

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.