



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

LOCAL COUNCIL PRIVATE FOSTERING ARRANGEMENTS

Warwickshire County Council Private Fostering Arrangements

**Faraday Hall
Lower Hillmorton Road
Rugby
Warwickshire
CV21 3TU**

Lead Inspector
Warren Clarke

Key Announced Inspection
25th November 2006 09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
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This is a report of an inspection to assess local authority private fostering arrangements against the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering. These standards can be found at www.dfes.gov.uk. The NMS specify a minimum standard for local authority practice in the fulfilment of their duties and functions in relation to private fostering under the Children Act 1989. Along with the new measures in section 44 of the Children Act 2004 and the 2005 regulations, they are intended to better focus local authorities' attention on private fostering, in part by requiring them to take a more proactive approach to identifying arrangements in their area.

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life.

Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above. The Private Fostering National Minimum Standards are mapped to just two of these outcomes, Staying Safe and Management.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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Local Authority INFORMATION

Name of Local Authority Warwickshire County Council Private Fostering Arrangements

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CV21 3TU

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SUMMARY

Warwickshire County Council

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The actual inspection of the private fostering service followed immediately on from that of the Local Authority's mainstream fostering service. It was conducted over two days and included visits to households where children and young people are being cared for within private foster care arrangements.

Judgements made of the performance of the Local Authority's private fostering service based on evidence derived from interviews of carers, children, social workers and management staff involved in the Service. The inspector also examined relevant case records, other documents concerned with the management and administration of the service and was able to observe a launch/promotion event in a few weeks before the inspection visit.

What the local authority does well:

The appointment of a Development Officer to co-ordinate and act as specialist advisor together with the commitment to develop this aspect of the Local Authority's function is encouraging. Commendable efforts have also been to promote the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005 and the standards of service and practice associated with them.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Not applicable, this is the first inspection.

What they could do better:

This is the first inspection of the service under the new regulations and standards and it has, therefore, possibly yielded more recommendations for action than is likely to be the case subsequently when the Service's policies, procedures and practices have become more established. Principally, however, what the Local Authority must address, as priority, is ensuring that risk to children and young people is identified and attended even when their referral is relation to private fostering arrangements.

It must also ensure that, where a private fostering arrangement already exists at time of notification, the circumstances in which the child or young person is being looked after is safe enough pending completion of the assessment process. Assessment should also be concluded in a timelier manner, and where there are issues that unduly delay their completion these should be reported to the Private Children's Panel or the decision-maker for guidance or decision.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Staying Safe

Management

Staying Safe

The intended outcome for these Standards are:

(NMS 2) The local authority is notified about privately fostered children living in its area.

(NMS 3) The welfare of privately fostered children is safeguarded and promoted

(NMS 4) Private foster carers and parents of privately fostered children receive advice and support to assist them to meet the needs of privately fostered children; privately fostered children are able to access information and support when required so that their welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

(NMS 5) The local authority provides advice and support to the parents of children who are privately fostered within their area as appears to the authority to be needed.

(NMS 6) Children who are privately fostered are able to access information and support when required so that their welfare is safeguarded and promoted. Privately fostered children are enabled to participate in decisions about their lives.

The Commission considers that all these Standards should be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for the following Standard(s):

2, 3, 4, 5 and 6

The structure for assuring a safe and effective private fostering service has been put in place, but there is cause for current practice to be more closely monitored until there is wider confidence in the effective implementation of the policies, procedures and practices that form that structure.

EVIDENCE:

At the time of inspection there were only two cases of private fostering and one of these had been effectively and erroneously closed by the Local Authority. Although there has been a major launch of private fostering and wide promotion of it by the Local Authority, it remains worrying that so few cases are known about particularly as previously there have been concentrations of such arrangements in particular areas within its borders.

This might indicate either a failure to report such arrangements on the part of those involved or because such cases are not being correctly identified at the Local Authority service outlets.

The inspector observed directly a major launch of the Local Authority's private fostering service at an event in October 2006 and has seen evidence of a wide distribution of written promotional information and local media items, which in clear terms defines private fostering arrangements, the duties and responsibilities of those involved and the services and support available in this regard. It was also noted that the Local Authority has a sound set of working principles, policies and procedures as shown in its Statement of Purpose (i.e., an operational guide or working plan) for the service.

