

Together4Children Permanency Partnership

Adoption Agency Annual Report
1st April 2024 - 31st March 2025



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 fourth 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 2024 to 31 March 2025, covering the overall work within Together4Children, the progress with adopter recruitment and the service specific for each of the four partner agencies.

Introduction

Foreword from Sarah Havill, Head of Together4Children



As I reflect on the past year, I am pleased to present this Annual Report, which highlights the work undertaken across the region, celebrates our achievements and addresses ongoing challenges.

A central focus this year has been developing the knowledge and skills of adoption and children's social workers across the region in respect of the modernising adoption agenda, and I am proud of our team's commitment to maintaining links for our children and families. A new appointment to our Marketing, Recruitment and Communications Manager has also led to a re-energised approach to recruitment, in response to the challenges around adopter sufficiency. Ensuring we have the right families for our children has been and continues to be a key priority.

National Context

Whilst representing a small part of the total children's social work sector, adoption continues to have a high profile politically, with the government's renewed commitment to strengthening adoption services and its recognition of the vital role adoption plays in providing permanence for children who are unable to remain with their birth or extended families.

In April 2024, Adoption England, a collaboration of regional adoption agencies including Together4Children, and a small national team, 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, attended by Sarah Havill, the Head of Together4Children, is 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.

There has been a decline in adopters in the last two years, with less registrations of interest to adopt overall, but with regional variations. The Adoption England 'You Can Adopt' campaign saw some of their most successful results to date in the 2024/25 financial year, in terms of engagement and cost-effectiveness, and Together4Children have supported the national campaign in our recruitment efforts.

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.

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 and work on strategic priorities over the past 12 months, with the support of an improvement plan that addresses our key areas for development. A review of our key central functions, including family finding and panel are underway, with the objective of achieving consistency and improved outcomes for our children and families.

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. I am proud of the way our staff have shown an openness to how we can improve our service and their continued commitment to strive for excellence.

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 to embed the University of East Anglia (UEA) model of moving children onto adoption, and we continue to deliver regional adoption and child permanence training across the region, on a rolling basis.

As part of our pan regional working, Together4Children, alongside Adopt Birmingham, Adoption@Heart and Adoption Focus, have scoped a proposal for grant funding to support adoption support initiatives, including the development of a Family Hub Support Network and peer support and engagement. The four regional adoption agencies within the West Midlands have the benefit of being part of established structures already and given the previous collaboration in respect of shared approaches to Early Permanence Practice, we are positive to how collaboration with adoption support will be beneficial.

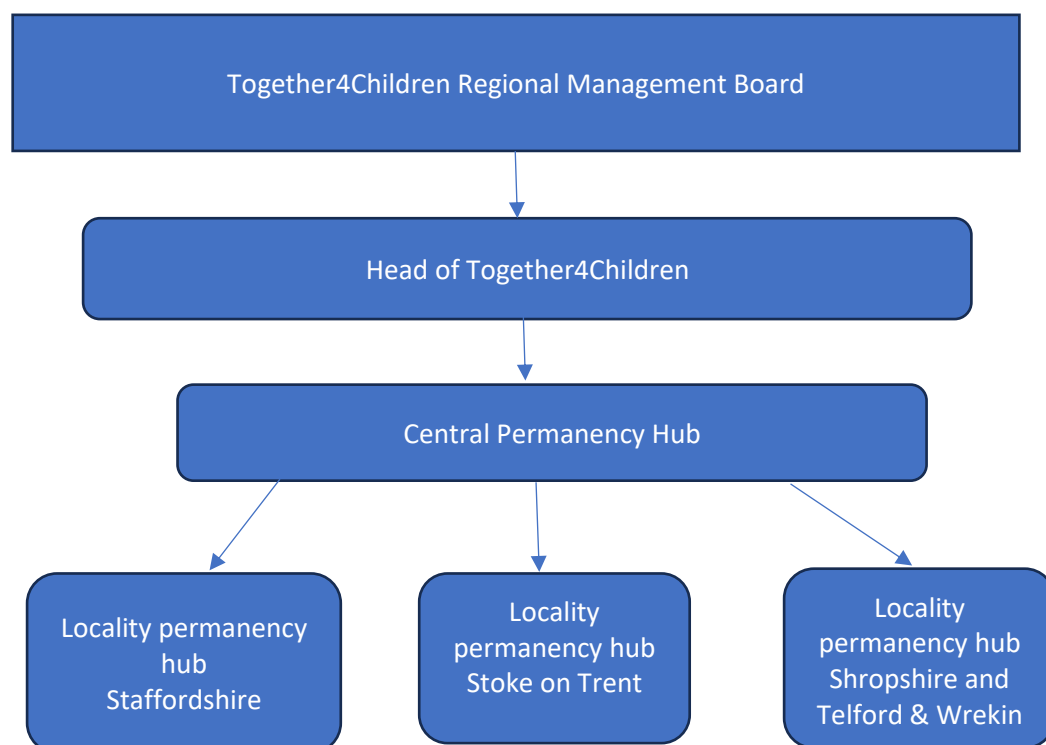
We know how important it is to secure children's permanency through adoption in a timely way. We regularly have approved adopters willing to offer early permanence; however, the lack of adopters generally means they are often matched with children already waiting.

