

Together4Children Permanency Partnership

Adoption Agency Annual Report
1st April 2023- 31st March 2024



Report produced by Sarah
Havill, Regional Head of
Together4Children.

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

This report fulfils the obligations in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002, to report to the "executive side" of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in this report. The report covers the full year 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, covering the overall work within Together4Children, the progress with adopter recruitment and the service specific for each of the four partner agencies.

Introduction

Sarah Havill, Regional Head of Together4Children



In June 2024, we filled a significant vacancy by appointing an experienced Regional Head of Together4Children. This strategic appointment will support the operations and strategic direction of the partnership and continue to drive progress.

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 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.

More recently, in April 2024, Adoption England, a collaboration of regional adoption agencies including Together4Children, and a small national team, have launched the new adoption strategy for England 2024-27, outlining the overarching commitment for achieving permanence for children and giving them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.

The National RAA Leaders group are working to deliver against key areas of the strategy in line with the key priority areas identified in the plan for 2024-2027:

- Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared, and supported to meet children's needs.
- Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.

- Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence in the services and practice provided nationally and regionally.
- Children move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.
- Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.

Together4Children were represented throughout the year at national level by the interim Heads of Service in post.

Adoption UK published their annual [Adoption Barometer](#) report, in May 2023. The report recognises and celebrates the improvements made in the UK, for example, the increasing numbers of children maintaining relationships with their birth families, and the positive impact of the Adoption Support Fund for children and families in England. But it also sets out the challenges that remain to effectively support those children and their families in key recommendations which focus on free, accessible, high-quality support for adoptees of all ages, whenever they need it.

There has been a decline in adopters in the last 18 months, with less registrations of interest to adopt overall, but with regional variations. The national picture is concerning, and at a national level a collaborative approach is necessary to ensure there are enough adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoption.

The current cost of living crisis is a significant threat to the number of approved adopters. Nine out of ten prospective adopters say the cost of living crisis is affecting their decisions about adoption, according to Adoption UK's December 2022 survey. Adopters are withdrawing from the process as they are concerned about not being able to afford the cost of caring for children.

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 and we are ambitious in our plans to embed practice that improves outcomes for adopted children and adopted people.

Regional Context

The Local Authority Partnership that delivers Together4Children has continued to mature over the past 12 months. The governance and financial arrangements underpinning the Partnership have been audited and given a good level of assurance. The required action has been taken to strengthen arrangements where required.

On the ground, managers, practitioners and business support staff 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, continuing to review practice, policy, and procedures in line with new research, to support effective service delivery.

Together4Children continues to be an active member of the Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC). Whilst all RAA's are working to ensure sufficiency for approval of adopters to meet the needs of children with an adoption plan, Together4Children still uses a relatively high number of inter-agency placements. Securing regional links is preferable to placing children at a distance. The focus this year has continued to be embedding the MTC Early Permanence Good Practice Guide. This follows the launch of the National Early Permanence Standards. This is in recognition of the need to ensure we consider early permanence for all children with a likely plan of adoption. Furthermore, we are continuing to embed the University of East Anglia (UEA) model of moving children onto adoption.

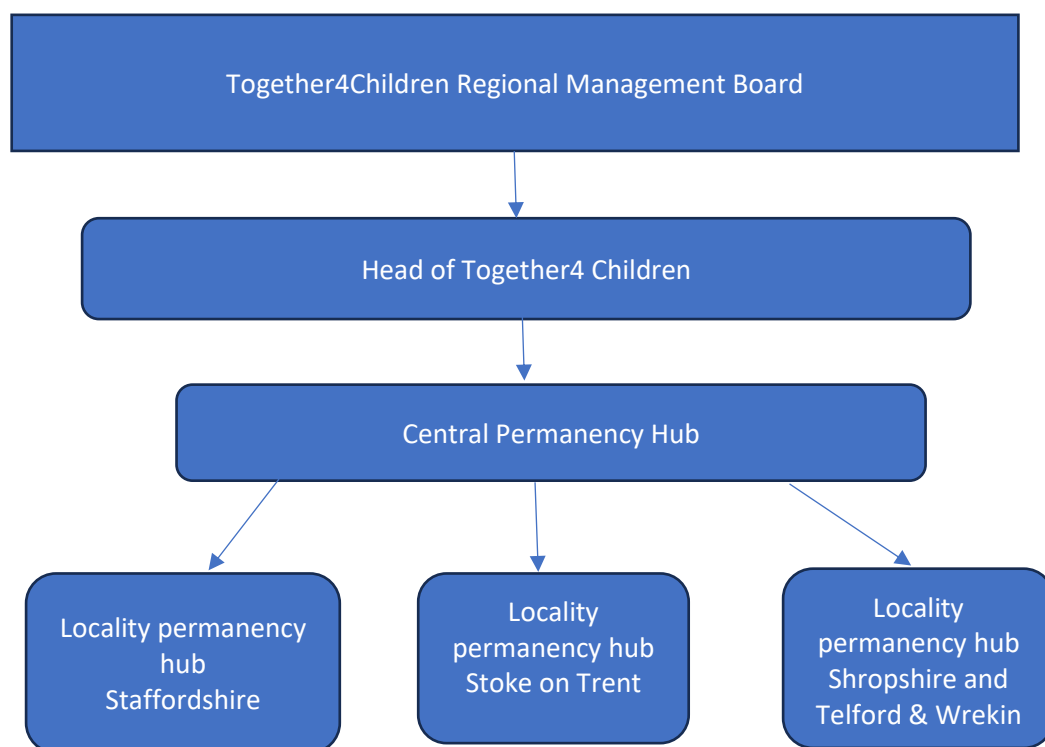
We know how important it is to secure children's permanency through adoption in a timely way. We regularly have approved adopters willing to offer early permanence; however, the lack of adopters generally means they are often matched with children already waiting.

