

Together4Children Permanency Partnership

Adoption Agency Annual Report 2021-2022

Together4Children Partnership Model

Together4Children is a partnership between Shropshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. We are working together to improve outcomes for those children who enter care and are not able to return to their birth parents.

Our Vision is to ensure that our children achieve emotional, physical, and legal permanence; growing up in loving homes with adults who provide them with a strong sense of security, continuity, commitment, and identity.

We aim to:

- Make best use of our collective resources to recruit, assess and support prospective adopters across the region.
- Improve the quality and speed of matching for children through better planning and by having a wider choice of adopters.
- Provide high quality support to children and their families delivered through a combination of direct provision and effective partnerships.
- Provide all children and their families the right support at the right time through a consistent permanency support offer across the region.

Preface

This is the Second Annual Adoption Report produced by Together4Children since the partnership went live on 28 September 2020. It is the first report that covers the activity and performance of the Partnership over a full year cycle.

This report is produced in accordance with the adoption services regulatory requirements and Adoption National Minimum Standards (2014), which state that the executive side of the local authority shall:

- receive written reports on the management, outcomes, and financial state of the agency every six months
- monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users
- satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

Introduction

National Context

Whilst representing a small part of the total children's social work sector, adoption continues to have a high profile politically. The programme of regionalisation which commenced in 2016 is all but complete, with 32 Regional Adoption Agencies covering virtually all Local Authorities in England.

The government launched their [Adoption Strategy: Achieving Excellence Everywhere](#) in June 2021, setting out its vision to further improve the adoption system across England with the provision of sector-led support to create national models of best-practice.

The National RAA Leaders group are working to deliver against key areas of the strategy in line with the 3 key priority areas identified in their plan for 2021-2023:

1. Adoption Recruitment
2. The Child's Journey
3. Adoption Support

Together4Children are represented at national level on the Child's Journey by our Head of Service who co-chairs this workstream and is also a member of the RAA leader's governance group.

Over the year, Together4Children and Adoption@Heart led activity bringing Agency Decision-Makers for children's plans of adoption (SHOBPA) together across the West Midlands. The workshop, which was supported by CoramBaaf has been developed further and is now being rolled out nationally.

Together4Children have recently led a bid to secure funding to work pan-regionally to develop best practice in relation to Early Permanence for children who may have a plan of adoption. The project will be delivered in 2022-23 across a collaboration of midlands-based Regional and Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

One of our Senior Practitioners has recently been appointed to a key national role, leading the work on matching. This will bring together best national practice and support the development of the information we hold about children who are waiting across England to support family finding for some of the children who would otherwise wait the longest.

Adoption UK published their annual [Adoption Barometer](#) report, in June 2021. This set out 6 key recommendations which focused predominantly on improving the quality of adoption support, with a specific focus on improving knowledge and expertise in relation to foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and attachment disorder.

The recently published [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), along with the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's [report](#), challenge modern adoption services to ensuring that adopted children maintain appropriate and meaningful links with their birth families.

Along with the sector-led improvements being driven pan-regionally and nationally through the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) Leader's Group, the pace of change, and expectation in relation to modernisation and improvement across the adoption system remains very high.

In November 2021, a [ruling](#) in the Family Court against Somerset Council called into question whether local authorities routinely follow the correct procedure for agreeing to the plan of adoption. The ruling has become known as the 'Somerset Judgement'. The focus of the ruling was highly technical and related to medical information provided by the adoption agency medical advisor. The ruling had a significant impact on children at various stages of the adoption process, until the President of the Family Division issued guidance in April 2022.

Regional Context

Children's services across our region continued to experience the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic throughout 2021-2022. For Together4Children, that meant continuing to deliver a proportion of our services via remote means. As the year progressed, we have adapted to the 'new normal' of hybrid working. We have been carefully evaluating the effectiveness of remote vs in-person delivery across the range of different functions and services that we deliver.

Positively, our direct work with prospective adopters and children has been able to return to pre-pandemic practice – with all managers and practitioners recognising the vital importance of time spent face-to-face with the people we provide our services to.

At the current time, we are moving towards more in-person meetings across our workforce, whilst remaining flexible and recognising the positives that the new ways of working that developed over the Covid 19 period, have given us.

The Local Authority Partnership that delivers Together4Children has matured significantly over the past 12 months. Governance arrangements have been audited and given a reasonable level of assurance. Action has been taken to strengthen arrangements where required.

On the ground, practitioners, business support staff and managers have worked incredibly hard to deliver a good service. We have worked together to understand and address many of the issues that have presented themselves during our first 18 months of regional operations, reviewing practice, policy, and procedures to support effective service delivery.

We know that there are challenges remaining, and that building a regional adoption service that delivers consistently good outcomes across a large geographical area will take time. In March 2022 we undertook a significant review of the partnership arrangements. This identified the progress and achievements over the past 18 months, but also set out the challenges and recommended actions required to further develop the quality, consistency and scope of regional adoption and permanency services delivered through the Together4Children Partnership.

We know how important it is to secure children's permanency through adoption in a timely way. During 2021-2022 further delays across the children's system, including delays with our regional Courts and capacity pressures within our services, have continued to create challenges in achieving permanence for some children within the timescales that we would want for them.

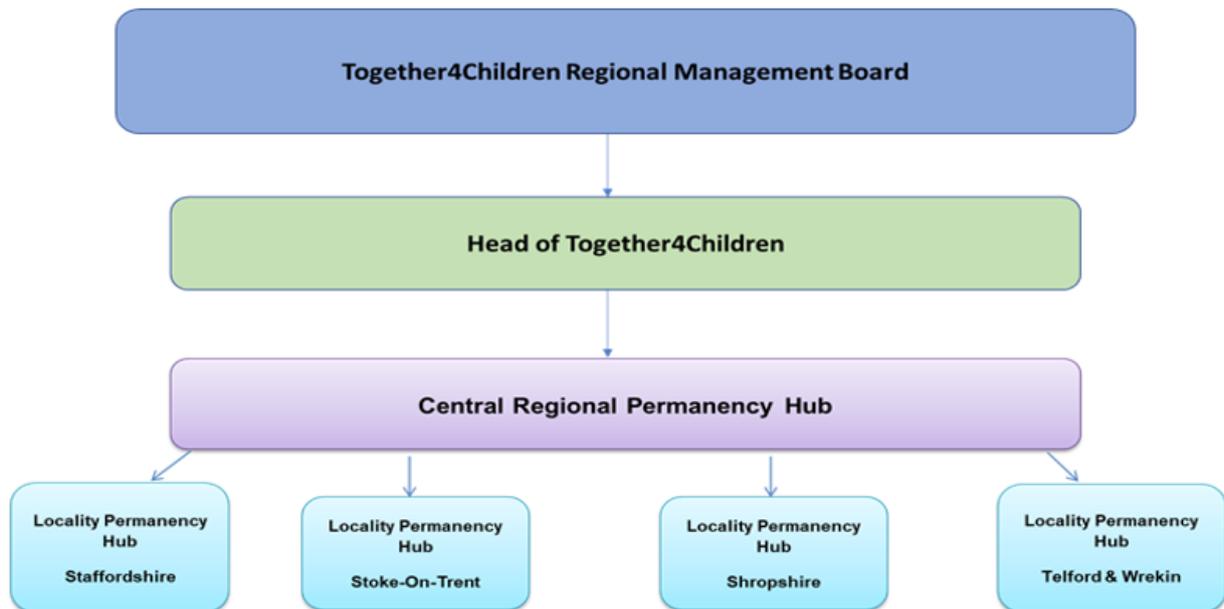
Furthermore, two Local Authorities in our region were impacted by the Somerset judgement, which created significant delays for some children in the latter part of the year. We are working hard to ensure that we can progress the plans for these children as quickly as we can.

