



# Coventry City Council Permanence Strategy

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## Contents

Foreword	Page 3
Introduction	Page 5
Principles for Permanence	Page 6
Planning for Permanence	Page 10
Options for Permanence	Page 14
Placement Stability	Page 19



## Introduction

### Foreword from the Lead Member

I am pleased to present Coventry's Permanence Strategy to you. It takes time, as well as a shared commitment, to improve children's outcomes and this strategy sets out how all practitioners in Coventry will work together to achieve permanence for the children we serve.

The strategy evidences the drive and commitment to improving services for our Children and Families services, recognising that each child is an individual, and approaches to service delivery need to be tailored to meet each child's individual needs in the best way possible.

This strategy builds on the priorities in the 'Coventry Pledge' and the Children's Services Improvement Plan to:

- Improve the health and well-being of children
- Listen to and involve children and young people in decision-making
- Invest in children and young people's future
- Ensure that children and young people are well prepared for adulthood through high quality learning and development
- Ensure that children and young people live in a safe and comfortable place
- Ensure that children and young people have a significant adult taking an interest in their education and life, ensuring they know why you are in care.

Practitioners across the whole of the children's workforce are central to the achieving early permanence and supporting children and young people to achieve their ambitions now and through the rest of their lives.



Cllr Pat Seaman  
Lead Member for Children's Services

## Foreword from the Director of Children's Services

I am passionate about improving services for children in Coventry, to enable them to reach their full potential. This Permanence Strategy applies to our work with all children living at home, on the edge of care and for those with long-term care plans. It must be underpinned by high quality practice from first offer of early help and throughout the child's journey through care. All practitioners across Children's Services should be aware of their role in achieving early permanence for every child in Coventry and how our collective practice contributes to each child's experience of receiving services and support. Working with families is at the heart of this strategy, and Coventry's overarching vision "to equip them with the knowledge and skills to enable them to raise their children in a loving, healthy and safe environment."

This strategy is also one of a number that support practice with looked after children in Coventry including the Corporate Parenting Strategy and the 'Coventry Pledge' to achieve our goal to continuously achieve "outstanding" outcomes for our children. Bringing these strategies together demonstrates our commitment to continue to drive forward practice improvements and deliver service changes.

This strategy will support our commitment to all children in Coventry and ensure that they receive the right help, at the right time in the right way. This is a key part of our work in delivering the overall vision for the city: "We want Coventry children and young people to: have supportive families; live safe from harm; achieve their potential; be healthy; and have positive and fulfilling lives".



John Gregg  
Director of Children's Services

## Introduction

### Definition of Permanence

Permanence is the long-term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all work with children and families. Permanence promotes every child's need for 'security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging throughout their childhood and beyond' (Care Inquiry, 2013). Permanence for children has three particular aspects:

Legal – the security and commitment afforded by the giving or sharing of parental responsibility, or appropriate level of delegated authority, via a range of legal orders available through the courts;

Emotional and psychological - when a child feels attached to an adult/s who provide a stable, loving and secure relationship;

Physical or environmental - a stable home environment within a familiar neighbourhood and community where the child's identity and belonging needs are met.

### Scope

This Permanence Strategy applies to all work with all children who are receiving early help, are children in need or require protection, looked after children and their families. It must be underpinned by high quality practice from first offer of early help and throughout the child's journey through care. It should be supported by all teams across Children's Services. All practitioners across Children's Services should be aware of their role in achieving early permanence for every child in Coventry and how our collective practice contributes to each child's experience of receiving services and support.

This policy is relevant to all practitioners in Early Help, MASH, Area Teams, Child Protection Chairs, Edge of Care, Placements Team, Fostering, Looked After Children and Permanence, the Virtual School, CAMHS, Independent Reviewing Officers, and Through Care whereby all children's need for stability, be it within their family or alternative care arrangements, form part of all assessments, planning, intervention and review.

