

Achieving permanence: an introduction and overview

The background and context

The Department for Education commissioned the development of the Achieving Permanence programme in 2016 as part of the Government's reform of social work via the development of social workers' knowledge and skills over the course of their professional journey. This focus on knowledge and skills represents part of a radical shift towards a practice-focused system that builds on the excellent practice already demonstrated by many talented social workers across England. It is intended to result in a stronger workforce that can deliver improved outcomes for all children and families.

In 2016 the Government announced its intention to explore depth of practice in key areas of child and family social work and identified child permanence as the first area of practice to be addressed. Knowing that social work skills and behaviour can adversely affect the speed, effectiveness, and quality of the process to find a permanent home or setting for a child, the Government is determined to develop a CPD programme that will improve the standard of child and family social work in this important area of practice.

In commissioning this Achieving Permanence programme, the Government identified that the current challenges in permanence social work practice are around ensuring that:

- the right permanence option is chosen for each child, based on a thorough knowledge of each option and the impact of delay on a child's life chances
- wider services and support are identified, set out in a care plan, and delivered to help children recover from previous experiences to achieve stability
- the legal processes are understood and navigated with skill (including the ability to perform well in the court arena)
- a suitable carer/arrangement is identified (being mindful of unconscious bias) and treated with respect
- families are supported in transition and beyond (including through disruption or breakdown).

The Achieving Permanence programme supports social workers to develop or sharpen skills they need so that they can make and sustain robust permanence decisions and is based on the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Achieving Permanence (KSS-AP).

The programme has been led by Mott MacDonald with the design and development of content by In-Trac Training and Consultancy in close collaboration with a Consortium Advisory Board who represent the sector, and with the benefit of scrutiny and input from a group of experts working with the Department for Education.

Vision and purpose

The Department for Education's vision for 2020 is "a system in which decisions about what is best for children who cannot be looked after by their parents are made robustly, swiftly and with confidence by members of a highly skilled professional workforce who present comprehensive evidence and analysis of options, including in court. Once a decision has been made, the placement plan should be progressed swiftly by social workers driven by a sense of urgency and a refusal to tolerate damaging delay for the children in their care"

The Achieving Permanence programme has therefore been designed to help transform contemporary practice with children/young adults, and their families. It exposes the complexity and uncertainties of achieving permanence for children/young adults whose families face difficulties. The Achieving Permanence programme is intended to enable experienced child and family social work practitioners to develop advanced skills to manage the challenges of achieving permanence for children/young adults.

The programme design reflects a series of crucial messages for improving social work practice:

- achieving permanence for each individual child/young adult must be at the forefront of assessment, planning and intervention at every stage of social work involvement with children/young adults and their families
- the voices of individual children/young adults, their parents and carers must be heard and their perspectives must be understood before decisions are made about their lives
- relationships represent the "golden thread" that enable children/young adults to overcome adverse circumstances
- behaviours, such as: observing; listening; communicating; showing empathy and unconditional positive regard; being honest; paying attention to the exercise of authority; and avoiding the misuse of power, represent the bedrock of effective social work practice
- promoting equality, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice are all essential to achieving permanence
- decisions made with and on behalf of children/young adults and their families must be informed by well-informed critical thinking
- decisions made with and on behalf of children/young adults, their parents, families, and carers may not always be welcomed by all parties involved, but must be explained and defensible
- the principles of corporate parenting require social workers to think beyond immediate needs and to plan for best lifelong outcomes for children/young adults.

Participant profile

The programme is intended for experienced practitioners.

Before a participant enrolls on the course, their line manager/supervisor will have verified that the candidate evidences:

- enhanced skill in whole family assessment
- direct work with children/young adults and families
- preparation of analytical reports
- ability to articulate defensible decision-making
- confidence in the practical skills required to prepare for and attend court
- experience in developing, implementing and reviewing plans.

Participants will be expected to have already achieved the level of knowledge and skills set out in the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Approved Child and Family Practitioners (2014).

All participants will therefore be:

- qualified for more than two years
- experienced in child and family social work
- experienced in care proceedings, either directly, or through shadowing another worker through a case
- engaged in regular reflective supervision.

It is also expected that participants' line managers/supervisors are confident that they:

- can achieve a consistently high level of skill in child and family social work
- are consolidating all the knowledge and skills set out in the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Approved Child and Family Practitioners
- are engaged in complex and challenging practice
- are ready, prepared, and open to advanced learning.

