



Shropshire Council
Legal and Democratic Services
Shirehall
Abbey Foregate
Shrewsbury
SY2 6ND

Date: Tuesday, 2 November 2021

**Committee:
Cabinet**

Date: Wednesday, 10 November 2021
Time: 10.00 am
Venue: Shrewsbury/Oswestry Room, Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY2 6ND

You are requested to attend the above meeting. The Agenda is attached

Members of the public will be able to access the live stream of the meeting by clicking on the link below and a recording will be made available afterwards

<https://shropshire.gov.uk/CabinetMeeting10November2021>

There will be some access to the meeting room for members of the press and public but this will be limited for health and safety reasons.

If you wish to attend the meeting please e-mail democracy@shropshire.gov.uk to check that a seat will be available for you.

Tim Collard
Interim Assistant Director – Legal and Democratic Services

Members of Cabinet

Lezley Picton (Leader)
Gwilym Butler
Dean Carroll
Rob Gittins
Kirstie Hurst-Knight
Simon Jones
Cecilia Motley
Ian Nellins
Ed Potter

Your Committee Officer:

Amanda Holyoak

Tel: 01743 257714

Email: amanda.holyoak@shropshire.gov.uk



AGENDA

1 Apologies for Absence

2 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

Members are reminded that they must not participate in the discussion or voting on any matter in which they have a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest and should leave the room prior to the commencement of the debate.

3 Minutes (Pages 1 - 6)

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the previous meeting held on Wednesday 20th October 2021

4 Public Question Time

To receive any questions from members of the public, notice of which has been given in accordance with Procedure Rule 14. Deadline for notification is no later than 10:00 AM Monday 8th November 2021

5 Members Question Time

To receive any questions from members of the council. Deadline for notification is not later than Friday 5th November 2021

6 Scrutiny Items

7 Fostering Service Annual Report 1st April 2020 - 31st March 2021 (Pages 7 - 50)

Lead Member – Councillor Kirstie Hurst Knight– Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

Report of Tanya Miles, Executive Director of People – attached

Tel: 01743 255811

8 Adoption Service Annual Report 1st April 2020 - 31st March 2021 (Pages 51 - 86)

Lead Member – Councillor Kirstie Hurst Knight– Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

Report of Tanya Miles, Executive Director of People – attached

Tel: 01743 255811

9 Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) Annual Report (Pages 87 - 98)

Lead Member – Councillor Kirstie Hurst Knight– Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

Report of Tanya Miles, Executive Director of People – attached

Tel: 01743 255811

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Committee and Date

Cabinet

10 November 2021

CABINET

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2021

In the Shrewsbury/Oswestry Room, Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY2 6ND

10.00 - 10.51 am

Responsible Officer: Amanda Holyoak

Email: amanda.holyoak@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743 257714

Present

Councillor Lezley Picton (Chairman)

Councillors Gwilym Butler, Dean Carroll, Rob Gittins, Kirstie Hurst-Knight, Simon Jones, Cecilia Motley, Ian Nellins and Ed Potter

36 Apologies for Absence

Councillor Simon Jones sent apologies for late arrival. There were no other apologies.

37 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None were declared.

38 Minutes

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2021 be approved as a correct record.

39 Public Question Time

Two public questions had been received from Mr Stephen Mulloy, one in relation to learning from customer feedback, and one in relation to the promotion of the Shrewsbury West Sustainable Urban Extension. The full questions and responses provided by the Portfolio Holder for Digital, Data and Insight, and the Deputy Leader are attached to the webpage for the meeting:

[Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday, 20th October, 2021, 10.00 am — Shropshire Council](#)

40 Members Question Time

Member Questions were received from the following Councillors:

Bernie Bentick – in relation to proposed Health Hubs

By way of a supplementary question, Councillor Bentick asked if a preferred site was the Meole retail park located at or near the park and ride car park. In

response Cllr Carroll (on behalf of Cllr Jones) stated that no decisions had been made but as part of the One Public Estate Programme, the Council was actively reviewing all locations in its ownership as were other public sector partners.

David Vasmer – in relation to transport plans and carbon reduction.
By way of supplementary question, Councillor Vasmer asked whether Shropshire Council would review its commitment to the North West Relief Road should further information be made available regarding a reduction in funding from the government if Councils are not being seen to be making a big enough contribution to carbon reduction. In response, Cllr Carroll (on behalf of Cllr Jones) stated that although further detail was still awaited, he would be very disappointed should government retrospectively reduce funding to a scheme that has already been provided funding.

Ruth Houghton, read by Councillor Vasmer – in relation to recruitment issues in the care sector.

By way of supplementary question, Councillor Vasmer asked for an assurance that staff working on Shropshire Council commissioned care work are being paid above the minimum wage and that our health partners are taking appropriate action to maintain their staffing levels and recruitment. This has been highlighted by the temporary closure of the Bishops Castle Community Hospital. In response, Cllr Carroll (on behalf of Cllr Jones) advised that Shropshire's rates to providers are higher than the regional average, whilst rates of pay in 2020/21 were lower, and the Council had previously recommended higher rates of pay to providers and continued to monitor rates of pay. Further work is being carried out on this as part of the 2022/2023 review of uplifts. With regards to the temporary closure of Bishops Castle Community Hospital, Cllr Carroll expressed his disappointment and concern, reminding members that the range of skills required by staff at a community hospital were different to those required in residential and domiciliary care settings.

Roy Aldcroft – in relation to complaints about education and children's services referred to the ombudsman.

A full copy of the questions and the responses provided by Portfolio Holders is attached to the web page for the meeting: [Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday, 20th October, 2021, 10.00 am – Shropshire Council](#)

41 Scrutiny Items

There were no scrutiny items for consideration.

42 Annual Customer Feedback (complaints) Report

Portfolio Holder for Digital/Technology/Data and Insight, Councillor Rob Gittins, presented a report which provided an overview of formal customer feedback to

the Council in 2020/21; covering complaints, compliments and comments as well as MP enquiries and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman investigations. In total, the council received 2,615 cases of formal feedback, including 1,200 complaints, 801 comments and 614 compliments. The report had been considered in detail by the Performance Management Scrutiny in September 2021.

A request was made for an addendum to the report itemising complaints and compliments raised by MPs. The Portfolio Holder said he would look into meeting this request.

It was felt that a 51% increase in compliments was remarkable and a great recognition of the efforts of staff during a difficult period.

Other comments were made with regard to the volume of highways complaints and planning complaints. The Portfolio Holder for Infrastructure reported that over 15,000 potholes had been filled between 19th April and 19th October 2021, with the backlog falling from over 12,000 at the end of last winter to 4,500. This number continued to reduce each month. The Deputy Leader advised that a piece of work was ongoing in light of the pressures the planning service was encountering with an increase in the number of applications.

RESOLVED

To note recommendations and actions in the Annual Customer Feedback Report to deliver robust customer feedback performance.

43 Business Rate Relief and Council Tax Discretionary Discount Policy Review

Portfolio Holder for Resources, Councillor Gwilym Butler, presented a report on the review of the business rate relief and council tax discretionary discount policy which has previously been reviewed every three years.

Members were advised that the continuation of the existing rate relief policy for a further twelve months will provide certainty to businesses and enable a full review to take place in 2022 when the impact of the pandemic may be better understood.

RESOLVED

To continue with the existing Business Rate Relief and Council Tax Discretionary Discount Policy for 2022-23 with a review of the policy in 2022.

44 **Discretionary Housing Payment Policy Review**

Portfolio Holder for Resources, Councillor Gwilym Butler, presented a report on the annual Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) Grant from central Government. Members noted that the Council policy was last reviewed in 2015.

Due to the uncertainty as a result of the pandemic, it was recommended that the policy remain as it is, with a commitment being made to review the policy every three years.

Members were urged to promote the discretionary housing payment scheme moving forward.

RESOLVED

To approve the DHP policy with a commitment to review the policy to be undertaken every three years.

45 **Annual Health & Safety Performance - 2020/2021**

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the Deputy Portfolio Holder for Resources, Councillor Jeff Anderson, was taking up the role of Health and Safety Champion for Shropshire Council following the work he has been carrying out since the elections in May.

Councillor Anderson presented a report on the Annual Health and Safety Performance 2020/2021 which detailed the key health and safety challenges for the Council, progress on last year's Annual Report and identifies key priorities for 2021/22.

Thanks were given to the Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager, Carol Fox and her team for their hard work over the last twelve months.

A query was raised regarding a possible review of the Council's policy on working from home with regards to equal pay for those unable to do so. Members were advised that any arrangements for additional pay would form part of the budget process and could be looked into further following the outcome of the pay review being discussed by the Unions.

RESOLVED

To accept the contents of the report; particularly noting:

- Good progress has been made during 2020/2021 on managing health and safety across the Council.

- Reportable employee accidents to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) have decreased and minor accidents have also decreased compared to last year's figures.
- Service Areas and the Health & Safety Team work well together.
- The Council continues to maintain a good relationship with the HSE.

To agree the Key Actions for 2021/2022

The key actions for Shropshire Council are:

- The Health & Safety Team to continue with the ongoing work involved with the Covid recovery
- Key actions from 2020/2021 have therefore been extended into 2021/2022 to include:
 - The Health and Safety Team to work with Service Areas to produce and implement Health & Safety management systems including policies, procedures and arrangements
 - Continual development of external contracts with associated Service Level Agreements (SLA) in place.
 - To fulfil contractual monitoring and support to Academies and customers under Service Level Agreements
 - To engage with Service Areas to ensure that health and safety compliance is in place and to review Self-Monitoring Checklist to ensure roll out to Premise and Team Managers.
 - Raise awareness of workstation assessments in particular agile working brought about by Covid and which will form part of the Council's working practices going forward.
 - Rollout of new workstation Healthy Working system.
 - To continue to implement the Wellbeing Plan and facilitate the three themes of Be Active, Be Minded and Be Informed by continuing staff wellbeing events throughout the year.
 - Support 'Leap into Learning' development for e-learning health and safety awareness courses across service areas.
 - Revised and simplified auditing plan for schools to enable more schools to be visited annually going forward.

46 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children National Transfer Scheme

Portfolio Holder for Children and Education, Councillor Kirstie Hurst-Knight, presented a report which provided an overview of the duties of Shropshire Council towards unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; how children and young people become the responsibility of Shropshire Council; how they are supported and how this is funded.

Members noted the important role of Shropshire Council to be a good corporate parent.

Members further noted that we are now in cycle six and should the scheme be adopted, a further six young people would be transferred into Shropshire. This is in addition to the 20 unaccompanied asylum-seekers under the age of 18 who are currently being looked after and 37 unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers ages 18-25.

RESOLVED

To support the work of the Children’s Social Care and Safeguarding Service in fulfilling the Council’s statutory duties and the requirements of the National Transfer Scheme.

To consider what other services or functions of the Council and partner agencies could contribute or assist in settling unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Shropshire, for example offering a secure base to be cared for, participation in activities, integration into local communities and with other young people and opportunities as care leavers for employment or training and suitable housing.

Signed (Chairman)

Date:



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Cabinet
10 November 2021

<u>Item</u>
<u>Public</u>

Fostering Service Annual Report 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2021

**Responsible
Officer**

Tanya Miles

e-mail: Tanya.miles@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743
255811

1. Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the activity, data and performance of Shropshire Council's Fostering Services from the 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. This report is for information and no decisions are required. The full annual report is attached at Appendix 1.

2. Executive Summary

Fostering services are a regulated activity provided by either a Local Authority or an Independent Fostering Agency. The service is regulated under The Children Act 1989 & 2004; Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.

In line with the increase in children looked after by Shropshire Council, there has been a significant increase in work for the fostering service, especially from a connected carer perspective.

Despite the increase in work, the service has succeeded in recruiting more mainstream foster carers to provide care for children looked after in comparison to last year. However, there were 13 resignations from mainstream households, resulting in no net gain in placement capacity.

Covid 19 has impacted on the delivery of fostering services. The flexibilities contained in 'The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2020' have been fully utilised to ensure the continuation of statutory services.

Placement stability and permanency for children looked after continues to be a key focus of activity. During this episode, there have been 12 Special Guardianship orders granted for children looked after and a further 9 children permanently matched with their foster carers. Wrap

around support is used to support vulnerable placements to prevent a further disruption for children.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet is requested to consider the information in this report and confirm its support for the work of Shropshire's Fostering Services as set out in the Annual Report in fulfilling the Council's statutory and regulatory requirements.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

4.1 Risk Management

Children and young people who are looked after by the local authority should wherever possible be cared for in a family-based setting. In the event of this not being possible within a connected carer arrangement with people already known to the child, it should be with mainstream foster carers. It is imperative there is sufficient focus on the growth of fostering as a resource to provide suitable and safe placements for children looked after. The risk is, if there is not sufficient focus on the growth of fostering services, we will be unable to provide sufficient mainstream foster placements.

Whilst a high proportion of children looked after are being cared for in Shropshire placements, there is a growing number of children and young people placed in Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements. The risk is, if there is not sufficient focus on the growth of fostering services, we will continue to see high numbers of children placed in IFA placements.

There are potentially risks arising from children and young people feeling alienated or isolated when they are placed at a distance from their birth family, education placement, social and leisure activities, we need to do all we can to place child and young people in local placements.

4.2 Human Rights

Children and young people have a right to be safe and to feel safe. If this can't be achieved withing their birth family, as a local authority and statutory body, we need to provide high quality foster placements so children can be safely cared for and safeguarded from further harm

Foster carers have the right to receive a good service from their fostering provider, this includes the provision of timely assessments, robust support and training, access to independent support and advocacy and

where appropriate help and assistance for them to secure permanence for the children they are caring for.

4.3 Equalities

All children and young people requiring a foster placement need foster carers who can support their access to health services, educational placements and support their ongoing relationships with birth family members and peers.

Connected carers are entitled to the same level of service provision as mainstream foster carers, their support needs are often different, however there needs to be flexibility in the system to be able to respond to the different needs of all carers.

Shropshire is a provider of regulated fostering services, there is the requirement to legally respond to Shropshire residents to secure permanence orders for children not looked after by Shropshire council and to monitor and oversee private fostering arrangements for all children under 16 living in Shropshire and under 18 should a child have a disability.

4.4 Community

Children and young people should have the opportunity to remain in their local community, recruitment to fostering will always be targeted to those living in Shropshire and in the immediate surrounding areas.

Shropshire Foster Carer Association has responsibility for the peer support of foster carers, they organise local events targeted at the community of foster carers.

Mockingbird (detailed in the report) will be a key focus of activity for the coming year, the purpose of Mockingbird is focused on a community response to fostering.

4.5 Consultation

The Fostering Service consulted widely with carers on the introduction of the new fee and allowance policy introduced in March 2020.

Young people are always consulted in making their care plans and whilst the children in care group (CiC) has been seriously disrupted through Covid, low level activity and consultation has continued.

5. Financial Implications

There are no new financial considerations contained in the report. The placement budget which includes spend on fostering placements is closely

monitored by our finance business partner and also through our internal placement monitoring panels.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

Not applicable

7. Background

7.1 Remit of the fostering service

The Fostering Service is a regulated activity, the remit is for the recruitment, assessment and support of mainstream and connected person fostering households. All foster carers require the approval of the Agency Decision Maker following a recommendation from fostering panel on their suitability to foster.

Regulated activity comprises of key components; annual foster carer review or sooner where there are concerns, supervision and support visits, frequency determined by the individual needs of the carer, unannounced visits, regular renewal of DBS and medical checks, completion of personal development plans and monitoring of up-to-date training.

In addition to foster carers who directly care for children looked after, as a statutory service, there is also a duty to work with private fostering and members of the public seeking a special guardianship order for a child in their care.

7.2 Service Growth

There has, in line with the growth in numbers of children looked after been significant growth in activity for the fostering service, this is particularly evident in the growth of the number of connected carer viability assessments and approvals. Connected carers are usually grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings of close friends where often there is a level of disfunction in the family dynamic which has necessitated the involvement of children's services. These placements require high levels of support, supervision and oversight. The judiciary will always be involved in connected carer placements, as a result, this work takes priority over the approval and support of mainstream fostering.

To ensure we also continue to grow our mainstream foster carer resource, the service is always striving to recruit more carers by using innovative marketing campaigns and by ensuring we are competitive with independent fostering agency agencies with competitive pay rates, robust training packages and regular support and supervision.

7.3 National Context

Nationally, there has been growth in the numbers of children looked after, initial projections were that most Local Authorities would see an increase of around 10% in numbers. In direct contrast, there is a national shortage of foster carers, most local authorities are seeing a decrease in fostering enquiry rates, hence the need to be a competitor in the fostering recruitment market.

7.4 Future Service Developments

The service is continuing to address the challenges of Covid 19. The most significant changes have been the move to virtual fostering panels and in the early stages of the pandemic virtual working practices. Whilst the service has now moved back to face-to-face work, virtual fostering panels have proved successful and whilst some move may be made to the format of these in the future, the service is likely to continue to use them.

Mockingbird is an area for future development, this work is being undertaken as part of our regional Together 4 Children permanency partnership.

It is likely the growth in the number of children looked after will continue to present challenges in ensuring we are able to continue to recruit new carers for Shropshire children, this alongside the need to manage the growth in connected carers will be a key focus of activity.

8. Additional Information

There is no additional information to be considered.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. No decision is required from Cabinet, but it is requested that the information is noted

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

N/A

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Cllr Kirstie Hurst-Knight

Local Member

All members

Appendices

[Please list the titles of Appendices and provide a link to the Sharepoint site where the document is located]

1. Fostering Service Annual Report 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021



Children's Placement Service Annual Report

June 2021

Team Managers: Karen Scardifield and Karen Pountney

Service Manager: Lisa Preston

1. Introduction

Children's Placement Service (CPS) continues to be a busy service with a number of complex situations and tasks. We have continued to maintain our core of skilled and dedicated foster carers and an equally dedicated and skilled team of social workers. The combination of these two factors continues to provide excellent outcomes for our looked after children that are placed with our foster carers. There have also been some continued challenges during this period, most notably the rise in the connected carer assessments when cases are subject to the scrutiny of the court. Whilst the team continues to rise to this challenge, this can detract from the recruitment and assessment of mainstream foster carers.

The purpose of this report is to provide further context to this but also to give an overview of activity, updates to practice initiatives such as permanence forum and placement stability forum and key areas for development in the coming year, such as the review of our fee and allowance scheme.

2. Overview of Activity of CPS

Shropshire's Children's Placement Service undertake a wide range of roles to support placements for Looked after Children. The service is regulated under The Children Act 1989 & 2004; Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.

The main aim of the service is to provide a comprehensive range of foster placements with approved foster carers to meet the needs of children who are looked after by the local authority and for whom it has been identified, as part of their Care Plan, that a foster placement is required to meet their needs.

The service aims to provide foster placements that offer a safe environment for children placed and where children have the opportunity to express their wishes and feelings, where they are listened to and their views respected and where they are aware of the diversity of the community of which they are a part.

To achieve this, the service aims to recruit, assess, train, support and supervise foster carers who have the appropriate skills or experience to provide quality placements. All staff and foster carers strive to promote best practice by ensuring the service meets, and in some cases even exceed, national minimum standards.

The pool of Shropshire foster carers continues to include placements for a wide range of children and young people, from pre-adoption babies, through to the more challenging teenagers, and respite carers and placements specifically for children with disabilities called Family Based Shared Care.

The service works in partnership with foster carers, parents and other relevant agencies and professionals, to meet the educational, health, emotional, social and other assessed needs of the children placed as identified in their Care Plans, Health Care Plans, Personal Education Plans and any other relevant Children's Plans.

In addition to assessing and supporting in house mainstream foster carers, the service also assess Family and Friends connected person's foster carers. In order to do this, work is timetabled and completed within Public Law Outline timescales and court directions.

The service also assesses potential Special Guardians and produces Special Guardianship reports for Looked after Children and Non-Looked after Children. As well as deal with private fostering referrals and assessments.

Shropshire Foster Carer Association have continued to be impacted by COVID on their ability to facilitate the events that bring foster carers together. SFCA have followed relevant COVID guidance which has been a challenge as they have missed not being able to provide these services and connection for their fellow foster carers but have made the decisions based on the safety of all. However, the SFCA have continued to keep in contact virtually with the foster carers and continued with their buddy scheme.

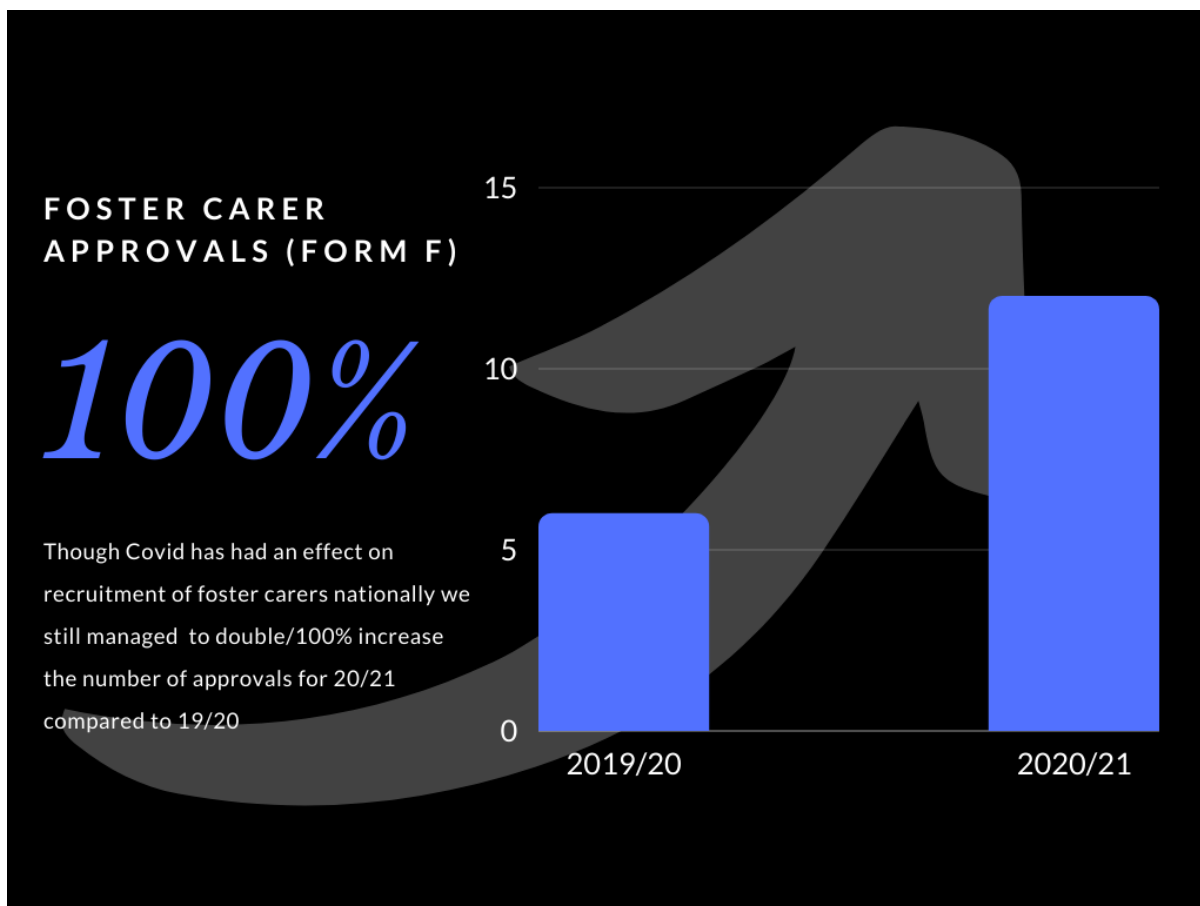
During this time the Adoption and Childrens (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 first set of amendment to offer flexibility expired on 25th September 2020. Flexibilities were extended till 30th September 2021 in regards to medical reports and virtual visits but in reality these have not offered any assistance following 25th Sept 2020.

