

Dorset Permanence Strategy 2021-2023



Dorset Council's Permanence Strategy 2021-2023

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1. Introduction

All children and young people should have the opportunity to thrive in their environment and home; to live with carers who love, support, care for and respect them and who will do so through their childhood into adolescence and adulthood.

We are committed to supporting our Children in Care to be happy and healthy, having the best start in life and being afforded every opportunity to reach their full potential. For children who are no longer able to remain with their birth family, research indicates that outcomes are significantly improved for children when they are in a safe, secure, stable environment where they feel cared for.

We are committed to ensuring that all children achieve permanence through a range of options including a return to birth parents or placement with extended family or friends. Where this is not appropriate or possible, we seek suitable permanent, family-based placements through foster to adopt, adoption, special guardianship, or long-term fostering. Where necessary, some young people will find permanence and security through good residential care. For all our children and young people, we seek permanent placements where they can achieve a sense of security, stability and belonging.

The Permanence Framework has three aspects as outlined in the Care Planning Guidance 2011.

1. Legal - Defining who has Parental Responsibility
2. Emotional or Physiological - The child feels attached to a care giver that provides a stable loving and secure relationship.
3. Physical and Environmental - The child has a stable secure home environment.

2. Our Core Principles

Dorset Children's Services are committed to a strengths-based restorative approach.

When developing our permanence plans the following principles are followed to achieve the best possible outcomes for children in our care:

- We will do our best to ensure that all children in our care grow up in stable and secure arrangements and are supported to safely leave care when appropriate
- All planning will start with the needs of the child
- We are ambitious for our children and young people and will help to overcome gaps in their early care and strive to achieve the standards that any parent would expect for their child
- Where it is safe to do so, the views, opinions, needs and priorities of children and young people in our care will inform everything we do.
- We will work with children and young people in our care, along with their parents and carers to shape their assessment, planning and services that support and care for them
- We will ensure that provision reflects a child's individual needs including age
- We will identify what needs to change in Dorset to make a real sustainable change to outcomes for all children and young people in our care.

3. Our Objectives

The primary purpose of permanence planning is to provide a safe, stable and secure home with a loving family, to support our children through childhood and to give them the best start in life and prepare them for adulthood.

When a child comes into our care, we will focus on seven key objectives in our planning:

- Family members and friends will always be considered in the first instance
- A child should only be in our care for as short a period necessary
- If it is safe to do so, we will put plans in place to support the child's return to their family
- Planning must always start early and be regularly reviewed

- Planning will always consider including multiple options for permanence with the primary plan clearly identified, so that in the event of a child not being able to return home, there is no drift in achieving permanence.
- Permanence should always be secured through the appropriate legal order to meet the child's needs.
- Young people may want to live independently and where the service assesses this to be suitable and this is part of the young person's transition plan to independence, then this may be supported.

4. How we will provide support

We believe in developing stable and trusting relationships with children, young people and families. The diagram below sets Dorset Children Thrive Practice Model.

We are committed to working from a strengths-based restorative approach in achieving permanence for our children and young people.

Here in Dorset we are passionate about building positive relationships with families. Our model is based on a strengths-based approach with restorative practice that will deliver positive impact and change and places children at the very heart of what we do.

Dorset Childrens Thrive Practice Model

Our Core Principles	Voice and Experience of Children and Young People
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Best start in life 2. Young and thriving 3. Good care provision 4. Best education for all 5. Delivering locally 6. Best place to live 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Children and young people are empowered to have their voices heard and their wishes and feelings understood. ♥ They will know and understand why we are involved and our role to support them. ♥ We will listen and respond to their views.
Our Commitment	Working with Families
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children and families receive the right support at the right time. 2. Keeping families together and, where this isn't possible, ensure children have the right permanence and forever home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Create and maintain trusting and respectful relationships ♥ Work with families, rather than doing to them, doing for them.

