

Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thursday 24 November 2022

Regional Permanency Partnership and Pilot Project Outcomes

Recommendation

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Consider the information within this update report

Local Member Interest:

N/A

Report of Cllr Mark Sutton, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Summary

What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?

In July 2021 Overview and Scrutiny committee members were briefed on the new arrangements for the delivery of the Regional Adoption Agency for Staffordshire County council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council.

The following report provides an update about the progress of the regional Together4Children Permanency Partnership which was launched at the end September 2020. This report draws on key headlines from the Together4Children Annual Report 2021-2022 (appendix 1) to demonstrate the outcomes of the regional arrangement over the first full annual reporting cycle.

Report

Background

1. Development activity for the Together4Children Partnership commenced in 2018 in response to the Government's 'Regionalising Adoption' agenda. This brought together 4 Partner Council's, to plan the delivery of adoption services regionally.

2. Through the development phase, we created a vision which goes beyond the delivery of Adoption Services and focuses on a broader range of activities to ensure that children entering care achieve permanency. We are working together to improve outcomes for those children who enter care and are not able to return to their birth parents.
3. Are aims are:
 - a. Make best use of our collective resources to recruit, assess and support prospective adopters across the region.
 - b. Improve the quality and speed of matching for children through better planning and by having a wider choice of adopters.
 - c. Provide high quality support to children and their families delivered through a combination of direct provision and effective partnerships.
 - d. Provide all children and their families the right support at the right time through a consistent permanency support offer across the region.

Together4Children Partnership Adoption Agency Functions, Governance, and Operational Structure

4. Whilst Together4Children has broader ambitions, the first key deliverables have been focused on our Adoption Service via a hub and spoke model – a combination of core central functions and networked regional delivery (via a Central Permanency Hub).
5. Partner Councils retain direct service delivery functions within Locality Permanence Hubs, working within the Together4Children practice framework whilst maintaining clear links to local Children & Families Services.
6. The Partnership is governed via Regional Management Board Chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services for Telford & Wrekin Council. Each partner council is represented on the Board by the Assistant Director (or equivalent) with responsibility for Children in Care.
7. Senior Operational leadership is provided through the Together4Children Senior Leadership Team, which is comprised of the Head of T4C, the Principal Manager for the Central Permanency Hub and the Head of Service (or equivalent) with responsibility for Adoption in each partner council.

Together4Children Partnership Legal and Financial Arrangements

8. Together4Children is underpinned by a comprehensive partnership agreement. The initial agreement was in place to the end of March 2022. Following a detailed review of arrangements, and in line with delegated

decision-making functions, the extension of the partnership arrangement has been agreed to March 2025.

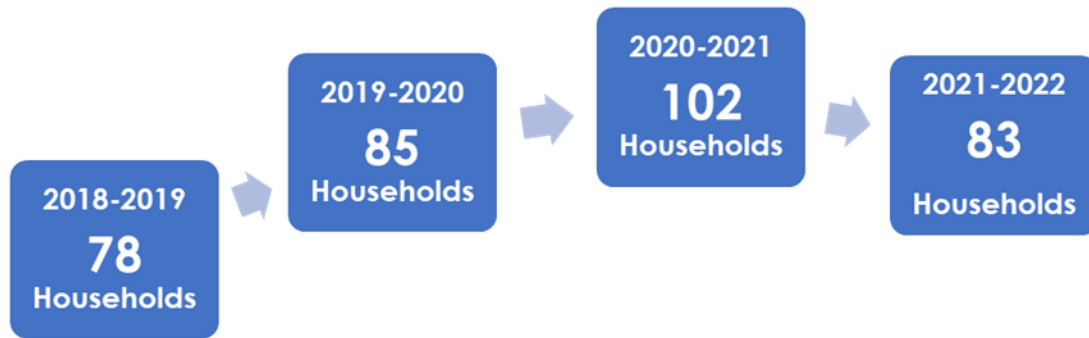
9. Regional financial arrangements were originally agreed across the 4 partner Council's Cabinets in November and December 2019. The Partnership's financial formula which was reviewed and amended in April 2022 ensures that each partner Council contributes a proportionate level of resource in line with the level of demand generated to meet the needs of children within their localities.
10. Within the governance arrangements risks (cost pressures/ overspends) are managed collectively (through a Regional Finance Board and the T4C Regional Manage Board) for centrally delivered functions, and locally for provisions that are delivered through each of our locality hubs.
11. In the financial year 2021-2022 the partnership's Central functions were delivered within budget, as were Staffordshire's locality-based functions.