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

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

Section 1: Together4Children Partnership Arrangement

1.1 Partnership Governance and Operational Structure



The Partnership is governed via the Regional Management Board, which is chaired by the Executive Director for Children Services and Public Health 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 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



1.3 Locality Permanency Hub Functions

There are three 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

A new marketing, communications and recruitment manager started in post in December 2024 following the previous post holder's departure in June 2024.

A new recruitment strategy has been approved with a digital search campaign and increased presence on social media going live at the start of March 25. This has led to an increase in initial enquiries from a 24/25 average of 28 per month (prior to this activity (April 24-March 25)) to an average of 44 per month once the campaign went live (March 25- end July 25).

Other developments have included the development of a pre-recorded information event, which is available for people who are unable to attend a live online event or if waiting for an event would cause delay. The full enquiry form (which triggers potential allocation of the household to localities) is now on MS forms and is shared directly after an event (previously this was an emailed word document) meaning a speedier and more efficient progression for enquirers coming through to allocation.



Monday 15 September 2025 at 18:00

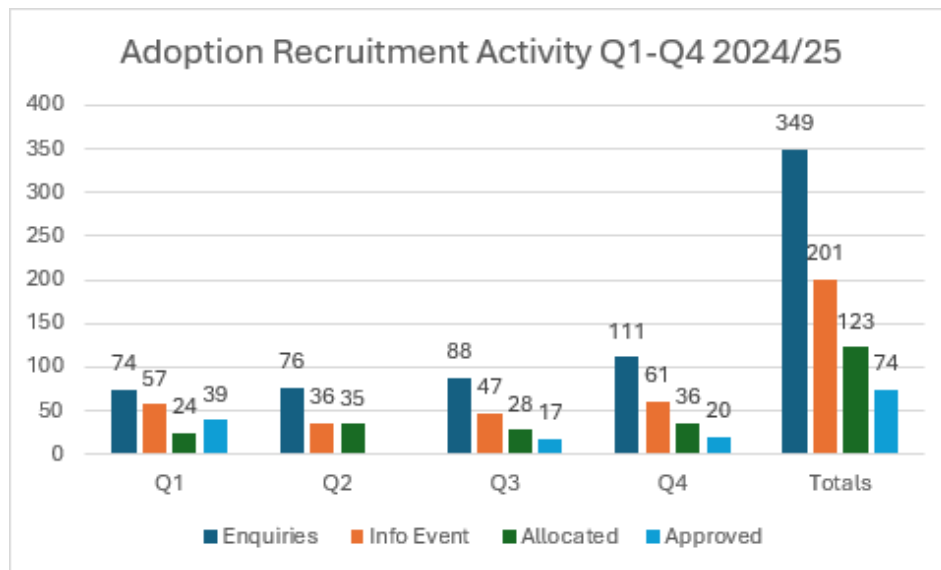
Online Introduction to Adoption Information Event

Additionally, there has been a considerable strengthening of internal processes, data collection and systems (utilising and expanding the functionality of the ISL system) as well as an investment into the human resources needed to provide a quality service at the 'front door' whilst also building increased strategic direction and oversight. This has been a key priority to ensure that there is appropriate response and follow up, suitable tracking is undertaken and that data sources are robust, visible and validated.

Outcomes for 2024/25 are as follows:

Adoption Recruitment Figures 2024/25	Actual Figures	Conversion
Enquiries	349	
Attended Info Event	201	57%
To Allocation Meeting	123	61% (of above) 35% of enquiries
Approved	74	60% (of above) 21% of enquiries

By breaking down outcomes into quarters we can begin to see the positive impact of the marketing strategy which went live end Feb 2025, leading to an increase in initial enquiries that has been sustained into Q1 2025/26.



2.3 Assessment and Approval of Adopters

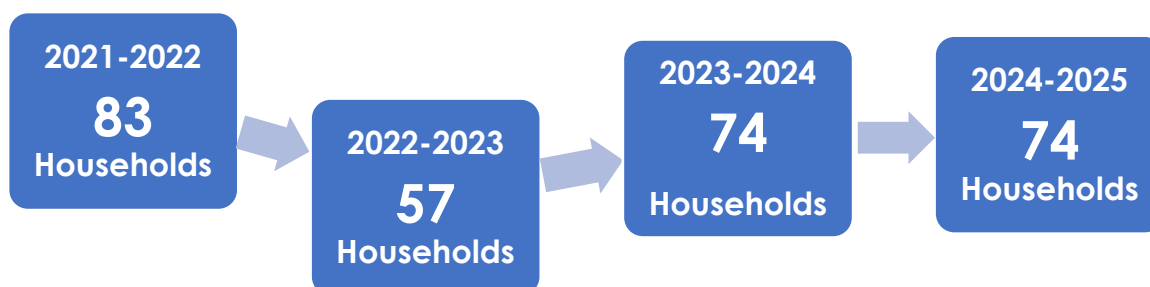
National Picture

The national adoption landscape reveals a persistent gap between the number of children needing adoptive families and the number of approved adopters. Adopter activity is at its lowest for the last 5 years. Over the last three years there have been more placement orders granted than adopter approvals, meaning that children have been entering the adoption process at a higher rate than adopters.

