

London Borough of Merton Council
Merton Children's Social Care & Youth
Inclusion



Permanency Strategy
2020-2022



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Background to the Permanency Strategy:

Merton Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion's Permanency Strategy should be read with the Merton Achieving Permanence Practice Guidance - 2020. The Permanency Strategy sets out the strategic direction for developing and delivering a plan of action for children to achieve permanent homes as early in their lives as possible. This includes permanent placements; reducing placement breakdowns; and achieving stable, safe and sustainable placements that promote all aspects of the child or young person's developmental needs. The plan reflects Merton's high ambition for the standard of care, which is to ensure young people are able to thrive and achieve.

In March 2020, collaborative audits reflected on Permanency, from the first contact to stability of care for a child or young person. These took place across Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion and the findings helped to inform the actions in this Strategy.

Definition of Permanency:

This is creating a home where a child or young person's emotional, physical and legal conditions allow them to feel secure; they have commitment from their carers and their identity is supported. The feeling of security should be consistent throughout the child's adult life.

Permanence for children has three particular aspects:

1. **Legal** - e.g. staying with birth parents who have Parental Responsibility; Adoption; or Court Orders such as a Child Arrangement Order or Special Guardianship Order;
2. **Psychological** - when the child feels attached to an adult who provides a stable, loving and secure relationship;
3. **Physical or environmental** - a stable home environment within a familiar neighbourhood and community where the child's identity needs are met.

Our Aim:

Our aim is to ensure that all children, of all abilities, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and class in Merton achieve a stable home environment as soon as possible and within a maximum timeframe of 14 months from them needing our intervention. Our pledge to Merton children is to hear and respect their views and work towards them achieving their ideal stable home life.

Not all children we engage with will need to be in Merton's care, however all of the children we work with will need to have their permanence needs considered and addressed. This may be in staying with or returning to their family; living with extended family, friends or connected persons through a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or Child Arrangement Order; long term foster care; Adoption; or residential care if this is necessary to meet the child's needs.

Our strategic plan helps to equip our social worker, practitioners, carers, Independent Reviewing Officers, supervising social workers and other professionals to work together

to find stable, safe and sustainable permanent home for Merton's children in a timely manner. We have reviewed children's records; completed thematic reports; spoken with adopters and foster carers; and with children and young people who have care experience, to gain their understanding of permanency.

We have continued to listen to young people and their families, from those that are unaccompanied and have no recourse to public funds to those who have returned to their family, after having been in the care of Merton. We have also gathered information from parents challenged by mental ill health and young people with special educational needs in order to ensure that our strategy is reflective of all families' diversity, cultural, sexual, and social experiences.

This Permanency Strategy will have a direct impact on how we ensure appropriate placements for children who need our care. Signs of Safety and systemic social work approaches are blended in our Merton Practice Model and seek to build on strengths within families and their networks. We focus on families being supported to find their own solutions to difficulties in the first instance. Merton's Family Group Conference service organises family network meetings, including extended family, at the earliest opportunity to support families to care for their children or in some cases to provide an alternative, permanent home.

As an organisation, Merton prioritises the achieving of permanency through robust and regular permanency planning meetings (PPM) for all children who have not achieved or are at risk of not achieving their permanence plan. Senior leaders have oversight of all children through a PPM tracker to ensure plans are delivered in good time for children and complexities, which may impact on achieving permanence, are addressed. A Monthly Permanency Tracking Meeting considers information from the PPM tracker and the Court and Pre-proceedings tracking meeting. Other meetings that contribute to the Permanency Tracking meeting are the Children in Care reviews and Permanency Planning Meetings.

