

Lincolnshire C.C. Private Fostering Arrangements

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 between parents and carers, and the purpose of inspection is to ascertain that the local authority is appropriately fulfilling its functions and duties with regard to overseeing and monitoring the placements of 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 Lincolnshire County Council the lead officer for private fostering is the head of service for Lincoln and North Kesteven with a county lead on safeguarding. Currently notifications of private fostering arrangements are received by the customer service centre. Staff there have been trained to deal with these notifications appropriately and are supported by a principal social worker to do so. Initial assessments are undertaken by a social worker from the family assessment and support team and subsequently an assessment of the carer's suitability to provide a placement is undertaken by a social worker from the fostering team. Following confirmation of placement suitability a family assessment and support team worker will hold responsibility for undertaking monitoring visits, in accordance with Regulation 8, and for completing the necessary reports. At the time of this inspection there are 21 young people in private fostering arrangements.

Summary

All National Minimum Standards (NMS), relating to private fostering, are grouped under staying safe and organisation. Systems and procedures relating to the management of private fostering notifications, the completion of assessments and the conduct of subsequent visits have recently changed significantly. New systems and practices are only partially implemented and, although they have been clearly explained and their potential impact has been well demonstrated, this inspection has also had to consider the impact of previous inconsistent, and sometimes unsafe practices, on the placements of young people currently in private fostering arrangements. This authority has been somewhat slow to fully implement policies, procedures and systems to ensure that notifications of private fostering arrangements are dealt with appropriately and that assessments of arrangements and visits to young people, in those arrangements, are undertaken in a timely manner. The appointment of an experienced and knowledgeable lead officer for private fostering and the pro-active involvement of the head of modernisation in awareness raising, training and systems development has meant that, since October 2007, a sound range of dedicated recording tools has been developed and staff are being fully appraised of their particular reference to private fostering arrangements. The profile of private fostering has been raised significantly and managers can demonstrate a dedication to maintaining this high profile and a commitment to improving timescales and recording practices in respect of private fostering arrangements. Significant improvements can already be demonstrated with statistics showing that visits in accordance with Regulation 8 are being completed in a timely way and increased notifications showing that awareness raising is working. Managers demonstrate a good awareness of where shortfalls remain, and responded positively to the recommendations made during the inspection, taking action to address some of them whilst the inspection was still in progress.

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 recent development of an apparently comprehensive system for the management and monitoring of private fostering arrangements is well supported by the inclusion of a dedicated private fostering module, on the new, electronic integrated children's system (ICS), which incorporates a range of pro-forma documentation covering notification, initial assessment and the recording of subsequent visits required under Regulation 8. The authority has adapted the pro-forma issued by the Department for Children and Families (DCFS) and supplies statistical information to that department as required. As previously detailed the profile of private fostering has been raised significantly. A sound communication plan is now in place and the local authority has undertaken, and continues to undertake, some successful awareness raising, through the local press and a range of appropriate periodical publications, and has developed a range of particularly effective postcards and posters to circulate to the public and associated professionals. Publicity materials include some good examples of what constitutes a private fostering arrangement to make it easier for the public to recognise arrangements requiring notification. The authority has developed a range of particularly innovative materials to focus young people's attention on the Every Child Matters outcome areas: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving and economic well-being. Notifications are increasing to demonstrate the effectiveness of the awareness raising activities. Some effective partnership working is currently being undertaken with the school referral service. To date, 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 Lincolnshire, to raise their awareness about what constitutes a private fostering arrangement and their responsibilities to notify such arrangements to the authority. The authority encourages appropriate cultural placements and those carers providing accommodation to young people from different backgrounds say that they receive appropriate support and that the continued involvement of parents, in most cases, promotes this. Historically notifications, assessments and subsequent visits, have not generally been dealt with in a timely manner and records demonstrate much inconsistency across the county. Decisions regarding the suitability of private fostering arrangements, and their potential capacity to meet young people's needs and keep them safe, have been subject to unacceptable delay. The capacity of the system, currently being implemented, to closely monitor timescales, and prompt timely responses, demonstrates the potential to ensure that such delays do not feature in respect of current or future notifications. Significant improvements in complying with visiting requirements under Regulation 8 can already be demonstrated. To date, the practice of utilising the looked after children (LAC) review system for young people in private fostering arrangements demonstrates regular, though not wholly appropriate, monitoring of the placement's capacity to meet their social, emotional, health and educational needs. The involvement of fostering service social workers, in some assessments of private foster carers and carer households, has also engendered a fairly comprehensive consideration of appropriateness and the completion of necessary checks on household members. However, not all private foster carers, even now, have been subject to

