

# *Children Looked After*

## **West Sussex Children's Service Placement Stability, Policy and Guidance**

**West Sussex County Council  
Children's Services**



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## **Feedback:**

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# West Sussex County Council **Children's Services**

## **Placement Stability policy and guidance**

### **1. Purpose**

- This document sets out West Sussex Children's Services policy and approach to ensuring that placement stability is at the forefront of every care arrangement.
- It will provide also practice guidance in relation to placement stability in identifying, managing and monitoring placement stability.

### **2. Background**

It is known from research into developmental trauma and attachment theory that the majority of children looked after have experienced early poor parenting, neglect and other forms of abuse, which is likely to have impacted on all aspects of their development.

The West Sussex's Permanency Policy (2014) states that:

'...many young people in care need the opportunity to form secure attachments to an alternative caregiver within a consistent and permanent relationship. Many have not had this opportunity and therefore, in order to redress the impact of their early life experiences, placement with permanent carers is needed at the earliest opportunity'.

However consistent and permanent placements are not the norm for many children who enter the care system within the United Kingdom. The Government Green Paper: 'Care Matters – Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care' ( DFEs, 2006) informs that:

*"Evidence shows that frequent moves between care placements have a very negative impact on the ability of children to succeed both in education and in other areas of their lives. Currently children in care are moved between placements far too frequently."*

Reducing the number of unnecessary placement moves is therefore a priority as stable and nurturing placements are thought to directly influence the child's ability to recover from the abusive and neglectful experiences which they have previously had. (Harden, 2004, in Price at al, 2008)

Therefore placement stability is central to supporting the needs of children in care. As good corporate parents we must ensure that there is proactivity by agreeing a series of agreed principles and strategies to improve placement stability.

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### **3. Definition and Scope**

A simple working definition of placement stability for the purposes of this policy is used as follows:

*'Well planned placements that reduce the need for placement changes and emergency placements'.*

This definition assumes that permanency is central to care planning. Ideally, children entering care would live in a single placement before returning home or becoming part of another family permanently. Children should move only when their permanency goals require it. The goal is to eliminate moves except those that are progressions toward permanency.

For the purpose of this policy, we will take a positive frame of reference and consider what a stable placement might look like within the following areas: -

- Adoptive Placements
- Foster Placements
- Residential Placements
- Kinship placements ( Family and Friends)
- Semi-Independent Placements

This policy has been produced with reference to and should be read in conjunction with:

- The West Sussex Children Looked After and Care Leaver's Strategy (2014-2017)
- West Sussex Permanency Policy (2014)
- The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 2: care planning, placement and case review
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) Sufficiency: statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children
- The West Sussex Quality Improvement Plan (- which outlines particular actions in relation to the Children Looked After and Care Leaver's Strategy and includes placement stability)
- The Fostering Service Statement of Purpose
- Management Instructions, as follows: -
  - ❖ Practice Guidance relating to Pathway Plans, care planning and statutory visits to a child
  - ❖ The protocol to reduce offending and criminalization of children in care

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- ❖ Care planning and decision making for children on the edge of care
- ❖ Legal proceedings (MIN 21 addresses the various assessments to be undertaken prior to or during proceedings)
- ❖ Family and Friends care
- ❖ Parent and Child placements
- ❖ Placing a Child Looked After
- ❖ Personal Education Plans

This policy covers the need for placement stability for all Children Looked After, (irrespective of age) and includes Care Leavers who are moving towards independence

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### **4. Principles**

*Permanency:* This is at the heart of all care plans with a clearly planned journey through care. Stability and permanency must be reached at the earliest opportunity.

*Attachment:* Young people's secure attachments to carers are very important to their mental health and wellbeing. Continuity of relationships is also important, and healthy attachments should be respected, sustained and developed where this is in the child's best interests.

*Placement moves are kept to a minimum:* Frequent moves, planned or not, can badly affect children.

*Participation:* The involvement of children and young people in decision making regarding their placements is essential. The wishes and feeling of children must be taken into account and due weight given, bearing in mind their age and developmental stage. Even if it is not possible to act on the views of a child, social workers should think about all the ways in which they can maximize their participation.

*Good Health:* This is a priority for our Children Looked After and Care Leavers; central to all children's ability to fulfill their potential as they develop from childhood and through to teenage years is the need to be well (- both physically and emotionally).

*Good Education and Stability in Education:* Children, who encounter the looked after system, are likely to have already experienced high levels of disruption and instability in their lives and the impact of this history will be

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exacerbated by further instability. A change of school at the same time will disrupt learning can mean a break from all previous routines, friendship groups and support networks simultaneously. Research shows that Children who are Looked After tend to move schools more frequently than their peers, which has a strong negative effect on attainment and outcomes.

