



Telford & Wrekin
Co-operative Council

Protect, care and invest
to create a better borough

FAMILY FIRST

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL'S CHILDREN'S SERVICES
PERMANENCE STRATEGY 2023 – 2024



FOREWORD



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Permanency planning is based on the philosophy that every child/young person has the right to a permanent and stable home. Permanence is the long-term plan for the child/young person's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for our work alongside children, young people, and their families. It aims to ensure a framework of emotional, physical, and legal conditions that will give a child/young person a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.

Belonging is a core concept of all of our support services and we recognise that a sense of belonging has been associated with improved confidence and wellbeing. A sense of belonging plays a large role in resiliency research; it mitigates against the negative impact of trauma, abuse and adversity and can lead to post traumatic growth and recovery.

Family life includes the right to have and maintain family relationships. It covers a child's right not to be separated from their family and to maintain contact if their family is split up. To decide if a relationship is covered by family life what matters is the closeness of the relationship rather than the legal status.

Our family are usually the people closest to us, those we care most about. Family life is not just about legal ties – it goes far deeper than that. It concerns our most important biological, social and emotional relationships. We hold the value that children and young people are best cared for by their birth families and extended networks, and this underpins our 'family first' ethos.

Where this cannot be achieved, we seek to ensure that children and young people's relationships are maintained in line with their best interests. Birth parents and extended networks are included within the decision-making processes and we provide alternative care which is nurturing and which fosters a sense of belonging.

Our strategic plan seeks to equip our practitioners, carers, and other professionals to work together to find safe permanent homes for children in a timely manner.

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1 INTRODUCTION: FAMILY FIRST

The underlying principle of our Permanency Strategy is that every child has the right to grow up in their birth family, where it is safe for them to do so, and in their best interests. This principle is grounded in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 – right to a Private Family Life. Where it is not possible for a child to reside within their family or relational network, we will promote relationships via direct or indirect family time where it is safe to do so.

Therefore, the lens of our practice when working alongside families is first and foremost how we can support parents to make this happen. We consider how we can aid the capacity of birth parents to make changes to their parenting to meet the needs of their child or children, utilising professional support complemented by a framework of support available from their extended network of family and friends.

This includes involving extended networks at the earliest stage in terms of identifying support to aid parents to care for their child/children, identifying who could care for their child/children in a crisis or if the situation became unsafe for the child to remain in their parent/s' care and any support that may be required to enable this to happen. As well as ensuring that the child/children/young person maintains meaningful links with people that are important to them.

This is reflected within our practice framework which outlines our relational approaches when working alongside children, young people and their families, and our commitments when working alongside children and their families.

Our commitments

- We are committed to keeping children safe from harm.
- We are committed to putting the child's best interests first and gaining a good understanding of children's lived experience in order to support them.
- We are committed to working collaboratively with parents, where they are motivated to identify the changes needed within their own families.
- We are committed to keeping children within their own family networks unless this cannot be achieved safely.
- We are committed to ensuring that children who cannot remain with family are well cared for in safe and stable placements.
- We are committed to achieving the right permanence plan for children in as timely way as possible.
- We are committed to working with families and partners in a strength's based and relationship led practice.
- We are committed to supporting our workforce to enable them to develop professionally and feel that they have a voice to make changes.
- We are committed to being the best Corporate Parents that we can be as a whole council.
- We are committed to listening to children and their families so that we can improve our services.
- We are committed to ensuring that records about the children we work with describe their journey with us and provide a good understanding of why decisions were made.
- We are committed to recruiting and supporting foster carers who have the skills and expertise to support our children in care.
- We are committed to supporting young people who become care leavers to achieve their full potential and to feel that we are there for them when they need us.

When children enter our care, we will promote those meaningful links with the significant people in their lives where it is in their best interests.

We are committed to supporting our care experienced young people to be happy and healthy. We honour their strengths, passions and qualities and seek to enable them to reach their potential.

We are committed to ensuring that all children achieve permanence through a range of options including actively promoting and regularly reviewing the relationships they have with their birth parents and significant people within their network and exploring whether a return to being cared for by their network is in their best interests. We acknowledge the positive impact for a child/young person being cared for by their extended family or significant people in their network, and we are committed to actively promoting this where possible.

Where this is not considered as being in a child/young person's best interests we seek alternative caring arrangements through fostering, alternative care/residential community care, Special Guardianship, Early Permanence and adoption.

Throughout these caring arrangements we continuously value the contribution of parents and significant people in the child/young person's extended network and seek to work in partnership with them wherever possible. We actively consider the significant relationships the child/young person has within their extended family networks and seek to preserve these wherever possible.

For all our children and young people, we seek permanent care arrangements where they can achieve a sense of security, stability and belonging. We acknowledge how important it is for a child/young person to have a sense of belonging and the impact this has upon their identity and outcomes in the future – this principle is underpinned by our Belonging Strategy.



