

# Planning for Permanency: an Overarching Strategy for Children's Services in Bracknell Forest

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## **Accessibility**

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# 1 Introduction

The Council Plan 2019 – 23 articulates Bracknell Forest’s commitment to keep the borough a place where all residents can thrive and to prioritise those with the greatest need and maximise their opportunities to become independent.

Our belief is that all children need security, stability, love, a strong sense of identity and belonging in order to thrive and fulfil their potential. Planning for permanence in all work within Children’s Services increases the possibility that those children with the greatest need in our community will have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond.

Planning for permanence for a child is often understood solely in terms of adoption or long term foster placements; however permanency, and the emotional stability and resilience which results, should be our goal for every child. Permanence is a relationship, not a place and every service, from universal through to adoption can contribute to achieving it. Children have different needs and come from diverse and complex families and permanency can be achieved for them through a number of different routes. Health, education, early help and the voluntary sector will all play a role. The permanency planning process can identify which option best meets the needs of the individual child. Our intention is to work together across all sections of Children, Young People & Learning, and in partnership with universal services, to achieve consistency in this area.

## 1.1 Bracknell Forest People’s Statement of Intent

*“In Bracknell Forest we believe that all children<sup>1</sup> are entitled to grow up in stable, nurturing and secure families. We will work purposefully to achieve this ambition for children and to ensure plans are developed on the basis of meeting the primary need for permanency of children, in accordance with our statutory obligations”*

## 1.2 Purpose of the Planning for Permanency Strategy

The purpose of this Strategy is to outline Bracknell Forest Council’s commitment to children and families whom they support and to children in their care, and to set out:

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<sup>1</sup> \*Applies to

- children and young people up to the age of 18 years.
- children and young people who have special educational needs and/or disabilities 0-25 years.
- young people leaving care to 25 years.

- a) the principles and values which underpin this work in Bracknell Forest
  - b) the statement of policy, that is what we will do in Bracknell Forest to promote permanence
  - c) how we will plan our services to implement our policy statement and achieve permanency for the young people with whom we work.
  - d) How we will measure the impact of the Permanency Strategy for children and young people
- Specific procedures for particular service areas will come under this overarching strategy.

### 1.3 Definition of Permanency

Permanence is a framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that give a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. Research highlights that high quality relationships and their continuity are the key element in developing a sense of permanence for children, above legal status.

*“Relationships should be the lens through which all work with individual children, family members and carers should be viewed ... (and are) ‘the golden thread running through a child’s life’<sup>2</sup>*

Our aim, in planning for permanence from our earliest involvement with a child and family, is to ensure all children have the best possible chance to grow up in a secure, stable and nurturing family to support them to develop ‘felt security’, and to build resilience through childhood and beyond.

## 2 Principles and Values

- All children have the right to family life.
- Maintaining children and young people safely in their own families or wider family network is our priority, but where this is not achievable to find alternative substitute care without delay.

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<sup>2 2 2</sup> The Care Inquiry, ‘Making not Breaking-Building Relationships for our most vulnerable children’  
Findings and Recommendations April 2013

- Where it is necessary for a child or young person to leave his or her family this will be regarded as a short-term option in order to secure a safe, supported return home; or
- If a child or young person cannot return home family members and friends will always be considered in the first instance with the permanence secured through the appropriate legal order to meet the assessed needs;
- Where a child needs to be looked after outside the family network, they must be placed in a safe, stable and nurturing alternative family with their placement secured through adoption, permanent/long term foster care, Child Arrangements Orders or Special Guardianship Orders;
- Decisions about permanency will respect the child's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language, identity and disability
- Children will be placed in local provision wherever possible.
- The voice and choice of every child will be respected. Every child and young person has a right to participate in decision-making about where they should live on a permanent basis and the degree of contact they should maintain with their family

### 3 Policy Statement

1. Families in Bracknell Forest will be supported in the care of their children to ensure their needs for stability, security and continuity of relationships are met. In partnership with other key agencies Bracknell Forest will seek to keep communities safe, facilitate the provision of good quality education and learning opportunities, enable access to health care and overall raise aspirations to those of the best.
2. Where families require additional help and support to ensure children have stable, safe and secure lives Bracknell Forest will, in conjunction with others, provide 'early help' and support to enable parents and carers to provide parenting which is 'good enough'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Good enough parenting is not a fixed entity but an outcome which must be constantly evaluated in line with the child's safety and protection, need for permanency and wider well-being issues including education and health.

