

Permanency Strategy

Operational From:

Agreed by:

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DLT

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Herefordshire Council is committed to ensuring that every child in its care has a permanent home that meets their needs. This strategy sets out Herefordshire Council's commitment to permanence for children and young people in its care. This strategy defines permanence and the key points in decision making with children, young people and their families to ensure that children and young people have the best possible care that provides them with security, stability and love through their childhood and beyond.

This strategy should be considered alongside Herefordshire Council's Children and Families Plan, Sufficiency Strategy and Corporate Parenting Strategy. This strategy and its impact should be considered and reviewed annually.

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1. Background to the Permanence Strategy

Herefordshire's Permanency planning is based on the philosophy that every child has the right to a permanent, caring and stable home, preferably with their own family. The primary focus of permanency planning is to ensure that children have a permanent home.

Herefordshire Council, as Corporate Parent for children and young people in our care, will work diligently to find permanent, safe homes and in a timely manner. For children and young people, this means the best possible care that provides them with security, stability and love through their childhood and beyond. This is the golden thread that will run through all our permanence work.

We are determined to ensure that the voices and lived experiences of children, young people and their families is at the core of our permanence work. We have emerging good practice which we will draw on to ensure the best possible outcomes for children, and young people considering the three core components of permanency. We will strive to develop our permanency work and learn from best practice and have processes in place for continuous improvement and development.

This strategy should be read alongside the Children and Young People's Services Plan, the Corporate Parenting Plan and the Sufficiency Strategy. The impact of this strategy will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis with learning from the preceding year.

2. Definition of Permanency

Permanency is about creating a home where a child or young person's relational, physical and legal conditions allow them to feel secure; where they have commitment from their carers and their identity and development is supported, they feel safe to strive and thrive in their childhood. That is where children and young people feel secure, cared for and stable consistently throughout their childhood and into adult life.

Permanence for children has three aspects as outlined in Care Planning guidance:

1. Relational permanence - refers to emotional permanency and the experience of having positive, loving, trusting and nurturing relationships with people important to the child. These relationships ensure a sense of belonging for the child. These relationships are usually provided by significant family attachments but also include friendships and community relationships. Where children are not able to live with their family of origin, the identification and strengthening of connections that a child has with their family and people of significance will be sought, supported and advocated wherever it is safe to do so.

2. Physical or environmental - a stable home environment within a familiar neighbourhood and community. Children's living arrangements should meet the child's developmental, educational, emotional, health, intellectual and physical needs. Physical permanence supports continuity of relationships with family, friends and community and enhance safety, belonging and wellbeing. Herefordshire Children's Services has clear plans in place to maintain stability and continuity to reduce the risk of changes for children and young people. Support will be provided where there are risks to this stability in maintaining key relationships for children.

3. Legal permanency refers to legal arrangements for a child that provides a sense of permanence and long-term stability. The first preference will always be for a child to be cared for by the child's family. This can be achieved by supporting the child's family where possible, or, if

the child is to be removed from the family, support must be given to the child and their family to consider a return where this is in their best interests. The first preference for permanence for children and young people will be to remain in the care of their parents where this is safe and meets children's needs.

The second preference is for a child to be cared under an Order with a member of the child's family. This includes Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) and Child Arrangements Orders (CAO). The stability that a child and young person has from living in within a wider family and friends' group is very important to Herefordshire and every effort will be made to ensure that a child or young person has the opportunity to do so.

The third preference for the child is to be cared for by the local authority. For some children, adoption may also be considered as the appropriate option by considering where there is no one in the child's family or friends' network that can care for them and taking into account *Re B (A Child)* (2013) where a Court concludes "nothing else will do".

3. Aims of the Permanence Strategy

In Herefordshire, we want to ensure that all children and young people of all abilities, genders, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and class have a stable and caring home environment as soon as possible and, within a maximum timeframe of 12 months from them needing our intervention.

We pledge that we will hear and take into account the views of children and young people and work with them towards them achieving their ideal stable home life.

