

Milton Keynes Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service
Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Robert Smith
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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 Milton Keynes are carried out by a range of staff employed in its children's services department. An identified qualified senior practitioner in the local authority's fostering team carries lead responsibility for awareness raising, training and helping to develop policy and procedures relating to private fostering. Initial assessments of private fostering situations are undertaken by local authority referral and assessment staff in conjunction with the identified lead worker. Subsequent full assessment and ongoing support and monitoring of identified private fostering situations is then undertaken by the lead worker assisted by a further dedicated social work assistant postholder within the fostering team. Children placed in private fostering situations may also receive ongoing individual support from local authority children's social work teams, depending on their assessed level of need. At the time of this inspection 13 private fostering arrangements were known to the local authority.

Summary

This was an announced inspection carried out by one Ofsted inspector over two days with feedback offered to senior managers on the third day. The judgements in this report have been made using new Ofsted benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 1st April 2008. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making judgments is not directly comparable with that used previously. Milton Keynes local authority has an overall good commitment to effective exercise of its responsibilities towards private fostering arrangements, as reflected in its allocation of two staff within the fostering team to promote, develop and carry out work in this area. Considerable work has been done in developing policies and procedures and towards raising awareness of private fostering in the local area. Initial notifications are responded to promptly and private foster carers and children in placements are offered very good levels of ongoing support and advice. When welfare concerns arise they are addressed promptly and fully. The inspection has however identified shortfalls in the effective and timely completion of full assessments of private fostering situations and in the regularity, content and associated reporting of subsequent monitoring visits. The local authority's own systems for monitoring compliance with the expectations of the National Minimum Standard and associated regulations lack rigour. The combined effect of these shortfalls is to undermine the consistency with which the safety and welfare of privately fostered young people is effectively monitored. The local authority's statement on private fostering arrangements also lacks some required information and does not accurately reflect all aspects of local authority practice in this area.

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.

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 and reporting of such arrangements. An extensive programme of awareness raising has, and continues to be, progressed by the authority's senior practitioner for private fostering, alongside input from other fostering and local authority staff. The local authority responds promptly and appropriately when first notified about private fostering arrangements in order to quickly reassure itself of the immediate suitability of such arrangements. The vast majority of such notifications relate to arrangements that are already in place, with few examples of prior notification by birth parents or proposed private foster carers. Initial visits take place within the required seven days, conducted usually by a combination of area social work assessment team staff and private fostering staff based in the authority's fostering team. Initial basic assessments of suitability are carried out and relevant checks initiated on household members. Local authority procedures indicate that subsequent fuller assessments will then be undertaken by private fostering staff, however completion of these fuller assessments is not being managed well. This issue is addressed more fully later in this report. Records of private fostering arrangements indicate there have been inconsistencies in the regularity of subsequent monitoring visits to private fostering households. While the regularity of visits within the first year of placements has been largely in line with regulatory requirements, recorded visits in subsequent years to some private fostering placements have not always been so, with apparent significant gaps between visits. While it is clear that where specific welfare concerns exist, or newly arise, good levels of visiting are promptly introduced to monitor children's welfare, failure to adhere to overall regulatory requirements for subsequent visiting undermines the consistency of monitoring of placed children's safety and welfare. There have been improvements in this aspect of practice since the appointment of an additional dedicated private fostering worker. The local authority has appropriate policies and procedures in place governing the imposition of prohibitions or disqualifications relating to private fostering. Although no recent actions of this sort have been initiated, prohibitions have been served in the past, and the local authority is diligent in ensuring follow-up liaison is conducted with local authorities in areas where it is suspected identified private foster carers may have subsequently moved to, and may be continuing to privately foster. As noted above initial basic assessments are carried out promptly by the local authority, with a view to completion of subsequent, more detailed assessments based on frameworks used for assessing local authority approved foster carers. However, in the absence of a clear and agreed timescale for completion and sign-off by a senior manager, a number of these subsequent assessments have taken lengthy periods for completion, in some cases more than a year. While examination of records indicates that suitable levels of contact and support have been provided during these prolonged periods of assessment, and any emerging concerns responded to, the delays in completion and formal managerial sign-off of the suitability of arrangements undermine the effectiveness of local authority safeguarding arrangements. The reports drawn up following subsequent monitoring visits also lack the range and detail expected under the standards and regulations to provide sufficient evidence that children's welfare is being rigorously safeguarded and promoted. While the reports of visits cover immediate matters discussed with carers and placed children, the full range of issues to be monitored under the relevant regulations is not being consistently addressed. In some cases records also indicate series of visits have taken place where the child in placement has not been seen at all, or only with the carer. The absence of consistent, direct and private contact with