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.

Section 1: Together4Children Partnership Arrangement

1.1 Partnership Governance and Operational Structure



The Partnership is governed via Regional Management Board Chaired by the Executive Director for 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.

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, Lead Regional Adoption Agency Adviser 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 operational managers across the central and locality hub functions.

1.2 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



1.3 Locality Permanency Hub Functions

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

Each Locality Hub has:

- 1 x Assessment & Support Team - undertaking adopter assessments (including non-agency) 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.

Section 2: Recruitment, Preparation and Assessment of Adopter Households

2.1 Marketing & Recruitment Overview

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.

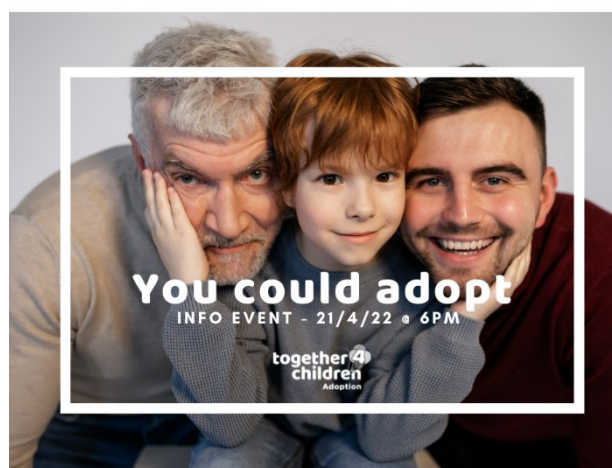
Our recruitment is driven by a strong marketing and communications strategy and campaigns running across the year to target a diverse range of potential adopters, able to meet the diverse needs of our children.



2.2 Referrals

During the year, our enquiries led to **170** households attending 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 generated **123** referrals to our Locality Hub assessment teams over the course of the year (including second-time adopters). Whilst a 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. This is a pleasing **29%** increase in the number of referrals from the previous year.



2.3 Assessment and Approval of Adopters

National Picture

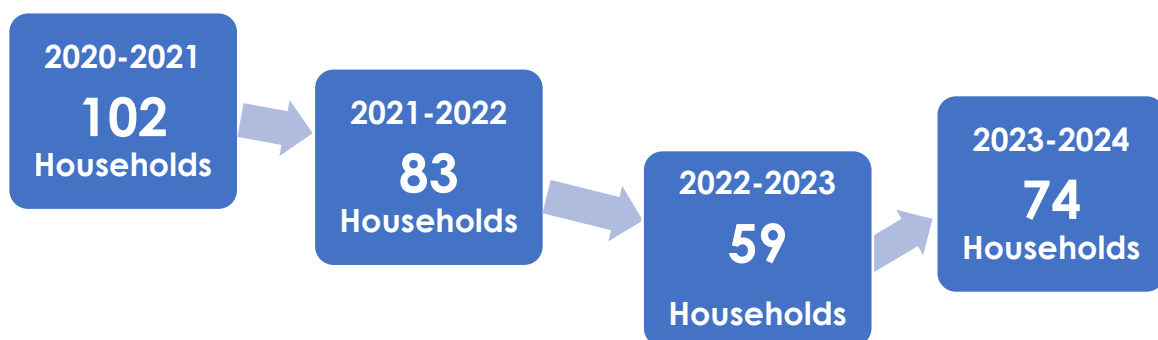
Nationally, there has been an overall decline in the number of adopters being approved and a decline in the number of adopters starting the adoption process. Whilst there are no nationally defined reasons for the decline in adopter numbers, the RAA leaders' group has begun to gather intelligence on the impact of the current cost of living crisis. Prospective adopters are making different decisions regarding family size. There is a clear North/South divide with adopter enquiry numbers holding steady in some Southern areas, whereas the Midlands and the North of the country are being adversely affected with an overall decline in enquiries and approvals.

In addition to this, In November 2022, Adoption UK published survey results of over 300 adopter households in different stages of the adoption process on the impact of the cost-of living crisis. They found: 7% delayed beginning their adoption approvals process. 5% paused the process after it had begun. 41% said they were considering adopting fewer children than previously.

The survey also found adopters were concerned about the expense of setting up a home for a child, buying essential equipment, being able to afford to take off their full adoption leave entitlement and having enough finance to enable them as a family to enjoy family experiences, such as days out and activities. These pressures were more acute for self-employed applicants, single applicants, and low-income households.

Regional Picture

Together4Children have done an excellent job reversing a two-year declining trend in adopter recruitment. Through strategic initiatives and dedicated efforts, we saw a growth trend in approving new adopter households during 2023/24. Current data provides an indication that this will continue into the coming year, with a likely increase again on adopter approvals. However, to meet the projected number of children that we expect will have a plan of adoption in 2024/25, we need a 40% increase on the number of households approved in 2023/24, an ambitious target.



We are working hard to increase the number of adopter households across the region, and we began to see an increase in recruitment, assessment and approval activity during the last quarter of 2023.

Completing Stage 1 (gathering statutory information) of our adopter assessments within our target has remained a challenge over the year. External factors such as the time it takes for applicants to complete medicals (usually provided by their own GP) and getting safeguarding checks back from other Local Authorities create challenges that most adoption agencies are experiencing at the current time.

Number of Days to Complete Key Phases of the Adopter Journey			
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Approval to Match
Together4Children	127	142	195
National Target	60	121	n/a

Once the required information has been obtained, 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 **142** days, which is a **6.5%** improvement in timeliness than the previous year. This is in line with national data, which shows a higher proportion of adopters are approved within six months, when compared to the previous year.