3. Where children have additional needs Bracknell Forest, in partnership with others, will seek to support parents and carers in accordance with its legal duty to provide additional services to promote the welfare of children in the area.
4. Where significant concerns exist regarding the care and safety of children Bracknell Forest will take necessary action to protect children from harm, (either actual or likely) and ensure that the primary need for permanency is met within a timescale appropriate to their chronological age.
5. Every reasonable effort will be made to prevent drift and delay for children or young people and to work with parents and carers to achieve stability within a defined time scale.
6. If young people cannot remain at home, placement with relatives or friends will be explored before other forms of placement are considered, thus promoting a sense of continuity, stability and permanence.
7. Bracknell Forest will adopt a contingency planning approach in its work with families in order to maintain focus on permanence for the child from the earliest point. Therefore, while reasonable efforts to strengthen and stabilise families are being made, legal advice and guidance will be sought and contingency plans developed in the event that agreed changes are not achieved within an agreed timescale (linked to the chronological age of the child).
8. At all times, Bracknell Forest will seek to work in partnership with parents and carers in an open and transparent way. However, the focus will always be on securing the best outcomes for children.
9. Children will be prepared for their permanency journey in an age appropriate manner, ensuring they have the information and support required to help them on that journey.
10. Life journey work will be started with the child at the earliest opportunity, whether the plan is for them remaining in the birth family or wider family and friends, becoming looked after, reuniting with family, or adoption. This work is to create a record for the child and help them understand and make sense of their past experiences and relationships.
11. Where necessary Bracknell Forest will seek the support of legal processes in order to ensure the needs of children are being met and are likely to be sustained throughout their childhood.

12. Short term foster care will be seen as a positive means of meeting the major needs of children, but primarily as the means to facilitate the safe return of children home to their natural families (including the wider family), or to permanent substitute care through adoption, permanent foster care, Special Guardianship or other legally protected arrangements.
13. Bracknell Forest will act as a responsible 'corporate parent' to those children who cannot live in their own families and become 'looked after'. Appropriate direct work with children and young people to promote resilience and address broken attachment will be undertaken routinely to support permanency and stability within placements and prevent break down.
14. Bracknell Forest will make all reasonable efforts to ensure there are sufficient local placements and sufficiently diverse placements for children looked after to ensure that the child has access to the friends, family or community within which they were brought up and which form part of their identity and their long term support network. Multiple moves and changes, including changes of school, will be avoided whenever possible.
15. Any decision to place a child away from his or her community will be based on the particular needs of the child, and considered within the context of a Permanence Plan. Where an alternative family placement is sought in the area of another local authority, the likely availability and cost of suitable local resources to support the placement will be explored.
16. Where siblings become Looked After, careful consideration to be given to their individual needs and their need to be placed together. Where it is not viable to do so, consideration of significant, good quality contact will be promoted by their care givers.
17. Carers, including family and friends carers, will be offered appropriate training and continuous support to maintain permanency of placements. In the event of difficulties or placement breakdown assistance will be promptly and readily available
18. Every young person will have information about how to make complaints or representations if required and how to access advocacy services.
19. For older children the aim of permanency planning will be to build resilience and stability and continuity of relationships, arranging for their independent living, accommodation and education, training or employment., and other life skills

Implementation of this Policy Statement is achieved through the different options for permanency described in Section 4. These are supported by specific policies and procedures, also listed in Section 4.

## 4 Options for Permanence

“Permanence’ for children means ‘security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging’. This is not connected to legal status, and one route to permanence is not necessarily better than any other: each option is the right one for some children and young people.”<sup>4</sup>

A range of options for permanence exist, all of which can deliver good outcomes for individual children. 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.

### 4.1 Living with Birth Family

For many children, permanence is achieved through work with the parents and wider family to enable them to provide and sustain care which is ‘good-enough’. When concerns arise regarding a child’s safety, permanence or well-being, children’s services, in partnership with others will determine the child’s safety and level of risk. In Bracknell Forest the approach used to assess and plan for change is the Signs of Safety model.

If there is no imminent risk of significant harm (actual or likely), children’s services will aim to work collaboratively with the family to make reasonable efforts to maintain the child’s safety within his or her family. The starting point for all work with families will be a discussion and evaluation of the needs of children, taking into account age, any special needs and protection requirements, again using the Signs of Safety assessments and tools to facilitate both the assessment and building a partnership with the family. The aims of any plans will be to secure the best form of care based on continuity, stability, good attachments and safety (either now or in the future).

***See Signs of Safety Procedures***

***See Referral Assessment Planning and Decision making for CiN Policy***

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<sup>4</sup> The Care Inquiry, ‘Making not Breaking-Building Relationships for our most vulnerable children’ Findings and Recommendations April 2013

## 4.2 Reunification with birth family following a period in care.

When children become looked after, where it has been possible to address the factors in family life which led to the child becoming looked-after successful return to their birth family may be possible.

***See Reunification Procedures***

## 4.3 Informal Family Arrangements

A child's parents (or a child with the consent of its parents) may choose to live informally with a person to whom they have a close relationship. The child's birth parents remain responsible for their child, including ensuring that they are safe and that their needs are met. If the child is not assessed as a Child in Need (Section 17 Children Act) the family will receive universal services from health, education and the Local Authority and Early Help resources to support permanency within the family. If the child is assessed as a child in need, the authority may provide a further range of support services.

***See Referral Assessment Planning and Decision making for CiN Policy***

## 4.4 Private Fostering

In cases involving children who are Privately Fostered the assessment and planning process should also keep the issue of legal permanence at the centre of planning. Since, by definition, the arrangements are known to be of a temporary duration, then the plan must identify the reasons with details of the long term aims for legal permanence along with associated timescales.

Where informal arrangements have been agreed it is recognised that families may require Local Authority support in order for a child's permanence to be secured. This support may take the form of advice, guidance, or in exceptional circumstances provision of financial support as a single or recurring payment.

