

# Adoption Panel Annual Report



**1 April 2017 - 31 March 2018**



## Overview

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the South Eastern HSC Trust Adoption Panel work from 1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018.

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 can 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 South Eastern HSC Trust 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.

## Introduction

This is the fifth Annual Report for the South Eastern HSC Trust Adoption Panel.

The Panel has continued to sit on the first and third Tuesday of each month and will normally sit for a half day, although it can be extended in time, or additional Panels scheduled if required.

The membership of the Panel has seen minimal changes over this review period:

- Mr Jonathan Patton and Ms Joan O’Hagan (Non-Executive Trust Board members) joined the Panel in April 2017.
- Mr David Hamilton, PSW & Manager SET Connects joining the Panel as a Social Work Representative in March 2018.

Induction and training was provided to all new members of the Panel to assist them in undertaking their new role.

The Trust would like to thank the new Panel members for their hard work and dedication since assuming their role on the Adoption Panel.

## **Panel Business Days**

The Panel held one review day during the year (5th September 2017), the discussions of this review day are outlined below.

The Panel Annual Report: In April 17- March 18 report it was agreed that it would be helpful to capture the following information.

- Capture the number of cases when it was agreed that adoption allowances would be left open
- Inclusion of adoption breakdowns
- Inclusion of information pertaining to post adoption support.

Training was discussed and the following was agreed:

- Legal training to be provided
- Training in regards to Best Interest and matching decisions
- Additional training for new members to include the use of Case Studies.

Appraisal options for the Panel were discussed and it was agreed this would be further explored.

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

The Panel will normally have a set agenda of three cases per panel, an additional slot is available to address urgent matters or for seeking Panels advice. The fourth slot is consistently used, and on occasions, additional Panel days are still required during the year.

# ADOPTION PANEL

1 April 2017 - 31 March 2018

## Adoption Panel Membership for this period is set out below:

Mrs Kate Anderson	Independent Chair Person
Mrs Lisa Hine	Vice-Chair Person & Head of Service Fostering Adoption
Dr Heather Anderson	Medical Advisor
Dr Maura Briscoe Non-Executive Trust Board Member	South Eastern HSC Trust Board Representative
Mrs Joan O'Hagan Non-Executive Trust Board Member	South Eastern HSC Trust Board Representative
Mr Jonathan Patton Non-Executive Trust Board Member	South Eastern HSC Trust Board Representative
Mrs Janine Walker	Independent Member <b>(on a break from Panel duties)</b>
Mrs Nicola Cherry	Independent Member
Mrs Sandra Ruddell	Independent Member <b>(on a break from Panel duties)</b>
Mrs Claire Brennan	Independent Member
Mr Stephen McVey	Independent Member
Ms Sara Tibbs	Independent Member
Ms Dorothy Riordan	Independent Member
Mr Wesley Graham	Independent Member
Mrs Ann Walsh	PSW Cared For Children (Social Work Representative)
Mrs Gillian Forrest	Principal Practitioner – Court (Social Work Representative)
Ms Lorraine Noade	PSW Cared For Children (Social Work Representative)
Mr David Hamilton	PSW, SET Connects Manager & PSW Family Centre (Social Work Representative)
Dr Michael Hoy	Assistant Director & Trust Agency Decision Maker**
Ms Sinead Owens Ms Emma O'Neill Directorate of Legal Services	Panel Legal Advisors Non-Voting
Dr Kerry Sweeney Consultant Psychologist	Provision of advice when required
Mr Conor Smyth	Adoption Panel Admin Manager
Ms Carole Wright	Administration Manager (oversees process in the absence of Mr Smyth)

\*\*It is the role of the Agency Decision Maker to review the Adoption Panel recommendation and any other matter they feel necessary, before making a decision on behalf of the Trust. The Agency Decision Maker can approve the recommendation, refuse the recommendation, ask for additional information or request further work is completed.

## Summary of Panel activity

During this period the Panel continued to meet on the **first** and **third** Tuesday of each month and had an allocated time frame of a half a day.

