

November 2024

Title of the Report Private Fostering

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Cllr Stacie Elson

1. Aim

- To provide an update to the Scrutiny Committee in respect of Private Fostering. To provide assurances around how Walsall Safeguarding partnership has delivered its duties and functions in relation to private fostering and how the welfare of privately fostered children have been safeguarded and promoted during the last 12 months period. This report also outlines the activities which have been undertaken to promote awareness of the notification requirements regarding children who are privately fostered.
- To support proposals for the ongoing implementation and development of Private Fostering both internally and across the wider partnership.

2. Recommendations

That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Note the Private Fostering report and the progress made to date.
2. Support the safeguarding partnership in driving accountability across the wider partnership and community in raising awareness of children who reside in Private Fostering arrangements.

Report

Thousands of children across Britain live with adults who aren't their parents in private fostering arrangements. They may be teenagers who have a poor relationship with their parents, children from overseas sent to live with family friends for a better life, or their parents may be in prison, ill or serving in the armed forces.

Private fostering may often be safe and appropriate however there are equally vulnerabilities and potential risks for this hidden group of children. It is imperative that the wider partnership and community are alert to the potential for a privately fostered child and know what to when such a situation is recognised. Each partnership agency is responsible for the distribution and awareness raising of private fostering.

Performance:

Performance relating to private fostering has significantly improved in the past three years. To show the improving performance of PF awareness I shall set this out over the past three years.

2021-2022

We received 8 private fostering contacts received into MASH and 6 children privately fostered across the year

2022-2023

Between October 2022 and October 2023 there had been eighteen children that had been identified as living in a private fostering arrangement. This was an increase of 200% compared to previous reporting year. Furthermore, in total we received 14 MASH contacts whereby children were identified as potentially living within a private fostering arrangement and this was an increase of 75%.

2023-2024

Between 1st November 2023 and October 2024 we received 26 contacts to MASH. This is an increase of 85% compared to previous reporting year.

There have been 16 children that have been living in a private fostering arrangement. Whilst this is a slight decrease in last year's reporting it should be acknowledged that last year we had seen a 200% increase in the numbers of children being privately fostered therefore arguably this is still a consistent increase of children privately fostering since we commenced increased private fostering awareness across the partnership. Some of these arrangements have now ended for differing reasons as set out in annual report. We currently have eight children that are known to be living within a private fostering arrangement.

This data shows a significant increase in the number of contacts received which is an indication that private fostering awareness is becoming better recognised amongst the local authority, partners and the wider public.

Notifications / Referral source

Reasons for a child living in private fostering arrangements:

- Living with great Aunt as father has criminal convictions that preclude him from caring for children
- Four children have experienced a family breakdown and living with family friends
- Young person is aged 15 is an expectant father with his 15 year old girlfriend and wants to live with the same household
- Parental poor health
- Parent deceased, a will was completed which consented for the child to live with their cousin
- Moved to live in the UK with elder boyfriend and his parents.

Notifications / Referral source

Of the 16 children that were identified as being privately fostered across the year the following table outlines how we became aware of the arrangement:

Allocated Social Worker	4
Education	1
Early Help Practitioner	1
Health	1
Another Local Authority	1
Parent / Carer	8

Of the 26 MASH contacts received-

Education	5
Home Office	6
Health	2
West Bromwich Albion Football Club	1
Private Foster Carer	7
Another Local Authority	1

Across the 12 months we can see that the identification of the number of children in private fostering arrangements has increased. We can also see that there is a varied source from across the partnership which would support the view that the awareness raising and training offer is having a positive impact. We recognise that the number of children does remain low and there is further work to do so that this is progress to be maintained and built upon.

