

Private Fostering in Norfolk: A multi-agency approach

Presentation to Norfolk Safeguarding Board Best Practice Group

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Introduction

- Bob Holman's research from the 1970s was influential in raising the public and professional awareness of Private Fostering and the Laming inquiry 2003, following the death of Victoria Climbié, raised it again, however, privately fostered children remain one of the most vulnerable groups of children in our society.

- It is estimated that there are approximately 10,000 children in Britain growing up in Private Fostering arrangements, which are unknown to Local Authorities, despite legislation following the death of Victoria requiring local authorities to be proactive in identifying such arrangements.
- As at 31 March 2013, 1500 children were reported in being in Private Fostering arrangements in England. Underneath this figure, there is a significant amount of 'churn' with placements commencing in the year 2012/13 totalling 2,500 and placements ending totalling 2,590. There were 3,020 notifications in the same year.

Legislation

- Private Fostering is underpinned by the Children (Private arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005 and refers to England only and are made under the Children Act 1989.
- The National Minimum Standards for private fostering are issued under the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 and they, along with The Regulations, are intended to better focus Local Authorities' attention on Private Fostering, in part by requiring them to take a more proactive approach to identifying arrangements in their area.

A Privately Fostered child is a child who is:

- Under 16 (or 18 if disabled)
- Cared for by an adult who is neither a parent, nor grandparent, aunt, uncle, sister or brother (whether by full blood, half blood, marriage or civil partner ship) nor a step parent.
- And is to be cared for in that person's home for 28 days or more.
- And where the carer does not have parental responsibility for the child.
- The parent retains parental responsibility for the child during a Private Fostering arrangement.

It is the duty of the Local Authority to:

- Satisfy itself that the welfare of the Privately Fostered child is being satisfactorily safeguarded and promoted and to determine the suitability of all aspects of the Private Fostering arrangement in accordance with the regulations.
- Promote awareness in their area, amongst both professionals and the wider community of notification requirements.
- Give advice to prospective Private Foster Carers and children.
- Satisfy itself of the proposed arrangement before it commences (when advanced notice is given).

- Accordingly, Local Authorities aim to raise the numbers of notifications in general and in particular the notification of arrangements before they start.
- Additionally Local Authorities are required to report directly to the Department of Education on an annual basis regarding the numbers of notifications Privately Fostered children in their area and how well they have met their duties. The deadline for the next report is 30th May 2014.

The regulations 2005 require that:

- The person who proposes to care for a child notifies the Local Authority in writing six weeks in advance or immediately if the arrangement is due to begin within the next six weeks. It is an offence for a Private Foster Carer not to report a private fostering arrangement.
- An agency who becomes aware of such an arrangement ensures that the Local Authority is notified.
- When the child moves into a Private Fostering arrangement the Local Authority must be informed within 48 hours. If this has not happened for any reason the Local Authority must be informed immediately.

- Once notified of either a proposed or actual private fostering arrangement an officer of the Local Authority must visit the placement within 7 working days. The officer must speak to all members of the household and speak to the child alone. Visits must also be made to those with parental responsibility (where it is practical).
- Within 42 working days of the notification of the proposed or actual arrangement the Local Authority must make a decision on the suitability of the placement and complete a written report accordingly.

- If considered that the arrangement is suitable the child must be visited by an officer of the Local Authority and spoken to alone at intervals of not longer than 6 weeks in the first year of the placement and intervals of not longer than 12 weeks thereafter. The officer should also visit when asked to do so by the child, carer or parent. A written report must be completed after each visit.
- The Local Authority must be informed within 48 hours (or in advance if possible) of any change in circumstance, including the placement coming to an end, a member of the household being charged with committing a criminal offence or changes to the household.

- Local Authorities have the power to impose requirements on Private Foster Carers such as the age, number and sex of the children that they privately foster.
- The Local Authority can impose a prohibition on a person that they consider is not suitable to Privately Foster.

