

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Private Fostering Arrangements

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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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 responsibility for identifying, responding to, and monitoring private fostering arrangements for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council lies within the authority's Children, Education and Social Care Department. The authority works to raise awareness of private fostering and to promote and respond to notifications of private fostering arrangements to ensure that children's welfare is safeguarded. The authority's arrangements are managed by the operational safeguarding manager. At the time this inspection was undertaken the authority was aware of four existing private fostering situations and had worked with another nine in the preceding year.

Summary

This was the first inspection of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's procedures and practice to identify, respond to and monitor private fostering arrangements. This was an announced inspection. Its purpose was to assess how the authority complies with the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for private fostering all of which relate to the staying safe and organisation outcome areas. The authority effectively promotes public awareness of private fostering. It uses a range of methods and is experiencing increased numbers of enquiries as a result of this. It is effective in raising the awareness of private fostering within the wider multi-disciplinary teams working with children and families. The authority responds well to notifications of private fostering. It carries out good assessments of the suitability of arrangements and the arrangements for meeting children's needs but the physical safety of private foster carers' homes is not always assessed well enough. Decisions regarding the suitability of arrangements are carefully and promptly made. There are two relatively minor weaknesses in documents used in the process of responding to private fostering arrangements, but the impact of these are minimised by good practice. Effective social work supports children, their parents and private foster carers. The authority has a clear and detailed statement that sets out its duties and responsibilities in relation to private fostering. The authority effectively monitors the way it discharges its private fostering responsibilities at an individual case level and strategically. Staff members are well trained in their duties and functions.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This was the first inspection of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's arrangements for private fostering.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The authority effectively raises public awareness of private fostering. A range of publicity initiatives have taken place. These have included advertisements placed in the council magazine delivered to all homes in the area, leaflets displayed in the authority's buildings and information about private fostering included in a parenting booklet given to all families. The authority took part in a regional radio and press advertising campaign and other innovative methods to raise

public awareness of private fostering are planned. Recently, a letter about private fostering was sent out, via schools, to the families of all children living in the authority area. The authority monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of these measures. Forty-one enquiries resulted from the letter sent to families using the authority's schools. Although only one of these enquiries was, on examination, private fostering the number of responses demonstrates the authority's success in raising awareness. The authority works closely with professionals from other agencies to increase their awareness of private fostering and their responsibility to identify and report any arrangements they become aware of. Private fostering matters are covered in multi-agency safeguarding training, information is provided for schools through governors and regular meetings with head teachers. The authority's Local Authority Designated Officer is also the lead on private fostering and ensures that awareness of private fostering is reflected throughout this role. The authority has received an increasing number of enquiries and referrals about private fostering from professionals from other agencies. This shows that work in this area is being effective. An efficient process for responding to notifications operates within the authority. The First Contact Team effectively screen and identify any private fostering arrangements and these are allocated promptly to the relevant social work team. Initial visits to arrangements take place within the seven day timescale and subsequent visits occur with at least the required frequency. Detailed records of these visits and the assessment and checks carried out are made using the Integrated Children's System (ICS) recording formats. The authority ensures that notifications are received from one of the parties in the private fostering arrangement. The notification form used contains a declaration regarding applicants' suitability that does not cover all the matters required in the Regulations, but thorough checks made to establish the suitability of the arrangement reduces the impact of this weakness. There is a clear process for making decisions about the suitability of arrangements. However, the letter informing people of the suitability of an arrangement is completed before all background checks have been received. This letter does not make it clear that the decision that the arrangement is suitable for a child is conditional upon the receipt of satisfactory information from these checks. This could potentially lead to a challenge or confusion if a decision had to be changed subsequently. However, people involved in the arrangement are told, verbally, of the conditional nature of the decision. The authority's Scrutiny Panel, made up of senior officers, considers any appeal made regarding decisions of suitability. A procedure for making requirements or prohibiting an arrangement is in place although such action has not occurred yet. The authority effectively determines the suitability of private fostering arrangements. Checks on the suitability of private foster carers are thorough. Records of these checks are clear and show that the NMS and Regulations are being met. Visits to arrangements and meetings with all parties involved establish the likely duration of the arrangement and ensure the placement is able to meet children's needs. Comprehensive and detailed records provide evidence of this work and help promote good planning for children. The suitability of the accommodation is not assessed in a sufficiently structured or thorough manner following the introduction of the ICS private fostering recording forms, although it was before these forms were introduced. This could mean that safety issues are not clearly identified and potentially leave children vulnerable to accidents in the home. The authority gives close consideration to whether privately fostered children are children in need, under the Children Act 1989 and the relevant procedures are followed where this is the case. The service makes clear decisions and is effective at complying with required timescales. The authority and its social workers provide privately fostered children, their carers and the people with parental responsibility for them with good support. It seeks children's views effectively and reviews their placement regularly. Social workers visit children regularly and assess their needs. Where privately fostered children are deemed to be children in need