Part 1 – Together4Children Partnership Adoption Agency Functions

Together4Children delivers the adoption service for our partner Council's via a hub and spoke model – a combination of core central functions and networked regional delivery (via a Central Permanency Hub).

Partner Council's retain direct service delivery functions within Locality Permanence Hubs, working within the Together4Children practice framework whilst maintaining clear links to local Children & Families Services.

1.1 Partnership Governance and Operational Structure



The Partnership is governed via Regional Management Board Chaired by the Director of Children's Services for Shropshire Council. Each partner council is represented on the Board by the Assistant Director (or equivalent) with responsibility for Children in Care.

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.

Further operational leadership and management is provided through the Wider Leadership Team which comprises of managers across the central and locality hub functions.

Central Permanency Hub Functions

The Central Permanency Hub has a small team of staff who provide functions and undertake activity for the whole region. The core central functions are:

- Central co-ordination of functions across the Partnership
- Adopter Recruitment
- Regional Family Finding
- Adopter Training
- Children's (Permanency) Tracking
- Adoption Panel Advice and Management
- Adoption Panel Coordination
- Agency advice and support to Agency Decision Makers

Locality Permanency Hub Functions

There are 3 Locality Hubs across the region. These are based in Stoke (City of Stoke-on-Trent), Uttoxeter (Staffordshire) and Shrewsbury (Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin).

Each Locality Hub has:

- 1 x Assessment & Support Team - undertaking adopter assessments and supporting prospective adopters through to the granting of an Adoption Order.
- 1 x Permanency Support Team – supporting adopted children and their families through a variety of activities.

Staff within these Hubs support children's social work teams in relation to permanence planning and adoption providing in-reach advice and support.

1.2 Marketing & Recruitment

Together4Children have operated a single 'front door' for adopter recruitment since September 2020. Bringing together our region's marketing activity has provided the resource to engage with potential adopters creatively, using a rich mixture of information sources. With a focus on digital marketing and recruitment, we have been able to target resources more effectively, and ensure that our messaging is current and adapted to the needs of children who require an adoptive family.



Digital media supports our telephone enquiry line - **0300 111 80444**, where potential applicants can talk to friendly and knowledgeable call takers about next steps.

Our recruitment is driven by a strong marketing and communications strategy and campaigns running across the year to target a diverse range of potential adopters, able to meet the diverse needs of our children.

1.3 Enquiries & Referrals

During the year we received 720 initial enquiries that led to either a telephone discussion and/or sharing information. This is an 18% increase on the previous 6 months of activity following our launch in September 2020 un to the end of the reporting year in March 2021.

Of these initial enquiries, a total of 232 people attended one of our Regional Information Events, where they were able to find out more about adopting a child, hear from people with experience of adoption, and talk to experienced adoption practitioners.

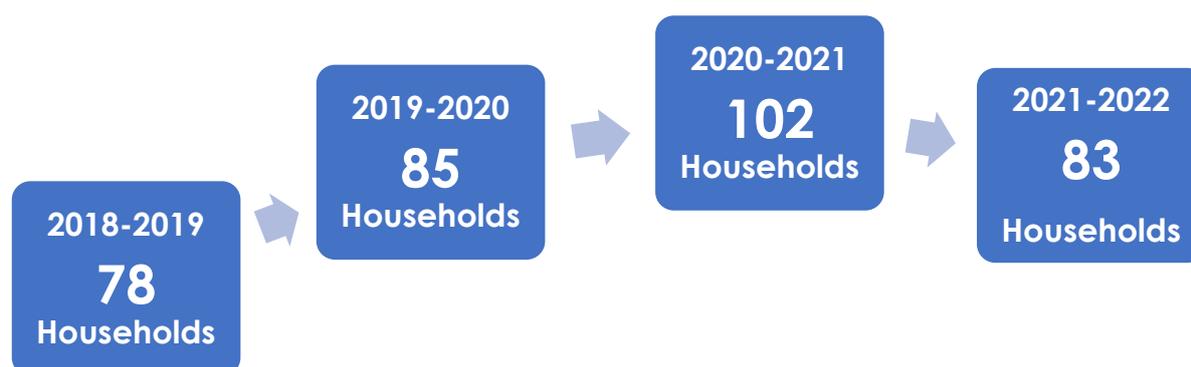
This led to 140 referrals to our Locality Hub assessment teams over the course of the year (including second-time adopters). Whilst a small proportion of those households referred through will choose not to progress following an in-depth 'information-giving meeting' with a Social Worker, the majority proceeded through to begin their adopter assessments.



1.4 Assessment and Approval of Adopters

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. During this we increased the number of adopters approved from 78 in 2018-19 to 102 in 2020-21.

This year the number of approvals has fallen back to 83 households. The main reason for this is that, having commenced assessment, higher numbers of prospective adopters have chosen not to continue the process or, in a small number of cases, have not been approved. It is important to recognise that not everyone who applies and is assessed will always be found to be suitable and this reflects the strength/skills of our assessing social workers and the scrutiny of our panels in ensuring that our prospective adopters are in a position to provide permanency for our children.



It would also appear that uncertainties around employment and general instability in people's lives is becoming more of a factor in their decision-making. We are considering the learning from this year to better understand the factors that create a barrier for people continuing their adoption journeys. This is feeding back into the

conversations we have with potential adopters early in the information-giving stages of the journey.

Despite this dip in numbers of adopter household approvals this year, overall activity remains positive. Taken together, the last 2 years of strong adopter recruitment and approval activity have led to the highest proportion of children being able to move into families who have been assessed and approved by the Together4Children partnership (see section 2.1). 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.

Completing Stage 1 (gathering statutory information) of our adopter assessments within the 60-day target has remained a challenge over the year. We have only been able to achieve this for 24% of the households who we assessed.

External factors such as the time it has taken for people applying to become adopters to have a medical (usually provided by their own GP) and getting safeguarding checks back from other Local Authorities outside of the T4C region continues to impact on these timescales.

31 Households
currently in Stage 2 of
assessment

However, once we have been able to gather the required information, stage 2 of the process, which involves the social work assessment, completion of the Prospective Adopter Report and presentation to Adoption Panel is completed on average in 139 days. Overall, our timescales for the assessment of our prospective adopter households are below the average for England (Provisional Q4 ASGLB Data Pack – June 2022).

Average Timescales for Completion of Prospective Adopter Assessments 2021-2022

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Overall
Target	60 days	121 days	182 days
Together4Children	121	139	260
England (RAAs)	121	146	266

1.5 Non-Agency Adoption

Together4Children provide the non-agency adoption provision for our partner local authorities. This work includes all those categories of adoption where the adoption agency and the adoption panel do not play a part in the placement of the child for adoption. These are:

- Partner adoptions (formally known as stepparent adoption)
- Anyone who has had care of the child (for any 3-year period in the past 5 years)
- Local authority foster carer(s) proceeding without the support of social care after a child has been living in their care for over 1 year.