3. In House Foster Carer assessments & Recruitment

There have been ongoing developments to the fostering recruitment process over the last 12 months. Most of these have been driven by the impact of Covid and involving finding new and innovative ways to engage with our public.

A more digital approach to information events and also recruitment in general has seen approvals increase by 100% compared to the previous year.

Our marketing & Recruitment Manger has been in post for over a year and the new digital medias have been employed, the access-points to engage with the prospective adopters and increased child specific/step down campaigns developed have now become the bedrock of our practice.

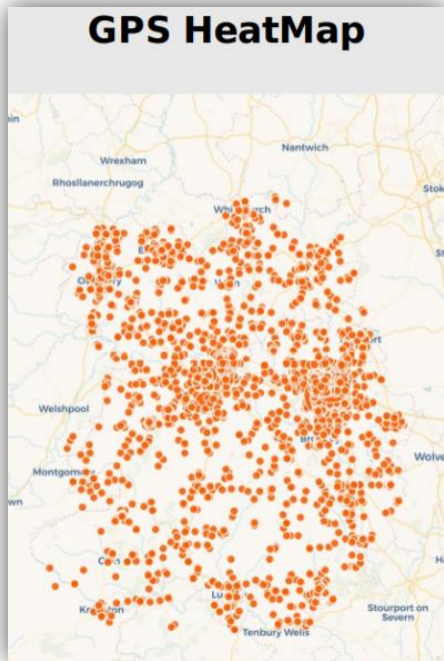


3.1 Multi point for entry

To maximise recruitment and engagement last year we introduced several points of access to start the fostering process to facilitate the historic single point of entry which had been via the Freephone Telephone line/screening call. This included launching successful monthly evening Information Session and monthly day-time coffee-shop drop-ins however in-light of the pandemic we have moved these events to a digital platform offering a virtual information event and 'drop-ins' via social media platforms.

3.2 Geographic recruitment

An initial zeitgeist heat mapping exercise of fostering enquiries 2 years ago showed perhaps an over reliance on the west and centre of the region for fostering recruitment. Over the last 12 months we have worked hard to try and maximise engagement across the whole of the region. Through including marketing techniques/coding, we now have superior data that evidences that our message is more receptive across the Shire as the map below shows. He we can see all GPS references/areas where a recent on-line campaign received a click-through.



3.3 Campaign

We continued to move away from sporadic ad-hoc marketing activity towards one centralised theme and campaign that runs for longer periods across the year.

Our main campaign #GiveMe5 was extended slightly again due to Covid but our 'Amazing carer'. Campaign launched later in the year and in place for the 2021/22 year

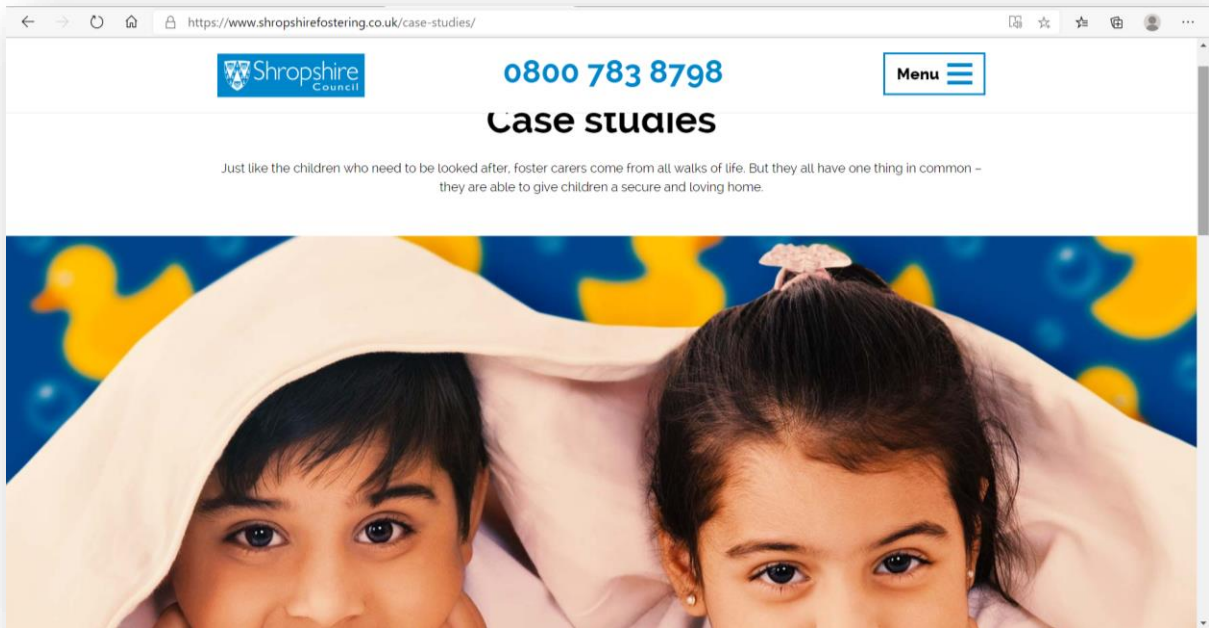
The aims around this campaign aimed to:

- Profile the positive and fun aspects of fostering
- Position of foster carers as 'doing an amazing job'
- Look to reduce the recruitment age of our foster carers by using a new/less corporate vocabulary in our adverts, type font and imagery.



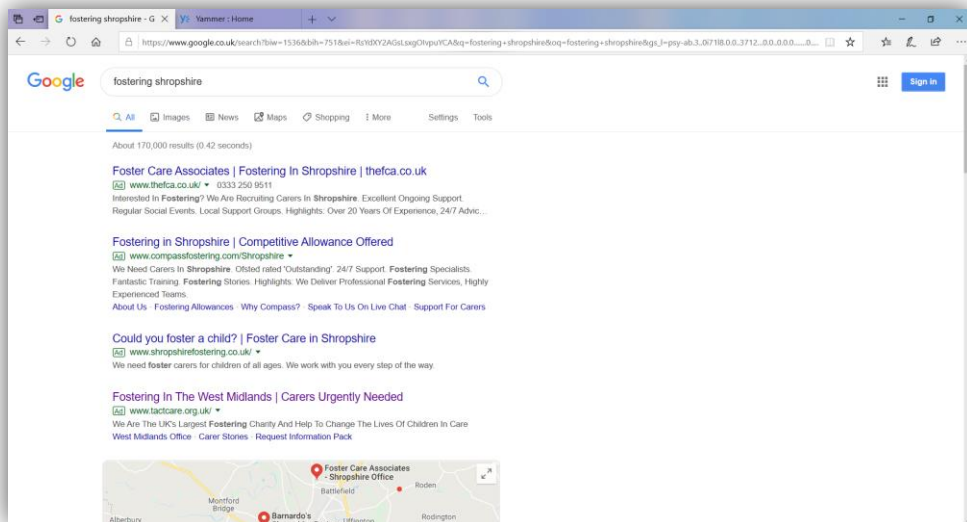
At the same time as undertaking the new campaign we rebranded Shropshire Fostering with a new logo that sits closer to that of Shropshire Council but looks to maintain an independence and vibrant pallet. The website was also overhauled in line with the new branding and new digital assets and literature created





Digital

As we mentioned, digital marketing is taking a bigger than ever role in our activity. We have maintained some pay-per-click marketing to endeavour to appear as high as possible on Google search.



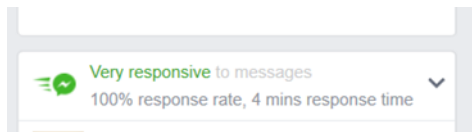
As part of this digital plan social media plays a holistic part. Twitter but more specifically Facebook has been used to really develop micro targeted communications.

Targeted adverts within the Facebook platform utilising geographic targeting, demographic targeting and behavioural targeting (as well as removing groups based on negative keywords) have been utilised. These adverts present themselves also in sister platforms such as Messenger and Instagram. There will be a mix of 'low-interest' and 'high-interest' self-populating enquiry forms, Messenger-click-throughs and also tailored sub-landing pages. This approach makes fostering recruitment more personal, more tailored and more cost effective.

In addition to the paid-for activity within social media, organic posts utilising current trends and news articles (such as Wimbledon and a pop stars supporting fostering in a music video) have been employed to deliver a key recruitment messages and delivered at time appropriate periods (i.e. Start of play at Wimbledon and during the Chart-Show).



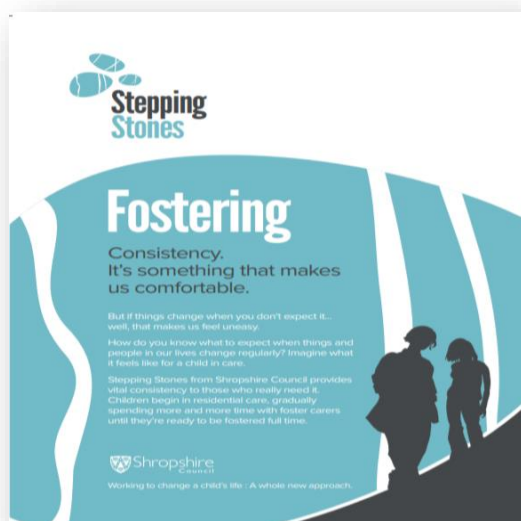
Linked with launching in social media is a need to present the organisation as responsive to messages and encourage enquiries within this app rather than necessary requesting that prospective foster carers leave this app and launch another app to enquire. Our average current response time to enquiries through this medium (regardless of time of day/evening) is just 4 minutes and we aim to maintain this within single figures.



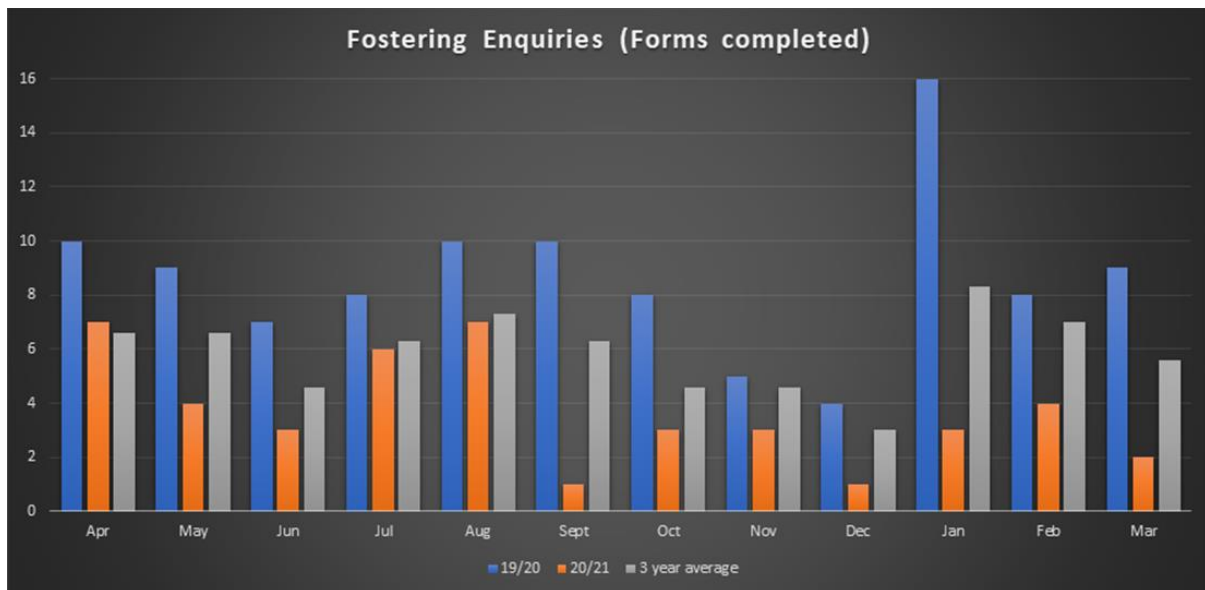
We know that digital platforms (such as Google and Facebook) priorities rich content and video. For this reason, now have a stock of short video commercials in-keeping with the current campaign objectives and recruitment message.

3.5 Specific Campaigns

SBL and Stepping-Stones has been treated separately to the key fostering marketing activity as it is easy for the specific message to become lost or swallowed by the larger fostering message.

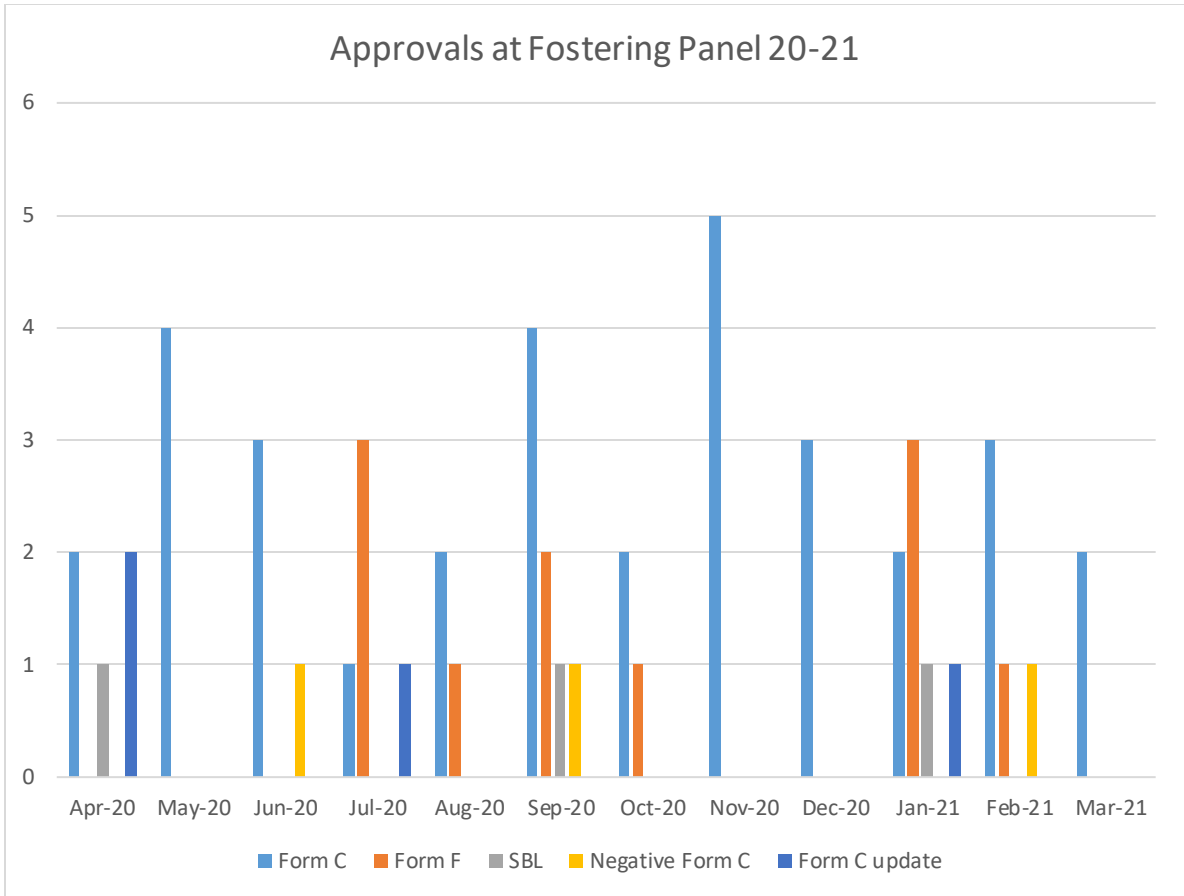


Fostering Enquiries 2020 – 2021:

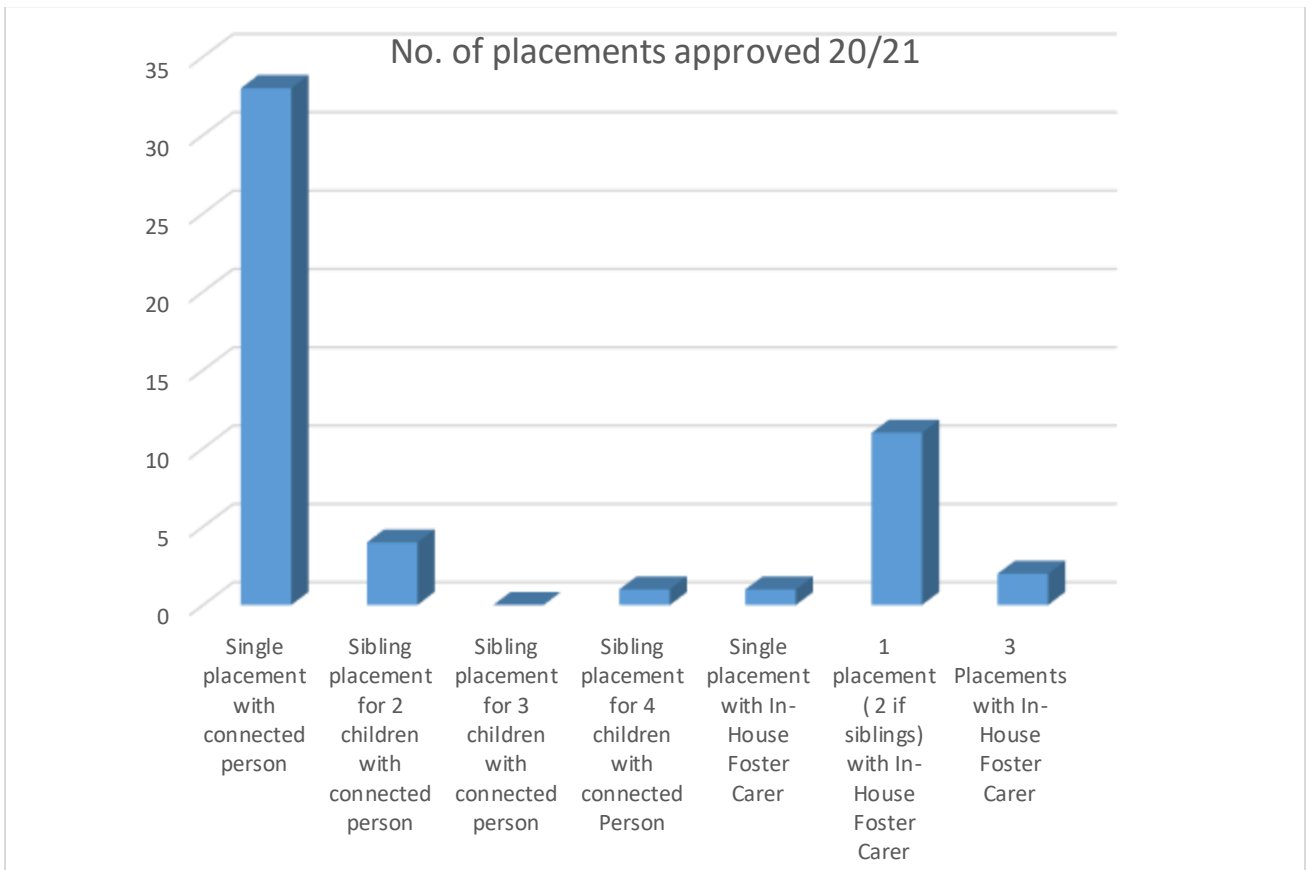


4. Approval Data

11 mainstream Foster Carer households were presented at Fostering Panel during this time compared to 36 Connected Person Foster Carer households and 4 Form C updated assessments which were also presented at panel. This demonstrates the ongoing challenge in being able to use resource to recruit and assess mainstream carers when there is such a high demand for connected person foster carers which is not reducing. The connected person foster carer assessments are often complex and within very tight court timescales and therefore it is inevitable that these are prioritised and often take up the majority of the worker's time. However, this weighting does not assist the services ability to sustain any growth in in house foster carers. The ADM for final approval is Lisa Preston Service Manager-Adoption, Fostering and Residential Services with the Sonya Miller AD acting as ADM in the absence of Lisa Preston.

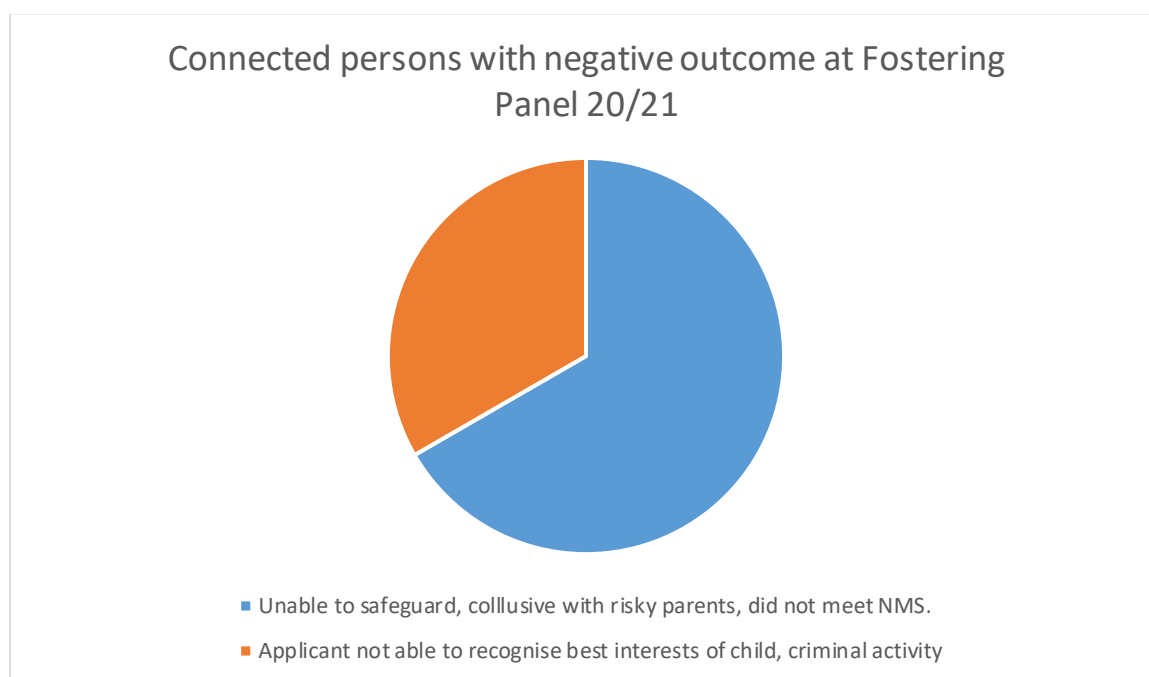


In this period the placements approved in the fostering households were:



This chart shows us the high number of looked after children that have been able to be placed within the wider family due to the assessment of connected persons. This has been in line with the children's care plans and the best interests of the children. In total 45 looked after children were able to be placed with connected person foster carers.

