

# ADOPTION PANEL ANNUAL REPORT



*For Year-  
end 31st  
March  
2020*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This is the seventh Annual Report for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Adoption panel (hereafter referred to as the 'Trust')

The adoption panel has continued to sit on the first and third Tuesday of each month and will usually sit for a morning, although it can be extended in time, or additional panels scheduled if required.

The membership of the adoption panel has seen some changes over this reporting period. Ms Julie Patterson and Mr Michael Mulholland have joined as social work representatives to replace Mr David Hamilton, Mr Jason Caldwell and Ms Lorraine Noade. Ms Ruddell, Ms Tibbs and Ms Walker have all resigned from being independent panel members in this reporting period. Ms Pamela Robinson was appointed Adoption Panel Advisor in July 2019 to support the functioning of the adoption panel.

Each panel consists of an independent chair, a medical advisor, a non-executive panel member, a panel advisor, a social work representative and an independent panel member. Legal advice is provided for each panel in writing in advance of each panel.

(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 role as members of adoption panel.

The adoption 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 adoption panel will normally have a set agenda of three cases per panel, an additional slot is available to address urgent matters, or for seeking panel's advice. The fourth slot is regularly used and additional panel days are required during the year to meet demand.

## **2. OVERVIEW**

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Trust adoption panel from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020.

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 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

### **3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The adoption Panel continues to have a high volume of work being presented, which has been managed within the panel timetable. All panel members have become fully integrated into their roles on the adoption Panel and independent members have received an appraisal to assist the development of reflection, learning and identification of training needs.

- 3.1 The number of best interest recommendations made by the panel has increased significantly this year from eighteen to twenty nine. This was the highest number in the seven years of the adoption panel in Trust and the highest number across the five trusts for the year.
- 3.2 There was an increase in the number of adopters recommended for approval by the adoption panel in this period from eleven in the previous year to twenty four from 2019-2020. This was the highest number of approvals across the region. Fourteen new approvals were for dually approved or concurrent placements. This will provide greater choice in the matching process in the incoming period and will benefit children by optimising their matching considerations at pre linking panel.
- 3.3 Numbers of adopters wishing to be considered for concurrent placements has remained steady at four. The adoption team continues to promote and educate prospective adopters on this type of placement
- 3.4 Matching recommendations by the adoption panel remained high at twenty five. Twelve children were informally matched and thirteen formal matches were recommended by Adoption panel.
- 3.5 The number of former foster carers who are assessed and approved to adopt a child in their care remains high at ten. Three of the children had been placed with concurrent carers before coming to adoption panel for a best interest recommendation. Therefore those young children had experienced emotional permanence and attachment formation from an earlier stage.
- 3.6 Four children had their best interest recommendation rescinded at adoption panel in this reporting period.
- 3.7 Freeing orders granted remained relatively constant at fifteen, one less than the previous year 2018-19.

The number of Adoption Orders on Trust children was slightly higher this year. Twelve children were made subject to orders compared to nine the year 2018-19.

- 3.8 Adoption panel time was utilised more effectively in this reporting period with four additional panels having to be scheduled to meet demand and avoid delay and less gaps in panel schedules occurring due to case readiness and more forward planning with the adoption panel advisor, adoption panel admin manager and social work teams.

- 3.9 There were five training opportunities in the course of the period including signs of safety, PPANI, legal training on the use of balanced analysis of care planning options within looked after children review where the care plan changes to permanence via adoption, regional training on adoption panel and “Beyond together or apart” regarding siblings.

## 4.0 **ADOPTION PANEL BUSINESS DAY AND TRAINING**

The adoption panel held one business day during the year (11<sup>th</sup> June 2019); the discussions of this review day focused on;

- Review of the draft 2018-2019 Adoption Panel Annual Report.
- Update on adoption service developments within the Trust, including post-adoption support, permanence clinics and adoption recruitment campaigns.
- Feedback on learning from an intercountry adoption case.
- Update on special restrictions on adoption from Ethiopia.
- Learning from Court judgements regarding adoption panel reports and minutes.
- Appraisals of independent panel members. It was agreed that the adoption panel chair Mrs Kate Anderson will undertake this role in the short term.
- Adoption panel legal issues training was noted to be outstanding for panel members and was being progressed by the Adoption service.
- Feedback on panel experience in relation to the presenting social worker and prospective adopters in attendance to be taken forward

In addition to adoption panel business discussed on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019, panel members availed of training provided by Ms Emma O' Neil and Ms Sinead Owens, solicitors from Directorate of Legal Services (DLS) who act as panel legal advisors. This training was received alongside Principal social workers in Safeguarding regarding the legal implications in Looked after Child reviews and the use of balanced analysis of care options.