An increasing number of adopters have withdrawn from the adoption process, and the reasons for this are varied. The 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. Additionally, some prospective adopters lack confidence in their suitability, capacity, and capability to be 'good enough' adopters; there is a lack of trust in the process, particularly amongst minoritised groups. Furthermore, variability in support being provided and a fear that the right support will not be available at the right time also plays a factor in adopters' decision making.

Regional Picture

Together4Children have done an excellent job in 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, and this has been consistent in 2024/25, with the same number of households approved for a second year running. Current data provides an indication that this will continue into the coming year, with a likely increase again on adopter approvals. To meet the projected number of children that we expect will have a plan of adoption in 2025/26, we need a **13.5%** increase on the number of households approved in 2024/25, which we feel is an achievable target.



Completing Stage 1 (gathering statutory information) of our adopter assessments within our target has continued to be 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.

	Stage 1	Stage 2
Together4Children	123	143
National Target	60	121
National average	128	147

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 **143** days, which is in line with the previous year, but is also outside of the national target. Factors that can affect this timescale are when additional assessment visits are required, or sometimes the work or holiday commitments of the prospective adopter household or assessing social worker.

Our timescales are under that of the national average however for 2024/25 as provided by the ASGLB.

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 **13** Adopter Preparation Training Events for **85** prospective adopter households. An increase of 5 households from the previous year. 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 really appreciated the guest speakers explaining their journey to us to give us greater insight."

Fantastic, engaging leaders of the course. Very approachable.

In January 2025 we took the 350th booking for Prep Training since the conception of T4C.

Early Permanence

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

It is positive to see that **92%** of households attending preparation training also attend the Early Permanence module.

"At first we were 90% decided about not going down the EP route we still wanted to keep it as an option but after today's session we have found ourselves a lot more open to it and maybe even for it to be our preferred route."

We have delivered **13** Early Permanence Training Events for **78** prospective adopter households.

Brothers and Sisters

We have delivered **13** Adopting Brothers/Sisters workshops for **76** prospective adopter households. A pleasing **89%** of households attending preparation training.

"This session we found very useful as we have been considering just 1 child, but we may now be open to 2 children."