Negative fostering assessments are also required under regulations to be presented to panel if they have entered stage 2. In this period, we have had 3 negative outcome assessments presented to panel.



Through the recruitment process, we endeavour to meet the needs of the service and the needs of the children entering the Looked after Children's system. The needs of the children do change, and we have noticed that the needs and presentations are becoming more complex. However, there is a consistent need for carers for teenagers, sibling groups and disabled children. We alter our recruitment drives and questionnaires to meet the needs of a wide variety of children, but these key areas prioritised. We are also doing this in line with considering carers for our Stepping stones project.

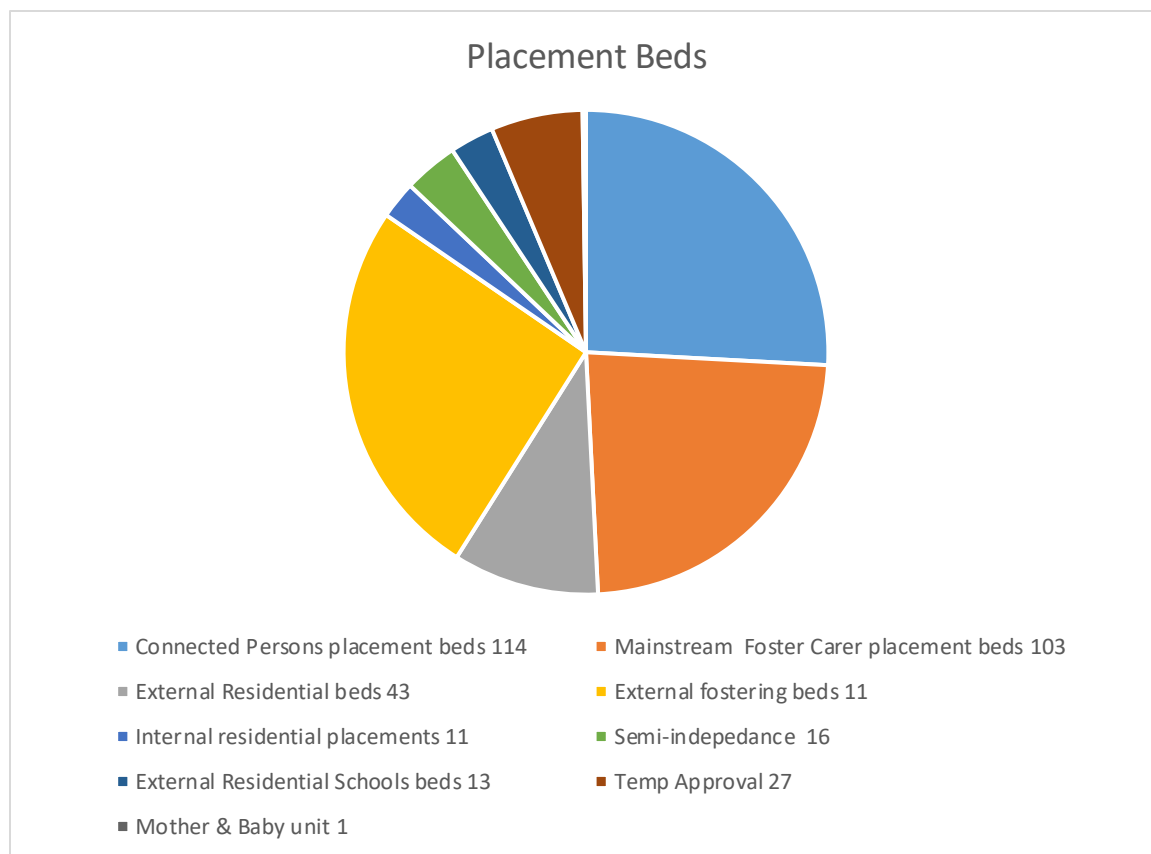
We continue to use social media to increase our reach to people considering being foster carers and have seen an increase in enquiries due to this.

Our Shropshire Foster Carer Association continues to be a driving force in Foster Care development. The SFCA would normally be running several events to facilitate carers to have social and learning opportunities however due to the COVID-19 pandemic this

has not been possible, and this has had an effect on foster carers ability to share peer support and interaction. The SFCA continue to meet regularly with the service management team to contribute to developments and advocate for the carers. The SFCA representatives will also be involved in new projects that are emerging bringing the foster carer voice to the fore.

External Residential is also used where it is not possible to place a child in internal provision. Stepping down a looked after child from residential to foster care is one of the council’s strategies for achieving stable placements and reducing overall service costs and this will continue to be worked on alongside the Stepping Stones project.

There were 160 Fostering Households on the 31st March 2021 (including in house foster carers and Connected Person foster carers). This is divided into 68 mainstream fostering households and 92 connected person households. This overall number did not include 20 connected persons foster carer households which are under Reg 24 temporary approval.



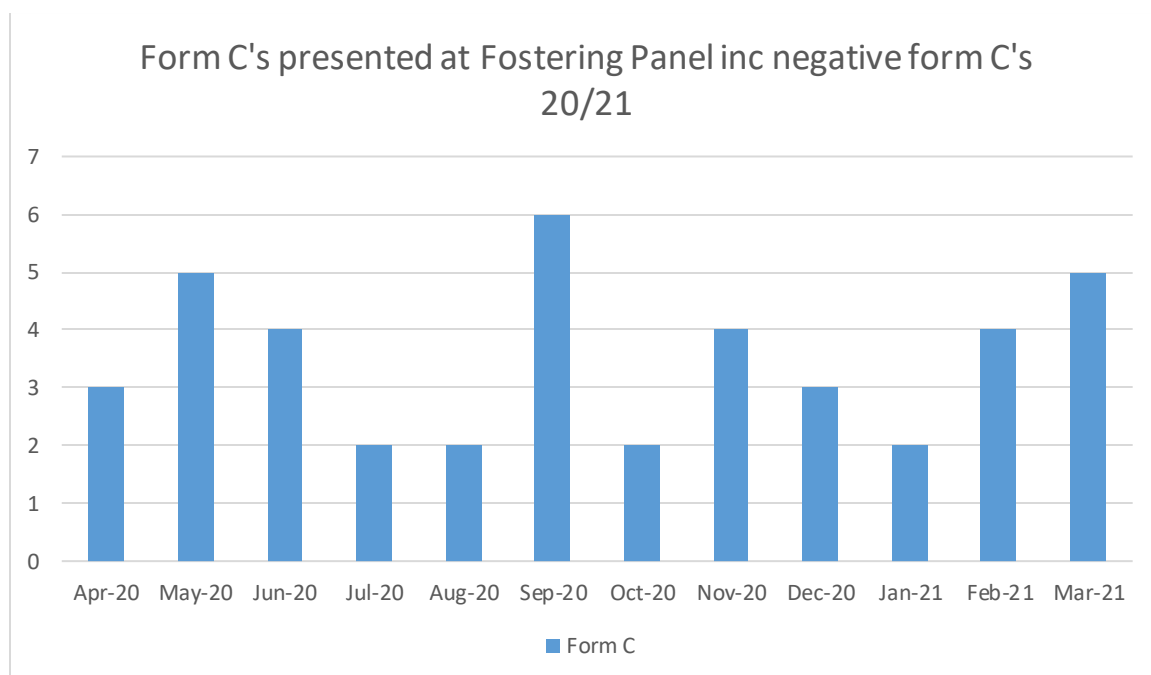
5. Connected Persons Foster Carer Assessments

Prior to the presentation of a Connected Person foster carer household to panel they need to be subject to a viability assessment to ensure that they would meet the basic requirements of fostering regulations. If this is positive, then they will proceed to the full assessment which can last from between 12 weeks to 16 weeks. During this time

a child may be placed with the applicant/s under Temporary Approval, but this cannot last beyond 16 weeks.

The chart below shows that Children's Placement Service have assessed an increasing number of Connected Person Foster Carers throughout the 2020-21 period and continue to experience a high demand for viability assessments and full assessments overall. The number of new connected carer viability requests for this period is 200 which is a 110% increase on last year's number of 95 viability referrals. There continues to be requests for viabilities and assessments for families which are located out of county and sometimes out of the country. The ability to attend to these visits has been affected by COVID restrictions and the need to keep service users and staff members safe and so the use of virtual visits via SKYPE, TEAMS and Whatsapp has been used. Please note that although Connected Persons are family or friends, they are still required to abide by fostering regulations and expectations and to be provided with a supervising social worker. Connected carers are entitled to the same level of support, including financial support as in-house foster carers.

The Regional Connected Carer protocol agreed by the local Family Justice Board members continues to be disregarded by courts. The regionally agreed connected persons protocol which specified appropriate timescales and amounts of people put forward for assessment, was signed up to by the judiciary, all six Local Authorities and CAFCASS. Despite this relaunch, there have continued to be a high number of referrals for connected carer assessments, these are often not in line with the protocol. CPS management team have continued to challenge these on a case by case basis however with a 110% increase in viability referrals it is clear that this is a growing concern.

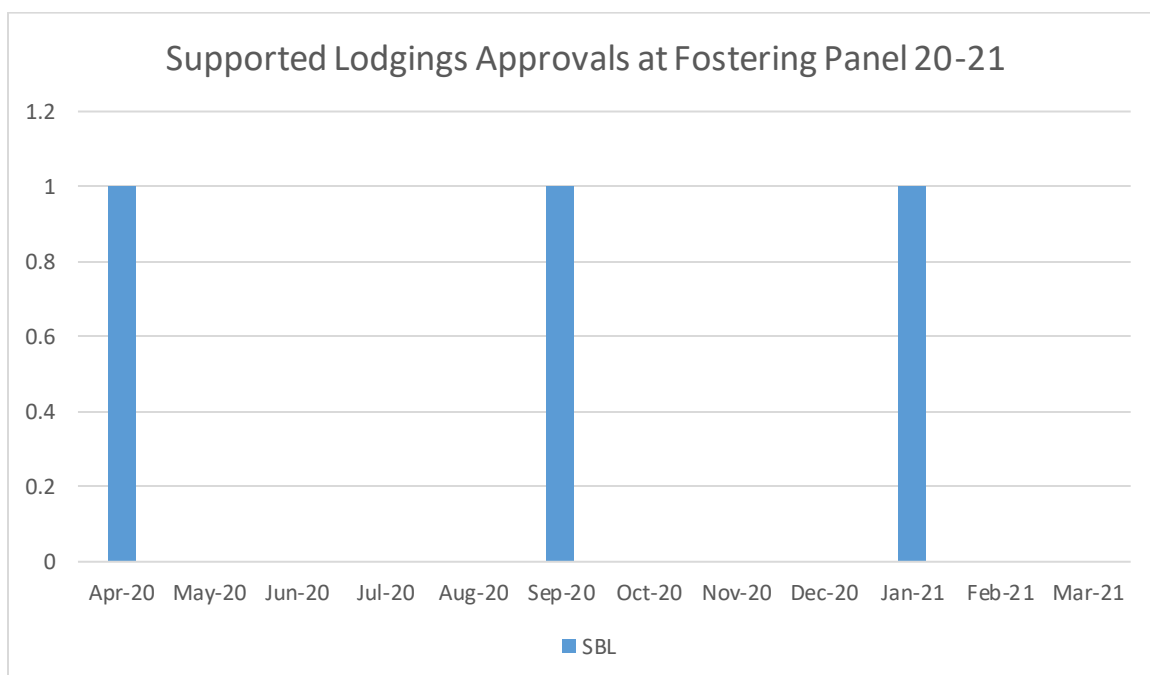


6. Supported Board and Lodgings

Supported lodgings is a nationally recognised type of provision for young people in care and leaving care aged 16+ when those children need support to live independently rather than needing full-time care. Children under age 16 cannot be placed. A large proportion of local authorities in England either provide the service in-house or commission it from the 3rd sector.

This type of provision falls outside both children's and adult's regulatory frameworks, due mainly to the emphasis on "accommodation-based support" rather than "care." It is used as a stepping stone to independence, and only ever when it's in a child's best interests. For some children, it's the right choice such as those who do not wish to live with a foster family or in a residential home. For some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children this can be the right option, but not for all.

During this period 3 households were approved at panel to become SBL providers.



This shows that we have had a lower approval of our supported lodgings providers and this is hoped to increase with an increased awareness in our marketing campaigns.

7. Staying Put:

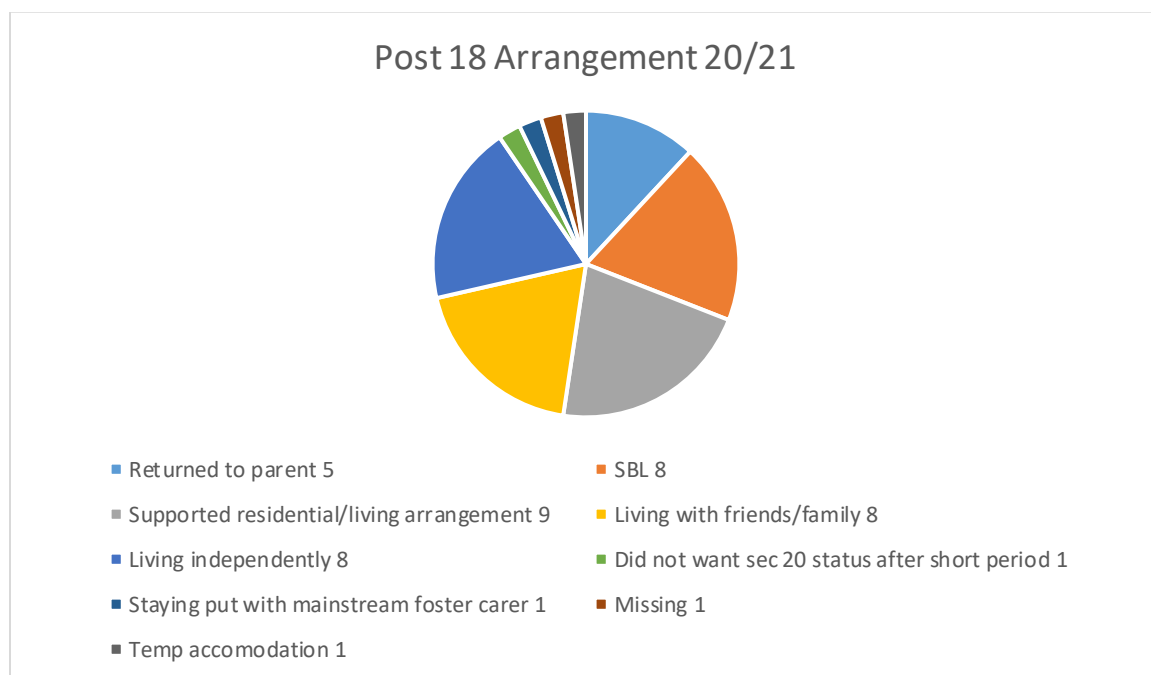
A legal duty on local authorities in England came into force on 13 May 2014, in Part 5 s23CZA5 Welfare of Children (98) of the Children and Families Act 2014.

This requires local authorities in England to facilitate, monitor and support staying put arrangements for fostered young people until they reach the age of 21, where this is what they and their foster carers want unless the local authority considers that the staying put arrangement is not consistent with the welfare of the young person.

A staying put arrangement is not the same as a foster placement. The young person staying put, who must be a former relevant child, is no longer a looked after child. They are a young adult and a care leaver. They are entitled to support as a care leaver and will be allocated a personal advisor who is part of the Leaving Care Team. The foster carer is no longer acting in the capacity of foster carer for that young adult; they are their 'former foster carer'. The foster placement becomes a 'staying put arrangement' and is not governed by fostering services regulations. The aim of Staying Put is that the care leaver will continue to receive support until ready for independence.

The 'former foster carer' offering a staying put arrangement may at the same time be offering foster placements to children who are looked after. Such placements will continue to be subject to provisions of the fostering services regulations. In this circumstance, the former relevant child will, as things stand, require a DBS check as they become a member of the fostering household over the age of 18.

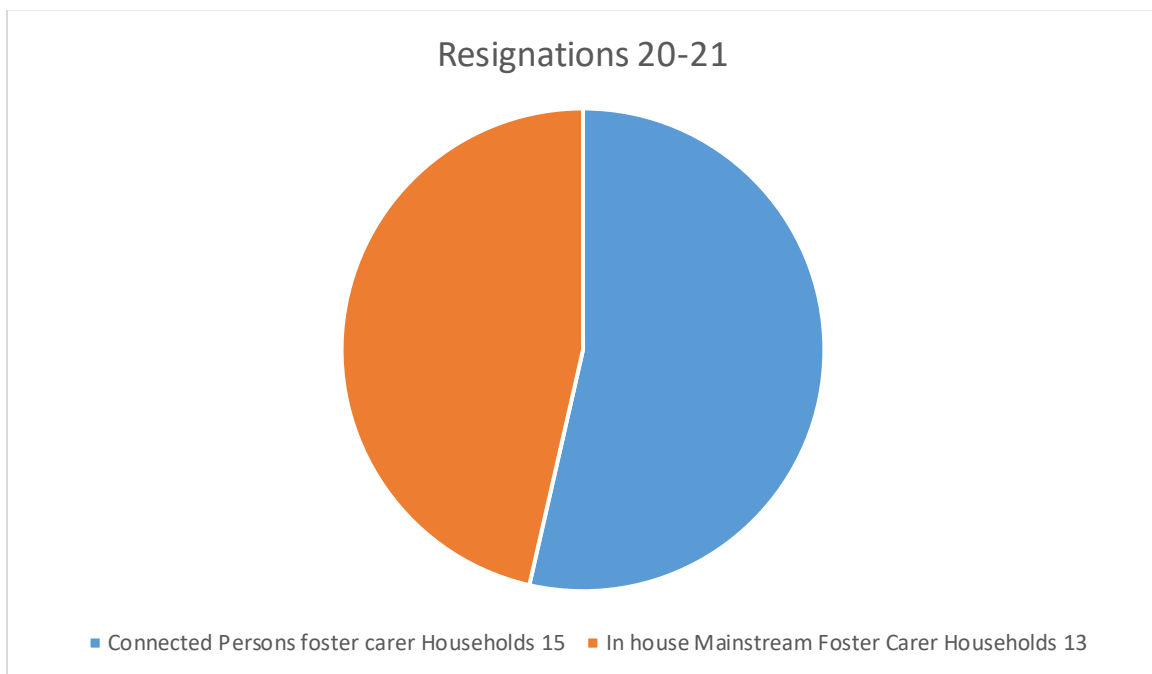
In the year 2020-2021, 42 young people who were looked after turned 18 in this period, 1 of these remained as 'staying put' with their former mainstream foster carers, however 2 remained with their connected carer foster carers under SBL.

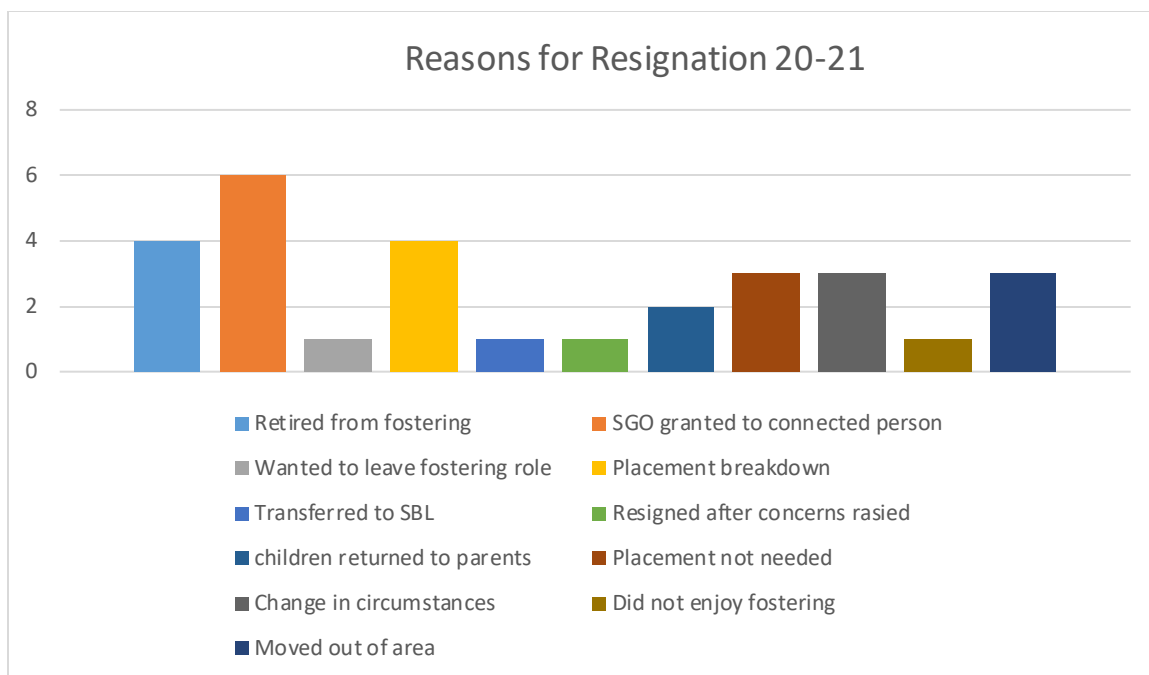


8. Resignations

Resignations from Fostering come from both In House Foster carer and Connected Person Foster carers for a variety of reasons. For some in house carers, they have decided to retire after many good years of fostering, while a minority chose to transfer to Independent Fostering Agencies. The majority of Connected Persons foster carers resign after securing a legal order such as a Special Guardianship orders which offers permanency to the child or children they are caring for if the child or children they are caring for returns home.

Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, we had 28 foster carer households' resignations from 15 Connected Person Households, and 13 In House Foster Carer Households.





