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# **Children's Safeguarding & Specialist Services and Early Help**

## **Placement Stability Policy & Guidance**

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# Contents

1. Purpose	4
2. Background	4
3. Definition and Scope	5
4. Principles	6
5. How will we promote Placement Stability	8
5.1 Ensuring a focus on improving Placement Stability	9
5.2 Effective diversion from care and early intervention	9
5.3 Strong tracking, and case planning to avoid drift and achieve permanence	10
5.4 Increased placement choice	11
5.5 Increased multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support to placements and increased partnership with foster carers	12
5.6 Enable children and young people to participate fully in decision making	13
5.7 Ensure that there are robust managements systems which improve performance on stability across Telford & Wrekin Council and dealing rigorously and effectively with areas for development	14

# 1. Purpose

- This document outlines Telford & Wrekin Children's Services policy and approach to ensuring that placement stability is at the forefront of every care arrangement.
- The document also provides practice guidance in relation to placement stability in identifying, managing and monitoring – how to obtain additional help if and when required to support placements.

# 2. Background

It is known from research into developmental trauma and attachment theory that the majority of children looked after have experienced early poor parenting, neglect and other forms of abuse, which is likely to have impacted on all aspects of their development.

The Telford & Wrekin Council Permanency Strategy (2018) states:

'... our commitment to ensuring that children and young people at risk or who come into our care are supported through our involvement and activities to achieve secure, stable and loving homes that support them through childhood and beyond.

Our overall goal is that permanence planning and practice is not seen as an additional process; but is central to our care planning practice.

The intention of our Placement Stability Strategy is to support permanency for children and young people in a timely way. Through the most appropriate preventative and or legal placement option to meet their needs. Permanency options include:

- Remaining with or returning to the care of their birth family
- Permanent placement with family or friends carers
- Adoption
- Early permanence placements/fostering for adoption
- Special Guardianship (SGO)
- Child Arrangements Orders
- Long Term Foster Care
- Residential Care

Permanency is the long term plan for a child or young person's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption.

The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (DfE 2015) defines the objective of planning for permanence as:

*To ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.*

Permanency depends on securing the right placement for the right child at the right time. Children's experiences of the care system vary considerably, depending on a multitude of factors including age, ethnicity and reasons for placement. What matters is the quality of their relationships with their carers and significant individuals in their lives.

Placement stability is significant to achieving permanence through a variety of routes. Some will require a change in legal status and parental responsibility and some will not require the initiation of care proceedings.

For children and their families on the 'edge of care', the support from our Family Solutions, Family Group Conferencing, Early Help and Children in Need Services may be required to maintain permanence within their families.

Achieving permanence for a child or young person needs to be a key consideration from the day they become looked-after. The permanence planning process, informed by multi-agency contributions, will identify which permanence option is most likely to meet the needs of the individual child; taking account of his/her wishes and feelings.

It has long been recognised that a sense of stability, identity and belonging is needed for children and young people to be able to be achieve their individual needs.'

### 3. Definition and Scope

A simple working definition of placement stability for the purposes of this policy is used as follows:

**Well planned placements that reduce the need for placement changes and emergency placements.**

We wish to reduce the number of placement moves for our children and young people by ensuring that our children and young people are placed in the most appropriate placement when entering care. Children/young people should move only when their permanency goals require it. The goal is to eliminate moves except those that are progressions toward permanency.

The purpose of this policy, is to support children in a range of current and proposed placements to achieve stability and permanence in the following care arrangements.

1. Adoptive Placements
2. Foster Placements
3. Residential Placements
4. Kinship placements (Family and Friends)
5. Semi-Independent Placements
6. Placement at home
7. Children moving to Child Arrangement Orders and Special Guardianship Orders

This policy has been produced with reference to and should be read in conjunction with:

- Telford & Wrekin Council Permanency Policy (2018)
- The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 2: care planning, placement and case review
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) Sufficiency: statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children
- The Telford & Wrekin Council Improvement Plan (-which outlines particular actions in relation to the Children Looked After and Care Leaver's Strategy and includes placement stability)
- Care planning and decision making for children on the edge of care
- Legal proceedings
- Family and Friends care
- Parent and Child placements
- Placing a Child Looked After
- Personal Education Plans

This policy covers the need for placement stability for all Children Looked After, (irrespective of age) and includes Care Leavers who are moving towards independence

## 4. Principles

*Permanency*: This is at the heart of all care plans with a clearly planned journey through care. Stability and permanency must be reached at the earliest opportunity.