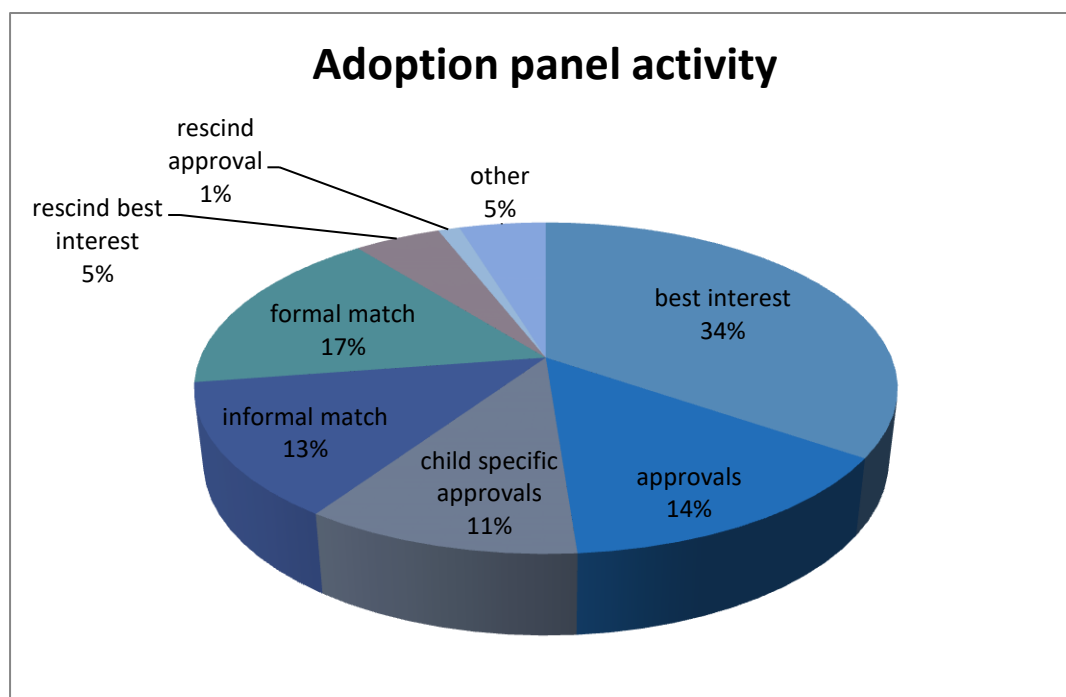
Training opportunities took place on;

11 <sup>th</sup> June 2019	- Legal training as stated above
26 <sup>th</sup> November 2019	-Regional training day on for all adoption panel members, Health and Social Care Board staff and members of the Department of Health
7 <sup>th</sup> January 2020	- Signs of safety framework delivered by Donna Dugan, Signs of safety coordinator in the trust. -Julie Smyth, PPANI Coordinator from the PSNI on the Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland, (PPANI)
10 <sup>th</sup> March 2020	-“Beyond Together or Apart” training with Shelagh Beckett

## 5.0 ADOPTION PANEL ACTIVITY

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

A summary of panel business is detailed in the chart below;



In this reporting period the highest percentage of adoption panel time was spent on best interest recommendations followed by matching considerations (30%) and 25% adoptive applicant approvals.

It is pleasing to report that no adoption panels were cancelled in this reporting period. One panel took place in July 2019 with only one case due to two last minute cancellations. In the course of the reporting period four additional panels were arranged (May 2019, September 2019, January 2020 and March 2020) to meet the demand for panel time and to avoid unnecessary delay in care planning and matching for children. 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.

Within the reporting period the adoption panel has been optimally utilised with cases being brought forward to fill gaps that inevitably arise. We would like to acknowledge the hard work of all the presenting social workers in making these possible, often providing reports for panel at short notice and highlighting the advantages of good forward planning and collaborative working.

Demand for panel time is constantly reviewed and additional panels were and will continue to be arranged to avoid a wait of more than 12 weeks for a panel date.



## 5.1 CHILDREN

<b>Panel Business</b>	<b>2019 / 2020</b>	<b>2018 / 2019</b>	
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations	<b>Twenty nine</b>	<b>Eighteen</b>	
Freeing Orders Granted	<b>Fifteen</b>	<b>Sixteen</b>	
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations Rescinded	<b>Four</b>	<b>Two</b>	
Children Adopted	<b>Twelve</b>	<b>Nine</b>	
Matching Recommendations Made	<b>Twenty five</b> Of these 12 informal and 13 formal	<b>Twenty-one</b> Of these, 3 were *informal and 18 were *formal matches	

*\*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.*

### ANALYSIS – BEST INTEREST CASES

Cases are presented to adoption panel by children 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 decision is reached at the looked after child review to refer the matter to adoption panel for an examination of whether or not the panel consider adoption to be in the child's best interest, the case is then prepared for adoption panel.