9. Foster Carer Annual Review

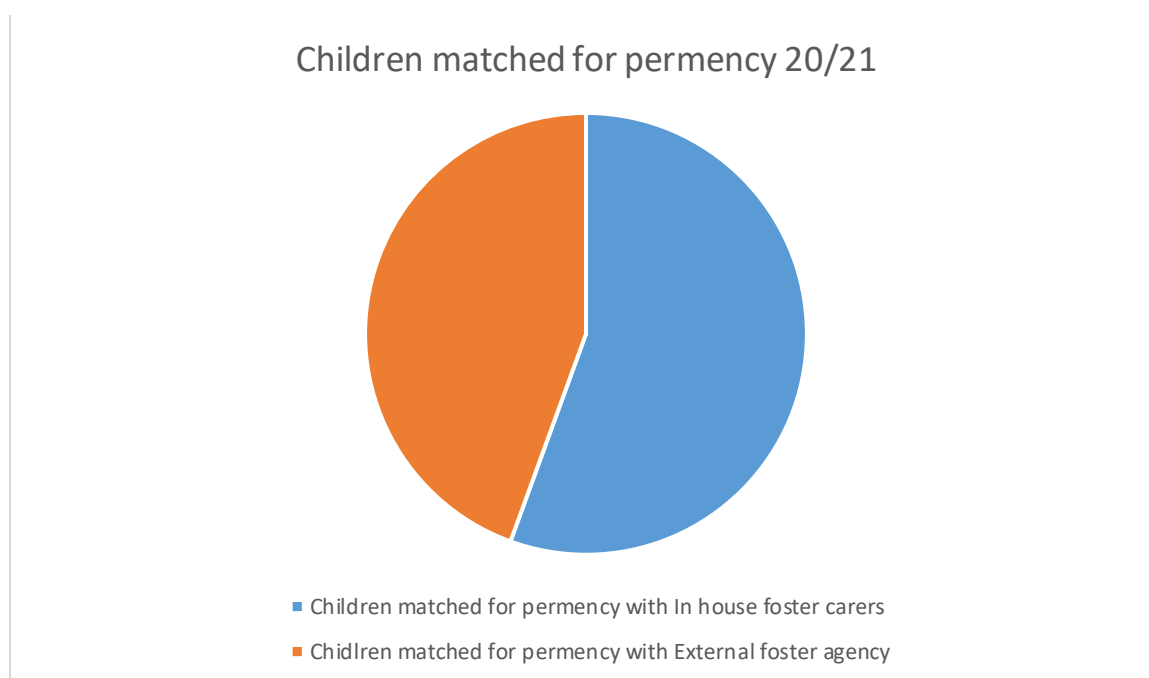
All approved fostering households are required to have an annual review of their suitability as carers within one year of their approval. Thereafter reviews should occur each 12 months or whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary or appropriate to safeguard the welfare of any child who has been placed with that carer, but at intervals of not more than a year.

Children's Placement Service undertook 109 reviews of fostering households between 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. There have been some reviews which took place outside of timescales. The reason for this has been carers ill health, and difficulty in mutually convenient times and arranging times with carers as children have been at home more so during COVID 19. Likewise, reviews have been delayed when carers have experienced family bereavements, not wishing to meet with the service, s.47 investigations and unresolved complaints made by carers. Some reviews have been delayed due to service capacity.

The annual reviews are chaired by the Fostering Team managers, and by an experienced Independent social worker. The majority of annual reviews this year have taken place via telephone calls and virtual Teams meetings. This has been to minimise face to face meetings due to COVID 19 global pandemic.

10. Matching

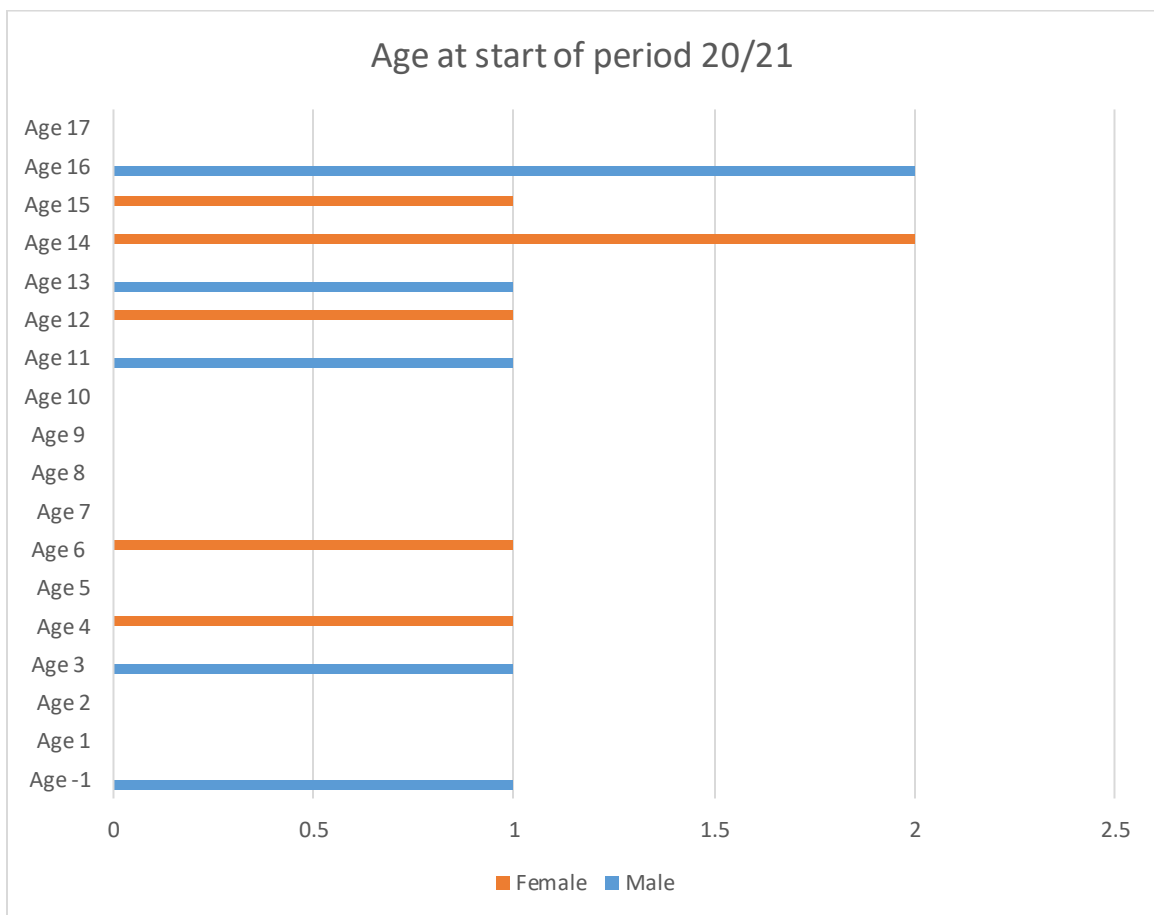
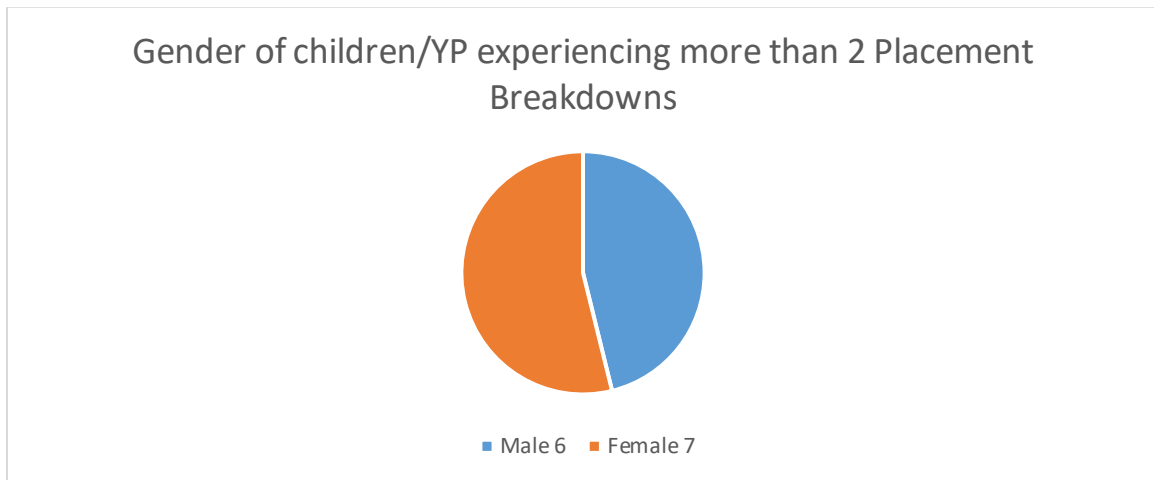
In this period there were 9 children matched with their carers. Out of these 5 children were matched with in house foster carers, and 4 children were matched with external foster carers which continues to demonstrate the commitment to the permanency of the children in local authority care which is in line with our Permanence policy and demonstrates the foster carers commitment to the children in their care.



11. Placement moves

During this period, there were 13 children who had experienced more than 2 placement moves. Children who experienced 2 placement moves may have been moved from an emergency placement to a short/long term placement, moved from a foster care placement to a family member or moved from a short-term placement to a

long term or permanence option therefore this data is only covering those children who have experienced more than 2 moves.



The data from this period does not lead us to any solid conclusions around age and placement disruption and has shown that there is little evidence that gender plays a part on placement disruption. However, after age 14 there appears to be an increase in disruption in permanence.

12. Private Fostering

Private Fostering is an arrangement made for a child under the age of 16, or under 18 if a child has a disability, to be cared for by someone other than a close relative for 28 days or more. Close relatives include brothers, sisters (whether of full blood, half blood or marriage) stepparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

A child is not privately fostered if the person caring for him has done so for fewer than 28 days and does not intend to do so for longer than that. Privately Fostered children are not deemed to be 'looked after' and are not necessarily a child in need.

In Shropshire, we have a designated lead social worker for Private Fostering who is situated in the Children's Placement Service.

Referrals are received through the Initial Contact Team in the first instance where the receiving manager will decide, if based on known history, and any additional presenting information whether the young person may be a child in need and as such require a social work assessment of the child's needs. The case will also be allocated to a fostering social worker to undertake an assessment of the carer. If no social work assessment is required, the referral will be directly transferred to the Children's Placement Service to begin a Private Fostering report. A social worker will undertake the initial assessment visit within 7 working days. This report is then presented to Shropshire's Suitability Forum within 21 days of the notification being received

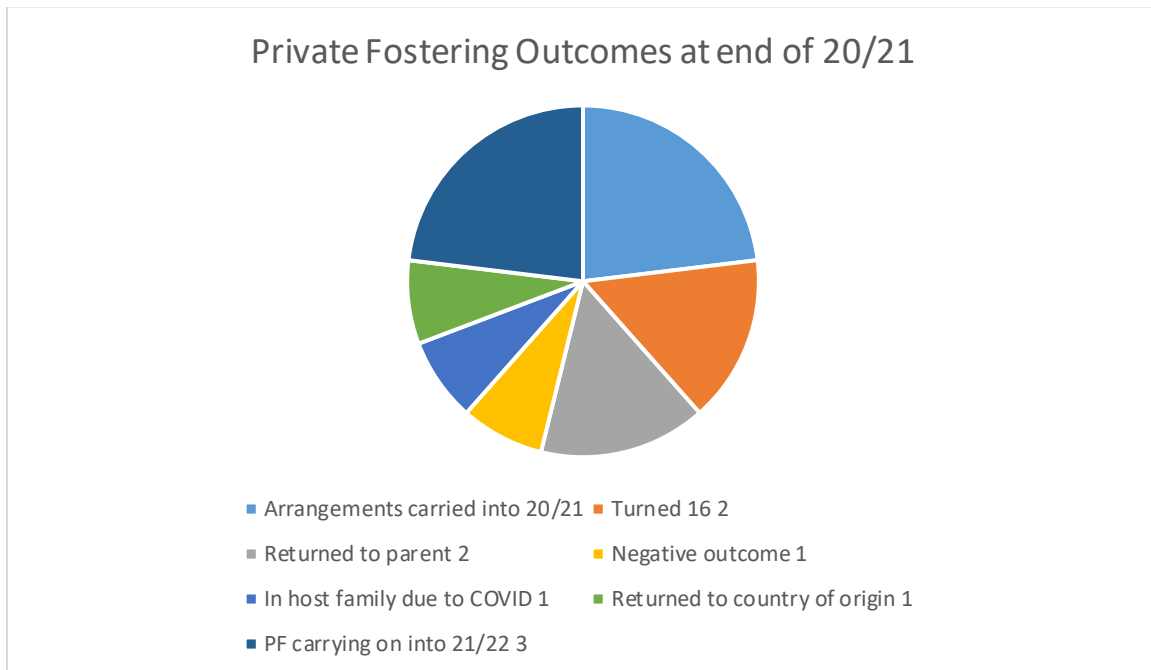
If a child is not under a Child in Need arrangement or a social work plan, then the regulation visits to the child will be carried out by a Children's Placement Service officer. These visits are every 6 weeks for the first year and every 12 weeks for the second and subsequent years. Additional visits can be requested by the child, private foster carer or parent. Any concerns raised in regard to the welfare or care of the child from these visits will be followed by in accordance with the safeguarding policies and pathways.

The suitability forum is made up of Service Managers and Team Managers from children's safeguarding service. The purpose of the forum is to note the suitability of the arrangement and consider any requirements or prohibitions.

By the 1st April 2020, there were 3 private fostering arrangements on-going from the previous year, and a further 7 new PF arrangements assessed between 1st April 2020 and the 31st of March 2021.

Out of the 7 Private Fostering arrangements assessed in 2020/2021

- 1 was a foreign language student staying with host families identified and arranged by a private independent school as the child could not return home due to COVID.
- 1 child returned to their country of origin
- 1 was assessed as a negative arrangement
- 1 child returned to birth family
- 3 new PF arrangements are ongoing into the next year.



There remains a steady flow of referrals for assessment of private fostering arrangement. Due to the onset of COVID 19 pandemic at the end of this time period the service is expecting this rate to rise.

We continue to hold regular suitability forums which enable us to have a senior management overview of the suitability of arrangements and to put in any restrictions, recommendations or prohibitions if required.

We continue to build professional relationships with agencies who are involved with placing young people from overseas with host families to ensure better and timelier notifications in order to safeguard them.

13. Special Guardianship Orders

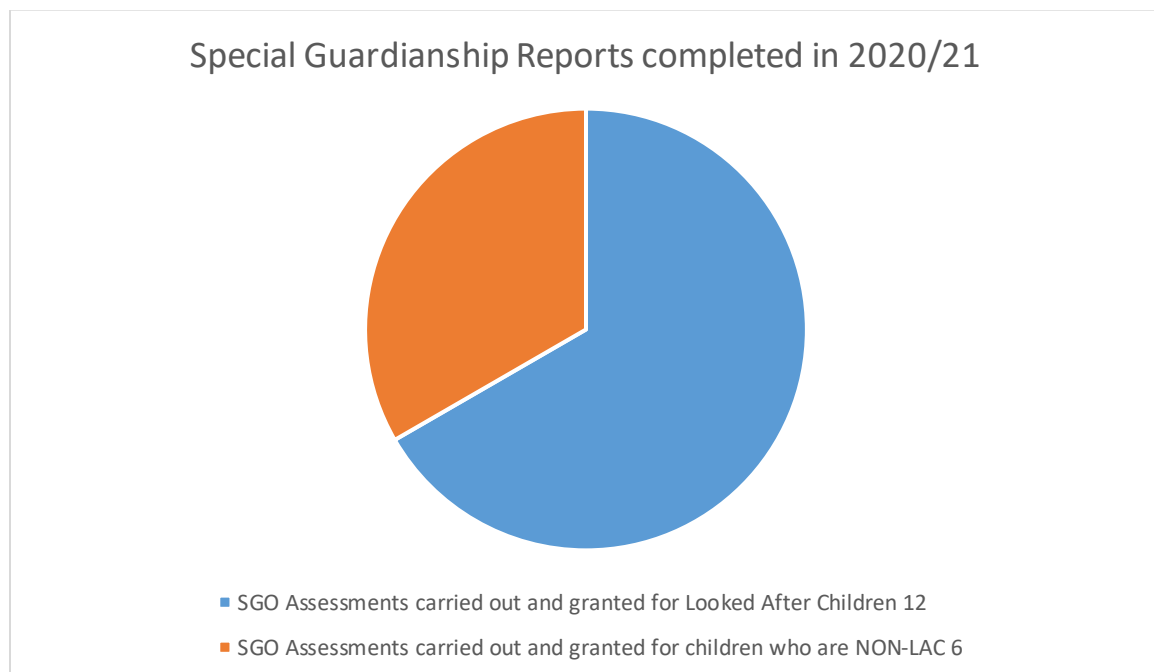
A special guardianship order is an order appointing one or more individuals to be a child's 'special guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989

and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement.

The Children's Placement Service undertake, upon request, Special Guardianship reports for children who are Looked After and children who are not subject to an order. The Children's Placement Service took on this role following the merging of Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire adoption services. In addition to these, the service has noted an increase in requests for Special Guardianship reports on children who are not within the looked after system.

Post Order support is available for all Special Guardians which may include: Annual contact to offer a review of the Special Guardianship Support Plan or updated Special Guardianship Assessment of Need, advice and support, mediation, access to training and assessments for therapeutic work to be funded through the Adoption Support Fund (for children who have been previously looked after immediately prior to the order being granted) . In addition, in 2021 Shropshire Council commissioned memberships for Special Guardians and other kinship carers with 'Kinship', the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales.

Between 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021 18 SGO's were granted and of these 12 were for children looked after.



14. Mockingbird

The service has also been involved with The Mockingbird Project with Telford and Wrekin Fostering Service and The Fostering Network. The Fostering Network's Mockingbird programme is an innovative method of delivering foster care using the Mockingbird Family Model. This is an extended family model that provides respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.



Key elements of the model

- Foster carer led advice, guidance and emotional and social peer support
- Planned and emergency sleepovers
- Formal and informal training and development opportunities
- Whole community social activities
- Support to permanence - birth family, long term placement, adoption, independence
- Support with sibling and birth family contact

Mockingbird's underpinning principles

- active child protection
- birth family viewed as partners and future support
- community-based care
- continuity of care
- cultural relevancy, identity and belonging
- foster carer support

- normalisation of care
- unconditional care

Mockingbird's impact

- Improved placement stability - reduced placement breakdown
- A network of strong and authentic relationships able to replicate the support offered by an extended family
- Improved experience of peer support
- Improved sibling contact
- Improved process and experience of respite care
- Improved skills, confidence and role satisfaction for foster carers
- Improved levels of carer retention and recruitment
- A strong, robust and resilient structure able to support children, young people and fostering families through times of crisis and transition.
- Improved experience of birth family contact
- Costs saved and costs avoided.

15. Foster carer training 2020-21

An updated support and training strategy were provided as this year's Annual foster Conference. The new Strategy includes courses which have been written and were offered from April 2020. The new courses are discussed further in the "moving forward" section.

Training and Development - Foster and Connected Carers 01.04.20-31.03.21

Training Area	Medium	
	Face-to-Face/Virtual	The Training Hub
Child Protection - Raising Awareness	125 (12 f2f)	
First Aid	123 (20 f2f)	
Family Time	57	
Safer Caring	38	

Solihull Approach - Understanding Your Child	36	
Domestic Abuse Briefing	12	
ACEs	9	
Staying Put	3	
CSE	2	
Allegations	2	
Safeguarding Now	1	
Medications	COVID restrictions	39
Internet Safety	COVID restrictions	30
Reporting and Recording	COVID restrictions	18
Nurturing Attachments	COVID restrictions	22
Black Lives Matters	COVID restrictions	20
	160	129

yellow - required

green - other areas with high participation

Pre-approval training is not included in the above figures. During 2020/21

38 connected carers completed Skills to Care training (4 did not progress) and 20 foster carers

completed Skills to Foster training (7 did not progress).

The Hub training included the three areas of mandatory training, and also two areas which have been particularly popular with carers. There are other courses on the hub which have only been completed by a small proportion of the cohort, so these have been excluded from this analysis.

In normal circumstances, when training is being delivered on a face-to-face basis, the evaluation data is inputted on to a spreadsheet and a formula gives data on the impact of the training course (increased confidence, knowledge etc.). However the nature of the virtual training means that we haven't been able to use this in the same way.

15.1 Pre-Approval

Due to the COVID pandemic only a small amount of training was able to be delivered face to face. Pre-approval training is not included in the annual training figures.

During the 2020/21 training period 38 connected carers completed Skills to Care training (4 did not progress) and 20 foster carers completed Skills to Foster training (7 did not progress).

The Hub training includes three mandatory courses: Medications, Internet Safety and Reporting and Recording. Two other courses (which are not mandatory) Nurturing Attachment and Black Lives Matter have been particularly popular with carers. Other courses available via the hub have only been completed by a small proportion of the cohort and have not been included in the analysis.

When we are able to deliver training our training on a face-to face basis evaluation data is inputted onto a spreadsheet with a formula that provides immediate data on the impact/effectiveness of the training provided. For example, it enables us to determine if attendees feel they have increased confidence, knowledge, skills and so on. However, the nature of the virtual training means that we haven't been able to use the evaluation tool in the same way.

During the Skills to Foster programme there are a range of activities and exercises that are completed during taught session(s). The training also includes home practice tasks which are set at the end of each taught session. The home practice tasks make up 40% of carers training and development standards. It is a requirement that these are completed by Foster carers within their first year of Fostering.

2020/21 saw the introduction of a 1-day Pre-Approval training course for Connected Carers.

Skills for Care has proven a success with 38 households having attended to date. Training feedback from attendees has been very positive. There has been an increase in the number of Connected Carers attending induction training courses since the commencement of the Pre-approval programme. Connected Carers course feedback has been positive and in the main they have found it to be helpful, not just in terms of content but also because they have had the opportunity to meet their peers who are going through the same process. Feedback has determined that they are more likely to attend other training and are more confident to do so.

15.2 Training and Development Standards (TDS)

For in house carers the current system in place for completion of the standards has proved to be effective. Nearly all carers have completed them within the required timescale of 18 months.

Carers who may have fallen outside of the timescale are being supported to complete the standards as soon as possible.

The programme for Connected Carers to complete their TDS incorporates the Pre-Approval training (as it does with mainstream carers). The training standards are explained to participants during the sessions so that they have a clearer understanding of the programme and the reasons why the training must be completed.

There are currently 9 households out of timescale for completion. However, it should be noted that since the introduction of Skills for Care there has been a marked increase in carers completing within the 18 months' timescale.

15.3 Induction Training

Five courses make up the carer's induction programme:

- First Aid
- Raising Awareness of Safeguarding and the Protection of Children
- Solihull Approach – Understanding Your Child
- Safer Caring
- Family Time (Contact)

It is agreed that these are the key courses to be completed during the first year of Fostering. There have been a few minor adjustments in terms of how some of the training is delivered.

