



South Eastern Health
and Social Care Trust

ADOPTION PANEL ANNUAL REPORT

**For Year-
end 31st
March 2022**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

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

The Adoption panel has continued to operate twice a month, usually on the first and third Tuesday of each month for a morning. The adoption panel normally consists of an independent chair, a medical advisor, a non-executive director, a social work representative, an independent panel member and a panel advisor. Legal advice is provided for each panel in writing in advance of panel.

The membership of the Adoption panel has had some changes in personnel in this reporting period. Legal advice to the panel has been provided by Kathryn Minnis, Assistant Chief Legal Advisor, DLS from April 2021 until Jenna Boyce, Solicitor from DLS assumed this role from December 2021. The position of Vice Chair of the Adoption panel has been assumed by Nuala Hanna, Sector Manager, since October 2021.

Lesley McKenna, Principal social worker joined the panel membership as a social work representative in January 2022.

(See Appendix 1 for list of Adoption panel members)

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

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

2.0 OVERVIEW

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the South Eastern Trust Adoption panel from 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022.

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.
- Providing a consultation service to the Trust on adoption issues.
- Making recommendations in respect of the payment of adoption allowances

3.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Adoption panel continues to have a high rate of case referrals which are managed within the panel timetable.

- 3.1 The number of best interest recommendations made by the panel was fifteen. These five female and ten male children ranged in age from six months old to five years old.
- 3.2 Four children had been placed with concurrent carers before the proposal for best interests was brought to adoption panel. A further three children were in placement where the foster carers or kinship carers wished to be assessed to adopt them. Therefore, those seven young children had experienced emotional permanence and attachment formation from an early stage.
- 3.3 The Panel recommended forty matches throughout the period. Ten recommendations were for informal matches of children to dually approved carers and thirty were formal matches, when the child was available for adoption through freeing order or parental consent.
- 3.4 Thirteen adoptive applicants were recommended for approval by the adoption panel in this period. This was the same figure as the previous year.
- 3.5 The number of adopters wishing to be considered for concurrent placements reduced to two.
- 3.6 Five former foster carers were assessed and approved to adopt a child in their care.
- 3.7 Thirty children were freed for adoption by the Courts in this period, significantly higher than the previous year. This was mainly attributed to delayed court hearings caused by the pandemic then being concluded.
- 3.8 The period of time from best interest recommendation to the granting of the freeing order ranged from three months to three years.
- 3.9 Twenty-one children were made subject to Adoption orders. This was an increase of ten from the previous year

4.0 ADOPTION PANEL BUSINESS DAY AND TRAINING

A panel business meeting took place on 3rd March 2022 to consider the annual report of 2020-2021.

Actions agreed included;

- Future Training areas – to include and overview of new adoption bill training.
- an overview of post adoption support in SET and how this is assisting in supporting families to remain strong.

Both of these will be reported on in the annual report of April 22- March 2023.

Adoption Panel training took place on 8th June 2021 hearing from Dr Leigh Crawford, Specialist Clinical Psychologist in Adoption Services, on the impact of adverse childhood experiences, developmental trauma and therapeutic parenting. Karen Leonard, Senior social worker of the Adoption team, shared a presentation on “Lifting the lid on adoption assessments” and how therapeutic parenting is explored in the assessment phase.

On the 7th September 2021 panel members received training from Dr Heather Anderson, Adoption panel medical advisor, on Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder including the physical impact on a child and the importance of early intervention and diagnosis. Dr Leigh Crawford, Clinical psychologist, then shared a presentation about Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and the associated challenges in parenting, including blocked trust, blocked care and secondary trauma.

Thanks goes to all who contributed to the ongoing training of panel members in adoption related matters.

Annual appraisals

All independent panel members received an appraisal from the Adoption Panel advisor in this reporting period.

5.0 ADOPTION PANEL ACTIVITY

Adoption panel operated on Zoom platform throughout the report period April 2021 to end of March 2022. Full panel membership has been at each panel with presenting social workers and applicants joining the panel on Zoom.

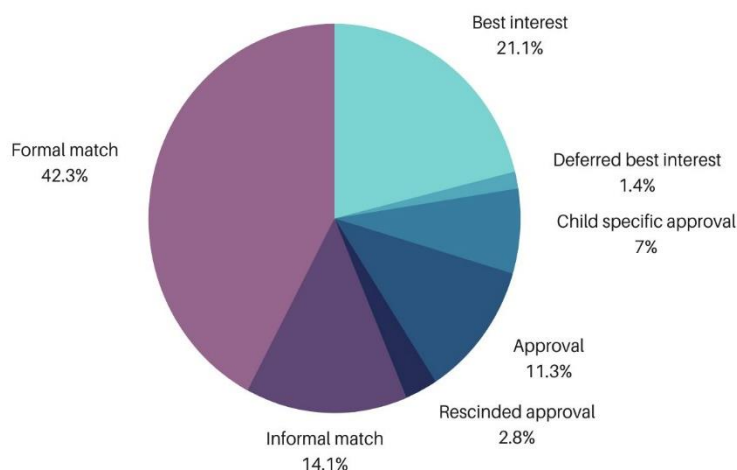
Panel scheduling is still subject to frequent change with twenty-one bookings being cancelled in the year, the majority of which were due to delays in court, delays in expert reports being received by teams, courts permitting further assessment of parents or staff sickness. Where gaps in the schedule have arisen, every effort is made to bring cases forward. However, this is not always possible and as a result there were nine panel slots unused in this period. Two additional panels were held to consider a best interest recommendation and then informal match, where a previous panel outcome had been to defer a recommendation until receipt of further information.