All children need to have stable and permanent arrangements in their everyday lives to enable them to develop and grow into healthy adults. The task for practitioners is to achieve that stability in the best way possible for each individual child. For this reason, working towards permanence is relevant to all areas of social work with children. This strategy will support our commitment to all children in Coventry and ensure that they receive the right help, at the right time in the right way. This is a key part of our work in delivering the overall vision for the city: **"We want Coventry children and young people to: have supportive families; live safe from harm; achieve their potential; be healthy; and have positive and fulfilling lives."**

There are links within this document to related policy, procedure and good practice.

### Early Intervention and Staying at Home

The first consideration in permanence planning is working with families and children to support them in staying together. Staying at home can offer the best chance of stability. An early offer of effective help can often result in better outcomes for children, enabling them to remain in the care of their parents and have all of their needs met within that setting.

Working with families to equip them with the knowledge and skills to enable them to raise their children in a loving, healthy and safe environment offers the best chance of stability. Some families may need additional support in order to make this a realistic option, and the local authority is committed to providing such support.

Early Help Services, Responsive Services, Family Group Conferences, Edge of Care, and the effective delivery of the Public Law Outline will play a vital role in supporting families.

### Reunification

Where children have had to move away from their parents' care, the primary aim will be to rehabilitate children back to their parents at the earliest opportunity where it is appropriate to do so. Intensive work will need to take place within the first few weeks of the child becoming looked after or moving to other carers to achieve this. All reasonable efforts will be made to rehabilitate the child with his/her family, unless there is sufficient evidence that further attempts at rehabilitation are unlikely to succeed or will be harmful to the child.

Every child's care plan will include Signs of Safety statements that outline what change is required by the birth parents for the local authority to be confident about the possibility of reunification.

A family network meeting or Family Group Conference should be convened to determine what help and support is available from extended family members that may enable the child to return home and remain in the care of their parents.

When children do return home a robust assessment of need, evidencing the changes parents have made in the area of difficulty that led to the child to become looked after, is required alongside a robust transition and support plan to ensure a sharp focus on the safe and successful reunification for the child. Children returning home are a vulnerable group and Working Together (2015) makes clear the local authority's responsibility to make sure the arrangements are safe and supported by effective interventions and services from a range of professionals. This affords the family the best chance of success and positive outcomes for the individual child.

## **Involving Children and Young People**

In Coventry, children are at the heart of everything we do - they are involved in planning and decision-making. Children have the right to understand what is happening to them and why it is happening. Children should be involved (in an age appropriate way) in the discussion and thinking about their care plan and should know what is proposed. They should have the opportunity to express their views about it and to have those views discussed and recorded. Where the child's view cannot be upheld the reasons for this will be shared with the child and recorded on the child's file. Children should know and understand the implications of the care plan for them and their future. Children's Services will encourage and enable them to do this in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding. Children should also be made aware that the final responsibility for decisions rests with the adults concerned.

Independent Advocacy Services are available for children in care and those on a child protection plan. The involvement of this service can assist children in engaging in the care planning process. Children have a right to make representations and complaints and they will receive help to do so if this is required.

Coventry County Council is committed to the involvement of children and young people in the shaping and development of services. It has a Participation Service which aims to ensure that children and young people receiving services are encouraged, supported and enabled to express their views about services. For children and young people who are looked after, there is a Voices of Care Council, and they are actively encouraged to take part.

## **Partnership with Parents and Family Networks**

Coventry City Council Children's Services will work in partnership with parents and family networks, in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for children. It will support the child's birth family to provide a permanent home for the child as long as it is safe to do so. Parents have the right to make representations and complaints, and will be advised of the procedures to do so.

For the duration that a child is looked after, parents will be kept fully involved and informed in all decisions about the child's future. Parents will have the opportunity to contribute to the child's Looked After Child Review and their views will be taken into account, where it is safe and meets the child's needs to do so. Parents will be informed in the event of a change in the child's circumstances e.g. placement or school move, change in care plan, social worker or significant health concerns.

Birth families will be encouraged to provide relevant information about themselves and their family history. Parents will receive an explanation of how significant this information is for their child as they grow up.

