



St Helens Permanence Policy and Guidance

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Introduction

This document confirms the commitment by St Helens Council to the Children We Look After and aims to ensure that all colleagues working with our children and young people have a secure and stable home life which supports them into adulthood.

The policy contributes to the St Helens Council priorities to ensure we create safe and strong communities for all.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the St Helens pre-proceedings and PLO guidance which provides an overview of the procedural aspects of social work practice for children and young people who we look after.

The policy below details the principles behind permanence for children and young people and explains the options available for social workers to pursue, in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for the children and young people and families they are working with.

1. Permanence Policy Statement:

St Helens defines "Permanence" 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.

Permanence planning is based on the philosophy that every child has the right to a permanent, safe, stable and loving home, preferably within their own family.

Permanence does not necessarily mean a placement outside of the family and we are committed to ensuring that all family options have been fully explored before considering a placement outside of the immediate or extended family or network.

The question "How is the child's need for permanence being met?" is at the core of all social work practice with families. This will ensure the child's need for a loving, safe, stable home is always at the centre of all practitioners thinking and intervention.

The primary focus of permanence planning is to ensure all our children achieve the maximum potential they can, facilitated by a cohesive and multi agency team of carers and professionals who share the same vision and ambition.

As corporate parents for children and young people we look after, St Helens will work to find permanent, safe homes for our children that meet their specific needs, in a timely manner.

The best possible care involves giving children security, stability and love through their childhood and beyond to ensure the best outcomes as they become adults.

2. Definition

A Permanence plan 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 ensures a framework of emotional, physical, and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.

3. Principles

There are several principles that underpin permanence planning for a child or young person. The objective of the plan for permanence is to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support

It is 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 live with foster carers 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. Residential Care is a positive option for some young people and should not be viewed as a "last resort".

St Helens will always 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 to remain with their birth parents, 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 their 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 Network meeting and/or Family Group Conference;
- Security: A feeling of security and being loved as a permanent member of a family or care setting;
- Stability: The child expects the placement to continue, offer consistency and be stable;
- Voice: The child's wishes and feelings along with her/his age and understanding must be considered in planning for permanence. Where the wishes and feelings of the child do not correspond to the assessed needs and plan for the child, the child will always have access to an advocate and the oversight of the Independent Reviewing Officer.
- Identity: Where possible, be consistent with or fully able to support their identity, ethnicity, language, religion and culture.
- Life story: The child is aware of their birth family and history and their parents are encouraged and supported to provide information about themselves and about the child's birth and early life. The professionals involved need to support children and young people to understand their origins and their life journey to date with life story work and later life letter (in the case of adoption)..
- 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 adults. Consideration must also be given to the Life Long Links project which can further enhance the child's sense of belonging

- **Family Time:** The child has positive on-going contact with parent(s), family and friends where appropriate. The purpose of the contact should be clearly defined in the child's plan and meet the child's needs;
- **Siblings:** 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:** the child should have stability in educational provision and training; and carers will have high aspirations for what they wish the child to achieve;
- **Self-confidence:** Positive engagement in sports, hobbies and interests in order to promote their resilience and build self-confidence;
- **Independence:** The child is assisted and supported into independence when s/he chooses, and this is safe and appropriate;
- **Staying Put:** the child feels a sense of belonging to their carer's as (s)he moves into adolescence and adulthood; belonging does not end at the age of 18 years;
- **Timeliness:** Decision-making must be within the child's time scales 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 Looked After Child Review
- **Review:** where a child remains looked after in care then care planning should be subject to continuous assessment and review with effective management oversight.

4. Delivering Permanence

Which route to permanence, for which child, will depend on interacting factors which are likely to determine where the child should live and what role their family can play in the child's life now and in the longer term. These include:

- The child's family and kinship network, the potential risks and protection they offer, their capacity for change and repair
- The child, their age, developmental needs, impact of trauma and harm, their identity, and the quality of their relationships with their family including parents and siblings
- The availability and capacity of the wider family and network.

