



Permanence Policy

Policy Owner:	Ben Short, Director of Operations
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Policy Summary:

This policy sets out Slough's commitment to ensuring that all children and young people in our care are given the opportunity to live safely and securely in a family. It describes our approach to planning for permanent placements for 'looked after' children or a child who may become 'looked after' because the parents are unable to meet the child's long-term needs.

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1. Key Messages

- It needs the whole Council and partnership to make the difference needed for our children and young people so that they are happy, safe & loved, thriving.
- Children and young people will be listened to, respected and supported to co-produce solutions to permanence at a strategic planning level and at their own individual level.
- Permanence and stability begins with helping children and young people to live with their families in their community. This means helping early and to utilise family network meetings and family group conferences.
- We are co-parents and co-grandparents to the children and young people we care for. This means that wherever possible we will work alongside birth and adoptive parents and connected carers.
- When children cannot live with their parents, we will secure the best plan to meet their needs within their timescales. Where possible this will be in Slough, but where this is not possible, we will ensure that we support ongoing links with family, significant relationships and community.
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2. What is permanence?

“Achieving permanence for a child will be a key consideration from the day the child becomes looked after” (The Children Act 1989).

Permanence Planning can be defined as the implementation of policies and practice which will ensure that, wherever possible, children will grow up within a family (whether birth family or alternative permanent family) which offers “continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or care givers, and the opportunity to establish life-time relationships”. Permanence is a framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity.

3. Introduction and Purpose

This policy sets out Slough's commitment to ensuring that all children and young people in our care are given the opportunity to live safely and securely in a family. It describes our approach to planning for permanent placements for 'looked after' children or a child who may become 'looked after' because the parents are unable to meet the child's long-term needs.

We believe that the most appropriate place for most children and young people to live is with their own families, networks and communities. To this end, Slough Children First provides a variety of services to support families, including short breaks for children with disabilities, parenting support services, edge of care support, Family Group Conferences and Adoption Support.

Where parents are unable to meet the needs of a child or young person, Slough will assist, wherever possible, in securing a placement within the child's wider family.

Where it is not possible for children to live with their families and they are looked after by the local authority (or at risk of becoming looked after), the highest priority is to secure a permanent stable placement, which meets the child's needs, as speedily as possible.

4. Aim

The aim of this policy is:

To provide high quality, timely permanence plans for our Cared For Children, which ensure that if they cannot live within their birth family, they will have an alternative permanent family home with carers or adoptive parents who will nurture them to adulthood and beyond.

The policy outlines a set of principles and values which will prevent drift and delay in permanence planning for children, in order to effect permanent placement as early as possible for children who cannot remain at home.

In practice, this means the following for a child:

- No children will be in pre-proceedings for more than 16 weeks;

- Children will be in proceedings for no more than 26 weeks;
- Children subject to placement orders will be adopted within 4 months;
- Every child in a long-term foster placement will be matched with their carers;
- We are committed to reducing the bureaucracy around childhood which includes proportionate visits and reviews, based on the permanency plan;
- We will support social workers to use consistent formats and efficient best practice tools;
- Every child will have a confirmed permanency plan within 6 months of coming into care;
- Every child will have the right to a family group conference before a permanency plan is agreed;
- We will learn from successful stable placements and work to implement consistent support to children in long term foster placements;
- Our assessments will be timely and of good quality;
- We will support fragile placements and only move a child when it is necessary;
- We will ensure children have regular care planning meetings within the Child Looked After (cared for child) reviews and they are timely and focussed;
- All our looked after children will receive life story work through Virtual Memory Box (in process of being set up);
- All our systems and processes will underpin our vision;
- We will work in a restorative way that builds relationships with children, families, foster carers and guardians;
- We will reduce the number of transition points for our looked after children.

5. Principles

The key principle underpinning our permanence policy and the care planning process is that the welfare of the child is paramount, which includes their need to be safeguarded in all circumstances.

In practice, this means the following for a child:

- the same opportunities, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, disability, culture, race, religion and language;

- a right to a family life and, where practicably safe and conducive to their development, this will be within their birth family;
- the engagement of preventative services, which may include Family Group Conferencing and Edge of Care services, to keep the child with the birth family until the point a permanence plan is obtained;
- where it is not safe for children to live with their birth parents in a situation where they will develop age appropriately, alternatives within their wider birth family or family friends must be explored thoroughly and at a very early stage in the assessment process with a thorough Genogram created and updated to identify possible carers.