Where adoption is the plan, independent advice and support for birth parents will be offered by Adoption Central England. Counselling and support will be provided for birth parents who are considering relinquishing children for adoption.

## **Preventing Drift**

Coventry City Council is determined to ensure services are outcome driven - it is clear about the impact it has on children and young people. This is why long-term stability, and quality of care, needs to be secured for all children with minimal delay. It follows that decision-making must take place within the child's timescales in order to prevent unnecessary drift.

The damaging impact of childhood neglect and abuse throughout adolescence and into adulthood provides a compelling case for taking early decisive action to prevent its occurrence and recurrence and to mitigate the consequences (Brown and Ward, 2012). Efforts to rehabilitate the child to the family must be time limited due to the risks associated with drift and disrupted attachments at key stages in childhood, particularly in the early years. Delay is damaging to a child's life chances and must be kept to the minimum in order to ensure the best possible outcomes.

## **Decisions are evidence based**

Coventry City Council strives to ensure practitioners receive the best learning and development offer, so that all decisions are based on the most up to date research and good practice. Decision making will be evidenced on the child's file.

There is a growing body of compelling evidence that the development of children's brains is adversely affected when they are exposed to poor parenting by their primary care giver. This ranges from damage in the womb when the mother is using drugs and/or alcohol, to damage in the early months and years by inconsistent parental response, and lack of continuity of care.

Attachment relationships and child development will be considered from the point of assessment, through care planning, service delivery, placement and review. All children will have a genogram, assessments will explicitly identify the child's key attachment figures in their family and community, and Family Group Conferences or family network meetings will be offered to families to enable them to identify permanent and safe arrangements for children.

For children in care, assessments and support packages should focus on promoting attachments and reducing any potentially negative impact of care arrangements on attachment experiences and secure relationships.



Coventry City Council is committed to providing the right conditions for each child to form healthy and lasting attachments and receive appropriate levels of support to overcome abuse and neglect. This includes ensuring children feel like valued members of, and sense of belonging to a family and wider community, and feel secure.

## **Lifelong Links**

Children need to be securely attached to adult carers who can provide safe and effective care throughout their childhood and beyond. Our priority, in promoting permanence, is to preserve and promote attachment relationships, minimise disruption and keep children, wherever possible, safely within the context of their birth family.

The vast majority of children in care reach out, or return to, their birth family at some point, often when they leave care. It is important children and young people are prepared for this and that connections to birth families are supported throughout childhood.

Coventry City Council seeks to identify adults, such as wider family and friends, or other connected people, such as previous foster carers, residential workers, social workers or school teachers, who can provide essential support and a lifelong trusting relationship which provides continued support. Such lifelong links provides support with the challenges young adults face when they leave care and throughout their lives.

### Permanency Tracking

Every child will be tracked throughout their journey before and through care. This will:

- Ensure that permanency planning for children is progressed with the pace and urgency that is needed, including achieving legal or emotional security, for children and young people.
- Improve the timeliness and the quality of evidence for court work, including pre-proceedings work. This should also include ensuring assessments of connected persons are timely and robust and those children and their carers receive appropriate support.
- Ensure that children are prepared well for moving to their permanent home, including starting life story work at an earlier stage.

Outcomes from these panels are monitored via a robust tracker to ensure agreed timeframes are met, drift in progressing plans avoided, ensuring permanence plans for children are made in a timely manner and avoiding unnecessary delay.

#### [Permanency Tracking](#)

### Public Law Outline (PLO)

The PLO should be implemented, where safe and appropriate, prior to care proceedings being initiated. For those circumstances where proceedings are necessary, it will identify and focus on the key issues for the child. This has the aim of making the best decisions for the child, within the timetable set by the Court, and avoids the need for unnecessary evidence or hearings. To achieve this social workers must undertake parenting assessments, Family Group Conferences, and connected persons assessments within the PLO timeframe.

The quality of assessments, with robust analysis of needs, and analytical chronologies supports evidence based decision making for children. A parenting assessment should be completed and written up at this stage, and submitted to the Legal Planning and New Admissions Panel.

