



South Eastern Health  
and Social Care Trust

# ADOPTION PANEL ANNUAL REPORT

For Year-  
end 31st  
March 2023

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

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

The Adoption panel has continued to operate twice a month, usually on the first and third Tuesday of each month for a morning. The adoption panel normally consists of an independent chair, a medical advisor, a non-executive director, a social work representative, an independent panel member and a panel advisor. Ms Jenna Boyce, Solicitor, DLS provides written legal advice for each panel.

The membership of the Adoption panel has had some changes in personnel in this reporting period. Mr Michael Mulholland ceased his panel membership as a principal social worker in November 2022 due to a change in employment Ms Riordan retired as an independent panel member in December 2022. The remaining four independent panel members agreed to take on additional panels to ensure panel cover.

Due to staff absences amongst principal social workers, panel was assisted by current Principal social workers taking on additional panels. A number of other Principal social workers in children's services provided assistance; Ms A. Walsh, Ms A. O'Boyle and Mr C. Conlon, in order to keep adoption panel functioning.

Agency decision maker was completed by Ms Elaine Somerville from April to May 2022 and then undertaken by Ms Nuala Hanna from May 2022 until February 2023 when the role was assumed by Mr Maurice Largey, Assistant Director, cared for children's services.

(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 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

The Adoption panel has three primary functions;

To consider and make a recommendation to the adoption agency on;

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

Additionally, the Adoption panel has responsibility for;

- Providing an opinion on the suitability of a proposed placement of a child for whom the care plan is adoption, with prospective adopters.
- Providing a consultation service to the Trust on adoption issues.
- Making recommendations in respect of the payment of adoption allowances

### **3.0      EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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

- 3.1      The number of best interest recommendations made by the panel was twenty-three. These ten female and thirteen male children ranged in age from five months old to eight years old. Five children were presented to panel before their first birthday.
- 3.2      The period from placement in care to best interest recommendation at adoption panel ranged from five months to 4years and 4 months.
- 3.3      The Panel recommended twenty- three matches throughout the period. Seven recommendations were for informal matches of children to dually approved carers and sixteen were formal matches, when the child was available for adoption through freeing order or parental consent.
- 3.4      The adoption panel recommended twelve adoptive applicants for approval in this period. The number of adopters wishing to be considered for concurrent placements was one.
- 3.5      Five former foster carers or kinship carers were assessed and approved to adopt a child in their care.
- 3.6      The Courts freed sixteen children for adoption from the South Eastern trust in this period.
- 3.7      The period of time from best interest recommendation to the granting of the freeing order ranged six weeks to three years and three months.
- 3.8      Twenty-nine children were made subject to Adoption orders; fourteen boys and fifteen girls. This was an increase of eight from the previous year and correlates with the high number of freeing orders made in the previous year (thirty).

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

The previous panel business meeting took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> 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

Adoption Panel training took place on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2022 regarding the Adoption and children's bill delivered by Nuala Hanna.

A regional workshop for adoption panel members in November 2022 addressed topics including:

- Overview of ARIS
- Adoption and Children's Bill overview
- Barnardos foster to adopt scheme
- The STAR matching tool
- Feedback on adopters experience at adoption panel and diversity among adoptive families in NI from Adoption UK
- Learning summaries re Leiland Corkhill, NI Public Services Ombudsman investigation findings
- A research paper outlined by Dr Holly McSpadden, clinical psychologist in SET re the lived experience of adoptive parents of a child with a trauma history.

The panel business meeting regarding the annual report of 2021-2022 took place in May 2023 and will be reflected in the next annual report. The overview of post adoption services is scheduled for 2024.

## 5.0 **ADOPTION PANEL ACTIVITY**

In the period April to October 2022, Adoption panel was conducted remotely using Zoom. Panel resumed operating in person from October 2022 and a hybrid approach has been utilised to enable staff and panel members to attend via Zoom when necessary.

Full panel membership has been at each panel with presenting social workers and applicants joining the panel on Zoom.

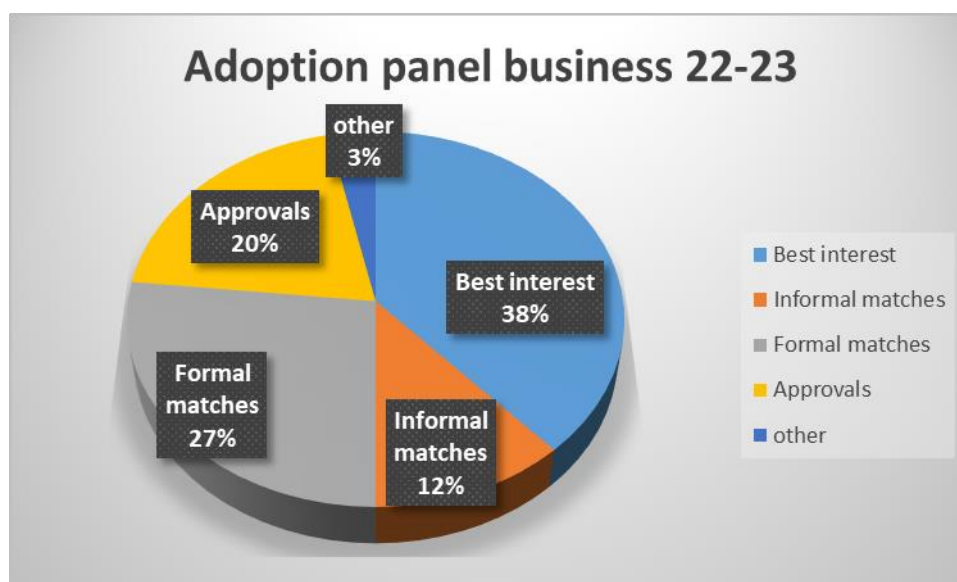
Panel scheduling is still subject to frequent change with fourteen panel slots unused. Seventeen bookings were cancelled or postponed in the year, the majority of which were due to delays in court, delays in expert reports being received by teams, courts permitting further assessment of parents or staff sickness. Where gaps in the schedule have arisen, every effort is made to bring cases forward. However, this is not always possible.

