

## Practice and improvement fund early placement project

**Output 2: Summary of findings from the expert group interviews undertaken in August & September 2016**

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## 1. Introduction

In 2016 the Expert Working Group for Early Permanence conducted interviews with representatives from a number of local authorities leading into wider consultations for Practice Improvement Fund Early Permanence project funded by the DfE's

The ultimate aim of the project is to improve the outcomes for looked after children by driving improvements in the way they are matched and placed and to identify areas of excellent practice in early permanence. The results will be used to inform the project and will be fed back to the cross-organisational expert group on early permanence.

Additional consultations designed to inform this project have included:

- Focus groups with Coram BAAF to inform the design of the good practice guidance;
- Feedback from discussions in the concurrent planning subscription network group hosted by Coram Adoption; and
- An on-line survey of local authorities undertaken by Coram's Impact and Evaluation team.

The findings presented in this report are a summary by theme of the key issues raised from the insights and proposed recommendations only of the interviews completed by the DfE Expert Group on Early Permanence. No additional analysis has been undertaken at this stage; this report only presents the main findings in summary form. Interviews were completed with consultees from:

- Blackburn;
- Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption and Cambridgeshire County Council;
- Essex; Gloucestershire County Council;
- Leeds City Council;
- Lincolnshire;
- Solihull;
- Southwark;
- Sunderland;
- Tri Borough; and
- East Sussex.

The purpose at this stage is to inform the discussions on the further development of the project outputs, in particular the development of the Quality Mark.

The following sections group the feedback from the interviews into a number of key themes with observations from respondents grouped together. The interview schedule asked about both 'insights' and 'recommendations' and these are presented separately here.

## 2. Thematic Analysis

### 2.1. Insights

#### *2.1.1. Education and promoting understanding or permanence*

- Basic awareness needs raising of what permanence means, what the local authority's policies and procedures are (especially for those at the 'front end' of children's services).
- Social workers lacked confidence in assessing and implementing early permanence throughout all teams.
- Social workers were confused about entitlements for carers and roles and responsibilities as supervising social worker for carers.
- Assessing the adopters' capacity to cope with uncertainty is critical but complex.

#### *2.1.2. Internal support mechanisms, team working and commitment*

- Senior level support for early permanence is vital, particularly managers and legal colleagues; they must understand permanence so that they can make the changes required to achieve it.
- Briefing to front-line teams is also essential.
- Champions are the key; people to take the lead and responsibility and be willing to undertake the additional workload required, more work at every stage, more support for carers and social workers and contact workers supporting these placements.
- A supportive culture and joined up teams are crucial.
- As more Early Permanence (EP) placements are completed, the scheme gathers momentum as organisational confidence grows, positive outcomes are evidenced and unexpected benefits emerge. Success becomes self-reinforcing internally.
- Expect teething issues re processes, referrals etc. It takes time, commitment and perseverance to sustain and embed this work. If placements are achieved, the evidence of good outcomes sells the scheme.
- Effective team work between LAs and VAAs and within the LA is needed.

#### *2.1.3. Communication*

- Good communication and liaison between different teams and professionals involved is crucial to success. Having a network of lead contacts across each agency and providing good information is crucial.

#### *2.1.4. Timing*

- Also key was preventing delay and early permanence being achieved.

### ***2.1.5. Approach to adopters***

- It is essential to be honest with applicants/adopters about the task. Similarly, clarity is required on describing what permanence involves.
- One respondent suggested that the title is misleading – Fostering for Adoption suggests Foster carers going on to adopt; and it might make sense to revise this.
- There also needs to be a strong emphasis on the benefits for the child and putting the child first.
- Early permanence is beneficial for older children too.

### ***2.1.6. Planning, systems and tracking***

- Early and robust planning is essential with independent ‘checkpoints’ and flexibility of process.
- Need a whole systems approach – consistency of systems either across RAAs or nationally.
- The importance of rigorous and sustained tracking of babies/children prior to coming into care, at pre-birth or during proceedings, was emphasised by several respondents.
- However well we try to plan, the unexpected happens and we need to be flexible and creative.

### ***2.1.7. Differences/similarities with Fostering for Adoption process***

- Given the rising number of contested adoption hearings, feedback from adopters suggests that their experience is not that different adopting via FFA.

### ***2.1.8. Impact of early permanence***

- One respondent explained that she has observed “some beautiful and well attached relationships as an outcome of early placement, which bodes well for the future”.

## 2.2. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 2.2.1. *Resources, support and training*

- It would be helpful to have more than one worker doing the work.
- High levels of support needed at every stage.
- Train and skill social workers around pre-birth assessment work. Need a rolling agenda of training for all staff.
- Stakeholder engagement across the board. CAFCASS guardians should be as skilled as social workers if they are being asked to make recommendations in the best interests of the child.
- Do training, awareness of outcomes and cultural challenge before you launch. Need senior management commitment with no ambiguity or ambivalence.
- Contact needs careful support and social workers may need encouragement to accept that it can work with Fostering for Adoption or Concurrent Planning carers bringing child to contact, and managing the relationship between all parties.
- Good social worker knowledge on early permanence crucial and confidence in explaining this to adopters including the use of real experiences from adopters.
- Specific early permanence support groups for carers who take on such placements.
- Development of good quality additional training for EP adopters which incorporate an experimental element.
- Support from senior management and ADM.
- Investing time in buying a quality service is expensive, and the more children placed, the more it costs. In-house placements would be cheaper – but less child centred and effective. There is however a perverse incentive re costs which needs to be addressed.
- Even the DfE interagency reimbursement grant scheme potentially discriminated against the early placement of vulnerable children who did not qualify for a grant unless disabled, in a sib group or BME.

### 2.2.2. *Legal/judicial issues*

- Fostering for Adoption does pre-empt the decision of the court – for all the right reasons - to avoid delay and changes of placements. Important to raise awareness in court system of legislative powers of LAs through regulation 25a.
- Role of legal services is important; it is crucial to have the legal team on board.
- Ensure you have strong links to legal services to enable children to be tracked from the earliest point.
- Clear policy and procedures needed for those specific carers who have early permanence placements in terms of entitlements and statutory responsibilities of supervising social worker.
- Use your Family Justice Board to ensure that all agencies are on board with the proposal.

### ***2.2.3. System impacts***

- Make sure the system is designed to generate as much accurate information as is possible as soon as the child is identified; treat this aspect of the adoption no less thoroughly than you would normally.
- Ensure you have good systems to manage referrals and assessments and work hard to embed processes.
- Develop a network of key link advisors and use the IROs and the permanence panels to drive up quality.
- Largely removes the need for matching panels; if a child is already placed with a family how likely is the panel not to approve?
- Make sure that the Matching Panel is on board and understands dual approval and early identification of children and the panel role
- Working with VAAs has many advantages – they provide an independent service which creates confidence and manage contact which is a very sensitive area. VAAs recruit carers, provide high levels of support and facilitate contact.

### ***2.2.4. Approach to adopters***

- Need robust questioning of motivation and resilience of prospective adopters at their approval panel.
- We need adopters who are flexible and able to accept children with health uncertainties as well as with legal risk factors.