<p>3. Proportionate interventions that are focused on outcomes for the child</p> <p>4. Children in our care have loving and stable homes</p> <p>5. Children leaving our care will be supported to independence.</p>	<p>♥ Families are empowered to make decisions and shape solutions.</p> <p>♥ We will provide person-centred meetings and strengths-based conferences that enable the family to lead what needs to change for them.</p>
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5. What to consider when a child cannot remain at home

When the decision has been made that a child cannot remain at home, there are several options which we will consider which may take place alongside child protection planning.

5.1 Family Group Conferencing

We see the family as part of the solution and engage with families at the earliest opportunity. Family Group Conferences provide a child centred and family focused approach to build relationships and support networks. The Family Group Conference brings together members of the family to find their own solutions and formulate a family plan.

In Dorset, Daybreak is commissioned to provide Family Group Conferences. An independent coordinator helps the family prepare for the family group conference and children may be supported by an advocate. It is a voluntary process and we support FGC occurring before a child comes into our care. This supports families by providing a setting and framework to talking through concerns and to co-produce a solution.

5.2 Family finding process

In Dorset we seek to build or maintain a child's family support network by identifying relatives and other supportive adults who could provide permanence, sustainable relationships and support through the transition to adulthood and beyond. In developing Life Long Links children are connected to people who are important to them.

With a focus on children's safety and supporting families to create sustainable plans to meet their children long term permanence needs, we will always first consider whether a child could return home or remain with extended family members.

This could include:

- Finding a family member or friend who will care for the child if the child is unable to remain at home.

- Improving placement stability and the child's support network.
- Increases the child's sense of self and belonging.

The process operates on the principle that relatives are located and consulted regardless of where they live.

5.3 Identifying the Best Permanency Option

When deciding on a child's primary and contingency permanence plan, we will work with other multiagency professionals, children, and their families to understand the child's needs. As part of this process we will consider the factors below:

- The age of the child and their wishes and feelings
- Short-term stability – the quality of the child's attachments and the impact of uncertainty
- Long term stability- a permanent home with a sense of family, community, culture and continuity of relationships and identity.
- How children develop and maintain relationships with key family members and other appropriate adults (lifelong links)?
- Educational experiences, hobbies, and friendships.
- Understanding what a child wants and supporting the development of a relationship between the child and their carer to create a family environment.
- Possibility of finding permanence through adoption
- How will our child be supported to transition to adulthood?

5.4 Supporting Reunification with Birth or Extended family.

Dorset Council have developed a pathway for operational staff to follow should this be identified as an option in a child's permanence plan. Please see https://www.proceduresonline.com/dorset/cs/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Reunification%20Pathway%20Flowchart.pdf for the reunification pathway.

If reunification has been identified in a child's permanence plan and that they may be able to return to their family, it is important to

- Clearly communicate to the family what needs to happen to enable the child to return home and the timescales.
- Understand family ties and long – term relationships with the family, school, and the community
- Use of Family Group Conferencing and The Harbour (if 12-18 years old) to help facilitate the above.

5.5 Siblings

Sibling relationships are important and we will carefully consider how siblings will keep in touch as part of their individual permanence plans. We know that children are most likely to have more positive outcomes when they maintain their relationships with their siblings. However, in some instances we know that it can be difficult to place siblings together such as :

- Large sibling group
- Differing care entry times
- Differing needs relating to past experiences of trauma
- Significant age differences

Our children when not placed with their siblings will be supported in an age appropriate way to understand the reasons for this and keeping in touch arrangements between siblings will be a priority in our permanence planning when sibling keeping in touch is assessed as appropriate.

If there is a plan for Adoption, decisions about siblings being placed together or apart must be made at an early stage and based on a balanced assessment of the children's needs.

5.6 Keeping in Touch

When it is in their best interests, it is important that the child remains in contact with their family. This maintains their identity, gives reassurance, provides an on-going source of information, gives the child permission to live with alternative carers, minimises the sense of loss and assists adopters if the child is placed for adoption.

