

London Borough of Hounslow

Private Fostering Annual Report

1st April 2022 - 31st March 2023

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1. Overview of Private Fostering

Introduction

This report provides an overview of private fostering arrangements in the London Borough of Hounslow from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. The report details how the Local Authority has complied with its duties and functions in relation to private fostering. This includes how the welfare of privately fostered children has been safeguarded and promoted during the last 12 months.

Children who are privately fostered are not looked after children and therefore not 'in care'. The term 'privately fostered' relates to a private, informal arrangement made between a parent, or person with parental responsibility and a friend or family member caring for their child.

Definition of Private Fostering Arrangement

A private fostering arrangement is one that is made between individuals, without the involvement of the Local Authority or the courts. It is an arrangement made for the care of a child under 16 years, or up to 18 years if disabled, by someone other than a parent or close relative, for 28 days or more.

A private foster carer may be a friend of the family, the parent of a friend of the child, or someone previously unknown to the child's family who is willing to provide care. A person who is a close relative under the Children Act 1989, e.g. a grandparent, sister, brother, uncle or aunt, whether a blood relation or related by marriage, civil partnership or as a step-parent is not classified as a private foster carer.

The period for which the child is cared for by the private foster carer should be continuous and over 28 days. However, continuity is not broken by the occasional short break, for example if a child or young person spends the occasional weekend with a parent but is cared for elsewhere during the week.

The private foster carer becomes responsible for providing the day-to-day care of the child in a way which safeguards and promotes their welfare.

Overarching responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child remains with the parent or those with parental responsibility. It is the responsibility of the Local Authority to ensure that the welfare of the privately fostered child is safeguarded and promoted by determining the suitability of all aspects of the private fostering arrangement, such as the home environment, carers capacity and financial status.

Examples of Private Fostering

This is a list of typical examples of private fostering arrangements:

- Children sent to the UK (e.g. for education or health care) by parents who live overseas.
- A teenager living with a friend's family because they do not get on with their own family.
- Children living with a friend's family because their parents' study or work involves unsociable hours or travel, making it difficult to use ordinary day care or after-school care.
- Children staying with another family because their parents have separated or divorced.

- A child from overseas staying with a host family while attending a language school, or overseas students at boarding school who is staying with a host during the holidays.
- Asylum seeking or refugee children.
- Children who continue living with a step-parent that they had previously lived with alongside their parent, after the step parent has separated from the birth parent. When the step parent was not previously married to, or in a civil partnership with, the parent who holds parental responsibility.
- A child cared for by a friend/family member due to parents' ill health or inability to care for the child.

2. Standards and Duties

Hounslow Private Fostering Standards

The duties of the Local Authority in relation to private fostering are set out in the Children Act 1989, the Children (Private Arrangement for fostering) Regulations 2005 and amendments contained within the Children Act 2004.

Duties of the Parent/Private Foster Carer

When a child is to be privately fostered, both the parent and the private foster carer must notify the appropriate Local Authority of the proposal. The Children Act (1989 and 2004) Section 70 created a number of offences in connection with private fostering, including failure to notify an arrangement or to comply with any requirements or prohibition imposed by the Local Authority.

In the event that other agencies, e.g. health and education, become aware of a private fostering arrangements, they have a duty to notify the local authority in the child's area of residence. Following notification to the Front Door Service, an initial assessment would be completed to determine whether this constitutes a private arrangement which meets the child's welfare needs. If the arrangement is considered to be private fostering, the Fostering Team would supervise and monitor this arrangement.

International Aspects

There is no specific provision in the immigration legislation for children to be admitted to the UK for private fostering. However, foreign nationals and Commonwealth citizens who are admitted to the UK for a limited period, e.g. as visitors, students or work permit holders, may be joined or accompanied by their children provided that certain conditions are met. There is no bar to parents placing their children in private foster care during their stay in the UK, provided that they take their child with them when they leave the country and meet all the usual requirements regarding notice and suitability of the proposed arrangement. Children will normally be given leave to remain for the same period as their parents.

Referral Process

The Fostering Team are notified of any private fostering situations by Hounslow's Intake Team. Following a private fostering referral, the Intake social worker will visit the address where the child is cared for and accommodated within seven working days of notification. The social worker will then undertake a short assessment of the child's circumstances.

