

Children’s Services

Permanence Strategy

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1. Introduction

All children and young people should have the opportunity to thrive in their environment and home; to live with carers who love, support, care for and respect them and who will do so throughout their childhood into adolescence and adulthood.

For children who are no longer able to remain with their birth family, research indicates that outcomes are significantly improved for children when they are in a safe, secure, stable environment where they feel cared for. We are committed to supporting our Children in Care to be happy and healthy, having the best start in life and being afforded every opportunity to reach their full potential.

We are committed to ensuring that all children in our care achieve permanence through a range of options including a return to birth parents or placement with extended family or friends. Where this is not appropriate or possible, we seek suitable permanent, family-based placements through foster to adopt, adoption, special guardianship, or long-term fostering. Where necessary, some young people will find permanence and security through good residential care. For all our children and young people, we seek permanent placements where they can achieve a sense of security, stability and belonging.

The Permanence Framework has three aspects as required by Government guidance¹.

1. Legal - Defining who has Parental Responsibility
2. Emotional or Physiological - The child feels attached to a care giver that provides a stable loving and secure relationship.
3. Physical and Environmental - The child has a stable secure home environment.

2. Our Core Principles

Dorset Council Children's Services are committed to a strengths-based, restorative approach. When developing our permanence plans the following principles are followed to achieve the best possible outcomes for children in our care:

- We will do our best to ensure that all children in our care grow up in stable and secure arrangements and are supported to safely leave care when appropriate
 - All planning will start with the needs of the child
 - We are ambitious for our children and young people and will help them to overcome gaps in their early care and strive to achieve the standards that any parent would expect for their child
 - The views, opinions, needs and priorities of children and young people in our care will inform everything we do; we must also consider their safety and wellbeing

¹ The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013

- We will work with children and young people in our care, along with their parents and carers to shape their assessment, planning and services that support and care for them
- We will ensure that services meet individual needs as far as possible
- We will identify what needs to change in Dorset to bring about the best outcomes for all children and young people in our care.

Our work follows the Dorset Children Thrive Practice Model, which means that we will develop stable and trusting relationships with children, young people and families. We work alongside children and their families helping them to recognise and build on their strengths.

Dorset Children Thrive Practice Model

Our Core Principles	Voice and Experience of Children and Young People
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Best start in life 2. Young and thriving 3. Good care provision 4. Best education for all 5. Delivering locally 6. Best place to live 	<p>Children and young people are empowered to have their voices heard and their wishes and feelings understood.</p> <p>They will know and understand why we are involved and our role to support them.</p> <p>We will listen and respond to their views.</p>
Our Commitment	Working with Families
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children and families receive the right support at the right time. 2. Keeping families together and, where this isn't possible, ensure children have the right permanence and forever home 3. Proportionate interventions that are focused on outcomes for the child 4. Children in our care have loving and stable homes 5. Children leaving our care will be supported to independence. 	<p>Create and maintain trusting and respectful relationships</p> <p>Work with families, rather than doing to them or doing for them.</p> <p>Families are empowered to make decisions and shape solutions.</p> <p>We will provide person-centred meetings and strengths-based conferences that enable the family to lead what needs to change for them.</p>

We want the voices of the children and young people that we support to be at the heart of everything that we do. All the children and young people we work with have a right to support from an independent advocate, someone who is not part of Dorset Council who will help them to put forward their views and wishes. Young people's advocacy in our area is provided by the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS).

3. Our Objectives

The primary purpose of permanence planning is to provide a safe, stable and secure home with a loving environment, to support our children through childhood and to give them the best start in life and prepare them for adulthood.

When a child comes into our care, we will focus on seven key objectives in our planning:

- Placement with their family or friends will always be our first consideration
- A child should only be in our care for as short a period necessary
- If it is safe to do so, we will put plans in place to support the child's return to their family
- Planning must always start early and be regularly reviewed
- Planning will always include including more than one option for permanence with the primary plan clearly identified, so that in the event of a child not being able to return home, there is no delay in achieving permanence by another means.
- Permanence should always be secured through the most appropriate legal route for the child's needs.
- Young people aged 16 and 17 may want to live independently and where the service assesses this to be suitable and this is part of the young person's transition plan to independence, then we will place them in supported lodgings.
- We monitor all supported lodgings to ensure that they are of a good standard

4. What if a child cannot remain at home?

If we decide that a child cannot remain at home, there are several options which we will consider. These options may form part of a Child Protection Plan.