2 OUR CORE PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

When developing our permanence plans the following core priorities are our culture of quality:



Children's Services Priorities 2022 onwards

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1.
To create conditions so that every child is safe and feels that they belong in their home and educational setting. | 2.
To promote access to a quality education offer for all children and young people across the borough. | 3.
To focus on the best start in life and work with children, young people and their families as early as possible to avoid issues escalating. |
| 4.
To develop a system wide approach with key partners to deliver our aspirations for children and young people. | 5.
To ensure the workforce is skilled and develop a professional curiosity to adapt to changing service need. | 6.
Every person to have access to opportunities to engage in stimulating activity which will improve their sense of wellbeing. |
| | | 7.
To prepare our children and young people for independent, successful adulthood. |

Our objectives

Within our approach of family first, our primary focus is to promote and enhance the strengths of birth parents to care for their child/young person with support from both their own relational network and from professionals. We will try, wherever possible, to utilise the support of the extended family network to reduce the need for a child/young person to be cared for by the local authority.

These approaches are reflected within our Child in Need, Child Protection and Public Law processes.

The primary purpose of permanence planning is to provide care arrangements that reflect principles of support, care, love, safety, stability, and security, to support children and young people throughout their childhood years and prepare them for adulthood.

When considering permanence plans for children we focus on the following key objectives in our planning:

- 1.** Birth parents, family members and friends/ extended relational networks will always be considered in the first instance.
- 2.** We ensure that parents and extended relational networks are aware of their rights and can actively contribute to decision making and planning, including signposting to legal advice and independent advocacy.
- 3.** We ensure that all parents have access to an advocate throughout the Public Law Outline Process.
- 4.** Our advocacy offer in respect of child protection conferences is under development and will be achieved by 2024.
- 5.** We ensure that all of our children have access to advocacy when required and this will aid their voice being heard.
- 6.** The separation of children/young people from their birth parents/extended network will be for the shortest time necessary to safeguard the child/young person.
- 7.** Within a period of separation, the child will be afforded with opportunities for family time which is of good quality with people who are important to them if it is in their best interests.
- 8.** Where direct family time is not considered to be in the child/young person's best interests, other mechanisms for the child/young person to remain connected with them will be explored.
- 9.** Parents and others from the extended relational network will be consulted in relation to the child/young person's care and progress.
- 10.** We will work alongside birth parents/family members to promote rehabilitation of the child/young person to their care if it is safe to do so.
- 11.** Provide a clear analysis in situations where a child/young person is unable to remain within their birth family/extended relational network.
- 12.** We understand the link between a child/ young person's cultural identity and the impact this has on a sense of belonging and we will actively ensure that we practice in a manner which is culturally competent.
- 13.** Planning will start early and be reviewed regularly.
- 14.** Eliminate drift and delay for children by reaching the right decision within a timeframe which meets the child's best interests - understanding the impact delay can have on a child in the short and long term.
- 15.** The primary plan will always be for children to return to their birth families' care, although other viable plans for permanence will be explored at the same time to avoid drift and delay if this cannot be achieved.
- 16.** Permanence should always be secured through the most appropriate legal order to meet the child/young person's needs.
- 17.** We will ensure that the wishes and feelings of children and young people are at the heart of our decision-making and that they have influence in respect of formulating their plan of permanence.
- 18.** We will actively ensure the child/young person understands their journey and that this is achieved through direct work and is captured within our recordings.
- 19.** Produce high quality records about the child's permanence process which evidences an analysis of the options we have considered and are sensitively presented.
- 20.** Assess the impact of trauma, abuse, neglect and separation and loss on a child's development and how this affects their capacity to build and maintain relationships throughout their life.

- 21.** We understand the value of brother and sister relationships and that this is often the most enduring relationship of a person's life. We assess the impact of brothers and sisters remaining together or separately with a clear analysis of the impact on all children, with the aim that all brothers and sisters will grow up together wherever possible unless it is in their best interests to be cared for separately.
- 22.** That the child/young person will have stability in terms of their learning within education provisions and training.
- 23.** We will take into account the child's developmental age and stage and the likely impact of different transitions as well as the support the child may need now and, in the future, to promote security and stability.
- 24.** All care experienced children and young people are supported to understand decisions that are made and have access to life journey and life story work to enable them to understand their history.
- 25.** We act as a strong corporate parent for our care experienced children and young people to support them to reach their full potential.
- 26.** We will continue to review the role that parents/extended relational networks have in a care experienced young person's life and make any changes to arrangements in accordance with their needs.
- 27.** We will continue to consult with birth parents/extended relational networks in relation to a child/young person's care if it is safe to do so.
- 28.** When the young person is of an age and stage to make decisions in respect of living independently, we will work alongside them to promote a successful transition to independence.
- 29.** We continue to support young people exiting care throughout their transition to adulthood.



3 TOGETHER4CHILDREN (T4C) PERMANENCY PARTNERSHIP

Telford & Wrekin Council are part of the Together4Children Regional Permanency Partnership with Shropshire Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Staffordshire County Council. The T4C Partnership has set ambitions to support legal and psychological permanence for all care experienced children.

In the broadest sense, to consider how we can work together to support improved outcomes for children who cannot return to their birth parents and their long-term care needs will be met by kinship carers, special guardians, long-term foster-carers, or through adoption. We recognise that adoption will only ever be a permanence option for a small number of care experienced children who do not return to their birth parents' care.



4 GENOGRAM – RELATIVES AND CONNECTED PEOPLE SHOULD BE LOCATED REGARDLESS OF WHERE THEY LIVE

Genograms are family trees that include details around relationships, events, identity, family values and other important stories which contribute to a family's journey and a child's heritage. We are committed to making sure that our children's stories and heritage is protected, honoured and available for them, and they get a chance to take an active part in creating and contributing to their genograms.

