

TITLE OF REPORT: Early Permanence Report 2020/2021

REPORT OF: Strategic Director, Children Adults and Families

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek the views of the Corporate Parenting Board on the attached report:

Background

2. The Local Authority are responsible for securing permanency for those children who, for reasons of their safety and welfare are unable to live within their birth families and whose needs are such that placement with foster carers, with a plan of adoption (early permanency) has been judged to be the best permanency option for those children.

Early Permanence Planning is crucial if the local authority is to avoid delay in achieving stable and permanent care arrangements for the children in their care. 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 Background:

- 1989 Children Act
- Adoption Acts 2002, 2014 and 2017
- Public Law Outline (2014)
- Children & Families Act (2014)

Proposal

3. It is proposed that the local authority continue to place suitably assessed children under early permanence arrangements.

Recommendations

4. The Corporate Parenting Board is asked to consider this report and make any recommendations for action as judged necessary.

Early Permanence

5. 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 at a later date 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.

How does Early Permanence work?

6. The local authority refers babies about whom there are concern regarding the care they may receive from their birth family to the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt North East. If appropriate and agreed, the local authority 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.

Early Permanence avoids the risk that the baby may be moved from foster carer to foster carer while the local authority and 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 twenty-four 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.

Under the Public Law Outline (2014) and the Children & Families Act 2014, guidance states that court 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.

Gateshead local authority and Adopt North East will only place babies under Foster to Adopt or Early Permanence arrangements when, based on the available evidence and the birth family's history, there is a high probability that the court decision for the child will be adoption. The evidence upon which social workers make their decision to recommend a foster-to adopt placement usually includes previous siblings being removed from the parent's care and subsequently no evidence of improvement in the circumstances of the birth family.

Benefits of Early Permanence

7. 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.

In the last 12 months (01/10/2020 – 30/09/2021) the average number of days between a child entering the care of the local authority and moving in with an adoptive family is 358.

It is clearly in the child's best interests to minimise the time spent waiting in foster care; Early Permanence eliminates the waiting period for children.

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 or from foster carer to foster carer.
- 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 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.

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.

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.

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.

An additional measure of quality assurance is the Early Permanence Panel, which is chaired by the Deputy Strategic Director for Children and Families. The panel is attended by Service Managers, Team Managers, and local authority Lead Solicitor. Relevant data regarding children who are in the care of the local authority and those who are the subjects of court proceedings is presented and individual cases are scrutinised.

The length of court proceedings and the reason for any delays understood so that, if possible, measures can be taken to avoid similar delay in the future. Sometimes, however, timetabling 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.

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.

Agreement for Early Permanence and all adoption plans are agreed by Deputy Strategic Director for Children and Families before recommendations about each child are made to the court.

Table 1 :

The number of Gateshead children placed in Early Permanence Placements during the year 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. Year- end total.

Year	Gateshead Children placed in Early Permanence Placements (Foster to Adopt)
2019/2020	4
2020/2021	9
Total	13

From 2016 until 2019, Gateshead's Safeguarding and Care Planning Service had placed seven babies under the Foster to Adopt or Early Permanence arrangements. All seven babies were adopted successfully following the period of fostering by their adopters.

Table 2:

The number of children placed in Early Permanence Placements during the year 2020/2021 by regional authority. Year-end total.

Year	Regional Authority	North East Children placed in Early Permanence Placements (Foster to Adopt)
2020/2021	Gateshead	9
	Newcastle	1
	North Tyneside	4
	Northumberland	1
	South Tyneside	4

As can be seen from the table above, Gateshead leading the region with regard to Early Permanence arrangements. All children placed for adoption under early permanence arrangements whose care proceedings have concluded have been successfully adopted. None have been reunified with parents.

Table 3:

Total number of children with a plan of adoption during the year 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. Year- end total.

Year	Gateshead Children with a plan of Adoption.
2019/2020	22
2020/2021	21
Total	43

Out of all the plans for adoption during 19/20 and 20/21, 13 out of 43 (30%) were early permanence placements.

Recommendation

8. It is requested that the Corporate Parenting Board note the contents of this report and raise any questions about the Early Permanence process if thought necessary.

