

Southampton City Council Private Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority private fostering services

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to judge the quality of local authority private fostering services to promote and safeguard children's and young people's welfare.

The key 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

Information about the services

Southampton City Council's private fostering service is responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children who are privately fostered.

These arrangements are delivered through the council's main fostering service, and one of the service's principal officer's has a lead role for private fostering. Private foster carers, the children and young people they care for, and the parents of those children are supported by a small social work team who have specific expertise and experience in private fostering.

Information about private fostering is provided on the council's website, in addition to local publicity and awareness-raising campaigns.

Summary

The services were judged to be Good

Improvements/developments since the last inspection

At the last inspection the service was found to be inadequate and a range of recommendations were made to improve the service. The recommendations from the last inspection are met.

A full review of private fostering placements was undertaken and changes made so that children and young people's placements accurately reflect their status. Assessments of suitability cover all aspects of a child or young person's needs as outlined in national minimum standard three, including consideration of information from Criminal Records Bureau checks. Robust decisions are made and recorded following the assessment and any decision is notified to all parties in the arrangement.

The effectiveness of the services

The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services

The overall effectiveness of the private fostering service is good.

This was an announced full inspection of the council's private fostering service to assess how well the national minimum standards and regulations in relation to private fostering arrangements are met and whether the recommendations made at the previous inspection have been completed.

Overall, children and young people who are privately fostered, their parents and private foster carers are provided with a good service. Assessments, support and interventions are tailored to the individual circumstances of each placement, resulting in safe placements that meet privately fostered children and young people's needs.

Strong leadership and management have ensured through a strategic approach that the private fostering service is well embedded in the council's operation. The service has the capacity to improve and has developed quickly since moving its operation to the fostering service last year. It has a strong focus on outcomes for children and an integrated approach to training staff and developing links with appropriate agencies. Further work is needed to ensure that the promotion of equality and diversity is embedded within all aspects of the service and monitored appropriately.

There are very good systems in place for receiving and managing referrals and supporting placements. The diverse range of sources for referrals shows that the council's awareness-raising campaign has impact. Staff who work within private fostering competently develop the internal and external awareness strategies and promote the quality of service. However, detailed data to show how and from where referrers gain their knowledge of private fostering is not widely available.

	Judgement
The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services	Good

The quality of the service

The quality of the service is good. Moving the private fostering service from front-line children's services to the fostering team has enhanced the development of an efficient and effective child-focused service where dedicated staff time prioritises the needs of privately fostered children. Staff from outside of the private fostering team understand, or can very quickly check whether a particular set of circumstances mean a child is privately fostered; this results in a responsive service where collaborative services have placed private fostering as a central activity of the

council.

Awareness of private fostering is effectively promoted with relevant agencies such as the police and education as well as among the council's staff. Staff from differing parts of the children's services department speak knowledgeably about private fostering and how this affects their work. Referrals come from a range of sources, such as the Border Agency, which demonstrates a widespread understanding among professionals. There is a great deal of activity to increase public awareness including attending community groups and information being made available in council publications. This has some success; however, it is not well supported by any systematic analysis of the link between raised awareness and publicity materials or activities.

The staff induction programme results in greater awareness and understanding of private fostering within the council. This leads to referrals from a wide range of internal sources, staff questioning whether a care arrangement is private fostering and a fast response to referrals which identify potential private fostering arrangements. .

The private fostering team has well-established links to all aspects of the council's children's services from the initial contact centre to the child protection team. There is a comprehensive internal training programme in place which includes presentations to locality teams, senior staff and early years staff. This results in staff who are able to explain the procedures they follow if they wish to discuss or refer a private fostering arrangement.

The team effectively use a full range of paperwork which covers the referral, notification and support functions of the service. Privately fostered children and young people benefit from a needs-led approach which is based on an accurate assessment of all their needs including those relating to health, education, culture and contact. This is enhanced by the use of the children in need assessment form. Prior to the completion of the full assessment an initial agreement is signed by all parties; this creates a safe basis for placements from the outset.

