

St Helens Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Sharon Lloyd
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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

The local authority fostering service takes lead responsibility for publicising information about private fostering arrangements, receiving notifications, carrying out assessments and supporting private foster carers. The children's social work teams provide support to children who are privately fostered. There are currently two children in private fostering arrangements in St Helen's. The inspection considered how the local authority had met its obligations to privately fostered children since 2005.

Summary

Good policies and procedures are in place to safeguard children and social work staff have received training about private fostering during 2008. Safeguarding procedures have not always been good because the local authority has not carried out criminal records bureau and other checks aimed at safeguarding children as soon as arrangements become known. Practice is reviewed and improved where shortfalls are identified.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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 satisfactory.

Policies and systems are in place to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in private fostering arrangements. The fostering service takes the lead responsibility for receiving notifications and assessing the suitability of carers.

Those involved in private fostering arrangements have access to clear information about their obligations and the services they can expect from the local authority. This is because written information for children, parents, private foster carers and professionals is available at public buildings throughout the area as well as on the local authority website. It sets out clearly the duty to notify the local authority as well as the support that will be provided as a result of notification. It is available in written English only. Although an interpreting service is available to the local authority, the written information does not make it clear that it can be translated into different languages or made available in different formats. This means that it is not readily available to all members of the community.

Since the first written information was produced in 2005, there has been a steady increase in the number of notifications received, most of these coming from social work teams or schools. Notifications have not been received directly from parents and only one has come from private foster carers.

To raise awareness of private fostering amongst professionals, information has been shared with the police, the housing department, sure start and schools as well as the safeguarding unit, school nurses, G.P.s, dentists and education support officers. Training events have taken place with head teacher and social workers and new employees to social work and social care learn about private fostering as part of their induction. The traveller education service ensure that travellers and immigrant communities in the local authority are made aware of the private fostering regulations and are proactive in raising awareness of the need to notify any such arrangements to the local authority. They maintain good links with other local authorities so that any concerns about those moving between authorities are passed on.

There has been at least one incident where the social work team has not notified the fostering service of private fostering arrangements and has allowed children to live with carers who have not been checked or assessed as suitable to look after them for several months. This means that children have been at risk from living with potential abusers. Clear guidance regarding the procedures to be followed is now available within the local authority, and this has resulted in improved practice in forwarding notifications to the fostering team.

Procedures are in place to assess private fostering arrangements and support children. An initial assessment is conducted by the social work team, including an emergency police check and inspection of the home including the child's bedroom. A more comprehensive assessment of suitability is undertaken by the fostering team. This does not commence until at least 28 days after the notification has been received, even though the child may have lived there longer. It includes Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and other checks on the private foster carers and other adults living in the home. There is sometimes a delay in applying for a CRB check and some children have been in private fostering arrangements for over six months before a CRB check has been applied for. The assessment may take several months to complete. This does not adequately safeguard children from potential abusers.

The suitability of the premises is assessed and the child's wishes and feelings ascertained. Arrangement for financial support, contact with family, the child's education, religion, cultural needs and health are considered. This means that the carers' ability to meet the child's needs is assessed. Where there are gaps, the local authority provides support to sustain the arrangement and ensure the child's needs are being appropriately met. For example, financial assistance is provided where neither the parent nor the carers can afford to pay school dinner monies and bus fares. Support is provided to access local services or schools and to help young people prepare for adulthood.

A contract is provided by the local authority to be drawn up between the parents and the private foster carers. It promotes clear agreements for the responsibility and care of the child. It is clear that parents retain parental responsibility. However, arrangements for consent to medication are not included so that children in need of treatment may have to wait unnecessarily. Private foster carers do not have children's full health history so children's health needs may not be identified.

The assessment of arrangements is considered by the fostering team manager who makes a recommendation regarding approval of arrangements to the agency decision maker. Where arrangements are deemed unsuitable, approval is not granted and the child moves from the placement. Some children have at this stage been accommodated by the local authority.

Foster carers and children receive support from both the fostering service and the children's social work teams. Children and private foster carers know their social workers and report that they are helpful and nice. They have their telephone numbers and report that they can contact them if they need any advice or support. Children are visited by a social worker every six weeks during the first year of the arrangement and three monthly thereafter. Records show that children are seen alone; however, details recorded are minimal so that the service cannot demonstrate that children's welfare is well promoted through the systems in place to safeguard them. Records of involvement with parents are not always maintained so the local authority cannot demonstrate that it has provided birth parents with appropriate advice, information and support.

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.

A comprehensive Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the services provided by the local authority and is available on the website and to all interested parties. Good procedural guidance is provided to staff involved in delivering the service and all documentation is easily available on computer to ensure that social work staff follow procedures. Documentation addresses all the matters required by the regulations.

The local authority monitors all private fostering arrangements. This includes notifications, referrals, assessments and ongoing arrangements. Files are well maintained and audited so the managers have a good overview of arrangements in place and compliance with the legislation. An annual report provides information to show how the local authority has met its safeguarding obligations to children in private fostering arrangements. Procedures are reviewed and improved regularly so that an increasing number of children in private fostering arrangements receive services that safeguard them from potential abuse. The service is constantly seeking to improve its practices and raise awareness within the community so that it can reach and support more children living in private fostering arrangements.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Children remain within their own culture and continue to attend their own schools. Their needs are considered although not always in depth. Private foster carers are given guidance about where to access the support they may need to help meet children's individual needs. Written information is widely available, however, it is not available in formats other than written English and this means that those unable to read English may not know about the services provided and their obligations to notify the local authority of private fostering arrangements. To address this, the local authority ensure that those working with the traveller community share information about private fostering verbally. All professionals working with children in the area have been informed about the need to make the local authority aware of any arrangements that come to their attention.

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):

- provide advice for those involved in private fostering arrangements in different formats so that this information is accessible to all (NMS 4.3)
- carry out criminal records bureau and other checks promptly to ensure that children are protected as far as possible from living with potential abusers (NMS 3.2.6)
- ensure that arrangements are in place that promote the child's health (NMS 3.2.7)
- provide advice and support to parents of privately fostered children as needed and evidence this in records (NMS 5.1)
- ensure that social workers have a good understanding of their duties in relation to children in private fostering arrangements so that there is no delay in assessing the safety and wellbeing of children (NMS 2.1).