### Family Group Conference (FGC) model

The FGC model seeks to transform relationships between the state and families on matters concerning the welfare of a child. The FGC process works as a tool to assist wider family to identify their own solutions for family dynamics and difficulties. Often untapped resources within the child or young person's own family network are identified which can result in an avoidance of children coming into care, and a reduction of dependency on specialist services, by increasing family capacity and resilience. FGCs should be used during the child

protection planning stage as well as pre-proceedings as part of the PLO agreement. FGCs can also support the development of rehabilitation support packages.

In the event the family do not wish to engage in the formal process of a FGC or there are immediate concerns that the family network may be able to assist the parents to resolve a family network meeting may be arranged. This is an opportunity for the family to meet with the social worker and agree what support the family network can offer to the child/ren and their parents.

## **Connected Persons**

If it is not possible for children to remain in their parents care, families may make their own arrangements for children to be cared for within their own family network. This may be under a range of frameworks such as applications for Child Arrangements Orders (CAO) or Special Guardianship Orders (SGO).

If the child needs to become looked after, the local authority has a responsibility, where appropriate, to place children with connected persons. These may be planned arrangements, or sometimes a looked after child may be placed in an emergency with a connected person under Schedule 4 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2015.

[Connected Persons Policy](#)

## **Multi-track, Parallel Planning**

The Care Planning Regulations (2015) and the Adoption Act 2002 require there be a written Permanence Plan presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Statutory Review (i.e. 4 months after a child first becomes looked after). Permanency Planning Meetings will be held prior to the child's second LAC Review via the Permanence Panel where senior managers for Looked After Children, Fostering and Adoption will be available to advise on the available options. The Permanence Plan will identify the appropriate option (or options depending upon the stage reached in any care proceedings) for the child, and will be formally endorsed at this review.

Permanence Plans are required for all children who are looked after (except for those who start to be looked after age 15+ years where the needs assessment and the pathway plan form the permanence plan).

Multi-track planning in this context refers to a situation where two or more plans run in parallel. In such cases, the main focus will be upon rehabilitation home but at the same time, a parallel plan or plans (e.g. placement with connected persons, long term fostering and/or adoption) will be assessed in order to achieve an alternative permanent placement if rehabilitation is deemed not in the child's best interests.

The main principle behind multi-track planning is the avoidance of delay and, as such, it is imperative all assessments run alongside one another (as opposed to sequentially). Birth parents will always be informed of all options are under consideration. The exception to this

is Fostering to Adopt arrangements which would be discussed with parents prior to the child's birth or the matter entering care proceedings.

Permanency planning is supported by aspirational and SMART Care Plans.

## **Fostering to Adopt**

Concurrent planning is an established practice for placing children with dually approved carers as prospective adopters and as local authority foster carers.

The advantage of this type of placement is that the child will be placed with foster carers who, subject to a Placement Order being made, or parental consent, are expected to go on to become the child's adoptive family. The child benefits from an early placement with their eventual permanent carers. This type of placement has potential to reduce this delay and prevents unnecessary moves.

It is possible that such a placement may not lead to adoption, for example, because the child's plan changes where rehabilitation with the birth family is recommended following assessment. This may mean that the child returns home or is moved to another permanence arrangement. For the vast majority of children in such placements, progression towards adoption will be the anticipated outcome.

[Foster to Adopt](#)

## **Sibling Assessments**

Many children live within complex family structures with step or half-siblings living with them or elsewhere. Coventry City Council recognises the lifelong importance of sibling attachments and is committed to meeting the needs of sibling groups. Every attempt will be made to assess siblings at an early stage to ensure full consideration of their relationships with each other, to inform placement choices. Siblings will be kept together when this is assessed to be appropriate and in the interests of each individual child.

Where it is not in siblings' best interests to remain together, or a placement for a large sibling group was not available, regular contact will be prioritised and close geographical proximity between placements will be sought.

Where a child is placed permanently and there are further siblings born, consideration will be given to whether siblings/he can be placed in the same household.

