



**WOKINGHAM**  
**BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Children in Care  
Permanency Strategy  
2021 - 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Stability and a sense of belonging are key indicators of future positive life chances for children and young people and provide the best chance of recovery for those who have experienced abuse and neglect. In light of this, achieving permanence for children is a key goal for child and family social work in Wokingham.

The children and young people who are looked after by Wokingham Borough Council are amongst some of the most vulnerable groups in our community. As their corporate parents, it is the Authority's responsibility to keep them safe and to make sure that their experiences of being in local authority care are positive and improve their on-going life chances. It is the responsibility of both our Elected Members and our Children's Services staff to approach this parenting role with as much passion and commitment as any parents would, and to ensure that our Children in Care each have the best opportunity to achieve their full potential.

We are committed to developing our current arrangements in order for us to improve the lives of such children. The intention is to bring together the range of activity across the council and its partners at all stages of the care journey, firstly focussing on supporting families to stay together, wherever it is safe to do so, and thus minimising the need for children and young people to become looked after.

Where children or young people cannot be supported within their immediate families, placements with a relative, friend or other person connected with them will always be explored as the preferred placement option, provided that this is assessed to be in the best interests of the child or young person concerned. In such circumstances, Wokingham Children's Services will strive to engage with families early, using our Practice Framework to involve the wider family network in helping us to explore family stability and options for permanence.

We are also committed to ensuring that our services are responsive, flexible and culturally appropriate so that all children and young people in our care receive the best possible support within placements, as close as possible to their home. The Authority also expects to listen to the views of the children in its care, using their feedback to inform and develop service delivery. Similarly, we expect to support children to take an active role in placement planning. We believe that supporting children in this way will help to ensure that they enjoy their childhoods and achieve the best that they can, thus improving their opportunities in adulthood.

Ultimately, the Council has a key role as a corporate parent to ensure that all the children in its care receive the unconditional warmth, stability, attention and opportunity that responsible parents provide to their own children. To this end, the Council has an important role in

leading and co-ordinating the work of other services in Wokingham, in order to ensure that by working co-operatively together the different services collectively meet our children's holistic needs.

The central principle of corporate parenting is that the local authority should, through the efforts of its Members and staff, seek the same outcomes for the children in its care as every good parent would want for their own child or children. This covers their education, health and welfare, what they do in their leisure time and holidays, how they celebrate their culture and how they receive praise and encouragement for their achievements. This also extends to providing appropriate support once young people have achieved the age of 18, including continued assistance around education, training or employment, and emotional and practical support as they establish themselves in their adult lives.

To help us achieve all of these aims, we have made a "Pledge" to the children and young people in our care, and this represents a promise of the things that the Authority will do to ensure that children and young people are at the heart of everything we do. All members of the Council, managers, staff and carers have embraced this pledge and seek to ensure our promise is fulfilled. The pledge will continue to be one of our highest priorities for the children and young people in our care.

*"The central principle of corporate parenting is that the local authority should, through the efforts of its Members and staff, seek the same outcomes for the children in its care as every good parent would want for their own child or children."*

## 2. Defining Permanence

Department for Education guidance on the Children Act 1989 sets out the following definition of what permanence should offer a child:

*“...a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity ... a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond’.*

Put simply, permanence means an enduring long-term commitment and stable family experience that enables the child to put down roots and creates a foundation for belonging. Permanence can be provided by the child’s parents or other relatives, other connected people, foster carers, Special Guardians or adopters.

When children and young people experience permanence, they have one or more ‘family’ members, including at least one parenting adult, who intend to always be there for them. If children and young people experience permanence they are more likely to then also maintain other important connections to the people around them such as their siblings and extended family members. Research shows that children who grow up experiencing a sense of permanence are more successful in building and maintaining friendships and social connections. Research and evidence also tells us that when children come into care, the damage caused by separation from their birth family members can affect them for a long time. This may then create additional emotional and behavioural issues for the child as he or she is growing up, in some cases resulting in the child requiring expert therapeutic support to help overcome these issues.

Permanence for children/young people has three aspects:

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

### Why does it matter so much?

Disruption of a child’s meaningful attachments to parents, siblings and other significant adults can create potential trust issues and relationship difficulties. Without a sense of permanence, children cannot settle and anxiety can develop which sometimes manifests through behavioural and/or psychological issues later on in life.

