

# inspection report

## LOCAL COUNCIL PRIVATE FOSTERING ARRANGEMENTS

### **Fostering Services (WCC Private Fostering Arrangements)**

**Family Placement Service  
1st Floor, 4 Frampton Street  
London  
NW8 8LF**

*Lead Inspector*  
Rossella Volpi

*Announced Inspection*  
19<sup>th</sup> February 2007

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
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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](http://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** Fostering Services (WCC Private Fostering Arrangements)

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NW8 8LF

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# **SUMMARY**

## **Westminster City Council**

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

This inspection was part of the local authority's fostering and private fostering arrangements' joint inspection. The joint inspection was conducted by Bernard Burrell and Rossella Volpi, mainly in February 2007, but ended on 1 March. There are two separate reports, for fostering and for private fostering arrangements, although there was some joint work and planning.

This report only relates to the private fostering arrangements' inspection, which was conducted over three days and included:

- Discussion with the social worker assessing one private fostering arrangement.
- Discussion with the manager with the lead responsibility for private fostering (referred to as 'the manager' in the report).
- Discussion with other professionals within the authority.
- Visit to one carer.
- Case tracking of two fostering arrangements, (out of 3 known to the authority), where children were in placement. One assessment had been completed and approved. The other assessment had been sent back for more work to be carried out.
- Inspection of other relevant documentation.

The inspection was also informed by the manager's own annual written assessment of the strengths of the service and the areas where progress was still needed.

While private fostering arrangements are not regulated services, local authorities have functions and duties with regard to children who are privately fostered. The commission for social care inspection has agreed to inspect all local authorities against the new national minimum standards over the next three years.

The London Borough of Westminster is one of the local authorities whose private fostering arrangements have been inspected in the first year. It should be noted that in comparison to those authorities due to be inspected in years two and three, those in year one would have had less opportunity to progress work in this area, by the time of their inspection.

At the time of inspection there were 3 ongoing known arrangements. There had been an additional 6 arrangements during 2006, which had ended.

## **What the local authority does well:**

The assessments seen showed that there were positive outcomes for the children and that their carers supported them regarding health, education, development, culture and other important needs.

For example, in both cases it was noted from the records that the child was receiving good care, developing well and forming strong attachments.

There was a designated lead manager, with responsibility for promotion of awareness of private fostering arrangements and the carrying out of the assessments.

All privately fostered children were regarded as children in need and were entitled to support from the authority. All had an allocated social worker. Support was also available to carers and birth parents.

Westminster expected assessment and placement visits to include speaking to the child / young person alone, unless inappropriate to do so. The authority expected carers to value the child's culture, racial identity, faith, preferred language, sexual orientation and differing abilities. The procedures developed placed emphasis on ensuring that the child would be listened to.

Westminster had made efforts to promote awareness of private fostering in the community and produced well-designed leaflets and posters.

Steps had been taken to ensure that relevant staff had a good understanding of private fostering.

The authority was aware that few notifications of private fostering arrangements had been received and planned renewed publicity campaigns.

A programme of more detailed briefings on private fostering had begun to agencies in the community and to schools and health visitors in particular.

## **What has improved since the last inspection?**

This was the first inspection conducted by CSCI under the national minimum standards for private fostering, which came into force in July 2005 and the children (private arrangements for fostering) regulations 2005.

## **What they could do better:**

The authority needed to generate more notifications of private fostering arrangements by targeting the agencies in the community and by publicising more the matters to the general public.

The low number of notifications meant that the initiatives already taken had not yet been effective and should be reviewed, so that children in private fostering arrangements could be identified and safeguarded.

There was an urgent need to improve the rigour of the assessments and approvals.

There was no significant evidence that the monitoring in place was effective enough. There was potential to make it so, because of the expertise of the people involved, but the lack of clarity regarding roles, responsibilities and accountability had prevented the potential to be fulfilled.

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](mailto: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**

## **CONTENTS**

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, 6**

Quality in this area was adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence, including a visit to the service.