One additional panel was held to consider best interest recommendation on three children whose social workers had previously been postponed their panel bookings.

Two panels were longer with four cases considered on the day of panel to facilitate cases.

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

A summary of Adoption panel business is noted below;



In this reporting period, the adoption panel time was almost equally spent on matching at 39% and best interest recommendations 38%. Approvals and other

approval cases (rescind approval and change of age range) taking 23% of panel time.

Demand for panel time is under continual review 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

<b>Panel Business</b>	<b>2022/2023</b>	<b>2021/2022</b>
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations	<b>Twenty-three</b>	<b>Fifteen</b>
Best interest recommendations deferred	<b>Zero</b>	<b>one</b>
Best Interest for Adoption Recommendations Rescinded	<b>Zero</b>	<b>Zero</b>
Matching Recommendations Made	<b>Twenty three</b> <b>Informal*-7</b> <b>Formal*- 16</b>	<b>Forty</b> <b>Informal-10</b> <b>Formal-30</b>

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

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



### 5.1.1 Best interest cases- analysis

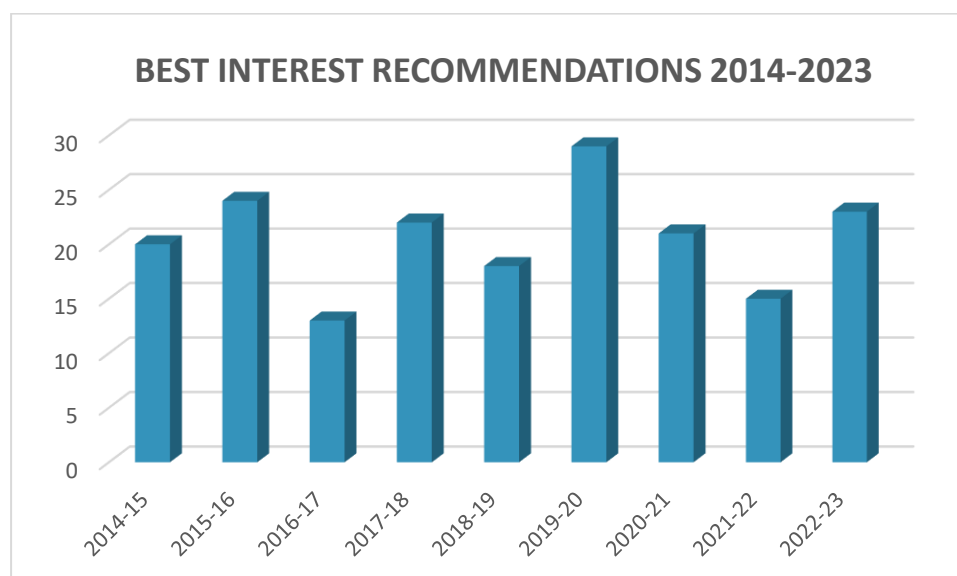
Cases are presented to Adoption panel by Child and Family social work teams (CAFT) following the care planning process and a careful, balanced analysis of care planning and placement options for a child. When a Looked after Child (LAC) review outcome is to refer the matter to Adoption panel for an examination of whether or not the panel consider adoption to be in the child's best interest, the case is then prepared for adoption panel.

The number of children who received a Best Interest decision was twenty-three, an increase of eight from the previous year. Adoption is considered the most appropriate care plan for these young children having determined that these parents are not able to safely parent on conclusion of assessments, there are no kinship options suitable and where long term fostering or residence order are not appropriate permanent options.

Twenty-one of these children had parents from Northern Ireland, with two 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- learning disability, mental health issues, domestic abuse and violence, addiction issues, inter-generational issues, limited supportive networks or kinship care options, criminality, imprisonment, vulnerable parents through trauma or premature death of one parent.

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



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.

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

	2022 / 2023	2021 / 2022
Single Children	Six	Three
Siblings	Two sets of two	Three sets of two
Children of a sibling group where older siblings are in care, adopted or Residence orders	Thirteen	Six
Children who had been placed concurrently	One	Four
Best Interest recommendations rescinded	Zero	Zero

### *Age range and ethnicity*

Children presented to panel for best interests ranged in age from five months to eight years old. Five children were presented to panel before their first birthday. There were thirteen male children and ten female children.

