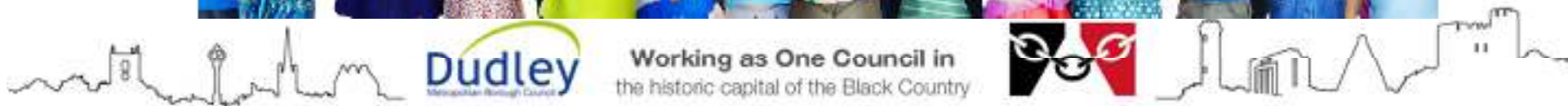


Children first and at the heart of all we do

Achieving Permanence – Report for Corporate Parenting Board

April 2024

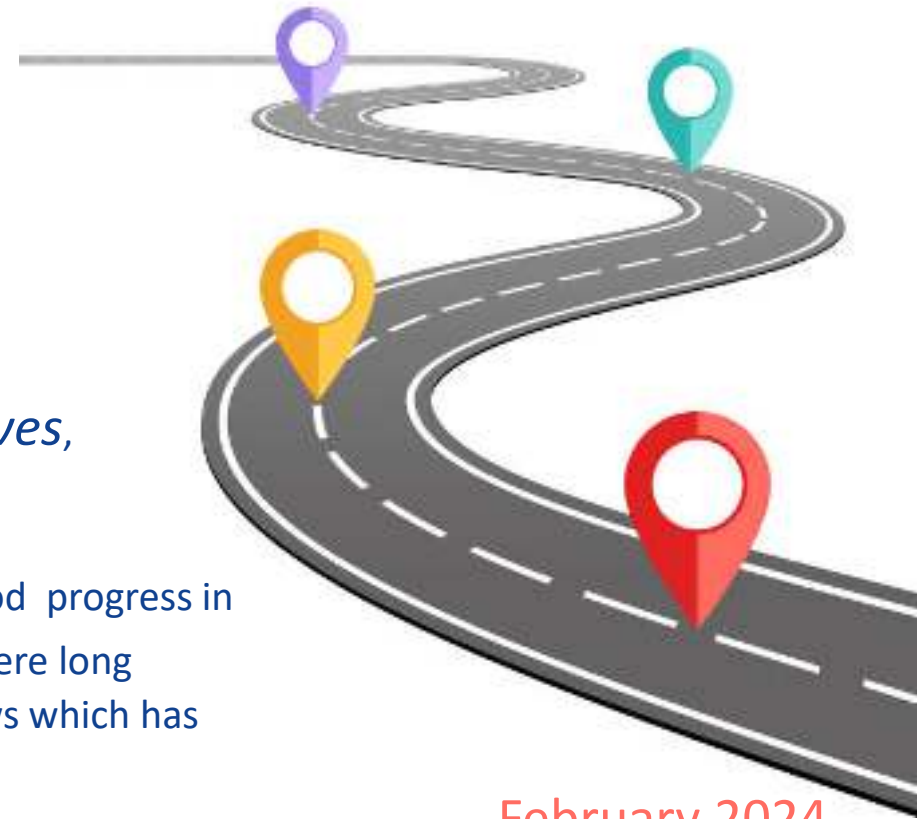


What do we know about the impact of our practice?

There is more likely to be a *permanence plan* identified at the child's second review when they are in our care, currently at 90%. Work has been completed with IROs to ensure their understanding of permanence including sequential planning in proceedings.

Our children are less likely to experience sequential *placement moves*, remaining with their foster families

Where the plan is for children to remain looked after, we have made good progress in *formally matching* children with their foster carers where these were long established plans; we have identified the gap in our annual foster reviews which has limited the matching process, and have a plan in place to address.



February 2024



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Where the plan might be for *permanence outside of the family*, there is greater attention to progressing to the Agency Decision Maker. Agreed arrangements are in place for Deputy ADM cover for Adoption and Fostering to avoid delays.

