



Adoption
England

regional adoption agencies working together

National Practice Standards for Early Permanence

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early permanence

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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce the National Early Permanence Standards designed as part of our national programme of work to promote the need for greater consistency and opportunity for children to access the benefits of early permanence, regardless of where they live in England.

Early Permanence is a child-centred practice that offers stability at a very early stage, preventing multiple moves and the associated trauma of separation from and loss of attachment figures, until a court has reached a decision about the final care plan for a child. The need for good quality care planning for children and twin tracking to prevent delay is crucial. We have listened and learned from several sources and, whilst the terminology to describe the approach has changed over time, preparation and support for parents and carers is vital for better meeting the needs of children.

Our key aim is for the standards to be used as a tool to enable local authorities, regional adoption agencies and voluntary adoption agencies to progress and secure consistency and coherence in the early permanence offer to children within their governance and partnership arrangements.

I wish to thank the Coram Centre for Early Permanence for leading in the design and development work in close association with the National Working Group for Early Permanence and representatives including ADCS and CVAA, RAA leaders and the contributions from parents, carers, lawyers and practitioners who gave their time generously.

I welcome and endorse the standards and invite you to embed them in your governance, partnerships, planning and practice of early permanence.

Sarah Johal MBE
National Adoption Strategic Lead



Introduction

The Early Permanence Sector Standards have been developed through the need to set out good practice arising from the statutory provision in legislation including the Children and Families Act 2014, and the associated amended Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2013.

The standards have been commissioned by the National Early Permanence Working Group sitting as part of the RAA Leaders Child's Journey Workstream. They have been developed by the Coram Centre for Early Permanence in consultation with key stakeholders and in discussion with multiple agencies. The national picture shows significant variation in implementation of early permanence for children who may have an adoption outcome.

The National Adoption Strategy¹ cites sector standard setting as a mechanism for improving delivery in early permanence services, with an aim to achieve consistency and coherence in approach across the country.

The evaluation of regional adoption agencies final report² highlights the perceptions of carers, practitioners, and leaders in practising early permanence as a continuing area of challenge. This includes navigating the legal and support systems it requires, while confirming commitment to early permanence for its benefits to children.

Footnotes

- 1 Adoption strategy (publishing.service.gov.uk)
- 2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

Key purpose

The purpose is to promote and shape effective early permanence practice systems across LAs, RAAs and VAAs to:



Achieve child-centred practice in matching.



Enable more children to benefit from early permanence.



Promote effective working partnerships across agencies.



Help standardise practice guidance and outcomes in delivery across agencies.



Promote confidence and informed delivery of early permanence.



Be used as a dynamic tool to organise and strengthen local arrangements.

Implementation and governance

The EP standards are a framework to guide good practice and standardisation across all agencies. The implementation and governance arrangements for EP

practice should be developed locally across regional partnerships. The standards will be reviewed to incorporate experience of their use and any new sector changes.

National Practice Standards for Early Permanence



Standard 1

Principles underpinning effective delivery of early permanence to children who may be adopted.

S1. All professionals, including practitioners, managers and leaders across organisations take active responsibility to ensure the effective delivery of early permanence in their area.

- 1.1 The child's welfare throughout their life will be the paramount consideration in care planning, and their wishes and feelings, needs and best interests kept at the centre of all decision making.
- 1.2 Early permanence is considered for all children as early as possible in the care planning process where adoption is believed to be a potential outcome in line with statutory duty (s22c (9B) (c) Care Planning and Placement Review Regulations 2010).
- 1.3 A child is placed with EP carers who can meet their immediate needs and who also have the potential to adopt them as early as possible in their care journey, giving them the opportunity to form secure attachments and achieve their best long-term outcomes
- 1.4 All children, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Children, brothers and sisters and children with specific developmental needs and of different ages are given the opportunity to benefit from, and are supported through early permanence.
- 1.5 LAs/RAAs/VAs draw on the knowledge of people closest to the child including family and carers to gain a full picture of their early life experience, support and cultural needs and ensure that this is shared to assist care planning for the child.
- 1.6 All agencies (LAs, RAAS, VAs, CAFCASS, Courts, and IROs) work in partnership to secure the best interests of the child in accordance with their roles and responsibilities.
- 1.7 The legal and human rights status of the child's family is recognised and respected throughout the early permanence process and they are given information and support to enable the child to be returned to their care wherever possible.
- 1.8 Opportunities for the child to keep in touch with family members and significant people is promoted wherever possible and recognised as key to the life-long wellbeing of the child.
- 1.9 The child is protected from the emotional uncertainty around placement decisions and potential court outcomes. The uncertainty is managed by the adults involved in caring for the child, with robust support for early permanence carers.