Participants' line managers/supervisors must also be satisfied that participants have a clear understanding of:

- child development
- the impact of trauma and neglect on children/young adult's well-being;
- attachment and resilience
- child care and family law
- anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive social work practice.

The learning process

This programme refers to the Knowledge and Skills Statement Achieving Permanence (2016) and rests upon the definition of permanence set out in the Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations Vol. II: care planning, placement, and case review (June 2015).

“Permanence is the long-term plan for the child’s upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption. The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security.”

The Achieving Permanence programme goes beyond building basic knowledge and skills. It challenges participants to engage in both personal and professional development by:

- drawing on participants’ personal and practice experience
- emphasising the importance of participants’ ability to build constructive relationships
- highlighting the systemic principles that underpin achieving permanence
- enhancing participants’ capacity to work empathically and create climates in which children/ young adults, families and carers can thrive
- exposing the dynamic between assessing need, identifying and managing danger, and preventing harm
- encouraging participants to examine the emotional literacy that underpins work with children/young adults and families
- exploring how core personal beliefs about childhood and family life, social work values, and professional commitment to social justice combine to potentiate and drive participants’ contribution to achieving permanence for every child/young adult they encounter.

Since the programme is intended for experienced practitioners, aspects of the core programme can be adapted in collaboration between the facilitator and each participant cohort to meet varying interests, experience, and needs.

Core tasks and reading will be directed for all, with wider reading and extra tasks recommended for participants wishing to pursue specific issues or interests. A blend of independent and face to face learning, supported by the development of a community of learning will encourage participants to share their knowledge, experience, interests, and concerns. The course offers participants an interactive journey of learning.

Participation, assessment and certification

This programme consists of four modules and each module requires the participants to engage in seven weeks of structured study. The teaching therefore extends over a period of six to seven months. Participants must attend all four module workshops and are also required to commit time each week to independent guided study throughout the programme, having drawn up a learning agreement with their own line manager.

Each participant is required to:

- participate in all four face to face workshops
- actively engage in individual workbook tasks
- produce evidence of the development of their knowledge and expertise throughout the programme
- produce evidence of their enhanced skill in direct work with children/young adults, parents, carers, and other professionals
- create a practice portfolio that demonstrates personal/professional development achieved and the impact of learning on practice.

Participants receive a certificate of completion after their line managers have verified successful completion of all aspects of the programme. Since participants are not required to submit any work for formal (summative) assessment, the certificate of completion does not confer any academic credits.

The Achieving Permanence programme is designed at the level of advanced social work practice and delivered at academic level seven (Masters Level) via a structured combination of individual and interactive tasks. Participants are therefore expected to contribute and perform at Masters level. This means that, in accordance with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education QAA, Masters Level Descriptors they should:

- deal creatively with complex issues using a whole systems approach, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and enable others to understand how and why they have reached their recommendations
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional level
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding and to develop new skills to a high level.

Both the face to face workshops and the learning materials are designed to be thought provoking, and demand that participants critically evaluate complex issues, think systemically, and engage creatively with the needs of children/young adults. Participants are expected to link new learning to their current work with children/young adults, carers, parents, and their families.

Participants are expected to engage in self-directed learning, and to take personal responsibility for their development, with a view to gaining confidence to make decisions in complex and unpredictable situations. Participants are encouraged to

make full use of the community of learning for collaboration, to access support from their co-participants throughout the programme, and, of course to offer similar support towards others.

Structured opportunities to review and build evidence of personal and professional development are threaded throughout the programme. It is designed as an iterative process where participants review their practice, consolidate experiential and formal learning, and work with co-participants and line managers to set themselves new developmental goals.

Each participant is required to review their work with a child/young adult/family throughout the programme. They are also required to pursue an area of specific interest to them and/or to their team.

Programme structure and timetable

Participants join a cohort of around twenty people to form a small community of learning for the duration of the programme.

The Achieving Permanence programme consists of twenty-eight weeks of structured learning and is made up of four modules. Each module contains six weeks of independent learning and one taught workshop. Weeks one, two, five and six of each module require participants to complete activities set out in the participant workbook, working at advanced level to link research, theory and practice. In week four, participants attend workshops designed to enable reflection, debate and skills development. Weeks three and seven specify essential reading. Recommendations for wider study and for deeper investigation of specific issues are made throughout the workbook.

