

Permanency in Sandwell: A Partnership Approach 2022-2025



Working together to create more **resilience** within families and communities and to ensure all of our children & young people have a **safe, happy** and **stable** home.



Contents

• Contents	2
• Introduction	3
• Context	4
• Defining Permanence	5
• Our Aim	6
• Voice of the child and understanding their lived experience	7
• Our approach to permanence and our agreed principles	8
• Sandwell priorities for Permanence	10
• Permanency Outcomes	11
• Routes and processes to achieve Permanence	23
• References	31



Introduction

Our partnership approach to permanency is underpinned by our **ethos** and **standards**:

Our ethos centres around **children** and **families**, which means:

- We have high aspirations for our children, we make a difference and change children's lives for the better
- We place children at the heart of everything we do
- We keep families safe, keeping them together where possible
- We work alongside our families, guided by their needs
- We empower and work with the whole, extended family
- We only use language that our children and young people can understand
- We celebrate our children and enable them to smile, laugh, play and succeed



Our ethos also focuses on our **staff** and **partners** which means:

- We support and look after each other
- We make meaningful connections and collaborate effectively with the wider Sandwell family
- We share a common understanding of our responsibilities
- We encourage each other to learn, develop & reflect
- We embrace diversity and celebrate each other's differences

Based on our ethos, we have a set of **practice standards**, one of which is being that:

We will secure children's futures and where they cannot live with their parents, we will secure the best plan of permanence for them as early as possible

Our standards promote quality practice that places children at the heart of everything we do. This underpins work we undertake with our families, alongside all our partners.



Context

This document defines permanency and our aims; a set of principles; and a range of permanency options for children, as well as priority areas of action to help all professionals achieve permanent homes for children as early in their lives as possible.

Its primary focus is on children living with their birth parents - working collectively across all partners to build resilience in communities and services offered where needed.

Through this document, we will ensure that whenever children are unable to live with their parents that we will rigorously explore all possibilities for children to live with



connected carers, extended family members and significant others, promoting children's needs in most circumstances to remain within their communities.

Working within the principles of this document, the Trust will promote children achieving stable, safe and sustainable homes that promote all aspects of their developmental needs, alongside our partners. Sandwell's ambition is for the stability, consistency and quality of all children's care to be supported through a robust multi-agency approach, ensuring children can thrive and achieve.

The image shows the cover of a strategy document titled 'Early Help for Sandwell Children and Families Strategy 2022-2024'. The cover features a dark blue header with the title in white and yellow text. Below the title, it says 'Working together to provide' followed by three bullet points: 'the right support', 'in the right place', and 'at the right time', each with a corresponding checkmark icon. At the bottom, there are logos for various partner organizations including Sandwell, NHS, and SCVO.

This document should be read in conjunction with the partnership's Early Help Strategy and the Trust's Permanence Guidance. **(All hyperlinks on page 31)**



Defining Permanence

Permanence can be defined in 3 clear categories:

- **Legal** - where a child lives with his or her birth parent(s) who has sole parental responsibility (PR), or the carer of the child has a legal order which gives them whole or partial PR: for example, an Adoption Order; Care Order; Child Arrangements Order or Special Guardianship Order;
- **Psychological** – when the child feels emotionally attached and secure with an adult who provides a stable, loving and secure relationship;
- **Physical and environmental** - a stable home environment in a familiar neighbourhood and community where the child’s identity and diversity needs are met and promoted.

For everyone working with children and families in Sandwell, this means:

- **Planning** to ensure a child has a secure attachment in a stable and loving family.
- **Securing** a future for a child that supports them through childhood and beyond, giving them a sense of continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.
- More than a legal framework - it’s about **emotional and physical security** within a safe and nurturing environment where identity and attachments thrive beyond childhood
- Increasing the likelihood of a child **fulfilling their potential**



Our Aim

Our overall aim is that we will:

Secure children's futures with their families wherever possible. When they cannot live with their parents we will secure the best plan to meet their needs in their timescales.