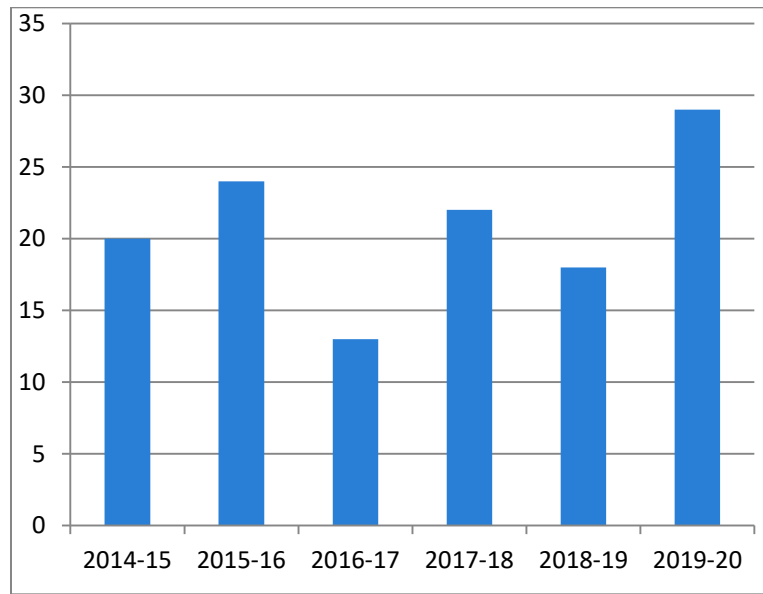
The number of children who received a best interest decision has increased to twenty nine, an increase of eleven from the previous year. Most of the children presented for best interest recommendation went through panel on the first presentation.

This figure demonstrates a number of factors working together;

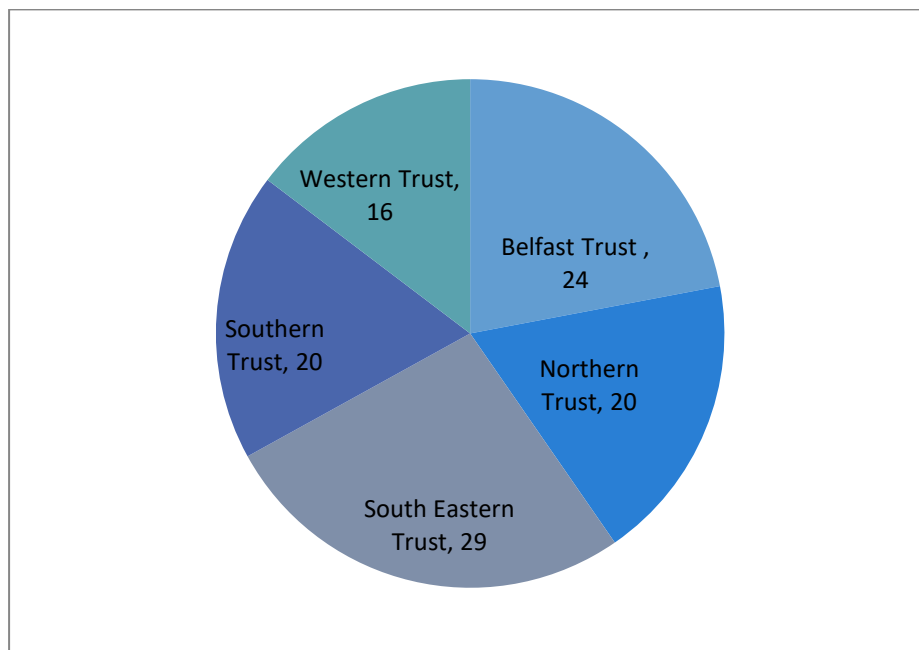
- the usefulness of the legal training on care planning decision making and use of balanced analysis

- Increased quality assuring of reports being submitted for adoption panel consideration.
- Those cases that are not ready for adoption panel are rescheduled to allow for further work.  
Spaces have been largely filled with other cases being slotted in or moving forward in the schedule, enabled by forward planning

The chart below shows the Trust's Best Interest figures since the 2014/2015 reporting period



Throughout the region in this period, best interest recommendations ranged from sixteen to twenty-nine, with South Eastern Trust producing the highest number on this occasion (see chart below).