All non-agency adoptions have similar characteristics and there is a basic format comprising referral, consultation, provision of written information, assessment, and preparation of the Annex A report for court.

Maintaining this activity within the adoption provision of the Partnership ensures that the expertise, knowledge, and experience required to undertake this specialist work under the adoption regulations is maintained.

The table below shows the level of non-agency adoption activity across the region. For 2021-2022, Together4Children received 134 referrals for non-agency adoption provisions and undertook 64 assessments. At 31/03/2022 the service had 35 assessments on-going and a further 56 assessments awaiting allocation. This statutory activity is managed alongside our adopter assessment activity, and our primary responsibilities in relation to the adoption of children from care.

Non-agency Adoption Activity 2021-2022				
	Staffs Hub	Joint Hub	Stoke Hub	T4C
Referrals received	36	69	29	134
A16's (Notification of Intent) sent out	30	62	8	100
A16's returned	23	36	6	65
Non-agency Assessments completed	27	37	0	64
Ongoing assessments @ 31/03/2022	20	10	5	35
Waiting for assessment @ 31/03/2022	8	21	27	56

1.6 Adopter Training Activity

Together4Children have delivered Regional Adopter Preparation & Training since January 2021 through our dedicated Regional Training Officers, who are supported by practitioners from across our locality teams.

During the year we have continued to develop and extended our preparation and training offer to focus on key areas. We deliver 'core' preparation training over 3 days. This enables participants to learn about the adoption journey, understand about the children we need to find families for, and learn about the support that they can access. We deliver our training using a blended face-to-face and virtual approach, ensuring that groups of prospective adopters meet and begin to form mutually supportive relationships, whilst ensuring people can access training and information in more flexible ways.

The feedback on our preparation training from Prospective and Approved Adopters is 99% positive.

"We felt it was very helpful to hear from adopters who have already been through the process"

We have strengthened the training that we offer prospective adopters considering offering a child early permanence. We have also developed our offer to support prospective adopters to consider adopting brother and sisters together. There is an expectation that most prospective adopters attend both courses to ensure that they

have considered fully different routes to adoption and the importance of maintaining sibling relationships for adopted children.

“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.”

Over the year we delivered 16 Adopter Preparation training courses each consisting of core content, adoption support, brothers and sisters and early permanence, with 83 prospective adopter households attending.

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

“We didn’t think that this would be right for us but after attending the training we have changed our minds and wish to go down the Early Permanence route.”

During the same period, we delivered 23 workshops for family and friends of prospective adopters. These are held virtually to allow as many people as possible who are in the prospective adopter’s support network to attend. Approximately 230 family members and friends attended these workshops.

“My awareness was raised about the many difficulties the child may have experienced before they are adopted.”

In addition to our core training offer, we provide a broad range of additional training for our adoption community throughout the year. During 2021-2022 we have grown this offer, delivering training and workshops to over **200 households**. We use a mix of specialist trainers and therapists, experts by experience and our own specialist and accredited practitioners to deliver our training offer. Over the year this has included:

- Caring for Yourself – self-care for adoptive parents
- Understanding Your Child – a group-based introduction to parenting children who may have experienced trauma
- Two Hands – a more in-depth group-based course to grow adoptive parents knowledge and application of therapeutic parenting approaches
- Non-Violent Resistance – accredited, evidence-based approach to responding to child to parent aggression
- Talking to Children about Adoption – helping adoptive parents to talk to their children about their adoption journey
- The Teenage Brain – support and advice for adoptive parents of teenagers.
- Internet Safety – support and advice for parents navigating the internet and social media to keep their children safe
- Moving Children on to Adoption – preparation for supporting children through their move to a new home
- When the Senses Don’t Make Sense – an introduction to supporting children with underdeveloped sensory systems

Section 2: Activity & Outcomes for Children in 2020-2021

2. Children in Care and Regional Adoption Activity

Between 2021 and 2022 the total number of children in care in our region increased by a further 6%. This follows the overall pattern of an increasing children in care population over the last 3 years across the region.

	Total CIC @ 31/03/2021	Total CIC @ 31/03/2022	% +/- Last 12 Months
Shrops	504	608	+21%
Staffs	1242	1303	+5%
Stoke	1004	1021	+2%
T&W	425	423	-1%
Total	3175	3355	+6%

Whilst the number of children adopted from care continues to fall nationally (from a peak of 5,360 children in 2015 to just 2,870 children in 2021), the number of children adopted in the T4C region has remained relatively stable over the past 5 years, averaging a little over 100 children each year.

Overall adoption activity has remained relatively consistent over the past 2 years. However, there have been some significant shifts in levels of activity between the 4 partners. Across the region, the number of children aged 0-5 years has continued to increase. Children in this age range are the most likely to have a plan of adoption.

	Total CIC Aged 0-5 @ 31/03/2021	Total CIC Aged 0-5 @ 31/03/2022	% +/- over 12 months
Shrops	158	197	+25%
Staffs	283	318	+12%
Stoke	284	277	-2%
T&W	129	121	-7%
Total	854	913	+7%

Both Shropshire and Staffordshire have seen increases in younger children in care, whilst Stoke-on-Trent and Telford & Wrekin have both experienced a relatively small decrease in numbers.

Through this, we can see that changes in children in care populations have impacted on activity levels across the partnership and between partners. Whilst most RAAs nationally have developed and launched with reducing levels of activity, Together4Children have seen no such decline, and in certain parts of the region activity levels have increased, with significant spikes in demand on our services being a feature of the past 18-months.

	T4C Region	% +/- 2021-22
ADM Plan of Adoption	158	+20%
Placement Orders	121	+12%
Children Placed	99	- 2%
Adoption Orders	104	+ 1%

The table below shows key adoption activity across the partner councils over the past 2-year reporting periods.

	2020-2021			2021-2022		
	ADM Plan of Adoption	Placement Orders	Children Placed	ADM Plan of Adoption	Placement Orders	Children Placed
Shropshire	26	15	13	28	21	20
Staffordshire	41	33	31	43	34	26
Stoke-on-Trent	34	26	29	58	42	26
Telford & Wrekin	32	34	28	26	24	27
Total	132	108	101	158	121	99

Levels of activity have increased during 2021-2022 across the whole region. Overall, more plans of adoption were agreed for children and the number of Placement Orders granted by Courts increased. The slight drop in the number of children placed for adoption over the year was caused by the delay resulting from the Somerset Judgement, meaning that we were unable to progress matching and transition arrangements for several children during the final quarter of the year. We estimate that approximately 10-15 children were delayed in moving to their adoptive homes before the end of the reporting year.

The number of Adoption Orders granted in the region remained consistent with the previous year (104 against 103 granted in 2020-2021, although this number is also likely to have been depressed by the impact of the Somerset Judgement (as Adoption Order Applications were stalled for approximately 2 months whilst Local authorities waited for the President of the Family Division's ruling on the matter).

2.1 Where we Found Homes for our Children in 2020-2021

One of the main 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, without the need to transfer support arrangements at the statutory 3-year point, post Adoption Order.

93% of the children we placed for adoption during the year were placed with adoptive families from our region.