## **Preparing children for Permanence**

All children in care should benefit from good quality life story work (LSW). Children in care require accurate knowledge about their past and birth family to develop a secure understanding of who they are and become psychologically healthy. LSW can take a number of different forms ranging from a practitioner preparing a 'life story' book for the child to direct work where the practitioner works alongside the child to help them understand their life experiences. Each approach has a valid application and it is important to establish which approach is most appropriate for the individual children and their current circumstances.

Children have a right to be well prepared before any permanent change in their lives. Direct work tailored to their specific needs should be undertaken before joining a new family. Transition work, appropriate to the child's developmental stage, should be undertaken and recorded.

For adoption placements every child should have a 'life story' book, including clear information on their birth and life before they were adopted. The life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters; and the completed life story book at the latest within 10 days of the adoption ceremony. The Later Life Letter should be given to the adopters by the child's social worker within 10 days of the Adoption Ceremony taking place.

[Direct Work with Children and Young People](#)

[Later Life Letters](#)

### **The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)**

The role of the IRO will be to consider each individual child's care planning:

- Length of use of section 20 and appropriateness of this;
- Children who have had more than 3 placement moves within a year;
- Permanence plans are in place by the second review;
- The appropriateness of the overall care plan;
- Where concerns arise in terms of drift in permanency plans the IRO will raise this through the Escalations process.

[IRO Handbook](#)

## Options for Permanence

The right permanence option for a child always depends on their individual circumstances and based on an assessment of need. All options for the child need to be conceptualised within a common understanding of permanence that:

- Provides high quality and stable care;
- Support children's sense of identity and belonging;
- Connect past, present and future throughout childhood and transitions out of care and into adult life (Care Enquiry, 2013).

Permanence can be achieved in a variety of ways, the options for permanence are:

- Staying with birth parent(s) or returning to their care
- Placement with family or friends/connected persons (which could be under fostering arrangements or legally secured by a CAO or SGO; see below) where there has been a thorough assessment process that clearly demonstrates that the proposed carer is able to care for the child at least until the child is 18;
- Adoption where it has been determined that the only realistic option to meet the child's needs is for him/her to be placed permanently away from his/her birth family with new carers;
- Long-term fostering is an option for children who have significant attachments to their birth family, but they are not able to live with them;
- Child Arrangements Orders where a proposed carer (often a family member) shares parental responsibility;
- Special Guardianship Order where a special guardian undertakes to care for a child until they reach the age of 18 and beyond. These arrangements should have a support plan. The special guardian shares parental responsibility for the child and is entitled to exercise parental responsibility to the exclusion of the parents;
- Residential care offers stability for a minority of older young people who struggle (or do not wish) to live in a family setting these settings provide the right environment to meet their needs and develop the necessary skills for semi-independent/independent living. Also includes children with significant health needs and disabilities that require residential care.

There is a history of adoption being perceived as better for children's outcomes than foster care. However, research into the experiences of children in care, and the practices that help children to flourish, discovered that although more looked after children than in the general population disliked their appearance, feared bullying and had reduced access to the internet, more than three quarters of children trusted their carer and only 5% did not. Furthermore, 97% of children said they had a trusted adult in their lives and 89% said they liked school (most of the time). More than 80% felt involved in decisions made about them by their worker and about the same proportion felt settled in their placements. Crucially, 83% of children thought their lives were getting better in care and, remarkably, a larger proportion of children in care than in the general population always felt safe (Selwyn and Briheim-Crookall, 2017).

## Advantages and disadvantages of different permanence options

### Staying with birth parent(s) / Reunification

#### Advantages:

- The first consideration in permanence planning is working with families and children to support them in staying together.
- An early offer of effective help can often result in better outcomes for children, enabling them to remain at home with their parents and have all of their needs met within that setting;
- Staying at home can offer the best chance of stability;
- Some families may need additional support in order to make this a realistic option, and the local authority is committed to providing such support.

#### Disadvantages:

- Children may experience inconsistent parenting throughout their childhood and a robust assessment and support must minimise further abuse or neglect;
- Children may experience intermittent social care involvement and stigma throughout their childhood.