When our children are in our care, including with family and friends, we have taken the opportunity to *revisit permanency* including attention to the discharge of care orders, the seeking of SGOs and regularly revisiting whether parents have moved on to a point at which reunification can be considered. This is embedded within our Practice Framework and support from Herts in place relating to Reunification work.

We have an expectation that permanency planning meetings take place every 6 weeks until the child has achieved permanency and to begin from pre-proceedings stages. We have not yet achieved the level of consistency we would like for these meetings, but as shown in Quality Assurance data, there is an increased understanding and culture of keeping permanency as the goal from Day 1.



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How do we know?

Our journey at February 2024

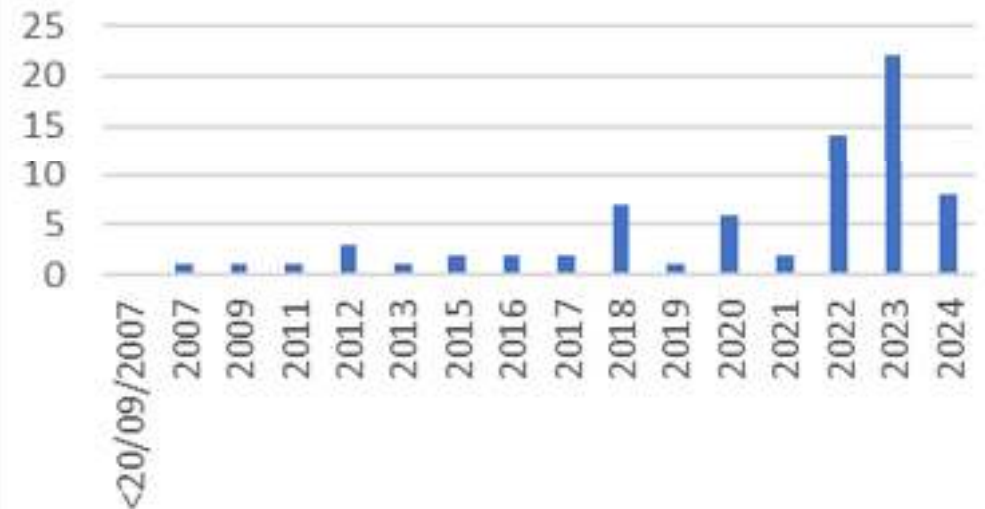
As at beginning February, a review of Permanency Planning Meetings recorded in LCS was undertaken.

There is an increase in meetings taking place for our younger children, and children who came into our care more recently (in the last year).

This demonstrates Managers understanding of the requirement.

There is also good evidence of Through Care Teams using Permanency Planning meetings to consider 'later permanence' options, such as reunification or SGO (42 meetings had been held for children in this part of the Service)

Current permanency planning by date became looked after



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How do we know?

Our journey at February 2024

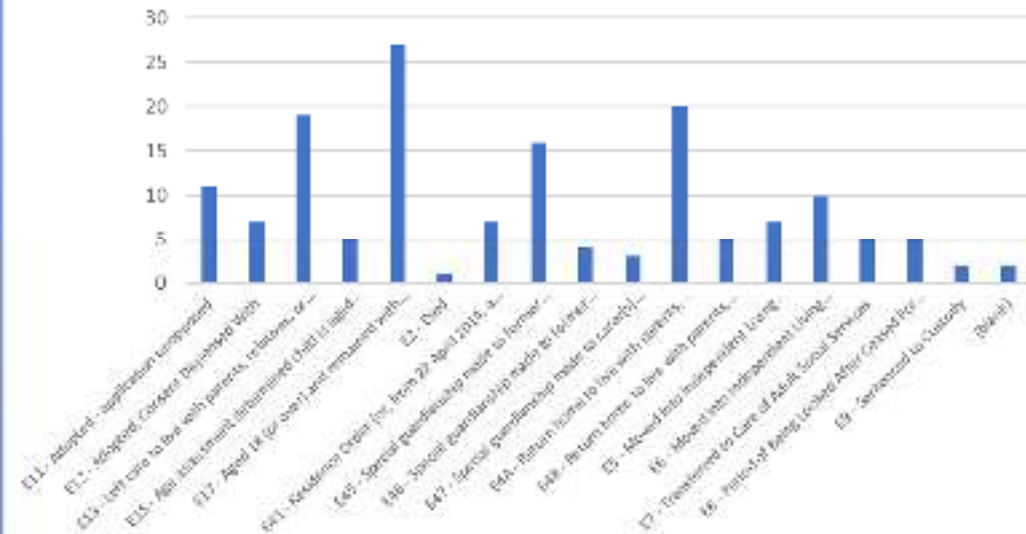
During 2023, from 108 children who came into our care, 97 remained in our care at the start of 2024. 11 children left our care within the year.