*Attachment:* Young people's secure attachments to carers are very important to their mental health and wellbeing. Continuity of relationships is also important, and healthy attachments should be respected, sustained and developed where this is in the child's best interests.

*Placement moves are kept to a minimum:* Frequent moves, planned or not, can significantly affect children and young people.

*Participation:* The involvement of children and young people in decision making regarding their placements is essential. The wishes and feeling of children must be taken into account and due weight given, bearing in mind their age and developmental stage. Even if it is not possible to act on the views of a child, social workers should think about all the ways in which they can maximize their participation.

*Good Health:* This is a priority for our Children Looked After and Care Leavers; central to all children's ability to fulfill their potential as they develop from childhood and through to teenage years is the need to be well (- both physically and emotionally).

*Good Education and Stability in Education:* Children, who encounter the looked after system, are likely to have already experienced high levels of disruption and instability in their lives and the impact of this history will be exacerbated by further instability. A change of school at the same time will disrupt learning can mean a break from all previous routines, friendship groups and support networks simultaneously. Research shows that Children who are Looked After tend to move schools more frequently than their peers, which has a strong negative effect on attainment and outcomes.

*Equality of Opportunity:* All Children Looked After and Care Leavers should have the opportunity to achieve optimal development; according to their circumstances and age. The Department of Health, 1998a stated that:

*“Children and young people... should all be considered as individuals with particular needs and potentialities ... differences in bringing up children due to family structures, religion, culture and ethnic origins should be respected and understood and those children with ‘specific social needs arising out of disability or a health condition’ have their assessed needs met and reviewed “*

*Strong Networks:* Placements should enable Children Looked After and Care Leavers to remain in their communities and maintain their networks (if in their best interests) to minimize disruption in their lives. Every child who

needs to be looked after will be placed in or close to their own area as far as possible, unless it is assessed that they will benefit from being placed out of area.

*Carers should be at the centre of a child or young person's experience of Corporate Parenting and should provide the mainstay of their support:* Every child who needs to be looked after will be cared for by carers who are appropriately supported and developed so that they have the necessary skills and experience to meet their needs.

*Support:* Children and young people should have a clear risk assessment and a plan to address risks with **detailed support services** for the carer and child. These plans should be reviewed if there are significant changes or an elevated risk of placement

*Placements should support positive transitions to adulthood:* They should ensure that Children Looked After and Care Leaver's education, employment and training will enable young people to positively contribute to their local community and wider economy and succeed in independence. See local offer for care leavers and services provided by the children in care and leaving care team. Services provided by children with disabilities team.

## 5. How will we promote Placement Stability?

Research indicates that there is no single definitive action which will immediately achieve placement stability (Report for Department for Education and Skills – September 2005).

Achieving placement stability requires holistic planning to ensure key input from the right services and resources and regular review of the impact of these in creating stability for the child/young person and carers. There are several factors at play and there is a dynamic relationship between them which acts to improve stability.

There are four main factors identified within DFES research. These are as follows:

- Effective diversion from care and early intervention
- Strong tracking and case planning to avoid drift and achieve permanence
- Increased placement choice
- Increased multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support to placements

Bearing in mind the complexity of this issue and research evidence considerable thought and planning is taking place on an on-going basis within Telford & Wrekin's Children's Services to ensure that Children Looked after and Care Leavers can live in stable and nurturing placements. This will be achieved by:

## **5.1 Ensuring a focus on improving placement stability – strong leadership and vision**

Within Telford and Wrekin Children's Services there is a 'whole system approach' to supporting Children Looked After and Care Leavers and keeping families together. This approach has been documented within the Permanence Strategy. The strategy brings together the range of activity and services to support to achieving permanence.