### 3. Objectives in Permanency Planning

Our overarching objective when undertaking any form of permanency planning is to ensure that the child or young person is provided with care arrangements that deliver continuity, consistency and security of care, as well as support which positively promotes their individual sense of security, self-esteem, and identity.

The question *"How are the child or young person's permanency needs being met?"* must be at the core of everything we do.

Although our work to meet these objectives will be dictated by the unique circumstances of the child or young person in question, the following overarching principles will inform our approach:

#### **The importance of family and family life**

We believe that all children have the right to experience family life, and that wherever it is consistent with their health and wellbeing this should be within their own birth families. Where it is necessary for a child or young person to leave their family, we will aim for this to be for as short a time as needed to secure a safe, supported return home.

In cases where a child is unable to be cared for by their birth parents, we will first look to place the child or young person with a member of their extended family (whether that be on a temporary or permanent basis), provided that it is assessed as being consistent with the child's welfare. Permanency will then be secured through the appropriate legal order to meet the child or young person's needs.

#### **Securing alternative permanent carers swiftly**

Where it is clear that a child or young person cannot appropriately remain in the care of their birth parents or within their family network, our planning will be swift and clear to identify an appropriate permanent placement, secured through adoption, long-term foster care, a Child Arrangements Order or a Special Guardianship Order.

Priority consideration will always be given to forms of placement which facilitate the child or young person's early discharge from public care, provided that this is consistent with their welfare. For older children, the possibility of independent living will also be considered

Residential group living will only ever be considered if there is clear evidence to suggest that placement within a family is not appropriate to the child or young person's individual needs.

## **Ensuring a communicative and collaborative approach**

Our practitioners will always seek to work in partnership with parents and families to meet the above objectives, and will ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child or young person are always sought and taken into account. We believe that this will support the child to achieve a form or permanency that is well suited to their individual long-term care and parenting needs, and will allow any moves to be undertaken in a planned, knowledge-driven and child-focused manner.

Provided it is in keeping with the assessed needs of each child or young person involved, contact with their significant relatives will be facilitated, and where possible siblings will be placed together. When these objectives are not possible or appropriate, the reasons will be carefully explained to the children or young people involved (if of an age and understanding) as well as the birth relatives, and then recorded.

## **Child-centred, timely and responsive planning**

In order to prevent children from remaining for any longer than is necessary in placements which are deemed to be short-term or bridging arrangements, every child in the care of the Authority will have a clear Permanency Plan (or parallel plan) in place by the time of their second Looked After Child Review.

Our Permanency Plans will be developed carefully around the child's needs, taking into account their age, experiences, abilities and wishes. Plans will cover all aspects of moving the child on, or if appropriate confirming their short-term placement as their permanent placement. Where the child is subject to Care Proceedings, planning will normally begin before the Final Hearing as part of a twin tracking process.

We believe that the earlier permanency planning begins, the better the outcome for the child is likely to be. With information collected over a longer period, more time can be given to gaining a fuller understanding of the child, their earlier life experiences, their birth family and their relationships.

Our conversations about the child's long-term care and parenting are also likely to evolve over time. We will seek to initiate discussions from an early stage with the child (if of an appropriate age and understanding), significant birth family members, foster carers and any

other professionals involved. Discussions will be ongoing and will actively encourage all of those with knowledge of the child to share their views, so that as full an understanding as possible of their experiences and needs can inform the future planning process.

While there is no longer a requirement for local authorities to give due consideration to a child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background when matching a child with prospective carers, it remains best practice at Wokingham for these considerations to be given due weight - provided that this does not unduly delay achieving a permanent placement for the child.