Where no families are identified who can meet the needs of children within our region, we will always look quickly to other agencies across the Midlands and nationwide to ensure that we explore every possibility of finding the right families for our children in a timely way.

The table below shows where the adoptive families came from for those children who moved into their new homes in 2020-2021.

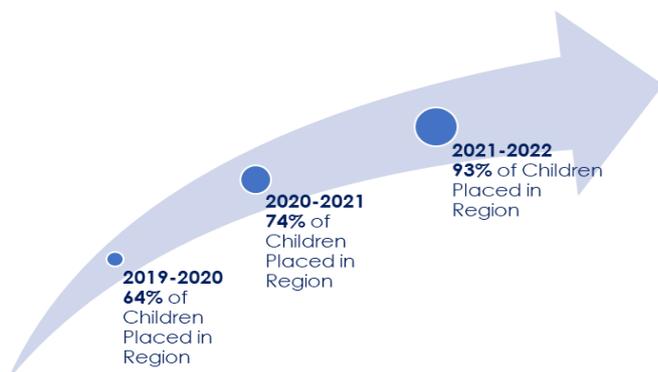
Children Placed With:	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
Own LA/T4C Adopters*	20	23	25	24	92
Other RAA/LA Adopters**	-	2	1	-	3
VAA***	-	1	-	3	4
					99
% Children Placed In-Region	100%	88%	96%	87%	93%

* Adopters approved by one of the Local Authorities within the T4C Partnership.

** Adopters approved by another Local Authority or Regional Adoption Agency.

*** Adopters approved by a Voluntary Adoption Agency

It is positive to see that we were able to identify families for over 90% of our children across the year. This builds on improvements over the last 3 years in terms of the number of children who we have been able to find an adoptive home for within our region. This increase in the use of our own region's adopters has accompanied a corresponding decrease in the use of inter-agency placements, and their associated costs, over the same period.



2.2 Early Permanence

The table below shows the number of children who were placed in 'Early Permanence' arrangements over the year.

This is usually where children are placed with approved adopters, where the Local Authority is confident that the likely outcome for the child is adoption, but before a Court has made that decision. Where the Court does decide that adoption is the right plan, the child can remain with those carers who then go on to adopt them.

	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
Children Placed	20	26	26	27	99
Early Permanence	7	3	16	5	31
% Children placed EP	35%	12%	62%	19%	31%

Early permanence means that children are placed earlier within their prospective families and that means that they experience fewer moves and changes of primary caregiver. Research evidence tells us that these are significant factors that are beneficial for children's long-term outcomes.

This practice does carry some risks for the prospective adopters, however. Occasionally children will return to their birth family, and early permanence carers need resilience and right support to help them to work with professionals to achieve the best outcome for the child.

Some of the arrangements recorded in the year resulted from the use of early permanence placements as a way of avoiding other delays (caused by, for example, the Somerset judgement). So, whilst the overall rise in the use of Early Permanence is positive (from 12% to 31% of all children placed), and does reflect real progress, the figures for this year also reflect the use of Early Permanence in some other instances to avoid delay for children.

The figure is also significantly higher than the England Average for Early Permanence placements which stands at 17% (ASGLB Q4 Data April 2021- March 2022). Although, for the reasons outlined above, this figure for the Together4Children region needs to be treated with an element of caution.

The table also shows a significant degree of variance in the use of Early Permanence arrangements across our Partners. In the current reporting year some of this variance will relate to the authorities who were directly impacted by the Somerset Judgement. However, the need to drive improvement in this area, and develop consistent practice across the region is evident. We are keen to make best use of the Pan-Regional Early Permanence funding in the current year to deliver this outcome.

	Early Permanence Placement Trend					
	2019-2020		2020-2021		2021-2022 Q1-Q3	
	Children	%	Children	%	Children	%
Shrops	0		1		7	
Staffs	3		0		3	
Stoke	4		5		16	
T&W	2		6		5	
Total	9	7%	12	12%	31	31%

2.3 Timescales for Achieving Permanency for Our Children

A10: This is a national performance indicator which measures the average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions.

It is reported as both an aggregated figure averaged over the preceding 3 years (to account for the fact that a child's journey to adoption will normally take longer than 1 year to achieve), and against the reporting year (for all those children whose Adoption Order was granted during the reporting period 2020-2021)

A10 Indicator – 3-year Average	2018-2021	2019-2022
Target	426 days	426 days
England Average	438	445
Together4Children	-	471
Shropshire	319	359
Staffordshire	352	352
Stoke-on-Trent	492	590
Telford & Wrekin	506	556

The most recent national measure we have for this timescale across local authorities in England is 445 days (provisional - ASGLB Q4 Data Set 3-year average Mar 2019 – Mar 2022). From the table below we can see that the overall A10 indicator for the Together4Children region is

above the target number of days (426) and national average (445) at 471 days.

Shropshire and Staffordshire continue to perform below the target for this indicator, meaning that children in these Local Authorities are placed more quickly than the target timescales (and the national average). The indicator for Stoke-on-Trent and Telford & Wrekin has declined. This reflects the increasing time it took for children from entry to care to move through the whole adoption process during 2020-2021.

By comparing year on year performance, we can see the general trend in terms of the average time it takes for a child to move in with their adoptive family.

We can see from the table below that 3 of the 4 Together4Children partner councils have seen an improvement in performance against this indicator during 2021-2022. This means that the time taken from entering care to moving into an adopted family has shortened for most children in the region compared to the previous year. We will continue to work with

partners across the region to ensure that we support practice improvements to reduce the overall time it takes for a child entering care to move in with their permanent family.

A10 Indicator 2-year Trend	2020-2021	2021-2022	Trend
Shropshire	423	406	↓
Staffordshire	372	319	↓
Stoke-on-Trent	510	665	↑
Telford & Wrekin	630	433	↓

It is important to note that performance against these indicators has declined nationally and this is attributed to Covid 19. It is also the case that the regional performance represented in these indicators will have been impacted by Covid 19 (as family finding activity for the children in this cohort would have been taking place between April 2020 and April 2021). For these children, there will have been a range of factors which have impacted on the time it has taken for them to move into their adopted families, including:

- Significant delay in Care Proceedings for children caused by capacity issues in the Family Courts.
- Delays in Care Planning for children created by, for example, extended timescale for specialist assessments due to lockdown restrictions.
- Delays in being able to place children in their new families due to restrictions and practice issues – especially during the initial national lockdown period.

A2: This is the second key national indicator and measures the average time between an LA receiving court authority to place a child (Placement Order) and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family.

A2 Indicator – 3-year Average	2018-2021	2019-2022
Target	121 days	121 days
England Average	196	196
Together4Children	-	216
Shropshire	116	127
Staffordshire	137	166
Stoke-on-Trent	189	232
Telford & Wrekin	312	305

The most recent average timescale measure we have for local authorities in England is 196 days (ASGLB Q4 Data Set April 2019-March 2022). At 216 days, the overall timescales for the Together4Children region are longer than both the national target of 121 days and the England average of 196 days.

Again, it is reported as both an aggregated figure averaged over the preceding 3 years and for the 12 months of the current reporting period. This indicator is a measure of how quickly we can find the right families for children once the Court has given us authority to place for adoption. It reflects the capacity of services to 'family find' for children, and the sufficiency of adopters locally, regionally, and nationally.

