

**29 January 2024**

**Title of the Report** Private Fostering

**Ward(s):** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr Stacie Elson

## **1. Aim**

- To provide an update to Scrutiny Board 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 has 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**

The Scrutiny Committee are invited to:

- Note the progress made to date since the Ofsted recommendation was made in October 2021 :

***Management oversight and support for children living in private fostering arrangements was to improve.***

Significant changes have been made to process and practice across children's social care systems in order to support the correct identification of children in Private Fostering arrangements. These will be outlined further in this report.

- ***To support the safeguarding partnership in driving accountability across the wider partnership and community in raising awareness of children who reside in Private Fostering arrangements.***

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 do when such a situation is recognised. Each partnership agency is responsible for the distribution and awareness raising of private fostering.

### 3. Report detail

#### **Performance-**

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

Some of these arrangements have now ended for differing reasons that I will outline later in the report. We currently have five children that are known to be living within a private fostering arrangement.

This data shows an increase in the number of referrals and children in private fostering arrangements when comparing to last year's annual report whereby we received only 8 referrals and had six children who were privately fostered. We know that referrals rates are nationally low, but this improvement indicates that private fostering awareness is becoming better recognised amongst the local authority, partners and the wider public.

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.
- Two children have experienced a family breakdown and living with friends of the family.
- Young person is aged 15 is an expectant father with his 15-year-old girlfriend and wants to live with the same household.
- One child's mother is experiencing mental health difficulties, and the child is now living with previous ex-partner to mother.

#### **Notifications / Referral source**

Of the eighteen 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	7
Police	2
Early Help Practitioner	1
Health	2
Home Office	2
Another Local Authority	2
Parent	2

Of the 14 MASH referrals received-

Education	8
Home Office	4
Health	1
Housing	1

Across the 12 months we can see that the identification of the number of children in private fostering arrangements has increased. What can also be seen is that there is a varied referral source from across the partnership which would support the view that the awareness raising and training offer is having a positive impact. Despite this, it is recognised that the number of children identified as 'Privately Fostered' overall remains low and there is further work to be undertaken in order to further develop partnership and community understanding of when to refer a child to the local authority.

Reasons identified for 13 children no longer being identified as private fostered:

Young Person turned 16 years old	4
Returned to parent's care	3
Permanency achieved with PF carer via a Child Arrangement Order	2
PF not deemed to be appropriate plan and care proceedings initiated	4

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

- PF (Private Fostering) leaflets for children, parents and carers have been redesigned and are available on Walsall Partnerships website
- 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
- Three safeguarding partnership implementation meetings have occurred with a focus on private fostering awareness.
- Private fostering has been included in all DSL/refresher training and the PF leaflet has been emailed out to all educational establishments and across Early Years.
- Housing have confirmed the PF leaflets will be shared across all teams and added as an agenda item for team meetings.
- Private fostering is included within any induction programme for any 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 3 occasions throughout the year.
- We have celebrated PF awareness day on 8<sup>th</sup> November by ensuring that we have visibility on the internal Walsall intranet

- PF discussed in locality training events

In addition to these points, changes to the mosaic workflows, establishment of the PF toolkit and development of the PF tracker has greatly supported in improving practice.

An audit tool has been developed and audits have taken place twice this year. This was undertaken by Group Manager, MASH team manager, duty and assessment team manager, fostering team manager and private foster senior social worker. This is to ensure that there is learning from both elements of the children and fostering service. The audits have evidenced that progress has been maintained in respect of the identification of a PF arrangement, appropriate checks undertaken and assessments concluding timely.

#### **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.

Whilst the number of identified private fostering arrangements in Walsall remains low, we have seen a 200% increase in the number of children whom have been identified as living in a private fostering assessment. There are successes emanating from the work completed to date.

We have started the journey of raising awareness across the partnership with the hope that we continue to identify those children that have been privately fostered. To continue to increase awareness the next stage will be to work closely with Walsall Communication Team to develop a strategy in raising further awareness via the media.

We have the correct procedures in place and an emerging confidence that social workers, team managers and Group Managers recognise when a child is living within a private fostering arrangement and appropriate assessments and checks are undertaken. We have evidenced that when these arrangements are not deemed to be safe appropriate safeguarding action is undertaken, furthermore when permanency can be achieved via a private law order this is also progressed.

## **Background papers**

### **Private Fostering Annual Report**

#### **Author**

**Jade Read**

**Group Manager, Safeguarding and Family Support**

[jade.read@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:jade.read@walsall.gov.uk)