



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

LOCAL COUNCIL PRIVATE FOSTERING ARRANGEMENTS

Northumberland Private Fostering Arrangements

**Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF**

Lead Inspector
Stephen Smith

Key Announced Inspection
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The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
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This is a report of an inspection to assess local authority private fostering arrangements against the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering. These standards can be found at www.dfes.gov.uk. The NMS specify a minimum standard for local authority practice in the fulfilment of their duties and functions in relation to private fostering under the Children Act 1989. Along with the new measures in section 44 of the Children Act 2004 and the 2005 regulations, they are intended to better focus local authorities' attention on private fostering, in part by requiring them to take a more proactive approach to identifying arrangements in their area.

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life.

Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above. The Private Fostering National Minimum Standards are mapped to just two of these outcomes, Staying Safe and Management.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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SUMMARY

Northumberland County Council

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

This was the first inspection of the arrangements put in place by Northumberland County Council Children's Services Directorate to identify, respond to and monitor private fostering arrangements. These arrangements have been put into place to meet the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering which came into force on 18 July 2005, and the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005.

At the time of this inspection the Directorate had identified a small number of private fostering arrangements within the county and was monitoring and supporting the families and young people involved. The authority has a clear procedure for responding to situations of private fostering and is aware of the areas it needs to concentrate on as this plan develops. The authority acknowledges that there is further work to do and that there are likely to be other private fostering arrangements that they know nothing about. Consequently the overall judgement for the effectiveness of the authority's arrangements is 'adequate'. However, work is ongoing to provide staff training, a wider publicity programme and other internal arrangements are being developed to assist staff. The authority's plans in these areas are good and, when fully implemented, are likely to lead to 'good' outcomes for privately fostered children living in the county.

The Inspector would like to thank those staff involved in working with private fostering arrangements at either a direct, policy making or administrative level, for their welcome, assistance and the important part they played in the inspection. Information and evidence in this report was gathered by the inspector over a two day period by:

- Talking with the officer responsible for developing the management of private fostering arrangements and the procedure for responding to notifications and dealing with identified situations;
- Talking with the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board;
- Talking with a staff member involved in raising awareness of private fostering through publicity materials and campaigns;
- Discussion with social work staff involved in assessing and supporting two private fostering arrangements;
- Discussion with social work Team Managers and staff responsible for receiving telephone referrals and enquiries that could include private fostering situations;
- Reading policies, procedures and publicity materials;
- Reading files relating to two private fostering situations.

The inspector planned to visit a child and the family caring for him on a private fostering basis but the child and family chose not to be spoken to.

What the local authority does well:

Northumberland County Council Children's Services Directorate has developed a good plan about how it deals with private fostering arrangements in the county and what it is going to do to make sure the public know about private fostering and the council's responsibilities. The authority has a good understanding of how its plan is progressing and the work it needs to do next. All staff spoken to were open and realistic about the authority's strengths in this area and also the areas it needs to develop.

The authority has a good understanding of the demographic make up of the county and knows the different needs in different areas. The service has a good understanding of the types of private fostering that may be taking place within the county and has focussed its work on the areas where arrangements are most likely to exist.

The authority has provided very good information for staff from across the Children's Services Directorate about private fostering. Social workers had a very good understanding of private fostering and there are good arrangements to make sure that colleagues from health, education professionals and staff in schools are informed about private fostering and know what to do if they were to hear of an arrangement.

The authority has a very clear step-by-step procedure in place for staff members to follow when dealing with notifications or the discovery of private fostering situations. This procedure states what staff should do initially and then on a long-term basis to support children and private foster carers.

The authority has done some good publicity in areas identified as the most likely for private fostering arrangements to exist, having identified this as a priority before carrying out wider 'awareness raising' publicity for the public in general.

The inspection provided evidence of some extremely good work with, and support to, privately fostered children, their families and private foster carers.

The authority has effective reporting systems and processes in place that allow monitoring by senior managers including the Director of Children's Services and Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

What has improved since the last inspection?

This was the first inspection of the authority's management of these arrangements.

What they could do better:

The authority should carry out wider 'awareness raising' publicity about private fostering for members of the public across the county.

Training about private fostering should be provided for all staff. Social workers should receive more detailed training about recognising situations, responding to notifications, the process for assessing and systems for checking the suitability of private fostering arrangements.

When working with people who are notifying the authority of a private fostering arrangement the authority should ensure that the people notifying the authority sign the notifications forms and not the social worker who is helping them complete the form.

Records of private fostering situations need to be better and more detailed, to show that work carried out complies with the authority's responsibilities under the regulations and makes sure that children are kept safe. The way these records are monitored to make sure they are in good order also needs to get better.