During 2023, 154 children left our care, 58 turned 18 and the next largest cohort of 39 returned to parents or family members.

For all the 21 children who were an infant (pre-school) when they entered care, they are now before the Court for permanence decision making (some have concluded)

30 children became looked after who are now aged **5-11 years**. 30 children also ceased to be looked after at this age in the year. For these children, 1 in 3 returned home; 19 achieved permanency through adoption, SGO, or CAO.

Ceasing to be looked after by reason

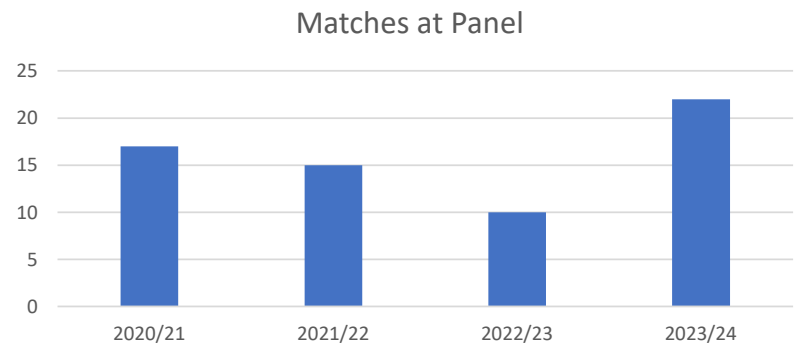
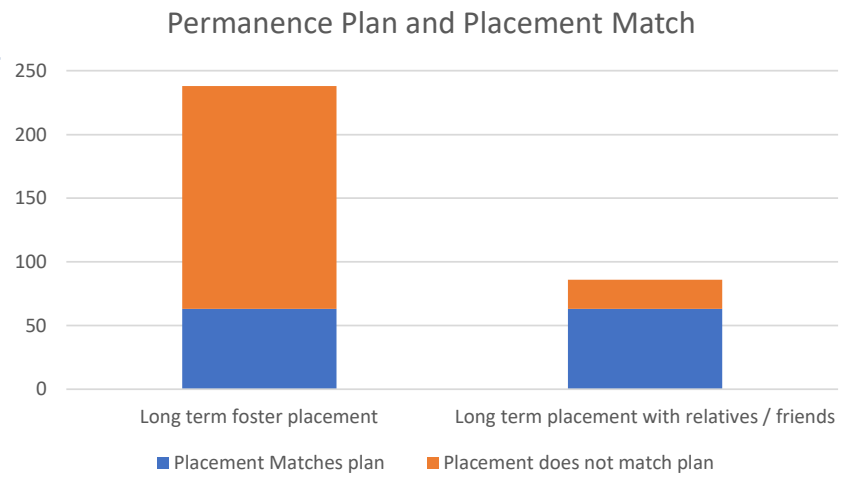