In practice, however, the service being provided is at this stage is variable. That is, it is taking too long for assessments of private fostering arrangements to be completed thus creating circumstances in which children and young people might possibly be looked after in risky situations. In one case the private fostering arrangement commenced in April 2006 and the carer appears not to have been given authorisation to arrange medical treatment for the child until September of that year; the fit persons check as related to the carer was not carried out until September/October and consideration about the suitability of the arrangements by the private fostering panel was not due until December 2006.

A case that appears to straddle private fostering and family and friends as carers (an aspect of mainstream foster care) was brought to the inspector's attention. Whilst the inspector was mindful of the range of complex factors that characterised this case, it was noted that it had not been included in the private fostering register but neither was the child's welfare being safeguarded by other provision. Accordingly, the case was unintentionally drifting without being brought to the attention of the Children's Panel or the Local Authority's decision makers being given the opportunity to discharge their scrutiny duties and to provide the necessary guidance on the best way to safeguard the child's welfare.

Among the cases examined, some worrying issues related to the protection of children emerged. With so few cases in the assessment sample, it is not possible to report in sufficient detail without risk of identifying those involved, but the issues were conveyed to the Private Fostering and Fostering Development Officer, who assisted with this inspection. In essence, there was a failure to adequately investigate allegations of physical abuse of a relevant child and, in the circumstances, other children who might have been at similar risk if the allegation had proved to be valid. There appears to have been a failure to take proper account of concerns expressed by professionals of another statutory agency who were familiar with both the child and the private foster carers' circumstances.

The carers who by default and acting in good faith were cast in the role of private carers were given little financial support and, frankly, a poor service for all concerned. More worryingly, is that though over time the circumstances for both the child and the carers' family became more risky, the case was closed when they appeared to have needed the greatest level of monitoring and support.

In the inspector's opinion, the evidence given above suggests that in some instances there is insufficient appreciation among social work practitioners in the Local Authority of the intention of the introduction of National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering and strengthening of the accompanying regulations. The lessons afforded by well publicised cases where there was a failure to adequately protect children appears not be fully inculcated in some of the practice judgements in the cases cited above. Although these examples illustrate lack in some area, the inspector assesses the Local Authority's measures for the protection of all children, including those privately fostered, to be acceptable and the policies and procedures for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of privately fostered children and young people have been reported to have been endorsed by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

In terms of balance, the inspector also saw examples of private foster carer, child and parent being provided with the advice, support (including some financial support) and information that their circumstances merit. There was also evidence of information about private fostering from the child, parent and carer's perspectives. Some of this literature is that produced by the Department for Education and Skills (dfes), British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering and the Local Authority's own leaflet, which, if required, can be translated into another language or presented in a format appropriate to individual needs.

In discussions with the Private Fostering Development officer about the information that the Local Authority provides for children and young people, it was highlighted that this is currently limited to a leaflet produced by BAAF. Accordingly it was agreed that an information pack similar to that available for children being looked after by the Local Authority will be produced and made available to children and young people in private fostering. The pack will provide information about local services such as children's rights and advocacy and other public information as is relevant to the children and young people's age.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- (NMS 1) Relevant staff are aware of local authority duties and functions in relation to private fostering.
- (NMS 7) The local authority monitors the way in which it discharges its duties and functions in relation to private fostering.

The Commission considers that all these standards should be inspected

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

The structure, which has been put in place for operating the service and for overseeing its effectiveness in delivering desirable outcomes and in keeping the children and young people safe, augurs well for future performance. In the meantime there needs to be close monitoring of practice until the structure is bedded in.

EVIDENCE:

As mentioned earlier the Local Authority has set out clearly in its Statement of Purpose its responsibilities and duties and how it intends to discharge these. This has been promoted within its own children services directorate and to other local agencies involved in the care, treatment and education of children or otherwise provision of services for them. For example, apart from the private fostering launch event, which was open to the Local Authority's children services staff and others involved in the provision of children services locally, it was noted from the records that social workers, in August 2006, received briefing and training in how they are expected to work with children and families involved in private fostering arrangements.

This is a relatively short time between then and the time of this inspection and might explain some of the critical observations made above. That said, the range of staff – managers, advisors and social workers - who the inspector interviewed had a working understanding of what is legally expected of the Local Authorities to provide an efficient and effective private fostering service.

The Private Fostering Development Officer also advised the inspector of arrangements, which have been made for newly recruited social workers to receive briefing and training in relation to private fostering and for all children and families staff on an ongoing basis.