their needs are assessed as appropriate. Good support is provided, where children are estranged from their families, to promote reunification and to develop good relationships. Private fostering agreements help to identify financial and other support arrangements and private foster carers are offered support with claims for allowances. Work takes place to support the families of a privately fostered child and to help children maintain and develop contact with them. Private foster carers are provided with advice and guidance as well as practical help. The service provides support to help private foster carers look after the child or work with their parents. For example, one private foster carer said that a child's social worker had visited three times within six weeks to offer support and help. The authority ensures that the nature of private fostering arrangements are kept under review. It is alert to situations in which a private arrangement may change into one in which the authority needs to take more control. It monitors arrangements to ensure that all parties to the arrangement are fulfilling their responsibilities to the child and takes appropriate steps where this is not the case.

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 good.

The authority's plan for private fostering is comprehensive and detailed. It is supported by clear procedures and staff are well aware of their responsibilities and duties. This helps protect children. Staff members have a very good and clear understanding of the authority's statement and its duties in relation to private fostering. They know their roles and responsibilities well. The authority provides staff members with good training relevant to their roles. All staff and those from other agencies working with children and families are provided with safeguarding training that covers private fostering. Training in the authority's procedures and recording systems is mandatory for all social workers. Training is provided to the wider staff group within other authority departments. For example, housing workers receive safeguarding training that informs them what to do if they see a situation they consider may be private fostering. Very good support is provided by the Private Fostering Officer (PFO), practice managers and the authority's development officer. The PFO is closely involved in the work done in each private fostering situation and provides specific, individual support and guidance where necessary. The authority effectively monitors the work it does in relation to private fostering. Accurate and comprehensive records are maintained under the ICS. These contain all the required information and demonstrate the good work carried out in individual arrangements. Good records are maintained of suitability decisions. The PFO maintains a very close oversight of the process as well as making the ultimate decision about suitability. This ensures that work done complies with the requirements of the Regulations and Standards and provides a very effective quality assurance process. The authority's Scrutiny Panel gives close oversight to ensure the quality of work carried out and monitors any concerns or practice areas requiring development. The authority effectively monitors and reports on the number and nature of private fostering arrangements in the area. Good reports are produced for the Local Safeguarding Children Board

and the Director of Children’s Services. Statistical information is collated for submission to the Department for Children, Schools and Families as required.

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):

- make sure that notifications regarding private fostering contain all the information required by Schedule 1 of the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005 (NMS 2)
- ensure that letters regarding the suitability of private fostering arrangements make clear that a decision that an arrangement is suitable will not be final until all necessary checks have been received (NMS 2)
- make sure that the suitability of private foster carers’ homes is robustly assessed (NMS 3).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for private fostering arrangements

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the local authority is notified about privately fostered children living in its area (NMS 2)
- the welfare of privately fostered children is safeguarded and promoted. (NMS 3)
- 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 4)
- the local authority identifies and provides advice and support to the parents of children who are privately fostered within their area (NMS 5)
- 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 (NMS 6).

Ofsted considers 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

Ofsted considers 1 and 7 the key standards to be inspected.