The ability to secure permanence for any child will require robust planning and monitoring to ensure assessments are completed at the earliest opportunity to inform the final care plan. Permanence planning is scrutinised by the Permanence Panel which considers the circumstances for all children we look after to ensure progress.

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

- High quality and timely assessments of a child's needs;
- Any assessment of the child/young person's experience will always refer to the factors outlined in the principles as outlined above. This will help to ensure appropriate planning and the focus of practice to best help the child/young person achieve as strong a sense of permanence as possible;
- Clear plans; with identifiable outcomes, service provision and actions to meet those needs;
- Multi-agency commitment and effective joint working processes to ensure that the services necessary to support children in permanent family placements and /or prevent their breakdown are prioritised and delivered;
- Where there are concerns that a child may not be able to remain with their birth parents without statutory intervention a family group conference will be held at the earliest opportunity to fully explore the options for the child to remain safely within the extended family and friends" network;
- Robust case reviewing arrangements for the early identification of the need for permanent arrangements and to prevent drift;
- The opportunity for the voice of the child to be heard and evidenced in the plan and to include their views and feelings; depending on the age of the child they will be given some choice re placement options as far as is possible particularly to ensure they can maintain school placements and their friendships.
- Effective communication pathways to ensure that family, carers and other individuals that the child considers to be an important part of their life can express their needs and feelings and are aware of the plans for the child and their role in these plans where appropriate.
- Multi-agency planning and support around the child or young person's education or training, in order to ensure stability within their learning journey and the ability to achieve the best possible outcomes.
- Policies and services that support all children placed within the range of permanence options;
- A Permanence Planning Meeting will consider and develop plans prior to the four-month review to detail the final care plan. This meeting will be chaired by a Team Manager and attended by relevant partners and colleagues. It will consider all assessments required to agree the formulation of the care plan. This is particularly important where there are complex issues e.g. a sibling group and/or where children and young people have complex and challenging needs.

5. Permanence Planning - must include the following:

- A timetable for introducing the child to the placement that ensures that both child and carers have a mutual understanding and commitment to the move;
- If the plan is for a children's home, full due diligence on the provision is required and then evaluated to ensure the team can meet the desired aims, objectives and outcomes for our child;
- Placement planning meeting to ensure carers are fully aware of all the child's needs and specific issues.
- Plans for Life Story Work and more specific therapeutic work to take place during the planning for the placement before and after the child has moved into placement.
- Life Story Work is not a one-off event and must be undertaken when it is an appropriate time for the child and information collated by social workers from the commencement of any alternative arrangement. It should continue throughout the child's childhood if they remain in a permanent or long-term placement, whether this is residential or a family placement;
- Arrangements for Family Time, if appropriate, that are based on the needs of the child and with the priority of achieving stability and permanence in their lives. In addition, social work teams should consider a referral to the Life Long Links service.

6. Permanence Options

There are various options to consider in care planning for permanence for a child who we are looking after. Achieving each type of permanence will present different challenges for all parties. It will depend upon:

- The capacity of the parents/carer to understand and meet the needs of the child;
- The level of attachment the child experiences with their parent/carer;
- The quality of the intervention and support provided by professionals working with the child and their family;
- The level of co-operation of all involved in the permanence planning.

Consideration needs to be given to the degree of control granted to the caregiver and the degree in which parental responsibility is apportioned or delegated. The options also affect the support and the type of support carers can expect from St Helens Borough Council in the longer term.

6.1 Reunification/Staying at Home

6.2 Placements with Family and Friends Carers

6.3 Early Permanence Placements / Fostering for Adoption

6.4 Special Guardianship (SGO)

6.5 Child Arrangements Orders (CAO)

6.6 Permanence in Foster Care & in Long Term Foster Care

6.7 Long Term Residential Care

6.8 Adoption

The following provides a summary of each permanence option and information about the relevant support, financial support, and available legal orders regarding each option.