***See Private Fostering Procedures***

## 4.5 Living with Family or Friends and Connected Person's Care

The preferred option for every child who cannot live with their parents is to grow up in the care of their extended family or with an adult with whom they have an existing significant relationship. Thus routes to permanence outside the public law care system may include family and friends care, particularly where such care can be supported via private law routes such as a child arrangement order. Consideration of a special guardianship order or adoption may also be considered. Where relevant to the child's needs, a

'connected person' who is a family member or friend, assessed in line with statutory guidance may become an approved foster carer in order to look after the child.

**See *Connected Person's Procedures***

## 4.6 Child Arrangement Order

A Child Arrangement Order may be used to increase the degree of legal permanence in a placement with family or friends, or a long-term fostering placement, where this would be in the child's best interests. This is a private law arrangement made by agreement between family members.

A placement with family or friends/Connected Persons may be identified as a preferred option and the carers may be encouraged and supported to apply for a Child Arrangement order where this will be in the best interests of the child. A Child Arrangement order confers Parental Responsibility, to be shared more equally with the parents than with Special Guardianship, which in some cases may be a more appropriate arrangement.

A Child Arrangement order has the following advantages for permanency:

- It gives Parental Responsibility to the carer whilst maintaining the parents' Parental Responsibility;
- The child will no longer be Looked After and there need be no social work involvement, therefore, unless this is identified as part of the child's plan;
- There is no formal review process;
- The child will not be Looked After and so less stigma is attached to the placement;
- Any contact is likely to be agreed and if considered necessary by the Court, set out in a **Contact Order**. (s8 Children Act 1989)

A Child Arrangement order has the following disadvantages for permanency:

- It is less secure than Adoption or Special Guardianship in that an application can be made to revoke the Child Arrangement Order. 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;
- There is no formal continuing support to the family after the Order is made although in some instances, a Child Arrangement Order Allowance may be payable by the local authority;
- There is no formal reviewing of the arrangements after the Order unless a new application to court is made, for example by the parents for contact or revocation. (NB New applications to court may be expensive to defend, and the carers would have to bear the cost if not entitled to assistance with legal costs).

- There is no right to an assessment of need.

## 4.7 Special Guardianship

Special Guardianship addresses the needs of a significant group of children, who need a sense of stability and security within a placement away from their parents but not the absolute legal break with their birth family that is associated with adoption. It will also provide an alternative for achieving permanence in families where adoption, for cultural or religious reasons, is not an option.

Special Guardianship Orders offer greater stability and security to a placement than Child Arrangement Orders in that whilst they are revocable, there are restrictions on those who may apply to discharge the Order and the leave of the Court, if required, will only be granted where circumstances have changed since the Special Guardianship Order was made.

Special Guardians will have Parental Responsibility for the child and 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 such fundamental issues.

Special Guardianship has the following advantages as a Permanence Plan:

- The carers have Parental Responsibility and clear authority to make decisions on day to day issues regarding the child's care;
- There is added legal security to the Order in that leave is required 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;
- It maintains legal links to the birth family;
- The child will no longer be in care and will not require social work involvement.
- The Special Guardian or child have the right to request an assessment of their support needs
- Children who were looked after by a local authority immediately before the making of a special guardianship order may be entitled to leaving care services as a qualifying young person under the 1989 Children Act.

Further leaving care support may be agreed by the Local authority on an individual case basis Special Guardianship has the following disadvantages as a Permanence Plan:

- The Order only lasts until the child is 18 and does not necessarily bring with it the sense of belonging to the special guardian's family as an Adoption Order does;

- As the child is not a legal member of the family, if difficulties arise there may be less willingness to persevere and seek resolution;
- 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 Child Arrangement Order, they can apply for any other Section 8 Order (i.e. Contact Order, Prohibited Steps Order or Specific Issues Order) as of right.

**See *Special Guardianship Policy and Procedures***

## 4.8 Adoption

Research strongly supports adoption as a primary consideration and as a main factor contributing to the stability of children, especially for those under four years of age who cannot be reunified with their birth or extended family. In Bracknell Forest Adoption will generally be considered as a plan for children according to the individual needs of a case. The needs of individual children as part of a sibling group need to be assessed and considered when deciding which children in a sibling group may be suitable to be adopted. Fostering for adoption and concurrent planning, may provide a means to securing permanence by adoption at an early stage for some children.

### 4.8.1 Fostering for Adoption

**See *Adopt Berkshire Fostering For Adoption Procedures***

### 4.8.2 Concurrent Planning

**See *Adopt Berkshire Concurrent Planning Guidance***

## 4.9 Permanent and Long Term Foster Care

For those children who remain looked-after an important route to permanence is foster care. Permanent foster care is different from a foster placement that lasts a long time. It is ensuring, through a careful matching process, that the right family is identified and supported to care for a child through childhood and into adulthood.

Long-term fostering as an option for long term care will be considered only where there is a clear assessment and Panel recommendation that the child's needs can be appropriately met in this way. The suitability of long term fostering as a plan depends on the future involvement of the parents and the child's individual needs.

