

Oxfordshire County Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Robert Smith
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Address	Department of Social Services Yarnton House Rutten Lane Yarnton KIDLINGTON Oxfordshire OX5 1LP CHange
Telephone number	01865 854432
Email	
Registered person	Oxfordshire County Council
Registered manager	David McAulay
Responsible individual	Andy Couldrick
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

Local authority responsibilities in respect of private fostering arrangements in Oxfordshire are carried out by a range of staff employed in its children's services department. A dedicated full time private fostering development worker, who covers the whole county, oversees awareness raising, policy development and monitoring of practice in relation to private fostering. Area based social work assessment staff carry out the initial assessments in response to notifications of private fostering arrangements. Ongoing support of continuing private fostering placements is then provided by allocated social work staff in area family support teams. In the year to 31 March 2007 the local authority received 22 notifications of new private fostering arrangements.

Summary

The local authority pays good attention to raising awareness of private fostering in Oxfordshire and has good systems in place for monitoring and reporting upon its practice in this area. The timescales for initial response to notifications are however not being consistently met and the regularity of subsequent monitoring visits by staff is also inconsistent. Assessments of the suitability of placements and the safety of children are generally satisfactory despite some minor shortfalls in the coverage of some assessment reports. Ongoing monitoring of placements is satisfactory but lacks consistent coverage of all relevant areas of welfare in some cases. However good attention is paid to providing sufficient support and advice to private foster carers and placed children when needed to ensure their welfare is safeguarded and promoted. Good attention is paid to ensuring staff in the local authority are aware of their responsibilities and clear policy, procedure and guidance is in place to help ensure staff exercise those responsibilities fully and consistently.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This was the first inspection of the local authority's private fostering arrangements and therefore no areas of improvement are reported.

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 puts good effort into ensuring relevant agencies, services, community groups and the general public are aware of the nature of private fostering and the expectations around notification of such arrangements. An extensive programme of awareness raising has, and continues to be, progressed by the authority's private fostering development worker. This is a full time post dedicated to developing awareness and local authority practice in relation to private fostering. Awareness raising of private fostering issues with boarding schools in the area has not yet been progressed fully. The local authority provides an adequate initial response to private fostering notifications, the majority of which are received after the commencement

of the arrangements. However the local authority is failing to consistently undertake initial visits to notified situations within the seven day timescale indicated in the regulations, as such visits have to compete with other priority demands on children's social work teams. This could be placing some placed young people at risk. Where knowledge of situations indicate possible welfare concerns initial visits are however prioritised. The subsequent regularity of visits to private fostering situations is also not consistently in line with the expectations of the regulations. It is however clear that where significant welfare concerns exist very regular visiting does take place, at times well in excess of the expectations of the regulations, so as to ensure the safety of young people in placement. Management information systems used by the local authority do not currently track key target timescales for private fostering situations but work is in hand to address this. The local authority has guidance and established processes in place for completion of initial assessments of private fostering situations. The majority of these assessments are completed within reasonable timescales and are signed off by field work assessment team managers. There are a small number of cases however where, although visits have taken place, completion of assessments has been significantly delayed, resulting in incomplete early consideration of the overall safety and appropriateness of the placement. Assessments undertaken by staff of private fostering situations are generally satisfactory, covering the main key areas of welfare consideration. The assessments do not however consistently cover all the areas indicated by the regulations, meaning some areas of placed children's needs may be being overlooked. Similarly the contents of subsequent visits reports are inconsistent in their coverage of the areas laid out under regulations and are often descriptive rather than evaluative of the continuing appropriateness of the placement. Visit reports are sometimes not clear as to whether or not children have been seen on their own and, if not, how their views of their placement have been determined. Assessments are also not always precise in describing the actual relationship of the carer to the child in placement, which can lead to confusion over the status of the arrangements. Generally appropriate attention is paid by the local authority to checking the suitability of private foster carers. With a few specific exceptions Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are undertaken promptly for carers and household members, suitability declarations obtained, references taken up and checks made against local authority records. The local authority also seeks, wherever possible, immediate feedback from local police with regard to the appropriateness of private foster carer households. The police response to such requests is however currently variable across the local authority. The local authority has not yet prohibited any private fostering arrangements or applied any requirements to existing arrangements. Policy, procedure and guidance is however in place to deal with these situations. The local authority provides appropriate levels of advice and support for private fostering arrangements and classifies all children in private fostering placements as 'children in need'. Carers are provided with relevant information on responsibilities and expectations around private fostering arrangements and on how to access advice from the local authority. Where additional services or support are needed to meet the needs of placed young people this is provided by the local authority, in line with its support arrangements for other types of fostering. Good examples include provision of direct additional support for young people in placement and financial support in situations where birth parents are not contributing financially to placed children's upkeep. Carers are generally positive about the support provided by the local authority and are able to contact supervising social work staff when they need to. Parents of privately fostered children are also provided with relevant information on their responsibilities and how to contact the local authority if they have concerns or are seeking further advice. Supervising workers also try to ensure parents are kept informed of issues in placements, maintain contact and work in partnership with private foster cares to meet the

needs of their children. In many situations this is however difficult to achieve, for example where parents are overseas or where parents are estranged from their children and relationships have broken down irrevocably as is the case in a number of the private fostering placements overseen by the local authority. Appropriate information is provided for children who are privately fostered although this is not yet in a particularly child friendly format. The information did not make reference to the independent advocacy service contracted by the local authority to support children placed in mainstream fostering. Children are given information on how to contact the social worker supervising their placement.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome area

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome area

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome area

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The local authority has a generally appropriate statement in place outlining definitions, duties and its operational policies in relation to assessment and monitoring of private fostering placements. Some aspects of the document lack detail and do not fully reflect current local authority practice. Considerable effort has been put in by the local authority to ensure all relevant staff have a good understanding of, and ready access to, detailed policy, procedure and guidance on private fostering practice. Reference to private fostering is included in staff induction and training programmes as appropriate. The private fostering development worker attends relevant national training and policy development events to help ensure local authority practice remains well informed and up to date with latest policy developments. The local authority has effective systems in place for monitoring private fostering, primarily through the post of the private fostering development worker. This worker maintains good collation and oversight of relevant statistical information and this should be improved by planned extension of local authority information systems to incorporate private fostering activities. Samples of private fostering cases are regularly reviewed to monitor the appropriateness of practice and adherence to regulatory expectations. The local authority submits detailed annual statistical information as required to the Department for Children Schools and Families and good detailed annual summary reports on practice strengths and shortfalls are provided for the Head of Children's Services and Local Children's Safeguarding Board. Case records on private fostering placements are in generally satisfactory order although, as already noted under the Staying Safe outcome, various aspects of record keeping are inconsistent and not fully in line with regulatory expectations.

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):

- consider extending awareness raising around private fostering to boarding schools in the county (NMS 2)
- ensure initial visits in response to private fostering notifications and subsequent visits to placements take place within the timescales indicated by regulation (Regulations 7 and 8, NMS 2)
- ensure initial assessments, and subsequent visit reports, consistently cover the areas required by regulation and provide a clear evaluation of the ongoing appropriateness of placements (Regulations 7(1)(e) and 8(4) NMS 3)
- ensure evidence of satisfactory completion of CRB checks and references is maintained consistently on private foster carer records (NMS 7)
- liaise with local police to establish the viability of obtaining immediate local police checks for all newly notified private fostering households (NMS 2)
- develop information for privately fostered children in more child friendly formats and ensure information regarding access to advocacy services is included (NMS 6)
- ensure the local authority's statement in relation to private fostering is updated to accurately reflect current arrangements and practice (NMS 1)

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.