Genograms help us plan for stability by generating conversations early on in our relationship with families around who can be called upon during a crisis for support, safety and care. It creates plans that are built around organic support networks that respects the family's heritage wherever possible and encourages relational and strengths-based working. We are committed to on-going genogram training and workshops for our practitioners to look at how these valuable tools can be utilised to their fullest potential to support families and make sure they are based on our key values:

- Genograms will be completed with the family wherever possible allowing all members to contribute.
- They will help us honour their wishes and values wherever possible during a crisis/emergency.
- Where children are of an age and stage to do so, children will contribute to their genogram and continue to have access to it throughout their journey.

4a Seeing the child in the context of the family

The principle that children should be brought up by their parents unless they are at risk of harm is enshrined in legislation, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Human Rights Act 1989. Telford & Wrekin Council are committed to working with children and their families to ensure they have the support they need to overcome any problems to ensure children remain with their parents and if this is not possible, that they remain within their family and friends network in line with our family first ethos.

We recognise that the make-up of children's families may differ in that there are some children who may be cared for by two birth parents or a same sex couple, and others will be cared for by a lone parent or by parents who co-parent following separation. Regardless of the family's composition, we will work to support the adults who are most important to meeting the child's long-term welfare needs.

We recognise the many challenges that lone parents can face and that expectations about fatherhood have changed over time and shared care-giving arrangements are now the norm in many families. We recognise the constructive role fathers can play in the lives of their child/ren and given that men often feel they are overlooked as a resource for their children, we will ensure fathers are included in any intervention with their child/ren and provide or signpost to appropriate support if this is needed. (Research in Practice 2017).

Our practice models are strength-based approaches which look to support mothers/fathers/carers to make positive changes to the child's family life when they are referred to children's services.

4b Maintaining life-long links

If a child is unable to return to the full-time care of birth parents or those within their wider network, it is crucial that they maintain meaningful links to the people they love and are important to them. Parents may need support to help them appreciate the vital part they can play in supporting their child to live with alternative carers so that the child experiences stability and a sense of emotional security. Careful planning for the time children will spend with their birth parents, brothers and sisters or wider family/friends is crucial, and arrangements need to be kept under regular review. The birth family can also play a vital part in contributing to the child's life story work which supports the child's developing sense of identity and belonging.

Our continued engagement with families may also increase opportunities for children to return to live within their birth family after a period of being cared for by the local authority.

Brothers and sisters

We recognise the importance of relationships between brothers and sisters and are always looking to ensure the best interests of our individual children. With this in mind, we always try to maintain sibling groups and relationships, and have brothers and sisters placed together. Being able to live with their brothers and sisters who are also cared for by the local authority is an important protective factor. Positive sibling relationships provide valuable support during changes in a young person's life in both childhood and adulthood.

It may not always be possible to place brothers and sisters together in certain circumstances and where this applies children should be supported to understand why they cannot live with their brothers and sisters or half-siblings. In these circumstances where it is in the best interests of each individual child, family time for brothers and sisters must be promoted and maintained.

4c Family Group Conferences/Family Conversations

We recognise that families and extended relational networks are an important connection to a child/young person's heritage, history, identity, and sense of belonging.

We also understand the valuable role that family and extended networks can play in complementing the support we offer to children, young people, and their families.

Family Group Conferences and conversations provide the opportunity for the family and extended network to come together and devise a plan of support around a child/young person.

Family Group Conferences

We ensure that every family has the opportunity to engage in a family meeting. The ethos of this is to recognise the strengths that are evident within the family and how these can be built upon to support in meeting the needs of the child/young person, supporting them to resolve difficulties using their own knowledge and skills which is complimented by professional support.

This approach provides a bridge between family members and professionals and seeks to enhance the power and agency they have in decision making and plans for the child/young person, working together in the best interests of the child.

Family Conversations

A family conversation enables the extended relational network of a child/young person to be able to voice their opinions and share their knowledge and expertise to devise a family plan to meet the child/young person's needs and to help keep them safe. We acknowledge that family meetings need to occur at the earliest stage to support parents caring for their children, but also as a mechanism for identifying who could care for the child in a crisis or be considered to care for the child in the event that it is not safe for them to remain at home with their parents.