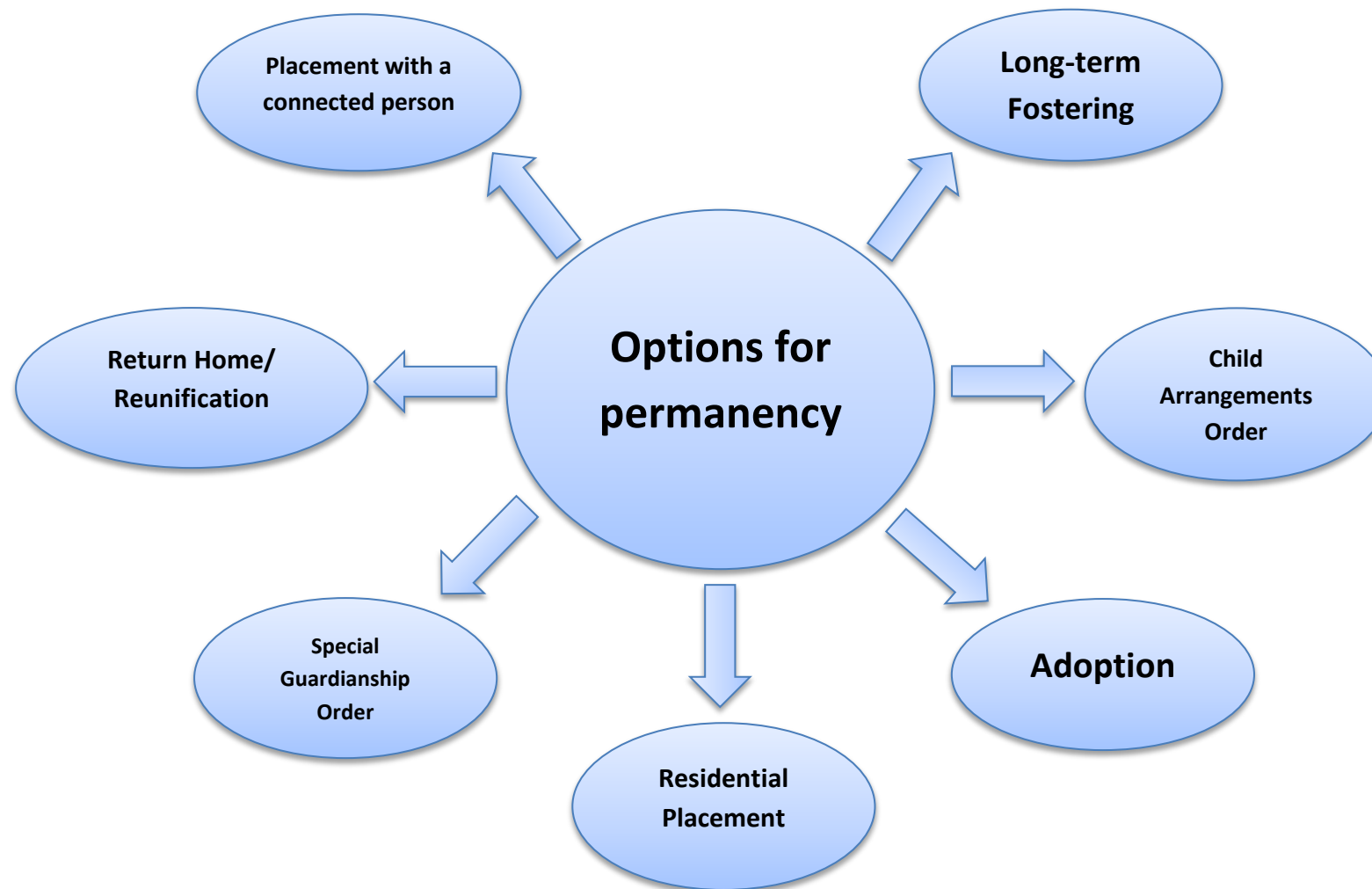
Wherever possible, we will also aim to plan to ensure that care is provided locally, unless this is clearly identified as being inappropriate.

### **Providing robust assessment**

If Wokingham Children's Services is to provide the best possible care for looked after children, all of the kinship carers, foster carers and potential Special Guardians that we recommend as being potentially suitable will need to demonstrate that they have the capacity to provide permanence for the child - including those who are Relatives and Friends or Connected Person Carers. This will be a fundamental aspect of all our assessment work, and the importance of familial ties and relationships with siblings will not be overlooked. Likewise, the significance of the child's previous and existing relationships with his or her parents, siblings, and other significant adults and carers will need to be understood.

## 4. Options for Permanence

The avenues that we have available to pursue the permanency needs of our children are as follows:



## 4.1 Return home/Reunification

The first stage of permanency planning is working with families and children in need, to support them to stay together. Staying at home offers the best chance of stability. However, this must always be balanced against the risk of harm to the child.

If a child has been removed, every effort needs to be made for the child or young person to be reunified with their birth family. Again, this must be balanced against any possible risk of further harm to the child or young person.

During statutory reviews of placements, reunification may be considered as an option. If this has been agreed then a reunification assessment will need to be undertaken to ascertain whether the child/young person can return home.

