



Children and Young People's Services

Permanence Planning Strategy

2021-2025



The Deal
2030

Our People

Our Place

Our Future

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Legal Framework

- Children Act 1989
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010

- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011
- The Special Guardianship Regulations 2005
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)
- Court orders and pre-proceedings for local authorities (2014)
- Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Review (2015)

1. Permanence Policy Statement

The Deal for Children and Young People outlines our ambition to support all children in the borough to be healthy, happy, and safe. A key component to achieving this is ensuring that all children achieve permanence.

Our definition of "Permanence" is a framework of emotional, physical, and legal conditions that gives a child/young person a sense of commitment, security, and continuity of care throughout their childhood and beyond.

Permanence planning is based on our philosophy that every child has the right to a permanent, safe, stable, and loving home, preferably with his or her own family. This includes the exploration of extended family network before consideration of an alternative placement would begin. Where children cannot live with their own family, we are committed to supporting children to remain in the Wigan borough, close to people and places that matter to them.

Our permanence planning will be built on the following principals:

- Is this good enough for my child?
- Will this support the child or young person to become a confident resilient adult?

To develop a culture that has a relentless focus on permanence, we must ask “How are we meeting the child’s permanence needs?” this question must be at the core of all social work practice with families. This will ensure the needs of the child or young person for a loving, safe, stable home is at the centre of all practitioners thinking and at the heart of all their assessments and plans.

Wigan Council is committed as a corporate parent for cared for children and young people and will work conscientiously to find permanent, safe homes for children in care that meet their specific needs, in a timely manner.

2. Defining Permanence

Permanence is the long-term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption. It aims to ensure a framework of emotional, physical, and legal conditions that will give a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.

3. Key Objectives in Permanence Planning

The objective of planning for permanence is to ensure that children have a secure, stable, and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging. It is also important to remember that older children and young people also need to achieve permanence in their lives although they may not wish (for a variety of reasons) to be in a foster home or to be adopted. For example, they may prefer to live in a children's home where they can also achieve a sense of security and belonging.

Permanence should start from the first point of contact between a child and the service; this includes, but is not limited to:

- Considering their journey to date, and the impact this has had upon them, when determining subsequent intervention and decision making; being mindful of repeat interventions which have not achieved desired or sustained change previously;
- Being professionally curious; respectful challenge and asking the right questions;

- Undertaking an eco-map/genogram with the family and exploring their network. Engaging those in the network who are able to offer support and/or protection to the child, and involving them in safety planning and contingency planning;
- Engaging absent/non-resident parents, and their networks, as appropriate;
- Considering the long-term prognosis for change, rather than solely focusing on the here and now; exploring the social history of parents/carers as part of the assessment of their parenting capacity.

The question "how are the child's permanence needs being met?" must be at the core of everything we do.

Where it is necessary for a child to leave their family:

- This should be for as short a time as is required to secure a safe, supported return home; or
- If a child cannot return home, plans must be made for alternative permanent care. Family members and friends should always be considered in the first instance with the permanence secured through the appropriate legal order to meet the child's needs;
- Where it is not in the child's best interests to live within the family network, it will usually be in the interests of the child for alternative permanent carers to be identified and the placement secured through adoption, long term foster care, Child Arrangements Orders or Special Guardianship Orders;
- Residential group living is provided only when a need for this is identified within the Care Plan and when substitute family care is not appropriate;
- For older children arranging for their independent living must be considered.

Where it is clear that families and children are unable to live together, planning must be swift and clear to identify permanent alternative settings.

Wherever possible, care should be provided locally unless clearly identified as inappropriate.

Contact with the family, Connected Person and extended family should be facilitated and built on (unless clearly identified as inappropriate).

The professionals involved will work in partnership with parents/families to meet the above objectives. The wishes and feelings of the child will be taken into account. The older and more mature the child, the greater the weight should be given to their wishes.