The authority should make sure that it does the necessary background checks on private foster carers' suitability as soon as possible after it learns about a private fostering situation.

The authority should consider ways of providing social workers with extra support for the increased workload that some private fostering situations place on them.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

Staying Safe

Management

Staying Safe

The intended outcome for these Standards are:

(NMS 2) The local authority is notified about privately fostered children living in its area.

(NMS 3) The welfare of privately fostered children is safeguarded and promoted

(NMS 4) 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 5) The local authority provides advice and support to the parents of children who are privately fostered within their area as appears to the authority to be needed.

(NMS 6) 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.

The Commission considers that all these Standards should be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for the following Standard(s):

2, 3, 4, 5 and 6

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to the authority. The authority has made a good start in promoting public awareness of private fostering in areas where arrangements are likely to exist but needs to undertake more general publicity. Recorded evidence of the arrangements for assessing and approving private fostering arrangements is not good enough to adequately demonstrate that situations are safe for the children concerned. Privately fostered children, their parents and the families who privately foster get very good support.

EVIDENCE:

All staff members spoken to demonstrated a good understanding of the demographics make up of the county and its needs. Work had been done to

identify situations and areas that could make private fostering arrangements likely and it was clear that this information has formed the basis of the authority's planning. The arrangements identified by the authority to date have been situations in which families have been experiencing difficulties and children have moved to stay with friends or more distant relatives. In many of these situations the people involved had been receiving social work support already so were known to the service and all people involved said that situations tend to be short lived as emphasis is placed on helping the families work to reunification; evidence from case tracking provided confirmation of this statement.

Publicity information about private fostering is included in detail on the authority's website but most publicity to date has been targeted and prioritised towards the areas identified as being likely to have resulted in situations of private fostering. A detailed information sheet has been produced and Department of Education and Skills (DfES) leaflets are widely available. The Head of Community Support and the authority's publicity officer told the inspector of the range of other publicity measures used, including information for schools, and planned developments. The Head of Community Support recognised the need to move to a broader type of publicity as well as that targeted to specific situations. All parties spoken to said that they considered that there would be more private fostering arrangements in existence than the authority knows about and understood the difficulties in identifying these. A staff member said, "Its likely that only someone who knows a bit about private fostering will look at the website, its those who don't know who we have to inform but we don't know who they are or how effective we are being." The inspector would agree with this view and it is recommended that a broader 'awareness raising' publicity programme takes place alongside the current, effective targeted work.

Staff members receive good information and guidance about private fostering at a general level through the authority's 'Core Brief' system and 'FACT' sheet newsletter. The authority's children's teams include education and health staff as well as social workers and this has been very helpful in ensuring that professionals working with children and families are aware of private fostering procedures and able to recognise situations they might come across. Staff members spoken to all have access to the Private Fostering National Minimum Standards and regulations and have been issued with the authority's private fostering procedure. Social workers spoken to said they have had to deal with situations as they occurred and, particularly in their earlier experiences, learned as they went along. They said that, as they do not frequently work with private fostering arrangements, they don't get enough 'practice' for the work to become 'second nature'. It is recommended that training is provided to social work staff in terms of recognising situations, responding to notifications and processes for assessing and checking the suitability of private fostering arrangements. More general training should be provided for the wider staff team also. The Head of Community Support acknowledged this and said

that the need for this training has been included in the overall training audit being carried out by the authority.

Commendably there was evidence to show that information about private fostering has reached other professionals as staff members informed the inspector of situations in which a professional from the education field and one from health had notified the authority of private fostering situations. The Referral and Assessment Officers, who are the authority's first point of contact for public enquiries and referrals, are well informed about private fostering and what might or would not constitute a private fostering arrangement.

Some privately fostered children's files examined contained a very useful checklist of the actions and checks needed to ensure that situations notified and identified as private fostering are dealt with in a way that is effective and complies with the authority's procedure and the National Minimum Standards. Unfortunately, this checklist was not completed and there was a significant shortfall in the quality of recording in the file that use of the checklist may have avoided. It is recommended that this checklist is used correctly as a working and monitoring tool.

In two files relating to one of the private fostering arrangements case tracked during the inspection, there had been a seven month delay in dealing with a situation that had been identified as private fostering. This situation was, however, identified within a few weeks of the National Minimum Standards being introduced and the situation was complex for a number of reasons including the fact that there was no identified person with parental responsibility for the children. Staff members accepted this situation was not ideal and it was evident that a situation identified more recently had not been subject to a delay. In the case of the first example above, the letter of notification to the authority of the private fostering arrangement had been signed by the social worker, not the private foster carer. The authority should ensure that notifications are made by the people specified in the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005.