Where this is not deemed to be a private fostering arrangement, and there are no child protection or safeguarding concerns, there will be no further action. In a private fostering situation the child will be allocated to a social worker in the Fostering Team to further assess and to offer continued support.

3. National and Local Context

The National Context and Hounslow

In 2015 there were 1560 private fostering arrangements in place in England. The number fluctuated between 1250 and 1650 over the previous nine years but overall have been relatively stable. The regions with the most children reported in these arrangements continue to be London and the South West. Hounslow appears to have similar numbers of children in private fostering arrangements as other local authorities.

This is the latest national statistics available regarding private fostering, with no more recent data published since 2016. The Department for Education no longer publish data on the notifications of private fostering arrangements and do not collect this data from Local Authorities.

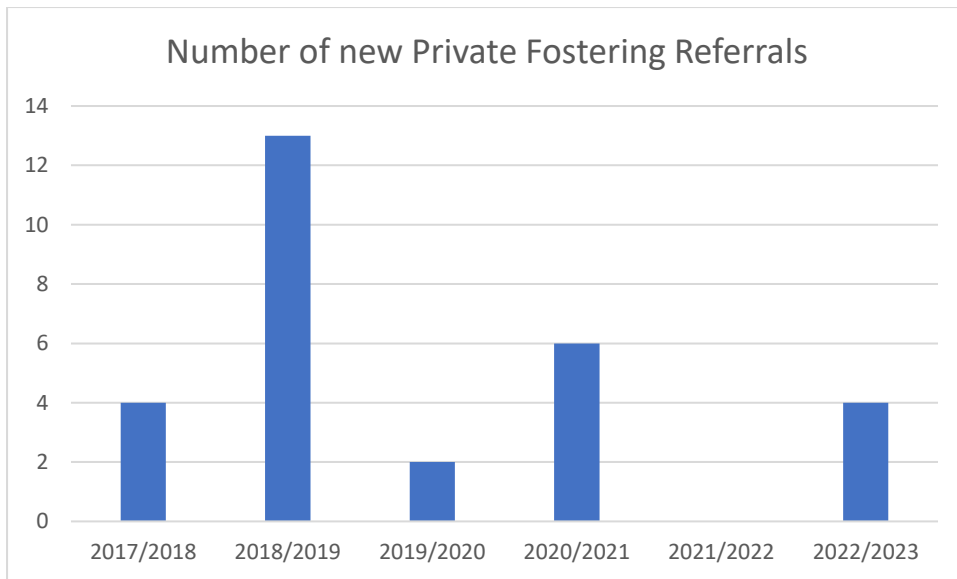
4. Private Fostering Data 2022/23

Private Fostering Arrangements

Hounslow received four new referrals for private fostering assessments during 2022/23. Of these, two closed before the assessment started due to the private foster carer moving out of borough. Two carers were assessed by the Fostering Team for approval.

One of these referrals was made from a neighbouring Local Authority as this was a previously known private fostering arrangement in their area. One referral was made by Hounslow Early Help and two were from school admissions.

The table below shows the number of new referrals received each year for the last six years. Please note this is the number of new referrals only and does not include the number of cases opened or monitored.