## **5.2 Effective diversion from care and early intervention**

Telford and Wrekin Council has invested in services such as Family Solutions, Family Group Conferencing and Early Help Services to prevent breakdown in the family, tight gate-keeping processes and rapid rehabilitation schemes to return children home quickly when they are looked after. This reduces the number of children looked after, releasing money to be re-invested in even better prevention or in developing placement choice or placement support services.

The following objectives have been identified to achieve this:

- Identify those children and young people who are suffering or likely to suffer harm from abuse or neglect and who need referral to children's social care.
- Engage extended family and kinship networks.
- Provide good challenge and broader input at the gateway to care.
- Developing an integrated community model to support struggling families using existing approaches in the county.
- Improve professional development to support confident risk management (the implementation of the Systemic Practice model across Children's Services).
- Proactive case management and working with birth families and children for as long as is needed – which is key to successful reunification. This may include a period of a child being looked after with continuing focused interventions following rehabilitation home.

## 5.3 Strong tracking and case planning to avoid drift and achieve permanence

The following objectives have been identified in relation to this aim:-

- Ensuring that all Children Looked After and Care Leavers have as quickly as possible a plan for permanency with a clear and planned journey through their care irrespective of their age. (See permanency strategy)
- Ensuring effective assessment and planning processes and listening to the views and wishes of children and their families.
- All placement decisions to be supported by integrated high quality assessment and planning.
- All children will enter care in a planned way unless it is an emergency situation.
- Complete, high quality and timely information is available to carers on a child to assist the matching process and placement planning.( including health and education plans)
- Rigorous scrutiny by management and Independent Reviewing Officers of care plans and permanency planning.
- A placement stability risk assessment and action plan, to be considered at the start of every new placement which is reviewed and updated if there is an escalation of risk.
- Care planning meetings should be increased where placements are becoming fragile and if additional assistance is required referrals made to placement stability panel.
- There is a clear process for the approval of placements which are to become long term which include consideration of support needs of the child/young person and the carer/s.
- Supporting children and young people to remain with their foster carers post 18 via staying put arrangements should be discussed with the supported accommodation officer located within the leaving care team.
- Training and development will be reviewed annually to assist social workers, support workers and foster carers in maintaining placement stability.
- There are a number of key officers who are able to support social workers and foster carers where placements become fragile depending on the child/young person specific needs. For example consultation with the virtual school head for looked after children, life story worker for looked after children. LAC/CAMHS clinicians, behavior support team, Personal Advisors, Systemic Consultants and sessional support staff out of hours for internal foster care and commissioned support for external care placements. Where social workers and support staff experience particular challenges in securing the right resources and

support referrals should be made to the placement stability panel which meets fortnightly on Mondays (see terms of reference on placement stability panel)

## 5.4 Increased placement choice

The service will ensure that there is a sufficient range of high quality accommodation for Children Looked After and Care Leavers within our local authority area by:

- Increasing the number and capacity of in-house fostering and adoptive placements. It is critically important to have a sufficient pool of foster carers and adopters to cater for the varied needs of children. Without it, there is a lack of placement choice and this is associated with placement instability.
- Using independent providers to complement our in-house provision when the needs of the child require this. (specific cohorts of children may require this service). Wherever possible these providers will be locally based so that young people have the opportunity to remain in their communities and maintain their networks.
- Residential homes when this is best environment to meet their needs. Where this is the case there should be a positive choice for this type of provision and a plan for step down to a family placement at the right time. The permanency plan for children/young people in residential will return children/young person to a family environment whenever possible and appropriate in meeting the needs of the child.
- School based settings- a significant proportion of disabled Children Looked After are cared for in school-based settings which are out of county and have been identified to meet their holistic needs.
- Commissioning of a flexible range of support for children between the ages of 16 and 25 that provides a pathway between care and independence. This includes the Staying Put arrangements, Supported Lodgings and semi-independent accommodation.