4.1 Family Group Conferencing

We see the family as part of the solution and engage with them at the earliest opportunity. Family Group Conferences provide a child-centred and family-focused approach to build relationships and support networks. The Family Group Conference brings together members of the family to find their own solutions and formulate a family plan.

In Dorset, Daybreak is commissioned to provide Family Group Conferences. An independent coordinator helps the family prepare for the family group conference and children may be supported by an advocate. It is a voluntary process and we encourage holding a Family Group Conference before a child comes into our care. This supports families by providing a setting and framework to talk through concerns and to co-produce a solution.

4.2 Family finding process

In Dorset we seek to build or maintain a child's family support network by identifying relatives and other supportive adults who could provide permanence, sustainable

relationships and support through the transition to adulthood and beyond. We help children to strengthen their links to people who are important to them. With a focus on children's safety and supporting families to create sustainable plans to meet their children's long-term permanence needs, we will always first consider whether a child could return home or remain with extended family members.

This could include:

- Finding a family member or friend who will care for the child if the child is unable to remain at home.
- Improving placement stability and the child's support network.
- Increases the child's sense of self and belonging.

The process operates on the principle that relatives are located and consulted regardless of where they live.

4.3 Identifying the Best Permanency Option

When deciding on a child's primary and contingency permanence plan, we will work with other multi-agency professionals, children, and their families to understand the child's needs. As part of this process we will consider the factors below:

- The age of the child and their wishes and feelings
- Short-term stability – we will keep changes in a child's life to a minimum, whilst ensuring they are safe and healthy
- Long term stability - a permanent home with a sense of family, community, culture and continuity of relationships and identity.
- How children develop and maintain relationships with key family members and other appropriative adults (lifelong links)?
- Educational experiences, hobbies, and friendships.
- Understanding what a child wants and supporting the development of a relationship between the child and their carer to create a family environment.
- Possibility of finding permanence through adoption
- Supporting the child through the transition to adulthood

4.4 Supporting Reunification with Birth or Extended family

Dorset Council have developed a pathway for operational staff to follow should this be identified as an option in a child's permanence plan. Please see our Reunification Flowchart for the reunification pathway.

If reunification has been identified in a child's permanence plan and that they may be able to return to their family, we will:

- Clearly communicate to the family what needs to happen to enable the child to return home and the timescales.
- Understand family ties and long-term relationships with the family, school, and the community
- Make use of Family Group Conferencing and The Harbour (if 12-18 years old) to help facilitate the above.

4.5 Siblings

We know that children are most likely to have more positive outcomes when they maintain their relationships with their siblings. However, in some instances we know that it can be difficult to place siblings together, for example where there are:

- Large sibling groups
- Differing care entry times
- Differing needs relating to past experiences of trauma
- Significant age differences

Our children when not placed with their siblings will be supported in an age appropriate way to understand the reasons for this and keeping in touch arrangements between siblings will be a priority in our permanence planning so long as this is safe and in accordance with the wishes of each child.

If there is a plan for Adoption, decisions about siblings being placed together or apart will be made at an early stage and based on a balanced assessment of the children's needs.

4.6 Keeping in Touch

It is important that the child remains in contact with their family, unless there is evidence that this is not in their interests. This maintains their identity, gives reassurance, provides an on-going source of information, gives the child permission to live with alternative carers, minimises the sense of loss and assists adopters if the child is placed for adoption.

Direct contact works best when all parties agree to the following:

- The plan for permanence
- The parental role of the permanent carers
- The benefit of contact and all involve agree to the plan for keeping in contact
- The plan for keeping in touch

4.7 Indirect family time

We recognise the development of technology has made virtual keeping in touch (for example by Skype or Zoom, social media or email) more accessible and reliable. This does not replace the need for direct family time where this is assessed as appropriate.

Indirect keeping in touch, as with direct keeping in touch, must be agreed by all parties with a clear plan to prevent confusion.

4.8 Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer (QARO)

QARO are champions of our children in care and will look to ensure timely and appropriate permanence is achieved for all. We have developed the QARO role to ensure the child is central to decision making. They will work to ensure the right permanence is achieved for our children based on their individual needs. This means ensuring that our children and young people are provided with permanent homes that are nurturing, loving and stable whether from parents, foster carers, special guardians, or adopters.