Two panels were longer with four cases being presented on the morning of panel to enable timely care planning for a child.

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

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

ADOPTION PANEL BUSINESS 2021-2022



In this reporting period the highest percentage of adoption panel time was spent on matching at 56.4%, best interest recommendations 21.1% and approvals and rescinding of approvals taking 19.7% of panel time.

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

5.1 CHILDREN

Panel Business	2021/2022	2020 / 2021
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations	Fifteen	Twenty-one
Best interest recommendations deferred	One	-
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations Rescinded	Zero	Five
Matching Recommendations Made	Forty Informal*-10 Formal*- 30	Thirty-eight Informal 23 Formal 15

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

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

5.1.1 **BEST INTEREST CASES- ANALYSIS**

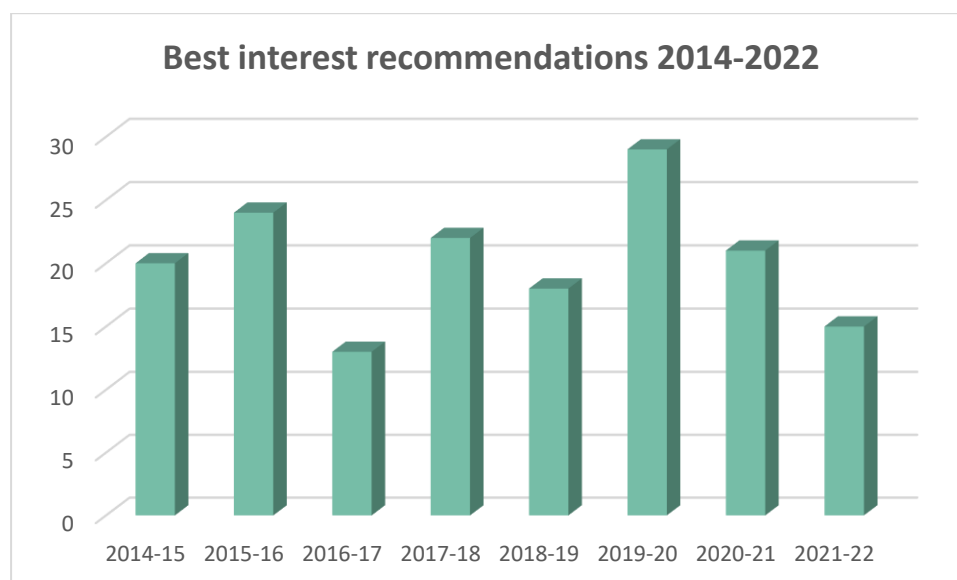
Cases are presented to Adoption panel by Children and Family social work teams (CAFT) following the care planning process and a careful, balanced analysis of care planning and placement options for a child. When the decision is reached at the Looked after Child Review to refer the matter to Adoption 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 was fifteen, a decrease of six from the previous year. Adoption is considered the most appropriate care plan for these young children. Best interest cases are frequently subject to scheduling changes due to decisions in the court arena to permit further assessment of the parents, or to permit extensions to previously agreed additional assessments.

Fourteen of these children had parents from Northern Ireland, with one having parents from an eastern European country.

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

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



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

	2021 / 2022	2020/2021
Single Children	Three	Eight
Siblings	Three sets of two	Two sets of two children
Children of a sibling group where older siblings are in care, adopted or Residence orders	Six	Nine
Children who had been placed concurrently	Four	One single child
Best Interest recommendations rescinded	Zero	Five

Age range and ethnicity

Children presented to panel for best interests ranged in age from 6 months to 5 years old. Four children were presented to panel before their first birthday. Fourteen of the children had parents from Northern Ireland/ UK. Only one had parents originating from another European country. There were ten male children and five female children.

Siblings

The number of siblings being presented for Best Interest recommendation has increased to six children. In these sibling pairs, Beyond Together or Apart assessments had been completed by the social work team, one concluding that the siblings should be placed separately due to their complex needs and the two other

concluded they should be placed permanently together. This is a critical process and one that carries lifelong implications about sibling relationships.

Six of the children who received a best interest recommendation had older siblings in care, adopted or subject to residence orders. One of these six children was matched and placed alongside their older sibling who had been adopted. Sadly, the difficulties faced by birth parents can be long lasting and despite support, interventions and assessment, they are unable to sustain positive change to enable them to parent their children safely.

Placement at time of best interest

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

The period from placement to best interest recommendation ranged from twenty-three months to three months which demonstrates the window of assessment of birth parents; some children being placed concurrently at the initial stage of parental assessment by the Trust and then subsequent assessments being undertaken leading to a longer period of concurrent placement. Other children are placed concurrently at the latter stages of assessment before final care plans are concluded in the LAC process, hence their period of concurrent placement is shorter.

A feature that has continued in the Trust is for foster carers to express a desire to be assessed to adopt their foster child. In the fifteen children who obtained a best interest recommendation in this period, three had foster carers or kinship carers who had requested an adoption assessment. The other eight children were referred to the pre linking panel for matching with suitable dually approved carers.