Merton Priorities:

- To ensure children have regular PPMs to progress their plan of permanence until it is achieved.
- Provision of robust oversight of children requiring permanence to ensure timeliness and quality of care, through the use of performance indicators, management tracking systems, and the Independent Reviewing Service.
- Providing timely, well matched permanent placements through increasing our capacity of in-house foster carers, and having good quality permanence reports for children.
- To include birth families in the child's life wherever safe and appropriate for children in care.
- To support birth parents to make changes and mend relationships with children in care in the event reunification may be achieved, either pre or post adulthood if it is in the child's best interest to do so.
- To ensure that children understand their life journey and develop positive narratives about themselves through quality, inclusive life story work.
- Improving staff knowledge of permanency through training and supporting social workers to have systemic conversations with families in practice. This should lead to improved outcomes for children and families.

- Continuing a cycle of learning to ensure our practice is developing and evolving to meet the needs of our children. This includes feedback from children and families, audits, learning reviews, learning from others and national guidance and research.

Outcomes of Permanency Planning:

Reunification/Staying at Home:

We are focused on supporting children to live with their birth family whenever it is safe to do so and enabling families to be ambitious in achieving this. We understand that good relationships are crucial and promote this through our Practice Model. Delivering the right service at the right time for sustainable change and offering support at the first instance means children are more likely to remain in their families. If this is not possible we look to the family and extended network for alternative care.

Placements with Family and Friends Carers:

If children are unable to live with their immediate family our priority is to identify a member of their extended family or network to care for them. Genograms and ecomaps are used as direct tools to help families and practitioners to better understand their strengths and systemic functioning. Family group conferences or family network meetings are used at the earliest stage to identify what supports each member could offer to strengthen the family's functioning. These meetings will also work to identify who could provide either short, or long-term care depending on the need of the child and their family. Our Fostering Recruitment and Permanency team undertake connected persons and SGO assessments with an aim of completion in 14-weeks.

Special Guardianship (SGO)

Special Guardianship provides an alternative legal status for children and provides the child with permanency without taking away all of their parent's rights. A special guardian is usually a family member or family friend. SGO's can be granted as an outcome of court proceedings initiated by Merton or through private law applications. SGO's are also an option for foster carers who have children settled in their care and who can meet their needs without state intervention.

Adoption

Adoption is a way of providing the security, permanency and love of a new family when it is not possible for a child to be raised by their birth parents or within the birth family. Adoption is a legal process which transfers parental responsibility from the child's birth parents to their adoptive parents.

Permanent Foster Care

Permanent foster care means that a child or young person lives with a committed foster carer until they reach adulthood. Being brought up by a consistent carer over time provides a greater sense of belonging within a family. If a child does need to move to other carers, their family network will always be considered to see if it is safe and appropriate to achieve permanence with them.

Staying Put Arrangements

Staying Put arrangements are positive outcomes for our care experienced young people who are approaching 18 years-old. Changes to the Leaving Care Act have enabled young

people to remain with carers longer, this means a young person has a stable placement with their permanent foster carers who are their forever family. Merton aims to have sustainable placement agreements for all of our children before the age of 18 years. The increase in Staying Put arrangements has highlighted the need for more foster carers to be recruited who can meet the needs of older children entering care for the first time.

Routes to Permanence:

The plan for permanence can take different routes and the outcome should always be that the child/young person feels safe, supported, and secure and they are encouraged to achieve their full potential. The aim is to support children and young people by minimising the number of moves before they achieve their permanent home. Young children can experience early permanence through Concurrent Planning Placements and Foster to Adopt placements. Merton will consistently parallel plan all options until the child/young person achieves permanency.

Concurrent Planning Placements

Concurrent Planning is where a child moves from their birth parent(s) to their prospective permanent family while reunification is still being pursued. These arrangements can be made for a child of any age.

Fostering to Adoption

Foster-to-adopt describes assessed and approved prospective adopters who are also approved as foster carers so they can care immediately for children they would like to adopt. This would be before the Agency Decision Maker and Courts have formally decided a child can be placed for adoption.

Foster-to-adopt carers most often care for babies where there have been previous children adopted and the family history and identified risks are such that adoption is more likely than not. Some prospective adopters become foster-to-adopt carers so the brother or sister of a child they have already adopted can join them. Foster-to-adopt arrangements can also be used for older children and brother and sister groups.