Whilst it is important, when undertaking permanence planning, to promote the child's links with their racial, cultural, and religious heritage, this should not be allowed to introduce delay in achieving permanence for the child. (Note that due consideration no longer has to be given to a child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background when matching a child and prospective adopters).

4. Delivering Permanence

Wigan Council will always look to provide high quality support and intervention to children and families to enable children to remain living with their family where it is safe to do so, where this is not possible for the child, the following factors will be considered when planning for the child:

Family solutions: If it is not possible for the child to be cared for by her/his birth parents then options within the extended network of family and friends will be considered as a priority. All families will be given the option of a Family Group Conference;

Security: A feeling of security and being loved as a member of a permanent family or care setting;

Stability: The child expects the placement to continue and be stable;

Voice and Experience: The child's lived experience, wishes and feelings along with her/his age and understanding must be taken into account when planning for permanence;

Identity & Diversity: To be consistent with or fully able to support her/his ethnicity, language, sexuality, religion, and culture. When looking at matching children to care givers we will aim to ensure that the carers can offer appropriate care and support and make a real and positive difference to any child;

Life story/Direct Work: The child understands her/his birth family and history and

her/his parents are encouraged and supported to provide information about themselves and about the child's birth and early life. social workers will tell their family story with care and direct work is purposeful and adds value and support to the overall plan;

Family and friends: The child is a member of an 'extended family' and part of a wider long-term network of family and friends. The carers should nurture and promote the child's ability to build long term friendships and relationships with their peers and other trusted adults allowing them to develop and grow into a resilient confident adult;

Family Time: The child has positive on-going interaction with parent(s), family and friends where appropriate. The purpose of the time spent together should be clearly agreed and recorded in the child's plan and meet the child's needs;

Brothers and Sisters: children will be placed together whenever possible unless the individual assessed needs of children indicate that children's needs will be better met placed separately;

Learning: Stability in educational provision and training; and carers have high aspirations for what they wish the child to achieve. All children's achievements must be celebrated by their carer;

Self-confidence: Positive engagement in sports, hobbies and interests in order to promote their health and wellbeing, resilience and build self-confidence;

Independence: The child is assisted and supported into independence when s/he chooses, and this is safe and appropriate. Planning for independence must start at the earliest opportunity for each child to prevent any drift or delay;

Staying Put and Staying Close: the child feels a sense of belonging to their carers as (s)he moves into adolescence and adulthood; belonging does not end at the age of 18 years;

Timeliness: Decision-making for achieving permanence must be within the child's timescales in order to prevent drift and delay;

Twin track or parallel planning: including Fostering to Adopt, may provide a means to securing permanence at an early stage for some children;

Early planning: A child's permanence plan should be established at the four-month review and recorded in the review Decisions. Where the plan is to achieve permanence with current carers then there should be no delay in achieving this;

Review: where a child remains cared for, then care planning should be subject to continuous assessment and review with effective management oversight and a robust team around the child driving the plan.

The service will strive to deliver the commitments outlined in this policy by providing the following:

- High quality, robust, evidence-based and timely assessments of a child's needs;
- Any assessment of the child/young person's lived experience will help to ensure appropriate planning and best practice in line with their plan to help the child/young person achieve permanence as soon as possible;
- Clear plans include clear timescales, identifiable outcomes, support services and provision and actions to meet those needs; these plans should be reviewed meticulously to accurately measure progress, or otherwise, of actions set. All children to be afforded regular care planning meetings to monitor progress;
- Multi-agency commitment and effective joint working processes to ensure that the services necessary to support children in permanent family placements and/or prevent them ending in an unplanned way are prioritised and delivered;
- Where there are concerns that a child may not be able to remain with their birth parents, support will be made available through the edging away from care panel which will include as a minimum, holding a family group conference at the earliest opportunity to fully explore the options for the child to remain safely within the extended family and friends network;
- Robust reviewing arrangements via Permanence Trackers will be in place for

the early identification of the need for permanent arrangements and to prevent drift;

