



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

LOCAL COUNCIL PRIVATE FOSTERING ARRANGEMENTS

Local Authority Private Fostering Arrangement

**Children & Young People's Directorate
Eastgate House
121-131 Eastgate Street
Gloucester
Glos
GL1 1PX**

Lead Inspector
Diana Waters

Announced Inspection
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The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess local authority private fostering arrangements against the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering. These standards can be found at www.dfes.gov.uk. The NMS specify a minimum standard for local authority practice in the fulfilment of their duties and functions in relation to private fostering under the Children Act 1989. Along with the new measures in section 44 of the Children Act 2004 and the 2005 regulations, they are intended to better focus local authorities' attention on private fostering, in part by requiring them to take a more proactive approach to identifying arrangements in their area.

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life.

Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above. The Private Fostering National Minimum Standards are mapped to just two of these outcomes, Staying Safe and Management.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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Local Authority INFORMATION

Name of Local Authority	Local Authority Private Fostering Arrangement
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Local Authority Web address	www.gloucestershire.gov.uk

SUMMARY

Gloucestershire County Council

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

This is the first inspection of the Private Fostering Service in Gloucestershire. At the time of completing the pre inspection paperwork in May 2006, there were 25 private foster carers with 28 children in placement. It was reported that from Jan –July 2006, 38 private fostering referrals were taken, these referrals ranged from babies to older teenagers.

The inspection of the private fostering service took place in July 2006 at the same time as the local authority fostering and adoption inspection. The inspector interviewed the Private Fostering Coordinator, the Private Fostering Social Worker, vice chair of the Foster Care Panel and other local authority workers. The Inspector attended Foster Care Panel and examined reports and files relating to privately fostered children and carers. The Inspector interviewed carers, children, parents and a grandparent.

7 carers, 8 young people and 10 professionals (allocated workers) completed CSCI questionnaires.

What the local authority does well:

Gloucestershire have for many years received notifications about private fostering arrangements. Private fostering advice is readily available from the service.

Since 1998 County Council employees have been invited to private fostering awareness seminars. New social workers are informed about private fostering during their induction.

The expertise and knowledge of the Private Fostering Coordinator is recognised and has been used to inform and train other professionals, both locally and nationally.

Customer Service Officers have been trained and work effectively in determining private fostering arrangements at the first point of contact with the Children and Young People Directorate and make appropriate referrals to the private fostering section.

Links with language schools and other providers where young people may become privately fostered have been effectively developed.

Assessment reports on private foster carers are presented to Foster Care Panel.

The service has systems in place to monitor the performance of the private fostering service.

What has improved since the last inspection?

This is not applicable as this is the first inspection of Gloucestershire private fostering service.

What they could do better:

Early clarity is required for carers regarding the financial arrangements for privately fostered children, especially in arrangements where the local authority have assisted/intervened or where children have made their own arrangements. Where either the duration of the placement or financial arrangements to support it are unclear at the outset, social workers should seek to clarify these matters during subsequent visits.

Visits to both carers and young people should adhere to the time scales as set out in Regulations 7 and 8 and guidance issued by Gloucestershire County Council (GCC). Carers and young people should be provided with the contact details of the ongoing social worker who will be visiting them while they are privately fostered and whom they can contact if they have concerns about their care or wish to request a visit.

Parents should be consulted within 7 working days of notification of a private fostering arrangement.

Decisions about the suitability of the placement should be made within the required timescales as defined by GCC policies, procedures and framework for the assessment of children in need and their families 2000. If Foster Care Panel is to be used to scrutinise private fostering reports, then sufficient panel time should be available to facilitate this and its members should be made fully aware of the private fostering National Minimum Standards and regulations.

Systems should be developed to monitor Regulation 8 visits to private fostering placements and reports on these visits must clearly include whether privately fostered children have been seen alone.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Staying Safe

Management

Staying Safe

The intended outcome for these Standards are:

(NMS 2) The local authority is notified about privately fostered children living in its area.

(NMS 3) The welfare of privately fostered children is safeguarded and promoted

(NMS 4) 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 5) The local authority provides advice and support to the parents of children who are privately fostered within their area as appears to the authority to be needed.

(NMS 6) 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.

The Commission considers that all these Standards should be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for the following Standard(s):

2, 3, 4, 5 and 6

Quality in this outcome area is judged to be adequate.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The Private Fostering Coordinator confirms he is notified about private fostering arrangements by a variety of agencies. Within Gloucestershire, there is a proactive approach to promoting awareness of private fostering, other professionals have verified this.