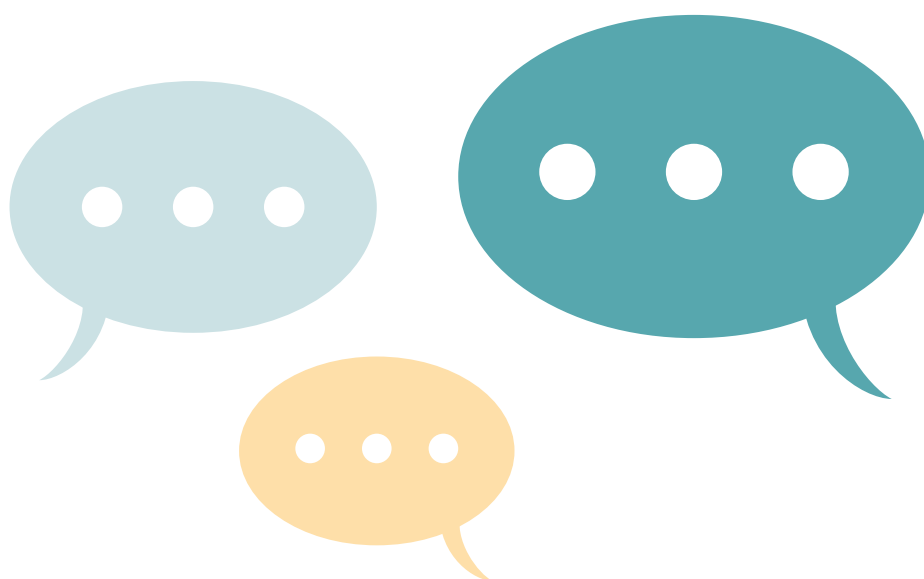
The meeting also seeks to identify any barriers for family members/extended networks being in a position to care for a child/young person and provides an opportunity for support to be provided early with an aim to mitigate any difficulties identified.

Family meetings are also offered to promote the relationships of significant people for care experienced children/young people, to preserve links with their extended network should they be unable to be cared for by them on a full-time basis. Family meetings can also be offered when reviewing family time and making any plans for the child/young person to return to their birth family's care should it be in their best interests.

Family meetings can also strengthen the relational network around a child/young person and can seek to repair any fractured relationships and resolve family difficulties.

We are developing the role of parent experts who have received support from services to support future parents/carers and extended family members via our family group conferencing service, to engage in initial meetings with families and support with the facilitation of family meetings. This approach can aid the relationships between families and professionals and seeks to dilute the power imbalance.

If there is an intention to care for a child for more than 28 days by someone who is not a close relative, they will be supported by the private fostering process. If this becomes long-term, consideration will be given to a more formalised arrangement.



5 PLANNING FOR PERMANENCE

5a Assessment and Planning

All children have the right to grow up within their birth family or wider relational network. This should be achieved with support being provided with the least disruption to the child's right to family life and without the need for the child to be cared for by the local authority when a family is experiencing difficulties in meeting the needs of a child. It is important that plans are swiftly put in place to ensure minimum disruption for the child and to ensure that they will have a safe and secure home environment in which their needs are consistently met in the longer term.

Achieving permanence for a child is a key consideration from the day the local authority starts to care for them, and all children must have a plan for permanence by the time of their second Child in Care Review. The plan will be formulated in collaboration with the birth family, wider relational network, other agencies as appropriate, and will take the wishes and feelings of the child into account.

Telford & Wrekin Council believe that with its support and through working in partnership with birth family, children should be able to return to the care of their family when the problems that led to the local authority caring for the child have been addressed and changes are being made and sustained. When this is not possible, other options will need to be explored taking all the factors relating to the child into account:

Kinship care – it may be possible for members of the wider relational network to care for the child and arrangements can be formalised and supported by the making of a private law order such as a Child Arrangements Order or a Special Guardianship Order. In some circumstances, the court may decide that a Care Order is necessary, and the prospective carer will then need to be assessed and approved as connected carer for the named child for the duration of the order or until the child's care plan changes. There is an expectation that connected foster carers will progress to Special Guardianship, if the child cannot return to the care of their parents, and it is the view of the local authority that it is not in the welfare interests of the child to continue to be cared for by the local authority if they are in a stable and loving placement and their needs are being consistently met.

Long-term foster care – when relationships have been formed between the child and the foster carers they have been placed with, the carers may express a wish to care for the child in the longer term and if these are the wishes and feelings of the child, permanence can be secured through long term foster care, special guardianship or adoption. In other circumstances it may be necessary to identify alternative foster carers and ensure they are able to meet the child's needs in the longer term through careful matching. Family finding must start at the earliest opportunity to achieve permanence and avoid drift and delay for the child.

Adoption – when it is not possible to return a young child to their birth parents or place the child within the wider relational network, the local authority will consider adoption for the child. When parents do not consent to adoption, a senior manager from the local authority (Agency Decision Maker) will decide whether the child should be placed for adoption. The final decision regarding adoption is made by the court. Where adoption is identified as the plan, we are committed to seeking Early Permanence wherever possible.

5b Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in overseeing permanence plans

Independent Reviewing Officers play an important role in achieving permanence for a child within a timescale that is right for them. The IRO has a statutory responsibility to monitor and evaluate a care plan to ensure it meets the child's needs and that there is no drift in implementing a permanency plan. The IRO will need to explain the implications of the child's permanency plan and options of support. Where it might not be possible to identify a single plan for permanence for the child, a 'twin-track' or 'multi-track' plan will be identified and time scales applied to any pieces of work that need to be undertaken.