- The opportunity for the lived experience of the child to be heard and evidenced in their plan and to include their views and feelings;
- Children will be supported to remain in their placements through multi agency support and access to the weekly Placement Stability Panel and MATCH meetings (multi agency therapeutic consultation hub).
- Depending on the age of the child they will be given some choice with regard to where they will live, as far as is possible particularly to ensure they can maintain school, hobbies, and their friendships.
- Additional education support is available including: Early Years Pupil Premium funding is available to settings to support in meeting need, Pupil Premium Plus funding is available to schools to support in meeting need, the Virtual School Head in the local authority where the previously looked after child is resident has an advice and guidance role for parents /carers and for schools at a system-level or at a child-level with parental consent. This can involve support at meetings for parents. Where a child's permanence pathway is identified and shared with the VSH while they are looked after, cross-border support can be arranged to ensure prospective parents or legal guardians feel supported. This might be in areas such as transition to a new school.
- Effective communication strategies to ensure that family, carers and other individuals that the child considers to be an important part of their life are able to express their needs and feelings and are aware of the plans for the child and their role in supporting these plans where appropriate;
- A Permanence Planning Meeting will consider all plans for permanence prior to the four- month review to detail the final care plan. This meeting will be chaired by an Advanced Practitioner or a Team Manager and attended by all members of the partnership around the child. It will consider all assessments to agree the formulation of the permanence care plan. This is particularly important where there are complex issues e.g. brothers and sisters and/or where children and

young people have complex and challenging needs.

5. Clearly communicating the Permanence Plan

- Developing an age appropriate way to communicate the plan to the child which includes words and pictures, photos, videos, profiles of foster carers and family books;
- Communicating a Permanence Plan effectively involves setting it out clearly and concisely as part of the Care Plan, in a way that acts as a useful reference to all involved during the review process;
- Good quality Care Plans set out clear, concise statements about what is working well, what we are worried about, what needs to happen, and the intended outcomes;
- Make timescales clear.

6. Options for Permanence

The options for permanence are:

- Staying/Returning Home
- Placement with Family or Friends/Connected Persons
- Adoption
- Foster to adopt placements, concurrent planning and temporary approval as foster carers of approved prospective adopters
- Special Guardianship
- Child Arrangement Orders
- Long-term Fostering
- Long-term Residential Care

Staying / Returning Home

The first stage within permanence planning is work with families and children in need to support them staying together. Staying at home offers the best chance of stability. Research shows that family preservation has a higher success rate than reunification. This of course has to be balanced against the risk of harm to the child.

Placement with Family or Friends/Connected Persons

If the assessment concludes that the child cannot safely remain at home, every effort must be made to secure a placement with a family member or friend/Connected Person as their carer. This will be either as part of the plan to work towards a return home or, if a return home is clearly not in the child's best interests, as the preferred permanence option. It is very important to establish at an early stage which relatives or friends might be available to care for the child, to avoid the kind of delays that can happen during court proceedings where this work has not been done.

Adoption

Adoption transfers Parental Responsibility for the child from the birth parents and others who had Parental Responsibility, including the local authority, permanently and solely to the adopter(s).

The child is deemed to be the child of the adopter(s) as if he or she had been born to them. The child's birth certificate is changed to an adoption certificate showing the adopter(s) to be the child's parent(s). A child who is not already a citizen of the UK acquires British citizenship if adopted in the UK by a citizen of the UK.

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.

Adopters 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. A child subject to an Adoption Order will be entitled to

additional education and Early Years support. This will be accessed through the designated teacher in the child's school/Early Years setting.

Adoption has the following advantages as a Permanence Plan:

- Parental Responsibility is held exclusively by the carers;
- The child is no longer Looked After;
- No future legal challenge to overturn the Adoption Order is possible;
- The child is a permanent family member into adulthood;
- As a previously Child in Care, the child is entitled to additional education support throughout their school career.