Direct contact works best when all parties agree to the following:

- The plan for permanence
- The parental role of the permanent carers
- The benefit of contact and all involved agree to the plan for keeping in contact

Direct family time is less likely to be effective if a parent

- Disagrees with the plan for permanence
- Does not accept the parental roles of the permanent carer
- Does not accept their own minimal role with the child
- Is unreliable in their commitment to contact
- Has no significant attachment to the family

5.7 Indirect family time

We recognise the development of technology has made indirect keeping in touch more accessible and reliable. This does not replace the need for direct family time where

assessed as appropriate. Indirect keeping in touch, as with direct keeping in touch, must be agreed by all parties with a clear plan to prevent confusion.

5.9 Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer (QARO)

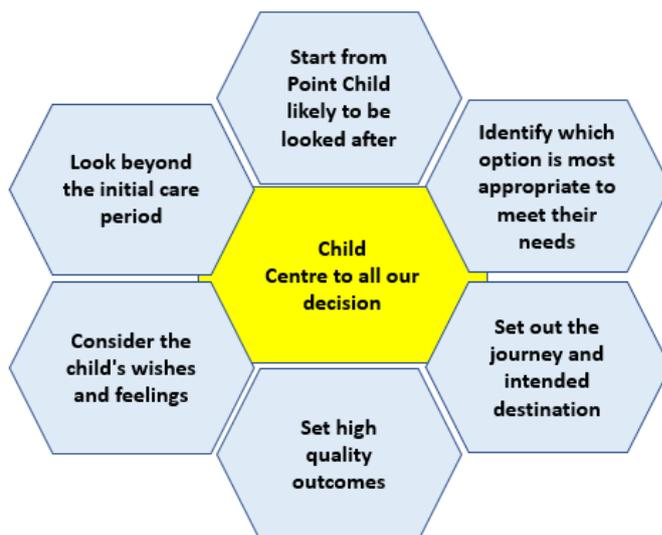
QARO are independent champions of our children in care and will look to ensure timely appropriate permanence is achieved for all children in care. We have developed the QARO role to ensure the child is center to decision making.

They will support the services to ensure timely actioning of process to ensure the right permanence is achieved for our children based on their individual needs. Ensuring our children and young people are provided with permanent homes that are nurturing, loving and stable whether from parents, foster carers, special guardians, or adopters.

To facilitate this the QARO must be satisfied by the second Child in Care Review that the child and their parents have been consulted and have been part of the creation of the permanence plan and any subsequent updates. The QARO should also have had the opportunity to comment on the plan. Where a single permanence plan cannot be agreed, a Twin or Multi track plan will be identified with clear timescales. The QARO has a statutory responsibility to monitor the child’s journey and ensure there is no drift or delay in implementing the plan and achieving permanence. The QARO will also look to gain the child’s views as to their permanence plan.

6. Planning for Permanence

A permanence plan and meeting must be held before the child’s second Child in Care Review and thereafter on a minimum of 12 weekly until permanence is achieved.



The permanence planning process will

- Plan for permanence based on assessment.
- All assessments will consider what is the best permanence option and how stability can be achieved for the children in our care.

Stability can be considered in the following way:

- Ensuring continuity of care for a child who is entering our care for a brief period before returning home (short medium term) and
- A sense of a permanent home (long term stability)

An assessment of a child's need in relation to permanence must include:

- Focus on outcomes and consider stability issues based on the needs for the child and family in the long term.
- Consider contact with parents, siblings and wider family

The Assessment will include :

- Outcomes for the child
- Their wishes and feelings
- The child and family's support needs
- Keeping in touch with siblings, parents, friends, family (lifelong links)
- Evidence that the plan is linked to an assessment and the needs of the child.

We will consider when assessed as in the child's best interest a return to the family home. We will always parallel and a contingency plan to prevent drift or delay in achieving permanence for our children. If this is through Court, this will be subject to the Public Law Outline process which has a 26-week timescale.