Not all children we engage with will need to be in Herefordshire Council's care. However, all the children we work with will need to have their permanence needs considered and addressed. This may be in staying with or returning to their family; living with extended family, friends or connected persons through a SGO or CAO; long term foster care; adoption; or residential care (if this is necessary to meet the child's needs).

Our strategic plan helps to equip our social workers, practitioners, carers, Independent Reviewing Officers, supervising social workers and other professionals to work together to find stable, safe, caring and sustainable permanent homes for our children in timely manner.

This Permanency Strategy will have a direct impact on how we ensure we have safe and appropriate homes for children and young people who need our care. It will support the Sufficiency Strategy and Improvement Plan. This will ensure that Herefordshire Council understands the needs of our children and young people and the types of care and support they need. These strategies and plans will also provide a benchmark for the local authority, social workers, partners and the community about our processes and expectations for good social worker practice and; how children, young people and their families will be supported.

Herefordshire Council uses a blended restorative, relationship-based approach as our Practice Model and seeks to build on strengths within families and their networks. We focus on the strengths families have and they will be supported to find their own solutions to difficulties in the first instance by using Family Group Conferencing. We have Family Network meetings at the earliest opportunity to support families to care for their children or, in some cases to provide an alternative, permanent home.

Herefordshire Council will prioritise permanency for children through regular planning meetings for all children who have not achieved or, are at risk of not achieving their plan for permanence. Senior Managers across the service will have oversight of permanency planning through Legal Gateway and through the Permanence Panel. A Permanence Tracker is in place to enable shared information from our different information systems, Legal Gateway Meetings and Permanence Panels. Other meetings that contribute to tracking Permanency are Children in Care reviews and care planning meetings. The detail within the permanence trackers is held by the Case Progression Officers and the Permanence Champion. All these processes will be carried out with the voice and lived experience of the child at its core. We will seek feedback from children and young People to test this at regular intervals through our participation work.

The information that we gather around children and young people's needs, or where there are gaps in provision, will be considered and reviewed as part of our duties towards placement sufficiency and the impact of this strategy.

4. Herefordshire's Priorities

- Ensuring every child in the care of Herefordshire Council has a clear permanence plan within 4 months of coming into care. This includes all information being placed on the tracker to ensure all children have a plan in place and that arrangements are meeting children's needs.
- That permanence planning is child centred considering of the child's needs, their wishes, their history, their family and the things that matter.
- Refreshed and relaunched weekly Permanence Planning Forum
- Regular Care Planning Meetings to ensure children and young people's plans stay on track
- Development of data around permanence for children and young people
- Ensuring and strengthening the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer and Corporate Parenting Board
- Reviewing the offer to Special Guardians and those holding Child Arrangement Orders
- Ensuring most children live within 20 miles of their home by strategically working with our partners to ensure that children, where they cannot remain with parents or extended family, can continue to live in Herefordshire by building relationships with local providers to ensure children and young people stay close to home.

5. Considerations for Permanence Planning

Permanence Planning

Our permanence planning map supports us to consider permanence and *'how will stability be achieved?'* Stability can be understood by ensuring continuity of care for children who are going to be in care for a brief period before going home and, for children who are going to need a more permanent arrangement (short- or medium-term stability); and providing a sense of a permanent home (long term stability).

An assessment of a child's needs in relation to their Permanence Plan must consider stability and continuity, considering the child and families need for long-term support and maintaining links,

including contact with their parents, siblings and wider family network. This will be based on the principle of stable home based on love. To support in achieving this, children and young people should have their child and family assessment updated each year unless there is a need for an update assessment as outlined in a care planning meeting or review.

The assessment will include:

- Outcomes for the child.
- Their wishes and feelings.
- The child's and family's support needs.
- How the child and family, friends/ connected persons remain in contact when it is in their best interests; and
- Evidence that the plan is clearly linked to previous assessments.