It was concluded that the Local Authority meets the standard in relation to the arrangements it has put in place for monitoring private fostering, but that there have been so few cases since those arrangements were established, their effectiveness can only be judged by the cases referred to above, which indicates that closer monitoring is necessary during the stage when the private fostering arrangements are being assessed. The measures that the Local Authority has put in place includes a Children's Panel, which will consider and make recommendations on the suitability or otherwise of arrangements as presented in the social workers' assessment. This panel will be well placed to monitor and provide feedback on trends and some aspects of quality of service issues.

The Local Authority has an integrated child care information system, which is able to provide statistical reports that inform on the performance of the service in achieving its objectives. The Local Authority has a system of case file audit by middle and senior managers. This, together with the quality maintenance role it is intended that the Development Officer will play, should provide more than adequate monitoring safeguards. The forecast, therefore, for a safe service through the contribution of the monitoring measures, once they become embedded, is good.

In regard to the requirement for there to be executive monitoring of the Service in relation to desired outcomes for the children and young people involved and the effectiveness of measures to protect them, have been attended. In the case of evaluation of the effectiveness of the service in delivering good outcomes, the Development Officer told the inspector the Service's Statement of Purpose is to be amended to introduce the practice of preparing an annual report for the Director of Children, Young People and Families, in this connection. The inspector also saw evidence of arrangements, which are already in place for a similar reporting arrangement to the Chairman of the LSCB about the protection of children. These arrangements were taken into account in the prediction above about the service's future performance.

Optional

Being Healthy

JUDGEMENT –

The health of children and young people in private foster care arrangements is being promoted by the measures introduced by the Local Authority, but these might be strengthened by providing information to the relevant households and opportunities for training of carers, where relevant.

EVIDENCE:

The children and young people who were seen or whose case records were examined were seen or reported to be in good health. It was observed that private foster carers' ability to respond appropriately to children health care needs feature in the assessment criteria of consideration about the suitability of private foster care arrangements. This includes being able to secure primary health care for those concerned and ensuring that carers have the necessary authorisation to arrange routine and emergency medical treatment for the children.

Given that there is in some cases, particularly where it is an existing private fostering arrangement, a time gap between notification and the completion of the assessment it might be necessary to introduce a checklist to ensure that in the meantime the arrangements for health and safety of the children are acceptable. It might also be helpful to provide private foster carers and the children and young people they are looking after with the child health promotion and, as appropriate, training for carers. Advice on sexual health and relationships is particularly indicated in light of some of the findings at this inspection.

Whilst the Local Authority Private Fostering Service's Statement of Purpose satisfies the required standards and regulations, in the inspector's opinion, it might be helpful to stakeholders if the service provided were to reflect more obviously the Local Authority's duties and functions in relation to the five national outcomes areas.

These are outcomes to which the service activities provided by all public bodies, concerning the care and treatment of children and young people, must contribute. They are reflected in the main headings in the main text of this report, except that which relates to management.

Enjoying and Achieving

JUDGEMENT –

The approach that the Local Authority has adopted for deciding the suitability of private fostering arrangements takes account of the extent to which the children involved will be provided with the opportunities and support for normal development. This was apparent in one of the cases that were closely examined.

EVIDENCE:

The few cases of private fostering as were current at inspection, were not sufficient to provide a substantial enough body of evidence from which to draw accurate conclusions about the Local Authority's performance in the area. However, in the cases examined the young people's education was being supported and their schools appeared to have not only provided them opportunities to achieve, but also contributed to their emotional sustenance. It was noted that in determining the suitability of private fostering arrangements, the Local Authority has introduced the welfare criteria as set out in the Children Act 1989, which includes the child's education and the adequacy of plans to respond to needs arising from their disability, religion, culture, etc.

Making a Positive Contribution

JUDGEMENT –

The approach that the Local Authority takes in determining the suitability of private fostering arrangements ensures that contact arrangements are given due consideration, and the plans for consulting with children and young people in such arrangements is likely to be effective given evidence derived from inspection of its mainstream fostering service.

EVIDENCE:

In ensuring that children in private fostering arrangements are able to make a positive contribution, it is expected that the Local Authority will check that parents and carers will make provision for this. Also, that it has its own means of consulting with the children and young people concerned. The indicators used for assessing how children make a positive contribution is by their being enabled to maintain contact with their relatives, friends and others significant to them. Also in being able to express views and opinions about how they are being looked after and how to make their concerns or complaints known.