full, appropriate assessment, those who have, have not always been assessed within appropriate timescales and, in some cases, checks on the suitability of carers and household members have not been appropriately completed. A written agreement has been developed for use between young people's parents and those providing a private fostering placement. This is good practice and the pro-forma is appropriate and includes signed consent for medical treatment and details of financial arrangements. However, the agreement is not always utilised and, where it is, there are no current arrangements for review resulting in the document not always representing current circumstances. Some carers say that they have been appropriately supported to obtain information about child and other financial benefits and there is a clear demonstration of referral for additional funding under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (children in need), where this is appropriate. In some cases child protection concerns, relating to young people in private fostering arrangements, do not appear to have been responded to in a timely and appropriate manner. Comments, appearing to amount to disclosures by young people, do not appear to have been responded to or fully investigated, in a timely way, to ensure the young person's continuing safety. There is however, good indication of an improved response with tighter management of the service and regular auditing and monitoring of files. The pro-forma for file auditing is commendably comprehensive and a summary of file audits is regularly considered by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and both highlights and shortfalls are recognised and responded to. Long term private foster carers say that written information provided, both to them and to young people placed, has been minimal or non-existent in the past but all confirm the recent receipt of booklets, purchased by the local authority from the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), providing good information about private fostering. Leaflets have also been provided to young people to explain how they can complain to the local authority and negotiations have recently been finalised for the provision of an advocacy service, for privately fostered children, through the National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS). NYAS will send out details of the service and contact information. Shortfalls, in terms of allocation of social workers to young people in private fostering arrangements, were highlighted during the joint annual review (JAR) of the authority in 2006. Subsequent to that review a worker has always been allocated to each privately fostered young person. All carers, young people and parents, spoken to and returning questionnaires, speak very highly of the current service received from their allocated worker. Carers made the following comments: 'She explained things really well and was there when needed'; 'She has discussed finances with the family and has always responded straight away to queries'; 'She puts everyone very much at ease enabling a very natural rapport with the child'; 'She has been consistent, reliable and thorough in her careful attention to the needs of the child, providing her with a fine example of professionals' integrity in balance with genuine warmth for her as an individual'. Young people commented positively about both their placements and their social workers: 'She (SW) was very understanding and I felt I could trust her'; 'I feel wanted and I'm always included in family activities'; 'The past four months living here has made me feel most welcome and wanted'. The authority is currently undertaking a survey of the views of children and young people who are privately fostered. This is the first time this group has been targeted and the aim is to gain understanding of how they view the service, and what changes or improvements they would like to see.

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 good.

A wholly appropriate Statement of Purpose (SOP), in relation to private fostering, has been prepared and is available to local authority staff, associated professionals and to the public. The local authority's website includes a good range of information. The SOP includes full coverage of all items required under standard 1.2. The lead officer has a good knowledge of private fostering and demonstrates good awareness of her management and monitoring responsibilities. Despite some delay, written reports to the Director of Children's Services and to the LSCB have now commenced, with the first of these being submitted in June 2008. The first written report is commendably comprehensive and incorporates a summary of the authority's position, with regard to private fostering, as it stood in July 2006 when a self assessment was submitted to the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The report goes on to detail subsequent activity and concludes with an overview of the current situation. There is a good indication of significant improvements, particularly since October 2007, with the development of clear policies and procedures, clear definition of individual roles and responsibilities within those procedures and the imminent implementation of dedicated and wholly apt, electronic recording pro-forma tools in relation to notification, assessment and regulatory visits. A seemingly sound electronic system will support effective monitoring to ensure that notifications are responded to quickly and appropriately, that assessments as to suitability are completed within required timescales, that social worker visits are made at the required regular intervals and that records contain all the written reports required by the regulations. There are good arrangements for managers to perform regular audits to ensure that records are being retained to the required standard and there are sound indications that shortfalls, demonstrated in some of the current records, will not occur once the new system has been fully adopted. Statistics demonstrate that there has already been significant progress in relation to the timely completion of visits to young people in private fostering arrangements, in accordance with Regulation 8. There has been good liaison with the local authority training section and a good range of training has commenced, for both local authority staff and associated professionals, in relation to both private fostering generally, with input from BAAF, and to the new ICS recording requirements. The authority has opted to spread expertise and awareness across the county, rather than having designated private fostering workers, due to the size and geographical spread of the county and the potential for condensed expertise to be less valuable. Some of the workers, already involved in supervising private fostering arrangements, have not fully accessed the training provided to date and demonstrate a lack of full awareness of the private fostering regulations and standards and some confusion about the specifics of their role. Private fostering has been fully incorporated into induction training for new staff and has been included in the multi-agency training provided by the LSCB.

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 Lincolnshire 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)
- ensure that decisions about the overall suitability of arrangements are made within required timescales and signed off at managerial level (NMS 3.4)
- demonstrate the suitability of proposed or actual private foster carers, and household members, to provide a safe placement for any child who is, or is proposed to be accommodated (NMS 3.2.6, NMS 3.3, Schedule 2)
- give priority to training for front line staff, currently 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.