Assessment and Care Planning must be a thorough and an evolving process with decision making kept under regular and rigorous review to produce the best outcome for a child in a timely and effective way.

In practice, this means the following for a child:

- the right to participate fully in discussions about their future, as far as they are able, whilst being made aware that the final responsibility for the decision rests with the adults concerned. They will also be assured that when their preferences are not acted upon, the reasons will be explained to the child and recorded in writing;
- the participation of the birth parents with their views actively sought and considered;
- full consideration always given to the feasibility of the child being rehabilitated to the care of their birth family;
- when a child needs to be looked after by the local authority they must be placed within a safe, stable and nurturing alternative family;
- entitlement to grow up securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of their childhood and beyond, maximising their potential that is encouraged and supported by their carers;
- decision-making within the child's timescales in order to minimise drift within the care planning process with the child kept informed at each stage of the planning process in an age-appropriate way with reasons for delays clearly recorded with responsibility specified for all professionals involved with a family;

- the local authority will work with parents and carers to achieve the best possible outcomes for children;
- access for the child to readily available support and assistance, if they are experiencing difficulties, or there is a placement breakdown;
- support services available to meet their assessed needs, information about how to make complaints or representations and support to access advocacy services if they so wish.

6. Roles and Responsibilities

The **Cabinet Member, Children's Services**, as a member of the Council Executive, has political responsibility for the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of local authority children's services. The Cabinet Member is also democratically accountable to local communities and has a key role in defining the local vision and setting political priorities for children's services within the broader political context of the Council.

The **Director of Children's Services (DCS)** has professional responsibility for the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of local authority children's services. The DCS is responsible for securing the provision of services which address the needs of all children and young people, including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, and their families and carers. (Ref: Statutory guidance on Roles and Responsibilities of DCS).

The **Heads of Services** are responsible for overseeing the implementation of this policy across Children's Services and with relevant partners.

Service and Team Managers, Children's Services are responsible for overseeing, monitoring and ensuring the effectiveness of permanence planning and lead on timely care planning for children, based on relevant research and current best practice.

Social workers will obtain the views of the child and all relevant family members, undertake appropriate assessments, liaise with other agencies, and take the resulting information into account in developing the care plan and undertaking the actions required to progress the permanency plan.

The child's independent reviewing officer (IRO) has a key role to provide independent review, advice and challenge to the care plan and to ensure the child is able to access independent advocacy.

The statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions, including timeliness, in relation to the child's care;
- ensure that children are reviewed within the statutory timescales;
- ensure that the ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning their care plan are given due consideration;
- address any other issues as prescribed in the IRO Handbook.

The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child.

7. Planning for Permanence

7.1. Early Intervention and Prevention

Every effort will be made to support children and their families to enable the children to experience stability, care, protection and nurturing within their birth families. Families experiencing difficulties will be signposted and encouraged to access services which are available within the community, e.g. through Health Services, Education, voluntary agencies, etc.

Where children need to become looked after as a result of an urgent situation following a Section 47 enquiry, the social worker will establish at an early stage which friends or relatives are available to care for a child and will undertake an assessment of their ability to care for the child in the immediate future and whether they can care to adulthood and beyond. There are circumstances in which an assessment will not have been commenced or completed, due to the urgency of that situation and the need to protect the child by removal from home. The same efforts will be made to ascertain whether the child could be safely cared for within the wider birth family or with family friends.

7.2. Assessment

Children will receive a holistic assessment to identify their individual needs and inform the care planning process.

All assessments will be carried out in accordance with guidance and Slough's procedures, with multi-agency input, co-ordinated and lead by the child's social worker. This assessment will provide a clear evidential basis for decision-making, and will address the health, educational, ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic needs of each child.

Every effort will be made to work with parents to address concerns, so that the children can be safely cared for by them at home. However, in certain circumstances when this cannot be achieved, Children's Services may need to consider instigating care proceedings.

Prior to the issuing of proceedings, it is necessary and important for Children's Services to have carried out all assessments required in order to determine the possible placement options available for the child and therefore to inform the care planning.

Where care proceedings have been instigated, Children's Services will continue to work in a restorative partnership with parents and birth family members as appropriate and in accordance with the timescales set down within the Public Law Outline (PLO) and ratified by the Court. The PLO process requires that, in order to minimise delay for the child, care proceedings should be completed within 26 weeks, except in exceptional circumstances.

