



Annual Report:

FAMILY ROUTES

2023

Foreword – Chair

In 2023 Family Routes continued to build and consolidate its Board Membership. One member, Elizabeth Shaw, concluded her time with the Board in November 2023. A further member is in process of introduction. This pending member has personal experience of adoption and has used Family Routes' services in the past.

Since being appointed as Interim Chair in June 2022 my priority continues to be the reconstruction of the Board with the appropriate skills and knowledge to meet our current operating climate including particular economic challenges in the funding environment. Elizabeth Shaw concluded her time with the Board in November 2023 and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Liz for her guidance and expertise during her time on the Family Routes Board.

The number of Trustees has increased to six with two further potential Trustees identified, one of whom has personal experience of adoption and has used Family Routes' services in the past.

My knowledge and experience of the quality of the services offered by Family Routes and the contemporary challenges to those services is growing and I am impressed not only by the humanity of the work but also by the innovation in service development.

As Chair once again I extend my thanks to staff who put the beneficiaries at the heart of everything they do. I also want to thank our funders and supporters whose ongoing confidence in the quality of our services and the funding of these services mean that many children, adults and indeed whole families receive much needed support and intervention at a time of great challenge.

Joseph Copeland
Chair, Family Routes

Family Routes is the overarching corporation that incorporates four distinct services:

Adoption Routes

Adoption assessment and post-adoption support for families and adults

Origins

Access to adoption records, information and potential reconnection.

Fertility Counselling Service NI

Leading provider of specialist fertility counselling.

Next Step

Support and counselling service for birth families.

TESSA

Therapeutic and education support for adopted children and their adoptive parents

TESSA TEENS

Mental Health programme of support for adopted teenagers and their families.

The staff group comprises a core team of 6 staff including social work, counselling, support and admin roles, and a regional resource of 50+ specialist therapists, counsellors and social workers. Family Routes provides training and awareness raising on adoption and fertility-related issues, and plays a key role within the sector, working in partnership with a wide range of voluntary and statutory organisations.

Family Routes services are funded through a variety of sources including DHSSPS core funding; SPPG (Next Step), National Lottery Fund, Community Foundation Mental Health Fund, as well as donations from the public and some Church of Ireland parishes.

In mid-2023 the organisation was advised of a 50% reduction in Core Grant Funding as was the Voluntary Sector in general.

Increasingly service users e.g. adoptees/adopters are engaged in the shaping and co-design of service development.

Adoption Routes

As with all Family Routes services, the Adoption Routes service is available to people throughout Northern Ireland.

In recent years, Family Routes has placed a great focus on developing support services for people affected by adoption - services which support birth parents (Next Step) and adopted children and their adoptive families (TESSA). In line with the new three-year strategic plan Adoption Routes has focused on building capacity and capability to place more children in the Northern Ireland care system rather than place children from elsewhere in the UK. This has included the establishment of a new Northern Ireland-based adoption panel. Reprofitting the adoption offer through upgrade of the existing website and establishing a skilled staff team in adoption.

Origins

This service supports adult adoptees as they consider tracing their birth family.

The impact of the Truth and Recovery Strategy interest in exploring origins has increased for adopted adults. We have been a member of the Access to Adoption Records Group developing new policy and practice guidance in this field alongside experts by experience. The newly published (November 2023) Access to Records Policy and Procedure will now guide our practice in this area going forward. The Family Routes Board of Trustees has been engaged in giving careful consideration to lodging our Adoption and Mother and Baby Home archive with PRONI for the purposes of restoration, preservation and storage. The decision has now been made to take this action in early 2024. Family Routes will retain a digital record and any individuals seeking access to their records and potential reconnection will be directed to Family Routes for support and guidance. The overarching priority for the Board has been that we continue to be able to exercise our legacy duty of care to our historical beneficiaries. The Truth Recovery Panel will shortly seek to access information from our archive and we are committed to give our full co-operation in this respect again with the focus being on the historical beneficiaries.

