

Darlington Borough Private fostering Arrangements

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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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

The responsibility for identifying, responding to and monitoring private fostering arrangements in Darlington Borough Council lies within the authority's Children's Services Department. The authority works to raise awareness of private fostering and to promote and respond to notifications of private fostering arrangements to ensure that children's welfare is safeguarded. The authority's arrangements are managed by the Children's Commissioning Manager. At the time the inspection was undertaken the authority was aware of one existing private fostering arrangement.

Summary

This was the first inspection of Darlington Borough Council's procedures and practice to identify, respond to and monitor private fostering arrangements. This was an announced inspection. Its purpose was to assess how the authority complies with the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering all of which relate to the 'staying safe' and 'organisation' outcome areas. The authority works well to raise public awareness of private fostering and the need to notify the authority of any planned or existing arrangements. It is good at providing staff with training and working with partner agencies to ensure that they are alert to any private fostering arrangements they encounter and notify these to the authority. The authority has not implemented its policies and procedures effectively and work done in relation to private fostering has not been robust enough to promote children's wellbeing and protect them from potential harm. The authority's quality monitoring and assurance systems have failed to identify and address the weak practice in relation to private fostering. Consequently children have not been adequately protected.

The overall quality rating is inadequate.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This was the first inspection of Darlington Borough Council's arrangements for private fostering.

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.

The authority works well to inform the general public about private fostering and the need to notify the authority of any arrangements. A well presented leaflet is available and translations and accessible versions of this are available. Leaflets and posters are displayed in libraries, doctors' surgeries and council offices. Information is easily accessible on the council's web site. The authority have placed advertisements in its magazine which is delivered free to all households. Information about private fostering is contained in parenting booklets available to all families. The authority also took part in a regionally arranged advertising campaign. The authority works effectively to raise the awareness of private fostering within professionals from the wider multi-disciplinary team. It provides very regular safeguarding training that includes information about private fostering to a very wide range of professionals. The authority provides all employees with corporate induction that includes information about private fostering. It

delivers training and awareness raising activities in such a way as to ensure they reach as many professionals as possible. This awareness raising has been effective in producing private fostering enquiries or referrals from other professionals and council staff. For example, housing support workers and educational welfare officers have recently made referrals although these turned out, on investigation, not to be private fostering arrangements. The authority has a policy and procedure that sets out how it will respond to notifications. However, this procedure is not followed well enough to ensure that children's welfare is fully safeguarded. In the one private fostering situation of which the authority was aware there were a number of significant failings. The situation had been notified by a professional person but the authority had not sought a subsequent notification from the young person's parent or private foster carer. This meant that some basic information about the foster carer needed to enable suitability checks to be carried out was not available to the authority. A delay of three months took place when the case was transferred between social work teams. This delayed any further assessment of the placement and carer taking place. Additionally, the frequency of subsequent visits to the private fostering placement was significantly less than that prescribed by regulations. The weaknesses in the way this case was managed potentially placed the privately fostered child's wellbeing at significant risk. The authority has taken effective steps to safeguard a child in one situation which the authority did not deem to be suitable. A procedure for making requirements or prohibiting an arrangement is in place although such action has not occurred yet. Darlington Borough Council's procedure sets out how it will assess and determine the suitability of private fostering arrangements. However, this procedure was not followed in the case of the one private fostering arrangement that the authority was aware of at the time of this inspection. The record of the initial visit did not contain all the information required by the regulations. For example, there was no evidence that the child has been seen alone or the person with parental responsibility spoken to. The assessment did not ascertain the child's wishes, the expected duration of the placement or the financial arrangements in place to ensure the child was supported. Additionally, the private foster carer's suitability and capacity to care for the child was not assessed sufficiently thoroughly. As such the authority had not done enough to ensure the child's welfare was safeguarded and promoted. The authority's plan for private fostering sets out how support will be provided to privately fostered children, their parents and private foster carers. Satisfactory support is provided for any private fostering situations that the authority is aware of. For example, one social worker provided a child and private foster carer with good support relating to education and work was evidence to support the child's family.

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.

The authority has a statement in place which sets out its duties and responsibilities in relation to private fostering. The statement contains the majority of the information required. However, it does not identify what training is available to private foster carers, the expert within the

authority that social workers can go to for advice about private fostering or the role of other agencies in regard to private fostering and how the authority will work with these agencies. The authority’s step by step procedural guidance is generally clear and helpful and supports the private fostering statement. However, this guidance is not sufficiently clear about how the final decision about suitability of an arrangement will be made. It also does not set out how a private fostering arrangement identified through existing casework should be managed. The authority makes staff members aware of its statement and its duties in relation to private fostering and staff understand their roles and responsibilities. The authority provides staff members with written information about private fostering and good training is provided. Safeguarding training provided to all children’s service staff and partner agencies covers private fostering. Social work staff cover private fostering within their induction and all council staff touch on the issue within the authority’s corporate induction. Supervision and team meetings provide a forum for further training and information for social workers. The authority is in the process of implementing the Integrated Children’s System (ICS) of electronic record keeping. This was not in place in relation to private fostering when the inspection was undertaken but is planned to be ready for any future private fostering arrangements identified. Records of private fostering arrangements do not cover all the required matters sufficiently well. They do not show that the work necessary to protect children has been carried out well enough. Full reports of assessment and monitoring visits are not retained, although ICS documents are available for these records in future. Decisions about the suitability of arrangements are not recorded on files. The authority’s system for quality assuring the work it carries out and the recording of this work is not effective. It does not ensure that practice complies with the national minimum standards and regulations. This is a very significant failure as monitoring systems have failed to identify weaknesses in practice that potentially left a child at risk of harm. The authority has a system in place to investigate any concerns raised. Managers are alerted to any newly-identified private fostering arrangement. It produces appropriate management and statistical information for the director of children’s services and the safeguarding board and provides the Department for Children, Schools and Families with the necessary statistical information.

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):

- ensure that notifications of private fostering arrangements are made, by the parties concerned, that include all the information required to allow suitability checks to take place (NMS 2)
- ensure that visits to private fostering arrangements take place with at least the frequency set out in the regulations (NMS 2)

- ensure that the internal transfer of cases does not delay the process of assessment and the checking of suitability of private fostering arrangements (NMS 2)
- ensure that the initial assessment of private fostering arrangements cover all matters identified in the regulations (NMS 2)
- ensure that, unless it is inappropriate, children in private fostering arrangements are seen alone at all subsequent visits to the placement and that full reports covering the matters set out in regulations are produced (NMS 3)
- ensure that all checks on the suitability of private fostering arrangements set out in the authority's procedures are carried out (NMS 3)
- ensure that records of decisions about the suitability of private fostering arrangements are retained (NMS 3)
- ensure the private fostering plan contains all the elements required and that additional guidance is clear and unambiguous (NMS 1)
- ensure that the systems for quality assuring private fostering work and records effectively ensures the quality of work done and its compliance with the national minimum standards and regulations (NMS 7).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for private fostering arrangements

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the local authority is notified about privately fostered children living in its area (NMS 2)
- the welfare of privately fostered children is safeguarded and promoted. (NMS 3)
- 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 4)
- the local authority identifies and provides advice and support to the parents of children who are privately fostered within their area (NMS 5)
- 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 (NMS 6).

Ofsted considers 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

Ofsted considers 1 and 7 the key standards to be inspected.