

Herefordshire Local Authority Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

Unique reference number	SC076304
Inspection date	26 January 2009
Inspector	Suzanne Young
Type of Inspection	Key

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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

A private fostering arrangement is one that is made privately (that is to say without the involvement of a local authority) for the care of a child under the age of 16 (under 18, if disabled) by someone other than a parent or close relative with the intention that it should last for 28 days or more. Local authorities are required to raise awareness of the necessity to notify the authority of any private fostering arrangement and to encourage positive outcomes for privately fostered children and young people, and reduce any risks to their welfare and safety.

Assessments of the suitability of private fostering arrangements and the support provided to children, young people, their parents and carers is provided by social workers from Herefordshire's referral and assessment team and the authority's long term teams. Decisions regarding the suitability of private fostering arrangements are made by the Service Manager (Safeguarding and Looked After Children).

Summary

This was an announced key inspection, which concentrated on the progress made by the authority in meeting the National Minimum Standards for private fostering. It concentrated on the service's ability to keep young people safe and the organisation and management of the service and covered all seven standards.

Although the authority have developed systems and procedures to identify and assess children in private fostering arrangements these have not yet been fully implemented. This leaves children and young people without adequate safeguards and potentially places them at risk. The authority has not raised the awareness of private fostering within the local community and staff are not yet aware of or trained in the procedures for private fostering arrangements. Managers are not undertaking regular quality assurance monitoring of the service.

The authority is aware of two private fostering arrangements in its area. Assessments of the suitability of private fostering arrangements and the support provided to children, young people, their parents and carers is provided by social workers from Herefordshire's referral and assessment team and the authority's long term teams. Assessments of arrangements have been taking place although these have not been within required timescales.

The overall quality rating is inadequate.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of Herefordshire Council'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 inadequate.

Although the authority have developed systems and procedures to identify and assess children in private fostering arrangements these have not yet been fully implemented. This means children and young people are not adequately being safeguarded and potentially are at risk. There are currently only two private fostering arrangements known and being supported by the local authority. The local authority has not raised the awareness of private fostering arrangements with professionals or within the general public. Due to the very small amount of private fostering arrangements within the county, a dedicated post in relation to private fostering arrangements has not been considered viable.

The authority has established a private fostering working group, chaired by the Service Manager (Safeguarding and Looked After Children) to develop a programme to promote the general awareness of private fostering arrangements within it's organisation, other agencies and the general public. This is due to start in February 2009. Internal briefings have already taken place for some key staff within the authority. A local authority press officer is a member of the working group to draw up the authority's communication strategy and a children's advocacy worker is a member to give a child focus to the authority's response to private fostering. Children and young people who are in private fostering arrangements will be able to access an advocacy service.

The authority plans to develop and distribute publicity materials, such as leaflets and posters amongst the general public, professionals, parents, carers and young people, to inform them of the need to notify private fostering arrangements to the local authority. There are no current plans, however, to produce this information in different languages and formats so that it is accessible to all parts of the community. This potentially means some communities could be left without any awareness of private fostering requirements and the necessary safeguards to children and young people within these groups not being provided.

The local authority has developed notification documents to ensure they receive appropriate information regarding a young person who may be privately fostered. These forms, however, do not record the child's place of birth or the address of the private foster carers and person giving notice of private fostering arrangements address over the last five years. A pro-forma agreement has also been developed to be used by carers and parents clearly identifying how the child's needs will be met.

The authority has developed an assessment document detailing all information required in assessing the suitability of private fostering arrangements. This, however, has only recently been devised and was not in use when the two existing privately fostered children's placements were arranged. Although all private fostering carers have been subject to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance the assessments have not been undertaken in a timely fashion, with considerable delays in obtaining CRB checks in relation to private foster carers and members of their households. One private fostering arrangement is in the process of being re-assessed in retrospect to cover all areas as required under the private fostering regulations.

Social workers from both the referral and assessment teams and long term teams are responsible for undertaking an assessment of private foster carers along with social workers from the fostering service to ensure that they are suitable to provide care for children. Once this assessment has been completed a report is presented to the Service Manager (Safeguarding and Looked After Children) for the arrangement to be signed off. Where concerns are raised

these are discussed at a meeting with both the fostering and children's managers and presented to the Service Manager for his decision.