The profile of the twenty nine children where the adoption panel made best interest recommendation is broken down as follows;

	<b>2019/2020</b>	<b>2018/2019</b>
Single Children	<b>Eight</b>	<b>Five</b>
Siblings	<b>Four sets of two children</b>	<b>Five sets of two children</b>
Children of a sibling group where older siblings are in care or are adopted	<b>Thirteen</b>	<b>Three</b>
Children who had been placed concurrently	<b>Three</b>	
Best Interest recommendations rescinded	<b>Four</b>	<b>Two</b>

The number of siblings being presented for best interest recommendation has reduced to eight children. In these three sibling pairs, the recommendation from the social worker was for them to be placed together for adoption.

It was recommended by the social workers that for six of the thirteen children who had a sibling with a care plan of adoption, that these children should not be placed together due to the level of their needs. Together or Apart assessments are undertaken by the social work team and submitted to adoption panel for consideration at the time of best interest.

Two of the thirteen children were later matched and placed alongside younger siblings when their care plans also became adoption and best interest was achieved.

Three children who received best interest recommendations had been placed concurrently at an earlier stage with approved adopters. Concurrent adopters offer a foster placement for a child when the care plan for those child/children is rehabilitation to a parent or adoption. In these cases the birth parents were still being assessed at the time the child joined this placement and following the conclusion of the assessment, the care plan became permanence via adoption. The use of concurrent placements has enabled these children to achieve emotional stability with a primary care giver at the earlier opportunity.

The age range of the children presented to panel for best interests was from aged 7 to 5 months old. There were fifteen male children and fourteen female children.

The legal profile of the children being referred to the panel for a best interest recommendation was balanced with fourteen subject to interim care orders and

fourteen having been made subject to full care orders at the time of panel. An interim care order is required by the Trust in order to lodge freeing applications before the court. Often it is the case that birth parents will not provide consent to information being gathered by the social worker for the child's presentation at adoption panel so therefore interim care orders are required which enables the social work manager to provide this consent.

Consolidated hearings of care and freeing processes are still in use which can streamline the court applications and avoid drift for children in their legal status being confirmed. The children already subject to full care order had a higher average age, having been in care for longer.

There were no relinquished children presented to the adoption panel in this period.

<b>Legal Profile</b>	<b>2019/2020</b>	<b>2018 / 2019</b>
Voluntarily Accommodated/ relinquished for adoption	<b>Zero</b>	<b>Zero</b>
Interim Care Order	<b>Fourteen</b>	<b>Thirteen</b>
Care Order	<b>Fourteen</b>	<b>Four</b>
No Order	<b>One</b>	<b>One</b>

### BEST INTERESTS RESCINDED

Four children were returned to panel in this period to have their best interest recommendation rescinded. For two of these children the social work team had been unable to identify suitable adoptive placements despite extensive family finding efforts. Both of these children had complex needs

The other two children, a sibling pair, were rehabilitated to the care of a parent following a significant change in circumstances and further assessment.

### ANALYSIS – FREEING ORDERS

During this reporting period, fifteen children were freed for Adoption, eight of which were male and seven were female. This is a slight decrease of one from the previous year; this figure would correlate with the sixteen best interest recommendations made in 2018-19. All but two of the children freed were already in placement at the time of their freeing. These other two children moved to their permanent placement within two months of their orders being granted.

Social workers within children's services continue to strive to deliver emotional permanence for children the earliest stage, whether that is with foster parents who are then assessed to adopt the child in their care or via the use of dual approved and concurrent placements.

Of the fifteen children who obtained a best interest recommendation in this period, only four of these children were freed before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. The other eleven had best interest recommendations pre April 2019. This demonstrates the lengthy court processes involved with freeing applications. Three further freeing hearings had been expected to conclude before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 but were delayed in the court process. Reasons for delays include birth parents being permitted to have additional assessments, younger siblings being born, care order appeals being lodged by birth family, new partners coming into the lives of birth parents and kinship carers coming forwards at a late stage.

Regionally there were a total of sixty four freeing orders granted by the courts compared to seventy four in the previous year.

### ANALYSIS – ADOPTION ORDERS

The number of adoptions has risen slightly to twelve compared to nine in the previous reporting period. Two further adoption orders had been anticipated but due to placement issues arising, these adoption applications were not yet concluded by the court.

All adoptive placements are supported by adoption services both pre and post Adoption Order. Post adoption support plans are now submitted with every formal match to outline how this support will be delivered.

Eight of the children adopted had experienced dually approved placements, two had been placed concurrently and three were placed post freeing orders due to more complex family finding.

### ANALYSIS – INFORMAL & FORMAL MATCHING

Twenty-seven matches took place at panel over in this reporting period. There were eleven informal matches and sixteen formal match proposals presented to the adoption panel in this reporting period.

Three children were presented at adoption panel twice in this reporting period - for informal and then formal matching, having been placed dually approved and then freed for adoption in the court. The matching therefore took place in respect of twenty four children in total.