Standard 2

Effective early care planning and use of legal processes is achieved in early permanence.

S2. **All professionals, including practitioners, managers and leaders across organisations actively work together to secure best outcomes for the child.**

- 2.1 LAs work in partnership with their RAAs/VAAAs to ensure they have clear pathways for early permanence and that these are communicated effectively throughout the LA and all relevant agencies.
- 2.2 LAs ensure that timely viability assessments of suitable people within the family network are carried out with full regard to the needs of the child, and where paternity is unclear or disputed there should be prompt access to paternity testing services.
- 2.3 All organisations and individuals empowered by statutory duty, work together to ensure early permanence placements are available and supported; including Adoption Agencies, approval panels, children's SWs and Contact Workers, IROs, Legal advisers, LA Agency Decision Makers, CAFCASS and Court Professionals.
- 2.4 The Local Authority and RAA have clear planning mechanisms and information sharing procedures in place to identify children who will benefit from early permanence from the early stages of the PLO process.
- 2.5 Information about early permanence is provided to the child's parents and family members in a timely, clear and accessible format tailored to individual family needs.
- 2.6 The potential for different outcomes for the child as part of twin tracking (a return to family or adoption) and the primacy of the final court decision is communicated effectively to and understood by all.
- 2.7 Tailored intervention plans including emotional and practical support for all parties are in place to enable reunification home if identified as a safe and secure outcome for the child.
- 2.8 Where early permanence is considered for an unborn child, pre-birth conferencing sets out a clear multiagency plan leading up to and after birth, including information and support to the parents and, by consent, other family members.
- 2.9 Where the LA is approached to facilitate a consensual adoption, an early permanence placement is considered. Consent from all holding parental responsibility is sought in line with legal provisions and use of Section 19 is considered as early as possible if clarity is needed.
- 2.10 LAs/RAAs/VAAAs work together to provide multiagency training and have information sharing mechanisms in place to promote best practice in early permanence.

Standard 3

Preparing and enabling early permanence carers to undertake the caring duties involved in early permanence.

S3. **Agencies recognise the challenges of early permanence for EP carers and robustly support them to undertake this role.**

- 3.1 Early permanence is integrated into RAA and VAA adopter recruitment strategies from initial enquiry onwards.
- 3.2 All prospective adopters are encouraged to learn about and be open to early permanence, whilst understanding that if during assessment it becomes clear this is not the most appropriate route for them, they can opt out at any time.
- 3.3 The RAA takes responsibility for ensuring local sufficiency of early permanence carers to meet the needs of the children likely to require early permanence placements.
- 3.4 Robust preparation and training are provided to EP carers (in addition to core adoption training) covering; the benefits for children, the legal process and role of all involved professionals, the full nature of their role as foster carers and all potential outcomes. This training is delivered by experienced professionals and includes previous EP carers.
- 3.5 EP carers are supported to understand and respect the legal and human rights involved in early permanence and to have empathy with the parents and family's circumstances throughout the process whatever the final permanence outcome.
- 3.6 EP carers are informed and supported to see the benefits for the child of meeting and maintaining a relationship with their parents, family and friends, wherever this is safe and possible to do so.
- 3.7 EP carers are helped to understand the complex nature of their role and that during proceedings they act as foster carers for the child with no additional rights accorded to their approved adopter status.
- 3.8 EP carer's supervision, support and advice needs are fully recognised by the LA and RAA/ VAA and responded to in a timely and sensitive manner throughout the early permanence process. EP carers have access to named social workers, as well as mentoring, peer support groups/ networks.
- 3.9 Where the court decides the outcome for the child is reunification to their family, EP carers are kept informed and are supported and enabled to contribute to a successful transition home.
- 3.10 Where a Placement Order is granted, and a formal match agreed at panel, the changed status of the EP carers to an adoptive family with parental responsibility is supported by social workers sensitive to this transition.