Together4Children Activity & Performance 2021-2022

12. The recruitment of potential adopters for our children has been supported by strong and effective marketing activity. This has included:
 - a. Successful launch and maintenance of social media channels.
 - b. [Together4Children](#) website.
 - c. Development of downloadable digital Information Event and Microsoft Teams based Information Events.
 - d. Delivery of marketing campaigns focusing on finding adopters for children in sibling groups and other priority children.
13. This has led to strong performance in relation to enquiries and referrals through to our 3 assessment teams - 720 Enquiries for people considering adopting a child leading to 140 referrals through to our assessment teams.

Assessment & Approval of Adopters

14. Together4Children partners have been working collaboratively since 2018 to increase the number of adopter households able to provide permanent homes for children in our region. This has resulted in an overall rise in the number of families we have assessed and approved as prospective adopters over this period. This represents a positive outcome, meaning that we have been able to find more homes for children within our regional 'pool' of adopters.



15. In turn, this supports positive transitions for children and means that we can better support children and their families as they move through their adoption journeys. It also means that we avoid the costs involved in using adopters approved by other agencies and maintaining support to children and families who live at a distance.
16. On average it takes 260 days to complete our Prospective Adopter Reports (the statutory assessment that underpins the agency's decision about the suitability of people to become adopters), against an England average of 266 days.
17. We provide comprehensive training and support to those who are embarking on their adoption journeys. We deliver this support and training on a region-wide basis.
18. The feedback on our preparation training from Prospective and Approved Adopters is 99% positive.

"A very informative and useful training day helping us to reassure ourselves about our decision to adopt siblings, it has been a boost to our confidence." "

"Excellent session, the trainers were knowledgeable and passionate about Early Permanence."

Activity and Outcomes for Children

19. Like other parts of the Children's Services system, activity and outcomes for children with a plan of adoption was impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic and we are still seeing these impacts for the cohort of children within the 2021-2022 reporting period.
20. The overall number of Placement Orders (the Courts' permission to seek an adoptive placement for a child) dipped in 2020-2021 (108) but recovered during 2021-2022 (121). Correspondingly, the number of children placed for adoption has been slightly lower than the average

over the past 5 years at 101 children placed in 2020-2021 and 99 children placed in 2021-2022.

21. We know that the number of children needing an adoptive home across the region is rising in the current year and we are expecting to place approximately 120 children with adoptive families by the end of March 2023.

Finding Homes for Our Children within Our Region

22. One of the fundamental aims of Together4Children is to ensure that, where we can, we find homes for our children within our region. This supports good transitions which we know are a critical part of the adoption journey for children and adoptive parents; and helps us to support children and their families into the future.
23. During 2021-2022 93% of the children we placed for adoption went to live with a family that had been assessed and approved within the Together4Children region.
24. However, where no families are identified who can meet the particular needs of a child or children within our region, we work as fast as we can to look to other agencies across the Midlands and nationwide to ensure that we explore every possibility for finding the right families for our children.

