

Southampton City Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Lynda Mosling
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Address	Southampton City Council: Social Services 14 Cumberland Place Southampton Hampshire SO15 2BG
Telephone number	06380 833 336
Email	
Registered person	Southampton City Council
Registered manager	Jane Martin
Responsible individual	Susan Allen
Date of last inspection	

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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

Southampton City Council private fostering arrangements are the responsibility of the children's social care teams. There is no dedicated worker or manager responsible for the development of the service although two managers have lead responsibility for the private fostering arrangements as part of their wider role. At the time of the inspection there were seven private fostering arrangements being supported. All young people in the notified placements have an allocated worker.

Summary

This is the first inspection of the private fostering arrangements provided by Southampton City Council to measure the National Minimum Standards. The service has started the process of raising awareness of private fostering arrangements but this has been slow and there has been some confusion about the definition of a private fostering arrangement. This has led to a range of placements under this heading where the status of the young person is not clear. The strengths of the service are with regard to the advice and support offered to young people. Young people are visited by child care workers and are consulted about their care. The weaknesses are with regard to lack of consistency of approach to assessment, and management oversight of the arrangements. The service has made some recent improvements in the way they advertise the need to notify the council of arrangements and has formulated a plan for continued improvement. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the plan. There are two outcome areas judged in this inspection. The staying safe outcome area is judged as satisfactory. The organisation outcome area is judged as inadequate. The overall judgement is therefore inadequate. There are eight recommendations made as a result of this inspection to ensure the welfare of privately fostered young people is safeguarded.

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 Southampton City Council's Private Fostering Arrangements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards to inspect under this outcome area

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has started the process of raising awareness of private fostering arrangements by placing advertisements in local publications and distributing leaflets to schools, housing and other public places. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board's (LSCB) information sub group has taken responsibility for information sharing and has a recurring agenda item to discuss private fostering. The leaflets used have been produced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and provide basic information about the definition of private fostering. They do not give specific information about what can be expected from the service or other local agencies. A strategic plan sets out the timescales for future activities to raise awareness.

Most of these are planned during the next few months and include presentations to other agencies and consultation with council members. Notification numbers remain low with only seven current arrangements recorded for the city. Whilst the service is now distributing information about private fostering this is a recent action, and clarity about what constitutes a private fostering arrangement is only just beginning. This is evidenced by the range of placements that have been supported by the service under private fostering arrangements, some now thought to be kinship care supported by financial payments under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and another that may fall into the category of family and friends fostering (Regulation 38 - The Fostering Services Regulations 2002). Notifications are sent to the Children's First team and then allocated to a worker for initial assessment. Management of the cases is through team managers but there is no clear evidence of management oversight of the cases including how the responsibilities are discharged. The initial assessments vary in quality. It is not clear how the private fostering arrangements meet the individual needs of the young people as the young people's social, emotional, religious or cultural needs are not clearly assessed. The service, in all cases but one, have undertaken relevant checks on the members of the household, including criminal record bureau checks (CRB). There is evidence that the service has ensured a young person's safety by insisting that one of the extended family, with relevant convictions, has no contact with the young person. However, in another case the attempts to undertake criminal record bureau checks have failed, despite efforts by the allocated worker to meet with the carers to gain the necessary information. Although a local police check has been made there is no clear, recorded, decision concluding whether the lack of CRB affects the assessment or safety of the young person. Although the occupants of the household are mentioned in the assessments there is little information to describe how the arrangements affect any of the household, including the children already living there. Advice and support is given to carers regarding a range of issues. Carers talk of help with re-housing, where larger premises were needed to continue caring for the young person. One carer commented on the survey, 'we have been extremely happy with the assigned social worker'. The issue of financial support is not clear. Some carers are receiving money from the service, some from the parent of the young person. One said she had expected to be assessed as a foster parent and another said he was struggling to care appropriately for the young person. The carers do not have clear written statements about their responsibilities or how they are to be financially supported. The service makes arrangements for contact with parents and provides support with communication with parents. There is evidence that the service takes steps to protect children and private foster families from interference and harassment from parents, where necessary. There is evidence that most of the young people in private fostering arrangements are seen as 'children in need'. Young people are visited on a regular basis and are offered the chance to see the worker alone. One young person said 'the social worker visits every three months' to offer help and support. The same young person said they are 'well cared for' in the placement.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards to be inspected in this outcome area.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards to be inspected in this outcome area.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards to be inspected in this outcome area.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

The statement on private fostering arrangements covers the basic responsibilities and functions of the service with regard to private fostering. It does not give any specific information about how the service will discharge its duties. Some of the duties and functions in the statement do not appear to have been addressed by the service. For example at (8.iii) it states 'The Southampton Safeguarding Children's Board will monitor that the city is fulfilling its duties and functions in relation to private fostering, through the receipt of an annual report, and identifying any actions which should be taken to improve its functions regarding privately fostered children'. At the inspection no such annual report could be found although there was evidence that the board has discussed private fostering. There was also no record of an annual report being produced for the director of children's service as suggested by the statement. Records are kept regarding the numbers of privately fostered young people, although these are not always kept up to date. For example, whilst the service records eight young people are cared for, one arrangement has ceased, making the current total number only seven. There is no central record of any issues raised by privately fostered young people, or the outcomes of the arrangements. The statement says that staff induction programmes will include information on private fostering and that 'all relevant staff have an appropriate understanding of the local authority's duties and functions in relation to private fostering'. This is not borne out by the evidence seen as there is confusion about the definition of a private fostering arrangement. Notifications are allocated to one of the child care teams and an assessment is undertaken by a social work assistant under the supervision of a qualified worker. There is not a particular team that deals with private fostering cases and the social work input is managed by whichever team leader the work is allocated to. Whilst all notifications have been responded to, there appears to be no consistency, or oversight, of private fostering arrangements. The self-assessment information provided by the service identified a problem in meeting the visiting arrangements within the timescales. Records seen did not all contain a clear conclusion about the satisfactory nature of the arrangement or a detailed explanation of how the arrangement meets the needs of the young person. The decision making process is unclear with no record of a manager having signed-off the decision and no evidence that any of the parties have been written to regarding the outcome. This adds to the lack of clarity voiced by the carers. The service has started to respond to the standards and requirements but still do not have systems that are consistent, and tested, to adequately monitor the private fostering arrangements. There is currently no dedicated worker or manager who can devote time to develop and monitor the arrangements.

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 information setting out the help and advice available locally to those involved in private fostering arrangements (NMS 2.2.2)
- review the current placements under private fostering arrangements to clarify the status of the young people (NMS 2.3.4)
- ensure there is a clear decision made following the assessment and that this decision is notified to all parties in the arrangement (NMS 3.4)
- ensure an annual report regarding the private fostering arrangements is made available to the Local Safeguarding Board and the Director of Children's Services (NMS 7.9 & 7.10)
- set up recording and monitoring systems that meet all of the standards (NMS 7)
- review the current management arrangements regarding private fostering (NMS 7).
- ensure a decision about young people's safety is recorded following consideration of criminal record bureau checks (NMS 7.2)
- ensure the assessment of suitability covers all of the aspects required by the standards (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.