Dudley
Metropolitan Borough Council

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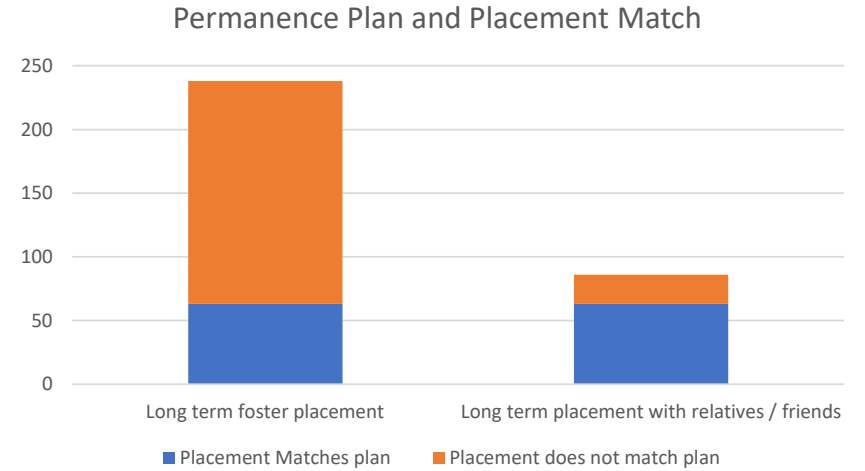
- Formal matching for our children with their foster carers is a work in progress. 73% of our children with a permanence plan of long term foster care, have not yet had their current placement formally identified as their 'forever home'. Permanence is important for both children and their carers as it increases stability.
- In 2020/21 there were 17 matches at the Fostering Panel, this reduced over the next two years to 15 and then 10. This was in part related to staffing issues. With better staffing this has been an improving picture. As at February 2024, 22 long term matches have been completed year to date. There is a long way to go, but we are achieving momentum.
- We are focusing on progressing matches for those of our children who are living with IFA foster carers as well as increasing the matches with in-house foster carers (where SGO is not the primary plan).
- We are also currently considering how we celebrate the long-term matches at the fostering panel, which is joint work between the Fostering and Independent Review Service



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- 73% of all children placed with family and friend foster carers have a permanence plan and will remain with those carers. The option of a Special Guardianship Order is regularly and routinely discussed with carers where appropriate.
- There has been a reduction in the number of Special Guardianship Orders over the past 3 years. This is partly because a no detriment policy was introduced in 2019/20 and higher than average number of carers converted to SGO at that time. This meant in future years there were less carers to convert.
- To date this year 16 children have achieved permanence through Special Guardianship Order. There are also a number of assessments underway. Regular tracking meetings are also held to ensure that we are monitoring those families who might become ready for an increased permanence offer.



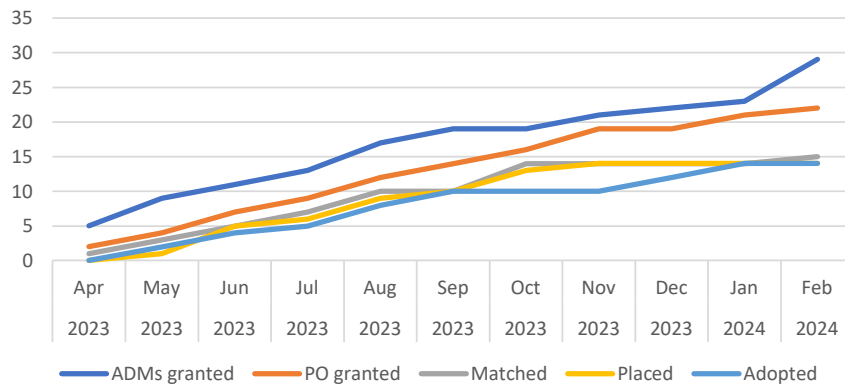
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How do we know?

Our journey at February 2024

Adoption Activity 2023/24 Cumulative



- There is a consistent focus on ensuring the Child Permanence Report is completed to a high quality, with consistent practice guidance and oversight from the Adoption Advisor
- Training workshops with the RAA are delivered on a regular basis.