Standard 4

Children are matched with suitable early permanence carers.

S4. **Effective systems operate to place children with early permanence carers who can meet their immediate needs and have the potential to adopt should this be the final outcome of proceedings.**

INITIAL MATCH (placing with EP carers as foster carers)

- 4.1 An early permanence placement is sought that reflects the child's current and anticipated future needs (including permanency), based on the information available at that time.
- 4.2 The LA's Nominated Officer is fully trained and supported to work with the legal responsibilities and care duties involved in early permanence. When considering individual children, they are fully briefed on the immediate and perceived longer-term needs of the child and have all the information relating to the early permanence carer to authorise a suitable match.
- 4.3 Procedures are in place for timely decisions to be made in regard to Reg. 25a approvals as temporary foster carers (Reg. 25A Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regs. 2010).
- 4.4 Race, culture, religion and language of the child are considered in relation to the child's needs to belong and for continued identity development when choosing EP carers.
- 4.5 The health and development needs of the child both in the immediate term and in the future are considered when placing the child in an EP placement.
- 4.6 A child is placed with EP carers who work in partnership with the LA to fully implement the care plan, including reunification should this be the final outcome.

FORMAL ADOPTION MATCH (Panel & ADM decision)

- 4.7 Adoption Panel Members have access to training on early permanence and understand that the decision to recommend a match of the child with their EP carers must be considered as robustly as all other matching decisions.
- 4.8 Evidence of the quality of care to the child in the early permanence fostering phase must be weighed alongside the EP carer's capacity to provide a secure and loving home throughout the child's life into adulthood. The merits of placing a child with the EP carers they are currently living with are actively balanced against any identified shortfalls and their significance to the long-term wellbeing of the child.

- 4.9 The Adoption Support Plan should include information on the child's current and anticipated development needs and how these will be met in the future. It should be recognised that whilst EP can improve a child's journey through care it cannot reverse harmful experiences and all adopted children face significant developmental challenges.
- 4.10 The matching decision fully takes into account the child's on-going need to understand their own life story and their needs to maintain significant relationships.
- 4.11 The formal adoption matching process rigorously explores that the child's early permanence carers may or may not be the best adoption permanency match, balancing the child's need for stability and continuing relationships.



Standard 5

The engagement of family members important to the child.

S5. **All services ensure that the child's family is actively supported to engage with the early permanence plan.**

- 5.1 The changes required of the child's family to promote reunification are clearly communicated and set out in an agreed plan including timeframes, assessment, and review procedures.
- 5.2 The child's family is actively supported to make the changes to their parenting set out in the care plan, and tailored interventions are put in place to enable potential reunification with their child.
- 5.3 Parents are fully helped to understand what an early permanence placement is, and its benefit to their child. The role of the early permanence carers, contact supervisors, social workers and other professionals involved are clearly explained to the child's parents and family.
- 5.4 The child's parents/family are supported to take part in family time/contact. Family time supervision arrangements are facilitated by professionals who have an understanding of early permanence.
- 5.5 Practitioners communicate openly and respectfully with parents and others with parental responsibility, giving clear and honest progress information about the placement and the legal position in a clear and timely manner, and family rights to legal representation are explained.
- 5.6 All agencies and individuals working with the family support them to understand that the court makes the final decision on what is best for the child and helps prepare them for either outcome (reunification or adoption).
- 5.7 Family members are informed and consulted appropriately at all stages of the care process and supported to access independent counselling and advocacy.
- 5.8 Where the court outcome is an adoption plan the child's family is helped to cope with their grief and loss, and fully supported to contribute to their child's life story and fulfil post adoption arrangements to maintain relationships.

Standard 6

Maintaining significant relationships to support continuity for the child.