It is essential as part of any plan for a child to return home, to provide effective monitoring and support through a robust multi-agency network, working in partnership with the parents or carers. This ensures the provision of effective help to parents and the child as well as an early alert to potential breakdown.

While Wokingham Children's Services will not generally advocate for children to be placed in parental care under the auspices of a Care Order, where the court deems this to be the most appropriate placement option, we will work within the Placement with Parents regulations to best support any such placement. There is an expectation that if a Care Order is deemed necessary, during the statutory reviews planning will be considered around discharging the Order.

## **4.2 Placement with a Connected Person**

If the conclusion of an assessment is that a child or young person cannot safely remain at home, we will make every effort to secure a placement with a Connected Person. This will either be as part of the plan to work towards a return home or, if a return home is clearly not in the child or young person's best interests, as the preferred permanency option.

It is very important to establish at an early stage which of the child or young person's relatives or family friends may be available to care for them, in order to avoid the kind of delays that can otherwise occur during court proceedings where this work has not been done.

Given that relative carers may need extra support to care for a child, we will ensure that there is an active and coordinated Placement Plan to support the process, regardless of whether the child is subject to a Child Protection or Child in Need Plan, or is placed under the auspices of a Care Order.

In addition, where a placement with a relative or friend is being sought or has been achieved but has yet to be confirmed as being the child's permanent placement option, we will track the progress of the case via the use of Permanency and Legal Tracker Meetings. This will allow us to ensure that there is no unnecessary delay which might impact on the welfare of the child or young person concerned.

### 4.3 Long-term Fostering

Long-term foster care (also known as permanent foster care) can offer stability and security for children and young people in care. It is often the most suitable placement option for older children who have strong and well-established relationships with their birth parents and/or wider family members. It is also sometimes a positive placement option for younger children whose emotional and practical care needs require significant input from partner agencies, and whose foster carers, whilst wishing to provide permanent care for the child, have concerns about losing the corporate parenting role and associated support from the local authority. Long-term foster carers can help children to manage and negotiate what can be complex relationships with their birth families.

Where a child or young person's specific individual needs mean that adoption or Special Guardianship is not the appropriate Care Plan, the Authority will always endeavour to secure a long-term foster placement specifically for them. This will be done at the earliest possible stage, in order to ensure that the child or young person does not experience 'drift' in respect of their placement.

Where a child is to be placed for adoption, the target timescale around achieving a positive 'match' is 121 days from the date of the Placement Order being granted. In order to achieve parity for children with a long-term fostering plan, the Authority also aims to identify a positive 'match' for each child within 121 days of a Care Order being granted.

In line with the relevant Government legislation and guidance, we also actively encourage and supports young people to extend their placements beyond the age of 18. These are known as **Staying Put Arrangements**, which can provide an important form of transition into adulthood for young people in long-term foster placements.

## Long-term fostering

### Potential advantages as a Permanency Plan:

- The local authority retains a role in negotiating between the foster carers and the birth family over issues such as contact;
- There is continuing social work support to the child or young person and the foster family in a placement that is regularly reviewed;
- It maintains the legal relationship between the child or young person and their birth family members, who can still play a part in the decision making.

### Potential disadvantages as a Permanency Plan

- Lack of parental responsibility for the carers;
- Continuing social work involvement in the child or young person's life, as well as the carers' lives
- Regular Looked After Reviews, which may be destabilising to the placement;
- Possible stigma attached to the child or young person due to them being in local authority care;
- The child or young person is not a legal member of their foster family. If difficulties arise there may be less willingness on both sides to persevere and seek a resolution.

## 4.4 Child Arrangements Orders

Child Arrangements Orders were introduced in April 2014 by the Children and Families Act 2014, which amended section 8 of the Children Act 1989. The orders replaced Contact Orders and Residence Orders.

A Child Arrangements Order is a court order regulating arrangements relating to any of the following:

- a. Who the child (who is the subject to the order) is to live with, spend time with or otherwise have contact with;
- and
- b. When the child is to live with spend time with or otherwise have contact with a particular person.

The 'residence' aspects of a Child Arrangements Order (i.e. who the child is to live with/when the child is to live with the person) can last until the child reaches 18 years unless discharged earlier by the court or by the making of a Care Order.