Assessment and monitoring of an arrangement:

In Norfolk all notifications and queries about Private Fostering arrangements should, in the first instance, come through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
Tel: 0344 800 8020

- The MASH will take the initial information and pass the information onto the county wide team that deals with all Private Fostering arrangements in Norfolk. Currently this team is called the Specialist Social Work and Diverse Communities Team.
- The Team consists of 4 Social Workers, 2 Community Support Workers and 1 Accommodation Officer and a Team Manager.
- The Team's other duties are working with unaccompanied asylum seeker children and children and families who are have no recourse to public funds.

- Following being passed information from the MASH the Team Manager (SSWT) will make a decision based on the initial information as to whether the child is Privately Fostered. The team will also provide advice and guidance to professionals and members of the public who make contact through the MASH with queries about Private Fostering.
- If it appears that the child is / will be living in a Private Fostering arrangement a Social Worker from the Team will begin the assessment as laid out above. This may mean working with another Social Work Team if the child is already open to Children's Services as a Child In Need (under S17 of the Children Act) or subject to a Child Protection Plan.

- In addition to the statutory duties the team will (if they are the Primary Team) Chair Planning Meetings in which the child, parent, carer and relevant professionals will be invited to, in order to ensure that all are aware of the Plan and that the Plan is suitable for the child. The frequency of these will depend on the individual child but will be at least 6 monthly.
- If the assessment of the placement raises concerns for the safety and wellbeing of the child and it is considered that the child is at risk of significant harm, Child Protection enquiries will be instigated under S47 of the Children Act 1989.
- If the assessment concludes that the arrangement should be prohibited the parents and child will be advised. If the parents do not take protective action Children's Services will take the necessary action to safeguard the child.

Why are children Privately Fostered?

- 4 broad reasons have been identified in the Research Report on Private Fostering authored by the National Children's Bureau in 2010
- Firstly for '**child-centred**' reasons related to the desire to improve the life chances for the child including children being brought to the UK from abroad for a specific time-limited purpose (to learn or acquire fluency in the English language) or with broader benefits in mind (such as to receive an English education). Children falling into this category include children attending language schools, children sent to the UK for educational purposes and UK born children involved in vocational activities

- Secondly for ***'parent-centred'*** reasons related to the parents need to work or study thereby preventing them from caring for the child: these reasons do not imply that the welfare of the child may not be promoted through the arrangement but the instigation and duration of the placement relates to the changing nature of the parents' rather than the child's circumstances. Children falling into this category include children from overseas whose parents are working and studying in the UK, UK born children whose parents are working abroad or working away in the UK and children whose parents are serving in the armed forces

- Thirdly for '**carer-centred**' reasons related to the Private Foster Carers' own personal gain. Trafficked children fall into this category as well as children brought in from abroad with a view to adoption.
- Finally for reasons related to '**family crisis**' including family breakdown, parental problems or the child electing to live elsewhere: some of these children may be subject to Safeguarding or Children In Need interventions with Social Workers already involved or the child being known to Children's Services. These children are normally local and the arrangement is almost always reactive as distinct from the planned nature of the arrangements inherent in the first 3 reasons.

What is the Norfolk profile?

- In Norfolk, as at 31 March 2013 14 children were living in Private Fostering arrangements. Placements commencing totalled 28 in 2012/13 and placements ending totalled 25. In the same year there were 48 notifications.
- 14 children remain living in Private Fostering arrangements in Norfolk as we speak here today.

- Norfolk's profile mainly comprises children who find themselves in Private Fostering situations due to family breakdown (occasionally from out of county) or children from overseas who are sent to the UK for time-limited study or on a longer-term basis to improve their life chances.
- Many of the notifications fall into the first category with children moving from one placement to another and it is often unclear as to whether the parent is in agreement with the arrangement.

Where do our Notifications come from?

- Norfolk's 48 notifications for 2012/13 were split into the following referral sources:
Carer (1); Parent (1); Family Member (4);
Children's Services (22); CAMHS (1); Health (4);
Voluntary Sector (4); Other (2); Police/Probation (5);
School/College/Children's Centre (3); Not identified (1).

How well is Norfolk doing?