By the time of the second Child in Care Review the QARO must be satisfied that the child and their parents have been consulted and have been part of the creation of the permanence plan and any subsequent updates. The QARO should also have had the opportunity to comment on the plan. Where a single permanence plan cannot be agreed, a Twin or Multi track plan will be identified with clear timescales. The QARO has a statutory responsibility to monitor the child's journey and ensure there is no drift or delay in implementing the plan and achieving permanence. The QARO will also look to gain the child's views as to their permanence plan.

4.9 Additional support for children and families

Children and young people can meet others who are in the care of Dorset Council through our Youth Voice programme. Youth Voice also offers opportunities to get involved in volunteering and in the Dorset Youth Council.

Families who have a child who is in care, or may be taken into care, can get support from the [Family Rights Group](#).

4.10 What if a child or their family is unhappy with our work or disagrees with our decisions?

If a child or young person is unhappy with something we have done, or a decision we have made, they should speak to their social worker, advocate, or QARO. If they are still unhappy, they should use Dorset Council's formal complaints procedure.

If a child's family are unhappy, they should speak with the child's social worker. If they are still unhappy, they should use Dorset Council's formal complaints procedure.

5. Planning for Permanence

A Permanence Plan must be developed and presented at a Permanence Planning Meeting before the child's second Child in Care Review. The Permanence Plan must then be reviewed every 12 weeks as a minimum until permanence is achieved.

The permanence planning process will always be based on an assessment of the child's needs. All assessments will consider what is the best permanence option and how stability can be achieved for the children in our care. Stability means the following:

- Ensuring continuity of care for a child who is entering our care for a brief period before returning home or
- Finding a permanent home for the child

The assessment will include:

- What the child wants and needs in life
- The child's feelings
- The child's and family's support needs
- Keeping in touch with siblings, parents, friends, family (lifelong links)

We will ensure that our assessments and support inform excellent Permanence Plans that result in timely permanence being achieved. Some Permanence Plans require the approval of the Family Court; in these instances, we will follow the Public Law Outline, which takes a maximum of 26 weeks to complete.

To give our children the very best start in life, we will look to long term outcomes for our children including consideration of transition into adulthood and beyond. In working alongside our children, we can understand our children's wishes and feelings and ambitions in life thus creating a plan that will build a foundation that will see our children transition into adulthood. To support the success of our children and young people, relationships and strong networks are critical to our young people's resilience and achieving their full potential.

6. Permanence and Local Placements

Where a placement is with long-term carers, it is important that the child have access to their friends, family and local community with whom they are brought up. Keeping our children in touch with their birth family and lifelong links will remain a priority and focus of our work with our children.

If we do decide to place a child away from their local community, this decision will be based purely on the needs of the child. We will not place a child in another Local Authority area until we have explored the availability, suitability and cost of a more local placement.

7. Options for Permanence

There are six permanence options for children in care.

- Reunification
- Long term fostering
- Placement in a children's home
- Early permanence leading to adoption

- Special Guardianship/Child Arrangement Order
- Adoption

The primary permanence option will reflect the wishes and feelings of the child and the outcome of assessments completed.

7.1 Return home (reunification)

We strive to keep children and young people in the care of their family unless it is unsafe for the child for us to do so. We have a clear and detailed reunification pathway for our children in care which ensures any reunification decision is evidence based and actioned in a timely manner. Our reunification pathway ensures we work with our children, their families, local communities, the child's lifelong links and multi-agency professionals to ensure a safe sustainable transition back into the family home. Our decision-making will always be based on evidence for the child's safety and wellbeing. Please see our Reunification Flowchart for further details.

We have flexibility in our planning and placements to facilitate the above including use of a bridging placement where appropriate to support reunification arrangement.

7.2 Long-Term Fostering

Long-term fostering is where a child is placed with foster carers with the intention that they will stay with those foster carers until they are adults. This can be particularly helpful for older children who can retain good links to their birth family whilst knowing they can develop in a settled home.

Please see our Long-Term Fostering Flowchart for further details.

Once a child is in an approved long-term foster home, their permanence plan will be reviewed on an annual basis and monitored in subsequent Child in Care reviews to ensure other permanence options such as Reunification and Special Guardianship are considered. We are committed to involving children, their birth parents and foster carers in permanence planning as required by government guidance.²

When a child is in foster care, parental responsibility is shared between the parents and the local authority where the arrangement comes under Section 20 of the Children Act, or is held by the local authority alone if the arrangement has been made under a court order.