Particular attention will be given to the following categories of children and young people:

- Disabled children
- Children with challenging behaviour
- Children from sibling groups

- Children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds especially from black and minorities groups
- Young People who require support to achieve independence
- Children who have experienced multiple placement moves

\*Kinship care is an alternative permanence option when children cannot return to their birth parents. Outcomes are generally good for these children, and in recent research review found to be, 'in the main, faring significantly better than those looked after in non-kin foster care' (Selwyn et al 2013: 67)

These options are addressed in detail within the Telford and Wrekin Permanency Policy.

## 5.5 Identified activity to support placement stability

The following actions have been identified:

- Carers in Telford and Wrekin will be provided with the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of children who require therapeutic parenting- and advice and support in managing challenging behaviour. This will be provided through training, development, supervision and support from education, Children's Social Care, health and Child and Adolescent Services (CAMHs).
- Targeted training to social workers, foster carers and support staff.
- We have developed the role of the Family Finding and Targeted Services Team to better support good placement outcomes and effective matching.
- Carers will be provided with information about the child so they can prepare for the placement and placements will, as far as possible, be planned.
- The Team around the Placement/care planning meetings will play a crucial role in ensuring that there are strategies to support placements from the start and to provide urgent support when a placement is at risk of breakdown.
- The placement stability panel will review the support plans for specific children and young people where there is a high risk of placement breakdown and monitor progress of these placements.
- Developing a range of respite provision for children and young people and their carers to alleviate on going challenges which may alleviate placement breakdown.

- The recruitment of specialist foster carers to provide placements for children and young people with significant needs to prevent residential care or stepping down from residential care.

## 5.6 Enable children and young people to participate fully in decision making

The views of children are important at every stage of their care planning and placement.

We will ensure that children's wishes and feelings are heard and they are involved in a meaningful way in all their plans for help and protection through sufficient preparation. The views of children will therefore influence decisions such as where they live and who they may have contact with whilst in placement and for the future. The following areas will be given priority:

- When planning placement changes, the child or young person's wishes will be fully taken into account, along with consideration of their best interests. If the wishes of the child cannot be acted upon this will be explained to the child or young person and these reasons recorded.
- The child's IRO will ensure children will make children and young people aware of their right to access advocacy services when a review decision is likely to overrule their wishes and feelings. The child or young person should also have enough notice of any planned change to arrange for an advocate to support them in their review meeting.
- Children and young people will be consulted regarding levels of contact with family and friends and due weight given to these in accordance with their age, understanding and best interests.

Children will also actively influence service delivery:

- In Telford and Wrekin the Children in Care Council and other consultation mechanisms contained within the Participation Strategy (2018) will be used to ensure that leaders and managers are informed of the relevant issues for young people in placements or receiving a service as care leaver.
- Issues raised will shape the service design and improve the quality of service provided.

## 5.7 Ensure that there are robust management systems which improve performance on stability across Telford and Wrekin and deal rigorously and effectively with areas for development

- **Case Audit** activity throughout the year reviewing children's placements.
- **Disruption meetings** will be held following the breakdown of an approved long term placement to explore and learn from placement breakdowns, as to what will assist the child and likewise inform practice development. Such meetings will always include feedback from the foster carer and the child/young person.
- **Complaints** and other feedback given by children, carers and parents on the quality of care offered will be reviewed for usage in future service development.
- **Data** will be maintained on all forms of breakdowns, including foster placement and adoption data which will be reviewed monthly in relation to trends and specific case reviews. Where there are identified service issues these will be reported to CSSS management team and Children's commissioning team to progress to achieve service responses.
- **Placement Stability Panel** provision of reports to CSSS management group and commissioners in relation to resources, service needs, gaps and barriers.
- **CSSS Quality Assurance Group** this group receives reports on service quality and recommendations for service improvements and will monitor the quality of practice to improve placement stability.
- **Social Workers/foster carers training.** Feedback and review of impact of specific training to support children's and young people's needs in placement.
- **Independent Reviewing Officers** will provide scrutiny and will negotiate for improvement in care planning where needed. If necessary will escalate concerns about care planning through the Dispute Resolution Process.
- **Participation** of Children and young people via the Care Council in relation to the quality of their placements and the support they require.
- **CSSS Management** and Corporate Parenting Strategic Group

receive regular performance reports on children's placements.