A2 Indicator 2-year Trend	In Year 2020-21	In Year 2021-22	Trend
Shropshire	175	199	↑
Staffordshire	203	195	↓
Stoke-on-Trent	186	299	↑
Telford & Wrekin	407	233	↓

We know that some children wait longer than others because finding families who want to adopt older children, children in sibling groups, and children with additional needs is more difficult. It also takes longer to find families for children where there are considerations around ethnicity and faith.

Across the region we see a mixed picture in terms of this indicator. For 1 of our Local Authorities there has been a significant improvement in timeliness from a difficult position in the preceding year. One Local Authority's timescales have slipped from a strong position in the previous year and the other 2 Local Authorities have seen a relatively little change.

It is important to note that we are ambitious when it comes to finding permanent homes for our children, even when we know that it will be a challenge. This ambition for our children can also lead to drops in overall performance measures (where it has taken us longer to find a family that can meet a child's complex needs, for example). We know that 46% of the children that these timescales relate to had characteristics which evidence tells us will mean that they are likely to wait longer.

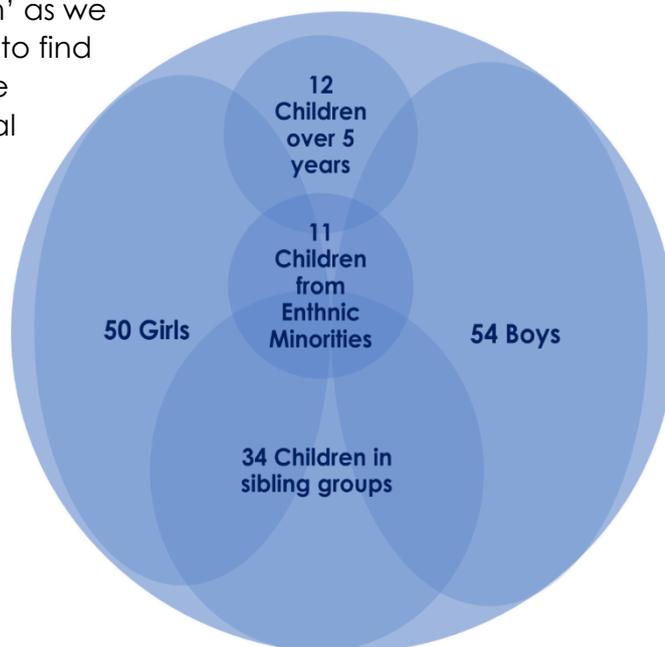
To understanding the reality behind these indicators in detail, Together4Children partners look at the unique journeys of the individual children that together, make up the cohort that this indicator relates to. This analyse is explored in more detail in the localised information in part 2 of this report.

We recognise that reducing the time it takes to find the right families for our children is a key priority for the Together4Children partnership. Other measures we are taking to reduce this timescale are outlined below.

2.4 Children Adopted During 2020-2021

104 Adoption Orders were granted for children across our region, securing their legal permanence within their new families. Of the children who were adopted, **12** children were aged over 5 years, **34** children achieved permanency alongside one or more of their brothers and sisters, **13** children came from ethnic backgrounds other than 'white British', and **4** children placed for adoption had a disability. 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.

It is very positive that overall, 47 children (45% of all children adopted) were priority children. This shows good outcomes for children who may not have found adoptive homes without the dedication and ambition of practitioners across the Together4Children partnership.



2.5 Overview of Regional Family Finding Activity

Our Regional Family Finding team utilises a variety of resources to support them to find the right families for our children:

- Regional Matching Meetings.
- Linkmaker (a web-based tool used to support family finding regionally and nationally).
- Exchange days & Activity days (Regional/Pan-regional/national events where adopters can find out more about, and potentially meet children who we are family finding for).
- Use of professional relationships and networking opportunities.
- Pan-regional Family Finding arrangements (e.g., the 'Midlands Together Collaboration').

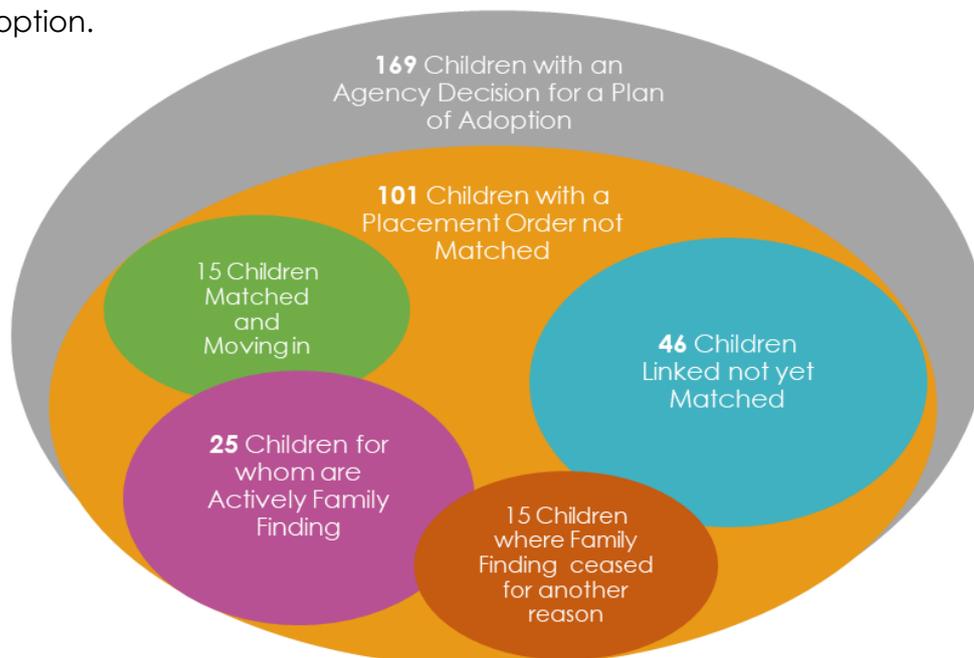
Since the launch of Together4Children we have been working hard to embed regional family finding arrangements, implement new working practices, integrate IT systems, and develop our pan-regional networks.

On the rare occasions that we are unable to find homes for children with our own approved adopters, we work across a collaboration of 5 Regional Adoption agencies and 2 Voluntary adoption agencies based in the midlands to try and identify homes for our children, before considering prospective adopters from across

the whole of the country. This means that we avoid placing children at a significant distance, which supports good transitions, and helps us to provide the right support to families in the critical early stages.

2.6 Children with a Plan of Adoption on 31 March 2022

At the end of the current reporting there were **169** children across our region where Agency Decision Maker's across our partner local authorities had decided on a plan of adoption.



Of these, **101** children had a Placement Order granted by the Court, giving their agency the authority to place them for adoption. These children had not yet been formally matched with their adoptive family (which involves an Adoption Panel making a recommendation approving the match, and an Agency Decision Maker agreeing).

Of those **101** children with a Placement Order, who had not yet been matched with their adopters, on the 31 March 2022:

- **15** children were matched and were in the process of moving to their new families.
- **36** children had been linked with their prospective family and were progressing to a match.
- **10** children were linked with their current foster carer/s or the adopters of a sibling, and assessments were on-going.
- **15** children where family finding had stopped for another reason, such as on-going assessment or change of plan away from adoption

This left **25** children for whom we were actively looking for an adoptive family.