Within Sandwell Children's Trust and across the wider partnership, we believe that all children need security, stability, love, a strong sense of identity and belonging to thrive and fulfil their potential.

Planning for permanence in all stages of our work increases the possibility that those children with the greatest need in our community have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond.

Based on our shared values and aims across the partnership, permanence planning and practice should not be an additional process; it is central to our practice. The question ***'How are the child's long term needs being met?'*** must be at the core of everything we do.

Therefore, we want to ensure that:

- Permanency, and the emotional stability and resilience it provides, is our goal for every child
- Every service, from universal services through to adoption contributes to achieving permanence
- Permanency discussions at the first point of contact and subsequent planning identifies the needs of the individual child and the permanency plans that reflect Sandwell's ethos
- We work together across all services, to achieve consistently high-quality practice in permanency planning



Voice of the child and understanding their lived experience

The voice of the child and understanding their lived experience is central to everything we do. We need to ensure that the child's voice and lived experience is reflected from our first point of contact and in our partnership assessments and plans. We should explore the child's experience of living in a home with a continuous significant parent/s or carer/s, understanding their experience of stability and quality of care. We should assess how to understand the child's world and ensure plans are timely and purposeful to improve their experiences at home.

When children cannot live with their birth families or connected family we should ensure that our approach to finding a new home improves their experiences whilst maintaining birth family relationships, wherever possible.



It is important that children:

- understand that we want them to remain at home with their parents and family wherever possible.
- are not separated from brothers and sisters wherever possible. However, when separation is assessed as the best plan, it is important that clear arrangements and direct work are undertaken to ensure they remain in contact with one another.
- help to influence where they are going to live by our observations and direct work
- experience us actively listening to them and understanding their specific needs
- understand that Sandwell Children's Trust staff, alongside partners and communities will ensure that all permanence planning incorporates attention to their diversity needs and how these will be met. These include but are not limited to age, disability, learning need, identified gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation.



Our approach to permanence and our agreed principles

Wherever possible we should support children and families to remain together, where there is stability and quality of care for the child. When it is deemed necessary for a child to be looked after away from his or her family, this should be for as short a time as needed with a focus on a child being able return home to a safe, secure and loving family home life. If a child cannot return home, plans must be made in a timely way to ensure a new permanent home can be identified and prepared for the child to move to. Family members and friends should always be considered, with permanence secured through the appropriate legal order.

Our Principles

- The Trust and its partners will ensure that children are supported to remain at home. Universal and specific interventions and services will support change where needed and ongoing support when this is in the best interests of the child.
- Where it is not in the child's best interest to live within their family network, the partnership will contribute specific information that relates to their assessments of the child to inform the primary and parallel permanence plan in order to secure alternative permanent carers via adoption, long term foster care, a Child Arrangement Order or Special Guardianship Order.
- Residential care should only be agreed when living within a family setting cannot be achieved; and the long-term plan should be for a child to return to a family environment as soon as possible, wherever possible.



- Preparing children for their independent living will be addressed through the care plan, based on their age and level of understanding. Continuity of care, for example Staying Put and Shared Lives arrangements will be considered as positive options.
- Wherever possible, the child should live permanently within their own local community unless this has been identified as not appropriate.
- Staying in touch and meeting with the family and extended family should always be arranged in a way that benefits the child; and it should be facilitated and built on where it is in the child's best interests to do so.
- All partners will work together with children, parents/families to ensure the best possible permanence plan for the child.
- Any plan for a child must consider their wishes, feelings and lived experience; this must be clearly evidenced throughout the assessment and planning process with partners jointly deciding long term plans
- All assessments and plans will explore and identify aspects of difference and power that impact upon a child experiencing their needs being met and being able to develop and thrive.
- Every child's links with his or her racial, cultural and religious heritage must be considered; wherever possible the child brought up within the same racial, cultural and religious environment as their birth family.



