

Norfolk County Council Private Fostering Arrangements Service

Inspection report for private fostering arrangements

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Inspector	Steve Briggs
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Address	Norfolk County Council Social Services Department St. Withburga Lane DEREHAM Norfolk NR19 1DH
Telephone number	01362 694711
Email	
Registered person	Norfolk County Council - Fostering Services
Registered manager	Not Applicable
Responsible individual	Malcolm Griffiths
Date of last inspection	

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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

Norfolk County Council is the local social services and education authority. Within the Council, the Children's Services Department covers both education and social services for children and families, and Private Fostering arrangements are overseen as part of that Department's work. The Department is responsible for ensuring that duties on the Council for safeguarding children who are privately fostered are carried out, and awareness about those duties is raised. The function of the service is to ensure that private fostering arrangements for children cared for are notified, assessed, and monitored.

Summary

This is the first inspection of the way Norfolk County Council undertakes duties under the Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005, and accompanying National Minimum Standards. Under the Standards, two outcomes are inspected, Staying Safe, and Organisation. Norfolk County Council is good at visiting, supporting, and listening to privately fostered children and their carers, but inadequate in letting people know they should be notifying these arrangements, and making sure the carers are properly checked in good time. Norfolk carries out these responsibilities working together with the Local Children's Safeguarding Board and other professionals. It monitors how it complies with Regulations, reporting each year on how well it is doing. Norfolk County Council has some recent written procedures that meet regulations. But does not yet have a plan or inter-agency protocol to safeguard privately fostered children who may be out of the sight of caring agencies, and although a few children are privately fostered, there is no track record to monitor, which is inadequate.

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

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards in this Outcome group

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

The Council has to raise public and professional awareness of the Regulations and Standards concerning private fostering arrangements across the county. With some exceptions, a person making an arrangement for a child to live with another adult or adults for more than 28 days has to notify the County Council, and anyone else who is involved in the arrangement must also notify if this is not done by the child's carer or parent. The Council must ensure it knows if children are being looked after by adults in these circumstances who are not close family members. Children are not fully safeguarded by the County Council programme of communication activities about private fostering, including for the public, local authority staff and other agencies. Because of an internal reorganisation, the County Council programme of communication about private fostering has only just started. They have had a duty to raise

awareness since 2005. This means children may not have been safeguarded as intended, because there is limited awareness of the regulations. There are approximately 190,000 children in Norfolk. There are six children currently known in private fostering settings. The Council has not been clear enough about the definition of these arrangements, and has until recently treated some children as being in a different scheme without the same legal safeguards and timely assessments and checks on carers. The welfare of privately fostered children may be compromised if carers are not assessed and appropriately checked to be safe and suitable. There is good evidence of a child centred approach to the private fostering arrangements that are known about. The children and carers are regularly visited and supported by social workers and other professionals. The children and their carers do not always have settled lives, but the Council is working to ensure that where possible contact is maintained with the child's family, the child has support for religious and cultural needs, and they and their carer can access all necessary services. The children can express their views. The carers are satisfied this is possible and with the support they mutually get. There is evidence of intensive work to achieve this result, including support to education and health needs of the children. There is recent publicity to raise awareness about the need to notify private fostering arrangements in November 2007 to all households, via `Your Norfolk` magazine. There is a County Council public free-phone telephone number advertised in `Your Norfolk`, that gives swift and accurate information about private fostering if a person contacts them. Local public libraries are helpful as a member of the public would wish, and give correct information. The Children's Services Department is ensuring that it has a single process for responding to notifications once contact is made with its officers. This is through a procedure document dated November 2007. The free-phone number is accessible on the County Council website, on a web page that is reached through its Adoption and Fostering Service pages. But the two types of fostering are not very similar so it may require some prior knowledge for a person to make the true link on their own. This web-page is available through an `All Norfolk` search facility on District Council websites, but not directly on the local councils` web-pages. There is no link to the County Council through two of the largest Health Trusts websites, and it is not possible to find out about private fostering in this way. The publicity does not provide enough targeted and current information to those who may come into contact with privately fostered children, including teachers, health visitors, nurses, doctors, housing officers and community workers, to tell them about their role in assisting the local authority to carry out its duty. Information regarding private fostering is not accessible throughout the county, for example in health centres or schools there is a lack of awareness of what it is and means. In addition the wording on the County Council's website page may give professionals the impression that if they become involved in a private fostering arrangement or know of them, it is optional to ensure the arrangements are notified. Therefore safeguarding of children who may be in private fostering, but who are not officially known, may not be arranged. County Council publicity materials are available in other languages, but the website page on private fostering does not say this, nor do the link pages to reach it. There are 101 languages spoken in Norfolk, but no minority community constitutes even one per cent of the total population of nearly a million people. There has been a growth in immigration from the European Community which is stretching local services` communication and care processes. There is no data set that predicts how many children may be privately fostered now or in the future. Targeting communities or types of people who might make arrangements and not know they should be notified, is complicated. Officers of the Council think arrangements might be made by people whose culture would not see the need to notify as significant, or where children might be very vulnerable due to trafficking. There are plans to cover settings such as language schools as part of a targeting process to ensure potentially vulnerable children are safeguarded.

