**Permanence Policy Statement**

Head of Service, Child(ren) Looked After and Leaving Care

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1. Overarching Statement

This Permanence Policy Statement relates specifically to children who are looked after by Somerset County Council.

• We recognise and are committed to upholding the rights and freedoms of the European Convention on Human Rights which are given effect in UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998 and the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The following policy statement is set in the context of those principles and provisions.

• We are committed to acting as a good 'Corporate Parent’ to enable all children looked after by the Authority to achieve their full potential in life.

• We recognise that all children have the right to family life which offers them permanence and that where consistent with their welfare this should be within their birth family or with a 'connected person' as defined by the Care Planning Regulations 2010.

• We define permanence as the framework of legal, physical and emotional permanence which gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity throughout childhood and into adulthood and believe this is achieved by the provision of consistent care, stable relationships and a secure family base in life.

• We recognise that delay in planning and implementing plans for permanence is detrimental to good outcomes for children.

• We recognise placement moves prior to permanence are detrimental to good outcomes and any unnecessary moves should be avoided.

• We believe every child should reach their full potential and are best supported to grow and achieve within their own families.

• Where children are separated from their birth families every effort will be made to re-unite them where it is safe and consistent with their welfare.

• Where this cannot be achieved within timescales which meet the child's needs and a decision is taken that a child cannot return to the care of their birth family, we will consider all other options which will promote permanence.

• Family Group Conferences are recognised as an important tool in identifying support and placement resources within the extended family, and these will be used wherever possible.

• Decisions about achieving permanence must take into account the wishes and feelings of children and young people, their birth parents and families.

• We recognise that parents experience trauma and loss and we will encourage birth parents and family members to access available support.

• Where the wishes of a child are not followed the reasons will be clearly recorded and explained to the child in a way they can understand where appropriate.

• The importance of children maintaining connection with their birth family is acknowledged. Plans which enable such connections to be sustained and are appropriate to support permanence for the child will be developed and supported.

• We recognise the legal duty to give preference to a permanent placement with family or friends unless that would not be the most appropriate placement for a child.

• We are committed to offering a range of support services to support the assessed needs of children in permanent placements and their carers, whatever the legal status of the placement.

• All placements will be made following a clear plan which will include a programme of introduction to the placement.

• Somerset County Council considers that the routes to permanence are:

* Staying / returning home
* Family and friends care
* Adoption
* Special Guardianship / Child Arrangement Orders
* Long-term foster care

• The decision about the most appropriate route to permanence will be based on a thorough assessment of the child, the parenting capacity of any prospective carers and will take account of relevant research findings.

# Siblings

Somerset County Council is committed to:

* Keeping siblings together whenever possible, appropriate and in the best interests of each individual child. This will be achieved by undertaking a balanced assessment of the individual needs of each child in the sibling group and the likely or possible consequences of each option on each child. Several factors will be considered including: the relationships in the sibling group, the attachments, the health needs of each child and each child’s view.
* Promoting positive relationships e.g. family time arrangements.
* Where a child in care has a sibling(s) who has been previously adopted, we will ensure that we consult with the sibling’s adopters prior to agreeing a permanence plan for the child.

# Parallel Planning

* We are committed to ensuring children find their permanent family as quickly as possible. In order to do so we actively explore and pursue all appropriate permanence options concurrently.
* These options are considered regularly at permanence planning meetings and at each CLA review as part of the child’s plan.
* All permanence options must be shared with parents from the outset

# Reunification

* We are committed to reunification as a permanence option and where appropriate this should be revisited regularly as part of the CLA review process.
* Decisions will be made in line with the conclusions of an evidence based, multi-agency assessment.
* There is an expectation that the original risks which led to the child coming into care will have been regularly re-assessed. Evidence in those assessments needs to show how the risks have been removed or reduced and/or strengths and resilience factors.
* Assessment should consider support available within family, friends and community and what if any additional support is needed to sustain a return home. Family Group Conference should be considered to fully explore resilience and support.

