



# Private fostering in Southwark

**Information for professionals**

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# Private fostering

The Children Act 1989 introduced legislation to safeguard children who are privately fostered. As a result, local authorities should be notified about all private fostering arrangements.

This leaflet is for professionals, including teachers, police officers, social workers, GPs and other health professionals, who come into contact with privately fostered children in Southwark.

**Information for professionals**

## What is private fostering?

Private fostering occurs when a child under 16 (or under 18, if disabled) lives with and is looked after for 28 days or more by someone who is not their parent or a close relative.

With the term parent, we mean anyone who has parental responsibility, including step-parents through marriage.

Private fostering does not include foster and care arrangements arranged by Southwark Council's children's services. Private foster carers do not hold parental responsibility.

Grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles or aunts are all considered to be close relatives under the terms of the Children Act 1989. They can be a full or half relation and can be related by marriage. However, great aunts, great uncles or parents' cousins are not classified as close relatives.



## What kinds of private fostering arrangements are there in Southwark?

It is estimated that there could be between 15,000 and 20,000 children being privately fostered in the UK. Some of the common situations where a private fostering arrangement occurs are:

- Children and young people whose parents live overseas and have usually been sent to be educated in the UK.
- Children whose parents are unable to care for them for a number of reasons, for example parents may have to work or study long unsociable hours or parents might have more than one job. In other situations, parents may have drug or mental health issues which prevent them from caring for their child for periods of time.
- Children who are seeking asylum and who have arrived in the UK with adults that they are not related to.
- Young people who are estranged from their families. They may have chosen or been forced to leave their parents' home for a number of reasons. The young person may then make their own arrangements such as living with friend's, girlfriend's or boyfriend's family.

- Children who have been brought to the UK to be adopted. Until formal notice of intention to apply to adopt is given, these children are considered to be privately fostered.

In some private fostering arrangements, children may be at risk of significant harm. For instance children who have been trafficked (transported for exploitation) and brought to the UK to work as servants or for prostitution. These are private foster care arrangements even though the adults these children and young people live with are not acting as parents.



## **What does the law say?**

It is a legal requirement for parents and the person intending to privately foster and anyone else who is aware of a child being placed in a private fostering arrangement to notify their local authority.

The local authority must then ensure that the children in these arrangements are being safeguarded and cared for appropriately. If there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or could be harmed, then he or she can be removed.

Private foster carers and birth parents should inform us six weeks before a private foster arrangement is to be made or within 48 hours if the arrangement is made in an emergency.

Many people won't be aware their informal arrangements are known as private fostering, or that they have to notify the local authority.

Through regular home visits we will assess the suitability of private fostering arrangements and ensure that there are no causes for concern.

We will also provide family support and advice to carers to ensure that they are getting the help they need. In some cases we can help them to access benefits they are entitled to.

## Your responsibilities

Many parents and private foster carers are not aware they have to notify local authorities of the arrangements they make. This makes it difficult for us to check if the children are being looked after properly.

If you are aware that a child is being privately fostered, you should encourage the parents or private foster carer to notify us about their arrangements, explaining that it is the legal duty of both parents and carers to do this.

They can do this by:

Phoning **020 7525 1921**

or emailing

**[privatefosteringadvice@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:privatefosteringadvice@southwark.gov.uk)**

We will then arrange for social workers to visit them.

Some people may be wary of notifying us of the private fostering arrangements they make. We do not want to change these arrangements but we are required to check that children are safe and being properly cared for. You can help us by reassuring families and private foster carers that we are here to help them and may be able to offer them support and advice on how to access benefits.

If you are not sure that they have notified or will notify us you should let us know.


If you have child protection concerns about any child, you should notify us immediately.

If you need more information, call us on **020 7525 1921**.

Or you can email us at **MASH@southwark.gov.uk**

Further information can be obtained from Southwark Council's website.

**[www.southwark.gov.uk/safeguardingchildren](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/safeguardingchildren)**

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