6.1 Reunification/Staying at Home: The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning and Placement & Care Review (2015)

a. Staying at home offers the best chance of stability for children and efforts in working with the parent(s) and family about care arrangements for the child is the first line of approach if there is no risk of significant harm to the child(ren);

b. Where a child(ren) cannot remain safely at home and intervention is necessary which means that the child(ren) is received into care then the focus of family work should be on reunification where this is safe to do so;

c. Any plan to rehabilitate the child to the birth parents or other family members will be pursued with some urgency to minimise the length of the separation of child and parents / carers but only where it is safe to do so. For reunification to be successful several factors are relevant to achieve a safe and appropriate return of children home:

- Thorough multi-agency assessments;
- Good support identified from extended network of family and/or friends including the use of a Family Network Meeting or Family Group Conference;
- Clear written expectations have been set for the parent(s) to meet before the child could return home and within what timescales;
- The views of the child/young person are central and social workers must ensure they are involved and spoken to throughout any period of change;
- Problems which led to the admission to care have been addressed;
- Return to other parent or parent has a new partner who makes a difference;
- Appropriate support/safety plan is in place and any specialist support has been provided and parents engage with this;
- There is effective preparation of parent(s) and child(ren), including life story work;
- Effective monitoring of the child(ren) before and after return.
- Appropriate Senior Manager approval to any reunification or placement with parents and family or friends;

d. If a child is subject to care proceedings and the assessment work indicates that reunification should be attempted, then:

- Wherever possible, time within the care proceedings should be used for this;
- Placement with Parent Regulations should be used to support placement at home with parent(s) if the child is subject to interim or final Care Orders. Senior Management approval is required.
- If, at the final hearing in the care proceedings, it is proposed that the plan for permanence should be for the child(ren) to live with a parent or parents then proportionate use of the court orders available should be used, including use of a Supervision Order or no order where safe and appropriate to do so;
- Arrangements are in place to provide multi-agency support to the parent(s) and child(ren) through a clear and appropriate support plan;
- As part of a step-down approach the plan and support should be reviewed and chaired by the Team Manager for at least a 3-month period;
- The CAFCASS officer and the Independent Reviewing Officer should be kept informed at all key points about planning for the child or any changes / significant events. e.g. It will be necessary to ensure that there is Twin Track or Parallel Planning alongside efforts in reunification so that alternatives for care, e.g. possible solutions provided through the Family Group Conference or alternative placement options are also considered and clear contingency plans are in place. Support available to enable this permanence option:
 - A clearly written support plan including support from within the family - this is multi-agency support identified through a Child in Need plan;
 - St Helens has the discretion to provide support on a one-off or regular basis under section 17 Children Act 1989 - Children in Need of support. Available legal orders to support this permanence option:
 - Supervision Order;
 - Family Assistance Order
 - Section 8 Order Children Act 1989.

For further information please see:

Reunification – An Evidence Informed Framework for Return Home Practice (NSPCC, 2015)

6.2 Placements with Kinship Carers/Family and Friends Carers

When a child cannot safely return to their birth parents, every effort must be made to seek a placement with relatives or friends. It is important to establish at the earliest possible stage of a child coming into care which relatives or friends might be available to care for the child to prevent delay. The use of genograms and ecomaps to assist the family identify possible carers must be used as part of any assessment.

A Family Network Meeting or Family Group Conference should always happen prior to a child entering care unless there is an immediate risk of harm to the child/young person.

Good quality assessments of family and friends carers need to be completed to assess the quality of the care to be provided as this leads to better outcomes for children. Placements need to be well supported as family and friends carers may be older, have poorer health and must manage difficult relationships within the family because of caring for the child/young person.

Ideally placements within the extended family or with friends should be supported by a Child Arrangements Order or a Special Guardianship Order (see 6.4 below) or through adoption rather than a Care Order. A Supervision Order may assist family and friends carers in feeling supported during the first year of a placement in more complex circumstances, rather than the child remaining on a Care Order.

