

Hertfordshire County Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Joe Staines
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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

Hertfordshire's private fostering officer is based in the Family and Friends team which is part of the Family Placement service. The project officer is an experienced social worker, with some experience of private fostering work. The project officer is line managed by a team manager with experience of setting up a similar team in another London borough. Overall management responsibility sits with the head of placement and provider services. The local authority also employs a marketing and communications officer, whose role includes monitoring and producing communications to raise awareness of private fostering and the duty to notify. The marketing and communications officer is responsible for looking at all methods of communicating both with professional, elected members, key partners and members of the public.

Summary

This key, announced inspection took place over a two day period and resulted in judgements in relation to the two outcome groups relevant to private fostering; staying safe and organisation. Staying safe has been judged as satisfactory, whilst organisation is judged as good. The council has undertaken some very good work in terms of promoting awareness of the notification requirements and ensuring that those professionals who may come into contact with privately fostered children understand their role in notification. Communications with council staff, elected members, members of the public and key partner agencies, along with voluntary organisations has taken place and there has been an increase in notifications from three in the year 2006-7 to 26 in the following year. Good work has also been undertaken in providing advice and support to private foster carers and prospective private foster carers, along with children and young people who are privately fostered. The council has a clear statement of purpose, defining the measures it intends to take to ensure it meets the National Minimum Standards and Regulations that apply, however, the practice identified at this inspection shows some shortfalls and failure to comply with all regulatory requirements. Areas that require improvement include the speed of responses to notified arrangements, and ensuring all of the required activities take place at visits, and are recorded.

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 service.

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 a range of different activities to promote awareness of the notification requirements and ensures that those professionals who may come into contact with privately fostered children understand their role in notification. The activities include articles and guidance documents for staff on the county council's intranet site, presentations to social work teams and a corporate induction that includes material on private fostering. However, despite the work undertaken, the local authority has only had limited success in

ensuring its staff's awareness of required activities is transferred into actions that comply with all elements of the National Minimum Standards and Regulations. Shortfalls have been identified by the local authorities own audits in relation to completing assessments and follow up visits within the required timescales, and consulting with parents of privately fostered children.

The local authority has a programme of communication activities for the public and identified local partnership agencies, and a range of up to date publicity materials which include the legal definition of a privately fostered child with examples, the notification requirements and the procedure for notifying, and the benefits of notification and possible consequences of non-notification. Examples of work undertaken include contact and communication with schools, staff from team working with asylum seekers, translation service, child care providers, foster carers, members of children's services panel (elected members) and Hertfordshire corporate parenting group (elected members and officers from the Children, Schools and families team). Also Partner agencies including the police, Primary Care Trust's, the Local Safeguarding Children Board, Hertfordshire children's trust partnership (multi disciplinary group), external agencies such as faith groups, community groups, Citizens Advice, independent and private schools and language schools. Information has been provided in the form of press releases, radio interviews, leaflets, banner stands, adverts in the local press, releases to child care providers.

The local authority has a clear system for passing referrals of private fostering arrangements to the relevant team. This involves first line referral to the client services team who conduct the initial assessment and refer to the friends and family team for a more thorough assessment and ongoing work. The initial assessments are not always sufficiently detailed and do not evidence that all aspects of suitability are determined. The local authority's own audit identifies significant delays in starting a detailed assessment thus delaying a decision about overall suitability at managerial level. This means that the welfare of children may not be fully safeguarded.

The local authority provides good information to prospective and actual private foster carers in the form of a file, containing materials from the local authority and partner agencies that give good information about local support services. Children who are privately fostered also receive a good pack, with information in languages and a format aimed at making them easy and attractive to use. Information is provided from a variety of partner agencies and information is provided in different languages on how to complain, make a suggestion or compliment. However, the local authority has had only limited success in contacting and supporting the parents of privately fostered children.

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.

The local authority has a clearly written statement of purpose, which sets out its duties and functions in relation to private fostering and the ways in which they will be carried out. The statement includes all of the information required by regulations, with the minor exception of the name of the manager(s) who will sign-off decisions about the overall suitability of an arrangement. The statement of purpose, and other relevant documents are made available on the council's website, and several promotional materials refer potential service users to the site if they wish to read about private fostering. The practice that takes place is not always in accordance with that outlined in the statement. This has contributed to a failure to ensure that in every case all the required checks are undertaken, potentially compromising the welfare of young people.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service ensures that information is provided in a range of languages, and feedback from service users has led to additional languages being used, in line with the needs of the community. Links have been forged with translation services and community organisations with links into various diverse sections of the community.

The local authority has recently begun the process of transferring client information onto the national "Integrated Children's Services" and maintains hard copies of old files alongside the new system at present. The records in both systems are well maintained and stored securely. Records detail the advice and support given to parents and/or carers, and the information and support given to children. Records are kept and monitored about the numbers of privately fostered children and private foster carers living in the local authority's area. Reports of these audits, along with annual reports for consideration by the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board on how it satisfies itself that the welfare of privately fostered children in its area is satisfactorily safeguarded and promoted, including how it co-operates with other agencies in this connection.

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
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 (NMS 2.3.1, Regulation 4,7)	17 April 2009

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that assessments of the capacity of the proposed or actual private foster carer to look after the child and the suitability of household members are completed using the

dimensions and domains in the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (2000) [NMS 3]