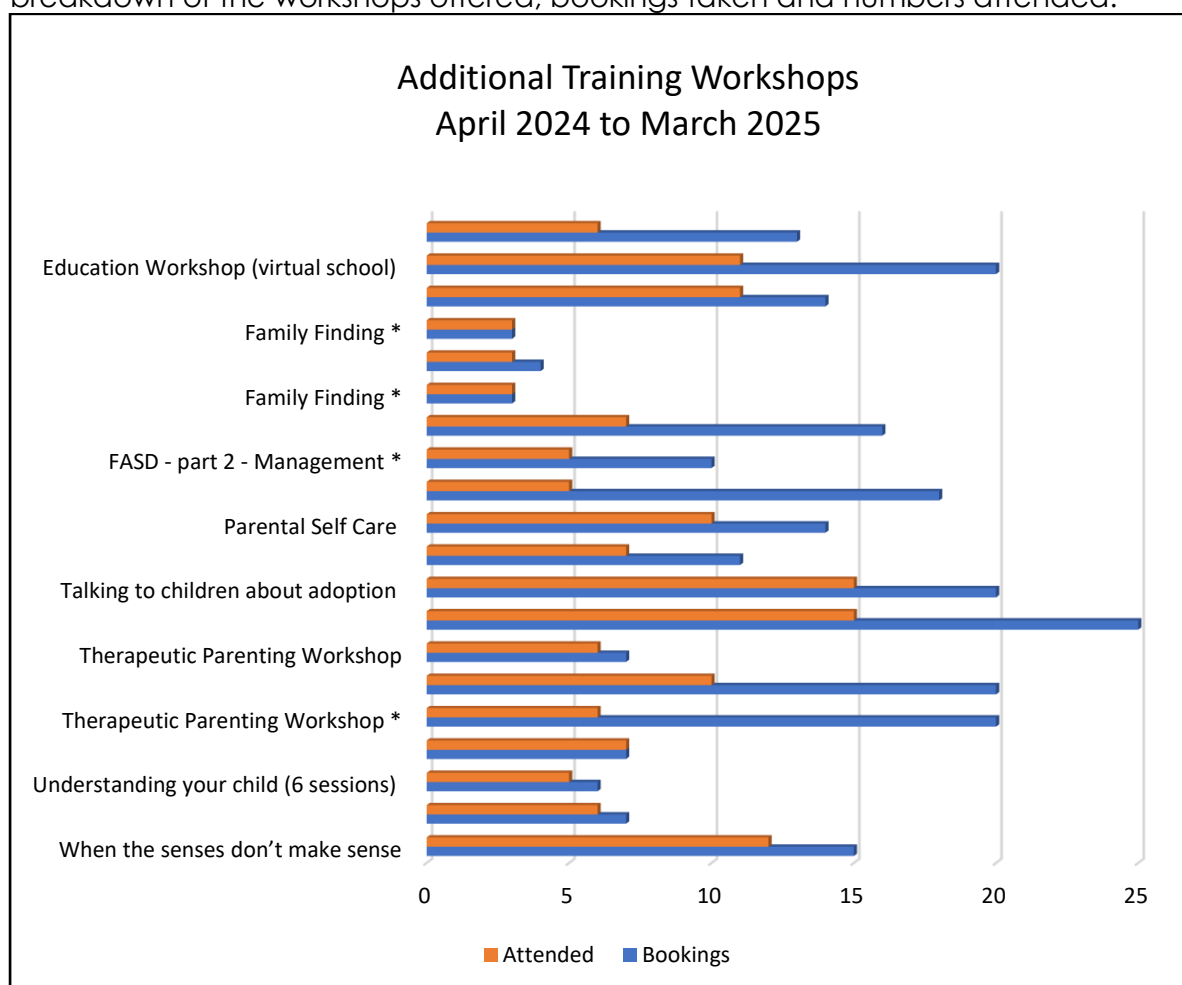
Family & Friends

Over the year, we delivered **12** 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 prospective 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. **190** screens attended with multiple family/friends behind those 190 screens.

"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 held **20** workshops for our adopters during 2024/25 with **153** households (screens) attending across the 20 workshops. Below is a breakdown of the workshops offered, bookings taken and numbers attended.



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 2024-2025, Together4Children received **107** referrals for non-agency adoption provisions, which is an increase of 73% from the previous year. We undertook **38** assessments, which is in line with the previous year. At 31/03/2025 the service had **28** assessments on-going and a further **30** assessments awaiting allocation, which is an increase of 114% as a result of the increase in referrals received. 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 2024-2025				
	Staffs Hub	Joint Hub	Stoke Hub	T4C
Referrals received	41	35	31	107
A16's (Notification of Intent) sent out	21	15	10	46
A16's returned	18	12	7	37
Non-agency Assessments completed	15	16	7	38
Ongoing assessments @ 31/03/2025	12	4	12	28
Waiting for assessment @ 31/03/2025	11	11	8	30

Section 3: Activity & Outcomes for Children in 2024-2025

3.1 Regional Children in Care Trends

During 2024-2025, all our partner local authorities experienced a decrease in their total number of children in care, with us seeing an overall decrease of 2.7%. This is following a trend of increasing numbers in the children in care population over the last 3 - 4 years across the region. Stoke on Trent saw the largest decrease of 7.8%

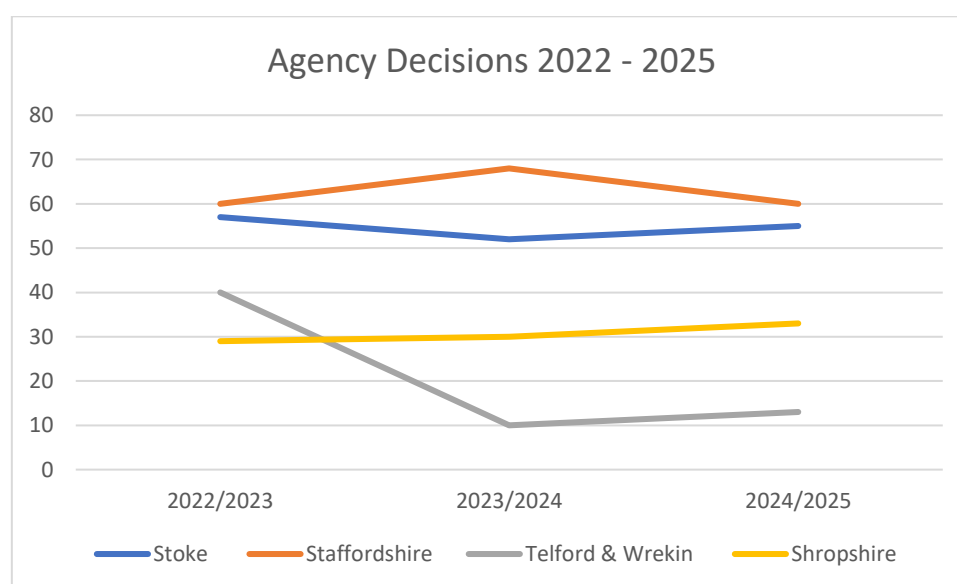
	Total CIC @ 31/03/2024	Total CIC @ 31/03/2025	% +/- Last 12 Months
Shrops	720	717	-0.4%
Staffs	1310	1308	-1.5%
Stoke	1151	1059	-7.8%
T&W	412	410	-0.5%
Total	3593	3494	-2.7%

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 8%

	Total CIC Aged 0-5 @ 31/03/2024	Total CIC Aged 0-5 @ 31/03/2025	% +/- over 12 months
Shrops	189	170	-10.1%
Staffs	307	315	+8%
Stoke	308	261	-15%
T&W	85	72	-15.3%
Total	889	818	-8%

