

Multi Agency Referral and Assessment Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

Unique reference number	SC077274
Inspection date	7 July 2008
Inspector	Jeffrey Banham
Type of Inspection	Key

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Trafford has established its policies and procedures in relation to the discharge of its duties under the Children Act 1989, the Children Act 2004 and the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering Regulations) that came into force on July 1st 2005. The responsibility for the service rests with the Multi Agency Referral and Assessment Service. A multi- agency private fostering steering group has been established. Assessments of the suitability of carers rests with the family placement team. Social workers undertake Initial and Core assessments on all privately fostered children and young people. Privately fostered children and young people are regarded as 'children in need' and are reviewed every six months, together with the suitability of the private fostering arrangement. The service has produced a Private Fostering Service Development Plan for 2008.

Summary

The announced key inspection covered all the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for private fostering arrangements. There are five children and young people privately fostered in Trafford. Within the last 12 months other identified arrangements have been reported either by other local authorities or professionals within the borough and have subsequently ended. The service has developed detailed policies and procedures for managing private fostering arrangements and has identified a lead officer with overall responsibility for service development. The agreed policies and procedures are not always fully implemented by social workers responsible for the management of the cases. The welfare of children is compromised by inconsistent adherence to the procedures such as the length of time assessments of carers should take. Visits to children are not always carried out with the required frequency. Cases of children are not always reviewed within the timescales required by the local authority's procedures. Other agencies involved in the care of children are not sufficiently aware of the definition of private fostering arrangements. The service has identified that improvements are required and has set up a multi-agency steering group to revise the procedures and reinforce practice requirements in line with the service development plan.

The overall quality rating is inadequate.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of the local authority's private fostering arrangements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

The local authority has produced a set of procedures to provide the framework within which it discharges its duties in relation to private fostering arrangements. It has supported the introduction of these procedures by a strategy designed to inform and train all staff within children's services and staff from other relevant agencies such as education and health services. Members of the public have been given information through local publicity campaigns. Private foster carers and parents of children privately fostered are provided with support in accordance

with their wishes and the needs of the placement. However, the practical implementation of the NMS and the local authority's own procedures have not been robust, consistent or systematic. There are examples of social workers being involved with families where private fostering arrangements are in place and not recognising the status of the placement. The local authority's own procedures are not always implemented and other agencies involved with children have not been aware a private fostering arrangement being in existence, or of their responsibility to notify. Assessments of carers have taken longer than the timescales set out in the authority's procedures, and visits to children, with subsequent written reports, have not taken place with the required frequency. The suitability of private fostering arrangements is not always agreed and signed-off at the appropriate managerial level. In addition cases of children in private fostering arrangements, who are defined by the authority as 'children in need', are not always reviewed within the required timescales. Although there is no evidence that children have been put at risk in any placements, it is clear that the procedures for responding to private fostering arrangements, which are in themselves detailed and appropriate, are not sufficiently understood or implemented throughout the service and in the agencies involved in the care and supervision of children. The practice of the local authority cannot yet demonstrate that it is able to provide satisfactory levels of safety for children in private fostering arrangements.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has produced a Statement of Purpose for the private fostering arrangements and accompanying fostering procedures and guidance. These were first introduced in 2006. The procedures set out the arrangements for defining, notifying and responding to private fostering arrangements. They have been accompanied by a public information campaign and training events for local authority staff and other relevant agencies such as health. The procedures were reviewed and reintroduced in 2007 to ensure all staff have an appropriate understanding of the local authority's duties and functions. Children and carers have separate and individual records that are designed to contain the written reports required by the regulations. The files demonstrate that reports such as those required following visits to children and the signing-off by a manager are not always completed. The local authority has reviewed a sample of cases and this has identified that its own procedures are not always implemented. The annual report to the Director has recognised that there is a need to reinforce the procedures for those staff responsible for their implementation. A multi-agency support group has been created in order to promote the raising of awareness of the policies and procedures and to ensure all relevant staff implement the agreed practices.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure all staff have an appropriate understanding of the local authority's duties and functions in relation to private fostering (NMS 1.3)
- ensure that decisions about the overall suitability of arrangements are made within required timescales and signed-off at managerial level (NMS 3.4)
- ensure comprehensive, well-organised and confidential records are kept for each privately fostered child and each private foster carer and contain the written reports required by the regulations (NMS 7.2.).