

Shropshire County Council Children's Placement Services

Inspection report for local authority private fostering services

Inspection date	09 February 2011
Lead inspector	Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Full
Unique Reference Number	SC073690

Service address	Mount McKinley Buildings, Shrewsbury Business Park, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY2 6FG
Telephone number	01743 254706
Email address	Chris Dennison
Nominated person	Chris Dennison

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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

Shropshire County 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 Children's Placement Services and Children in Need service. The head of service for fostering has a lead role in overseeing private fostering arrangements and is the nominated person. An experienced senior social worker also provides the lead on private fostering arrangements.

Private foster carers are assessed and supported by social workers in the cChildren's pPlacement tTeam. Children and young people who are privately fostered are assessed and supported by social workers in the children in need teams.

Information on private fostering is provided on Shropshire County Council's website. This is in addition to local publicity, radio and awareness-raising events throughout the year.

Summary

The services were judged to be Inadequate

Improvements/developments since the last inspection

Recommendations were made at the last inspection in relation to promoting awareness of private fostering requirements, developing publicity materials, and ensuring that staff awere aware of their duties and functions in this respect. Training for the fostering panel was also recommended. Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that this recommendation has been met.

Improvingements to the reports on the suitability of private foster carers was recommended, along together with ensuring that privately fostered young people are provided with written information on who to contact if they have concerns or want to access an advocate. These recommendations are partially met.

Developing processes for monitoring the service and providing annual reports to the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the Director of Children's Services were also identified as areas for improvement. These recommendations are partially met.

The effectiveness of the services

The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services

The service has achieved some improvement ~~around~~ in relation to awareness-raising of private fostering. Surveys from staff and other stakeholders indicate that briefings and publicity have been effective, and overall these efforts have resulted in some increases in the number of enquiries about and notifications of private fostering arrangements. New weaknesses and shortfalls have emerged however as a result of this inspection.

Generally, children and young people's needs are assessed within the required timescales. These initial assessments, which vary in content and quality, cover a range of issues relating to children and young people's welfare needs and contact arrangements with parents. The format for assessment omits a number of important areas, however, such as the intended duration of placement and how decisions about the child's day-to-day care are to be taken.

Subsequent assessments of ~~for~~ private foster carers, and therefore suitability decisions, are subject to long delay. Some young people, who have reached 16 years of age during this time, are excluded from the assessment process. This means that children and young people are left in situations of unknown risk, which compromises their safety and well-being. —

	Judgement
The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services	Inadequate

The quality of the service

The promotion of the awareness of private fostering requirements is satisfactory. This is an area of improvement since the last inspection and has resulted in an increase in enquiries and notifications about private fostering. This demonstrates that awareness-raising activities have some impact in reducing the numbers of unknown private fostering arrangements. —

Information about private fostering has been disseminated to a range of universal services, making use of conferences, briefing sessions and training events. A variety of media, including local radio, is used to reach the wider community.

There has been less success in raising awareness among st some sections of the general public. There is no strategy in place, for example, — to promote awareness among st faith groups or 'hard to reach' groups such as the travelling community.

The majority of private foster carers noted, in their survey returns, that the local authority provides them with the guidance, advice, information and support they need. Private foster carers also report that social workers regularly visit children and young people in placement.

Private foster carers and young people confirm that they know how to contact the local authority about any concerns they may have, although not all have been provided with a copy of the complaints procedure.

	Judgement
The quality of the service	Satisfactory

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

Once notified, the service is prompt in undertaking initial assessments of private fostering arrangements, and children and young people are visited regularly by social workers. In the majority of cases the service ensures that the immediate welfare needs of children and young people are addressed, including contact with parents.

The safety and well-being of children and young people are jeopardised, however, by a number of inconsistencies in procedure and practice. For example, parental responsibility is not always determined and information about cautions and convictions is not always sought and explored in timely manner.

