**Long-Term Fostering**

**Practice Guidance**

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**About This Document**

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1. **Introduction**

**Permanence Policy Statement**

Every child and young person has a right to a safe and secure future, and Essex County Council is committed to achieving the stability and security of permanence for every child in its care. For those children who need to remain in care long-term, fostering can provide a valued and secure route to permanence.

A long-term foster placement means an arrangement made by the responsible authority for the child to be placed with a foster carer where all the following conditions apply:

The child’s plan for permanence is foster care and this is recorded in the child’s care (life) plan;

The foster carer has agreed to act as the child’s foster carer until the child ceases to be looked after; and,

1. The responsible authority has confirmed the nature of the arrangement to the foster carer, birth parents and the child.

*The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015*

Therefore, long-term fostering is likely to be an appropriate plan where all or most of the following factors apply:

* Primary need is for a stable, loving family environment whilst there is still a significant level of continued involvement with the birth family
* Child has a clear sense of identity with the birth family, whilst needing to be looked after away from home
* There is need for continuing oversight and monitoring of the child's developmental progress
* Birth parents are able and willing to exercise a degree of parental responsibility in the best interests of the child or young person, and return home remains a potential option for the future

A long-term foster placement should provide for a child’s current needs and likely future needs, with assessment that the long-term foster carer has capacity and is willing to continue to do so. This policy and practice guidance document sets out the way in which we assess, plan and support long-term foster placements for children who need to remain in care, and whose plan for permanence has been determined as long-term fostering.

Where the permanence plan for the child is long-term foster care the current short-term foster placement may be assessed to meet the long-term needs of the child. Alternatively, a new placement will need to be identified for the child, following an assessment and matching process.

1. **Assessment & Planning**

The decision to seek a long-term foster placement for a child in care must be made by the Children & Families Service Manager and endorsed by the statutory review.

Where the child is in an existing foster care placement, usually for more than 12 months, consideration should be given to whether this foster placement should become the long-term foster placement. The wishes and views of the child and the foster carer will be the paramount consideration at this stage. Such a proposal should be considered through the statutory review process, taking into account the existing relationship between the child and the foster carer, and the child’s relationships with the foster carer’s wider family and community. Consideration should also be given to the progress the child has made in the placement, recorded through the statutory review process.

Where the child is in an existing foster care placement which is not suitable to be the long-term placement, the reasons for this decision should be clearly communicated to the foster carer, and the child where it is appropriate to their age and understanding. A long-term placement search should take place, informed by the assessment of the child’s needs.

The assessment and planning process for long-term foster care should address the child’s current needs and likely future needs, and the capacity of the foster carer to meet these needs now and in the future. The length of placement will vary according to the child’s age and the long-term plan for the child, including the likelihood of reunification in the future and/or transition to adulthood. These factors must all be considered in planning for support and services where long-term foster care has been identified as the plan for permanence for a child.

**The support and services which will be needed to ensure that the placement remains stable, secure and meets the child’s needs should be identified** taking into account the carer’s previous fostering or other childcare experience, family configuration (including placement of other children under fostering arrangements), existing relationship with the child, knowledge, skills, and capacity to care for the child long term under a fostering arrangement.

The assessment and planning process may be enhanced through consultation with a Mental Health Coordinator, or the Therapeutic Fostering Team; in particular to reflect upon the child’s needs, areas of consideration within the matching assessment, and to identifying future support needs.

It is imperative that the foster carer fully understands and explicitly agrees to the long-term commitment they are making to the child. A record of the discussion of these matters including the outcome should be made as part of the assessment process.

1. **Decision Making**

It is important to recognise that decision making about long-term foster care, and the permanency of any fostering arrangement will be a significant and emotive issue for the child, the prospective long-term carer and the parent(s) or others with parental responsibility. Discussion and decision-making must therefore be sensitive to the individual needs, wishes and circumstances of the child. For some children and young people, an explicit assurance of the security of their foster placement, and their relationship with their foster carers, will be hugely important. Other children and young people, who maintain close links with their birth family, may feel compromised by this explicit recognition of a long-term commitment, and may experience a sense of loss or conflicted loyalty, not conducive to placement stability. For this group of children and young people there will be discretion to keep the matching consideration low-key. However, the assessment and decision on long-term matching should still be made.

