

Northamptonshire County Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Sharon Treadwell
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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

Private fostering arrangements are not regulated services, they are private arrangements, and the purpose of inspection is to ascertain that the local authority is appropriately fulfilling its functions and duties with regard to young people who are privately fostered. The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations and the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering came into force in July 2005. Within Northamptonshire County Council the lead officer for private fostering is a team manager within the family support team. Hilary Ryan was acting service manager for the north of the county when allocated lead responsibility, retained it when she returned to her substantive post, and now combines it with managing 28 family support staff. Prior to 2006 the adolescent response team carried out private fostering work with young people aged over 13 years and family support teams with those under 13 and cases were often not kept open subsequent to completion of an initial visit. Currently initial notifications of private fostering arrangements go to one of four referral teams, across the county, who undertake initial assessment visits and cases determined to constitute private fostering arrangements are then referred on to the family support team for completion of a private fostering assessment and for subsequent monitoring visits.

Summary

There are only seven national minimum standards for private fostering and these are grouped under staying safe and organisation. All seven standards have been inspected. A significant rise in notifications of private fostering arrangements during the last two years demonstrates that the authority is successfully raising awareness, although there is a recognised need for this awareness raising to be extended to target known, minority ethnic communities in Northamptonshire. A clear statement is in place to detail the authority's procedures for fulfilling its duties and responsibilities in relation to private fostering and a number of successful arrangements are currently being supervised, which are supporting young people well to achieve very positive outcomes. Some private foster carers have been involved in providing such placements for many years and have successfully supported young people through university and into highly successful employment. Although there are some examples of comprehensively completed private fostering assessments, workers are not routinely demonstrating the suitability of the accommodation and the capacity of the private foster carer and other household members to provide a safe placement for the child. Workers are not promoting written agreements between carers and parents to clarify how decisions about the child will be taken, that financial arrangements for the child's care and maintenance are appropriate and that arrangements are in place in relation to the child's access to health services. At present monitoring visits are generally being carried out in accordance with the required timescales but initial private fostering assessments are not, with the result that suitability decisions are not being made within the 42 days recommended under the Children Act 2004. The electronic recording system, used by the local authority, is not responsive to need and data collected in relation to private fostering is known to be unreliable. The current arrangement for the recording of monitoring visits, on this system, is producing very inconsistent records which cannot be considered to constitute a written report in accordance with the standards or as implied by Regulation 8. Workers completing initial assessments and monitoring visits are not being provided with adequate training to support compliance with regulatory requirements in relation to recording responsibilities and timescales for completion of tasks.

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 the local authority's private fostering arrangements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The local authority has undertaken some successful awareness raising since 2006, in relation to private fostering, through the local press and radio stations and by circulating information leaflets to the public and associated professionals. Notifications have increased significantly over the last two years. To date however, although some of the current private fostering arrangements involve young people from various minority ethnic groups, no work has been undertaken to specifically target minority ethnic communities within Northampton to raise their awareness about what constitutes a private fostering arrangement and their responsibilities to notify such arrangements to the authority. The authority has a clearly stated procedure for responding to notifications, which includes timescales as detailed within the regulations, national minimum standards and the Children Act 2004, however these are not always currently complied with. The current notification record does not include all the necessary information. Historically, subsequent visits to young people in private fostering arrangements, have not always been made in a timely manner, especially during the first year, but currently this visiting is generally in accordance with requirements. There continue, however, to be delays in completing initial assessments of private fostering arrangements and this is resulting in suitability decisions not being made within the 42 days required under Chapter 4.1 of the Children Act 2004. The current system for managing notifications requires social workers taking the referral to make the initial visit to assess the capacity of the placement to safely care for the child and whether the placement constitutes a private fostering arrangement. This worker is not responsible for establishing such matters listed in schedule 3 as appear to be relevant. Regulations require that this work is undertaken within seven working days. Currently family support team workers are expected to undertake this as part of the private fostering assessment and it is therefore never completed within the required timescale since the case is not passed to them within that period. Files generally reflect that the wishes and feelings of children in private fostering arrangements are obtained and are taken into account well. In terms of placements tracked during this inspection children's health, education and cultural needs are highly prioritised and these children have demonstrably settled well with their private foster carers and made good progress. Some of the carer files examined contain a minimal amount of information and sometimes an inappropriate demonstration of the suitability of the carer, the premises and other members of the household to look after the child safely. No written agreement is promoted between the carer and the parents and financial arrangements are sometimes woolly. Carers are sometimes missing out on access to benefits because of lack of awareness. Health arrangements can also be unclear because of the lack of any written agreement, particularly where parents are reluctant to agree to carers having any medical consent. Where solid agreements are not reached between parents and carers children can have their access to health services and financial resources restricted. Appropriate leaflets have been made available to young people, parents and private