Family and Restorative approach

If it has been identified in a child's care plan that they are able to return to their family home, it is important to:

- Clearly communicate with the family: what needs to happen to enable the child to return home, and the timescales;
- Understand family ties and long-term relationships with family, school, and the wider community; and use Family Group Conferencing (where appropriate) to help facilitate the above.
- Working restoratively, drawing on relationship-based approaches, drawing upon strengths, identifying worries and planning what needs to happen and who is around this child and their support using genograms and ecomaps.

Family group conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a child centred, family focused approach to build relationships and support networks. FGC focuses on bringing together members of the family to take part in voluntary sessions to find their own solutions and formulate a '*family plan*' to resolve issues. Family Group Conferencing is referral led. All families should be referred to Family Group Conferencing as part of the safeguarding process (ideally prior to an Initial Child Protection Conference). Where children have been in care for a period of time and permanence has not been achieved, a Family Group Conference or Family Network Meeting convened the child's social worker should be convened to consider options.

Family Group Conferencing:

- Enabling families to plan and take control of their lives;
- Puts the child at the heart of the decision;
- Gives the child a voice;
- Supports the sharing of honest information and concerns with the family;
- Making the family aware of the 'non-negotiable' and the 'bottom line';
- Clarifying the role & responsibilities of all involved;
- Identifying resources and shortfalls in resources;
- Focuses on solutions rather than problems

Sibling Groups

It is important to maintain sibling relationships within a permanence plan. More successful outcomes occur for children placed together with their siblings. To better understand sibling relationships, we will carry out a sibling assessment to inform our plan for the child and young person's permanence. It is harder to place a sibling group together in certain circumstances, such as:

- Where children come into care at different times or have different needs related to past experiences, current behavioural or emotional needs or there is a significant difference in age; and
- Children are part of a large sibling group. Where it is not possible to place siblings together children will be supported to understand the reasons for this and where it is in their best interests, arrange sibling contact.
- Where the plan is for adoption, the decision should be made early whether it is in the best interests of the children to be placed together or separately. Such decisions will be based on a balanced assessment of the needs of each child and the impact of the decision on each child.

Life story work

Life Story Work is crucial for children to understand their experiences. This includes the child's experience within their birth family, their history and supportive relationships. Life Story Work should include a narrative as well as pictures and other forms of information to help the child understand why they came into care and any subsequent changes.

The work should include the child; their birth parents and extended family where appropriate. It should include information collated by parents (where possible), carers, social workers and other key people. Life Story Work should start from the beginning of our interventions with the child and be updated alongside the child as they grow to help them process and form an accurate narrative of their life journey.

Life Story Work must be recorded sensitively using '*language that cares*' on the child's file using language which empathises with children's birth families and recognises the impact trauma can have on the challenges and decisions adults might face. In exceptional circumstances, where it is not appropriate to include the child, there must be a plan for sharing the child's life story with them.

In Herefordshire we will ensure that all children have meaningful Life Story Work and, for those children who require therapeutic support to understand their life story, they receive this in a timely way.

Family Relationships

Where a child is living with long-term carers it is important that the child has access to the friends, family or community in which they were brought up. Enabling ongoing contact with birth their family will remain a priority.

Where it is in their best interests, it is important that the child remains in contact with their family. This maintains their identity, gives reassurance, provides an on-going source of information, gives the child permission to live with alternative carers, minimises the sense of loss and assists adopters if the child is placed for adoption.

Direct family time would work most effectively if all parties agreed to the following:

- The plan for permanence;
- The parental role of the permanent carers and the benefits of family time;

Direct family time is less likely to be effective if a parent:

- Disagrees with the plan for permanence;
- Does not accept the parental role of the permanent carer;
- Does not accept their own role with the child;
- Is unreliable in their commitment to family time and
- Has no significant attachment to the family.

The views of the child, such as if they do not wish to have direct contact, must be considered and given considerable weight.