Best interest recommendations rescinded

No children were returned to Adoption panel in this period to have their best interest recommendation rescinded.

Legal Profile	2021/2022	2020/2021
No Order	One*	One
Interim Care Order	Fourteen	Fifteen
Care Order	None	Five
Relinquished for adoption at the time of Adoption panel	One* (as above- no order)	Zero

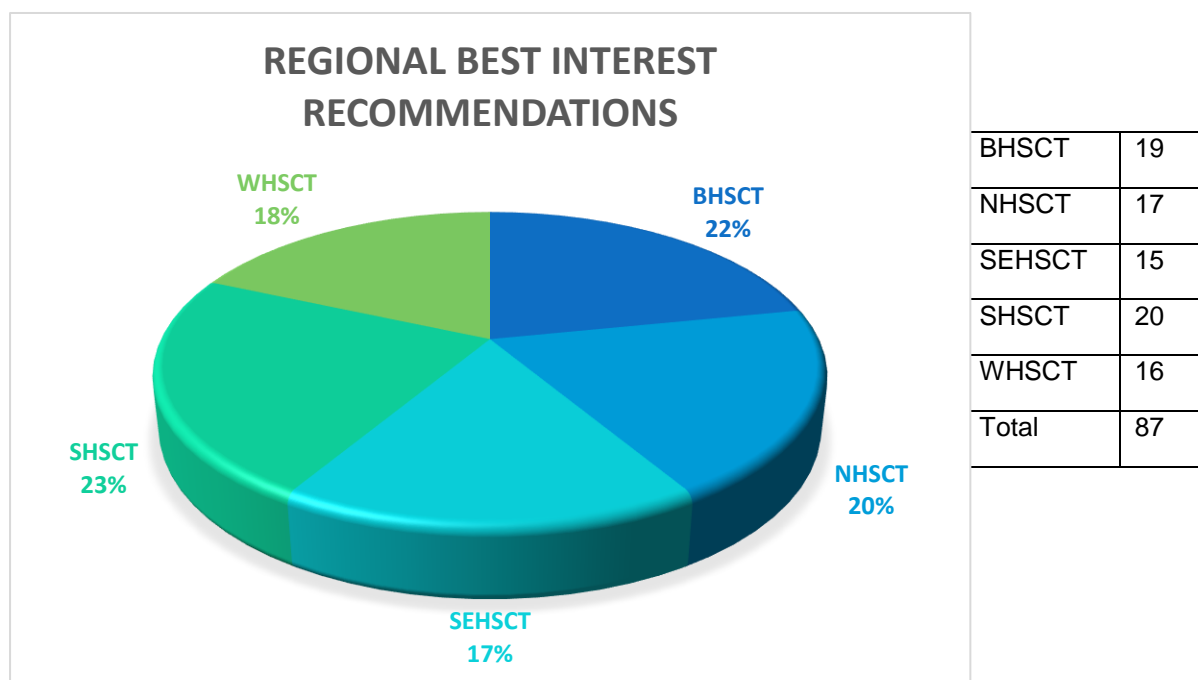
The legal profile of the children being referred to the Adoption panel for a Best Interest recommendation was predominantly those subject to Interim care orders. None of the children were subject to full care orders at the time of adoption panel. Sometimes it is the case that birth parents will not provide consent to information being gathered by the social worker for the child's presentation at adoption panel so therefore Interim care orders are required 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, focus on one phase of assessments of parents and avoid drift for children in their legal status being confirmed.

There were was one relinquished child presented to the adoption panel in this period.

REGIONAL DATA- BEST INTEREST

Throughout Northern Ireland in this period 2021 – 2022, best interest recommendations totalled eighty-seven ranging from fifteen to twenty. The Southern Trust reported the highest number of Best interest recommendations at twenty with South Eastern Trust having the lowest number in this reporting period at fifteen. This total number was a small increase from the previous year total of seventy-nine. Variations in numbers between the Trust areas is small. (See chart below).



Of the eighty-seven, there were fourteen sibling groups and within this eleven sibling groups were recommended to be placed together and three sibling groups were recommended to be placed apart.

During 2021-2022, fifty boys (57.47%) and thirty-seven girls (42.52%) were made the subject of a 'best interests' recommendation.

Regionally the average age of child at point of adoption panel for best interest was two years six months old.

Data provided by Children adopted from care NI report 2021-2022

5.1.2 **INFORMAL & FORMAL MATCHING- ANALYSIS**

The number of matching cases brought before the Adoption panel increased slightly in this reporting period from thirty-eight in the previous year to forty proposed matches in this year.

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

Proposed matches were brought to panel on six of the children who received a best interest recommendation and in the same reporting period. Four children were informally matched with their concurrent carers at the time of the best interest recommendation.

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

Ten of the children recommended for matching formed five sets of sibling pairs who were proposed to be matched together.

In total thirty-four sets of adopters were considered by the panel.

- Twenty-six of these sets of adopters had been assessed and approved by the South Eastern Trust.
- Eight of the matches were to adopters were from other Trust areas and were sourced through ARIS.

