

West Sussex LA Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Valerie Packham
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

West Sussex County Council has a private fostering service to undertake statutory duties and functions with regard to safeguarding children and young people who are privately fostered. Apart from the initial assessments of children and young people, the operational private fostering work is carried out by a specialist social worker. The private fostering social worker is supervised by a fostering team manager, with the service manager for fostering overseeing the work. At the time of the inspection there were 12 notified private fostering arrangements in place. The service raises awareness of the requirement to notify on an ongoing basis across the county. All children and young people in the notified arrangements have the private fostering social worker as their allocated worker.

Summary

This is the first inspection of West Sussex County Council's private fostering arrangements against the Children (Private Arrangements For Fostering) Regulations 2005 and the accompanying National Minimum Standards. This inspection was an announced key inspection, with the outcomes of Staying Safe and Organisation assessed in order to focus on the ability of the service to keep children and young people safe and on the overall management of the service. The outcomes Being Healthy, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Economic Wellbeing were not assessed. Serious gaps have been identified in some aspects of the private fostering service. In particular, the safeguarding of children and young people has been compromised due to the service being unable to evidence that for a substantial amount of time social work visits have taken place. There are a number of areas in which the organisation of the service and delivery of the practice are satisfactory. All staff involved in the service are qualified and experienced social workers. The service has links with other agencies, ensuring that privately fostered children are able to access appropriate education and health services. West Sussex County Council has an ongoing publicity campaign for promoting the awareness of private fostering in the county. Staff members have been provided with information and training. Work has also taken place with partner agencies to ensure other professionals working with children are aware of their responsibilities to notify the council of any private fostering arrangements. The service is making the required reports about private fostering to the Children's Director and the Local Safeguarding Children Board. A Policy, Procedures and Guidance document is in place, which is also on the website.

The overall quality rating is inadequate.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Not applicable: this is the first inspection

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 service has a dedicated specialist private fostering social worker, who is supervised by a fostering team manager. Both members of staff attend the British Association for Adoption

and Fostering (BAAF) special interest group meetings for private fostering. The service manager for fostering in West Sussex oversees all private fostering work. The private fostering service uses a range of publicity materials to raise awareness of the private fostering notification requirements within the county. The first awareness raising campaign began in 2005 and is ongoing. Awareness strategies have included a media campaign, an article in the Children's Trust Newsletter and articles in the West Sussex County Council Connections Newsletter which is delivered to all households. The West Sussex County Council website has the Policy, Procedures and Guidance on private fostering. It is a complex document which is not easily accessible and it is not a straightforward read for members of the public. All language schools in West Sussex have been contacted to raise awareness of private fostering. Leaflets are prominently displayed in the county's libraries. Posters and leaflets are distributed to key locations, such as council offices, health services, education establishments and libraries, on an ongoing basis. This year work has focused on further developing awareness within West Sussex County Council. Such work has included producing new guidance for frontline staff and a presentation to senior managers has taken place. The service has not yet raised awareness with some community groups and settings, such as faith groups, which could mean some private foster children are not being appropriately identified and adequately protected. The private fostering social worker has regular meetings with the Immigration Service at Gatwick airport to promote awareness of private fostering issues. West Sussex County Council has clear procedures which outline the process of assessing children by qualified social workers in each of the Integrated Service Delivery Areas (ISDAs). A core assessment is not routinely undertaken following notification; instead an initial assessment is completed. The initial assessment is not always being completed within the required seven days following notification and such delays leave children and young people vulnerable. The private fostering social worker receives the initial assessments from the ISDAs and then the suitability process of the private foster carers takes place. Formal health and safety checklists are not used during the assessment process. The final private fostering assessments and reports are brief and do not provide robust evidence, for example, that the parenting capacity of carers has been assessed. Suitability of carers includes checks with the Probation Service and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) as well as taking up written references. The whole process should ensure children live with private foster carers who are able to meet their needs. The team manager takes an overview of the completed report, with the service manager making the overall decision as to suitability. Decisions about the overall suitability of arrangements have not always been made within the required timescales. This is largely due to delays with CRB checks and the initial assessments taking longer than seven days to complete. The local authority has not yet been informed in advance of private fostering arrangements taking place. All notifications have been made once the children have already started living in private foster care. In December 2007, an independent audit revealed a serious performance issue with regards to file recording. This inspection also discovered that some records of statutory visits have not been completed during 2008. It is not possible therefore, to evidence that privately fostered children and young people have been visited according to the statutory timescales, over a long period of time during 2007 and some parts of 2008. The service is confident that the necessary visits have been completed. However, due to a lack of evidence, it is unknown whether the welfare of privately fostered children and young people in West Sussex has been consistently safeguarded. A new system flags up in advance when CRB checks are due for renewal and these are dealt with by the council's dedicated CRB team. However, the safety of privately fostered children and young people were previously put at risk by delays in renewing some private foster carers' CRB checks. Children and young people are provided with a BAAF booklet about private fostering with contact details for the private fostering social