#### ***Law and Policy focus***

##### **Care Order**

Remains a looked after child and statutory responsibilities including health assessments, dentals, PEPs and Looked After Reviews continue. This can be intrusive for the child and family. There is a requirement for multi-agency Looked After Reviews every six months.

Assessed and regulated under Regulation 17 and Schedule 3 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations (2010).

Gives the Local Authority Parental Responsibility.

Local Authority can exercise its Parental Responsibility to remove from parents' care under a Care Order if the child/ren is *at imminent risk* of significant harm. If not, the parent/s must be given reasonable notice (legal advice is 14 days) of our intention to remove.

##### **Supervision Order**

No longer looked after.

Subject to Children in Need planning and guided by Working Together (2015). The requirement for multi-agency meetings is 4-8 weekly. The focus is family support.

Does not give the Local Authority Parental Responsibility but requires the Local Authority to advise, assist and befriend the child.

Ceases to have effect after one year unless an application is made to extend it (maximum of 3 years).

Specific directions can be applied to the Order such as a requirement for the parent to take the child to school or medical appointments and/or specifying the frequency of social work visits.

If the child/ren are at imminent risk of significant harm Police Protection or Emergency Protection Order can be applied. If not, an Interim Care Order application can be made which will be listed within 7 working days (with abridged time for service).

The threshold for making the order is the same for both a Care Order and Supervision Order. A court may only make a Care Order or Supervision Order if it is satisfied—

(a) that the child concerned is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm; and

(b) that the harm, or likelihood of harm, is attributable to—

(i) the care given to the child, or likely to be given to him if the order were not made, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give to him; or

(ii) the child's being beyond parental control.

A court should make the least draconian order possible and should only make an order if it is better than making no order at all, known as the no order principle.

## **Family or Friends/Connected Persons**

### **Advantages:**

- It maintains legal links to the birth family who can still play a part in the decision making for the child;
- Kinship foster placements are more stable than non-relative foster care (Rock et al, 2015). The qualitative data indicates that kinship carers tend to offer care unconditionally and feel a sense of binding duty and commitment to the relative in their care;
- The local authority retains a role in negotiating between the connected foster carer and the birth family over issues such as contact;
- There is continued social work support to the child and their family in a placement that is regularly reviewed and the frequency of visits/reviews can be reduced or increased in line with the child's needs and regulation.

### **Disadvantages:**

- The carers do not have parental responsibility;
- Continuing social work involvement which could be perceived as intrusive into the child's life;
- Stigma attached to the child due to being in care;
- The child is not a legal member of the family. If difficulties arise there may be less willingness to persevere and seek resolution.

## **Adoption**

### **Advantages:**

- Parental responsibility is held exclusively by the adopters;
- The child is no longer looked after;
- No future legal challenge to overturn the Adoption Order is possible;
- Decisions about continuing contact will usually be made by the new parents (on the child's behalf) who are most in touch with the child's needs, although this may be subject to any Contact Order made by the Court at the time of the Adoption Order;
- The child is a permanent and legal family member.



Disadvantages:

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

## **Long-term fostering**

Advantages:

- The local authority retains a role in negotiating between the foster carers and the birth family over issues such as contact;
- There is continuing social work support to the child and foster family in a placement that is regularly reviewed and the frequency of visits/reviews can be reduced or increased in line with the child's needs and regulation;
- It maintains legal links to the birth family who can still play a part in the decision making for the child;
- The possibility of "Staying Put" beyond the age of 18.

### [Staying Put Policy](#)

Disadvantages:

- The carers do not have parental responsibility;
- Continuing social work involvement which could be perceived as intrusive into the child's life;
- Stigma attached to the child due to being in care;
- The child is not a legal member of the family. If difficulties arise there may be less willingness to persevere and seek resolution.