The authority was taking steps to promote awareness of the notification requirement both in house and within the wider local community.

The low number of notifications meant that the initiatives had not yet been effective and should be reviewed, so that children in private fostered arrangements could be identified and safeguarded.

There were a few, but significant gaps in assessments that should be urgent targets for the authority to address. This should result in a more rigorous vetting of carers' suitability and therefore better safeguarding of children.

**EVIDENCE:**

Specific responsibility for promoting awareness of private fostering arrangements and carrying out the assessments was held within the duty and assessment team. The team manager being the designated lead manager on private fostering.

Assessments could be carried out by social workers in a number of teams, responsible to a different team manager. The designated lead manager on private fostering was intended to retain overall responsibility. (An outline of the challenges this was posing is given below, in the section on management).

The authority had taken a number of initiatives to raise awareness with external professionals and the wider community. For example, the council communications unit was developing posters and leaflets about private fostering. There was a programme of distributing publicity on the issues of private fostering including to GP surgeries, health services, libraries, schools, leisure centres, voluntary organisations and private hospitals.

The programme of promotion had included presentations to head teachers, briefings sessions for social workers and managers, briefing sessions for multi-agency family support panels.

Westminster included a section on private fostering on its web site. Also through the local safeguarding children board, the authority had promoted private fostering amongst professional organisations within the borough.

(Below in the section on management the arrangements for induction or training of the authority's own staff are briefly outlined).

There was potential for steady progress to be made because the manager was aware of the need to maintain the publicity campaign and increase its referral rate. He had contacted other authorities, which had had more opportunity to progress work in this area, to discuss what had worked well and learn from their experiences. He discussed, during the inspection, his plan for a targeted approach.

He intended to widen its audience, for example to the homeless, the travelling community or faith centres. He was intending that publicity would be made available in the community languages and that an information leaflet for children would be developed.

(See recommendations)

The authority appreciated that in most cases lack of notification from carers would be due to ignorance or anxiety. The manager said that training for staff and other professionals would emphasise that carers needed to be informed, counselled and encouraged to come forward.

However the authority had also put in place procedures for handling disqualifications and for prosecutions or prohibitions, (including appeal procedures), should there be concerns about the motives of the carers and the welfare of the child. The procedures had yet to be tested.

Westminster's expectations required an initial assessment on all notifications to determine whether they met the private fostering threshold and a core assessment to be undertaken, within the timescales laid down by the national assessment framework.

Such assessment would take account of the carer's parenting capacity and the child's developmental needs. This would include how the carer would deal with diversity issues, contribute to the maintaining of a positive identity for the child, promote health, education, emotional and behavioural development and social presentation.

Once the assessments would be / were completed, the decision about the suitability of the arrangement would be signed off by a service manager with expertise in this role, as she was also the chair of the fostering panel. In the longer term the plan was to form a panel from a sub-group of the local children safeguarding board, to approve and review private fostering arrangements.

While it was evident that the authority had taken steps to safeguard the children, there were a few, but very significant gaps in the assessments that made safeguarding not robust enough and that should be urgent targets for the authority to address.

The details were discussed with the manager during the inspection and are not all repeated here, for confidentiality reasons. However the main points are outlined below.

In one case tracked, which had been a long-standing arrangement, the following were noted:

- No evidence of full assessment of suitability for all household members (including lack of criminal record bureau (CRB) checks).
- The records of visits, while regularly done, greatly differed in content and depth, making it difficult to ascertain how the assessments were progressing. It was difficult to see, from some of the records, what was happening for the child regarding the 'every child matters' outcomes.
- There had been long delays in completing the assessment.

It was appreciated that this was a particularly complex situation, unclear at first. It was also noted that since the current social worker took over, safeguarding became more robust (because of regular visits, monitoring and engaging with all relevant parties).

However, that this was a private fostering arrangement became clear at least 16 months before the assessment was sent to be signed off. Even so gaps still remained and the assessment could not be signed off when presented to the service manager.