The data in the table above shows that our prospective adopters waited **195** days on average to be matched with a child(ren). National data taken from the ASG 2023-2024 quarter 4 data shows that 18% of approved adopter families had a child matched with them within 3 months of approval. **Within Together4Children, 27% of our adopters had a child matched with them within 3 months of approval.**

2.4 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.

Preparation Training

During this period, we have delivered **15** Adopter Preparation Training Events for **80** prospective adopter households. 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

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

"All the guest speakers were brilliant to listen to and it was really helpful hearing their experience of the adoption process."

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.

On the 13 December 2023 we took our 250th booking for Preparation Training, since Together4Children was launched.

Early Permanence

We have strengthened the training that we offer prospective adopters considering offering a child early permanence.

"It was warm and friendly; the information was helpful. As a couple it has made us feel more confident that the adoption process is the right direction."

"Thank you for this insight and information. Excellent speakers, and their joy of adopting their little girl gave a powerful balance to the challenges they experienced."

It is positive to see that 84% of households attending preparation training also attend the Early Permanence module.

We have delivered **13** Early Permanence Training Events for **67** prospective adopter households. As from October 2023, Early Permanence training was made mandatory.

Brothers and Sisters

We have also developed our offer to support prospective adopters to consider adopting brother and sisters together. Our campaign, 'together', was launched and in October 2023, the Adopting Brothers and Sisters training was made mandatory. Together4Children are working hard to highlight importance of sibling relationships for adopted children.

During the year, we ran **13** Adopting Brothers and Sisters Training Events for **62** prospective adopter households, which is 78% of households attending preparation training.

"Learned a lot about sibling groups, which is really going to help us to decide on what is the best course of action for us. "



Family & Friends

Over the year, we delivered **14** 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. The workshops help to inform the prospectives adopters' network about adoption, and how they can best support their friends/family members who are considering adoption through the process and once a child moves in. Approximately **286** family members and friends attended these workshops.

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

Our Broader Training Offer to Adopters

In addition to our core training offer, we provide a broad range of additional training. Over the year we have delivered training and workshops to almost **200 households** using a mix of specialist trainers and therapists, experts by experience and our own specialist and accredited practitioners. Our offer has included:

- Parental self-care
- Understanding Your Child – 6 Sessions a group-based introduction to parenting children who may have experienced trauma.
- Therapeutic Parenting
- 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.

- Understanding your teenager – 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.
- When the Senses Don't Make Sense – an introduction to supporting children with underdeveloped sensory systems.
- Self-Harming Behaviours – support parents manage self-harming behaviours in children and young people.
- FASD Awareness – workshops to raise awareness of foetal alcohol syndrome disorder.
- FASD Management – training to support parents whose children are displaying symptoms of foetal alcohol syndrome disorder.

2.5 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 2023-2024, Together4Children received **62** referrals for non-agency adoption provisions and undertook **39** assessments. At 31/03/2022 the service had **58** assessments on-going and a further **14** 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. Overall, when making comparisons to 2022-2023 data, it evidences that activity in this area has reduced including a reduction by 46% of families waiting for assessment.

Non-agency Adoption Activity 2023-2024				
	Staffs Hub	Joint Hub	Stoke Hub	T4C
Referrals received	34	15	13	62
A16's (Notification of Intent) sent out	18	11	1	30
A16's returned	17	11	1	29

Non-agency Assessments completed	10	29	0	39
Ongoing assessments @ 31/03/2024	26	20	12	58
Waiting for assessment @ 31/03/2024	0	14	0	14

Section 3: Activity & Outcomes for Children in 2023-2024

3.1 Regional Children in Care Trends

During 2023-2024, two of our partner local authorities (Shropshire and Stoke on Trent) continued to experience an increase in their overall number of children in care, continuing to follow the overall pattern of an increasing children in care population over the last 3 - 4 years across the region. However, two of our partner local authorities (Staffordshire and Telford & Wrekin) started to see a decrease in the overall number of children in care for the first time in the past 3 years, particularly Telford & Wrekin who had had a 9.2% decline in children in care numbers.

	Total CIC @ 31/03/2023	Total CIC @ 31/03/2024	% +/- Last 12 Months
Shrops	656	720	+9.7%
Staffs	1385	1310	-5.4%
Stoke	1108	1151	+3.9%
T&W	454	412	-9.25%
Total	3603	3593	-0.3%

When we look at the children in care numbers of children aged 0-5 years, we saw a decrease across 3 of our 4 partner local authorities and an overall decrease across Together4Children of 6.4%

	Total CIC Aged 0-5 @ 31/03/2023	Total CIC Aged 0-5 @ 31/03/2024	% +/- over 12 months
Shrops	197	189	-4%
Staffs	336	307	-8.6%
Stoke	305	308	+1%
T&W	112	85	-24.11%
Total	950	889	-6.4%

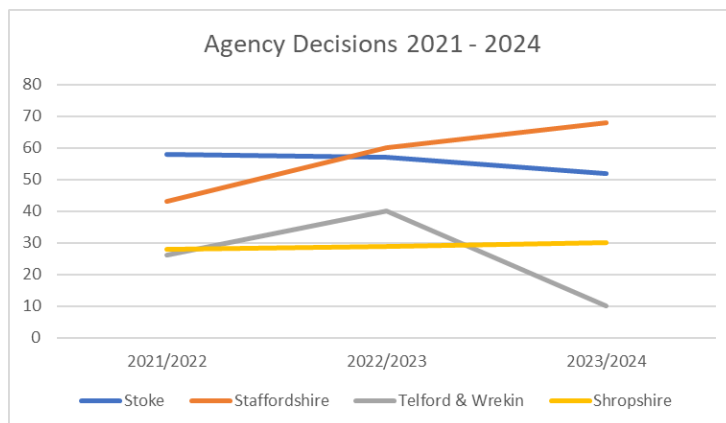
3.2 Agency Decisions for Children's Plans of Adoption & Placement Orders

The decision to place a child for adoption is recognised as being one of the most significant decisions about a child's life that a Local Authority makes through the discharging of their statutory children's social work duties. Together4Children supports senior managers in our partner Local Authorities by providing formal *Adoption Agency Advice* for all children where a plan of adoption is proposed.