### *Siblings*

Best Interest recommendations on siblings decreased from six to four children. In these sibling pairs, social work assessment concluded they should be placed permanently together.

A significant number of the children who received a best interest recommendation (thirteen) 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. The plan for the majority was to place them as single children or

remain in their foster family via adoption. This figure highlights 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*

On the date of the best interest adoption panel, fourteen children were currently placed in short term foster care placements and needed matching with suitable prospective adoptive families and. Eight of the children were with foster carers or kinship carers who wished to be assessed to adopt them.

One child 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 in assessment 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 in care to best interest recommendation ranged from five months to four years and four 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. When children are placed concurrently at the latter stages of assessment and before final care plans are concluded in the LAC process, their period of concurrent placement is shorter.

#### *Best interest recommendations rescinded*

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

<b>Legal Profile</b>	<b>2022/2023</b>	<b>2021/2022</b>
No Order	<b>Two</b>	<b>One</b>
Interim Care Order	<b>Fifteen</b>	<b>Fourteen</b>
Care Order	<b>Six</b>	<b>None</b>
Relinquished for adoption at the time of Adoption panel	<b>One*</b> <b>(as above- no order)</b>	<b>Zero</b>

The legal profile of the children referred to the Adoption panel for a Best Interest recommendation was predominantly those subject to Interim care orders. Six 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 to enable the Social work manager to provide this consent.

Where a child is subject to an interim care order or running on no order before the court, courts often provisionally timetable for consolidated final hearings of Care and Freeing applications, which can streamline the court applications, focus on one phase of assessments of parents and avoid drift for children by confirming their legal status.

## **REGIONAL DATA- BEST INTEREST**

Throughout Northern Ireland in this period 2022 – 2023, best interest recommendations totalled one hundred and fifteen ranging from thirteen to thirty-two. The Southern Trust reported the highest number of Best interest recommendations at thirty-two with Northern Trust having the lowest number in this reporting period at thirteen. This total number was an increase from the previous year total of eighty-seven. Variations in numbers between the Trust areas is small. (See chart below).

HSC Trust	No. of children	No. of sibling groups	No. of boys	No. of girls
BHSCT	28	2	12	16
NHSCT	13	2	7	6
SEHSCT	23	2	13	10
SHSCT	32	5	18	14
WHSCT	19	2	9	10
Total	115	13	59	56

Of the 115, there were 13 sibling groups recommended to be placed together, including 2 groups of 3 siblings.

59 boys and 56 girls were made the subject of a 'Best Interests' recommendation.

Of the 115 children who received a 'Best Interests' recommendation, the youngest child was 3 months old and the eldest child to receive a 'Best Interests' recommendation was 13 years and 8 months.

*Draft ARIS annual report, 2022-2023*

### 5.1.2 Informal & formal matching- analysis

The number of matching cases brought before the SET Adoption panel decreased in this reporting period from forty in the previous year, which was particularly high, to twenty-three proposed matches in this year. This constituted 39% of the panel time for the year.

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

Proposed matches were considered by panel on seven of the children who also received a best interest recommendation in the same reporting period. One child was informally matched with their concurrent carers at the time of their best interest recommendation panel.

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 by the court. The matching therefore took place in respect of twenty children in total: nine males and eleven females.

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

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

- Thirteen sets of adopters had been assessed and approved by the South Eastern Trust.
- Four of the matches were to prospective adopters from other Trust areas or one of the Voluntary Adoption agencies in Northern Ireland and were sourced through ARIS. One of these matches was for a pair of siblings.

Adopters included;

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

### *Age range of children at matching*

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

### *Ethnicity of carers*

All of prospective adopters originated from Northern Ireland.

### *Former carers*

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

### *Concurrent carers*

Of the sixteen formal matches considered by the adoption panel, five children were formally matched to their former concurrent carers.

### *Matched to new carers*

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

### 5.1.3 LEGAL ORDERS

	2022-2023	2021-2022
Freeing orders granted	Sixteen	Thirty
Parental consent to adoption	Two	Two
Adoption orders granted	Twenty-nine	Twenty-one

#### *Freeing orders- analysis*

During this reporting period, sixteen children were freed for Adoption, ten were male children and six were female.

Of the twenty-three children who obtained a Best Interest recommendation in this period, three were freed for adoption before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

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

- late stage kinship options coming forward and being assessed,
- children with complex health needs and associated placement finding issues,
- change of Judge mid case,
- those children who had obtained best interest decision during 2020 had elongated court processes linked to the pandemic, only resulted in final freeing hearings in the period 2022-2023

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 twenty-one in 2021-22 to twenty- nine in this reporting period up to end of March 2023. Fifteen were female children and fourteen were male children. The age of the children at the time of the adoption order ranged from one year eleven months old to nine years old. 41% of the children adopted in this period were 5 years old and over with the other 59% being under 5 years old. Four of these children were adopted as part of a sibling group of two.



In terms of ethnic origin, the majority (26) of the children adopted were from white Northern Irish/ Irish/British backgrounds, while three of the children were of Eastern European heritage.