The delays meant that the child had continued to live for a protracted period where the suitability of the arrangements were not fully assessed. Also that the case had lacked the scrutiny that the stage of presentation for signing off within a certain timescale should give.

- There was an unusual sleeping arrangement for the foster child, which should have been subject to a robust, regularly monitored risk assessment, reviewed at managerial level. No evidence of this was seen.
- While the social worker received managerial support, the priority in the caseload was child protection cases, over assessments of privately fostering arrangements. This could cause continuing delays on other assessments.
- The assessment, once completed, went to the service manager to be signed off, without being overseen by or advice sought from the designated lead manager on private fostering.

It was not clear what was the protocol about who would oversee the assessments and audit the work, when the allocated social workers are in different teams from the lead manager on private fostering. This would also mean that the expertise of the lead manager did not benefit the assessments. (The implications of this in relation to safeguarding are also discussed below, in the section on managing).

- There was lack of clarity about the frequency of visits expected by the authority after 1 year, if the assessments had not been completed.

In the other case tracked, where the assessment had been completed and signed off, it was noted that:

- The suitability of all relevant members of the household was not assessed. Instead the authority relied on the assurances of the foster carers about the carers having conducted the necessary checks themselves.
- The carers had not been CRB checked by the authority. Instead the authority relied on the assurances of another agency, abroad, which had conducted suitability checks. It was not clear whether a copy of the original checks had been seen or not, but in any case these would have not included CRBs. (This was contrary to Westminster's procedure and

contrary to what is stated in the annual quality assurance document, submitted by the authority to inform the inspection).

- There was no sound reason given for the above. In fact the lead manager on private fostering queried this in writing, when he saw the assessment. His queries were not responded to and the assessment was sent to (and was) signed off nonetheless.

(See recommendations)

The authority was committed to ensuring that carers and parents of privately fostered children would receive advice and support to assist them to meet the needs of the children.

It was also evident from the discussion with the manager, social worker and carer and from records seen, that the social worker had been ascertaining the views of the child. He had been liaising with the parents, supporting them with a range of complex issues. (In the other case tracked the birth parents were not contactable).

The carer visited was very pleased with the help and support from the social worker, which had included discussion of financial arrangements, practical advice and support regarding accommodation.

There was also direct evidence from the child about some positive outcomes deriving from the placement.

The manager said that the authority regarded children in private fostering arrangements as children in need. He could therefore use the powers and discretion under the appropriate legislation for practical and financial support of the children, carers and birth families, if necessary, to ensure that privately fostered children would not have less opportunities than the children looked after by the authority.

The manager recognised the importance of the work with birth families and said that he had access to Westminster's facilities for interpreting and translation. Specialism on disability would be provided when a particular impairment required it. The manager had also full use of other specialist resources such as a welfare rights advisor and a housing advisor.

Carers would be given information in writing about their responsibilities under the regulations and standards and also those of the local authority; specific training would be planned for them. Private foster carers had access to Westminster's training programme for approved foster carers.

Therefore there was potential to fulfill the expectations of the national minimum standards and of the authority regarding advice and support to

children, their parents and carers. The assessment process identified what advice and support may be required and it was happening in the cases tracked. The lack of notifications, however, would mean that in a number of cases it would not be happening, by default.

Furthermore, information in different languages and formats was not yet available. This was a target identified by the manager to be fulfilled during 2007.

The written information that was provided was only for parents and carers, not yet for children. Another target for 2007 was the developing of age appropriate materials in suitable formats for social workers to use with children, to inform them about private fostering, their rights and whom they can contact

The authority was aware that the above needed to include:

- Information for young people with disabilities approaching the age of 18, with details of Westminster's procedure for assessing eligibility for adult community care services.
- Information about the arrangements for providing advice and assistance to those privately fostered children who would qualify for this (under section 24(2)(e) of the children act 1989.

# 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):**

**1, 7**

Quality in this area was adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence, including a visit to the service.