The criteria the Local Authority use for determining the suitability of private fostering arrangements take account of children being able to maintain contact with their parents and in all the cases examined and what one young person told the inspector the contact arrangements that they had with their families were satisfactory. The Local Authority has a well established system for consulting children and young people about their care experience and the quality of service and intends to use this to ascertain the views and opinions of those who are being privately fostered. As mentioned earlier, the private foster guide that the Service intends to develop and issue to the children and young people will include information about making their views known, how to complain and from where they might seek advocacy in this regard.

Achieving Economic Well Being

JUDGEMENT –

Whilst the Service recognises the importance of arrangements for the children and young people's economic wellbeing, the translation of its policy about this into practical support, in some cases, needs attention.

EVIDENCE:

In assessing how the Local Authority has sought to ensure the economic wellbeing of children in private foster care, examination of relevant case records and other documentation showed that this aspect of care is reflected in the criteria for determining the suitability of arrangements. For example, social workers, in assessing private arrangements, are required to consider the efficacy of proposals for the maintenance of the child.

In the actual cases assessed, practice was variable. In some instances the financial arrangements were properly considered and grants and financial benefits advice were given resulting in tangible evidence of economic wellbeing. That is, a comfortable living environment, the young people having sufficient clothing and fashionable accessories so that they do not appear adversely distinguishable from their peers.

In one situation the carers expressed concern about the paucity of financial support from the Local Authority in circumstances where they had become private foster carers so as to diminish the need for the child to be looked after and in which the lack of financial means was evident. Overcrowding in a household providing private foster care was also observed, which was of some concern to the inspector given the health, economic and social disadvantages associated with it, and its drawbacks in promoting safe caring.

No assessment was made of the extent to which the Local Authority assists private foster carers to prepare children for independence or semi-independence in ways likely to secure financial wellbeing into adulthood.

However, where deficits were identified in securing economic wellbeing for certain young people, the likelihood is that their lack of economic wellbeing will proceed into adulthood thus placing them at risk of becoming reliant on the public welfare system in this regard.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion

"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

STAYING SAFE		MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	3	1	3
3	1	7	3
4	3		
5	2		
6	3		

Are there any outstanding recommendations from the last inspection?

This is the first inspection.

RECOMMENDATIONS		
These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Local Authority to consider carrying out.		
No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	PF2	The unexpected low numbers of notifications of private fostering arrangements should be investigated to establish whether this is an accurate reflection of actual existence of such arrangements.
2.	PF3	The Local Authority must ensure that where the need for private fostering arrangements arises out of allegation of abuse, the child protection procedures are invoked.
3.	PF3	The Local Authority must give due regard to concerns expressed by other agencies based on their intelligence about households where children and young people are, or it is proposed they be, placed in private fostering arrangements.
4.	PF3	Where the Local Authority is notified of private fostering arrangements and the child concerned appears to be at risk and/or in need, it must exercise its powers and duties to protect and ensure that the child and his or her parents receive appropriate services including those as might diminish the need for the private foster care arrangements.
5.	PF3	The Local Authority must ensure that private foster care arrangements are not likely to compound risk to vulnerable young people.
6.	PF7	Private fostering cases should be subject to closer monitoring from the time of notification to determination of the suitability of the arrangements. This should happen until such time as the current policies, procedures and practices become embedded.
7.	PF3 and PF4	The Local Authority should:

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure that in the time between notification and completion of private foster care arrangements, there are adequate provisions for health of the children and young people concerned where they are actually in private foster care at the time of notification; 2. Give information to private foster carers and provide training, where relevant, as will assist them in promoting the health and safety of the children and young people in their care; and, 3. Give the children and young people health promotion information in keeping with their age, understanding, communication needs and as is pertinent to their personal circumstances.
8.	PF1	The Local Authority should consider revising its Statement of Purpose for private fostering so that it clearly reflects how it discharges its functions and duties in order to contribute to the five national outcomes for the care and treatment of children and young people.
9.	PF3	The Local Authority should ensure that, in practice, all the necessary steps have been taken to secure the economic wellbeing of children and young people who are being cared for in private fostering arrangements.
10.	PF4 and PF6	The Local Authority should proceed with its plan to produce and issue information packs to children in private foster care, similar to those issued to children and young people who are being Looked After.
11.	PF7	The Local Authority should consult with children; parents and carers involved in private foster care arrangements about their experience, views and opinions of the service.

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