*Equality of Opportunity:* All Children Looked After and Care Leavers should have the opportunity to achieve optimal development; according to their circumstances and age. The Department of Health, 1998a stated that:

*“Children and young people... should all be considered as individuals with particular needs and potentialities ... differences in bringing up children due to family structures, religion, culture and ethnic origins should be respected and understood and those children with ‘specific social needs arising out of disability or a health condition’ have their assessed needs met and reviewed “*

*Strong Networks:* Placements should enable Children Looked After and Care Leavers to remain in their communities and maintain their networks (if in their best interests) to minimize disruption in their lives. Every child who needs to be looked after will be placed in or close to their own area as far as possible, unless it is assessed that they will benefit from being placed out of area.

*Carers should be at the centre of a child or young person's experience of Corporate Parenting and should provide the mainstay of their support:* Every child who needs to be looked after will be cared for by carers who are appropriately supported and developed so that they have the necessary skills and experience to meet their needs. Carers are part of the ‘team around the child’.

*Support:* All children and young people should have a clear risk assessment and a plan to address risks with **detailed support services** for the carer and child. These plans should be reviewed if there are significant changes or an elevated risk of placement

*Placements should support positive transitions to adulthood:* They should ensure that Children Looked After and Care Leaver's education, employment and training will enable young people to positively contribute to their local community and wider economy and succeed in independence.

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### **5. How will we promote Placement Stability within West Sussex Children's Service?**

Research indicates that there is no single definitive action which will immediately achieve placement stability (Report for Department for Education and Skills – September 2005). The area is complex and that no single action can work in isolation. There are several factors at play and there is a dynamic relationship between them which acts to improve stability.

There are four main factors identified within DFES research. These are as follows:

- Effective diversion from care and early intervention
- Strong tracking, and case planning to avoid drift and achieve permanence
- Increased placement choice
- Increased multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support to placements

Bearing in mind the complexity of this issue and research evidence considerable thought and planning is taking place on an on-going basis within West Sussex Children's Service to ensure that Children Looked after and Care Leavers can live in stable and nurturing placements. This will be achieved by:

#### **5.1 Ensuring a focus on improving Placement Stability - strong leadership and vision**

Within West Sussex Children's Services there is a 'whole system approach' to supporting Children Looked After and Care Leavers and keeping families together. This approach has been documented within the Children Looked After and Care Leaver's Strategy (2014 to 2017). The strategy brings together the range of activity across the council and the children's partnership at all stages of the care journey. It includes a focus on supporting families to stay together whenever it is safe to do so.

The West Sussex Children's Services approach to Placement Stability builds on research evidence to ensure the stability of Children Looked After.

(\*refer to the Children Looked After and Care leaver's Strategy and Quality Improvement Plan for detailed actions)

#### **5.2 Effective diversion from care and early intervention**

The West Sussex Family Point is investing in early intervention to prevent breakdown in the family, tight gate-keeping processes and rapid rehabilitation schemes to return children home quickly when they are looked after. This reduces the number of children looked after, releasing money to be re-invested in even better prevention or in developing placement choice or placement support services.

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The following objectives have been identified to achieve this:

- Identify those children and young people who are suffering or likely to suffer harm from abuse or neglect and who need referral to children's social care.
- Engage extended family and kinship networks.
- Provide good challenge and broader input at the gateway to care.
- Developing an integrated community model to support struggling families using existing approaches in the county.
- Improve professional development to support confident risk management (the implementation of the Signs of Safety model across Children's Services and the implementation of Attachment and Developmental Trauma interventions).
- Proactive case management and working with birth families and children for as long as is needed – which is key to successful reunification. This may include a period of a child being looked after with continuing focused interventions following rehabilitation home.

### **5.3 Strong tracking, and case planning to avoid drift and achieve permanence**

The following objectives have been identified in relation to this aim: -

- Ensuring that all Children Looked After and Care Leavers have as quickly as possible a plan for permanency with a clear and planned journey through their care irrespective of their age.
- Ensuring effective assessment and planning processes and listening to the views and wishes of children and their families.
- All placement decisions to be supported by integrated high quality assessment and planning.
- All children will enter care in a planned way unless it is an emergency situation.
- Complete, high quality and timely information is available to carers on a child to assist the matching process and placement planning.( including health and education plans)
- Rigorous scrutiny by management and Independent Reviewing Officers of care plans and permanency planning.
- A placement stability risk assessment and action plan, to be completed at the start of every new placement which is reviewed and updated if there is an escalation of risk.
- The introduction of placement support meetings, when there are concerns that a placement may be becoming unstable.
- A clear process for the approval of placements designated as long term.
- That whenever possible children will remain with their carers after the age of 18 under 'Staying Put' arrangements.