The authority had developed a strategic plan and established procedures for monitoring the way in which it discharged its duties and functions in relation to private fostering.

An urgent review was needed of its statement of purpose, of the procedures for assessment and of lines of accountability for monitoring. This would better ensure that all stakeholders know who is responsible for the authority's duties and the ways in which they should be carried out to best safeguard children.

### **EVIDENCE:**

Westminster had a written statement of purpose setting out the local authority's duties and functions in relation to private fostering and the ways in which these were to be carried out. It included a clear definition of private fostering, the notification requirements, gave an outline of the assessment and approval process and of the ongoing duties to provide support.

While the statement met much of the expectations of the minimum standards for private fostering, it was last revised in 2005 and it needed to be updated. For example, regarding the names of the officers with responsibility for private fostering, or to clarify and review how the authority will determine the suitability of all aspects of a private fostering arrangement, etc. (Examples were highlighted in the discussion with the manager during the inspection and also related to some of the issues outlined above in the report).

(See recommendations)

Steps had been taken to ensure that relevant staff had appropriate understanding of private fostering. The team manager was confident that his team and the management team had a good understanding. He said that there had been a high level of stability amongst the managers and therefore there had been good opportunity to build knowledge and share understanding.

There had been a high turn-over of social work staff which, the manager thought, might necessitate renewed impetus in ensuring that all staff knew enough about private fostering to act appropriately to support the authorities' duties and functions. However, despite this, the information and in particular a screening tool given to all staff (regarding private fostering) was starting to be effective with more staff contacting the manager for advice.

The authority had taken steps to ensure that its duties and functions about private fostering would be included in the induction programme of new staff. There were a number of ways in which induction for new staff was delivered and it was envisaged, but not yet achieved, to include private fostering on all.

The manager considered that this would be easily and imminently achievable. He was planning to evaluate and expand very soon, with the training manager, the training provided / to be provided for all staff, both as part of induction and other regular training and refresher sessions.

The work done with privately fostered children and carers was carried out by named, qualified social workers and recorded, according to Westminster recording policy. The records were well-organised and kept with due regard for confidentiality.

The manager conducted regular audits of the casework done. These would also include the matters to which the authority had to satisfy itself in relation to suitability of carers and time-scales. The ones seen on the two case files tracked were both comprehensive and accurate. Audits would be more effective if the authority stated clearly what it wanted the assessments to include (i.e. checks, references, how they satisfy themselves about disqualifications, etc.)

(See recommendations)

The final signing off of the assessments had been placed with a senior manager, independent of the assessment process.

Private fostering was overseen by the local children's safeguarding board (operational and preventative subgroup), which made regular reports to the director of children's services.

A system for recording the number and nature of enquiries received in relation to private fostering was being started.

The above demonstrated that there were monitoring system, but some significant shortfalls were identified during the inspection.

These were discussed in some detail with the manager and impinged on safeguarding (as outlined above in the report). The main issue was that the specific role and authority of the lead manager on private fostering were not well defined.

It was appreciated that the assessments might need to be conducted by a range of social workers in different teams, some of whom, therefore, would be managed by different operational managers.

However the monitoring of how the functions were being carried out needed to be clearly linked to the authority to ask for actions to be taken. There was an urgent need to improve the rigour of the assessments and approvals.

Therefore, if the authority considers best to continue with the system whereby private fostering cases would be held in different parts of the service (i.e. different teams and managers), the role and authority of the designated manager, who was supposed to have overall responsibility for private fostering, would need to be made explicit.

(See recommendations)

One example for the conclusions above was:

While the audits were conducted and both the current manager and his predecessor had pointed out some areas for action, there was no follow up by the authority recorded on file. There was no evidence of feedback to the manager about whether the actions he identified as necessary would be taken or not and the reasons.

Another example is the matter outlined above in the report under safeguarding. The manager stating and recording on the file his concerns about what he considered to be gaps in the assessment was ignored. There was no sound recorded reason on the file about why the assessment went to be signed off despite the manager's concerns.