Adopters included;

- Heterosexual married couples
- Family members
- Same sex couples
- Single people
- Foster carers with existing attachments to the child
- Those who had experienced infertility
- Those who had chosen to adopt having had their own birth children

Age range of children at matching

The children matched at panel ranged in age from eight months to seven years and four months old.

Ethnicity of carers

The majority of prospective adopters originated from Northern Ireland, with only three who were originally from other areas of Europe.

Former foster carers

Examining the thirty formal matches considered by the adoption panel, seven of these children were formally matched to their former foster or kinship carers who had undertaken child specific adoption assessments.

Concurrent carers

One child was formally matched with their concurrent carers in South Eastern Trust area. Three of the children were only placed following their formal match due to the stage in the legal process when a placement was identified- one was freed for adoption already and two were placement adoptions by parental consent.

Matched to new carers

The remaining nineteen children were formally matched with prospective adopters who had been their dually approved carers. In each of these three types of placements, the children had been able to achieve emotional permanence at an earlier stage in their care planning journey.

5.1.3 LEGAL ORDERS

	2021-2022	2020-2021
Freeing orders granted	Thirty	Ten
Parental consent to adoption	Two	—
Adoption orders granted	Twenty-one	Eleven

Freeing orders- analysis

During this reporting period, thirty children were freed for Adoption, fourteen were male children and sixteen were female. This is a significant increase from the previous year's total of ten. This figure highlights the court processes resuming following the impact on court cases due to the pandemic in 2020-2021.

Of the fifteen children who obtained a Best Interest recommendation in this period, four were freed for adoption before 31st March 2022.

The period of time from best interest recommendation to the granting of the Freeing order ranged from three months to three years. Factors which added time to the progression of the case to final hearing for freeing included;

- late stage kinship options coming forward and being assessed,
- children with complex health needs and associated placement finding issues,
- change of Judge mid case,
- the impact of the pandemic on court hearings,
- challenges in identifying suitable prospective adopters due to the reduced numbers of available adopters across Northern Ireland.

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

Adoption orders- analysis

The number of adoptions has increased from eleven in 2020-21 to twenty- one in this reporting period up to end of March 2022. Nine were female children and twelve were male children. The age of the children at the time of the adoption order being granted ranged from one year nine months old to seven years four months old. Six of these children were adopted as part of a sibling group of two. Eight of the adopted children had siblings who had also been adopted or were in long term foster care.

In terms of ethnic origin, fourteen of the children adopted were from white Northern Irish/ Irish/British backgrounds, while seven of the children were Irish or Roma Traveller, or mixed or other ethnicity.

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

Seven of the children adopted had experienced dually approved placements. Eight were adopted by former foster carers and four were adopted by their concurrent

carers. Two children had been freed and were placed following their formal match and subsequently adopted.

Children received into SET area

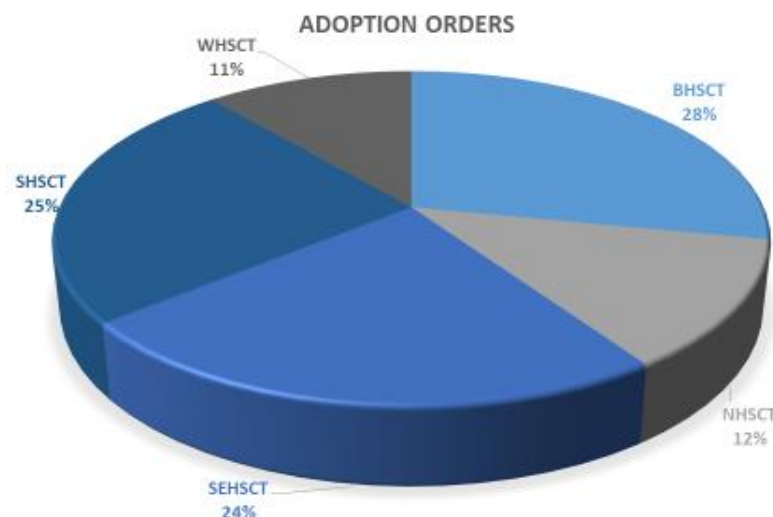
Three children from other Trust areas who had been referred to ARIS were matched at other Adoption Panels and placed with approved adopters in the SET area in this period.

Regional adoption figures

Regionally the number of adoption orders granted in the period was eighty-nine. This is a significant increase from fifty-seven in the previous year. The South Eastern Trust figure was 24% of the total number of Adoption orders granted.

The Children Adopted from Care NI 2021/2022 report notes that,

“Although every child’s situation is unique, with regards to the children adopted during, 2021/22, the average length of the adoption process was longer than in recent years. There are a number of factors, however, that may cause delays to the duration of the adoption process, and in 2021/22, some 13% of the adoptions noted a delay due to COVID-19. Other delays were influenced by delays within the court system (for example appeals being lodged or delays in judgements being made) or further options were being explored”.