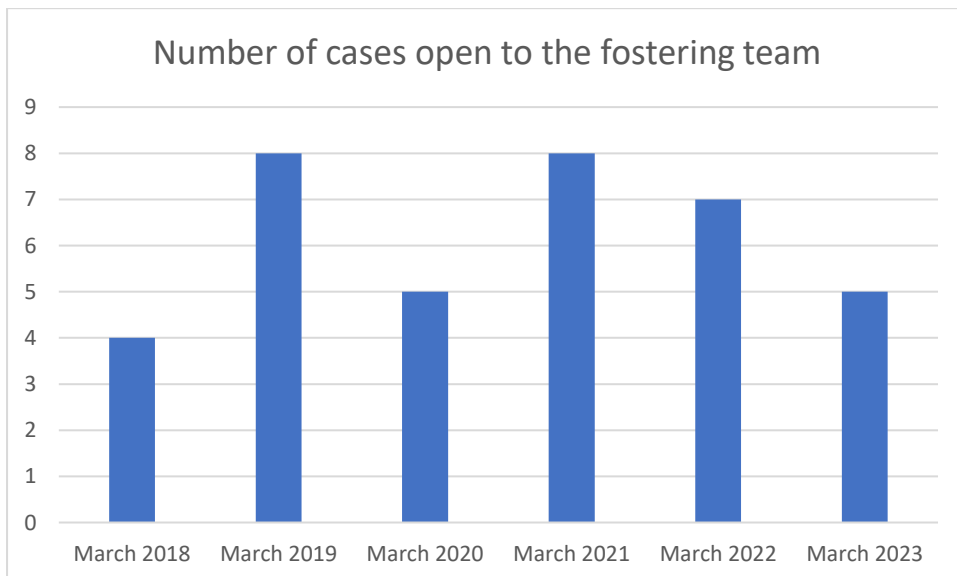


Allocated Cases

During 2022/23, Hounslow supported five children residing in a private fostering arrangement. Three of these were monitored under Regulation 8 visits and two of the arrangements are in the process of assessment by the Fostering Team.

Six private fostering cases have closed within the year, including two of the new referrals received. The complexity of cases has increased, including the need to provide ongoing advice and support. One case is currently being worked on jointly between the Fostering Team and Intake Team due to safeguarding concerns.

The table below shows the number of private fostering arrangements being monitored over the last six years;



The number of cases has decreased over the last three years. The reason for these closures were due to two children turning 16 and therefore no longer constituting a private fostering arrangement. Two children were made subject to a Child Arrangement Order.

In contrast to previous years, two out of the five arrangements are new and are being monitored by the Fostering Team. The arrangement has been known for less than a year and subsequently required more frequent visits compared to the three cases which have been ongoing for over a year. The two new cases are both currently in the assessment stage. Previously there have been long standing arrangements and therefore the monitoring visits were less frequent in line with regulations and policy.

Demographics

The five children in private fostering comprise of no sibling groups. Those young people that are currently supported through a private fostering arrangement range from six to 15 years old.

The children's ethnicities which are similar to previous years are recorded as; White British (2), Black or Black British (2) and Asian or Asian British (1).

Case Closures

During 2022/23 a total of six cases were closed to the team:

- Two children turned 16 years old and are no longer open to the team as these are no longer private fostering due to their ages.
- Two young people are now subject to a Child Arrangement Order, which was sought by their private foster carer. This is a positive outcome and affords greater security for both children.
- Two young people moved out of borough with their private foster carer and therefore a referral was made to their new Local Authority.

5. Ofsted Requirements and work undertaken this year

Since the last Ofsted inspection in 2018 a number of improvements have been made in private fostering arrangements. We continue to raise awareness of private fostering with our colleagues and this year we have:

- Held two seminars through Hounslow Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Attended team meetings with Intake and Safeguarding Teams
- Held a workshop for the Fostering Team
- Attended a 'marketplace' event with Childminders and Early Years Settings
- Had regular liaison with managers in other teams, mainly Intake and MASH.

In order to improve service delivery, there were changes made to the workflow of the notifications and alerts forwarded by the Front Door to the Fostering Team. This is working well with a reduction in delay from the point of notification to assessment and allocation. The Private Fostering Lead has continued to liaise with managers and staff in the Front Door teams to monitor, track and advise on private fostering cases.

There is an alert system in LCS to the Fostering Team Duty when a notification is received. This enables the Private Fostering Lead to track cases and initial assessment and to offer and provide advice with the aim of minimising delay of assessments.

The Private Fostering Lead had previously liaised with the Hounslow school admissions team, who will notify Children’s Services if they become aware of a private fostering arrangement through the admission application. This appears to be working positively as we are seeing a number of referrals from school admissions to MASH.

During this year the Private Fostering Lead has delivered two private fostering seminars promoted by the Safeguarding Partnership where attendees have included professionals from the Police, Youth Offending Service, Health, schools and early years settings. Training was also rolled out to the Fostering Team and in team meetings with the Front Door Safeguarding and Support Services.

The Private Fostering Lead has linked in with Hounslow’s Early years advisory support and attended a marketplace event with childminders and Early Years providers to promote and advise on private fostering at a drop in event held in June 2022.