6. Routes to Permanence Planning

Ensuring best options

When deciding on a permanency option, we will work with the child and their family and our multi-agency partners to understand the child's needs and take the factors below into account within our child and family's assessment. Minutes of all meetings will be recorded on the child's file and will be within their care plan:

- The age of the child;
- How is stability going to be achieved?
- Short-term stability - the quality of the child's attachments and the impact of uncertainty; Educational experiences, links with extended family members, hobbies and friendships;
- Long-term stability - a permanent home with a sense of family, community, culture and continuity of relationships & identity. Understanding what a child needs from their carers, including supporting the development of a relationship between the child and their carer to create a family environment;
- Will it be possible to find permanence through adoption?

The use of genograms and ecomaps will support social workers understanding of key relationships for children. Where matters are before the court, Family Network Assessment Records are presented which outlines family members that have been approached to assessed whether they could care for child or children.

Concurrent Planning

Concurrent Planning is where a child moves from their birth parent(s) to their prospective permanent family while reunification is still being pursued. These arrangements can be made for a child of any age.

Parallel Planning

All efforts should be made to safely keep a child with, or return, the child to their parent. Where this may not be possible alternative plans will be made in parallel to support the children to live with extended family/ connected carers or within their communities.

Parallel planning is essential, especially when assessments of birth parents are being completed and the plan is not known. The child must not experience drift in achieving permanence. Where a child is unable to be cared for by their guardian or parent, or other family and friends, adoption, special guardianship or permanent fostering should be considered.

Permanency Planning Meetings

The service has a two Case Progression officers who facilitate permanence planning meetings and work closely with social work teams to ensure that the plans for children in pre-proceedings and care proceedings do not drift. The child's social worker, Team Manager and Service Manager will attend this. Fostering Social Workers will be invited where viability assessments of connected persons are taking place. The Early Permanence Manager will attend where there is a plan of adoption. The meeting should include the views of the child, their parents and significant others. Where children are in care, Care Planning Meetings will be scheduled as soon as care proceedings are issued. The Permanence Plan will then be reviewed and tracked on a regular basis by the Case Progression officer, the Team Manager and the Independent Reviewing Officer to monitor for drift and delay until permanence has been achieved with the best outcome for that child.

The initial PPM could be one of parallel planning. A second permanence planning meeting should be scheduled prior to the second Looked after Review to approve the final permanence plan. Where plans for permanence remain outstanding, PPMs should continue to take place every six weeks until the plan for permanence is agreed.

Where a permanence plan of adoption is an appropriate plan for the child, a PPM should take place before booking for an ADM decision. Where a Placement Order has been made, and statutory reviews under the regulations take place at 3 and 6 months, discussions should take place and consider why the child has not been placed and whether the plan meets the child's best interests.

Regular reviews of children subject to a placement order take place with the Case Progression Officers and Early Permanence Team and Adoption Central England (ACE) to minimise drift and delay. To ensure senior management oversight, Permanence Planning Panel will meet fortnightly to track those children with a placement order, ensuring that the permanence plan to maintain oversight of permanence plans and placement orders. This will be particularly important in situations where children have not found families within six months.

In the corporate parent service permanence panel meets fortnightly to consider all permanence plans including SGO, DCO and long-term fostering. Chaired by the Head of Service. The decisions of the panel are put on the child's file and the tracker updated at the meeting. A bimonthly report is produced for the Service Director and DCS.

Role of the IRO Service

The IRO service has a statutory responsibility to chair a looked after child's review and to monitor the child's case on an on-going basis. An IRO will be appointed to each child with 5 working days of a child becoming looked after and will chair their Looked after Reviews. The initial review will be within 20 working days of a child becoming looked after followed by a second review within 3 months, then by subsequent 6 monthly reviews.

As part of this process, at the second review the IRO must be satisfied that the local authority has explained to the child and their parents what the plan for permanence is. It is the IRO's role to review and agree the plan for permanence, ensuring that it is the most appropriate for the child. Where it is not possible to identify a single plan for permanence at the second review, a concurrent or multi-track plan will be identified, and time scales will be attributed to any pieces of work that are needed to formulate a single plan for permanence.