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

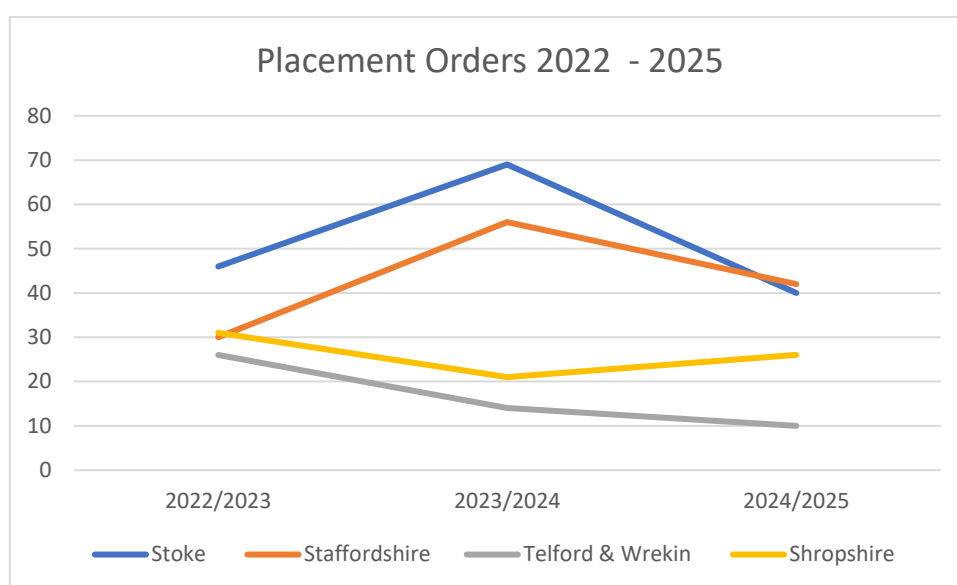
The decision to place a child for adoption is recognised as being one of the most significant decisions about a child's life that a Local Authority makes through the discharging of their statutory children's social work duties. Together4Children supports senior managers in our partner Local Authorities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



During 2024-2025, Together4Children saw an overall increase of only 1 agency decision from the previous year. 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.

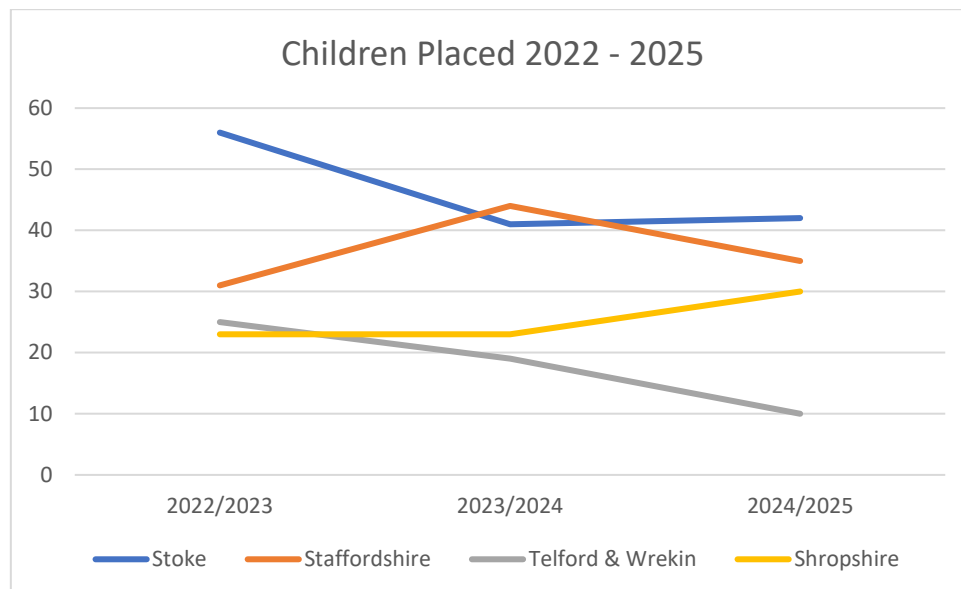
A total of **161** agency decisions were made in 2024-2025 compared to **160** the previous year, a 0.6% increase. Nationally, there was an increase of 4% in children's agency decisions. (DfE's *Children looked after in England including Adoption 2024 data*)

Together4Children saw a decrease of **26%** in the number of Placement Orders granted by our Courts which provide legal authority to Local Authorities to place a child with prospective adopters; from **160** in 2023/24 to **118** in 2024/25. Three of the four partner local authorities saw a decrease, whilst Shropshire saw a slight increase from 21 in 2023/24 to 26 in 2024/25. Nationally, we saw a 4% decrease in Placement Orders granted during 2024-2025.



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 2024-2025 we have found homes for **117** children, an 8.5% decrease from **127** children placed for adoption during 2023-2024, with two of our Partner Local Authorities (Staffordshire and Telford & Wrekin) placing fewer children than the previous year. The year-on-year decrease in children placed in Telford & Wrekin, is a direct correlation to the reduction in children's agency decisions and Placement Orders.



3.4 Where we Found Homes for our Children in 2024-2025

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 **88** children (75% of the total 117 children we placed) with our own Together4Children adopters.

75% of the children we placed for adoption during the year were placed with adoptive families from within 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 2024-2025.

Children Placed With:	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
T4C Adopters*	29	26	26	7	88
Other RAA/VAA Adopters**	1	9	16	3	29
% Children Placed within T4C	97%	74%	62%	70%	75%

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

** Adopters approved by another Regional Adoption Agency or 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 across the locality children's teams 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.