Sandwell priorities for Permanence

- **Strengthen and develop the roles** of Manager, Safeguarding Leads, Independent Reviewing Officer and Child Protection Chairs to understand and positively impact on permanence development. Ensure that the quality and frequency of **supervision** and **management oversight**, across the partnership, drives the quality of permanence practice which delivers good permanence outcomes for children.
- Develop a **common language** that is understandable for all (children, families and partners) to facilitate permanence practice.
- Focus on **direct work** and **Life Story work**, paying attention to pulling capturing and analysing long term needs in assessments and plans so that children's voices and lived experiences are shared, understood and inform their assessments and plans.
- Create **partnership learning opportunities** and develop the early stages of help offered to children and families, ensuring all children are given the best opportunities of living with their families and in their communities.
- Ensure **quality assurance activity** continually drives permanency. This includes developing specific permanence data to track and drive performance, dip sampling, observation, practice reviews and a thematic spotlight on practice. This is with the aim of promote partnership learning, driving pace and the quality of practice.
- Focus on **children in pre-proceedings**. This means reviewing all children's plans, ensuring all activity and plans are good and drive good permanence outcomes within timescales.



- Focus on **reviews**. This means ensuring more robust midway reviews that more frequently rag rate need, ensuring parallel plans are in place at the second review; and making sure the IRO ‘footprint’ evidences oversight and helps Managers drive planning.
- Develop **simple, accessible guidance** for practitioners, managers and partners to easily understand permanence routes and quality practice approaches to ensuring that children have the best and most timely permanence outcomes.
- Progress the **sufficiency strategy** to ensure more ambition and a range of quality homes and alternative care for children and young people.
- Ensure pace in **permanence tracking activity** to achieve permanence for children, particularly those under five and on care orders.

Permanency Outcomes



- **Remaining at home**
- **Returning home**

The first stage within permanence planning is assessment and multi-agency/community support tailored with families and children in need to improve care at home. Staying at home offers the best chance of stability where it is safe, and risks can be managed.

It is essential that we work with our partners to ensure that early help and interventions can offer the most effective services to families and children. Creating positive opportunities for children to remain at home. Sandwell Children’s Trust have a core intervention service which includes a commitment to Family Group Conferences (FGC), a Family Solutions Team and Multi-Systemic Treatment offer that aims to strengthen family resilience and skills to enable children and young people to remain at home. These services work with and complement the multi-agency and community partners assessments and intervention.



These approaches consider extended family members or friends who could care and support the child and parents to remain at home or to provide extended family care. The aim of the FGC is to identify suitable family members or friends at the earliest stage so that there is no delay in identifying support and alternative care arrangements if children are unable to remain with birth parents. This can also inform the court or care planning process.

Ensuring Advocacy services, both contracted and community based, are available for children and families to access throughout the permanency planning process. It is important for them to receive advice, guidance and support that will enable them to articulate their views and needs clearly.

When a child needs to come into care, a plan with clear interventions needs to be undertaken swiftly to address the reasons why this was needed. This will ensure that risk and resilience factors are critically analysed with partners to safely manage any remaining risk and ensure a return home with no delay. Research indicates that if a child is in care for over 20 weeks or longer they are less likely to have a successful reunification with their birth parents. *Sinclair and colleagues (2007) Pursuit of Permanence.*

Where the plan is for the child to return home during or following any legal proceedings and where the child is subject to a Care Order, an Assessment under Regulation 17 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulation 2010 must be undertaken before deciding to place the child with their parent. The decision to place the child with their parent must be approved by the Director of Operations. The Permanence Plan must also consider the appropriateness of discharging the Care Order where a decision is made for the child. Care Orders at home should only be an option used in exceptional circumstances where the level of risk demands protection via a Care Order.

Where any plan includes the consideration of the child being placed with their parents, recent best practice guidance from the Final Report of the Public Law Working Group, indicates that best practice should be followed. **(Hyperlinks on page 31)**



President of the Family Division (March 2021). This best practice guidance notes that regarding a Care Order with the child remaining at home:

"The making of a care order should not be used as a vehicle to achieve the provision of support and services after the conclusion of proceedings"

There may be good reason at the inception of care proceedings for a child to remain in the care of their parents/carers/family members and subject to an Interim Care Order, pending the completion of assessments.


