
Child Specific Assessment – Where applicants have applied to adopt a specific child and their abilities will be assessed against the specific needs and circumstances of that child.

Kinship Care – Providing care of children by relatives or, in some cases, close family friends with a specific attachment of relationship with the child.

BAAF – British Association for Adoption and Fostering

CAR NI – Child Adoption Report Northern Ireland

Appendix 1
Regional summary of adoption activity from 2016 - 2019



1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019

Trust	Domestic Applications	Inter-Country Applications	Freeing Orders	Adoption Orders
Belfast Trust	16	<5	21	23
Northern Trust	24	0	26	16
South Eastern Trust	16	0	16	14
Southern Trust	21	<5	16	8
Western Trust	9	<5	15	21
Total	86	5	94	82

1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018

Trust	Domestic Applications	Inter-Country Applications	Freeing Orders	Adoption Orders(All Categories)
Belfast Trust	25	1	20	17
Northern Trust	28	1	20	17
South Eastern Trust	16	2	13	26
Southern Trust	23	1	13	19
Western Trust	17	0	15	20
Total	109	5	81	99

1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017

Trust	Domestic Applications	Inter-Country Applications	Freeing Orders	Adoption Orders
Belfast Trust	16	4	10	26
Northern Trust	42	6	19	48
South Eastern Trust	16	4	16	20
Southern Trust	5	1	12	16
Western Trust	19	0	21	29
Total	98	15	78	139

Our Vision

To deliver excellent integrated services in partnership with our community

If you would like to give feedback on any of our services please contact:

Email: user.feedback@northerntrust.hscni.net

Telephone: 028 9442 4655



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