

London Borough of Hounslow

Private Fostering Annual Report

1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024

Claire Goodhead, Lead Professional for Private Fostering

Contents

- 1) Overview of Private Fostering**
- 2) Standards and Duties**
- 3) Private Fostering Data**
- 4) Work undertaken this year to improve practice and drive learning and improvements**
- 5) Quality Assurance and learning from audits and improving practice**
- 6) Promotional Strategies for 2024/25**
- 7) Conclusion**

1. Overview of Private Fostering

Introduction

This report provides an overview of private fostering arrangements in the London Borough of Hounslow from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024. 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

All private fostering referrals come to the Fostering Team via the usual Children's services route and the case must be referred through MASH and 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 child and family 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. Once the case is accepted by the fostering team, a private fostering social worker is allocated within 24 hours to complete the Private fostering assessment within 42 days.

During this year, the Private Fostering Lead, and Fostering duty have received phone calls from professionals to notify of private fostering arrangements and these have then been passed to colleagues in MASH as a referral through the correct channels.

We have also received phone calls this year from members of the public who have informed us that they are intending to be a private foster carer. This is a positive step and not something we have encountered over the previous 5 years and could be indicative of awareness raising both locally and nationally regarding private fostering. Not all of these cases progressed to a private fostering assessment.

3. Private Fostering Data 2023/24

Private Fostering Arrangements

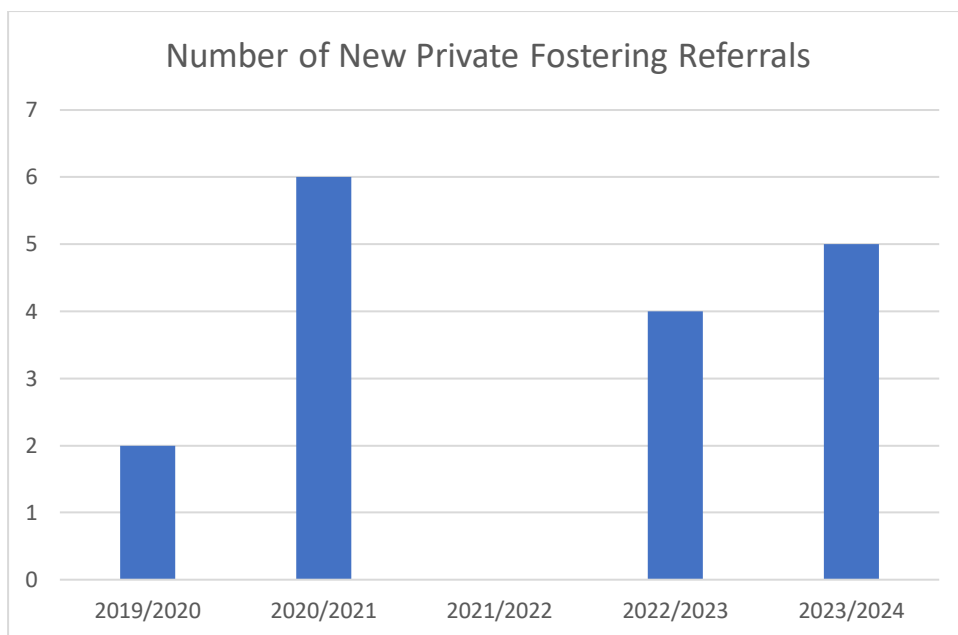
Hounslow Fostering Team received five new referrals for private fostering assessments during 2023/24. All five of these cases progressed to a private fostering assessment. There were 2 further cases which were referred to Hounslow and were assessed by the Intake team prior to closure. These cases closed as the young people turned 16 during the assessment by Intake team, thus ending the private fostering status.

Of the five cases that progressed to the Fostering team, two of these were referred internally from current Children's Services involvement, one was referred by the private foster carer and two were referred by UK Border force (but we had already been notified by an Education Guardianship).

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

The increased number of referrals could be indicative of the increased awareness and promotion of public fostering over recent years. Two private fostering seminars continue to take place yearly which have been highly attended this year by a wider range of professionals than previously, there has also been promotion through GP seminars and promotional materials are now being displayed alongside fostering recruitment resources at various community events and venues.