Parallel Planning

All efforts should be made to safely keep or return a child to their parent or carer. However, where this may not be possible alternative plans will be made in parallel to supporting them to live with their birth family.

Parallel planning is essential especially when assessments of parents are being completed and the outcome is not known. The child must not experience drift in achieving permanence and, if the child is unable to be cared for by their guardian or parent, other family and friends, adoption or permanent fostering should be considered.

Family network meetings and Family Group Conferences should be held as early as possible to agree what needs to happen to help the child to return home and within what timescales. Schools and community professionals should be consulted to identify alternative family members where the parents are not open to the involvement of their extended family network.

It is important that Merton, through the Independent Reviewing Officer, continues to hear what children and young people want from a permanent alternative home, which will help the matching processes and support bonding between the permanent carer and child or young person.

- APPENDIX 1 Flowchart to permanency
- APPENDIX 2 Permanence Different Ages
- APPENDIX 3 Initial Permanency Planning Meeting
- APPENDIX 4 Subsequent Permanency Planning Meeting

Permanency Planning Meetings:

Permanency Planning Meetings (PPM) are Merton's core forum for the professional network to develop, reflect on, and progress permanence for children. The child's views, identity and needs are central to the development of their permanence plans.

The meetings are chaired by the Social Work Team Manager and attended by the Social worker and other relevant people in the child's network which may include: a supervising social worker, the foster carer, a family finder, school or virtual school, Children in Care Nurse, CAMHS practitioner, the child's guardian (if subject to court proceedings). The Independent Reviewing Officer also attends as part of monitoring the agreed plan and parallel plan, ensuring the timescales are being met.

The PPM is an opportunity to share all aspects of understanding the child/young person's story through relationships with, and knowledge about them and to better inform the Care Planning to achieve permanency. The professional network are able to make appropriate decisions to optimise the placement options for the child; allowing for any specialist assessments which may be needed for the child or their parents to be commissioned and shared.

The meeting is helpful for professionals to think carefully about a child's permanent placement. It is important to consider some or all of the following:

- Brother and Sister groups
- Children with heightened needs
- Child or young person's developmental needs and ability to form attachments
- Children and young people who have had a number of disrupted living arrangements, both in their families and in care placements.
- The child or young person's identity and profile of a family that would best meet their needs.
- Robustness of the care plan, timescale for, and focus on, the child (as noted in March 2020 audit)

The record of the meeting and all agreed decisions is shared with professionals and placed on the child's record. The information is shared with the Permanency Lead and is entered on Merton's Permanency Tracker.

Other considerations for Permanence Planning Meetings:

- Consideration of the type of order and placement is very important. This is not always the same if the child will be moving to their permanent placement in another country.
- The quality of attachment the child experiences with their parent or carer could determine whether they will be able to adjust to their permanent carers easily and the help they may need to form attachments.
- The foster carer's experience, services available and level of support the future carer may need to support the child or young person.
- The progress of the child's life story work.
- Arrangements for family time based on the needs of the child. This should balance the priority of achieving stability and permanence with the need for identity, belonging and connection with their birth family.
- Child Permanency Reports (CPR) will be used to identify a child's needs, using all assessments of their lived experience and their birth parents life experience. A child focussed chronology; family genogram and ecomap should help inform the CPR. Thorough CPRs underpin better matching and appropriate planning to help the child or young person achieve permanence.

Life Story Work:

Life Story Work is the story of the child's journey, which includes the child's experience within their birth family and encompasses the child's history and ecosystem. Life Story work should include a narrative as well as pictures and other forms of information to help the child understand why they came into care and any subsequent changes. The work should include the child; their birth parents and extended family where appropriate. It should include information collated by parents (where possible), carers, social workers and other key people. Life Story Work should start from the beginning of our interventions with the child and be updated alongside the child as they grow up to help them process and form an accurate narrative of their life journey. Life story work will be recorded sensitively on the child's file using language which empathises with children's birth families and recognises the impact trauma can have on the challenges and decisions adults might face. In exceptional circumstances, where it is not appropriate to include the child there must be a plan for sharing the child's life story with them.