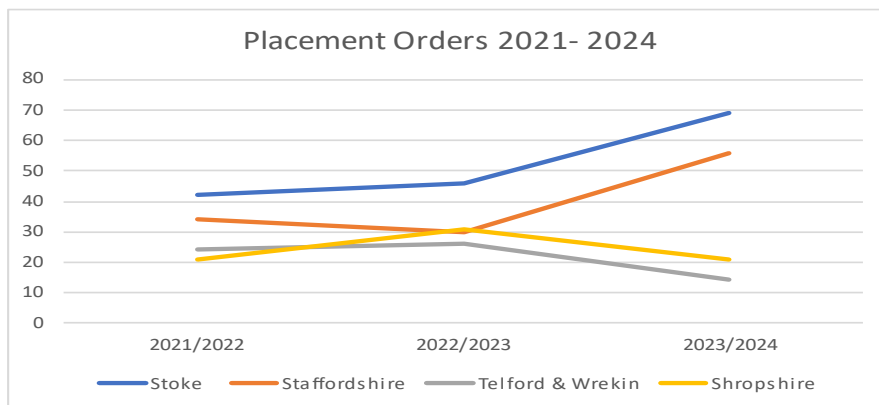
During 2023-2024, Together4Children saw an overall decrease of 14% in agency decisions. The line chart illustrates that Telford & Wrekin saw a significant decrease in numbers, going from 40 agency decisions in 2022-2023 to 10 in 2023-2024.

A total of **160** agency decisions were made in 2023-2024 compared to **186** the previous year.

The decrease in agency decisions for Together4Children is not in line with the national picture, which showed an increase of 13%. (*DfE's Children looked after in England including Adoption 2023 data*)

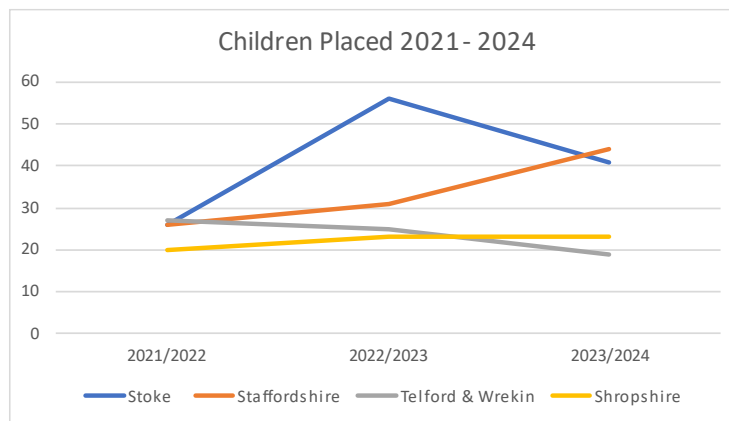


The number of Placement Orders granted by our Courts which provide legal authority to Local Authorities to place a child with prospective adopters, increased from **133** in 2022-2023, to **160** in 2023-2024. However, as the line chart illustrates, we see a clear divide with two local authorities (Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent) both seeing a steep incline in Placement Orders granted, and two authorities (Telford & Wrekin and Shropshire) seeing a decline. This is in line with the agency decision numbers in the respective authorities. Nationally, there was a 12% increase in Placement Orders granted during 2023-2024.



3.3 Children Placed for Adoption

The activity above has led to increasing numbers of children who need adoptive families to meet their needs for permanency through adoption. During the period 2023-2024 we have found homes for **127** children, a slight decrease from **135** children placed for adoption during 2022-2023, with two of our Partner Local Authorities (Stoke on Trent and Telford & Wrekin) placing fewer children than the previous year.



3.4 Where we Found Homes for our Children in 2023-2024

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.

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.

By utilising our existing pool of adopters we were able to find homes for **87** children (68.5% of the total 127 children we placed) with our own Together4Children adopters.

68.5% of the children we placed for adoption during the year were placed with adoptive families from with Together4Children.

The table below shows where the adoptive families came from for those children who were matched with their new families and moved in moved into their new homes during 2023-2024.

Children Placed With:	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
T4C Adopters*	21	21	32	13	87
Other RAA Adopters**	0	4	0	0	4
VAA***	2	19	9	6	36
% Children Placed with T4C	91%	48%	78%	68%	68.5%

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

** Adopters approved by another Regional Adoption Agency.

*** Adopters approved by a Voluntary Adoption Agency

One of the ways we have been able to place our children closer to the region is via the Midlands Together Collaboration arrangements, where we seek to make potential adopters from the wider midland's region available for children. This means that when we do have to look outside of Together4Children for prospective adopters we are able to draw on the resources of agencies within the wider region.

Whilst every effort is made across our regional family finding team to place children with Together4Children approved adopters, it is important to recognise that use of inter-agency adoption has always played a role in ensuring that suitable placements can be found for children to meet their needs in a timely way.

3.5 Early Permanence

Early Permanence is a child-centred practice that aims to ensure that those children unable to live safely with their birth families are placed with their permanent substitute families at the earliest opportunity, avoiding the need for multiple moves and the associated trauma of separation from, and loss of, attachment figures.

Throughout the year, Together4Children has worked closely with colleagues from Regional Adoption Agencies and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to develop Early Permanence practice, specifically around the use of 'Fostering for Adoption'.