### **5.4 Increased placement choice**

The service will ensure that there is a sufficient range of high quality accommodation for Children Looked After and Care Leavers within our local authority area by:



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- Increasing the number and capacity of in-house fostering and adoptive placements. It is critically important to have a sufficient pool of foster carers and adopters to cater for the varied needs of children. Without it, there is a lack of placement choice and this is associated with placement instability.
- Using independent providers to complement our in-house provision when the needs of the child require this. (Specific cohorts of children may require this service). Wherever possible these providers will be locally based so that young people have the opportunity to remain in their communities and maintain their networks.
- Residential homes when this is best environment to meet their needs. Where this is the case there should be a positive choice for this type of provision. The permanency plan will be to return children to a family environment whenever possible and appropriate in meeting the needs of the child.
- School based settings- a significant proportion of disabled Children Looked After are cared for in school-based settings which are out of county and have been identified to meet their holistic needs.
- Commissioning of a flexible range of support for children between the ages of 16 and 25 that provides a pathway between care and independence. This includes the Staying Put arrangements, Supported Lodgings and semi-independent accommodation.

Particular attention will be given to the following categories of children and young people:

- Disabled children
- Children with challenging behaviour
- Children from sibling groups
- Children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds especially from black and minorities groups
- Young People who require support to achieve independence

\*Kinship care is an alternative permanence option when children cannot return to their birth parents. Outcomes are generally good for these children, and in recent research review found to be, 'in the main, faring significantly better than those looked after in non-kin foster care' (Selwyn et al 2013: 67)

These options are addressed in detail within the West Sussex Permanency Policy.

### **5.5 Increased multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support to placements and increased partnership with foster carers**

The following actions have been identified as a priority:

- Carers in West Sussex will be provided with the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of children who require therapeutic parenting- and advice and support in managing challenging behaviour. This will be provided through training, development, supervision and support from education, Children's Social Care, health and Child and Adolescent Services (CAMHs).
- Staff who work with Children Looked After have been trained in Attachment and Trauma. (The training will be embedded over 2015-2016)

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- We are developing the role of the Family Placement Social Worker to better support good placement outcomes.
- We are developing a Placement Finding Team to ensure more effective matching.
- Carers will be provided with information about the child so they can prepare for the placement and placements will, as far as possible, be planned. Placements made in a hurry, without consultation and without full information being given to the carer are more likely to disrupt (Sinclair, 2009).
- The Team around the Placement (TAP) will play a crucial role in ensuring that there are strategies to support placements from the start and to provide urgent support when a placement is at risk of breakdown.
- The introduction of placement support meetings, when there are concerns that a placement may be becoming unstable.
- All children will have a placement stability risk assessment which will be undertaken at the time of matching and will inform the placement agreement. Carers will receive high quality information from the outset of placements which ensure that they have knowledge of any behavioural difficulties
- There is a designated out of hours service available for all carers.

### **5.6 Enable children and young people to participate fully in decision making**

The views of children are important at every stage of their care planning and placement.

We will ensure that children's wishes and feelings are heard and they are involved in a meaningful way in all their plans for help and protection through sufficient preparation. The views of children will therefore influence decisions such as where they live and who they may have contact with whilst in placement and for the future. The following areas will be given priority:

- When planning placement changes, the child or young person's wishes will be fully taken into account, along with consideration of their best interests. If the wishes of the child cannot be acted upon this will be explained to the child or young person and these reasons recorded.
- The child's IRO will ensure children will make children and young people aware of their right to access advocacy services when a review decision is likely to overrule their wishes and feelings. The child or young person should also have enough notice of any planned change to arrange for an advocate to support them in their review meeting.
- Children and young people will be consulted regarding levels of contact with family and friends and due weight given to these in accordance with their age, understanding and best interests.

Children will also actively influence service delivery:

- In West Sussex the Children in Care Council will be used to ensure that leaders and managers are informed of the relevant issues for young people in placements or receiving a service as care leaver.

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- Issues raised will shape the service design and improve the quality of service provided.

### **5.7 Ensure that there are robust managements systems which improve performance on stability across West Sussex and dealing rigorously and effectively with areas for development**

- Disruption meetings will be held following the breakdown of an approved long term placement to explore and learn from placement breakdowns, as to what will assist the child and likewise inform practice development. Such meetings will always including feedback from the foster carer and the child/young person.
- Complaints and other feedback given by children, carers and parents on the quality of care offered will be analysed for usage in future service development.
- Data will be maintained on all forms of breakdowns, including foster placement and adoption and analysed on a monthly basis.
- Independent Reviewing Officers will provide scrutiny and will negotiate for improvement in care planning where needed. If necessary /she will escalate concerns about care planning through the Dispute Resolution Process.
- The Multi Agency Children Looked After Group (MACLAIG) will meet quarterly and will address the outcomes for Children Looked After - giving attention to the goals outlined within the Children Looked After and Care Leaver's Strategy. This is monitored through the Quality Improvement Plan.
- The sub-groups for MACLAIG will also address Placement Stability.
- The Corporate Parenting Panel will receive 6 monthly updates on the progress of MACLAIG. There is participation of the Children in Care Council within the Corporate Parenting Panel.