The suitability of the identified foster placement to be the long-term placement for the child will be decided by a Fostering Decision Maker, based on detailed information addressing the areas identified above. The decision maker will consider the suitability of the ‘match’ between the child’s current and future needs and the capacity of the foster carer(s) to meet these needs now, and in the future. **The support and services which will be needed to ensure that the placement remains stable, secure, and meets the child’s needs into the future should also be identified and the decision maker will consider whether this is appropriate.**

Where it is agreed that the placement will become the long-term placement, this should be communicated clearly, in writing, to the child (when appropriate), the foster carer, the child’s parents or any other person who is not a parent but has parental responsibility.

Children and young people who want explicit recognition of this decision will have the opportunity to choose how this is marked; for example, a matching certificate can be provided; a formal celebration; an opportunity to meet with the decision maker; a gathering of those people and professionals important to the child; a family outing or celebratory meal.

1. **Support available to enable long-term fostering**

Like other permanency options for children and young people, long-term fostering arrangements will require universal and targeted support to ensure they sustain. Current and likely future support needs should be considered within the assessment and matching process.

The following support (as a minimum) will be available to children and foster carers:

* A clear plan of support should be set out within the child’s Life Plan, and the Placement & Support Plan. This should be reviewed regularly at the child’s statutory review;
* The foster carer will have an allocated Supervising Social Worker (SSW) from the fostering service and will have access to a range of services and training;
* Access to consultation from a Mental Health Coordinator and/or Therapeutic Fostering Team
* Weekly allowance is paid to meet the costs of caring for the child, as well as the weekly fostering fee.

Additional and specific support may be needed at times during the placement in order to address the child or young person’s needs, and ensure the arrangement remains stable and sustainable. It is important that carers and professionals stay alert to the changing circumstances and dynamics of the foster family, including the child, and respond promptly to any emerging concerns or additional needs. The Placement & Support Plan should be reviewed at each statutory review for this purpose.

1. **Recording and Notification**

Decisions regarding long-term fostering must be clearly recorded on child and foster carer’s electronic case record by:

* The **child’s social worker** and the foster carers’ **supervising social worker** completing the long-term fostering pathway within the child’s mosaic record; evidencing the assessment of the child’s needs and the carer’s capacity to meet these; the support plan; date of recommendation, and any actions required.
* The **decision maker** will consider the matching recommendation and record a decision; inform CYPPS to ensure ‘Placement Type’ on Mosaic is accurately recorded as long-term fostering. This will ensure there is a clear record that the child is in a long–term foster care placement and reported accordingly within the SSDA903 return to the DfE.
* The **supervising social worker** changing the ‘Care Type’ in the foster carer’s record to show they are now the Long-Term Foster Carer for the child or young person.
* The **supervising social worker** completing a revision of foster carers approval terms if needed (Revision of Approval)

While it is permitted in regulation that local authorities can apply flexibility to the frequency of social work visits and statutory review meetings in agreed long-term foster care placements; this must be balanced with the recognition that support needs will emerge over time and need to be swiftly identified and supported in order to maintain placement stability. Any decision to reduce frequency of social work visits will be recommended within the statutory review process, in consultation with the child and the carer, and authorised by the responsible Director of Local Delivery. The decision to not hold a meeting as part of the six-monthly statutory review cycle will be made by the IRO, in consultation with the social worker and the child/young person where appropriate.

1. **Endings**

Sometimes long-term foster placements end before the child or young person is ready to leave care. This can happen despite everyone’s best intentions, and even where extensive support has been in place. Some endings will happen in a planned way, and generally considered to be the right thing for the child or young person, in other circumstances the ending may be sudden; and not planned.

Wherever possible endings should be managed in a way that minimises disruption and further trauma for the child, and where possible opportunities for reflection and learning should be created.

**Statutory Review confirms child’s care plan as long-term fostering**

Child placed

Placements identified – PPM arranged

Long term matching report completed by CSW and SSW, signed by carer and forwarded to Decision Maker

Return to start of process

Record rationale within statutory review

At second statutory review after placement go to option 2

Current placement unlikely to meet long term need but placement change not advised at this stage

Record rationale within statutory review report

CYPSS liaises with LT fostering workers in relevant quadrant to explore options

Current placement not suitable to meet long term need

**OPTION 1**

Current placement considered suitable to meet long term needs

**OPTION 3**

**OPTION 2**



If agreed:

* Decision letters sent
* Placement types updated
* Revision of Approval Terms for carer completed if required
* Celebration considered

Referral to CYPPS for LT placement

Long-term Fostering Support Plan reviewed in each subsequent statutory review

**If IFA placement present to Quadrant Care & Resource Panel to agree long term funding commitment**

If not agreed:

* Reasons/ decision letter sent
* Return to start of process