The 'contact' aspects of a Child Arrangements Order (who the child is to spend time with or otherwise have contact with and when) will cease to have effect when the child reaches 16 years, unless the court is satisfied that the circumstances of the case are exceptional.

Any person named in the order as a person with whom the child is to live will have parental responsibility for the child while the order remains in force. Where a person is named in the

## Child Arrangements Orders

### Potential advantages as a Permanency Plan

- It gives parental responsibility to the carer whilst maintaining the parents' parental responsibility;
- The child will no longer be Looked After and there therefore needs no social work involvement, unless this is identified as necessary;
- There is no review process;
- As the child will not be Looked After, there is less potential for stigma attached to the placement.

### Potential disadvantages as a Permanency Plan

- It is less secure than Adoption or Special Guardianship in that an application can be made to revoke the Order (although the court can be asked to attach a condition refusing a parent's right to seek revocation without leave of the court);
- There is no formal continuing support to the family after the Order is made (although in some instances, a Child Arrangements Order Allowance may be payable by the local authority).

## Who can apply for a Child Arrangements Order?

- A parent or guardian;
- A party to a marriage (whether the marriage is subsisting or not) where the child was brought up as a child of the family;
- A person with which the child has lived for 3 years (This need not be continuous but must not have started more than 5 years or ended more than 3 months before the making of the application); or
- A local authority foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year.
- Where a Child Arrangements Order is already in force, a person who has the consent of those in whose favour the Child Arrangements Order was made;
- Where the child is Looked After, a person with the consent of the Local Authority;
- In any other case, a person who has the consent of all those with Parental Responsibility; and
- Anyone else wishing to apply, including the child, must apply to the court for leave to make an application for a Child Arrangements Order.

order as a person with whom the child is to spend time or otherwise have contact, but is not named in the order as a person with whom the child is to live, the court may provide in the order for that person to have parental responsibility for the child while the order remains in force, but this will not otherwise be the case.

Child Arrangements Orders are private law orders and cannot be made in favour of a local authority.

A court which is considering making, varying, or discharging a Child Arrangements Order, including making any directions or conditions which may be attached to such an order, must have regard to the paramountcy principle, the 'no order' principle and the welfare checklist under the Children Act 1989. Interim Child Arrangements Orders can be made.

Where a child would otherwise have to be placed with strangers, a placement with Connected Persons may be identified as a preferred option and the carers may be encouraged and supported to apply for a Child Arrangements Orders where this will be in the best interests of the child.

The holder of a Child Arrangements Order does not have the right to consent to the child's adoption nor to appoint a guardian; in addition, he/she may not change the child's name nor arrange for the child's emigration without the consent of all those with parental responsibility or the leave of the court.

Whilst support may continue for as long as the Child Arrangements Order remains in force, the aim will be to make arrangements which are likely to be self-sustaining in the long-term. There is no professional reviewing of the arrangements after the Order unless a new application to court is made, for example by the parents for contact or revocation. (**Note:** New applications to court may be expensive to defend, and the carers would have to bear the cost if not entitled to assistance with legal costs.

## 4.5 Special Guardianship Orders

Special Guardianship addresses the needs of a significant group of children and young people who need a sense of stability and security within a placement away from their birth parents (and sometimes other relatives), but not the absolute legal break with their birth family that is associated with adoption. It can also provide an alternative way of achieving permanence in families where adoption is not an option for cultural or religious reasons.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) are usually granted in one of two situations:

- Where the child or young person is subject to Care Proceedings and a relative or other adult (already significant to the child) commits to caring for the child, subject to a return to parental care not being achieved. In this scenario, the prospective carers will be assessed within the proceedings, either before or after the child is placed in their care.
- Where the child or young person has previously been placed with foster carers on either a short or long-term basis and the carers have established an attachment to the child and want to commit to the child becoming a permanent and legally recognised member of their family, with the intention of the child remaining as a permanent member of the family throughout the remainder of his or her childhood.

Special Guardianship Orders in favour of a relative are often the court's preferred permanency option for children who are subject to Care Proceedings but are unable to be safely returned to parental care. During Care Proceedings the local authority is often required to consider and assess a wide range of family members to ensure that all possible options for legal permanency within the extended family network have been considered. Generally, completing an in-depth Viability Assessment in the first instance will confirm whether a full assessment should be progressed.