The authority's Referral and Assessment Officers spoken to were well informed about private fostering and able to respond with effective advice to queries. The authority uses its existing assessment framework to collect the information needed about a situation and this works well as it is a tool that social workers are familiar with. Case tracking during the inspection provided evidence of an extremely high level of support to the privately fostered children concerned including very frequent visits taking place.

The authority has a clear procedure in place and operates systems including the use of SWIFT (the authority's computer system) to manage the private fostering work carried out including working to the set timescales and ensuring appropriate reporting takes place.

Recording in the files relating to one private fostering arrangements examined was not robust enough and did not demonstrate that all the work to ensure the safety and well being of the child had been carried out sufficiently. Discussion with the team manager and the social worker involved made it clear that both knew the situation well and that a great deal of good work had been carried out to support the private foster carers and the children concerned. In the files of the two siblings living in private foster care however, the initial assessments of the arrangements were not signed by the team manager, the core assessment contained was completed with the wrong name for one of the carers and the approval report on the files was not signed by the person responsible for agreeing arrangements and contained the wrong name for one of the carers. These files also contained gaps in recording or inaccuracies in dates, for example there was no evidence that a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosure applied for had been returned or whether, if not, it had been followed up and dates were inaccurate on a checklist of checks with probation, health and education authorities about the private foster carer. Additionally, an email on file raising some background concerns about the private foster carers was not supported by evidence that this information was given any consideration.

In the file of the other private fostering arrangement case tracked there was a delay of two months from the start of the arrangement before the CRB disclosure or checks with probation, health and education had been applied for and there were no references on file. In fact the private fostering arrangement came to an end before these checks were received. Positively, both files examined contained brief safe caring policies signed by the private foster carers that demonstrated that safe caring issues had been discussed with, and considered by, the private foster carers. All parties spoken to raised the need for clear evidence of the decision making process regarding private fostering situations and it is vital that records provide this evidence. The weakness in recording noted also shows that the quality of the monitoring of private fostering arrangements and records is not as robust as it should be. The authority must ensure that records in place are robust, and show that work carried out complies with the authority's responsibilities under the regulations and standards.

Social workers and other staff spoken to raised the issue of their high workload in terms of undertaking checks within timescales and following up requests where necessary. The Head of Community Support said that administrative support is identified for these checks in the authority's procedure and accepted that a specific shortfall in administrative support in one office has occurred but that plans are in place to address this. The authority should ensure that suitable arrangements are in place to enable necessary background checks to be undertaken as promptly as possible.

Social workers and their managers spoken to described the additional and different workload when working with private fostering arrangements and

different issues around the management of risk, monitoring and training. Training for social workers involved in such arrangements is recommended.

A young person who, at the time of the inspection had just moved out of a private fostering situation told the inspector in a questionnaire that she was safe and well cared for "because my (relation) looks after me well." She confirmed that she had discussed her situation with her social worker and that she had said she was "happy and OK."

Clear evidence was available during the inspection to show that very good work and an extremely high level of support was being given to the young people and their private foster carers in the situations case tracked. Evidence showed very frequent visiting taking place on an, at least, monthly basis with these being recorded on the authority's 'statutory visits' forms. Interim visits were noted to take place very frequently and, for a period of time, these were almost daily in the case of one young person. In one situation the authority had included a young person aged over 17 within the private fostering arrangements because of concerns over his vulnerability.

Files contained evidence of financial advice and help being given to privately fostered children and their carers including assistance with benefit claims and some support through one off payments made at the authority's discretion. Records also showed that young people and their private foster carers had been given information about and help accessing service such as education and health. Records of meetings and visits showed that social workers had given private foster carers very clear and detailed information about private fostering, its implications and the requirements it placed on them.

One young person's file contained evidence that very good work had been carried out with the child's father and grandparents. It also showed that the young person had been assisted to locate her mother and that a lot of work had been done to support their reunification. In their questionnaire responses a young person and a private foster carers said that they had received a great deal of support from the social worker concerned, in terms of their situation and support for the young person's family.

Social workers and their managers told the inspector that, in situations like the private fostering arrangements case tracked, they were already spending a lot of time working with the young person and their situation. They said, in such situations, private fostering work entails them supporting the young person, the private foster carers and the young person's family whereas, in a Looked After Children fostering situation, they would have the assistance of a fostering worker to support the carers. One social worker said, "I know this is not what matters but, in terms of workload, it would be easier for us if the child was looked after." It is recommended that the authority consider ways of providing additional support to social workers in this situation.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers that all these standards should be inspected

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

1 and 7

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to the authority. The authority has a clear plan setting out how it will carry out its duties but needs to implement planned training and ensure that staff are fully aware of the arrangements. Monitoring arrangements are generally effective though the monitoring of the quality of recording in private fostering files needs to improve.