11 Support available to enable this permanence option:

- A clear support plan including support from within the extended family network; A range of multi-agency support as outlined in the Connected Carers Policy ;
- St Helens has the discretion to provide support on a one-off or regular basis under section 17 Children Act 1989 - Children in Need of support;
- Special Guardianship Order payments;
- Child Arrangement Order payments;

Available legal orders to support this permanence option:

- Child Arrangements Order
- Special Guardianship Order
- Supervision Order
- Adoption Order

6.3 Early Permanence Placements / Fostering to Adoption

The Children and Families Act 2014 imposes a duty to consider placements with carers who are approved as both adopters and foster carers if the plan for a child is adoption- see Fostering to Adopt Procedure.

Fostering to Adopt placements enable the child to remain in one placement where they can develop strong attachments with primary carers whilst care proceedings are progressing. It is anticipated to reduce placement moves for the child in adoption processes.

Foster to Adopt carers will be specifically recruited, assessed, and approved for this role. They will require a level of resilience and will be supported throughout this process by the dedicated Fostering/Adoption Social Worker.

Social Workers have a duty to consider a Foster to Adopt placement where consideration is being made for an unborn child or infant to be separated from birth parents, where all assessments have ruled out a return to family members and where it is believed there will be a high likelihood of a plan of adoption being the final determination.

However, it is not appropriate for all cases therefore discussion should take place at the Legal Gateway Panel and legal advice sought. Birth parents must be informed and IRO and CAFCASS consulted.

6.4 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)

Special Guardianship provides an alternative legal status for children, and provides greater security than long term fostering, but without the absolute legal severance from the birth family that an Adoption Order provides. It is a legal route to permanence for children for whom adoption is not appropriate and in general are remaining within the extended family network of family and friends.

The Special Guardian will have parental responsibility for the child and may exercise this to the exclusion of all others with parental responsibility, apart from another Special Guardian. There are exceptions to the decisions a Special Guardian can make, for instance they cannot change the child's surname or take them out of the country without the permission of the court for more than 28 days or the agreement of all people with parental responsibility.

The birth parents also retain the right to consent or not to adoption by the Special Guardian. Special Guardians may be supported, including financially, by St Helens and will have the right to request an assessment for support services.

It is St Helens responsibility to assess this for 3 years following the making of the Order, if the child or young person lives outside of St Helens because of the decisions made by the Court. After this time, the Local Authority where the child or young person lives, should be approached for them to consider any support needed.

The level and extent of support needed should be established by undertaking a formal assessment at the point of the completion of the court report.

Support available to enable this permanence option:

- A clear multi-agency support plan

In St Helens most Special Guardians are kinship carers. The complexity of these arrangements regarding contact and support needs require close attention to detail to ensure that special guardians are equipped to meet the on-going needs of the children or young person.

Available legal orders to support this permanence option:

- Special Guardianship Order
- Supervision Order may be made by the court if there are concerns regarding ongoing support and services. A robust and clear support plan for an SGO will negate the need for this
- Section 8 Orders

6.5 Child Arrangements Orders

Child Arrangements Orders were introduced in April 2014 by the Children and Families Act 2014. They replace Contact Orders and Residence Orders.

A Child Arrangements Order is a court order regulating arrangements relating to any of the following:

- a. With whom a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact; and
- b. When a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact with any person The 'residence' aspects of a Child Arrangements Order can last until the child reaches 18 years unless discharged earlier by the Court or by the making of a Care Order.

The contact aspects of a Child Arrangements Order cease to have effect when the child reaches 16 years, unless the court is satisfied that the circumstances of the case are exceptional.

A person named in the order as a person with whom the child is to live, will have Parental Responsibility for the child while the order remains in force.

Child Arrangements Orders are private law orders and cannot be made in favour of Local Authorities

Interim Child Arrangements Orders can be made 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 Orders where this will be in the best interests of the child.