# Family and Friends Care

* Family and Friends often can provide a positive permanence option for children looked after.
* Assessments must evidence that Family and Friends can provide care for a child into adulthood and the carers have the capacity to meet the child's changing needs.
* Supporting children to live with their extended family or friends can provide good outcomes and is consistent with our legal duties but must always be consistent with the child's needs.
* We define Family and Friends Care for a child looked after as placement of the child with family members or other significant adults (connected persons) who have an established relationship with the child.
* Family and Friends care can be provided in a variety of ways. It would be expected that the carer would make an application for a Special Guardianship Order, Child Arrangement Order or an Adoption Order. On occasion, the care could be provided within a long term fostering framework, but this option should be very carefully considered alongside the concerns re outcomes for children in the care system compared to those not in the care system.
* Immediate placement under Regulation 24 (temporary approval as a foster carer) will be used only exceptionally and following a positive viability assessment.

**Special Guardianship**

* We are committed to special guardianship as a permanence option for children placed with either family and friends’ carers or foster carers. We see special guardianship as offering legal permanence to the children involved and a family for life.
* Somerset County Council has its own Kinship Team that undertakes Special Guardianship assessments and an assessment of post order support. The support needs identified may be offered by the Kinship team or links made with community and specialist resources outside of the Local Authority. The team also offer advice, training, support groups and access to the Adoption Support Fund for therapy.
* When we consider that a child in an existing fostering arrangement may benefit from their carers becoming their special guardians, information and advice will be made available to those carers to allow them to make an informed choice about whether this is an option they wish to pursue.
* This will be informed by an assessment of the child’s needs, including ongoing needs into adults alongside an assessment of the carers abilities to meet their needs into adulthood. There should be a consideration of what the support needs of a Special Guardianship option are likely to be.

# Adoption

• We are committed to adoption as a permanence option which should be considered for all children. Adoption offers a child legal permanence and a family for life.

• Somerset County Council is part of a regional adoption agency and our adoption services are delivered by Adopt South West (AdoptSW). We retain overall responsibility for the children in our care.

• AdoptSW has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and for intercountry adoptions.

• AdoptSW is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans and our Children Looked After Teams and AdoptSW Family Finding Teams work closely together.

• AdoptSW provides support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptees, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives.

• The process of placing a child for adoption is clearly set out in legislation. Delays in adoption planning and implementation have a severe impact on the emotional health and development of children and the likelihood of a successful adoption.

• With AdoptSW we actively consider Foster to Adopt placements when it is in the best interests of a child to achieve early permanence.

• When the carers of a child in an existing fostering arrangement ask to be considered to become adopters, information and advice will be made available to those carers to allow them to make an informed choice about whether this is an option they wish to pursue

#  Long Term Foster Care

* Where all permanence options outside the care system have been exhausted, we believe that long term fostering can provide a secure family base for children and young people and meet their needs in childhood and into adulthood through use of Staying Put.
* Even though there are no current family of friend’s option, it is crucial to ensure that this is regularly reviewed to try and identify a family link and/or home base for the child.
* The decision that long-term fostering is the preferred option for the child will be taken initially through a Permanence Planning Meeting and agreed at a subsequent CLA Review.
* Children in long term fostering placements remain in care, subject to statutory visits and reviews, health assessments and personal education plans. It is expected that greater authority to take decisions about their day to day lives will be delegated as appropriate to their foster carers (see Delegation of Authority Policy) to enable children to have as “ordinary” a life as possible.
* There is a formal process of ratification for the recognition of a permanent fostering placement. The long-term matching will be considered and agreed by the Permanence Panel and will be informed by an assessment of the child’s needs, including ongoing needs into adults alongside an assessment of the carers abilities to meet their needs into adulthood. There should be a consideration of what the support needs of a permanent fostering option are likely to be.