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| Local Members Interest |
| N/A |

Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday 06 July 2021

Together4Children Permanency Partnership Update

Recommendation(s)

- a. Update report for information and consideration

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

Summary

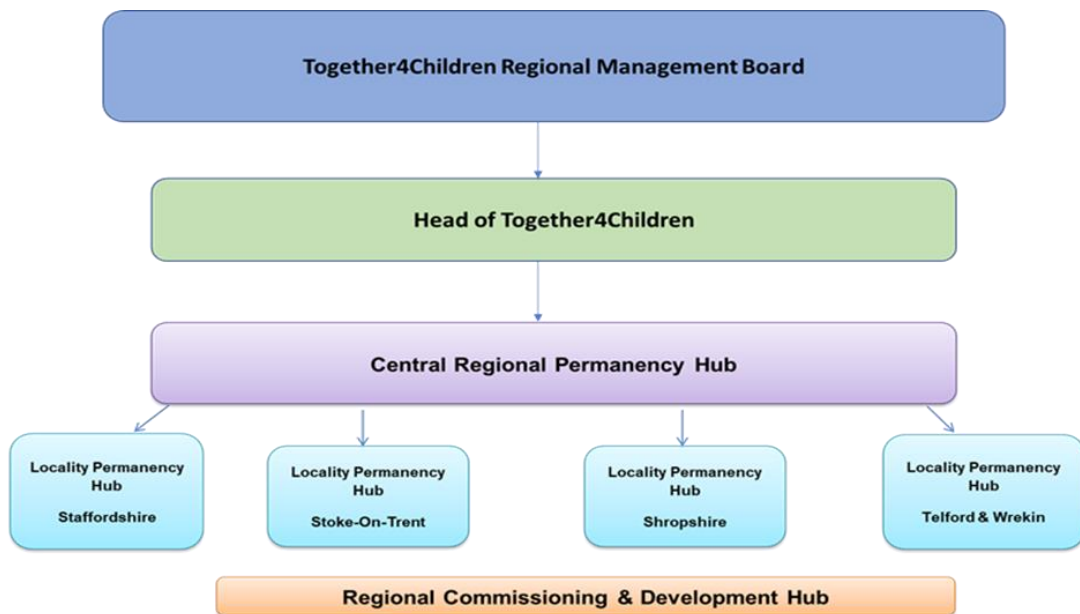
What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?

1. The following report provides an update in relation the progress of the regional Together4Children Permanency Partnership which, since going live on 28 September 2020 has been delivering the regional adoption service for Staffordshire County Council, Shropshire Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Together4Children is a partnership between Shropshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council.
5. 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.
6. We aim to:
 - 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

7. Whilst Together4Children has broader ambitions, the first key deliverables relate to the provision of our partner Council's Adoption Services via a hub and spoke model – a combination of core central functions and networked regional delivery (via a Central Permanency Hub).
8. 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.
9. 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.



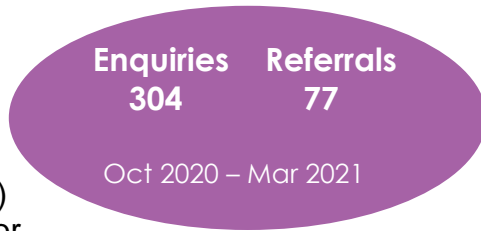
10. Senior Operational leadership is provided through the Together4Children Senior Leadership Team, which is comprised of the Head of T4C, the Principle Manager for the Central Permanency Hub and the Head of Service (or equivalent) with responsibility for Adoption in each partner council.

Together4Children Partnership Financial Arrangements

11. Regional financial arrangements were agreed across the 4 partner Council's Cabinets in November and December 2019. For 2020/21 and 2021/22 the Together4Children budget is set on the basis that each Partner contributes 100% of "in scope" budgets (Adoption Service), as disaggregated from the 2019/20 budget.

12. The Partnership's financial formula 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.

13. 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.



14. In the financial year 2020-2021 the partnership's Central functions were delivered within budget, as were Staffordshire's locality-based functions.

