



**SWAC RESOURCE:
REUNIFICATION FRAMEWORK**

Introduction

If an early permanence placement is terminated because the Local Authority or the court make a decision that the child should return to the birth parents or an alternative placement is in the child's best interests, it will be essential that this is properly planned and that the carers and the child receive support on an on-going basis to help them recover from the loss and grief that they will inevitably experience.

Prospective adopters entering into an early permanence placement will inevitably be hoping that the child remains with them, and adoption is the final outcome, but experience tells us that there will be a number of cases where the child will be returned to the care of either a birth parent or family member. Early permanence foster carers may have been told that the Local Authority has reached the view that adoption should be the plan for the child, but must also be aware that there can be changes or challenges that emerge during the placement. Where circumstances then change following the early permanence placement being made, early permanence foster carers will need significant support to manage changing contact arrangements where further assessments are then ordered by the court for birth parents or family members, and particularly if the care plan then changes to support the child's return to their birth family. In particular, there should be an awareness of the need to support the early permanence foster carers in enabling a positive transition for the child whilst managing their own feelings.

Objective 1: Social Workers will feel supported and be able to support Early Permanence foster carers when a child is reunified with their birth family or other identified carer.

Objective 2: Early Permanence foster carers will be supported when a child is reunified with their birth family or other identified carer.

The framework is in three phases:

- Stage 1: Preparing for the move
- Stage 2: Making the move
- Stage 3: Supporting relationships after the move

When a parent is determined to be reunited with their child as soon as possible, there may be limited time to plan and prepare comprehensively. Therefore, an outline of the minimum necessary to support the transition is provided, and all parties must be mindful of the need to progress the transition at the child's pace, in order to minimise trauma to the child.

This framework has been created with reference to best practice identified in the UEA Moving to Adoption model.

Stage 1: Preparing for the move

Stage 1 refers to a period of time after the decision has been made, by the local authority or the court, that the child should return to the parents, or an alternative placement match, and the permanence placement is terminated.

Key principles:

- Opportunities for the early permanence foster carers and the parents/identified new carer to build a positive relationship should be promoted at an early stage in the moving process, since this can help the success of the move.
- Supporting the early permanence foster carers, in order to achieve as smooth a transition for the child as possible, should be initiated as soon as reunification is identified as the plan for the child.

The plan should be individualised to take into account the specific needs of the child. The age of the child is one factor, but each child will be different. For example, some babies will take longer than others to comfortably accept all caregiving routines from a different care giver, even if the main carer is their parent or known family member. An older child who has been with an early permanence/foster family for some time may need several months to process their losses and adjust to the realities of the new family life, or be ready to move more quickly in some cases.

Planning some face-to-face contact between the early permanence /foster carers and the parents/new carer and providing opportunities for them to try to develop trust in each other and begin the process of working together to support the child through the move, will be beneficial for all parties longer term.



Planning must be sensitive to the needs and circumstances of the early permanence foster carers and parents/new carer. Geography, personal characteristics, additional responsibilities and the needs of other family members are all important considerations. Adoption, fostering and Children's Social Workers can ensure that important issues are taken into account for their respective families, but they may also need to promote co-operation and help the two families to understand each other's needs and perspectives.

Local Authority agreement on funding for and provision of counselling for the early permanence foster carers should be obtained at an early stage and needs to be available from the time a decision for reunification is made.

Allowing time, within the plan, for rest and reflection can be important for the adults to process emotionally charged events.

Checklist

To do	Rationale	Responsibility
Transition planning meeting	To ensure all stakeholders have input into the plan and that it meets the needs of the three key stakeholders (child/parents/EP foster carers)	Child's Social Worker
Communicate transition plan		Child's Social Worker
Confirm contact arrangements as part of plan		Child's Social Worker
Plan face-to-face contact between the EP foster carers and the parent(s)/new carer	To provide opportunities to try to develop trust in each other and begin the process of working together to support the child through the move	Child's Social Worker/R&A Social Worker
Draft the EP carer support plan		R&A Social Worker



Stage 2: Making the move

Stage 2 covers the period of more intensive visits and contacts that culminate in the child's official move back to their parents or new carer.

Key principles:

All arrangements and timescales should focus on the needs of the child.

The child's feelings about the move should be held in mind and responded to sensitively.

There should be flexibility in the planning, in consultation with the child, the families and the Social Workers, to allow for emerging circumstances and needs.

It is important to ensure that early permanence foster carers, parents and professionals are observing and thinking about the child's emotional state and taking note of how they are expressing or not expressing their feelings. Hold in mind that children do not always show their feelings directly. Ensure that there are opportunities to communicate the full range of children's feelings within the professional network.

Help early permanence foster carers to expect and manage signs of anxiety and uncertainty in the child. Encourage them to work together. Initially, the early permanence foster carer might need to step forward to comfort the child. Further on in the plan, the early permanence foster carer might remain available but support the parents or new carer to provide comfort.

Be prepared to slow the pace of the visits if there are signs of the child's distress. The child may need time to have their feelings acknowledged and understood by their trusted adults, before being able to progress towards the move. In some cases, the plan may be monitored on a daily basis, with inbuilt flexibility according to the child's emotional progress.

The early permanence foster carers or child may be having concerns about the plan or the move. Good teamwork in the professional network is essential to ensure that these are responded to appropriately and sensitively. The Social Workers should ensure that they can have separate conversations with the early permanence foster carers and parents at key points during Stage 2. Difficult issues can be hard to discuss in the presence of others.