- Norfolk's Private Fostering arrangements were recently inspected by OFSTED in February 2013.
- They were judged to be 'adequate' with the Social Work Team commended for its relationship based work with children and young people in Private Foster Care.
- Specific improvement actions were identified relating to statutory compliance with assessment and visiting time-scales, the timely processing of criminal record checks, aspects of the electronic case management process as it relates to Private Fostering and the literature required for carers and the children and young people who are fostered.
- Improvements were also required in the area of promoting awareness of Private Fostering to the public in general and to the multi-agency partnership noting Norfolk's relatively low number of notifications and arrangements.

Our Response to OFSTED

- The Local Authority and the NSCB has responded by implementing a series of actions embedded within the Children's Social Care Improvement Plan.
- Complete revision of the templates used by the Social Workers for the recording of Private Fostering within the electronic social care record (CareFirst).
- Improved performance monitoring arrangements.
- Improved arrangements for checking criminal records including fast-track PNC checks for all notifications where the child is already in placement.
- Development and implementation of a Norfolk-wide communications strategy for Private Fostering.

How can you help?

- Frontline professionals and their employing organisations coming into contact with children are in a unique position to identify potential Private Fostering arrangements and encourage the parent or carer to contact Children's Services.
- Teachers and Learning Support staff including the independent sector and boarding schools, GPs, Health Visitors, Paediatric Nurses and Doctors, Police Officers, child care professionals working in the voluntary sector, Sure Start and Early Years workers, staff in Language Schools, Housing and Police Officers play a particularly important role in identification.

Professional duty to Report

- Your role is initially one of encouraging the parent or carer to report the arrangement.
- Should the parent or carer fail to do so, the NSCB protocol on Private Fostering requires the professional to report the arrangement to Children's Services.

Publicity

- Today the NSCB and Norfolk Children's Services is launching a suite of Private Fostering literature including a poster for display in public settings in Norfolk, a public information leaflet, a specific leaflet for private carers and parents and a leaflet for children and young people.
- The Norfolk County Council website pages have also been revamped in synchrony with the publicity information – [www. http://www.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.norfolk.gov.uk)
- There are also several specific guidance sheets for Health professionals, Teachers and for Criminal Justice agencies that have already been produced and are available today.

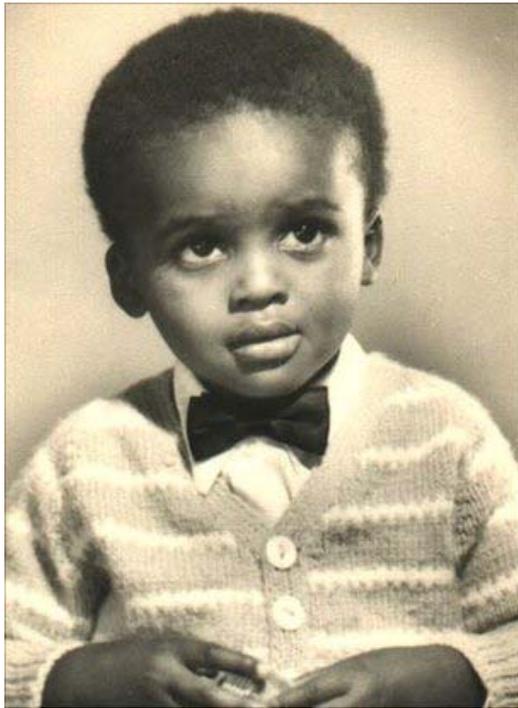
This is our logo for Private Fostering in our
County....



Promoting the message...

- We want you to display the posters in your own professional setting and also consider whether you may wish to stock and distribute the general public information leaflet in your own work.
- Contact: cs.sswt@norfolk.gov.uk to place an order for the publicity material.
- We want you to think about how you receive information about Private Fostering in your professional and work-based training and how you can disseminate your knowledge to other colleagues.
- Children will be best protected where there is a culture of multi-agency ownership of the Private Fostering agenda and awareness is built into professional training and development programmes – just as we are doing today.

**And finally, when you think of private fostering,
think of these children....**



Thank you for taking time to listen

Have you any questions?