Both carers and children or young people are positive about the service provided. They confirm it meets their needs and is responsive when things change. Private foster carers find the social worker helpful and supportive. One carer said she used the social worker as 'a sounding board' who helped her by discussing difficult issues so she could respond to a child's needs appropriately. Finance is an issue for carers; this is recognised and taken into account by staff who maintain a balance between support they can give and the private nature of the arrangement. Children, young people and carers are not sufficiently clear about the information the council keep about them, the complaints procedure or what services are available. One person confirmed that they received this information and could not remember what it said but all were confident that they would be told if they asked. Service users do not therefore fully understand what services are available to them; however, this does not impact on the safety and well-being of the children and young people.

The decisions made are child-focused, comprehensive, robust, well documented and follow required timescales throughout. Children and young people said they were happy with the service they receive and have a clear understanding of what support is available. Visits are undertaken as required by regulations and more frequently if needed, therefore children and young people benefit from a responsive needs-led service. This has resulted in positive outcomes for children. One child said: 'I am happy with the support I get from the social worker', and a private foster carer said they thought the social worker got the balance of support right and another that you 'couldn't knock' the social worker.

	Judgement
The quality of the service	Good

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of privately fostered children and young people

The safeguarding and promotion of children and young people's welfare are good. Children and young people say they feel safe in their placements, confirm that their social worker visits them every six weeks and say they feel able to raise concerns if they want to. They know who to contact if they want to discuss or get help with anything and that they always get a quick response. One young person commented: 'I like my social worker; I can talk to her about things.'

Assessments clearly identify how children's welfare is protected and highlight potential concerns. Records of visits continue to identify and address any other issues of concern, resulting in a continuing understanding of children's needs and therefore improved outcomes. When necessary joint visits are undertaken between child protection workers and staff working with privately fostered children to ensure the appropriateness of a placement and deal with child protection concerns. Children and young people therefore benefit from a consistent and coherent approach to any concerns about them.

There is a clear balance between protecting and promoting the children and young people's welfare and a recognition of the private nature of the arrangement. Issues relating to their care and support are acknowledged and dealt with. For example, there is good liaison with schools. Contact issues are resolved sensitively in an effective and collaborative manner which results in better relationships with their parents where appropriate and improved outcomes for children and young people.

Assessments are comprehensive, clear and individual. This leads to safe private fostering placements being identified, supported and maintained. Staff also demonstrate a commitment to children's ongoing needs and safety when they leave their private fostering placement.

Links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) are well established. The LSCB reviews and scrutinises how well the council's private fostering service protects

children, ensures partner agencies, such as the police and health are involved and provides advice and guidance on how the service should develop. Children are therefore protected by a real commitment to develop an integrated service which promotes multi-agency working to safeguard children in private fostering arrangements across the council.

	Judgement
Safeguarding and promoting welfare	Good

Promoting equality and tackling discrimination

The private fostering service satisfactorily promotes equality and tackles discrimination. Further development is necessary in order to fully embed this within every aspect of practice.

Children and young people's individual needs, such as their religion, health and ethnicity are appropriately identified, assessed, supported and met. Children and young people and their carers are helped to understand each other's views, thereby promoting placement stability.

Promotional literature for adults and children about private fostering is available through the council's website and is used at events and training. It is well written and easy to understand. The website enables those with a visual impairment to read or listen to the information provided. Translations into languages other than English are available on request. While the website lacked information about how to request a translation this was remedied during the inspection and the availability of translations is now clear.

Staff understand general issues relating to private fostering but are insufficiently clear about the role of private fostering in local communities in their area. Through the awareness campaign links have been made with services for refugees and asylum seekers and the private fostering social worker is part of the local authority inner city multi-agency group. There are plans to establish links with community and faith groups. Referrals are monitored by equality strands but there is no analysis of this, which impedes the development and focus of awareness campaigns and may reduce the potential to increase the numbers of known arrangements.

