

Islington Private Fostering service

Inspection report for local authority private fostering services

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Lead inspector	Seka Graovac
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Service address	222 Upper Street, London, N1 1XR
Telephone number	02075277163
Email address	
Nominated person	Gavin Swann

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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

Islington Private Fostering Service is responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children who are privately fostered and live in this London borough. The service is delivered through the council's children in need service. The operation's manager has a lead role for private fostering. A senior social worker dedicates her working time to private fostering (80%) and child trafficking (20%). Other social workers involved in the private fostering arrangements come from different teams within children in need service. Private fostering is overseen and the arrangements are signed off by the head of this service on recommendations from the Islington Private Fostering Panel. The Director of Children's Services and the Director of Child Protection, as well as the elected members of the council and Islington Safeguarding Children Board keep a keen eye on the development and the quality of this service..

Summary

The services were judged to be Good

Improvements/developments since the last inspection

The last inspection of this service was conducted in March 2008. The overall quality was assessed as good. The only weakness identified related to the initial assessment of one private foster care arrangement not being carried out in the required timescales. The service has introduced robust monitoring and implementation systems to address this issue. The improvement has been achieved: initial assessments are always carried out within seven working days of the arrangement becoming known to the service. This contributes to more robust safeguarding of children in private fostering arrangements.

The effectiveness of the services

The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services

This is a good service with some outstanding features. The council has a firm commitment to working together with other agencies to identify fostering arrangements and to promote good practice. The elected members of the council fully support the management of this service in setting high expectations in relation to the quality of this service. Sufficient resources, appropriate management structures, efficient operations, clear procedures and staff expertise enable a good quality provision. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding children and promoting their welfare. The service is individually tailored and sensitive to the privately fostered children's needs. Good support is provided to private foster parents to enable them to successfully carry out their role. Social workers promote the values of equality and diversity in their work within private fostering service, effectively.

The service is characterised by a constant drive to improve. Rigorous monitoring processes have led to the formulation of comprehensive development plans. Through its own monitoring, the service identified a weakness in its service provision. This relates to the time taken for staff to request relevant information from the local police and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). A well-targeted action plan is being implemented to ensure that these checks are consistently requested in a more timely manner. Due to the significance of these checks on the suitability of a private fostering arrangement, this inspection report includes a formal recommendation relating to the timeliness of these checks. This is to support the council's implementation of a safer practice and to ensure that it is fully embedded in what would have otherwise been an excellent service.

The service's capacity to improve is outstanding. There is a strong learning and reflective social work culture. In addition to keeping abreast with what is new in private fostering, the service is working together with other progressive organisations to spearhead research in this area. Islington Private Fostering Service is emerging on a national scene as a leader in developing this field of social care.

	Judgement
The overall effectiveness of the private fostering services	Good

The quality of the service

The service has implemented comprehensive and effective strategies to promote awareness of the notification requirements and to 'find' the privately fostered children in Islington, so that it can be confident that they receive good support.

The council proactively engages the universal services, as well as a wide range of voluntary organisations and local communities to help identify children who are being privately fostered. The council's clear information on private fostering is available in different languages and is disseminated widely. It provides an accurate definition of private fostering and specifies the responsibilities for notifying the authority of such arrangements. It also explains how to easily notify the council of a private fostering arrangement.

The service has recently carried out a private fostering audit in two schools. The audits were highly successful in identifying the unreported private fostering arrangements. The service has appropriately shared the information with the relevant councils to ensure that they are aware of the private arrangements in their locality.

In addition to using excellent strategies to promote external awareness, the private fostering service ensures that the council's staff maintain high levels of knowledge about the private fostering. For example, private fostering information is included in induction and on-going training programmes for all staff working across children's social care. The specialist senior social worker has delivered over 120 training sessions on private fostering, internally and externally.

The council has been effective in identifying an increased number of the private fostering arrangements. In the past 12 months, the service supported between 12 and 18 privately fostered children, at any one time. This is a many-fold increase in relation to the number supported at the last inspection.