Of the informal matches recommended by the adoption panel, seven of the proposed adopters came from within the Trust. Two were foster carers who were then assessed and approved to adopt, three were matched following concurrent placement and four children were matched to prospective adopters from other trust areas through ARIS (Adoption Regional Information System)

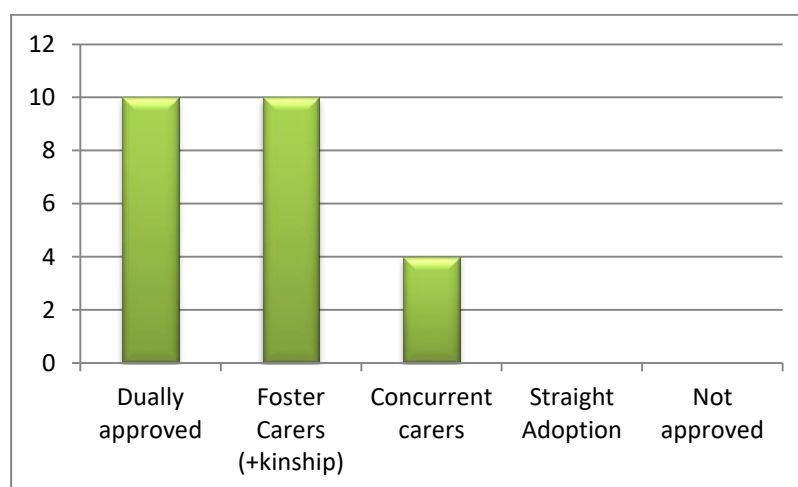
With regard to the formal matches considered by the adoption panel, seven of these children were formally matched to their former foster carers who had undertaken child specific adoption assessments. One was a kinship adoption, three were formally matched with their dually approved carers in the Trust area and the other five were matches through ARIS in other Trust areas.

## 5.2 PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS

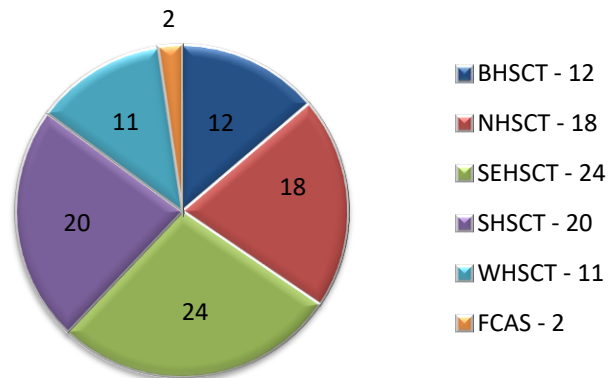
The Trust adoption team is responsible for assessing those who live in the Trust area and who wish to adopt. They may be related to the child, be the current foster carers of a child or be as yet unknown to a child requiring adoption. Proposals are presented to the adoption panel for recommendation of approval based on comprehensive assessments.

### Domestic applications recommendations made at panel

	2019/2020	2018 / 2019
Domestic Adoption Applications Recommended for Approval by Panel	Twenty four	Eleven



Fourteen applications brought to panel were for prospective adopters 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. Four of the fourteen also wished to consider a concurrent placement. This number remained the same as the previous year. Nine prospective adopters were approved for a single child and five wished to be considered for a sibling group of 2 children. Regionally the total number of approved adopters in the year was eight seven. Sixty nine were dually approved or concurrent and eighteen were for child specific adoption.



Data provided from the ARIS annual report 2019-2020.

The south eastern trust approved the highest number of adopters in the year ending March 2020. This is a significant increase from the previous year of eleven approved for adoption and testimony to the hard work of the adoption team with additional support from Family Care Service social workers.

There were no age range amendments and one rescinding of approval and match in this period. This was a kinship case which did not proceed to placement.

	2019/2020	2018/2019
Approval ranges amended	Zero	Zero
Approvals deferred	Zero	Zero
Approvals to Adopt Rescinded by Panel	One	Zero
Adoption Reviews	Ten	Eight
Approved Adoption Applicants on Trust Adoption Register as of 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2019	Sixteen	Eight
Approved Adoption Allowances for this period	Seven	One



Total Number of Adoption Allowances Paid	<b>Seventy-six households which corresponds to Eighty-seven children as of 31.03.20</b>	<b>Seventy-two households, which corresponds to Eighty-three children (as of 31.03.19)</b>
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A social worker from the adoption team attended recruitment meetings with fostering staff to plan on-going events/campaigns to promote fostering and adoption together including a display stand for adoption at the “Till I Grow Up” on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2019. Adoption leaflets and flyers were also displayed on the fostering stand on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2019 at a community fun day held at a local church.

