

Annual Report 2024 - 2025

Children's Services Public Law Outline (PLO) and Care Proceedings.

Impact of practice and outcomes achieved.

Introduction

This report is about how Shropshire Children's Services use the Public Law Outline (PLO) process and how we work through our care proceedings. The report will evidence the significant changes we have made to both processes and the positive impact of these upon our children and families as they are now getting the right outcomes at the right time with less delay.

The Public Law Outline (PLO) is a process that happens before going to court. It is used when we are very worried about a child's safety or wellbeing. The aim is to give parents one last chance to make changes so that court action can be avoided. Parents get a letter before proceedings explaining the concerns and inviting them to a meeting. At the meeting, the Team Manager and Social Worker – on behalf of Shropshire Council – explain why we are worried and what needs to change. Parents are strongly encouraged to bring a solicitor (they are entitled to free legal advice when in PLO). We then agree a targeted time limited plan of action together and review this with regular meetings. If improvements are made, we are then able to successfully end PLO and avoid the need for court. If not, we may start care proceedings if our concerns remain high and we cannot manage the risks to the children any other way.

Care Proceedings are court cases where the LA asks a judge for legal orders to protect a child. The most common orders are:

- Care Order – we share parental responsibility and can decide where the child lives.
- Supervision Order – we support and monitor the child at home under a Child in Need Plan or a Child Protection Plan for the duration of the Order (typically 6 or 12 months).

The court only makes these orders if the threshold test in the Children Act 1989 is met in that the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and the harm is because of the care they are getting (or not getting) or because they are beyond parental control. The Children Act 1989 sets out the law for child protection and care orders and the Children and Families Act 2014 says care proceedings should finish within 26 weeks (unless there are exceptional reasons).

Court

There continues to be clear progress in our court proceedings – children are escalating into court at the right time and are concluding on a plan of permanency swifter than in previous years.

How do we know?

- Of the applications made to court in the specific scrutiny period (Oct 2024 to end of March 2025) the court granted 83% of the Orders requested by the Social Work team (this equates to 16 children out of 78). For the remainder, the court made an alternative Order. On none of these applications did the court consider that the application should not have been made. It should be noted that of those 16 children where an alternative Order was made, the court granted the original Order requested on 3 several weeks later - conceding that the Social Work Team had assessed the circumstances correctly. We are therefore getting our thresholds right when we make the decision to commence court proceedings in order to keep children safe.
- The number of Legal Planning Meetings has significantly increased from 169 in 2022 to 192 in 2023 to 305 in 2024. This demonstrates increased senior management oversight as they were co-chaired by the Assistant Director Donessa Gray and Service Manager for Case Management and Court Amanda Beaufoy. More children are now heard at this meeting to ensure that plans are effective.
- Between October 2024 and March 2025, 78 children in 42 families entered proceedings. Between that same date, 134 children in 75 families ended proceedings. This demonstrates a high turnover of court work.
- Out of 134 children concluding proceedings in the scrutiny period (Oct 2024 to March 2025) – 43 children concluded within 26 weeks (meaning 32% of children concluded in timescales). The average length of proceedings is currently 42 weeks which demonstrates a continuous trajectory of improvements around compliance and timescales despite working with a higher number of children.
 - In Jan-Dec 2021, average week was 49 weeks (136 children concluded)
 - In Jan-Dec 2022, average week was 47 weeks (165 children concluded)
 - In Jan-Dec 2023, average week was 58 weeks (150 children concluded)
 - In Jan-Dec 2024, average week was 44 weeks (216 children concluded)

As evidenced above, the service concluded a much higher number of children in 2024 compared to previous years, yet the average number of weeks is the lowest in the 4 years. There are now weekly compliance meetings to ensure that the service is on track with meeting court directions in timescales and this will contribute to the continuing decrease in average weeks in proceedings – for 2025 thus far this is 41 weeks, and this is expected to be less by the end of the year.

- As of end of March 2025, there were 16 children in 63 families in live court proceedings.

PLO

The primary aim of our PLO (Public Law Outline) process is to prevent children needing to escalate into court. The secondary aim is to complete all appropriate assessments so that if ultimately children cannot be kept safe in their families, the court has all the information required at an earlier stage to make the final decisions around permanency – resulting in shorter lengths of proceedings.