The increase in phone calls from professionals as well as members of the public (which we have not previously experienced) evidences that there have been significant positive steps in awareness raising of private fostering.



Since July 2023, we have begun to collate monitoring information regarding consultations on private fostering. This analysis will provide data which will allow us to see all contacts and consultations on private fostering, and provide an indication of how much contact we have with professionals and individuals even when the outcome is not private fostering.

This has provided a benchmark for us to consider the amount of enquiries and contact we are having when a case is not deemed to be a Private Fostering Arrangement. This will also evidence how our promotional work is reaching professionals and families.

Between 25th July 2023 to 31st March 2024, we have had 34 contacts involving 35 different children where consultation or advice has been sought and this has been deemed to not be a private fostering case. Therefore, these cases have not progressed to referral. This analysis has only commenced this year. This data will allow us to see trends of where contacts are coming from and how we can target our promotional activities.

Seven of these consultations have been from MASH, four from a carer or family member, two contacts from professionals and twenty-one have been alerts via LCS (the computer system used to record information when children become known to social care). An alert is received by the fostering team on LCS when the case is screened by MASH and it may possibly be a private fostering case. These early alerts enable cases to be tracked through referral and initial assessment and to offer and provide advice, with the aim of reducing delay in assessments. It also allows the private fostering lead to provide guidance to MASH colleagues in identifying private fostering cases.

This will assist us and will provide strong evidence of private fostering awareness amongst colleagues within Hounslow, as well as professionals and members of the public. It also shows that the contact details of the private fostering lead are known and that people are aware of where to seek guidance and clarity.

This number of contacts gives some assurance that we are giving advice, and that individuals and professionals are seeking clarity when it is not clear about the private fostering status.

Allocated Cases

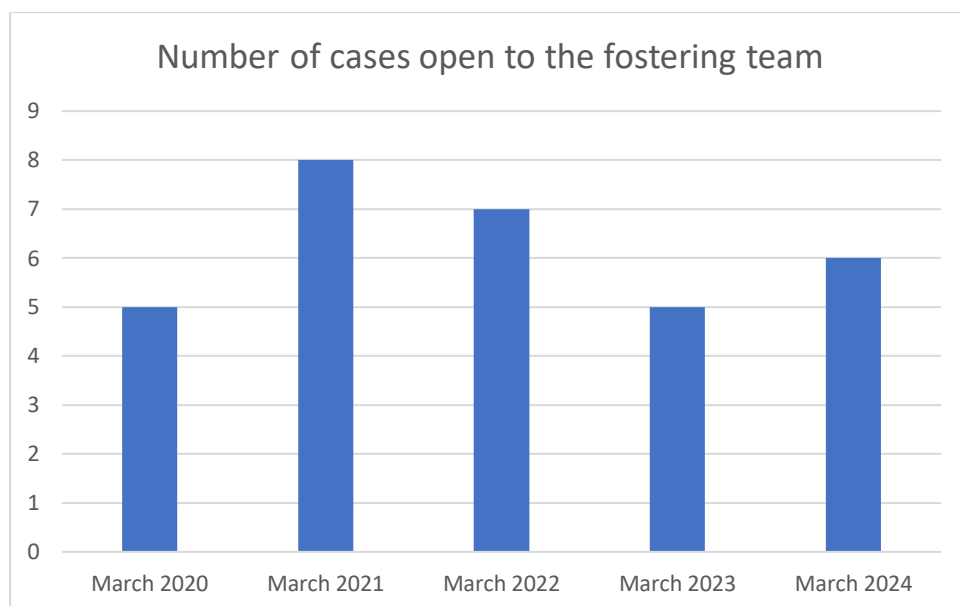
During 2023/24, Hounslow supported a total of eight children residing in a private fostering arrangement. Four of these were monitored under Regulation 8 visits and four of the arrangements are in the process of assessment by the Fostering Team.

Two private fostering cases have closed within the year, including one of the new referrals received. Both of these cases were referred back to Intake Team due to safeguarding concerns being raised. Meaning at the end of March 2024 there were six open cases to the Fostering Team.

This is an increase since March 2023 when the Fostering Team were monitoring 5 young people in private fostering arrangements.