In this model, the Local Authority is primarily progressing towards a decision for the care plan to be adoption, and family reunification appears unlikely based on known factors relating to birth family. The child is placed with prospective approved adopters who are also temporarily approved as foster carers for the specific child in question. In the event of a Placement Order being granted they could, subject to the outcome of a further legal and regulatory process, go on to adopt the child. They will also be prepared to support rehabilitation to birth family should that become the plan for the child.

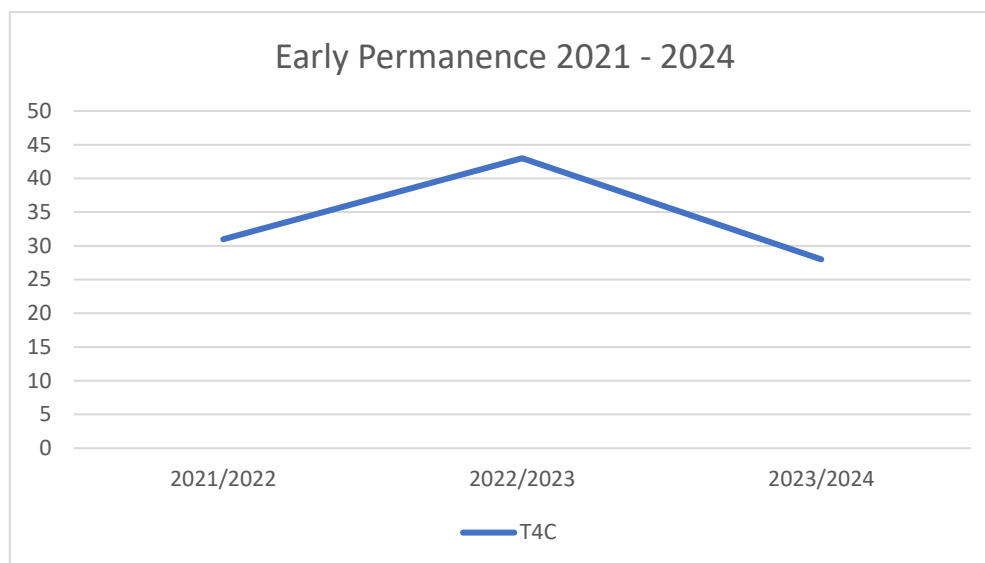


	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
Children Placed in 2023-2024	23	44	41	19	127
Early Permanence	15	5	6	2	28
% Children placed EP	65%	11%	15%	10.5%	22%

The table above shows the percentage of children placed in an early permanence arrangement, showing Shropshire being an outlier in placing considerably more children in an early permanence arrangement, than the three other partner local authorities.

Where it is appropriate, Early Permanence is considered for all children across the region, and we continue to embed consistent practice across the partnership. As outlined in the adopter training activity, early permanence training is now mandatory for all prospective adopters and a priority for 2024-2025 will be to grow the number of adopters able to consider early permanence.

The below graph shows a decline in children being placed in early permanence placements from the previous year. This is indicative of a reduced number of adopters available and able to consider early permanence placements. National data also indicates a 4% decrease in early permanence placements.



3.6 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.

A10 Indicator – 3-year Average	2019-2022	2020-2023	2021-2024
Target	426 days	426 days	426 days
England Average	445	480	475
Together4Children	471	488	495
Shropshire	359	421	465
Staffordshire	352	413	450
Stoke-on-Trent	590	548	568
Telford & Wrekin	556	553	498

The most recent national measure we have for this timescale across local authorities in England is 475 days.

From the table above we can see that the overall A10 indicator for the Together4Children region is 495 days, which is above the target number of days (426) and above the England average. Two out of the 4 Local Authorities in the partnership (Shropshire and Staffordshire) however remain below the England average across three years. The indicator for Stoke-on-Trent had improved in the three years to March 2023, however we can see timeliness starting to increase again to March 2024.

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 2 of the 4 Together4Children partner councils have seen a deterioration in performance against this indicator during 2023 - 2024, with Stoke on Trent seeing a significant jump from 463 to 574 days. 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 Trend	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Shropshire	406	440	507
Staffordshire	319	505	468
Stoke-on-Trent	665	463	574
Telford & Wrekin	433	635	464

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	2019-2022	2020-2023	2021-2024
Target	121 days	121 days	121 days
England Average	196	197	197
Together4Children	216	221	218
Shropshire	127	176	180
Staffordshire	166	199	202
Stoke-on-Trent	232	211	258
Telford & Wrekin	305	282	234

The most recent average timescale measure we have for local authorities in England is **197** days (ASGLB Q4 Data Set 2023-2024). At **218**, the overall timescales for the Together4Children region are longer but within range of both the England average of **197** days and the target of **121** 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 Trend	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023 - 2024	Trend
Shropshire	199	179	192	↑
Staffordshire	195	182	209	↑
Stoke-on-Trent	299	148	304	↑
Telford & Wrekin	233	208	254	↑

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.

The above table indicates an increase in timeliness across the region, with a significant increase in Stoke on Trent, where the number of days that it takes to match children with adopters from the making of the Placement Order have more than doubled.