When not in proceedings, our approach will remain the same to ensure assessments and our support and intervention inform permanence plans that result in good quality plans and timely permanence being achieved.

To give our children the very best start in life, we will look to long term outcomes for our children including consideration of transition into adulthood and beyond. In working alongside our children, we are able to understand our children's wishes and feelings and ambitions in life thus creating a plan that will build a foundation that will see our children transition into adulthood. To support the success of our children and young people, relationships and strong networks are critical to our young people's resilience and achieving their full potential.

7. Permanence and Local Placements

Where a placement is with long term carers, it is important that the child have access to their friends, family and local community with whom they are brought up. Keeping our children in touch with their birth family and life long links will remain a priority and focus of our work with our children.

Any decision to access an out of area placement away from the local community will be based on the needs of the child. When this is in a another Local Authority, the availability and cost of a suitable local resource to support the placement must be explored. In a prospective adoptive placement, this will form part of the assessment of need for adoptive support services but will be carried out as part of the permanence planning.

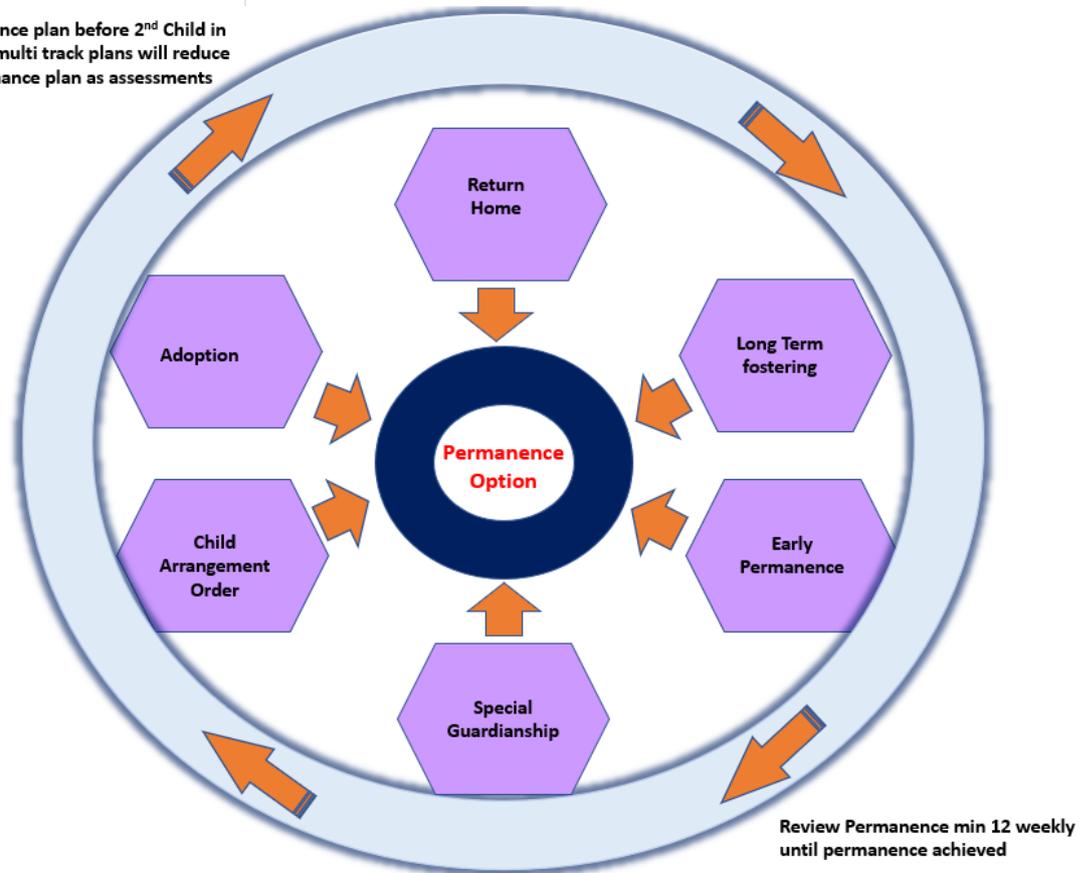
8. Options for Permanence

There are four permanence options for children in care.

