



**Annual Report:**

**FAMILY ROUTES**

**2024**

## **FOREWARD – CHAIR**

This has been a year of challenge for Family Routes but also achievement.

The challenges arise from the continued insecurity of statutory funding and lack of progress of the implementation of much needed new Adoption and Children's Legislation.

The organization's achievement despite an unstable funding environment has been to maintain high standards of service to our beneficiaries and increase the number of those beneficiaries.

This year has seen the repositioning of Family Routes as a credible Adoption Agency in Northern Ireland. We were very pleased to welcome Frances Nicholson MBE as the Chair of our newly-constructed Adoption Panel.

The number of Trustees currently stands at five with plans to recruit two new members in the New Year.

Stability in Board Membership and active participation has deepened the Board's knowledge of the operational challenges of Family Routes' services and the operating environment. I am grateful for their continued commitment and engagement.

As Chair, once again, I extend my thanks to staff for putting the beneficiaries of our services at the heart of everything that they do and constantly striving to do more and better.

I also wish to thank our funders and commissioners for their ongoing confidence in the quality of our services in the current challenging environment.

**Joe Copeland**  
**Chair Family Routes**

Family Routes is a Voluntary Sector Organization registered the Charity Commission Northern Ireland and a Voluntary Sector Adoption Agency regulated by the RQIA. We are an active member of the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies and one of three Voluntary Sector Adoption Agencies in Northern Ireland, the other two being Barnardo's and Family Care Adoption Service.

We provide five services and seek to influence policy, strategy, investment and practice in all service areas.

**Adoption Routes** – recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters, support in matching, placement and post adoption support.

**Origins** – Access to historical records for adults impacted by adoption, information, guidance and recommendation where appropriate.

**Fertility Counselling Service ni** – Lead provider of Fertility Counselling in Northern Ireland, for the Regional Fertility Centre, Royal Hospital and TFP, Fertility Partnership.

**Next Step** – Support and guidance for birth parents whose children are subject to a statutory best interests decision leading to their child's adoption.

**TESSA/TESSA Teens** – Therapeutic and educational support to adopted children and their adoptive families.

The Core Staff Team at Family Routes comprises eight individual staff members equating to ??? full-time equivalents.

Additionally, we engage with approximately forty self-employed sessional workers who meet the needs of our varying services and beneficiaries, adoption assessors, birth parent counsellors, fertility counsellors and a broad range of therapeutic counsellors to meet the support needs of adoptive families and adopted children.

In 2024 Family Routes were funded by a variety of sources including The Department of Health, Social Services Core Funding, SPPG, National Lottery Fund, the Community Foundation, Mental Health Foundation, the Regional Fertility Centre and the Fertility Partnership as well as a small level of voluntary funds income from the public and some Church of Ireland Parishes.

Departmental Core Grant funding was held at 50% of the previous allocation across the Voluntary Sector in general.

Increasingly service beneficiaries are engaged in shaping service design.

## **ADOPTION ROUTES**

This is a Regional Adoption Service. In pursuance of the current three-year plan Family Routes has had a significant development focus on our adoption service.

The objective has been to reposition Family Routes as a contemporary, effective adoption agency for children in Northern Ireland.

A new adoption panel, chaired by Frances Nicholson MBE has been established and four potential adopters have been approved this year.

An Adoption Development Manager is in post overseeing the work of four adoption assessors.

By the end of the Financial Year 2024/25 we anticipate the achievement of six adoption placements.

The rebuilding of the Adoption Agency has been substantially supported by the Dormant Accounts Fund (National Lottery)

We have built a collaboration with the other two Voluntary Sector Adoption Agencies, Barnardo's and Family Care Adoption Service to promote the Voluntary Sector contribution to adoption in Northern Ireland.

The organization is in the process of registration as an Adoption Agency with the RQIA to more fully reflect the range of adoption related services, including TESSA, Next Step and the Origins Service.

## **ORIGINS**

Family Routes was an active member of the Development Group for Adult Adoptee Access to Birth Records Policy and Procedure (published November 2023.)

We continue to collaborate with statutory and voluntary sector colleagues to ensure effective and consistent implementation of the resultant practice and service available across Northern Ireland.