A voluntary community group is assisting with developing contacts with one migrant community in part of the county, but this is not comprehensive. Insufficient work is done to ensure that information about private fostering is accessible to carers and others in minority communities.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards in this Outcome group

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards in this Outcome group

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards in this Outcome group

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

The National Minimum Standards say that as part of relevant staff being aware of the local authority's duties and functions in relation to private fostering, it has a written statement or plan which sets out how it goes about dealing with those responsibilities. There is no such plan or statement in Norfolk. There is no Member policy nor inter-agency protocol at Chief Officer level that drives a common and properly resourced approach to make sure that relevant staff are aware, and if necessary trained to respond, and that vulnerable children are not missed between agencies and departments. Children being privately fostered in un-notified arrangements are not safeguarded unless any professional coming into contact with them knows what to do about it and helps to take the right steps. Two levels of awareness and training are identified by officers of the Council as needed. Firstly, the staff in the Children's Services Department who may carry out assessments and make decisions about suitability of arrangements and carers. The steps to achieve this are completed. Secondly, all other professionals in Norfolk coming into contact with children and families. The steps and resources to achieve this second level are not fully apparent. There is a Children's Services Action Plan that refers to future intentions, and planning links with local partners are in hand, but as there is no overall County or Interagency Plan it is not clear how this is being resourced, and whether awareness can be raised enough to safeguard any privately fostered child. There is a procedure in Children's Services dated November 2007 that meets the requirements of legally defining private fostering; stating who internally to ask for advice about it; specifying when visits and assessments should be made; what those visits must cover; how they are recorded and reviewed and who makes decisions about suitability; how children and carers should be supported, and any conditions or prohibitions that may be made. None of the latter are necessary to date and there are no privately fostered children on the child protection register. The records that are kept of current privately fostered children show the historical confusion in definition of what the arrangement really is and consequently have a lack of clarity about the level of checks on the carers that should be applied, leading to an inadequate process. One assessment does not begin promptly upon notification, and once started takes several months to complete. Although the children and carers are frequently visited and well supported from the beginning, the length of time taken for the approval of the arrangement is unsatisfactory. There are regular contacts

by social workers, recording at times as if a child is seen on their own, showing evidence of sensitive approaches to their and needs. File recording is not always clear if children are seen alone as is required, and if they are not seen alone it is not recorded why. Children must be seen alone to enable a free expression of wishes and concerns. Recording of the number of private fostering notifications is kept by a database that is in the process of being significantly upgraded. The data system does not provide management information about whether assessments commence and are completed in good time, and cannot currently prompt managerial follow up if timescales slip, nor provide management reports. This is necessary to ensure assessments of carers are appropriately signed off with the child's needs identified. A process of file auditing is in place as part of a frequent random selection of Departmental files, under the independent remit of the Local Children's Safeguarding Board Auditor. But there is no report annually on the welfare of privately fostered children to the Chair of the Local Children's Safeguarding Board (LCSB), and on how the agencies are working together to achieve this. The departmental reorganisation of Norfolk Childrens Services took approximately eighteen months and interrupted planning for private fostering within the local authority. In this time representatives of the LCSB kept the issue on their agenda, but without resources or the direct responsibility to pursue it. The Chair of the LCSB `Children Living Away From Home` Sub-Group is a key part of the current linking process with the local authority and has a regular route to the Chair of the LCSB, or the Director of Children's Services if necessary. However this person has many other responsibilities. Overall Norfolk County Council is not monitoring the way in which it discharges its duties and functions in relation to private fostering as outlined in the National Minimum Standards, nor is a written report provided each year for the Director of Children's Services. There are future plans, however there is no track record of monitoring currently available. This means there is potential for privately fostered children not to be known about and privately fostered children may not have access to the appropriate services and safeguards.

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):

- devise a written statement or plan that makes relevant staff aware of the County Council's duties and functions in relation to private fostering and the ways in which they will be carried out, (NMS 1.1)
- introduce a proper monitoring system for evaluating how the County Council and its partners are discharging the duties and functions specified in the written statement or plan (NMS 7.1)
- review the arrangements between the Director of Children's Services and Chair of the Local Children's Safeguarding Board to ensure that information and reports they should receive

and make are in place, and that the arrangements between their agencies are effective, (NMS 7.9 and 7.10)

- ensure that records of visits to privately fostered children indicate if the child was seen alone, and report the reason why they may not have been seen alone, (NMS 7.3 and Regulation 8 (3))
- improve the level of awareness of the need to notify about private fostering arrangements, in particular for relevant professionals who may have contact with children and carers, (NMS 2.1.1.)
- provide simple public information about private fostering that is accessible and available for carers, parents, and groups in the community , (NMS 2.2.1.)
- review who may be defined as a private foster carer and specify the level of checks that will be made on such carers, and ensure all current carers and household members are checked as specified, (NMS 3.2.6)
- ensure that any private fostering arrangement is assessed and that the specified level of checks are completed within required timescales (NMS 3.4 and Regulation 4 Schedule 2, Regulation 7 Schedule 3).

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.