An interim planning review is an important element of the process in Stage 2. This should draw together the perspectives of all members of the team around the child (and the child themselves as appropriate). There should be a clear focus on the emotional wellbeing of the child.

Checklist

To-do's	Rationale's	Responsibility's
Review child's response to changes and amend plan accordingly (if required)	To achieve the first key principle of focusing on the needs of the child.	Child's Social Worker's
Review transition plan	To achieve the third key principle of allowing flexibility and allowing for emerging needs.	Child's Social Worker's
Drafting the EP carer support plan	Meeting objective 2	R&A Social Worker's
An interim planning review	Meeting objectives 1 & 2	Child's Social Worker's

Stage 3: Supporting relationships after the move

Stage 3 of the framework covers the period from the return day through to the first statutory review.

Key principles:

Some continuity of early permanence (foster) family relationship will support the child in managing the loss of the foster family and building trust in the birth family.

The child's feelings about the move should be held in mind and responded to sensitively.

There should be flexibility in the planning, in consultation with the child, the families and the Social Workers, to allow for emerging circumstances and need.

The early permanence foster carers will need to be supported, at the right time for them, to manage the transition and life beyond the child's return to their family/an alternative carer.

For early permanence foster carers, Stage 3 involves letting go of their role of providing secure base caregiving for the child, whilst also supporting the child's growing trust in their family/new carer. This process is likely to create mixed feelings for early permanence foster carers and their family members. There will be pleasure and satisfaction in seeing the child settle in their original family, but at the same time, a sense of grief and a need to mourn the loss of the child.

Reunification from an early permanence placement can be isolating for the carers, who may feel set apart from other carers who have gone on to adopt their children. The carers may feel they have to pull away from other early permanence carers, who can find the situation too anxiety-provoking. The carers can lose not only the child but their support network of other early permanence carers.

Early permanence foster carers will need sensitive support from their Social Worker, including encouragement for all family members to acknowledge their feelings, and find ways of talking about them.



The early permanence foster carers will also need to be supported, at the right time for them, in thinking about their future plans to adopt. Some carers have chosen to take a second early permanence placement; others choose to return to the 'traditional' route; and for some they may feel, at least at this time, that they do not wish to pursue a further placement. However, there may be a strong desire for another placement very quickly, and while this might be helpful in some cases, it is important for the Social Worker to feel confident that all family members are ready to provide physical and emotional availability and respond sensitively to a new child in the family.

Checklist

To do	Rationale	Responsibility
Review child's response to changes and amend plan accordingly (if required)	To achieve the first key principle of focusing on the needs of the child.	Child's Social Worker
Reviewing the EP carer support plan	Meeting objective 2	R&A Social Worker
EP carer feedback survey link provided		R&A Social Worker
EP carer support initiated.		R&A Social Worker
Discussing future adoption plans		R&A Social Worker

Reunification plan minimum requirements

When a parent is determined to be reunited with their child as soon as possible, or where a parent request the return of a previously relinquished child*, there may be limited time to plan and prepare. Therefore, an outline of the minimum necessary to support the transition is provided, and all parties must be mindful of the need to progress the transition at the child's pace, in order to minimise, as far as possible, trauma for the child.

* If the parent(s) request the child's return from an early permanence placement, then the LA is expected to return the child within **seven** days. If the child has been 'placed for adoption' following Section 19 consent, the child must be returned to their birth parents within **14** days.

Key principles:

- Opportunities for the early permanence foster carers and the parent(s)/identified new carer to build a positive relationship should be promoted where possible, since this can help the success of the move.
- Some continuity of early permanence (foster) family relationship will support the child in managing the loss of the foster family and building trust in the birth family.
- All arrangements and timescales should focus on the needs of the child.
- The child's feelings about the move should be held in mind and responded to sensitively.
- There should be flexibility in the planning, in consultation with the child, the families and the Social Workers, to allow for emerging circumstances and need.

The focus will be on stage two of the framework and the period of intensive visits and contacts that culminate in the child's official move back to their parent(s).

There should be a clear focus on the emotional wellbeing of the child.

Early permanence foster carers will need sensitive support from their Social Worker and all family members to acknowledge their feelings, and to find ways of coping.

Checklist

To do	Rationale	Responsibility
Transition planning meeting	To ensure all stakeholders have input into the plan and that it meets the needs of the three key stakeholders (child/parents/EP carers)	Child's Social Worker
Communicate transition plan to all parties	For the EP carers and the parents/identified new carer to build a positive relationship	Child's Social Worker/R&A Social Worker
Confirm contact arrangements to all parties, as part of plan		Child's Social Worker
Review child's response to changes and amend plan accordingly (if required)	To achieve the first key principle of focusing on the needs of the child.	Child's Social Worker
Draft the EP carer support plan		R&A Social Worker
Commence EP carer support	To enable feelings of both satisfaction and grief to be expressed and supported.	R&A Social Worker
Case review	To learn from what has taken place, both good and any suboptimal practice.	Child's Social Worker/R&A Social Worker/Family Finding team lead

Case review

After the placement has ended, a multi-agency professionals' review meeting should be held, to review what has taken place from start to end, so learning from what has taken place, both good practice and where this may not have been the case can be included in guidance and practice going forward.