Adoption has the following disadvantages as a Permanence Plan:

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

Family finding should begin as soon as adoption is under consideration, and before the Agency Decision Maker decides that the child should be placed for adoption, or a Placement Order is made.

Foster to Adopt Placements, Concurrent Planning and Temporary Approval as Foster Carers of Approved Prospective Adopters

The Children and Families Act 2014 imposes a duty to consider placements with carers who are approved as both adopters and foster carers and where a child is placed in a fostering for adoption placement, the relationship which the child has with the person who is a prospective adopter must be considered by the Court or Adoption Agency alongside other relevant relationships the child has with their relatives or other persons.

Where the local authority are considering adoption for a child, or are satisfied that the child ought to be placed for adoption but is not yet authorised (either by consent or by Placement Order) to place the child for adoption, the authority MUST consider placing the child with a relative, friend or other Connected Person who is also a local authority foster carer or, where they decide that such a

placement is not the most appropriate placement, then they must consider placing the child with a local authority foster carer who has been approved as a prospective adopter.

In such a situation, the requirements under the Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 to ensure that placements allow the child to live near the parents' home, be placed within the local authority area, remain at the same school and to be placed together with sibling(s), do not apply.

The carers may be dually approved by being fully approved adopters and foster carers for any child, or they might be approved prospective adopters who have been temporarily approved as foster carers for a named child under regulation 25A of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. This temporary foster carer approval process can be carried out at the same time as the adopter approval process.

Special Guardianship Orders

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 can also provide an alternative for achieving permanence in families where adoption, for cultural or religious reasons, is not an option.

The following persons may apply:

- Any guardian of the child;
- A local authority foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year immediately preceding the application;
- Anyone who holds a Residence Order / Child Arrangements Order with respect to the child or who has the consent of all those in whose favour a Residence Order / Child Arrangements Order is in force;
- Anyone with whom the child has lived for 3 out 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 (e.g. anyone, including the child, who has the leave of the court to apply).

The parents of a child may not become the child's special guardians.

Special Guardianship Orders offer greater stability and security to a placement than a Child Arrangements Order 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.

A Special Guardianship Order made in relation to a child who is the subject of a Care Order will automatically discharge the Care Order and the local authority will no longer have Parental Responsibility.

Special guardians may be supported financially or otherwise by the local authority and, as with adoptive parents, will have the right to request an assessment for support services at any time after the Order is made.

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 there need be no social worker involvement unless this is identified as necessary, in which case an assessment of the need for support must be made by the relevant local authority;
- A child subject to a Special Guardianship Order will be entitled to additional education support throughout their school career.

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 Arrangements Order, they can apply for any other Section 8 Order (i.e. Prohibited Steps Order or Specific Issues Order) as of right.

Child Arrangements Orders

A Child Arrangements Order may be used to increase the degree of legal permanence in a placement with family or friends/Connected Persons, or a long-term fostering placement, where this would be in the child's best interests.

Where a child would otherwise have to be placed with strangers, 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 Arrangements Order where this will be in the best interests of the child.

A Child Arrangements 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.

The holder of a Child Arrangements 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 the consent of all those with Parental Responsibility or the leave of the court.

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

The making of a Child Arrangements Order can now be made until the child is 18 and will have the effect of discharging a Care Order.

The following people may apply for a Child Arrangements Order:

- A parent or guardian;
- A party to a marriage (whether the marriage is subsisting or not) where the child was brought up as a child of 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 before or ended more than 3 months before the making of the application);
- A local authority foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year;
- Where a Child Arrangements Order is already in force, a person who has the consent of those in whose favour the Child Arrangements Order was made;
- Where the child is Looked After, a person with the consent of the relevant local authority;
- In any other case, a person who has the consent of all those with Parental Responsibility.

Anyone else who wishes to apply, including the child, must apply to the court for leave to make the application for a Child Arrangements Order.

