

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Early Permanence

**REPORT OF:** Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Early permanence is an umbrella term which includes both Fostering for Adoption and Concurrent Planning. Both schemes enable the local authority to ensure that permanent care arrangements are secured for the child as quickly as possible. Fostering for Adoption enables the local authority to find foster parents for children who are willing to adopt them later if the courts decide they cannot return to live with their birth family. It is aimed at helping babies whose birth families are still being assessed as to whether they can look after their baby or not.

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### **Background**

1. Early Permanence Planning for children who can no longer live with their parents is crucial if the local authority is to avoid delay in achieving stable and permanent care arrangements for the children in their care.
2. This report describes the Early Permanence process and the arrangements Gateshead's Children and Families Service has in place, to ensure children are not waiting unnecessarily for planning processes and court agreements to be complete before they are placed in their permanent placements.

### **Policy Context**

- 1989 Children Act
- Public Law Outline (2014)
- Children & Families Act (2014)

### **Adopt North East Early Permanence Project**

3. The Adopt North East Early Permanence Project is a DfE funded Practice Improvement Project, initiated in March 2018 and scheduled to complete its work in October 2019. The purpose of the project is to develop a framework for early permanency planning for children in the Regional Adoption Agency, 'Adopt North East' region by building on cross-sector expertise, sharing best practice and upskilling the workforce. The objective is to provide timely high-quality adoptive placements and working collaboratively across the sector to

achieve excellence in practice through a range of partnership activities, including workshops, masterclasses and conferences. Alongside staff from voluntary organisations and other local authorities, Gateshead social workers and managers have attended events and have embraced the learning from the project.

4. A final conference will be held in Gateshead on 23rd September.

### **How does Early Permanence work?**

5. Local authorities refer babies about whom there is concern to the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt North East. If appropriate and agreed, Adopt North East places the babies with foster carers who have already been approved as adopters. This means they can go on to adopt the baby if the courts decide he or she cannot live with their birth family.
6. Early Permanence avoids the risk that the baby may be moved from foster carer to foster carer while the courts assess the birth family's ability to look after him or her. National data tells us that time taken from the baby being placed into local authority foster care to being placed with their adoptive family usually takes between six and 24 months. Once an order has been made in court which allows the child to be adopted (Placement Order) he or she can then be matched with adopters.
7. Appendix 1 shows that for children currently in the adoption process, in Gateshead the average time between a Placement Order being made and being matched with adopters is 4.28 months. From being placed in local authority care and being placed for adoption, excluding Foster to Adopt arrangements, children in Gateshead wait on average just over one year (355 days).
8. Under the Public Law Outline (2014) and the Children & Families Act 2014, guidance states that care proceedings should be completed within 26 weeks, to be sure that children are not being unduly kept waiting for their permanence plans to be legally agreed.
9. The local authority and Adopt North East will only place babies under Foster to Adopt or Early Permanence arrangements where, based on the available evidence and the birth family's history, there is a high probability that the court outcome will be adoption. This usually includes previous siblings being removed from the parent's care and no evidence of improvement in the circumstances of the birth family. Gateshead's Safeguarding and Care Planning Service has placed seven babies under the Foster to Adopt or Early Permanence arrangements in the last three years. All seven babies were adopted successfully following the period of fostering by their adopters.

### **Benefits of Early Permanence**

10. Because the foster carers with whom the baby is living have already been approved to adopt the baby it means there is a seamless transition from foster care to adoption.

11. Other advantages of Early Permanence are:
  - It speeds up the planning of babies' lives and avoids delay in deciding their future
  - It avoids the disruption of being moved from foster care to adoption
  - Bonding with the people who will eventually adopt him or her can begin right away – in many cases the baby is placed with the Early Permanence carers directly from the hospital where he or she was born
  - The foster carers who go on to adopt them will have had a chance to get to know the baby's birth parents during the court process. This means they will know all about the baby's background and the circumstances that led to him or her being placed in care
  - It strengthens the attachments between the child and their adopters and avoids disruption to attachment between the child and their foster carer.
12. For those children for whom Early Permanence placements are inadvisable because their specific family circumstances may mean that an outcome of adoption at court is uncertain, Gateshead Council has systems in place to ensure that children are placed with their adopters or in a permanent care arrangement as soon as possible. For unborn babies whose siblings have previously been removed from parents care because of safeguarding concerns, planning begins before the child has been born, initially by completing an Unborn Baby Assessment and acting upon the findings of that assessment.
13. For all children, if safeguarding concerns are so great that care outside that of their parents is necessary, a Legal Gateway Meeting will be held immediately, and legal proceedings will begin. Thereafter, a period of concurrent planning will begin. This means that parents and other family members or persons connected to the child will be assessed regarding their suitability to offer permanent care of the child. This will happen alongside a referral to Adopt North East and planning for possible adoption.
14. To avoid any unnecessary delay in securing a child's plan for permanence, the child's Independent Reviewing Officer will seek assurances about the permanence plan for the child at their second Looked After Review. This takes place no later than four months after the child has become looked after by the local authority.
15. An additional measure of quality assurance is the Early Permanence Panel, which is chaired by the Service Director for Children and Families. The panel is attended by Service Managers, Team Managers and local authority Lead Solicitor. A member of the performance team presents the relevant data regarding children who are in the care of the local authority on a voluntary basis (S20 of the 1989 Children Act). This means their parents have agreed that they be looked after by the local authority. The Panel will also scrutinise the length of time taken from first becoming looked after to being adopted. Additionally, the length of court proceedings is measured and the reason for any delays understood, so that, if possible, measures can be taken to avoid similar delay in the future. Often, however, time-tabling by the court builds in delay to children's plans so that they sometimes wait in local authority care longer than necessary and their permanence arrangements are delayed.