**See *Fostering Procedures***

#### **4.10 Staying Put with former Foster Carers**

This arrangement is a way to extend the transition to adulthood for looked after children/young people, by continuing to live within the supported environment of a family and household. Specifically it gives young people who are in stable and supportive placements the opportunity to pursue education, training and employment, without the disruption of having to move into 'independence' during this critical period of their lives. This will facilitate them to engage successfully as citizens, both socially and economically.

**See *Staying Put Policy and Procedures***

**See *Leaving care Procedures***

#### **4.11 Alternative supported living arrangements for young people**

Older children and young people may not be able to live with birth parents for a variety of reasons nor wish to be in a foster home or to be adopted and will need support finding secure accommodation. It is important that they too have continuity and emotional security and achieve permanence in their lives in order to move into the adult world. In these circumstances an alternative, planned, permanent living arrangement may be the most appropriate permanency plan. The care planning process will also address the need for strong relationships with adults, such as wider family and friends or other connected people, who can provide emotional support and long term trusting relationships, particularly during periods of transition.

### **5 Services to Support Permanency**

Coordinated Local Authority and multi-agency support services will work together to secure 'permanency' for the child with their birth families.

#### **5.1 Universal Services**

High quality universal services are the building blocks of effective early help. The strong, core, universal services provided by the Authority and our partners play an important role in supporting permanence in families and building resilience by

- ensuring children and young people get a good start in life and parents receive support in the early years
- ensuring people have the life skills and education opportunities they need to thrive
- providing access to good leisure and recreational facilities
- investing in integrated, supportive and self-reliant communities where crime rates are low.

- meeting physical and emotional health needs
- focusing on prevention,
- supporting a strong and resilient economy.

The local Voluntary and Community Sector (inclusive of the Faith Community) can play a vital role in Early Help, Permanency Planning and supporting or creating resilience for a child. The diversity and specialisms within the Voluntary and Community Sector range hugely enabling many different forms of support, help or advice and information to be available to a child and his/her family. The potential contribution of the local community and the Voluntary and Community Sector should be considered when planning for permanency for a child.

A good quality education can compensate in some ways for a poor start in life through providing a wide range of opportunities to achieve and develop personally and socially in a safe and supportive environment. The importance of stability in education is also recognised and reducing the number of changes in school is a priority. Bracknell Forest is working closely with schools to raise standards for all children and young people and improve Ofsted outcomes, particularly in those schools graded Requires Improvement. Schools are well supported to fulfil their safeguarding duties, particularly through the Safeguarding and Inclusion Team and the Education Welfare Service. The Council has invested in promoting emotional health and wellbeing in schools and, working in close collaboration with health services, to improve mental health services. This work in all schools contributes to supporting children, young people and families.

## 5.2 Signs of Safety

Signs of safety is the the underpinning approach adopted in Children, Young People and Learning for how we do work with children and families in Bracknell Forest. It supports our aspiration to achieve permanency through its emphasis on working collaboratively and transparently with families and can act as the catalyst that initiates behaviour change by families.

## 5.3 Prevention and Early Help

Early Help refers to a way of working which will ensure that children, young people and families who are at risk or vulnerable to poor outcomes are identified early and that their needs are effectively assessed and met by agencies working together. The aim being to prevent their escalation and provide timely assistance (early intervention) rather than to respond only when the difficulty has become so acute as to demand attention (late intervention).

In Bracknell Forest Prevention and Early Help provides a wide range of support and services, described below, which support the permanency agenda.

Children's Centres offer a universal service but also targeted services for families with children under five years for families with greater need. This is individual according to the needs of the family, but may include help with housing, worklessness, or regarding domestic abuse, and parenting. All of which support the agenda of maintaining children within strong and nurturing birth families.

The Family Focus Programme is a government initiative which aims to engage and support families with complex and multiple needs, who meet specific criteria. The programme works holistically to improve outcomes for the whole family, improving resilience and self reliance, aiming to ensure children remain in their families without the need for statutory interventions. One assertive key worker will provide continuity of support and relationship and coordinate the services of other professionals and providers. The trusting relationships established are an effective tool for maintaining permanency within a family.

Similarly, the Family Intervention Team delivers intensive early intervention to families and children which helps to maintain permanency within families and prevent the need for Tier 3 services intervention. They have a robust and effective step up/step down interface with Children's Social care ensuring families receive a continuum of help for their changing needs.

The CAF / Family CAF are the main early help assessment processes in place to enable practitioners to undertake a holistic assessment of need and identify what support is needed in order to reduce the risk of needs escalating to require Tier 3 intervention. A CAF provides a framework to assess the needs of a single child, and a Family CAF provides a framework for a practitioner to assess the needs of the whole family. Use of CAF in assessing needs within families and use of Family Support Worker role, where relevant, to provide timely help, promotes permanency and supports efforts to keep families together.

For those families whose level of need meet or have met the statutory threshold the Early Intervention Hub acts as a key transition point for "stepping up" to Tier 3 statutory services, and also for cases that have been supported at Tier 3 and are ready to "step down" to a lower level of support. For those cases needing step up to Tier 3 the named Early Help key worker will remain with the family for a flexible handover period which will end by negotiation with family and Tier 3 worker. If a family is then stepped back down to Tier 2 services Early Help will endeavor to provide the same named keyworker to facilitate effective transition.