- Reunification
- Long term fostering
- Special Guardianship/Child Arrangement Order
- Adoption/early permanence

The primary permanence option will be chosen based on the wishes and feelings of the child or and the outcome of assessments completed

Initial Permanence plan before 2nd Child in care review multi track plans will reduce to final permanence plan as assessments completed



8.1 Return home (reunification)

We strive to keep children and young people in the care of their family who are best placed to provide care, unless it is unsafe to do so. We have a clear and detailed reunification pathway for our children in care which ensures any reunification decision is evidence based and actioned in a timely manner. Our reunification pathway ensures we work with our children their family, local communities the child's lifelong links and multi-agency professionals to ensure a safe sustainable transition back into the family home. Where this is not possible the reunification process allows for clear evidenced based decision making. Please see https://www.proceduresonline.com/dorset/cs/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Reunification%20Pathway%20Flowchart.pdf for further details.

We have flexibility in our planning and placements to facilitate the above including use of a bridging placement where appropriate to support reunification arrangement

8.2 Long Term Fostering

Long term fostering has a clear role in achieving permanence for Children in Care in Dorset. This is in particular for our older children who will retain stronger links to their family. We have a refined Long Term Fostering Pathway which sees our Agency

Decision Maker available on a weekly basis to review and ratify placements based on key document decisions.

Please see

https://www.proceduresonline.com/dorset/cs/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Long-term%20Fostering%20Flowchart.pdf for further details.

We remain focused on ensuring that a child's permanence state does not lead to their permanence status not being reviewed, which may lead to children remaining in our care longer than is appropriate. Once a child is in an approved long term foster home, a permanence plan will be reviewed on an annual basis and monitored in subsequent Child In Care reviews to ensure other permanence options such as Reunification and Special Guardianship are considered. We are committed to involving children, their birth parents and foster carers in permanence planning as highlighted in the 2015 Regulations and Guidance for Long Term Fostering England.

8.3 Early Permanence Placements

Where possible we are committed to achieving permanence and stability at the earliest opportunity for our babies and children. Collaborative tracking with Aspire RAA enables the identification of children who require an immediate and a potential adoptive placement. Early permanence is used to provide a foster placement which can then become an adoptive placement if required.

An Early Permanence Placement provides the mechanism for our children to be placed, where appropriate, with approved adopters in a foster placement whilst we remain in proceedings. If the plan for adoption is agreed and a Placement Order is granted, they will be matched and adopt the child. This process reduces the number of placement moves for the child and disruption.

We are committed to achieving permanence at the earliest opportunity for our babies and young children. An Early Permanence Placement provides the mechanism for our children to be placed, where appropriate, with approved adopters in a foster placement whilst we remain in proceedings. If the plan for adoption is agreed and a Placement Order is granted, they will be matched and adopt the child. This process reduces the number of moves in placement and reduces disruption to our children.

8.4 Special Guardianship

Our Regional Adopting Agency ASPIRE hold responsibly for completing 13-week Special Guardianship assessments from point of referral. Dorset Council acknowledge that Special Guardianship Order for some of our children is an appropriate permanence pathway and as such we have a clear special guardianship pathway and finance policy to ensure equitability in support packages offered to prospective Special Guardians.

Please see https://www.proceduresonline.com/dorset/cs/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/SGO%20Pathway.pdf and

https://www.proceduresonline.com/dorset/cs/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/SGO%20Finance%20Policy.pdf for further details.

