

How to Guide: Permanent Foster Carer

While not offering the legal security of adoption or Special Guardianship a formal structure for recognizing the planned long term nature of a fostering placement can provide assurance, safeguard and support for a child and the carers through childhood to adulthood. Permanent Foster Care differs from Long Term foster care in that such placements may have existed for some time due to efforts to rehabilitate or court processes, or e.g. where a young person has entered and remains in care in adolescence and but no formal planned process of matching the child to a carer has been made and there is no commitment to maintain the placement to adulthood.

Where a child is not likely to be rehabilitated to parents, social workers should be ready to discuss Permanent Foster Care as an option with Foster Carers, usually in conjunction with the fostering service supervising social workers. Care should be taken not to place unfair pressure on foster carers, who may not have committed to such care. This discussion should not be limited to local authority carers but is legitimate to raise with externally commissioned foster carers who may even be willing to contemplate transferring to the local authority, although this should never be a pre condition to considering permanent foster care.

However when such commitment is not available, the social worker must give consideration within the LAC Review around whether an alternative placement might provide the child with a greater sense of permanence, recognizing that to continually raise such an issue when it is clearly not likely may in fact destabilize an otherwise positive placement. The social worker should arrange a Permanence Planning Meeting together information on the child, have the

plan agreed, and identify and plan for future support and services. Key issues at the meeting will include:

- Future accommodation needs of the fostering family;
- The future ability of the carers to meet the child's needs, especially where it has not been possible to find a suitable adoptive match for a child due to lack of available adopters who can address issues such as religion, ethnicity, or culture, or where the child has a complex background or needs. While carers may be meeting current needs the long term needs must be carefully considered;
- Where the child has had a number of changes or placement or worker a Life appreciation meeting might be held to collate what is known about the child to inform the planning around a permanent fostering placement.

Where the proposed permanent foster carer is already approved either by the Department or by an Agency, a long-term match must not be assumed, no matter how long the child has been in placement, but a careful assessment will be required.

The child's social worker should complete a revised copy of the Child's Care Plan, including the child's wishes and feelings, and an update on the child's health, educational, emotional, and social developmental needs.

The proposed match should then be considered by the Departments Permanence Panel, along with the Permanent Fostering update on the carer's Form F, the child's Care Plan, the performance plan pro-forma, and placement plan part 2. (Where the carers are with an agency, their approval in principle as "long term carers" will need to have been previously agreed by the carers own Fostering Panel.)

When the match is agreed by the Department's Permanence Panel written correspondence will be sent to the carers explaining the permanency decision, to the child's social worker with a letter for the child's case record, and to the child's birth parents as well as to the Child. The child's social worker should carefully file copies of all such letters.

As Permanent Fostering does not change the legal status of the child LAC reviews must continue to be held. The child's social worker must be sensitive in recognizing the new status of the placement but also needs to recognize that the child's needs are paramount and must be considered fully. Issues that are considered at every review, such as whether or not the responsible authority should seek any change in the child's legal status need sensitive handling and the child's social worker should consult with the IRO to consider creative ways of dealing with this without undermining the agreed plan or raising anxiety for the child; e.g. the reviewing requirement may be met by teleconferencing, smaller face to face meetings etc.

The child's social worker will also need to be sensitive around the issue of leaving care arrangements and the development of a Pathway Plan where the presumption in a settled placement is for continuity in a long-term family. In such instances it will be vital for the child's social worker to discuss the child's history, role and membership in the family in detail prior to that worker approaching the young person.

In the event that the placement experiences stress it is important that the child's social worker offers the same attention and support to prevent breakdown as would be given to any birth or adoptive family. If the situation becomes one of potential disruption the social worker should arrange a core stability group meeting to identify what support can be put in place, and liaise with the fostering service around this.

In the case of disruption a change of plan will be required at a LAC review.