The making of a care order based on a plan for the child to remain in the care of her parents/carers is a different matter. There should be exceptional reasons for a court to make a care order based on such a plan.

A care order should not be used as a vehicle for the provision of support and services.

A plan should be devised to provide necessary support and services without the need to make a care order. Consideration should be given to the making of a supervision order, which may be an appropriate order to support the reunification of the family.

The risks of significant harm to the child are either judged to be such that the child should be removed from the care of her parents/carers or some lesser legal order and regime is required. Any placement with parents under an interim or final order should be evidenced to comply with the statutory regulations for placement at home. **(Hyperlinks on page 31)**

It should be rare in the extreme that the risks of significant harm to the child are judged to be sufficient to merit the making of a care order but, nevertheless, the risks can be managed with a care order being made in favour of the local authority with the child remaining in the care of the parents/carers. A care order represents a serious intervention by the state in the life of the child and in the lives of the parents in terms of their respective European Convention on Human Rights, article 8 rights. This can only be justified if it is necessary and proportionate to the risks of harm of the child.

 COURTS AND TRIBUNALS JUDICIARY

[Click here to read a message from the President of the Family Division: publication of the President's Public Law Working Group report](#)





• A home with family and friends carers

If the assessment concludes that the child cannot safely remain at home, every effort must be made to secure a placement with relatives or friends. This will be either as part of the plan to work towards a return home or – if a return home is clearly not in the child's best interests – as the preferred permanence option to ensure the child retains links with their family and community. It is important to establish at an early stage which relatives or friends might be available to care for the child to avoid delay.

The legal status of the placement with a relative, friend or other connected person is important. It is essential that the social worker can clarify the legal status of the placement and whether the placement is a private family arrangement or is subject to Regulation 24 of the 2010 Care Planning Regulations. This sets out arrangements for the temporary approval of a connected person as a foster carer; in exceptional circumstances by the Director of Operations for up to **16 weeks** to allow an immediate placement and sufficient time for a foster carer approval process to be undertaken.

In these circumstances, permanence options must be considered, for example:

- Special Guardianship Order
- Child Arrangement Orders
- Adoption

Where possible, the child's plan should not be to remain in care for the remainder of their childhood. Every effort should be made to secure permanence via the above routes. This means considering what the family needs regarding support to progress one of these plans.





• A home with a carer under a child arrangement order

A Child Arrangements Order sets out who a child should live, spend time or otherwise have contact with. It can offer physical and psychological permanence as well as a degree of legal permanence. Parental Responsibility (PR) is equally shared between the carers and the birth parents. A Child Arrangement Order is in force until the child reaches 18 years of age however it can be revoked in certain circumstances.

Child Arrangements Orders were introduced in April 2014 by the Children and Families Act 2014 (which amended section 8 Children Act 1989). They replace Contact Orders and Residence Orders.



This legislation applies to England and Wales.

A Child Arrangements Order means a court order regulating arrangements relating to any of the following:

- With whom a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact; and
- When a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact with any person.

The 'residence' aspects of a Child Arrangements Order (i.e. with whom a child is to live/when a child is to live with any person) can last until the child reaches 18 years unless discharged earlier by the Court or by the making of a Care Order.

The 'contact' aspects of a Child Arrangements Order (with whom and when a child is to spend time with or otherwise have contact with) cease to have effect when the child reaches 16 years, unless the court is satisfied that the circumstances of the case are exceptional.

A person named in the order as a person with whom the child is to live, will have Parental Responsibility for the child while the order remains in force. Where a person is named in



the order as a person with whom the child is to spend time or otherwise have contact but is not named in the order as a person with whom the child is to live, the court may provide in the order for that person to have Parental Responsibility for the child while the order remains in force.

Child Arrangements Orders are private law orders and cannot be made in favour of a local authority. Where a child is the subject of a Care Order, there is a general duty on the local authority to promote contact between the child and the parents. A Contact Order can be made under section 34 of the Children Act 1989 requiring the local authority to comply with any arrangements for the child to have contact with a named person.

