

## Corporate Parenting Panel

23 February 2018



### Looked After Children Planning for Permanence: Fostering and Adoption

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### Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Corporate Parenting Panel about the current activity and performance in relation to achieving Permanence for Looked After Children and to outline the plans for service developments over the next 12 months.

### Introduction – Context of Permanence

- 2 Permanency is defined as a framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that give a child/young person a sense of commitment, security, and continuity of care throughout their childhood and beyond.
- 3 Permanence planning is based on the philosophy that every child has the right to a permanent stable and loving home, preferably with his or her own family.
- 4 Permanence does not necessarily mean a placement outside of the family and wherever possible all family options must have been fully explored before any consideration of a placement outside of the immediate or extended family or network.
- 5 For the purposes of this report, the focus will be retained on those children for whom it has been concluded that permanence must be achieved outside of the birth family and therefore as Looked After Children for whom the Council is acting as Corporate Parents.
- 6 Children and Young People's Services (CYPS) have developed an Early Permanence Strategy as a key priority for service improvement. This aims to maintain and support children within their birth families and for those who cannot that their care plans are progressed in a timely manner without delay. The Strategy will also ensure a consistent approach across the service.

## **Permanence in Durham – The current situation**

- 7 Durham County Council are currently responsible for Looking After 790 Children and Young People and of these 400 have a care plan of permanence outside of their birth family. The plans of these children are detailed more specifically below:
- 286 have a plan of long term placement within foster care
  - 22 have a plan of long term placement in a residential setting
  - 92 have a plan of Adoption
- 8 Of the 286 Children and Young People who have a plan of long term placement within foster care 213 are in a permanent placement.
- 9 Of the 22 Children and Young People who have a plan of long term placement in a residential setting all are in placements which can provide them with permanence.
- 10 Of the 92 children with a plan of Adoption, a number of these have not yet progressed through the Court arena so their plans are not yet confirmed. There are 63 of these children who are the subject of a Placement Order. 21 of those 63 children are in their prospective adoptive placement.

## **Action Planning for those Children not in a permanent placement**

- 11 Of those children with a plan of long term foster care, there are currently 73 children who are not matched to a permanent placement. Of those children 39 are in a placement which can offer them permanence but due to the needs of the child or the carers it is not yet appropriate to formally match these children to their placement via the fostering panel. Subsequently, there are 34 children currently for whom the Local Authority are actively family finding for, as they do not have a permanent placement identified. There are significant challenges in family finding due to the complex needs the children have and the challenging behaviours they can present with. All of the 34 children have stable and consistent care arrangements at present, albeit the current carers are unable to care for the children on a permanent basis.
- 12 The Fostering Service has been recently re-structured. One of the aims of this is to improve the performance in relation to family finding and reduce drift and delay in securing long term placements for children. All of these children have an identified social worker who acts as family finder and whose role it is to identify appropriate foster carers for them. Ensuring the analysis of children's needs to inform the Recruitment and Marketing Strategy across both Fostering and Adoption is a key priority enabling us to recruit the carers we need.
- 13 In relation to children with a plan of Adoption, there are 63 children who have had their plans ratified by the Court and who are now the subject of Placement Orders. There are currently 21 of these children who are placed in their prospective adoptive placements. The other 42 children all have an allocated family finder who is continually exploring both the regional and

national pool of prospective adopters to find the right family for them. All of the 42 children have some additional or complex needs, are older children or are part of a sibling group and nationally these are recognised as significant barriers to securing timely adoptive placements. The service continues to work proactively for these children and plans are in place with the Marketing team to ensure that adopter recruitment is targeted and tailored to the needs of these children.

- 14 In addition it should be noted that the close working relationship between the adoption team and LAC3 who produce all the Child Permanence Reports for children with Care Plans of adoption ensures that this is a key focus and early identification of adopters and linking and matching takes place for these children without delay.

### **The context of OFSTED**

- 15 An identified improvement in permanence, particularly for adopter recruitment which was based on an analysis of need, was made by OFSTED in 2016 to ensure that recruitment was targeted to the needs of the children. The adoption service is working closely with marketing & communications in line with a Revised Recruitment and Marketing Strategy to develop a profile of those adopters who have adopted children with complex or additional needs and those older children, as well as sibling groups. It is hoped that a profile specifically for these carers will allow recruitment activity to be targeted and focussed to identify prospective adopters for the children who we have been unable to secure placements for.
- 16 Recruitment of adopters has declined significantly nationally which is confirmed by the figures presented by the Adoption Leadership Board and is insufficient to meet the needs of the numbers of children with a care plan of adoption. The service is progressing with its plan to become part of Regional Adoption Agency, and a project manager is currently being recruited to progress this process. The service is also seeking to further develop its strategy with regard to fostering to adopt and this will be a crucial element of the new early permanence strategy and in the development plan of the new pre-birth intervention team.

### **Introduction of the Early Permanence Strategy**

- 17 The main barrier to achieving permanence for children is the lack of sufficient fosters carers to meet the level of demand to effectively care for them and meet their needs. Significant resources and efforts have been put into increasing the carer population and the picture in this regard is improving. This is a national issue given the rising numbers of looked after children across the country. There are other barriers such as drift and delay in progressing children's plans and lack of realistic planning that can also contribute to a failure to realise a child's plan at the earliest opportunity. Mention the wider restructure of FF and the focus on reducing the number of change of social workers.

- 18 To seek to address this the Service has devised a new “Early Permanence Strategy”, which will be shared with all frontline children’s services workers and managers via briefing sessions within March. The purpose of this strategy is to ensure that achieving permanence is for children is a centre of all social work practice and that the importance of permanence is equally recognised and prioritised at the start of the child’s journey if they do become looked after as it is at the end.
- 19 The strategy aims to raise the awareness of and the general profile of permanence and to provide workers with the information, tools and support to achieve permanence at the earliest possible stage for the child.
- 20 As part of the restructure of children’s services the scrutiny and monitoring of Special Guardianship Order plans will also be conducting within the Looked After Service and the Agency Decision Maker for Adoption will directly oversee these plans, which recognises Special Guardianship Orders as one of the key routes to permanence for children.

## **Summary**

- 21 This report highlights that despite some very good examples of achieving permanence for children, there continue to be children whose plan is permanence outside of their birth family and yet who Children’s Services have been unable to identify a permanently matched placement to meet their needs provide such a placement to meet their plan at this time. There remains further work therefore to do in this area to improve performance and achieve permanence for all children.

## **Recommendations**

- 22 Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to:
  - The implementation of the Early Permanence Strategy to deliver a consistent service wide approach to Care Planning for children to remain at home with their families whenever possible and where children need to become looked after their plans are progressed in a timely manner to avoid drift and delay
  - To continue the targeted recruitment of both foster carers and adopters, based upon both the profiles of the children to ensure the provision meets the needs of the most difficult children
  - To improve effective senior management oversight of all cases where children are looked after to reduce drift and delay and that they achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity
  - To ensure a clear performance framework is developed to effectively report progress to CYPsMT and to Elected Members

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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**Finance – N/A**

**Staffing – N/A**

**Risk – N/A**

**Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – N/A**

**Accommodation– N/A**

**Crime and Disorder– N/A**

**Human Rights– N/A**

**Consultation– N/A**

**Procurement– N/A**

**Disability Issues– N/A**

**Legal Implications– N/A**