## 5.4 Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

The MASH is a team of professionals from the council and partner agencies working together to address safeguarding concerns for children in the Borough efficiently and effectively. The MASH team collects and shares intelligence, with the aim of allowing agencies to act in a co-ordinated and consistent way with the minimum of delay. Staff in the MASH are aware of the importance of thinking permanency from the front door as soon as a referral is received, carefully considering the history before making a decision about what steps need to be taken next.

## 5.5 Children's Social Work Teams (Child Protection, Child in Need and Looked After Children.)

Children's social care teams will lead on achieving change and improvement in the issues that led to Children's Services involvement, or the child becoming looked after. They also support relationships between children and their birth families during placement and after return home. Care plans will focus on how permanency will be achieved.

The step up step down process will link Children's Social Care with Early Help Services to provide 'edge of care' support where required and offer additional advice, guidance and information to birth families to access targeted or universal services.

### 5.5.1 Court Work

While working with the family to improve outcomes for the child, social work teams will adopt a parallel planning approach so that if parenting is not improving sufficiently or quickly enough to protect the child from significant harm a contingency plan is in place. Thus the local authority will obtain legal advice about a particular case as part of this process in line with practice guidelines. If it is decided that the threshold for proceedings is met Children's Social Care will hold a pre-proceedings meeting. At this meeting additional parenting capability assessments, over and above those prepared as part of any statutory assessment, will be commissioned.

In some cases, the level of concern about a child's welfare may require rapid and sometimes immediate recourse to the courts and the Local Authority will make an application.

During proceedings, the Local Authority may apply for an Interim Care Order, or an Interim Supervision Order. The 'No Order' principle will be applied where it is not considered that an Order is necessary. The child may remain at home, be placed with a relative, who will be assessed as a foster carer in line with 'Connected Person' procedures, or become Looked After by a Bracknell Forest or independent foster carer. These decisions will be made in consideration of the child's safety and the plan for permanency. Further assessments will be conducted throughout the proceedings both of the parents and any relatives they put forward to be carers for their child. Proceedings need to be concluded within 26 weeks following issue in line with statutory expectations. This timescale is

set to ensure plans for permanency are established with minimum delay. During the proceedings children's need for stability and security remains a priority alongside the child's voice to inform long term decisions surrounding a child's welfare.

The purpose of care proceedings is to make a permanent plan for the child that ensures their future wellbeing. The court will make an order which will decide who should look after the child from the end of proceedings onwards. In deciding any question about the upbringing of a child the court must treat his or her welfare as its paramount consideration. The court should also have regard to the general principle that when determining any question with respect to the upbringing of the child, any delay is likely to prejudice the welfare of that child. A Placement Order may be obtained in the event that Adoption becomes the primary plan for the child. Where this occurs, this plan will need to be ratified by the Agency Decision Maker before being presented formally to Court. Long term foster care will also be explored where this is deemed appropriate. However where possible, other outcomes that enable the child to remain within their birth family will always be considered as a first option, unless this is deemed unsuitable for the child's timescales.

## 5.6 The Children's Specialist Support Team (CSST)

Permanency Planning for all children includes those with disabilities. Permanency issues are embedded in all of the work undertaken by CSST. Often families use extensive professional and family support to assist them with the daily needs of their child/ren with significant disabilities, to ensure that they can continue to live within their family.

Despite receiving such support, it is sometimes not possible for children (with disabilities) to remain in the care of their families. It is important that we have the conversation about permanency with parents and or carers early in our work. Delaying or omitting that conversation, could lead to a child losing the opportunity to grow up in a family.

Whilst family support is the dominant form of services for children with disabilities, non-family solutions, ie residential schools and children's homes, are used more extensively for children with disabilities, than their peers.

The role of the CSST is to assert and advocate for children with disabilities, who have the same needs as their typically developing peers, that is: -

- A safe and nurturing family home.
- A permanent family home.
- Entitlement to securing both of these in a timely manner.

Bracknell's vision is that adequate support will enable all children to grow up in a typical home with a family.

Examples of activities carried out within CSST which support permanency

- Family preservation is paramount.

Bracknell Forest has a good range of short breaks activities for children and respite support for parents. Family Group conferencing and a solution focused (signs of safety) approach are encouraged in all aspects of our work.

We have multi agency engagement in our Resources Allocation System, fair start Panel (RAS) that has a whole family approach and personalisation as a value base.

- Voice of the Child

It is an expectation that all social/family workers know the children they are working with. Really understanding - What does it mean to be 'this' child and what should a good childhood look like, for this child?

- Inspire a belief and actions that recruit alternative family options

There can be an assumption that children with complex disabilities cannot have their needs met within families – the role of CSST is to explore this for each and every child. This myth is best dispelled by the fact that a child with every kind and severity of disability is currently living successfully with a family. While one family finds a child's needs too great or their lifestyle too restricted, another family with a child with identical disability is doing well. The disability alone is not the reason for non-family life. We must look beyond the child for an explanation.