The adoption team were actively involved in the Regional Campaign during National Adoption Week from 14-20 October 2019. An Information Evening took place on 23 October 2019 in La Mon House Hotel. Thirty-five people attended the event. Those who attended had heard about the evening through a letter of invite from the Trust, Facebook, Radio, HSC Website or friends/family.

A preparation to adopt course was held in the Trust from 25-27 November 2019. Twenty people attended the training including nine couples and two single people. All applied to progress further with their application.

The total number of enquiries received between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 was seventy-nine.

The adoption team continue to working with adoption services across the region to co-ordinate regional recruitment campaigns.

Adoption services will continue to highlight adoption and the needs of children who require adoption through local media, combined regional campaigns, using social media platforms and using adopters’ personal experiences of adoption. These efforts will seek to encourage more enquiries.

### DOMESTIC APPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT RECEIVED

In total, twenty-six applications from prospective adoptive parents were received by the adoption team in the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020.

These applicants are all at various states in the assessment process and 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 reporting period.

### 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 seven children during 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. In total, adoption allowances were paid to seventy-six households. This was in relation to forty-six males and forty-one females (eighty-seven in total).

Due to the complex histories of some of the children being presented to panel, at the point of the formal match, the panel have recommended that payment of adoption allowance are left open for four 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.

### DOMESTIC ADOPTION APPLICATIONS (BY TRUST AREA)

<b>SETRUST Area</b>	<b>2019 / 2020</b>	<b>2018 / 2019</b>
North Down	<b>Nine</b>	<b>Eight</b>
Lisburn	<b>Twelve</b>	<b>Five</b>
Downpatrick	<b>Three</b>	<b>Three</b>

The figures above highlight that the greatest number of people applying for adoption in this reporting period remain from the North Down and Lisburn areas with three from the Downpatrick area. However it should be recognised that these figures vary from year to year. In addition to the above figures, two sets of foster carers who live outside our Trust had child specific assessments. It is positive to see more applicants from the Lisburn side of the trust as geographical location has to be taken into account when it comes to matching of children to new families. This is sometimes the reason that placements need to be sought outside of the Trust area, as the only available options are living too close to birth family members.

The Trust continues to offer a range of options for adopters, i.e. dual approval, concurrent care, straight adoption (after the granting of a Freeing Order), however the vast majority of adoptions continue to remain in the dual approval category, although the number being approved for concurrent care is gradually increasing.

It is standard practice for all applicants to attend the adoption panel when their adoption application is being considered.

## **6.0 ROLE OF ADOPTION PANEL ADVISOR**

Ms Pamela Robinson took up the role of adoption panel advisor in July 2019 working for 18 hours a week on adoption panel business in addition to other principal social worker roles in children's services.

This role has involved;

- Assisting the chairperson and administrator in agreeing the agenda and finalising the Panel record.
- Quality assurance of adoption panel reports and requesting additional information from social workers in advance of the panel date when necessary.
- Guidance to social workers in case preparation for panel
- Prioritisation of pre adoption medicals with child health
- Interface with CAF teams, permanence and adoption teams regarding adoption panel issues.
- Liaising with legal advisors on legal issues arising in cases
- Monitoring demand on panels and organising additional panels to meet demand.
- Providing advice to social workers following best interest recommendation regarding the next steps
- Clarification of practice for panel members during panels
- Providing a conduit between adoption panel and social work teams regarding cases that are presented to the panel- highlighting for example good practice, delay in care planning, when additional information is requested by the panel.
- Delivering induction to new adoption panel members

The adoption panel advisor role has improved the effectiveness of panel to meet the increasing demand during this reporting period and promoting the readiness of cases for panel to avoid last minute cancellations due to missing reports, out of date medicals, or incomplete details.

The lockdown of March 2020 brought significant challenges for the adoption panel and major changes have been necessary to provide this service since April 2020.

Feedback from panel members would indicate the benefit of the adoption panel advisor role in support their interface between the Trust and providing clarification to panel of social work practice.

## **7.0 ADOPTION REGIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEM (ARIS)**

### **REFERRALS OF PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS**

From the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, the profiles of fourteen approved adopters from the Trust were notified to ARIS for inclusion on the database. All four newly approved concurrent carers have taken placements of Trust children. Only one of the approved adopters from this year was matched with a child before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. Three further children were matched with Trust adopters approved before 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019.

## REFERRALS OF CHILDREN

Twenty nine children from the Trust were notified to ARIS as having a best interest recommendation in this reporting period.

From the 1 April 2019 - 31 March 2020, the Trust referred thirteen children to ARIS for matching, as no suitable matches were available within the Trust area. Six of these children achieved a cross trust match in this year.