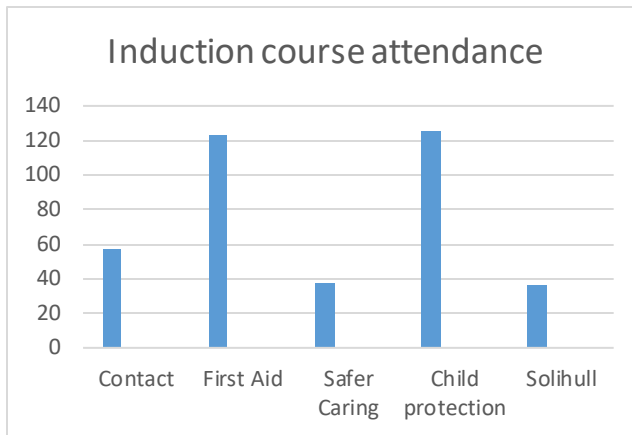
First Aid is now a 3-hour course provided by a specialist company. Since making changes to the course duration there has been an increase in attendance and completion of this training.

The frequency of Child Protection training has been increased. The training is now delivered at least once a month to ensure that we can maintain timescales not just for newly approved carers but also to ensure that renewals are kept up to date.

Evaluation feedback from this course demonstrates that Carers find it useful and informative:

“Clear and concise. Information delivered in a format that was easy to understand ... demonstrating knowledge surrounding all the subjects covered, and able to provide insights and actual examples.”

All of the induction courses have been matched to both sets of TDSs (in house and Connected Carers), in order to support the standards to be met in a timely manner.



This graph shows the number of carers who have attended each of the induction courses during this review period. At the beginning of each course carers are given an evaluation form and they are asked to rank their knowledge and understanding of the topic and their confidence of working with children around this topic prior to training. They are then asked to rank these again following the training, so we can see the difference and check that the course has improved these two areas for carers.

Data from delegate's evaluations show that for each induction course, they felt that both their knowledge and confidence around the topic had significantly increased. This shows that courses provided are not only supporting carers to gain a better knowledge, but also increasing their confidence.

The Solihull Approach training continues to be one identified by carers as having a significant impact on them, this can be seen from the comments made on evaluations such as: ***“The training met all the requirements I needed to give me a clear understanding of the Solihull Approach ... well done for arranging this.”***

15.4 Core Training

There were 9 Core training courses within the training strategy

- Loss and Bereavement
- CSE
- Responding and Dealing with Behaviour
- Attachment
- Managing Risk in Contact
- Education and SEN
- Children's Health
- Allegations

Attachment training is delivered in 2 parts, the first looks at theory and the second explores how the theoretical concepts they have learnt about can be put into practice and how this can be supported through play.

15.5 New Courses

This period has seen the introduction of new course programmes.

- Solihull Trauma.
- Safeguarding (Exploitation and County Lines)
- Life Story

- Self-Harm
- Working with Transgender Young People.

Each of the above courses have been delivered twice so far. Feedback has been positive, and they will continue to be part of the training strategy moving forward.

15.6 Additional learning opportunities

In July 2021 we returned to face to face training. To date the following programmes have been delivered to foster carers/connected persons:

Skills to Foster
Family Time
Allegations Training

a. COVID -19

Following the March 2020 conference all Face to face training was postponed until further notice due to the COVID 19 Pandemic. This resulted in increased additional planning and utilisation of different training/learning approaches to ensure that we could continue to support all Foster Carers in the best way possible on their learning journey.

Training was prioritised as follows;

- Pre-Approval Training
- 6 sessions of the Skills to Foster programme
- Skills for Care course.

These courses were (during periods of constraints) delivered virtually. Worksheets and knowledge check quizzes were developed for each training programme. These documents were sent out to the carers undergoing assessment. The completed work was returned to the Development Officer to mark/check. There was also regular phone contact with the Development Officer at specific agreed points during their completion of sessions. This was done to ensure understanding and check in with individuals on how the training was going.

b. Moving Forward

Following the COVID pandemic the team have had to develop and create new innovative ways of delivering and manage training. It is anticipated that this new way of working will be ongoing. Since July 2021 we have commenced delivery of some face to face training and take up of places has been positive.

The Training Hub will continue to offer online training covering such topics as:

- Medications
- Internet Safety
- Reporting and Recording

16. Payment for Skills

Shropshire operates a Payment for Skills Scheme for the fostering service whereby foster carers receive additional skills allowances according to their assessed level of competence, knowledge and experience. The agenda for the supervision of foster carers will address the possible progress of the foster carer under the scheme and each foster carer's annual review will take account of this. Payment for skills also applies to connected person foster carers. A new Payment for Skills document was implemented in the 1st March 2020.

The document outlines the scheme for payment to foster carers offering family-based care to children and young people looked after by Shropshire Council.

The arrangements outlined in the document represent a continued commitment by the Council to family-based care and a real attempt to recognise the skills and expertise of carers and reward them accordingly. It is also an attempt to reinforce the fair and transparent payment structure. This is coupled with the Council's commitment to continue to pay foster carers children's allowance payments which are higher than the Department for Education recommended rates and in line with regional partners, and payment for skills which are designed to both recruit new carers and retain existing carers by offering competitive payment amounts.

This scheme affords carers the status they deserve by introducing a process whereby their expertise can be measured, but also raises the profile of family-based care in Shropshire and therefore renders us more effective in carer retention and recruitment.

The scheme is only available to foster carers approved by, and registered with, Shropshire Council. It is designed to recognise the range of skills and experience that carers and prospective carers possess, as well as the time and commitment involved in caring for children who are looked after by this Council.

More importantly, by constantly striving to increase the skill base of all our foster carers we should see a consequent improvement in placement stability leading to better outcomes for Shropshire's looked after children.

There are 3 levels of payment for skills, all of which involve payment of a fee in addition to the child allowance. Child allowances are only payable if there are children in placement.

Care plus payments, which are fee payments are a higher rate of pay which will only be used in accordance with the criteria contained in the policy. This is paid alongside child allowance payments.

This policy was created with the assistance of the Shropshire Foster Carer Association and through the consultancy process with all Shropshire foster carers.

17. Participation

Between April 2020 – March 2021 the in-person group work was on hold due to COVID restrictions. Work with young people continued outdoors on a 1:1 basis and Wendy Stockton Targeted Youth Worker spent hours walking with young people. Although the weather wasn't always the best the young people were happy to have the opportunity to be outside for a short period, many having had little social contact with anyone outside of the family during the lockdowns.

CiCC Members (Children in Care Council) were invited to attend virtual social group meetings; although there was little uptake, 3 young people attended the meetings on a regular basis and found this to be a good form of support; they also completed a 12 week training course to become Peer Supporters.

Throughout the year CiCC members and potential new members were regularly updated on what was happening, information was also sent to carers. The Youth Music/Hive Project was put on hold until earlier this year when young people were invited to a virtual music making workshop, 4 young people attended.

Recruitment for new CiCC members started in Spring 2021 with the plan being that when summer arrives there will be introductions by the Peer Supporters 1:1 or in small groups for walks and chat.

There are plans in place for the summer for a face to face catch up between Peer Supporters and new members at the Hive to listen to the Podcast made by the 2019/20 group followed by indoor activities. Other activities planned for the summer are face to face outdoor activities and games, a BBQ to be organised by the Leaving Care Team and a workshop tester session at the Hive and Strawberry recording studio.

The hope is to re-start the Monthly Saturday Social Group Meetings in the Autumn when the community room in Shrewsbury is open again.

17. Permanency

Permanency Forum has been up and running since April 2018. Permanency Forums have been established to support social workers in their permanence planning for children.

All children need a secure, safe and loving home in which to be cared for through their childhood. They need to be able to develop and maintain secure attachments in order to thrive and to be enabled to have opportunities and life-long links and a network of support that will last through to adulthood.

Planning for permanence needs to be a feature of all our interventions with children we work with, in order to avoid delay and ensure all options are considered.

We have a duty to ensure the welfare of the child is paramount, and also to work in partnership with children and their parents, taking account of their wishes and feelings.

Impact for children

Permanence planning is well embedded in practice in Shropshire and is effective in preventing delay. Planning for our children who are unable to live safely with their parents is progressed speedily and where there are delays, the reasons for this are known.

Permanency forum has enabled senior managers to have oversight of both permanence decisions and the progression of care plans.

The number of children on care orders who are placed at home with parents remains a focus of attention. There are a number of children who need to progress and an appropriate plan in place for this.

Social workers are clear where there are parallel plans in place that avoid undue delay. The presence of managers for adoption and fostering and the SGO support worker is invaluable in supporting social workers through the different pathways to permanence and enables themes to be picked up.

The presence of the Senior IRO enables the link to be maintained with IRO oversight of plans.

The Permanency Co-ordinator is able to meet with individual social workers and their managers where any drift or delay has been identified to assist in putting plans back on track. This may be through advice or 'hands on' support to family find for children who are not yet in their permanent placement, or to complete CPRs or Together or Apart assessments.

Action plan:

- Continue to reduce the number of children who could safely have their care orders discharged who are placed at home with parents. Permanency Coordinator to

get firm dates from SWs for draft statements with legal and then QA timescales. Ongoing at this time.

- Permanency Co-Ordinator to liaise with the IRO lead for SGO's Nikki Watton and the TM's for timetabling in deadlines for the SGO's that need to be prioritised for completion.
- Filter all other connected carers to see who is coming up to 12 months post-placement and check no other drift-bring to the next tracker meeting. Completed.
- Children in residential care to be reviewed through Permanency Forum to see if their needs can be met in a foster placement. Ongoing at this time.
- Permanency Coordinator to ensure that permanency actions and recommendations are recorded clearly on children's case records prior to the 2nd Review. Completed.

There are quarterly permanence reports available with data and figures.

19. Conclusion

The Childrens Placement Service continues to retain a skilled and dedicated cohort of In-House Foster Carers, who like all, have had to deal with the pressures both practically and emotionally of COVID. We have also managed to maintain a stable workforce despite increasing demand on workers. Unfortunately, we continue to have a full-time worker on long term sick leave and workers who have been subject to self-isolating and shielding due to COVID which has restricted their ability to carry out all the tasks necessary. This has led to the need to use agency workers. We continue to have growing numbers of viabilities with a 100% increase and a growing number of connected persons assessments which prevent the service being able to concentrate on recruitment of mainstream carers.

With the continuing high numbers of connected persons assessments this can also lead to a requirement of a high level of placement support, which the support worker, targeted youth worker and carer intervention specialist support with. If a connected family are not able or willing to proceed to permanence through SGO then this support has to continue for a number of years. We continue to offer a good training package to our new and existing carers, and feedback on this is positive.

20. Our priorities in the coming year will be:

Team

- To retain settled teams and explore areas for growth in resource to meet the significant demands.

- To review the resource available to understand the impact on both Recruitment & Assessment and Support & Development teams of a rise in foster carer numbers.
- To maintain the physical safety and emotional welfare of the staff during and post COVID.

In House Fostering

- To continue to increase the amount of Foster Carers to meet demand.
- To review our use of social media-based technology to develop our marketing strategies.
- To encourage, where appropriate, families to seek permanence through SGO with the appropriate support.

Permanence

- To continue to make full use of the permanency tracker and permanency coordinator, and permanency forum to promote permanency for all of our looked after children in a timely fashion.

Foster Carers

- To ensure that all foster carers, including connected persons foster carers are completing TSD's within the allotted time frame
- To continue to encourage and enable foster carers to participate in and see the importance of attending training to develop their knowledge and skills to support the children in their care.
- To ensure that carers are supported through the COVID period and the period of readjustment that will follow.
- To encourage foster carers to be ambitious for their fostering career and recognise the difference they can make to the lives of all children from 0- 18 years.

21. Shropshire Foster Panel Chair 2020/21 Comments:

The year has again been largely a very positive period. Panel has 18 members, 7 of whom are Independent, including the Chair and they bring a diverse range of skills and experience. 5 members have left during the year and have been replaced with new members who reflect our objective to improve and widen the diversity of our Fostering Panel. We continue to

look for more Panel Members to widen further the diversity of our membership.

Due to increasing workload and complexity of some cases presented and the continued impact of Covid 19 Panel has met twice per month throughout the year and the outlook for the coming year indicates this pattern continuing.

We have again heard a good range of Applications, Reviews and more complex negative assessments and brief reports.

By far the greatest number of Applications have again continued to be for Connected Carers and the details of these are presented clearly within the body of the Annual Report.

Overall, the Annual Report describes another very positive year, with many challenges. The Conclusions, Areas going well, Areas of challenge and Areas for development, summarise very well the work and results of the year and detail some objectives and actions for the coming year.

We have introduced regular monthly catch up meetings between the Panel Chair and Panel Advisor, to look at current trend's areas for development and any areas of concern.

The Quality of Assessments presented to Panel have again been good and continue to improve. Panel continues to challenge Assessments, whilst never losing sight of the often very difficult circumstances that require the best possible outcome for children and Foster Carers.

Feedback form Applicants attending Panel has been positive. As Chair I endeavour to obtain verbal feedback, before Applicants leave each meeting, as it is still difficult to receive completed Feedback Forms. It is always helpful to receive this feedback to learn from and particularly listen to Applicants perceptions of their panel experience.

I am very pleased to Chair a caring, strong and challenging Panel that takes a pride in looking for Positive Outcomes for the young Persons entrusted to the care of our Local Authority.

I am similarly pleased to have the support of a very professional team within our Fostering Service.

Everyone connected with our Fostering Panel, Panel Members, Social Workers, Panel Advisor, Panel co-ordinator, Admin and Business Support Services and Team Managers/ ADM, play a vital part in being an effective

Team who work tirelessly to achieve the results and outcomes that are described within this Annual Report.

Thank you all.

Mike Roughan MBE

Independent Chair

Shropshire Fostering Panel



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<u>Committee and Date</u>
Cabinet
November 2021

<u>Item</u>
<u>Public</u>

Shropshire Council Annual Adoption Report 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2021 and Together 4 Children Annual Adoption Report 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2021

Responsible Officer

Tanya Miles

e-mail: Tanya.miles@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743 255811

1. Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the activity, data and performance of Shropshire Adoption activity as part of our Regional Adoption Agency Together 4 Children (T4C) from the 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. This report is for information and no decisions are required.

2. Executive Summary

Adoption is a regulated activity provided by either a Local Authority or a Voluntary Adoption Agency. The service is regulated under The Children Act 1989 & 2004; The Adoption and Children act 2014 and Adoption Agency Regulations 2005.

All Local Authorities are legally required to work under the auspices of a Regional Adoption Agency. T4C Regional Adoption Agency went live on the 28th September 2020. T4C 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.

The vision of the partnership 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.

Covid 19 has impacted on the delivery of statutory adoption functions. Although this is reflected in some of the performance data for 2020-2021, the impact of this is most likely to be felt in the reporting period 2021-2022 given the impact Covid has had on those children in the adoption process at that time. Those children in the cohort of 2020-2021, will have already been through several statutory processes' pre-pandemic and it may only

be the latter part of their adoption journey that has experienced some delay.

The flexibilities contained in 'The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2020' have been fully utilised to ensure the continuation of statutory services.

Whilst there have been some challenges in the first year of operation, the partnership has worked hard on embedding key practice initiatives, aligning statutory requirements and working together successfully with the challenges of Covid and virtual working. There is clearly a lot more work to be undertaken with a clear focus on driving performance in all areas and incorporating the wider permanency agenda in the future.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet is requested to consider the information in this report and confirm its support for the work of T4C Regional Adoption Agency as set out in the Annual Report in fulfilling the Council's statutory and regulatory requirements.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

4.1 Risk Management

When a decision is made that a child is unable to be safely cared for in their birth and the plan is for adoption, it is the responsibility of the Local Authority to achieve this without delay. It is imperative there is sufficient focus on the development of statutory adoption services and for this to be as part of a Regional Adoption Agency. There is a risk of Shropshire not being statutory compliant if we were not part of a Regional Adoption Agency.

4.2 Human Rights

Children have a right to be safe and to feel safe. If this can't be achieved within their birth family and there is a care plan of adoption, as a local authority and statutory body, we need to ensure we safeguard children through the provision of high-quality adoption placements.

4.3 Equalities

Those applying to adopt should expect to receive a high-quality inclusive service. It is imperative the partnership offers all prospective adopters, including Shropshire residents a fair and equitable service; it is the responsibility of all partners to monitor service delivery.

4.4 Community

Children with a plan of adoption should have the opportunity to remain within a community setting, whilst it is possible to place Shropshire children with adopters living in Shropshire, having access to a wider pool of adopters enables us to place children further afield in partner community settings.

4.5 Consultation

T4C consults with adopters through an adopter advisory group facilitated by Adoption UK. This enables us to consult on new approaches to service delivery. In addition to this, adopter feedback is sought at every point of the adoption process.

5. Financial Implications

There are no new financial considerations contained in the report. T4C has a pooled budget which is closely monitored by service leads and finance business partner.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

Not applicable

7. Background

7.1 Remit of Together 4 Children (T4C)

T4C is responsible for the delivery of statutory adoption functions on behalf of the four member authorities as a delegated responsibility through a hub and spoke approach. There is a robust governance structure in place with one Head of Service post responsible for overall delivery. The statutory decision making for children remains the responsibility of the individual Local Authority.

T4C central hub has responsibility for adopter recruitment, training and assessment, management of adoption panels and family finding for children. The provision of adoption support currently remains in the locality hub, although joint activity does happen and there is movement towards a pooling of these resources.

7.2 Service Growth and key performance data

There has been a significant increase this year in the number of Shropshire children referred to the adoption service, 61 compared to 29 the previous year. From this number, 26 children have had an Agency Decision to confirm their plan of adoption compared to 23 the previous year. 13 Shropshire children have been placed for adoption, one of whom was an early permanence placement and 8 children have been adopted.

The service is currently family finding for 12 Shropshire children.

Adoption performance is measured through key performance indicators from the Department of Education. They are measured over a 3-year period. Covid has impacted on performance with some delays for children being placed, some delays in care proceedings and some delays in the completion of adoption cases in the court.

A10 measures number of days from entering care to moving in with an adoptive family. National average is 376 days, Shropshire has performed well in this year with the average number of days being 319. However, we are likely to see a dip in next years data as the 2020-21 figures are alongside good timeliness figures for 2017-2020.

A2 measures time between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and the decision for a match with an identified family. National average is 178 days. Shropshire performed at 116 days, which is lower than the national average. However, current data is indicating we are currently performing at 175 days, this is due to the impact of Covid and the very complex needs of some children which impacts on the overall average.

The service has sadly had one adoption disruption this year.

The service has approved 33 adopter households, which is an increase of 6 on last years data.

7.3 Future Service Developments

Whilst the recruitment of adopters has proved successful, there is a need to support adopters to consider a wider pool of children and in particular our priority children. There is also a need to support more adopters to consider early permanence placements.

There has been some growth in the capacity for adoption panels, this was needed so that children's matches with adopters could be given equal priority to adoption applications. This needs to remain under review to ensure there is sufficient capacity.

Further work is needed on our alignment of adoption support and how we can utilise the skills within the wider geographical footprint to support more families.

Further work is needed on joining up services to address the wider permanency agenda and to extend Together 4 Children to include Special Guardianship Support.

8. Additional Information

There is no additional information to be considered.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. No decision is required from Cabinet, but it is requested that the information is noted

<p>List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)</p>
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<p>N/A</p>

<p>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)</p>

<p>Kirstie Hurst-Knight</p>

<p>Local Member</p>

<p>All members</p>

<p>Appendices</p>

<p>[Please list the titles of Appendices and provide a link to the Sharepoint site where the document is located]</p>

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. T4C Annual Adoption Report 2020-212. Shropshire Annual Report 2020-20213. T4C Annual Report Performance Briefing June 2021 |
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Together4Children Permanency Partnership

Adoption Agency Annual Report 2020-2021

[Partner LA Name]

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 first Annual Adoption Report produced by Together4Children since the partnership went live on 28 September 2020.

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

- receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months,

- monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users,
- satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

Context and the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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

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

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

Despite the significant challenges, the Together4Children Partnership has delivered significant achievements, including:

- A successful and well publicised launch at the end of September 2020.
- Delivery of a strong brand and very effective marketing and recruitment activity.
- Design and delivery of remote provision of service critical activity including adopter recruitment and preparation, assessment, adoption panels, adoption support assessment and the delivery of adoption support interventions.
- Delivery of Regional workforce development events.
- Building stronger relationships with our adopter community through our partnership with Adoption UK and our Adopter Advisory Board.
- Implementing the 'TESSA' pilot (an early intervention model of support delivered through our partnership with Adoption UK).
- Joint delivery of the Covid-19 Adoption Support Fund resources to 450+ adoptive and Special Guardianship families.
- Significant progress in moving to regionalised adoption panels.

And since we went live, we have seen more of our children moving into their new families with adopters from within the T4C region.

This is all credit to the commitment and dedication of practitioners across the T4C region who have demonstrated a huge amount of professional skill, creativity, dedication and determination to keep our services functioning and delivering good outcomes for children in the face of enormous challenge.

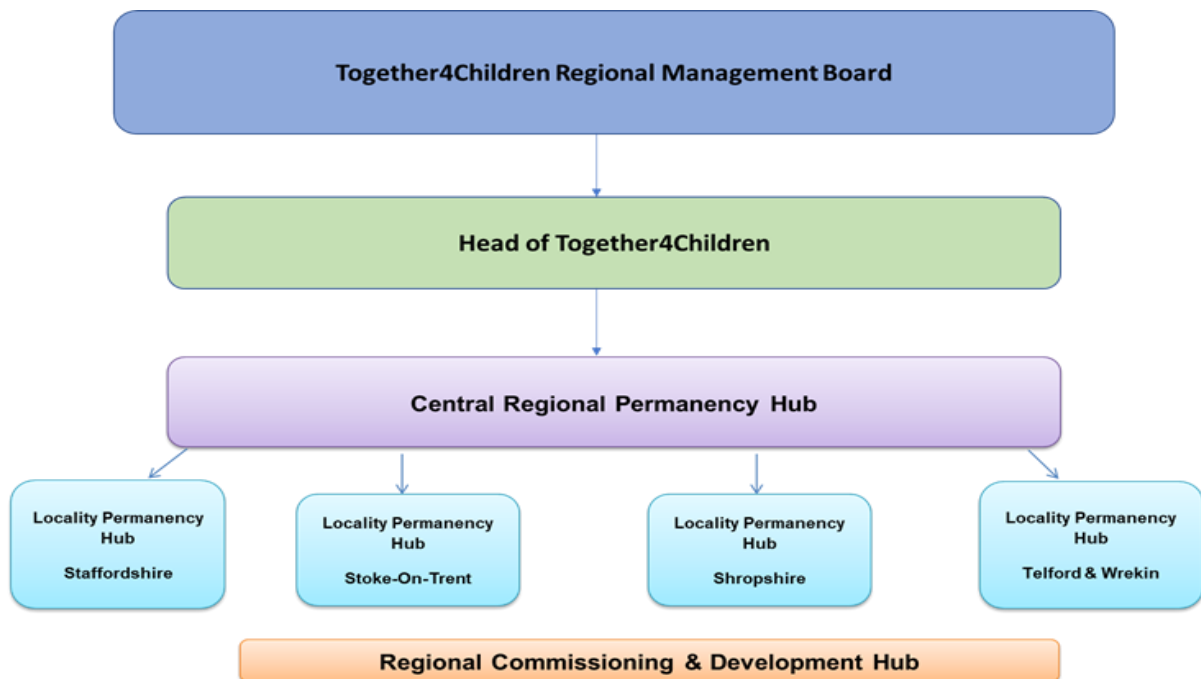
Part 1 – Together4Children Partnership Adoption Agency Functions

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

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

1.1 Partnership Governance and Operational Structure

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



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

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

Central Permanency Hub Functions

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

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

Locality Permanency Hub Functions

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

Each Locality Hub has:

1 x Assessment & Support Team - undertaking adopter assessments and supporting prospective adopters through to the granting of an Adoption Order.