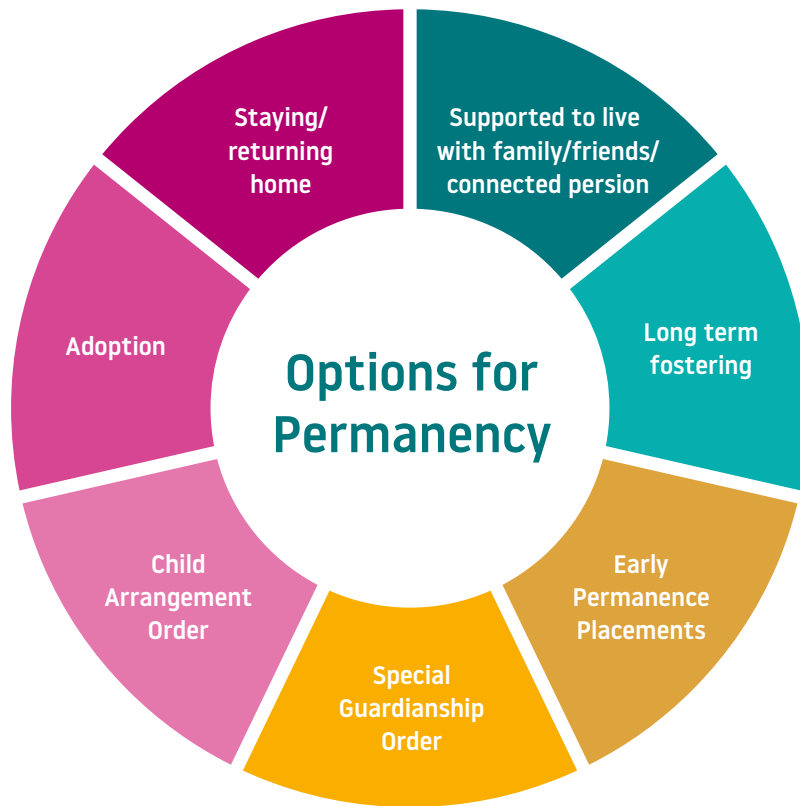
The IRO will chair statutory reviews for the child the local authority is caring for, and make sure there is a record of the meetings. The IRO will also review the file for the child and meet with the social worker/talk to the child and family/carer in between reviews when there are complex plans in place or when there are unnecessary delays. The IRO has a duty to make sure that the child, dependent upon their age and level of understanding, has an understanding of their rights (see the [IRO Handbook](#) for further information). It is important that statutory reviews continue to re-visit the frequency of family time and ensure life-long links are maintained, in addition to whether it is in the child's best interests to return to the care of their birth family.

IRO's duties include ensuring that the child, where appropriate, has been informed of their right to apply with leave, for an order under section 8 of the Children Act 1989, and, where the child is cared for by the local authority, for the discharge of the care order and their right to make a complaint and to have an advocate. If the child wishes to take legal proceedings under the 1989 Act, the IRO must establish whether there is an appropriate adult able and willing to assist the child to obtain legal advice or bring proceedings on the child's behalf or, if there is no such person, assist the child to obtain such advice.

These are all complex issues to explain to a child and the IRO will need to be able to satisfy him/herself and his/her manager that the child is aware and understands his/her rights, taking into account the age and understanding of the child throughout this process.



6 OPTIONS FOR PERMANENCY



6a Returning home to birth family/relational network

When a child is being cared for by the local authority we will continually review if it is in the child's best interests to return to the care of their parents or be placed within their relational network and identify the support that would be required.

If a child is subject to a Care Order and is placed at home with his/her parents under Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, the local authority will keep the arrangement under regular review and seek to revoke the Care Order at the earliest opportunity once assessments show that the parent/s have been able to make and sustain positive change.

6b Child Arrangements Orders

A Child Arrangements Order determines who a child should live with, who a child can spend time with and for how long. It provides a person whom the child lives with to make key decisions in relation to the caring arrangements for the child without excluding the person with parental responsibility. Child Arrangements Orders work well where there is an agreement between who the child is cared for and persons who hold parental responsibility.

Where children and young people are unable to remain with their birth families, consideration will be given to whether alternative care may be provided by an alternative family member/someone within the relational network of the family. If appropriate birth family/people within the relational network should be supported to apply for a Child Arrangements Order which can be achieved under the guidance of the local authority.

6c Special Guardianship Orders

Telford & Wrekin Council acknowledge that Special Guardianship Orders can be an appropriate permanence pathway. There is a special guardianship pathway and finance policy to ensure equitability in support packages offered to prospective Special Guardians.

A Special Guardianship Order is a Court Order appointing one or more individuals to become a child's 'Special Guardian'. It is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from an arrangement underpinned by a legal order. A Special Guardian has responsibility for the day-to-day decisions relating to a child's upbringing, which can be exercised to the exclusion of any other person with parental responsibility apart from other Special Guardians. Special Guardianship addresses the needs for children who need a sense of stability and security within a family/extended relational network arrangement, but not the severing of birth family links that is associated with adoption. Special Guardianship Orders offer stability, whilst they can be revoked, there are restrictions to those who may apply to discharge the order. The leave of the court, if required, will only be granted where circumstances have changed since the order was made.

Parental responsibility will be given to Special Guardians which is shared with any other person with parental responsibility. However, the Special Guardians will have the legal right to make all day-to-day arrangements. Any person with parental responsibility must be consulted, and their consent is required for, the child's change in name, adoption, placement abroad for more than 3 months and other fundamental issues.

If a Special Guardianship Order is made and a child was subject to a care order, the care order will automatically be discharged. The local authority will no longer hold any parental responsibility.

Telford & Wrekin Council has an SGO Policy which outlines the support we will provide.

Assessing for a Special Guardianship Order

The Family and Friends Team are responsible for completing Special Guardianship assessments. These assessments are undertaken over a period of three months.