The IRO also has a statutory responsibility for monitoring the child's case to ensure that there is no drift in implementing the permanency plan. The IRO service will continue to provide an oversight at relevant and regular intervals for the child and young person.

Foster for Adoption

- This is where the child is placed with an approved adopter (early permanence carer) in a fostering placement whilst permanence plans are considered. Where the court decides that a child should be adopted, a placement order is normally granted or applied for. The local authority can then 'match' the child and the early permanence carer through Adoption Panel and their subsequent recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker. The early permanence carers can then seek to adopt the child. Decisions should return to the ADM at 6 and 12 months. An application can be made if the child has been in placement for 10 weeks.

7. Outcomes of Permanency Planning:

Reunification/Staying at Home: We will focus on supporting children to live with their birth family whenever it is safe to do so. We will enable families to be ambitious to achieve this plan. We understand that good relationships are crucial. In Herefordshire, this means ensuring the right support is available at the right time for sustainable change. Enabling support at the first instance means children are more likely to remain with their families. If this is not possible, we will initially look to the family and extended network for alternative care.

Placements with Family and Friends /Connected Carers:

If children are unable to live with their immediate family our priority is to identify a member of their extended family or network to care for them. Genograms and ecomaps are used as direct tools to help families and practitioners to better understand their strengths and systemic functioning.

Family Group Conferences or family network meetings are used at the earliest stage to identify what supports each member could offer to strengthen the family's functioning. These meetings will also work to identify who can provide either short, or long-term care depending on the need of the child and their family. Where family or connected persons want to look after children in their families, they can be considered as kinship/ connected carers. Our Fostering Recruitment undertake connected persons and SGO assessments with an aim of completion in 16 weeks.

Special Guardianship (SGO) / Child Arrangement Orders (CAO): Special Guardianship provides an alternative legal status for children and provides the child with permanency without taking away their parent's rights. A special guardian is usually a family member or family friend. SGO's can be granted as an outcome of Court proceedings initiated by Herefordshire Council or

through private law applications. SGO's are also an option for foster carers who have children settled in their care and who can meet their needs without state intervention.

Adoption: Adoption is a way of providing the security, permanency and love of a new family when it is not possible for a child to be raised by their birth parents or within the birth family. Adoption is a legal process which transfers parental responsibility from the child's birth parents to their adoptive parents.

Permanent Long Term Foster Care: Permanent foster care means that a child or young person lives with a committed foster carer until they reach adulthood. Being brought up by a consistent carer over time provides a greater sense of belonging within a family. We want our carers to provide lasting relationships to children and young people which extend into adulthood as part of their lifelong relationships. Where a child has been living with a fostering family for a period of two years and to secure permanency for a child, there will be discussions around whether a special guardianship order or a similar order may be in the child's best interests. Where children need to move to other carers, their family network will always be considered to see if it is safe and appropriate to achieve permanence with them.

Long Term Residential Care As part of our Corporate Parenting responsibilities a plan of long-term residential care would not normally be considered as a long-term permanence plan for a child under the age of 15. We will always look at family-based care for younger children, whilst appreciating that some older children manage relationships better within a residential setting but are mindful that this option does not provide permanence to children and young people.

Staying Put Arrangements: Staying Put arrangements are positive outcomes for our care experienced young people who are approaching 18 years old. Changes to the Leaving Care Act have enabled young people to remain with their carers longer. This means a young person has a stable home with their permanent foster carers who are their forever family.

Herefordshire Council will ensure that sustainable agreements for our children before the age of 18 years. The child in care review at age 16 should start the conversation and planning for Staying Put so that young people and carers are involved in the decision making. The increase in Staying Put arrangements has highlighted the need for more foster carers to be recruited who can meet the needs of older children entering care for the first time.