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.

Twenty of the children adopted had experienced dually approved placements. Former foster carers adopted four children and three were adopted by their concurrent carers.

#### *Children received into SET area*

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

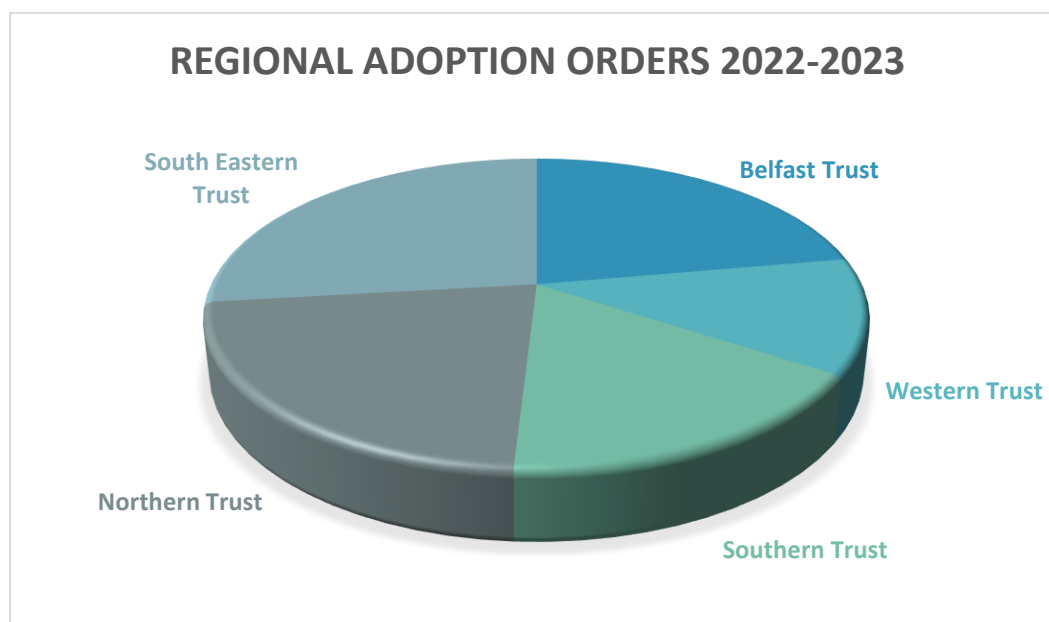
### 5.1.4 Regional adoption figures

There were 108 Adoption Orders made in the twelve-month period, an increase on the previous year's figures of eighty-nine. It was anticipated that following the delays to care planning and court processes due to the Covid-19 pandemic through 2020 and 2021, there would be an increase in Adoption Orders as the court system caught up with the care planning decisions required for children; this may explain the significant increase to Adoption Orders this year.

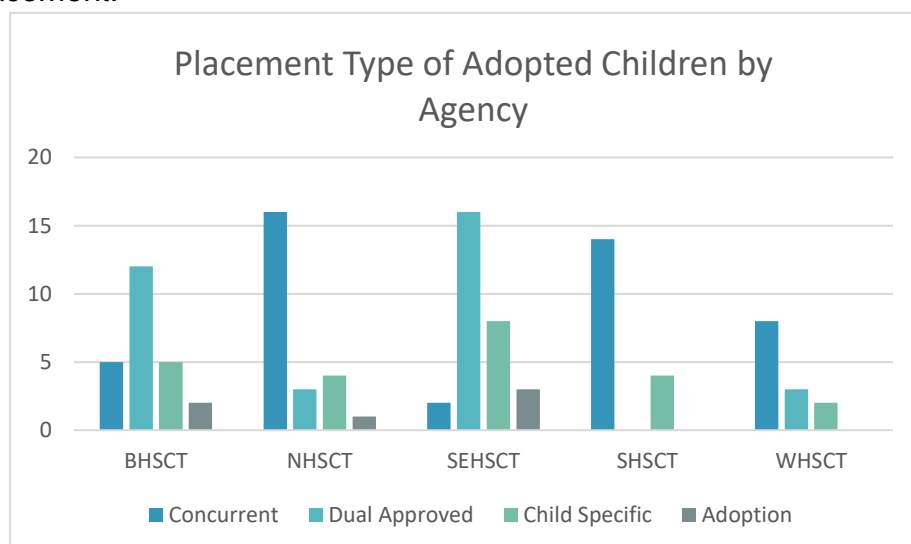
Included in the 108 Adoption Orders is 13 sibling groups (26 children) who were adopted as part of a sibling group.

Table 1 Number of children adopted from care by HSC Trust  
year ending 31 March 2023 % of all children

HSC Trust	Number	adopted from care
Belfast	24	22%
Northern	24	22%
South Eastern	29	27%
Southern	18	17%
Western	13	12%
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>



The table below highlights the different placement types utilised by the five Trusts on the journey towards adoption orders. Within the SET area, the predominant placement type is dual approval. This is largely down to the limited availability of concurrent carers and geographical factors influencing concurrent placement suitability when referrals are received. Demand for placements is outstripping supply within the Trust and the Adoption team has not been fully staffed for over eight years. The team has to operate a waiting list for assessment following preliminary checks on applicants. Due to the high number of children who are only referred to pre linking panel following conclusion of the care planning process, often approved adopters, who would consider concurrent placements, are being linked with children in need of dual approved placements ( already have a best interest decision from adoption panel and a freeing application is before the court). This will only be rectified when the available pool of approved adopters can be enlarged to provide more choice when linking a child for a concurrent or dually approved placement.