Any of the following may apply for a Special Guardianship Order:

- A child's legal guardian
- A relative or a foster parent with whom the child has lived for at least 1 year immediately preceding the application.
- Anyone the child lives with because of a Child Arrangements Order
- Anyone the child has lived with for 3 of the last 5 years.
- Where the child is subject to a Care Order, any person who has the consent of the local authority.
- Anyone who has the consent of all those with Parental Responsibility for the child.

The parents of a child may not become Special Guardians.

All Special Guardianship assessments also have a support plan outlining the support that Telford & Wrekin Council will continue to provide once the order is granted.

How can a Special Guardianship Order support the child

Telford & Wrekin Council will assess the need for support services, including financial help, if a child was cared for by the local authority immediately before the Special Guardianship Order is granted. If the child was not cared for by the local authority, an assessment of need for support services can be undertaken at the discretion of the local authority.

It is important that children who are not (or were not) cared for by the local authority are not unfairly disadvantaged by this approach. In many situations, the only reason that the child is not cared for by the local authority is due to relatives or someone connected to the child coming forward to offer alternative care for the child. There is a discretion to undertake an assessment of other people in relation to Special Guardianship Support services (Section 14f of the Children Act, 1989). This should follow the same procedure as used where people have an entitlement to an assessment and the child, the Special Guardian or prospective Special Guardian and parents can make a request to the Family and Friends Support Team.

6d Supported to live with Family or Friends/Connected Persons

Where children and young people are unable to remain safely in their birth parents' care, Telford & Wrekin Council are committed to identifying and supporting the most appropriate person who is able to meet the child's needs, whilst working with birth parents. Family and friends who are able to care for a child can be supported in several arrangements by the local authority and do not need to be approved as connected person foster carers. This can be as part of a preferred permanence option to meet the needs and wishes of the child or as part of a plan for the child to return to their relational network.

It is important to note that often when family members are approached or come forward to care for a child the family is often in crisis, and if possible, this should be avoided by identifying any prospective alternative carers at the earliest stage possible.

The prospective carer requires support to start their journey of coming to terms with the crisis situation and should be understood in this context. Many prospective carers have competing demands and are often required to manage challenging family dynamics including with birth parents. For many family members/extended family network this can be the first time they are aware of concerns for the child and or the first time they have come into contact with the local authority and this can feel daunting for them.

It is important to note that family arrangements will always be supported with the options that promote the preservation of a right to a private family life, however whereby the local authority needs to put in plans for example managing family time, this is no longer considered to be a private family arrangement and the caring arrangements will require regulation.

Once a family/member of the relational network has come forward to be considered as a carer for the child, the Family and Friends team undertakes a Viability Assessment in the first instance to consider whether there are enough strengths to proceed to a full Connected Person/Family and Friends Assessments (Form C).

Should the child need to be cared for by the local authority either under a voluntary arrangement (Section 20) or under an Interim Care Order (ICO) a family and friends' carer can be supported via the child being placed in their care under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010). This is appropriate in an emergency when it is not possible to assess and approve the person as a foster carer for a named child/ren before they are placed. This allows the child/ren to be placed with or remain in the care

of a familiar figure in reassuring surroundings and achieves early permanence for the child while a detailed assessment is completed.

This period of temporary approval lasts for 16 weeks, although it can be extended for a further eight weeks in exceptional circumstances, and the carers will receive support as foster carers during this period.

The Form C assessment is an intensive process and all prospective carers should be provided with advice, guidance and support to enhance their capacity to meet the needs of the child. A balanced narrative of the relative/connected person's strengths, any areas of development and any further support that could be provided to mitigate any concerns/areas of need must be clearly outlined. The Fostering Panel makes a recommendation which is considered by the Fostering Decision Maker who makes the decision regarding suitability to be approved as a connected foster carer for the child/ren. If carers are approved the children's and young people's placements become subject to Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards and Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. If the carers are not approved, they can appeal through the Independent Review Mechanism or the court.

Support

The Family and Friends Support Team are responsible for supervising and supporting Connected Person/Family and Friends prospective and approved foster carers, in terms of training, advice, support and guidance to enable them to meet the needs of the child they are caring for.

6e. Long-term foster care

The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015 provide a definition of a long-term foster placement which is when all of the following conditions are met:

- The child's plan for permanence is foster care;
- The foster carer has agreed to look after the child until they cease to be in care; and
- The child's responsible authority has confirmed the arrangement to the foster carer, the child and their birth parents.

Before making a long-term foster placement the local authority must assess the ability of the foster carers to meet the child's needs now and in the future, and identify any support services that will be needed to achieve this. The child's wishes and feelings must be taken into consideration, it must be considered that the placement will safeguard and promote the child's welfare, the IRO must be consulted, the child's relatives must be consulted where appropriate, and a new placement plan must be prepared and signed by the foster carer.

As a plan of permanence, long term fostering enables ongoing support to be provided to the child and foster family and this is regularly reviewed to ensure the child's needs are being consistently met.

Long term foster care is generally appropriate for older children and young people particularly if they have retained strong links to their birth families and do not want or need the formality of adoption. Children often worry about their birth family and family time can help reassure them by letting them see that their parents and siblings are all right. Family time also helps to keep children informed of important changes at home and for some, family time also plays a role in the assessment of whether a return home would be possible. .