As set out above, there is clear evidence that the length of court proceedings is reducing year on year and part of the reason for this is that our PLO process is becoming more effective.

Current data

- 67 children in 40 families entered PLO in the scrutiny period (Oct 2024 to March 2025)
- 74 children in 39 families concluded PLO in the same period – of these 17 families escalated into court proceedings and 22 families did not require further escalation, PLO therefore successfully ensured that 56.4% of families were able to keep their children safe.
- As of the end of March 2025 there were 63 children in 37 families in PLO.

Ongoing work in respect of Public Law Outline (PLO) and Care Proceedings

- Joint training around PLO delivered between Shropshire and Wiltshire to Social Workers on 17/01/25 and this is now being embedded.
- Trailblazer pilot between March 2024 and March 2025 involving all Local Authorities attached to the Wolverhampton/Telford Court (Shropshire, Sandwell, Dudley, Wolverhampton, Telford and Walsall) – this has resulted in Social Workers receiving training around the Parent Assess model, risk assessments and sexual harm

assessments (funded by the pilot). There have also been a number of excellent resources and guides created by the pilot which have been rolled out across the service to support Social Workers step by step in PLO and court.

- Initial PLO letter for families has been re-written following feedback from court experienced parents – this was launched 07/04/25 with an expectation that Team Managers quality assure every letter to ensure it fits the template.
- PLO Plan created using national guidance – this will ensure more robust management and tracking of children in PLO and will support multi-agency and CP Chair oversight of PLO alongside the Child Protection Plan. This was rolled out to all Social Workers for immediate implementation as of 14/04/25 with supplementary training offered.
- Continued emphasis on Family Group Conferences and Family Meetings (where a family may not agree to the larger, more formalised process) to support children remaining within their families – this question is explored in every Legal Planning Meeting and forms part of every PLO agenda.

The following outlines the demand and performance of the service, comparing 2023/24 to 2024/25. Demonstrating a full year's comparison that reflects the improvements in the service delivery. This is important as this shows the impact of the work outlined above and results in children and young people's plans and arrangements for their long terms care (permanence arrangements) being completed timelier. This enables children and young people to understand their forever family situations clearly and feel safer in those arrangements.

- There has been a 30.04% increase in legal planning meetings held since 2023, this shows a greater management oversight and thorough decision making by the teams, avoiding drift and delay in practice and securing the best outcome for children and young people.
- For children who were made subject of court proceedings, there was an increase of 15.82% in applications being submitted to the court compared to 23/24.
- The number of children where care proceedings were concluded in the period between 24/25 was 39.13% higher than the year before.
- The average number of weeks children were subject to care proceedings decreased significantly during 24/25 by 28.07% compared to 23/24.
- This outcome is a result of increased management oversight that is ensuring all court directions are complied with and not allowing timetables to drift off track, this also

ensured children secure their permanency quicker often meaning they are no longer children looked after.

- Oversight of the Service Manager has ensured that all court directions are complied with. This has resulted in fewer extension applications being submitted into the court, resulting in huge cost savings for the department.
- Children entering Public Law Outline (PLO), the process where we can work with families alongside lawyers to try and avoid care proceedings, if possible, has almost doubled in 2024/24 compared to 2023/24.
- This results in the service giving families additional support earlier in the process to avoid court proceedings.
- More children entering PLO allows work with the family to be frontloaded prior to any court application. This has supported families to step back into child in need, early help and community services more quickly, and decreased the length of time court proceedings when they are actioned due to comprehensive assessments and expected supports already having been in place to try and avoid the application.
- During 2024/25, 70 children were taken into police protection (PP), this is when police use their powers to be able to take children and young people to a place of safety for 72 hours maximum duration if they deem them to be unsafe in the circumstances they find them, usually this is supported by another family member or foster placement if available.
- There had been a spike in this number earlier during 24/25. This was addressed by a multi-agency audit with police and the Department for Education advisor. The learning from this resulted in a significant decrease in the numbers of children made subject to police protection from January 2025.
- 2024/25 Private law application matters where members of the public make applications to the courts directly, saw a significant increase by 61% for requests for section 7 reports.
- These are requests by the court for a social worker to assess a child, young person's wellbeing, usually relating to families separating or custody applications made by parents.
- There was also a 38% decrease for requests for section 37 reports. This is a request from the court for a social worker to undertake an assessment of risk in relation to children and young people's home circumstances and parental relationships and care. This can sometimes result in a referral to children's services and child protection or care proceedings being required.