- Approaching Adulthood

Ensuring the child's experience of childhood has relevance for her or his experience of adulthood. Ensuring permanency needs are identified in the 'Needs assessment and Pathway Plan for children approaching adulthood.

That thought is given to the long term needs of those children who may require 'carers' beyond the life of their parents.

- Narrowing the gap between children with disabilities and their peers, means we :-

Challenge the assumptions that some children with disabilities (or children with some disabilities) are fundamentally different from other children and therefore do not need the family life that our society values for other children.

Ensure the questions posed to other parents who are unable or unwilling to raise their children are asked of parents of children with disabilities.

- Promote emotional well being

Permanency is a developmental requirement for well-being. The most vulnerable children are those with the most significant disabilities, yet these are the children most at risk of not having permanency.

Our guiding principle is all children need families.

## Our goals

- To promote a sense of belonging
- Orientation to child's experience , rather than caregiving arrangements
- Focus on relationships, particularly those that can be continuous
- Quality outcome viewed as lifelong connection not just competent care
- Focus on the future
- Distinguish between child and adults needs

An emphasis on child development directs attention to the difference between children and adults in a child's need for a nurturing parental figure in day-to-day care.

- Keeping social work assessments relevant and up to date.

For some families the needs of one family member are in conflict with the needs of others. Planning for a child to leave her or his home begins when the needs of the child and the needs of other family members become incompatible. What may be most desirable for the child may not be most desirable for the rest of the family. Assessment needs to address conflict of need where it exists, considering relationships, roles, responsibilities, and satisfaction of the needs and preferences of all members of the family. Often there is a fine line between respecting the family choice and supporting decisions that we feel may be inappropriate or even harmful for one or more family members. Unquestioned parental choice assumes the child belongs to a family rather than in a family. When a parent chooses to place a child in a non-family setting when other viable alternatives exist, then the compatibility of the parent/child vantage points need further assessment.

- Case supervision and management

Continuity of social worker/family workers is a critical part of the success in permanency planning. The management team work hard to ensure good retention outcomes. We recognise good management oversight and case supervision is critical to the success of the team's work.

## 5.7 Family Group Conference Service (FGCS)

A Family Group Conference is a facilitated meeting of a family's network of extended family and friends, which draws on their combined strengths and resources to make decisions and resolve difficulties. The active participation of children and young people in their own FGC is central to the model. By working in partnership and encouraging ownership of decision making, families and young people become more enabled and willing to draw upon their own resources.

FGCS is also able to offer a mediation element, enabling families to resolve more specific differences and build relationships. Whatever a child's family make up, it is through having a lifetime family, informal but substantive connections with other caring adults, and supportive communities that children and adolescents are able to move to adulthood in a healthy and productive way.

Family group decision making via a family group conference is an effective approach to supporting the aim of reaching the highest degree of physical safety, emotional security, and legal permanency that can be obtained within the context of a family relationship. It has a proven track record across the spectrum of CSC cases, from helping to avoid families becoming open cases at the initial assessment stage, to helping toward early case closure, avoidance of CP and LAC, as well as de-escalation.

FGC is a relational model that reminds us that permanence is a relationship, not a place. FGC best assists permanency if it is offered as early as possible. When planning for children FGC is one of the LA's "Tools for Permanency" an FGC will always aim to promote family-centered and collaborative approaches to achieving safety, timely permanency and the overall well-being of children and families who re in receipt of CSC services.

FGC can be particularly helpful to adolescents in Foster Care. Given that the adolescent stage can be a tumultuous experience for any young person, this is increased in complexity and vulnerability for those living in foster care. FGC enables us to devote serious attention to promoting and planning for Childrens lifelong connections in a way that enables co production with the young person to be at the center.

## 5.8 Family Placement

### 5.8.1 Support for Connected Persons

It is vital that the agreed services/ supports are available, accessible and responsive to the needs of the family. For 'Connected Persons Care' permanence, the authority provides a range of support services if it is required, based on assessed needs of the child and the circumstances of the family. The Disabled Children's Service will look at family and friends to secure permanency for disabled children who are in care.

### 5.8.2 Family Finding

Where a relative or family friend (Connected Persons carer) does not come forward to permanently care for a child the process of 'family finding' needs to be undertaken. This is a joint activity between those professionals responsible for the child and those responsible for assessing and approving carers.

All proposed matches of a child with a permanent foster carer need to be recommended by Fostering Panel and approved by the Agency Decision-Maker. As well as providing training and support to carers, children also need to be prepared for a new family. This will always include help in understanding and collecting information about their 'life story' and may involve some therapeutic work in helping to deal with the loss of their birth family and enabling a child to accept a new family.

### 5.8.3 Foster Carer Recruitment

The Foster Carer Recruitment Strategy aims to ensure that there are a sufficient number of local placements and suitably diverse placements to meet children's needs.

### 5.8.4 Training and Support of in-house foster carers

All approved foster carers will have an allocated, suitably qualified supervising social worker. The allocated supervising social worker is responsible for supervising and supporting carers, ensuring that they have the necessary guidance, support and direction to maintain a quality service, and prevent placement breakdown. This support may include respite care according to the needs of the individual child and foster family.