This means that each of the programme's four modules follows the same pattern and consists of:

- Weeks one to three:
structured learning activities and guided reading to consolidate knowledge and prepare for the workshop day
- Week four:
A face to face workshop day to share and further develop skills and to explore real life practice challenges
- Weeks five to seven:
structured learning activities and guided reading that build on the workshop content.

Whereas the workshops focus mostly on skills (behaviour) and values, knowledge is primarily addressed in participants' independent study and online activity. The content of the whole programme has been mapped to address the expectations set out in the Knowledge and Skills Statement Achieving Permanence.

Module content

Module 1

Permanence: Every Child's Right

Module 1 serves as the foundation for the programme, giving an overview of the process and the content of subsequent modules. It provides a structured approach to evaluate participants' current practice and identify a personal development plan in relation to achieving permanence for children/young adults. It enables participants to reflect on what they can contribute to achieving permanence for children/young adults in their current role. Assessment is the cornerstone for achieving permanence. Whether attendees work in early intervention, within safeguarding, child in need, residential, fostering or adoption services, the focus on each child/young adult's social worker's encounter informs the plan for their future. This remains true regardless of whether the assessment is a one-off or part of a long-term piece of work.

The module enables participants to begin coming together to form a learning community which will continue throughout the programme, with a view to their practice leadership contributing to the development of the profession.

Learning Outcomes

Participants will be offered opportunities to:

- understand the shape of the course, how each module works, what is expected of each participant, the process of blended learning, and how course completion will be certified
- engage in collaborative working with a view to forming a safe community of learning with a culture of constructive challenge and critical thinking for the duration of the programme and beyond
- identify personal learning goals and prepare a study plan
- consider their current and future contribution to the transformation of practice, and how the interface between core beliefs and professional values drives their practice
- reflect on the impact of living with loss and uncertainty
- interrogate what permanency means, why it is important, and how it might involve competing demands/conflicted decisions
- deconstruct what a permanence plan communicates to the child/young adult and the significance of SMART/ExACT planning
- explore ethical dilemmas that practitioners face in achieving unique permanence planning for each child/young adult at every stage of their engagement with social work services
- name the challenges of working in contested political contexts
- focus on the child/young adult's identity to shape their plan and ensure the child/young adult's voice is heard.

Module 2

Relationship: The Golden Thread

The core of this module is building relationships. It recognises the central paradox that it is in significant relationships that many children/young adults have been harmed and yet it will be through the relationships they can make with others that they will develop their capacity to recover. Recognising that important relationships are children/young adults' "golden thread" that sustains them into adulthood, this module is trauma informed and incorporates the latest research. This module rests on the premise that the presence of an adult with a sustained interest in them is an important factor in building resilience for children/young adults. For most children/young adults that person exists in their family, for others it will be the relationship they make with a new carer, and for some it will be from a member of the community developing a passion (e.g. for sport, art, music, group activities, volunteering etc.).

Learning Outcomes

Participants will be offered opportunities to:

- exemplify in-depth working knowledge of development in childhood/young adulthood, how it might be compromised, how it can be supported, and recognition of their changing developmental needs
- explain the importance of relationships for children/young adults in the home, school, and community, and develop the knowledge and skills to encourage relationship-building, and integrate these elements for children/young adults
- create, build, and sustain effective relationships with children/young adults, their families, carers, community, and professional networks
- consider diverse family structures and parenting styles
- examine knowledge around parenting capacity and capabilities, including strategies for how capacity can be developed, and identifying who is available within their community network to support these relationships
- apply insight into the experience of trauma (including loss, abuse, and neglect) and its impact across the life course
- develop skills in recognising and offering appropriate interventions based on sensory experience, arts, and play
- elaborate skills in relation to assessing parenting capacity (including in matching processes), opportunities for sustained change, and exploring permanent options for children/young adults
- identify strengths in the family to sustain children/young adults within their existing communities e.g. use of Family Group Conferences
- develop advanced skills in communicating effectively with traumatised children/young adults, their carers, support networks, by listening, attuning, and responding verbally and in writing in ways that represent their views accurately and compassionately
- evaluate which relationships are each child/young adult's "golden thread" and what it will take to maintain them with a view to developing caring, safe, and secure networks around children/young adults to sustain them into maturity

- recognise how vicarious or unresolved trauma in carers continues to affect children/young adults' experience with a view to enabling carers to manage this process (within available resources).