12 of these children had only recently been granted a Placement Order and family finding was focused on finding a home within our region.

There were **13** children where we had not been able to quickly identify a home within our region and were looking for prospective adopters across the Midland's collaboration of Adoption Agencies, or nationally.

2.7 Regional Overview of Placement Disruptions

A placement disruption is defined as an adoptive placement that comes to an end before the granting of an Adoption Order. These usually occur with the first weeks or initial months following the placement of the child with their prospective adopter. Whenever an adoption disruption occurs, a meeting is conducted with all relevant parties and a disruption report is compiled by an experienced adoption manager who was either external to, or independent of, the children's services practitioners and teams involved in the Care Planning, matching and placement decisions. The learning from placement disruption is fed-back within the agency, with the adoption panel, and with the social work teams and practitioners involved.

Across the region, during 2020-2021 2 placements disrupted affecting 2 single children. Whilst we would never want children to experience a further change in their care, this represents a relatively low rate of disruption which is broadly in line with national averages.

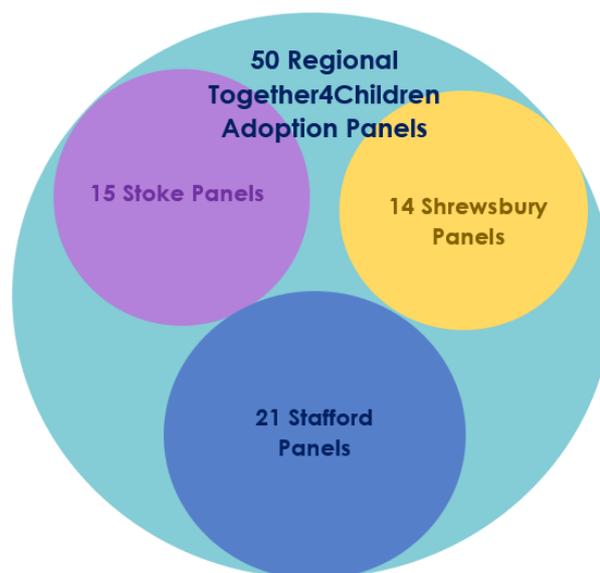
T4C Region Placement Disruptions 2020-21	T4C Adopters	Inter-Agency
No. of Placement Disruptions	1	1

3.0 Together4Children Regional Adoption Panel Activity

Our Regional Panels came together in December 2021, and we are continuing to integrate and embed activity to fully support our regional adoption arrangements.

Over the year a total of 50 adoption panels have been convened across the partnership. We run 3 adoption panels which operate from Shrewsbury, Stafford and Stoke. Each Panel hears matches and approvals from across the partnership.

Over the year our panels have reviewed and made recommendations upon **76 matches** for children with their prospective adopters, **83 adopter household approvals**, 2 brief reports (second-time adopters), and 8 de-registrations.



We were pleased to appoint a new Chair for our Stoke Panel. This means that each Panel has a dedicated Adoption Agency Adviser and an independent panel chair. We have also appointed vice-chairs and new panel members across our panels.

Alongside making recommendations about the approval of prospective adopters, and matches for children with their adopters, adoption panels provide vital quality assurance feedback to the regional adoption agency. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement.

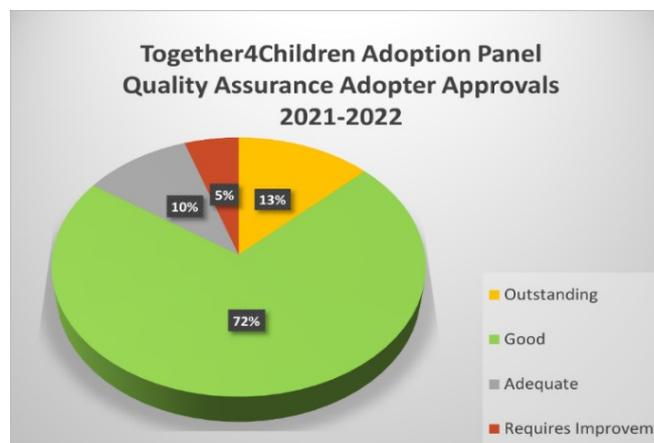


There remain some inconsistencies in the way that quality assurance feedback is gathered and collated across the region. There are also opportunities to develop this important feedback in ways that will support the oversight and assurance of the quality of practice across the partnership. This is a key part of the focus for development and improvement over the coming year.

Whilst opportunities exist to further develop this aspect of our reporting, a sample of the information collated over the year gives a strong indication of the overall quality of adoption practice across the region.

Quality Assurance feedback is obtained by Adoption Panel members after each child's matching recommendation and each adopter approval recommendation.

The following table shows a sample of panel feedback for 31 matches covering children from all 4 partner authorities and adopters from all localities. From this sample we can see that overall quality is rated as high, with 94% rated good or



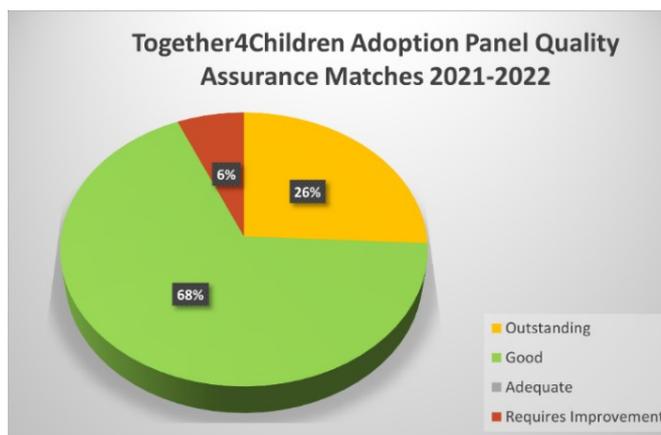
outstanding. This overall rating includes the quality of the Child Permanency Report, the Prospective Adopter Report (PAR), other matching documentation and the presentation of the Child's and Prospective Adopter's Social Workers.

Similarly for adopter approvals, feedback provides a positive picture of the standard of work presented to our regional adoption panels. The

table below shows the overall rating for PARs and Social Worker presentations with 85% being good or outstanding. This is based on a representative sample of 39 adopter approvals, covering PARs from each of our 3 locality teams.

Based on our analysis of the feedback for children's matches, a key theme identified is that the voice of the child is not always clearly represented within the documentation.

Our analysis of Prospective Adopter Reports has identified that, in some instances, issues of diversity have not been explored as fully as they could have been.



These are 2 areas of practice that we will work to address in the current year.

We are in the process of reviewing and developing our quality assurance processes for our regional adoption panels and moving to a regional system support by Microsoft Surveys. This will give us better access to a broader range of feedback which will provide a richer source of evidence and information about the quality of work presented to each of our 3 panels.

4.0 Together4Children Regional Adoption Support

We know that some of the most valued support for adopters and their children comes from other adopters. Through our core services and innovative partnerships, we aim to offer a range of peer support options so that everyone can be a part of our adopter community.

Where families need something more, we have skilled and experienced, multi-disciplinary practitioners on hand to provide specialist support. Working alongside key partners, we can support access to therapeutically trained practitioners, play therapists, social workers, clinical psychologists, and others with specific skills and qualifications.