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

The following can apply for a Child Arrangements Order without needing the leave of the court. In addition, any person who is not automatically entitled to apply for a Child Arrangements Order may seek leave of the court to do so:

- Any parent (whether or not they have Parental Responsibility for the child), guardian or special guardian of the child;
- Any person named in a Child Arrangements Order that is in force with respect to the child, as a person with whom the child is to live;
- Any party to a marriage (whether or not subsisting) in relation to whom the child is a child of the family - this allows step-parents (including those in a civil partnership) and former step-parents who fulfil this criterion to apply as of right 14 ;
- Any person with whom the child has lived for a period of at least three years - this period need not be continuous but must not have begun more than five years before, or ended more than three months before, the making of the application; or
- Any person who has the consent of each of the persons is named in a Child Arrangements Order as a person with whom the child is to live;
- A St Helens foster parent is entitled to apply for a Child Arrangements Order relating to whom the child is to live, and/or when the child is to live with any person, if the child has lived with him/her for a period of at least one year immediately preceding the application;
- A relative of a child is entitled to apply for a Child Arrangements Order relating to whom the child is to live, and/or when the child is to live with any person, if the child has lived with the relative for a period of at least one year immediately preceding the application. (A relative is a child's grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt (by full or half-blood), or by marriage or civil partnership).

A Child Arrangements Order specifying with whom the child is to live has the following advantages:

- a. It gives Parental Responsibility to the carer whilst maintaining the parents' Parental Responsibility
- b. The child will no longer be Looked After and there need be no social work involvement, therefore, unless this is identified as necessary
- c. There is no review process
- d. The child will not be Looked After and so less stigma is attached to the placement

6.6 Permanence through Long-Term Foster Care

For those children and young people who remain looked after, an important route to permanence is long term foster care.

A long-term foster placement is where a child's fostering home is deemed suitable to meet their needs until they reach 18 or beyond, including Staying Put arrangements.

This is particularly appropriate for those children who have strong links to their birth family and network.

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

- St Helens retains a role in negotiating issues between the birth family and the child.
- The child / young person and the foster carers are provided with continued support in a family placement that is continually 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 child's life and any decision making around a child / young person's care.

Support available to enable this permanence option:

- A clear plan of support should be outlined in the child / young person's care plan. This should be reviewed regularly at Looked after Reviews;
- The foster carer(s) has an allocated supervising social worker from the Fostering Service and will have access to a range of training and support;
- Weekly financial support to meet the costs of caring for the child / young person, including a Professional Fee for the foster carer;
- For those children and young people placed with external Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) the costs and support to the child / young person's placement are agreed between the external IFA and St Helens

Available legal orders to support this permanence option:

- o Care Order
- o Section 20 with parental agreement to a Care Plan of Long-Term Foster Care

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 able to live in the area they view as local wherever possible.

Any decision to place a child away from their community should be based on the particular needs of the child, and the rationale clearly set out in their Care Plan.

Where an alternative family placement is sought in the area of another local authority, the likely impact for our child, in terms of access to suitable local resources to support them must be explored. In the case of an adoptive placement, this will be required as part of the assessment of need for adoption support but should be carried out in relation to any permanent placement.

6.7 Long Term living in a Children's Home

For most children , time living in a Children's home should be identified in their care plan as a short term transition with the aim of preparing, enabling and supporting the child to return to live in a family setting. Long term arrangements can be a positive option for some of our children and may better meet their needs, following assessment.

The needs of older children and young people must be considered in relation to achieving permanence in their lives. Some of our young people may not be able to live with birth parents, nor wish to be in a foster home but prefer to live in a children's home. However, the care planning process must identify adults such as wider family and friends or other connected people who can provide a long term trusting relationship and emotional support and which will provide continuing support, particularly during periods of transition.

Research states that good quality work with families can help the young person build bridges back to their parents or other family members who may be able to provide that support even though it is not possible for the young person to live at home for a period of time.

It is essential to support young people to make the transition towards independence with the provision of high quality leaving care support.

6.8 Adoption.

In many cases where a child cannot safely be cared for by their birth parents the care plan is one of adoption. St Helens is committed to adoption as a legal and emotional permanence option which can be considered for all children.

Research strongly supports adoption as a primary consideration and as a main factor contributing to the stability of children and which promotes good outcomes. Adoption transfers Parental Responsibility for the child from the birth parents and others who had Parental Responsibility, including St Helens, 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 and the child takes on the surname of the adoptive parent. The child's birth certificate is changed following the making of an adoption order to an adoption certificate showing the adopter(s) to be the child's parent(s).