Module 3

Making the Permanence Decision

This module provides an overview of the legal system, legal ethics, core principles of legislation, and the role of precedent and case law. It will explore how case law develops and will equip social workers with the skills, resources, and knowledge to help them remain informed of significant changes, such as relevant case law decisions on threshold criteria and permanence. Its aim is to ensure that decision-making is evidence-informed and based on an understanding of legal processes.

This module addresses the application of critical, analytical, and reflective thinking to assessment, planning and decision-making. It will consider a range of practical tools (e.g. chronologies, The Five Anchor Principles). It equips social workers to consider the advantages and disadvantages of all permanence options for individual children/young adults. It also provides an overview of significant research evidence relating to these (including options for supporting a child/young adult within the family, reunification to parents and other long-term permanence strategies) to ensure that the decisions that are made are in the child/young adult's best long-term interests.

Learning Outcomes

Participants will be offered opportunities to:

- exemplify the role of practice wisdom in advanced social work
- express in-depth understanding of the legal system and how to navigate it
- identify the range of legal orders and permanence options (including reunification) and evaluate the most appropriate option based on individual children/young adult's needs and evidence-informed practice
- explain the developments in case law relating to permanence and the purpose of contact for the child/young adult
- differentiate between intuitive, reflective, analytical, and critical thought processes, with a view to applying these purposefully in social work assessment, planning and decision-making
- employ deep understanding of how the law can ensure that the child/young adult's voice is heard and enable best practice
- compare all the realistic options for achieving permanence, analyse alternatives, and stress-test decisions
- prepare written and oral evidence that properly reflects that the role of advanced social workers as expert witnesses and advocates in communicating the needs of the child/young adult
- evaluate relevant and up to date research with a view to sustaining evidence-based assessment, planning and decision-making

- demonstrate capacity to meet the time frames for the developing child/young adult and challenge court and local authority processes if timely decisions are not made.

Module 4

Sustaining Permanence

The focus of this final module in the Achieving Permanence programme is on sustaining and maintaining permanence: a long-term plan for a child/young adult's upbringing. Planning, achieving, and sustaining permanence represents an underpinning framework for all social work with children/young adults and their families to ensure that children/young adults have:

'a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security.' (CA'89 Guidance and Regulations Vol II: care planning, placement and case review' HM Government June 2015)

This module consolidates and builds on the work undertaken in the first three modules to identify and sustain best practice, supported by a systematic understanding of current research and theory. It addresses planning, managing, reviewing, and supporting children/young adults in their placements and families.

Learning Outcomes

Participants will be offered opportunities to:

- evaluate how to plan, manage, support and review placements in complex and unpredictable situations
- demonstrate effective working with children/young adults, their carers, wider family, informal and professional networks to ensure all placements are stable, safe, and loving
- create relationships with children/young adults that help them come to terms with their past and present experiences (including loss and transitions)
- employ effective communication, play, life story work and other relevant interventions to build a strong identity and develop resilience (and recognise when/how to access appropriate therapeutic support where required)
- develop relationships with a range of carers to understand and meet the needs of the specific children/young adults in their care and beyond
- identify appropriate contact arrangements that meet the needs of children/young adults, and support all involved to manage the child/young adult's practical and emotional experience with sensitivity and care
- determine risk factors in relation to placement breakdown and work effectively with children/young adults, and with their carers and families to prevent disruption where possible
- illustrate how to manage any disruption and change as effectively as possible
- review learning during the programme, draw up CPD plan, and reflect on achievements.

Language and vocabulary

The Achieving Permanence programme is written in plain English: jargon and acronyms have been avoided as much as possible.

Since Achieving Permanence has relevance for unborn infants, babies, very young children, children, adolescents, teenagers, young people, young adults, and young adults up to the age of 25 as indicated in the Children and Social Work Act, 2017, the programme documentation draws upon research, legislation, guidance, and a professional literature that may use any of these terms. For simplicity, these are all encompassed in this programme's materials by referring to *children/young adults* except where a specific demographic is under discussion.

Similarly, the terms parent, person with parental responsibility, birth parent, biological parent, step-parent, carer, caregiver, kinship carer, substitute carer, foster carer, foster parent, guardian, special guardian, adoptive parent, are used in the legislation and literature to describe various types of relationship with a child/young adult. Where the phrase *parent/caregiver* is used in this programme's materials it is intended to describe the person providing day to day care for a child/young adult, regardless of their legal status.

Since people who use public services are referred to differently across the four UK legislatures, and within different parts of the multi-professional network, this programme's materials refer to *people* unless the context requires otherwise.