

Essex Private Fostering Arrangements

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

Unique reference number	SC068560
Inspection date	10 March 2009
Inspector	Helen Norry / Hazel Hudson Green
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

Essex County Council has a designated team manager and two qualified social workers who are responsible for the private fostering arrangements.

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 will last for more than 28 days.

The data set provided by the authority prior to the inspection show there have been 26 private fostering arrangements notified to the authority that have begun during the last 12 months.

The breakdown in age range show the majority of these placements are young people aged 15 and 16.

Summary

This was the first inspection of Essex County Council's private fostering arrangements. It was an announced key inspection which concentrated on the progress made by the authority in implementing the national minimum standards for private fostering.

Written information provided by the service prior to the inspection was detailed and gave a number of good examples of the work they had already undertaken in promoting private fostering arrangements. The authority have a comprehensive statement of purpose that sets out the roles and responsibilities of the council in terms of the private fostering arrangements.

There has been a sustained and creative effort made by the authority to promote to a wide audience the need for notifying the council of any such arrangements. The authority have a single point of entry for notifications and a response is made within seven days by the social work team responsible for assessing and supporting private fostering arrangements.

Written assessments are based on the common assessment framework and address the needs of the young person in placement, the ability of the carers to meet those assessed needs and the dynamics of the family placement. Some signatures are missing from crucial documents and therefore the records are not an accurate reflection of the work being undertaken nor provide a historical record in the event of any concerns being raised at a later date. All assessments are taken to the fostering panel which offers an additional level of monitoring and scrutiny to safeguard young people in placement. Carers spoke very positively about the support they are given by social workers. There is a good level of management support in place with a clear structure of responsibility and accountability at all levels.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of Essex County Council 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 good.

Since the launch of the national minimum standards and private fostering regulations, Essex County Council has made a sustained effort to raise the awareness of the private fostering arrangements and the need to make a formal notification to the local authority where someone other than a parent or close relative is caring for a child under 16.

They are creative in the use of the media and have employed a professional communications consultant to support them in this area of work. They acknowledge it requires specialist skills to use the media effectively and to ensure the message gets across to as wide an audience as possible. Posters have been distributed to GP's surgeries and other health professionals, district councils, benefit offices and other prominent public organisation and community associations. The manager has been on the radio to promote the work and to raise awareness. Links are made with colleagues in education to help with the distribution of information in schools. Adverts appear regularly in local newspapers, they are visual and attractive and get the message across. They use the local intranet and internet effectively and have web links with the British Association of Fostering and Adoption (BAAF) website. The information is clear and helps the public and professionals to have an understanding of the regulations relating to private fostering and how to notify the local authority of a private fostering arrangement. The authority are planning to promote and raise awareness amongst other ethnic groups and intend to make contact with the Multi faith groups, a local mosque and a Vietnamese association and Afro Caribbean clubs.

Good clear information sheets have been developed to help parents and private foster carers to understand their respective responsibilities in terms of both notifying and placements arrangements. Young people are given a copy of the BAAF information leaflet.

The team have raised the awareness of private fostering arrangements with the Essex Asylum seeking team and have worked closely with the unaccompanied / trafficked children's working groups to ensure they are clear about the need to notify of any private arrangements they come across in the course of their work. Links have also been made with the Immigration children and young people teams at Stansted airport to ensure they are fully aware of the need to notify of such arrangements.

The authority have a single point of contact for all notifications and they use an 0800 number which is widely circulated to all professionals and members of the public. The authority respond to all notifications and visit within seven working days to begin the assessment of the carers and to assess the placement needs for the young person. All the statutory checks are undertaken and the authority are working hard to take up checks before placements begin when they are notified in advance of a placement. Carers are also asked to sign an anti-oppressive statement making a commitment to providing care within the terms of the diversity and equality framework. The assessment is based on the Common Assessment Framework looking at the needs of the child, the carers ability to meet those needs and keep a child safe and the family dynamics.

All assessments are taken to the fostering panel. It offers an additional level of scrutiny and further safeguards for the young people. Carers and the young people are encouraged to attend the panel to offer their views. Such practice ensures that placements are assessed and monitored from the very start of the department's involvement.

Carers spoke of 'good support' and 'brilliant social workers who involved the whole of the family'

Request for an 'out of hours emergency telephone number' were suggested particularly a contact number for weekend support'.

An annual household review is undertaken by an independent reviewing officer, another piece of practice that provides an additional level of independence and scrutiny of the placement which further safeguards young people. The files show young people are consulted and offer their views on the placement but it is not consistent throughout their placement history and therefore children are not routinely consulted.

The authority have a number of policies and procedures in place that provide the foundations for delivering a good service to young people in placement, carers and birth families.

The current population of privately fostered children is predominantly those who are adolescents estranged from their families and living away from home. The authority indicate there has been a significant increase in notifications as the private fostering arrangements are publicised widely across the county. Where placements are not considered suitable links are made with the area child protection teams for an additional assessment to be made and alternative resources considered.

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 agency has produced a detailed statement of purpose that accurately reflects the work they undertake. It clearly sets out its duties and functions in relation to private fostering arrangements. A report is submitted to the director of children's services and to the Local Children Safeguarding Board for approval.

The deputy leader of the council and corporate parenting panel attends the fostering panel twice a year to look at the work of the panel in safeguarding children. The scrutiny members panel also look at specific areas of the council's activity and the private fostering arrangements have been to this panel to ensure its work is monitored and evaluated at a higher level.

There are good training opportunities for internal staff, and they are developing a training programme for other local authority workers health and education professionals and for carers. The training module for foster carers on diversity has been improved to ensure there is a wider focus on equality and is available to all private foster carers. Where trans-racial private fostering arrangements have been identified specific work is undertaken to promote positive care by the carer and social work staff spoke of the importance of this area of work in recognising different cultural and ethnic needs.

Carers are able to access training and those interviewed spoke of being able to attend the Skills to Fostering course, a further area of good practice that supports carers in meeting the needs of children in their care.

Staff are supported in accessing training opportunities, one member of the team attends a bi-monthly meeting with BAAF. It is a special interest group on private fostering arrangements, it is well attended by other local authorities and gives staff an overview of activity and good practice in other authorities. Essex have commissioned BAAF to undertake some training with the fostering panel about the specific issues that relate to private fostering arrangements including Parental Responsibility and Equality and Diversity. The team are looking to develop a training module on how teenagers handle bereavement.

The team develop good working relationships and protocols for working with a local language school who provide student exchange visits and whose activities come under the remit of the private fostering arrangements. The social workers make contact with the families and visit the school to meet the students and to explain the purpose of the legislation and their roles and responsibilities in managing the private fostering arrangements for the local authority. This has demonstrated effective inter-agency working relationships in raising the profile of the arrangements' and protecting and safeguarding young people.

Each young person and carers have their own personal file, these are detailed and comprehensive however there are some anomalies with signatures missing from crucial documents which impacts on the accuracy of providing a historical record in the event of any concerns being raised at a later date.

The assessments are not always clear on the financial arrangements made between the birth family and the carer. Where a financial need has been identified within a private fostering arrangement the social workers approach area based social work staff and use Section 17 money to meet the identified need. The process delays providing immediate financial support for placements. Carers spoke of this as being a difficult and challenging area when caring for a young person with no additional financial support from either birth families or the council for such things as school uniforms or equipment.

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):

- evidence that agreements are in place between parents and private carers in relation to finance (NMS 3.2.5)
- provide evidence that they ascertain the wishes and feelings of the young person throughout the duration of the placement (NMS 3.2.2)