In last year's annual report we advised that Family Routes planned to lodge our Adoption and Mother and Baby Home Archive with PRONI for the purposes of restoration, preservation and storage.

Substantial preparatory process was carried out by PRONI in the early stages of this year. However, in October 2024 the Department requested that Family Routes and PRONI did not progress further until the Department had had the opportunity for further advice on the legislative context.

## **FERTILITY COUNSELLING SERVICE NI**

The Fertility Counselling Service NI provides counselling to individuals and couples at a Regional level who are undergoing or considering fertility treatment. Clients are referred by the Regional Fertility Centre (RFC) which is an NHS clinic which also treats private patients and with whom Family Routes has a Service Level Agreement and The Fertility Partnership (TFP) a private clinic established in 2014. Clients may also self-refer.

Recognizing the level of trauma posed by the experience of infertility, the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act 2008 asserts the requirement of appropriate counselling as a pre-requisite to fertility treatment.

The service received 490 referrals from both clinics in the year to date. The specific requirements of service involve IVF, surrogacy and donor conception. Patients are referred who are about to receive treatment for cancer and wish to achieve the potential to have a family.

We provide Welfare of the Child Assessment Reports to clinicians to advise their treatment decisions.

We also provide counselling for individuals anticipating gender transformation with regard to the preservation of fertility.

The Fertility Counselling Service NI is staffed by three professionally qualified Fertility Counsellors.

To date the Fertility Counselling Service has received 490 referrals, which includes transgender and welfare of the child assessment requests.

### **NEXT STEP**

The Next Step service was established in 2015 as a partnership between Family Routes, Family Care Adoption Service and Adopt NI. Family Routes is the lead body for this initiative.

Next Step is funded by the SPPG. The service provides support, information and counselling to birth parents, birth relatives, siblings and foster carers who are impacted by a child being placed for adoption. The service includes the Regional Origins Tracing Service (ROTS) which is delivered by Adopt NI.

Birth parents who are subject to a Best Interests decision recommending that their child should be freed for adoption are “some of Social Work’s most alienated’ groups (Charlton 1998)

They are hard to reach, often having experienced significant adversity and trauma in their own younger lives.

They often have little family support, are isolated and not equipped to deal with the loss of their child/children.

The Next Service is responsive to the challenges of engagement of these service users and in the context of contemporary adoption, the continued presence of the birth parent’s history on a child’s life is increasingly important.

The contract for this for this service has been extended on a periodic basis since September 2020.

This has given rise to significant challenges in achieving stability, staff recruitment and development.

### **TESSA**

TESSA is funded by the National Lottery.

In 2024 to date the service has received 103 adoptive family referrals in the year to date, 190 adults and 161 adopted children.

The National Lottery Funding concludes at the end of March 2025. The Service has been at this position before, in 2022.

The anticipation was then and had been now, that there would be Departmental Strategy to underpin investment in Post Adoption Support. Given the recent announcement of a ‘pause’ to implementation, Family Routes will once again in a position of no funding for this service in March 2025.

The Service has achieved very positive outcomes in the past year, increased volume of service users, diversification of interventions and a greater consistency of Regional availability.

### **NETWORKING AND INFLUENCING**

1. Family Routes is represented on the Department’s Adoption Legislation and implementation and Policy/Procedure Development Group
2. During 2023, Family Routes was an active member of the Adult Access to Adoption Records Group, membership being both professionals and experts by experience to

develop and implement new Policy and Procedure Guidance for Adult Post Adoption Record Access and Support

Family Routes continues to meet with Voluntary Sector and Statutory Sector colleagues to aim for a consistent and effective service implementation.

On 14<sup>th</sup> November 2024 the Voluntary and Statutory Sectors met at Dunsilly Hotel with TEO, The Department and PRONI to report on implementation to date.

Family Routes is an active member of the Trauma Network.

Family Routes offers specialist training on infertility and adoption related matters.

We have established a collaboration with Barnardo's and Family Care Adoption Service to promote the contribution both in policy/practice terms but also service delivery for the voluntary sector

Lynda Wilson  
ICEO Family Routes



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte  
Máinnystrie O Poustie



Health and Social  
Care Board



**LOTTERY FUNDED**