## **Special Guardianship Orders**

Advantages:

- Legal security in that leave is required from the court for parents to apply to discharge the order and will only be granted if a change of circumstances can be established since the original order was made;
- Special guardians will have parental responsibility for the child. Although this will be shared with the child's parents, the special guardian will have the legal right to make all day to day arrangements for the child. The parents will still have to be consulted and their consent required to the child's change of name, adoption, placement abroad for more than 3 months and any other fundamental issues;
- Legal links to the birth family and ongoing contact;
- The child will no longer be subject to a Care Order or in care and will not automatically be subject to social work involvement;
- The child will not be looked after and so less stigma is attached to the placement;

- As with adoptive parents, they have the right to request an assessment for support services at any time after the Order is made. This must always be supported by an SGO Support Plan.

Disadvantages:

- The order does not necessarily bring with it the lifelong sense of belonging as an Adoption Order does;
- Although there are restrictions on applications to discharge the order, such an application is possible and may be perceived as a threat to the child's stability;
- Although a parent requires leave to apply for a CAO, they can apply for any other Section 8 Order (i.e. Prohibited Steps Order or Specific Issues Order) as of right.

## **Child Arrangements Order**

A CAO states that the child will live with a person, and that person will have parental responsibility for that child until the order ceases. Some CAOs will make very specific arrangements for the child such as who the child can or cannot have contact with whilst other orders will be more open with detailed arrangements to be made between the parties by agreement.

Advantages:

- A CAO may be used to increase the degree of legal permanence in a placement with family or friends/connected persons, or a long-term fostering placement, where this would be in the child's best interests;
- It gives parental responsibility to the carer whilst maintaining the parent's parental responsibility;
- Legal links to the birth family are maintained and there can be ongoing contact;
- The child will no longer be in care and will not automatically be subject to social work involvement;
- The child will not be looked after and so less stigma is attached to the placement.

Disadvantages:

- It is less secure than Adoption or Special Guardianship in that an application can be made to revoke the CAO. However, the Court making the order can be asked to attach a condition refusing a parent's right to seek revocation without leave of the court;
- A CAO enables parental responsibility to be shared more equally with the parents, than with Special Guardianship, which in some cases may be a more appropriate arrangement;
- There is no right to an assessment of need and no formal support plan to the family after the order is made although in some instances a CAO Allowance may be considered by the local authority.

## Placement Stability

Children who are looked after are likely to have already experienced very high levels of disruption and instability in their lives, and the impact of this history will be exacerbated by further instability (Boddy, 2013). Working to build stability and to better understand factors leading to instability is a high priority for Coventry Children's Services.

### Research into placement stability

A systematic review into understanding foster placement instability for looked after children (Rock et al, 2015) identified a number of key themes influencing placement stability.

#### Child factors:

- Older age was consistently linked to increased placement instability;
- A history of unstable placements;
- Qualitative studies highlighted children 'giving up', 'disconnecting', or 'withdrawing' and externalising problems;
- Support and encouragement for academic achievement appears to be a feature of more stable placements;
- A feeling of being accepted into a family unconditionally was identified by children as key to building relationships.

#### Protective factors in carers' approaches:

- Effective boundary setting, discipline and routine tolerance/flexibility;
- Emotional involvement, kindness and affection;
- Child centeredness;
- Commitment;
- Good communication.

#### Placement factors:

- Kinship foster placements come through as more stable than non-relative foster care. The qualitative data indicated that kinship carers tend to offer care unconditionally and feel a sense of binding duty to the relative in their care;
- Separation from siblings was associated with instability in a majority of studies, though conflict between siblings in a foster placement may also contribute to placement breakdown.

#### Social work practice:

- Repeated changes of social worker were associated with instability while a consistent relationship supported stability;
- Involving children in decision making has been shown to predict fewer moves.

## **Matching**

The most important social work task identified by children is finding the right placement (Morgan 2014). The child's social worker and the supervising social worker for the proposed foster carers should have a discussion about the strengths and support needs of a potential placement in order to determine the likely success of the placement. In the absence of the allocated social worker the respective Team Managers should have this dialogue wherever possible.