7.3 Placement in a children's home

Some young people either will not want or will not be able to live with foster carers. Often, these young people will have experienced very difficult circumstances, which means they need intensive help to feel safe, nurtured and secure. Until recently, this intensive help was only available in specialist placements outside of Dorset, which meant that young people lost their family and friend networks. Now this care can be provided in

² 2015 Regulations and Guidance for Long Term Fostering England

one of our four children's homes, helping young people to stay in touch with those who matter most to them.

7.4 Early Permanence Placements

We aim to achieve permanence and stability at the earliest opportunity for babies and children who have come into our care. Our partnership with Aspire Regional Adoption Agency enables the identification of children who require an immediate foster placement leading to adoption by the foster carer(s).

7.5 Special Guardianship Orders

Special Guardianship addresses the needs of children who require a sense of stability and security within a placement away from their birth parents, but not the legal break with family that is associated with adoption. Special Guardianship Orders offer stability, and whilst they can be revoked, there are restrictions regarding those who may apply to discharge the order. The court will only discharge a Special Guardianship Order if circumstances have changed since the order was first made.

Special Guardians share parental responsibility with the birth parents. However, Special Guardians have the legal right to make all day to day arrangements. The parents must however be consulted, and their consent gained for a change in the child's name, adoption, placement abroad for more than 3 months and other fundamental issues.

If a Special Guardianship Order is made and a child was the subject of a care order, the care order will automatically be discharged. The Local Authority will then no longer hold any Parental Responsibility.

Dorset Council have a 2021 Special Guardianship Finance Policy (see link above) to reflect our offer to prospective Special Guardians. Special Guardians have the right to request an assessment for support from Dorset Council at any time after the Special Guardianship order has been made.

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

- A Guardian
- A foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year immediately preceding the application
- Anyone who holds a Residence or Child Arrangement order with respect to the child who has the consent of all this in whose favour a resident or Child arrangement Order is in force.
- Anyone the child has lived with for 3 of the last 5 years
- Where the child is subject of 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.

7.6 Child Arrangement Order

A Child Arrangement Order may be used to increase the degree of legal permanence in a placement with a family or friend/connected person or a long-term foster placement. The order confers Parental Responsibility, to be shared more equally than with Special Guardianship, which in some cases may be a more appropriate arrangement.

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

Whilst support may continue for as long as the Child Arrangement Order remains in force, the aim will be to make arrangements which are self-sustaining in the long run.

A Child Arrangement Order can be made at any time before the child turns 18. The following may apply for a Child Arrangement Order:

- A parent or guardian
- A party to marriage where the child was brought up as a child in the family
- A person with whom the child has lived for 3 years (This need not be continuous but must not have started more than 5 years or ended more than 3 months before making of the application)
- A Local Authority foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year

7.7 Adoption

We recognise some of our children will not be able to remain in the care of their parents or family. For those children, where appropriate, adoption will be their permanence plan. This will be identified at the earliest opportunity as part of the child's permanence plan.

Adoption legally transfers parental responsibility for the child permanently to the adopter. The child is then deemed to be the child of the adopter(s) as if the child had been born to them and the child's birth certificate is changed to an adoption certificate showing the adopter(s) to be the birth parent(s). The child will also acquire UK citizenship if they are not already a UK citizen (assuming they are adopted by a UK citizen).

The adopter(s) may be supported, including financially, by the Local Authority and will have the right to request an assessment for support services at any time after the order is made. Adoption makes a clear legal break from the birth family and there is no review process. Once a child is adopted, they are no longer a Child in Care.

8. Regional Adoption Agency

Aspire were formed in July 2017, as a partnership of Local Authorities coming together to form one of the first Regional Adoption Agencies in England. Families for Children, a local voluntary adoption agency, are also partnership members. Our purpose is to provide outstanding services for children and adults with links to adoption or special guardianship.

9. Conclusion

This strategy aims to ensure our children in care achieve their permanence option in an appropriate time frame, supported by professionals and their families working alongside one another in an open and transparent way. In doing so, this builds our children's resilience and provides them to have the best opportunities and start in life as Dorset children.