Fertility Counselling Service ni (FCSni)

The FCSni offers specialist fertility counselling to individuals and couples from across Northern Ireland who are considering or undergoing fertility treatment. People are referred by the two Fertility Clinics in Northern Ireland: The Regional Fertility Centre (RFC) which is an NHS clinic which also treats private patients and with whom the FCSni has a Service Level Agreement; and Belfast Fertility TFP which is a private fertility clinic established in 2014 at which point a contract with FCSni was established. People may also self-refer.

Recognising the life trauma posed by the experience of infertility, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 states that:

'a woman shall not be provided with treatment services...unless she and any man or woman who is being treated together with her have been given a suitable opportunity to receive proper counselling...'

FCSni meets this need by providing much needed therapeutic support for individuals and couples on this fertility journey.

Within the last year this service has also been receiving referrals to counsel individuals undertaking transgender fertility preservation. This counselling is part of a Pilot Project being undertaken by the Regional Fertility Centre, Belfast.

Staff Composition

FCSni is staffed by three professionally trained specialist Fertility Counsellors, two contracted staff, and one self-employed sessional staff member.

Summary of Activity Levels

In the year to date the Fertility Counselling Service received 511 new referrals in total, a significant increase in the previous year. With New Decade New Approach we anticipate a further increase as more cycles of treatment will gradually become available.

Feedback from Referrers/Partners

'It is invaluable for us to be able to refer our patients to the Fertility Counselling Service in Belfast. The feedback we receive from patients about the caring and compassionate way they are received at the Fertility Counselling Service is always excellent and I know that for many it has been literally a life saver. Our patient groups suffer from high levels of recurrent grief and bereavement often leading to depression and anxiety, sometimes with suicidal ideation. Attending the counselling sessions has helped these patients to heal, to move forward on their journey and to repair relationships broken through stress. The FCS see people quickly for first appointments and the telephone counselling has been very helpful for those with work commitments, or who live some distance away.'

Voluntary Sector Agency

Patients often show reluctance when the word "counselling" is mentioned to them. However, without fail, when they return they confess that the experience has been enormously helpful. They report that the counsellors are empathetic, challenging and caring; that they make them face up to and discuss issues that they have perhaps ignored and that they have facilitated the patients in coming to a decision (and not always the initially obvious one) about what to do next. It is a very difficult balance between pushing couples (or individuals) too far and losing their respect and pushing them far enough to ensure that they fully understand the implications of their actions. We, in the Regional Fertility Centre, are very fortunate to have such an expert team responsible for providing our counselling services. I cannot commend them highly enough for what they do and how they do it.

In addition to providing counselling services, staff also facilitate training and other awareness-raising activities. This is highly sought-after due to the recognised specialist knowledge base and expertise developed over 30 years of delivering the service.

Next Step

The Next Step service is provided as part of a partnership arrangement since July 2015, with Adoption Routes as the lead agency and in partnership with Family Care Adoption Services and Adopt NI. Next Step is funded by the Strategic Planning & Policy Group. The service provides support and counselling to birth parents, birth relatives, siblings and foster carers who are impacted by a child being placed for adoption, and includes the Regional Origins Tracing Service (ROTS) delivered by Adopt NI.

Birth parents are some of “social work’s most alienated service users” (Charlton, 1998). They are, typically, a hard-to-reach group often facing multiple significant and adverse challenges. Many birth parents having experienced complex trauma themselves. The contributing factors resulting in their child/children being removed from their care, are complex and varied. The adoption of a child is in and of itself often very traumatic for any birth parent. Many of Next Step service users have little or no family support and are very isolated and thus they have limited support helping them come to terms with their loss and experience. Next Step has a vital role in the provision of support to birth parents and other relatives at this pivotal time in their lives, in the hope their experience of adoption can bring about change and be a turning point, rather than yet another crisis.