placed children again undermines the overall effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements. The local authority provides very good levels of ongoing support for private foster carers. Provision of basic written information and advice is supplemented by good levels of face to face contact and visiting, when requested, to advise and support carers in a number of different areas relating to their care of their private foster children. On some occasions limited financial assistance is provided, for example for purchase of beds. Private fostering cases are held as ongoing allocated pieces of work for the identified private fostering staff which helps ensure a prompt response to any support request from carers. The quality of support is reflected in comments from carers such as 'I would like to thank Milton Keynes Council fostering department for their work and support for the four years I have had my private foster child', 'my social worker is the best very friendly, funny, helpful and always there when I need her' and 'the social worker is a helpful lady'. The local authority also ensures private foster carers can have access to training and development opportunities offered to its own approved foster carers, although this is rarely taken up. Consideration is being given to development of a support group for private foster carers. With regard to support for parents of privately fostered children the local authority takes appropriate steps to ensure they are informed of the practicalities of private fostering arrangements and their resultant rights and responsibilities. The local authority also tries to ensure appropriate arrangements over matters such as contact and financial support are put in place between carers and birth parents. However, due to the particular circumstances of many of the private fostering arrangements known to the local authority, effective engagement with birth parents proves very challenging. Where possible the local authority does seek to explore alternative options for placed children's care that may be more beneficial to their longer-term welfare. For example, the local authority, by effective use of its established family group conferencing programme, supports the transition of young people from private fostering to living within their extended family. The local authority provides good levels of support for young people in private fostering placements. Where placed young people are deemed to have particularly complex support needs, or there are particular welfare concerns, they may continue to have support from an allocated member of the children's social work teams. Otherwise they receive support from the allocated private fostering worker. This is in the form of written advice and guidance on private fostering and their rights, direct support and advice offered by visiting private fostering staff and through provision of, or signposting towards, other relevant advice and support services. Particular arrangements have been put in place to enable privately fostered children to have fast-track access to local child and adolescent mental health services.

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.

The local authority has a written statement in place, as required by the standards, that outlines how it exercises its statutory responsibilities with regard to private fostering. While this document is largely satisfactory, some areas of information are missing, or out of date, and as a

consequence it does not accurately reflect current practice in the local authority. An example is the reference to consideration of private fostering arrangements by the local authority's fostering panel, which, in fact, does not take place. Appropriate training and familiarisation exercises around the local authority's private fostering processes has taken place for all social care staff teams and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), and further such work is planned. Private fostering awareness is not yet a formal part of all social care staff induction packages. Records are maintained for private foster carers and placed children. While these are generally satisfactory, as already noted, there are gaps and inconsistencies with regard to both assessment records and records of subsequent monitoring visits. In addition there is inconsistency in the way information about carers and placed young people is held on separate files, particularly if both carer and placed child are supported by private fostering staff. Systems are in place to monitor key statistical information regarding private fostering arrangements known to the local authority and annual returns to central government are submitted satisfactorily. The local authority anticipates that implementation of new data management systems for private fostering, as part of the Integrated Children's System (ICS), will further enhance management of key information. Systems for direct monitoring of compliance with private fostering practice expectations under the standards are however unsatisfactory. While files provide evidence of staff supervision and occasional file audits relating to private fostering cases, these systems have not identified the shortfalls evident during the course of this inspection, for example those relating to regularity of subsequent visits, delays in completion of assessments and the quality of reporting following visits. Regular reports on private fostering arrangements and local authority practice are being produced as required by regulations and standards for the Director of Children's services and the LSCB although the shortfalls indirect practice monitoring noted above mean the accuracy of those summary reports, is in some areas, undermined.

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 subsequent visits to young people who are privately fostered are conducted at the required intervals and that records to that effect are consistently maintained on carer and young people's files. (Regulation 8, NMS 2).
- review processes and procedures for the conducting of full assessments on private fostering arrangements to ensure they are completed within agreed and defined timescales and signed off by a senior manager. (Regulation 4 & 7, NMS 3).
- review the structure of records relating to subsequent visits to private fostering situations to ensure all required areas of information and assessment are consistently addressed and reported upon. (Regulation 8, NMS 3).

- review the statement on private fostering to ensure it contains all required areas of information and accurately reflects current practice within the local authority. (NMS 1).
- review procedures for maintenance of records on privately fostered young people and their carers to ensure information is being recorded separately for each in a consistent manner. (NMS 7).
- put in place more effective systems for monitoring practice with regard to private fostering arrangements and compliance with the expectations of the regulations and National Minimum Standards. (NMS 7).

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.