Child Arrangements Orders are private law orders and cannot be made in favour of a local authority. Where a child is the subject of a Care Order, there is a general duty on the local authority to promote contact between the child and the parents. A Contact Order can be made under section 34 of the Children Act 1989 requiring the local authority to comply with any arrangements for the child to have contact with a named person.



- **A home with a special guardian carer**

Special Guardianship offers a high degree of legal permanence, as well as psychological and physical permanence. Although PR is shared between the Special Guardians and the birth parents, the Special Guardians have the “exclusive exercise” of PR. The child is not in care and therefore the Trust does not share any PR. It remains in place until the child reaches 18.

Special Guardianship addresses the needs of children who need a sense of stability and security within a placement away from their parents but does not sever the legal relationship with birth parents associated with adoption. This provides a permanent legal relationship between a child and a member of their family or significant other.



The following persons may apply:

- Any guardian of the child
- A foster carer with whom the child has lived for one year immediately preceding the application;
- Anyone who holds a Child Arrangements Order with respect to the child or who has the consent of all those in whose favour a Child Arrangements Order is in force;
- Anyone with whom the child has lived for three out of the last five years;
- Where the child is subject of a Care Order, any person with consent of Sandwell Children's Trust;
- Anyone who has the consent of all those with PR for the child e.g. anyone, including the child, who has the leave of the court to apply.



SGOs offer greater stability and security to a placement than Child Arrangements Orders in that – whilst they are revocable, there are restrictions on those who may apply to discharge the Order. Leave of the Court is required and will only be granted where circumstances have changed since the Special Guardianship Order was made.

Special Guardians will have PR and although this will be shared with the child's parents, the special guardian will have the legal right to make all day to day arrangements. Parents must be consulted, and their consent is required to change their child's name, agreement for their child to be adopted and any placement abroad for more than 3 months. These areas are not exclusive but represent indicative issues which need to be considered when sharing PR with parents.

An SGO made in relation to a child who is the subject of a Care Order will automatically discharge the Care Order and Sandwell Children's Trust will no longer have Parental Responsibility. The SGO should be part of the plan from the outset and not part of two stage process.



Special Guardians may be supported financially or otherwise by the Trust and, as with adoptive parents, will have the right to request an assessment for support services at any time after the Order is made (see SGO Support policy for detailed procedures).

Advantages of Special Guardianship as a permanence plan

The carers have Parental Responsibility and clear authority to make decisions on day to day issues regarding the child's care

There is added legal security to the Order in that leave is required for parents to apply to discharge the Order and will only be granted if a change of circumstances can be established since the original Order was made

It maintains legal links to the birth family

The child will no longer be in care and there need be no social worker involvement unless this is identified as necessary, in which case an assessment of the need for support must be agreed by the Trust and its partners

Disadvantages of Special Guardianship as a permanence plan

The order only lasts until the child is 18 and does not necessarily bring with it the sense of permanent belonging to the special guardian's family as an Adoption Order does

As the child is not a legal member of the family, if difficulties arise there may be less willingness to persevere and seek resolution

Although there are restrictions on applications to discharge the Order, such an application is possible and may be perceived as a threat to the child's stability

Although a parent requires leave to apply for a Child Arrangements Order, they can apply for any other Section 8 Order (i.e. Contact Order, Prohibited Steps Order or specific Issues Order) as of right.





• A home with a permanent foster carer

Long term fostering does not provide legal permanence as the foster carers do not hold Parental Responsibility (PR). The child is either looked after on a Care Order, which the birth parents can seek to revoke, or voluntarily with birth parents' agreement. If a child is on a Care Order, PR is shared between the Trust and the birth parents and if they are accommodated voluntarily (Section 20 Children Act 1989) the birth parents retain sole PR.

However, long term fostering can offer psychological and physical permanence for the child. A long-term fostering arrangement ceases when a child attains adulthood at age 18, although Staying Put arrangements enable a previously fostered child to remain with the foster carers up until the age of 21 as an adult in their home.