The Children Adopted from Care report also notes;

- The average age of children at the time of adoption was at 4 years 6 months, and ranged from a year and a half to close to 11 years old;
- From the child's last entry into care, the average length of time for a child to be adopted in 2021/22 was 3 years 4 months. This was slightly higher than in recent years;
- For children adopted in 2021/22, 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 6 months;
- In 2021/22, children adopted by Concurrent Carers were younger at the time of adoption (3 years 11 months compared with the national average of 4 years and 6 months) and they also had a shorter last duration in care (3 years 2 months compared with the regional average of 3 years 4 months).
- The majority of the children adopted from care were of white ethnic background (82%). This was lower than in previous years. Some sixteen children (8%) were Irish or Roma Traveller, black African or mixed or other ethnicity.
- Twelve children (13%) had special needs or a disability. This included emotional or behavioural difficulties, sensory impairment, autism and learning disability.
- In 2021/22, 51 of the children (57%) were adopted as a single child adoption whereas 43% were adopted as part of a sibling group (38 children).
- For children adopted in 2021/22, the average duration from the Trust Looked After Child Best Interest Proposal to adoption was 2 years 6 months, same as the previous year. In 2021/22, this ranged from 13 months to 5 years 7 months.

5.2 PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

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

Domestic applications recommendations made at panel are detailed below;

	2021/2022
Total number of Domestic Adoption Applications Recommended for Approval by Panel	Thirteen
Child specific approved adopters	Five
Approved to adopt and available for placement	Eight
Open to concurrent or dual approval placements	Three
Open to dual approval placements	Five
Open to placements of one or two children	Two

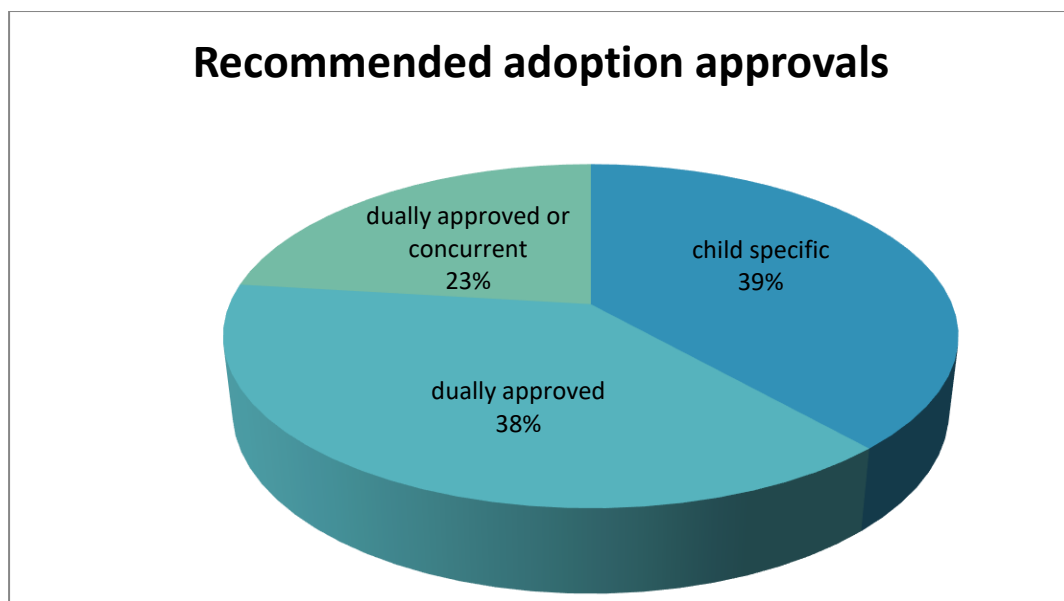
Five child specific adoption assessments were presented to the Adoption panel in this period. This number included current foster carers and kinship carers. These child specific approvals were considered at panel along with the proposal to informally match the child to these carers. The table below demonstrates that 54% of the adoptive applicants brought to panel were for child specific approval.

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

Those recommended for approval to adopt in this period included married heterosexual couples and same-sex married couples.

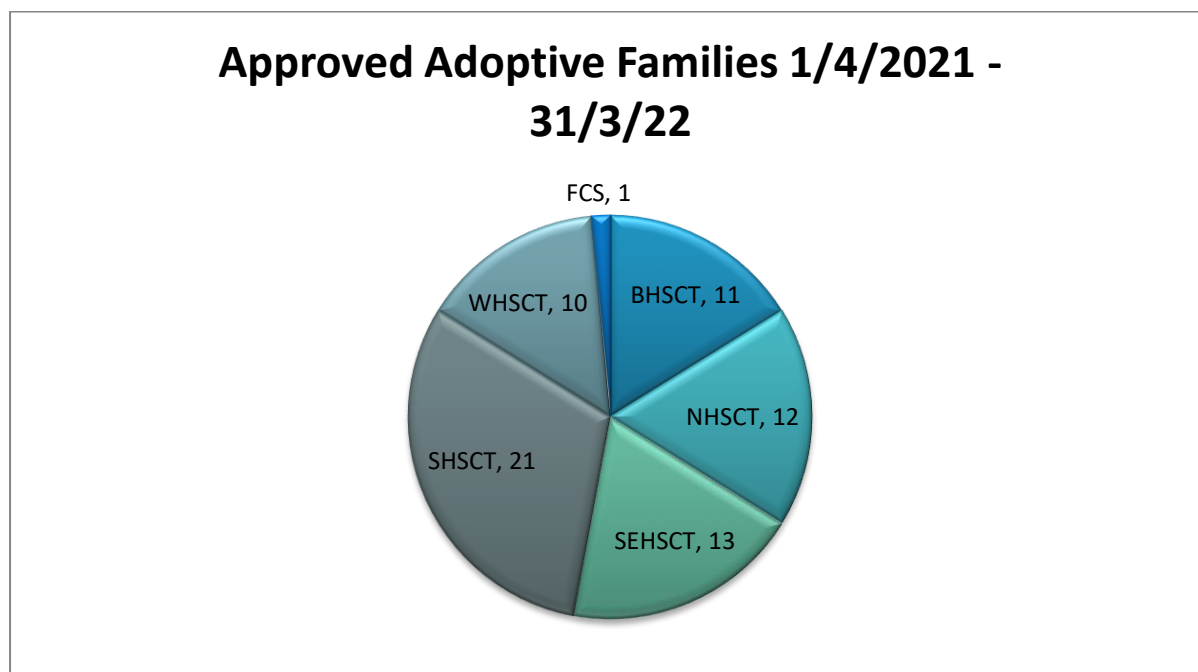
Two of the thirteen applicants were approved for one or two children and ten were approved for single children (of which four were available to be matched to children requiring adoption who were not to be placed with kinship or current foster carers).