Over the last year, we are seeing that many of these young people are 15, which is a significant change from previous years when there were a wider range of ages. This has occurred as a result of the children getting older, and many of the new referrals are relating to older teenagers who are 14 or 15 years old.

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



We have seen an increase in the number of cases open within the fostering team, and an increase in the number of private fostering referrals. This again could be indicative of an increased awareness. There has been a 20% increase in both the number of referrals received and the cases open to the team.

Demographics

The six children in private fostering comprise of one sibling group of two children. Those young people that are currently supported through a private fostering arrangement range

from seven to fifteen years old. As of March 2024 there is 1 child aged seven, 1 child aged twelve, 1 child aged fourteen and 3 children who are aged fifteen. It is likely therefore that we may see a decrease in number of open cases next year when the children turn 16 and this is deemed to no longer be a private fostering arrangement.

The children's ethnicities are recorded as; White British (2), White - Other (2) and Asian or Asian British (2). This is less diverse than we have seen in previous years. Due to the difference from the diverse ethnicities seen in previous years only been present this year, it is not possible to draw conclusions on why this might be.

4. Work undertaken this year to improve practice and drive learning and improvements

As part of the quality assurance and improving practice and learning the Fostering Team complete monthly audits of the private fostering cases. The audits have highlighted patterns and themes that required improvement and practice development.

Initial patterns were noted around a lack of regular management oversight and timescales, this has now been addressed. A lack of DBS' completed was also noted. As the audits have only been completed during the last nine months, it is not possible at this stage to provide conclusive patterns and themes but these audits will continue and will allow us to record and monitor patterns as they emerge.

As themes emerge they are discussed between the private fostering lead and team manager in our monthly private fostering meeting and actions and plans are put into place and management oversights added to LCS at this point as well as in monthly supervision.

At the offset these audits showed some key themes which we wanted to address, and this led to the introduction of an improvement plan devised by the Team Manager and Assistant Team Manager, in conjunction with the Head of Service. There were then subsequent monitoring meetings with the Head of Service recording progress for each improvement area.

This was in turn reported to Hounslow's Safeguarding Children Board (HSCB) Safeguarding Effectiveness Subgroup Meeting. As a result of this, Private Fostering has remained on HSCB's agenda and updates have been given at quarterly meetings. Feedback from the HSCB evidences that the team are now providing a good and efficient service in monitoring and managing Private Fostering.

Through this improvement plan, the following changes have been implemented:

- The Fostering Independent Review lead now conducts monthly audits of one of the private fostering cases. Feedback is then given to social worker, line manager and fostering team manager for oversight. This includes clear actions and timescales for any required improvements.
- The Private Fostering Lead (PF Lead) and Fostering Team manager meet monthly to discuss and review all private fostering cases in the team, to ensure additional management oversight.
- All private fostering cases are discussed in monthly supervision with social workers. Supervision notes are clearly recorded on LCS.

- All private fostering cases are subject to a transfer meeting led by the at the point of referral with the social worker and assistant team manager from the Intake Team and The Private Fostering lead and Fostering Team manager. The Children and Families assessment is read prior to this meeting, along with checklist to ensure all necessary information is recorded and considered and the assessment is of a suitable standard to confirm the private fostering arrangement and that there are no safeguarding concerns.

5. Quality Assurance: Learning from audits and improving practice

This quality assurance work has had a positive impact on service delivery and has allowed for regular and comprehensive management and independent oversight from the auditor.

From the audits it has been identified that further support and training is required to assist social workers in completing private fostering assessments. In order to improve practice, the Team Manager has commissioned training from Coram Baaf- a one day workshop on private fostering, responsibilities and regulations. The aim of the training is to support social workers to gain a better understanding of Private Fostering and improving the quality of reports and support provided to privately fostered young people and their carers.

An emerging theme from more recent audits is the timescale of assessments being completed. In regards to the five new referrals received this year, one assessment was completed in this report year, and this was not completed in timescale. The other four referrals had assessments due for completion after March 2024 and therefore this data will be included in next year's report. We will also be able to provide a more in depth analysis of the timescales of assessments completed.