This option can be a positive plan for older children who retain strong links to their birth families and do not want or need the formality of adoption (also see Long Term Matching Process for detailed procedures).

Advantages of Long Term Fostering as a permanence plan

The Trust can facilitate contact that is assessed as being in the child's best interest

Disadvantages of Long Term Fostering as a permanence plan

The carers do not have parental responsibility



Advantages of Long Term Fostering as a permanence plan

There is continuing social work support to the child and foster family in a placement that is regularly reviewed to ensure that the child's needs are met

It maintains legal links to the birth family who can still play a part in decision making

The child's identity, heritage, culture and religion are maintained through these links

Disadvantages of Long Term Fostering as a permanence plan

Continuing social work involvement as part of a statutory system, for example statutory visits, medicals, annual reviews of carers and child in care reviews

Stigma attached to the child due to being in care

The child does not have a legal relationship within the foster family therefore the child maybe more prone to experience placement moves



• A home with adoptive parent/s

We recognise that 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.



The government have in recent years provided significant financial support to address the therapeutic needs of adopted children and their families.

We recognise that for those children where it is decided that adoption is the appropriate route to permanence growing up in an adoptive family is a positive opportunity for them.

Adoption ensures that children's needs are prioritised and that they can get the support they need from professionals who understand the long-term impact of being adopted. Despite the legal break from the birth family that adoption creates we are committed to enabling children to grow up with every opportunity to retain links with the birth family.



Siblings

Sibling relationships are important, and will be carefully considered 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. 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.



Keep 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. We support the need for adopted children to keep in touch with any members of their birth family where this is in their best interests. Adoptive parents increasingly support direct approaches to support children in keeping in touch with their birth families.





Early Permanence Placements

Where possible we are committed to achieving permanence and stability at the earliest opportunity for our babies and children. Close partnership working with Adoption@Heart 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. This is called Foster for Adopt.

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.



Adoption@Heart

The Regional Adoption Agency Adoption@Heart was formed in April 2019, as a partnership between Sandwell, Dudley, Wolverhampton and Walsall. Prior to this there was a successful collaboration arrangement in place between these agencies within the Black country. The service now recruits and supports adoptive parents to one single pool of adopters for the region and undertakes family finding for all children with a permanence plan of adoption in the region, including those from Sandwell.



Routes and processes to achieve Permanence

- **Parallel Planning/Twin Track/Triple Track**

Sandwell Children's Trust, along with its partners, will consistently parallel plan all permanence options with a focus on the primary plan until the child/young person achieves permanency.

The plan for permanence can take different routes and the outcome should always be that the child/young person feels safe, supported, and secure and they are encouraged to achieve their full potential. The aim is to support children and young people by minimising the number of moves before they achieve their permanent home. Young children can experience early permanence through robust planning, this is often referred to as parallel, twin track, triple track planning, Concurrent Planning Placements and Foster to Adopt placements. The approach is to ensure that children can move to a new home and care, where this is necessary, swiftly, if it is not possible to follow through on the primary plan.

Concurrent Planning Placements

This is where a child moves from their birth parent(s) to a prospective permanent family while reunification is still being pursued. These arrangements can be made for a child of any age.

Fostering for Adoption

This describes assessed and approved prospective adopters who are also approved as foster carers, so they can care immediately for children they would like to adopt. This would be before the Agency Decision Maker and Courts have decided a child can be placed for adoption.



Foster-to-adopt carers most often care for babies where there have been previous children adopted and the family history and identified risks are such that adoption is more likely than not. Some prospective adopters become foster-to-adopt carers so the brother or sister of a child they have already adopted can join them. Foster-to-adopt arrangements can also be used for older children and brother and sister groups.

Parallel Planning

All efforts should be made to safely keep or return a child to their parent or carer. However, where this may not be possible alternative plans will be made in parallel to supporting them to live with their birth family.

Parallel planning is essential especially when assessments of parents, family and friends are being completed and the outcome is not known. The child must not experience delay in achieving permanence and, if the child is unable to be cared for by their guardian or parent, other family and friends, adoption or permanent fostering should be considered.