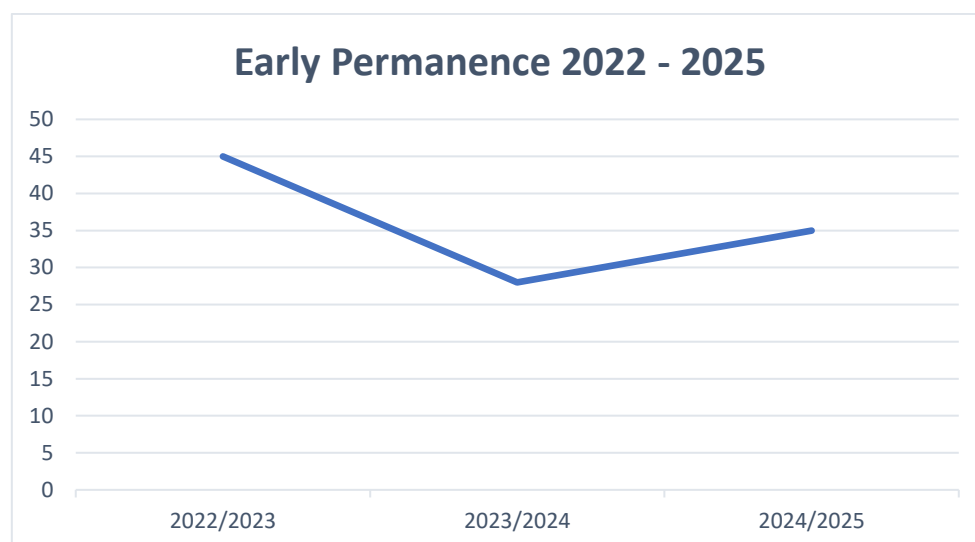


	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
Children Placed in 2023-2024	30	35	42	10	117
Early Permanence	8	11	15	1	35
% Children placed EP	27%	31%	36%	10%	30%

The table above shows the percentage of children placed in an early permanence arrangement, showing that Together4Children placed 30% of children via an early permanence arrangement. This is a pleasing increase of 8% from the previous year.

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 2025-2026 will be to grow the number of adopters able to consider early permanence.

The below graph shows the increase from 2023/2025 in children placed via early permanence arrangements, but we are still not reaching the number from 2022/2023, where we placed 45 children via early permanence. This is indicative of a reduced number of adopters available and able to consider early permanence placements. National data 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	2020-2023	2021-2024	2022 - 2025
Target	426 days	426 days	426 days
England Average	480	475	475
Together4Children	488	495	491
Shropshire	421	465	438
Staffordshire	413	450	476
Stoke-on-Trent	548	568	510
Telford & Wrekin	553	498	539

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 491 days, which is above the target number of days (426) and above the England average (475), though it has come down slightly. Shropshire remain below the England average across three years, and Staffordshire is in line with the England average. Whilst Stoke on Trent are above the target and the England average, they have achieved a reduction in their timeliness during the last 3 years, whilst Telford & Wrekin have seen an increase. It is important to understand the context for this, as often it can be due to the circumstances of individual children.

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 a positive reduction in timeliness during 2024 – 2025, with Shropshire seeing a significant reduction of 207 days and with Stoke on Trent seeing reduction of 115 days. Telford & Wrekin have seen an increase of 80 days, but this is due to individual children that have affected the overall average. 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	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024 - 2025	Trend
Shropshire	440	507	300	↓
Staffordshire	505	468	454	↓
Stoke-on-Trent	463	574	459	↓
Telford & Wrekin	635	464	544	↑

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	2020-2023	2021-2024	2022 - 2025
Target	121 days	121 days	121 days
England Average	197	197	205
Together4Children	221	218	214
Shropshire	176	180	174
Staffordshire	199	202	195
Stoke-on-Trent	211	258	237
Telford & Wrekin	282	234	249

The most recent average timescale measure we have for local authorities in England is **205** days (ASGLB Q4 Data Set 2024-2025). At **214**, the overall timescales for the Together4Children region are longer, but within range of the England average of **205** 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	2022-2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	Trend
Shropshire	179	192	167	↓
Staffordshire	182	209	178	↓
Stoke-on-Trent	148	304	224	↓
Telford & Wrekin	208	254	314	↑

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.

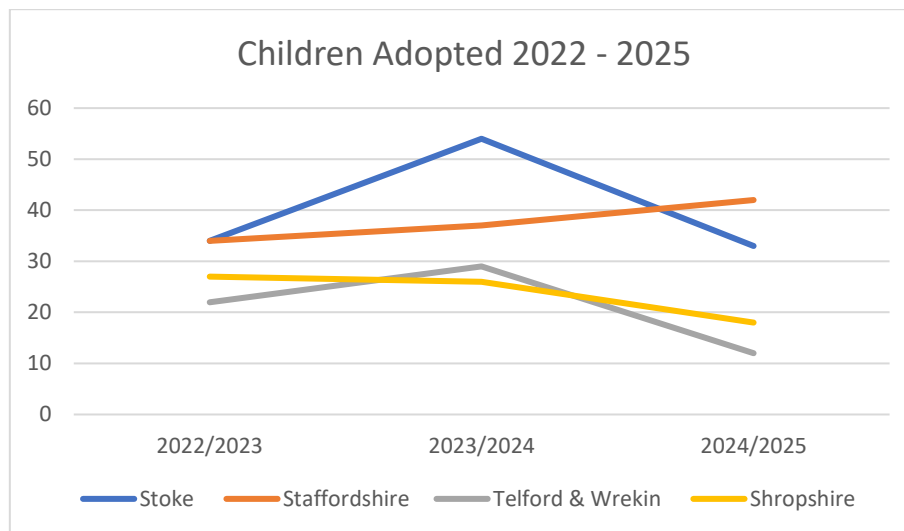
The above table indicates that 3 of the 4 local authorities have seen a positive decrease in timeliness, whilst Telford & Wrekin have seen an increase of 60 days.