Ofsted inspection October 2023

This year also saw the Ofsted inspection in October 2023 of Hounslow local authority children's services which received an overall judgement of 'good.' The report published in December 2023 highlighted the private fostering work being undertaken and progress since the last inspection in 2018. The report highlights *"The local authority has worked diligently across teams and services to identify and raise awareness about privately fostered children, but recognise that they have more to do. Privately fostered children's needs are mostly assessed promptly. They are visited regularly and seen alone and their views are clearly recorded."*

This was a highlight of the year and in stark contrast to the previous Ofsted report which highlighted concerns around private fostering. Prior to Ofsted visiting, there had already been much improvement work in private fostering, with the implementation of the improvement plan, which identified the key areas for development.

Audits and staff supervision have also highlighted what was recognised by Ofsted, that children are being seen regularly and social workers are able to talk comprehensively about privately fostered children, their wishes and needs.

We continue to raise awareness of private fostering with our colleagues and this year we have:

- Held two seminars through Hounslow Safeguarding Children Partnership. 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. The number of attendees at these sessions has risen significantly this year compared to previous years.
- Attended team meetings
- Had regular liaison with managers in other teams, mainly Intake and MASH.
- 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. A closer working relationship has been established this year which has provided the scope to have discussions at an earlier stage, whereby the case can be tracked through the assessment process or advice and confirmation if this is not a private fostering case.
- Raised awareness and had literature available at all departmental events where Fostering is promoted in the local community, including Fostering Fortnight, summer events and festivals.
- Throughout this year, private fostering leaflets and promotional materials have been included as part of general fostering promotion and leaflets have been distributed through this to some libraries and leisure centres in the Borough. They have also been included in festivals and events throughout the year.
- Transfer in meetings have become standard practice and allows for a smooth transition with clear timescales for assessment being set. It is anticipated that this meeting and process will prevent the need for cases to be re-referred back to Intake team for safeguarding reasons after short periods in the Fostering team. Thus decreasing the change in Social Workers and teams for children and their families.
- In February 2024 the Private Fostering Lead attended a GP forum attended by GPs across the borough where a presentation about private fostering was given. Literature was also provided to be shared with GPs and health colleagues at GP surgeries who were not in attendance.

6. Promotional Strategies for 2024/25

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	Two seminars took place this year with 2 more planned.	Seminar planned for November 2024.

through seminars and presenting additional awareness training to the HSCP.	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).	
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.	Attendance at team meetings with other teams.	September 2024
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
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.
To produce promotional materials and literature in other languages and formats to enhance availability.	Using our current materials we will make this more accessible.	March 2025
To link with all schools in the Borough to provide them with literature and resources on identifying potential private fostering arrangements and know how to refer.	To link with Virtual college and safeguarding leads at schools and colleges in the borough.	October 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.	Ongoing.

7. Conclusion

The Fostering Team deliver a good and efficient service in managing and protecting children placed in private fostering arrangements. Through the process of monthly audits, supervision

and monitoring of cases, there are identified actions to not only improve practice, but to evidence good outcomes for children.

This year has consisted of changes in the way private fostering cases are recorded and notified about at the earlier stages, as well as changes in the transfer to the fostering team from intake teams. This has a positive impact on timeliness of assessments, staff allocation and clearer objectives when cases are allocated.

This years Ofsted report highlighted evident strengths of the team in promoting the participation of children in private fostering arrangements. For example children are seen regularly and seen alone and their views are recorded. This demonstrates the good work being undertaken by Social Workers, Team Managers in monitoring and safeguarding these children and young people.

It is evident that there are good systems in place, which has improved the working relationship across the departments, and increase in workshop participation. This in of itself will assist in the identification and referrals of assessments in a timely way. Since July we have also been tracking the number of consultations we receive so that going forward we can identify where contacts are received from. The aim is that in the longer term this will allow us to see the impact promotional work is having amongst colleagues and wider professionals and assist us with being assured that private fostering is known about and we are receiving suitable notifications as soon as possible.

Promotional activities this year have reached a far higher number of people than in previous years, as well as a wider reach of professionals including presentation at a GP seminar. We are seeing the positive impact this is having with a high number of contacts from not only professionals but from carers and families themselves. This is a significant step forwards in terms of identifying all and the correct children to monitor within private fostering arrangements within the Borough. It is fully anticipated that as awareness increases, the number of referrals and contacts will also increase in future years.