Concerns which emerge about private foster carers are not given sufficient weight and consideration. The service does not follow its own procedures in relation to the suitability of sleeping arrangements for young people. Visits to children and young people are undertaken regularly; however, these are not reported on using the welfare checklist under Schedule 3. It is not always clear whether children and young people have been seen on such visits.

One young person commented that they have not been given copies of the complaints leaflet, and in survey returns private foster carers were not aware of the availability of training and services, or post-private fostering plans for young people. Private foster carers are also unclear about whether they can access training or support to assist them in meeting children and young people's needs.

Young people coming up to 16 years of age are not sufficiently safeguarded. Staff understand, and case files note, that if notifications of private fostering are received for young people approaching this age, their private fostering arrangements will not be assessed.

As previously mentioned, there are delays in reaching a decision about suitability. Assessments, when completed, are eventually presented to a fostering panel, where

the arrangements are noted. Although this is a valuable layer of scrutiny and quality assurance, this also adds to delays in the senior manager making a final decision about the suitability of private fostering arrangements.

	Judgement
Safeguarding and promoting welfare	Inadequate

Promoting equality and tackling discrimination

The service's web-site indicates that information on private fostering is available in a range of community languages. The service has a good understanding of the composition of local demographics.

Although identified as an area of work to be undertaken, there are no formal strategies in place for promoting awareness of private fostering within faith groups, or 'hard to reach' groups such as travelling communities.

Children and young people's assessments clearly reflect their individual needs. Some young people are discriminated against, however, on the grounds of age, where the assessment of private fostering arrangements are concerned.

	Judgement
Promoting equality and tackling discrimination	Inadequate

The quality of leadership and management

Management ensure that staff in the local authority and partner agencies are fully informed, through training and briefings, of their role and responsibilities with regard to private fostering notifications. This helps to reduce the number of unknown private fostering situations.

Overall, however, leadership and management are ineffective in ensuring that, in every case, privately fostered children and young people are safeguarded. The response to private fostering arrangements is not efficiently co-ordinated between child-care and foster placement teams. Organisational change and staffing pressures have led to delay in work being allocated, leading to drift and delay.

Management have some oversight of private fostering arrangements and report to both the Director of Children's Services and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board on these matters. The monitoring process lacks the level of scrutiny required, however, for the local authority to satisfy itself that children and young people are safeguarded and regulations are complied with.

	Judgement
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The quality of leadership and management**Inadequate****Capacity to improve**

The local authority has made some attempts to improve the service since the last inspection. A specialist worker has been appointed to lead on private fostering, providing advice and information.

There has been some success in relation to promoting awareness of private fostering among ~~gsg~~ universal services. This has led to an increase in notifications and enquiries about private fostering situations. A specific worker has recently been appointed to speed up the process of assessment of private foster carers.

The Director of Children's Services and the nominated person are fully aware of the work that now needs to be undertaken. The fostering manager, together with other heads of service identified an immediate way forward to address identified weaknesses and drive forward further improvement.

For example, fewer workers will be responsible for processing private fostering notifications. Decisions on the suitability of private fostering arrangements will be made by one of two senior managers without the assessment going to a fostering panel. The policy of excluding young people approaching 16 years of age in private fostering arrangements from assessment is immediately withdrawn.

These actions will have a beneficial impact on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people.

	Judgement
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory

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
Regulation	ensure that decisions about overall suitability are made within required timescales (NMS 37 , breach of regulation 712)
Regulation	ensure assessments of private fostering arrangements are compliant with the standards and regulations (NMS 3, breach of regulation 7)
Regulation	when carrying out a visit under this regulation establish such matters listed in Schedule 3 as appear to be relevant and after each visit make a written report to the local authority. (NMS 3, breach of regulation 8 (5)(6))
Regulation	monitor the way in which the local authority discharges their functions (NMS 7, breach of regulation 12)
Good Practice NMS	implement a strategy for promoting awareness of private fostering amongst local faith and other community groups. (NMS 2.1)
Good Practice NMS	ensure that in every case privately fostered children and young people and their carers are given a copy of the complaints procedure and other information. (NMS 4)-