Three children from other trusts were received into placements within the trust area in the year.

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- April 2019 and October 2019. The permanence team profiled six children in total. This included two sets of two siblings. Placements were achieved for three of these children, the other three children have had their care plans changed to long term fostering due to their complex needs.

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.

## **8.0 NORTHERN IRELAND REGIONAL OVERVIEW – ORDERS GRANTED**

One-hundred-and-eleven children were adopted from care in Northern Ireland during the year ending 31 March 2020- up from seventy three in the previous year;

- The average age of children at the time of adoption was 4 years 2 months, one month younger compared to the previous year;
- From the child's last entry into care, the average length of time for a child to be adopted in 2019/20 was 3 years 1 month. This was the same as in the previous year;
- For children adopted in 2019/20, the average duration from the HSC Trust proposal that adoption was in the best interest for the child (the looked after child best interest proposal) to the Adoption Order was 2 years 3 months, the same as in 2018/19;
- In 2019/20, children adopted by concurrent carers were substantially younger at the time of adoption (3 years 4 months compared with the national average of 4

years and 2 months). They also had a shorter last duration in care (2 years 7 months compared with the national average of 3 years 1 month).

*Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland 2019/20*

The Trust secured twelve Placement Adoption Orders in this period for children who were previously looked after.

<b>HSC Trust</b>	<b>Number</b>
Belfast	25
Northern	32
South Eastern	12
Southern	26
Western	16
NI total	111

*Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland 2019/20*

Please note however that a total of twenty two adoption order were achieved by the Trust over this reporting period. The remaining ten relate to both step parent adoption which are not subject to adoption panel business but are recording in the delegated statutory function report.

## **9.0 INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION**

There was one adoption order granted in the reporting period for intercountry adoption. No further intercountry adopters were approved. One couple had their matching criteria altered at adoption panel in the period.

## **10.0 SOUTH EASTERN TRUST PRE- LINKING PANEL**

The Trust pre-linking panel meets on a monthly basis. The current make-up of the panel is as follows;

- Principal social worker for Adoption (Chairperson),
- Principal social worker for Safeguarding,
- Senior social worker for permanence and post adoption support teams(x2),
- Senior social worker for adoption team,
- Clinical Psychologist, SET connects attached to permanence and post adoption team
- Senior social worker for fostering services

The pre 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 early stage which is of benefit to the children by enabling possible placements for children to be identified at an earlier stage or identifying where placements will need to be sought in other trusts.

The pre 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. A pre linking panel summary is submitted by the pre linking panel chairperson for the matching proposal to the adoption panel.

## **11.0 POST ADOPTION SUPPORT**

The Trust Permanence & Post Adoption Teams continue to offer support to families following the granting of an Adoption Order. There are now two well established teams- one in Newtownards and one in Ballynahinch.

### **Social Work support**

In this reporting period, post adoption support activity continued to grow within the Trust and intensive support has been required by a number of families in the area. There are 55 active support cases at the end of the reporting period.

This support and intervention ranged from counselling, advice, narrative work, therapy, self-esteem work, addressing issues around contact. Some of these families were referred into the SET connects service for Psychology input. Some were referred through the post adoption referral panel into Extern projects such as Linx and Time out, which provide support for teenagers who are displaying risk taking behaviours. Families can also access the Trust's edge of care support schemes, Step Up Step Down and Fostering Positive Family Relationships (FPFR). Therapeutic, Education and Support Services in Adoption (Tessa) provided support to a number of families in this period also.

There were no adoption breakdowns in this reporting period.

Post adoption contact is facilitated by the team for over 55 children who have direct contact in the year which is facilitated and supervised by the team. There are also 30 indirect contacts that are facilitated by the post box service to exchange letters, cards and gifts between birth family members and adopted children. This continues to be an important link for adopted children in forming their identity. Reviews of these contacts take place periodically to ensure it is still in keeping with the adopted child's needs.

Staff within the Permanence and Post adoption team have been Level one DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy) and Therapy trained, therefore adding to their skill set in providing advice and support to adopters and in their work directly with children and young people

Specialist clinical psychologist, Dr Leigh Crawford is now integrated within the permanence and post adoption team from SET Connects (TTLAAC). The team continuing to be able to access SET Connects service generally when required. Dr Crawford undertakes profiles of children coming to the pre linking panel, provides support and advice on moving children to new families. She also consults on cases and undertakes direct support to families in addition to the social worker.

#### Group activities

The team continued to be proactive with Adoptive families by organising group activities.

- Attachment based swimming classes– for families with pre-school aged children who are in the early stages of their adoption journey
- An outdoor activity day and BBQ for upper primary/lower post-primary age children and parents.