*Draft ARIS annual report 2022-23*

### *Regional demographic information on adopters.*

The Draft ARIS annual report details the following,

*Some 75% the adopters were different sex couples who were married or in a civil partnership and 5% were different sex unmarried couples. Some 7% were same sex couples who were married or in a civil partnership and 6% were same sex unmarried couples. A further 6% were single adopters (all female).*

*Of all the adopters, 11 had previously adopted a child or children<sup>5</sup>, and 22 had dependent birth children living in the household.*

*The age of the adopters ranged from early thirties to early sixties, with the largest proportion of the adopters being in their forties at the time of the adoption (63%).*

#### *Regional demographic information on adopted children*

*The majority of the children adopted from care were of white ethnic background (90%). Some eleven children (10%) were Irish or Roma Traveller, or mixed ethnic group.*

*Nineteen children (18%) had special needs or a disability. This included emotional or behavioural difficulties, sensory impairment, autism and learning disability.*

*In 2022/23, 75 of the children (69%) were adopted as a single child adoption whereas 33 children were adopted as part of a sibling group (31%). In 2022/23, the average length of time between the date of the child's last period of care started to the Adoption Order was granted was 3 years and 7 months. Some 5% of the children were adopted within two years of entering the final period of care and for just over two-thirds of the children the last period in care lasted three years or longer.*

*The average age of children adopted from care was 4 years and 4 months and ranged from 1 year 2 months old to 9 years and 3 months.*

*The Children Adopted from Care NI 2022/2023 report notes that children adopted in 2022/23, the average duration from the Trust Looked after Child Best Interest Proposal to adoption was 2 years 6 months, similar to the previous two years. In 2022/23, this ranged from 9 months to 5 years 6 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;

	<b>2022/2023</b>
<b>Total number of Domestic Adoption Applications Recommended for Approval by Panel</b>	<b>Twelve</b>
<b>Child specific approved adopters</b>	<b>Six</b>
<b>Approved to adopt and available for placement</b>	<b>Six</b>
<b>Open to concurrent or dual approval placements</b>	<b>One</b>
<b>Open to dual approval placements</b>	<b>Five</b>
<b>Open to placements of one or two children</b>	<b>Two</b>
<b>Adoption approvals rescinded</b>	<b>One</b>

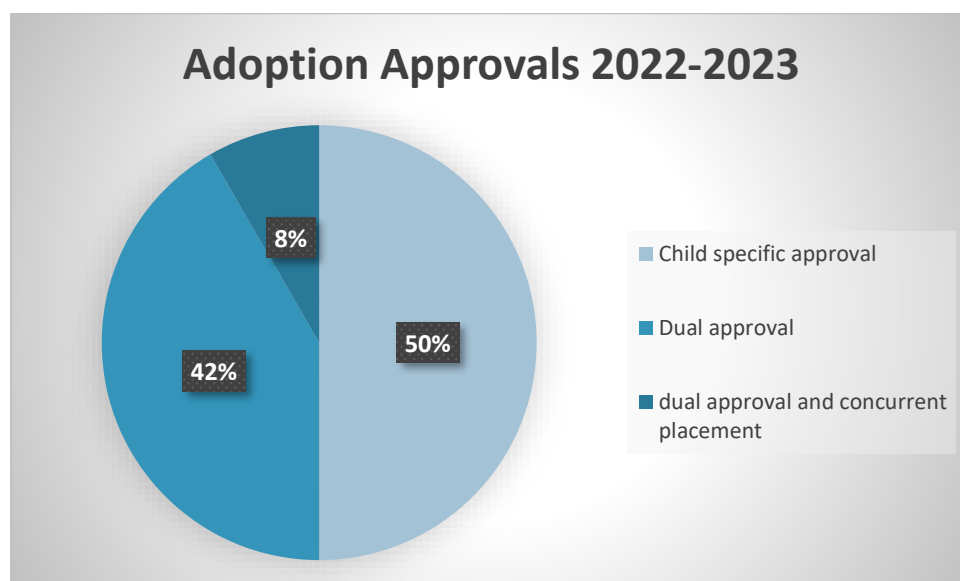
Adoption team social workers presented six child specific adoption assessments to the Adoption panel in this period. This number included current foster carers and kinship carers. These child specific approval cases were considered at panel along with the proposal to informally or formally match the child to these carers.

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. One 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 cohabiting or married couples.