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 of children where this has been the case in Telford & Wrekin, which has impacted on their overall timeliness.

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 2024-2025

105 Adoption Orders were granted for children across our region, securing their legal permanence within their new families. This was a decrease of 41 from the previous year. Nationally, there continues to be more Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) granted than Adoption Orders granted, with SGOs accounting for 58% of permanence orders.



The graph above shows that 3 of the 4 local authorities within Together4Children have seen a reduction in the number of adoption orders granted, bar Staffordshire who have continued to see a year-on-year increase since 2022. Of the 105 children adopted, 9 children were from an ethnic minority background, 38 children were part of a sibling group, and 15 children were over 5 years of age.

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 five Regional Adoption Agencies and three 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

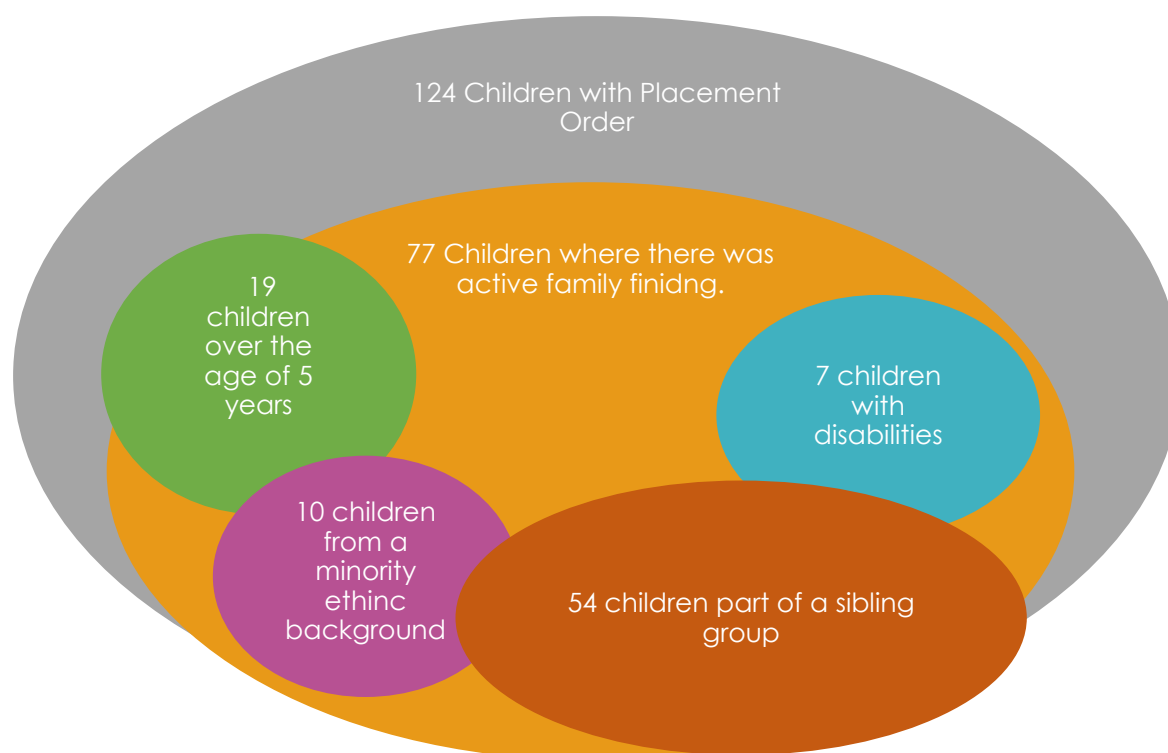
At the end of the current reporting year, there were **180** children across our region where Agency Decision Maker's across our partner local authorities had decided on a plan of adoption.

Of these, **124** 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 **124** children with a Placement Order, who had not yet been matched with their adopters, on the 31 March 2024:

- **16** children had been linked with their prospective family and were progressing to a match.
- **8** children had their plan changed away from adoption and were awaiting their placement order being revoked
- **23** children where family finding had stopped for another reason, such as on-going assessment

This left **77** children for whom we were actively looking for an adoptive family. Of these children, 54 were part of a sibling group, 19 were over the age of 5 years, 10 were from a minority ethnic background and 7 of the children had disabilities. These are known as harder to place characteristics. Together4Children are aspirational for children, but it can take longer to find families for children when there are additional considerations.



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 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 2024-202, 2 placements disrupted affecting 2 children, both of whom were placed with inter – agency adopters. Whilst we would never want children to experience a further change in their care, this represents a relatively low rate of disruption as a region.

T4C Region Placement Disruptions 2023-2024	T4C Adopters	Inter-Agency
No. of Placement Disruptions	0	2

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 2024-2025.