1 x Permanency Support Team – supporting adopted children and their families through a variety of activities.

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

1.2 Regional Performance Overview 2020-2021

Marketing & Recruitment

Understanding that potential adopters engage with us in different ways, we have created a rich mixture information sources ranging from video, to digital and written materials. The routes to our 'front door' are similarly multifaceted, such as our traditional telephone enquiry line - **0300 111 80444**, through to new media engagement like Messenger.



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



- A successful launch campaign in September and October 2020.
- Successful launch of social media channels.
- The launch of the [Together4Children](https://www.together4children.org.uk) website.
- Development of downloadable digital Information Event and Microsoft Teams based Information Events.
- Delivery of a marketing campaign focusing on finding adopters for children in sibling groups and other priority children.

Enquiries & Referrals

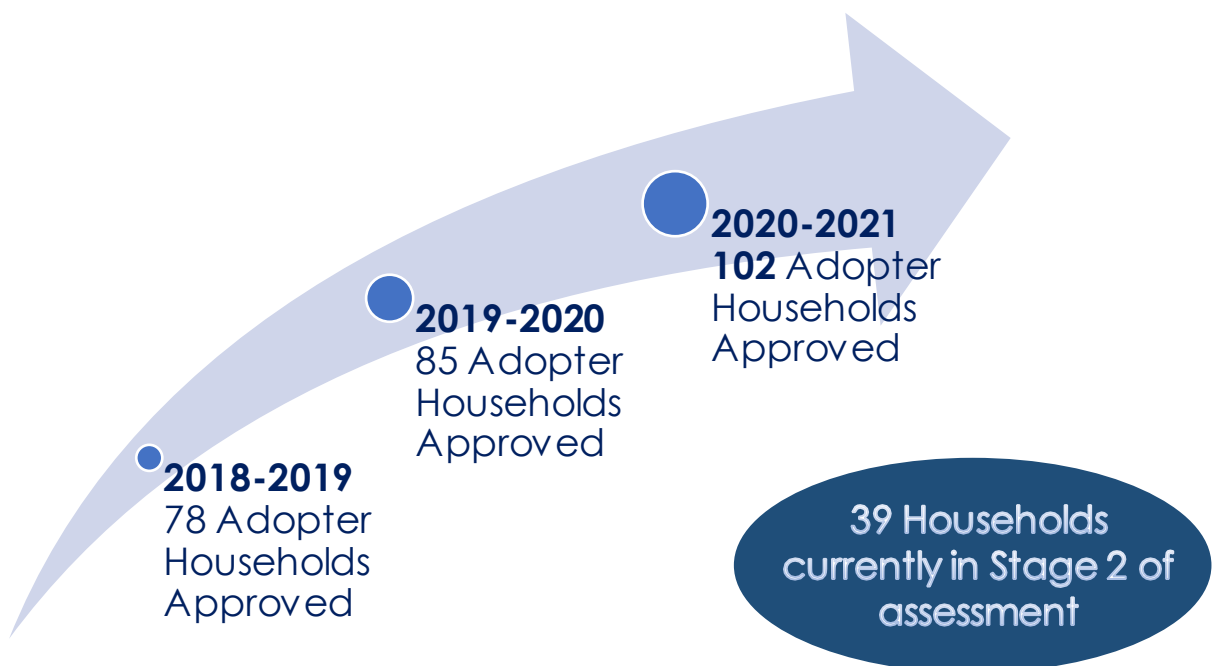
From the end of September when we launched, to the end of March 2021 we received a total of 304 enquiries from potential adopters.

This led to 77 referrals to our Locality Hub assessment teams.



Assessment and Approval of Adopters

Together4Children partners have been working collaboratively since 2018 to increase the number of adopter households able to provide permanent homes for children in our region. This has resulted in a year on year rise in the number of families we have assessed and approved as prospective adopters.



This represents a positive outcome, meaning that we can find more homes for children within our own regional 'pool' of adopters. In turn, this supports positive transitions for children and means that we can better support children and their families as they move through their adoption journeys. It also means that we avoid the costs involved in using adopters approved by other agencies.

A challenge for us this year has been completing our assessments of prospective adopters within our target of 6 months. We have only been able to achieve this for 40% of the households who we assessed. This has been particularly impacted this year by external factors such as the time it has taken for people applying to become adopters to have a medical (usually provided by their own GP), and getting safeguarding checks back from other local Authorities outside of the T4C region.

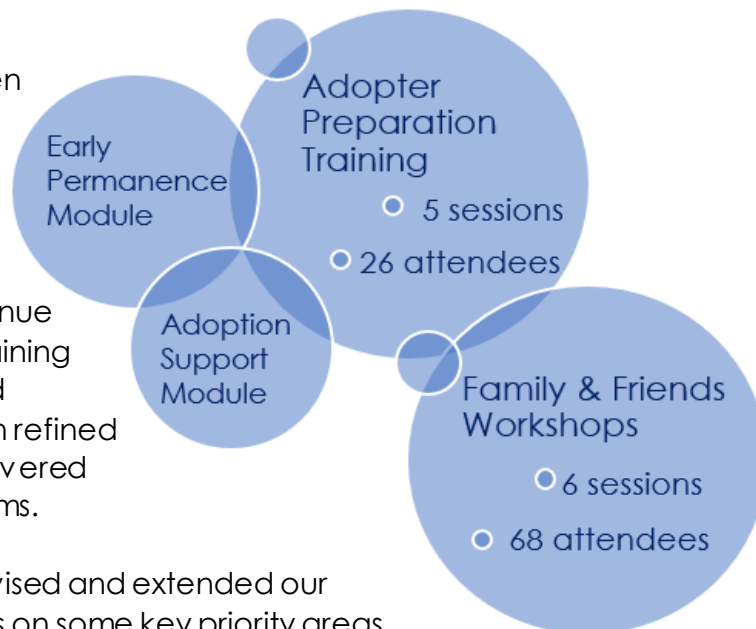
Adopter Training Activity

From April-December 2020 Adopter Preparation and other adopter training activity was delivered by each partner. During this time work was undertaken to design a consistent package of preparation training that was able to be delivered remotely across the region.

From January 2021 adopter Preparation training has been Delivered centrally via our Regional Training Officers, with the support of locality practitioners.

At the current time we continue to successfully deliver this training remotely using materials and approaches that have been refined over the past year to be delivered effectively via Microsoft Teams.

During the year we have revised and extended our preparation training to focus on some key priority areas. We have introduced a module as part of our core training to help prospective adopters consider offering a child early permanence. We are currently developing a module to support those considering adopting children in sibling groups.



Activity & Outcomes for Children in 2020-2021

We know that activity and outcomes for children with a plan of adoption has been significantly impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic during this reporting period. To help understand how this has impacted our region, we have compared our activity during 2020-2021 with activity in 2019-2020. This provides a very broad comparison helping us understand the regional impact of Covid 19. However, it must be noted

that there are always year on year fluctuations in activity across the region and there were significantly higher levels of adoption activity in 2019-2020 than there had been in previous years.

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

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

	2019-2020			2020-2021		
	ADM Plan of Adoption	Placement Orders	Children Placed	ADM Plan of Adoption	Placement Orders	Children Placed
Shropshire	23	14	17	26	15	13
Staffordshire	58	51	56	41	33	31
Stoke-on-Trent	37	36	33	34	26	29
Telford & Wrekin	39	24	29	32	34	28
Total	157	125	135	132	108	101

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

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

	T4C Region	% Difference 2019-20
ADM Plan of Adoption	132	-16%
Placement Orders	108	-24%
Children Placed	102	-25%
Adoption Orders	103	+13%

Where we Found Homes for our Children in 2020-2021

One of the key aims of Together4Children is to ensure that, where we can, we find homes for our children within our region. This supports good transitions which we know are a critical part of the adoption journey for children and adoptive parents; and helps us to support children and their families into the future.

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

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

	Shrops	Staffs	Stoke	T&W	Total
Own LA/T4C Adopters*	10	26	13	25	74
Other RAA/LA Adopters**	1	1	7	3	12
VAA***	2	4	9		15
					101
Early Permanence	1	0	5	6	12

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

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

*** Adopters approved by a Voluntary Adoption Agency

Early Permanence

The table also shows the number of children who were placed in 'Early Permanence' arrangements. This is where children are placed with approved adopters, where the Local Authority is confident that the likely outcome for the child is adoption, but before a Court has decided. Where the Court does decide that adoption is the right plan, the child can remain with the adopters.

Early permanence means that children are placed earlier within their prospective families and means that they experience fewer moves and changes of primary caregiver. We know that these factors are beneficial for good outcomes.

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

Currently the number of children placed in these arrangements across the region is slightly below the England national average (13%). We can also see that there are disparities in practice between our partners. Together4Children are committed to supporting the development of early permanence practice across the region, with the aim of placing more children with early permanence carers where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Timescales for Achieving Permanency for Our Children

The average timescale for local authorities in England is 409 days (based on 3-year average timescale: ASGLB Dashboard Data – Q3).

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

Comparing in year timescales against the average 3-year timescales gives a general indication of the overall trend in relation to this performance indicator.

We can see from the table below that all partner councils have experienced a drop in performance during 2020-2021. This means it has taken longer in the past year for children entering care to be placed with their adoptive family. For the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire this increase has been relatively marginal. For Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin the increased amount of time it is taking to secure permanency is more significant. However, both Shropshire and Staffordshire remain below the England national average for this indicator (2018-2021).

A10 Indicator	2018-2021	In Year	Trend	< 3 Year national average
Shropshire	319	423	↓	✓
Staffordshire	352	372	↓	✓
Stoke-on-Trent	492	510	↓	✗
Telford & Wrekin	506	630	↓	✗

Given the impact of Covid 19 over the course of this reporting period it is unsurprising that we are seeing this increase in children's timescales. There are several factors that we are aware of which have impacted across the children's system which have created delay in achieving the outcomes we want for our children:

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

A2: This is the second key national indicator and measures the average time between an LA receiving court authority to place a child (Placement Order) and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family. The national average across England for this indicator is 186 days (ASGLB Dashboard Data – Q3).

A2 Indicator	2018-2021	In Year	Trend	< 3 Year national average
Shropshire	116	175	↓	✓
Staffordshire	137	203	↓	✓
Stoke-on-Trent	189	186	↑	✗
Telford & Wrekin	312	407	↓	✗

Again, it is reported as both an aggregated figure averaged over the preceding 3 years and against 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.

We know that some children wait longer than others because finding families who want to adopt older children, children in sibling groups, and children with additional needs is more difficult. It also takes longer to find families for children where there are considerations around ethnicity and faith. Across the Together4Children partnership, 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).

Across the region we can see an overall decline against this indicator with relatively steep increases in the time it has taken to find families for our children for three of our partner councils. In any given reporting period, the unique journeys of individual children will impact on this indicator and those factors are discussed in more detail in the localised information in part 2 of this report.

As this indicator only reports against children for whom an Adoption Order was granted in the current reporting period, it mainly represents activity prior to the launch of the new Together4Children arrangements which brought family finding activity for the whole region together within the Central Permanency Hub.

Our success in recruiting and assessing more adopters than in previous years will play a significant part in helping us to reduce the time it takes for us to find the right family for a child.

The drop in performance against this indicator will also reflect some impacts from the early stages of the Covid 19 pandemic, such as disruption to Adoption Panels in the earlier part of 2020 and the general difficulties for social work practitioners created by lockdown restrictions. It also reflects the fact that some key activities which support family finding such as national activity days and exchange events all but stopped during the reporting year.

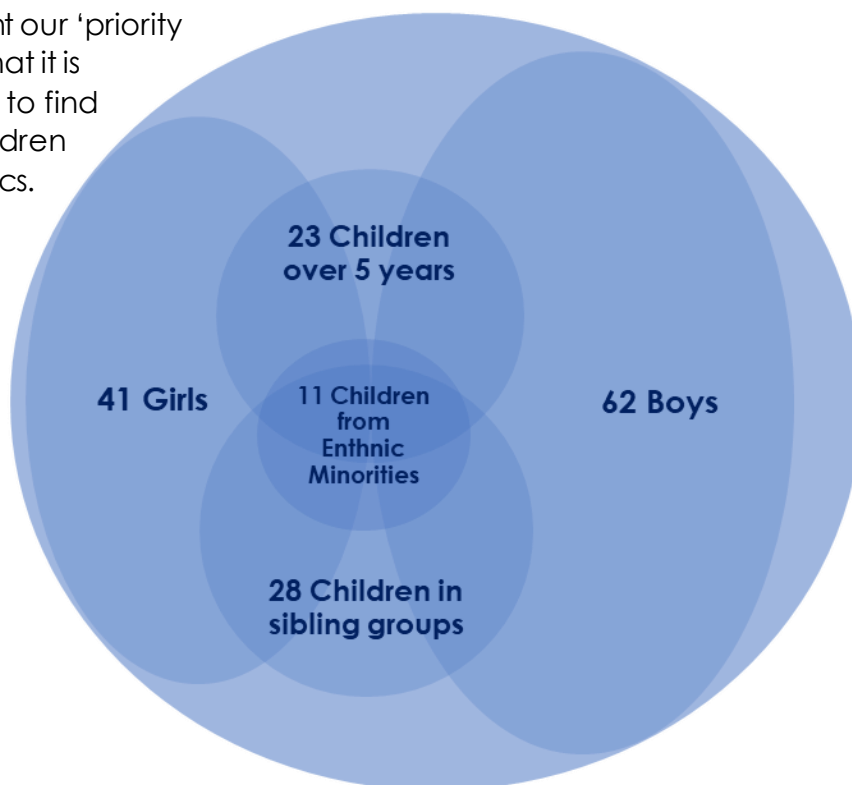
However, we recognise that reducing the time it takes to find the right families for our children is a key priority for the Together4Children partnership. Other measures we are taking to reduce this timescale are outlined below.

1.3 Children Adopted During 2020-2021

Despite the challenges of the past year **103** Adoption Orders were granted for children across our region, securing their legal permanence within their new families. Of the children who were adopted, 23 children were aged over 5 years, 28 children achieved permanency alongside one or more of their siblings, and 11 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.

It is very positive that overall, 48 children (47% of all children adopted) were priority children. This shows good outcomes for children who may not have found adoptive homes without the dedication and ambition of practitioners across the Together4Children partnership.



1.4 Regional Overview of Children Waiting and Family Finding Activity

- To ensure that any adopter assessed within our region can be considered for any child within the region.
- To create a wider choice of potential families for our children, increasing the likelihood of finding a family that can meet a child's individual needs.
- To identify those children who have been waiting or are likely to wait the longest and focus our resource and capacity on finding permanent homes for them.
- To identify children where we may not have a potential family within region who are able to meet their needs and take swift action to consider adopters across our wider (Midlands) region and nationally.

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

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

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

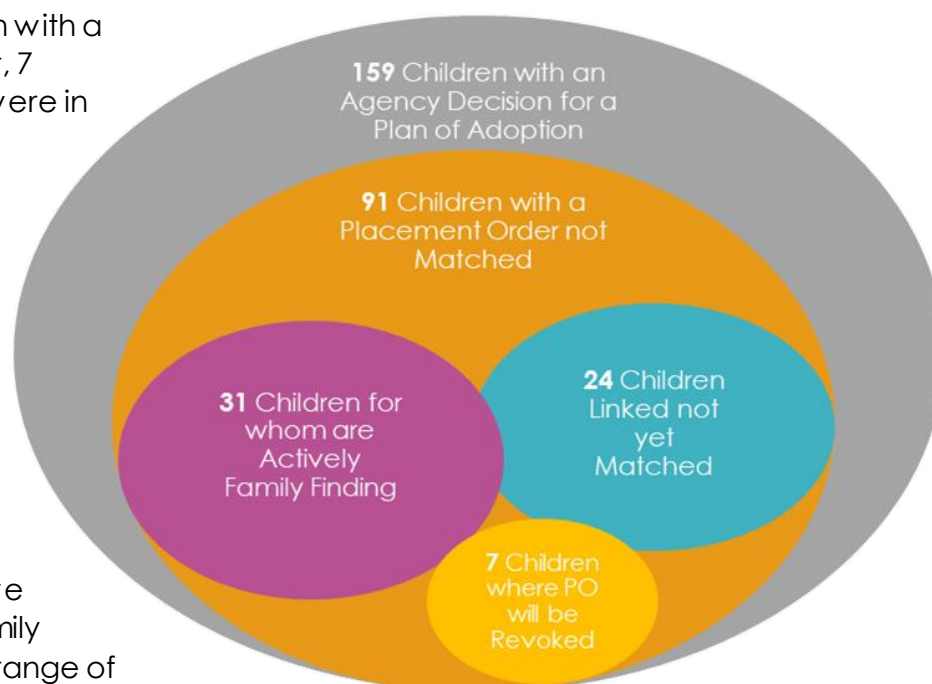
Children with a Plan of Adoption on 31 March 2021

At the end of the current reporting there were 159 children across our region where Agency Decision Maker's across our partner local authorities had decided on a plan of adoption.

Of these, 91 children had a Placement Order granted by the Court, giving their agencies 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 the 91 children with a Placement Order, 7 children's plans were in the process of changing away from adoption. A further 24 children had been linked with their prospective family and were progressing to a match.

For 31 children, we were actively family finding using the range of activities outlined above.



Of the remaining 29 children, the majority were currently in foster homes where their carers were being assessed to provide their permanent care via adoption of special guardianship.

1.5 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 2020-2021 2 placements disrupted affecting 1 single child and 2 siblings placed together. Whilst we would never want children to experience a further change in their care, this represents a relatively low rate of disruption which is broadly in line with national averages.

T4C Region Placement Disruptions 2020-21	T4C Adopters	Inter-Agency
No. of Placement Disruptions	0	3

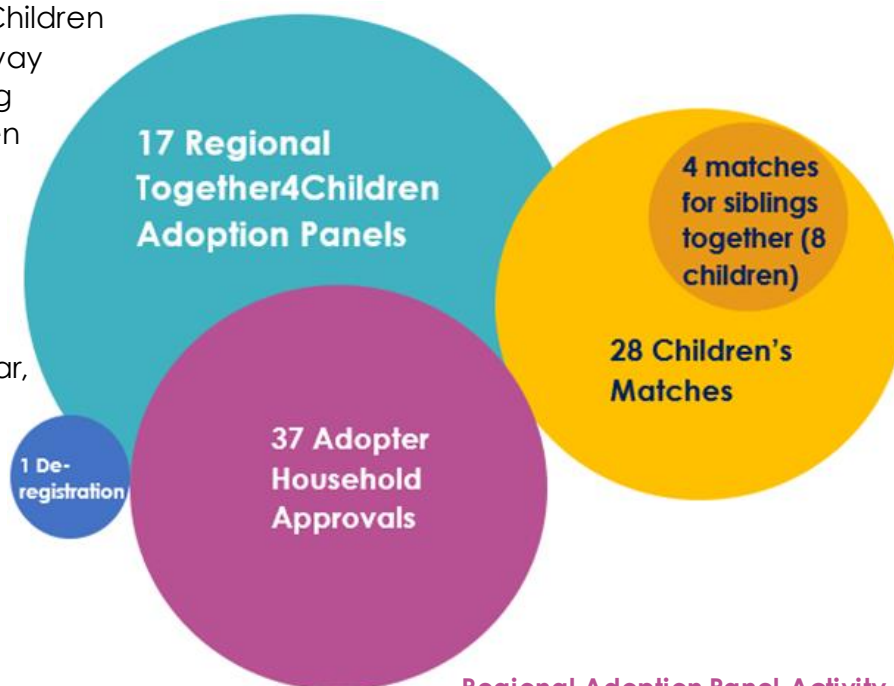
1.6 Together4Children Regional Adoption Panel Activity

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, consistent 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.

Over the reporting period a total of 46 adoption panels were convened across the partnership. We have 3 adoption panels which operate from Shrewsbury, Stafford and Stoke. Since October 2020, we have begun the complex work of bringing the 3 panels together to operate as a fully regional resource. Our Adoption Panels began to hear regional items from December 2020, and we are continuing to develop and integrate the activity of our panels to fully support our regional arrangements.

Because Together4Children was launched half-way through the reporting period it has not been possible to report on the whole year's activity in detail.

As we enter the current reporting year, we will be better able to report on the quality assurance functions of our Panels.



Regional Adoption Panel Activity
December 2020 – March 2021

1.7 Together4Children Regional Adoption Support Delivery

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund – Covid 19 Provisions

In May 2020 the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund made exceptional provisions for Regional Adoption Agencies to apply for funding to provide therapeutic and other support to families impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic and lockdown measures.

From May-December 2020 Together4Children jointly identified, commissioned, and delivered approximately £225,000 of support provisions for adoptive families and Special Guardians on behalf of our 4 partner councils.

Support provided to over 450 families across the region

230+ memberships for support organisations

30+ peer support packages

80 specialist therapeutic interventions

24 therapeutic parenting training packages

4 therapeutic support groups

Adoption UK 'TESSA' and Together4Children

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

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

AdoptionUK
Together we're family

TESSA
Helping adoptive families grow together

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

Locality Permanency Support Activity

Our 3 locality Permanency Support Teams based in Shrewsbury, Stoke and Uttoxeter have been key in implementing and delivering the regional initiatives above.

In addition to this work, we have continued to deliver the vital support that our children and families need by effectively managing and adapting service delivery throughout the pandemic.

During the year our teams completed 349 support assessments and reviews, working directly with children and their families to identify and review their support needs and plan the right interventions.

Our teams made 549 applications to the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund for the specialist therapeutic interventions required to meet needs identified through our assessments. Over the same period, our teams supported over 1400 'Post Box' arrangements, facilitating and supporting the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive parents.

Throughout the year our teams have continued to deliver other important activities to support adopted children and their families including support groups and therapeutic parenting courses.



“The course has helped massively, with all your tips and knowledge and putting it into everyday context that makes it more understandable. I know as a family we’ve had a lot less issues.... and I’m sure it’s because I’m now more equipped with my little tool kit to understand what [my child] needs.”

Feedback from a parent who attended our 'Two Hands' Therapeutic Parenting Course
March 2021

1.8 Together4Children Financial Information 2020-2021

Overall expenditure on central partnership functions was £771,621 for the period 2020-2021. This delivered a £78,092 underspend due to some staffing vacancies across the partnership from the point of go-live and some savings against panel costs and other operational expenses.