At the point of seeking a fostering placement, it is important to identify critical issues and risks that will need to be managed by a foster carer, but overly negative referrals can lead carers unnecessarily to refuse a placement. Local authorities need to monitor the quality of referral information and ensure that they do not inadvertently demonise a child by over emphasising the negative aspects of a child's background (Narey & Owers, 2018). It is important to the future stability and success of the placement that referrals are complete in full with up to date information and thorough description and analysis of children's needs.

It is vital that children and their carers are fully informed and involved in the matching process, wherever possible, as this increases placement stability. A third of children in foster care said they had not been told enough about their current foster family before they moved in to live with them (Morgan, 2014). Children wanted more information about their future carers, and about any other children living in the household (Morgan 2014). Children and young people should be routinely provided with the carers profile prior to moving and have the opportunity to visit their placement in advance.

Equally, placement stability is facilitated when carers are fully informed about a child's needs and difficulties and prepared what to expect in terms of behaviour (Rock et al, 2015).

For those children who will remain in care it is vitally important to their sense of belonging and security for the foster placement to be formally acknowledged and agreed at Fostering Panel. This is an opportunity for children and their carers to celebrate the commitment made. Permanence can be undermined when the placement is not formally long term matched leaving the child with a sense of uncertainty and insecurity.

## **Planned Moves**

The decision for a child to come into care should be made in a planned manner to ensure robust matching takes place and children are prepared for moves.

Some placement moves may be positive decisions informed by a child or young person's wishes and supported by a good analysis of issues. Research certainly provides examples of children's unhappy experience and feeling that no one listened to them about their wish to move on (Sinclair et al 2007). Nevertheless, repeated moves are associated with a range of negative outcomes and a good deal more can be done to support stability.

## **Placement Support**

Placement Planning Meetings should be convened as part of the process of identifying and placing a child - as set out in the Placements in Foster Care Procedure and the Placements in Residential Care Procedure. The first Placement Planning Meeting should be held wherever possible before the placement begins. This is an opportunity to develop the Placement Plan and identify the child's needs and what support may be required to support the child and the carers in order to promote placement stability from the onset. Where this is not possible because of the urgency of the situation, it should be held in order that the Placement Plan is prepared within 5 working days of the start of the placement. It is the responsibility of the child's social worker to write up the Placement Plan.

Strengthening the team around the child and their carers promotes good outcomes.

Placement support packages could include:

- Frequency and focus of supervising social worker and child's social worker visits.
- Frequency of Stability Meetings using a Signs of Success methodology.
- Direct work with the child or young person, including timely LSW.
- Positive activities for the child e.g. drama club, scouts, sports.
- Training needs of the carers.
- Looked After Children CAMHS. The current service specification for the Looked After Children mental health service, Journeys, includes working with children and their carers to ensure they receive the support they need to strengthen placements and prevent unnecessary breakdown.
- Planned respite care within the child's or carer's network (or mainstream foster carer if this is not possible) where this meets an identified need.
- Back up carer assessments with members of the carer's network should be prioritised.
- Agreed delegation of authority.

## **Stability Meetings**

Stability Meetings should be used for the most vulnerable children and as such the need and frequency will be agreed on a case by case basis within the Placement Planning Meeting. Stability Meetings should be used where there is an identified need and therefore should take place no longer than 4-6 weeks apart in order to address need, review interventions and promote stability.

Stability Meetings can be arranged for children at the start of a placement where there is an identified need to provide a high level of support in order to give the placement the best possible chance of success.

There is an expectation that for every placement where carers have given notice this should be reviewed within a Stability Meeting prior to the Notice period ending to determine if supports could stabilise the placement or inform future care planning for the child. The

Council has written to all providers emphasising that such meetings must always take place before notice is given on a child's placement (except where there is an immediate child protection concern). Instances where Stability Meetings have not taken place will be raised by the Placements Team and challenged by the appropriate Operational Lead.

## **Disruption Meetings**

A formal Disruption Meeting will be arranged for all children whose permanently matched foster placement breaks down.

Coventry City Council is committed to analysing the causes of placement breakdowns and a formal review will take place for all children with three or more placement moves within 12 months to ensure that learning is identified or individual children and to aid wider service development.



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