Birth parents are often naturally suspicious of professionals, and it can take time to build trust and rapport. Efforts are made to provide service users with regular appointments. It is our experience at times that service users can stop attending for a while and then want to pick up with the service again at a later date or at a further stage in the adoption process, often reflecting periods of crisis or difficulty in their lives, and also because they need some time and space to come to terms with the latest decision or court outcome, for example. We are gently persistent in our approach, recognising that service users face many real challenges in engaging with services. They may not have telephone credit to make contact to cancel an appointment; their housing situation may have changed and this has become their priority; or they may be experiencing significant mental ill-health which makes managing normal day to day activities difficult. Whatever the block to engaging with us we try to reassure them that support is available to them and that we can pick up again when they are in a more settled situation. We offer flexibility as we build a positive working relationship with each individual person, recognising that while there are patterns, each person has their own unique set of life circumstances and challenges. During the pandemic all Next Step sessions have been via zoom or by telephone call – on occasion counsellors will meet a client outside for a walk, weather permitting. We will also continue to reach out after other organisations are likely to have stepped back when service users miss appointments. This is reflected in stats for cancelled appointments but is also reflected

in the engagement with a vulnerable group of people who typically struggle to engage and maintain engagement.

In the year-to-date Next Step received 45 new referrals. This service has been subject to continuous contract extensions over the past three years and would benefit from the opportunity to review and re-tender.

Staff composition:

The Next Step service is coordinated by one core member of Family Routes staff. She is supported in delivering the service by other professionals on a sessional basis.

Feedback from referrers/partners:

"I feel that my client has really began to accept the current situation since starting work with Next Step. She is very wary of social workers and as a result refused to listen to advice and guidance given. She speaks very highly of her Next Step worker and the fact that Next Step is not involved in the court process really helps her to trust Next Step and your advice."

(Referring Social Worker)

TESSA

TESSA is a National Lottery funded support service for adoptive families, offering services to parents, children and schools

In the year-to-date TESSA received 47 new referrals.

In May 2022 TESSA additionally launched a new mental health programme for adopted teenagers called TESSA TEENS. A number of specific programmes are currently running including photographic, equine, art and music.

Staff composition:

The TESSA Project is staffed by a Project Coordinator and an Admin Assistant. In addition, it contracts over 30 self-employed Counsellors, Therapists and Social Workers on a sessional basis to provide a wide range of therapeutic and assessment services to adopted children and their families.

This service has been extensively evaluated with very positive outcomes. In early 2023 the TESSA Service was awarded two-year funding from the National Lottery. For the previous twelve months, Family Routes had sustained the service through the Charity's own funds.

Networking and Influencing:

- Family Routes is represented on the Departmental Adoption Legislation Implementation and Policy and Procedure Development Groups.
 - During 2023 Family Routes has been a member of the Adult Access to Adoption Records Group, membership being both professionals and experts by experience to develop and implement new Policy and Practice guidance for Adult Post Adoption Record Access and Support. The new Policy and Procedure guidance was issued in November 2023, concluding our engagement in this process.
 - Family Routes is a member of the Trauma Network.
 - Staff contribute to a range of committees/panels/networks. For example, one counsellor continued her role as a member of BICA's Accreditation Board, one counsellor continued membership of the HFEA's Licensed Centre Panel in this year. Staff also offer regular input to support meetings organised by the Fertility Network UK.
 - Family Routes has contributed to specialist training on the impact of infertility for prospective adopters and also for medics engaged in the fertility field.
 - Staff provide awareness-raising and specialist training in a range of contexts e.g. Delivering training to Health & Social Care Trust staff, raising their awareness of the issues facing birth families, and bespoke training for BICA members on Trauma Perspectives on Infertility
 - Staff regularly contribute to conferences and workshops e.g. Trauma Summit.
 - Family Routes is currently engaged in planning a Conference on Becoming a Family with the Help of Donation in collaboration with the Fertility Clinics.
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Priorities for 24/25:

- Continue review of all internal systems and processes to ensure the continuing provision of high quality, effective and response services.
 - Continue to build the Board to ensure robust governance arrangements are in place to support the ongoing development and sustainability of the service.
 - Maximise our newly-developed and enhanced online and social media presence which aims to raise awareness of the complexity of issues relating to fertility and adoption, and increases awareness of and access to the range of services we offer
 - Deliver a medial and advertising strategy to promote Family Routes/Adoption Routes as the Adoption Agency of choice in Northern Ireland for Prospective Adopters.
 - Continue to deliver on our Financial Recovery Plan.
 - Continue to increase engagement with a range of current and potential stakeholders, including service users.
 - Successfully transfer our archive records to PRONI and establish good operational protocols to support access for our beneficiaries.
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