S6. **Practitioners, managers and leaders actively enable the child to maintain significant relationships throughout the care journey and into the future.**

- 6.1 The value to the child of maintaining significant relationships throughout an evolving life story is acknowledged by all involved in EP care planning and given due recognition in working practices.
- 6.2 Early Permanence carers are trained and helped to understand their role in supporting family time visits including meeting the parents when safe and possible to do so, and know who to contact should any issues arise.
- 6.3 Family time arrangements should be in the child's best interests and communicated clearly to EP carers and the family. Everyone should be clear of expectations on them including basic care responsibilities around family time, present giving, confidentiality etc.
- 6.4 Professionals supervising family time understand the value of direct and meaningful family time and are trained in early permanence, including managing the sensitivities of handovers between carers and family members and positive handling of the likely emotional anxieties.
- 6.5 When considering the use of digital technology (for example platforms for virtual meetings) for family time, LAs take into account emerging evidence for best working practices.
- 6.6 Where an EP carer goes on to adopt the child, they are supported to consider the benefits of, and promote significant relationships for the child.

Standard 7

Court outcomes result in the Child's reunification with family.

S7. Reunification of the child with their parent, family member or connected person.

- 7.1 Where the court (or LA) decides reunification should be the plan for the child the change of focus should guide all practice.
- 7.2 Multiagency working continues to inform the process of care planning for the child's return home. This will include consideration of transitions for the child from EP carers to parents/ family member, and support needs of all, with the child's needs given primacy.
- 7.3 The LA and the RAA/VAA work in partnership to create a reunification plan which complies with the requirements of court, best interests of the child and works in partnership with the EP Carers and parents.
- 7.4 Where reunification plans prior to final hearing is agreed, the child's parents and family understand that on-going assessment of their parenting will be used to inform final evidence at court.
- 7.5 The LA, RAA/VAA have a duty and responsibility to keep all parties informed of the process of the child's transition out of the early permanence placement and family members are actively consulted and supported during the reunification planning process.
- 7.6 The reunification process enables early permanence carers to support the child's transition and to contribute to the child's life story.
- 7.7 The emotional impact on EP carers of supporting a child through the reunification process should be recognised and opportunity provided to process their feelings of loss. The EP carers should have access to a named support worker, and opportunity for independent counselling where required.
- 7.8 Where there are other children in either the child's family or the EP carer's family, active consideration is given to their support needs in relation to reunification and any future contact arrangements.

Standard 8

Delivering an effective organisational strategy for early permanence.

S8. Senior and Operational leaders influence and drive change for effective delivery of early permanence for children.

- 8.1 LA/RAA leaders ensure all professionals in their services understand the legal duty to consider early permanence for any child where adoption is being considered.
- 8.2 LA/RAA/VAA Leaders and managers show drive and commitment to providing quality early permanence placements for all children identified as benefitting from one. They ensure systems are in place to achieve this.
- 8.3 LAs include a clear vision for early permanence within their overall permanence strategy which includes multiagency working and the roles that key partners will play. This EP strategy vision should be reviewed annually as part of the wider permanence plan and communicated to all stakeholders.
- 8.4 Organisational strategies recognise the need for effective multiagency arrangements across legal, health, frontline, court, and specialist services to deliver early permanence and leaders promote networking and effective communication between partners.
- 8.5 Leaders and managers across the LA/RAA/VAA ensure that comprehensive data gathering and impact evaluation systems are in place and used to inform and promote effective early permanence practice.
- 8.6 Leaders promote a learning culture within their own organisations and partnerships. This culture should be committed to on-going improvement across and within all the services involved in delivering early permanence to consistently provide the best outcomes for children.
- 8.7 LA/RAA/VAA Leaders should nominate a network of Early Permanence Champions who hold the knowledge and experience to advise, support, and forge positive working practice and training across teams and in collaboration with partnership organisations.
- 8.8 Leaders promote best practice and consider the use of the National Early Permanence Quality Mark process to audit and drive early permanence development.



Glossary of terms as used in the standards

Adopters – approved adopters who have a child placed with them under a Placement Order.

Adoption Support Plan refers to the requirement to ensure each child has a clear and updated support plan to enable their wellbeing and specific support needs to be met throughout the early and ongoing phases of their development.

Approval Panel refers to the Adoption Approval and Fostering/Permanence Panel process with a formal role to make recommendations on carer approval and matching.

Care planning – Local authority process of childcare planning including a twin track plan. Local Authority (LA) public body with responsibility for the child where adoption is a possible outcome of care planning.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) is a statutory agency that represents children in family court cases in England and advises the family courts about what is safe for children and in their best interests.