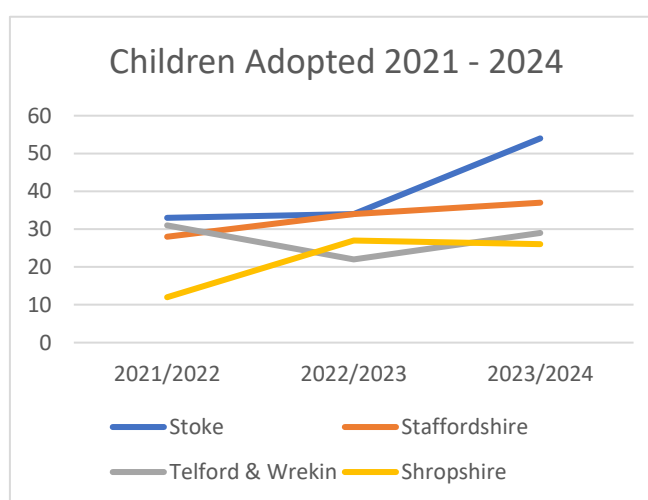
It is important to note that we are ambitious when it comes to finding permanent homes for our children, even when we know that it will be a challenge. This ambition for our children can also lead to drops in overall performance measures (where it has taken us longer to find a family that can meet a child's complex needs, for example).

To understand 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 analysis is explored in more detail in the localised information in separate locality reports.

3.7 Children Adopted During 2023-2024

146 Adoption Orders were granted for children across our region, securing their legal permanence within their new families. This was an increase of 29 from the previous year. Of the children who were adopted, **39** children were aged over 5 years, **63** children achieved permanency alongside one or more of their brothers and sisters, and **12** children came from ethnic backgrounds other than 'white British'. 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.

The graph on the right shows that, since the development of the Together4Children partnership, the number of children who have left care via adoption has increased, particularly Stoke on Trent who have seen a significant rise in adoption orders granted during 2023 – 2024. It is positive a number of children that were 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 partnership.



3.8 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.

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 3 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.

3.9 Children with a Plan of Adoption on 31 March 2024

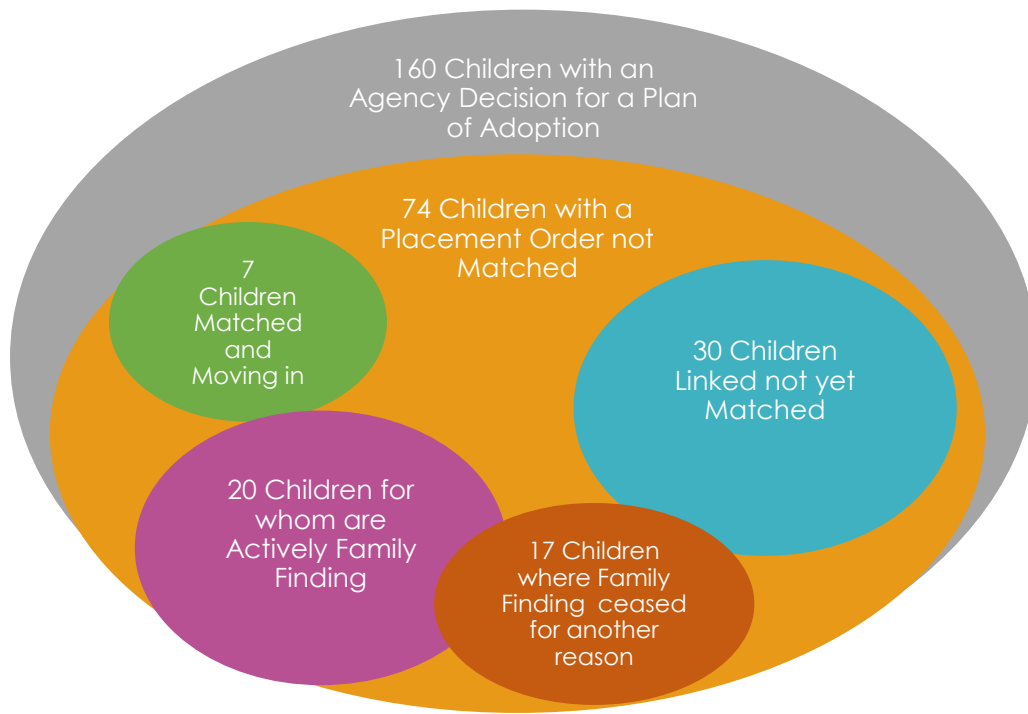
At the end of the current reporting there were **160** children across our region where Agency Decision Maker's across our partner local authorities had decided on a plan of adoption.

Of these, **74** 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 **74** children with a Placement Order, who had not yet been matched with their adopters, on the 31 March 2024:

- **7** children were matched and were in the process of moving to their new families.
- **30** children had been linked with their prospective family and were progressing to a match.
- **17** children where family finding had stopped for another reason, such as on-going assessment or change of plan away from adoption.

This left **20** children for whom we were actively looking for an adoptive family.



3.10 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 within 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 2023-2024, 1 placement disrupted affecting 1 child, who was placed with inter – agency adopters. This child has since been placed with another adoptive family and the child is doing well. 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 2023-2024	T4C Adopters	Inter-Agency
No. of Placement Disruptions	0	1

4.0 Together4Children Regional Adoption Panel Activity

Our Regional Panels came together in December 2021, and we have been continuing to integrate and embed activity to fully support our regional adoption arrangements throughout 2023-2024.

Over the year a total of **51** adoption panels have been convened across the partnership. In a change from the last financial year, our adoption panels have been fully combined and operate from the central hub of Together4Children and are no longer locality based. Each Panel hears matches and approvals from across the partnership.

Over the year our panels have reviewed and made recommendations upon 122 matches for children with their prospective adopters, 74 adopter household approvals, 2 de-registrations, 2 relinquished children and 1 brief report to panel. In total, Adoption Panels across the region heard 201 cases in the year 2023 - 2024.

We have three Adoption Panel Advisors and three Independent Panel Chairs who are allocated to panels. We have also appointed vice-chairs and new panel members across our panels and have completed a process to bring our Central List of all panel members together. Panel members and Panel Chairs regularly come together for development sessions, which are held bi-monthly and enable them to discuss current themes, topics of interest and areas of practice/research which will contribute to their development within adoption panel.