- There is increasing evidence of consideration of adoption where appropriate.
- Adoption activity was slower at the start of the year partly due to staffing issues.
- Adoption activity has increased through the year, and as of February 2024, 29 ADM decisions for adoption have been made. 14 of these children to date have achieved permanence with their adoption order being finalised. For some children it takes more time to identify suitable matches, which the RAA is working hard to address.



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Quality Assurance

Permanency planning is a key consideration in our monthly practice learning audits.

The findings during Q3 2023-2024 show:

There was a marked drop in the proportion of files graded 'inadequate' for permanency, from 10% to 3% which is very positive, although there was also a small drop in files graded 'good, from 54% to 52%.

Overall, this is an area of relatively strong practice, with a good level of improvement from Q1 to Q3, including outstanding gradings in this area.

- Young people living independently received good help, and there were examples of children being given good information about why decisions had been made for them.
- Children are being supported to live with their families where that can be managed safely.
- Permanency planning meetings are not yet being held as required by our procedures, expectations are reinforced in the revised Practice Standards which were completed in December.



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Quality Assurance



In Quarter 4 2023/24 the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance has undertaken 1:1 Practice Audits with each Independent Reviewing Officer, looking at an example of a child where they have made a difference in their permanence plan.

The assurance work evidenced that the IRO use of Quality Assurance checks, Progress Reviews and Dispute Resolution is effective in preventing and challenging delay for children.

On average, over the last 6 months, 92 Progress Reviews have been completed each month.

IROs regularly review the application of Practice Standards such as visit frequency, permanency planning meetings and supervision which are all effective in avoiding drift and delay.



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Training

- Permanency Training continues to be offered as a core training element for all qualified Social Workers.
- As at December 2023 81 members of staff had either completed or were booked to complete the training (from a total of 119 required staff), this is 60% completion, a slight increase on 59% in the previous quarter.
- Reunification Training with Hertfordshire is taking place during March 2024 for all Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers.



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Practice Guidance



- In Q3 Permanency Guidance was updated and shared across the workforce with focused presentations to the Team Manager forum and within the Principal Social Workers practitioner session with Social Workers.
- The Practice Standards were also substantially revised with a whole directorate approach and formally launched in January 2024.
- The Practice Framework demonstrates our commitment to achieving permanence, alongside reviewing permanence plans to revisit if there are viable family options. Steps to achieve this would include bringing children closer to Dudley (in placements) or being creative about Family Time arrangements to improve family connections.



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Staffing

- In September 2023 there was investment in the Foster Home review service with an additional 0.5 post. There are now 1.5 FTE Foster Home Reviewing Officers – this has increased capacity and resilience in the service.
- Quality assurance work was undertaken with audits of 16% of Foster Home Reviews which provided encouraging feedback, with a benchmark of quality to improve on. The Service Managers for Fostering and Safeguarding and Review work closely together on the recommendations and service action plan.
- Principal Social Worker is named deputy for Adoption ADM and Fostering ADM to create resilience in service and avoid delays at panel.
- SW Workforce data – reduction in turnover rates to 17%, caseloads have reduced, to 17.7. This increases stability in relationships with our children, our Social Workers ‘know their children well’ which means the right permanence option can be identified.



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Fostering Staffing

Fostering has moved from a position of high vacancies to a fully staffed team as of summer 2023.

There has been a focus on four main areas:

- Matching
- SGO conversions
- Foster carer reviews
- Foster carer support

This has included:

- Development of a Foster Carer Association, and working in partnership with the foster carers to increase support.
- Development of a resource support team, who are developing links with SGO carers and who are reviewing support plans annually.



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Next Steps:

- Reunification workshops with Herts
- PSW session with Services on Permanence – Aspirational planning
- Improve data reporting for permanence planning meetings



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Questions and reflections...



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