Consensual adoption – where a parent approaches the LA to ask for their child to be adopted, as opposed to the LA removing a child against a parents wishes under care proceedings.

Contact Workers are those assigned in relation to family link visits and contact to act as supervisors and promote and oversee the contact plans and arrangements.

Digital technology – the use of virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other social media platforms and the accompanying digital hardware needed to use these such as smart phones, laptops, home computers and tablets.

Early Permanence (EP) is an umbrella term covering concurrency and fostering for adoption placements. Both retain the potential for a child to be reunified with their family depending on specific care plans and circumstances and the outcome of the final court decision.

EP Carers – Approved adopters and approved as foster carers (whether by dual approval mechanisms or Reg 25a).

Family Court (the Court) has jurisdiction in England to issue a Placement Order for a child and deals with all family law matters in relation to children and families.

Family time – contact sessions for the child and parents/ family during proceedings.

Formal Adoption Match - After a court Placement Order is granted and when an Adoption Panel formally considers whether the proposed adopters are a suitable life-long match for the child.

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a registered social worker with an independent role of the LA to monitor care plans to meet the child's current needs, listen and advocate with and for the child and conduct regular reviews.

Initial Match – When the child is linked with the EP carers for the fostering phase.

LA Agency Decision Maker is a senior manager of the Local Authority who makes an independent decision as to whether a proposed care plan is the right decision for the child and considers recommendations from but is independent of the adoption and fostering/permanency panel.

Legal Advisers refers to the Local Authority solicitors providing legal advice to the service.

Legal and Human Rights refers to the wider platform of the Human Rights Act and European Convention on Human Rights as relevant to the UK and Family Law.

Local Authority (LA) is a public body with responsibility for the child where adoption is a possible outcome of care planning.

Maintaining significant relationships – post adoption contact (direct or indirect).

National Early Permanence Quality Mark – an independent sector led award mechanism to facilitate consistency and coherence in best practices in early permanence across the sector.

Nominated person – individual given the authority by the Director of Children's services to authorise temporary foster care approval to approved adopters for a named child. It is expected to be a social worker with good understanding of care planning, including adoption and fostering, and could be the Adoption Agency Decision Marker.

Parents – The child's legal parents.

Public Law Outline (PLO) is the legislative framework within which child proceedings must be dealt with including pre-proceeding duties. It can be the early point where alternative family members are identified as carers for the child with a duty on the Local Authority to undertake viability assessments.

Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is an agency providing adoption services with and on behalf of multiple local authorities within a geographic region across the country.

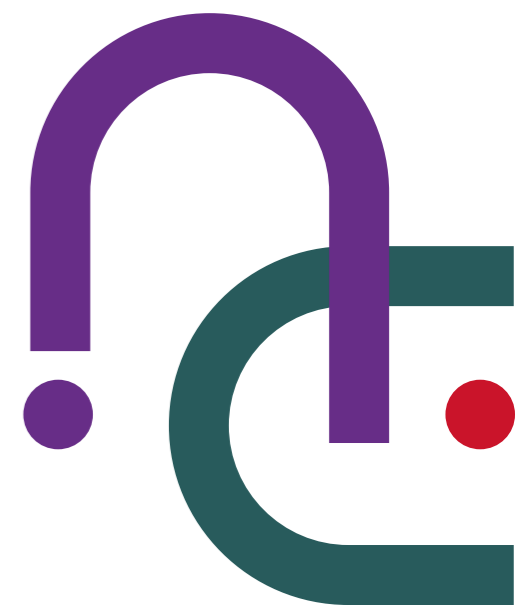
Reunification – when the child is returned from the Early Permanence placement to live with their family.

Section 19 – The LA can make an application under Part 19 of the Family Procedure Rules 2010 for guidance on how to proceed in practice matters relating to family proceedings.

Significant people in the child's life, may be extended relatives, neighbours and friends, connected to the child.

Twin-Tracking – an established care planning process where adoption plans are progressed at the same time as pursuing other options for children.

Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) is a registered independent agency providing adoption services and works in partnership with local authorities and regional adoption agencies.





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