16. Following the assessments of parents and any other family members, firm plans for the long-term or permanent care of the child will be agreed. This will take place in a Decision-Making Meeting, that includes social workers, service and team managers and the local authority legal representative. The plans will either be for adoption, long-term fostering or placing a child with another family member through a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangements Order.

### **Recommendation**

17. It is requested that the Looked After Children Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of this report and raise any questions about the Early Permanence process if thought necessary.

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EXTENSION 3865



**APPENDIX 1**

Children currently in the Adoption Process June 2019

| <b>Child ID</b> | <b>Date of Birth</b> | <b>Disability</b> | <b>FFA?</b> | <b>Date Period of Care Started</b> | <b>Date of decision should be adopted</b> | <b>Placement Order Granted</b> | <b>Date Matched</b> | <b>Date placed in FFA placement</b> | <b>Date placed for adoption</b> |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| P240001         | 10/06/2012           | No                | No          | 18/04/2018                         | 07/02/2018                                | 30/07/2018                     | 16/04/2019          |                                     |                                 |
| P272721         | 13/02/2013           | No                | No          | 20/08/2015                         | 15/03/2016                                | 27/01/2017                     | 23/06/2017          |                                     | 10/07/2017                      |
| P273780         | 16/02/2013           | No                | No          | 23/03/2018                         | 18/12/2018                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P316342         | 23/12/2013           | No                | No          | 18/04/2018                         | 07/02/2018                                | 30/07/2018                     | 20/12/2018          |                                     | 16/01/2019                      |
| P393222         | 14/01/2013           | No                | No          | 05/03/2018                         | 03/07/2018                                | 17/08/2018                     | 20/12/2018          |                                     | 15/01/2019                      |
| P433522         | 08/10/2015           | No                | No          | 23/03/2018                         | 18/12/2018                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P433542         | 18/10/2014           | No                | No          | 23/03/2018                         | 18/12/2018                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P452762         | 15/04/2015           | No                | No          | 18/04/2018                         | 07/02/2018                                | 30/07/2018                     | 09/10/2018          |                                     | 05/11/2018                      |
| P475835         | 30/07/2016           | No                | No          | 13/11/2017                         | 24/04/2018                                | 03/10/2018                     | 25/02/2019          |                                     | 19/03/2019                      |
| P477170         | 21/05/2013           | Yes               | No          | 14/10/2016                         | 25/04/2017                                | 13/10/2017                     |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P494129         | 15/03/2017           | No                | No          | 08/06/2017                         | 19/09/2017                                | 16/08/2018                     |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P495631         | 02/08/2016           | No                | No          | 05/03/2018                         | 03/07/2018                                | 17/08/2018                     | 20/12/2018          |                                     | 15/01/2019                      |
| P497731         | 04/05/2017           | No                | No          | 06/09/2017                         | 19/12/2017                                | 16/07/2018                     | 26/03/2019          |                                     | 26/03/2019                      |
| P506353         | 21/08/2017           | No                | No          | 25/08/2017                         | 12/02/2018                                | 09/04/2018                     | 18/10/2018          |                                     | 06/11/2018                      |
| P509094         | 02/05/2017           | No                | No          | 28/06/2017                         | 31/05/2018                                | 31/05/2019                     |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P524113         | 19/01/2018           | No                | No          | 22/01/2018                         | 23/10/2018                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P524996         | 10/07/2017           | No                | No          | 29/08/2018                         | 02/04/2019                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P525874         | 15/06/2017           | No                | No          | 15/06/2017                         | 26/09/2017                                | 21/11/2017                     | 02/03/2018          |                                     | 09/03/2018                      |
| P534953         | 11/04/2018           | No                | No          | 12/04/2018                         | 22/01/2019                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P537852         | 12/02/2018           | No                | No          | 12/02/2018                         | 22/05/2018                                | 04/09/2018                     | 26/11/2018          |                                     | 06/12/2018                      |
| P540847         | 11/03/2018           | No                | No          | 19/03/2018                         | 16/05/2018                                | 23/01/2019                     | 03/05/2019          |                                     | 16/05/2019                      |
| P542587         | 30/06/2018           | No                | Yes         | 02/07/2018                         | 04/09/2018                                | 17/09/2018                     | 18/10/2018          | 02/07/2018                          | 18/10/2018                      |
| P548367         | 20/07/2018           | No                | No          | 08/08/2018                         | 05/11/2018                                | 14/12/2018                     | 26/03/2019          |                                     | 06/04/2019                      |
| P550792         | 21/06/2018           | No                | No          | 22/06/2018                         | 23/10/2018                                | 22/01/2019                     | 21/03/2019          |                                     | 21/03/2019                      |
| P553051         | 30/07/2018           | No                | Yes         | 01/08/2018                         | 02/10/2018                                | 20/03/2019                     | 17/05/2019          | 03/08/2018                          | 17/05/2019                      |
| P558186         | 10/10/2018           | No                | No          | 11/10/2018                         | 26/02/2019                                | 29/04/2019                     |                     |                                     |                                 |
| P562586         | 10/10/2018           | No                | No          | 11/10/2018                         | 18/12/2018                                | 11/02/2019                     | 21/03/2019          |                                     | 08/04/2019                      |
| P586868         | 25/02/2019           | No                | No          | 28/02/2019                         | 19/03/2019                                |                                |                     |                                     |                                 |

