

## **Private Fostering Guidance for Police Officers, Community Liaison Officers and other Criminal Justice Professionals.**

Police and other Criminal Justice professionals who are involved with families where there are children under the age of 18, or with young people under age 18 themselves, can play an essential role in identifying privately fostered children. Although most children in private fostering situations are likely to be safe, in some private fostering arrangements there are clear safeguarding issues and children and young people effectively have no one who is concerned for their safety or welfare.

This guidance aims to raise the awareness of the role of Police and Criminal Justice professionals in highlighting cases of private fostering and safeguarding children at risk. It should be read in conjunction with the Norfolk Safeguarding Children Board Protocol 29 on private fostering which has been written in accordance with statutory guidance.

### **What is a private fostering arrangement?**

**A private foster carer is someone *other than* a parent or a close relative who cares for a child for a period of 28 days or more, in agreement with the child's parent. It applies only to children under 16 years, or under 18 if they are disabled.**

**A private fostering arrangement is not a when a child is Looked After by the Local Authority or placed in any residential home, hospital or school.**

Private foster carers can be part of the child's wider family, a friend of the family, the parents of the child's boyfriend or girlfriend or someone unknown but willing to foster the child. A cousin, great aunt or a co-habitee of a mother or father would therefore be a private foster carer.

Close relatives - a grandparent, a brother or sister, an aunt or an uncle, a step parent - are *not* private foster carers.

### **Who may be privately fostered?**

This list is by no means exhaustive and indicates the scale and variety of situations and agencies these arrangements can cover.

- Children whose parents are unable to care for them, for example if they have chronic ill health or are in prison;
- Children sent to this country, for education or health care, by parents who live overseas;
- A child living with a friend's family because they don't get on with their own family;
- Children living with a friend's family because of their parents' study or work;
- Children staying with another family because their parents have separated or divorced;

- Teenagers living with the family of a boyfriend or girlfriend;
- Children from abroad who attend a language school or mainstream school in the county and are staying with host families;
- Children at boarding schools who do not return to their parents in the holidays but stay with 'host families' recruited by 'education guardians';
- Unaccompanied asylum seeking minors who are living with friends, relatives or strangers.

**Children who are trafficked** into the UK are especially vulnerable and are often living in de facto private fostering arrangements. Child trafficking is the movement of children for exploitation, including domestic servitude, commercial sexual exploitation and to support benefit claims (see [www.ecpat.org.uk](http://www.ecpat.org.uk) for further information). Where trafficking is suspected, a safeguarding referral should be made to Norfolk County Council Children's Services.

### **What to do if you are aware of a private fostering arrangement:**

By law, a parent, private foster carer or other persons involved in making a private fostering arrangement must notify Children's Services as soon as possible. However, parents and carers often do not tell professionals or agencies about such arrangements; they may not be aware that they need to (and this may apply particularly to new communities in the UK such as migrant families from new-EU states), or they chose not to tell agencies about these arrangements.

Children's Services are **not** involved in making private fostering arrangements but are responsible for checking that the arrangements are suitable for the child. As a professional it is important for you to notify Children's Services if you are in contact with a child or young person who is being privately fostered. This will help protect the child against abuse or neglect and provide some reassurance that the child is being looked after properly.

### **Signs to watch out for**

- Have you started seeing a child with a previously unknown adult or adults?
- Has a child mentioned to you that they are staying with someone else or that their parent(s) have gone away for a long time?
- Is there something unusual or unclear in the child's administration file? This may include copies of passports, visas and other immigration related documents which are unclear or do not clearly show that the child has rights of residence in the UK, or that it is unclear who has parental responsibility for the child.
- Are the adults in charge of the child evasive or inconsistent when asked about the child.
- Is the child seen out late at night or seen in situations which might indicate an exploitative situation (such as begging).

### **What Criminal Justice Professionals can do:**

- Ensure that all staff, including any staff are aware of the definition of private fostering and the Local Authority's responsibilities when such arrangements occur;
- Look at records to check on the home situation, and make a note to follow up any circumstances which are not clear.
- Whenever staff become aware of private fostering arrangements they should notify the Senior Designated Professional for safeguarding (SDP);
- The SDP or another appropriate member of staff should speak to the families of children who might be involved in private fostering and check that they are aware of their duty to notify the Local Authority of the arrangement. Professionals should actively encourage the parents and/or carer to notify Children's Services of the arrangement

**If you believe that a private fostering arrangement has not been reported to Children's Services you should contact them directly:**

**Customer Services Centre: 0344 800 8014**

**If you suspect that a child who is living in a private fostering arrangement is being harmed or is at risk of significant harm (including suspecting that a child may be trafficked) and urgent action is required, follow your Child Protection procedures.**

### **What happens after the Local Authority is notified?**

When the Local Authority receives notification about a private fostering arrangement, the Specialist Social Work Service - Diverse Communities will arrange for an officer to visit the child within seven working days. They will contact the parent or person with parental responsibility, run checks on the carer and talk to the young person. This will be to ensure the young person is happy, safe and thriving in the arrangement and that they are able to access education, medical care and any other services they may need. The Local Authority will also check that the accommodation is safe and suitable and enable the carer to access suitable training if required. Providing everything is in order, the family will continue the arrangement with the social worker providing checks at regular intervals to ensure the young person is safe, happy and has access to all the services to meet their needs.

### **Further Guidance & Resources:**

- [Protocol 29: Private Fostering, Norfolk Safeguarding Children Board](#)
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010), DSCF, pgs 242-243
- <http://privatefostering.org.uk/>
- ['Child Trafficking and Private Fostering', ECPAT UK](#)