The service continues to monitor the impact of its awareness raising strategies. Data are analysed and used to develop better ways for identifying private fostering arrangements that exist in the borough. The council continues to proactively look for the privately fostered and so called hidden children to ensure that they receive appropriate support and remain safe.

The council's stable, committed and skilled social work force ensure that the privately fostered children and their carers consistently receive a good quality service.

The children and carers who met with the inspector were very positive about the quality of the support they receive from the social workers. Ofsted written survey also showed a high level of satisfaction with the service. This was expressed both by the children and their carers.

The service is effective in securing positive outcomes for the privately fostered children. Some examples: all children are in education, all have received a medical assessment, all overseas privately fostered children have had their status checked and regulated, all older children have a transition plan in place, some children returned to their parents as planned, some children were identified as requiring a higher level of support and became accommodated by the children's social care services.

Islington's Private Fostering Service has a positive impact on the lives of the privately fostered children in this borough.

	Judgement
The quality of the service	Good

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

The service's quick response to any information indicating that a particular child might be privately fostered in Islington has a positive safeguarding impact. The council's procedures for responding to notifications and for assessing the suitability of the arrangement promote good safeguarding practice and protection of children effectively.

The private fostering specialist social worker visits the carer and the child within seven working days of the information coming to light, a referral being made or a full notification being received. During this visit, it is ascertained if the arrangement satisfies the private fostering criteria and if there are any immediate risks to the child. The service is working closely with the local police to ensure that relevant information is appropriately requested and shared in the context of the risks identified and general vulnerability of the children who are privately fostered. The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are regularly carried out on the carers and any other adults, as well as those who are over 16 years old and are closely associated with them. The council is currently implementing a plan to make it easier for the carers and their associates to complete a CRB application. This has been introduced to resolve the identified issues with delays in carrying out these checks and to improve the timescales.

In those initial phases, the fostering service also searches its own records or collaborates with other councils if relevant, to ensure that the carer is not disqualified from privately fostering children.

Following the initial assessment, the social workers carry out a full assessment of the child's needs and of the carer's capacity to meet those needs. The outcomes of the core assessment appropriately underpins the suitability process and directs the support provided by the social workers. Those assessments are always carried out within the appropriate timescales. To ensure the robustness of the suitability decisions, the assessments are presented to the multidisciplinary private fostering panel.

The diversity of professional expertise of people involved and the multiple levels of the decision making process that include signing off by the Head of Children in Need service contribute to the quality of the safeguarding children. The safeguarding is further enhanced by the close links with the Islington Safeguarding Children Board and the overview provided by the Director of Child Protection.

The allocated social worker visits the private foster carer and the child on a regular basis and at least once in four weeks in the first year of the arrangement. This exceeds the national minimum standard by a third. In the subsequent years, the follow-up visits are less frequent, but the frequency is dependent on the need. This shows that the service is individually tailored and responsive. Those visits contribute to the ongoing safeguarding of the privately fostered children. The social workers ensure that children's welfare continues to be effectively promoted while they live with their private foster carers. Private foster carers are offered training on various topics relating to child protection, such as domestic violence, gangs, neglect, trafficking of children, e-safety and online exploitation.

Through Ofsted written survey and discussions with the inspector, the privately fostered children expressed feeling safe. They reported that they regularly see their social workers and find them helpful.

A representative of one of the organisations involved in working with this private fostering service told the inspector that the most impressive thing about the service is how swiftly staff deal with any safeguarding concerns.

	Judgement
Safeguarding and promoting welfare	Good

Promoting equality and tackling discrimination

Islington Private Fostering Service is effective in promoting equality and diversity within its operations. The publicity material is available on request in large print, Braille, audiotape or in another language. This is advertised in Bengali, Chinese, Somali and Turkish. Interpreters are regularly used to support good communication between the council's staff and the private foster carers and children for whom English is an additional language.

The council's good demographic knowledge and understanding of its diverse population is supported by an equally diverse work force. The service has developed close links with the UK Border Agency and a UK branch of the International Social Services Network that aims to protect Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB). Through working with Voluntary Action Islington and using its own internal knowledge, the service is forging closer links with the local refugee and faith groups. In addition to promoting the awareness of the private fostering arrangements, these connections help build inter-community relationships and better integration within this highly diverse London borough. The links with the organisation that supports people who do not have a recourse to public funds enable this private fostering service to raise the awareness about the help that is available amongst the most marginalised members of the community. The promotion of equality and diversity is integral to the council's engagement. Respect and anti-discriminatory attitudes are fully embedded in the private fostering social work practice in Islington.