EVIDENCE:

The authority has a plan in place setting out its responsibilities regarding private fostering and a clear procedure for staff to follow. This procedure sets out the process from receiving a notification or becoming aware of a private fostering situation, through responding, assessing, reporting and supervising the arrangements. It was very positive to note that all staff members interviewed were well aware of their duties, responsibilities and those of the authority, as well as the definition of private fostering. The high level of integration of health, education and social workers within children's teams has been a major factor in helping all staff become aware of private fostering and good briefing arrangements are in place for staff through 'Core Brief', the 'FACT' sheet and through team meetings. Leaflets about private fostering were displayed in offices visited and staff members confirmed that they had received written information including the procedure and the National Minimum Standards and regulations.

It is apparent that staff have become much more aware of their duties in relation to private fostering over the last year. A situation identified in August 2005 was dealt with only after a significant delay, though there was a lot of evidence to show that the young people concerned had received a great deal of social work support throughout this period. A later situation, however, had been recognised and responded to promptly.

Staff members spoke to were not aware of the local authority's plan in relation to private fostering covering all the points set out in Standard 1.2 of the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering. Namely, staff were not aware of how training is to be provided, how publicity is to be used to promote awareness of the need to notify the authority and the named person in the authority to contact as a point of advice. Some of the information set out in this standard is contained in the authority's procedure but it is recommended that a broader summary statement or plan containing the information in this standard is circulated to staff.

As mentioned earlier in the report, training should be provided for staff relating to private fostering. This should include awareness raising training and specific training regarding assessing, checking and supporting private fostering situations including specific work in issues such as developing safe care policies, caring out health and safety checks and so forth.

Records for children and private foster carers observed did not record sufficiently clearly that thorough checking and assessment of private fostering situations had taken place. Additionally, recording files examined did not evidence a sufficiently robust decision making process. Issues noted in these files are set out in the Staying Safe section of this report. The lack of robustness in this recording also highlighted that the quality of recording is not monitored sufficiently robustly by the authority.

The authority has systems in place to record and report the numbers of privately fostered children and their carers that are known to be living in the county. The authority's Referral and Assessment Officers know how to recognise and advise enquirers. There is a very clear system of recording information on SWIFT and people interviewed knew how the information is used. All parties spoken to had a good understanding of the likely nature of any private fostering arrangements and how to deal with them.

An effective procedure is in place, of which staff were aware, that sets out clear arrangements for making decisions on arrangements and managers spoken to explained how they monitor timescales, patterns, trends and compliance with the regulations. A clear system is in place for compiling information for the statistical data return required by the DfES and the Director of Children's Services and Chair of the LSCB confirmed that he receives a report annually in each capacity that contains the information he needs to know for both roles.

Optional

Being Healthy

JUDGEMENT –

N/A

Arrangements to ensure that the health needs of privately fostered children are supported and met were not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

Enjoying and Achieving

JUDGEMENT –

N/A

Arrangements to ensure that privately fostered children are supported in both enjoying and achieving were not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

Making a Positive Contribution

JUDGEMENT –

N/A

Arrangements to ensure that privately fostered children are supported in making a positive contribution were not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

Achieving Economic Well Being

JUDGEMENT –

N/A

Arrangements to ensure that privately fostered children are supported in achieving economic wellbeing were not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion

"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

STAYING SAFE		MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	2	1	2
3	2	7	2
4	3		
5	3		
6	3		

Are there any outstanding recommendations from the last inspection? N/A

RECOMMENDATIONS		
These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Local Authority to consider carrying out.		
No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	PF2	A broad 'awareness raising' publicity programme should take place for members of the public across the county.
2	PF1 PF2 PF3	Staff training relating to private fostering should be provided at a general level for the wider staff team and more specific training for social work staff in terms of recognising situations, responding to notifications, the process for assessing and systems for checking the suitability of private fostering arrangements.
3	PF3	The file checklist to ensure all required activity and checks are carried out and recorded should be used consistently in private fostering files.
4	PF3	The authority should ensure that notifications are made by the people specified in the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005.
5	PF3 PF7	The authority should ensure that records of private fostering situations are robust, complete and accurate and show that work carried out complies with the authority's responsibilities under the regulations and standards. The monitoring of the quality of this recording also needs to be more robust.
6	PF3	The authority should ensure that suitable arrangements are in place to enable necessary background checks on private foster carers' suitability to be undertaken as promptly as possible.
7	PF4	The authority should consider ways of providing social workers with additional support in situations in which private fostering situations are placing demands in terms of supervision and support of placements over and above their normal work.

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