Pressures and Challenges to Achieving Permanency in Merton:

Access to high quality early intervention services; well managed assessment and permanency planning; a stable and highly skilled workforce and sufficiency of alternative permanent care arrangements are the key factors which underpin the timely achievement of permanency for children and young people.

Achieving workforce stability across the social care sector is a nationally recognised challenge in supporting good outcomes for children. Between the period 12 to 18 months ago, Merton Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion experienced multiple changes within its senior leadership team which impacted on stability of the wider workforce and the pace of permanence practice being developed. The permanent senior leadership team is now stabilising the system and driving permanency practice improvements.

Nationally, children are entering care at a later age, including unaccompanied asylum seeking and separated children and young people who are remanded. Merton has

reflected carefully on the challenges in identifying placements and finding permanency for this age group. Our Sufficiency and Fostering Recruitment Strategies include a focus on securing permanency options for teenagers who may present challenging behaviour or have experienced difficulties living with their birth families as adolescents. Our fostering recruitment campaigns are focussed on identifying carers for teenagers and asylum seeking children.

Merton implemented a blended practice model of Signs of Safety and systemic social work approaches from September 2016. These strengths and relationship-based approaches are supporting staff to work more intensively with children and their families; providing a common language to frame harm, safety and our theory of change with families;

The Independent Reviewing Service (IRO's) has oversight of all plans for children in care and works with social workers and professionals to progress plans in children's timescales - this service has a stable workforce. IROs are strengthening their approach to positive challenges as part of the Dispute Resolution Processes (DRP) with the social worker, team and department if a child's plan is not being progressed.

Merton works towards meeting all children's placement needs, including the small number of children who require specialist intensive fostering; residential care or shared care with their parents. We recognise that some families caring for children with additional needs will require care placements to support their children to remain within or connected to their family network. Family and friends are also encouraged to provide, where possible, shared care giving a consistent adult in the child's life. Specialist placements are not always local to where the child's family lives and Merton is considering how to meet these needs.

Merton is proud of the successful transition to the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt London South (ALS). Senior leaders are engaged in the strategic oversight and operational development of this partnership and anticipate improved identification of forever families and better matches for our children who need permanency through adoption. The ALS Board is sighted on the delays in securing permanency through adoption for children from black and minority ethnic groups; children with additional needs and brothers and sister groups has endorsed an adopter recruitment strategy focussed on families with black and ethnic minority heritage.

Areas of Development and Action Plan:

1. Permanency in the child's timescale				
Practice	Action Required	Professional Lead	Date to Complete	Evaluation Criteria and Outcome
Identify Merton's children most of risk of not achieving permanence at an early stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permanence Planning Meeting and Action plan led by social worker, overseen by IRO and involving all relevant professionals and parents where relevant 	Social worker and IRO	Review each quarter	Tracking will evidence that plans are being progressed in the child's timescale
Six weekly Permanency Planning Meetings for - children within PLO processes; children in care; and those in Long-Term placements needing matching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team managers will chair PPM's 6 Weekly The consistency of meetings will be monitored through the Children's Permanence Tracker; which reviews the progress of all children in care or likely to become looked after 	<p>Team Managers</p> <p>Heads of Safeguarding and Children in Care Services will monitor and ensure meetings are taking place and actions completed</p>	Reviewed Monthly at Permanency Tracking Meetings	<p>PPM's will become more regular and evidenced on the Children's Permanence Tracker.</p> <p>Children's plans will be reviewed regularly by professionals to prevent delay.</p> <p>Children will achieve their permanent sustainable home within 14 months where possible.</p>
For each child's permanence plan to be informed by a child focused chronology and genogram/ecomap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent template for Chronologies to be used, supported by guidance. Genograms to include the child's network and inform 	Heads of Safeguarding and Children in Care Services	Reviewed Quarterly at the Permanency Tracking Meetings	Chronologies and genograms will be standardised and reflect the child's needs and the members of their networks

