

# Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No. 02/15

Date: March 2015

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CYP OSC)

Purpose: In light of a substantive item and report coming to CYP OSC on 25 March 2015 on the sufficiency of placements to meet the needs of Medway's Children in Care and Care Leavers it was agreed at the pre-agenda meeting that this briefing note be prepared ahead of the committee meeting to inform Members of the permanency options for Looked After Children

Author: Jo Cross, Head of Looked After Children and Proceedings Service.

## Permanency Options for Children in Care

- 1.1 Medway Children's Social Care believe that children should be brought up by their birth parents where ever that is safe to do so. We recognise for a small minority of children alternative care will need to be provided. When ever we can we will look to a child's kinship networks to secure alternative care. All our children and young people should be placed with carers who love, support and respect them, and who will do so through their childhood into adolescence and adulthood.
- 1.2 In 2014 the DfE described permanence as;  
  
*"The framework of emotional permanence (attachment), physical permanence (stability) and legal permanence (the carer has parental responsibility for the child) which gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. The objective of permanence is to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond. Permanence provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families; from family support through to adoption. This can include situations where the Local authority and birth parents share PR but where the carer has made a long term commitment to the child".*
- 1.3 Similarly, the Care Inquiry in 2013 stated that permanence for children means;

*“Security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging” They found that this was not necessarily connected to legal status and that no one route to permanence was better than another. The Inquiry also called for a greater recognition for long term foster care and suggested that in formalised arrangements the arrangement could be called foster “parenting” as opposed “caring”.*

- 1.4 In recognising the importance of permanency to children and young people, Medway has a clear, robust and recently revised Permanence Policy which guides and directs our practice in this area.
- 1.5 Where the care plan is for rehabilitation of children in the care system with their birth families or other family or friends under a formal or informal arrangement, the service supports securing legal permanence for our Looked After Children through a range of placement options and planning, which includes adoption, Special Guardianship, and long term foster care.
- 1.6 Whatever the source of permanence for individual children, each option is finalised following a robust assessment of the child’s needs, and decisions are made in tandem with Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), parents/carers where appropriate, and the young person themselves as far as practicable.
- 1.7 There is a monthly Permanence Panel to review and monitor permanence arrangements for children and young people to ensure plans are timely and reduce any drift and delay in securing the best option for that child. The panel is chaired by an off-line Head of Service, and is attended by the Legal, IRO and Adoption and Fostering Services, and the Head of Looked After Children and Proceedings Service.
- 1.8 The panel has a number of roles which support our overall ambition of securing permanence for looked after young people. These include tracking individual cases to ensure timely decisions regarding permanence are made, reviewing cases where a change of permanence plan is required, and reviewing cases where current foster carers are considering taking a Special Guardianship Order on a child placed with them.

## **Adoption**

- 1.9 Medway has a stand alone Adoption Team who undertake a number of roles including family finding for prospective adoptive families and matching for specific children and recruiting and assessing adopters.
- 1.10 The team work closely with their colleagues in the operational social work teams to secure permanent adoptive families for children, and they provide support for adopters when placements are made.

- 1.11 It is anticipated that there will be 44 completed adoptions in the year 2014/15. This compares to 43 completed in the year 2013/14, 26 in 2012/13 and 15 in 2011/12.
- 1.12 The Adoption Team utilise a range of creative options to secure adoptive families for children including Adoption Open Days and the use of specialist family finding agencies.
- 1.13 Each year the DfE publishes a National Scorecard for Adoption showing a range of outcome measures including timeliness of adoptions and the percentage of children adopted.
- 1.14 The timeliness of adoptions is influenced by a number of factors including the length of the court proceedings wherein adoption is agreed as the plan, and the length of time it takes to secure the appropriate family.
- 1.15 The latest Scorecard in 2014 showed that in the 3 years 2011-14, the average length of care proceedings took 54 weeks against a national average of 48. The target across the country is now 26 weeks. In Medway we have made considerable progress with the average length of our care proceedings now being around 28 weeks. This improved timeliness will support the finding of permanent placements for children with adopters where this is the assessed and agreed plan.
- 1.16 Research and practice indicate that some children are harder to place for adoption, including older children, sibling groups and young people with complex needs. In Medway we do well for these children and we are in-line with or out performing nationally in these areas. The most recent Adoption Scorecard showed the considerable progress Medway has made in placing children over 5 for adoption. In the 3 year period 2010-13 2% of children aged 5+ were adopted in Medway compared to 4% nationally. In period 2011-14 however this had increased to 5% in line with the national average.

### **Special Guardianship**

- 1.17 Special Guardianship is a formal court order that was introduced in December 2005, allowing someone other than the parent to assume parental control over a child.
- 1.18 The child lives with the special guardian and they are no longer looked after by the local authority once the order has been made. Orders last until the child is 18. Orders can be sought by foster carers, family members or family friends.
- 1.19 Special Guardianship Orders are often taken by former foster carers who develop a special and particular bond with a child and wish to formalise

that child's place within their family. Medway has a relatively high rate of carers opting for this route.

- 1.20 Where anyone wishes to secure a Special Guardianship Order on a child the Fostering Team undertake a discrete assessment of the carer to ensure that they can provide the level of care and support that the child needs throughout their childhood.
- 1.21 Wherever possible, and depending on the age of the child we seek the wishes and feelings of the child in relation to the planned order.
- 1.22 Medway actively promotes the use of Special Guardianship Orders to secure permanency for children. The Fostering Team are currently undertaking 18 foster carer assessments for prospective Special Guardianship Orders.

## **2. Long term Fostering**

- 2.1 Long term/permanent foster care can offer vital and much needed stability and security for looked after children and young people. It might suit young people where there remain strong links to their birth parents and extended family. Similarly it might be a suitable option for some young people where their emotional and practical needs: often arising from a disability or assessed emotional issue, require significant input from partner agencies and the foster carer has concerns about losing the corporate parenting role and support from the Local Authority.
- 2.2 Long term/permanent foster carers may offer vital stability and security to young people and help them manage and negotiate what can be complex relationships with their birth families.
- 2.3 Where the specific individual needs of a young person mean that adoption or special guardianship is not the appropriate care plan, Medway will always endeavour to secure a long term/permanent foster carer specifically for the young person. In addition we will do this at the earliest possible stage to ensure that young people do not "drift" in placements, especially those of Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers.
- 2.4 Once the permanent long term foster carer has been found and approved the allocated social worker should present the case to the Permanence Panel for approval of the placement.

## **3. Staying Put**

- 3.1 Medway has an up to date Staying Put policy and we actively encourage and support young people to remain with their carers beyond the age of 18.