Special Guardianship addresses the needs for children who need a sense of stability and security within a placement away from their birth parents, but not the legal break with family that is associated with adoption. Special Guardianship Order offer stability, whilst they can be revoked, there are restrictions to those who may apply to discharge the order. The leave of the court, if required, will only be granted where circumstances have changed since the order was made.

Parental responsibility will be given to Special Guardians which is shared with the parents. However, the Special Guardians will have the legal right to make all day to day arrangements. The parents must be consulted, and their consent is required for, the child's change in name, adoption, placement abroad for more than 3 months and other fundamental issues.

If a Special Guardianship Order is made and a child was subject of a care order, the care order will automatically be discharged. The Local Authority will no longer hold any Parental Responsibility.

Dorset Council have a 2021 Special Guardianship Finance Policy to reflect our offer to prospective Special Guardians. Special Guardians have the right to request an assessment for support services at anytime after the Special Guardianship order has been made.

Any of the following may apply for a Special Guardianship Order:

- A Guardian
- A foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year immediately preceding the application
- Anyone who holds a Residence or Child Arrangement order with respect to the child who has the consent of all this in whose favour a resident or Child arrangement Order is in force.
- Anyone the child has lived with for 3 of the last 5 years
- Where the child is subject of a Care Order, any person who has the consent of the Local Authority
- Anyone who has he consent of all those with Parental Responsibility for the child.

The parents of a child may not become Special Guardians.

8.5 Child Arrangement Order

A Child Arrangement Order may be used to increase the degree of legal permanence in a placement with a family or friend/connected person or a long-term foster placement. The order confers Parental Responsibility, to be shared more equally than with a Special Guardianship, which in some cases may be a more appropriate arrangement.

The holder of a Child Arrangement Order does not give the right to consent to the child's adoption nor to appoint a guardian. In addition, they may not change the child's name nor arrange for the child's emigration without consent of all those with parental responsibility or leave of the court.

Whilst support may continue for as long as the Child Arrangement Order remains in force, the aim will be to make arrangements which are self-sustaining in the long run. The making of this order can now be made up until the child turns 18.

The following may apply for a Child Arrangement Order:

- A parent or guardian
- A party to marriage where the child was brought up as a child in the family
- A person with which the child has lived for 3 years (This need not be continuous but must not have started more than 5 years or ended more than 3 months before making of the application)
- A Local Authority foster carer with whom the child has lived for 1 year.

8.6 Adoption

We recognise some of our children will not be able to remain in the care of their parents or family. For those children, where appropriate, adoption will be their permanence plan. This will be identified at the earliest opportunity as part of the child's permanence plan.

Adoption legally transfers parental responsibility for the child permanently to the adopter. The child is then deemed to be the child of the adopter(s) as if the child had been born to them and the child's birth certificate is changed to an adoption certificate showing the adopter(s) to be the birth parent(s). The child will also acquire UK citizenship if they are not already a UK citizen (assuming they are adopted by a UK citizen).

The adopter(s) 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. Adoption makes a clear legal break from the birth family and there is no review process. Once a child is adopted, they are no longer a Child in Care.

9. Regional Adoption Agency

Aspire were formed in July 2017, as a partnership of three Local Authorities coming together to form one of the first Regional Adoption Agencies in England. These were Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council, and the Borough of Poole. Since April 2019 we became two local authorities, BCP Council & Dorset Council. We are working in partnership with Families for Children, a local voluntary adoption agency. Our purpose is to provide outstanding services for children and adults with links to adoption or special guardianship.

The original three Local Authorities and Families for Children had been working together for many years. Our strength in partnership only enhances the quality of the services we offer as a Regional Adoption Agency.

10. Conclusion

This strategy aims to ensure our children in care achieve their permanence option in an appropriate time frame, supported by professionals and their families working alongside one another in an open and transparent way. In doing so, this builds our children's resilience and provides them with the best opportunities and start in life as a Dorset child.

11. Appendix A: Care arrangements for Children in Care