We know that adoption is a lifelong journey, and we always aim to provide the right support for children and families at the right time.

4.1 Our Partnership Work with Adoption UK

Adoption UK is the leading charity providing support, community and advocacy for all those whose lives involve adoption, including those parenting children who cannot live with their birth families, and adopted people.



Since the inception of Together4Children, and throughout our development, we have been proud to

work in partnership with Adoption UK. Our Adopter Advisory Board is made of new and experienced adoptive parents from across the whole of our region. With the expert guidance and dedication of the Board's Chair and Vice-Chair, and the wider support of the Adoption UK organisation, our advisory board has provided advice, guidance, and critical feedback about the development and delivery of our adoption services.

This has ensured that the voice of our adoptive parents is at the heart of our service priorities, and that we have receive feedback about the quality of our services directly form the families who are reliant on them.

Throughout the course of last year, feedback from the Advisory Board has challenged us to improve the range of workshops and training available to adopters as a part of our adoption support offer and improve the information available to adopters on our website.

In the current year, feedback from our Advisory Board has driven service priority planning in respect of life story work and life story books.

4.2 Adoption UK 'TESSA' and Together4Children

Over the past 2 years, Together4Children have been partners in delivering Adoption UK's innovative 'TESSA' support program for adoptive families. Over the year, we have worked with Adoption UK to move the TESSA programme onto a sustainable footing, reducing the use of the Big Lottery Funding and bringing core elements of the provision within the criteria for the Adoption Support Fund.

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:



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

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

Locality Permanency Support Activity

Our 3 locality Permanency Support Teams based in Shrewsbury, Stoke and Uttoxeter deliver a range of statutory and other adoption support provision across our region. These include:

- Signposting to other appropriate services
- Targeted information, advice and guidance regarding behavioural, attachment and other difficulties

- Advice and guidance via the Together4Children Virtual School Network
- Support with contact between an adopted child and his or her birth family (post-box/direct contact)
- Meetings, events, and activities to enable groups of adopters and adoptive children to get together and support each other
- Training to help adopters to meet the needs of their adoptive child
- Referral to TESSA (Therapeutic, Education & Support Services in Adoption).

Where more specific support is required, our specialist practitioners undertake an assessment of need.

Adoption Support Referrals				
	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
Referrals Allocated	117	35	54	206
Reviews	101	56	102	259
Allocated Families	189	33	141	356

During the year, our teams completed **465** adoption support assessments and reviews, working directly with children and their families to identify and review their support needs and plan the right interventions.

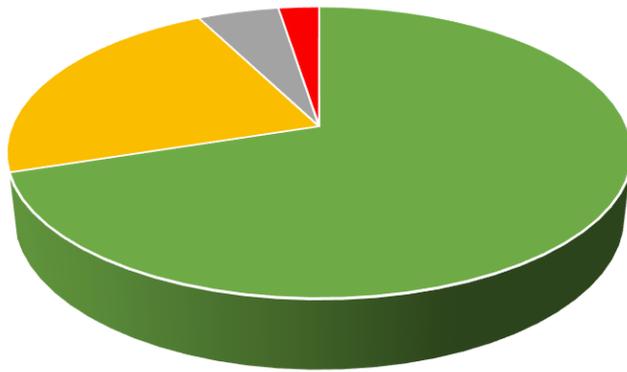
Adoption Support Fund	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
New Applications Received	311	65	125	501
Applications (match funded)	7	1	3	11
Application total (inc. Internal Applications)	341	66	162	569

Our teams made **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.

“The support provided by ‘D’ has been amazing, thank you”

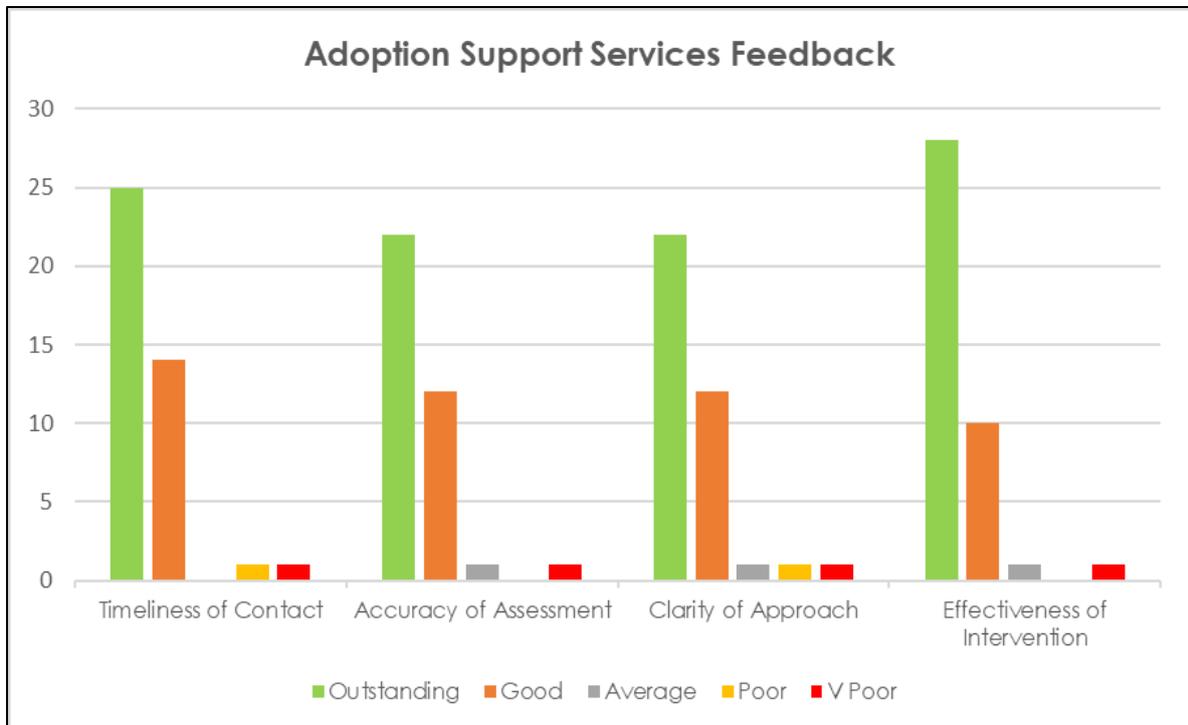
“ ‘T’ is a brilliant, warm, kind, informative social worker. She... has made a huge difference to the lives of our children”

Adoption Support Overall Rating



■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Average ■ Poor ■ V Poor

A representative sample of feedback from over 40 families who received a service provides positive feedback about the quality of support they received, with over 90% of responses rating the service they received as either good or outstanding. Across the range of measures including timeliness of follow up following enquiry, accuracy of the social work assessment and the effectiveness of the support provided, feedback from families who responded to our questionnaire was overwhelmingly positive.



Our specialist practitioners have supported over **150** adopted people to access their adoption records and supported over **100** referrals for independent Support to Birth Relatives who have been affected by adoption.