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.

Our Quality Assurance Feedback form has been developed and ensures that meaningful reflection and analysis of the documents provided is gathered. This is then fed back to social workers through supervision with their respective managers in the Partnership.

Across all panels, we ask our members to consider, Prospective Adopter Reports, Matching Reports, Child Permanence Reports, Adoption Placement Reports and Adoption Support Plans. Quality Assurance feedback is obtained by Adoption Panel members prior to panel. Forms are sent out with the paperwork and then collated by the panel advisor after panel. Any additional comments can be added to the quality assurance form by the panel advisor. In the past reports have been categorised as 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Requires Improvement' and 'Inadequate'. Whilst this method can be helpful, we also need to understand the reasoning behind that grading along with areas of strength and development.

Panel have highlighted the following as consistent areas of strength:

- Adopters come across in person as they do in the PAR
- Analysis and Reflection is demonstrated by the social workers throughout the PAR
- Social Workers can support the adopters when needed and answer questions panel may have
- Matching paperwork enables a good sense of the child and how the adopters can meet the needs of the children
- The UEA model of introductions is being implemented across the partnership
- Child Permanence Reports are updated and include recent photographs of the child. Most of the Child Permanence Reports include photographs of siblings and parents which panel have commented will be important as the child grows up
- Keeping in touch plans have usually been well considered and are becoming more child led.

Panel have commented on the following regarding areas for development:

- Where a child has been placed under Early Permanence it would be helpful for there to be more input from the fostering service as to how the Fostering Standards have been met and their overall view of the placement. It could be through a report or through the fostering social worker attending panel.
- How diversity is covered within reports could be further developed although is improving

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

4.0 Together4Children Regional Adoption Support

It is recognised that early life adversity impacts children developmentally, emotionally, cognitively and socially and requires therapeutic support for children to thrive. 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.

4.2 Permanency Teams Early Support Offer

Our 3 locality Permanency Support Teams based in Shrewsbury, Stoke on Trent 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.

4.3 Referral & Assessment Activity

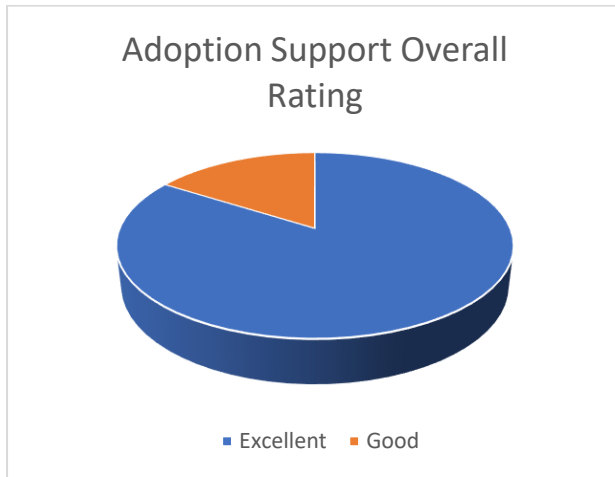
Where more specific support is required, our specialist practitioners undertake an assessment of need. During the year, our teams completed **409** adoption support assessments, working directly with children and their families to identify and review their support needs and plan the right interventions. This is an increase of 24 from the previous year, which continues to show the continued pattern year on year, of an increase in adoption support activity across all 4 partners.

Adoption Support Referrals 2023-2024				
	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
Referrals Allocated	246	71	92	409
Allocated Children	167	94	266	527

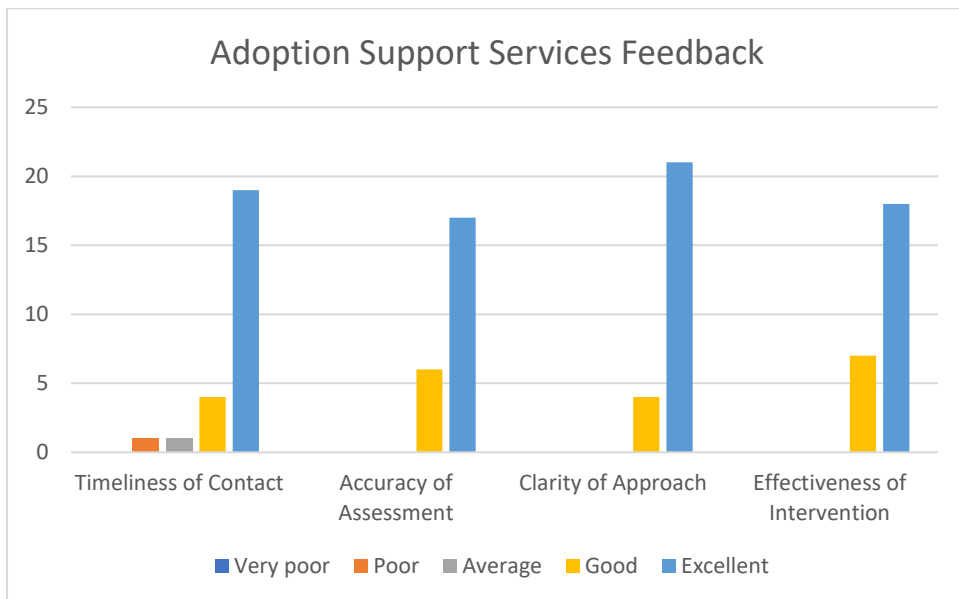
Our teams made **572** applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund for the specialist therapeutic interventions required to meet needs identified for adopted children through our assessments. A small number of these applications (only 2%) were match funded with the local authority.