## Special Guardianship Orders

### Potential advantages as a Permanency Plan:

- The Special Guardians have parental responsibility and clear authority to make decisions on day to day issues;
- There is added legal security to the Order, in that leave is required for birth parents to apply to discharge it;
- It maintains the child or young person's legal links with their birth parents and wider family;
- The child or young person will no longer be in care, and no social worker involvement is required unless identified as necessary.

### Potential disadvantages as a Permanency Plan:

- The Order only lasts until the child or young person is 18, and does not necessarily bring the same sense of belonging as an Adoption Order;
- As the child or young person is not a legal member of the family, if difficulties arise there may be less willingness on both sides to persevere and seek resolution;
- Although there are restrictions on applications to discharge the Order, such an application is possible and may be perceived as a threat to the child or young person's stability.

## Who can apply for an SGO?

- Any guardian of the child or young person;
- A local authority foster carer with whom the child or young person has lived for at least 1 year immediately preceding the application;
- Anyone who is named in a Child Arrangements Order as a person with whom the child or young person is to live;
- Anyone with whom the child or young person has lived for 3 out of the last 5 years;
- Where the child or young person is subject of a Care Order, any person who has the consent of the local authority;
- Anyone who has the consent of all those who hold parental responsibility for the child or young person.

A Special Guardianship Order offers greater stability and security to a placement than a Child Arrangements Order in that, whilst it is revocable, there are restrictions on those who may apply to discharge the order and the leave of the court, if required, will only be granted where circumstances have changed since the Special Guardianship Order was made.

Special Guardians acquire parental responsibility, and although this will be shared with birth parent(s), they will have the legal right to make all day-to-day arrangements with regard to the child or young person's care. The birth parent(s) will however still need to be consulted - and their consent obtained - in order for the child or young person to change their name, become adopted, be placed abroad for more than 3 months, or for any other similar fundamental issues.

A Special Guardianship Order made in relation to a child or young person who is the subject of a Care Order will automatically discharge the Care Order and the local authority will no longer have parental responsibility.

Special Guardians may be supported financially or otherwise by the local authority and, as with adoptive parents, will have the right to request an assessment of need for support services at any time after the Order is made.

Where a Special Guardianship Order is being sought the Wokingham Children's Services Permanency and Legal Tracker Meeting will monitor the progress of the case in order to ensure that there is no unnecessary delay which might impact on the welfare of the child or young person concerned.

## 4.6 Adoption

The granting of an Adoption Order legally transfers parental responsibility for the child or young person from the birth parents (and any others who had parental responsibility, including the local authority) permanently and solely to the adopter or adopters. Once legally adopted the child or young person is deemed to be the child of the adopters, as if they had been born to them.

Research strongly supports adoption as a primary consideration for permanency, and as a main factor contributing to the stability of children and young people, especially for those aged under four years who cannot be reunified with their birth parents or provided with permanent care by a member of their extended family.

Wokingham Children's Services is ambitious in its pursuit of adoptive placements for children in need of permanent families away from their birth parents and extended family networks. **To this end, adoption will always be considered for children aged eight and under who cannot return to the permanent care of their parents or their wider family and friends network.**

Adopters may be supported, including financially, by the Authority, and will have the right to request an assessment of need for support services at any time after an Adoption Order is made.

In light of our aims to ensure a collaborative and communicative approach to permanency planning, at an appropriate stage we will always seek to discuss the adoption plan with the child, the birth parents, and any other adults who hold parental responsibility for the child. We will also provide the birth parents of the child with written information about adoption. When a potentially suitable prospective adoptive family is identified, they will also be provided with full information about the child and

## Adoption

### Potential advantages as a Permanency Plan:

- Parental responsibility for the child or young person is held exclusively by the adopter.
- The child or young person is no longer Looked After.
- No future legal challenge to overturn the Adoption Order is possible.
- Decisions about continuing contact will usually be made by the new parents (on the child/young person's behalf) who are likely to be most in touch with their needs (subject to any Contact/Child Arrangements Order made at the time of the Adoption Order);
- The child or young person is a permanent member of their adoptive family into adulthood.

### Potential disadvantages as a Permanency Plan

- It involves a complete and permanent legal separation from the family of origin.
- There is no review process following the granting of the Adoption Order.

their family background and circumstances, in order to facilitate them reaching an informed decision about whether or not they are likely to be able to provide appropriate care and parenting for the child.

Where the child is of an appropriate age and understanding life work will also be undertaken to prepare them for their new placement. Wherever possible this will be undertaken by the child's allocated Social Worker.