Prior to proceedings being instigated, parents must be informed that concurrent planning will be followed, and that all possible options will be considered from the outset, robustly and at the same time, not sequentially. The options to be assessed, and in this order are:

- whether the child can be rehabilitated home;
- whether there are family and friends who would wish to be assessed as potential long-term carers (possibly seeking a Special Guardianship or Child

Arrangement Order to provide the child with more security) should the child or children not be able to return home, and if neither of these options is feasible;

- whether the care plan should be adoption or long-term fostering.

It is important that we work with parents to help them to understand that adoption is one of the options which will be considered, especially for younger children.

If the decision is made that a child should be rehabilitated home, at any stage, it is essential that this is as the result of a thorough assessment, and that the requisite checks have been carried out, in accordance with The Placement of Children with Parents Regulations. The decision should be made at a Care Planning Meeting, and authorised by the Director of Operations, or a nominated senior manager. If a child who has been accommodated under S20 is to be returned home a plan should be put in place to ensure that there is adequate support in place for the child and their birth parents.

Parents, children and young people must be kept informed and involved at each stage of decision-making in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding.

7.3. Sibling assessment

Assessment of sibling groups must be undertaken to establish the extent and quality of relationships in a sibling group in order to inform the decision-making about whether or not they should be placed together. It is important to ascertain the perceptions and wishes of the child and their family, to assess the shared experience of siblings and each of the children's individual permanence needs, including their attachment pattern and behaviour. Siblings who are looked after should be placed together whenever possible although it is recognised that in some cases this will not be appropriate. A full assessment of the children's needs should be undertaken based on the BAAF Practice Guide: "Together or Apart – Assessing brothers and sisters for permanent placement (2001).

When brothers and sisters are not placed together, arrangements should be made as part of each of their care plans to enable them to have regular contact, providing this is appropriate for each child. If an assessment determines that the children should live

together, a permanent placement for them to do so should be sought. Usually, and especially where there is a pre-existing and meaningful relationship, it will be important to actively seek to maintain sibling relationships within any permanency plan.

Research with regard to sibling placements emphasises that the most enduring relationships people have are likely to be with their siblings. The impact on separated siblings of losing vital support, a shared history and continuity can be detrimental to children's continued stability in alternative family placements. More successful outcomes are achieved for children who are placed with their siblings. Children should, therefore, be placed with their siblings unless there are specific reasons or circumstances which mean a joint placement would not meet the individual needs of each child. There may also be instances where the lack of a suitable placement would lead to unacceptable delay.

If, after careful assessment, there are concerns about placing siblings together, a Care Planning Meeting, chaired by a Head of Service, should be held and minutes taken, so that the reasons supporting the final decisions are clearly recorded. The record should include the child's own views, and, where applicable, the reasons why these were over-ridden.

Where a decision is taken to place siblings separately, families should be sought who are open to promoting sibling contact wherever possible.

As part of the assessment process, the child's social worker must ascertain, at the earliest possible stage, whether there are any other siblings who have been placed for adoption. If so, contact should be made with their adoptive parents at the earliest opportunity to consider whether a placement under foster to adopt provision may be possible.

8. Planning process

In situations where there are significant concerns about the well-being of a child or children the following procedure will be followed:

The Team Manager will, in consultation with the child's social worker, recommend to the Head of Service, that the case will be presented to the Legal Gateway Panel. This meeting is chaired by the Head of Service, and the following information must be provided:

- Social Worker to submit the panel paperwork in advance of the panel meeting;
- Copy of most recent assessment and chronology
- Team Manager and Social Worker must prioritise attendance at the meeting to give a verbal update or arrange for a colleague to attend on their behalf.

A clear record of the meeting, including actions and timescales will be made and uploaded onto the child's record. These tasks are the responsibility of the child's social worker. A Review date will be set at the legal gateway and is usually at 6 weeks.

In situations where a child's safety needs to be secured more urgently, an urgent legal meeting will be convened chaired by the Head of Service and subsequent actions will then be referred to Legal Gateway in the normal way.

In cases where the initial Legal Gateway is held on an unborn baby, the review Legal Gateway will be scheduled for no later than 2 weeks prior to the Expected Date of Delivery (EDD). The Legal Gateway must set a date when draft documentation will be ready, and a date set for the decision to be made about whether admission to care following birth is still indicated.

