

**Analysis of LACSIG Care Planning to Permanence**

**Regional Events Programme 2012**

**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

To provide LACSIG, CELCIS and the Scottish Government with an analysis of the Care Planning to Permanence regional events series held during 2012.

**BACKGROUND**

Following the publication of the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA) report [*Care and Permanence Planning for Looked after Children in Scotland*](http://www.scra.gov.uk/home/care%20and%20permanence%20planning.%20cfm), the Scottish Government & LACSIG made a commitment to examine and improve the care planning system. This series of events were organised to raise the profile of permanency planning across Scotland, and encourage greater cooperation in identifying and addressing drift and delay in the system.

In September 2011, SG & LACSIG invited local authority Heads of Service (Children) to an event to consider the findings of the SCRA research. Attendees agreed that a series of similar events should be established for each region, allowing practitioners from all relevant organisations to reflect on the research and how it relates to their own practice. In this way, it was hoped that the events would encourage local authorities and their partners to improve local systems / procedures.

CELCIS was asked to assist in the organising of this series of events, the first of which took place in February 2012. Five further events were held between March and October 2012, covering all 32 local authority areas.

**WHO ATTENDED?**

There was a mixed representation across the child care sector, including panel members, Reporters, social work practitioners, team leaders and strategic managers. A number of representatives from voluntary organisations and the NHS also attended. The mix of interested parties encouraged a rich dialogue and debate during each session.

**PROGRAMME**

All attendees heard directly from the SCRA about their research into permanency planning. The national context and plans for improvement were introduced by members from LACSIG, and at each event there were presentations from participating local authorities on good practice or current improvement programmes. This ‘local’ dimension provided a positive platform for each event. Representatives from the Scottish Government’s Looked After Children Unit provided closing remarks at each event.

The programme invited attendees to reflect on issues through a few case study examples and their own experiences. It encouraged them to identify problems they encounter in trying to deliver effective and efficient permanence planning. Then, in small groups, attendees were asked to develop solutions to these challenges.

**COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE**

Across all the events it became clear that there is a community of effective permanence practice, with attendees describing the core components as:

* Good working links between the CHS and social work staff
* Effective legal advice being provided, based on the welfare of the child
* Good permanence practice and decision making being founded in the principles and practice of GIRFEC
* Clarity in decision making, backed up with strong leadership which quality assures and supports timely practice

**IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS TO COMMON ISSUES**

From an analysis of the completed evaluations from the events, the following themes emerged in respect to solutions:

***Learning and development opportunities****:*Participants highlighted the importance of being proactive in accessing relevant learning and development, and linking this into research and reading. This will lead to a sounder evidence base and confident practice.

***Effective multi agency assessment - based on understanding of attachment, child development and purposeful use of chronologies****:* There is a role for early identification (and assessment of extended families) in reducing delay and drift. Having high expectations for all children in terms of securing permanency through robust care planning is essential. It was felt that there was still too much caution when it came to slightly older children, perhaps reflecting a lack of confidence in what could be achieved for them through a permanence plan.

***Systems****:* The importance of effective and clear tracking and quality assurance was emphasised, as these lead to greater clarity and accountability in setting permanency timescales and deadlines. This includes the objective chairing of reviews as a key building block in securing permanency and effective care planning for children and young people.

***Contact:***There is a need for a ‘back to basics’ examination of the purpose (to assess the options of reunification or permanence) and quality of contact arrangements, focusing on the welfare of the child being paramount. This should look to free families, professionals and panel members from the ‘entitlement to quantity’ approach, which can lead to poor *quality* activities. There is a need to recognise that contact with the child is a right which parents hold in primary legislation in order to fulfil parental responsibilities. This should be viewed as a key intervention opportunity with parents and other family members.

The importance of addressing ‘what needs to change’ within a family at the start of involvement was emphasised, and then continuing to be transparent and authoritative (without being punitive) when changes do not happen sufficiently quickly to assure the safe upbringing of the child. The use of contracts for contact purposes was highlighted as an effective way forward. Tensions between Children’s Hearings and social work teams were often noted, and this was particularly common over the emotive issue of contact arrangements. Many participants felt that both agencies have lost sight of the need for contact to be considered positively as part of the child’s welfare needs. There was wide acceptance that children need to be kept in close touch with people who are meaningful to them [or who could be] and that the plan of intervention should reflect that.

***Staff confidence:*** A key topic for the social work managers and staff present was the challenge of building ‘real confidence’ in staff, particularly around managing purposeful interventions with families and having the confidence to make permanence decisions. There is a need to have strong leadership from senior managers. This should encourage and support staff, but also involve effective monitoring of progress towards settling every child permanently, whether this is to be with relatives or elsewhere.

***Pre-qualifying training and support to newly qualified social workers:*** There was some concern about the quality of student placements in pre-qualifying training (particularly the limited access to a local authority assessment and care planning team experience). Also, there were some concerns about the content of pre-qualifying training. Is there, for instance, sufficient knowledge and informed discussion about legislation? For newly qualified social workers there is a need to further consider their developing practice needs in relation to permanency.

***Legal processes:*** The interface between social work, Children’s Hearings and the Court was frequently highlighted as a concern. The consistent production of well-written reports and presentations (which provide a narrative, reflect multi-agency working, clear assessment and show joint ownership of recommendations) was seen as an important part of the solution. There was also the view that the introduction of reforms to Children’s Hearings Scotland provides the opportunity to re-establish the culture of the system being a short term intervention measure for children and their families. Panel members should be clear that children should not be reviewed continuously at this forum year after year.

Examples were given of ‘legal process delays’ occurring at early stages, after an initial CPO or referral to the hearings. This led to some children spending months on continuations of temporary measures, with the family, local authority and Hearing unable to make purposeful intervention. There was an example of a local authority proceeding to apply for a Permanence Order to the Court rather than waiting for the Hearing proof to be resolved. In addition, some anxieties were expressed about the quality of legal advice/representation linked to generic litigation teams together with concerns about the need for ‘more and more evidence’ and the implication this has in terms of the standard of proof required. These concerns reflect similar concerns identified in England and Wales.

***The Adoption Register:*** There was wide spread support for continuing to promote the adoption register to enhance options for children and prospective adopters.

***Post placement support:*** Effective post placement support is critical to successful placements, particularly as children’s needs are growing in terms of complexity.

***Resources:*** There continues to be a resource issue in terms of permanence practice, with staff describing situations where attention is taken from permanency work due to crisis elsewhere for children (e.g. child protection).

***Concurrent planning:*** It was felt that concurrent planning and a concurrency approach will secure more timely permanence, especially for very young children.

***Permanence Orders:*** Permanence Orders can be very effective in reducing timescales in securing children.

***Too many different reports:*** There was a view that the plethora of different reports is contributing to delays; there is a need for a whole systems approach. The format and quality of reports needs to be addressed. Reports should include coherent narratives on assessment and intervention, reflecting the main GIRFEC components and ‘SMART’ planning recommendations. There may well be a ‘lead writer’ who is a social worker, but content and recommendations should reflect multi agency contributions.

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