The Family Placement Team has also facilitated the development a 'fostering community'. The social activities shared by carers, their own children and those they foster has led to looked after children getting to know other carers and their families and makes the occasional 'respite' arrangements from their substantive placement a more positive experience than staying with 'strangers'.

The supervising social worker must also ensure that the foster carers' training and development needs are identified, and that newly approved carers work towards meeting the training, support and development standards and complete their core training within the first 12 months of approval.

### 5.8.5 Contact with Birth Family

The service will promote and facilitate contact between children in foster care and their families of origin, and others who have played an important part in their lives. Good, regular and consistent contact arrangements are important, particularly in facilitating reunification.

### 5.8.6 Placement near home

In order to maximise the opportunity for children to retain substantial and meaningful links with family, friends, schools and relevant others, they will be looked after whenever practicable within reasonable travelling distance of their family.

### 5.8.7 Placement of Siblings

Siblings will be accommodated together as long as this is practicable and consistent with each child's welfare.

### 5.8.8 Preparation of children and family for substitute placements

The child will receive from their social worker as much, age appropriate information as possible about :

- The reasons for the foster placement.
- The foster carers and their family, before placement, if possible using the foster carer's life book.
- Information about his or her rights as a looked after child. Including having an advocate or independent visitor.
- A copy of the Young Person's Guide to Being Looked After as part of the LAC Pack.
- Contact with parents and significant others.
- Schooling.
- Proposed length of placement.
- Parental involvement in the placement.
- Frequency of social worker visiting.
- Use and provision of IT equipment
- The Department's complaints procedure.

The child and their carers should be encouraged to be involved in the planning and decision-making process, and to attend the Placement Planning Meeting if appropriate and should also be encouraged to participate in that and given support to do so, as for a statutory child care review.

### 5.8.9 Life Chances Team and Virtual Team

The multi agency Life Chances Team has been developed to track and support children who are looked after in order to anticipate and prevent issues leading to placement breakdown. The team meet once a month to discuss concerns relating to individual looked after children and make specific plans to address them. Members of the Team champion the needs of looked after children in their respective services. A Leaving Care Life Chances Team has also been developed to support the education, health and housing needs of our care leavers. This includes dedicated support from specialist services.

### 5.8.10 Life Skills Programme

Foster carers and young people, along with the other designated professionals involved in working with and supporting Looked After Children, have developed a Life Skills Programme for Children in Care. One aim of the programme is to empower young people through information, support, and skills (including independent living skills) to be fully involved as partners in directing their own permanency planning and decision-making. The Life Skills Programme is targeted at all young people 11 years plus. The project is currently being implemented by a number of foster carers and the young people they look after with a view to preparing them for stability and successful independence when they leave care.

## 5.9 Virtual School

If a child has to move placements, the virtual school will ensure that there is minimum disruption to their education, whether the child is placed within the borough or in another LA. The virtual school will:

- liaise regularly with the school, social worker and other relevant professionals to maintain a clear view of the educational needs of the child.
- rigorously track and monitor attainment and progress data, including attendance, behaviour and exclusion on a termly basis for all children looked after by Bracknell Forest
- ensure appropriate provision is being made within school both as curricular and extra curricular support.
- work in partnership with the child's school and, where needed, other organisations to maximise educational opportunities, resources and funding, as well as provide training to support specific needs.
- work with relevant professionals to provide support and training to ensure PEPs are of a high quality.
- ensure that the child, where eligible, is able to access the Pupil Premium Grant and monitor the use and impact of these funds on raising educational standards.
- ensure social workers adequately consider the educational needs of children looked after when a child/young person comes into care or when taking decisions about moving placements.

## 5.10 Adopt Berkshire

The key functions of Adopt Berkshire are to support permanency through adoption. The service actively contributes to ensuring that Bracknell Forest performs well in terms of placing children for adoption within national timescales, by both recruiting adopters seeking to adopt an unrelated child(ren), and by assessing relatives and friends and existing foster carers who have applied to be considered as potential adopters for a specific named child(ren). They achieve this by:

1. Supporting Bracknell Forest to identify those Looked After Children who would benefit from adoption at an early stage and to achieve the placement of these children with appropriate prospective adoptive families within timescales appropriate to the needs of each child.
2. Recruiting, preparing and assessing prospective adoptive applicants who are seeking to adopt unrelated children and who are likely to be able to meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally and nationally.
3. Undertaking the preparation and assessment of relatives and friends and existing foster carers who have applied to be considered as potential adopters for a specific named child(ren).
4. Supporting approved and waiting adopters in achieving the placement of appropriately matched children.
5. Providing a high standard of post placement support to the children placed for adoption by Bracknell Forest, and to their prospective adopters, during the pre-adoption period and ensuring that robust adoption support packages are in place, where necessary, in order to maximise the long-term success of each child's placement.
6. Providing appropriate support to the prospective adopters recruited by the service following the placement of children and to work effectively with placing authorities in order to maximise the long-term success of each child's placement.