A Child Arrangements Order has the following advantages:

- 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 necessary;
- There is no review process;
- The child will not be Looked After and so less stigma is attached to the placement;
- A child subject to a Child Arrangements Order will be entitled to additional education support throughout their school career.

A Child Arrangements Order has the following disadvantages:

- It is less secure than Adoption or Special Guardianship in that an application can be made to revoke the Child Arrangements 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 Arrangements Order may be payable by the local authority;
- There is no professional reviewing of the arrangements after the Order unless a new application to court is made, for example by the parents for contact or revocation. (**N.B.** 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).

Long-Term Fostering

For those children who remain Looked After an important route to permanence is long-term foster care. Where the permanence plan for the child is longer-term foster care this may be where the current short-term foster placement is assessed to meet the long term needs of the child for permanence or where a new placement is identified for a child as a result of an assessment and matching process.

This option has proved to be particularly useful for older children who retain strong links to their birth families and do not want or need the formality of adoption and where the carers wish for the continued involvement of the local authority.

Long-term fostering has the following advantages as a Permanence Plan:

- The local authority retains a role in negotiating between the foster carers and the birth family over issues such as contact;
- There is continuing social work support to the child and foster family in a placement that is regularly reviewed to ensure that the child's needs are met;
- It maintains legal links to the birth family who can still play a part in the decision making for the child.

Long-term fostering has the following disadvantages as a Permanence Plan:

- The foster carers do not hold Parental Responsibility and this may delay or complicate decision making;
- Continuing social work involvement and this may delay or complicate decision making';
- Regular Looked After Reviews, which, can, sometimes, be regarded as an intrusion in a long standing and stable placement;
- Stigma attached to the child due to being in care;
- The child is not a legal member of the family. If difficulties arise there may be less willingness to persevere and seek resolution;
- Post care and/or post 18 the carers have no legal responsibility towards the young person.

Long-Term Residential Care

For some children and young people living with a foster family may not be right for them at a point in their life. Their needs may be complex and they may have experienced a number of family arrangements including foster placement which have ended in an unplanned way. The focus of residential provision should be to aim to return the child / young person to a family environment but if this is not likely to be successful, residential care can be a positive and successful option for a very small number of young people. Our Atom Service provides, flexible, bespoke, residential provision in Wigan and is of high quality and the outcomes for young people are good. Atom working closely with our fostering service seeks to build positive relationships with foster

carers and children / young people to provide the best condition to achieve permanence within family-based care. We also recognise that Residential care can provide a therapeutic environment for some young people to enable them to receive the level of intense support they need to address difficult issues and return them to family arrangements.

It is important that if this is the long-term plan for permanence this should be ratified by the IRO at a CLA Review and subsequently approved at Permanence Panel or Out of Borough Panel. This should happen within 6-12 months of a child being placed to ensure children and carers are clear and secure in the knowledge that this will be their permanent home. This decision should be celebrated as a significant achievement for all.

7. Permanence and Local Placement

Where a child is placed with long term carers, it is important 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. For these reasons children should be placed in local provision wherever possible.

Any decision to place a child away from their community should 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 must be explored. In the case of an adoptive placement, this will be required as part of the assessment of need for adoption support services, but should be carried out in relation to any permanent placement

8. Assessing and Planning for Permanence

Assessments of a child's needs in relation to their Permanence Plan must:

- Focus on outcomes.
- Consider stability issues, including the child's and family's needs for long-term support and the child's needs for links, including contact, with their parents, siblings, and wider family network.

- Social workers must ensure the child's Permanence Plan is clearly linked to previous assessments of the child's needs.