Private Fostering Seminars have been run since 1998 and social work staff receive private fostering awareness at their induction. The private fostering coordinator has also been proactive in liaising with foreign language schools

and faith communities to raise their awareness of private fostering. Leaflets about private fostering are available in four other languages in addition to English.

Customer Service Officers work effectively in determining private fostering arrangements and make appropriate referrals, other referrals are made direct to the Private Fostering Co-ordinator, i.e. health visitors, education welfare officers, foreign language schools.

Records showed that visits after notification of a proposal to foster a child privately or upon receipt of a notification where a person is already fostering a child privately are not always made within the required 7 working days. The service had identified these gaps and had put in place an improvement plan; it continues to monitor performance in this area.

The service anticipate there are many more children in the community who are privately fostered, the Private Fostering Coordinator identifies the on going awareness campaign as needing further work.

Notifications of private fostering placements were reported to be coming in retrospectively and the local authority has welcomed these and acted appropriately.

The private fostering assessment report, written by the Private Fostering Coordinator or private fostering worker is submitted to Foster Care Panel, the assessment covers the points raised in Standard 3.2. The quality of reports varied. It was reported that gaining space on the Foster Care Panel agenda often incurred a time delay due to competing demands. As a result, in some cases there was a delay in confirming a private foster carers suitability and acceptance of the arrangements. Such delays were not helpful to workers, carers or young people.

It should be noted that private fostering assessment reports could be signed off at a managerial level without prior consideration by Foster Panel. Whilst this additional safeguard is recognised as good practice it is important to ensure that panel members are made fully aware of the Private Fostering National Minimum Standards and Regulations.

Initial assessment reports confirmed the likely duration of a placement and the financial arrangements where these matters had been agreed. However, in some of the cases where it had not been possible to confirm these matters during the assessment, these outstanding issues had not been resolved through ongoing contact with the private foster carers or child's parent. A number of carers confirmed that they were concerned that the duration of the placement and financial arrangements had not been clarified.

Carers reported workers discussing finance with them but in most cases this was limited to sorting out child benefit and reinforcing parental responsibility for the child, in some cases the circumstances around the admission to private foster care were not conducive to amicable discussion between carer and parent.

Carers' comments include:

- "I think those who privately foster should get some sort of help to care for the child when parents do not contribute to the Child's welfare."
- "A clothing grant would have helped as the child had little clothing" and "some regular financial help, we were 10 weeks without child benefit and that is only £ 11.70."
- "It is not clear that the child support agency understands private fostering, they obviously thought that fostering meant we were supported by the local authority!"
- "A bus pass to enable the young person to remain at a previous school would be really helpful, currently costing £40 a week, it is essential at this young person's stage of education to remain at that school"
- "The only thing we were not aware of was the finance as other than Child Benefit, we are getting no assistance from anyone"
- "I have been caring for this child without any help, Child Benefit may be several weeks in being sorted"

From the evidence seen some young people often had to depend on the private foster carer's own resources.

Advice was given to private foster carers by the Private Fostering Coordinator, the Private Fostering Worker and field social workers. The responses from carers regarding this advice varied. Frequently carers reported this was their first encounter with social workers and therefore they were not familiar with systems and did not know what to expect.

Quotes from carers included:

- "We would have liked more contact at the start as we felt we had been left."
- "The social workers were numerous and were slow to do anything constructive for the young person and we were left for long periods without hearing from anyone. It was difficult having to explain to different duty workers the scenario each time we made an enquiry."
- "I feel more advice could have been given! We waited 6 weeks for a Children in Need social worker to be assigned to the young person."
- "The social worker was very supportive."
- "Information about the child's immigration status would be helpful."
- "They helped with schooling and tried to sort out housing."
- "The social worker was wonderful, always quick to respond and tried hard to ensure support was in place."

Whilst all carers had contact details for the Private Fostering Co-ordinator, some reported that they did not have contact details for the officer with responsibility for Regulation 8 visits. Records showed, and carers confirmed, that in some cases visits to private fostering placements were not made at the required frequency. This problem appeared to be exacerbated where there had been changes of allocated worker.

Parents verified they have received advice from social workers, some children were on planned return home and these parents had frequent contact with the local authority workers. Parents spoken to by the Inspector had been happy with the contact with social workers.

Some children confirmed they have been enabled to participate in decisions about their lives, they had proactively sought out the carers with whom they now live and the carers and social workers had involved and consulted them. Others felt their wishes were overridden, for one child all the moves meant another change of school and the child was upset about the resulting disruption to both education and friendships.

Young people's comments when asked "Do you feel well cared for in your private foster home" included:

- "I feel safe."
- "I am treated fairly and not spoilt."
- "I am well fed, looked after and regularly checked whether I am happy."
- "I just get looked after well."