	2020-21 Budget	2020-21 Outturn	Variance
Central Permanency Hub	771,621	693,529	- 78,092

During the second half of the year, we have successfully recruited to vacant positions within the central hub. Additional underspend will be utilised to build capacity across our regional adoption panels and support our functions in relation to the 'adoption agency adviser' role.

Locality Permanency Hubs			
Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin	863,540	957,095	93,555
Staffordshire	1,248,470	1,209,186	-39,284
Stoke-on-Trent	676,910	654,181	-22,729
Total	2,788,920	2,820,462	31,541

Costs for the Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin locality hub (based in Shrewsbury) are shared across the two Councils under arrangements that preceded the Together4Children Partnership. The overspend totalling £93,555 reported for 2020-2021 relates to staffing costs and was identified as a cost pressure from the outset of the financial year. A proportion of this overspend will be offset against payment for therapeutic interventions (via the Adoption Support Fund) delivered by practitioners in the locality hub.

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

1.9 Annual Plan and Actions to Address Performance and Capacity Issues

Over the course of 2020-2021 several performance and capacity issues have arisen across the partnership. We have taken short-term action have been to address issues as necessary.

Following this report, and the analysis and review of the first operational period of Together4Children, we will set out our detailed plans to improve performance and address capacity issues over the coming year in our annual plan. The Together4Children Annual Plan will be published in July 2021 and will set out actions in relation to the following areas:

- Target recruitment activity to ensure enough enquiries from potential adopters who can meet the needs of our children.

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

Changes in policy and legislation applicable to the Together4Children Agreement

During the Covid 19 pandemic partner councils have jointly agreed how, and to what extent, we would implement the flexibilities introduced through the government's emergency legislation in relation to adoption [Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020].

Elements of the amended regulations have been used sparingly, and only when necessary, to ensure the continuation of service delivery.



Scott Crawford
Head of Together4Children

June 2021

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Part 2 – Partner LA Annual Report

This section of the report sets out the activity and performance of the adoption agency in relation to Shropshire children who had a plan of adoption during 2020-2021 and those who were adopted within the longer-term Adoption Scorecard Indicators (2018-2021).

Shropshire Children 2020-21	
No. of Children for whom an ADM Decision (Plan of Adoption) was made	25
No. of children Placed for Adoption	10
No. of Children for whom an Adoption Order was granted	8

2.1 Children Placed and Timescales

- Importance of timeliness in securing children’s permanency
- Impact of Covid 19 and reduced numbers of children placed. Delay in courts and increased timescales due to a range of factors.

Local A10, A2 & A3 Indicators – in year and 3-year trend

Please see part 1.2

There has been a significant increase this year in the number of Shropshire children referred to the adoption service, 61 compared to 29 the previous year. Referrals of children have included larger sibling groups which consist of:

- 1 sibling group of 3 children
- 4 sibling groups of 4 children.

For 1 of these sibling groups it has been decided that one of the children is not suitable for adoption.

There are a number of sibling groups of 2 children and the other children referred are single children. Children are referred to the Adoption Service where assessments are still ongoing regarding the feasibility of rehabilitation to the birth family or birth relatives, or assessments of their therapeutic needs. These assessments can often be protracted or take some time to arrange (particularly psychological assessments). This can mean that children referred to the Service at an early stage in their “Looked After” journey may not be placed for adoption until the court process has concluded. This can be a significant period of time from when they were first referred, or they may never be adopted at all.

In total, 26 children have received an ADM decision as suitable for adoption this year. This is an increase from the previous year when 23 children received an ADM decision.

Of these children, there are 8 females and 18 males. 9 children are single children, 5 children are sibling groups of 2 (1 child’s sibling received an ADM the previous year) 2 sibling groups of 3 children and 1 sibling group of 4. All children are white British.

19 of the children who have received an agency decision are waiting for placement orders and as yet, none of their plans have changed away from adoption.

There have been 13 Shropshire children placed for adoption this year of which:

There are 8 females and 5 males

All 13 children are white British-

10 children were in the 0-4 age group

2 children in the 5+ age group.

5 children were placed for adoption with their foster carers and 1 child was placed FFA and subsequently successfully matched with these carers as his prospective adopters.

Timeliness of adoption placements- scorecard and Covid

It is important to note that adoption figures are much better measured over a three-year period. Children placed for adoption often, because of their previous life experiences, take some time to settle into their new families. Adopters need to feel confident and secure that the time is right to lodge an application to adopt. Therefore, some children may be placed in one year and not adopted until the next. These figures are therefore subject to fluctuations year on year and are not an indicator that children are not being placed for adoption.

Covid 19 has had an impact on care proceedings with courts being closed and prioritising safeguarding hearings. Once courts re-opened, they developed virtual court hearings. However, some families were not able to have their proceedings heard virtually and this has caused significant delays for some children in receiving a placement order.

Shropshire & Telford's adoption service have continued, where safe to do so to place children with their prospective adoptive families following an individualised risk assessment for each child. This considers any health issues which places people at a higher risk should they contract Covid. This is pertinent to the adopted child, foster carers and any other adults and or children living in the foster home, adopters and any other adults and or children living in the adoptive home. We have asked prospective adopters to self-isolate for two weeks prior to any face to face introductions happening and where possible for foster carers to do the same. It has not always been possible or practicable for foster carers, their family members and other children living in the foster home to self-isolate and precautions have had to be made carefully around these factors. This has meant that some children have had their moves delayed as a result, whilst other children have moved faster than would be usual practice.

The previously published scorecard for the A1 indicator (now called the A10) the **National Average** for this rolling period (2017-20) was 376 days.

In Shropshire, the average time for children entering care and moving in with an adoptive family was 348 days. The figure for this 3-year rolling period for Shropshire is showing 319 days, this shows we have continued to be under the threshold. However, early indicators for the current 12 months are starting to show an increase in our timescales.

Five children were being adopted by their foster carers, as a result of high levels of staff sickness in the team in the previous year, means that foster carers had to wait to be allocated to a social worker to complete their prospective adopter assessments. As the children were already placed and settled in these families the impact on the children of this delay was minimal. This has however impacted on our timescales. Other delays have been some children being delayed going to panel for a match with their prospective adopters while waiting for blood borne virus tests to be completed. One child is an older child for whom suitable adopters could not be found within our own resources, we did eventually find a suitable inter-agency family.

The previous 3 year rolling period for the A2 figure, the **National average** between a Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and the Local Authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family was 178 days.

Shropshire performed at 69 days, which is significantly lower than the current figure of 116 days. The figures for this 12-month period however shows that this has risen to 175 days so we can see that delays in 2020-2021 have impacted significantly on the 3-year rolling average. This is both as a result of the Covid restrictions as described above and because of the therapeutic needs of an older child whose introductory period took longer than usual based upon this child's individual needs. Sadly, this child experienced a disruption despite a carefully planned introduction process jointly worked with permanence support.

All adopted children this year have been white British.

There have been 8 Shropshire children adopted this year. There have been delays in court due to covid-19 which has impacted on the amount of time children have waited for their adoption order. This has meant for some children that their adoption order did not get granted during this year.

Of the 8 children who have been adopted:
There are 2 sibling groups of 2 children and 4 single children.
3 females and 5 males
5 children aged 0-4
3 children aged 5+

1 child was placed with his adopters in an early permanence arrangement. This child has subsequently been adopted by these adopters.

2.2 Children Waiting for Adoption

2.2a Children with a Placement Order not yet placed	
No. of single children	3
No. of children who are part of a sibling group	9
Total	12

2.2b Children with a Placement Order not yet placed	
No. of white British children	12
No. of children from ethnic minority backgrounds	0
Total	12

2.2c Children for whom we are actively Family Finding	
No. of single children	1
No. of children who are part of a sibling group	6
Total	7

There are currently 12 Shropshire children waiting with a placement order, eight of whom have been waiting for a significant period. These children include older children, children in sibling groups where it would be detrimental to separate them and a child with significant health needs. There is a sibling group of two older children whose plans had changed to SGO with their foster carers however the foster carers have now decided to adopt and are in assessment. While this has created some delay, which will show in the figures the outcome for these two children is positive and there has been no changes of primary caregivers for the children.

While there are some delays in finding adoptive families for some children, there is a back story to each child's family finding journey that explains the reasons for any delay. Mainly delays are around finding the right adoptive families for children deemed 'harder to place'. Family finding for older children and children in sibling groups of 3 or more creates additional challenge and will often require family finding outside of the area or region. Some prospective adopters feel it is too challenging to take a sibling group of more than two children. Many prospective adopters will have little or no prior experience of parenting and therefore taking a large sibling group may be too daunting a task to consider. There continues to be a national shortage of adopters who want to adopt 3 children or more in a sibling group. Despite children being 'harder to place' the service has worked hard to identify a match, which can take longer, however the efforts undertaken demonstrate ambition for adoption plans to be achieved.

Of the other 4 children waiting with a placement order, 3 have matches identified and are waiting to go to panel. The fourth child had a match identified but this plan changed as there is now an unborn sibling and we are looking for adopters who can

provide an adoptive placement for both children with the youngest child being placed for early permanence.

2.3 Placement Disruptions

One child has experienced an adoption disruption. This child is an older child placed as a single child with adopters approved by a Voluntary Adoption Agency in an interagency placement. This disruption happened prior to the Together 4 Children Partnership going 'live'. A disruption meeting was held and key themes and learning for the agency have been identified.

Research into adoption disruptions and breakdowns has shown that there are some key factors that make the risks of disruption higher, such as the age of the child when placed for adoption, the nature of attachments, multiple foster placement moves and/ or maltreatment by birth family members. These risk factors need to be taken into consideration alongside adopters predicted capability through the assessment process of being able to respond to children who may have some of these risk factors.

It is important to note that placing children who are deemed 'harder to place' for adoption comes with a degree of risk. Therefore, it is important to warn against expectations that placement disruptions will never occur. Together4Children are ambitious for our children and will seek to find homes for children with 'harder to place' characteristics wherever possible.

Placing older children for adoption, for example, presents a range of challenges which research and experience tells us increases the potential risks of placement disruption.

2.4 Children where Plans Changed Away from Adoption.

Plans changed away from adoption (following the Agency Decision) for a total of 1 child in the year 2020-21.

The reasons for the changes in the plans were:

1. 1 x plans changed to Long Term Foster Care
2. 0 plans changed to Special Guardianship
3. 0 plans where the Placement Order not granted (outcome e.g. children returned to birth parents etc.)

2.5 Assessment & Approval of Suitable Adoptive Families

2.5a Locality Hub Assessment Activity & Performance	Target	2020/21
No. of Adoption Households completing Stage 1		38
No. of Adopter Households completing Stage 2		33

Percentage of Adopter Households completing Stage 1 in Time (2 months)		0%
Percentage of Adopter Households completing Stage 2 in Time (4 months)		63%
Percentage of full assessments (Stage 1 + Stage 2) completed in < 6 months		33%

This year we have approved 33 prospective adopter households which is 6 more than in the previous year. We have had 2 prospective adopter households that decided after they started stage 2 that they did not want to proceed. 2 further prospective adopter households where we have had concerns about their suitability during their assessment and have advised that we will need to complete a brief report for panel for advice about how to proceed. Both families have asked for more time to decide whether to proceed to panel or to withdraw.

Of the 33 approved, there are 6 prospective adopter households that were fostering the child/children in their care. And 6 prospective adopters who were 2nd or 3rd time applicants.

63% of adopter assessments were achieved within the timescale of 4 months. Others that didn't, required more time for assessment, had delayed panels to allow a match to take place. One assessment was delayed at the adopter's request because of bereavement.

Of the adopters approved this year:

15% of adopters approved this year are single adopters. This is slightly lower than last year when 18% were single adopters.

3% of adopters approved this year are LGBT which is a much lower number than the 12% last year.

This year 18% of adopters approved are of an ethnicity other than white British this figure is slightly higher than last year of 16%

Achieving the timescale of 8 weeks during stage 1 has been a significant issue for the team this year as a direct result of the Covid 19 pandemic. Many businesses and other local authorities have resorted to working from home. GP surgeries have been closed and these have significantly impacted upon our ability to obtain checks and medicals. We have used an independent GP for some adopter medicals and used the temporary relaxing of adoption regulations for some others however as we don't already have these systems in place in Shropshire it hasn't been a resource we have been able to use readily or easily. We have evolved our systems through the pandemic to reach businesses and other local authorities by sending emails for checks and references for those working at home to enable us to manage getting checks back in a more timely way however with local authorities it means having a direct contact with each local authority who we can email and this has proven to be more of a challenge.

Initial visits and Assessment visits to prospective adopters have been held in the main virtually using the regulatory flexibilities with a minimum of one face to face visit to the prospective adopter's home. More if the prospective adopters have children so that children can be visited face to face to talk about their wishes and feelings about adoption and to discuss their lived experiences as a child in that family. On these occasions, a risk assessment has been completed before each visit.

At the end of March 2021, we had 22 families approved and waiting, of these 11 have a child or children identified as a potential match and are either waiting for placement orders to be granted or are waiting to attend matching panel.

During 2020-2021 we have matched 28 adopters with 35 Shropshire and Telford children. We have also supported 2 of our approved adopters to be matched with 2 children from other Local Authorities and one family have had 2 children placed for early permanence from Stoke on Trent. This year we have placed some children with adopters approved by other adoption agencies, both other Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

In Shropshire we have placed 2 children with external adopters who were approved by VAA's. For Telford, we placed 4 children with adopters who were approved by VAA's and other Local Authority Adoption Agencies. These children have all been children deemed 'harder to place'. The number of children placed with external agencies this year has been far lower than last year when 11 Telford children were placed with VAA's or adopters approved by other local authorities.

Staffing

The adoption assessment and support team has experienced two long term members of staff who have left the team due to retirement this year and one senior social worker has taken maternity leave. We held 3 social worker vacancies in the team for some time during last year due to the embargo on recruitment during the staff consultation period.

We have now successfully recruited to all the posts in the team with some positive appointments. One social worker has stepped up to a senior position to cover the maternity leave and this post is being covered by a part time agency worker. The most recent appointment is due to join the team in early April at which point we will be fully staffed.

6. Adoption & Permanency Support

Shropshire Locality Hub consists of 1 Team Manager, 1 Senior Social Worker and 3 Part Time Adoption Support Therapists. This year 1 Social Worker has retired from the service. 2 Social Worker posts are currently being recruited to.

Throughout the year Covid 19 has meant that adjustments have been made to the delivery of individual therapeutic support services; therapy sessions have been delivered both online and face to face where safe to do so. Face to face training and social activities have been postponed, whilst virtual peer support services have

been provided across the region through virtual coffee mornings. Working in partnership with the TESSA program has provided access to peer to peer support and adoptive parent groups.

The demand for support services remains high. There have been 196 referrals for support services, 141 assessments have been completed that have resulted in support provisions being provided. There were 142 applications made to the Adoption Support Fund for therapeutic interventions to be delivered in 2020 – 2021 for both children and adult adoptees. A total of £368,588 funding was secured. Funding is claimed in advance of the therapeutic intervention being provided; Covid 19 has had a significant impact on the number of interventions that could be delivered in full.

Together4Children Annual Report 2020-2021 - Performance Summary Briefing

Performance against Key Indicators (A2 & A10)

1. During 2020-2021 the Covid 19 pandemic has had a significant impact on children's services and other critical areas (e.g. Family Courts). This, in turn, has contributed to some significant performance challenges for Adoption Services, which from 28 September 2020 were fully delivered through the Together4Children Partnership.
2. There have been widely reported challenges and impacts on the children's system throughout the year, which will have created delay for some of the children for whom we have been working to achieve permanency. These factors include:
 - Significant delay in Care Proceedings for children caused by capacity issues in the Family Courts.
 - Delays in Care Planning for children created by, for example, extended timescale for specialist assessments due to lockdown restrictions.
 - Delays in being able to place children in their new families due to restrictions and practice issues – especially during the initial national lockdown period.
 - Impacts on the children's workforce (increased sickness absence and practical barriers to undertaking work) and the need to prioritise activity (especially during the initial phases of the pandemic).
3. These factors combined will have had some impact on the 2 key National Performance Indicators which are reported by adoption Services across England. However, because these indicators only report against children for whom an Adoption Order was granted in 2020-21, it mainly represents activity from the preceding year and early part of 2020 (this is the reason why adoption activity tends to be measured across a 3 year average).
4. It is likely that further impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic will be seen in the performance returns for 2021-2022, given that the journeys of children who are adopted from April 2021 will have been impacted by the factors in 2. above.
5. **A10:** This is a national performance indicator which measures the average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (adjusted for foster carer adoptions). A10 is a measure of 'children's system' activity including the time taken for care proceedings to conclude as well as activity undertaken once the court has given authority for a child to be placed for adoption.

All partner councils have experienced a drop in performance against A10 during 2020-2021 and it is likely that factors above will have impacted on the timeliness for some children.

6. **A2:** 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.

3 of 4 Partner Council's have experienced a drop in performance against A2. This will reflect some impacts from the early stages of the Covid 19 pandemic, such as:

- Disruption to Adoption Panels in the earlier part of 2020
 - General practice issues for social work practitioners created by lockdown restrictions.
 - The loss of key activities which support family finding such as national activity days and exchange events during the year.
7. A further significant factor which will have impacted on A2 performance (and therefore A10 performance) relates to the characteristics of the 103 children who were adopted in the reporting period.

Of these children:

- 23 were aged 5+
- 11 were from ethnic minorities
- 28 were in sibling groups placed together

We know from national data that children with these characteristics wait the longest, because it is harder for us to find the right families to meet their needs.

In all, 47% of all the children adopted in the reporting period had what has been referred to as 'harder to place' characteristics. Whilst we are concerned about the time it has taken to find families for some of our children, achieving adoption for these children is a very positive outcome.

8. We are awaiting publication of national data for 2020-2021 to compare and benchmark the impact that we have experienced with the adoption sector nationally.

Actions to Improve Performance

9. Family finding activity was regionalised within Together4Children from October 2020. Since this time a range of actions have been undertaken to improve the timeliness of matching and placing children with their adoptive families.
10. During 2020-21 we have recruited, assessed, and approved significantly more prospective adopters (102) than in previous years. Our approved adopters are available for any child across the region meaning that we have a better chance of finding families who meet the needs of our children quickly, within our own region.
11. We are promoting Early Permanence (EP) with prospective adopters and increasing the numbers of households able to offer early permanence to a child. We are working across the system in partner Council's to promote increased consideration and use of EP.
12. We are reallocating resources and developing regional practice to ensure that we focus on achieving permanence for those children who have waited, or are likely to wait, the longest.
13. We are embedding the 'LinkMaker' tool within regional and pan-regional

family finding practice. This enables our practitioners to access information about all our children waiting and our approved adopters, as well as approved adopters from other Midland's Regional Adoption Agencies and Voluntary Adoption Agencies – improving the likelihood of finding families for our children.

14. We are identifying children earlier where we may not have a potential family within region who are able to meet their needs and taking swift action to gain approval for widening our family finding activity to consider inter-agency adopters.

Together4Children Senior Leadership Team
June 2021

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<u>Committee and Date</u>
Cabinet
10 November 2021

<u>Item</u>
<u>Public</u>

REPORT OF THE CHILDREN'S LOCAL AUTHORITY DESIGNATED OFFICER (LADO) 2020-2021

**Responsible
Officer**

Tanya Miles

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255811

1. Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the activity, data and performance of Shropshire's Local Authority Designated Officer from the 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. This report is for information and no decisions are required.

2. Executive Summary

"Local authorities should put in place arrangements to provide advice and guidance to employers and voluntary organisations and agencies on how to deal with allegations against people who work with children."

Working Together, 2018

The Local Authority is guided by legislation to provide a Local Authority Designated officer who reviews all allegations against professionals who work with children.

The 2020-2021 year has been exceptional due to the Coronavirus pandemic, which has resulted in a number of prolonged lockdowns across the country and regionally, meaning that a large number of organisations weren't operational during this period. For much of the year, most schools were only open for the children of keyworkers or those with specific needs, sports organisations were not running and many voluntary organisations, such as Scouting, could not open. Given the above, it would have been expected that the number of LADO referrals received during this period would have been considerably lower, however although there were 59 less referrals than the 2019/20 year, the difference is marginal (14%) and the figures aren't that dissimilar to previous years.

Other Key Findings include:

- The total amount of contacts during the year is 342 of which 43% did not progress beyond the initial contact stage
- 192 cases were progressed as referrals where some form of investigation was required.
- Just under 50% of all referrals related to allegations of physical abuse.
- Suitability has also remained consistent as the second most frequent reason for referral.
- Over half of the total number of referrals related to staff that work in children's homes
- the number of referrals involving the education sector has reduced considerably. This is most likely to be as a direct result of the fact that for almost 2 out of the 3 school terms in this period, the large majority of pupils were being educated at home.
- Foster carers are the next most frequent occupation resulting in referrals being made.
- Independent Childrens home still remain the most frequent referrers perhaps due to the large number present in Shropshire.
- Mainstream schools are the most frequently represented in education referrals involving teaching staff.
- 150 cases referred to the LADO did not progress beyond the initial contact.
- Of the 192 cases that progressed to an investigation, 46 cases were criminal matters investigated by the police.
- 145 cases resulted in investigations being undertaken by employers.

The full report is attached at Appendix 1.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet is requested to consider the information in this report and support the work of the Local Authority Designated Officer in fulfilling the Council's statutory and regulatory requirements.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

(NB This will include the following: Impact on Children and Vulnerable Adults, Risk Management, Human Rights, Equalities, Community and other Consultation)

- 4.1. Risks to children continue to be managed through the LADO process.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. There is no additional information to be considered.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. The LADO will now be mainly working at home.

7. Background

- 7.1. None

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. None

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. No decision is required from Cabinet, but it is requested that the information is noted

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Cllr Kirstie Hurst-Knight

Local Member

All Members

Appendices

Appendix 1: LADO Annual Report 2020-2021

LADO Annual Report

This is the annual report of LADO activity between April 2020 until March 2021.