## Adopt Thames Valley

Our regional adoption agency - Adopt Thames Valley - was established in December 2017 and has delegated responsibility for discharging certain adoption functions for seven local authorities (Bracknell Forest Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Reading Council (Brighter Futures for Children), Royal Borough of Windsor (Achieving for Children) and Maidenhead, Swindon Council, West Berkshire Council and Wokingham Borough Council).

Adopt Thames Valley takes responsibility for recruiting, assessing and training potential adopters, and works alongside our social workers to identify suitable, prospective adopters for children who have a plan for adoption.

By being a part of a regional adoption agency, we are able to access a larger pool of adopters from across our region when matching a child, which helps improve the quality and speed of the matching process - thus improving the longer-term outcomes for children.

## Adopt Thames Valley's Vision

- Working closely with its partners to ensure that children's best interests are at the heart of placement decisions.
- Ensuring targeted recruitment and the establishment of a wide and diverse pool of prospective adopters
- Matching so that children are placed without delay in secure, loving families
- Providing creative and outstanding adoption and special guardianship support services
- Investing in its workforce to ensure it has the right skills and capacity to deliver excellent services
- Actively listening to and learning from children, adults and staff with whom they work to develop and improve the services provided

See more details via the [ATV Statement of Purpose](#).

## 4.7 Residential Placements

Young people will usually only be placed by Wokingham within a residential placement for one of two reasons:

- The young person is presenting a level of emotional and/or behavioural difficulties that suggests that a family-based placement, even with very experienced carers, is unlikely to be able to contain and safely manage his/her presenting behaviours (i.e. the young person's presenting behaviours pose a significant level of risk to themselves, and their carers and/or any other children within a placement);
- The young person is actively requesting to be placed in residential care, as he or she does not feel ready to or feels unable to live within a family.

No young person aged under 13 should be placed as a long-term placement in residential accommodation, unless the unit is an established therapeutic setting that has been visited prior to placement by the social worker and a member Operational Permanency Team to assess its suitability for that individual young person.

Such placements will typically only be made where there is agreed joint/tri-partite funding and where an up-to-date assessment identifies that residential care is the most suitable placement option for a young person, and this has been confirmed at the Child in Care review. Any placement agreed should be able to work intensively with the young person to prepare them for a return to family-based care in the longer-term, whether this is with one or both of their birth parents, with a extended family members, or with foster carers. All residential placements will be monitored through the Child in Care review process to ensure that all services are working collaboratively to achieve the longer-term placement of the young person back in a family setting.

The funding for all proposed residential placements will be agreed by our *Access to Resources Panel* before the proposed placement is agreed, regardless of the anticipated length of the placement.

### The Access to Resources Panel

The purpose of this panel is to consider requests for resources from across our social work teams which exceed a certain threshold of cost. The panel's focus is on ensuring that such decisions are made in the best interest of the child, whilst also providing value for money and the most efficient use of our available resources. In line with this strategy, the Panel has regard to children having access to some form of family life, either with their birth family or where this is not possible with an alternative. Placements to the contrary will only be agreed by the panel in exceptional circumstances, and where there are plans in place to secure longer-term permanence.

## 5. Planning for permanency and assessing permanency needs

Assessments of a child or young person's needs in relation to his or her Permanency Plan will need to focus on outcomes, as well as consider any stability issues – including the child or young person's needs for long-term support, as well as any needs for contact with their parents, siblings, and wider family network. The **key objectives** in the below information box will inform our approach when undertaking this planning.

If it seems unlikely that rehabilitation to either of the child's parents will succeed, all other possible alternatives will be considered for the child - including placement options within the extended family and the possibility of fostering, Special Guardianship and adoption (including Fostering for Adoption in order to facilitate early placement in the child's potential adoptive placement).

Where the plan is to attempt rehabilitation to one or both of the birth parents or a wider family member, but the outcome is uncertain, we will pursue **parallel planning**. This could mean that a plan for long-term fostering or adoption runs alongside a plan for rehabilitation and/or exploration of the extended family.

If the chances of the child ultimately being placed for adoption are high, the possible merits of Fostering for Adoption will also be considered. Until assessments have been completed an adoption plan for the child will not be finalised, however Fostering for Adoption can be pursued with the child being placed with his or her prospective adopter(s) on a fostering basis until a Placement Order is granted.