The authority has not developed any written information for private foster carers, parents or young people as to what support is available from other agencies. The written statement indicates that private foster carers can access training provided by the authority's fostering service for its own foster carers. Children's social workers from the long term teams provide children and carers with ongoing support and advice and are also responsible for providing advice where needed to the parents of children who are privately fostered. Regular support visits to children, however, are not always undertaken within the required timescales. Private fostering children can have access to an advocate and free leisure facilities similar to those in mainstream fostering but cannot currently access the same support to education and health services. Financial support is also available to carers when necessary.

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 inadequate.

Children's safety, welfare and care within private fostering arrangements are not being safeguarded because staff are not yet aware of or trained in the procedures for private fostering arrangements. Managers are not undertaking regular quality assurance monitoring of the service.

Herefordshire Council has developed a written statement and procedure which sets out its duties and functions in relation to private fostering and the ways in which they will be carried out. The statement, however, does not state the role other agencies have in notifying the authority of a private fostering arrangement.

The information and guidance provided by Herefordshire is informative and contains useful examples of types of private fostering arrangements. Social workers however are not fully conversant with the guidance which could potentially result in privately fostered young people not being identified and protected. Social workers involved with supporting private fostering arrangements have as yet been given no training as to their roles and responsibilities and private fostering is not currently included in social worker's induction or safeguarding training.

The promotion of equality and diversity is inadequate. The authority has not developed publicity materials in an appropriate range of languages and formats which are accessible to different groups of private foster carers, parents and communities to raise awareness of private fostering. Systems and procedures are not in place to identify and reach these communities to enable the authority to meet their responsibility to provide equality of opportunity to all children and young people regardless of race, culture, gender, disability and sexuality. Similarly there is no information made available, in different languages and formats, to private foster carers on the

advice and support from other agencies such as health, education and housing. The assessment process, however, of potential private fostering arrangements does take into account the child's religious, linguistic and cultural needs.

Each young person has an individual file, however, private foster carers do not have a separate file and consequently, confidential information about private foster carers is kept on the young person's file. This could result in a breach of confidentiality.

Monitoring of private fostering arrangements is not currently being carried out. The authority plan to conduct file audits which will be the responsibility of the Audit, Planning and Review Manager. This, in conjunction with the private fostering working group, will provide monitoring required under the Private Fostering Arrangements Regulations to ensure that appropriate procedures have been followed regarding frequency of visits, decisions in relation to requirements, prohibitions, disqualifications and appeals. It is planned that the Service Manager (Safeguarding and Looked After Children) will report directly to the Safeguarding Board.

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):

- visit any young person who is privately fostered and undertake an assessment of the suitability of arrangements within prescribed timescales (NMS 3.3)
- ensure support visits to children and young people are undertaken within required timescales (NMS 6.1)
- promote the awareness and provide current information regarding private fostering within the general public and those who come into contact with children (NMS 2.2.3)
- ensure the publicity materials are available in an appropriate range of languages and formats, which are accessible to different groups of private foster carers, parents and communities (2.2.2)
- undertake appropriate checks in respect of private foster carers to determine suitability in a timely fashion (NMS 3.2.6)
- provide private foster carers with information regarding what support they can expect to receive and ensure these are in different languages and formats as appropriate (NMS 4.3)
- provide young people with information, in formats appropriate to their age and level of understanding, regarding private fostering and their right to be safeguarded (NMS 6.2)
- ensure notifications include all information required in Schedule 1 (NMS 2)

- ensure social workers are trained as to their roles and responsibilities with regard to private fostering (NMS 1.2)
- ensure that all staff are aware of the service's Statement of Purpose, including their duties in relation to private fostering and the ways in which they will be carried out (NMS 1.2)
- include in the Statement of Purpose information the role of other agencies in assisting the local authority to carry out its duty in particular through notifying the authority of an arrangement where they are not satisfied that the local authority have been, or will be notified of that arrangement (NMS 1.2)
- maintain separate files for children and private foster carers (NMS 7.2)
- present a report to the Director of Children's Services, which includes an evaluation of the outcomes of the work undertaken (NMS 7.9)
- prepare an annual report for the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board on how the authority 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 (NMS 7.10).