At the time of inspection, all except three young people privately fostered had been allocated a worker. Designated workers were field social workers, family support workers or students overseen by social workers. Carers and young people reported they were somewhat confused and frequently frustrated with the changes of personnel working with them. They had no clear understanding of the various social worker roles, i.e. Private Fostering Worker/Coordinator, access workers, Children in Need workers and Looked after Children workers. Their frustration lay in having to explain the same scenario several times to different people and once they had established a working relationship, the worker changed and sometimes they were passed from team to team and from area to area.

At the time of the inspection, a leaflet had been produced for older young people in private foster care, young people had been consulted about these leaflets but they were still to be approved before being circulated. One young person had requested to attend Panel to present her views on her placement in person but Panel had declined this request.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- (NMS 1) Relevant staff are aware of local authority duties and functions in relation to private fostering.
- (NMS 7) The local authority monitors the way in which it discharges its duties and functions in relation to private fostering.

The Commission considers that all these standards should be inspected

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

1 and 7

Quality in this outcome area is judged to be good.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

It was clear from questionnaires and interviews that relevant staff in the authority are aware of the Local Authority's duties and functions in relation to reporting private fostering arrangements. The Private Fostering Coordinator's name was quoted on many occasions as the referral, contact and expertise reference point.

Private Fostering referrals are received from schools, language schools, health visitors and social services staff. Customer service officers have training and awareness of private fostering scenarios and confirm this statement. It was reported by the Private Fostering Coordinator that it is likely there is still underreporting of the numbers of children in private foster care.

The Private Fostering Coordinator has provided training over many years to other members of the County Council. His expertise has been sought to train and share his experience of private fostering with other professionals. Clearly this training has proved helpful in promoting awareness of private fostering. It is the view of the Private Fostering Coordinator (and supported by the inspector) that this training should continue to be ongoing to maintain a high profile to both professionals and the public. The department have a published marketing and communications strategy.

The Private Fostering Co-ordinator has systems in place to monitor the department's compliance and adherence to National Minimum Standards. Using this information the Private Fostering Co-ordinator has begun to amend practice to ensure further compliance with the standards and regulations. It is noted that it is more difficult for the Private Fostering Co-ordinator to monitor ongoing visits to private foster carers and the children placed as this responsibility lies with the fieldwork teams.

Policies are in place relating to records held on private foster carers and privately fostered children. Strict adherence to these policies by all staff involved in private fostering was not found and practice was variable, i.e. there is a written record proforma of visits made to children, these were not seen on all files, and although recording evidenced visits have been made and children had been seen, there was no clear evidence of whether children had been seen alone.

Both the Private Fostering Coordinator and the Fostering Services Manager regularly review files held at supervision.

Recording by the Private Fostering Department include enquiries, complaints and private fostering returns, as well as the case recording on carers' files.

Optional

Being Healthy

JUDGEMENT –

This standard was not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

Enjoying and Achieving

JUDGEMENT –

This standard was not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

Making a Positive Contribution

JUDGEMENT –

This standard was not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

Achieving Economic Well Being

JUDGEMENT –

This standard was not inspected on this occasion.

EVIDENCE:

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion

"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

STAYING SAFE			MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>		<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	3		1	3
3	2		7	2
4	2			
5	3			
6	2			

Are there any outstanding recommendations from the last inspection? N/A

RECOMMENDATIONS		
These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Local Authority to consider carrying out.		
No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	PF2	Visits after notification of a proposal to foster a child privately, and visits upon receipt of a notification where a person is already fostering a child privately must take place within 7 working days.
2	PF3	If Foster Panel is to be used to scrutinise private fostering reports its members should be made fully aware of the Private Fostering National Minimum Standards and Regulations
3	PF3	Decisions about the suitability of the placement should be made within the required timescales as defined by GCC policies and procedures and the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families 2000. (Sufficient panel dates should be available to facilitate this).
4	PF6	Young people should be provided with the contact details of the social worker who will be visiting them while they are privately fostered and whom they can contact if they have concerns about their care or wish to request a visit
5	PF4	Ensure that all private foster carers are provided with contact details of the social worker who will be visiting them.
6	PF6	Ongoing welfare visits to children in placement should cover the matters set out in Schedule 3 (to include confirmation of the financial arrangements)
7	PF7	Systems should be developed to monitor Regulation 7 and 8 visits to private fostering placements and reports on these visits must include whether privately fostered children have been seen alone.
8	PF2	Further work is needed to promote awareness to the public and to encourage more reporting of private foster care arrangements by the community

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