Where a Permanence Plan includes a Parallel Plan, we will ensure that the parents are informed of the reasons why two plans are being made, and how this is designed to both meet the child or young person's current needs, whilst also preventing possible future delay.

### Key objectives for permanency planning

- Ensuring that the Permanency Plan is clearly linked to any previous or ongoing assessments of the child or young person's needs.
- Seeking full consultation with family and community networks in order to establish the child or young person's attachments/supports.
- Ensuring that the child or young person's own wishes and feelings are sought and taken into account.
- Ensuring that the child or young person has a Permanence Plan - which is incorporated into the Care Plan\* - by the time of their second Child in Care Review.

\*More details on Care Planning can be found via our [WBC Guidance on Care Planning Meetings](#)

In situations where the plan is for future re-unification with one or both parents, but the outcome is uncertain, a parallel plan will be developed to reduce any future delay, should that re-unification not prove to be appropriate or achievable.

The following table presents a brief, research-based checklist of key factors to be considered for permanency planning in relation to Long-term Fostering, Child Arrangements Orders, Special Guardianship Orders and Adoption:

Child Arrangements/Special Guardianship Orders	Adoption	Long Term Fostering
Child/young person needs the security of a legally defined placement with alternative carers, but does not require a lifelong commitment involving a change of identity	Child/young person's primary need is to belong to a family who will make a lifelong commitment to him/her	Primary need is for a stable, loving family environment whilst there is still a significant level of continued involvement with the birth family
Child/young person's relative foster or other carer needs to exercise day to day parental responsibility and is prepared to do so as a lifelong commitment	Child/young person's birth parents are not able or not willing to share parental responsibility in order to meet their child's needs, even though there may be contact	Child/young person has a clear sense of identity with the birth family, whilst needing to be looked after away from home
There is no need for continuing monitoring and review by the local authority, although support services may still need to be arranged	Child/young person needs an opportunity to develop a new sense of identity whilst being supported to maintain or develop a healthy understanding of his/her past	There is need for continuing oversight and monitoring of the child/young person's developmental progress
Child/young person has a strong attachment to the alternative carers and legally defined permanence is assessed as a positive contribution to his/her sense of belonging and security	Child/young person expresses a wish to be adopted	Birth parents are able and willing to exercise a degree of parental responsibility

## 6. Permanency Planning Meetings

A Permanency Planning Meeting (PPM) will always be held for a Looked After Child prior to their 4-month statutory review meeting. This will allow the meeting to identify the Overarching Permanency Plan for the child in good time, so that it can then be discussed and recommended at the 4-month review.

In cases where early confirmation of the Permanence Plan is required - for example, a baby that is relinquished at birth for adoption, or a child or young person who becomes looked after on an emergency basis - we will work to convene a PPM at the earliest opportunity, and no later than **two weeks** of the child being accommodated. The first statutory review meeting will then be used to confirm the plan.

Regardless of the type of permanency plan that is being pursued, a Permanency Planning Meeting will seek to:

- Confirm the assessed needs of the child or young person (including any needs relating to culture, religion, health, or education).
- Agree the detailed arrangements that will underpin the Overarching Plan.
- Identify the competencies that will be required of future carers.
- Agree the specific actions that need to be taken to progress the permanency plan.
- Agree who is responsible for taking specific actions.
- Agree timescales.
- Consider what action should be taken if some aspects of the permanency plan cannot be achieved within reasonable timescales.

To ensure that the permanency planning process is kept 'on track' and avoids any undue delays, we will ensure that PPMs are held at least **12 weekly** (unless there are significant delays within the court process which suggest that it would be inappropriate for such planning to be being actively pursued).

*For more details on our approach to Permanency Planning Meetings, please see our current guidance [here](#).*

## 7. Permanence and Local Placement

Where a child or young person is placed with long term carers other than adopters, it is generally important that they continue to have access to the family, friends or community within which they were previously brought up, and which form part of their identity and their likely long term support network. For these reasons, we will seek to place children or young people in local provision wherever possible.

Any decision to place a child or young person away from their community will be based on the particular needs of that child or young person and will always be considered within the context of a Permanency Plan. Where an alternative family placement is sought in the area of another local authority, we will explore the likely availability and cost of suitable local resources to support the placement. In the case of an adoptive placement, this will be required as part of the assessment of need for adoption support services, but a full exploration of available resources will be carried out in relation to any permanent placement.