The Private Fostering Lead continues to have regular discussions with the Team Manager and social workers in other teams to offer advice or have case discussions, primarily with Intake and MASH teams. The Fostering Team Management also receive a weekly data set of cases of children open to the Fostering team (i.e. children assessed or monitored under a private fostering arrangement).

6. Promotional Strategies for 2023/24

Service Priority	Action Taken	Date completed /expected
To undertake an on-going programme of development work to promote awareness and maintain the profile of private fostering across the teams and partner agencies. This is facilitated through seminars and presenting additional awareness training to the HSCP.	Two seminars took place with attendance from social care, health, police, education and early years settings. Attendance at team meetings with other teams.	Seminar planned for November 2023.
To continue to attend team meetings within Hounslow Children’s Social Care teams (MASH, Intake and Safeguarding) to update and refresh staff knowledge on identifying private fostering cases and the process for referral.	To continue to hold two seminars a year for external and partner agencies across social care, health and education to promote private fostering and advise agencies of their role. (HSCB)	October 2023

	To attend the October Managers' Forum and relevant service meetings.	
To continue to liaise closely with the Front Door, Intake and Safeguarding Teams to support early identification of private fostering arrangements.	Regular communication between private fostering lead and Intake team manager for case consultation to reduce delay. This also includes escalations of any concerns.	Ongoing
To assess all private fostering arrangements and audit on-going statutory visits (according to Regulation 8) to children if they are not subject to Child Protection or Child in Need plans.	Four weekly supervision ensures clear monitoring of this requirement. Management audits on private fostering cases to be carried out by the Annual Review Lead. Themes, practice and areas for development are disseminated to TM and team.	Ongoing
To continue to keep a record of all the details on private fostering cases which includes information about sources of referral, reasons for arrangements and outcomes, age and ethnicity of the children.	Data has been collated and analysed for this report and allows us to keep track on cases open to the team.	Ongoing
The Private Fostering Lead is a member of CoramBAAF's private fostering special interest group. This allows for discussion and networking with private fostering leads of other local authorities nationally.	There are three to four private fostering groups a year. The lead will continue to attend these.	Dates set by CoramBAAF.
To speak to community groups in the borough of Hounslow to increase awareness and to engage with teams who work with children and adults in this area.	Consultation programme to work with community groups	Ongoing by March 2024.
Social workers to continue to provide privately fostered children and young people with information about their rights.	Leaflets are provided to young people which will continue.	Updated by January 2024.

Hounslow's continued commitment

The Council and Senior Managers will;

- Continue to consider Private Fostering responsibilities as a high priority.
- Continue to communicate the importance of ensuring that privately fostered children are safeguarded and seen within statutory timescales.

- Be proactive in identifying private fostering arrangements and ensure that its assessments and visits are performed in line with legislation and good practice.
- Safeguard children and escalate cases to Safeguarding and Care Planning Services where necessary.
- Promote equality, diversity and treating others with respect.
- Undertake regular private fostering awareness campaigns, which help to highlight private fostering arrangements.
- Hounslow Council will continue to develop good working relationships with its wider community and partner agencies in order to create and develop a comprehensive and systematic approach to identifying children and young people in private fostering arrangements.

7. Conclusion

The population of children identified as being in private fostering arrangements remains smaller than previous years. However, without data to compare it is difficult to know if this is the case across other Local Authorities, although it appears to be similar. This year has seen a larger than usual number of referrals which suggests that awareness raising programmes are having a positive impact on referrals from our partner agencies. However, we do not receive any referrals from parents, young people or private foster carers themselves.

Research shows that raising the awareness of private fostering amongst professional agencies is more successful than advertising to the public. Therefore, it will be important that the HSCB continues to include private fostering as a compulsory element to safeguarding training. Two training events have taken place in 2022/23 and will continue in 2023/24.

For those arrangements for which we are notified, the quality of assessments and subsequent decisions demonstrate a good understanding of children's circumstances and ensuring that statutory guidance and safeguarding procedures are followed. Hounslow has implemented a good system to identify and meet the needs of children who are privately fostered. The Fostering Team continue to ensure that private fostering is seen as an integral part of the fostering service and have evidenced a robust approach to delivery.