6f. Alternative to Family Care

Living within a family setting will be the preferred permanency option for most children, including those for whom alternative to family care is a positive short-term option. However, for a small number of children and young people a long-term alternative to family care arrangement could equally be the best option. In particular, this can be useful for older children who find a family care arrangement difficult. When exploring if a long term alternative to family care arrangement is in the child/young person's best interests it is important that any options for a shared family care arrangements are considered and that the child's needs continually need to be reviewed to establish if a family care arrangement could be considered and what would need to happen for this to be achieved.

7 ADOPTION

For a small number of children adoption may be in a child's best interests. Adoption involves a legal process that transfers all parental rights and responsibilities for a child to the adoptive parents. Once the Adoption Order is granted, the child legally becomes part of the adoptive family, and all legal ties with the birth parents are severed. A plan of adoption for a child is therefore a serious step and it can only be reversed in very rare exceptional circumstances. Adoption should therefore only be considered after thorough exploration of all other possibilities and where it is evidenced that a child cannot be safely raised by their birth parents or within their wider family and friends' network.

Adoption can also provide an opportunity for birth parents/relatives who are unable to care for the child to have a role in that child's life where it is safe to do so through direct family time post adoption. The benefits of this approach enable the child to be loved and cared for by a wide range of people and enables them to have a link with their birth family throughout their life which can aid stability within their adoptive family. This approach to adoption is a relatively new concept and is part of the changing landscape of adoption within the United Kingdom, it is our aspiration that we will work with Together4Children to explore this concept further and we are committed to implementing good practice from recent research.

Adopted children will grow to identify with their adoptive family and will also have their own identity as an adopted child. Social workers need to make sure that adoptive parents have as much information as possible about their child's background so that adopters are able to encourage them to talk openly about this part of who they are. In appreciating the child's identity, the adoptive parent can support the child to feel positive about their identity and feel proud of who they are.

Where adoption is identified as the plan, we are committed to seeking Early Permanence wherever possible.

7a Together4Children Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

Together4Children is a partnership between Shropshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council and its Regional Adoption Agency for the four councils launched in September 2020. Our Vision 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 when it has been evidenced that they cannot be brought up within their birth family/extended network and adoption is identified as the plan of permanence.

We aim to:

- Make best use of our collective resources to recruit, assess and support prospective adopters across the region.
- Improve the quality and speed of matching for children through better planning and by having a wider choice of adopters across the region.
- Provide high quality support to children and their families delivered through a combination of direct provision and effective partnerships.
- Provide children and their families with the right support at the right time through a consistent permanency support offer across the region.

The T4C RAA is committed to ensuring practice is underpinned by the latest research, policy and good practice guidance. The principles of the Moving to Adoption model developed by the University of East Anglia are being embedded across the partnership to ensure the child's holistic needs are kept at the centre during a key phase of the adoption process when the child moves from foster carers to their new adoptive family. This model aims to support the parenting capacity of the adopters, and respect the child's previous relationships and identities, actively seeking to mitigate the inherent losses faced by adopted children and adults.

T4C is also committed to implementing the learning from recent research in respect of children being able to maintain lifelong links with their birth parents and/or the people who have been important to them throughout their lives and that this takes place face to face when it is safe and appropriate.

7b Early Permanence Placements

We want to create more opportunities for children in need of permanence through adoption to be placed with Early Permanence (EP) Carers. This means that a child can be placed with approved adopters who are also temporarily approved as foster carers by the local authority Agency Decision Maker during care proceedings. EP Carers receive training and support to look after the child as foster carers while their plan for permanency is finalised. The aim of Early Permanence is to reduce the number of moves a child experiences, thus providing a sense of stability and permanence at the earliest opportunity. If a Placement Order is made by the court, the EP carers will normally become the child's prospective adopters and will be able to make an application for an Adoption Order after their match has been formally agreed.

7c Birth parent/relative/prospective adopter meeting

Prospective adopters are expected to meet the birth parent(s) or other birth relatives of the child whenever circumstances permit this. This will be facilitated by the Adoption Social Worker and the Child's Social Worker who will support the structure of the meeting.

There are significant benefits in holding such meetings:

- The prospective adopters will be able to talk to the child in the future about having met their birth parent/relative
- The meeting may help the birth parent come to terms with the plan and feel reassured having met the prospective adoptive parent.
- The birth parent/relative will be able to provide information to the prospective adoptive parent for the child for the future.
- In addition, this meeting can also build the basis for ongoing communication or family time if this is considered as being in the child's best interests after their adoption.

If it is not possible to hold a direct meeting it will be important to find creative ways for family members to have communication with prospective adopters as a foundation for maintaining life-long links.

Prospective adopters may also meet brothers and sisters of the child who are cared for by other relatives/local authority, this is important to promote the child's history and identity as they grow up in addition to supporting the brothers and sisters of the child to understand their sibling's journey. This also impacts on their own identity and family story, in addition to providing a basis for indirect communication or family time post adoption should this be considered in the children's interests. Where face to face meetings cannot take place consideration should be given to indirect communication being facilitated with the prospective adopters honouring the sibling relationship and role the sibling has and is likely to have in the child's story.