Therefore there was no significant evidence that the monitoring in place was effective enough. There was potential to make it so, because of the expertise of the people involved, but the lack of clarity regarding roles, responsibilities and accountability had prevented the potential to be fulfilled.

Optional

## **Being Healthy**

### **JUDGEMENT –**

The team of London fostering inspectors decided not to assess this outcome for privately fostered children, as there are no regulations or national minimum standards that specifically relate to it. However the authority's annual quality assurance assessment, where it stated how it was meeting children's needs in this area, was looked at as part of the inspection.

### **EVIDENCE:**

## **Enjoying and Achieving**

### **JUDGEMENT –**

The team of London fostering inspectors decided not to assess this outcome for privately fostered children, as there are no regulations or national minimum standards that specifically relate to it. However the authority's annual quality assurance assessment, where it stated how it was meeting children's needs in this area, was looked at as part of the inspection.

### **EVIDENCE:**

## **Making a Positive Contribution**

### **JUDGEMENT –**

The team of London fostering inspectors decided not to assess this outcome for privately fostered children, as there are no regulations or national minimum standards that specifically relate to it. However the authority's annual quality assurance assessment, where it stated how it was meeting children's needs in this area, was looked at as part of the inspection.

### **EVIDENCE:**

# Achieving Economic Well Being

## **JUDGEMENT –**

The team of London fostering inspectors decided not to assess this outcome for privately fostered children, as there are no regulations or national minimum standards that specifically relate to it. However the authority's annual quality assurance assessment, where it stated how it was meeting children's needs in this area, was looked at as part of the inspection.

## **EVIDENCE:**

# 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>
<b>2</b>	2	<b>1</b>	2
<b>3</b>	1	<b>7</b>	2
<b>4</b>	2		
<b>5</b>	2		
<b>6</b>	2		

N/A

Are there any outstanding recommendations from the last inspection?

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>		
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 PF3 PF4 PF5 PF6 PF7	That the authority urgently finds effective ways to promote awareness, taking into consideration the diverse community needs in the borough, so as to ensure that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It receives notifications about private fostering arrangements</li> <li>- Is able to safeguard the children in such arrangements and to monitor how effectively this is done.</li> <li>- Provide the children, parents and carers with advice and support.</li> </ul>
2	PF3	That the authority takes urgent steps to ensure that assessments of private foster carers and of the suitability of arrangements are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sufficiently comprehensive</li> <li>- Consistent with the regulations, standards, guidance and the authority's own expectations.</li> </ul> <p>To this end the authority should also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gives clear guidelines of what it expects reports to cover and a format / checklist to support this. In particular regarding what checks should be carried out on carers, members of the household and other relevant people.</li> <li>- Make resources available to enable assessments to be completed within the required timescales.</li> </ul>
3	PF3	That the sleeping arrangement for a child, (discussed during the inspection and referred to in this report) is subject to a robust, regularly monitored risk assessment, reviewed at managerial level.
4	PF6	That the authority gives priority to the drafting of the

		<p>following for children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A version of the information leaflets that would be suitable for younger children.</li> <li>- Information leaflets in the range of community languages.</li> <li>- Information for children with disabilities approaching the age of 18, with details of Westminster's procedure for assessing eligibility for adult community care services.</li> <li>- The arrangements for providing advice and assistance to those privately fostered children who would qualify for this (under section 24(2)(e) of the children act 1989).</li> </ul>
5	PF1	That the authority updates its statement of purpose.
6	PF7	<p>That monitoring and auditing is made effective. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- That the role and authority of the designated manager, with overall responsibility for private fostering, is made explicit.</li> <li>- Clarity regarding responsibilities and accountability of all involved in assessments.</li> <li>- That the audits (conducted of how the functions are carried out) are clearly linked to the authority to ask for actions to be taken, when shortfalls are identified.</li> </ul>
7	PF7	That records of visits to private foster homes are consistently reflect what is happening for the child regarding the 'every child matters' outcomes.

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