The numbers of adopters approved in the South Eastern Trust was consistent with last year at thirteen approved to adopt.



Regional approved adopters

Regionally there were sixty-eight new approved adopters in the year; this was three fewer approvals than the year before.



Regional data- Adopters

“Just under three quarters (73%) of adopters were different sex married couple adopters, 10% were same sex married couples and a further 11% were single adopters (male or female). The remaining adoptions (five adoptions) were by unmarried couples or couples in a civil partnership, Of all the adopters, 10 had previously adopted a child or children, and around one in five (19 adopters) had dependent birth children living in the household. The age of the adopters ranged from late-twenties to early sixties, with the largest proportion of the adopters being in their forties at the time of the adoption (64%)”.

Children Adopted from Care NI 2021-2022

Additional roles and functions of the Adoption team

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

	2021/2022	2020 / 2021
Approval ranges amended	None	One
Approvals deferred	None	One
Approvals to Adopt Rescinded by Panel	Two	Zero
Approved Adoption Applicants on Trust Adoption Register as of 31 st March 2022	Six	Eight
Approved Adoption Allowances for this period	Ten	Seven
Total Number of Adoption Allowances Paid	84 households which corresponds to 54 male children and 49 Female children. (Total 103 children)	Seventy Eight households which corresponds to Ninety-six children (50 male and 46 female) as of 31 March 2021
Adoption enquiries	Eighty- one	One Hundred+eight

Adoptive applicants attended Adoption panel on Zoom to participate in the discussion.

There were two approvals rescinded in this reporting period at the request of the approved adopters, after a period of reflection following lockdown. Neither had been matched and placed with a child. Support was offered in this process.

The Adoption team continue to work with Adoption Services across the region to celebrate adoption in National Adoption week and co-ordinate regional recruitment campaigns when required. There was limited recruitment in this reporting period due to the numbers undertaking preliminary checks and waiting list for assessment. One Zoom information session was held in October 2021 and invited those who had enquired in the previous six months. This was held as part of the National Adoption Week.

The Regional SharePoint for adoption was launched in October 2021 which tracks enquiries about adoption through to approval and placement of a child and ultimately an adoption order. The majority of enquiries have been received through the regional website.

Domestic applications for assessment

A Preparation to Adopt course was held in the Trust over Zoom in June 2021 comprising of four half day sessions over a two-week period. Fifteen attended and all of the group attendees are now progressing to assessment. Although this method of training delivery presented some challenges, it had the benefit of being more accessible to applicants.

No further preparation to adopt course was held in the Spring of 2022 due to staffing pressures and the decision to prioritise assessments. Two sets of prospective adopters were able to attend training in other Trust areas and both have requested to proceed with their adoption application.

Training

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

Adoption Services staff delivered a half day of training in November 2021 on “Making the Move”, which explored the transitions of young children from foster placements to dually approved/ prospective adoptive placements. This training included a mix of prospective adopters and foster carers who are involved in moving children. A total of twenty-one people attended and heard input from social workers,

Psychologist and a foster carer and an adopter on their experience of this phase of the journey.

Adoption reviews

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

Adopters on register

Six approved adopters were on the register at period end as available for placement. This number corresponds to the high number of children being matched and placed. The effect of the pandemic on the waiting list for adoption assessment was significant in this period. Staffing turnover and absences in the Adoption team also contributed to delayed allocation for assessment. Bank staff and social work staff from other teams have been utilised where possible to undertake adoption assessments in an effort to meet demand for placements of children.

Placement support

In this reporting period the adoption team provided support to over thirty sets of adopters at differing stages of the adoption journey pre adoption order.

Adoption allowances

A recommendation that adoption allowances should be paid was made in respect of ten children during 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022. In total, adoption allowances were paid to eighty- four households. This corresponds to adoption allowances paid in respect of one hundred and three children. Each of these adoption allowances is reviewed annually and is a means tested allowance.

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

Step parent adoptions

The adoption team are responsible for the assessment of step parent adoption applicants. There were no new applications. All of the other step parent cases remain with the team until the matter is concluded in court.

Non agency domestic adoptions

Five applications for non-agency domestic adoption orders have been assessed by the team for the court in this period and adoption orders granted on all five children. This was an unusual route to adoption but one that did result in legal permanence for these children who previously were subject to Residence orders. One was for a Looked after child.