Great attention is given to the privately fostered children's individual needs, including their cultural identity and social integration. Carers have good opportunities to receive comprehensive training and increase their understanding of different belief systems and the issues affecting children, including those with disabilities.

The recently carried out council's survey of the privately fostered children's views used different versions of the questionnaires for younger and older children to ensure that they are age appropriate.

The operations manager brings a particular interest and expertise in issues relating to gender in social work.

	Judgement
Promoting equality and tackling discrimination	Good

The quality of leadership and management

Islington council is discharging its functions and responsibilities in relation to private fostering as described in legislation and in the council's own Statement of Purpose, very effectively. The council's senior management is working very closely with its elected members to maintain safeguarding of privately fostered children a priority. There is an exceptionally strong drive to galvanise various communities and professionals in this borough and further afield. The aim of this engagement is to raise the awareness and spread the message about the private fostering, its potential risks and the support available. The council's excellent communication strategy has led to the development of effective inter-agency relationships and a significant increase of the notifications received.

The vision of ensuring that privately fostered children are safe and well supported is translated into good social work practice in a seamless fashion. The private fostering service operations are managed efficiently and with a clear focus on the promotion of positive outcomes for the children who live in these arrangements. Through excellent management support and guidance, the front-line staff are enabled to effectively support privately fostered children, once they become known to the council.

The recently developed private fostering panel adds more scrutiny to the assessment of the suitability of the fostering arrangements. In addition to the regular annual reports being presented to the Director of Children's Services and Islington Safeguarding Children Board, the effective working together contributes to the robustness of the safeguarding of the privately fostered children in this borough.

The oversight of the council's senior management and ongoing monitoring processes ensure the high quality of the service provided to the fostered children and their carers. Rigorous internal auditing processes are supplemented by independent evaluation carried out by external consultants, consultation with children and carers

and a positive working relationship with Ofsted. The management of the private fostering service is committed to providing a service that exceeds the national minimum standards. Clear strategies and comprehensive work plans are in place to achieve that. The quality of the service continues to be rigorously quality assured. The plans are continually adapted to ensure that a desired outcome is facilitated as effectively as possible. The management's high expectations, determination and rigour are complemented with flexibility and innovation.

In addition to providing outstanding leadership and management to its own staff, Islington Private Fostering service is emerging as a national leader in this field. The service is keen to continue to learn and to contribute to the development of expertise by sharing its own data and good practice. For example, it is currently engaged in a research with CFAB about privately fostered children from overseas. The specialist private fostering social worker makes presentations at the national professional events, such as at the British Association for Adoption and Fostering and Community Care Live. One charity wrote to Ofsted, saying: 'We work with all of the 157 local authorities in the UK and Islington Private Fostering Service is by far the most advanced.'

	Judgement
The quality of leadership and management	Outstanding

Capacity to improve

The service's capacity to improve is outstanding. A clear commitment to identify privately fostered children in Islington and ensure that they are safe is backed by the significant resources and growing expertise. The service has a full support from the council's elected body.

There is a strong learning culture and interest in the current research enquiry. The management and staff are continually engaged in reflective consideration of their practice and its impact on the privately fostered children. Views of other stakeholders including those of the privately fostered children and their carers are sought in a systematic manner. The high performance audit culture is well balanced by the genuine commitment to improve the quality of the service for the children who are on the receiving end of it. The service is transparent and its evaluation of weaknesses and strengths is accurate. Any weaknesses identified are made subject to comprehensive improvement plans. Any other findings are also proactively used to drive and shape the improvement. The service has developed enormously since the last inspection.

	Judgement
Capacity to improve	Outstanding

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	ensure that the information relevant to the assessment of the suitability of the particular fostering arrangement is always requested in a timely manner from the local police and CRB. (NMS 3)