Such meetings are often built into the process of prospective adoptive parents getting to know the child and their family story. Careful consideration should be given to the timing of any meetings in line with the proposed plan of introductions and other options discussed if relevant.

Maintaining life-long links

There is wealth of research and evidence to show that when children are separated from their birth families and are either placed with kinship carers, in long-term foster care or adopted, maintaining contact with the people who are important to them – from separation and right through their childhood – has a significant impact on their well-being. Having contact with birth relatives can help children cope with loss and separation, make sense of the past and navigate identity issues. Over time, it can help to build or maintain direct relationships with birth parents, brothers and sisters, and extended family members.

8 APPENDIX

References:

- Featherstone B, White S and Morris K (2014) Re- Imagining Child Protection – Towards Humane Social Work with Families, The Policy Press.
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- Permanence Planning Guidance, Telford and Wrekin Children's Services Manual, https://telfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/g_perm_plan.html
- Research in Practice: Working effectively with men in families – practice pointers for including fathers in children's social care: Frontline Tool (2017) www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2017/july/working-effectively-with-men-in-families-practice-pointers-for-including-fathers-in-childrens-social-care-frontline-tool-2017/
- 'Making Not Breaking' The Care Inquiry (April 2013)
- Modernising post-adoption contact: findings from a recent consultation', Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (August 2021)

Legislation and guidance

- Children Act 1989; care planning, placement and case review (2010)
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- The Children Act 1989 and associated Regulation and Guidance
- Human Rights Act 1998The Adoption Act and Children Act 2002
- Children and Families Act 2014
- The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015
- 'Permanence Planning' (sections 3.50 – 3.73), IRO Handbook: Statutory Guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children, Department for Education (2010)
- 'Knowledge and Skills Statement: Achieving Permanence (2016) Department for Education
- Best practice guidance: Application and case management, Public Law Working Group, Courts and Tribunals Judiciary (March 2021) www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/message-from-the-president-of-the-family-division-publication-of-the-presidents-public-law-working-group-report/#related_content
- Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services (July 2013)
- Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, Department for Education.

9 GLOSSARY

Care experienced children

The term 'care-experienced' refers to anyone who has been or is currently cared for by the Local Authority or has been at any stage in their life, no matter how short the period, including adopted children who were previously cared for.

Cared for child (previously "looked after child")

"Cared for Child" means a person under 18 who is subject to a Care Order under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 (including an Interim Care Order), or is accommodated on a voluntary basis under Section 20 of that Act.

Experts by experience

We believe that mothers, fathers and extended family members/relational network who have been supported by our services have a wealth of knowledge to share through their lived experiences and therefore recognise them as 'experts'. We value the contribution many parents and extended family members/relational network are making to improve our support services.

Family and friends/connected person foster carers

Family and friends foster carers are approved Local Authority foster carers who have been assessed in relation to their suitability to care for a named child or named children only, and this will be reflected in the terms of their approval. The National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Fostering Services apply, and standard 30 relates specifically to family and friends foster carers.

Family and friends, kinship, connected person

A family and friends carer means a relative, friend or other person with a prior connection, other than a parent, who is caring for that child on a full-time basis. A child who is cared for by a family and friends' carer may be cared for by the Local Authority. A family and friends' carer can be assessed to become a foster carer for a specific named child if they are being cared for by the Local Authority.

Foster Carer

'Foster carer' means a person who is approved as a foster carer (by a local authority or an independent fostering provider) in accordance with regulation 27 of the Regulations 2011, or temporarily approved under regulation 24 of the 2010 Regulations.

Fostering Service

'Fostering service' means a local authority fostering service.

Informal arrangement

'Informal arrangement' means an arrangement where a child is living with a family and friends' carer who does not have parental responsibility for the child. References to 'informal arrangements' in this document do not include arrangements where the child is being cared for by the Local Authority or where the child is privately fostered, placed for adoption, or subject to a Child Arrangements Order or a Special Guardianship Order. The legislation which governs these arrangements does not apply to an informal arrangement.

Parental Responsibility

'Parental responsibility' has the meaning given by Section 3 of the Children Act 1989 Act, being all the rights, duties, powers responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his/her property.

Private Fostering

A 'private fostering arrangement' refers to an arrangement in which a child who is under 16 (or 18 if disabled) and who has not been provided with accommodation by the local authority, is cared for and accommodated by someone who does not have parental responsibility for her/him and is not a relative, and the arrangement is intended to last for more than a period of 28 days.

Relational network

People who have played a significant part in the life of a child whether they are biologically related or not may be considered part of a child's relational network. The child's network may include step-parents, step grandparents, neighbours, teachers, friends and childminders as well as members of their biological family.

Relative

'Relative' means grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt (whether full blood or half blood or by marriage or civil partnership) or step-parent, as defined in section 105 of the Children Act 1989;

Responsible authority

'Responsible authority' means, in relation to a child who is cared for by the Local Authority, is responsible for the child's placement.

Temporary Approval of a connected person as a foster carer

When there are circumstances in which the most appropriate placement for a child is to be cared for by a connected person and the need for such a placement is urgent, but it is not possible to assess and approve the person prior to placing the child, if the local authority is satisfied that the placement is the most suitable means to safeguard and promote the child's welfare, the connected person can be temporarily approved for up to 16 weeks as a foster carer for the child/ren.