It is essential that all decisions are clearly recorded, with details of who made the decision and on what basis.

The local authority should arrange a Care Planning Meeting to consider assessments, at which decisions in relation to the local authority's final care plan will be made, including decisions about whether siblings should be placed together or apart if they are unable to return home. These meetings, chaired by the Head of Service, will usually take place when all final assessments have been completed. It should be noted that a Care Planning Meeting (CPM) can be called at any stage during the proceedings.

The team managers of the children in our care Teams must be invited to the CPM which is held prior to the local authority's final care plan being filed at court.

If the final care plan is for adoption specific tasks will be agreed at the CPM to ensure that the Agency Decision Maker is in a position to make the decision about whether the child Should Be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) within the requisite timescales.

A Cared For Child's review will be held prior to the Issues Resolution Hearing, when the final care plan will be reviewed, including proposals regarding contact and the proposed plans to reduce contact if a Placement Order is made by the court.

Circumstances may arise when it is necessary for a child's care plan and/or placement to be changed at short notice. In these circumstances, it is essential that there is co-ordination, agreement and discussion between the social work teams, fostering and adoption service, legal services and the IRO. Legal services will ensure that the court is informed of any such changes.

The local authority should always give consideration, during the planning process to whether a Fostering for Adoption placement might be appropriate for a child, dependent on the circumstances. When considering one of these options "every case must be discussed on its own evidence-based merits and it is the child's needs that are the primary objective" (Coram/BAAF Practice Guidance on Fostering for Adoption 2013).

9. Alternative Family Placements

Child Arrangement Order

A Child Arrangement Order may be used to increase the degree of legal permanence in a placement within the wider family network, where this would be in the child's best interests.

Child Arrangement Orders give Parental Responsibility to the person named in the order. The (parental) responsibility is shared with the parents who must be consulted about key issues such as education. The order will last until the child is 16 unless

discharged earlier or unless, in exceptional circumstances, the Order is extended until the child is 18 when he or she will cease to be cared for.

Special Guardianship

Special Guardianship addresses the needs of a significant group of children who need stability and security but where the absolute legal break with their birth family through adoption does not meet the child's needs.

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) gives parental responsibility to the special guardian. The parents do retain parental responsibility but their ability to exercise this is limited. The intention of the order is that the special guardian will have sole responsibility for all the day-to-day decisions regarding the care of the young person. The order will last until the child is 18 unless discharged earlier. The child will cease to be looked after by the local authority.

10. Adoption

Adoption should be considered for all children who cannot remain within their birth family.

An Adoption Order transfers parental responsibility for the child from the birth parents and others who had parental responsibility for the child, including the local authority, permanently and solely to the adopter(s). The adopters legally become the child's parents. The order lasts for the whole of the child's life. The child will cease to be looked after by the local authority when the Adoption Order is made.

Once a decision has been made that a child is unable to return to live within their birth family, the Child's Permanence Report/Annex B will be prepared by the social worker. It is important that every effort is made to include the child's views, wishes and feelings about their care plan (dependent upon the child's age), and for these to be recorded in the Child's Permanence Report. It is also important to make every effort to discuss the care plan with the birth family and include their views, wishes and feelings within this report. If either the child's or the parents' views cannot be obtained the reasons must be recorded.

When the social worker informs the birth parents that adoption will be sought for their child, it is very important that they are given information about all available support services.

Prior to moving to an adoptive family, each child must be well prepared, in an age-appropriate way. Direct work, tailored to the child's specific needs, should be undertaken, and wherever possible the foster carers should be involved in the process. Prior to introductions starting and as an important part of the child's preparation, the child will be given information about their prospective adopters, including receiving a family book prepared by the adopters.

Slough provides, via the Regional Adoption Agency, a child's life story book: Statutory Guidance (Adoption & Children Act 2002) states that: "The life story book and "memory box" should be co-ordinated by one person, preferably the child's social worker, and given to the child and prospective adopter in stages. The first stage is at the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopter. The completed life story book should be presented within ten working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order". This book can be updated regularly, and the adoptive parents should be encouraged to add to this. It is good practice to ensure that children, unless very young, should be involved in preparing their book, and in voicing their hopes and fears about being adopted. The child's social worker must also provide a "**later life letter**", explaining "the child's history from birth and be sufficiently detailed so that in the future the adolescent child, or young adult, will have factual details about their birth family and their life before adoption, and so be able to understand why they could not live with their birth family and why they were adopted". This must be given to the adoptive parents within 10 days of the Celebration Hearing.