Achieving Permanence for Children in a Timely Way

25. We know how important it is for children's outcomes to secure children's permanency through adoption in a timely way.
26. 2 Key National Performance Indicators relate to timeliness for children. Staffordshire's performance continues to be better than the England national average against both indicators.
- a. **A10:** The time it takes from a child entering care to moving into their adoptive families (measured in days)

A10 Indicator – 3-year Average	2018-2021	2019-2022
England Average	438	445
Together4Children	-	471
Staffordshire	352	352

- b. **A2:** The time from Court authority to place a child for adoption (Placement Order) to the formal match with prospective adopters (measured in days)

A2 Indicator – 3-year Average	2018-2021	2019-2022
England Average	196	196
Together4Children	-	216
Staffordshire	137	166

Children Adopted in 2021-2022

27. 104 Adoption Orders were granted for children across our region (28 children placed by Staffordshire County Council), securing their legal permanence within their new families. Of the children who were adopted:

- a. 12 children were aged over 5 years
- b. 34 children achieved permanency alongside one or more of their brothers and sisters
- c. 13 children came from ethnic backgrounds other than 'white British'
- d. 4 children placed for adoption had a disability.

28. These children represent our 'priority children' as we know that it is more challenging for us to find the right families for children with these characteristics. This mirrors the national evidence about those children who wait the longest before moving into their adopted home.

Together4Children Regional Adoption Support Delivery

29. Over the past 2 years, Together4Children have been partners in delivering Adoption UK's innovative 'TESSA' support program for adoptive families.

30. We have worked together to review and revise the intervention and make it available as part of the support offer available to our families earlier in their journeys. The TESSA support offer includes:

- a. Clinical Psychologist-led assessment and support plans, family support, and core training.
- b. Innovative group therapy, counselling, coaching, and mentoring, enhanced training, school consultation.
- c. Support in accessing statutory and voluntary provision, specialist and medical support and community groups.

d. Since TESSA went live in October 2020 50 families across the Together4Children region have received support through this provision.

31. Our 3 locality Permanency Support Teams based in Shrewsbury, Stoke and Uttoxeter have undertaken:

- a. 356 support assessments and reviews
- b. 569 applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund for the specialist therapeutic interventions required to meet needs identified for adopted children through our assessments
- c. 2700 'Post Box' exchanges, facilitating, and supporting the exchange
- d. of information between birth families and adoptive parents.

32. Feedback from families who accessed our Adoption Support Services during 2021-2022 was overwhelmingly positive with over 90% of those providing feedback rating the timeliness and effectiveness of the service as good or outstanding.

"T' is a brilliant, warm, kind, informative social worker. She...has made a huge difference to the lives of our children"

Key Development Priorities 2022-2023

33. We are working to continually improve our service delivery and performance. We have set out the following key development priorities for the current year:

- a. Support Family Finding activity to reduce delay for children who wait the longest
- b. Develop Early Permanence practice and increase the number of children regionally who benefit from EP placements.
- c. Improve the quality of Life Story Work and Life Story Books
- d. Develop practice around moving children to adoption based on best evidence
- e. Further develop in-house delivery of Therapeutic Interventions for Children
- f. Improve on-going support for birth parents and birth families to help to maintain and develop keeping in touch arrangements where appropriate

Conclusion

34. Since going live, we have seen more of our children moving into their new families with adopters from within the T4C region with over 80% of

all children placed for adoption finding homes with families approved by our regional teams.

35. This outcome has evidenced the delivery of our core aim, to ensure that we find the right homes for children within our region where possible, so that we can continue to support those children and their families through the adoption journey.
36. By combining our resources we have also achieved significant improvements in the range of adoption support provision we have been able to offer across the whole region, including workshops with expert speakers, therapeutic parenting courses, peer group support and social events for our adopter community.
37. We are also very proud to be the first ever Local Authority Partnership to jointly launch the [Mockingbird](#) Fostering Model by working together across our four fostering services.
38. Over 2 years we have successfully delivered this innovative fostering model across 3 regional pilot sites, with the fourth and final pilot to go live in November 2022.

Link to Strategic Plan

39. Priority 5 - Offer every Staffordshire child and young person the best start in life, and the chance to achieve their potential.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

40. The Together4Children Annual Adoption Report 2021-2022 was presented to Staffordshire Corporate Parenting Panel on 18 October 2022

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Together4Children Annual Adoption Report 2021-2022

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