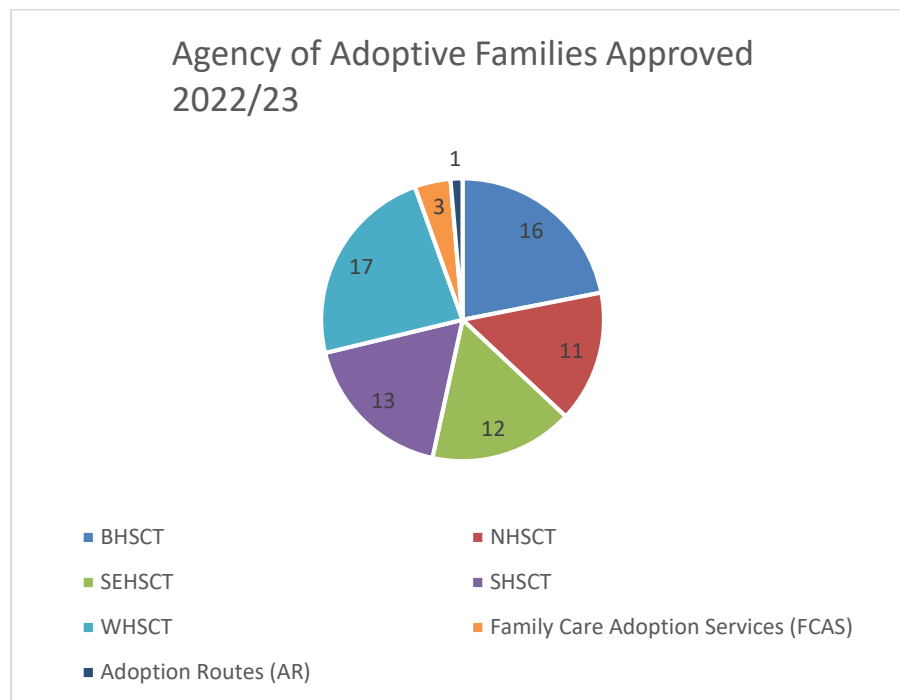
Three of the twelve applicants were approved for one or two children and nine were approved for single children (of which six were available to be matched to children with care plans of adoption).

The twelve adopters approved in the South Eastern Trust was similar to the previous year (13) approved to adopt.

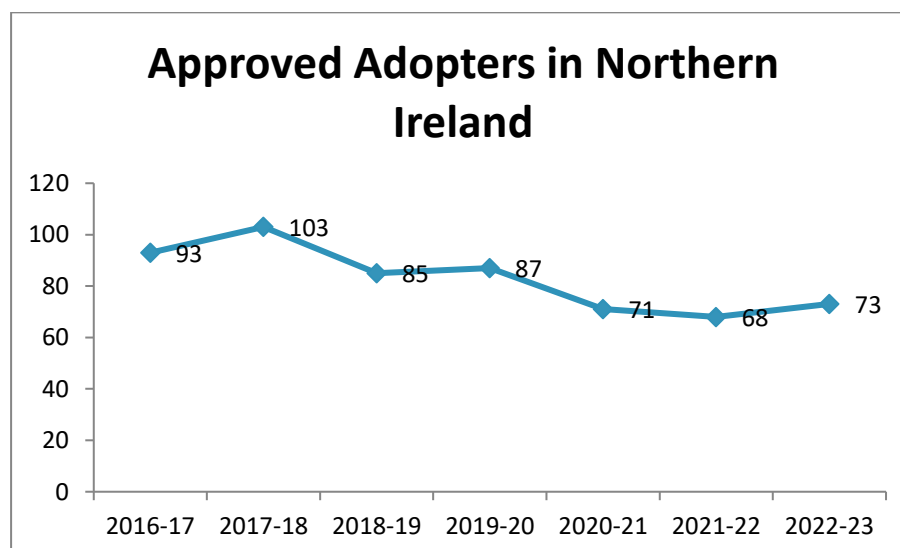


### 5.2.1 Regional approved adopters

ARIS was notified of 73 newly approved adoptive families in 2022/23. The number of newly approved adoptive families by agency is as follows:



While this is a slight increase from the previous year. There has been a downward trend in the approved number of adopters over the past 7 years.



## Family Composition

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

- *Six single females (8%)*
- *One single male (1.4%)*
- *Fifty-five mixed sex couples (75%)*
- *Eleven same sex couples (15%)*

*While forty-six of the newly approved adopters had no children, eighteen had birth children, seven had adopted children, one had birth children and adopted children and one had foster children.*

*The number of carers available to ARIS in the reporting year fell from 50 in 2021/22 to 35 in 2022/23. This is the lowest number recorded over the past 10 years and has created challenges for the service.*

*Of the seventy-three newly approved adoptive families, thirty-five of these families were approved as concurrent adoptive carers (47.9%). Twenty-two families (30.1%) were Dual Approved.*

*There were sixteen child specific adoptive assessments completed, this was a mixture of kin and non-kin foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care and families wishing to adopt their adopted children's younger siblings.*

Forty-eight children were referred to ARIS during 2022/23. 31.3% of the children for whom ARIS were asked to identify a placement, were 'matched' or 'linked' by the service.