Family network meetings and Family Group Conferences should be held as early as possible to agree what needs to happen to help the child to return home and within what timescales. Schools and community professionals should be consulted to identify alternative family members where the parents are not open to the involvement of their extended family network.



It is important that the Independent Reviewing Officer, continues to hear what children and young people want from a permanent home, which will help the matching processes, support bonding between the permanent carer and child and ensure connections with birth family are assessed and planned for to ensure the child can retain and continue a relationship with birth parents and family, wherever possible.



• Permanence Tracking

Permanency planning and tracking for children is crucial to drive the focus and quality of a permanent home and care for children. Whilst permanence planning and tracking is progressing in Sandwell the partnership need to make sure there is a strong focus on the child's journey, from first point of contact through to Adoption/Special Guardianship support.

Permanence planning and tracking must improve the timeliness and quality of assessments and plans developed with children, families and partners. The focus will be to enable children to stay with their families and communities wherever possible. When this is not possible we must create more opportunities to drive the plans for exploring possible connected carers and non-connected care options. We need to make sure that our practitioners, managers and partners are knowledgeable and have the requisite skills to identify the salient factors that will impact upon the quality of care and stability of a child's lived experience in a new home. We also need to make sure that our Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Chairs help to drive permanence quality and timeliness through their scrutiny and oversight.

We must identify the factors that are important for individual children in alternative care arrangements, this includes attention to a child's equality and diversity needs. Undertaking direct work to understand what these elements mean for individual children in different families and what support needs carers will have, clearly identified to ensure that children have the greatest opportunity to live in a new home without further disruptions.

There needs to be sustained engagement with our Regional Adoption Agency- Adoption at Heart, so they are actively involved in permanence tracking, ensuring all children have the best opportunity for full consideration of permanence options, as well as learn from good adoption practice what elements can be applied to successfully managing matching, transitions and post placement support.



• Working with birth parents and families

Continued work with birth parents and families is crucial for the stability and quality of ongoing care children need to improve and explore all opportunities for children to remain with their families and in their communities. Consistent engagement with families can also increase opportunities for children to return to live with their birth families after a period of being looked after by Sandwell Children's Trust. **Family Group Conferencing** is a model working with families at the earliest opportunity but also further along the child's permanence journey where it can assist with **life long links** with family and significant relationships that will support children into adulthood.

When this is not possible and alternative care and homes are needed for children, work must continue with birth parents to understand and engage in supporting their children to live with another family. Careful planning of contact arrangements with birth families which are regularly reviewed increases greater stability for children looked after. Children's identity and sense of belonging can become more established and flourish with good life story input with birth parent, carer and social work practitioner input with the child. Helping birth parents and carers to explore the differences and commonalities between them are important to build upon and create a new foundation and stories for children, as they develop.

Carer support to work with birth parents is crucial to help them protect the children they care for but also to develop empathy and respect for birth parents.

• Life Story work

It is best practice for all children who are to remain in long term care to have Life story work undertaken with them. Life Story work details the child's life history, people in their lives, personal information, stories, achievements etc. to promote their sense of identity and understanding of who they are, where they came from and why things have happened.



• Keeping in touch with family, brothers and sisters

It is important to assess the extent and quality of relationships in a sibling group and for this work to be undertaken early to inform the Permanence Plan for the children. Usually and especially where there is a pre-existing and meaningful relationship, it will be important to seek to maintain sibling relationships within any Permanence Plan, including those where an alternative family placement is sought. A 'Together and Apart' Assessment can be useful to determine the needs and views of individual children within a sibling group.

The impact on separated siblings of losing vital support, a shared history and continuity affects stability in the placement. Permanence decision making needs to ensure that brothers and sisters have good arrangements to promote staying in touch and meeting each other where it is necessary for them to live in different homes with different carers.



The importance of identifying strengths and difficulties in sibling relationships to make appropriate permanent placement decisions is crucial. It is important to ascertain the perceptions and wishes of the child, their family, significant others and foster carers, to assess the shared experience of siblings and the children's individual permanence needs. This involves thorough consideration of issues of gender, race, disability, identity, religion or beliefs.