Adoption Support Fund Referrals 2023-2024				
	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
New Applications	340	94	138	572
Applications (match funded)	11	3	0	14

A representative sample of feedback from **60** families who received a permanency support service provided positive feedback about the quality of support they received, with over **92%** 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.



“ ‘T’ spent the morning with us explaining everything about why our daughter may behave the way she does. No question was too big or small, and we felt comfortable and more confident as a result.”



Our specialist practitioners have supported **130** adopted people to access their adoption records.

Access to Records	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
New referrals	92	16	26	134
Referrals Allocated	88	16	26	130
Intermediary Services				
New referrals	26	0	0	26
Referrals Allocated	5	0	0	5

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.

This is a short extract from an adopted adult from a letter of thanks to one of our Permanency Support Teams.

“the care that was shown was so treasured and made what was at times a difficult journey, much more manageable”

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 **3865** 'Post Box' exchanges (we are looking to review the terminology of these exchanges to modernise this area of work), facilitating, and supporting the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive parents.

Post Box	Staffs	Stoke	JAS	T4C
Post Box received	1315	908	1434	3657
Post Box exchanged	1039	619	2207	3865

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 2023-2024

The Partnership has faced some financial pressure within the central permanency hub this financial year, as identified in the table below, with a overspend of £68,536.

Whilst we are working hard to ensure that our provisions are delivered within budget, this year's financial outturn should be viewed in the context of the Together4Children partnership achieving adoption for a significantly higher number of children than when the partnership commenced.

	2023-2024 Budget	2023-2024 Outturn	Variance
Central Permanency Hub	295,175	363,711	68,536

The overspend within the central hub was a result of panel becoming fully centralised and the recharge of the regional admin officer for Stoke on Trent, both were not originally budgeted.

As the host authority, Staffordshire re-charge the overspend to each partner, therefore after taking account of the re-charges for the additional costs highlighted above, this has resulted in a break-even position for the central permanency hub.

Locality Permanency Hubs			
	2023 – 2024 Budget	2023 – 2024 Outturn	Variance
Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin	1,370,640	1,358,493	-12,147
Staffordshire	1,970,403	1,831,299	-139,104
Stoke -on-Trent	1,051,540	1,056,437	4,897
Total	4,392,583	4,246,229	-146,354

The locality permanency hubs include the adoption assessment and permanency support teams. 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 underspend totalling £146,354 reported for 2023-2024 mainly relates to staffing vacancies, including maternity leave in the locality assessment teams, which were partially offset by a market supplement payment within Stoke on Trent's locality permanency hub of £5,882. Staffordshire also had an underspend of £14,200 against their panel budget.

5.1 Inter-Agency Expenditure

The table below shows the significant overspend of £649,956 on interagency expenditure through to the end of the financial year.

Expenditure	Budget	Outturn	Variance
Inter-Agency:			
Staffordshire	141,140	698,300	557,160
Stoke-on-Trent	200,000	456,747	256,747
Shropshire	62,000	94,104	32,104
Telford & Wrekin	270,000	73,945	-196,055
T4C Total	673,140	1,323,096	649,956

The reasons for the increased use of inter-agency placements relate to a combination of the high numbers of children being linked and matched across the region, and lack of sufficiency of adopter households being approved.

The table below shows a significant under-achievement of income for adopters approved by Staffordshire, against the target set for that locality hub. This is a historic budget target for Staffordshire, which is unachievable, but cannot be corrected as savings would need to be identified in other areas of the budget, to revise this target.

Income	Budget	Outturn	Variance
Inter-Agency:			
Staffordshire	-216,740	-52,058	164,682
Stoke-on-Trent	0	-29,970	-29,970
Shropshire	-31,000	-27,000	4,000
Telford & Wrekin	0	0	0
T4C Total	-247,740	-109,028	138,712

The inter-agency budget is managed and maintained at a local level for each Partner authority within the T4C Partnership.

It is important to note that whilst the use of IA placements impacts as a significant one-off cost, overall costs are avoided where:

- a) A child's plan of adoption would otherwise not be achieved meaning that they would most likely remain in foster care.
- b) The timescales for a child moving in with their adoptive family is reduced, avoiding the on-going cost of maintaining the child in care.

6.0 Key Achievements 2023 – 2024

I. Increase in the number of adopter households approved

This year has been successful in reversing the two -year downward trend in adopter approvals. Through improved marketing strategies, we have seen an increase of 29% in referrals to our locality teams on the previous year. We want to build on this now for 2024-2025.

II. Continued to embed regional practice based on the UEA model

Guidance has been successfully implemented across the region in respect of transitioning children to adopters, based on the UEA model

III. Adopter training

Training for adopters has continued to be developed, with the introduction of mandatory training on adopting siblings and early permanence

IV. Fully centralised Panel arrangements

In a change from the last financial year, our adoption panels have been fully combined and operate from the central hub of Together4Children and are no longer locality based.

7.0 Key Priorities 2024 - 2025

I. Embedding the cultural identity of Together4Children across our 4 local authorities

With a new and permanent regional head, the focus is to remember why Together4Children was launched and to develop consistent working practices and cultures across the region.

II. Adopter Recruitment

We plan to continue to build upon the successful recruitment strategies used this year, to continue to increase our approval of adopter households.

III. Maintaining significant relationships

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.

IV. Support Family Finding activity

Through a review of family finding, we want to ensure that the central hub family finding team have the right resource and processes in place to allow them to focus on finding the right family in a timely manner for the children in our region.

V. Timely Adoption Support

One of the main challenges we face is that the demand for adoption support services is exceeding the resources currently available. Addressing this imbalance will be a priority, to enable the partnership to continue to provide high-quality support to all adoptive families

Sarah Havill

Head of Together4Children Permanency Partnership

20/09/2024

Contributors

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