### 5.2.2 Additional roles and functions of the Adoption team

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

	2022/2023	2021/2022
Approval ranges amended	None	None
Approvals deferred	None	None
Approvals to Adopt Rescinded by Panel	One	Two
Approved Adoption Applicants on Trust Adoption Register as of 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2023	Six	Six
Adoption enquiries	Eighty-six	Eighty- one

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

There was one approval rescinded in this reporting period at the request of the approved adopters. 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. Adoption services acknowledged National adoption week in October 2022 with a celebration of adoption through *Adoption Reflections*- images depicting family life formed via adoption. These photograph montages, donated by adoptive families, are now on display in the Panel Room in Grove House, Ballynahinch. A local newspaper ran an article on this event.

There was limited recruitment in this reporting period due to the numbers already undertaking preliminary checks and a waiting list for assessment.

### *Domestic applications for assessment*

The trust hosted two Preparation to Adopt courses in May 2022 and November 2022 attended by twenty-five people.

### *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 2022 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. Twelve 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*

At the reporting period end, six approved adopters were on the register 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 fifty prospective adoptive households at differing stages of the adoption journey, pre adoption order.

### *Step- parent adoptions*

The adoption team are responsible for the assessment of step- parent adoption applicants. There was one adoption order granted for step- parents. All of the other step- parent cases remain with the team until the matter concludes in court.

### *Intercountry adoption*

The Adoption Team supported three new children placed with intercountry adopters in the South Eastern Trust area. The Adoption Team social workers undertake statutory monthly visits to these children until the Court grants Adoption Orders. Three review meetings are conducted at intervals.

There are two further intercountry adopters who are period end were awaiting placement and are reviewed on a six monthly basis.

There were two adoption orders granted in the reporting period for intercountry adoption. No further intercountry adopters were approved.

### *Support to Adopted adults*

Since 1st April 2022, enquiries from adopted adults have continued to come in at a steady rate with an average of three a month. This continues to be an area of growth and focus, directly affected by the publication of the Mother and Baby Home report in January 2021. Ms K. Leonard, Senior social worker of the Adoption team has been a member of a regional working group developing agreed protocols for access to records for adopted adults.

## 6.0 ADOPTION PANEL FEEDBACK

In the period April 2022- end of March 2023, presenting social workers and senior social workers received feedback forms regarding adoption panel.

Feedback was requested using seven questions on a Likert scale.

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

Thirteen 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. 100% (*clearly or very clearly*)
- Support and guidance was available to me for preparation of my case for panel- (100% *said available or very available*)
- I was welcomed into panel and the panel members introduced themselves clearly (100%-*very welcoming*)
- The questions that the panel members asked were relevant and fair- 54% considered the questions as very relevant; 46% of social workers graded the relevancy as 3-4.
- I was given the opportunity to clearly explain the assessment / care planning/decision making process in my case- 100% (*good or plenty of opportunity*)
- The recommendation of the panel was communicated clearly to me at the end of the panel- 100% (*clearly or very clearly communicated*)

### Social worker comments

*I found the experience of attending SE Trust Adoption Panel on 17/05/22 to be very positive.*

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*The week before the Panel I was provided with information to share with the applicants, which explained the procedure for attending via Zoom video link and giving details on Panel members, which the couple found useful.*

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The Panel were very gracious in terms of understanding the case pressures of the team, which had an onward impact on the allocation of this case.

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*The couple valued having the Panel Chairperson ringing them to confirm the recommendation of the Panel and to hear her positive comments about them.*

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*This was the first panel I have ever attended. I was not sure what to expect and was nervous leading to it but the panel members were very sensitive and tuned in to the child's needs. It was a positive experience*

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*This was the presenting social workers first experience of a virtual adoption panel, which was a new experience and learning. The clients/couple provided feedback and stated they would have had a preference to have attended panel in person, this is the shared experience of the presenting Social Worker.*

### Adoptive applicant feedback

Adoptive applicants received a Feedback questionnaire to gauge service user feedback. These were posted along with an explanatory letter. This process was impacted by admin absences for a period.

## 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 Likert scale. Only a very small number were returned and some preferred to provide verbal reflections through their social worker.

### *Comments included;*

The panel recognised we were nervous and took time to put us at ease. They did ask relevant and some challenging questions. A daunting day but we welcomed meeting the panel.

## *Analysis*

From the feedback forms received from social workers, the experience of attending adoption panel 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.

Feedback received from adoptive applicants in this period was very positive across all questions.

The use of Zoom for the virtual meeting platform in the first half of the reporting period caused some challenges. The adoption panel has been able to operate a hybrid model since October 2022 with presenting social workers and adoptive applicants in the panel room when possible.

Based on the small sample of feedback forms received, the adoption panel continues to deliver a good quality, sensitive service to staff and applicants. Further work is required to improve the return rate of feedback forms from adoptive 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
- Delivering induction to new Adoption panel members
- Coordinating training for panel members
- 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 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, all approved adopters were notified to ARIS. The profiles of six approved adopters were considered each month at pre linking panel as potential placements for children. Approved adopters go-live on the ARIS database three months after their approval. This may result in links to children referred to the database from other Trust areas.

### *Referrals of children*

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

From the 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023, the Trust referred six children to ARIS for live searches of the database for dually approved placements as no suitable matches were available within the South Eastern Trust area. One child was eventually matched following referral to the ARIS database. One SET child was referred to the ARIS database for a concurrent placement. Although this process took several months, this was successful in securing a concurrent placement.