Intercountry adoption

The Adoption Team supported six intercountry adopters. Four of these prospective adopters had a child placed in their care. The Adoption Team social workers undertake statutory monthly visits to these children until their Adoption Orders are granted. Three reviews are conducted at intervals.

The remaining two are awaiting placement and are reviewed on a six monthly basis.

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

Adult tracing

Since 1st April 2021, tracing enquiries have continued to come in at a steady rate with an average of 3 a month. Adult Tracing is seen as a growing area of work, directly affected by the publication of the Mother and Baby Home report in January 2021.

6.0 ADOPTION PANEL FEEDBACK

In the period April 2021- end of March 2022 presenting social workers and senior social workers were sent feedback forms regarding adoption panel.

Seven questions were asked using a scaling question format to determine feedback on each question.

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

Twenty-nine feedback forms were received from those social work staff.

- The booking of the panel and details for submission of reports was communicated clearly to me.96.5% (very clearly)
- Support and guidance was available to me for preparation of my case for panel- 100%(very available)
- I was welcomed into panel and the panel members introduced themselves clearly 96.5%(very welcoming)
- The questions that the panel members asked were relevant and fair- 82.7% very relevant;17.3% of social workers regarded the questions as mostly relevant
- I was given the opportunity to clearly explain the assessment / care planning/decision making process in my case- 96.5% plenty of opportunity
- The recommendation of the panel was communicated clearly to me at the end of the panel- 96.5% very clearly communicated

Social worker comments

"I have only ever attended Adoption Panel via Zoom and have always found it to be a positive experience. Panel members have always clearly introduced themselves and there has been plenty of opportunity to have some discussion and answer any questions."

"Throughout the process I had excellent support particularly from Sara Elwood SSW and Conor Smyth guided throughout by PSW Pamela Robinson – very happy with all the help in a difficult and complex case".

"I was very happy with and appreciative of the support provided to me throughout my preparations prior to attending Best Interests Panel. I feel that any queries or questions I had were answered and I felt that support was readily available to me as and when required. I feel this was really beneficial and reassuring given this was the first time I have ever been involved in the Best Interests Panel process".

“Social worker was well prepared for panel and questions/recommendations where relevant to path forward and will be taken on board.” – re a formal match

“Over the past two years I have had reason to attend the SEHSCT Adoption Panel a number of times for different cases and have always found the panel thorough and fair”

Adoptive applicant feedback

A Feedback questionnaire was designed and sent to all adoptive applicants to gauge service user feedback. These were sent by post along with a letter explaining the purpose of the request for feedback on their panel experience.

Adopter feedback

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



Feedback was requested using a satisfaction scale. Only a small number were returned and some preferred to provide verbal reflections through their social worker.



Comments included;

"We were nervous before panel commenced but we were put at ease straight away by the welcoming and smiley faces on screen".

"We felt heard by the panel in how each person responded to us. We felt the questions asked enabled us to share our experiences to date, the reasons why we have decided to have adoption as part of our journey, the learning/reading/webinars we have taken part in and our hopes for a life we can provide for little ones in need".

"We were grateful for the speedy phone call to hear whether had been approved or not! We felt well prepared for panel due to all of the support given to us throughout the assessment process".

"Thank you for making what could've been an emotional and nerve-racking experience an enjoyable one!"

"We were initially worried about not being able to clearly convey our genuine character in an online meeting. Despite feeling nervous about panel in general and anxious about any potential online communication issues which may have arisen, we both felt as at ease as we could have done once the meeting started and we were welcomed into panel".

“We felt the Adoption Panel were very welcoming and we were put at ease immediately. We were well prepared and the whole experience was so much more pleasant than we were expecting”.

Analysis

The feedback from both social workers and adoptive applicants has been largely positive in this reporting period.

Social workers have been generally positive in their experience of the booking system, support provided to them pre panel and their experience of panel as welcoming, fair and balanced. Adoptive applicants' reflections note the preparation before panel as positive and the panel manner and discussions as considered, balanced and fair.

While the use of Zoom for the virtual meeting platform has caused some challenges, the adoption panel has been able to operate and continue to deliver a good quality, sensitive service to staff and applicants.

7.0 ADOPTION PANEL ADVISOR

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

This role has involved;

- Assisting the Chairperson and administrator in agreeing the agenda and finalising the Panel record.
- Checking of documentation for adoption panel and requesting additional information from social workers in advance of the panel date when necessary.
- Guidance to social workers in case preparation for panel
- Prioritisation of pre adoption medicals with child health
- 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.
- Consulting on cases regarding concurrent care and twin track care planning
- Providing advice to social workers following Best Interest recommendation regarding the next steps
- Clarification of practice for panel members during panels
- Providing a conduit between Adoption panel and social work teams regarding cases that are presented to the panel- highlighting for example good practice, delay in care planning, when additional information is requested by the panel.
- Delivering induction to new Adoption panel members
- Coordinating training for panel members
- Overseeing the feedback process for Adoption panel attendees
- Being part of a work stream in the planning and delivering of care planning training to social work staff in children's services

8.0 ADOPTION REGIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEM (ARIS)

Referrals of prospective adopters

From the 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022, all approved adopters were notified to ARIS. The profiles of six approved adopters from the Trust were notified for inclusion on the ARIS database. They will also continue to be considered monthly at pre linking panel as potential placements for children who require placements in the Trust area. Approved adopters go-live on the database after a period of three months after which time they may be linked to children referred to the database from other Trust areas.