### 5.11 Post Adoption support

#### ***See Post Adoption Support Policy and Procedures***

The Adoption Agency will be able to financially support adopters where such support is assessed as being necessary to support the child's adoption, and where he/she would otherwise be denied the opportunity. Eligibility for such financial support will therefore be assessed on the basis of adopters' financial circumstances, where a judgement has already been reached that the adopters could meet the child's needs. Bracknell Forest Council offers support to all adopters pre and post-adoption to provide help in sustaining placements and in managing contact issues. Where there are difficulties within an adoption placement, either before or after an Adoption Order is made, support will be made available to the child and the adopters.

### 5.12 Leaving Care Team

For young people Leaving Care within Bracknell Forest, the Pathway Planning process seeks to engage young people in establishing Permanency for themselves which includes (but is not restricted to):

- Safe, stable and appropriate accommodation in a Locality of their choice.

- Stable employment, education or training which seeks to enhance their earning potential and their career prospects.
- Positive, stable and safe relationships and networks of support which provide them with practical and emotional support
- Appropriate services to address any unmet health needs (physical or emotional)
- For young people to be equipped with all of the practical and emotional skills they require to engage with their communities as positive citizens

The Leaving Care Service works in partnership with agencies such as Housing, The Department of Work and Pensions, Adults Social Care, Health Services, National Careers Services, Adviza and the Voluntary Sector to ensure that young people Leaving Care are provided with opportunities and appropriate Pathways to achieve Permanence, which for LCS refers to a goal of "Successful Independence".

The Leaving Care Service provides each young person with a tailored package of support, led by their Pathway Plan, to ensure that their progress to achieving successful independence is timely and sustained.

For those care leavers who become pregnant, parent and child foster care may be an appropriate arrangement when their babies are very young. A good placement can support permanency in a number of ways.

- Increase likelihood of parent and child staying together
- Promote parents' independence skills and understanding of the child's needs
- Gives the opportunity for a transparent, timely assessment, therefore if a decision to separate the parent and child is made it facilitates permanency without undue delay

***See parent and Child Foster Care Guidance***

### **5.13 The role of IRO/Conference chairs.**

The primary function of the Conference and Review Team is quality assurance; monitoring the performance of the local authority in fulfilling their responsibilities to children. The team supports permanency in a number of ways:

- Within Child Protection Conferences the Chair will work to make sure families are clear about what needs to change, and within what timeframe, to enable the child to remain or return home and what the consequences are should change not be achieved within the child's timescale.
- Both Child Protection Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers will also hold the local authority and multi agency partners to account to ensure plans are clear and focussed and the appropriate resources are allocated to support permanency.

- Both CP Chairs and IROs will challenge any drift or delay in achieving permanency through the appropriate means.

## 6 Partnership Working

Children, Young People and Learning will collaborate with other agencies that serve young people and families to engage young people and families as partners and to provide services, support and opportunities during and after placement.

- Local Authority staff and partners in other systems, (LSCB and Health and Well Being Board) will receive training, education, and support to implement the permanency strategy.
- Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel will monitor key performance indicators in relation to permanency for looked after children and care leavers and promote awareness of and commitment to permanency across the council.
- Young people, their families, and multi agency partners (including courts and attorneys) will be briefed about the permanency strategy including definitions of and options for permanency.
- The Children in Care Council (SiLSiP) will be briefed on the Permanency Strategy in order that they may be informed and fulfill their role in holding the Council to account for delivering on their promises.
- Local Authority staff, together with young people and families, will engage partners in the community to broaden awareness and to advocate for the need for life skills and permanence for young people in out-of-home care.

## 7 Measuring Outcomes at Each Stage in the Child's Journey

The impact of the Permanence Strategy for children and young people will be demonstrated by measuring the progress made and the outcomes achieved by each child and young person. The Performance Board will play a key role in monitoring progress and achieving permanency.

Children's Social Care will focus on the impact of each social care intervention for the child/young person by:

- Monitoring the individual progress of each child/young person and their outcomes.
- Capturing and disseminating the following performance management data to teams and management in order to proactively analyse and utilise the information to improve service delivery
  - Drift and delay in child's journey (timeliness of decisions, assessments and plans)
  - Types of permanence placements
  - Stability of placements
  - PLO timescales
  - Number of Adoptions

- Number of SGOs
  - Number of Reunifications
  - Number of Staying put arrangements
  - Adoption and Permanent Foster care disruptions
- Proactively seeking the views and experiences of children, young people and their families and using this feedback to improve and shape services
  - Providing reports to the Lead Member and Children's Services Leadership team, Bracknell Forest Council Overview and Scrutiny and Corporate Parenting Advisory Panels.
  - Ensuring performance management data is embedded in service business plans and reviewed at senior management meetings.
  - Carrying out regular file audits that have a particular focus on quality and timeliness of assessment and planning and effective case management.
  - Including a section on achieving permanence in the annual IRO report
  - Engaging in peer review opportunities and analysis of performance of statistical neighbours and best performing authorities to enhance practice and delivery of the strategy

## 8 Conclusion

Permanence is the word to describe what Bracknell Forest Council and its partners are working hard to achieve for children and young people across the Borough. Children, Young People and Learning has developed an overarching approach to permanency set out in this document. The principles, values and policy statement clarify our intent, permanency is the key priority. The description of services which currently support permanency demonstrate that it is already strongly embedded within our local systems and structures and our aims and aspirations are to build and strengthen these.