Every child who has a plan for adoption must be given "A Child's Guide to Adoption"; if the child is very young this book will be given to their adoptive parents at the Inter-Agency (Placement Planning) Meeting, and the social worker must record that it has been given.

The Regional Adoption Agency provides an adoption support service, which offers support, advice and a programme of activities to all Slough adoptive families. It is also responsible for providing advice and support to adopters of children placed by Slough for 3 years following the Adoption Order having been made. It manages the Mailbox Service, facilitating indirect contact between birth relatives and adoptive families, and, on occasion, may be involved in ensuring direct contact arrangements run smoothly.

There are clear timescales laid down in relation to the different stages of a child's journey to an adoptive placement, set out within National Minimum Standards for Adoption.

Early Permanence

Early permanence is an important part of permanence planning for children. Early permanence is where adoptive parents are also approved as foster carers so they can provide a safe and stable placement prior to adoption being confirmed as the plan for the child. This will prevent changes in the child's primary caregivers and enables these attachments to be developed at an earlier part of the child's life. The Regional Adoption Agency take a lead on early permanence practice and family finders support the child's social worker to consider if early permanence is a suitable plan for the child.

All children under the age of 3 should be considered if early permanence is an appropriate a plan and this will be considered at the PPM & PMG, including naming Early Permanence as a parallel plan for a child. Older children can be considered in specific circumstances i.e., sibling groups.

A representative from the Adoption Service sits on Legal Gateway Panel and can identify EPP potential at the earliest opportunity and any other children with a parallel plan for adoption.

Pre-birth assessments will be undertaken at the earliest point when pregnancy is confirmed, particularly if the parents have had previous children removed in the last 3 years, then EPP needs to be considered alongside the pre-birth assessment and Legal gateway processes.

11. Other non-family arrangements

Long Term Foster-care

For certain children, who are unable to live within their birth family, but for whom other alternative family placement options either are not appropriate or cannot be achieved, a placement with a foster-carer who is committed to parenting them on a long-term basis can be a positive option.

Connected Person's Placement

For some children and young people it will be appropriate for them to reside with a member of their extended birth family or family friends, under a fostering arrangement. The legal basis will usually be through a care order or S.20 agreement.

Residential Care

For a limited number of children and young people, placement stability will be achieved within a residential placement.

12. Family Time

It is our duty to facilitate and promote family time between the child and their birth family, except where such time with family would be incompatible with the child's welfare. Appropriate contact plans, whether direct or indirect, can be integral to the success of any permanent placement. Family time, in whatever shape or form, can provide an opportunity for a child or young person to make sense of their history and their current placement. It can avoid myths building up about the birth family and strengthen the child's ability to make sense of their history. However, research indicates that for some children contact can be traumatic and serve to reinforce abuse they have suffered. Very careful assessment, observation and regular review of time with family is therefore essential.

13. Permanence Planning Systems

A ***Permanence Monitoring Group (PMG)*** will be held weekly, chaired by the Strategic Lead for Permanence or a Head of Service, and is intended to ensure that there is robust oversight of timely planning for children in our care, so that they can be supported to achieve permanence at the earliest possible opportunity. Children will be referred to the Permanence Monitoring Group following:

- All children aged under 18 coming into care
- Once a final court order has been made confirming their looked after status
- Babies and unborn whose parents have indicated that they wish to relinquish them
- Children who are living with connected carers
- Children living at home with their parents and are 'looked after'
- Children cared for under Section 20.

Children will continue to be monitored at the PMG until they have achieved their permanence plan either through being adopted, being matched to their carers or achieving permanence within their families.

A ***Permanence Tracker*** is in the process of being developed.

14. Family Group Conferences / Family Network Meetings

Family Network Meetings should be offered to all children subject to statutory assessment (CIN/CP) and that these should be offered to the family and take place at the earliest possible opportunity. These meetings should be used to explore with families what support exists within their extended networks for the parents and children, and whether there are any members of the extended network who wish to be assessed.

Family Group Conferences (FGC) should be considered at all Legal Gateway Meetings about whether an FGC has taken place and if it has not occurred so far, whether the family agree to a FGC. For all children that enter Public Law Outline Pre-Proceedings an FGC must have been offered to the family.

The Family Group Conference service is being developed at the current time and they will be a member of the Legal Gateway and PMG panel.