A court in deciding whether to make a Care Order, is required to consider the 'permanence provisions' of the Care Plan for the child:

- The provisions setting out the long-term plan for the upbringing of the child - to live with a parent/family member/family friend; adoption; or other long-term care, and

The plan's provisions in relation to any of the following:

- The impact on the child concerned of any harm that he or she suffered or was likely to suffer;
- The current and future needs of the child (including needs arising out of that impact);
- The way in which the long-term plan for the upbringing of the child would meet those current and future needs.

In considering the child's needs, full consultation with family and community networks should be undertaken to establish the child's attachments and supports.

In all cases, the child's own wishes and feelings must be ascertained and taken into account.

By the time of the second Looked After Review, the child must have a Permanence Plan (incorporated into the Care Plan), to be presented for consideration at the review.

Where the Permanence Plan includes a Parallel Plan, the social worker must ensure that the parents are informed of the reasons why two plans are being made to meet the child's needs and prevent unnecessary delay.

9. Good Practice Guidance

The following practice guidance is not exhaustive; it is drawn from research and local knowledge.

Supporting Reunification with Birth or Extended Family

Research points to:

- The importance of clearly communicating to the family what needs to happen to enable the child to return home, and within what timescales;
- The importance of exploring family ties and long term relationships with family, school and community;
- The use of Family Group Conferences as an effective way of facilitating both the above.

i. Identifying the Best Permanence Option

The permanency 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 their wishes and feelings.

Issues to consider:

- The assessment process must ask how stability for this child will be achieved;
- Long term stability means the sense of a permanent home with the same family or group of people, as part of the same community and culture, and with long-term continuity of relationships and identity;
- Short or medium term stability or continuity will be important for children who are going to stay in care for a brief period before going home and for children who are going to need new permanent arrangements. The quality of a child's attachments and life will be detrimentally affected by uncertainties, separations from what /who is known and changes of school and placement;
- Educational experiences, links with extended family, hobbies and friendships and support to carers, contribute to guarding against disruption and placement breakdown;
- The importance of carefully listening to what children want from the placement, helping the relationship between carer and child to build, making thorough plans around contact with family, providing vigorous support during crisis times and taking a sufficiently flexible attitude to adoption by carers;
- The older a child is, the less likely it is that the child will secure a permanent family through adoption;

- The larger the family group of children, the harder it is to secure a single placement that will meet all the needs of all the children.

ii. Twin Track or Parallel Planning

Social workers are encouraged to consider working to this model; working towards a child's return home whilst at the same time developing an alternative Permanence Plan, within strictly limited timescales.

Where children's cases are before the court in Care Proceedings, the Court require twin track planning to be reflected in the Care Plan.

iii. Placement/Contact with Siblings - Issues to Consider

Wherever it is in the best interests of each individual child, siblings should be placed together. Being able to live with brothers and sisters who are also Looked After is an important protective factor for many Looked After children. Positive sibling relationships provide support both in childhood and adulthood and can be particularly valuable during changes in a young person's life, such as leaving care.

A number of factors however, can militate against achieving the positive placement of brothers and sisters together – they may have entered care at different times and/or they may have very different needs related to past experiences, current emotional and behavioural development and age, especially where there are significant age differences. There may be practical difficulties in accommodating large sibling groups together. In some circumstances a child may have been abused by a brother or sister. An understanding of family functioning and family history, providing appropriate support to all parties, as well as listening to the wishes and feelings of children, is therefore key to informing these judgements.

There are often some practical steps that can be taken to overcome some of the more logistical reasons for being unable to place sibling groups together. Where siblings placed together in foster care may be separated when one turns 18, consideration should be given to whether Staying Put arrangements may be beneficial for all the children involved.

There will, however, always be circumstances in which it is not possible to place siblings together and children should be supported to understand why they cannot live with their siblings. In these circumstances where it is in the best interests of each individual child, sibling contact should be promoted and maintained.

If it is likely that brothers and sisters who are not able to be placed together at the start of a care episode will remain Looked After for the medium to long term, arrangements should be made as part of each child's Care Plan which will enable brothers and sisters to live together, taking into account the other factors.