Throughout the year of 2023-2024, the following activities were undertaken:

- PF leaflets for children, parents and carers are available on Walsall Partnerships website
- PF leaflets and posters are visible in all family hubs across the locality and have been distributed to a number of agencies that are linked to the local community and through HAF.
- A PF awareness raising video is available on the partnership website
- A PF 7 minute briefing has been developed and is available on the partnership website
- The partnership officers continue to raise awareness with the early help partnership throughout their menu of training opportunities including; ACTION training where we raise awareness of Early help Supporting families lead professional training – for professionals who want to understand how to support families at level 3 early help
- Outcome star training
- Private fostering has been included in all DSL/refresher training, PF leaflet has been emailed out to all educational establishments and across Early Years.
- Private fostering is included within any induction programme for a new starter in Children Services

- A private fostering scenario is included within the Right Help Right Time multiagency training.
- PF has been added as an agenda item to Early Help, Health, Education Children Services briefings throughout the year.
- PF has also been added to Walsall Safeguarding Partnership Spotlight newsletter on two occasions throughout the year.
- We have celebrated PF awareness day on 8th November 2023 by ensuring that we have visibility on the internal Walsall website and are due to celebrate PF awareness day on 6th November 2024
- On 15th February 2024 Councillor Stacie Elson, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services Walsall Council released a press release- [Are you caring for somebody else's child? Walsall Council is here to help | Walsall Council](#)-
- Attendance at GP training event

4. *Financial information*

Privately fostered children do not receive a fostering allowance from the Local Authority. The guidance stipulates that financial sustenance for the carers is the responsibility of the parents. There may be a requirement to provide services under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

5. *Reducing Inequalities*

The number of identified private fostering arrangements in Walsall remains low and it is believed that this is due to non-identification rather than non-existence of such arrangements. Private Fostering remains an area of practice that brings challenges in both workforce understanding, awareness across partnerships and the wider Walsall community. There is emerging understanding of process around private fostering assessments and the roles and responsibilities of the children's social worker and the fostering social worker. There is evidence of robust safeguarding activity taking place and no child has been left at risk in a private fostered arrangement.

Children in private fostering situations can be invisible as has previously been stated. Whilst it is important that we act promptly and follow due process when a child has been identified, it is equally important to raise awareness and urge both the public and professionals to report signs of informal care arrangements for children who are being cared for by a person who is not their parents.

6. *Review*

Private fostering continues to be a priority for 2024 and is an identified area for improvement following the last OFSTED inspection in October 2021. Arrangements are in place to evidence how we will continue to raise awareness.

A main priority is to ensure on-going promotion to maintain awareness around the notification process of private fostering for professionals, carers, and young people.

Advice and support must be provided to private foster carers, parents of privately fostered children and to the children themselves. This may include advice on child development, religious or cultural issues, relevant training opportunities and

accessing universal benefits/ finances. All children who are subject to private fostering arrangements remain an open case and are subject to regular monitoring and support services.

Private Fostering remains an area of practice that brings challenges in both workforce understanding, awareness across partnerships and the wider Walsall community.

There is an understanding of process around private fostering assessments and the roles and responsibilities of the children's social worker and the fostering social worker is now better understood. Given the small numbers of children privately fostered this is still not routine for many social workers. Although we have experience of undertaking Private Fostering Assessments across all four localities in Walsall.

It is important that Children's Social Workers understand and are able to recognise a private fostering arrangement. The PF toolkit, awareness raising, training and changes to the mosaic workflow all support the development of this.

There has been a significant increase in the number of private fostering contacts and arrangements over the past three years, indicating improved awareness and reporting.

Revised protocols ensure timely assessments by locality and fostering social workers, with ongoing monitoring via the locality Group manager. Private fostering arrangements are tracked and audited regularly to ensure compliance with regulations and to identify areas for improvement.

Throughout the year various initiatives, including leaflets, videos, training sessions, and newsletters, have been implemented to raise awareness about private fostering among professionals and the public.

Future Actions: Plans include targeted communications, regular training, and collaboration with various sectors to continue raising awareness and improving the identification of private fostering arrangements.

Background papers

Private Fostering Annual Report

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