A summary of Panel business is as follows:

### Children

Panel Business	2017/18	2016/17
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations	<b>Twenty-Two</b>	<b>Thirteen</b>
Children Adopted	<b>Twenty-Two</b>	<b>Seventeen</b>
Freeing Orders Granted	<b>Thirteen</b>	<b>Sixteen</b>
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations Rescinded	<b>Two</b>	<b>Four</b>
Matching Recommendations Made	<p>Twenty-two in total</p> <p>Of these, <b>Eleven</b> were informal matches and <b>Eleven</b> were formal matches - relating to <b>Eighteen</b> children in total - ie. that some of the children were informally matched, and then formally matched within the 12 month reporting period)</p>	<p><b>Thirty-Two in total</b></p> <p>Of these, <b>Sixteen</b> were informal matches and <b>Sixteen</b> were formal matches- relating to <b>Twenty-One</b> children in total. - ie. that some of the children were informally matched, and then formally matched within the 12 month period)</p>

The number of children who received a Best Interest decision has increased to **twenty-two**, an increase of **nine** from the previous reporting period. The best interest figures since the 2014/2015 reporting period are **twenty**, **twenty-four**, **thirteen**, and **twenty-two**. This gives an average of **twenty**.

**Nine** children were booked into Panel for a Best Interest recommendation, but were later withdrawn from the original date offered. **One** had a change of care plan to kinship foster care after a relative came forward. The other **eight** children have been rebooked into Panel for best interest. The reasons for these delays included; kinship carers coming forward to be assessed, Court processes impacting on Care Planning and further assessment required. Whilst every attempt was made to fill any gaps arising in the Panel schedule, this was not always possible, therefore leaving some lighter panels. On other occasions, some Panels were oversubscribed and it has proved difficult to achieve consistency of cases being presented. This can cause a knock on effect in panel booking at the time of request for a panel date.

The number of adoptions in the year has risen from **seventeen** to **twenty-two** in this reporting period. This trend can often be seen following a higher number of Freeing Orders granted the previous year.

Of the **eighteen** children that were matched formally or informally, **one** was matched with kinship carers, **two** were matched with their Home on time concurrent carers following the child's Best Interest recommendation, one was matched with their foster carer, one with relatives of her foster carers, and one with connected person's foster carers. **Twelve** of the children were matched with strangers. **Eight** of these were matched in Trust placements. **One** was matched through a link through ARIS, and three further children were matched through ARIS to Family Care Society placements outside of the Trust.

The profile of the **twenty-two** children where the Adoption Panel made Best Interest Recommendation is broken down as follows:

	2017 / 2018	2016 / 2017
Single Children	<b>Twelve</b>	<b>Ten</b>
Siblings	<b>Two</b> sets of <b>two</b> children <b>Two</b> sets of <b>three</b> children	<b>One</b> set of <b>Three</b> children
Best Interest recommendations rescinded	<b>Two</b>	<b>Four</b>

It is interesting to note that the number of siblings being presented for Best Interest decision has increased significantly in comparison to the last reporting period, which may be a reflection of the detailed assessments that are undertaken in respect of the needs of each child and whether they are better placed 'together or apart'. Due to the complexity of their needs, none of these ten children are being placed together for adoption. It is also noted that six of the "single" children were the youngest of a larger sibling group who are also known to social Services through being in care or having been adopted. It is acknowledged that the age of a child at placement is a significant factor in relation to achieving placement stability. The Trust therefore is working towards identifying and placing children at the earliest juncture.

The legal profile of the children being referred to the Panel for a Best Interest Recommendation has remained constant with the majority having interim or full Care Orders in placed at the time of Panel.

Legal Profile	2017 / 2018	2016 / 2017
Voluntarily Accommodated / relinquished for adoption	<b>One</b>	<b>One</b>
Interim Care Order	<b>Ten</b>	<b>Three</b>
Care Order	<b>Seven</b>	<b>Thirteen</b>
No Order	<b>Four</b>	<b>Zero</b>

## Freeing Orders

During the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018, **thirteen** children were Freed for Adoption, **eleven** of which were male and **two** were female. The youngest of these children to be freed was **five** months old. The oldest to be Freed was **seven** years old. **Six** children were placed on a dually approved basis pre-freeing and **one** was in a Home on Time placement. This reflects best practice as the process of dual approval ensures the children are placed with the adopters at an earlier stage, thus aiding and improving the attachment process.



The children freed for adoption included **four** single children, **three** were the youngest of sibling groups where the older children were in foster care. **Three** sibling sets of **two** children were freed.

**Seven** of the **twenty-two** children who received Best Interest recommendations have already been placed with their new carers, with informal matching Panels being scheduled for a further **six** children. The Trust continues to seek placements for **four** children. **Two** older children are likely to have their care plans altered to long term foster care to remain with their current carers who wish to care for them long term. **Three** foster carers have asked to be assessed to adopt the child in their care currently.