Over the year a total of **47** adoption panels were convened across the partnership. Our adoption panels are fully combined and operate from the central hub of Together4Children, and each panel hears matches and approvals from across the partnership.

Over the year our panels have reviewed and made recommendations upon 117 matches for children with their prospective adopters, 74 adopter household approvals, 4 de-registration and 2 relinquished children. In total, Adoption Panels across the region heard 202 cases in the year 2024 - 2025.

We have three Adoption Panel Advisors and three Independent Panel Chairs who are allocated to panels. We have also appointed 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.

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 three 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 **397** adoption support assessments, working directly with children and their families to identify and review their support needs and plan the right interventions. This is a slight decrease of 12 (3%) from the previous year.

Adoption Support Referrals 2024-2025				
	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
Referrals Allocated	221	75	101	397
Allocated Children	209	90	219	518

Our teams made **506** applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) for the specialist therapeutic interventions required to meet needs identified for adopted children through our assessments. This is nearly a 12% decrease from the previous year, where 572 applications to the ASGSF were made. A small number of these applications (only 2%) were match funded with the local authority.

The table below shows that Staffordshire make nearly 60% of the overall number ASGSF applications.

Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund Referrals 2024-2025				
	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
New Applications	300	69	137	506
Applications (match funded)	9	0	0	9

Our specialist practitioners have supported **123** adopted people to access their adoption records.

Access to Records	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
New referrals	77	10	28	115
Referrals Allocated	98	10	15	123
Intermediary Services				
New referrals	9	0	0	9
Referrals Allocated	8	0	0	8

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.

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.

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

- 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 **2683** 'Post Box' exchanges, facilitating, and supporting the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive parents.

Post Box	Staffs	Stoke	Joint Hub	T4C
Post Box received	1380	866	1412	3658
Post Box exchanged	1111	579	993	2683

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 2024-2025

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 £77,681.

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.

	2024-2025 Budget	2024-2025 Outturn	Variance
Central Permanency Hub	£334,730	£421,110	£77,681

The overspend mainly relates to the costs of the panel chair and members £53,376, as a budget had not originally been set for 2024/25. The remaining overspend of £24,305 relates to in year agreements for specific posts to be recharged out to various partners.

Any expenditure incurred against the T4C Central Permanency Hub is fully recharged to partners based on agreed percentage splits.

Locality Permanency Hubs			
	2024 – 2025 Budget	2024 – 2025 Outturn	Variance
Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin	1,184,260	1,112,751	-71,509
Staffordshire	1,484,200	1,411,843	-72,357
Stoke -on-Trent	865,510	765,977	-99,533
Total	3,533,970	3,290,571	-243,399

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 £243,399 reported for 2024-2025, is mainly due to all partners having significant underspends due to vacancies and maternity leave not being covered.

5.1 Inter-Agency Expenditure

The table below shows an overspend of £121,425 on interagency expenditure through to the end of the financial year.

Expenditure	Budget	Outturn	Variance
Inter-Agency:			
Staffordshire	143,960	260,924	116,964
Stoke-on-Trent	361,730	598,689	236,959
Shropshire	209,970	74,124	-135,846
Telford & Wrekin	270,000	173,348	-96,652
985,660	673,140	1,107,085	121,425

The overspend comes from only Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent, which is offset by underspend for Shropshire and Telford. This is in line with performance data, which shows that both Shropshire and Telford have placed the majority of their children with T4C adopters.

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	-32,051	184,689
Stoke-on-Trent	0	0	0
Shropshire	-31,000	0	31,000
Telford & Wrekin	0	0	0
T4C Total	-247,740	-32,051	215,689

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 2024 – 2025

I. Renewed recruitment strategy

This year we have renewed our recruitment strategy and invested in modernising our enquiry process, to improve the experience of those who enquire with Together4Children. We have already started to see an increase in enquiries as a result of this work.

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

A moving on to adoption policy has been agreed and training across the region has been developed that is delivered on a rolling basis to social workers, foster carers and Independent Reviewing Officers.

III. Improved timeliness for children with a plan of adoption

We have worked hard to reduce the time it takes to match children with their permanent families. We have developed flowcharts that outline the process for matching children with adopters (internal and external to Together4Children) so that we improve consistency. This is ongoing work that we will continue to focus on during 2025 – 2026.

IV. Enhanced a sense of regional identity

We have implemented staff newsletters to improve the sense of shared identity and culture across staff within Together4Children. The newsletters provide an update of what is happening across the region, shares examples of best practice and research updates.

7.0 Key Priorities 2025 – 2026

I. Increase adopter sufficiency

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

- Continue to reach more people interested in adoption with accurate, open and honest information
- Use an evidence-based approach to 'what works' in communicating with people around adoption
- Promote adoption for children with complex needs
- Update the website with increased, relevant information
- Increase social media presence and digital content, including a diverse representation of adoption
- Ensure follow up and tracking of prospective adopters
- Include more adopters in recruitment and communication

II. 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.

III. Learning from disruptions

Though our disruption rate is low, when things do not go as planned, we can learn from this experience to prevent this happening again. It is important that learning from disruptions is improved across the regions for adoption social workers, family finders, children's social workers, panel members and agency decision makers.

IV. 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

08/09/2025

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Performance Leads