Together4Children Launch and Impact of Covid 19 Pandemic

15. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic the planned launch of Together4Children was delayed from 01 April 2020 to 28 September 2020. This delay, and the challenges brought about more generally by the pandemic have had some inevitable impacts on the partnership during 2020-2021, making this year unique in many ways. These impacts include:

- a. Launching midway through the financial year and performance reporting year - leading to practical challenges reporting performance pre and post go-live.
- b. Operational challenges to service delivery especially through the initial stages of the pandemic and national lockdown.
- c. The loss of organisational capacity (due to the pandemic) in relation to finance, performance, and other technical areas of support for the Partnership arrangement.

Together4Children Activity & Performance 2020-2021

Regional Branding and Adopter Recruitment

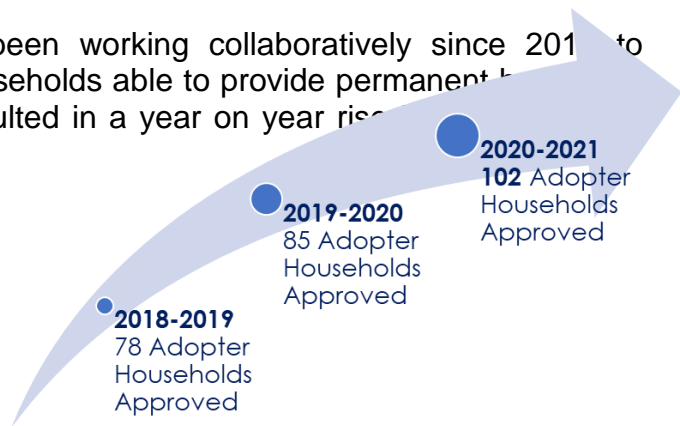
16. The recruitment of potential adopters for our children has been supported by strong and effective marketing activity. This has included:

- a. A successful launch campaign in September and October 2020.
- b. Successful launch of social media channels.
- c. The launch of the Together4Children website.
- d. Development of downloadable digital Information Event and Microsoft Teams based Information Events.
- e. Delivery of a marketing campaign focusing on finding adopters for children in sibling groups and other priority children.

17. This has led to strong performance in relation to enquiries and referrals through to our 3 assessment teams

Assessment & Approval of Adopters

18. Together4Children partners have been working collaboratively since 2017 to increase the number of adopter households able to provide permanent homes for children in our region. This has resulted in a year on year rise in the number of families we have assessed and approved as prospective adopters. This represents a positive outcome, meaning that we can find more homes for children within our regional 'pool' of adopters.



19. 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.

20. It also means that we avoid the costs involved in using adopters approved by other agencies.

Activity & Outcomes for Children in 2020-2021

21. Like other parts of the Children's Services system, activity and outcomes for children with a plan of adoption has been impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic during this reporting period.

22. Levels of activity have dropped over the last year with overall fewer plans of adoption agreed, a drop in the number of Placement Orders granted by Courts, and a subsequent drop in the number of children placed for adoption compared to 2019-2020.

23. We know that activity increased during the last 2 quarters of 2020-2021, and that this has continued into the current year. This is what we would expect to see given the relaxation of lockdown measures, a return to more normal practice, and a freeing up of other key parts of the children's system and Family Courts.

Finding Homes for Our Children within Our Region

24. One of the key 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.

73% of the children we placed for adoption during the year were placed with adoptive families from our region.

25. However, where no families are identified who can meet the particular needs of a child or children within our region, we look to other agencies across the Midlands and nationwide to ensure that we explore every possibility of finding the right families for our children.

Achieving Permanence for Children in a Timely Way

26. We know how important it is to secure children's permanency through adoption in a timely way. During 2020-2021 delays across the children's system, including significant delays with our regional Courts, have led to an increase in some of the timescales that we measure our performance for children against. We are awaiting publication of national data for 2020-2021 to compare and benchmark the impact that we have experienced with the adoption sector nationally.
27. Staffordshire's performance continues to be better than the England national average for the key performance indicators relating to adoption.

Children Adopted in 2020-2021

28. Despite the challenges of the past year **103** Adoption Orders were granted for children across our region, securing their legal permanence within their new families. Of the children who were adopted:
 - a. 23 children were aged over 5 years
 - b. 28 children achieved permanency alongside one or more of their siblings
 - c. 11 children came from ethnic backgrounds other than 'white British'.
29. 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. It is very positive that overall, 48 children (47% 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.