foster carers, defining private fostering, clarifying reporting responsibilities and detailing the support available. Work has been undertaken, and continues, to refine pro-forma recording of private fostering assessments to fully demonstrate the views of the carer, the parent and the child and to ensure that the completed document is fully reflective of all the required elements as detailed under schedule 2 or schedule 3, whichever is applicable.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

A wholly appropriate statement on private fostering has been prepared and is available to local authority staff, associated professionals and to the public and appears on the local authority's website. The statement includes full coverage of all items required under national minimum standard 1.2. The lead officer for private fostering has completed two written reports, which have been submitted to the director of children and young people's services and the local safeguarding children board (LSCB), during the last three years. The reports demonstrate ongoing monitoring of the receipt of notifications and of the assessment and subsequent supervision of private fostering arrangements and also demonstrate a sound awareness of the shortfalls in the current systems for managing these arrangements. A number of half day training courses have been staged, for local authority staff, to raise awareness about private fostering and to clarify their responsibilities and some of the current recording requirements. There has been some delay in incorporating information about private fostering into multi-agency training, due to training personnel issues, but it is proposed that this will be implemented during this year. Staff carrying out private fostering assessments and subsequent statutory visits have not had specific training around regulatory requirements in relation to recording responsibilities and timescales. There are considerable current difficulties in relation to the electronic recording system, which is not responsive to need where records relating to private fostering arrangements are concerned, and makes data collected unreliable. The family support team, in addition to completing written private fostering assessments in relation to recent notifications, have endeavoured to complete them in respect of placements made prior to the introduction of the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations in 2005. The lead officer told the inspector of proposals to adopt the pro-forma records recommended by the department for children, schools and families (DCSF) for assessments and subsequent visits, once these can be loaded into the electronic system. The pro-forma currently used to record private fostering assessments is appropriate but workers record subsequent visits in the running record and these entries are not always comprehensive, are inconsistent and cannot be considered to constitute a written report in accordance with standard 7.3 or as implied by Regulation 8(5).

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):

- target minority ethnic communities within Northampton to raise their awareness about what constitutes a private fostering arrangement and their responsibilities to notify such arrangements to the authority (NMS 2.2.3)
- take appropriate action, following receipt of notification of a private fostering arrangement, by arranging for an officer of the authority to visit within seven working days to establish such matters listed under schedule 2 or schedule 3 (whichever is applicable) as appear to the officer to be relevant and to make a written report of their findings (NMS 2.3.1, Regulation 4,7)
- ensure that notifications in respect of private fostering arrangements contain such of the information specified in schedule 1 as the person giving the notification is able to provide (NMS 2.3.1, Regulation 5(2))
- demonstrate the capacity of the carer to care for the child and the suitability of members of their household and premises (NMS 3.2.6, schedule 2 and 3))
- Demonstrate that financial arrangements for the care and maintenance of the child have been agreed between the parents and the private foster carer and that these arrangements are working. Where necessary ensure that private foster carers are enabled to obtain information about entitlement to child and other financial benefits (NMS 3.2.5, 4.2, schedule 2 and 3)
- complete a written report of each statutory visit to a private fostering placement, to include consideration of all elements listed under schedule 3. The report must indicate whether the child has been seen alone and should reflect the child's wishes and feelings (NMS 7.3, Regulation 8(5))
- provide training to front line staff responsible for the assessment and monitoring of private fostering arrangements to equip them to carry out their visiting and recording responsibilities in full accordance with legal requirements (NMS 7.2, 1.3).

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.