Where the plan is for adoption, in order to reduce delay, an early decision should be taken as to whether it is in the best interests of each child to be placed together or separately, and the impact on each child of that decision. The decision should be based on a balanced assessment of the individual needs of each child in the group, and the likely or possible consequences of each option on each child. Factors that may need to be considered will include: the nature of the sibling group (do the siblings know each other/ how are they related); whether the children have formed an attachment; the health needs of each child; and each child's view (noting that a child's views and perceptions will change over time).

V. Direct Contact with Birth Family Members and Others

Contact must always be for the benefit of the child, not the parents or other relatives.

It may serve one or all of the following functions:

- To maintain a child's identity. Consolidating the new with the old;
- To provide reassurance for the child;
- To provide an ongoing source of information for the child;
- To give the child continuing permission to live with the adoptive family;
- To minimise the sense of loss;
- To assist with the process of tracing;
- To give the adopters a secure sense of the right to parent. This will make the parenting task easier.

Direct contact will generally work best if all parties accept/agree to:

- The plan for permanence;
- The parental role of the permanent carers;
- The benefit of contact;
- The adoptive parents being present.

Direct contact is not likely to be successful in situations where a parent:

- Disagrees with the plan for permanence;
- Does not accept the parental role of the permanent carer and their own minimal role with the child;
- Has proved to be unreliable in their commitment to contact in the past;
- Does not have a significant attachment with the child.
- The wishes of the child to join a new family without direct, contact must be considered and given considerable weight at any age.

If direct contact is a part of the Permanence Plan, a formal agreement setting out how contact will take place, who with, where and how frequently must be negotiated before placement, and reviewed regularly throughout the child's life.

iv. Indirect Contact with Birth Family Members and Others

We do not all share the same sense of family - it means different things to different people. It helps when children are helped to understand to whom they are related, especially if they have complicated family trees including half-brothers or sisters living in different places. Identity is built on solid information.

Wherever possible, indirect contact between the child and their new family with people from the past should be facilitated:

To leave open channels of communication in case more contact is in the child's interests in the future;

To provide information (preferably two-way) to help the child to maintain and enhance their identity and to provide the birth relative with some comfort in knowing of the child's progress.

Indirect contact must be negotiated prior to placement, and all parties should be asked to enter into an agreement with one another about the form and frequency that the contact will take. Renegotiations of the contact should only take place if the child's needs warrant it.

All parties to the agreement will need to accept that as the child becomes older and is informed more fully about the arrangements for indirect contact, the child will have a view regarding its continuation. No contact arrangements can be promised to remain unaltered during the child's childhood. Those involved need to accept that contact may cease if it is no longer in the child's interests. Alternatively, an older child may need to change to direct contact.

Appendix 1: Identifying Permanence Options

Child Arrangements/Special Guardianship Orders	Adoption	Long Term Fostering
Child needs the security of a legally defined placement with alternative carers, but does not require a lifelong commitment involving a change of identity.	Child's primary need is to belong to a family who will make a lifelong commitment.	Primary need is for a stable, loving family environment whilst there is still a significant level of continued involvement with the birth family.
Child's relation, foster or other carer needs to exercise day to day parental responsibility and is prepared to do so as a lifelong commitment.	Child's birth parents are not able or not willing to share parental responsibility in order to meet their child's needs, even though there may be contact.	Child has a clear sense of identity with the birth family, whilst needing to be looked after away from home.
There is no need for continuing	Child needs an	There is need for

monitoring and review by the Local Authority, although support services may still need to be arranged.

opportunity to develop a new sense of identity whilst being supported to maintain or develop a healthy understanding of their past.

continuing oversight and monitoring of the child's developmental progress.

Child has a strong attachment to the alternative carers and legally defined permanence is assessed as a positive contribution to their sense of belonging and security.

Child expresses a wish to be adopted.

Birth parents are able and willing to exercise a degree of parental responsibility.