Background

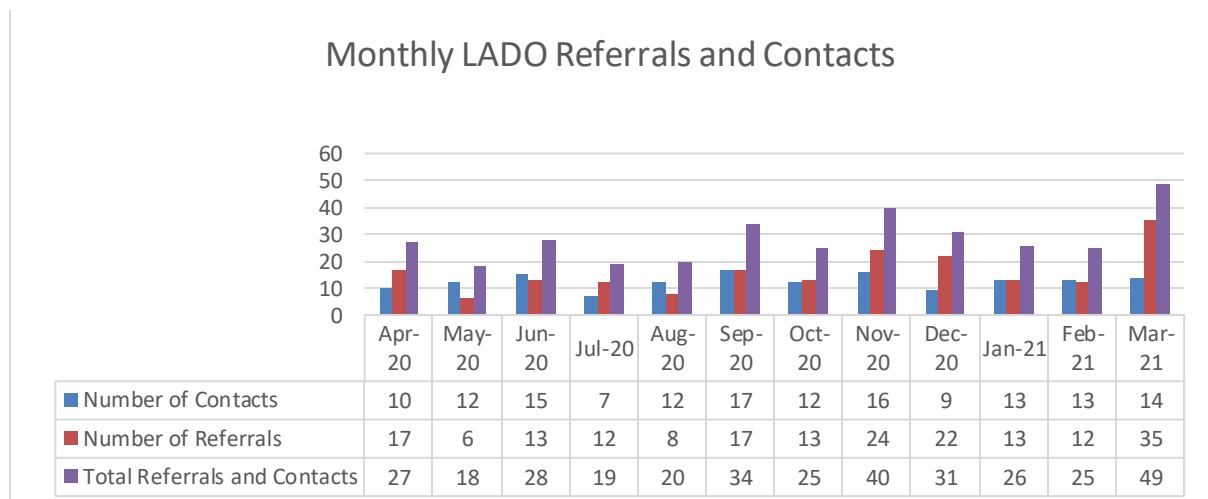
“Local authorities should put in place arrangements to provide advice and guidance to employers and voluntary organisations and agencies on how to deal with allegations against people who work with children.”

Working Together, 2018

Analysis of data and outcomes

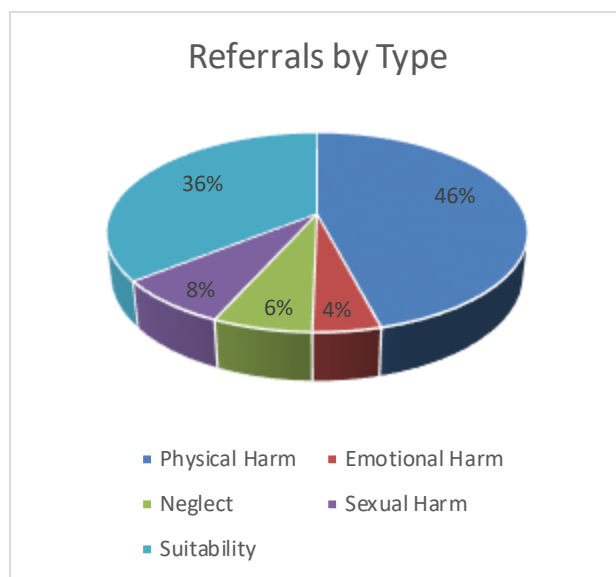
Overall referral figures

The 2020-2021 year has been exceptional due to the Coronavirus pandemic, which has resulted in a number of prolonged lockdowns across the country and regionally, meaning that a large number of organisations weren't operational during this period. For much of the year, most schools were only open for the children of keyworkers or those with specific needs, sports organisations were not running and many voluntary organisations, such as Scouting, could not open. Given the above, it would have been expected that the number of LADO referrals received during this period would have been considerably lower, however although there were 59 less referrals that the 2019/20 year, the difference is marginal (14%) and the figures aren't that dissimilar to previous years.



The total amount of contacts during the year is 342 of which 43% did not progress beyond the initial contact stage. However the remaining 192 cases were progressed as referrals where some form of investigation was required.

Referrals by category of abuse



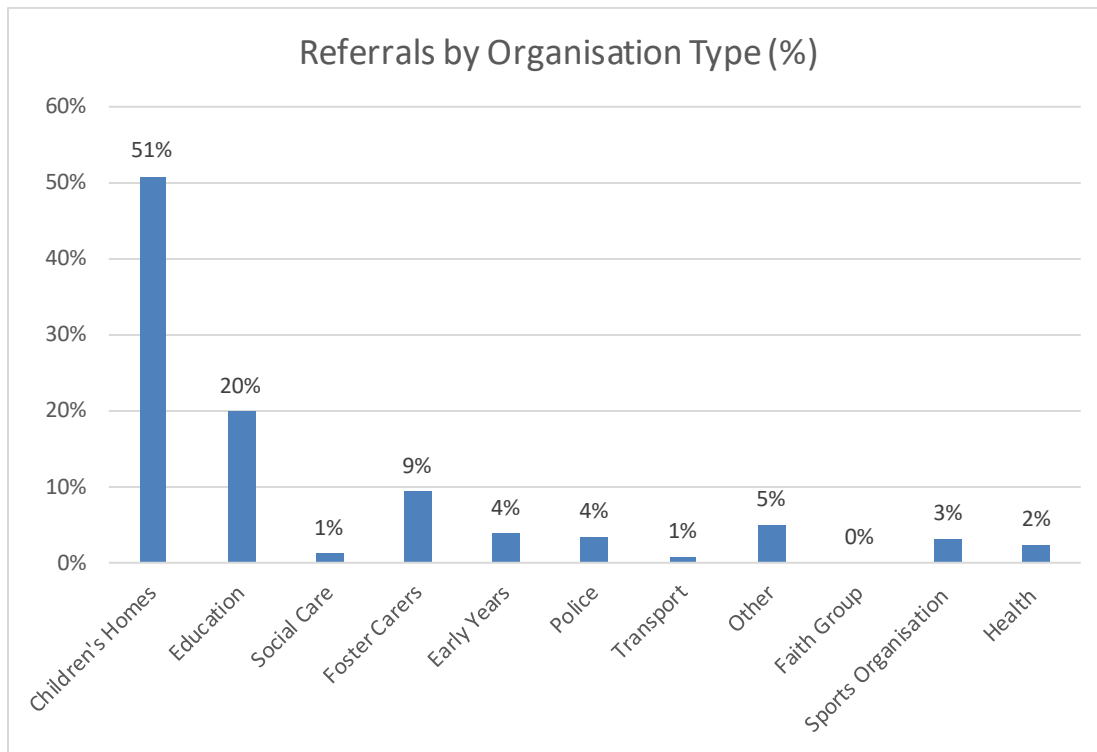
Just under 50% of all referrals related to allegations of physical abuse. This has remained consistent over recent years, and is therefore not unexpected despite the lower overall numbers of referrals. This has always been considered to be the most frequent reason for referral due to the large number of children's homes in the region, in addition to a number of specialist educational provisions where restrictive physical interventions are used. Even though many of the investigations identify no intent by the member of staff to cause harm to a child, the use of such interventions can often be misinterpreted as abusive by the children involved or lead to accidental harm being caused to children.

Suitability has also remained consistent as the second most frequent reason for referral. In December 2020 Working Together to Safeguard Children was also updated, and in relation to Positions of Trust (following an earlier update to Keeping Children Safe in Education) an additional criteria requiring a LADO referral to be made has been added:

A person has behaved or may have behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children.

This change has widened the threshold for referrals and therefore it is likely that this category will continue to increase, possibly leading to this being the most common reason for referral. However the new threshold has had limited impact on this year's figures as it only became operational at the end of the reporting period.

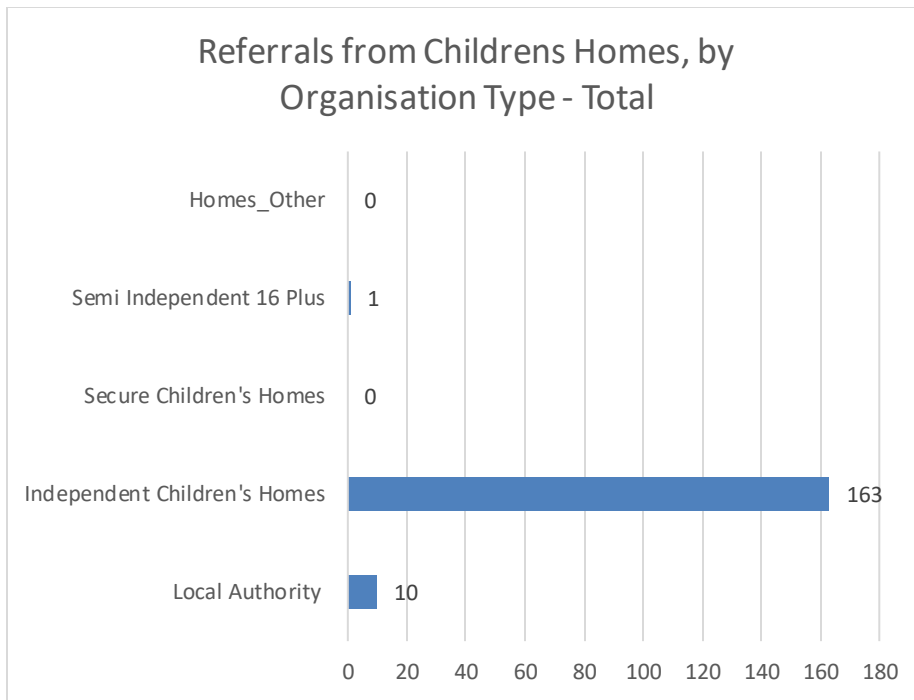
Referral by organisation type



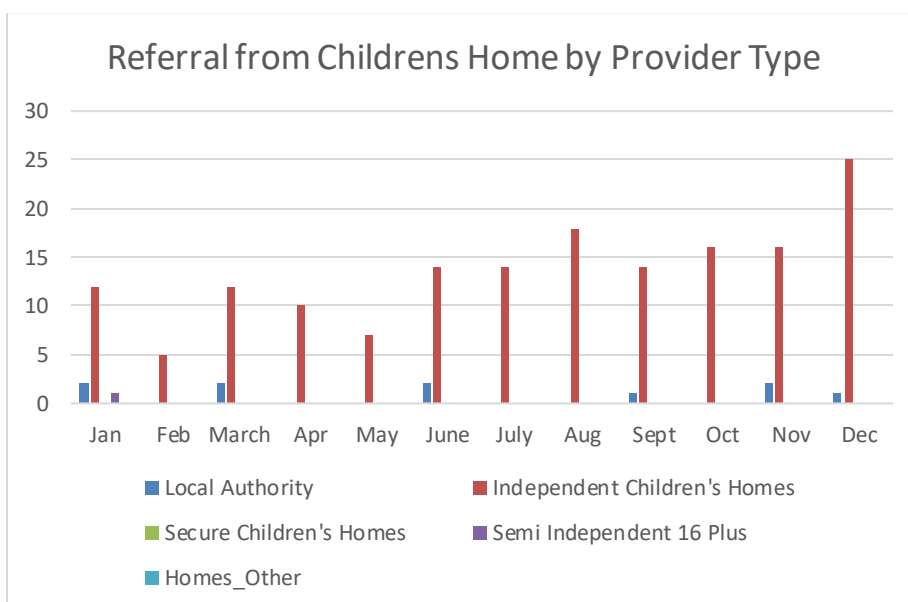
Over half of the total number of referrals related to staff that work in children's homes. This is consistent with previous years, however the number of referrals involving the education sector has reduced considerably. This is most likely to be as a direct result of the fact that for almost 2 out of the 3 school terms in this period, the large majority of pupils were being educated at home. Foster carers are the next most frequent occupation resulting in referrals being made. The most significant change in the type of organisations being referred is the much smaller than usual number of referrals regarding transport operators. Again this is likely to be due to the impact of the pandemic and fewer numbers of children being transported by bus or taxi to schools.

Children's Homes

As previously identified, referrals involving staff from children's homes are responsible for over half of the total yearly figure for all LADO referrals.



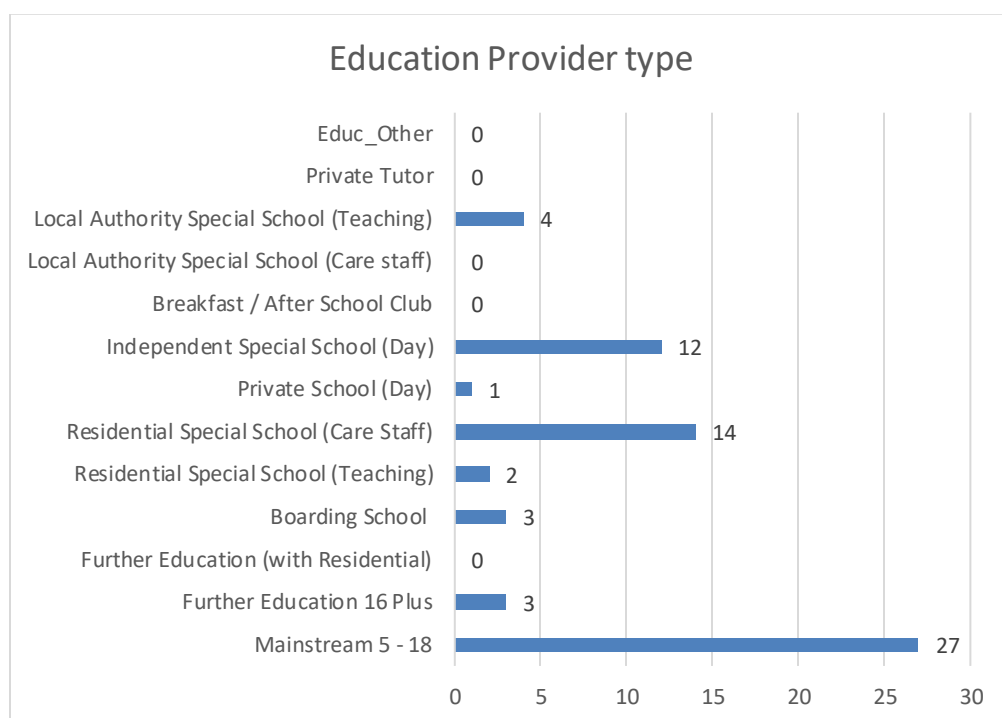
Independent Childrens home still remain the most frequent referrers perhaps due to the large number present in Shropshire, but this is also likely to be due to the cautious approach taken by these organisations in ensuring that all concerns are referred even if allegations have subsequently been retracted or there is evidence prior to referral that the allegation is unfounded.



Perhaps what is unusual about the referral patterns regarding children's homes is the apparent lack of impact of the numerous lockdowns on allegations being made. The monthly

referrals are relatively consistent throughout the year and in fact the months with the least referrals were in the months where there were limited external activities able to take place, and in fact when some homes were on complete lockdown with staff and children self isolating in the homes together. It appears therefore that for many of the children living in residential settings, the significant limits on activities that could be undertaken did not result in incidences where allegations were subsequently made.

Education Sector



Mainstream schools are the most frequently represented in education referrals involving teaching staff (27), however if the referrals involving care staff from specialist school provisions (14) are added to the referrals regarding teaching staff from specialist provisions (18) they account for the majority of education referrals. This is likely to be due in part to the needs of the pupils being supported there, however I would also acknowledge that due to the lockdowns in place there were more specialist provisions still offering face to face educational provision than mainstream settings.

Initial Action

As mentioned above, 150 cases referred to the LADO did not progress beyond the initial contact. The reasons for this are varied, however in the majority of cases, the LADO criteria was either not met, or following some additional basic fact finding taking place it was identified that the allegations were unfounded. It has continued to be the case that some

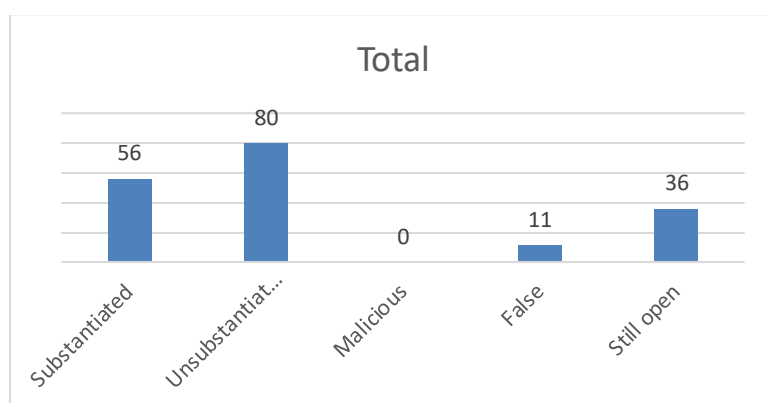
employers would prefer to make a LADO referral to ensure an independent view on a matter, even if the threshold is not met.

Of the 192 cases that progressed to an investigation, 46 cases were criminal matters investigated by the police. 145 cases resulted in investigations being undertaken by employers. In some cases employer investigations took place following the conclusion of a police investigation, where decisions could then be made on the “balance of probabilities” rather than the higher criminal threshold of “beyond reasonable doubt”.

Only 22 LADO Joint Evaluation Meetings took place during the 2020/21 year however 50 strategy meetings were held which were attended by a LADO, which then negated the need for a separate LADO meeting to take place. However many cases were not complex enough to require a JEM and agreements were reached outside of a formal meeting setting about the most appropriate type of investigation required.

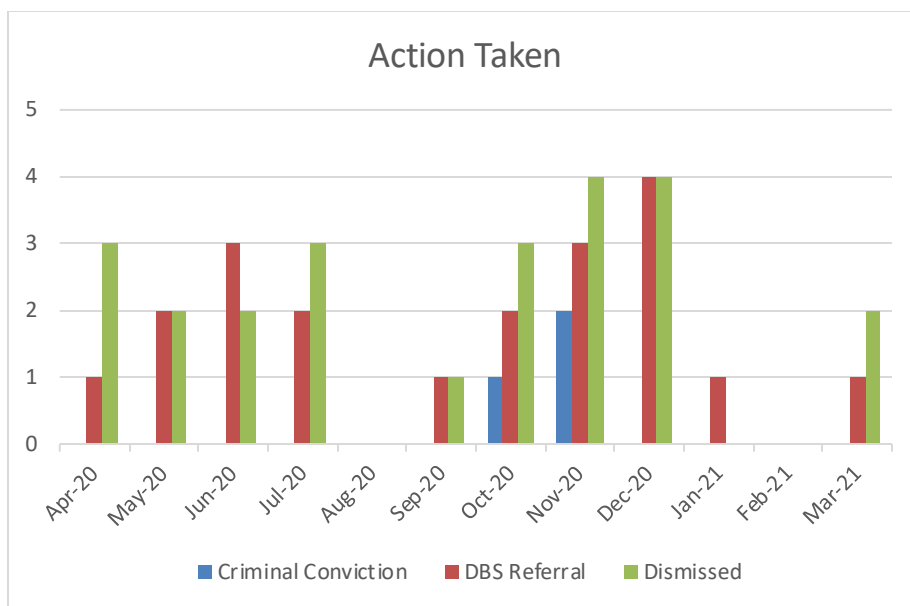
Final outcome

The chart below identifies the final outcomes of those cases accepted as LADO referrals.



A large number of referrals concluded with the allegations being unsubstantiated (41%). Despite investigations having taken place, there was insufficient evidence to confirm whether or not an event had taken place. However in many of these cases, the case summary may provide additional information which would support if there was considered to be any concern about the actions of the professional involved. In addition, despite an allegation concluding as unsubstantiated, further action could still be taken, for example by way of additional training or supervision being provided.

56 cases (29%) concluded as being substantiated. In some cases however it was not considered that there was any evidence of intent to cause harm to a child. For example, a child may have sustained some superficial injury from a physical intervention, however the restraint was considered to be reasonable and proportionate in that situation. Some of the cases that were substantiated were considered to be so serious however that further action was taken (see below).



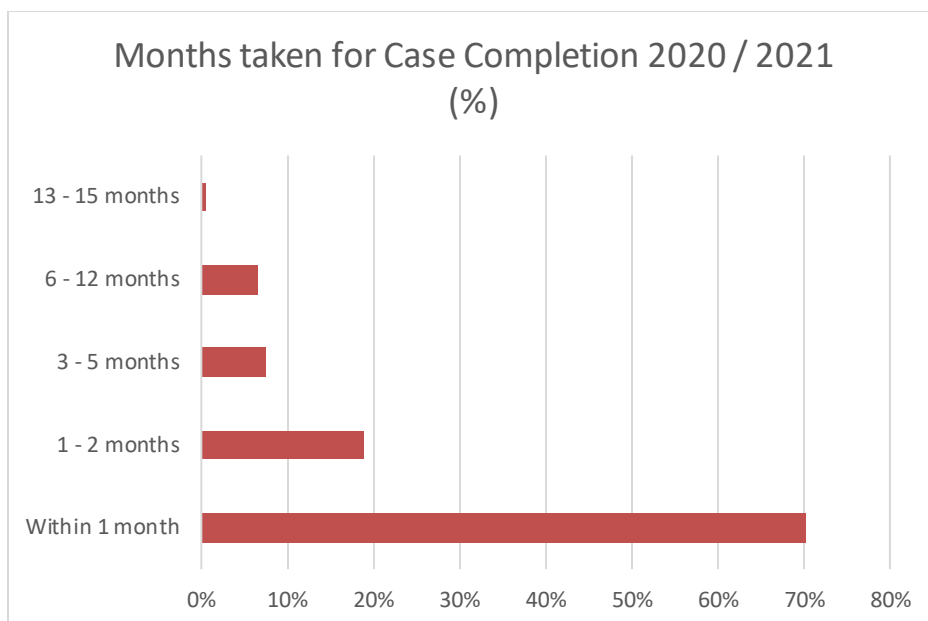
24 people in positions of trust were dismissed from their roles and 20 DBS referrals were made. 3 people received police convictions during this time.

36 cases remain open at this time. Some cases are still being investigated by the police, and in other cases, the outcome of further actions by the relevant regulatory bodies is still under consideration. Some organisations have been working with severely depleted staff over the pandemic and therefore investigation processes have been more prolonged than would be usually expected. For the cases still open, the LADOs have remained in regular contact with those agencies undertaking the investigations, to ensure that the process of investigation is as quick as possible. The impact of protracted investigations on the subject cannot be underestimated and part of the LADO role is to ensure that people who are under investigation are adequately supported. In addition, in cases where there are named children involved, appropriate support also needs to be considered for them during the investigation process.

Timescales

There is no specific legislation that determines the timescales within which a LADO referral must reach its resolution. However previous guidance recommended that 80% of cases should be resolved within one month, 90% within 3 months and all but the most exceptional of cases should be completed within 12 months.

The chart below shows the timescales for LADO cases to be resolved in Shropshire during the 2020/21 year.



Only 70% of cases were resolved within one month, however 89% of cases were concluded within two months. Although the initial figure falls slightly short of the recommended timescales, the majority of cases are dealt with as suggested by 3 months. Most cases investigated by the police take many months, and in some cases years, to conclude. The length of time that it takes for forensic analysis of a person's electronic devices to be provided is increasing year on year, and in addition, many court cases have been adjourned due to the strain on the criminal justice system of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Despite the unprecedented year that has been experienced internationally, the LADO picture in Shropshire has not been vastly dissimilar to recent years. There has been a small decrease in the number of referrals, however the reasons for referral, the sectors represented and the actions taken following a referral have remained fairly consistent. The ability of the LADOs to undertake direct training / awareness raising with different sectors has been limited, however good communication has remained with partner agencies.

In addition, the Shropshire LADO's have continued to be represented in the regional West Midlands LADO network, which has remained a good support network both in terms of progressing referrals, as well as sharing information where relevant to ensure appropriate safeguarding responses across different local authorities.