## Prospective Adoptive Parent

### Domestic applications where recommendations were made at Panel

	2017 / 2018	2016 / 2017
Domestic Adoption Applications Recommended for Approval by Panel	Fourteen	Fifteen
Category of Applications	<p><b>2017 / 2018</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dual Approval Applications (9)</li> <li>Straight Adoption (0)</li> <li>**Foster Care Approved (4)</li> <li>Concurrent (1)</li> </ul> <p><b>** Two of these were kinship carers</b></p>	<p><b>2016 / 2017</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Dual Approval Applications (5)</li> <li>Straight Adoption (0)</li> <li>**Foster Care Approved (9)</li> <li>Concurrent (1)</li> </ul> <p><b>* One was child specific, but was neither Kinship nor Foster Care</b></p> <p><b>**Six of these were Kinship</b></p>
Approval ranges amended	<p><b>One</b></p> <p><b>One</b> couple's age range of acceptance changed from 0 - 5 to 0 - 7 years</p>	<p><b>One</b></p>
Approvals deferred	<b>Zero</b>	<b>Zero</b>
Approvals to Adopt Rescinded by Panel	<b>Zero</b>	<b>Zero</b>
Adoption Reviews	<b>Eight</b>	<b>Nine</b>
Approved Adoption Applicants on Trust Adoption Register as of 31 March	<b>Eleven</b>	<b>Nine</b>
Approved Adoption Allowances for this period	<b>Eleven</b> households ( <b>Eleven</b> children)	<b>Nine</b> households ( <b>Twelve</b> children)
Total Number of Adoption Allowances Paid	<b>Seventy-Two</b> households, which corresponds to <b>Eighty-six</b> children	<b>Sixty-one</b> households, which corresponds to <b>Eighty-two</b> children

Of the **Fourteen approvals**, **ten** were dual approval / concurrent carers, and four were foster / kinship carers. This change in trend from the previous reporting period is reflective of an increase in recruitment and assessment activity by the Adoption Team. These recruitment activities included promotion of National Adoption Week in October 2017 via the Internet mainly which promoted existing adopters experiences, and an information evening on 27 November 2017 in La Mon House. The Adoption Team was also involved in the Til I Grow Up Event on 22 February 2017 in the Crowne Plaza, Belfast in conjunction with the Trust Fostering service. The Adoption team are currently working with Adoption Services across the region to plan for a regional recruitment campaign during October 2018.

## **Domestic applications for assessment received by the Trust Adoption Team**

In total **twenty-two** applications from prospective adoptive parents were received by the Trust Adoption Team between the period 1 April 2017 - 31 March 2018.

During this period, **six** of the **twenty-two** applications were presented to and recommended for approval by the Adoption Panel. These six are included in the **fourteen** domestic adoption applications recommended for Approval by Panel between the period 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018. **Two** of the applicants subsequently withdrew. The remaining **thirteen** applications received are at various states in the assessment process, and as they applied later in the reporting period of 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018, they have not yet been presented to Panel for a recommendation for approval. These applications will be presented to the Adoption Panel upon completion and addressed in the next Adoption Panel Annual Report.

All stranger adoptive applicants during this period have been dually approved. This change has been maintained from the previous year. **One** couple have been approved as concurrent carers.

## **Adoption Reviews**

Following the approval of prospective adopters, the social worker should visit and review their circumstances on a 6 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 18 months of being approved as prospective adoptive parents.

## **Adoption Allowances**

A recommendation that Adoption allowances should be paid was made in respect of **eleven** children during 1 April 2017 - 31 March 2018. In total, adoption allowances were paid to **seventy-two** households. This was in relation to forty-six male and forty female children (**eighty-six** in total).

Due to the complex histories of some of the children being presented to Panel, the Panel, at the point of the formal match, have recommended that payment of adoption allowance are left open for **five** children for future consideration. This ensures that if the needs of the child changes as they grow and develop, adoption allowances can be claimed to provide additional support if required.

## Number of Domestic Adoption applications (by Trust Area)

Area	2017 / 2018	2016 / 2017
North Down	Eight	Seven
Lisburn	Seven	Four
Downpatrick	Six	Five

The figures above demonstrate that the number of people applying for adoption is spread evenly across the Trust.

Information evenings take place annually. The Trust places advertisements in newspapers, advising of the date and venue in advance, and these information evenings are usually well attended.

The Trust plan to continue to offer a range of options in the future, i.e. dual approval, concurrent care, straight adoption (after the granting of a Freeing Order), however it is envisaged that the vast majority of adoptions will continue to remain in the dual approval category.

It is pleasing to note that it is now the norm for all applicants to attend the Panel when their adoption application is being considered.

Applicants are now provided with an information booklet which outlines Adoption Panel membership and what to expect on the day of their attendance. This is currently being updated to reflect the changes to panel composition over the last 2 years.

