

Derbyshire County Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Janet Manders
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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.

Derbyshire County Council has appointed the Planning & Project Manager to act as the authority's nominated person for private fostering. Assessments of the suitability of private fostering arrangements and the support provided to young people, their parents and carers is provided by district social workers. Decisions regarding the suitability of private fostering arrangements are made by the worker's service manager.

The inspector was informed of 13 private fostering arrangements that the authority is aware of in its area.

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.

The authority has undertaken awareness raising of private fostering arrangements within the local community, but staff within the authority feel that they have not received sufficient information in respect of private fostering arrangements to enable them to be effective in their work, this has resulted in inconsistent practice. The authority relies on district staff to undertake suitability assessments of private fostering arrangements and the same worker provides on-going support to the young person, the carers and the young person's parents. This has the potential of causing a conflict of interest for the worker.

There have been delays in undertaking suitability assessments; however, these have not been identified by the authority's monitoring. The authority has recently implemented a new computer system, which will strengthen the monitoring of private fostering arrangements. This will further protect young people.

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 Derbyshire County Council's Private Fostering Arrangements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for private fostering arrangements under this outcome.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The authority provides satisfactory support to young people who are privately fostered, their carers and parents so that young people are kept safe. The authority has undertaken a considerable amount of awareness raising with other agencies within the county and has produced an informative leaflet for the local community, which provides information regarding private fostering arrangements. This information has been widely distributed within the community; however, it does not include information regarding what the consequences are of not notifying the authority, nor is it available in different languages or formats. This has the potential of placements not being appropriately notified to the authority, thus suitability assessments are not undertaken. This could result in young people being placed or remaining in placements that are not suitable.

District social workers undertake assessments of the suitability of private fostering arrangements, which are notified to the authority. The assessments take into consideration the views of the parents, carers and young people concerned. Where it is felt that arrangements are not suitable, the authority takes appropriate action to safeguard young people. However, not all assessments have been undertaken in a timely fashion, with considerable delays in obtaining Criminal Record Bureau checks in relation to private foster carers and members of their households. This has been exacerbated by a lack of clarity regarding teenagers who are living with friends but without parents' approval. This has resulted in young people staying with carers for a considerable length of time before any assessment of the suitability of the arrangement has been undertaken. Such delays could potentially result in young people being left in unsafe situations. The department has made improvements in their processes to try to address this shortfalls and it was reassuring that the young people visited by the inspector felt that their needs were being met by their carers.

The suitability of private fostering arrangements are signed off by a service manager; however, this has not been undertaken in a timely fashion and it was not always clear when a suitability decision had been made.

Social workers provide support to the carers, young people and their parents. The support provided is inconsistent, in that one carer stated that the support provided was excellent. Another carer stated that they rarely saw the social worker, as the worker was only interested in seeing the young person. Arrangements where one social worker provides support to all parties could result in a conflict of interest or one party not receiving the appropriate support.

Young people are provided with good support from social workers. Regular visits are undertaken by the allocated worker and young people are provided with written information, this includes who to contact if they have any concerns regarding their care or the support they have received. Young people who are privately fostered have regular reviews undertaken by an Independent Reviewing Officer. Young people are encouraged to attend reviews and to express their views. This excellent practice ensures that consideration is given to whether the placement remains suitable and allows the young person to be involved in the planning of the care and support they receive.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for private fostering arrangements under this outcome.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for private fostering arrangements under this outcome.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for private fostering arrangements under this outcome.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The organisation of private fostering arrangements within Derbyshire is satisfactory. However, the low numbers of arrangements notified to the authority has resulted in a lack of understanding of private fostering arrangements within some district team. This has resulted in inconsistencies of service, which have not been identified through the authority's monitoring procedures.

The authority has developed a 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 of Purpose is an informative document and contains useful examples of types of private fostering arrangements, but does not indicate that the parent of a friend of the young person could be a private foster carer; even though this is the main category in which private fostering arrangements fall within the authority. It also does not include the responsibility of other agencies to notify the authority if they feel that a parent or carer will not notify the authority or the training available to private foster carers. This has the potential of not all private fostering arrangements being identified and notified to the local authority.

The authority has developed policies and procedures for staff to follow when they become aware of a private fostering arrangement. These are supported by the authority's new computer system, which indicates what tasks are required when someone is undertaking work in relation to a private fostering arrangement. This will assist in ensuring that young people in private fostering arrangements are protected, as staff will be clear about what tasks need undertaking to consider whether a placement is suitable. However, staff felt that they had not received sufficient detailed training in relation to private fostering arrangements for them to feel confident about the actions they need to take. This potentially results in appropriate procedures not being followed.

The authority has in place systems to monitor its practice in respect of private fostering arrangements; however, systems have not identified shortfalls in practice or ensured that tasks are completed within required timescales.

Both the Director of Children's Services and the Local Safeguarding Children Board receive an annual report evaluating the work undertaken in relation to privately fostered children and whether the welfare of privately fostered children is satisfactorily safeguarded and promoted, including how the service co-operates with other agencies.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Social workers are aware of the need to promote equality and encourage carers to value diversity. This is demonstrated in all their work with young people, carers and parents. Workers ensure that private fostering arrangements for young people are suitable to meet the young person's racial, ethnic and cultural needs, in addition to any other needs identified as part of the Core Assessment. However, a lack of publicity material in different formats and languages has the potential of discriminating against certain sections of the community. The authority states that as they have only a very low number of people from different backgrounds they do not publish information in different languages but will do if requested.

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):

- make available information regarding private fostering arrangements in different formats and languages (NMS 2.2.2)
- amend publicity information to include the consequences of not notifying a private fostering arrangement to the local authority (NMS 2.2.1)
- visit any young person who is privately fostered and undertake an assessment of the suitability of arrangements within prescribed timescales (NMS 2.3.1)
- undertake appropriate checks in respect of private foster carers in a timely fashion (NMS 3.2.6)
- ensure that there are effective and timely procedures in place to enable decisions about the overall suitability of arrangements to be made within required timescales, and signed-off at managerial level and that this is clearly recorded (NMS 3.4)
- amend the Statement of Purpose to include all relevant information as required by the National Minimum Standards and include as an example the situation where a young person is living with the parent of a friend (NMS 1.2)
- ensure that all staff receive training in respect of private fostering arrangements and that information is included in all induction programmes (NMS 1)

- implement an effective system for monitoring the way in which the authority discharges its duties and functions in relation to private fostering, so that it improves practice where this is indicated as necessary by the monitoring system. (NMS 7.1)