

7 Minute Briefing: Private Fostering

What is Private Fostering?:

Private fostering is a **private arrangement** - not made by the local authority- where a child **under 16** (or **under 18 if Disabled**) is cared for by an adult who is **not their parent or a close relative**, for **28 days or more**. Close relatives under the Children Act 1989 include grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts and step-parents, but *do not* include cousins, great-aunts/uncles, family friends, or neighbours. The care must be **continuous**, though brief breaks do not interrupt the 28-day rule.

These arrangements often arise due to family breakdown, parental illness, education-related placements, or teenagers staying with friends' families. Video: [Quick guide to Private Fostering](#)

Why Awareness Matters – What We Know Nationally

Private fostering is widely acknowledged as a **hidden safeguarding issue**, with many arrangements going unreported. National reviews highlight that actual numbers of privately fostered children remain unknown due to under-notification. Following cases such as Victoria Climbié, legislation emphasises the duty of professionals and communities to **identify and report** potential private fostering arrangements early

Legal Duties and Statutory Requirements

Parents and Carers Must Notify the Local Authority:

- Parents and private foster carers have a **legal obligation** to notify the local authority **at least 6 weeks before** the arrangement begins - or **immediately** if it is already underway.
- Families do not always know about Private Fostering and as a safeguarding concern **Professionals must recognise and report suspected private fostering timely, even where arrangements appear stable.**

Local Authority Duties

Under the **Children Act 1989** and **Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005**, the local authority must:

- Assess the suitability of the private foster carer, including checks and references.
- Visit the child within **6 working days** of notification and maintain regular visits (every 6 weeks in the first year, 12 weeks thereafter).
- Ensure the child's welfare is safeguarded and promoted, addressing health, education, identity, emotional and cultural needs.
- Offer support and advice to both carers and parents.
- Act if they deem the arrangement unsuitable, including prohibiting the placement if necessary.

Key Messages for all Agencies:

- 1. Know the definition:** Private fostering is living with a non-parent, non-close relative for 28+ days.
- 2. Stay curious:** Ask questions about living arrangements, especially where information is unclear.
- 3. Act early:** Report *any* suspected private fostering - notification is a **legal requirement**.
- 4. Protect the child:** Early identification ensures appropriate assessment, safeguarding, and support.
- 5. Work together:** Private fostering requires coordinated multi-agency awareness and vigilance.



Taking Timely Action and Making Referrals

If you **believe or suspect** a private fostering arrangement:

- **Notify Children's Social Care immediately.**
- Provide clear details of the caregiving arrangement, who has parental responsibility, and any known concerns.
- Continue to work jointly across agencies to support the child and monitor their circumstances.

The Need for Vigilance and Professional Curiosity

Because private fostering is often **hidden**, professionals must be **curious, questioning, and proactive**. This means:

- Asking **who the child lives with**, for **how long**, and **why**.
- Exploring whether the adult caring for the child is a **close relative**.
- Checking whether the arrangement meets or will meet the **28-day threshold**.
- Not assuming someone else will report it.

Professional curiosity is vital because some arrangements may involve: Cumulative neglect, lack of parental oversight, trafficking or exploitation risks, breakdown in education, healthcare engagement, or emotional well-being

Indicators Professionals Must Look For

Professionals should be alert to situations where a **child is living apart from their parents** under informal or unclear circumstances, including:

- A child from overseas staying with a host family for education.
- Teenagers living with friends' families due to relationship breakdown at home.
- Children staying with another family because a parent is unwell or unable to care temporarily.
- Language about unrelated adults.

Warning signs may include:

- Adults describing arrangements vaguely ("staying with a family friend").
- Parents not attending key meetings or appointments.
- Children presenting with different adults for appointments.
- Lack of clarity about who has daily care responsibilities or decision-making authority.