## South Eastern HSC Trust referrals to the Adoption Regional Information Service (ARIS)

### Prospective Adopters

From the 1 April 2017 - 31 March 2018, the profiles of **fourteen** approved adopters from the Trust were notified to ARIS. Of these approved adopters, **four** were kinship / foster carers and were referred only for statistical purposes. The remaining **ten** were 'stranger' adopters. **Seven** of these were identified for placements within our own Trust, and therefore did not go 'live' on ARIS.

### Children

**Twenty-two** children from the Trust were notified to ARIS as having a Best Interest recommendation in this reporting period.

From the 1 April 2017 - 31 March 2018, the Trust referred **ten** new children to ARIS for matching, as no suitable matches were available within the Trust area. **Two** have resulted in placements through the process of the Exchange day.

ARIS Exchange Days are arranged and facilitated by Health and Social Care Board. This is a process where Trusts within the region profile children that they have experienced difficulty obtaining a placement for. There are normally **two** exchange days per year, whereby the child's social worker will be in attendance and available to answer any questions prospective adoptive parents may have. Pictures and videos of the children form part of the social work presentation. Prospective adoptive parents who are 'live' on ARIS are invited to attend each Exchange day.

There were **two** ARIS Exchange days in the period (May and November 2017) At the May 2017 event, the Trust profiled **four** single boys ranging in age from **three** to **seven**. **One** of these has resulted in a placement. Another of these children went on to be matched with carers from the Trust; the other **two** were the children whose best interest recommendations had been rescinded in the year.

At the November 2017 event the Trust profiled **five** children in total; **four** girls and **one** boy. This generated a lot of interest and resulted in **one** placement for a **three** year old girl with complex developmental needs. The **two** older girls who are siblings placed together had no expressions of interest and are likely to remain in long-term foster care. The **one** male child is to remain with his current foster carers after a thorough exploration of his developmental needs. The Best interest regarding these 3 children will be rescinded within the coming year.

These events are a good way of accessing the pool of approved prospective adopters across the region, though are very time consuming in the preparation and follow up, sadly not always resulting in a suitable placement being found.

## Northern Ireland Regional Overview - Orders Granted

	2017/2018	2016/2017
Placement Adoption Orders granted	<b>Eighty-Five</b>	<b>123</b>
Step-parent adoptions	<b>Twelve</b>	<b>Twenty-Two</b>
Adoption Abroad	<b>Zero</b>	<b>Zero</b>
Adoption Relative	<b>Two</b>	<b>Four</b>
Intercountry Adoption	<b>Zero</b>	<b>Four</b>
Freeing Orders	<b>Eighty-Three</b>	<b>Eighty-One</b>

## Intercountry Adoption in the South Eastern HSC Trust

Number of Adoption Applications approved by Panel via Intercountry Adoption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Three</b></li> <li>• <b>One</b> couple were approved as potential adoptive parents for one female child aged 0-2 years, or twin female or female / male siblings aged 0-3 years from Thailand</li> <li>• <b>One</b> couple were approved as potential adoptive parents for one child of either gender aged 0-3 years from the Philippines, or twin siblings aged 0-3 years from the Philippines.</li> <li>• <b>One</b> couple were approved as potential adoptive parents for one female child, aged 0 to 18 months, from Thailand</li> </ul>
Adoption Orders Granted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Two</b></li> </ul> <p>(in respect of <b>two</b> female children, both from Thailand)</p>
***Change of acceptance range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>One</b></li> </ul>

\*\*\*Issues arose in respect of one intercountry adoption application. This was in relation to a couple who travelled to the Philippine's to meet a child, and following this it was evident that this child had significant medical issues that had not been previously known to them. This was a painful experience for the couple, and unfortunately they felt they were not in a position to proceed with the placement, and subsequently revised their matching criteria. The Trust liaised with the Department and the Filipino Authorities throughout this matter, with the Filipino Authorities subsequently acknowledging and accepting full responsibility that full medical information had not been disclosed. Trust learning in this regard is to ensure that should any concerns of a similar nature arise in the future, these should be robustly challenged from the outset.

Applications and placements have been from Hague convention ratified countries (eg. Thailand, Philippine's). Hague convention placements (with the exception of the Philippines) do not require an application to the High court for an Adoption Order under Northern Ireland legislation. All Hague convention placements are carried out under an entrustment or private fostering arrangement.

The Regional Team for Intercountry Adoption undertake the assessment of all inter-country applicants. The Trust now complete post placement assessments, reviews and reports, which is an additional and new area of work, however as noted above the numbers are small.

