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**Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board - 18<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

**Permanence Activity Report**

**Purpose**

1. This report is to provide the Corporate Parenting Board with an annual report that outlines the activity of the service, in relation to achieving permanence for children in the care of the Local Authority. The report will provide updates in relation to performance measures relating to permanence and the wider practice development approaches with employees responsible for achieving permanence in a timely way for children.

**Recommendation**

2. The Corporate Parenting Board is recommended to:
  - Utilise this report to inform strategic planning for Dudley Children and Young people in Care population.

**Background**

3. Achieving timely permanence arrangements for the children in our care is a priority for Dudley Children's Services. This area of work was identified as requiring improvement in previous Ofsted inspections. There has been a coordinate approach across the Service to both improve reporting measures, but more importantly the practice approach in line with Restorative Practice. Permanence continues to be an area of development and reporting to the Corporate Parenting Board will ensure oversight of the actions taken.

**Finance**

4. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **Law**

5. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.

## **Risk Management**

6. There are no risks directly arising from the report.

## **Equality Impact**

7. The Annual report recognises issues of equality for Children who are in our care and their individual right to achieve permanence in their care arrangements in a timely way.

## **Human Resources/Organisational Development**

8. There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

## **Commercial/Procurement**

9. There is no impact to trade or procurement arising from this report.

## **Environment/Climate Change**

10. Dudley Council has declared a Climate Emergency and is committed to work to address Climate Change and achieve the Net Zero target.

## **Council Priorities**

11. The contents of the report relate to the key council priorities outlined within the Children's Services directorate plan.



**Catherine Driscoll**  
**Director of Childrens Services**

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## **Appendices**

Power point presentation

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<b>Report title</b>	Achieving Permanence
<b>Originating service</b>	Safeguarding and Review
<b>Accountable employee(s)</b>	Nicola Hale Head of Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance <a href="mailto:nicola.hale@dudley.gov.uk">nicola.hale@dudley.gov.uk</a>

1. As at February 2024, it is possible to evidence the impact of practice improvement in the following ways:
  - 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 which has improved this measure
  - Our children are less likely to experience sequential *placement moves*, remaining with their foster families for longer, and therefore developing attachments and connections to people they trust
  - 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. This enables children to feel secure in their care arrangements and reduces the intrusion of statutory intervention.
  - Where the plan might be for permanence outside of the family, such as Adoption, there is greater attention to progressing the decision to the Agency Decision Maker in a timely way which in turn reduces any potential delays within Court proceedings. 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 our Partners in Practice is 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.
2. There is a firmer grip on reporting measures which ensure we know that the practice developments are making an impact. As at February 2024 there was a review of the Permanency Planning meeting activity with data drawn directly from the children's file recording system, LCS. This review demonstrated:
- 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).
  - 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)
  - This data demonstrates that Managers increasingly have an understanding of the requirement and purpose of using Permanency Planning Meetings to track actions for individual children's Care Plan.

In February 2024 there was also a review undertaken of all of the children who came into our care during 2023, alongside the number of children who left our care. This analysis showed that whilst the largest number of children leaving our care was due to them turning 18 and reaching adulthood, the next largest cohort (39 children) left our care because they returned to their parents or family, which demonstrates a solid application of our Practice Framework principles to reduce statutory intervention with families and enable children to be at home and in their communities, when safe to do so.

For the children who remain in our care who are pre-school age, they are all under Court Proceedings to determine their long-term permanence arrangement, which is appropriate for this age group of children, demonstrating a focus on making timely decisions about their care arrangements.

3. For our children in Fostering arrangements, the activity to formally match them to their cares continues to be a priority area of work. There has been a reduction in the number of children achieving permanence in Fostering matching in the last 3 years, partly due to staffing challenges within the Fostering service. As at February 2024 there had however already been 22 matches achieved which is over double the amount from the previous year and therefore demonstrates that momentum has been achieved.
4. There has been a reduction in Special Guardianship Orders achieved over the last 3 years which is partly due to a higher number being secured during the year the no detriment policy was introduced. This year, to date, 16 children have achieved permanence through SGO and a number of further assessments are in progress. There is a system of tracking processes in place to ensure children that would benefit from SGO arrangements are secured in a timely way.
5. In relation to Adoption arrangements there has been a focus on practice development with training secured with the Regional Adoption Agency and the oversight from the Adoption Advisor within the Local Authority has enabled consistency in the quality of the Child Permanence Reports. Adoption activity has increased through the year and to date 29 ADM decisions have been made for children, with 14 children already having their Adoption order finalised. It is always the case that for some children, identifying suitable adopters will take longer, but the Independent Review, and Permanency Planning Meeting structure allows a tight grip and oversight of the plan.
6. 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.

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.

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 by the Independent Reviewing Officers.

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, and will challenge the Local Authority when the permanence activity has not been conducted as expected.

7. Practice development around achieving permanence continues to be a priority for our Social Workers. 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 (our Partners in Practice) is taking place during March- April 2024 for all Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers.

8. 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.

9. Staffing is closely linked to the practice application and success in achieving permanence for children. Across the service there has been an improvement in securing permanent Service and Team Managers and an increase in permanent Social Workers. There has been a 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.

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.

The Fostering service 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.

10. The work to improve permanence arrangements and the achievement of timely permanence for children continues. The following actions are identified for the purpose of this report, however permanence is a focus within every Service Plan across Social Care with individual Team/Service focus to contribute to the overall aim.

Next Steps:

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

\*\*\*\*End of Report\*\*\*\*