	<p>reviews of the permanence plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing and roll out of template and guidance to Social workers and managers • Merton procedures and guidance to be updated to specify expectations about frequency and timescales for updating 			
Address delay and potential drift in care planning processes, CPR's and permanency meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Reviewing Officers continue to Raise Dispute Resolution Processes when necessary • Monthly Tracking meetings will monitor progression of plans 	IRO	Review each Quarter	Where appropriate DRP's are raised and outcomes recorded on the child's file. DRP's will be informally tracked in the monthly permanency tracking meetings.
Together or Apart Brother and Sister group assessments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular assessment of children's placement needs with their brother/sister - together and apart • Revisiting families who are caring for individual brother and sister groups to assess whether they can be placed together or at a later date; preparing families to become more resilient for children. 	Team Managers and Social Workers IRO's	Ongoing	Brother and sister groups are assessed and the assessment is revisited with the view to explore whether SGO carers/adopters could be supported to have children from similar brother/sister groups.
Life Story Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing a record of the child/young person's lived 	Social Worker, Foster Carers (if applicable)	Qualitative sample review annually	The child/ young person has a clear

	<p>experience and helping them gain an understanding of their journey to adulthood.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-production of the record with the child/young person 	<p>and CAMH's worker, ALS Social Worker, Permanent Carer, Birth Parent and Family Members</p>		<p>understanding of their narrative; with pictures of and information about people with whom they have shared life experiences. Life Story continues when a child/young person achieves permanency.</p>
<p>Improve social work staff understanding of routes to permanency and the Permanency Planning Meetings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training to be delivered to social work staff • Initial Care Plans to court highlight alternative routes to permanency 	<p>Permanency Lead and Independent Reviewing Officers</p>	<p>Reviewed each quarter through the Permanency Tracking Meetings</p>	<p>Independent Reviewing Officers and Permanency Lead to deliver training. Evidence of learning will be seen in PPM's and Initial Care Plans.</p>
<p>2. Providing timely, well matched permanent placements</p>				
<p>Engaging and supporting birth parent/s or family members for child/ young person to be reunited with family</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment and management oversight identifies this is the best plan for the child/young person given the child's needs and views • Assessment identified the needs of birth parents or relatives coming forward to offer permanency for the child/ young person • Trajectory for the child is realistic and achievable with the birth family being able to offer safe and stable care for the child/young person 	<p>Team Manager, Social Work, Birth Parent and/or Family Members</p>	<p>Reviewed monthly through Permanency Tracking Meeting</p>	<p>Child remains at home or returns to the parent or family members and continues to meet their milestones. Parent or family member is able to sustain the care of the child or young person with little or no social work intervention and is able to link into community support when needed. The child/ young person feels safe and secure within their family.</p>

<p>Regular updates on Family Finding activity from the Adoption London South (ALS) Social Worker for children referred to their services; especially those with Placement Orders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update of family finding shared at PPM's and with Social Work Teams on a Monthly basis • ALS will produce a quarterly report on outcome of searches for Merton children 	<p>Permanency Lead</p> <p>Family Finder for ALS</p>	<p>Review each quarter</p>	<p>Evidence of permanence secured and timescales.</p> <p>ALS worker and Permanency Lead review and highlight the children who are in need of placements and adoption to relevant HoS.</p>
<p>Continue to improve Placement stability and prevent breakdowns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disruption Meetings to be chaired by IRO when there is a risk of placement breakdown • Track children who have had two placement moves in a 12 month period. • Support plans to be SMART, with timeline and be child and carer focused • Placement choice is influenced and informed by education placement stability • Learning from placement breakdowns. 	<p>IRO</p> <p>Team Manager and Social Worker</p> <p>Team Manager and Social Worker</p> <p>Team Manager and Social Worker</p> <p>Permanency Lead, IRO Manager and Children in Care and 14+ Team Managers</p>	<p>Review each Quarter</p>	<p>Permanence Plan reviewed and updated.</p> <p>For children in care for more than a year there is evidence of reunification reassessed.</p> <p>Foster carers and Special Guardians Support plans are SMART and created with them.</p> <p>Briefings provided to staff to inform of what works for placement stability</p>