It is critical to explore issues related to children seeing and staying in touch with their brothers and sisters from the earliest point.

Contact with families when children are separated can be difficult to navigate, however research suggests that when families are engaged from the point of a Family Group Conference and onwards they are far more likely to make contact and become a positive experience for their children whatever the final permanence outcome. Early permanence planning is essential and can increase opportunities for contact between birth families, carers and adopters.



- **Transitions, approving and celebrating children and young people moving to a new home**

It is important that careful planning for children to move to any new home is prioritised. Good direct work to explore anxieties, wishes and hopes will inform the pace and format for introductions. Careful preparation of carers is important to be undertaken in tandem to ensure that they are also prepared to receive and be prepared for different responses and needs of individual children. The Sandwell Family Solutions Team can provide additional support during this period to support and promote consistency and stability for children and carers at a crucial time. Working closely with family members and short-term carers to prepare and plan is important. (www.movingtoadoption.co.uk)

Dependent upon the permanency plan there will need to be an approval of the plan by the Agency Decision Maker, in Sandwell Children's Trust and a celebration to acknowledge the transition and start helping the child or young person to navigate the transition between families and what this means for their identity and sense of belonging.



- **Challenges and opportunities to achieving permanence in Sandwell and what we are doing about it.**

Along with our partners, the Trust has an ambitious transformation programme underpinned by our purpose, ethos and standards.

As a partnership we recognise that there needs to be strong focus on permanence as part of the overall drive to improve the quality of services and practice to children.

As part of the current plan, the Trust has committed to supporting the development of a new locality model to ensure engagement with partners and communities is strengthened and give greater opportunities for children and families to be supported to remain together in their family and community networks. The Early Help Strategy should develop partnership impact to create greater opportunities for children and families to thrive together in Sandwell. This will ensure that children are given every opportunity to live with their families and within their communities.



Reflecting their need to have a sense of belonging and identity which increases their ability to become resilient and improves their life chances.

Access to high quality early intervention services; well managed assessment and permanency planning; a stable and highly skilled workforce and sufficiency of alternative permanent care arrangements are the key factors which underpin the timely achievement of permanency for children and young people. The Trust is working with Sandwell council and wider partners and communities to grow a more united early help strategy that will enhance already available early intervention services. Partner engagement with a permanence focus will assist children and families to have greater opportunities to live together in their communities. Our regional adoption agency partner has enabled a greater focus and drive on adoption for children where this is the child's plan.

Better planning and timely progress is key to supporting good outcomes for children. Workforce stability is a nationally recognised challenge across the sector. Sandwell Children's Trust has developed new social work roles, an enhanced experience for Newly Qualified Social Workers and has introduced a new leadership programme to support new leaders and managers. Leadership roles have been recruited to and provide a well-respected and stable leadership group to guide and lead the new transformation programme of which Permanence is a key priority area.



References

Legal Framework Guiding Practice:

- [Children Act 1989](#)
- [Adoption and Children Act 2002, 2004](#)
- [The Care Planning Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations 2010](#)
- [The Fostering Services Regulations 2011](#)
- [The Special Guardianship Regulations 2005](#)
- [Working Together to Safeguard Children \(2018\)](#)
- [Court orders and pre-proceedings For Local Authorities \(2014\)](#)
- [Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Review \(2015\)](#)

Policy and Procedures Guiding Practice:

- [Achieving Permanence Practice Guidance 2020](#)
- [CoramBAAF, 'Siblings Together or Apart' 2009](#)
- [Public Law Outline \(2014\)](#)
- [UEA Moving to Adoption Model. 2020](#)

Links to Sandwell Children's Trust policy, procedure and guidance

- [Permanence Planning Guidance](#)
- [Thresholds process map](#)
- [CIC Review and permanence process map](#)
- [Child's entry into care process map](#)
- [Recommendations to achieve best practice in the child protection and family justice systems](#)
- [Placement of children with parents](#)

[The above can be accessed through Sandwell's Tri.X page](#)