Together4Children Regional Adoption Support Delivery

30. In May 2020 the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund made exceptional provisions for Regional Adoption Agencies to apply for funding to provide therapeutic and other support to families impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic and lockdown measures.
31. From May-December 2020 Together4Children jointly identified, commissioned, and delivered approximately £225,000 of support provisions for adoptive families and Special Guardians on behalf of our 4 partner councils.

Adoption UK 'TESSA' and Together4Children

32. Together4Children are proud to be partners in delivering Adoption UK's innovative 'TESSA' support program for adoptive families. We are one of only two Regional Adoption Agencies in England to be offered the opportunity to pilot this program which is currently funded through the Big Lottery Community Fund. The program aims to create the conditions for healthy development and family wellbeing in adoptive families at risk of the effects of early childhood trauma.

33. Since TESSA went live in October 2020 **40** families across the Together4Children region have received support through this provision.

Locality Permanency Support Activity

34. Our 3 locality Permanency Support Teams based in Shrewsbury, Stoke and Uttoxeter have been key in implementing and delivering the regional initiatives above.
35. During the year our teams completed 349 support assessments and reviews, 549 applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund for the specialist therapeutic interventions; and supported over 1400 'Post Box' arrangements, facilitating and supporting the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive parents.

Key Development Priorities 2021-2022

36. 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. Target recruitment activity to ensure enough enquiries from potential adopters who can meet the needs of our children.
 - b. Support prospective adopters to consider providing homes for our priority children (e.g. those children likely to wait longer) through effective, high quality assessment, training, and support.
 - c. Support prospective adopters considering offering early permanence to a child, through effective, high-quality assessment, training, and support.
 - d. Support practice development across the region to increase the number of children placed with early permanence carers where that is the right plan for the child.
 - e. Address capacity issues across our regional adoptions panels to ensure that there is no delay in accessing panel for children's matches and adopter approvals.
 - f. Address capacity issues in relation to the adoption agency advice we provide to key decision-makers in each of our partner councils.
 - g. Move to fully regionalised panels to improve consistency, diversity and expertise and support quoracy across the region's 3 adoption panels.
 - h. Reduce the time it takes to match children with their permanent families by making best use of all Together4Children resources and supporting timely decision-making for children.
 - i. Improve the range and consistency of support offered to our adoptive families across the region, focusing on delivering the support that our families have told us they want.
 - j. Improve the way we communicate and keep in touch with our adopter community to ensure that we promote the support available and facilitate strong peer to peer networks.

Conclusion

37. Despite the significant challenges over the past year, the Together4Children Partnership has delivered significant achievements, including:
- a. A successful and well publicised launch at the end of September 2020.
 - b. Delivery of a strong brand and very effective marketing and recruitment activity.
 - c. Launch of the 'Central Hub' delivering critical elements of service delivery across the whole region.
 - d. Design and delivery of remote provision of service critical activity including adopter recruitment and preparation, assessment, adoption panels, adoption support assessment and the delivery of adoption support interventions.
 - e. Delivery of Regional workforce development events.
 - f. Building stronger relationships with our adopter community through our partnership with Adoption UK and our Adopter Advisory Board.
 - g. Implementing the 'TESSA' pilot (an early intervention model of support delivered through our partnership with Adoption UK).
 - h. Joint delivery of the Covid-19 Adoption Support Fund resources to 450+ adoptive and Special Guardianship families.
 - i. Significant progress in moving to regionalised adoption panels.
38. Since we went live, we have seen more of our children moving into their new families with adopters from within the T4C region.
39. In addition to the delivery of Regional Adoption Services, we are developing other areas of regional practice, supporting children who come into care to achieve stability and permanence within the foster or kinship care families.
40. We are very proud to be the first ever Local Authority Partnership to receive funding for, and jointly launch the 'Mockingbird Family Fostering Model' by working together across our four fostering services.
41. We are excited to be able to announce the launch of the first regional Mockingbird 'constellation' (a group of foster carers supported by an experience 'hub' carer) in June/July 2021.

Contact Details

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