Referrals of children

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

From the 1 April 2021 - 31 March 2022, the Trust referred five children to ARIS for live searches of the database as no suitable matches were available within the South Eastern Trust area. Three of the children were profiled at the Exchange day in November 2021. One placement was secured for a child via ARIS.

A further two children were referred to the ARIS database for a concurrent placement of siblings. This was successful in producing a placement.

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

9.0 SOUTH EASTERN TRUST PRE- LINKING PANEL

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

progressed using core group meetings to plan for transition to this placement. When a child who has been placed concurrently is later presented to the Adoption panel for a best interest recommendation, the proposed match is also presented to panel at that stage.

The current make-up of the Panel is as follows;

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

In this reporting period the pre linking panel received twelve new referrals for family finding for children, nine were seeking dually approved placements, two referrals were seeking a concurrent placement and one was a relinquished child for whom an adoptive placement was sought. A further five children were already in placement with foster carers who were being assessed to adopt them. Three were noted by the pre linking panel as already being in concurrent care at the time of the best interest recommendation. A further eleven children were carried over from the previous period and were reviewed at pre linking panel from April 2021 onwards until a proposed match was made to the adoption panel.

The Pre Linking panel facilitates a transparent process of reviewing links considered for prospective adoptive parents. A linking criterion is used following consideration of the child's profile and reading of suitable assessments; this assists in the decision of the strongest link to be explored before proposing a match to adoption panel. The pre linking panel uses the Coram Baaf Matching STAR (Strengths and Risks Assessment) in some cases.

A pre linking panel summary is submitted by the pre linking panel chairperson at the time of the informal matching proposal to the adoption panel.

10.0 POST ADOPTION SUPPORT

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

During the reporting period the Teams worked with 93 families with 113 children being supported. Intensity of the support varies depending on the presenting needs. Types of support included mentoring, liaison with education, revisiting narrative work with older children, support to parents on therapeutic parenting and navigating change, support regarding contact, advice on use of Theraplay, signposting to outside groups and SET Post adoption groups, review of post adoption support plans and post adoption contact plans.

Support is delivered from the Team assistant, Social Worker and/or Clinical Psychologist. All the social workers within the service are trained in Theraplay and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) which has enabled them to provide a more responsive and trauma informed assistance to children and adoptive parents within their adoptive placements. In addition, the team assistants facilitated on average 4 post adoption indirect and 9 direct contacts per month.

The Lead clinical psychologist for the service Dr Leigh Crawford continues to support adoptive families where there are more complex attachment and developmental trauma based issues.

The families asking for support highlighted they were experiencing greater pressure following the national lockdown period.

Counselling sessions with a freelance adoption specialist counsellor are also offered to the Adopters if required.

On occasion the Trust has provided funding for play therapy and art therapy following an assessment of need.

One young person experienced an Adoption breakdown (post Adoption Order) despite months of intensive support going into the family.

The Permanence and Post adoption team was able to re-establish the Attachment based swimming course after two years of postponement due to the pandemic. This is a group for adoptive parents and pre-school children run over a six weeks in a local leisure centre. Activities were held at Playball and a Scavenger Hunt was coordinated for a small group of parents and children.

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

Sitting within the post adoption support is the area of Adult tracing, a service for adults in the Trust who were themselves adopted.

11.0 ADOPTION PANEL SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS

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

- Training for panel members regarding the new adoption and children NI legislation
- Guidance leaflets for prospective adopters and social work staff on procedures following adoption panel
- Learning from practise- guides for social workers

Appendix 1

ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP

_ Adoption panel membership for the period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022 is set out below;

Mrs Kate Anderson	Independent Chairperson
Ms Nuala Hanna	Vice-Chairperson, Head of Service Fostering & Adoption
Dr Heather Anderson	Adoption Panel Medical Advisor
Dr Maura Briscoe	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mrs Joan O'Hagan	Non-Executive Trust Board Member
Mr Jonathan Patton	Interim Chairman of the Trust Board
Mrs Nicola Cherry	Independent Member
Mrs Claire Brennan	Independent Member

Mr Stephen McVey	Independent Member
Ms Dorothy Riordan	Independent Member
Mr Wesley Graham	Independent Member
Mrs Gillian Forrest	Principal Practitioner – Court (Social Work Representative)
Ms Julie Patterson	Principal Social Worker-Leaving Care and After Care (Social Work representative)
Mr Michael Mulholland	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding (Social Work representative from January 2020)
Ms Lesley McKenna	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding
Ms Elaine Somerville	Assistant Director and Agency decision maker
Kathryn Minnis	Panel Legal Advisors

Jenna Boyce	(Non –Voting) Directorate of Legal Services
Ms Pamela Robinson	Adoption Panel Advisor(non-voting)
Mr Conor Smyth	Adoption Panel Admin Manager
Ms Carole Wright	Administration Manager (Oversees Panel Administration in the absence of Mr Smyth)
Pauline Strange Glynis Munn	Additional Admin support to adoption panel

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.