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Together4Children Annual Report April 2021-March 2022

**Responsible
Officer**

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1. Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the activity, data, and performance of the Shropshire Adoption service as part of our Regional Adoption Agency, Together 4 Children (T4C) from the 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. 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 of 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., This is the second annual report for the partnership.

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.

The partnership continues to experience the impact of covid 19, most of the day-to-day business is now undertaken by hybrid working, although face to face events for adopters and children have recommenced.

This year, the partnership, along with other RAA's has worked hard on the following three priority areas as outlined in the national Adoption Strategy.

- 1.) Adoption Recruitment
- 2.) The child's journey
- 3.) Adoption support

In addition, the partnership has secured funding to work pan-regionally on the embedding of early permanence, the impact of this work will be seen in the next reporting year.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 Cabinet is requested to consider the information in this report and support the work of the T4C Regional Adoption Agency 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 Impact on children and vulnerable adults

For children who are unable to remain in their birth family, permanency outside the birth family should be a primary consideration. Adoption provides legal permanency for children and should be considered at the earliest opportunity.

4.2 Risk Management

When a decision is made that a child is unable to be safely cared for in their birth family 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.

4.3 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, we need to ensure we safeguard children through the provision of high-quality adoption placements.

4.4 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.

4.5 Community

Children with a plan of adoption should have the opportunity to remain within local communities. However, whilst it is possible to place most 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.

4.6 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

- 5.1 T4C has a pooled budget which is closely monitored by service leads and the finance business partner for each partner LA. Each Partner LA of T4C contributes an equal share of 25% towards the Head of T4C staffing costs, and any centrally commissioned services.
- 5.2 Prior to T4C's launch, a financial formula was proposed to ensure that local authorities in the Partnership who contributed sufficient approved adopter households to the collective pool were not disadvantaged financially, e.g. by committing the resources required to assess and approve adopters who were then effectively used by other LAs to place their children. In March 2022, the T4C Management Board made the decision to move away from the financial formula which had been developed prior to the Partnership's launch. It was agreed that no financial formula/reconciliation calculation would be applied for the year 2021-2022. The financial year, 2021-2022 provided the first full year cycle of 'intra-regional' placement activity, and this has

allowed the T4C Management Board to review the methodology of the formula to better reflect the key principle above. From 2022-23 onwards, a simple "Contribution vs Demand" model for partnership financial reconciliation will be used. In this model, each Partner LA is expected to contribute sufficient numbers of approved adopter households via their Locality Hub to meet their sufficiency needs within any given year. Where they do not; and draw on the resources of other partners to place their children within the T4C region, the other partners will be compensated through the reconciliation formula.

6 Climate Change Appraisal

Together4Children has enabled four Local Authorities to pool their resources to meet the needs of those wishing to adopt and for children with a plan of adoption. In doing so we have reduced our carbon footprint by reducing mileage and reducing travel times. The partnership continues to look for opportunities collectively to address the overall impact of climate change, for example, the continuation use of hybrid working across all four Local Authorities.

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 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 is currently provided in the locality hub, although there is more activity planned as a joint approach across the partner four Local Authorities.

7.2 Service Growth and Key performance data

There has been an increase this year in the number of Shropshire children with an Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decision that they are suitable for adoption. This is 28, compared to last year's figure of 26.

The service has placed 20 Shropshire children for adoption. Of these 7, (35%) were placed in early permanence arrangements. Early permanence means we can place a child with their prospective adoptive family before the completion of legal proceedings. This is a significant improvement on last year's figures.

8 children have been adopted. At the end of the reporting period, the service was family finding for 9 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. England 3-year average is 445 days. As predicted in last year's annual report, Shropshire's performance has dipped with the 3-year average number of days being 359 compared to last year's 319. However, this is still better than the England average.

A2 measures time between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and the decision for a match with an identified family. National 3-year average is 196 days. Shropshire 3-year performance was 127 days compared to a figure of 116 days last year. This continues to be lower than the national average.

There have been no placement disruptions for Shropshire children this year. This is a positive outcome and means that all children have remained settled and secure with their new permanent family.

The service has approved 28 adopter households, compared to 33 the previous year. The drop in number of approvals has been due to some adopters withdrawing from the process late on in their assessment. Despite the fall in number of approvals, more children have been matched with families from within the region, resulting in less inter-agency spend. This is also in the context of an increase of children 0-5 in the care of Shropshire council.

7.3 Future Service Developments

The partnership will continue to support the national Adoption Strategy agenda, with a focus on early permanence, reducing waiting times for children, transitions from foster care to adoption and the need for good quality life story work. Regarding adoption support, the focus for the coming year is on the delivery of therapeutic interventions for children and the support required to develop keeping in touch arrangements between birth family and adopted children.

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

Appendix 1: T4C Annual Adoption Report 2021-22

Appendix 2: T4C Locality Annual Report 2021-22