

Slough Borough Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Maire Atherton
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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

Slough Borough Council Department of Education & Children's Services has overall responsibility for ensuring that the local authority practice fulfils the Children Act duties and functions in relation to private fostering. The Fostering Service and the Children and Families Fieldwork Service have overlapping duties in relation to private fostering and a shared responsibility to assess and evaluate the suitability of private foster placements.

Summary

This was an announced inspection that covered all seven private fostering National Minimum Standards. These are grouped under the two outcome areas of Staying Safe and Organisation.

There is a detailed policy statement in place that sets out what the local authority aims to achieve. However, the combination of vacant posts and a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities of the social work teams has led to a shortfall in some practice areas, which means that the welfare of children may not be fully safeguarded.

The local authority adopts a robust approach in response to possible private fostering arrangements it has been made aware of. The majority have resulted in children being made the subject of a Residence or Special Guardianship Order where these meet the child's needs. In some cases the arrangements have not been assessed as suitable and alternative arrangements have been made. Slough Borough Council has a very low number of children privately fostered. There are plans in place to launch revised publicity materials and make a range of presentations in early 2009.

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 Slough Borough Council's private fostering arrangements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The local authority is familiar with the need to safeguard children by the promotion of the awareness of the notification requirements. Publicity materials have been developed and used in conjunction with some presentations to professionals, head teachers and health visitors, for example, as well as some media coverage, including a radio broadcast. There was regular awareness raising between September 2007 and January 2008, with little work since then, primarily due to the post of publicity officer being vacant. A new appointment has recently been made and there are clear plans in place to use the British Association for Adoption and Fostering awareness week in January 2009 as a springboard to launch revised publicity materials and make a range of presentations. The current publicity materials do not identify who to

contact in the local authority for information about notification or other aspects of private fostering, and are not available in other languages or formats.

The local authority has a very low number of private fostering arrangements in place. When informed about potential private fostering arrangements the local authority responds promptly to promote the welfare of the child. The records show that this may result in applications for Residence or Special Guardianship Orders where these meet the child's needs. There have been instances where private fostering arrangements have been assessed as not promoting the children's welfare and alternative arrangements have been made. In two cases the local authority has been involved with families prior to the assessment of a private fostering arrangement and this has led to lack of clarity in the difference between Regulation 38 placements (under the Fostering Regulations 2002) and private fostering placements.

The local authority policy outlines a two tier assessment process. The first is an initial assessment undertaken by a field social worker. The format contains the information outlined in the standard; if the initial assessment is that the child's needs are being met in the placement then a referral is made to the fostering team for a more detailed assessment which is presented to the fostering panel and then signed off by the agency decision maker. The initial assessments are not always sufficiently detailed and do not evidence that all aspects of suitability are determined. The shortfall in staffing in the fostering team has resulted in a significant delay in starting a detailed assessment thus delaying a decision about overall suitability at managerial level. This means that the welfare of children may not be fully safeguarded.

Private foster carers confirm that they are provided with such advice and support as they require, including guidance on entitlement to benefits. The local authority's information leaflets on education and health, for example, contain details of how the information can be accessed in other languages and formats. Private foster carers promote effective communication with parents, in one case arranging an overseas visit by the young person. Carers confirm that they have the contact details of the social worker and there are open channels of communication.

The local authority engages with parents as far as possible to promote the welfare of the child in the private fostering arrangement.

There are clear arrangements in place to ensure that social work visits occur within the statutory timescales and young people confirm that they see the social worker regularly and know how to make contact at other times. Young people could not recall receiving any written information about private fostering and what it means.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The local authority has a policy and procedure, written in 2005, which contains most of the information required under the standard. It does not contain the name of a person who can be contacted for advice, or that of the manager who signs off overall suitability decisions. However, social workers know that the fostering team manager is the designated expert and that the Group Manager signs off suitability decisions as the fostering agency decision maker. The practice that takes place is not always in accordance with that outlined in the policy, indicating that not all staff are familiar with this. As a result, there is a lack of clarity about where some responsibilities lie. This has contributed to a failure to ensure that in every case all the required checks are undertaken, potentially compromising the welfare of young people. The policy is due for review and this is planned for early 2009. A more regular pattern of delivery of training for staff is scheduled for 2009.

There are separate records available for each privately fostered child and private foster carer. Children have electronic case records, foster carers' records are hard copy at present. The children's records do not in every case indicate that the child has been seen alone. This has been identified by the local authority and is currently being investigated. It is thought that it may be due to a lack of familiarity with the electronic recording system rather than a failure to see the child alone. Foster carers' records do not contain up-to-date information in every case.

Whilst it is clear that staff involved with private fostering have a good working knowledge of individual cases and communicate effectively across social work teams there is a lack of evidence of effective monitoring.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The current publicity material is not available in other formats or languages other than English. Cultural, religious and ethnic needs of the child are considered as part of the assessment process.

The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has a good understanding of private fostering and the challenges involved in targeting the delivery of information appropriately and effectively. An annual report is presented to the LSCB. Last year the board considered how they could get behind the awareness raising campaign and support the initiative. As part of this, members of the LSCB agreed to go back to their respective agencies and raise awareness. This is to be reviewed in January 2009 when the next report will be presented. The LCSB chair is currently considering requesting a six monthly update on the annual report.

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):

- ensure that all the matters listed in Regulation 7 Schedule 3 are established and reported on in a timely manner, including obtaining CRB checks. The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005. Regulation 7. NMS 3.1
- ensure the publicity materials identify who to contact in the local authority for information about notification or other aspects of private fostering and are made available in other languages and formats. NMS 2.2.2
- provide privately fostered children with information, in formats appropriate to their age and level of understanding, about their private foster carer and his responsibilities, the meaning of their privately fostered status and their right to be safeguarded. NMS 6.2
- review the assessment and decision making process to ensure that both are completed within the required timeframe. NMS 3.4
- include in the written statement all the elements outlined in NMS 1.2
- ensure both children's and foster carers' records contain all the information outlined in the standard. NMS 7.2
- ensure effective monitoring of the way in which the local authority discharges its functions. The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005. Regulation 12. NMS 7.7