#### Other therapeutic supports

New to the Trust in this period is the one year pilot funded project; Equine Therapy. This was very popular for the teenagers and is complimentary to any existing therapy they are receiving. It provides the teenagers with companionship, comfort and a strong sense of wellbeing.

Counselling sessions with a freelance adoption counsellor were also offered to the adopters when required.

#### Training for adopters

Over 100 Adopters have availed of training provided by the Trust throughout this period. Adopters benefit from training organised by the fostering service. The training includes topics such as 'Introduction to Attachment', 'Attachment Building' and 'Brain Development & Trauma'. Adopters also attend the 'Core Issues in Fostering' training. The Trust recognises the importance of training to prospective and approved adopters in addition to social work support. The adoption service has established their own training booklet including courses on post-adoption blues, parent and child yoga and infant mental health. To date attendance by adopters at various stages in the process has been excellent and encouraging. All those who attended have found these courses beneficial and feedback has been very positive. It has also been noted that there has been an improvement in adopters attending fostering training courses, which has also been advertised in the adoption training booklet.

The newly developed training on 'Making the Move' - placing child with prospective adopters, was delivered in September 2019 by Dr Crawford and Ms Leonard. This was fully subscribed and a waiting list created.



## **12.0 ADOPTION PANEL SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS**

### **12.1 Update on Adoption Panel Service Developments (noted in 2018-2019 report)**

- The Trust will be progressing the appointment of an adoption panel advisor in the next reporting period.

**Achieved as noted in section 6 of this report**

- Development of feedback from adoption panel attendees to assist learning and development.

**Not achieved – the development of feedback from panel attendees to be developed in the next reporting period.**

- Enhancement of connectivity between the Trust pre-linking panel and the adoption panel, to ensure effective communication between the Trust pre-linking panel and the adoption panel around the decision making processes involved in the matching of children to prospective adopters. The Trust was also be incorporating into panel presentations the proposed transition plans and support plans for children moving to adoptive placements.

**Achieved. A summary is provided by the pre-linking panel for all matching proposals.**

- The Trust adoption service will continue to develop practice relating to the recruitment, training and post adoption support for children and adoptive families. The adoption panel will continue to be fully informed of these practice development through adoption panel business days.

**Achieved**

### **12.2 There are a number of areas of service developments relating to adoption panel business to be progress in the coming year (2020-21).**

- Continuity of adoption panel incorporating the adaptations that have been necessary due to the Covid 19 pandemic.
- Communication to adoptive applicants regarding the use of Zoom and the functioning of panel
- Development of feedback from adoption panel attendees to assist learning and development.
- Guidance leaflets for prospective adopters and social work staff on procedures following adoption panel
- Contingency arrangements for the production of minutes when these are impacted by annual leave or sick leave.
- Training for panel members regarding impact of Adverse childhood experiences, the impact of trauma on children and Foetal alcohol Syndrome





## Appendix 1

### **ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP**

Adoption Panel membership for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 is set out below;

Mrs Kate Anderson	Independent Chairperson
Mrs Lisa Hine	Vice-Chairperson & Head Of Service Fostering & Adoption
Dr Heather Anderson	Medical Advisor
Dr Maura Briscoe	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mrs Joan O'Hagan	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mr Jonathan Patton	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mrs Nicola Cherry	Independent Member
Mrs Claire Brennan	Independent Member
Mr Stephen McVey	Independent Member
Ms Sara Tibbs	Independent Member (resigned in March 2020)
Ms Dorothy Riordan	Independent Member
Mr Wesley Graham	Independent Member
Mrs Ann Walsh	Principal Social worker- Fostering, Cared For Children (Social Work Representative)

Mrs Gillian Forrest	Principal Practitioner – Court (Social Work Representative)
Ms Julie Patterson	Principal Social Worker-Safeguarding (Social Work representative from May 2019)
Mr David Hamilton	Principal Social Worker, SET Connects Manager & Family Centres (Social Work representative until May 2019)
Mr Jason Caldwell	Principal Practitioner for Safeguarding (Social work representative May to December 2019)
Mr Michael Mulholland	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding (Social Work representative from January 2020)
Mr Maurice Largey	Assistant Director & Agency Decision Maker (ADM) **
Ms Sinead Owens Ms Emma O'Neill Directorate of Legal Services	Panel Legal Advisors Non -Voting
Dr Kerry Sweeney	Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist Provision of advice when required.
Ms Pamela Robinson	Adoption Panel Advisor(non-voting) (commenced July 2019)
Mr Conor Smyth	Adoption Panel Admin Manager
Ms Carole Wright	Administration Manager (Oversees Panel Administration in the absence of Mr Smyth)

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

### **\*\*Agency Decision Maker**

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

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