worker inserted. Children and young people who wrote to Ofsted as part of this inspection confirmed they had received the BAAF booklet. Children and young people said they knew the private fostering social worker's telephone number, but they were unaware of how to make a complaint or who to contact should they have any concerns. Children and young people said they had met with the private fostering social worker on more than one occasion to talk about the arrangements for their care. The National Minimum Standards do not state that privately fostered children need to be provided with information on how to access an advocate unless they are assessed as being in need under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Privately fostered children and young people can be directed to advocacy services by the private fostering social worker. Financial arrangements are explored, with advice and support given as necessary by the private fostering social worker. Information can be provided in different languages and discussions can be supported by interpreters. The service encourages children and their private foster carers to maintain close links with family members. Private foster carers are given advice and support with practical arrangements to help maintain children in placement. Examples in the Policy, Procedures and Guidance include individual support by a social worker or other professional, a self help group, drop-in centres, training and accessing community resources. However, the full range of support as written into this Policy, such as a self help group and drop-in facilities, are not yet in place. The service does not routinely offer any training to private foster carers, but this is currently under review. The private fostering social worker is aware of the importance of parents providing full information about their children to the private foster carers. Any supplementary advice about children's needs arising from religious persuasion, racial origin, culture, linguistic background, education and health are given by the private fostering social worker. The service liaises with education and health services as necessary to support children and young people in private foster care to access services they need. The Policy, Procedures and Guidance states that an annual review should be undertaken, taking into account the suitability of the private foster carers and the children's needs. The Policy is not in line with practice, however, as reviews are not taking place. The local authority has clear procedures for dealing with situations where it is not satisfied that a child or young person's welfare is being, or will be, satisfactorily safeguarded or promoted by a private fostering arrangement. When arrangements have not been notified in accordance with the regulations, the local authority ensures the best interests of the child are met.

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 private fostering service has developed a Policy, Procedures and Guidance document, which sets out its duties and functions regarding private fostering and the ways in which those functions will be carried out. The legal definition of a privately fostered child is included, with only a few examples of arrangements listed. The document does not include the name of a person within the local authority with expertise in private fostering, whom social workers can

contact for advice. The name of the service manager who signs off decisions about the overall suitability of an arrangement is not written in the document. The local authority has a system for monitoring the way it discharges its duties and functions in relation to private fostering. As part of the monitoring process, the service manager ensures an independent file audit is carried out annually. Issues arising from the audits are reported to the Director of Children's Services and the West Sussex Local Safeguarding Children Board. A written report is produced each year, for consideration by the Director of Children's Services, which includes an evaluation of the outcomes of work in relation to privately fostered children and young people within its area. The local authority reports annually to the Local Safeguarding Children Board on how the welfare of privately fostered children is safeguarded and promoted, including how the local authority cooperates with other agencies. As noted in an earlier section of this Ofsted report, particularly serious issues were identified at the last file audit. The implementation of procedures including tighter monitoring and increased supervision are ways in which the local authority is trying to ensure these matters are being dealt with. This action is intended to improve practice in the interests of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of privately fostered children and young people. This inspection identified subsequent shortfalls which evidence the monitoring system introduced by the local authority is insufficient. Records are kept and monitored about the numbers of privately fostered children and private foster carers living in the county. Confidential records are kept on each private foster carer and each child. These include assessments, parental consent, health information, education details, reports about suitability and records of any visits made. Children are given the opportunity to contribute to assessments and to express their wishes and feelings about the private fostering arrangements. The local authority keeps records on all the arrangements and notifications. File recordings are clear as to whether children are seen alone and if not, then why not, as children are supposed to be seen alone to enable the free communication of wishes and feelings. Staff involved with the private fostering service are aware of the local authority's duties and functions in relation to private fostering and safeguarding children and young people. Other relevant professionals and local authority staff are provided with information and training about private fostering and how to make a referral. As part of the induction process of new staff, the service manager delivers training on private fostering.

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):

- include more examples of private fostering in the private fostering statement (NMS 1)
- provide young people in private foster care with information on who to contact should they have any concerns or complaints (NMS 6)

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- carry out annual reviews of the private fostering arrangements as per the local authority's policy and procedures (NMS 3)
 - continue to promote awareness of the notification requirements within West Sussex and consider ways of reaching diverse groups (NMS 2)
 - complete health and safety checks when undertaking private foster carers' assessments (NMS 3)
 - ensure that assessments and reports of the suitability of the private fostering arrangements are comprehensive (NMS 3)
 - include in the statement on private fostering the name of the person with private fostering expertise, whom social workers can contact for advice (NMS 1)
 - include in the statement on private fostering the name of the person who signs off decisions regarding the overall suitability of an arrangement (NMS 1)
 - ensure children and young people in private foster care are visited regularly by an officer of the authority in the first year of the private fostering arrangement, at intervals of not more than six weeks; and in any second or subsequent year, at intervals of not more than 12 weeks (NMS 3)
 - ensure an officer of the authority undertakes the required visit within seven working days of the initial notification being made (NMS 2)
 - ensure an officer of the authority makes a written report to the local authority after each visit carried out in accordance with regulation 8 (NMS 3)
 - review the private fostering information displayed on the website for accessibility and suitability (NMS 2)
 - review and revise the monitoring system and supervision system to ensure ways to improve social work practice are promptly identified and acted upon (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.