	Judgement
Promoting equality and tackling discrimination	Satisfactory

The quality of leadership and management

Leadership and management are good. The private fostering service is well integrated within the directorate and council as a whole. It is seen as a shared responsibility between staff and elected members and is regularly discussed at the

Local Safeguarding Children Board and in training events for staff.

There is a detailed Statement of Purpose and a position statement which accurately reflect the actions taken, progress made and next steps to develop the service. This meets requirements in legislation, promotes and safeguards children's welfare and enhances the clarity, development and purpose of the private fostering service. Responsibility for the service is located with a principal officer of the children's services department and all managers demonstrate a good awareness of the private fostering service, its development and the particular needs of children who are privately fostered.

There are good formal and informal communication systems which promote staff's knowledge and understanding of private fostering. Elected members receive a copy of the private fostering Statement of Purpose and are updated on how the plans progress. Discussions between the children first team, who receive all referrals about children, and the private fostering team are well established and frequent. This results in robust decisions about what constitutes a private fostering arrangement.

The management team have incrementally built the private fostering service and addressed the shortfalls identified at the last inspection. Importance has been placed on building a child-focused service and ensuring that the service is firmly understood and recognised within the council.

The service has been developed to deliver the necessary range of activities to meet the council's regulatory duties. Location within the fostering team brings suitable flexibility, and fluctuations in demand can be accommodated. However, the management team recognise that the success of their awareness-raising campaign may require an increase in staff and management time; this is monitored and demonstrates a proactive stance to ensuring that resources continue to meet the level of service need.

There is an ongoing strategic commitment to continually improve the private fostering service and a good understanding of how this can be achieved. These developments are supported by self-assessment, development planning and auditing, which results in staff being clear about what they are able to achieve. The service is therefore able to respond rapidly and make improvements which impact positively on outcomes for children and young people because staff are involved in service development and have a firm understanding of private fostering.

A single report is made to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Director of Children's Services. While it covers most elements it lacks an evaluation of the impact of the private fostering service and in particular the impact of individual awareness-raising activities. This leads to the use of anecdotal evidence to understand the service and fails to fully recognise the breadth or quality of the work taking place.

	Judgement
The quality of leadership and management	Good

Capacity to improve

The service's capacity to improve is good. The recommendations from the last inspection are met as detailed in the improvement section of this report.

All staff demonstrate a clear commitment to improving the service, as identified throughout this report. Development plans are based on a good understanding of private fostering, and focus on improving outcomes for children. The service improvements, particularly awareness raising and staff knowledge of private fostering occur because the right staff have been engaged in the right activities and the service is located in the right place within the council. This has resulted in a strong foundation from which to further improve the private fostering service and a strong staff commitment to success.

Continual improvement is enhanced by staff themselves being enabled to make decisions and recommendations about how to improve the service. Many of the improvements, such as those regarding changes to the paperwork, are driven and completed by the private fostering service's social worker. This creates a very responsive service and quickly changing practices to make improvements. Children and young people's views, and those of their parents and carers regarding the quality of the overall service, have not yet been sought in a systematic manner and therefore do not contribute to the development of the service.

	Judgement
Capacity to improve	Good

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations to improve the quality and standards of the local authority's private fostering services

This section sets out the recommendations to improve the quality and standards of the local authority's private fostering services.

Type	Recommendation
NMS	ensure that an evaluation of the impact of private fostering work by equality strands is undertaken and reported within the annual report for the Director of Children's services (NMS 7)
NMS	develop stronger links with faith and community groups in the Southampton area (NMS 2)
NMS	ensure that children, young people and private foster carers have written information about the private fostering service and how to make a complaint (NMS 4 and 6)
NMS	ensure that private foster carers understand the what training and support are available to them. (NMS 4)