Adopters may be supported, including financially, by St Helens and will have the right to request an assessment for support services, up to 3 years after the Order is made.

The expectation is that family time is maintained with brothers and sisters placed separately and some form of family time will be maintained with the birth family throughout the child's life depending on the circumstances. Research indicates that openness in adoption is key in adoptive placements and offers continuity when family time with the birth family is not possible.

Family finding should begin as soon as adoption is under consideration as part of twin tracking for a child, subject to the required legal permissions and following the making of a Placement Order.

For children who may be more difficult to place the Adoption Service will commence looking at all available possibilities to reduce unnecessary delay for the child.

Support available to enable this permanence option:

- A clear adoption support plan

Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and a comprehensive support service will be provided in partnership with other agencies. 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.

Available legal orders to support this permanence option:

- Care and Placement Order
- Adoption Order

7. Permanence Outcomes and Twin Track or Parallel Planning

The emphasis on early consideration of permanence plans and avoidance of drift has led to the development of twin track or parallel planning for children, where efforts are made to rehabilitate but the necessary information is gathered ready to put in place an alternative plan e.g., adoption, if this proves impossible.

Social Workers are expected to work to this model; working towards a child's return home where appropriate, 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 or parallel planning to be reflected in the Care Plan.

8. Good Practice Guidance

The following practice guidance is not exhaustive.

8.1 Supporting reunification with birth or extended family

- The importance of clearly communicating with 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 Network Meetings and Family Group Conferences as an effective way of facilitating both of the above
- Thorough multi-agency assessments;
- The views of the child/young person are central and social workers must ensure they are involved and spoken to throughout any period of change

8.2 Identifying the best permanence option

The care 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 home where they live, helping the relationship between carer and child to build, making thorough plans around family time with their birth 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 or permanence in foster care
- The larger the family group of children, the harder it is to secure a single home that will meet all the needs of all the children
- Where a child has had several homes, within the family or within any looked after arrangements, their trust in permanence will be reduced and therefore all trusted adults will need to work even harder to regain that
- These detailed considerations in relation to permanence options must be the subject of discussion within the Permanence Planning Meeting Chaired by the Team Manager, prior to the final care plan being ratified at a Statutory Review, and overseen by the Permanence Panel which is chaired at Head of Service level.
- It is important that the needs of each child are specifically considered and assessed

All decisions must be explained to the children in appropriate terms and they will be made aware of their rights.

8.3 Family Time with siblings - Issues to Consider

Wherever it is in the best interests of each individual child, siblings should live together. 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 work against achieving this; 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. 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, are therefore key to informing these judgements.

There are often some practical steps that can be taken to overcome some of the logistical reasons for being unable to place sibling groups together. Where siblings living together in foster homes may be separated when one turns 18, consideration must 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 for children to live together and children should be supported to understand this. A sibling assessment must be undertaken to inform appropriate decision making which can be explained to children and young people. In these circumstances where it is in the best interests of each individual child, sibling family time should be promoted and maintained.

Where the plan is for adoption, 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 they are 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).

8.4 Family Time with birth family members and others

Family Time must always be for the benefit of the child, not the parents or other relatives. This may be direct or indirect and is more likely to succeed where parents and the child accept the care plan.

The purpose of family time is:

- To maintain a child's identity and relationship with the parents/family - 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 a sense of emotional permission to live with the adoptive/foster family
- To minimise the sense of loss

Time for the child(ren) with their birth family must be negotiated as part of the Permanence Plan, a formal agreement setting out how this will take place, who with, where and how frequently must be negotiated before placement, and reviewed regularly throughout the child's life.

8.5 Clearly communicating the Permanence Plan

- The social worker must ensure that the child's care plan is discussed with parents throughout the time that their child is looked after particularly prior to and after each looked after review.

- All children should know their plan and have these shared with them. Social Workers should develop appropriate ways to communicate the plan to the child which includes words and pictures, photos, video, profiles of foster carers, adopters, and family books