Access to Records	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
New referrals	109	17	33	159
Referrals Allocated	76	17	33	126
Intermediary Services				
New referrals	28	3	11	42
Referrals Allocated	15	3	11	29

We understand the impact that the adoption of a child has on birth parents and the wider birth family during the adoption process itself, and for life. We work hard to ensure that we offer the right support to birth families that is independent of the local authority children's social work services. Our support includes:

- Providing information about the process of adoption
- Signposting to other support services, such as housing, benefits, and counselling
- Face to face meetings or support over the phone.
- Helping birth parents and birth family members to consider information that they may wish the child to have in the future
- Delivering birth family support groups
- Support with maintaining contact

Over the year, our teams supported over **2700** 'Post Box' exchanges, facilitating, and supporting the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive parents.

Post Box	Staffs	Stoke	JAS	T4C
Post Box received	1322	830	1263	3415
Post Box exchanged	1172	643	947	2762

Throughout the year our teams have continued to deliver other important activities to support and bring together adopted children and their families including:

- Virtual Drop in Coffee Mornings
- Winter Support Event
- Toddler Groups
- Social Events and Woodland Walks

5.0 Together4Children Financial Information 2020-2021

For the second year running Together4Children have delivered the region's adoption service provision within budget. Overall expenditure on central partnership functions was £1,215,357 for the period 2020-2021. This delivered a small underspend of approximately £10,000 due, in the main, to staffing vacancies throughout the year.

	2020-21 Budget	2020-21 Outturn	Variance
Central Permanency Hub	1,225,810	1,215,357	- 10,453

During the second half of the year, we have successfully recruited to some of the vacant positions within the central hub. Some underspend against substantive staffing positions has offset higher -cost interim staffing arrangements that have been in place to cover business-critical vacancies.

Locality Permanency Hubs			
Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin	953,600	1,026,824	73,246
Staffordshire	1,272,090	1,201,500	-70,590
Stoke -on-Trent	682,330	663,808	-18,522
Total	2,908,020	2,892,154	-15,866

Costs for the Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin locality hub (based in Shrewsbury) are shared across the two Councils under arrangements that preceded the Together4Children Partnership. The overspend totalling £73,246 reported for 2021-2022 relates to staffing costs and was identified as a cost pressure from the outset of the financial year. A proportion of this overspend will be offset against payment for therapeutic interventions (via the Adoption Support Fund) delivered by practitioners in the locality hub.

The underspends reported across the Staffordshire and Stoke locality hubs are due to a combination of staffing vacancies, and small savings against operational cost and staff expenses.

5.1 Inter-Agency Expenditure

Interagency Costs – reduction in use – 2018-2021 average annual cost to Partnership was £920,000. 2021-22 – £332,000 – 64% reduction representing approximate cost avoidance of £580,000/year.

Expenditure	Budget	Outturn	Variance
Inter-Agency:			
Staffordshire	227,740	32,600	- 195,140
Stoke-on-Trent	-	27,000	-
Shropshire	54,000	1,416	- 52,584
Telford & Wrekin	70,000	68,975	- 1,025

T4C Total	351,740	102,991	- 248,749
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Income	Budget	Outturn	Variance
Inter-Agency:			
Staffordshire	- 316,740	- 95,540	221,200
Stoke-on-Trent		- 57,000	57,000
Joint Hub	- 27,000	- 31,620	- 4,620
T4C Total	- 343,740	- 127,160	273,580

6.0 Annual Plan and Actions to Address Performance and Capacity Issues

Practice Development Priorities 2022-2023

Through work undertaken across the Wider Leadership Team and Senior Leadership Teams, and wider consultation with our Adopter Advisory Board, practitioners and other stakeholders, the following areas of practice development have been identified as priorities for the coming year.

i. **Support Family Finding activity to reduce delay for children who wait the longest.**

We know that some children will wait longer than others to be found adoptive families. These tend to be older children, especially older boys, brothers and sisters who need to live together, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, and children with additional needs.

We want to improve practice from the point of the agreement to a child's plan of adoption – where that child has characteristics that would put them at risk of waiting longer – by considering a range of options, for example:

- LA agreement for national search and option of Inter-Agency Placement at the outset of the plan.
- Child specific recruitment activity.
- Means tested adoption allowances (time-limited, specific to children's needs and focused on supporting the building of strong attachments).
- Enhanced settling-in allowances.
- Practical support with child-care, laundry services, loans/grants for higher cost family items.

In short, we want to be able to offer 'baked-in support' for children who may wait the longest.

ii. **Early Permanence**

In-line with the Midland's EP Project Aims, we want to:

- Identify areas of regional best practice and share learning between RAAs with more developed processes and more newly formed RAAs.

- Produce analysis and business-case in relation to potential cost-benefits of Early Permanence to Local Authorities.
- Develop the interface between VAA and RAA/LA service provision - to include analysis and development of the use of concurrent placements via current VAA provision, where appropriate.
- Identify core elements of best practice and produce a regional best practice guide - integrating these elements into regional policies and procedures.
- Develop a pan-regional suite of training materials that sit alongside the guide for Children's Social Work professionals, RAA and VAA staff, regional CAFCASS and Family Justice Boards, and prospective adopters who are considering offering Early Permanence to children.
- Deliver 2 pan-regional conference-style events for key stakeholders in Summer 2022.

iii. **Improve the quality of Life Story Work and Life Story Books**

Research with adopted young people tells us how important understanding their life story is to them. We know how critical this can be later in a child's life, as they enter adolescence, for example, and are going through important stages of identity development.

But our adopters tell us that the quality of information they receive, in the form of life story books for example, is not always of a good enough standard and does not help them to support their children.

We want to work with our adopter community and draw in regional and national expertise to improve the quality of this work.

We also want to work with Children's and Adoption social work practitioners to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge to support this critical work.

iv. **Moving to Adoption**

We know from research and practice experience how important good transitions are in supporting children and prospective adopters to make strong and healthy attachments from the start.

Building on the UAE Moving to Adoption model and resources that we introduced to practitioners last year, we want to further develop and embed this practice in relation to transitions. This will involve working with Children's social workers and Foster Carers, as well as other key people.

v. **Develop in-house delivery of Therapeutic Interventions for Children**

Considering the 3-year funding announcement for the Adoption Support Fund (through to March 2025) we will review our capacity to deliver in-house interventions that are claimable against the fund.

We are already delivering some in-house interventions (although this has been difficult to sustain during Covid 19) and have recently added a therapeutic parenting course to our core offer.

We have numbers of staff with accredited levels of therapeutic training. We want to support those practitioners to further develop their expertise and ability to directly deliver interventions, using funding drawn back from the ASF to build capacity and resilience into our permanency support offer, and redressing our current reliance on independent and private sector providers for these interventions.

vi. Improve on-going support for birth parents and birth families to help to maintain and develop keeping in touch arrangements where appropriate.

We know how important it is for all involved to get arrangements for keeping in touch right. This should start at the earliest point in the planning stages of a child's journey, but support should be available when it is needed right through an adopted person's life course.

Building on our initial development principles and what we are learning from current research and practice, we want to further develop the resources and support we offer to birth families. This includes thinking about the way that birth families, adoptive parents and adopted children keep in touch with each other. We want to learn from current national pilots that are looking at innovative ways to support and enhance keeping in touch.

vii. Learning from Disruptions

We want to bring together the learning from these disruptions into a learning event for practitioners. We want to look at all factors which may have impacted on the child's placement ending, but with a focus on any impacts on practice resulting from Covid 19.