- 8 children were made subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders (DOLS). Usually these are applications made to the court following a significant period of intervention with children or young people where we require legal support to be able to keep them safe. This is a rigorous process reviewed regularly and required to have the Directors oversight.

Legal Planning Meetings (LPMS):

These are meetings held to determine what legal status the service has for intervening with the family presented. Usually, the Local Authority have been working with the family for a significant period and unfortunately the children's needs are not being met sufficiently, or there has been an incident of abuse that has required immediate intervention and the sharing of parental responsibility to ensure the children are safe.

LPMS are held with the council's Legal Team and Service Managers chair these meetings given their gravity and potential impact on the family going forward. We do hope that LPMS also enable families to make informed decisions alongside their lawyers/advocates about how they will progress with their children's care and what services we should be supporting them with to ensure the children are retained at home, if possible, safely.

Number held:

24/25: 290 (30% Increase)

23/24: 223

Outcomes of the LPMS 24/25:

- Issue proceedings: 107
- Enter PLO: 80
- Continue PLO: 23
- End PLO: 32
- DOLS: 4
- No Action/CP: 34
- Other: 10

Care Proceedings Initiated:

Care Proceedings are initiated by the Local Authority usually seeking to secure parental responsibility legally for children that have been found to be at risk of harm and suffering as a result. The Local Authority seeks an order from the court that will allow the Local Authority

to look after the child/children if needed to ensure their safety whilst we continue to work with the family to reduce any risks known and identify the safest long-term arrangements for children and young people as quickly as possible. This process requires significant assessment and potentially specialist opinions to inform the courts final decision making. Alongside the families views and the children and young people involved.

24/25: 183 children in 106 families (15% increase)

23/24 158 children in 97 families

Legal Status outcomes during proceedings.

- Children subject to Interim Care Order application: 168
- Children subject to Interim Supervision Order application 15
- 87 children subject to urgent court application
- 82 children were in PLO at the time of issuing

Care Proceedings concluded:

24/25: 224 children in 133 families concluded proceedings (39% increase)

23/24: 161 children in 89 families concluded proceedings

Legal Status final orders made by the court

- Care Order: 113
- Care & Placement Order: 26
- Supervision Order: 62
- Special Guardianship Order: 8
- Child Arrangement Order: 6
- Other: (non-agency adoption): 1
- No Order: 8

Timeliness of proceedings

National average is expected to be 26 weeks.

24/25- Average week in proceedings: 41 weeks (28% improvement)

23/24- Previous year- average weeks in proceedings: 57 weeks

PLO entered:

24/25: 148 children in 80 families (92% increase)

23/24: 77 children in 42 families

PLO ended:

24/25- 144 children in 83 families ended PLO (33% increase)

23/24- 108 children in 62 families ended PLO

Outcomes achieved:

- 75 children stepped up into court
- 69 children stepped down from PLO

Private law matters

Issue	23/24	24/25	% increase/decrease
Section 37	13	8	38% decrease
Section 7	13	21	61% increase

In conclusion

This report shows the significant progress made by Shropshire Children's Services in both the Public Law Outline (PLO) process and care proceedings over 2024/2025. The service has shown a clear commitment to improving outcomes for children and families, with robust management oversight, improved training, and streamlining processes resulting in more timely interventions and permanency planning.

Key achievements include a substantial increase in Legal Planning Meetings, improved compliance with court directions, and a notable reduction in the average length of care proceedings—even as the number of children supported has grown. The PLO process has become more effective at preventing unnecessary escalation to court, enabling the majority of families to keep their children safe without requiring court intervention.

Initiatives such as joint training between Shropshire and Wiltshire, the Trailblazer pilot, and the development of new court and PLO walkthrough resources have empowered social workers and strengthened multi-agency partnership working. These improvements have led to a decrease in non-compliance with court directions, significant cost savings in terms of costs for legal and ongoing placements, and—most importantly—better outcomes for children and young people.

Overall, the service's dedication to continuous improvement and best practice has ensured that children and families receive the right support at the right time. Shropshire Children's

Services is well positioned to continue delivering high-quality, timely, and effective safeguarding interventions, securing positive futures for those it serves.

Amanda Beaufoy

Service Manager