

Liverpool City Council Private Fostering Arrangements

Inspection report for local authority private fostering services

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Lead inspector	Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Full
Type of registration	Private Fostering Services

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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

Liverpool City 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 main fostering service, and the service manager has a lead role on private fostering. Private foster carers and the children and young people they care for are supported by a social worker who has specific expertise and experience in private fostering, and a support worker.

Information about private fostering is provided on Liverpool City Council's website. This is in addition to local publicity and awareness-raising campaigns.

Summary

The services were judged to be Satisfactory

Improvements/developments since the last inspection

No recommendations were made at the last inspection.

At the last inspection the council was not aware of any children privately fostered. It was in the process of reviewing its strategy and developing systems and procedures aimed at raising awareness of the need to notify. These are now in place.

The effectiveness of the services

The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services

This was an announced key inspection which assessed to what extent all the national minimum standards and regulations in relation to private fostering arrangements were being met. It also considered how the local authority had addressed the recommendations made at the previous inspection.

Overall, children and young people who are privately fostered are provided with a satisfactory service. They say that they feel safe and happy in their placements and know who to contact if they have any worries.

Generally, children and young people's needs are assessed within required timescales. On the whole, their carers are suitably vetted to ensure that they have the ability to meet the needs of the children and young people they are caring for. Assessments take into account contact arrangements with parents, financial considerations and whether placements offered will provide them with good standards of physical safety and security.

Increasing numbers of enquiries and notifications about private fostering from universal services show that awareness-raising strategies are having some impact. Privately fostered children and young people, and their carers, benefit from the intervention, advice and guidance from a specific social worker and support worker.

Some shortfalls are identified, however, the majority of which could have been identified and addressed with closer monitoring by senior management. The service has the capacity to implement change, however, and so quickly drive forward further improvement.

	Judgement
The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services	Satisfactory

The quality of the service

The promotion of the awareness of private fostering requirements is satisfactory. The service uses a variety of media to publicise private fostering, and has used opportunities such as community conferences and events to alert professionals to their responsibilities. A number of enquiries and notifications have been made by a range of professionals from health, education and voluntary sectors. This demonstrates that awareness-raising activities have some impact.

There has been less success in reaching general members of the public however, although work is progressing in this area. Contact has been made with a number of faith and community groups. There are no plans to proactively distribute information in different community languages however, and no strategy is in place to promote awareness in 'hard to reach' groups. This means that notifications have remained relatively static, although have improved considerably since the last inspection.

The majority of private foster carers say that the local authority provides them with the guidance, advice, information and support they need. They have found this information to be good, and comment positively on the support from social workers.

For example, one private foster carer stated: 'The team is very thorough and gives me all the support and information I need.' Another noted: 'We are very satisfied with the help and support we have received from our social worker. She was on hand to answer any of our queries and put me at ease knowing she was there to provide information and support should we need it.'

Private foster carers are confident about contacting the local authority about any concerns they may have, and all have been provided with a copy of the complaints procedure. They report that social workers regularly visit children in placement, although some children have not been visited in accordance with these regulations.

	Judgement
The quality of the service	Satisfactory

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

Children and young people in private fostering arrangements say they feel safe in their placements. One young person noted: 'I like living here, I feel comfortable here.' They confirm they have regular visits from their social workers and know who to contact if they feel worried about anything. Another young person commented: 'My social worker is nice to me.'

All children and young people in private fostering placements are registered with a doctor, and private foster carers ensure they attend school or college. The majority of children and young people have contact with their parents. Records show that both parents and private foster carers are clear about the duration of these placements and future plans.

In the majority of cases, the local authority responds within required timescales to ensure that private fostering arrangements are properly assessed. This practice is not consistent, however. As a consequence, the assessment of the safety and suitability of placements is sometimes delayed which puts children and young people at risk.

Once an initial assessment has been made, more comprehensive reports are presented to and scrutinised by a private fostering panel. A senior manager makes the final decision on suitability and signs off the reports.

	Judgement
Safeguarding and promoting welfare	Satisfactory

Promoting equality and tackling discrimination

Parents who returned their surveys agree that private foster carers recognise their child's needs in respect of culture, disability, religion, faith, gender or race. Initial assessments cover these issues, and private foster carers confirm that issues of culture and religion are fully explored. They are also proactive on their own behalf in exploring community resources to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people they care for.

One private foster carer described their assessment process as being particularly thorough, although the detail of initial assessments does not always reflect the good work that has been undertaken. Decision-making after this initial assessment is also difficult to determine in some cases. This means that children and young people may not get the services to meet their individual needs.

	Judgement
Promoting equality and tackling discrimination	Satisfactory

The quality of leadership and management

In the majority of cases the local authority discharges its functions appropriately, ensuring that children and young people are safe in placement and their needs are met. The appointment of a social worker to deal specifically with private fostering means that staff and others are increasingly aware of their responsibilities under private fostering regulations. There is evidence of partnership working, and good developmental work is in progress with several representatives in key agencies.

This effective frontline work is undermined somewhat by a lack of robust monitoring procedures. There is no audit of private fostering files and the local authority's plan is not compliant with these standards. Some information has been produced on the number of children and young people placed in private fostering arrangements, but there is no evaluation of the work being undertaken and no report has been presented to the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Although the private fostering panel provides some overview and monitoring of individual cases, an absence of systematic monitoring means that management have missed opportunities to identify weaknesses in their own practice and procedures.

For example, greater scrutiny would have alerted the nominated person to the fact that not all private foster carers are suitably checked and in some cases do not have the authority to give consent to medical treatment.

	Judgement
The quality of leadership and management	Satisfactory

Capacity to improve

The local authority has demonstrated that it is capable of making significant improvements in private fostering arrangements. For example, since the last inspection, the number of notifications has steadily increased, and administrative and recording systems are in place.

The service has been restructured and a specialist worker appointed. There is closer working with partnership agencies in order to increase awareness of private fostering requirements. There is some effective working with private foster carers to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people.

The nominated person and managers are fully aware of the work that now needs to be undertaken, and an action plan is in place to drive forward further improvement.

	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
NMS	provide a written statement or plan which includes the points outlined in 1.2 of this standard (NMS 1.2)
NMS	ensure that decisions about overall suitability are made within required timescales and visit children in accordance with these regulations (NMS 3)
NMS	provide prospective foster carers with information in different languages and formats as appropriate, on the advice and support that is available (NMS 4.3)
Regulation	monitor the way in which they discharge their duties and functions in relation to private fostering. (Regulation 12)