<p>Improving stability and permanency for children by advocating for Foster carers to consider an SGO; or return home where significant changes have been made by carers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Workers and their managers to review the care plan of children in permanent foster placements and confirm whether the carers are willing and want to apply for an SGO. • Managers and IRO's to review the care plan of placements of children who have been in the same foster placement for two or more years. 	<p>Head of Service, Team Manager and Social Workers - Children in Care Team</p> <p>Team Manager/s and IRO's</p>	<p>Progress report each quarter</p>	<p>Children/ young people in permanent placements achieve security and reduced state intervention by SGO.</p> <p>Where SGO is not possible; birth families are reconsidered and assessed as to their ability to offer the child/ young person permanency</p>
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<p>Recruiting Permanent Foster Carers for older children and those where there is a need for permanent foster care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering recruitment strategy to include permanent fostering • Recruit foster carers willing and able to support the communities of children with disabilities and the LGBTQ community to offer safe spaces for them to grow and develop • Fostering recruitment advertising for Permanent foster carers using anonymised profiles of children • Ensure that where possible carers coming forward are assessed to be matched to specific children 	<p>Head of Service, Children in Care and Resources Fostering Recruitment Officer Fostering Recruitment Team Manager and Long Term Fostering Family Finder</p>	<p>Progress reviewed and reported each quarter</p>	<p>Increase in approved Permanent foster carers</p> <p>Named foster carers for children in need of permanent fostering from the LGBTQ and disability community</p> <p>Presentations of anonymised profiles at recruitment evenings.</p> <p>Fostering recruitment strategy to have a plan of yearly action to recruit permanent foster carers.</p>
<p>Developing the strategic approach to residential placements and residential schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying children for shared care arrangements and support their carers to manage their needs 	<p>Heads of Service and Team Managers</p>	<p>Reviewed each Quarter</p>	<p>More children will remain with known carers and significant adults until adulthood as a shared care arrangement</p>
<p>3. Obtaining feedback from staff, children and young people and carers</p>				
<p>Evaluation of practice and impact on permanency for children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merton to continue to audit records with a focus on Permanency 	<p>Quality Assurance Service, Managers and Senior Managers</p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>Findings will inform service delivery and practice improvement.</p>
<p>Hearing the voice of children and young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work undertaken to involve our Children in Care council to understand what they think we 	<p>Participation Lead, IRO Manager, Team</p>	<p>December 2020</p>	<p>Voice of the child will be evident in Permanence Planning Meetings and</p>

	need to do to improve practice and deliver permanency.	manager – Children in Care		will inform strategic planning for placements
Obtaining feedback from Foster carers who moved children on to permanency or offered permanency to Merton's children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The LTF family finder and Fostering Supervision Team manager to gather and evaluate feedback from foster carers as to what works in securing permanency for children and young people 	LTF family finder/ Fostering Supervision Team Manager/ Permanency Lead	December 2020	Feedback would inform the recruitment process for permanent foster carers and provide advice to the Fostering Network for other carers considering this option.

References:

Legal Framework Guiding Practice:

- Children Act 1989
- Adoption and Children Act 2002, 2004
- The Care Planning Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010
- The Fostering Services Regulations 2011
- The Special Guardianship Regulations 2005
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)
- Court orders and pre-proceedings For Local Authorities (2014)
- Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Review (2015)

Policy and Procedures Guiding Practice:

- Achieving Permanence Practice Guidance 2020
- CoramBAAF, 'Siblings Together or Apart' 2009
- Public Law Outline (2014)