In April 2016 inter-country adoption cases for the South Eastern Trust transferred from Belfast Trust to the South Eastern HSC Trust. We currently have four inter-country cases; one has had a placement in 2017 / 2018. These placements require support, statutory visits and reviews.

## South Eastern HSC Trust Pre-Adoption Linking Panel

The Pre-Adoption Linking Panel meets on a monthly basis. The current make-up of the Panel includes:

- PSW for Adoption (Chairperson)
- PSW for Safeguarding
- SSW for Permanence
- SSW for Adoption
- Psychologists, SET Connects
- PSW for Fostering.

The Pre-Adoption Linking Panel is now well established in the Trust and has continued to identify potential links between children and prospective adoptive parents. The Panel is considering potential matches at an earlier stage which is having a positive outcome for the children presented. This has helped to speed up the placement process by enabling possible placements for children to be identified at an earlier stage thus shortening delay.

The Pre-Adoption Linking Panel also facilitates a transparent process of reviewing matches considered for prospective adoptive parents. A matching criterion is used following presentations in respect of the children.

The Adoption Panel and Pre-Adoption linking panel will be engaging in joint training provided by independent panel chair from Scotland in June 2018, focusing on research and Panel experiences around pre linking considerations.

## Summary of Pre-Adoption Linking Panel Business

### Children

- **Twenty-eight** children have been considered at the Pre-Adoption Linking Panel during the reporting period. Of these, **twelve** were male and **sixteen** were female. **Five** of these children were sibling groups (**two** groups of **two** and **three** groups of **three**)
- The age range of the children considered at the Pre-Adoption Linking Panel ranged from **eleven** months to **seven** years and nine months old.

### Prospective Adoptive Parents (applicants)

- **Sixteen** couples were considered in respect of potential matches during this period
- Matching criteria was applied in respect of the prospective applicants and on occasions, couples may have been considered for more than one child.

## Summary

The Adoption Panel continues to have a high volume of work being presented to Panel which has been managed within the panel timetables, without the need for additional panels throughout the year. All new Panel members have received induction training and they have contributed fully and positively to the discussions prior to any recommendation being made.

A full one day training course 'Working with Gay and Lesbian Adopters' took place in June 2017 for Panel members. Further training is due to take place in June 2018 regarding Best Interest decisions and matching considerations.

Although there has been a further slight decrease in the number of Freeing Orders granted in this reporting period by **three** to **thirteen**, the number of children being adopted has increased by **nine** to **twenty-two**, which is an excellent improvement and a positive outcome for the children and families.

**Twenty-two** children were matched with prospective adopters over the reporting period, a decrease of **seven**. **Eleven** of these were children with Best Interest recommendations who were matched informally, enabling them to be placed with prospective adopters on a fostering basis while awaiting the outcome of the Court process for Freeing. The remaining eleven children were matched formally with prospective adopters following the granting of a Freeing Order.

While the concept of informal matching and placement of children with dual approved adopters is without doubt in the Best Interests of the child/ren, enabling them to be placed with adopters at an earlier stage and improving the attachment process, it does however have a detrimental impact on the operation of the Panel. Panel business has increased significantly over the last few years as a recommendation is made in respect of the informal match, and following the granting of a Freeing Order, the same case is required to return to Panel for a second time for consideration of a formal match. This matter is currently being considered as part of amendments to legislation proposed by the Adoption & Children's Bill.

The Trust adoption service has continued to embed a service restructure with post adoption support now being offered by the permanence team within the Trust. This realignment of post adoption support away from the adoption team was aimed at addressing the need for the Trust to increase the number of adoption assessments being completed. As highlighted within this report, the Trust has doubled the number of assessments of dual approved / concurrent applications. Despite the Adoption Team being impacted by staffing shortages over the last year, an increase in recruitment and assessment activity has been achieved over the past twelve months by utilising support from the independent adoption agency sector.

The anticipated adoption reform as set out by the Department of Health in the draft Adoption & Children's Bill was issued for consultation in the last reporting period. It is the intention of this Bill to consolidate Adoption Law in Northern Ireland, both Domestic and Intercountry. It will also add new provision to deliver adoption reform. Part two of the Bill will amend the Children (NI) Order so that the legislation is compatible. This is an on-going process and the Trust continues to remain open and engaged with the Department.

The previous reporting period noted a significant numbers of change and adjustments for the Adoption Panel. This year has enabled Panel members to gain experience in their respective roles which will enable training and reflection on adoption panel issues in the coming year.



**Mrs Lisa Hine**  
**Head of Service**

**Fostering, Adoption & Family Centres**



**Mrs Kate Anderson**  
**Independent Adoption Panel Chair**