Exchange day profiling was used for three of the children in this period. Unfortunately, no placements were identified through this method.

The Draft ARIS annual report notes that,

*During 2022/23, ARIS hosted three Adoption Exchange Days (29<sup>th</sup> April 2022, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2022 & 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023). These events allow prospective adopters to consider the profiles of children who are waiting for a family. These events currently take place online using a secure webinar-based platform.*

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



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

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

The 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

In this reporting period, the pre linking panel received sixteen new referrals for family finding for children. At the time of referral,

- fifteen children were in need of dually approved placements
- one new referral was seeking a concurrent placement.
- nine further children were already in placement with foster carers or kinship carers who were being assessed to adopt them.
- One child was noted by the pre linking panel as already being in concurrent care at the time of the best interest recommendation.
- A further six children were carried over from the previous period and were reviewed at pre linking panel from April 2022 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.

Pre linking panel identifies those children whose future permanent placement needs cannot be met within the SET area, either due to availability of suitable placements or due to risk assessment and proximity issues. Any links identified by ARIS are explored and reviewed through this panel.

A pre linking panel summary is submitted by the pre linking panel chairperson at the time of the initial match being proposal to the adoption panel.

## **10.0 CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY SUPPORT FOR PERMANENCE AND ADOPTION SERVICES**

There are two Clinical Psychologists providing support within Adoption services - Dr Leigh Crawford, Specialist Clinical Psychologist (3.5 days a week) and Dr Holly McSpadden, Clinical Psychologist (2 days a week).

Dr Crawford provides advice and consultation in relation to all children presented at Pre linking panel. A detailed profile is compiled of a child's emotional and developmental needs, to contribute to the family finding process.

Dr Crawford attends monthly Pre linking panel and is available to meet with potential adopters, once a match is being progressed. Support can be provided in planning a child's move to their concurrent, dually approved or adoptive home and remains available following the transition, whether this placement is in SET or another Trust area.

Dr Crawford offers post adoption support for Permanence Social Workers and adoptive parents, providing short-term guidance around issues such as narrative work, education, contact with birth family and general therapeutic parenting. She also signposts to other therapeutic or support services where needed, including to Post Adoption Intervention, which is provided by Dr Holly McSpadden.

Dr McSpadden's approach is based upon longer term and more intensive Therapeutic Parenting and, if appropriate, dyadic direct therapeutic intervention with parents and child. Dr McSpadden's work is informed by models such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), Just Right State and Theraplay.

Dr Crawford contributes to part of the Preparation to adopt course and is involved in Making the Move training (for Foster Carers and approved Adopters). She is available to join professional discussions and core group meetings and also provides monthly consultation opportunities with Adoption team social workers in relation to more complex adoption assessments.

## **11.0 POST ADOPTION SUPPORT**

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

Social workers trained in Theraplay and DDP are available within the permanence and post adoption team to provide direct assistance with the children and their parents.

During the reporting period, the Teams worked with 103 families with 118 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.

Two clinical psychologists for the Adoption service, Dr Leigh Crawford and Dr Holly McSpadden continue to support adoptive families where there are more complex attachment and developmental trauma based issues.

The Trust has provided funding for play therapy and art therapy following an assessment of need.

During the reporting period fifty-six families were supported with direct post adoption contact and forty- seven supported with indirect post adoption contact by the Permanence and Post Adoption Team.

The Trust ran two paddle boarding groups attended by a total of 8 families (11 children) and a fun day for sibling groups, which was attended by four families (10 children). There was also a Christmas coffee and craft post adoption event including. For the younger age group of children placed for adoption or already adopted, the Trust ran a six-week attachment swimming course attended by six families and seven children.

Counselling sessions with a freelance post adoption Counsellor is also available to adoptive parents when required.

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

Sitting within the post adoption support is the area of support to adopted adults who wish to gain access to information contained in their original file. This can sometimes lead to contact being established with relatives in their birth family.

## **12.0 ADOPTION PANEL SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS**

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

- Induction and integration of new panel members
- Improvement to rate of feedback from adoptive applicants
- Progression of training for panel members- a child's journey through care, supports and assessments to birth families, post adoption services, adult mental health

## Appendix 1

### **ADOPTION PANEL MEMBERSHIP**

Adoption panel membership for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 is set out below.

Mrs Kate Anderson	Independent Chairperson
Ms Nuala Hanna	Vice-Chairperson, Head of Service Fostering & Adoption Interim ADM for adoption panel
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	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 (retired November 2022)
Mr Wesley Graham	Independent Member
Mrs Gillian Forrest	Principal Practitioner – Court
Ms Julie Patterson	Principal Social Worker-Leaving Care and After Care
Mr Michael Mulholland	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding
Ms Angela Kerr	Principal Social Worker- Permanence and Post adoption
Ms Lesley McKenna	Principal Social Worker- Safeguarding
Ms Elaine Somerville	Assistant Director and Agency decision maker
Mr Maurice Largey	Assistant Director - cared for services. ADM to adoption panel January 23- March 23

Jenna Boyce	Panel Legal Advisor (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	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, and ask for additional information or request further work be completed.